

ACFID, CID AND PIANGO JOINT STATEMENT TO MARK THE START OF THE OCEANIA CONNECT REGIONAL CONFERENCE 2020

Today, we mark the start of the first pan-Oceania conference between the international development civil society platforms of the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia.

This is unique and special moment.

Never in the history of our organisations have we come together like we are today.

As a continent of over 41 million people across Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, we come from deep, rich, and diverse cultures and communities.

It is with great pleasure that we can unite under one virtual roof today.

COVID-19 and its implications for the region

We are here to discuss what is at the heart of all our missions: creating a more just, equitable and sustainable world.

And, with the pandemic continuing to spread: the voices, the action and the determination you bring is needed more than ever.

COVID-19 is a layer of intensity bearing down on the existing injustice and inequality we already fight against.

None more so than exacerbating pressures on women and girls. Compounded economic impacts are felt most acutely by women and girls; unpaid care work borne by women and girls has increased; and social isolation has created an exponential rise in gender-based violence.

Earlier this month, the World Bank estimated that as many as 150 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2021.

That is the confronting reality we face.

But in these extraordinary times, core to our values is to unite not divide – to form new, stronger ties; to work closer together; and to work better and smarter.

This unity is also at the heart of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). And it is only through shared enterprise that we can make progress on the path they set.

Far from accelerating worsening trends, we must accelerate the positive trends of our work, and to ward-off the worst of poverty and marginalisation threatened by this pandemic.

For Governments and citizens, our work has never been more relevant. With that, the responsibility on us is even greater.

Standing with the most vulnerable, we must strive to be the watchdogs, the defenders, the advocates, the ideas-generators, and the service providers to enable the world to build back better.

As we embark on four days of discussion, as leaders and representatives of civil society across Oceania, together we share our vision and calls to Governments and peoples across the region.

A Regional Response to COVID-19

Firstly, COVID-19. This virus has caused the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II.

And like every crisis, this pandemic threatens those furthest behind and will vastly accelerate inequality within and between nations.

Nations with the greatest capacity, capability and resources have the greatest responsibility to act. Global wealth redistribution and financing development strategies lies in the hands of the most developed nations.

They must ensure that the people and nations most impacted by COVID-19 do not fall further behind.

As Australia and New Zealand emerge from the shadow of infection, we must see the generosity and humanity of Oceania increase.

Development assistance in the form of grants must increase to the neighboring nations who are suffering the worst of the economic strife.

Whilst the pivoted response to COVID-19 is welcome, Australia and New Zealand commit under one-third of 1% of their national incomes on international development assistance.

In a continent with some of the least developed nations of the world, amidst the worst health and economic crisis in over a century, this level of assistance is totally inadequate.

It falls very short of the commitment to the SDGs and the target of Goal 17 for developed nations to reach 0.7% of Official Development Assistance/Gross National Income.

Without sufficient increases to international development expenditure, the progress and the key indicators of life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy, and income across the region will be lost.

We support the action taken by the G20 in its Debt Service Suspension Initiative. But to truly enable low-income countries to focus on the well-being of their people, we must permanently cancel all debt. High debt repayments and distress must not be borne by those least able to.

The humanity of Oceania must also resonate through our response to COVID-19.

This means being unrelenting in reaching those furthest behind. It means listening to our partners and responding to their priorities, not our own.

Development assistance must address the structural and root causes of challenges which drive poverty, injustice, and inequality. It must not be used to buy influence which bypasses achieving human well-being.

Our collective purpose must be creating inclusive, resilient communities where people of all ages and identities are free from extreme poverty, marginalisation, exploitation, abuse, hunger and sickness.

Urgent Action on Climate Change

At the heart of resilience across our region is tackling the causes and effects of climate change.

The urgency for action across our region cannot be understated. (And I don't need to tell this is our Pacific island neighbours.) It undermines every development gain we have and hope to achieve.

The Blue Pacific is an oceanic continent, made up of Pacific island countries and territories which is being threatened by sea-level rise, intensified natural disasters, warmer oceans, and the destruction of atoll states.

In this region, human-induced climate change is an existential threat to culture, livelihoods, and life itself.

The Boe and Kainaki II Declarations by the Pacific Islands Forum are clear about the urgent action required for bold climate action.

Many of you who attended the ACFID conference last year would know that was a very strong theme in the face-to-face conference held in Sydney last year, when many of our Pacific neighbours joined us and delivered that message.

Together, we echo their grave concerns, their declarations and call on all countries and non-state actors to take decisive action.

This must include:

- The drastic action necessary to limit warming to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels;
- Commitment to the Paris Agreement, and refraining from using Kyoto 'carryover credits' as an abatement to the Agreement;
- Clear commitments and strategies to achieve net zero carbon by 2050;
- An end to tax-payer subsidies for fossil fuels;
- A just transition to clean, renewable energy;
- Ending the construction of new coal plants and thermal coal exports; and
- Gender-diversity in the creation of prevention and response to climate change.

The world and the Oceania region are in this together, just as we have seen in the pandemic, even more so, we are in terms of climate action.

But our response is not consistent with the scale of the challenge.

On current trends we will exceed 1.5°C by as early as 2030 and reach 3°C or more by the end of this century. And with this, irreversible and disastrous changes to our climate.

Australia is a country that has recently shown international leadership in relation to the COVAX facility and initiative to give fair and equitable distribution of a vaccine for coronavirus to all nations, irrespective of wealth and geographic placement.

We call on the Australian Government to show comparable leadership in its action on climate change, particularly those actions that will have an impact on our Pacific neighbours.

Together, we raise our ambition.

Reshaping Power Relations in Oceania

The progress of Oceania and developing the strongest bonds between us requires fundamentally dismantling the relationships of power.

The disempowerment of the people of Oceania has a deep history in European and American colonialism.

Perversely, it is a theme which unites us.

But we must recognise that white-European descendants administer a contemporary form of colonialism in the shape of aid.

That is not to undermine its importance to regional development, but this power dynamic must change.

We must remove the shadow of colonialism and dismantle the narratives of 'donor and recipient'; 'capacity development'; and 'communities as beneficiaries', rather than as leaders.

The power relations must be overcome, development locally designed and led and development reshaped.

In short, it means we need to decolonise aid.

For Australia and New Zealand's international development, there should be no greater goal than advancing the interests and priorities of Pacific peoples.

Fostering an Enabling Environment for Civil Society

It is through civil society, and in civic space where power dynamics between nations can be reshaped and new priorities set for a post-COVID world.

But open societies, where people can freely express ideas and shape their nations, are in decline.

Civic space is closing around the world. In 2019, only 3 per cent of the world's population lived in countries with where their fundamental rights were protected and respected.

Across the Asia-Pacific the pandemic has emboldened Governments in the suppression of civil society, free press, and the freedoms and human rights of all people.

We call on Governments to reverse the pattern of shrinking civic space and heightened political repression and help foster an enabling environment for civil society and the championing of human rights.

Failing to do so would exacerbate instability in the wake of COVID-19.

The great Epeli Hau'ofa, said: "Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us."

In these difficult times, it is these apt words of hope that we join together over the coming days.

ENDS

This statement was jointly delivered by:

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It was delivered on 27 October 2020 to mark the opening of the Oceania Connect regional digital conference held by ACFID, CID and PIANGO.