



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

**Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction
Brisbane, Australia
19-22 September 2022**

Statement by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Australia Government and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction for the kind invitation extended to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to attend the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Reduction (APMCDRR) in Brisbane, Australia. As the most disaster-prone region in the world, we in the Pacific recognize that the APMCDRR is an important regional platform for learning on how best we can accelerate progress on the implementation of the Sendai Framework, and most importantly strengthen cooperation to reduce disaster risk.

The vulnerabilities of the Pacific Island countries (PICs) to climate change are an established fact. We are at the forefront of climate change and disasters impacts, and our countries are consistently at the top of the global risk ranking. Currently, three Pacific Island countries make up the list of the three most at-risk countries in the world¹. Our countries are frequently exposed to many extreme natural events and when we are impacted by them, the effects are devastating economically and socially particularly on our most vulnerable – our women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Recent estimates indicated that the average annual economic cost of disasters to PICs from 2018- 2020 was USD 1.075 billion or nearly 5% of the combined GDP of PICs². For some PICs, particularly Palau, Tonga and Vanuatu, they are at risk of losing more than 10% of their GDP annually to disaster³. Given that most PICs are already facing shrinking fiscal spaces and are now at risk for being in high debt distress – compounded by the impacts of COVID-19, building comprehensive resilience across all levels and facets of their economy is critical.

As the premier political and economic regional organization for the Pacific, PIFS has been responsible in ensuring a coordinated regional effort towards its disaster risk reduction and disaster management agenda. Linked to the implementation of the Sendai Framework is the advancement of the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific 2017 – 2030 (FRDP)⁴ objectives. The FRDP through its attendant implementation mechanism - the Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP) provides coordinated support towards building resilience to climate change and disasters. While the FRDP is to undergo its own midterm review, indications are that some progress has been made particularly in pushing through a regional, coordinated integrated approach to climate change and disasters at the national level as evident in their

¹ Vanuatu 1; Solomon Islands 2; Tonga 3

² ESCAP (2020) The Disaster Riskscape across the Pacific Small Developing States: Key Takeaways for Stakeholders. ST/ESCAP/2880.

³ *ibid*

⁴ The FRDP supports an integrated approach to building resilience to climate change and disasters. It was approved by Pacific leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum in September 2016.

various national Climate Change Policies, Joint National Action Plans for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (JNAPs), revisions to Disaster Risk and Climate Change legislation being implemented. Additionally, our Forum Economic Ministers have endorsed the development of a Regional Disaster Risk Finance Roadmap and to include guidelines on the formulation of National DRF Strategies. This follows the example of countries such as Fiji, Tonga and Samoa that have developed separate Disaster Risk Financing Strategies to pursue a more targeted approach to strengthening their financial protection against disasters. Other indications of progress include the increase in support for international cooperation to Pacific countries through investments in strengthening the accuracy and availability risk information, early warning systems, water security and other areas of resilience strengthening.

Moreover, our recent experiences dealing simultaneously with COVID-19 and disasters such as cyclones, volcanoes, earthquakes have made us to be more vigilant on the multifaceted risks faced by the region. At the regional level, we established the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway for COVID-19 (PHP-C) to help facilitate the movement of much needed medical supplies and equipment to enable our countries to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. We also continue to progress the development of a Regional Humanitarian and Disaster Response mechanism as requested specifically by our leaders through the Boe Declaration Action Plan. Such a mechanism once fully operational will significantly enhance our efforts at coordination and ensure that we can provide the relevant assistance to those who need it the most within the shortest possible timeframes. This has now been complemented in December 2021 by a renewed emphasis on the importance of disaster preparedness planning as articulated by the Pacific's Foreign Ministers.

Ensuring that no one is left behind and that we reach the 'last mile' has always been a key principle of integration under the FRDP. A people-centered approach in fact underpins the FRDP's three (3) main goals. To ensure that our regional approach is owned and benefits our people, civil society partners and communities have been explicitly recognized in our various regional frameworks as key stakeholders that needs to be involved in the design as well as their implementations. A very good example of this is the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy endorsed by Pacific leaders in July 2022 that provides an overarching guide for the resilient and sustainable development of the Pacific region for the next 30 years. PIFS will play a critical role in coordinating this ambitious regional effort to ensure that it yields the vision it contains.

Effectively dealing with climate and disaster resilience in an integrated manner in the Pacific is an ongoing priority of PIFS. New tools and guidance have emerged to support the integration of climate and disaster risk in the context of development in the Pacific. For example, at the regional level the Pacific Resilience Standards have been developed to strengthen the quality and integrity of resilience interventions. In Fiji efforts are progressing with a climate budget tracking tool that will enable greater transparency and accountability in the use of climate change and disaster risk funding. In Tonga, disaster risk financing, climate financing and risk mainstreaming, have gained momentum through an Aid Management & Resilient Development Finance Division established in 2021 under their Ministry of Finance. This unit is now positioned to co-lead the integration of resilience across government agencies and other stakeholders. This is also the case for the Solomon Islands where the Ministry of Finance has established a unit to coordinate and manage their climate change and disaster finance efforts.

Although PICs have undertaken the institutionalization of integration, the challenge now is to maintain a consistency of effort. However, there continues to be institutional and capacity issues across PICs. Our governments are challenged to retain skilled staff and the turnover can be significant resulting in loss of critical institutional memory. On another level, the continued siloed nature of global climate change and disaster risk discourse translates to duplication of actions at the national level which our capacity

constrained bureaucracies are challenged to coordinate and manage. The continued approaches to separately develop national climate change policies and plans and disaster risk reduction plans also continues to hinder the integration agenda in the Pacific.

Despite these challenges, there are some critical opportunities which PICs can pursue to strengthen their national as well as regional actions to strengthen their integration agenda. These include the need for strong regional leadership to champion the shared vision of resilience for PICs, fostering a culture of learning which is reflected in the continuous examination of our systems and processes that can bring greater efficiencies so that the burden of continuity and sustainability of resilience effort is maintained, and strengthening of local capacity to collate and communicate robust contextualized data and information in manners that will result in informed decision making.

For the Pacific, our policy commitments and related initiatives have bolstered our efforts to effectively address the implementation of the Sendai Framework. Moreover, the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent disasters in the region have increased investments in risk information and efforts to access financing for resilience building and disaster response. This has consequently put us in a better position to address the intent of the Sendai Framework. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a wake-up call for the Pacific Island region; acknowledging that our previous risk reduction, preparedness, and response efforts need to be significantly enhanced if we are to effectively deal with a multitude of disaster risks. We need to fully embrace and implement the 'Build Back Better' principle in our efforts; ensuring that all our systems of governance including policy, legislation, institutional arrangements, and financing mechanisms are oriented towards addressing multi-risk scenarios.

The APMCDRR is a good opportunity to strengthen our experiences and learning around disaster risk to help strengthen, in turn, policy and programming around resilience building. We always look forward to opportunities such as the APMCDRR to be able to share our regional experiences as well as learn from our partners in the Asia region. Through the sharing of knowledge and experience in resilience building, we can improve our prospects for addressing the increasingly more complex risk environment around us.

We again commend the Australian Government and UNDRR for continuing the invaluable efforts of connecting the Pacific region to this important regional platform.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
Suva, Fiji
2 September 2022