

Statement by the Honorable Tagaloa Tuale Sale Tagaloa, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Samoa

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you here to Apia and to Samoa, as we embark on a new process to review the implementation in the Pacific region of the Barbados Program of Action. As you are all aware, in 1992, at the Rio Summit, the special case of the island countries was formally elaborated in Agenda 21, with the statement that Small Island Developing States constitute a special case for environment and development. This recognition was later expanded upon at the United Nations Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States held in Barbados, and the Declaration and Program of Action that the conference adopted. The special case has been reiterated by the United Nations General Assembly, and is included in numerous international treaties and agreements. The Millennium Summit of World Leaders expressed the following commitment:

“We also resolve to address the special needs of Small Island Developing States, by implementing the Barbados Programme of Action and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly rapidly and in full. We urge the international community to ensure that, in the development of a vulnerability index, the special needs of SIDS are taken into account.” (Paragraph 17).

We can all see from this clear statement that at the international level there has been recognition of the special needs and situations of small islands, as evidenced by the Barbados Meeting and the program that was articulated to address the special needs. But what has actually been achieved in practice? Has there been any significant improvement in the situation for small islands, based on the Barbados Program? These are serious questions that are at the heart of this regional preparatory meeting. We have to achieve a better understanding for the continued value of the Barbados Program, and we have to be prepared to fully analyze whether our own implementation efforts – at the national as well as regional levels – has indeed been given the necessary focus and attention. Our meeting here this week is intended to start that process of analysis, so that we can identify and quantify our successes and failures, and to suggest feasible and practical solutions.

We all know that all small islands are not the same; they are not equal in shape, wealth or resources. But they do face similar constraints to varying degrees. They all experience a basic set of challenges, and certain site-specific constraints unique to a particular island. For example, all small islands, being largely coastal entities, are all faced with the waves of the oceans. But some small islands are particularly exposed to the oceans. All small islands have access to fisheries, but only some are able to exploit this for commercial profits. All small islands have vegetation and agriculture. But some small islands have poor sandy coral soil, and can only produce few crops. All small islands have freshwater resources. But some have to rely on harvesting rainwater from their rooftops in order to survive. All small islands have educational institutions, but only some have universities. Most small islands have cohesive societies, given the small size and the unique cultures.

But not all small islands have been able to maintain that social cohesion in the face of economic development. Clearly, among small islands, there is great similarity but also diversity.

The recognition of this diversity, as well as the similarities of the challenges is widely covered by the Barbados Program. In essential ways the Barbados Program represents a blueprint for sustainable development of small islands, and as such has received wide and enthusiastic support from the international community. The donor community has stated that the sense that they get from the Barbados Program is that the theories being expounded are seen as sensible, workable and pragmatic. The notion that small islands could become laboratories where sustainable development could be put into practice, as demonstrations for other larger countries, was one that small islands themselves strongly endorsed. But most of all, the Barbados Program is the recognition that small islands had to take certain steps if they were to survive the changing global situation.

Every year, the Secretary General of the UN requests information from donor countries, small islands and UN agencies regarding the implementation of Barbados Program. Responsiveness varies from year to year, but an overall picture has emerged. It has been estimated that while Barbados Program is not yet fully implemented, when looking at the tasks and efforts that have been undertaken under the Barbados Program, the major share of the necessary action has been carried out by the small islands themselves. This does not therefore fully take on board the carefully crafted balance in the Barbados Program, that small islands have the primary responsibility for their own sustainable development, but that their efforts should be substantially supported by the international community and supplemented through partnerships and other forms of assistance. We have come quite far in this regard in the Pacific region, but clearly there is much more for us to do.

There are very valuable lessons to be drawn from our regional and inter-regional cooperation in numerous sectors as a result of the Barbados Program. Exchanges and information sharing has spurred collaboration and a greater understanding of common problems. Solutions that have been tried in one region have been adapted for other regions, by experts from each region working together. These are very important developments for small islands, as it provides a foundation for greater collaboration. We do however need to build on our common strengths and to deepen this cooperation further.

Another hard lesson learnt is that sustainable development, with its key premise of integration, information and participation, is proving to be a relatively difficult concept to build policy around at the present time in small islands, as the public sector is organized and operated along traditional sectors as a result of mainly colonial and historic ties. By this I mean that energy, agriculture, health, and water for example are all considered separately, when it is becoming widely known that integrating investments in infrastructure and planning could be major cost-saving devices. Consequently, while many government leaders and senior policy makers increasingly speak the jargon of sustainable development, a very limited number of new policies are actually integrated across sectors. Economic issues are very often divorced from environmental

considerations and there is unfortunately weak capacity for social planning in most small islands.

Another obstacle to developing policy that addresses sustainable development, outside of the natural resource and environment portfolio, is the unavailability of quantitative tools that with proper information would allow for effective monitoring and corrective actions when needed.

I do not mean for this to be a pessimistic opening to our deliberations. On the contrary, I want it to be very clear that solutions can be found and that we have the political commitment and leadership and the intellectual capacity between us in the Pacific to develop and implement homegrown policies and measures that will achieve sustainable development for all of our peoples.

This meeting in Apia being the first of the regional preparatory session is an important occasion for us. It has particular significance in that we must aim to get it right in terms of the substantive approach and objectives so that the outcomes of your deliberations will serve to set the pattern for other regional sessions to take place in the Caribbean and the Atlantic and Indian Ocean. We must be determined to work hard in this regard.

We have a major opportunity next year in Mauritius to demonstrate to the international community that we have thoroughly analyzed our situations, capacities and challenges. As a means of building our resilience to vulnerability and to turn our small islands into sustainable development leaders we will present concrete ideas and ways and means to implement them. We will also have to present our views on partnerships to the donor community, so that we can seek mutually agreeable solutions. In this regard I am pleased to see that some members of the donor community and international agencies are here today, and I welcome your participation with us this week and beyond.

I have the honor therefore to declare this Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting opened.