

# THE SUVA DECLARATION FROM THE 2<sup>nd</sup> PACIFIC YOUTH FESTIVAL

## ACTIONING THE YOUTH AGENDA Suva Point 2009

On the occasion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pacific Youth Festival held from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> July 2009 in the Fiji islands, more than 300 young people from 13 Pacific Island nations and territories gathered to share knowledge, experiences, skills and cultural values; deliberate on youth issues and challenges; and draw attention to the important issues that hinder youth development, and to explore opportunities for further collaboration to support youth and development.

We present this Declaration in good faith and humility to the Pacific region - our governments, international and regional agencies, NGOs, civil society organizations, local communities and other young people – as an expression of our commitment to regional and national development.

This declaration is the voice of young Pacific Islanders who wish to work in partnership for sustainable island development. Against a backdrop of geographical, economic, socio-cultural and political diversity, we are unified as Oceanic people and stand in regional solidarity to declare the following:

We, the young people of the Pacific:

**Reflect** upon the Pacific Youth Charter 2006 which established the Pacific regional framework for the World Youth Festival themes;

**Acknowledge** that youth development issues are guided by international development frameworks as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals and other related global and regional frameworks that promote and protect the rights of men and women, children, sexual minorities and people living with disabilities and indigenous people;

**Support** the themes of the 2009 Pacific Youth Festival which are aligned to regional and international development frameworks, and include: Promoting healthy lifestyles, Pacific identity, Climate change adaptation, Good governance, peace and security, and Skills for life.

**Utilise** our youth voices in the strategic directions of national development plans and regional development initiatives. Recommended options and issues from this festival to be included for action in the forthcoming Pacific Youth Strategy 2010 – 2015 to be endorsed by Pacific Ministers for Youth.

**Accept** development agencies and inter-government bodies' intention to collaborate and report on progress against the Pacific Youth Strategy 2010 and continue to work towards effective coordination and in partnership with young people in response to this declaration.

**Recognize** that as young people, we are important human resources to development, and have an important role to play in building families, communities, institutions and nations; and in all sectors, both formal and informal. In this regard we humbly request governments and development partners to:

- Consider the importance of incorporating youth focused programs in all sectors of governments and recognize the value of investing in young people for sustainable social and economic development;
- Embrace youth citizenship and welcome young peoples' participation in the formulation and implementation of national development plans;
- Value and appreciate our youthfulness, honesty, commitment and our enthusiasm to work in partnership with relevant groups;

**Acknowledge** that since 2006, the 1<sup>st</sup> Pacific Youth Festival, there have been some significant achievements across the Pacific region. We acknowledge the achievements by development partners and other agencies that are not mentioned here:

- Improvements in preventative health services, access to clean water and sanitation facilities;
- The continuous development of education services in the Pacific is an essential means of equipping young people with important skills for life;
- The hosting of regional and national cultural festivals, sporting activities are important means to promote Pacific culture and identity and to provide opportunities for holistic youth development;
- Significant development in sports and recreational activities has provided new opportunity and promotes healthy living for young Pacific Islanders;
- There is also increasing support and commitment by Pacific Island countries towards increasing knowledge and understanding of sexual and reproductive health, HIV&AIDS, cultural identities, climate change and good governance, peace and security;
- New policies and legislation promoting and enforcing good health and nutrition in schools and communities, regulating pollution emissions will have positive outcomes;
- Increased partnerships and collaborative efforts by governments, development agencies and non-government agencies to address youth development issues, pool resources and increase effectiveness;
- Young people are more empowered to engage in development agendas in traditional, national and regional level.

**However, we express our deep concern that there remain considerable challenges that obstruct the development of young people, and hence communities and the nation. We highlight the following cross-cutting issues for immediate attention:**

- The need to identify a harmonious balance between Pacific traditions, cultural and religious values with modern Pacific lifestyles and international standards. While reliant on traditions, culture and religion for establishment of value systems and personal identities, Pacific Islanders also need to be conversant in important youth development issues. These include mental health, sexual and reproductive health, the rights of women, sexual minorities and children, environmental breakdown and loss

of traditional knowledge, new forms of media and technologies to ensure their wellbeing, strengthen national identity, promote peace, equality and unity and to harness new opportunities to safeguard futures and to have decent and productive employment and livelihood for young people.

