

Tuesday 15 November, 2011 – Opening Address by Dr Russell Howorth – Director of the SOPAC Division, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)

Colleagues, may I start by first welcoming you all to the Second Annual Partners Meeting for the Supporting Disaster Risk Reduction in the Pacific Project for the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) and funded by the EU from the 9th European Development Fund.

You will of course all be aware that this Project is benefitting from the outcome of the Regional Institutional Reform process (otherwise known as the RIF process) which has resulted in SOPAC the Commission becoming SOPAC the Applied Geoscience and Technology Division of the SPC from January 1st of this year.

The Project is a clear recognition of the emerging ties between SOPAC and the OCTs as it represents the first dedicated opportunity for SOPAC's services to be made available directly to French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Pitcairn and Wallis and Futuna.

In my Opening Address to the recent First SOPAC Division Meeting held here in Nadi just one month ago. I could not resist the temptation to find an appropriate quote in French to start my Introduction. About 1850 Victor Hugo, the renowned French writer wrote: *On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées*

Paraphrased this translates to something like "No power on Earth can stop an idea whose time has come".

For sure we are at a watershed in the region. The time has come to integrate the work programmes of the former SOPAC and the former SPC. The two largest technical regional organisations, the single largest regional reform ever attempted. We must now seek to seize the opportunity the "new SPC organisation" has to offer by way of improved service delivery of technical work to the Members here in the region. This Project for the OCTs clearly is a manifestation of that opportunity.

The SOPAC Division has a new Strategic Plan 2011-2015 (also accessible on the SOPAC website and in French) which outlines the core work of the SOPAC Division to include three technical work programmes, five technical support services and an on-campus corporate service.

The technical work programmes are: Ocean and Islands, Water and Sanitation, and Disaster Reduction. The technical support services are: Natural Resource Economics, GIS and Remote

Sensing, Technical Equipment and Services, Data Management and Publications and Library.

A key initiative is the inclusion of four high order 'key result areas' (KRAs) that link the work of the technical programmes and technical support services to deliver integrated outcomes:

- KRA 1: Natural Resources, Systems and Processes Monitored and Assessed
- KRA 2: Natural Resources Developed and Managed and Governance Strengthened
- KRA 3: Vulnerability and Risks Managed
- KRA 4: Service into Member Countries and the Division Efficiently and Effectively Delivered

The inclusion of these KRAs also provides a strong entry point for interlinkage and synergy with the work of the other SPC divisions, as well as other stakeholders nationally, regionally and internationally. I hope in due course, that along with the Joint Country Strategy process countries have engaged in with SPC to date, that SOPAC's work programme and benefits to be derived from it will in due course for the OCTs become integrated into your national development agendas.

The goal of SOPAC is to apply geoscience and technology to realise new opportunities for improving the livelihoods of Pacific communities.

Although implemented by the Disaster Reduction Programme this projects clearly has direct benefits from interlinkages and synergies with the two other technical programmes.

For French Polynesia, the Project is working to reduce two types of risks faced by the country: tsunamis in the Marquesas archipelago and cyclonic waves in the Tuamotus. Both initiatives will seek to reinforce the safety of populations: in the Marquesas by repairing sirens and developing local capacity to maintain them, and in the Tuamotus by identifying precise zones at risk and refining building codes.

For Wallis and Futuna, the Project is looking to enhance the safety of its people and infrastructure in the face of natural disasters in particular tsunamis.

For New Caledonia, the Project is looking to reduce public health risks resulting from contaminated drinking water, inadequate sanitation and drought, through enhancing the safety of drinking water and bridging the sanitation gap which puts the population and the lagoon (a UNESCO World-Heritage site) at risk.

For Pitcairn, the Project will focus on building resilience to longer, and more severe periods of drought the effects of which can be devastating on many fronts, including crop production, and drinking water consumption. The Project will be closely monitoring its climate, weather and

water resources and use this information to bolster the island's water catchment, storage, treatment and distribution capacity. Pitcairn is also enhancing its water and meteorology governance arrangements.

