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Reimagining Pacific Futures: Transformative Leadership, Regional Solidarity, and the Role of Universities in a Changing World

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā iwi o te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa. To the distinguished leaders and elders present, to my fellow Pacific Islanders, and to the esteemed people of Aotearoa New Zealand—Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa.
I wish to acknowledge the mana whenua, the tangata whenua of this land, for their enduring guardianship, wisdom, and hospitality. He mihi maioha tēnei ki a koutou mō tō koutou manaakitanga, me tō koutou whanaungatanga ki ngā iwi o te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, students, honoured guests, and all who have journeyed from near and far, I am deeply grateful and humbled to stand before you here in Aotearoa, a land that has given so much to the Pacific through its commitment to justice, education, and partnership. It is with profound respect that I greet you all this evening, conscious of the rich whakapapa that binds the peoples of the Pacific and the special bonds of whānau, culture, and solidarity that unite us.

May I also acknowledge our hosts for their generous welcome, and extend my respect to the elders past and present who have paved the way for dialogue and collaboration in this place. Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

I am honoured to speak to you today on the future of our Pacific – our Blue Pacific Continent – and how we can reimagine Pacific futures through transformative leadership, regional solidarity, and the power of our universities. As a proud Pacific Islander and an academic, I stand before you humbled by our rich heritage and mindful of the challenges and opportunities in our changing world. This evening, I want to share an *inspirational yet critical* perspective on how we, the peoples of the Pacific, can chart our own course forward.

Before I begin in earnest, let me acknowledge the many students, academics, policymakers and regional leaders in our audience. The fact that we are all gathered here – across generations and sectors – speaks to the inclusive spirit of the Pacific. It underlines a central theme of my message: that only together, with every voice at the table, can we navigate towards a future that is ethically, culturally, and environmentally just.

Pacific Values and Rights-Based Leadership

Let me start with the foundation of our journey: our values. The Pacific region is a tapestry of diverse cultures, but we share core principles handed down by our ancestors. These principles – respect for community, care for the land and ocean, humility, and service to others – form the bedrock of what I call rights-based and inclusive leadership. In practical terms, this means placing human dignity and community rights at the heart of development. It means leaders must protect the rights of all – from indigenous landowners to marginalized groups – ensuring that development is something done by and for Pacific peoples, not to us.

Our traditions teach us that true leadership is not about power or prestige, but about responsibility and service. As a famous Samoan proverb says: "*Ole ala i le pule o le tautua*" – the pathway to leadership is through service. In other words, one earns authority by serving the people. This wisdom is echoed across our islands. Whether in the village or the government, a leader's first duty is to uplift others, to protect the vulnerable, and to uphold justice. We need this ethos now more than ever, in a world where leadership can so easily stray into ego and self-interest. Pacific leadership, grounded in our values, insists on empathy, inclusion, and shared progress.

In promoting a rights-based approach to development, we also insist on ethical governance. There can be no sustainable development without good governance and trust in our institutions. Corruption, inequity, and abuse of power corrode the very foundation of our societies. We must therefore demand zero tolerance for the abuse of systems and corruption in our governments, universities, and organisations. This principle is non-negotiable. It starts at the top with leaders who lead by example – and it extends through every level of society.

When I began my tenure as Vice-Chancellor of Solomon Islands National University (SINU) on 1 January 2023, my very first communication to staff made this commitment unequivocally clear: I declared a policy of zero tolerance for corruption and committed to a leadership model anchored around three strategic goals – good governance, accreditation, and international ranking. These were not abstract ideals; they have guided our every decision and action. Through this unwavering focus, we have begun to rebuild systems that promote integrity and transparency. It has not always been easy. These changes have, at times, resulted in difficult decisions, including terminations of staff. But they have also marked a turning point. These actions were not punitive for their own sake – they were the result of rigorous efforts to uphold the governance standards we committed to, and they remain part of a broader, ongoing investment in institutional reform.

We seek to make SINU an "oasis of good governance", a model for integrity and accountability. We are cultivating an academic environment where our graduates are instilled with ethics, leadership, and values that will carry into the civil service, business, and community life. And just as importantly, ethical leadership must be inclusive. It must draw on the strengths of women and men, young and old, people of all backgrounds. We cannot afford to leave anyone out of the conversation or the benefits of development. In Pacific culture, a chief is advised by the community; so too must modern Pacific leaders listen to their people. Everyone deserves a seat in our *falafala*, our council, when decisions are made.

