

**Republic of Palau Voluntary National Review  
Pathway to 2030: Progressing with our Past  
Toward a Resilient, Sustainable, and Equitable Future**

16 July 2019  
New York, New York

**Republic of Palau VNR Presentation 2019  
Statement on Behalf of the Government of Palau Delivered  
by the Honorable Sinton Soalablai, Minister of Education.**

Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to stand before you today to present Palau's First Voluntary National Review. As a nation, we are proud of what we have achieved thus far. We also know that there are many challenges before us.

We look forward to working in partnership with you all to achieve our shared vision of a resilient, sustainable, and equitable future for the current generation and for generations to come.

**Introduction**

In the twenty-five years since independence, as a small island but large ocean state, Palau has established governance and infrastructure supportive of modern nationhood and evolved from a low-income country in 1994 to a high-income country in 2017. Palau achieved seven of the eight MDGs and has played a leadership role – both globally and locally - in safeguarding the environment for future generations. Other achievements include universal access to quality health care and education, reduction of poverty amidst a growing economy, a sustainably financed nationwide network of protected areas, and enduring regional and global partnerships. Nonetheless, challenges remain due to vulnerabilities as a small island developing state, global economic forces, and climate change.

Following the 2018 decision by His Excellency Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr. for Palau to report in this forum, eight inter-sector working groups led by government ministries, and including representatives of civil society and semi-government agencies, began the work of drafting the report. The report before you today has evolved over six months and seven drafts and reflects the inputs of several hundred stakeholders, including local, regional, and international friends and partners.

The Palau VNR is organized around four pillars – people, prosperity, planet, and peace, participation, and partnership. I will now turn my attention to Pillar One.

### **PILLAR ONE: People at the Center of Development**

Within Pillar One, the Palau VNR incorporates SDGs 4 (education), 2 and 3 (nutrition and health), and 11 (human settlements). Although discussed under Pillar One, education is a cross-cutting theme that underpins all pillars.

Palau has achieved universal school enrollment but of equal importance, on any given school day, 98 percent of school-aged children are in the classroom, and as a result of consistent attendance and quality instruction, 96 percent of children achieve mastery of basic literacy and numeracy skills when sitting Pacific Regional standardized examinations at the end of grades 4 and 6. Yes, universal enrollment in school is the law, but universal participation results from fee-free education in schools with running water, flush toilets, electricity, and internet connectivity, free transportation, and free lunches.

The vision of the Ministry of Education is that Palauan students will be successful in Palauan society and the world. Aligned with our vision, in 2015, we revamped our science curriculum to include some of the challenges to sustainable development we face as a nation, including non-communicable diseases, climate change, and disaster risk reduction. We hope that future generations will be better equipped to deal with these challenges, to be resilient, and to live more sustainably than my generation.

Within Pillar One, health is, of course, key. Like many countries, we face an epidemic of non-communicable diseases rooted in changing lifestyles and diets. As a nation, we pay the price in rising rates of chronic diseases resulting in reduced life expectancy. In education, we have responded. We have integrated non-communicable diseases into our science curriculum. We now offer health and physical education as mandatory graded subjects in grades 1-12 so that students and their parents are forced to take these courses seriously. We have revamped our school lunches to reflect the health messages we teach, and we have added after-school programs that encourage physical activity.

### **Pillar Two: Prosperity**

Since independence in 1994, we have continuously expanded our economy and achieved near universal employment while steadily reducing poverty. In 2008, our basic needs poverty rate was 25%, and six

years later, in 2014, the rate has fallen to 19%. As a nation, however, we do not just aspire to halve the number of people living below the poverty line but to eradicate poverty by 2030.

For education, equity has never been a major issue. Universal school enrollment is a given, and as noted already, daily participation approaches 100 percent. This is true for both girls and boys as well as to children with disabilities. We have a Special Education program that provides specialized education services to children with disabilities from pre-school through to high school graduation regardless of the nature of their disability. We are proud of what we are achieving here but recognize that more needs to be done, especially to help young people with disabilities succeed in post-secondary education and the world of work.

Beyond this, our National Scholarship Board has launched two innovative initiatives. The first is an internship program for Palauans completing their junior and senior years of college to return to paid work in their fields of study or interests for eight weeks during the summer. Although this is a new program that cannot yet be evaluated, preliminary results indicate that it is successful in opening the eyes of our youth to the many opportunities that await them at home at the end of their tertiary studies. The second innovation is a graduate loan program that supports young Palauans to obtain their master's and doctoral degrees at overseas universities. If they return home and work for at least five years, their loans will be forgiven.

### **Pillar Three: Protecting Our Island Home**

In the international arena, Palau is an outspoken advocate for the environment. But we do not just talk in global forums; we act at home. For Palauans, conservation is part of our culture and our way of life. We derive our food, identity, and traditions from our relationship with nature and in particular, our relationship with the ocean. The long-standing success of this symbiotic relationship is based on the responsibility that each Palauan is taught from childhood that they are caretakers of the land and sea. As a result of our traditional system of "bul" when chiefs protect a particular resource or a particular area, has evolved into a nationwide network of sustainably financed, community-based protected areas on both land and sea. We act, not only to protect nature but to protect people, prosperity, and livelihoods as well. As I previously mentioned, in 2015, the science community of Palau came together with the Ministry to revamp our science curriculum. Yes, we engaged consultants to assist in this effort, but the result was a curriculum designed by Palauan scientists for Palau. Our science studies now integrate scientific concepts with practical instructions on culture, health, climate change, disaster risk reduction, and environmental

stewardship. Every year over 80 percent of our students takes part in a marine education awareness program that builds from the curriculum and is offered by the Palau International Coral Reef Center. In this way, the Ministry of Education develops and implements a curriculum that has a lasting impact on student lives, homes, and communities for this generation and future generations.

