

**Pacific Islands Forum
with United Nations Missions**

Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji,
Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau,
Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands,
Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.



801 Second Avenue, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10017
687-3963

Telephone: (212) 687-4130 / Facsimile: (212)

Website: <http://www.un.int/fiji>
mission@fjiprun.org

Email:

**PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM CHAIR'S GENERAL STATEMENT FOR
ECOSOC HIGH LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM 2022**

Greetings Excellencies,

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the Member States of the Pacific Islands Forum present at the United Nations.

COVID-19 and the Pacific

As of June 2022, the pandemic has infected over 331,000 people across 21 Pacific Island Country Territories (PICTs) and caused the deaths of nearly 2,500 people living in the Pacific. While this infection rate is considerably lower than in other regions such as Europe and Asia, the strain on already under-resourced public health systems and essential services has been catastrophic. This has been further exacerbated by the ongoing economic and social impacts of closed borders for the past two years.

Health services have been disrupted and the limited resources available for health often redirected towards COVID-19 prevention, containment and treatment. With lockdowns and isolation measures put in place, additional challenges have been encountered in ensuring that the delivery and use of essential life-saving supplies reaches not just the main islands and cities, but also outer islands and remote rural communities. This has left many Pacific people unable to access other public health services and is compounded by the region's already high Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) levels.

As part of response packages, all PICTs have been allocated special budgets and stimulus packages for health care, unemployment, business operations, social insurance and other assistance. Traditional social protection systems, social structures and community safety nets have also been active in supporting communities and families experiencing difficulties.

In total, 14 categories of social protection measures have been implemented at varying levels across the region. Many were created during the pandemic to provide immediate and short-term assistance for the unemployed, elderly, informal sector and small business operators and students. Some countries offered more cover than others and cash responses are becoming increasingly common. This effort has involved governments, CSOs, churches and community networks, alumni associations and the private sector.

As the region begins to safely re-open and recover, the pandemic has shown that innovative solutions and increased investments are needed to address social vulnerabilities and inequalities in the areas of health and wellbeing; economic recovery; education; employment pathways; inclusive social protection systems; sustainable livelihoods and food systems.

Review of the five SDGs in focus in 2022

SDG 4 Quality Education

Our Pacific agenda for education recognises the importance of education and skills to respond to changing communities, labour markets and the broader impacts of climate change on the region. Building both transformative and soft skills amongst young Pacific people is identified within both SDG4.7 and the SAMOA Pathway.

Literacy and numeracy have been improving, but not for all. Pacific governments, through the Pacific Regional Education Framework (2018 – 2030) are giving greater attention to issues of quality and equity. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted education systems and gender equality across the region, leading to more students dropping out of education and limiting young people's access to further education and employment.

There is recognition that the quality and relevance of education needs to improve to address the growing number of out-of-school children and adolescents, and to support the transition of young people from school to work.

In the coming months the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) results will provide an important and accurate benchmark for education outcomes in the region.

SDG 5 Gender Equality

On Gender Equality, the Pacific is committed to the full realisation of human rights for women and girls in all their diversity. Women and girls in our region face high levels of gender-based violence, low representation in leadership and political participation, and are significantly disadvantaged economically.

In the Pacific, limited disaggregated data by gender, age, location, and disability and limited access to development-oriented research constitutes a major obstacle to inform gender responsive policies and processes. Technical assistance is ongoing to improve data collection and analysis within national statistics offices, government departments and civil society organisations. However, current funding and technical support is not commensurate with needs.

Across the Pacific region, women and girls are significantly disadvantaged economically – concentrated in informal work environments and operating at subsistence levels or at lower ends of the value chain. While entrepreneurship has been widely recognised as a key catalyst in women’s economic empowerment, formal ownership of businesses by women remains low across the region.

To advance the well-being of all women and girls, the Pacific recognises the need to target and eliminate the root causes of gender inequality. We recognise in the Pacific that programming must address the intersections between women’s economic empowerment, safety and discrimination, leadership and participation, access to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, disaster preparedness and livelihoods. Marketplaces are a critical space in which these interrelated factors come into play.

SDG 14 Life Below Water

Ocean

On Oceans, Pacific Island Forum Leaders recognise the relationship between climate change-related sea-level rise and maritime zones, including economic and strategic considerations. These are of key importance to our Pacific region and to all coastal States.

