Statement by UN Resident Coordinator, Mr Sanaka Samarasinha at opening of Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development & Capacity Building Workshop for Pacific SIDS, 14 December 2020

Hon Attorney General,
Secretary General Pacific Islands Forum
Executive Secretary of UN ESCAP
Ladies and Gentlemen

If there is one thing that the past months have revealed, it is that the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated pre-existing gaps in development and widened pre-existing inequalities.

It has erased years of development gains in just a few months.
To date more than 1 million people have died from the COVID-19 pandemic.
More than 100 million people are being pushed into extreme poverty.
Hunger has doubled.
More than 500 million jobs have already been lost.

Here in the Pacific we have largely been very fortunate. Through strong leadership and early action based on science, our populations have been relatively safe from the virus itself. However, it has all the same devastated our economies.

The pandemic's economic fallout is taking a particularly heavy toll on people working in the informal economy; small and medium-size businesses; and people with caring responsibilities, who are mainly women.

Around the world, the virus itself as well as its socio-economic impact has been felt the most by those already vulnerable: such as those living in poverty, older persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and those with pre-existing health conditions.

One day, the pandemic will be over. In a year. Perhaps five. But the long-term impacts of this crisis will depend on the actions of governments, institutions and leaders.
The secretary general has called for a New Social Contract at the national level that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

“One with a strong emphasis on quality education for all and on access to the new digital economy as powerful equalizers.”

The pandemic has revealed the stark risks and consequences of inadequate social protection systems, unequal access to health care and other public services and high levels of inequality.

Countries with strong social protection systems before the crisis were much better positioned to rapidly offer access to much-needed healthcare, ensure income security and safeguard jobs.

Secondly, the UN is calling for a relief package amounting to at least 10 per cent of the global economy. Only a tiny fraction of the more than 12 trillion dollars allocated to relief so far have to date reached developing countries and SIDS. Without this urgent injection, many of our countries risk the reversal of decades of development gains and backsliding on the Sustainable Development Goals — even as we fight on the frontline of the climate crisis.

The UN has also emphasized the need to urgently mobilize the financing to build for the future and put countries and economies on a sustainable trajectory.

While there has been a significant increase in liquidity, this has largely benefitted developed countries and countries with strong access to international financial markets. It has not to date benefitted LDCs and other developing countries such as the SIDS.

On debt and liquidity, the SIDS have long advocated the need to look beyond incomes and factor in the vulnerabilities of countries. The UN will continue to support the efforts of the Caribbean Development Bank, CROPS and others in this regard, including the possibility of establishing a Multidimensional vulnerability index, exploring creative approaches such as debt swaps and to cancel or restructure debt to unlock resources for the Sustainable Development Goals and climate action.

At the same time, we urgently need to secure the international cooperation and financing required to rollout COVID-19 vaccines and treatments that are available and affordable to all; vaccines, tests and treatments must be global public goods.
Thirdly, ladies and gentlemen, we often say crisis offers opportunity. The current twin challenges facing the planet of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis offer a unique opportunity to form a new alliance for inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery. As we close off a year that was dominated by a pandemic and look to a new year that is healthier and safer for humanity, COVID recovery and our planet’s repair must be the two sides of the same coin. As we look at providing much-needed support to economies in the region we must be mindful not to simply revert to the old normal of inequality, injustice and the mindless destruction of the planet. Instead, together we can and we must step towards a safer, more sustainable and equitable path to the future. To lock in future generations into industries that are killing the planet for them through financing that we are borrowing from those very same future generations is at best unconscionable and at worst suicidal. Here in the Pacific, we must ask the question, what can done to truly build back better whether it is in terms of renewables, energy efficiency in sectors such as transport and industries such as tourism. For instance, if shipping was a country, it would be the sixth largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world.

At last year’s Climate Action Summit, the UN launched the Getting to Zero Shipping Coalition to push for zero emissions deep sea vessels by 2030.

Yet current policies are not in line with those pledges.

We need to see enforceable regulatory and fiscal steps so that the shipping industry can deliver its commitments.

Exactly the same applies to aviation.

Turning briefly to VNRs, the challenge around accurate, timely and disaggregated data remains. I am pleased that the UN system is working closely with SPC and the National Statistics Offices to strengthen capacities, but much remains to be done.

Secondly, and related to the use of data, national monitoring mechanisms are still unable to effectively gather and analyze SDG progress. At the same time, the connection between VNRs and policy and budget imperatives of some countries remains tenuous. At a time when fiscal space is shrinking for many Pacific SIDS and finance ministers are required to make difficult choices, there remains a danger that VNRs are marginalized even more in the recovery phase of this pandemic.
Finally, let me close by making a plea for stronger and more meaningful stakeholder engagement in relation to Volunteer National Reviews. In late 2018 and early 2019 I traveled across the Pacific discussing with many of you how to ensure that VNRs are widely owned through systematic mechanisms for engagement. I am pleased to note that some countries now have expanded the consultative processes and some have even institutionalized mechanisms for this purpose. However, others lag behind and the consultative process remains superficial.

As difficult as some of these issues might be, I hope you are able to discuss them candidly over the next two days and are able to come up with pragmatic, yet principled solutions. We have a wonderful opportunity to use the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement as a blueprint for recovery. Together we can.

Thank you.