Fellow panelists, ladies and gentlemen

There are 2 groups of people who we consider are furthest behind.

First – those below the Basic Needs Poverty Line – statistics reveal these are people below certain income level per week and so are obviously at the bottom rung of the ladder.

So how is Government reaching out to these people.

Significant initiatives include massive investment in infrastructure development such as roads, bridges and jetties that allow people access to markets and services.

Another critical approach is through fiscal measures. For example, VAT has been reduced from 15% to 9% to put more money in the hands of ordinary Fijians.

In terms of the social protection programs, Government has recently reformed these. We now have a number of key components. These include:

- Poverty Benefit Scheme which includes food voucher and cash component
- There is a social pension scheme for the elderly
- Care and Protection allowance for vulnerable children
- Food voucher for pregnant rural women addressing nutritional dimension of poverty
- Subsidization of public transportation costs etc.

What’s critical about these reforms is that it takes into account the fact that poverty is a household concept.

So for example, by reforming the previous family assistance program to the current poverty benefit has infiltrated more equity in the process because the benefit that families now receive takes into consideration household size, composition and characteristics of household members. This way the assistance provided by Govt increases the concentration of resources among the poor.

These reforms have also increased the coverage of social protection in Fiji from around 3% to over 6% of the poorest in Fiji.
As we reform, ladies & gentlemen it is very very critical that we make administration of SP programs efficient.

We take enormous pride in reaching the most vulnerable in our society through the banking system. Almost all our social welfare recipients get their assistance through banks which is inevitably led to the process of banking the unbanked.

While a savings culture is promoted through this reformed process, it also creates banking history for those welfare recipients who intend to graduate out state’s welfare system to start their own SMEs.

Now the 2nd group of people who we consider are vulnerable and would be furthest behind if no action is taken.

This group of people are costal communities affected by sea-level rise.

There are some 40+ communities vulnerable to sea level rise and indeed the Fijian Government’s response is to relocate these communities to higher ground.

Three of these communities have already been relocated.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Climate change is a reality and more so for the small island sates of the Pacific.

The world witnessed the trail of devastation caused by Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji in February – the fiercest cyclone ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere.

Some 44 lives were lost. Schools, homes and livelihoods were all destroyed.

Events like this are a stark reminder that climate induced natural disasters, which experts predict will be more frequent in the future, will be the number one cause of poverty and social problems, at least in the Pacific if left unchecked.
This then stresses the urgency to upscale our mitigation and adaptation efforts. Indeed, Government’s response after the Category 5 Tropical Cyclone has been to review Fiji’s national building code to ensure that our structures withstand fiercest of storms.

So in addition to relocating coastal communities, Govt is also investing in climate resilient infrastructure. Such investments are costly and we need to tap into innovative sources of finance. In the Pacific, Fiji is the first country that has secured funds from the Green Climate Fund. Indeed Government will take a more aggressive approach in securing innovative sources of finance for our mitigation and adaptation efforts.

We have a national decarbonization and resilience building national strategy called the Green Growth Framework and the Ministry of Finance is now championing work on climate finance.

Fiji is also the first country to ratify the Paris Agreement on Climate change. We are serious about climate change and the need to take drastic actions ourselves as the effects of Climate Change will result in insurmountable social problems, especially for those furthest behind given their higher vulnerability and risk levels, which often greatly exceed their capacity to respond to and recover from disaster.

Thank you for listening.