Colleagues,

In 2010, the Pacific Small Island Developing States five-year review of the Mauritius Strategy for Further Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of SIDS (MSI+5) found that since the Rio Meeting in 1992 our vulnerability has increased whilst our capacity to cope has not. This has been due in no small part to the additional pressures of climate change, climate variability and sea-level rise which have been compounded by the international fuel, food and financial crises. These new pressures have exacerbated those that were identified in 1992 at the First World Conference on Environment and Development in Rio..

Pacific islands share much in common. However, each have their own particular challenges and opportunities, many of which stem from the largest shared resource, the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific islands have, are, and will continue forever to exist in a Blue World, the vast Pacific Ocean, which comprises over 95% of the sovereign territory and over which they have stewardship in the interest of the Global Commons.

Socially, the context of widespread small communities on generally small if not tiny islands provided, and still largely does provide, the basis for the traditional and cultural social fabric. The ocean provides food (and a large part of the global community), it endangers (cyclones, storm surges, and tsunamis), and underpins the many challenges faced (isolation from markets, high cost of imports and exports, cost of internal transport) and opportunities for economic development (tourism, fisheries, seabed minerals).

In summary, vulnerability is increasing. Capacity to cope is not. There is an urgent need to build resilience in order to manage the risks better.

Let me now highlight the issue of "The Level of Acceptable Risk", and of course who is responsible for determining the level of acceptable risk. 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 SPC's responsibility. The SPC's task is to provide the platform for informing all stakeholders, including through dialogue such as we are now engaged in here at this Annual Partners Meeting for the Supporting Disaster Risk Reduction in Pacific OCTs.

I recognise the rich and varied the experience and knowledge in this room this morning. To the delegates from the territories I know you have much to contribute to the region when it comes to managing disaster risk and public health risk. Do not let the language barrier hinder us, rather with the assistance of our interpreters let it enrich the discussions.

SOPAC for its part will facilitate the exchanges between OCTs and other Pacific island countries, in this instance in particular Fiji. The fieldtrips and site visits, which are a key part of this meeting provide for south-south intraregional lessons learnt sharing that the Project intends to foster.

So what are some of the lessons to be learnt here in the region for this Project to build upon:

- Firstly, and quite simply in my mind, let's not be complacent. Worse still we must not attribute all our vulnerabilities to the impacts of climate change.
- Secondly, we know we are vulnerable and we will continue to be vulnerable, climate change will only make matters worse. We must cope with the realities of today if we are to be better prepared for tomorrow.
- Thirdly, in order to be prepared we must address the risks these vulnerabilities expose us to.
- Fourthly, in order to address these risks and assist communities to determine the acceptability of the risk we must understand, and integrated programmes of data collection are needed supported by information databases extending across all sectors.
- Finally, people must work together and herein lies the value of the SOPAC Division and the new SPC generally. Lots of sectors are now able to work together within a single institution to support the island Members improve their efforts.

I mentioned the issue of complacency, and it is appropriate to point out that our region does have its own examples of failing.

In drawing my opening Address to a close, I would like now to acknowledge the generous contribution of the European Commission to this Project, having provided 5.068 million Euros. I would also like to acknowledge the considerable progress made by the Project over the past 18 months – the challenging beginning is now behind us.

Both the SOPAC Project team and the territories have worked collaboratively and relentlessly – initial successes show that we are on the right track for example with the signature of contribution agreements with all four territories – 3.22 million Euros to benefit territorial efforts in risk reduction; participation of territories in regional disaster risk management platform meetings and in water/sanitation regional consultations); progress to be consolidated over the remainder of the project life. The possibility of a no cost extension for another year (2013) is a reflection from both EU and the OCTs of the considerable progress made.

Let me assure you all that we in the SOPAC Division are committed to learning from this Project and that we will be responsive to the new challenges we face. We look forward to moving forward on the Project and at the same time seek out and secure new opportunities to serve the OCTs in the years ahead.

2nd Annual Partners' Meeting – Supporting Disaster Risk Reduction in Pacific OCTs Project

Written by Administrator

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Finally, I would like to thank you all for your attention and wish you all well for a fruitful meeting and rich exchanges. I look forward to reading a summary of outcomes from the meeting.