

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY LEITUALA KUINISELANI TOELUPE TAGO – ELISARA, FOR  
THE OPENING OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC LIBRARIES SUMMIT, 1 JUN 2018, THE  
PEARL RESORT, PACIFIC HARBOUR, FIJI**

Nisa Bula ladies and gentlemen

The Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts,  
Government of the Republic of Fiji

The Chairperson of INELI Oceania

The President Elect of the International Federation of Libraries Association

The Director for Global Libraries Programme, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

The Goodwill Ambassador for Education Timor Leste

The Director for Pacific UNESCO

Heads and representatives of national libraries and government institutions

Representatives of development partner organisation

Ladies and gentlemen

I bring you greetings from our Director General and the Pacific Community

I'm pleased to address you all as part of the Opening Session for the Pacific Libraries Summit and I want to thank the organisers for the opportunity given to the Pacific Community or SPC to be part of this important forum.

Firstly, I would like to begin by sharing some information on SPC, who we are and what we do in the Pacific region, for the sake of those who are not familiar with SPC, I recognize that for some of you this is not new information and I seek your indulgence for a few minutes of your time. SPC is an international organization that

was established by the Canberra Agreement in 1947. Our headquarters is in Noumea New Caledonia and we have a regional office in Suva, with sub-regional offices in Port Vila Vanuatu and Pohnpei Federated States of Micronesia. With over 600 staff spread across these premises, SPC is a bilingual organization with English and French as our working languages. SPC is the Principal, scientific technical organization in the Pacific region, proudly supporting development since 1947. We are an inter-governmental development organization owned and governed by our 26 country and territory members states, including our founding members namely Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States of America.

SPC is one of nine member agencies of the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific or CROP as is often known by many – other CROP Agencies include the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, Forum Fisheries Agency, SPREP and others and in pursuit of sustainable development to benefit Pacific people, our organisation works across more than 25 sectors. SPC is renowned for its knowledge and innovation in such areas as fisheries science, public health surveillance, geoinformatics and conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. Much of our focus is also on addressing major cross-cutting issues, such as climate change, disaster risk management, food security, energy security, gender equality, human rights, non-communicable diseases, cultural preservation, data dissemination, education and youth development. Using a multi-sector approach to responding to our members' development priorities, we draw on skills and capabilities from around the region and internationally, and support the empowerment of Pacific communities and sharing of expertise and skills between countries and territories.

Now, the second part of my address ladies and gentlemen, will draw some light on the social development issues in the region. Evidence and research has shown that Pacific people are living longer, more children are in school and more people have access to clean water and basic sanitation. There have been some improvement in development outcomes over the past decade and whilst the number of people living in absolute poverty has remained low, the proportion of those living below national basic needs poverty lines in the rural areas has increased. In terms of where improved development outcomes has been translated into higher living standards, improved health and education outcomes, this is evident in only a few Pacific Island Countries<sup>1</sup>.

Despite some of these advances in development, persistent inequalities and disparities in opportunities both within and among countries<sup>2</sup> and significant development challenges remain for our region. Gender inequality remains a key challenge, with the prevalence of violence against women being amongst the highest in the world; while women's participation in leadership and decision-making are some of the lowest globally. Unemployment, particularly unemployment of women and young people, is a major concern, with a Pacific average of 23% youth unemployment compared with a global average of 12%<sup>3</sup>.

The impacts of climate change continue to exacerbate the frequency and intensity of disasters and the increasing frequency of extreme climate events are seriously

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<sup>1</sup> Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, 2018, Brief on Development Coordination and Effective Development Partnerships

<sup>2</sup> SPC (2018), Social Development Programme Business Plan, 2018, p4

<sup>3</sup> SPC (2015). The Pacific Youth Development Framework 2014-2023: A coordinated approach to youth-centred development in the Pacific; SPC and UNICEF, 2011. *The State of Pacific Youth Report, 2011*.

affecting livelihoods and environmental sustainability. These circumstances are a lived-reality for Pacific people thereby challenging the resilience of many Pacific communities. The epidemic of non-communicable diseases continues to compromise gains in life expectancy; and incidents of conflict and instability all contribute to barriers inhibiting people from engaging fully in and benefitting from development.

A number of studies have found that women and children are more likely to die during an extreme weather event<sup>4</sup>. For example, in the tsunamis in Samoa (2009) and Solomon Islands (2013) around 70% of those who died were either children or female. While the Pacific is making some advances across various areas of sustainable development at national and regional levels, these ongoing challenges constrain the region from making rapid progress towards fully achieving the sustainable development goals. This calls for more responsive, transformative policies and programmes addressing the underlying causes and differentiated impacts of these challenges on men and women; boys and girls, young and old, and persons living with disabilities.