Critically, a rights-based, values-driven leadership is not a sentimental ideal – it is a practical necessity for development. When leaders respect and empower their people, we see better outcomes. Communities are more likely to support and sustain projects that they have helped to design and that align with their customs. Decisions made transparently and accountably earn public trust. And leaders who serve rather than rule foster stability and unity. In short, *ethical, inclusive leadership creates the conditions in which development can truly take root.*

Decolonising Development: Pacific Self-Determination in Action

Our forebears fought hard for the political independence of our island nations. Today, we must extend that fight to what I call the second wave of decolonisation – the decolonisation of development itself. Too often, development models in the Pacific have been imported or imposed, tied to outside agendas or reliant on external aid. While we appreciate genuine partnerships, we know that *no people can truly thrive while depending indefinitely on others' benevolence*. It is time to claim full ownership of our development journey – to pursue strategies of our own making, drawn from our realities, and on our own terms.

From my own professional journey, I have learned that *self-determination is not just a political aspiration; it is a practical development strategy.* In my over 30 years working in national and regional institutions, I saw well-intentioned donor programs falter because they were short-term or misaligned with local needs. By contrast, some of our greatest advances came when Pacific people seized the reins. Allow me to share one prominent example: the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, or PNA.

The PNA is a coalition of eight Pacific nations that control some of the world's richest tuna waters. Decades ago, our countries were largely relegated to the sidelines while foreign fleets harvested our tuna for a pittance. We provided the fish; others made the profits. The establishment of the PNA changed that equation. It was a bold exercise in collective self-determination – *Pacific nations asserting sovereignty over our resources and demanding a fair share of their value*. We introduced the Vessel Day Scheme (VDS), an innovative rights-based fisheries management system that allocates fishing days and caps tuna catches in our waters. Some doubted that a group of small islands could transform a global industry, but we had confidence in our vision.

Today, the results speak for themselves. An independent review hailed the VDS as *"the single most ambitious attempt of this kind seen in the world so far,"* noting *"overwhelming evidence that the VDS has been highly successful."* Under our stewardship, key tuna stocks have been maintained at healthy levels, and our countries have secured a dramatic increase in revenues. In 2010, before the VDS was widely implemented, Pacific states earned about US$64 million in tuna access fees. By 2016, that figure had surged to US$470 million. This influx of revenue has funded schools, hospitals and infrastructure across our islands. It is *transformative development*, driven not by external aid, but by Pacific ingenuity and resolve. As the head of the PNA Office during those years, I am proud to say that we proved what is possible when we act in unity and in our own interest.

Just as importantly, the PNA model broke the cycle of dependency. We created a regional institution that is self-financing and autonomous – able to make decisions based on Pacific priorities rather than donor agendas. The PNA Office generates its own income from industry fees and requires no foreign handouts to operate. This is almost unheard of in our region. It stands as a beacon of what Pacific self-reliance can look like in practice. It wasn't easy; it required vision, hard work, and solidarity among the PNA members. But we learned that we do not have to remain perpetually aid-dependent. With

determination, we can build institutions that *pay their own way* and answer first and foremost to our people.

In the process of asserting our economic rights, we also innovated. We established Pacifical, a global marketing company co-owned by our countries, to brand and sell our sustainably caught tuna on the world market. This was another bold stride towards self-determination – moving up the value chain rather than just exporting raw fish. Through Pacifical, we created an economic incentive for sustainable fishing and obtained a premium price for tuna carrying the Pacifical/MSC eco-label. Our Pacific Island nations, as shareholders in Pacifical, now earn a direct cut from each can of tuna sold with our label. Pacifical even pioneered blockchain traceability, so consumers in Europe or the US can scan a can and know which island nation's waters their fish came from. Think about that: a fisher in Kiribati can directly contribute to a story of sustainability told on a supermarket shelf in Amsterdam. We took charge of our narrative – and gained more value for our people – by thinking outside the box.

