

Written by Administrator

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Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 25-30 July 2011

Honourable Teariki Heather, Minister of Infrastructure and Planning, Distinguished delegates from the Cook Islands, Representatives of Member Countries, Representatives of donor partners the GEF, UNDP, UNEP, EU, and Representatives of supporting international, regional, and national agencies, colleagues and staff from MOIP and the WSP of the SOPAC Division of SPC.

On behalf of Dr Rodgers, Director General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, I would like to welcome you all to Third Regional Steering Committee for the Pacific IWRM Project, convened here in Rarotonga.

In doing so I would like to extend on behalf of all of us visiting, some for the first time and some of us like myself visiting yet once again, through you Minister our sincere appreciation to the Government of the Cook Islands for agreeing to host the meeting, and to all the government officials that have worked both here and in conjunction with the SOPAC Division staff in organising this meeting, I would also like to acknowledge the people of the Cook Islands for providing what I know will be the highest level of warmth and hospitality we are accustomed to whilst visiting the Cook Islands.

At the outset, let us not overlook that this community living in the Cook Islands. In their own small way this community represents the principle stakeholder group we are working for in this Project, the Pacific community of people throughout fourteen island countries of the region participating in these IWRM Projects.

The work we are here to discuss, and plan a way forward for, represents one of the region's most critical struggles – the struggle to protect the rights of men, women, boys and girls to safe water and sanitation. All of you have, in various ways, been at the forefront of this endeavour. It does not matter whether we are monitoring progress (or lack of it) against the global MDGs, the regional Pacific Plan or the Regional Water Policies, or National Water Policies and Plans. What

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does matter is we proceed with implementation to ensure safe water and sanitation services are available for everyone.

For Pacific island countries and territories:

- The scarcity of freshwater resources continues to pose several problems in the region. Despite high levels of total rainfall, water is sometimes not available in the high islands due to rainfall seasonality and inadequate storage. Localised pollution, excessive sedimentation due to uncontrolled watershed development and water wastage are common problems reported. Water shortages force some atoll communities to use polluted or salty groundwater for drinking and cooking.
- Critically important issues are the protection, conservation, management of supply/quality of water as a result of normal weather patterns and climate variability such as due to El Nino and Enso events. Climate change over the longer time frame is expected to make these issues even more important as frequency and intensity of events are predicted to rise.
- Death and disease occur through natural disasters such as cyclones, accelerating storm water runoff, floods, droughts and heat waves, which bring about a reduction in the availability of freshwater and a gradual decrease in water quality. This is especially exacerbated in the Pacific SIDS due to the fragility and vulnerability of the water lenses on atoll islands. Common vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue and other major killers such as malnutrition and diarrhoea are also likely to become even more serious if the climate change trends are confirmed over the forthcoming decades.

We together must improve our efforts today in order to be better prepared to cope with the challenges of tomorrow

The period 2006-2011 has seen increased support for, and intervention in the region's water and sanitation sector. This unprecedented growth has been guided largely by a number of strategic policy instruments including the Pacific Wastewater Policy and Wastewater Framework for Action (2001); the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Sustainable Water Management (2002) and the Pacific Framework for Action on Drinking Water Quality and Health (2005).

In 2006 water, sanitation and hygiene challenges facing the region were incorporated into the Pacific Plan. These policy documents are now in need of revision. It is timely to do this as we work towards the World Water Forum in France in March next year and the Third World Summit on Sustainable Development in Brazil in June (the so called Rio+20 Meeting).

In carrying out this important exercise it is key that the actions to address IWRM support to the participating countries, and work of the Pacific Water Partnership on Sustainable Water

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Management to ensure a more coordinated and strategic approach to water and sanitation activities in the region for the future.

Whilst there has been a period of unprecedented growth in support of water and sanitation activities in the region there remains a real challenge to secure adequate financial resources to continue into the future as many of these activities of necessity ongoing and yet remain project-funded. Sustainability is at risk.

I would like at this stage to extend appreciation first to the GEF and its implementation agents UNDP and UNEP for the ongoing Pacific IWRM Project. In particular I would like to recognise Al Duda the Senior GEF Adviser for the International Waters Focal Area. Al it does seem a long time since we last met but I do recall the seeds for this Project were sown in New York when we first met and convened two meetings with P SIDS Ambassadors.

Secondly I would like to acknowledge the European Union for their support to IWRM through the ongoing Project supporting national planning.

Of course there are other partners but I do appeal to all to be mindful that 2013 will see an end to the current project-funding cycle for many water and sanitation activities. This meeting is therefore key. A strategy for a way forward must start to emerge and I sincerely hope we can look forward to ongoing support from both the GEF and the EU.

It would be remiss of me at this stage not to highlight what I feel are three overlooked challenges both now and for the future:

- Developing and strengthening national capacities for hydrological services to enable the measurement of stream flows, water tables, drought sequences and floods, together with carrying out regular simple, reliable and robust water sampling and laboratory analyses.
- Increasing the use of rainwater harvesting.
- Overcoming the social barriers to the use of composting toilets, especially in areas where valuable freshwater is used for toilet flushing.

During the past year or so since you last assembled as a Regional Steering Committee, much has happened with the regional architecture especially at SPC and SOPAC. As you know, SOPAC is now a division of the SPC, and I will have more to share with you about this matter later in the meeting.

Suffice it to say at this moment that this has been a significant change for us, but – and I stress – does not in any regard diminish the new SPC organisation's commitment to member countries or our ability to support you in your water and sanitation efforts. In fact, it is more and more clear that the merger of SOPAC and SPC has in many ways strengthened our ability to support member countries, and has opened up new opportunities for collaboration – many of which we

are still discovering and will continue to discover.

Before I close I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge some changes in the Water and Sanitation Programme of the SOPAC Division. In particular, the departure of Marc Overmars the former head of the Water and Sanitation Programme. He had been with us for over 10 years and his efforts over the years need to be recognised.

Life must go on, and I am very pleased to advise you that the DG of SPC has very recently appointed Ms Rhonda Robinson as a Deputy Director in the SOPAC Division with responsibility for Water and Sanitation. Rhonda is no stranger to you, she has worked for over ten years on water and sanitation issues, many of those years as an officer in SOPAC. I am sure on behalf of us all I can extend best wishes to her in her new role and the challenges it will bring for her in the years ahead.

In closing I would like to acknowledge that many of you have travelled vast distances to come here, and taken valuable time away from your in-country work. The expense in time and dollars involved in making a meeting like this happen is considerable. But we wouldn't do it if face-to-face meetings like this were not valuable. Especially at this time of planning for the future.

It is up to us all to make sure we well and truly recoup the investment in this week in terms of implementation of improved water and sanitation outcomes in each of your countries. Please use this meeting well. Ask questions, make useful contacts, grill experts, and share your knowledge and experience.

I look forward to spending time with you all individually over the coming week, and wish you every success in your efforts to contribute to securing safe water and sanitation for the people of the Pacific.

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Dr Russell Howorth

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