

Final talking points of Director General SPC

5th France – Oceania Summit

Monday 19th July 2021, 6.00pm – 8.00pm (Fiji time)

Virtual

Session 3. COVID-19 economic recovery, connectivity and infrastructure

Micronesia/Melanesia/Polynesia Group Chair (TBC)

French Polynesia

EU (TBC)

SPC – DG

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted the Pacific region. To better understand these impacts, SPC commissioned an independent metasynthesis of the multitude of assessments undertaken in 2020. This drew heavily on our repository of regional statistics and information in the Pacific Data Hub and supported the development of a Socio-Economic Impact Assessment together with the Pacific Islands Forum. Some key findings included:

On the **Positive side**

- Traditional governance structures such as village leaders, committees, and councils played a critical role in local leadership, implementing government measures, managing impacts of COVID-19, and managing local resources.
- So too did leaning into traditional coping mechanisms of family and community food production and gathering. Highlighting the critical importance of access to land and ocean resources.
- The scaled up and innovative use of digital connectivity, where affordable and available, was a lifeline for continuing education, government services, and providing a window into the potential of digital transformation in the region's recovery.

There were many **Negative impacts** and Leaders have spoken to these throughout.

- The evidence consistently shows that governments, businesses and people experienced significant economic impacts resulting from the collapse of tourism, and reduced economic activity .
- Many above the poverty line prior to COVID have been pushed below it. This has certainly impacted disproportionately hard on the most vulnerable. Increases in domestic violence, days away from school particularly for girls, and the availability of the most basic necessities like food, continue to challenge many.
- Growing economic hardship are tightening the fiscal space to invest in critical recovery investments including in education, health care and food systems. This will impact on the short, medium and potentially long-term ability of PICT's to achieve all SDGs by 2030.

There are however **important opportunities on the road to recovery**. Amongst other things, **digital transformation and e-commerce is critical** and offers both economic and social recovery solutions.

This requires both improved infrastructure as well as capability, affordable options and attention to the 'last mile' for remote communities. In addition, as the world is necessarily moving to a low-carbon and climate compatible recovery pathway – it is **critically important that our region does not inadvertently inherit the cheap and obsolete infrastructure** and technologies of more affluent nations. This would not only lock our countries into further fossil fuel dependency but add to the mounting piles of waste and pollution many of our countries do not have the capability to deal with in country. **Funding support for appropriate technologies is critical** for the region in its recovery.

To finish, I would like to acknowledge and thank France, among/alongside other partners, for the response to the pandemic in the region and I note the opportunity to build on the areas highlighted in the recent multiyear SPC-FRANCE partnership signed with Minister Le Drian in January 2021 (public health, climate change, the ocean and its resources, sustainable management of natural resources/ food systems) in order to respond to post Covid-19 economic and development recovery challenges.