When I reflect on these successes, I recall a lesson I often shared with my colleagues during our journey: *we must not measure ourselves by the smallness of our islands, but by the greatness of our ocean*. As I have said before, we should "think big, and not be apologetic about our size and vulnerability, but instead look at the single largest geographic feature that surrounds the islands — the ocean." Our Pacific Ocean is not a barrier that isolates us; it is a bridge that connects us and a resource that empowers us. This mindset – seeing the Pacific for its vastness and potential – is key to reimagining our development approach. It aligns with what the late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa reminded us in his famous essay *Our Sea of Islands*: *"There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands.'"* The former vision narrows our potential; the latter recognises our islands as an expansive, interconnected community spread over a mighty ocean. Our ancestors understood this. They conceived of their world as one great oceanic realm full of opportunity. *"Their world was anything but tiny…. Smallness is a state of mind,"* Hau'ofa wrote. We are heirs to that large world. By decolonising our mindset and development practices, by trusting in our own approaches, we carry forward the struggle our leaders began at independence – a struggle not just for political sovereignty, but for economic and intellectual sovereignty as well.

Regional Solidarity: Strength in Our Blue Pacific Identity

The story of the PNA also underscores another crucial theme: regional solidarity. None of us, acting alone, can overcome the constraints of size or isolation. But together, as a region, we wield considerable power. Unity has always been our strength in the Pacific. We see further when we stand on each other's shoulders. We speak louder when we raise one voice. Our forebears knew this when they formed the Pacific Islands Forum in 1971, declaring that we share a "collective identity" and common purpose as Pacific peoples. Today, that idea finds new expression in what our Leaders call the Blue Pacific identity – the idea that we are one "Blue Pacific Continent," large, connected, and strategically important. This identity speaks to *"our collective potential and our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean"*. It underlines *"our ownership of our ocean space – Pacific people taking control of our domain"*, to borrow the words of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. In other words, we are not passive bystanders in the global system; we are custodians of one of the greatest lungs and richest ecosystems of the planet. Recognising this shared identity empowers us to act together to protect our interests and our environment.

History shows that when we unite as a region, we can achieve the seemingly impossible. It was Pacific solidarity that produced the 1985 Rarotonga Treaty, making our region a nuclear-free zone in defiance of great powers. Pacific solidarity also helped bring an end to atmospheric nuclear testing in our ocean. Within this proud regional legacy, New Zealand played a defining role. From its bold legal

challenges against nuclear testing at the International Court of Justice to its landmark 1987 nuclear-free legislation, New Zealand stood as a moral compass for the Pacific – demonstrating that even small nations can lead with courage and conviction. While few of us today were directly involved in those historic efforts, we are all beneficiaries of the principled stance taken by earlier generations. As new threats emerge and the geopolitical climate becomes more volatile, we look once again to New Zealand to be a force for peace in our region – to champion disarmament, uphold the Pacific's nuclear-free identity, and stand with us in protecting our Blue Pacific continent for future generations.

More recently, our united voice was instrumental in securing an ambitious Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015, when Pacific states – speaking as one – pushed larger countries to recognise 1.5°C as the threshold of survival for vulnerable nations. These are *not* just diplomatic footnotes; they are lifelines for our people, born from collective action. As Dame Meg Taylor, former Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, noted, *the Pacific Islands Forum has been at its best in moments of challenge, when our solidarity and resolve have been tested and we have "collectively found a way forward to deliver solutions" in the best interest of our people*. When others ask whether pursuing collective regional interests still has value in this turbulent era, I answer with a resounding yes. In fact, *"the story of the PNA is evidence of the value and relevance of collective action in this day and age."* Our strength lies in Wansolwara, as we say in Melanesia – being of "one ocean, one people."

However, regional solidarity cannot be taken for granted; it must be continually nurtured. In recent years, we have faced rifts and external pressures that tested our unity. The temporary withdrawal of some Micronesian states from the Pacific Islands Forum last year, for instance, reminded us that *all voices must be respected in our family*. We have since worked through those issues, guided by the principle of Talanoa – open, respectful dialogue – to heal and move forward together. We emerged more united, with reforms to ensure every sub-region is heard. This is how a family grows stronger from adversity. We must also be wary of divide-and-rule tactics from outside, which brings me to an important point: geopolitics.

Navigating Globalisation and Geopolitics with Pacific Agency

We live now in an era of intense globalisation and geopolitical competition. Our Pacific Islands are being courted by various powers, old and new, each with their own strategic interests. While we welcome genuine friends and partners, we must also be clear that *we are not anyone's pawn or prize*. Recently, I had occasion to state publicly that the Pacific is *"not a chessboard for global competition"*, but rather a collection of sovereign nations with our own aspirations, whose voices need to be heard. I reiterate that message today. We refuse to be viewed merely as stepping-stones in another's grand strategy. Our countries may be small in population, but we are rich in culture, humanity and natural heritage. We claim the right to engage with the world on *our* terms, consistent with our values and development needs.

