



SPEECH BY THE MSG DIRECTOR GENERAL

MR. LEONARD LOUMA, OBE

**AT THE 1ST MELANESIAN JOINT HYBRID MSG - PIFS SYMPOSIUM ON TRADE AND GENDER-
INTERPRETING TRADE AGREEMENTS FROM A GENDER LENS POST COVID-19 AND DIGITIZING
(ELECTRONIC COMMERCE) SUPPLY CHAINS IN THE MELANESIAN SUB-REGION**

THURSDAY, 18 AUGUST, 2022: 8.30 AM (VANUATU TIME)

Salutations

- *Secretary General Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Mr Henry Puna*
- *Deputy Director General of the World Trade Organisation, Ms. Anabelle Gonzales*
- *Deputy EU Delegation to the Pacific, H. E. Dr. Erja Askola*
- *PIFS Permanent Representative to the WTO, UN and other International Agencies in Geneva, Your Excellency, Ambassador Mere Falemaka*
- *Distinguished delegates and officials from MSG sub-region and our friends joining us from other PACP countries*
- *Invited guest speakers and moderators*
- *Representatives and participants from the Private Sector*
- *Ladies and gentlemen*

Good morning.

Let me, on behalf of the MSG Secretariat, offer a very warm welcome to you all to this 1st Melanesian Joint Symposium on Trade and Gender held in Port Vila, Vanuatu. I wish to thank you all for finding time to join

us for this Symposium. I am sorry that I am not able to be with you in person today and thus, this message delivered through this medium.

This event is organized for the Melanesia sub-region by the MSG Secretariat with the support of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) European Union (EU) TECCBUFF Programme. During my tenure as Head of the MSG Secretariat, I will be actively pursuing more joint undertakings, of a similar nature, with the PIF and the EU in our efforts to better serve our membership.

In this regard, let me convey my sincere gratitude to the Secretary General Henry Puna of the PIFS and Her Excellency Dr. Erja Askola of the EU Delegation for ensuring that this important Symposium on Trade and Gender event is made possible.

I am reminded that this is the first time that we are organizing a Trade and Gender Symposium in Melanesia. I do hope that this won't be the last but the first of many more to come.

It is pleasing to note that in keeping with the true Pacific spirit of family, goodwill and inclusiveness, invitations have been extended to our brothers and sisters in Polynesia and Micronesia, and across our Blue Pacific Continent, to join us for a constructive dialogue, 'talanoa' or 'storian' on this important topic on 'Trade and Gender'.

I am convinced that the discussions in the next two days will bring together useful information and provide opportunity for sharing of experiences and knowledge in good practices not only in the 'Trade and Gender' space in Melanesia and indeed the wider Pacific region, but also on how to best leverage the advances in the IT area to participate meaningfully in trade and commerce.

The MSG and the wider Pacific region face daunting development challenges occasioned largely by our 'smallness' - in relation to the size of our economies and size of our markets. Compounding these is the vast distance to markets, dis-economies of scale, high trade costs, supply side capacities, and the other trade infrastructure impediments that constrain us from taking optimum advantage of regional and global value chains.

It is critical that MSG economies, and indeed, other Pacific Island countries, take maximum advantage by developing and growing industries and appropriate sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry sector that with the support for women entrepreneurship.

At the risk of digressing from the main issues of the Symposium, let me just draw your attention, at this juncture, to this analogy. Let us think of our respective economies and countries like a BIRD. We all want

our economies and countries to be on an upward trajectory like a bird in full flight. But a bird cannot fly if it has only one wing or its other wing is clipped. Likewise, our economies and countries cannot prosper if the other half of our population, the womenfolk, is not there with us in the enterprise of economic growth and nation building.

Trade is recognized as an important foundation and enabler for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction. Trade facilitates better living conditions and improvement in the overall welfare of our peoples. Trade agreements are useful tools to lower trade barriers, incentivize private sector to take advantage of trade and investment opportunities towards enhancing international trade.

For the MSG, the current MSG Trade Agreement governs trade in goods only. To further enhance our economic and trade cooperation, the services sector has been included in the new Melanesian Free Trade Agreement. This affirms and manifests in a concrete way our members' commitment to, and aspirations to achieve the MSG sub-regional economic integration agenda.

We, at the MSG Secretariat, are under no illusion and recognize that 'Women Entrepreneurs' play an important role in contributing towards economic empowerment and development.

MSG Secretariat efforts, in this regard, and to fulfill the economic integration agenda decreed by our Leaders, are informed by the plethora of literature by authorities on the subject. They all proffer that it cannot be done effectively without the participation of our women folk.

For instance, according to the ADB's 2019 report on "*Leveraging Trade for Women's Economic Empowerment in the Pacific*", around 80 percent of economic activities in the Pacific are categorized in the informal sector and approximately 86 percent of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the region are female-owned.

The statistics also show that there is still a huge potential to bridge the gap between men and women in economic activities and labor markets in Melanesia and across the Pacific. We need to challenge ourselves to further bridge that gap.

The ADB's 2019 report also illustrated a significant increase in Aid for Trade projects that embrace gender equality and women's empowerment in the Pacific. Consequently, there has been a rise in development partner contributions to support in-country Aid for Trade projects which has, over the years, been directed towards gender inclusiveness in trade policies.

Again, we would do well to embrace these positive trends and challenge our countries to recalibrate their activities and take advantage of the changes in the donor community behavior and approach.

In the MSG sub-region, our Member States are already open for business post COVID19, and I note the same is happening for the other countries in the Pacific region.

The experiences of the COVID19 pandemic have been debilitating in all our economies. It has caused unprecedented damage to our communities, resulting in the closure of many micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME's), and precipitated major disruptions to supply chains of products and services. Massive redundancy exercises were undertaken, causing unemployment to rise in the formal sectors. The livelihoods of our communities were adversely affected and our economies posted negative growth thus resulting in losses in the Gross Domestic Product of our Island economies.

Despite these challenges, the pandemic has also provided the opportunity for the small and medium enterprises to embrace and increasingly use ICT platforms to leverage marketing of products and services, as well as sourcing of products and services. The increasing use of electronic commerce is inevitable.

While offering many conveniences in business transactions, the IT platform is still fraught with many dangers that our entrepreneurs must be made aware of and assisted to navigate through. Internet fraud and cyber- crime abound. There lies our other challenge! Developing and providing a credible safe space and environment for our entrepreneurs. How do we address this?

There has been increasing debate and dialogue taking place on Trade and Gender at the international front. Manifestations of this conversation is reflected in the increase in Aid for Trade projects demanding more enhanced and gender inclusiveness in trade activities.

The MSG Secretariat is aware of these developments and to this end, initiated this dialogue to deepen understanding and knowledge on the role and relationship between 'Trade and Gender', with a view to coming up with affirmative actions that can be taken to mainstream gender considerations in our trade development strategies and actions.

While we acknowledge that gender is not limited to women alone, we do, however, want to encourage all of us to recognize the significant role that women play in economic empowerment in Melanesia. We urge that more concerted attention is given to our women folk.

Therefore, convening a stocktaking dialogue and analyzing the relevant issues within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and electronic commerce is crucially important.

I am pleased to note that this two day event will bring together speakers at national, the Pacific region and international levels who will provide more insights, ideas and lessons to deepen our understanding and knowledge on how trade impacts gender, gender impacts trade and highlight strategies to improve women empowerment and their greater involvement in trade in the MSG sub-region, as well as the broader Pacific region.

With these remarks, I wish you well in your deliberations and look forward to the outcomes of the Symposium.

Takiu tumas, Tankiu tru, Oletti, and Vinaka Vakalevu