



HIS EXCELLENCY RATU EPELI NAILATIKAU

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ADDRESS AT THE PACIFIC CONFERENCE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS FOR ADVOCACY ON ICPD BEYOND 2014

Holiday Inn
SUVA

Tuesday, 13th August, 2013
9.00a.m.

- Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliaments,
- The Dean of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Your Excellencies the Ambassadors and the High Commissioners,
- The UNFPA Deputy Director Kate Gilmore,
- The Heads of the International Organizations,
- Members of the Diplomatic Corp,
- Distinguished guests, and
- Ladies and gentlemen.

Good morning, *ni sa bula vinaka, salam alaykum, Namaste.*

From the outset, I would like to convey my sincere appreciation to the Organizers for your invitation for me to open this very important conference for Pacific Parliamentarians.

As a former Parliamentarian and Speaker of Fiji's House of Representatives, I am only too pleased to honour the invitation, particularly so because the organisers including the United Nations Population Fund have contributed significantly to Fiji's progress as a nation.

So, on behalf of the Government and the people of Fiji, I warmly welcome you all to our shores and to the *talanoa* sessions over the next two and a half days.

We are here because of our collective responsibility to the peoples of this ocean of islands we call our home wherein leadership must be practiced with compassion adhering for the needs of all, not just for the men or the chiefs but for all, men, women, young people and children.

Communities of our island homes are unique in the world because of the three governance systems which continue to inform their decision-making process and thus influence national and community actions, that is, the traditional, the faith-based and the modern state systems of governance.

It is this triangular systems of governance where, you as contributors to this conference, will have a vital role to play because you represent the link between our people and the global and regional development agenda that needs to be developed with as much consultation as possible, taking into account the needs of our Pacific people.

At this juncture, I would like to enlighten this forum on the latest development, which most, if not all, countries in the Pacific have just made, with the establishment of the Pacific Islands Development Forum or the PIDF as it is known for short.

Heads of States and Governments last week concluded the inaugural meeting in Nadi with the hope and aspirations that the PIDF will bring renewed vigour and in fact – winds of change for the Pacific Island Countries in the sense that there will be more inclusivity in decision-making for the proper governance of our island states.

The leaders and their representatives at the PIDF meeting have all agreed that the PIDF will firstly become a better listener to our people. This inevitably means including for the first time in a more open and transparent manner the involvement of the business communities, the civil society organizations, the youth and the underprivileged, to name but a few, in discussions and decision-making towards the many challenges facing the Pacific.

This historic move is a change from the past, where most decision-making was predominantly confined to Governments, with limited, if any, input by the people that matter the most.

The PIDF is now being established here in Suva and, we look forward to the contribution of the Pacific Island Countries in furthering its noble and forward looking objectives.

Coming back to our gathering here this morning, the United Nations Population Fund has organized this *talanoa* session because it hopes that you will be able to share your experiences in advocating for the needs and rights of your people in your own countries. Through this sharing you will become more enriched and be able to learn from each other about how to strengthen our approaches.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to honour this *talanoa* with honesty and realistic contributions to ensure the establishment of a programme of development that will empower our people towards realising their basic human rights, and towards ensuring that all our people have access to essential services.

Twenty years ago, in Cairo, Egypt, the International Conference on Population and Development marked the historic moment in our development history when it shifted the focus of population and development from population as a number or statistic to a human-rights-based approach.

One hundred and seventy-nine countries including the Pacific Island Countries, attended that conference-the ICPD, where it firmly established that women's empowerment and gender equality were at the forefront with and among the development priorities and its programme of action and, in endeavoring to ensure that every one counted.

The countries at the ICPD signed an ambitious programme of action that committed all of us to provide universal access to family planning and sexual and reproductive

rights and health services, ensuring gender equality to the empowerment of women and to equal access to education for girls. We, as leaders, are committed to addressing the individual, social and economic impact of urbanizations and migration, and to supporting sustainable development in light of population dynamics.

The International Conference on Population and Development, followed by the millennium development goals in 2000, provided to the world, and to the Pacific, a framework and a set of goals to work towards.

In those 19 years, a lot of progress has been made, but as we all know, many challenges still face us as a global community. For example, mothers and children continue to die preventable deaths during childbirth, girls continue to have unintended pregnancies, women continue to be subjected to violence, sexually transmitted infections and new HIV infections continue to occur, and very few women are elected to public office to serve as leaders.

In the Pacific, we also know well the environment challenges that threaten our communities and development initiatives. We understand the impact of social and economic stresses that entice the brightest of our youth to work in more lucrative positions overseas.

On the other hand, we can be proud of what we have achieved so far in the region. Most Pacific Island Countries are on track to achieve universal primary education and gender parity in schools, although the quality of education remains a concern. Life saving treatment for HIV is provided to all those who need it, and protocols have been put in place in a number of countries to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Maternal mortality rates seem to be improving in most Pacific Island Countries and many countries report that close to one hundred percent of births are attended by a skilled birth attendant.

The recent review of progress on the implementation of the ICPD programme of action in the Pacific shows other notable signs of progress. The number of countries with national population policies is steadily increasing and sexual and reproductive health have received considerable attention, with improvements on integrating them into primary health care.

However, there is an urgency to pay attention to the significant challenges that remain. Low contraceptive prevalence rates in many countries have led to high fertility rates. Young women and men do not have access to the information, tools and services that they need to make decisions related to their sexual and reproductive health. The result is very high rates of teen fertility and sexually transmitted infections in a number of Pacific Island Countries.

