

Opening Address - 3rd Session of the Pacific Platform for Disaster Risk Management

Written by Administrator

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Check Against Delivery

Honourable Minister, Craig Foss, Minister for Civil Defence & Emergency Management and Chair of the 2011 Pacific Platform for Disaster Risk Management; Honourable Minister Mark Brown, Minister Finance, Cook Islands, Representatives of national, regional and international organisations,
Colleagues, old friends and new friends,

On behalf of the Director General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), Dr Jimmie Rodgers, I have the privilege to welcome to the 3rd Session of the Pacific Platform for Disaster Risk Management.

It is almost exactly 10 years that a meeting of the Pacific regional disaster management community was last held in Auckland and in this very venue and on your behalf I would like to express our deepest and most sincere gratitude, through the Honourable Minister, to the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management (MCDEM) staff, and the people of New Zealand for hosting this event.

Colleagues

The Pacific Platform for DRM is co-convened by the SOPAC Division of the SPC together with UN-ISDR. It links to the global initiatives led the Global Platform for DRR which meets biennially and the 3rd session was held from 8th – 13th May this year in Geneva Switzerland. I am pleased to acknowledge that the Pacific Islands voice was heard loud and clear at this year's Global Platform.

At the outset let me acknowledge the invaluable support for this meeting provided by many partner organisations in addition to MCDEM, that have made this meeting possible: UNISDR, SPREP, The Asia Foundation, USAID, UNDP Pacific Centre, UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs, International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies, World Bank GFDRR, AusAID, the European Union and the French Pacific Fund. I would also like to acknowledge the offer of MCDEM to provide the rapporteuring support to this meeting.

I extend a special welcome this morning to the representatives of Pacific Island countries and territories and to those that are joining us for the first time since the SOPAC work programme commenced operation on 1 January this year as a new and largest Division of the SPC. With this transition into the SPC comes a growth in membership and for our francophone colleagues I am pleased that interpretation services are available for the meeting. Last year representatives from French Polynesia and Wallis & Futuna joined the meeting for the first time. This year I am pleased to acknowledge the presence of representatives from Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, New Caledonia and Pitcairn Islands.

It is my pleasure to offer a special welcome to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the UN Resident Coordinator in Fiji. I also extend a special welcome to colleagues from the Caribbean who has once again honoured us by their presence. The delegation is headed by an old friend of mine, Jeremy Collymore, Director of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA).

I would also like to welcome another new country to our disaster partnership, Timor Leste. Timor Leste is a member of the Pacific ACP Group, and SPC will shortly be able to commence formal engagement with Timor Leste in Disaster Risk Management through support from the European Union. Unfortunately they could not make it to this meeting.

Colleagues,

Recent major events in the Pacific islands occurred in April 2007 when a magnitude 8 earthquake and tsunami occurred in the western Solomon Islands costing the country an estimated US\$90 million, equivalent to 90% of their year's operating budget; in January 2009 flooding in western Viti Levu, Fiji, families and small businesses in sample areas in Nadi and Ba alone lost an estimated US\$160 million (7% GDP); and in September 2009, the magnitude 8 earthquake and tsunami in American Samoa, Samoa and Tonga, a result of which the Samoa Government estimated the losses at US\$104 million (more than 5% GDP); and in January 2010 when a magnitude 7.2 earthquake and tsunami occurred again in the western Solomon Islands with costs still to be assessed. All except the latest event included loss of lives.

In recently released 2011 SOPAC/Cook Islands report the costs attributed to 24 cyclones since 1955 is estimated at US\$47 million. In February 2010 Cyclone Pat impacted Aitutaki damaging 78% of the buildings and devastating local agriculture, the recovery and reconstruction programme is estimated at NZ\$9.5 million and this figure does not include estimates for items such as loss of employment or tax revenue.

Likewise a recent SOPAC/Vanuatu report that acknowledged Vanuatu has established a contingency plan that has been costed at VT540 million for Gaua, an active volcanic island in the north which has been showing signs of increased activity in recent times. This plan would include the relocation of all the 2,700 people living on the island, and emphasises not so much

the costs but the need for easy access to funds should they be required.

I am sure we will here at this meeting updated costs on recent events in New Zealand, Australia and Japan from our colleagues from those countries..

