**Intervention by Dr Andrew Jones, Director GEM, SPC, for the 5th PGSC Meeting (Virtual)**

**12 August 2020**

Ni sa bula vinaka welcome colleagues and friends to Day 2 of our PGSC meeting.

I am honoured to Talanoa with you this morning, starting with part of my own story and coming around to two key points:

1. That each of your respective countries consider becoming a member of GEO, and;
2. That the PGSC consider being the collective national and regional voice for Earth Observations in the Pacific.

For or a long time I worked for an organisation outside the Pacific but part of my role was to develop technical projects in the Pacific. And it was the best part about my job, working with the Pacific. Thorugh this role I developed a passion for genuine sustainable development outcomes in the Pacific, and so I moved to the Pacific to pursue a career in that field. Because it’s only when you are actually in the canoe, that you can be sure you are all pulling in the same direction and together at the same time.

In my current role I see a lot of projects coming in from the outside, and some of these “partners” are self-serving or looking for token Pacific sponsorship to help them secure funding. These “partners” are easy to differentiate from the genuine partners who are here for the Pacific.

A great example of a genuine long-standing Pacific partnership is the Pacific Sea Level & Geodetic Monitoring Project that SPC implements in partnership with the Australian Government. This is one of the longest ongoing regional data collection exercises related to sea level rise in the world having commenced in the early 1990s. It’s a great example because it was developed through long-term trusted partnerships, and tasks that were originally being delivered by Australian Government officials were transferred to the Pacific as the capacity was built locally. COVID has amplified this just recently, as SPC and Fiji Met Service technicians installed a new system at the Lautoka Sea Level Monitoring Station, with remote rather than direct support from Australian Government Technicians.

In contrast to this great partnership, what I’ve observed in the Earth Observation and Remote Sensing space, was the total opposite. Over my first couple of years in the role, I had more than one project team arrive from another hemisphere and tell me that they had funding to set up a remote sensing capability for the Pacific, that they would manage the data back in their own country, and that they would build the capacity of Pacific Islanders to interpret the data. I also received invitations to workshops on prioritising Pacific Earth Observation needs, that were run by consortiums that didn’t include any Pacific organisations. These are the types of “partners” that I was referring to earlier.

I take some responsibility for that situation. SPC’s members entrust us to strategically guide them in technical matters such as these. We weren’t doing that, it left a vacuum, and people from outside the Pacific filled that space.

So if SPC take some responsibility for creating the issue, SPC are now taking some responsibility for addressing the issue. We are championing a Pacific-led approach to Earth Observations and Remote Sensing in the region. It’s the only way that we can ensure sustainable solutions for the Pacific, and that we can get some of that international funding flowing directly into the Pacific rather than through international “partners”.

Satellite remote sensing is one of the areas where there are genuine benefits to a regional approach as we can collect the same types of data over the whole Pacific, and process it in the same way at a regional scale for almost exactly the same cost of processing it at a national scale. So it makes no sense for us to be driven by external parties interested in a certain type of data, or a certain type of problem, in one or two cherry picked countries.

One way the Pacific can take ownership of the Earth Observation agenda in the Pacific is through joining the Group on Earth Observations or GEO.

Firstly, congratulation to the Kingdom of Tonga and our PGSC Chair for the leadership demonstrated in joining GEO last year.

GEO’s website states that it is “an intergovernmental partnership working to improve the availability, access and use of open Earth observations to impact policy and decision making”. GEO is run and governed by it’s member countries, so basically when you are a member of GEO, you can help to ensure that international Earth Observation investments are aligned with the interests of your country and your region. Here on the international stage the Pacific has significant power to influence through its voting rights. It is about the only region in the world who can get together and agree on a regional position, so SPC encourages all of our member governments to consider joining GEO.

Two key outcomes from GEO Ministerial in Canberra last year are worth highlighting at this PGSC meeting. The first is the formation of GEO’s Pacific Islands Advisory Group, which was formed after the meeting to increase GEO’s engagement with the Pacific. There are terms of reference for that group, and with the Council’s permission that terms of reference will be circulated to member countries, seeking feedback to ensure that the Advisory group is doing as much for the Pacific as it is doing for GEO more broadly.

The second point to highlight is attached to those terms of reference, which is our collective Pacific ‘Talanoa Statement’ that was drafted during the meeting. The essence of the Talanoa Statement is that the Pacific is already doing great work in the geospatial sciences, and that future Earth Observation and Remote Sensing initiatives need to be Pacific led.

In this context and most significantly, I am asking the PGSC to consider being the formal governance framework, and the collective regional voice, through which we formulate and drive a roadmap for Pacific Earth Observation and Remote Sensing initiatives.

Yours is the only member-led geospatial Council in the Pacific, formed by the region and for the region. Yours is the wisdom that we need in the Pacific context, and your voices are the ones we need advocating at the national and international level.

Taking on this role could translate into concrete benefits for the PGSC. SPC is committed to driving transformational development outcomes through the use of Earth Observation data, and there are opportunities for more sustainable funding to the PGSC if it is formally part of a governance structure that oversees such initiatives.

Such a role already falls within the broad remit of this Council as it is defined in the Charter, but should the PGSC consider being the Earth Observation voice in the Pacific, then the secretariat would take your advice on whether the charter be amended to specifically identify this a key role.

In closing I wish you all the best for you deliberations over the next two days and know that SPC stands ready to support you into the future, whatever it may bring.

Vinaka vakalevu.