



Ministry of Education
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

STATEMENT DELIVERED BY
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Mr President - Excellences', ladies and gentlemen,
I bid you a warm Kia Orana.

Taking this opportunity, I address you on behalf of Honourable Henry Puna, Prime Minister and Minister of Education for the Cook Islands, and the Chair of the Cook Islands National Commission for UNESCO.

When the Honourable Prime Minister addressed the General Policy Debate at the 39th session, he reflected on the milestones achieved since the Cook Islands had celebrated 50 years of self-governance in free association with New Zealand, the same year in which UNESCO celebrated its 70th Anniversary.

After 54 years of self-government, the Cook Islands is now set to graduate to 'developed' nation status, as determined by the OECD, in January 2020. This is certainly a positive achievement for our small country that consistently rises to the challenge of punching above our weight.

As we approach graduation status, we are reminded of the opportunities for our people – spread over 15 small islands and atolls and across more than 2 million square kilometres of ocean – it is our people who are at and will remain at the centre of our development.

In becoming the Pacific's first developed island nation, essentially reaching adulthood in a country sense, we have in turn reflected on what we need to do to be more self-reliant and our Government recognises that economic diversification, supporting different areas of industry, is key and our people crucial to success.

Our focus remains grounded with our children, their families and their communities, and while graduation is only the start of achieving greater things, there is no greater value than supporting the lifelong learning and development of our people.

Our culture, language, traditional knowledge and our unique identity are the foundations of our country.

It is on this premise that our approach to graduation status must be driven. It is this same premise that the Cook Islands have been empowered to contribute to the UNESCO agenda.

We continue to be committed to ensuring sustainable oceans, alongside and in support of our Pacific colleagues.

There is a growing significance and complexity of the oceans discourse, both domestically and beyond. This includes the importance of genuine partnerships and collaboration in ensuring sustainable oceans through sound activities and governance.

This very issue is our traditional knowledge; oceans is a part of who we are. We are committed to utilising our most treasured resource in a sustainable manner as we have in the past and will continue to do so into the future.

As such, the Cook Islands remains dedicated to Marae Moana – our Cook Islands Marine Park – spread over 1.9 million square kilometres of our ocean. Working together with our traditional leaders, local governments and our communities to promote sustainable development and balance economic growth with conservation of our ocean.

We are extremely proud of this concept of protection and guardianship, alongside development.

Through the provision of participation programme funding the Cook Islands National Commission supports a number of Non-Government Organisations in delivering programmes that further support the UNESCO mandate, including the publication of literature drawing on science, scripture and stories to validate local wisdom and traditional knowledge.

School holiday programmes are delivered with the focus of environmental and indigenous issues in the Cook Islands, teaching children life skills and traditional practices ranging from the ridge to the reef.

The delivery of support for families of children with Autism has also been greatly received by our communities, especially in our most isolated islands.

So as you can see the engagement of the Cook Islands with the UNESCO mandate is wide ranging.

Underpinning all of this is our commitment to ensuring education remains our priority, as I am sure it does for everyone in this room today.

We experience high levels of access and participation in the Cook Islands – however the challenge is to ensure we do not become complacent in this achievement.

We can't operate in silos and expect educational success with sustainable development. Working with all sectors of our community, including our public and private partners, fosters lifelong learning, cooperation and partnerships that ultimately meets the needs of our learners and our country.

With this, I take the opportunity to call UNESCO to account for the work of SIDS and the Pacific with ensuring the UNESCO agenda is implemented respectfully in our region.

The Pacific are committed and we continue to meet UNESCO obligations and responsibilities, despite our many geographical challenges. And, while recognising the financial constraints under which the organisation is working and the transformative change underway both within UNESCO and the UN as a whole – Will UNESCO ensure ongoing support and mutual benefit?

While we are part of the Asia-Pacific family, the Pacific are also 17 countries with one field office to meet all of our unique and collective needs.

We fully acknowledge the work and support of Headquarters and Regional Offices but nothing can replace the value added to our work by people working amongst us in the Pacific.

Sustainable support and provision needs to be assured to the multi-country office.

To this end, the Cook Islands encourages the UNESCO Board and Secretariat to ensure the highest level of representation, decision-making and inclusion is given to SIDS – thus placing SIDS at the centre of UNESCO priorities.

In closing – UNESCO - we urge you to be mindful of your own guiding principle of leaving no one behind when reflecting on how the organisation engages with and works alongside the Pacific region.

In addressing the 2030 agenda and its challenges as a collective UNESCO family, the challenge to UNESCO will be to build on the principles of cooperation, involvement and representation while balancing the unique individual contexts of all countries, and in a way that is equitable and empowering.

UNESCO, you have the Cook Islands commitment that we will support this challenge.

Kia Orana and thank you!