

WELCOME REMARKS
THE THIRD FORUM ICT MINISTERS' MEETING
FA'ONELUA CONVENTION CENTRE, NUKU'ALOFA, TONGA,
FRIDAY 19TH JUNE 2015

Professor Rajesh Chandra
Vice-Chancellor & President

1. Acknowledgements and Greetings

- Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince Tupouto'a 'Ulukala;
- The Honourable Deputy Prime Minister of Tonga and Minister for Environment, Energy, Climate Change, Disaster Management, Meteorology, Information and Communications; Mr Siaosi Sovaleni;
- The President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, Reverend Dr 'Aho and members of the Clergy;
- Honourable Ministers of Communications from Pacific ITU Member Countries;
- Chief, Projects & Knowledge Management, ITU, Dr. Cosmos Zavazava;
- Director of the Asia Pacific Branch of the International Telecommunications Union, Mr Ioane Koroivuki;
- Chairman of the CROP ICT Working Group, Dr. Dilawar Grewal and members of the Group;
- Distinguished Government representatives;

- Excellencies and members of the Diplomatic Corp;
- Heads and Representatives of UN agencies and International organisations;
- Representatives of Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP),
- Representatives of Communications and Industry organisations;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a privilege to be given the pleasant task of welcoming you all to this auspicious event – the Third ICT Ministerial Meeting for Pacific ITU Members. The University of the South Pacific, being the Chair of the Council of Regional Organisations Pacific (CROP) Working Group on ICT, is delighted to be highly involved with this meeting; which is generously hosted by the Government of Tonga; facilitated by USP and the ITU with support from our development partners such as the Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT) and others¹.

1. ¹ <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/AsiaPacific/Pages/Events/2015/June-Pacific-Ministerial-Meeting/home.aspx> downloaded on 16 June 2015.

I extend a very special welcome to His Royal Highness. Your presence, Your Royal Highness has made this occasion very special and has encouraged all the participants in their deliberations. Thank you very much.

2. Central Role of ICTs in Development

Your Royal Highness, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, your gracious presence here today signifies the continued and growing interest in and the importance of ICTs to the livelihood of our people of the Pacific region. In a recent Press Release on 26 May 2015 , the ITU reports—and I quote:

*"New Figures released by ITU indicate that over the past 15years, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have grown in an unprecedented way, providing huge opportunities for social and economic development"*²

² Source: http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2015/17.aspx#.VYBkqPow_tQ

The same press release went on to say: *Internet user penetration increased seven-fold since 2000, 3G mobile-broadband coverage is rapidly extending while Fixed-broadband uptake [is] growing at a slower rate; and that Broadband [is] now affordable in many countries.*”

In some of our countries in the Pacific we have made major strides, for example in Fiji, ITU reported that the percentage of the population using the internet has increased from 1.5% in 2000 to 37.1% in 2013, and Tonga from 2.4% to 35.0%. (<http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>).

Today, we congratulate the Republic of Marshall Islands, Kingdom of Tonga and Vanuatu for proactively taking measures to improve connectivity in their countries through fibre connections. We have witnessed how these fibre connections are changing the lives of the people in Tonga, Vanuatu and Marshall Islands. We also congratulate

Cook Islands and others who have taken advantage of O3B satellite technology to improve connectivity in their respective countries.

Unfortunately, as a region, we lag behind other regions our broadband connectivity, internet connections, the absence of an academic research and educational network, and in developing the necessary regulatory, policy, and human resources to take full advantage of the enormous opportunities being opened by rapidly evolving ICTs.

This we need to change with decisive and bold actions, and with the speed that will allow us not only to catch up with other regions, but to go beyond and excel exploiting the full potential of ICTs. Honourable Ministers, you have a crucial role in speeding up the ICT developments in our countries, and I hope that this conference will propel us to undertake policies and actions that will unlock the full potential of ICTs. This conference will give honourable Ministers an opportunity to share experiences, learn from successful examples of ICT development in the

region and beyond the region, and to chart a transformative agenda for ICT development that weaves national and regional perspectives and activities in a seamless strategy.

