

World Water Day 2010

Communicating Opportunities and Challenges- Safe Water for a Healthy Pacific

**Address by the SOPAC Director Dr Russell Howorth
Nadi, Fiji Islands, 26th March 2010**

Your Excellency Ambassador Chin, Commissioner Western Joeli Cawaki, Distinguished Guests and School Children, Good Morning.

I would like to welcome you all to the celebration of this year's World Water Day, which has the theme: Clean Water for a Healthy World. You may be aware that World Water Day has been celebrated annually since 1992 as an outcome of the World Summit on Environment and Development held in Rio, Brazil.

It is organised globally by the United Nations, and here in the Pacific SOPAC has coordinated activities with and on behalf of its island member countries and partners, and in particular I would like to acknowledge Live and Learn Environmental Education as SOPAC's longstanding partner in organising World Water Day and Taiwan ROC as a longstanding donor partner. Being the host government of the SOPAC Secretariat since it was established in 1975 Fiji has been particularly active in World Water Day. This year however is the first year we have brought the focus of the celebration to the Western Division .

For the Pacific, SOPAC and Live and Learn have expanded the global theme for 2010 into "Communicating Opportunities and Challenges- Safe Water for a Healthy Pacific". Obviously the World Water Day event itself addresses the issue of communicating opportunities. So let me at the outset begin by making a few observations in regard to the challenges in the context of safe water for a healthy Pacific.

Did you know the following?

- 6.7 million cases of diarrhoea occur in the Pacific region every year, a region with just over 10 million inhabitants..
- Less than half the people of the Pacific have access to safe water and proper sanitation.
- Only one in eight (12%) Pacific islanders have access to a piped water system, and slightly more (16%) still use open defecation in the bush, the beach, and/or the ocean on a regular basis.
- The impacts of recent natural disasters on water quality, outbreaks of typhoid in Fiji and Samoa, and a cholera epidemic in Papua New Guinea show that access to clean, safe water continues to be a major challenge in the Pacific.

Here in Fiji just 10 days after Cyclone Tomas the daily papers earlier this week contained at least 10 news items with headlines including:

- Diarrhoea Worries
- Diarrhoea scare in affected areas
- Team monitors island diarrhoea outbreak
- Typhoid Workshop for Villagers
- Call for Water Test
- Store Water in Clean Containers
- Water Safety Rules
- Unsafe Water the Silent Killer
- Water is Life, Conserve it

Here in the Western Division only a year ago you were reeling from the impacts of flooding and I am sure many of you gained first hand experience of the vital importance of secure access to adequate safe clean drinking water and hygienic sanitation services.

When we know all this, it is clear that much more attention is needed for water supply, sanitation and hygiene in the Pacific region. Ironically we might ask ourselves what is there to celebrate! Yet it is through World Water Day that the United Nations as well as SOPAC is attempting to raise the awareness of the importance of water quality for human health and environmental health, and reducing poverty. Globally this is recognised as a crucial issue in order for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.

SOPAC is the lead regional organisation supporting the Pacific island countries in the water sector. In order to achieve effective and efficient support to its Pacific island members and in turn “making a difference” at the community level SOPAC works in partnership with many stakeholders.

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For example the **Pacific WASH Coalition**. SOPAC has mobilised partners in the region to coordinate activities in the Pacific region on water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and established the “Pacific WASH Coalition”. Partners in the coalition include the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI), the Fiji School of Medicine (FSMed), Live and Learn Environmental Education (LLEE), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC).

Good water quality also sustains healthy ecosystems, which in turn leads to improved human well-being. Healthy water systems are less prone to environmental stresses like sedimentation and flooding and provide numerous environmental services to communities.

In a recently completed regional review of sustainable development in Pacific island countries 2005-2010 carried out by the ESCAP Pacific Operations Centre based in Suva, it was highlighted that the conservation and management of watersheds, groundwater and collection and storage of rainwater are critical to sustaining human settlement especially on the smaller islands. Historically however, there has remained the problem of poor supply and quality of freshwater resources, a lack of adequate sanitation, and a limited capacity to deal with these issues. At the national level there are often a multitude of agencies that deal with water and the fragmented management of this resource is compounded with a lack of overarching policy, outdated laws, and poor administration capacity.

Commitment to water resource monitoring and assessment) remains weak at best with most Pacific island countries having little measured hydrological and groundwater data to better manage their resource and provide design data for infrastructural projects especially given climate change and the adaption measures necessary to mitigate the direct effects.