#### **Pillar Four: Peace, Participation, and Partnership**

As a small island developing state, Palau faces many constraints. We are privileged over the years to have established many enduring bilateral and multilateral partnerships. As we move into the new era of resilient, sustainable, and equitable development, we strive to strengthen existing partnerships while building new Public-Private Partnerships. We rely on our partners for development finance as well as for the transfer of technology.

Beyond international partnerships, we recognize the critical role played by our domestic partners, especially those in civil society without whom we would not have progressed as far as we have. To speak to you with the voice of civil society, I am pleased now to turn over to Ms. Villaney Remengesau, who speaks today as the voice of the Belau Association of NGOs.

## Republic of Palau VNR Presentation 2019

Delivered by Ms. Villaney Remengesau on behalf of Palau's Civil Society Organizations

Excellencies, honorable dignitaries, esteemed representatives, ladies, and gentlemen, it is with great honor and privilege that I speak before you on behalf of all civil society organizations of our small island Nation of the Republic of Palau and also in support of all community-based organizations (CSOs) globally who are present with us today.

I would like to express our sincere gratitude to the government of Palau for including us in this meeting. We are truly grateful for the partnership. In brief, Palau's CSOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and (CBOs) work together in partnership with an umbrella organization known as the Belau Association of Non-Governmental Organization a.k.a. BANGO, which serves as a coordinating body that liaises with our government, partners, members, and the community. One of the most important roles for our CSOs now is putting more emphasis in working with the health sector in addressing our non-communicable diseases in our communities.

The creation of the sustainable development initiative globally and its evolution from the millennium development goals is one of the world's most effective tool in bringing an about great change in our communities, within our families, amongst us as unique individuals and more importantly to our fragile planet that cradles all living things.

The centerpiece of the 2030 Agenda is the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs that revolves around what we believe to be the four integral mechanisms that drive the implementation and attainment of the overall agenda which are:

- the idea that the SDGs are universal – accepted by all, and applicable to all;
- the indivisibility and interdependence of the goals;
- the focus on poorest and most marginalized groups – those “left behind”; and
- the focus on the participation of all stakeholders

The CSOs of Palau would like to recognize the Republic of Palau in its first voluntary national review on the SDGs. Titled “Pathway to 2030: Progressing with our past toward a resilient, sustainable and equitable future”, it showcases its successful effort in its work toward achieving its targets concerning the SDGs.

As a representative of the CSOs in our country, I imagine the many challenges we face in our desire to contribute toward the attainment of these SDGs and for our inclusion in the agenda as key players who are equal to government and all other entities in this collaborative effort. It is crucial to recognize that CSOs have vastly different capacities and resources, and so differ greatly in how much they could contribute to the achievement of the SDGs and in their capacity to engage in reporting and review processes. CSOs are diverse in size – some small as only a few people, others in the bigger countries employing several thousand with some focusing on a single issue while others are ranging across several different concerns.

The contribution to the 2030 Agenda, in this case, is to the specific commitment to “leave no one behind” in the implementation, follow up and review. The preamble pledges “that no one will be left behind,” and we wish to see the goals and targets met for all nations and peoples, most importantly for all segments of society. In most world gatherings such as this, and to maintain a public image, we often figuratively include everyone, but in reality, it is not always so.

For instance, I am a young woman with a disability, but I am a proud representation of the community for persons with disabilities. In our country, there exists like many countries, a disabled persons organization that promotes disability awareness and advocate for the rights, equality, well-being and inclusion of persons with disabilities at all level. We are very grateful for how far we have fought for our rights to gain equal access to all the establishments and services in our society as do the rest of our population; regardless of our physical, mental, or sensory impairments or limitations.

However, most of what we do as CSOs are not always recognized, especially in the reality that we also contribute to the participatory quality of SDG implementation as being the vehicle for the representation of people’s interests. There is a long-standing academic account of CSOs that sees their value in precisely this way, as giving voice to the voiceless and representing concerns that would otherwise not be represented effectively. We the CSOs operate between “empowered,” and “public” space to connect citizens to governments, and networks of global governance but sometimes the rest of the world fail to recognize the many valuable contributions that civil societies can make to achieve sustainable development at the national level.

Ladies and gentlemen, in closing, I would like to make a statement on behalf and in support of all CSOs present and beyond. While civil society organizations often play an important role as watchdogs by

holding governments accountable, they are also often some of the primary implementing partners working with governments to achieve most of the SDGs, from health to equality to climate change. Inclusive development is key. Accessibility for everyone, including the community for persons with disabilities is a precondition that needs to be addressed at all levels. For instance, in education – is it inclusive from early childhood and intervention?, in terms of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) – how accessible is UHC for women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, migrant workers among others. We are calling the global community for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in this call for support and a greater emphasis on the accessibility to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities as well as the general population.

Also, I'm proud to report that one of our local governments, namely the Koror State, is the only institution in the Pacific that employs the highest number of persons with disabilities. Palau CSOs have been working closely with them as a key partner in addressing some of the SDG activities in helping Palau meet some of its National targets. Having begun this with one state government, we will work to expand it to other states and the region.

The United Nations should increase the private sector's engagement in the implementation of the SDGs while also giving them open opportunities to share their knowledge, experiences, and concerns in line with the Assembly and in doing so, no one is left behind. In Palau, we have declared this year, 2019, a "Year of Innovative Learning and Excellence." I call upon the global community to support Palau in technology and for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in this call for support and a greater emphasis on the accessibility to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities as well as the general population. Partnership at all levels is key, and working together should be the "holy grail" to realizing a better world for all.

Thank you all.