Yes, great power rivalry has returned to our region – echoes of the Cold War are apparent, with talk of "spheres of influence" and pressure to take sides. This puts our leadership in a delicate position, but not an unfamiliar one. Pacific leaders have long practiced the art of balancing external relations to protect our people's interests. We benefited, for example, from both East and West during the Cold War while staunchly guarding our own sovereignty. We can and must do the same today. It will require even greater solidarity and savvy. We need to double down on strengthening regional mechanisms like the Pacific Islands Forum, so that we present a united front on issues of common concern. When our leaders stand together, we increase our leverage to say *no* to arrangements that do not benefit us, and *yes* to those that do. Unity is our shield against being coerced or divided.

At the same time, Pacific agency in geopolitics means proactively diversifying our partnerships. The world is wider than two superpowers. Our interests may be better served at times by engaging with emerging partners – whether that's Japan, India, the EU, or others – on specific needs. By broadening our network, we avoid over-dependence on any one partner and create more room to manoeuvre. Above all, we should articulate and adhere to our own vision for regional security. We have done this through the Boe Declaration on Pacific Security (2018), which emphasises human security, environmental security, and regional cooperation. It's a vision of security that goes beyond military considerations to the security of our peoples' livelihoods and wellbeing. We don't want a militarised Pacific; we want a peaceful Pacific. *"Rather than allowing external actors to impose security frameworks that do not reflect Pacific realities, our leaders must advocate for a security architecture that aligns with our cultural, social, and environmental contexts,"* I have argued recently. That means any security arrangement in our region – whether it's about maritime policing, disaster response, or climate-induced relocation – should prioritise peace-building, humanitarian support, and the safeguarding of our people and ecosystems, not the power projections of others.

Globalisation, of course, is not only about politics. It is also about economic and social change – some of it empowering, some of it disorienting. Our Pacific communities are increasingly plugged into a global web of trade, technology, and migration. This brings new opportunities: access to larger markets, new technologies, educational exchanges, and the spread of ideas. We see Pacific entrepreneurs selling handicrafts via the internet to customers overseas, and our talented youth gaining scholarships and experiences abroad. Our diaspora communities in Australia, the US, and elsewhere send back remittances that boost local economies and ideas that enrich our societies. These are positive aspects of globalisation we can harness.

Yet globalisation also poses profound challenges to our way of life. One concern is the erosion of our cultures and languages under the tide of global media and consumerism. Another is economic vulnerability: as we integrate with the world, we become exposed to global shocks—whether financial crises, pandemics, or spikes in food and fuel prices from wars far away. Equally troubling is that much of our historical and ongoing trade in natural resources has been deeply exploitative, built on powerful external interests taking advantage of vulnerabilities within Pacific communities—such as the devastating phosphate mining on Banaba, or current mining practices in Solomon Islands that disproportionately benefit foreign corporations rather than local people. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted these vulnerabilities by showing how quickly global disruptions can reach our shores, cutting off tourism and supply chains we relied on. It reminded us vividly of the value of self-reliance and regional cooperation—such as the importance of producing some of our own food and medical supplies, and of sharing resources with our neighbours when borders shut down.

So how do we respond to globalisation in a way that safeguards our identity and rights? I believe the answer lies in being proactive shapers of globalisation, rather than passive subjects. We must actively project our voice, culture, and products into the world, rather than letting the world wash over us. Pacific music, art, and film, for example, are gaining global audiences—showcasing our stories on our terms. In the economic realm, we can leverage niche markets by exporting high-quality, sustainably sourced products (as we did with Pacifical tuna), and by promoting eco-tourism that respects our environment and culture. We should also continue to fight for fair rules in international trade that recognise our small size and special circumstances. Critically, we need to invest in our human capital so that our people can compete and thrive globally. That brings me to the indispensable role of education and universities.

The Transformative Power of Universities in the Pacific

If leadership and solidarity are the compass and canoe that will carry us forward, then education is the star by which we navigate. Our universities and colleges are more than just institutions of learning; they are incubators of the future. They shape the mindsets, skills, and values of the next generation who will become our leaders, workers, thinkers and innovators. In reimagining Pacific futures, universities have a transformative role on multiple fronts: creating future leaders grounded in ethics and culture, driving innovation and research to solve local problems, decolonising knowledge systems, and fostering regional connectivity.