Colleagues,

I wish to now emphasise that this 3rd Platform Meeting is about all stakeholders engaging in an ongoing interactive dialogue to better inform, hone and focus our perspectives for the benefit of the island communities we all serve. Those communities we all serve, which for the SPC/SOPAC Division includes all Pacific island countries and territories, continue to face significant challenges.

In 1992, nearly 20 years ago in Rio, and subsequently in Barbados two years later those significant challenges were recognised. The “Special Case” in sustainable development attributed to Small Island Developing States was agreed. Next year 2012 in Rio, that Special Case I am sure will be reaffirmed. It still exists, the vulnerability, and risks experienced by communities on small islands has not gone away in the past two decades despite huge efforts by all. In fact there is a strong case that the vulnerability and associated risks are increasing, whilst capacity to cope is not. Vulnerabilities and risks in the environmental, social and economic areas of development continue. For the Pacific the unique context of vast ocean space that both unites us and divides us is a vital element of the “special case.”

Building resilience in our blue ocean world, is crucial as the recent global fuel, food and financial crises have demonstrated.

On the issue of vulnerability and risk, in 1982 some ten years before the Rio Summit and nearly 30 years ago, I had the privilege to address the then SOPAC Governing Council members on the topic of erosion focusing on landslides and coastal erosion. If I may quote:

“Throughout history, erosion along with other continuing geological processes has influenced man and his activities, causing considerable losses and costs to life and property. The chance of this happening is expressed as risk. Risk is expected to increase in the future unless man modifies his activities in the light of an increased understanding of the processes at work”.
Unquote.

Colleagues, I ended that address by focusing on the issue of “The Level of Acceptable Risk”, and of course who is responsible for determining the level of acceptable risk. It is within that context of risk that I will now address our collective task here at this Platform Meeting.

There is no such circumstance as “No Risk”. Having accepted that as a reality, the task at hand is to “Know Risk” In other words it is our collective responsibility to work together to assemble all the necessary data and information leading to knowledge and a better understanding of risk, and ultimately the determination of the level of acceptable risk.

Who determines the level of acceptable risk? The answer of course differs around the region.

For sure it is not the SOPAC Division's responsibility. The SOPAC Division's task is to provide the platform for informing all stakeholders including through interactive dialogue such as this Meeting will provide.

Colleagues...

A key outcome of this meeting is to consider and hopefully adopt a "Roadmap" to develop an integrated regional strategy for Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change ready for endorsement in 2015.

At present you will be aware that the regional policies guiding work on disasters and climate change are the Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Framework for Action, and the Pacific Islands Framework for Action on Climate Change. Both these regional policies, endorsed by leaders in 2005, run their course by 2015.

Over the recent years we have for sure witnessed a growth in activity in relation to disasters and climate change adaptation and mitigation. At national and also sub-national level this is becoming quite evident and since last year conversations on risk and on climate in the Pacific have cited the pioneering efforts of Tonga in integrating their approaches to climate change and disaster management with the endorsement by Cabinet of a Joint National Action Plan.

Other countries are also integrating their approaches with progress now being made in the Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Niue and Tuvalu. Fiji and the Federated States of Micronesia are poised to also move forward with integration. The efforts of these countries have seen a major groundswell of support from the numerous regional and global partners.

I have mentioned the strong Pacific voice at the Global Platform for DRR in Geneva in May. Within the region there have been a number of recent opportunities for discussions where disaster reduction and climate change have been a focus and provided a response to the Forum leaders wishes. In late February a high level dialogue facilitated by the EU involving a number of Leaders and officials converged on Vanuatu and discussed the integration of disaster and climate risk initiatives. This was followed by discussions a few weeks later at the Pacific Climate Change Roundtable in Niue. In June, Pacific Health Ministers, at their meeting in the Solomon Islands acknowledged the critical importance of the need to coordinate activities and to develop national linkages between the disaster and health sectors and encouraged that multi-sectoral training on disaster and emergency management continue. In October last year the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (crop) met for the first time at CEO level as subcommittee on Climate Change.

The success of these initiatives depends on consistent and ongoing interaction and dialogue between key stakeholders within a "whole of country approach" together with dialogue with development partners.

It is crucial that this interaction and dialogue ensures an improved enabling environment that does indeed provide for cost effective implementation so that no regrets adaptation strategies

are in place and maladaptation avoided.

