The 12th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

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Focused Thematic Discussions and Interactive Dialogues
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Public participation: a tool for development

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Transcript of statement by Ms. Keleni Tikomaisuva-Seruvatu,
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Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you very much to our distinguished panelists and Ms. Durant, our distinguished moderator, for bringing us together here, this very critical topic that we will dialogue on.

I think for Fiji's experience and listening to the remarks, the earlier remarks by the distinguished colleague from Indonesia, we can agree that public participation stands as a cornerstone of sustainable development. It transforms how communities engage with policies that affect their future. And I draw on three key lessons that Fiji has learnt in terms of how inclusive its processes are with regards to development policies across a wide sector or wide fora. In Fiji's experience, we view public participation and the input of all stakeholders as critical to our budget consultations. It is a critical factor as well when we consider our national development plan processes. And the third is in our national legislation processes, which involves Parliament, we view public participation and input as a relevant and key input into that process of finalizing national legislation as well as you will be well aware, excellencies, on treaties and conventions as well.

So, on Fiji's part, I think one of the key challenges that we face at the moment is our geographical dissemination of where we are at the moment. As you know, as a smaller and developing state, we are comprised of 300+ islands, with 150+ islands being occupied. So, for us, in terms of dealing with the issues and the inclusivity and participation of communities and territories in maritime zones in the outer islands that has proven to be a challenge for us when we undertake these processes.

One of the ways in which we are trying to innovate is to utilize the digital platform. That is to ensure that these communities able to access these mechanisms and are able to give their views to participate in these mechanisms via virtual means. We know that it continues to be a challenge, but one of the things that that we emphasize is that it's a journey. It's not an issue of success or failure. It's an issue of how effective the process has been in getting all views of stakeholders on board in terms of our national priorities and rural priorities. And I will say this, that it's an issue that is not confined to Fiji. It's an issue that the Pacific in general also faces when we deal with issues of inclusivity and getting everybody's views on board and all stakeholders on board. For us, I think one of the ways that we've tried to be a bit more innovative, in addition to utilizing digital platforms, is really to utilize the current processes that we have.

In Fiji, culture like the rest of the Pacific, our cultural mechanisms play an important part in how we do things and so we utilize those channels of communications. So, at the community level, at the village level, we have people who are in charge and utilize those contacts to help us to get the use of people to help disseminate issues as well, from the national down to the subnational and community levels.

One of the other things that we are dealing with at the moment as well is how to empower our communities, especially when it comes to things or issues that matter for us. Environment and climate change is a big issue for us. Sea level rises. Those are big issues for us as island communities. So, one of the ways that we've tried to empower our communities is to deploy teams, to go out to the communities, to the outer islands, to help them to understand the opportunities that are out there for them to access climate finance. So, as we speak, I think earlier this month, it's the first time for us, for three of our frontline communities, to get direct financing, so that direct financing from the one of these major international donor partners, for them to access that directly is a sign that for us, something is working. Something that we're doing is working. So, we are trying to innovate by empowering them, getting the information out through as many channels as possible, so that we are able to include them in the journey of our development. I think earlier this year as well, in June, we hosted the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development in Fiji.

And at the national level, I see this because for Fiji's part, we continue to be, continue to be committed to the journey, but as you will know I'm sure Member States here will also have their own experiences of what the challenge can be like when we speak at the national level, at this level, at this level that we are speaking in and at the ground level. So the challenge really lies in how we connect, what we are talking about here today, the development, the right to development that we are talking about today, and how our local communities can access that right, can benefit from the discussions that we are talking about or from the dialogue that we are having today, so that they can see it as a tangible measure of effectiveness.

One of the critical issues for us as well, and I think my colleague from Indonesia has raised this language. In Fiji, we've got three major languages, which is Fijian English and Hindi, and we've got these sub dialects. I'm sure most of us as well can relate to this. We've got some dialects that are spoken by various regions within our country. So, language plays a big role in how we ensure that our communities are considered and are included in the development process. Robust civic education also plays a key role.

And as I've said previously, it's something that continues to be a journey for us. It's not really an issue of success or failure. It's an issue of how effective we're doing and how effective our process has been and continuously looking to improve as we go. I'll leave it at that for now, and I'll welcome any further interaction on this.

Thank you.

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