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The Future of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Framework for Pacific Regionalism¹

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the future of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. These are important topics to discuss at an important juncture in our region's history. Allow me to acknowledge the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Rajesh Chandra, and his staff for the warm welcome and for extending the invitation to me. This is the first public lecture that I have been engaged with since taking up office and I am sure it will not be the last. Let me state for the record that I have been in office for five months, so I seek your understanding that anything delivered here comes from within that limited time span.

Since taking up office, I have visited 10 countries and will visit the remaining six before the leaders meeting in September. It has been very useful for me to make face-to-face contact with the leaders, including key officials to whom the secretariat belongs. I also want to state that I have been given a term of three

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years in which to successfully implement the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. Let me assure you that I will be working very hard with my staff at the secretariat to ensure that we deliver on the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.

As a region, we face numerous shared challenges: managing our ocean and fisheries resources, our land-based natural resources, and trying to manage and mitigate the effects of climate change. Economic development remains elusive for the large part across the region, while dependence on development assistance remains high, and in some parts of our region it is necessary for the delivery of basic services.

There is unprecedented interest by a wide range of external actors in our region — some new, some old — and all have combined to present a crowded and complex geopolitical landscape. In addition, our regional architecture is more complex and varied than it once was. Part of this complexity arises from the way in which the regional architecture is governed and financed. Some regional institutions have members who are metropolitan countries and donor partners. Many regional institutions do work encouraged by or in response to their funding sources. These configurations present a complex regional architecture where geopolitics and finance play an important part. It is important that we, as individuals and citizens of the countries and territories of the Pacific, are aware of these complexities.

Against this backdrop, the Framework for Pacific Regionalism presents an opportunity, both for the region and for the Pacific Islands Forum. For the region, it presents an opportunity to work towards the deeper form of regionalism that was always envisaged under the Pacific Plan, but was not delivered on; a regionalism that would acknowledge and recognise our shared challenges, draw on our many shared strengths, build the political will to act collectively, and devise and carry out effective, collective solutions to these challenges — whether through technical or political means.

The Framework for Pacific Regionalism also signals or demands a number of shifts on the part of the Pacific Islands Forum. These include a greater political commitment to regionalism; a more inclusive Pacific Islands Forum; a forum that is open to robust and frank discussion about regionalism; and a secretariat to the Pacific Islands Forum that offers high-level policy advice to support and inform leaders' discussions and decisions.

I will begin this discussion by talking very broadly about the Framework for Pacific Regionalism and some of its key features. I will then say more about the shifts to the Pacific Islands Forum and its secretariat that the new framework signals. First, I will make a few introductory comments.

Introductory Comments

The first is a caveat: that it is important to recognise that regionalism must be about improving the lives of the people of the Pacific, and about fulfilling the goals and objectives set out in the framework. Regionalism cannot be pursued for its own sake. There must be some tangible benefit that it brings about. If regionalism is not doing this, then the strategy must be thoroughly evaluated.

It is worth pointing out that the debate and the discussion about regionalism and its benefit is ongoing. There is never a point where the value of regionalism is assumed. It is continually brought into question and challenged. Regionalism is by no means an assumed good. Regionalism is something that must be revised and revisited and made relevant and appropriate. Our role, and the role of those who work in regional institutions, is to ensure that regionalism remains relevant, and that it delivers tangible benefits to the people of the Pacific.

The second is that the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, and regionalism more generally, is not intended as a replacement for national effort. We will always, first and foremost, think and act as citizens of our own Pacific Island countries, no matter the level of regional integration in the Pacific. There is no doubting the primary sense of identity that we derive from our nationalities, from our culture and custom. There is often a perception that regionalism will somehow displace nationalism or do away with national sovereignty or identity. This is not, by any means, assumed under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, and it is also worth noting that the priorities that come about through the framework must complement national effort. Any encroachment on national sovereignty under the framework needs to be undertaken with the greatest caution.

Thirdly, in spite of these caveats, there is clearly a role for regionalism. I see our region as being one of great opportunity and promise. I said that we face numerous shared challenges, but that we also possess abundant natural and human resources. Our ability to deliver on our potential depends in large part on our ability to think and act collectively — not only at the political level, but also at the local level. Additionally, our collective voice at the global level on key issues to our region is of continuing importance to our collective well-being.

Fourthly, I earlier made mention of the regional architecture. What I would say in respect to the range of actors in the regional space — whether at regional level or sub-regional level, such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Polynesian Leaders Group and the Micronesian Leaders Summit, or whether they represent special interests as in the case of the parties to the Nauru Agreement — is that our goals and interests are fundamentally one and the same: we all want to improve the lives of the people of the Pacific and we all recognise that working collectively at some level can help to achieve that goal.

Finally, the role of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat amongst the range of regional institutions is clear. We have a mandate to carry out the wishes and the decisions of the leaders of the 16 independent forum countries of the Pacific. We also have a responsibility to provide leaders and officials with high quality policy advice in support of their work of making good regional public policy decisions. I am committed to ensuring that the forum secretariat delivers on these expectations, now and into the future. I also want to ensure that we have good working relationships with other regional and sub-regional institutions, to ensure that we are delivering effectively and efficiently on the regional agenda under the framework.