Furthermore, in order to provide for cost effective implementation so that no regrets adaptation strategies are in place it is vital to understand the current situation on the ground. Data collection, historical and ongoing through sound monitoring programmes must underpin the knowledge base upon which no regrets adaptation strategies can be designed. Otherwise, costly mistakes are inevitable. Pacific island countries and territories will need technical capacity building and in many cases capacity supplementation in order to establish and achieve the adequacy of these information databases.

The development over the past two years of the regional risk database by SOPAC and supported by the ADB and World Bank is in my view unique as a first information database of its kind. It will be launched here this week and I am sure all will agree this work needs to continue.

Colleagues,

Over the past two years progress has been made, for example in areas such as agriculture and education, and these will be shared this week. Opportunities for training and capacity building in DRM now build on a firm foundation of training courses available at regional and national level through to tertiary level and potential for on-line learning is now being explored.

The meeting will also hear of community level efforts and also specifically how humanitarian response is being streamlined and strengthened. The meeting will also hear how the penetration of disaster risk in national and sub national development planning and decision-making frameworks is progressing. Early warning systems for a range of hazards are often talked about but sometimes people are not too certain of exactly what exists by way of support in this area. The state of play in relation to early warning systems will be presented this week.

In terms of challenges that we face moving forward, these unfortunately present themselves on a number of fronts and remain largely the same. I reiterated these at the Global Platform in May in my address to the Heads of Intergovernmental Organisations Meeting and they include:

- The challenge of integrating disaster management and climate change mainstreaming is on going.
- The need to have more precise baselines of data and information to inform disaster management and development decision-making.
- Limited response mechanisms for disasters.
- Weak capacity in providing end-to-end early warning services for flood, drought, tsunami, and other hazards.
- Limited implementation of national disaster risk management priority activities already identified.
- Untapped potential in regional and national partnerships to support disaster risk management; insufficient training and capacity building at the regional and national level.

SPC/SOPAC Division hopes to be able to capture many of the positive developments, experiences and outstanding challenges in the upcoming regional synthesis report on the

implementation progress of the Pacific DRR and DM Framework for Action and the global Hyogo Framework for Action for the period 2009 - 2011.

Colleagues

Let me draw my Opening Address to a conclusion by providing you with some language that you may wish to consider for inclusion in the record of this Platform Meeting and conveyed beyond these four walls and maybe to our Leaders.

In order to reduce risk and vulnerability of Pacific island countries and territories the following are critical cross-cutting issues that need to be addressed in an integrated manner at national level and supported by the SPC and other regional and international partners:

- Regardless of how climatic patterns may change, the impacts of natural hazards must be managed now and on a day-to-day basis, and in order to do so it is key to understand the vulnerability and risks and build this knowledge into decision-making at all levels.
- Global climate change is a critical issue for PICTs, and adaptation and mitigation of the adverse effects of climate change is the common context for addressing this. However natural hazards and climate-associated problems exist for all PICTs today. These hazards contribute to the increasing vulnerability of natural environments of PICTs. It is essential that PICTs secure and maintain their natural environments in as healthy and resilient state as possible to ensure that they can cope not only with the natural hazards of today but also ensure effective protection against potential future hazards and changes in climate.
- Increasing populations and their desire for development has escalated negative impacts, it is therefore critical that land and coastal and ocean resources, including infrastructure, development and management strategies can cope with further development pressures and impacts, and in order to do so easy to use, up to date, information management GIS-based systems integrated across all sectors at national level supported by appropriate regional mechanisms are essential.
- Increasing infrastructure, responding to globalisation and international trade, including tourism, are now part of development in the Pacific, and PICTs that are already naturally vulnerable due to their geographic isolation and small size amidst a vast ocean world are now forced to contend with these impacts in addition to the everyday day-to-day land, coastal and ocean resource use management problems.

Allow me to finish with a few lines from the poem "To Risk" by William Arthur Ward

*To laugh is to risk appearing a fool,
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.*

*To reach out to another is to risk involvement,
To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.*

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To place your ideas and dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return,

To live is to risk dying,

To hope is to risk despair,

To try is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.

I wish you all well for the success of this 3rd Disaster Risk Management Platform Meeting. As I said earlier it is the opportunity for all of us engaging in an ongoing interactive dialogue to better inform, hone and focus our perspectives for the benefit of the island communities we all serve. If we do not take that opportunity we each risk nothing, do nothing, have nothing and are nothing.

Thank you.

Dr. Russell Howorth, Director, Applied Geoscience & Technology Division, Secretariat of the Pacific Community

(Auckland Holiday Inn, 1st August 2011)