

A New Dawn for Pacific Regionalism

We have just three months to the end of 2020, the initial year of the Decade for Action leading up to 2030 – the deadline the world set to achieve 17 life-changing goals for sustainable development. By then, we anticipate that our Pacific children will be ushered into a very different Blue Pacific Continent in a very different world.

This future – including the state of Pacific economies, the health of its democracies, its natural environment and resources, its strategic position in the world as a region, and most importantly, the well-being and standard of living of Pacific people – will no doubt depend on our decisions today.

The COVID pandemic and its impacts have triggered much eye-opening and thought-provoking debate, highlighting the importance of relationships. Relationships are built on our day-to-day conversations and we either have conversations or don't have, which are crucial for either building or deteriorating the relationships.

Talanoa and relationship-building

The Pacific people are accustomed to having such conversations or “talanoa” for centuries, and engaging so much more today given the economic and financial shocks to our societies and small economies. Talanoa allows the free and open expression of one's experiences, ideas, hopes and fears, while giving the same opportunity to others. It builds understanding, solidarity, inclusion and lays the foundation for joint solutions.

Today, as Pacific communities live with the realities of the vulnerabilities of small island developing states, these challenges are talked about in the circles of kava by the men or rugby fields by men, women and young people, and in women's village/komiti groups, men's council, and young people's leadership council meetings. We have learned to survive and cope living high levels of vulnerability including proneness to global exogenous shocks, narrow resource bases, remoteness, dependence on food imports, and limited ability to benefit from economies of scale.

With the COVID-19 reality, we are now looking at profound implications not only for the global economy, but for the Pacific – in all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. The tensions keeping leaders, policy makers and financiers checked today, are between the financial pain of economic and social loss versus the recovery strategies, innovations and solutions, and the ideas to reengineer economies and reset.

The Pacific must strategically engage, “Lalanga” or weave and creative solutions through **4Cs of coordination, cooperation, commitment and care** to restore and revitalize our premier lead political and economic agency the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to be more relevant, resilient and responsive to these Post-COVID priorities of the Blue Pacific Continent and the 2050 Strategy.

Leadership at this point is not about a title or position, but it is better coordination or actions and example. It is not foreign for the Pacific as a region to engage with the international community, and therefore PIFS must seize the opportunities and take advantage of all avenues and options at its disposal this time around to be more

assertive in driving the agenda for engagement, and partnership for greater international cooperation, and commitment to actions as the people Pasefika are worse-off.

The United Nations completed its High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2020 in mid-July where leaders from the Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) joined the rest of SIDS calling on the international community to help SIDS out of this crisis. As responsible citizens, it is widely acclaimed that we cannot be left to swim and navigate our sinking ships alone. The Pacific is not alone in this, and every effort must be taken to navigate the bureaucracy of institutions, mechanisms and frameworks of the United Nations and other multilaterals to have a talanoa, strengthen relationships and partnerships for temporary and long-term solutions.

What does the future hold for our children?

A very different world with high risks of public debt vulnerability, downturns in the economies, collapsed health systems and with weaker social safety nets that would take decades to reset and build back differently.

For many of the Leaders, they have been having round table talanoa on priorities for post-COVID19 and asking the meaningful questions. Many of us may believe we have the meaningful solutions, and that may be true.

The Pacific and the PIFS is at a crossroads, with the global economy and broader trade environment undergoing fundamental shifts which poses key questions for the relevance, robustness of the Pacific regionalism, for the role of PIFS to safeguard the stability, growth and resilience of sustainable development for the region.

The Forum Leaders' Pacific Vision is for a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives. This is the vision for all the people of the Pacific, and that would drive the 2050 Strategy and sustainable development for the Pacific Forum.

The 2050 Strategy is a new dawn for Pacific regionalism that is faced with the challenges of the new era of post-COVID. The post-COVID era characterised with accumulating debts and fast-changing geopolitics involving Pacific Forum Island Countries (FICs) in a playhouse for rivalries between those with the money and unfortunately everyone not being in a level-playing field. It is obvious that the Pacific needs to secure financial access and investments to fund development for FICs, but needs genuine and durable partners that are serious, responsible and care for the people of the Pacific.

The new dawn is calling for new talanoa or conversations that have many implications on the future pathways for implementing the 2050 Strategy. With globalisation with its economic and socio-cultural components, along with the rapid rise of digital connectivity, there is obviously no two-ways for the Pacific to shy away or defer urgent conversations that will inform the implementation of the 2050 Strategy.

The agenda for the talanoa should prioritise debt relief, engagements with development finance institutions and international investment firms for responsible and viable foreign direct investments, resetting for healthy debt-to-GDP ratios amongst

others, as these are highly likely to present further challenges down the line with respect to the realisation of the Forum Leaders' Vision.

Commitment and accountability to engage and form strategic partnerships at regional and global alliances are key to success. Enhancing these partnerships for sustainable development with the ethical dimension of care will change the talanoa. Achieving the priorities of post-COVID and the sustainable development goals by restoring economies through implementation of democracy and protection of human rights. Building back differently for clean and resilient regional and global recovery, and implementing via honest, clean, good governments.

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