



**PACIFIC ISLANDS  
FORUM SECRETARIAT**

**CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS' STATEMENT  
TO THE 2020 FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING**

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) welcome the opportunity for open and constructive dialogue around economic recovery policies and initiatives to tackle the global pandemic of COVID-19. We note the work of national governments of the region in containing the spread of the pandemic, and to stop it from reaching our shores, recognising that this human crisis is an unsettling time. CSOs also note that the Pacific Islands Forum has invoked the *Biketawa Declaration* and established the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 as a regional response. We appreciate the measures in place in order to contain the spread of COVID-19, including the adoption of policies to support social protections, jobs and livelihoods, and businesses.

2. CSOs further note the efforts of Forum Members and stakeholders towards regional cooperation and collaboration to combat and respond to crisis such as COVID-19, and further urge Ministers to explore other avenues of collaboration, and to look at mechanisms such as the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF), and the possibility that a mechanism such as the PRF could take into account pandemics preparedness/response as an output to strengthen resilience at the community level.

3. CSOs **recognise** the two-pronged nature of challenge to the Pacific. While the COVID-19 pandemic presents the most urgent threat facing humanity today, the adverse impacts of climate change remain the greatest threat in the long run. We therefore **urge** Ministers to ensure that economic recovery measures to address the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are just and align with the goals of the *Paris Agreement* to lead the transition into a greener and fairer post COVID-19 economies.

**Partnership in Recovery and Development**

4. CSOs note that in 2019, Forum Economic Ministers endorsed this Dialogue with CSOs as a permanent feature of the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM). We appreciate this recognition and opportunity, noting the unique position CSOs hold in working with and advocating for communities. In this light, CSOs **emphasise** the importance of having community stakeholders participating at both regional and national consultations around recovery policies and initiatives such as crisis management & response and food security. CSOs kindly **remind** FEMM to be more responsive towards people's anxieties, with measures relevant and appropriate to their plight.

5. CSOs acknowledge the *Teieniwa Vision* that resulted from the Regional Anti-Corruption Meeting hosted by the Republic of Kiribati in February 2020 and **emphasise** its recognition of the importance of enhanced transparency and accountability, strengthening public awareness and the right to information. Given that countries are allocating COVID-19 response budgets, CSOs **emphasise** that citizens must be engaged in the process through submissions and are being informed of funding / resource allocations. This is key to allaying fears that communities may have about their livelihoods and survival. CSOs would like to **highlight** that there is current work being done on citizen budgeting workshops through a

partnership between the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Public Finance Management Unit. In addition, CSOs acknowledge the ongoing capacity building for NSAs under the Forum Secretariat's NSA Programme to better engage in effective policy development, implementation and tracking regional policy priorities, as well as in monitoring regional and national commitments on gender equality policies and strategies to ending violence against women and girls.

## Human Security

6. CSOs acknowledge that the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the Pacific peoples and communities are further exacerbated by natural disasters. Weak public health systems and social protection policies and initiatives during this crisis have in effect, served to expose the vulnerabilities of marginalised and disadvantaged groups, which includes the elderly, children, persons with disabilities, youth, women, the LGBTQI community, rural, maritime and poor populations. CSOs **call for** comprehensive reviews of social protection legislation and relevant policies that include innovative and adaptive strategies to protect against future and recurring waves of pandemics and epidemics.

7. CSOs **recognise** Forum Economic Ministers' commitments to advancing women's economic empowerment, acknowledging the differential and disproportionate impacts on women's economic livelihoods and security due to the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters such as TC Harold, and **urge** Forum Economic Ministers to implement gender responsive economic recovery planning and budgeting

## Agriculture and Fisheries as Preferred Industry

8. CSOs acknowledge the importance of the Agriculture and Fisheries sectors for food security, as evidenced by our collective experiences in the context of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. We **encourage** the need to build agriculture and fishery-based Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), particularly for women and youth, through ease of business, access to markets as well as to financing and value adding to the supply of food products. Furthermore, we see the sectors as providing alternative livelihoods and an expanded job market where work is not only related to farmers but agricultural more broadly, logistics and IT service professionals. To this end, CSOs wish to **highlight for your information** a survey conducted by the Pacific Islands Farmers Organisations Network (PIFON) in six Forum Member countries, which highlights the potential of Agriculture as a preferred industry in the socio- economic recovery plans of Forum Member countries and the region. The survey titled *Pacific Farmers Have Their Say* is available and the report can be accessed on this link: <https://pacificfarmers.com/resource/pacific-farmers-have-their-say-survey-report/>

9. CSOs further reiterate the importance of financial inclusion programmes, particularly activities such as value-chain capacity building, the Pac Farmer app and financial literacy through partnerships with development or commercial banks and telecommunications service providers.

