



**STATEMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE  
KINGDOM OF TONGA**

**At the General Policy Debate**

**40<sup>th</sup> SESSION OF THE  
GENERAL CONFERENCE OF UNESCO**

**BY**

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I acknowledge the presence of His Almighty God in our midst.

**Mr. President**, on behalf of the Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, I congratulate you on your election to the Presidency of the 40<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Conference, and assure you that you have the full support of my country under your eminent leadership.

**Mr. President**, as part of the UNESCO Family, we are constantly reminded of the noble mandate of UNESCO. The work of UNESCO that has been founded on the preamble of the Constitution is therefore **now needed more than ever before** due to the emergence of new threats to peace and security. Without peace and security in all forms, nothing can be accomplished.

**Mr. President**, Tonga has continued to integrate important international agreements, such as the SDGs and SAMOA Pathway in its national planning process. The Government has moved the responsibility for national planning from the Ministry of Finance to the Office of the Prime Minister to ensure a whole government approach to planning.

**Mr. President**, Education continues to be the backbone of our efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda. For 2019/20, the Ministry of Education is the largest recipient of government's total recurrent budget being **15.5%** followed by the Ministry of Health: **12.2%**. However, it must be noted that over 60% of these budgets are for salaries of employees, hence leaving 40% for operations, which can have an alarming impact on the achievement of SDG 4. Tonga's Education Act 2013 legitimised a compulsory school age of 4 to 18. The Government recently approved the development of a National Early Childhood Development Council comprising of Ministers of Education, Health, Finance, Internal Affairs

and Justice and a Steering Committee to better oversee and coordinate investment and activities for Early Childhood Development as extremely essential for the foundation of humanity.

**Mr. President,** Tonga's challenge for Education is not "access to education", but that of the provision of **quality** education and the monitoring of achievement of quality education". We therefore ask for UNESCO's assistance for the review of our Education structures and systems, particularly our Information systems, Curriculum development, and Examinations and assessment. Tonga also sees a great potential for sports in our children and youth and we would also like to receive UNESCO's assistance for sports development at the school level.

**Mr. President,** the other main threat that we register is climate change and health epidemics. The impact of climate change and health epidemics has a devastating effect on schools and students. Schools are forced to close or to be re-located. Some of our schools that were damaged by Cyclone Gita in 2018 have not been re-built prompting students to use tents or relocate to other schools. Our schools have had to close down this month due to an outbreak of measles. Samoa has declared a State of Emergency for the same issue. **What can UNESCO offer** *in times of crisis like this when students are temporary denied the right to quality education?*

**Mr. President,** we remain committed to the Paris Agreement for the benefit of our future generations. In August, our Pacific Leaders, in the tiny island of Tuvalu where sea level rise is having the greatest impact, endorsed the "strongest statement to date on climate change" known as "The **Kainaki II Declaration**" through which they declared a climate change crisis in the Pacific Region, and called on urgent action to prevent catastrophic global warming and disasters." The leaders also decided to

develop the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. UNESCO is kindly asked to examine these documents commensurate with the preparation of the new C4 and C5.

**Mr. President,** Tonga remains fully committed to our and UNESCO's common goal to **"Leave no one behind"**. The UNESCO family must have an inclusive voice on the governance of UNESCO – the UNESCO Executive Board. It is sad that sometimes elections have to be aggressively contested for in some of the groups, hence undermining the process of equity, peace and tolerance that UNESCO has long been promoting and advocating. The Pacific has 17 members in total, yet it has not had a voice in UNESCO's Governance mechanism for a long time now. The Office of the 17 member-states in Apia, Samoa is also poorly staffed and poorly funded. Programmes for the Pacific can be more effectively coordinated and delivered from the Apia Office rather than from the Secretariat. Budget for the sub-regional statutory meetings for the Pacific have also been cut.

**Mr. President,** Tonga believes in multi-lateralism, and the application of equity and human rights. We would like to see UNESCO in the future considering the needs of every member state, whether it be a large or small country in terms of population and resources, or a small or large contributor to UNESCO's budget. We should share the responsibility to change the world. Having said these, Tonga supports the proposed amendment to Article V of UNESCO's Constitution, that will be discussed in Item 7.3 of the Agenda of the General Conference, which is proposing *"to introduce term limits to enable more rotation in the Executive Board. The issue of term limits is not a new issue. The Board needs to be more inclusive and diverse. [SEP]I appeal to all Member States to understand our plea and support the proposal for amending UNESCO's constitution and introduce*

*term limits. It is being asked in good faith for the benefit of my country and other small islands developing states.*

## **CONCLUSION**

**Mr. President,** there is so much more that I would like to say, but time will not permit me to do so. I would like to extend my gratitude to UNESCO as well as all the member states who have assisted to strengthen Tonga's capacity to be able to implement its commitment to UNESCO and the 2030 Agenda. Let's not be confined to thinking Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, Group 4, Group 5(a) and Group 5(b) – let's coordinate our actions around the world to fight the threats to peace, humankind and international security. I wish all candidates who win seats on the Executive Board and sub-sidiary organs a very successful and rewarding time in office for themselves and for the UNESCO Family they serve.

MALO 'AUPITO, THANK YOU. MERCI BEAUCOUP.