The forum secretariat's position in relation to Fiji is quite clear. Our position is to respect and support the decisions taken by forum leaders. We welcome the recent pronouncements by the Hon. Prime Minister of Fiji regarding their participation in all forum activities at the public service, technical and ministerial levels, and we look forward to advancing the work and development of the region together with Fiji. You would have noted in the media over the past week that Fiji's Supervisor of Elections recently led a Forum Election Observer mission to Bougainville, providing important technical and logistical leadership to the elections observation there. This is indeed encouraging for the forum and its secretariat.

I also wish to remind us of successful examples of regional cooperation where shared commitments and values have led to some tangible benefits. Our very own regional University of the South Pacific is a case in point. This university is not only the place that produces our next generation of leaders and thinkers, but it is a very important hub for interactions between peoples from right across our large and diverse region.

The Framework for Pacific Regionalism

You will recall that the eminent person, Sir Mekere Morauta, and his review team canvassed the opinions of over 700 people across the region and took in over 70 public submissions during the review of the Pacific Plan in 2013. It was a widely consultative process, and one which overwhelmingly called for an overhaul of the Pacific Plan. The review team noted that the plan was in many ways a highly productive regional strategy and that it was not delivering the kind of regionalism that was originally intended. There was little political buy-in from leaders, and the regional agenda was largely driven by officials and regional agencies. As a result, the number of so-called priorities produced

under the Pacific Plan was unworkable; in one year alone there had been up to 37 priorities presented to leaders at their annual meeting. In short, regionalism had lost its politics under the Pacific Plan.

One of the review team's major recommendations was to replace the Pacific Plan with the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, which has now been in place since its endorsement in Palau by the Pacific Islands Forum leaders in July 2014. As a strategy for delivering on regionalism, the framework is a flexible one. It contains a vision, and a set of values and objectives, as well as a process for identifying the region's public policy priorities. But it does not prescribe any specific priorities, as the Pacific Plan did. It does not set out a timetable for delivering on regionalism. It does not prescribe a particular form of regionalism for the Pacific to adopt or take up. This flexibility provides space — space for the region's citizens to voice their concerns and raise initiatives for leaders; space for a more robust dialogue at leaders' level about regionalism; and space for regionalism to progress at a pace that is appropriate and suited to the many stakeholders concerned.

A set of tests for regional action is identified in the framework. These tests are central to assessing and selecting the regional initiatives that will be put forward for leaders' consideration and discussion at their forum this year. These tests will help to ensure that initiatives have a regional character, which benefit people, and require political oversight. These tests will provide rigour to regional priorities. The specialist sub-committee on regionalism — with a make-up of representatives from Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, Australia and New Zealand, small islands states, civil society and the private sector, and with the secretary general as chair of the committee — is tasked with selecting a limited number of initiatives, submitted by citizens and organisations from within the region, for leaders to consider at their annual meeting later this year.

Monitoring and reporting on the framework will be a priority. In recognising this, we will need to develop a set of indicators and measures to ensure that we are making effective progress, so as to ensure that these measures are aligned to the sustainable development goals. This reporting will not be confined to the regional initiatives that arise from the framework. Reporting will also be carried out on the framework itself to ensure that we monitor and report on the 'state of regionalism', that is, to ascertain whether regionalism is effective and is delivering on the expected objectives.

I wish to highlight four features of the framework.

An Emphasis on Focused Political Conversations

Out of a recognition of the fact that regionalism had lost its politics under the Pacific Plan, the framework places an emphasis on creating the time and space for leaders to have open and robust discussions about regionalism — about what the regional agenda should be, about what forms of regionalism are appropriate, and about the pace at which regionalism should occur. The opportunity for leaders to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of regional approaches is fundamental to the success of the framework — without these conversations occurring at the political level, regionalism will not progress or deliver on expectations.

Changes to the Regional Architecture

The Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) structure, which is synonymous with Pacific regionalism, is not without its issues. The deeper form of regionalism called for by the framework requires a more coordinated approach and effective regional governance, including a set of financing arrangements, if it is to be effectively realised. At the core of this is analysis of how collective effort and action is best governed and incentivised. In short, we need to interrogate how the network of regional agencies can be better positioned to deliver on the framework, acknowledging that, at an institutional level, their specific mandates are clear.

The secretariat has already started work in this area by reviewing the CROP working groups, to ensure that these groups are well positioned to deliver on the regional agenda under the framework. We will also shortly carry out a review of all meetings that require the attendance of officials, ministers and leaders, to ensure that these meetings are relevant and effective, and worth the time taken by participants to actually attend, and that there is policy cohesion between meetings and the work of regional organisations. Most importantly, we are also conducting a review of the governance and financing arrangements of CROP with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, to ensure that these arrangements are also positioned to deliver on regionalism under the framework.