3. Regional Cooperation and Building Strong Alliances

Despite the fact that the Pacific islands are very diverse with their own unique contexts and challenges, there is a strong imperative for regional co-operation that will strengthen and draw support from national policies and actions. Regional co-operation can reduce the cost of ICT developments as we exploit greater economies of scale; learn from policies and policy experiences, and share the cost of some regional services, particularly in more complex areas such as cyber security that has become such a menace for countries, companies and people all over the world.

The Small Islands Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action better known as the Samoa Pathway³ saw leaders emphasising the

³ SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (S.A.M.O.A Pathway) <http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1537> accessed 16th December, 2014

linkages between sustaining high levels of economic growth and job creation and to the lack of ICT networks, limited human and institutional capacity amongst other things. To this end the Samoa Pathway has called for more efforts and attention to ICT infrastructure, regional ICT platforms, ICT in Education, appropriate access with affordable costs etc.

4. Sustainable Development: Transforming Commitments into Action

This year we are here to discuss ICT with a theme of “**ICT for Sustainable Development, Cybersecurity and Disaster Risk Management**”. This theme represents the priorities of the region.

Today, Ministers will be presented with the Review Report of the **Framework for Action on ICT Development in the Pacific (FAIDP)**

The report submitted to you today represents our collective engagement

as a region and desire to explore mutual synergies through a clear strategy to better harness ICT to improve the livelihoods of our people.

5. Major Challenges

I wish to highlight the importance of addressing a number of challenges whose success or failure will impact ICT development greatly:

- a. First, we need to ensure that the policy makers and implementers, major international agencies, significant funders such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, CROP Working Group all work together within an agreed framework, share information, and synergize each others' efforts. This has not been happening in the past and needs to change for the benefit of the region.
- b. Second, investing in broadband: while some countries have established their fibre connections, others will need to ensure that there is enough broadband (either fibre if this is possible or through satellite otherwise) because without this, even the

best laid-out plans will not have too much real impact on economic and social development.

c. Third, we need to strengthen our **cyber defences**. Most countries find this a daunting task individually, but there is already a regional initiative that can be revitalized. I very much hope that this will be done.

d. Disaster Risk and Management

Fourth, the Pacific remains vulnerable to diverse disasters such as cyclones, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes etc. and these are intensifying. The impact of disasters on national GDPs is very significant as we saw from the recent Category-5 Cyclone Pam. We need to deploy ICTs better in the future in dealing with disasters.

Within the Pacific, two Pacific countries (Tonga and RMI) are party to the Tampere Convention⁴ which allows for seamless

⁴ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXV-4&chapter=25&lang=en&clang=_en

deployment and landing of emergency ICT equipment during times of disasters. Tonga also leads the way in the Pacific in terms of Early Warning systems in ICT and there are valuable lessons that can be shared across countries and territories. We are grateful to the Kingdom of Tonga for allowing us to view these facilities.

e. Regional Knowledge Hub

Fifth, establishing a Regional Knowledge Hub for the Pacific is important. This is to make sure that the Pacific can have access to the right information at the right time. To a certain degree a Knowledge Hub exists already at USP in terms of the concentration of knowledge, the infrastructure to make it available on-line, and the ability to create content as well as helping the region. However, the dots have not been linked effectively, so the emphasis will be to link these; expand

According to above UN link, Marshall Islands is a signatory to the Convention since 11 Nov 1998 while Tonga's status is party to the convention through a deposit of an instrument of accession (a)

knowledge concentration; make it available to others easily and to be inclusive in our approach.

f. Sixth, we need to give priority to intensifying the use of broadband through content creation, getting businesses to use ICTs, creating national and regional systems to allow safe transactions, investing in digitizing government services, to name a few things. All these will take investment and effort because establishing fibre connections by themselves will not yield the desired results.

g. Finally, we need to build high-level advocacy involving the Honourable Ministers, but also including Prime Ministers and Ministers of Finance who control overall development and the purse strings.

6. Your Royal Highness, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your kind attention and I wish you all a very fruitful and outcomes-oriented meeting.

7. Malo Aupito