Firstly, our universities must be breeding grounds for ethical, visionary leaders. This means that a Pacific university education should do more than confer degrees – it should instil *character*. At my inauguration as SINU Vice Chancellor, I shared my aspiration that our university *"provide a world-class education to our students, foster an environment of inclusivity and respect, and be a leader in research and innovation."* Academic excellence and technical skills are vital, but so too is nurturing students' moral compass and critical thinking. I believe every graduate in the Pacific should leave university understanding the importance of *service, integrity, and community values*, regardless of their field of study. In fact, we are considering making ethics, leadership and good governance a prerequisite part of the curriculum for all students, alongside their core subjects. Imagine if all our future engineers, teachers, business people, and public servants enter the workforce equipped not only with knowledge, but with a deep sense of responsibility to their nation and region. That could change the game. Our goal is to produce graduates who are not only employable globally, but who are also engaged citizens rooted in their culture and ready to tackle Pacific challenges.

Secondly, universities have the responsibility to decolonise knowledge and promote innovation that fits our context. For far too long, Pacific knowledge systems and indigenous ingenuity were undervalued by formal education. That is changing. We are now proudly incorporating Pacific studies, local languages, and traditional ecological knowledge into our programs. We recognise that our *kastom* (custom) and modern science can complement each other. As one young climate activist put it recently, *our indigenous knowledge must be respected as a form of science*. Whether it's Polynesian navigation techniques or agroforestry practices in Melanesia, our ancestors developed sophisticated solutions adapted to our environment. Our universities should document, research, and teach these alongside Western science. This is part of decolonising the curriculum – validating our ways of knowing and learning from them to forge innovative approaches. For example, in agriculture faculties, students might study both the latest agronomy and the traditional methods of yam cultivation that promote soil health. In climate research, Western data models can be enriched by local observations passed down over generations. By marrying the best of both worlds, we can innovate in a way that is truly Pacific. This fusion can help us address everything from climate adaptation (like restoring traditional resilient crop varieties) to modern tech solutions (like adapting apps for local languages).

Innovation also means embracing technology. I have been a strong proponent of digital transformation in education. We cannot leapfrog into the future if our universities remain analog. At SINU, we are working to connect our entire campus to 24/7 Wi-Fi, ensuring students can access information anywhere – even studying under the trees if they wish. We are pushing for more of our programs to be available through distance and flexible learning, so that a villager in a remote atoll can earn a qualification without leaving home. This is about democratising education. It is also about keeping pace with the *21st century economy* that runs on knowledge and connectivity. In the next few years, we hope to see our universities operating on fully digitised administrative systems – from admissions to libraries – to improve efficiency and transparency. Embracing emerging technologies, whether it's online learning platforms or research labs with modern equipment, will allow Pacific students to innovate at the cutting edge. We have already seen sparks of tech innovation by Pacific youth, such as

apps developed for local healthcare and education needs. Our institutions should support and scale these ideas – perhaps through new innovation hubs and incubators on campus, where students and faculty can collaborate with entrepreneurs. In fact, I envisage SINU and other universities in our region becoming *Incubation Hubs* for things like sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, marine science, and digital startups. We can provide the space and mentoring for young people to turn their ideas into solutions that benefit our communities.

Another critical role of universities is fostering regional solidarity and collaboration. The University of the South Pacific (USP), for instance, is a regional university owned by 12 Pacific countries. It has for decades brought together students from across Oceania, creating a pan-Pacific alumni network and identity. At SINU, while we are a national university, we are actively seeking partnerships with regional and international universities. My dream is that within the next 5–10 years, several of our programs will be offered jointly with universities in the region and beyond – perhaps a joint degree with USP or an Australian university in fields like nursing or climate science. These partnerships can elevate the quality of our programs to global standards, give students exchange opportunities, and create research links focused on Pacific issues. They also send a message: that Pacific universities are not isolated ivory towers; we are part of a global knowledge commons and we contribute to it.

Moreover, universities should serve as neutral hubs for dialogue – where government, private sector, civil society and communities can come together to discuss development issues. I often stress the need to *"explore the power of collaboration and develop strong public-private sector partnerships in research and innovation,"* and to make the university an *"interface between academia, government, industry, non-government organizations, and the community to promote dialogue on public policy issues."* In practice, this could mean hosting regular policy forums on campus, where leaders and citizens debate topics like health, education, or urban development with input from researchers. It could mean collaborative research projects – for example, economists at the university working with the Finance Ministry on a home-grown economic reform plan, or marine scientists advising local fishers on sustainable practices. By opening our doors and sharing expertise, universities become engines of evidence-based policymaking and innovation throughout society.