- Young people are in dire need for professional mental health services including counseling facilities and suicide prevention programs to change negative and discriminatory perceptions of sufferers of mental illness and provide crucial resources for the holistic development of young Pacific Islanders.
- The major proportion of young people in the Pacific still do not receive opportunities to develop critical life-skills to equip themselves with protective defenses such as positive self-determination, self-esteem, motivation and decision-making skills to negotiate adolescence, negative peer pressure, reduce risk-behaviour, teenage pregnancy and drugs and substance abuse. Many parents do not support or guide their children in developing life-skills. Young people's shyness and lack of voice may be interpreted as a sign of respect, but figures as a significant obstacle to their development;
- Groups of young people remain marginalised from the main thrust of development and service delivery. There is little development support for young people living in rural areas or outer islands, young people living in urban informal settlements and young people living with disabilities;
- Many young people lack skills for employment such as project and business management skills. Opportunities for formal employment are few. Unemployment breeds discontent, loss of identity and low morale, causing many young people to practice risky behaviour or engage in exploitative work;
- Violence, abuse, discrimination and exploitation still exist in many Pacific communities particularly against women and children - both girls and boys. Discriminatory attitudes towards women, sexual minorities, youth and children contribute to abusive and exploitative behaviour;
- Information and communication strategies do not always use local languages, local knowledge and culturally appropriate methods to reach vulnerable and marginalized youth of the island nations and communities or effective approaches and hence, levels of awareness or change in behaviour are not evident in parts of the Pacific. Levels of STI infections and teenage pregnancy remain high and the spread of HIV infection is of great concern in many Pacific Island nations. Many young people do not know where to access information, for example available opportunities for training;
- Many youth development programs are poorly managed, are not supported by research and evaluations are not documented;
- The nature of our small island populations renders the Pacific region vulnerable to global pandemics and crises. The lack of disaster preparedness places our nations at great risk;
- Financial resources remain a critical need to support and sustain the scale of intervention required to sufficiently address youth issues.

In the area of Promoting Healthy Lifestyles:

- Suicide amongst youth in the Pacific is in some countries the lead cause of death, or at least one of the top three causes of death. Many young people do not have access to professional support and counseling services. Mental health policies do not exist.

- Pacific communities often have unhealthy eating habits and are reluctant to change towards healthy living, leading to high levels of lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular problems;
- Provision of sexual and reproductive health services are often inconvenient, are not youth-friendly, not confidential or are not readily available or easily accessible;
- Up-to-date legislative and policy environments, their monitoring and enforcement to regulate consumption of tobacco and other drugs and substances remains weak, enabling many young people to abuse substances.

In the area of Pacific Identities:

- There exists a weakening of traditional knowledge and lack development focus in preserving Pacific heritage. Some Pacific languages are dying out and many young Pacific Islanders do not have an understanding of cultural protocols and values;
- The need to integrate culture and tradition into school curricula to offer new opportunities for future employment and livelihood, develop cultural industries and strengthen national identities;
- The lack of focus on rural and outer island development increases incentives to move to urban areas and creates imbalance and disintegration of traditional values and practices;
- There is a lack of acknowledgement and knowledge of the emerging 'urban youth culture' and its impact on young peoples sense of identity.

In the area of Climate Change Adaptations:

- Changing non-environmentally friendly attitudes and practices proves to be a continuous challenge. Many traditional and national leaders remain to be convinced of the magnitude and severity of this issue and hence, do not support the issue and youth initiatives. In addition, many young people are not aware of these critical issues affecting all of our futures;
- There is no strategy to hold our nations accountable to protecting our people from the effects of climate change;
- The loss of our island and ocean biodiversity is one of the most serious obstacles to sustainable development for the benefit of today's youth. Unsustainable fishing, forestry and agricultural practices and the disastrous impacts of mass migration to urban centres and industrialization have serious impacts on food and productive security and waste management. The protection and sustainable use of biodiversity is also the most practicable means of adapting to climate change and economic breakdown;
- Some communities already are living with the consequences of climate change and have little access to clean water and sanitation due to salinization of fresh water lenses. Others are facing erosion of coastal areas due to sea level rise;
- Our coral atoll nations are at risk of losing their ownership rights of their land and ocean territory, and their national identity.

In the area of Governance, Peace and Security

- Lack of involvement of young people in all sectors of national development processes and little understanding of the importance of such and the negative impacts of not being involved. Traditional and cultural values and expectations hinder the active and effective participation of young people.
- Negative attitudes toward supporting youth and women in political participation and decision-making, including few gender equality policies in the region;

- There is little civic education and a lack of awareness of active youth citizenship amongst young people and decision-makers at national, institutional and local level.
- Few resources are allocated for the engagement of youth in development;
- Integrity and other important virtues are not widely practiced amongst our leaders nor constituents. Many leaders have failed to deliver their promises to young people;
- Political instability across the Pacific region is a hindrance to young people's development;
- Inadequate mechanisms for young people to engage in development agendas;
- Many Pacific island rural and outer island communities do not have access to provision of security;

**Finally, we acknowledge the limited resources available in the region however; we identify strategic options for sound investment and action. These options can be further enhanced through adoption and integration into regional, national and local development strategies.**