10. Border closures and transportation constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic have seen the loss of agricultural and fishery export markets and the lack of food security in remote islands or atolls where agriculture is limited. <sup>1</sup>The Asian Development Bank also warned that reduced air and sea link would increase food security concerns for small island nations with limited agricultural production. Because there is less trade demand in the world, there will be less ships supplying food and other important imports to these countries. "Some countries are already stockpiling food". CSOs **recommend** strengthening the regional agricultural and

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<sup>1</sup> Financial Times 06/08/2020 Jamie Smyth in Sydney

fisheries trade as part of the key sectors to socio-economic recovery and food safety measures to ensure safety of food products traded amongst the Forum members.

## **Economic Recovery and the Informal Sector**

11. CSOs note that stimulus relief funds and economic recovery programmes have targeted the formal sector, leaving out the large informal sector. CSOs also note that budgets generally span one year. Globally we have seen the collapse of both marquee and small businesses. Many businesses such as those in the tourism industry are referring to recovery over a long term. CSOs urge FEMM to **consider** economic recovery stimulus for the informal sector and at least a 2-year recovery budget to assist both formal and informal sector businesses.

## **Socio-Economic Challenges**

12. Food Supply – CSOs note the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has detrimental effects on the livelihoods and well-being of people in rural and outer island areas and in urban informal settings. The most vulnerable populations were especially impacted during lockdown periods. There was a reduction in household income and remittances, difficulty in accessing healthy food supplies, and increases in the price of food. The World Bank has forecasted a 13% decline in foreign remittances to the Pacific in 2020<sup>2</sup>. CSOs **propose** the following measures to alleviate hardship: control the prices of food products; subsidise fresh and nutritious foods to ensure low prices; and, where a lockdown is likely to take place, facilitate easy access to funds prior to the lockdown to ensure people are able to purchase sufficient healthy food for the lockdown period.

13. Health containment restrictions, such as a lockdown, have impacted public transport, which meant that many with health problems were not able access health services, centres and/or hospitals. CSOs **recommend general increase in health budget for health systems and services to enable** the provision of accessible mobile health services that can provide basic health care to patients with disabilities, marginalised communities and for rural and urban poor communities in informal settlements. The service can also be a vehicle for preventive education on COVID-19.

14. COVID-19 Tax and Loan Relief – Governments have provided a variety of relief packages as part of the suite of response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their economies. Given the continuing uncertainty over the global pandemic, CSOs **urge** FEMM to **consider**: a moratorium on loan terms and conditions; a moratorium on rent increases and evictions as temporary measures; the provision of a tax holiday for companies and reducing consumption tax; and ensuring that employers' contributions to workers retirement funds that were suspended are restored.

15. Seasonal Workers – Workers in the Labour Mobility Program (LMP) and Seasonal Workers Scheme (SWS) in receiving countries are directly impacted by COVID-19 through reduction in working hours, expired contracts, lost employment, increased accommodation rents, lack of information on employment status and visa renewal, working without personal protective equipment (PPE), and uncertain salary arrangements especially for farm workers who have become essential workers. Furthermore, many seasonal and LMP workers are stuck in the receiving countries due to the closure of borders. Neither group of workers were included in the stimulus relief funds of the receiving and sending countries. CSOs **urge** the inclusion of stranded seasonal and LMP workers in COVID-19 stimulus packages and **call** for strengthening labour mobility arrangements and agreements for the protection of workers, inclusive of employment conditions, financial and living arrangements.

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<sup>2</sup> The World Bank Press Release, April 22, 2020

16. Gender equality issues – The COVID-19 pandemic and the TC Harold *dual* impacts experienced across Pacific communities include, widening of gender inequalities and further marginalisation of women and girls. There are also the potential risks of regression of gender equality achievements in the Pacific, if gender equality is not central to response and recovery measures in the region. With the focus on the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of resource allocation in the short term, the risks of de-prioritisation of the gender equality work and the existing FEMM commitments towards women’s economic empowerment, is high.

17. With the current health crisis, anecdotal data and rapid gender assessments conducted by members, CSOs and development partners show an increase in gender-based violence (and its severity and frequency) due to confinement observed across Pacific countries. What has been observed, with already existing resource constraints is the demand of key services within new conditions of lockdowns.

18. CSOs **call** on FEMM to consider gender responsive economic recovery planning and targeted actions to support women’s economic empowerment and investments towards essential services, including actions for ending violence against women and girls.

## **Education**

19. The closure of schools and learning institutions have disrupted education for all students. Parents were ill-equipped to continue their children’s learning and school communities were not prepared with remote teaching programmes due to lack of connectivity, access and capacity. CSOs **emphasise** the 6 Principles of the *Pacific Regional Educational Framework* (PacREF) and **encourage** FEMM to **consider** increased investment in education, particularly digital infrastructure to future proof education.

## **Conclusion**

20. To conclude, Pacific CSOs are sincerely appreciative to your Excellencies, Forum Economic Ministers, for the opportunity to participate in today’s virtual meeting. Pacific CSOs also acknowledge the continual support of the Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor, and the commitment of the Forum Non-State Actors’ Programme to engaging with CSOs via virtual meetings during the challenging period posed by the COVID-19 global pandemic.