Pacific SIDS Regional Preparatory Meeting
16-18 August 2023
Nuku'alofa, Tonga

Roundtable 2: Sustainable economic development, people centred social transformation and prosperity issues in Pacific SIDS

16 August 2023, 4:00pm – 5:45pm

Background Note

Introduction

Ensuring social justice, social inclusion, sustainable livelihoods, and secure communities with access to essential goods and services are key components of sustainable development in SIDS. People could be given an opportunity to bring economic transformation in their communities. Additionally, social development outcomes indicate a mismatch with inclusive growth results which are reflected in well-being of the people. Smart social investment is needed to ensure all people benefit from inclusive economic growth.

Youth engagement also plays a critical role in accelerating the implementation of sustainable development. Facilitating access to quality education and employment opportunities for the youth while promoting gender equality are central to fostering social inclusion. Institutional support to enhance productive capacity and technological development is a significant tool to engage with youth, especially to support women entrepreneurs.

The COVID-19 highlighted further the social challenges in the Pacific region including inter alia inadequate social protection, and poverty. By undertaking appropriate policy measures in preparing people and private sector, transformation of social structure is necessary across the Pacific region.

So, climate emergency and pandemic impacts are key drivers of lack of progress in social development. The ongoing lack of employment opportunities, declining real wages, rising cost of housing and uneven access to healthcare services are failing to attain leave no one behind principle.

The session will focus on challenges and emerging issues deserving closer attention to enhance the social and human capital development in the Pacific SIDS. It will further discuss ways to improve the Pacific's investment in social protection system while allowing for addressing health, education and skill development components. The discussions will explore the way forward for Governments to undertake policies to overcome social development challenges.

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Challenges and perspectives

Social development issues include aspects related to human well-being including health, education, gender equality, social protection, human rights and participation. The SIDS face challenges in achieving social development due to their geographic isolation, small population size, limited financial resources, environmental vulnerability, high levels of NCDs and exposure to external shocks.

The Pacific has lagged behind other regions in managing to secure economic growth, which critically impacted their social progress. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have further exacerbated the cost-of-living challenges. The perennial problems of distance to major markets, prohibitive transport costs, small domestic markets, limited financial and human resources have also been adversely impacting their social development opportunities.

Many Pacific SDIS are still experiencing high levels of unemployment, particularly among women and young people. There is an average of 23% youth unemployment rate in the Pacific and there not enough employment opportunities being created to provide employment to all. For example, an estimated 15% of people in the Pacific have some form of disability many of whom are marginalized and often excluded and unable to access essential services (such as water and sanitation and health and education services) as well as key infrastructure. Less than 10% of all children with disabilities in the region attend school, compared to 70% of children who do not have a disability. Reports show that the rate of unemployment for persons with a disability in the region ranges from 50% to 90%. Social development therefore remains a high priority for the full inclusion of these citizens of the Pacific SIDS.

The Seasonal Worker Program provides opportunities of employment but are attracting those workers with skills that their own countries need. Small businesses are an important component of Pacific economies, and women make up 80% of small business owners. The Pacific SIDS also facing challenges to improve their social protection system. Investment in Education and Training are also lagging behind in comparison to many other developing economies. So, budgetary allocations in these social development and protection areas need to be improved.

Perspectives on these social issues, especially related to education, food and employment are posing challenges that require closer attention to enhance the people-centred social development in Pacific SIDS.

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Recommendations for Action

The Pacific region is in a position to prepare policy options to address these challenges and create opportunities.

- Ensure gender equality action by catalyzing women's entrepreneurship.
- Build and strengthen inclusive social protection systems.
- Prepare robust and inclusive policies for creating jobs, especially for the youth and women.
- Create provisions for investment in higher budgetary allocations, including for gender-responsive budgeting and disability inclusion.
- Ensure regional and national policies for Small, and medium sized businesses are given appropriate attention and care.
- Coordinate policies to build a robust regulatory environment that both protects people from exploitation and simultaneously attracts investment in jobs-rich sectors.
- Investment in Education and Training programmes for raising the skill and reskill of workers.
- Identify the essential areas of support to maximize the opportunities for potentially transformative labour mobility programs and to strengthen economic progress, improve livelihoods, provide family centered assistance so that benefits are spread around families and communities.

Proposed Guiding Questions for the Discussions

- How can we effectively address these new and emerging social development challenges in the Pacific region?
- What are the key factors that will help increase investment in social protection system at the national level?
- How can we prepare social development and inclusive policies to support national efforts within the Pacific regional context?