- Identify vulnerable groups of young people including school drop-outs, youth in rural areas and outer islands, young people with disabilities, young people in squatter settlements, young people living with HIV and young offenders, to target specialized and participatory interventions to address their issues and needs;
- Use innovative communication strategies in local vernacular to promote positive behaviours and positive mental attitudes including using role models, peer-to-peer education, new technology and creative means of communication such as art, music and sport. Ensure communication messages reach rural areas in a culturally appropriate ways and engage traditional and religious institutions, parents and communities;
- Encourage parental understanding and guidance for youth development needs particularly for development of life-skills, positive self-esteem and decision-making;
- Invest greater resources in young people and the development of their capacities to assist with national development. Provide appropriate resources for young people to be engaged in the development agenda as proactive, self-empowered and self-starters.
- Explore the use of sport as a tool for advancing national and regional development objectives and priorities, particularly those associated with youth;
- Encourage and support young people in small business schemes;
- Conduct youth focused research and documentation in different development issues, for example, traditional knowledge and practices. Engage and build capacity of young people as researchers;
- Partnership and collaboration between national, traditional and church leaders, communities and with young people to foster harmonious relationships and acceptance of modern Pacific youth identity within traditional contexts. Involve young people as meaningful participants throughout project cycles from beginning to end.

In the area of Promoting Healthy Lifestyles:

- Assist the development of a compulsory gender-sensitive and life skills based education program that encompasses all issues related to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and other related issues starting, starting before they become sexually active – as early as possible at primary school level;

- Incorporate mental health in the health education curriculum in schools and promote healthy lifestyles amongst families;
- Increase access to youth-friendly support services to provide professional counseling and information on: HIV & AIDS and sexual and reproductive health issues, especially to groups of most-at-risk young people such as street vendors, village youth, unemployed youth and sex workers, mental health and suicide prevention to young people in school and out of school youth;
- Sustain the promotion of sport and physical fitness by integrating into youth development programs and in education curricula.

In the area of Pacific Identity:

- Create and avail opportunities for young people to pursue careers in performing and visual arts;
- Develop programs and activities and school curriculum subjects on the preservation of cultural heritage;
- Support national culture and heritage departments to work with young people on cultural heritage issues;
- Formulate national youth employment policies and legislation to facilitate greater access of young men and women to support services for wage and self-employment through coordinated delivery of services that include skills training, commitment of relevant authorities and the private sector, job placement and apprenticeships for employment;
- Formulate and strictly enforce laws on important environmental issues including the protection of fishing reserves in the Pacific Ocean;
- Accommodate and accept without stigmatizing young people's freedom of choice on sexual identity

In the area of Climate Change Adaptation:

- Accord a greater focus on the need to address climate change as a mainstreamed issue impacting on all sectors of government and all sectors of society;
- Recognize traditional and ecological knowledge as an important tool to adapting to the effects of climate change;
- Develop effective community based approaches to raise awareness of, implement and manage sustainable development initiatives and explore renewable energy sources;
- The scale and regional nature of environmental and climate change issues requires effective networking at national, regional and international levels and consolidated efforts to protect the region's natural resources and our nations' environments. This includes working with young environmentalists;
- Strongly support advocacy initiatives by young people in bringing the issues faced by island countries to the international arena. In this regard, we endorse the *Pacific Youth Festival Declaration on Climate Change* and young peoples' call to be included the global, regional and national agenda for climate change adaptation;
- Acquire and update technology and equipment for effective climate monitoring to ensure Pacific nations have advance notice of natural disasters;
- Strictly enforce existing legislations that regulate pollution emissions and prevent littering;
- The Pacific region needs a strategy to hold Pacific nations accountable for the protection of their people from the effects of climate change and to stand in solidarity

to hold industrialized countries accountable for the environmental and social impacts in the Pacific.

In the area of Governance, Peace and Security

- Encourage gender equality in male dominated professions including the political and leadership arena;
- Continue to establish student councils or bodies in schools and tertiary institutions
- Advocate for the establishment of National Youth Councils
- Establish participatory mechanisms such as national youth parliaments or national youth festivals (that link to regional youth events) to inform national development directions. Ensure participatory structures have fair and equal representation of young people including marginalized and disadvantaged groups;
- Conduct civic education for young people including their rights and citizenship responsibilities.
- Ensure good governance principles are practiced by leaders in particular the principles of participation and responsiveness to ensure national stability;
- Involvement of young people in community safety, crime prevention and other local government initiatives;
- Utilize our diverse cultural values and practices such as traditional conflict resolution to work towards peace-building and unity. Empower young people to become peace-builders;
- Allocate sufficient resources for youth development and youth focused programs through additional investment or redirecting and refocusing existing investment;
- Include youth representatives in national advisory committees in government ministries;
- Monitor and enforce legislation to protect young people and children in employment and labour;
- Conduct civic voter education to young people and consider lowering voting age to 18 years.

To advance the progress for young people and Pacific communities, we call for continuous collaboration in the Pacific region and true partnership between young people and the regional and national leadership. We enforce the notion that youth of Pacific nations must 'think globally and act locally'.