Greater Inclusiveness

The process for determining the region's priorities under the framework calls for any and all members of the Pacific Islands Forum community to submit ideas and concepts around key issues for the region. This marks a fundamental shift away from previous practice, whereby priorities were largely determined by officials or regional agencies, with very little consultation of the broader public. From our consultations thus far, the opening up of this process has been largely welcomed by regional civil society and private sector stakeholders.

A Shift in the Development Paradigm

The framework represents a major shift in the development paradigm. We are talking about a process whereby the region's priorities — political, social, economic, and developmental — will, over time, be determined primarily by the Pacific Islands Forum leaders through an open public policy process. This is a change to current practice. Presently, it is an uphill battle for leaders to articulate and put forward their own collective agenda at the regional level, when there are so many actors and partners at the table.

Future of the Pacific Islands Forum

What does the framework mean for the future of the Pacific Islands Forum? I suggest that it signals at least four important shifts for the Pacific Islands Forum.

Political Commitment to Regionalism by Leaders

The Pacific Islands Forum leaders have mandated the implementation of the framework, now it is incumbent on them to drive it forward; our leaders need to make a political commitment to taking collective approaches to addressing common challenges. This requires collective political will to act regionally, recognising the inherent and natural tensions that exist between national and regional imperatives. Ongoing dialogue is important if we are to sustain this collective commitment to regionalism over the long term.

A More Inclusive Pacific Islands Forum

The framework sets out an open, inclusive public policy process — one that seeks the views of those beyond government and the usual set of stakeholders, in a meaningful and practical way. In particular, this process seeks the views of those who did not previously have access to regional priority-setting processes: civil society, the private sector, community groups, academia, and citizens, for example. This inclusive approach requires a shift on the part of the Pacific Islands Forum and its secretariat; it means incorporating the views of those outside the traditional set of stakeholders. There will be some challenges in the short term, and we will have our points of difference around issues, but the fundamental tenet here is that we work together and that we harness the strengths of those in civil society and in the private sector.

Inclusivity, however, cannot be limited to this process. It needs to be more than a buzzword. The forum secretariat must engage with civil society and the private sector more routinely in its work. We need to recognise the important role that civil society plays in the regional space.

I have begun to reach out to a number of regional civil society and private sector organisations, some of whom are in the audience today. We have engaged formally and informally, and I am encouraged by our conversations and interactions.

I also think that there is a role for academia in this new paradigm. The forum secretariat can do more to bridge the divide between policy and research. Sound policy is based in part on robust knowledge and analysis, and I am very interested in developing closer relationships with the University of the South Pacific and other universities and think tanks in the region in order to develop partnerships that support and enhance regional policy making.

A More Effective Post-Forum Dialogue

The framework calls for improved and more meaningful political discussions at the regional level. Some have expressed concerns that the post-forum dialogue is not the productive mechanism for political dialogue that it should be. There are issues with the format of the discussion, and many of our regional partners reduce the effectiveness of the post-forum dialogue by bringing bilateral issues to the discussion table.

The process for priority-setting that the framework calls for needs to be accompanied by an improvement in the quality of our conversations about regionalism, and this includes those conversations with our post-forum dialogue partners. We are already conducting work in this space in consultation with our members, with our post-forum dialogue partners, and with the government of Papua New Guinea, who will host this year's leaders forum.

A Fit-For-Purpose Secretariat to the Pacific Islands Forum

The Framework for Pacific Regionalism calls for some fundamental changes to the Pacific Islands Forum, and there is a need to ensure that the secretariat is fit for purpose in light of these changes. An external review commissioned by senior management has just been carried out in the secretariat, and in response to this review, a change process aligned to the implementation of the framework is now in place, to ensure that we have the right institutional set up within the secretariat to deliver on the framework over the short- and long-term future. The framework demands a number of important and fundamental changes for the secretariat, so it is important that we look at ourselves to see whether we are fit-for-purpose to deliver.

The secretariat will also have to position itself to provide responsive, high quality, and high-level policy advice to the leaders in support of their discussions and decisions on regional issues. This policy advice should not only be about issues, but also about the state of regionalism, and the extent to which regionalism is valued. Leaders' decisions on regionalism will be enhanced and strengthened by quality policy advice.

The forum secretariat also needs to find its optimal position in relation to other CROP agencies. The secretariat's role is primarily political and policy-oriented, although it is the case that we currently implement projects and activities. The way in which we align ourselves and work with and support our fellow CROP agencies will be vital in delivering effectively on the regional agenda under the framework.

Conclusion

In summary, the framework calls for a Pacific Islands Forum that is willing to embrace a deeper level of regionalism; that incorporates and harnesses all perspectives and opinions within the regional community; and that is willing to take a leadership role. It will lead to a strengthened Pacific Islands Forum — one that provides genuine regional leadership, that responds to the challenges of the region, and that embraces and practices the principles of inclusivity. I believe that it is important for the Pacific Islands Forum to continue to play a leadership role in the regional space, given it is the only political grouping comprising all 16 independent Pacific Islands countries. However, it is important that the Pacific Islands Forum make the kinds of shifts that the Framework for Pacific Regionalism demands, to deliver fully on the expectations that the people of the Pacific have of us and of regionalism.

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