Finally, let me touch on student empowerment. Students are at the heart of everything we do in universities. Empowering them means ensuring they have not just knowledge, but confidence and support to be change-makers. This involves mentoring programs, leadership training, and encouraging student initiatives in social and environmental projects. It also means listening to their voices – students must have representation in how institutions are run, and in national conversations. Whenever I speak with students, I am inspired by how passionate and idealistic they are about tackling issues like climate change, gender equality, or unemployment. Our duty as current leaders and academics is to nurture that passion and give it channels to effect change. I encourage students: *dream big and do not be afraid to question the old ways.* Universities should be places where the status quo can be respectfully challenged and new ideas tested – even if some fail. That is how progress happens. After all, it was a group of idealistic Pacific students in the 1970s who began campaigning for a nuclear-free Pacific. They eventually carried the region with them, changing policy at the highest levels. Today's students have the same power to shape history, if we empower them with education, ethical guidance, and trust in their abilities.

Facing the Climate Crisis: Our Moral Imperative

No discussion of Pacific futures can ignore the elephant in the room: climate change. This is not just an environmental issue for us; it is an existential threat and a matter of basic rights and justice. The science is unequivocal that global warming is leading to sea-level rise, coral bleaching, more severe

cyclones, and changing weather patterns. For low-lying atoll nations like Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, the very notion of a future is at stake – their lands could be uninhabitable within decades if trends continue. Even larger islands like mine (Solomon Islands) face flooding villages, loss of food security, and displacement of communities. Climate change threatens to reverse our development gains and violate our peoples' fundamental right to a safe, secure life. We refuse to accept that fate. As Pacific peoples, we have contributed least to global emissions, yet we suffer first and worst. We have every right to be angry, but instead of drowning in despair, we are rising in action.

Our youth have a saying now: *"We are not drowning, we are fighting!"*. You might have heard this rallying cry in international forums – it was popularised by the Pacific Climate Warriors and young leaders like Brianna Fruean of Samoa. *"We are not drowning, we are fighting"* has become a powerful slogan of resilience and resistance. It captures our refusal to be mere victims. It says to the world that we will do everything in our power to save our islands, our cultures, and our people – and we ask the world to stand with us in that fight for survival. I have been deeply moved by the leadership shown by our youth on this front. They are organising at the grassroots, raising awareness, and even taking legal action. Just last year, a group of law students from the Pacific successfully lobbied at the United Nations for a resolution to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the rights of present and future generations in the face of climate change. *That* is transformative, ethical leadership in action – led by the young, grounded in moral principle.

As leaders and elders, we have a moral imperative to match our actions to the scale of the crisis. Regionally, the Pacific has been at the forefront of climate advocacy. We initiated the Talanoa Dialogue process in the UN climate talks to infuse negotiations with storytelling and human values. We continue to punch above our weight in pushing for deeper emissions cuts and climate finance. But we must also prepare our communities for the impacts that are already unfolding. This means investing in adaptation: building seawalls, securing fresh water, developing climate-resilient crops, and planning internal relocations where necessary. Our universities and colleges are helping by researching salt-resistant taro strains, mapping coastal hazard zones, and training a new generation of environmental managers. It also means broadening our definition of security to include climate security. In the Boe Declaration, our leaders affirmed that climate change is *"the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific."* There is no ambiguity there. All sectors must factor climate into their strategies – be it health (for disease patterns), finance (for disaster funds), or education (for climate awareness).

Importantly, confronting climate change is not only about infrastructure and policy – it's about values and solidarity. It tests who we are as peoples. In the Pacific, we have a concept of the *voyaging canoe* to describe our shared fate. Just as in old times, where many people in one big canoe had to paddle together or perish, today all of humanity is in the same canoe of planet Earth. And within the Pacific, we island nations are in one canoe: if one part of the canoe is damaged, the whole vessel is at risk of sinking. We have to look after each other. This may mean providing refuge and dignity to climate-displaced families from neighbouring islands in the future – a sensitive topic, but one we must approach with compassion and openness. It certainly means standing in solidarity to demand climate justice on the world stage. Our message is simple: *We will do our part, but we need the world to do theirs*. The future of the Pacific should not be sacrificed for the sake of perpetuating high-carbon lifestyles elsewhere.