In five countries in the Pacific over 60 young women out of a thousand between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year. Chlamydia rates are above 20% in eight Pacific Island Countries and the rates are often more than double for young people. Unplanned pregnancies put women at high risk for unsafe abortion and its complications.

We are fortunate that HIV rates have remained low, but they must be constantly addressed, advocated for and reversed. There is no room for complacency, which is the biggest enemy in response. With risky behaviour such as changing sexual partners frequently, having more than one sexual partner, having sex with casual partners and sex workers without protection, the low rates of condom use, the prevalence of HIV related stigma and discrimination, the creeping and steady increases in new infections annually, means that the HIV explosion remains a threat.

Gender-based violence and sexual violence continue to be an unacceptable scourge that pervades our communities and the rates are embarrassingly high. Governments recognize the need for health care services to help victims, and the need to strengthen referral mechanisms that would allow a survivor of violence to timely,

effective and safe access to protection, psychosocial care or even a short-term shelter in most communities.

The ICPD review in the Pacific also highlighted the persistent gaps in the realization of rights and social protection for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, youth and people with disabilities. Management of increasing urbanization and planning for both internal and external migration remain limited. Integration of population and sexuality education issues into the education system is still under development. Enabling women to enjoy full participation in the political and the economic arena remains elusive for most Pacific Island Countries.

Your contribution to this *talanoa* will determine for the most part, the legacy we, as leaders, today leave behind. You are at this conference because of your knowledge in relation to the experiences of your families, your communities, and your island nations. You know first-hand what is affecting our people, what is important to us and what we expect of our governments. You can and it is our hope, that you will play your part in creating a renewed commitment to the further development of our Pacific Island societies.

My own personal experience in working with young people to address the threat of HIV and AIDS in the Pacific has shown me that we must redouble our efforts to ensure a bright, sustainable future for Pacific Islanders. In my advocacy role, I have visited one hundred and eleven out of one hundred and seventy seven secondary schools throughout Fiji with messages of prevention of HIV, avoiding getting HIV, practicing safe sex by using condoms, showing respect for and giving dignity to those affected by HIV and Aids. I have seen the creativity, energy, and passion of young people in action. I have also heard their pleas to us, as leaders, to hear them and to take action.

Young people in our region comprise one fifth of our population. I had the pleasure of meeting some of their representatives in a meeting in Nadi last month. They were formulating a collective voice to the Pacific Small Island Developing States

preparatory meeting a week later. And what a powerful - loud and clear – voice they resonated.

Young people are calling for Pacific leaders to work with them because they want quality education for all young people and decent jobs. They want to lead the way in addressing climate change. They want to ensure a healthy life and prevent non-communicable diseases and to attain sexual and reproductive health. I can think of no greater responsibility of governments than to respond to the needs and the challenges of our young people. I pledge to take up that responsibility and I urge each of you to do the same.

We are nearing the end of the commitments made in the ICPD Programme of Action, and the Millennium Development Goals, and we have not yet fully achieved some targets. The global community over the coming year and a half will be defining the shape and projection of development in the years to come. We, in the Pacific, have the opportunity to make a strong and important contribution towards our collective future. Allow me to make some suggestions to you as leaders in the Pacific.

First, let us involve our communities in the discussions, in particular women and young people. We need to build partnerships and mechanisms for stakeholder engagement so that we are representing the true perspective of the Pacific. We need to organize community level, sub-national, national and regional consultations that include all of the voices of our communities. Women and young people should be included as meaningful members of our delegations to regional and global discussions and, we must be accountable to our communities through transparent and open dialogue.

Second, let us put the future of our children and our young people as the focus of our efforts. Let us do as they ask of us and take action to give them the education they deserve, the health they have a right to, the jobs they desire, and the sustainable planet they need.

Let me use the example of sexual and reproductive health, which seems appropriate for this audience and allows me to draw from my own HIV work. We need to ensure that women and men are able to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health and this includes young people. In this regard, we need to not only target young people in schools, but also those who are out of school as well as parents and the communities. The involvement of parents is critical to ensure that they also have a good understanding of the nature of the issues that are raised by young people.

Through my experience in schools in Fiji, it is clear to me that young people need and desire information about sexuality and sexual health. We have to break down the barriers to young people accessing services to protect and promote their health. Some young girls still have the assumption that they cannot get pregnant through their first sexual encounter. This challenges us to ensure accurate information is accessible to young girls. We should ensure that every pregnancy is wanted and that every child birth is safe by providing access to family planning and making quality antenatal and postnatal care universally available. Our children should be immunized and provided with the nutrition they need to grow and prosper. And they need the love and support of a caring family and an inclusive community.

Lastly, let us finally recognize that women and girls are the core of our communities. They are leaders, business people, public servants, educators, care-givers, mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. Girls should have the same access to education, health, nutrition and opportunity as boys. Women and girls should not live in fear of violence, intimidation, or being ignored.

At present, we have an incomplete Pacific picture. But if we strive to also have women as our legislators, as our judges and juries, as our police officers, as our peacekeepers, as our teachers, as our principals, and as our professors, and the list is endless - we will have the balance that we require and need to have a society that heeds respect, tolerance and inclusivity.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you well in your deliberations over the next few days.

When you return to your countries, I urge you all to be advocates for continuing the goals of the ICPD Programme of Action and for the Pacific to work collectively with the global community to ensure that the ambitious future that we set for ourselves in Cairo 20 years ago is ultimately realized.

Thank you, *vinaka vakalevu, sukria, bahoot dhanyavaad.*