With these social development challenges facing the region, governments in Pacific Island Countries and Territories continue to work closely with regional organisations, development partners including Australia and New Zealand, civil society organisations and the private sector, to develop and implement strategies to address these development challenges. These efforts include the adoption of multisectoral approaches to policy and programme interventions that seek to

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<sup>4</sup> See examples at [https://www.unisdr.org/files/48152\\_disasterandgenderstatistics.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/48152_disasterandgenderstatistics.pdf)

enhance capacity and strengthen capabilities at all levels so Pacific people and Pacific communities are at the forefront of addressing these challenges, capitalizing on their strengths and cultural assets to build resilient communities, in line with the regional and global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Agenda and the SAMOA Pathway. Our region has also developed numerous regional frameworks on health, education, gender, youth, climate resilience, oceans and fisheries, land resource management, disability and many others, to further guide our interventions and programmes of support in response to the development needs of Pacific communities.

To this end, ladies and gentlemen, this brings me to the last part of my address where I will share some of my own reflections on the importance of libraries in the context of sustainable development. The opportunities for libraries in relation to literacy and learning, civic participation and access to information continues to be of great relevance given the need to tap into reservoirs of knowledge including Pacific and indigenous knowledge, that are becoming increasingly important as we search for answers to address our complex development challenges. From SPC's perspective, the need to bridge the gap between science and traditional knowledge to address issues of environmental sustainability is an important consideration for the Pacific and this calls for sustaining platforms such as our libraries, that host some if not all of this information. Our libraries will always be a great source of knowledge and information for our use and for the use of generations to come, but the challenge is to keep up with the rapid changes in ICT and to continue to innovate and be creative about how we share this information and knowledge through our libraries. I remember growing up in Samoa and

visiting the Public Library in Apia was always a huge adventure and fascinating activity for me - although I must admit that at times it was an opportunity for me to escape the multitude of chores I have to do after school and on Saturdays in preparation for the usual Sunday activities. Today, I am not so sure that level of enthusiasm and excitement about going to the library still exists with the developments in i-phones and i-pads and what not. Our children and young people have become accustomed to looking at phones and computers for answers as opposed to going through isles of shelves of books in the library. Convenience has become the deciding factor and as such, the trip to the library is becoming too much of an inconvenience and if it cannot be accessed online, then it must not be that important of a resource to be used or referenced.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no doubt about the important role of libraries to ensure continued access to information and knowledge by our people in the Pacific and globally. Furthermore, libraries also house the archives where stories about our origins and histories are stored and preserved for future generations. Given the richness of our Pacific cultural heritage, preserving our cultural assets, traditional knowledge, and language resources is crucial in preserving our cultural identity and who we are as Pacific people. That said, our libraries have a crucial role to play in the preservation and storage of our cultural heritage; recognizing, as alluded to earlier, the need to be more innovative and creative about how we provide this service. Additionally, the role of libraries and its contribution to development and to educational needs of our populations ought to be promoted a lot more aggressively now, given the current development landscape. As stakeholders in this field, we need to be strategic with our approaches and highlight the purpose of why

we need libraries, so that our own relevance is retained, our value add is made clear and people buy in to what we have to offer in pursuit of our development agenda nationally, regionally and globally.

In closing ladies and gentlemen, the conversation about libraries is much more broader and goes deeper than the libraries themselves, because it's about development, it's about education and it's about access to information as a basic human right. It's also about building the knowledge of our nations; and enhancing the capabilities of our people to enable development that is sustainable, and led by our people wherever they are in their different contexts –whether it's in the Pacific, in Asia or in other regions of the globe.

To conclude ladies and gentlemen, I want to share a personal story, I grew up in a village called Malie in Samoa where I was raised by my grandparents, and next door to my grandparents place was the Primary School. My grandfather was a teacher by profession and so education was a key element of our orientation and training growing up. In the lead up to my grandfather's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2010, we, his grandchildren, got together to explore some ideas on how we would celebrate the 90 years of his life – and after exploring several options, we settled on a library project for the Primary school, where my grandfather was also a school principal at one stage during his teaching career. So we fundraised, tapped into our networks, collected and bought books and did all sorts of things which none of us had any prior experience in doing. In the end we launched our library project and it was a real success – I can never forget the smiles on those children's faces when they walked into the library that morning – with lots of wow moments and big smiles..

and what a memory... Now who would have thought that this story would BE told anywhere some 8 years later and what an appropriate place to share it –at the Pacific Libraries Summit. Ladies and gentlemen, I congratulate the organisers for convening this forum and look forward to the dialogue today. I thank you all for your kind attention, vinaka vakalevu and happy independence Samoa!