Yet, amid the grave threat of climate change, I remain hopeful. Why? Because I know the spirit of our people. We come from survivors and navigators. We have endured cyclones, colonialism, wars, and we are still here – speaking our languages, holding our traditions, caring for our lands. The climate

crisis challenges us to tap into that ancestral resilience and wisdom. For example, in some places, communities are reviving traditional house-building techniques that withstand cyclones better than modern materials. Others are replanting mangroves as natural buffers against storm surges – an old practice making a comeback. And across our region, there is a revival of *vanua* and *fonua* concepts – the idea that land, sea, and people are one – which fosters an ethic of living *with* nature rather than against it. Our forefathers were expert stewards of the environment; they understood how to live sustainably because their lives depended on it. In charting a new development path under climate change, we can draw on that heritage.

A Vision for the Blue Pacific Continent

So, what is my vision for the future of our Blue Pacific Continent? Let me paint it for you.

I envision a Pacific 25 years from now where transformative leadership rooted in our values is the norm rather than the exception. Our political and business leaders see themselves first and foremost as *guardians* of the people and the environment. They practice transparency, respect human rights and uphold the rule of law. In this future, young girls and boys across the Pacific know that they too can aspire to leadership, because they see diverse role models – including women and indigenous leaders – successfully leading their communities. Our traditional chiefly systems work hand-in-hand with modern governance, each reinforcing accountability and service. The "Pacific Way" of dialogue and consensus helps us manage conflicts and change peacefully. This is a future where *no one is left behind* – not remote rural villagers, not persons with disabilities, not any gender or group. Inclusive, rights-based leadership will ensure development is equitable and broad-based.

I envision a Pacific that has taken full ownership of its development journey. By 2050, we have largely broken free from the shackles of dependency. Our economies are diversified and sustainable. We prioritise industries that we have comparative advantages in – whether it's niche agriculture, ocean resources, cultural industries or renewable energy. We use external aid carefully, but we are not beholden to it. Many of our regional organisations, following the example of the PNA, have found ways to be self-funding through the services they provide. We have a 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent – a blueprint created by Pacific minds – which guides our collective development. It focuses on resilience, self-reliance, and genuine partnership. We actively cooperate as a region to achieve economies of scale: sharing shipping routes, jointly procuring essential medicines, and swapping technical expertise. In this future, if a cyclone devastates one island, others rally immediately with support, coordinated through regional mechanisms that are well-oiled and ready.

In my vision, our Blue Pacific economies balance wisely on the twin pillars of green growth and blue economy. This means we've harnessed our natural resources in sustainable ways. We lead the world in things like sustainable fisheries management (building on VDS success), in eco-tourism, and perhaps in ocean-based renewable energy. We protect at least 30% of our marine areas, giving space for fish stocks to regenerate, and our forests are managed with an eye to carbon sequestration and biodiversity. We treat our environment not as an endless commodity to exploit but as sacred heritage to sustain – a viewpoint our ancestors held intrinsically. By 2050, let it be said that the Pacific Islands set the gold standard for living in harmony with nature, proving that development *can* be achieved without destroying the life-support systems of our planet.

Crucially, I envision Pacific universities at the forefront of our transformation. In the coming decades, our universities will produce a new wave of home-grown experts – scientists, doctors, engineers, policy analysts – who provide local solutions. No longer will we have to rely so heavily on foreign consultants to tell us the state of our reefs or how to run our hospitals. We will have our own think-

tanks and centres of excellence tailored to Pacific needs. Our universities will continuously feed the civil service and private sector with skilled, ethical personnel. They will also keep our leaders honest by serving as the *"critic and conscience"* of society – researching, speaking, and publishing without fear on the issues that matter. I foresee stronger networks among all Pacific tertiary institutions, physical and virtual exchanges of staff and students, and an online "Pacific Knowledge Hub" that makes research accessible across our languages and countries. Education will be more inclusive – I hope by then we achieve gender parity in all fields, and equitable access for rural and indigenous students through scholarships and ICT-enabled learning. With education, we will convert our *youth bulge* into a dividend: a generation of youth who are globally competent but fiercely committed to their islands.

