

TALANOA AFTER 50 years

The world has been brought to a standstill once at immense cost to the economies, education and health more generally. The COVID-19 has spread to almost every country in the world, with few exceptions with no confirmed cases so far are Small Island Developing States (SIDS) which as of end of January 2021 include 12 islands of the Blue Pacific Continent. Many of the characteristics of SIDS that usually present development challenges, especially our remoteness and low population densities, may be the traits that have kept us safe so far through the pandemic.

Despite the chaos that has emerged as a consequence of the recent selection of the post of the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and of the crises of Climate Change and COVID-19 pandemic, an opportunity has presented itself - the opportunity to rethink our development strategy and chart a new course.

As our region reset and build forward better to 2030 and frame pathways of a 2050 Strategy, we must not panic but remain focus and try to minimise the risks, while balancing that against the consequences of the actions we take. Our leaders can still reunite the aspired “One Blue Pacific Continent” and policy-makers can forge pathways to sustainable economic growth by recognising the intimate inter-linkages between social, economic and environmental challenges and by identifying the many opportunities we/SIDS can harness to facilitate our transition to an inclusive and green economy.

In 2017, Forum Leaders endorsed the Blue Pacific narrative as the **core driver for collective action, in support of their vision for a region of peace, harmony and prosperity**. Our Pacific voyagers have navigated their way across the Pacific Ocean long before, for a thousand years before the Europeans discovery of the islands, and well before political and economic boundaries were marked, negotiated and established - and the process continues to today.

“**Our sea of islands**” as coined by a fellow Tongan, the late Professor ‘Epeli Hau’ofa is the region’s commonality, common denominator and is the fundamental essence of our region. Our Pacific Ocean remains our lifeblood, our inspiration, a powerful catalyst and basis for Pacific regionalism. We have access to natural assets and unique indigenous knowledge that can help us to develop sustainably and manage our natural environment productively and equitably. In order to take advantage of these opportunities we must develop integrated solutions to environmental challenges, economic recovery and sustainable development. As a Tongan and like many others, we are proud of our history of being one of the founding members of the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation, now the premier institution known as Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS).

*“As Tongans, we inherited from our forefathers who were great voyagers of the Pacific sea of islands have learnt and developed our own way of getting along with one another and getting things done. The tradition of being **calm, confident, tolerant, pragmatic and fair** is a central part of who we are, and what the leaders of the region needs today to facilitate the coalition of the willing of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to reset the region towards 2030 and the 2050 Strategy.”*

The leaders of the 21st century must be able to operate within conditions of great volatility as this is the new normal. The solid foundation of Pacific values is clearly expressed by the PIF Leaders’ aspirations and values. *“Those are the values one must stand for as the region try to steer the ship and work with the members to get through what are incredibly difficult times: times of pandemic and socio-economic hardships, times of elections, times of*

environmental challenge, times of growing inequality demanding endurance with wisdom and humility. We have to come back to those basic values and ask how we are going to build forward better around these. We have the Pacific regionalism and regional priorities for the 2050 Strategy, we have the Paris Climate Agreement, the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, which talk about prosperity, peaceful and inclusive societies as the bedrock of the future. So continuing to mobilise people around the aspirations the PIF member countries themselves have expressed for a better, more inclusive, fairer, more inclusive, more sustainable world.”

‘The post of the SG of PIFS is a critical and very important one, and there is a lot to be done at PIFS and by PIF membership with its development partners. The PIFS needs a well-established leader and I have confidence that any of the candidates could do the job as evident by five member countries putting up their best for the top bureaucrat job of the PIFS. The interest on the outcome of the selection of the SG was awaited by women and men of the Pacific and globally”.

As we say in Tonga, “*ne fofola e fala kae fai e talanga*” - the mat was spread and ready for the Leaders’ “talanoa” via Zoom on 3rd February - the new way of working in this COVID era. The Leaders began to “lalanga” with strands of what brought people together with shared purpose, interests and values to ‘do something’ in a concerted way? Meaningful conversations build the relationship through realistically evaluating situations - perhaps what we thought was the truth or agreement is no longer the truth in today’s environment and challenge ourselves to interrogate reality and do something about the strained relationships. At the end of the day, we are dealing with people not robots here.

The responsibility and respect based on religious and Pacific cultural values are crucial for the “talanoa” and the forms of leadership. The PIF coalition’s leadership to date determined the outcome of the selection, the PIF leadership determined its sustainability and its ability to respond to changing circumstances, broker relationships and divergent interests, and challenge vested interests that we witness to date. The crisis at hand is evident of the supposed to be “coalition of the willing” practices of leadership - perhaps there was a process of adaptation to authentically open to other perspectives? One can imagine the different types of power in the room - “the visible, the hidden and the invisible”.

I am reminded of the Paris Declaration on Aid effectiveness (2005) and the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA 2008) with driving principles for making aid more effective - the goal that aid works when we work together? The shortfalls are few in contrast to the opportunities to address and rectify the situation which calls for urgent actions for the Blue Pacific. After 50 years of being together, the region needs to **re-charge, reset together as a stronger force for its people and planet, and with a mature approach reclaim:**

Ownership: Reunited and Resetting Together our #2050Strategy

Strengthen the Pacific one voice diplomacy towards #COP26

Responsibility and Accountability: #PIFLeadersOf2021 #Together #BluePacificContinent

Could decisions be revisited to ensure that the consensus building process enhance relationships and garner the most from both ends to overcome and manage the risk of division and reunite and work together?

What is your hope as a Pacific islander?

That the PIF Leaders take responsibility of the crises, and with humility bring the best of wisdom into play; lead reforms to process and PIFS to be more relevant and be that robust premier institution of the Blue Pacific Continent.

Noted on 9/2/2021

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