At SOPAC we promote a very relevant phrase *“You cannot manage what you don’t measure”*, a very potent statement given the growing water issues in the region.

The current situation in Fiji is a very real example of all these historic weaknesses. Anyone living in the urban and periurban areas of Suva for example who are continually facing water cuts, even though it is raining heavily outside, are witnesses to this chronic reality. And an even greater reality that must be acknowledged is that there is no “quick fix” solution.

Likewise another lesson from the history books. Where as a result of lack of planning over recent decades development has spread onto low lying areas of river flood plains surrounding meandering river channels that are subject to periodic flooding, it should not come as a surprise that events occur such as the January 2009 floods here in Nadi and Ba. Equally, important once again is to understand the fact that spending large amounts of money on dredging such as is currently being proposed may not solve the problem. Indeed it may make matters worse, as we simply do not understand the hydrology or hydraulic morphology of the rivers, their deltas or nearshore conditions enough to predict that dredging is the best sustainable solution.

Without robust long term hydrological and hydraulic river channel data including sediment transport rates being available, mathematical modelling cannot be undertaken to provide accurate predictions on the effects of flooding for critical return periods and the best

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engineering, economic and social solutions for mitigation works be it levees, dredging or bypass channelling. . That information and knowledge is vital to designing successful dredging programmes, factoring in climate change scenarios, and to allow for post dredging surveys to be repeated to assess how effective it is and how it might be improved.

To address these issues SOPAC is working with the Nadi Basin Catchment Committee and relevant government departments, and local authorities to improve flood preparedness and integrate land and water management planning. Some of the activities include:

- Improvement of rainfall and hydrological events monitoring to improve flood forecasting;
- Development of a Nadi Basin Catchment Committee and Flood Management Plan;
- Awareness raising on flooding resilience for local communities and other stakeholders.

This World Water Day has a strong focus on improving water supply and sanitation, but we must be mindful that hydrology extends beyond water supply and sanitation and flooding issues, and provides data essential to many facets of life in Fiji, including road and bridge design, urban drainage, hydroelectricity supply, irrigation, and tourism to name a few.

In Fiji, SOPAC is working with the new Water Authority and the Ministry of Health to improve the safety of drinking water supplies and the protection of water sources.

I will now turn my attention to some regional activities being implemented by SOPAC.

A Water Quality Monitoring (WQM) capacity building programme is being jointly implemented by SOPAC with WHO and the USP Institute of Applied Sciences. The main objective of the programme is to build sustainable national capacity for monitoring the quality of drinking water, surface water, ground water and coastal waters. Four pilot countries (Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Niue, and Vanuatu) have been provided with basic water testing equipment and in-country training on best laboratory practice.

The **Pacific Drinking Water Safety Planning Programme** is a joint initiative of WHO and SOPAC. The programme, now in its second phase is focusing on promoting a risk management approach for the provision of safe water supply through pilots in four member countries (Cook Islands, Palau, Tonga and Vanuatu).

Wastewater Management Training Courses address the Guiding Principles of the Pacific Wastewater Policy and Framework for Action and is being implemented by a consortium of SOPAC, USP-Institute of Applied Sciences, International Oceans Institute, UNESCO-IHE, GPA/UNEP and UN Department of Ocean Affairs and Law of the Sea (UN/DOALOS). The first series of training courses held in Suva, Guam and Port Moresby have been followed up through additional courses in Kiribati and Tonga.

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I have mentioned but a very few examples of what is going on in the region by way of implementation to contribute to “making a difference’ at both national and community level.

As I have also mentioned a great deal more time and effort and necessary resources are needed to ensure all the people of the region are provided with that security of access to safe water.

In closing, I would wish you all a successful half-day with us here to celebrate World Water Day 2010. My staff are here to be of assistance and do not hesitate to ask them any questions or to seek clarifications about SOPAC’s role both here in Fiji or in the region generally. They will also attempt to provide answers to queries in regard to our partners and partnerships, or they will at the very least point you to places especially accessible on the internet where your questions may be answered.

Finally I would like again to thank you all for your presence here today. In particular to the representative of the Trade Mission of Taiwan, Ambassador Chin for being our Chief Guest and to you the young children of the Western Division who represent the key target audience for this World Water Day 2010 event.