Our Pacific people, through our leaders, continue to reaffirm our role as guardians, custodians, and stewards of the Ocean. We successfully advocated for increased ocean consideration at the international level, including through UNCLOS; UN Fish Stock Agreement; Rio+20 Ocean Package and the 2030 Agenda with the inclusion of SDG 14 on Oceans being a Pacific-led endeavour; the 1st UN Oceans Conference; a new legal instrument for BBNJ; Ocean-Climate Dialogue at the UNFCCC; as well as more current discussions on the implications of sea-level rise on maritime boundaries delimitation. This leadership stems from the depth and extent of connections Pacific peoples and communities have with the Ocean.

The ground-breaking 2021 Pacific Islands Forum *Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the face of Climate Change-related Sea-level rise* further reinforces the Blue Pacific’s call to world leaders to urgently commit to decisive climate action that limits global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. We strongly urge our global family to do all that is necessary to achieve this target.

Fisheries

On Fisheries, an assessment of the key commercial tuna stocks (skipjack, albacore, yellowfin and bigeye) in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) shows that they are all in the “healthy” range. Recent stock assessments done for these four tuna species indicate that stocks are not overfished and overfishing is generally not occurring.

SDG 15 Life Above Land

On life above land, habitat loss continues to be an issue and is caused by human impact and unsustainable practices such as logging and forest conversion for plantation and agriculture; land-based activities that contribute to marine pollution and other forms of improper waste management; clearance of mangrove areas, foreshore reclamation, coral harvesting, dredging, sand mining and coastal development; poorly managed mining operations; and the impact of natural disasters and extreme events.

Invasive species is the leading cause of species extinction on island ecosystems. This can also impact food and economic security through the introduction of new diseases and pathogens with the potential to wipe out agricultural, fisheries and crop development. The management of invasive species requires national commitment and regionally coordinated responses as these unwanted species do not respect borders. There continues to be a commitment to address the issue and targeted interventions continue to be implemented in the region.

All PIF members have phased out the use of Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). The region now faces the challenge of phasing-out consumption of the remaining Ozone Depleting Substances (ODSs) and the phasing-down of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) used in the Pacific region, primarily in refrigeration and air-conditioning.

The challenge of managing waste remains and is further complicated by climate change, through increased disaster waste and many landfill sites becoming inoperable through flooding and other disaster-related causes.

SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals

On SDG 17 partnerships, we in the Pacific acknowledge the importance of inclusive, transparent and accountable partnerships at national and regional levels.

At the highest political level Pacific Leaders, including Forum Economic Ministers, hold annual regional dialogue sessions with the private sector and civil society. Moreover, the private sector and civil society are consulted in national policy making. In a few countries, such as New Caledonia, Samoa and PNG, there are dedicated financing facilities to help the private sector and civil society contribute to national development.

Voluntary National Reviews

I would like to end my statement with a few words on our Pacific Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

Firstly, I congratulate the Government of Tuvalu for presenting their first VNR report at this 2022 session. Like other Pacific countries, these VNR's have showcased changes to the institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, including newly established mechanisms for coordination or adjusting existing frameworks. The VNRs are seen as a norm-building process and the best practices identified can be replicated across other Pacific countries.

The VNRs have forced countries to focus on the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of an unprecedented amount of reliable administrative and official data while also focusing on the aspect of availability of disaggregated data. As a consequence of the VNR

process, substantial efforts have been reported at the national level in assessing data availability, sources, methodologies, coverage, and dissemination. While addressing the identified gaps in data and methodology, countries are actively looking for solutions that best fit their national context, including defining national targets and indicators.

The top three challenges highlighted by reporting countries include the lack of disaggregated data, the lack of capacity in data collection and management, and insufficient financial and technical support. Despite these challenges, countries have, to the best of their abilities, taken various measures to strengthen their statistical systems to meet the needs of follow-up and review, including the establishment of clear governance structures for data and monitoring; the use of technology to strengthen data collection, analysis and dissemination; branching out to new data sources; involving stakeholders, and mobilising resources through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Overall, the VNRs have shown a strengthening of national ownership of the SDGs, promotion of transparency, inclusiveness and participation in reporting on development priorities and support for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Last week our Leaders met in Suva, Fiji and endorsed the Pacific Islands Forum's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. We look forward using this framework to secure the SDGs and to lift our collective ambition for our and future generations even higher.

I thank you

ENDS.