



Development on Small Islands – What does a complexity approach have to offer?

on the topic:“Big and Complex Challenges in Small Places?”

Hosted by the UNDP Global Center for Public Service Excellence – Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, (LKYSPP- UNDP)

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

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CO-CHAIRS,

EXCELLENCIES,

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the UNDP’s Global Center for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) Conference on Big and Complex Challenges in Small Places, in light of the on-going efforts to prepare for the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) Conference later this year in September.

I am delighted to make this statement at the renowned National University of Singapore and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy– and to be here with your Excellency, Ambassador Verghese Matthews, and my fellow counterparts from the Government of Singapore;

This afternoon, I look forward to the opportunity to share your knowledge and experience in tackling some of the issues faced by Small islands states, as similar to those in my own country, the Kingdom of Tonga.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Indeed – let me begin by saying that “it is a big year for small islands!”

As 2014 also happens to be the ‘International Year Of SIDS’, we have an unprecedented opportunity to shape the global sustainable development agenda for years to come, as we

prepare for the upcoming 3rd International Conference On Small Islands Developing States this September.

Tonga looks ahead to the 3rd SIDS conference with great anticipation.

Our long-standing support for SIDS reflects our own place in the world- but we are especially pleased that the International Year Of The SIDS and Conference is held in the South Pacific - within the region that we call home !

And today’s conference presents a highly significant opportunity to galvanise international action in support of SIDS and to focus on Tonga’s partnership with the international development agencies and especially with the Government of Singapore.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Today, the top three complex and big challenges faced by Tonga and other small islands states in the Pacific are Climate Change and sea level rise, natural disasters and geographic isolation.

But the list adds on other key challenges such as the disadvantages of smallness in size, diversity of economies, narrow range of resources and manpower, non-communicable diseases, limited access to energy resources and export markets.

To start with, natural disasters and climate change remain a looming threat to daily life of Small Islands Developing States. Because we are located among the most vulnerable regions in the world, Tonga knows well the bitter experience of cyclones that regularly batter our region – and the recent events of Tropical Cyclone Ian and its disheartening effects on one of our island groups, shows that our vulnerability to climate change and disaster risks is very real!

The frequency and intensity of these natural hazards is expected to increase as a result of climate change. And with their increasing impact, we are sure to face disproportionate high economic, social and environmental consequences.

In the past our geographic dispersion and isolation from markets has placed us at a disadvantage economically, because of high freight costs, and hindered our competitiveness with other regional neighbours.

And because we were smaller in size than New Zealand and other larger Pacific islands, it forces undue specialization, excessive dependence on international trade and development aid due to limited resources and costly public administration and infrastructure.

But in many ways, over the last four years, Tonga has learnt to bear the brunt of crises of climate change, food security and finance and it has never been more active than before in its responses and efforts at building its own resilience to addressing these complex issues.

Tonga has learnt that if it doesn’t adjust, it will continue to make decisions reactively – and continue to look in the rear view mirror - so a shift from prediction to anticipatory awareness

approach will help itself in disaster reduction and mitigation. In recognizing that it can be afflicted by economic difficulties and confronted by development imperatives similar to those of bigger developing countries, Tonga saw the need to reinvent itself and find ways to strengthen its own resilience.

With resilience, it shows that the challenges of natural disasters are inevitable but Tonga's focus should be on fast exploration, quick detection, and early recovery.

Never before has Tonga has learned to adapt itself to change and takes leadership in full pursuit of sustainable development than this decade that we are in.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

What is unique about Tonga is that it is the only remaining Polynesian sovereign state in the Pacific that has never been colonized by a foreign power. Since 2010, Tonga has undergone historic and fundamental changes from an executive monarchy to a modern parliamentary democracy. This was an important turning point in Tonga's move towards globalization.

Tonga's strive for individuality and efforts to continually reconstruct itself and keep its relevance to the world are the key for survival of small islands that have little power to alter the region let alone the world.

The world stage is an arena for business - where big and small nations compete for economic survival, for political independence, armed with their best resources and uniqueness for a competitive edge, looking for niche markets for survival. And as a small nation, Tonga has strived to make itself relevant so that other countries will have an interest in our continued survival and prosperity as a sovereign and independent nation.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

The International Year of Small Island Developing States will celebrate the contributions that this group of countries has made to the world. Never before, have our people from the region been at the forefront of efforts to addressing pressing global issues through ingenuity, innovation and use of traditional knowledge.

And Tonga is very proud of its instrumental contribution to the signing of the framework to establish a Pacific Regional Data Repository (PRDR), last September in New York by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, as a testament of the Pacific's leadership in stepping up to the climate change challenges and support the UN Initiative for Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL).

Again, our small island Kingdom has continued to make waves on the international scene in its effort to rally support from international partners for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to pursue blue economy, which focus on ocean resources and marine environment, and the development of shipping and port facilities, tourism industries and offshore mining.

It makes the best of its existing resources, by recognising the significant contribution that Blue Economy can make towards the alleviation of hunger, eradicating of poverty and mitigating climate change.

Again, in the midst of global uncertainty, inequality and volatility of economic issues and prospects, Tonga like other small island states accepts its vulnerabilities and looks to reposition itself in the global arena and work together with donor agencies in building resilience, undertaking change management and target other investments.

These targeted investments may be exploiting the sectors of tourism, agriculture, ICT, finance and green/blue economy.

At the domestic level, and within our own administration, Government is moving towards more dynamic public and private collaboration and partnership.

Public private partnerships (PPPs) are key to addressing the main challenges of Tonga, in terms of its infrastructure, transport and communication and access to capital. Identifying champions in the private sector and other partners to promote entrepreneurship in Tonga should be treated with urgent action.

In the services sector, particularly tourism, this presents a genuine opportunity for Tonga and SIDS to expand their economic activity while earning foreign currency. Blue economy can open up opportunities for investment in this area.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Just like other small islands state, Tonga is inspired by the success story of the Singaporean experience! – Not only in the sectors -government and the progress of the information and communication technology but public service administration excellence.

This morning, Tonga signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nanyang Business School, to offer MBA fellowship programme scholarships to Tongan candidates.

Access to quality skills and training is vital to delivering an effective public service.

This is a very core relationship that the Government of Tonga wishes to see flourish with the assistance of the Government of Singapore and the Global Centre for Public Service Excellence.

This afternoon, I stand before you to seek the best advice and technical skills from Singapore's best in the public service excellence.

We are truly inspired by your leadership in public service reforms and look forward to gaining insights from this Conference into generating better public services.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

In conclusion, let me reiterate that achieving and sustaining development in small nations like Tonga is a complex and demanding tasks. There are other various roles played by aid, trade, remittances and governances.

But what is certain is, if Tonga and other small nations faced with complex challenges do not address their vulnerabilities head on – the adverse effects of climate change, rising oil and food prices, economic instability and inability to adapt will put Tonga's survival at risk.

Resilience is the way forward to sustaining complex challenges in small nations.

Lastly, given this afternoon's opportunity to address the Conference, I would like to thank the director of the UNDP GCPSE – Max Everest Phillips and friends from the UNDP for their considerable efforts in organising this event.

This is a unique moment for Tonga to seek additional support from the Government of Singapore in public sector reform and leadership programs.

I am pleased to say that Singapore and the Pacific Islands Countries including Tonga, share warm and friendly relations which are underpinned by strong political will.

With that warm note, let us look forward to an interactive, substantive discussion with our counterparts here from the UNDP and the Government of Singapore with high hopes that I can take home tangible outcomes and priorities for Tonga in its forthcoming address of the SIDS.

Thank you.

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