

Ministry of Education
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK



ISLANDS

STATEMENT DELIVERED BY THE
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PRIME MINISTER and
MINISTER OF EDUCATION

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Madame/Mr Chair, Excellencies, distinguished representatives, our youth delegates, ladies and gentlemen I bid you Kia Orana.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate UNESCO on celebrating its 70th Anniversary. It is indeed an auspicious milestone and reminds the world of just how long the message and mission of UNESCO has been with us and yet sadly, how, at times we struggle as a global community to live up to that.

The Cook Islands also celebrates this year – our 50th Anniversary of self-governance in free association with New Zealand. We have taken the time to reflect on where we have come from and acknowledge the opportunities we will have and challenges we will face in the next 50 years. Our national vision is for a society where all live with dignity, enjoy their human rights, achieve their full potential and contribute to the development and wellbeing of society. You will note that this vision describes the attributes and opportunities for our people – for our people, spread over 15 small islands and atolls and more than 2 million square kilometres of ocean are at the centre of our development.

When we consulted with our communities on what they wanted for the Cook Islands in the next 50 years, a group of students at one of our secondary schools told us they wanted a Cook Islands they can be proud of. As they will be the leaders in 50 years, it is our responsibility to make sure our focus remains grounded on our people, their families and their communities. By promoting social investment, our people will be able to fulfil their potential, prosper and participate in the social, economic, political and cultural life of our nation and when today's young people take the lead they can take the lead of a country they are proud of.

With this in mind, how can the Cook Islands contribute to the UNESCO agenda and how can the programmes and initiatives of UNESCO support our development pathway?

Our culture and our identity are the foundations of our country. We have thousands of years of knowledge and practice that have led us to be the people and the country that we are – this cannot be lost. The work of UNESCO on Intangible Cultural Heritage, Education for Sustainable Development, Memory of the World Programmes and work to support archival practices in the Pacific all support this. But we must go further. The Cook Islands commits to working in the next year to ratify at least one additional Cultural Convention. Why has this work not had priority? Possibly because until the more recent conventions of ICH and Cultural diversity, we did not necessarily see our cultural heritage reflected in the older conventions. Our Cultural Heritage is not buildings and monuments, are cultural heritage is centuries of calendars for fishing and planting, traditional navigation, using our ocean and environment to signal our weather, drum beats and dance steps.....these are the things that have made our country what it is and are still all in use today. We must find a way to see these aspects of knowledge and practice recognised within the tools of UNESCO so that we see them validated when we ratify such conventions.

We have high levels of access and participation in education from Early Childhood to Senior Secondary but ensuring education is high quality and relevant to the lives of young people, creates challenges in our country. The ability to sustain a scope of curriculum programmes for small and often geographically isolated cohorts, and the ability to meet the needs and interests of all students, requires new ways of thinking about resourcing and providing access to education. To this end we are investing in the integration of IT into our teaching programmes and the use of real time IT as a delivery modality to our isolated students. The cost of such infrastructure and connectivity has a significant impact on the operating expenses of our schools but equity over economies of scale informs our decision making. For our “at risk” and “in risk” youth, ongoing engagement or re-engagement with education and training both formal and non-formal helps to improve individual self-esteem and responsibility which supports a more cohesive society. Currently we are:

- Strengthening our TVET and skills development programmes;
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- Building second chance training opportunities; and
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- Providing easily accessible pastoral care through counselling and careers advisory services.

We know that the issue of supporting our Youth in a fast changing 21st century is one that the whole Pacific is dealing with. We also know that many of the UNESCO programme areas and the work of other UN agencies have identified youth strategies. We humbly ask that such efforts could have a greater level of explicit co-ordination and collaboration so that countries can have more streamlined access to expertise and support in this area.

I take this opportunity to note the importance of the UNESCO Field Office for Pacific States to our region. We recognise the financial constraints under which the organisation is working but request that such constraints do not impact on the ability of the Apia office to support our countries in the implementation of the full scope of the UNESCO agenda. Whilst we fully acknowledge the work and support and Headquarters and regional offices nothing can replace the value added to our work by people working amongst us in the Pacific.

Within the Pacific region, we know each other well. We understand the impact the decision of one country can have on the political and financial environment of our neighbours and the livelihoods of those in the region. We work together for the betterment of our region whilst respecting the sovereignty and unique culture and contribution of our individual countries and people. To this end, the Cook Islands offers its full support to the candidacy of Samoa as a voice for the Pacific on the UNESCO Executive Board.

As we commence work on the post 2015 agenda and respond to the challenges of the Global Sustainable Development Goals, the challenge to UNESCO will be to build such an understanding as that we have in the Pacific across all countries so that, whilst we maintain our individual sovereignty,

we respect each other and work together to meet global goals in a way that is equitable, empowering and sustainable for the wellbeing of all and particularly our next generation. We, the Cook Islands, are ready to play our part in meeting this challenge.

Kia orana e kia manuia