



GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

STATEMENT DELIVERED BY
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PRIME MINISTER OF THE COOK ISLANDS

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Mr President - Excellencies and distinguished representatives - I bid you a warm Kia Orana from the Cook Islands.

It is certainly heart-warming to address you virtually today, especially when I know that it would have been much more enjoyable to meet in person with fellow delegates and UNESCO staff amongst the halls and great rooms of Fontenoy.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate UNESCO on its 75th anniversary. It is a remarkable achievement to have accomplished such growth and influence since 1945.

Since joining UNESCO in 1989, the Cook Islands has adopted and promoted many significant programmes. We remain committed to the core values of multilateral diplomacy, democratic governance, inclusiveness, and diversity.

The Cook Islands is increasingly recognised as a strong and effective advocate for the Pacific region and the Small Islands Developing States, better known to us as SIDS - a priority group in UNESCO's Strategy. We acknowledge UNESCO's efforts in supporting the SIDS agenda, through the establishment of a Section dedicated to our Islands.

As a small island developing state ourselves, our economy is still extremely vulnerable given our narrow economic base which relies on tourism and our exposure to natural disasters exacerbated by the ever-present impacts of climate change.

Indeed, nothing has emphasised this fragility more than the disastrous economic and social impacts which followed the global outbreak of COVID-19. And although over 95% of our eligible Cook Islands population has been vaccinated, we now face a challenging road to economic recovery and will be relying more than ever on our international institutions to speed our recovery.

Despite these challenges, my country has committed to ensuring UNESCO's presence in the Cook Islands and regionally, remains active. That said, I was concerned to learn that virtual participation at this year's General Conference has been severely limited. At a time when countries have been forced to adapt quickly and utilise technology and when even our most isolated islands in the Pacific have been able to connect via interactive virtual platforms to ensure

business continuity, that UNESCO could not do the same for such a long standing and prestigious General Conference, is disappointing. The very principles that launched UNESCO 75 years ago are being put at risk.

There is no greater value than supporting the development of our people, and whilst spread over 15 small islands and atolls and across 2 million square kilometres of ocean – it is our people who are at the centre of our development.

We know that people are also at the centre of UNESCO's mandate. The desire of UNESCO to respond to the needs of the most disadvantaged and excluded is critically important, especially during times of great crisis and challenge.

We are significantly involved in UNESCO's work on *Education for Sustainable Development*. Ensuring our children and their families have the requisite skills and knowledge needed to make decisions on issues that will impact the environment they and future generations will inherit, is vital to us.

Our 'Marae Moana', Marine Protected Area, has provided the Cook Islands with valuable first-hand experience and expertise on integrated policy in oceans governance, and in this context we believe we can add value to the programmes covered under UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

Our Youth programmes are also well positioned for cross-sectoral approaches. Building a stronger resilience in our Youth has become even more important in the current global environment and particularly during times of significant disruption to the structures that normally provide our young people with a safe place for development.

The Cook Islands are part of the Asia-Pacific family, yet the Pacific are also 17 countries with one field office to meet all of our unique and collective needs.

We recognise the financial constraints under which the organisation is working but request that such constraints do not impact on the ability of the Apia office to better and effectively support our respective countries.

Representation of the Pacific region has been regrettably missing from UNESCO's governance structure. So, to this end, the Cook Islands is humbled to have the unanimous support of all Pacific Islands countries and territories in our candidacy for the Executive Board of UNESCO. Today, we approach the Board as the Pacific and as a small island developing state, representative of many voices, and with a

commitment of adding a unique and valuable perspective to the work of the Executive Board.

The Cook Islands stands ready to work with all members of UNESCO to ensure our world will provide a safe, nurturing and peaceful place for generations to come.

Thank you and Kia Manuia