In terms of geopolitics, my hope is that by mid-century the Pacific will be firmly established as a zone of peace – not by the dictate of external powers, but by our own commitment. We will likely see continued interest in our region, but perhaps by then a stable multipolar order will have emerged, and the Pacific will have secured a respected voice in global forums. I'd like to see a Pacific Island state holding a non-permanent UN Security Council seat periodically, or even a permanent seat if reforms allow – why not? We will certainly hold others to their climate commitments (in my vision, the world does finally take action and we manage to limit warming to 1.5°C, giving our islands a fighting chance). If some islands must undergo relocation or unprecedented adaptation, it will be done with dignity, led by Pacific people with international support. In this future, the concept of the Blue Pacific Continent will have matured into a potent reality: we think, act, and advocate as one oceanic continent, not as disparate small nations. Our collective diplomacy will be admired as a model of regionalism, perhaps akin to how the Nordics or the Caribbean are seen today – small nations that leverage big influence through unity and moral leadership.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I envision a Pacific whose people remain deeply connected to who they are. Amidst all the change – technological, economic, climatic – we must still be us. In 2050 and beyond, a child in the Pacific should still grow up able to speak their native language, know their genealogy, and inherit the wisdom of their culture. They should be able to swim in unpolluted lagoons, hear traditional stories, and feel pride in their identity. Our greatest riches are not gold or fish or timber – our greatest riches are our people, our cultures, and our way of life grounded in intimate relationship with our islands and environment. This is a life not of extraction, but of symbiosis – of giving back as we take, of living in rhythm with land, ocean, and sky. If we lose that, no amount of GDP will console us. Therefore, in every step we take toward "development," let's ensure it is culturally attuned and people-centred. I dream that years from now, Pacific societies will have struck a beautiful balance: our children will be just as comfortable coding software or performing surgery as they are performing a *taualuga* dance or navigating by the stars. That blending of old and new will keep us resilient and whole.

Conclusion: Charting Our Own Course

Ladies and gentlemen, *our canoe is ready*. We have the winds of change at our back – some gentle, some cyclonic – but we also have sturdy voyaging canoes built with the knowledge of experience. We have our values as the sail, our solidarity as the hull, and education and innovation as the guiding stars above. The journey will not be easy. It will demand courage to challenge the status quo, tenacity to stay the course through storms, and compassion to ensure everyone comes along. There will be obstacles: doubt, external pressures, internal disagreements. But I am confident that if we hold true to the spirit of the Pacific – a spirit of collaboration, community, and hope – we will prevail.

Each of us in this room has a role to play in reimagining Pacific futures. Whether you are a student or a senior official, ask yourself: how can I contribute to transformative leadership? How can I strengthen solidarity in my community or field? How can I support the education of the next generation? Often it is the small actions, the daily choices, that cumulatively forge a new path. Mentor a younger colleague. Insist on transparency in your office. Plant a tree. Speak your language to your children. Support regional initiatives. These are not grand gestures, but they build the future from the ground up.

I am reminded of the wisdom of our navigators of old. When sailing at night, they would keep their gaze on a fixed star to maintain direction, even as waves rocked the canoe. *Our fixed star* must be the vision of a self-determined, thriving Pacific. If we keep that in sight, we can handle the swells and currents that buffet us. We can adjust the sails and ropes – our strategies and tactics – but not lose our course. And whenever we feel discouraged by the magnitude of challenges, recall the distance we have already travelled: from colonised islands to independent nations; from being disregarded to being leaders on the world stage in climate and oceans; from isolated communities to an interconnected Blue Continent. This journey is ongoing, but we have much to be proud of and hopeful for.

In closing, I return to the theme of *leadership, solidarity, and education* as our pillars. Transformative leadership will ensure our development is just and inclusive. Regional solidarity will ensure we are masters of our collective destiny, not subjects of someone else's agenda. And empowered universities will ensure we have the knowledge and human capital to innovate solutions in tune with our values. If we can strengthen these pillars, the Pacific future we dream of will steadily become reality.

Let us envision that future together tonight – and more importantly, when we leave this gathering, let us work together to build it. Our ancestors voyaged by the stars to find these islands we call home. Now it is our turn, in a new age, to voyage by the lights of our principles and vision to find a better home for our descendants. The Pacific *is* rising. The tide of history is in our favour if we, with wisdom and unity, seize this moment.

Together, we can – and will – reimagine and realise a brighter future for our Blue Pacific Continent.

Fa'afetai tele lava. Tank yu tumas. Thank you. God bless you and God bless the Pacific!