

# Youth as Partners in Sustainable Small Island Development

“Being young does not mean we are insignificant”

Leaders, today you stand again to discuss the major issues affecting our island homes in search for solutions. We would like to ask one question: “How long have we been in this same place, discussing the same issues and promising the same solutions?” We all know it is hard to solve the issues our islands are facing, but if the leaders of today partner with the leaders of tomorrow we CAN ensure a sustainable future.

We are 29 youth from 11 Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), of diverse backgrounds, passionate advocates of sustainable development and agents of change. We are striving towards positive transformation of the Pacific. We represent the Pacific youth voice in the SIDS process.

We have gathered to articulate the future we want: an inclusive, peaceful, and healthy Pacific where young people are partners in sustainable small island development. Our journey towards our future has already begun.

We have identified four issues that are important to enhancing sustainable development of our small islands and future generations of Pacific Islanders. These issues are access to a quality education, youth employment, health, and climate change. To effectively address them, we need a solid foundation of good governance and freedom of information, creating an enabling and inclusive environment, free from crime, violence and discrimination, that provides equal opportunities for all. We feel that it is important to explicitly mention the issue of violence and discrimination, as it is not something we can be quiet about – it happens right across the Pacific.

We want governments of the Pacific to foster strong partnerships with all stakeholders to adhere to a human rights approach to achieve our sustainable development goals. This approach should be inclusive of young people with disabilities, rural and outer island youth, young people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, young women and young men.

## **Educated Youth for a Sustainable Future**

We, the Pacific youth, need access to affordable and holistic education, where we are provided with the tools from an early age to become critical thinkers, active learners, innovators and strong leaders. We want to see an educational environment that provides greater opportunities for us by being less limiting and more inclusive of people living with different abilities and interests, as well as those in rural areas and outer islands. In order to achieve this, we need a system that understands the uniqueness and diversity of our Pacific Island cultures and languages and the rapid changes of the world in order to fully prepare us to step up and be proactive about the future we will inherit from you, our leaders.

As we face a changing climate, it is extremely important that young people understand the challenges that come with this. We would like to see environmental issues brought to the fore in the school system to increase awareness of its effects and the role young people can play. We are committed to taking a more active role in the provision of community outreach programs.

## **An Employed Youth Population Contributing to Sustainable Futures**

It is not easy being young in the labour market today. Pacific youth face the challenge of having limited opportunities for decent work. A gap between capacity and opportunity exists even for young people with

qualifications. Failure to provide opportunities perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty, crime and violence that prevails in our societies today.

We believe that continuous investment in youth development is central to sustainable futures. We call upon the public and private sectors, in both the formal and informal economies, to provide decent work for young people. This includes enabling policy environments to cater for young people of all abilities and to prevent all forms of discrimination. With access to finance, skills-building and training, young people can create their own opportunities for self-employment.

### **Healthy Young People for a Sustainable Future**

We, as Pacific youth are concerned with three aspects of health: sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); mental wellness; and physical health. Young people need to have stable and healthy lives to earn a living and contribute to Pacific island development.

The SRHR issues that we face are sexually transmitted infections, HIV & AIDS, teenage pregnancy and sexual violence against women and children. Pacific cultures often prohibit sexual health and sexuality being discussed openly in families, communities and schools. There are also alarming rates of suicide among our youth population attributed to inadequate coping skills, poor emotional management and substance abuse. Furthermore, there are high rates of non-communicable diseases (NCD) that can be addressed by responding to behavioral risk factors that are present amongst youth.

Young people need greater access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services. School curricula needs to incorporate both the social and biological aspects of SRHR at age-appropriate levels from preadolescence. Young people need safe spaces to be creative and artistic and to openly talk about their issues and views to foster healthy emotional development. Child, adolescent and youth nutrition needs to be urgently promoted to reduce the risk of NCDs, especially for islands that are more dependent on imported and unhealthy food.

We would like to work with governments to: develop accepting and inclusive communities of care for all young people; overcome cultural barriers by developing and delivering peer education programs on sexual and reproductive health; and involve young people in carrying out communication strategies with our peers.

### **Young Pacific Climate Change Warriors**

Pacific SIDS lie at the forefront of climate change impacts, sea-level rise, extreme weather patterns and ocean acidification, largely due to the continued burning of fossil fuels by developed nations. Young people in the Pacific need to be best equipped when responding to climate change because we live with its impacts.

Children and youth have demonstrated an active role in climate change solutions even with limited resources. We believe creating a partnership with our governments, civil society, regional organizations, the private sector and donor agencies will enable us to contribute effectively to policy development and social mobilization at grassroots, national and regional levels. We can lead major educational and awareness activities using and preserving Pacific cultural knowledge and skills.

While we acknowledge the efforts of our governments to tackle this global crisis, climate change adaptation and disaster risk management projects and policies must be inclusive of children, youth and persons with

disabilities from the very beginning. We support the move towards better integration and coordination of state agencies to improve disaster risk management and climate change response.

We need our countries to lead the way and move towards 100% renewable energy and invest in the creation of 'green jobs' for young people. The answers to alternative sources of energy are already available. We believe that information about climate change impacts, adaptation and mitigation measures should be made easily accessible and understandable through a variety of media forms.

We will work to create a unified network of youth climate leaders in the region, continue with environmental advocacy in our schools and communities, and cooperate with governments and other stakeholders in leading climate solutions. We are part of the solution.

**In closing**, we would like to share the following story told to the younger generation by the *Toeaina* (elders) of Tokelau.

*"The canoe is central to Tokelauan society. Every extended family has one. The canoe provides food and transport. Any family that has no canoe is considered destitute, and others will help until that family obtains one of their own. This canoe is considered the property of the whole extended family. Anyone who tries to own a canoe for his own private use is thought to have no love for his kin. So this canoe binds the family together as a unit. A canoe made of Kanava tree lasts for years and can be passed on from generation to generation. The person who sits at the end is a Ulu Hina (Grey Hair), a person who has knowledge in caring for his or her community, but the canoe is powered by the energy of the young people."*

The story of the canoe reminds us about sustainable development. We are all family on this great canoe of the world, journeying together towards a better future. It sails under your guidance as we paddle with our passion.