Office of the Minister for Disability Issues
Office of the Associate Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage
Chair, Cabinet

REPORT ON OVERSEAS TRAVEL: HON CARMEL SEPULONI

1. I recommend that Cabinet note this report on my travel to Fiji, from 26 February 2019 to 28 February 2019 to attend the 6th Pacific Disability Forum as the keynote speaker and Chief Guest and engage in bilateral meetings with Fijian Ministers. A report back for my onward travel from 28 February 2019 to 3 March 2019 as part of the New Zealand delegation to Kiribati and Tuvalu will be provided separately by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who led that delegation.

2. For context, whilst attending the Conference of State Parties on the United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities I also attended a meeting hosted by the Pacific Disability Forum. At this meeting I spoke about the desire to work closely at a regional level to ensure Pacific disability perspectives are incorporated in work being undertaken on behalf of the New Zealand government in the Pacific region. My attendance at the conference was a part of that commitment and supported the aim to ensure that New Zealand remains present in conversations relating to disability issues within the Pacific region.

Report
Breakfast meeting with Fijian Woman Members of Parliament and United Nations Development Programme staff

3. Whilst in Fiji I was hosted by the Deputy High Commissioner Halia Haddad at the Official Residence to speak with Fijian woman MPs and the UNDP about issues of female representation and opportunities where greater collaboration on shared issues could benefit from a cross-party approach. The group were very optimistic about the opportunity to develop this approach further.

4. Six Fijian woman MPs were in attendance at the breakfast as well as two representatives from the United Nations Development Programme who were responsible for the Fiji Parliament Strengthening Project.

5. The meeting was a useful opportunity for woman MPs to continue discussions they had begun whilst visiting New Zealand the week prior as part of an inter-parliamentary visit supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Commonwealth Women’s Parliamentarians Group. Many of them found the experience of understanding New Zealand’s parliamentary system but particularly being able to spend time with other female MPs as useful to developing in their own roles. I found it useful to be able to visit these same MPs whilst on official business in Fiji to continue to develop and foster these relationships and conversations.
Visit to the Fred Hollows Pacific Eye Institute

6. I was able to visit the Fred Hollows Pacific Eye Institute which has benefited from NZ Aid investment via the Fred Hollows Foundation New Zealand (FHFNZ). FHFNZ established the Pacific Eye Institute in 2006.

7. The Pacific Eye Institute offers eye care training for doctors and nurses from the Pacific region and a full range of eye care services. The only training facility of its kind in the Pacific, The Institute is leading the charge against avoidable blindness by countering the massive shortage of eye specialists in the region.

8. The Pacific Eye Institute in Suva was built and resourced in partnership with Fred Hollows, Fiji government, AusAID and NZ Aid Programme. As intended the Fijian government has taken over the running on the centre (i.e. they pay the staff and provide resources). On-going support is provided by Fred Hollows from New Zealand.

9. The New Zealand Aid Programme has supported The Fred Hollows Foundation NZ in its work to end avoidable blindness since 2001 in an effort to strengthen Pacific eye care services and help prevent and reduce preventable blindness and visual impairment.

10. This includes Strengthening Pacific Eye Care Systems (SPECS), a five-year (2016-20), NZ$7.6 million initiative across Pacific island countries. The activity’s objective is to prevent and reduce avoidable blindness and visual impairment through increased access to high-quality eye care in the Pacific, provided by trained locals.

11. It also includes support for other Pacific Eye Institute centres in Vanuatu, which held its official opening of the NZ$2.1m upgrade and expansion earlier in February 2019. New Zealand provided funding of $600,000 towards the multi-purpose facility, as well as a solar power system.

12. It was useful to be able to see some of the outcomes of investments from our Aid Programme and hear from staff about the significant change it is making in the treatment of vision impairments across the Pacific.

Bilateral meetings with Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar Minister Education, Heritage and Arts

13. I was able to meet with both the Minister for Women Children and Poverty Alleviation Mereseini Vuniwaqa as well as the Minister for Education Heritage and Arts Rosy Sofia Akbar whilst in Fiji.

14. Hon Vuniwaqa discussed some of the recent changes to disability supports that have been introduced in Fiji and the phased implementation to support people with particularly high needs. We were also able to discuss broader support provided in Fiji to people receiving government transfers through insurance packages like paramedic insurance following natural disasters. I noted that following disasters in NZ, like the Christchurch earthquakes, we know that people with disabilities are always disproportionately affected often in ongoing ways which means targeted support to this group will likely have a positive effect given the frequency of natural disasters and/or extreme weather events in Fiji.

15. We also discussed the importance of having government representation at senior levels during regional discussions on disability- we noted how significant it is to
encourage the continued discussion amongst our counterparts in the region. The Minister said that this was the first Pacific Disability Forum she had attended.

16. It was also a good opportunity to discuss the ongoing work in New Zealand and Fiji for the prevention of sexual and domestic violence which is a shared priority for both countries. I discussed New Zealand’s approach to both needing to respond to crisis while being focused on prevention, including support for potential perpetrators of violence, which was met with much interest by Hon. Vuniwaqa. We agreed to continue to keep one another informed as our initiatives in the sexual and domestic violence space develop as well as within the disability sector.

17. Later in the day Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar was available to meet for a bilateral conversation which largely canvassed the challenges and opportunities the Minister saw within the Education system in Fiji. The Fijian education system is undergoing significant reform and I was able to relay my understanding from the perspective of the culture change work being undertaken with the Ministry of Social Development in New Zealand and our commitment to a welfare overhaul. We discussed that ensuring that agencies understand the vision for the system/department and associated culture change necessary will be crucial for progress.

18. We also discussed the shared countries needs of having to prepare graduates better for what is needed in the changing world of work and also the need for industry to better plan their ongoing workforce needs. We discussed the benefits of better cooperation between government agencies and employers to support those transitioning into work whether that is through apprenticeship schemes or other industry partnerships.

19. I also discussed the desire to work with Minister Akbar on issues around cultural heritage within Fiji and my interest around further discussions on repatriation of human remains in the region.

20. The Minister expressed an interest in gathering further expert insights on how best to progress her educational work programme. I discussed with her the Welfare Expert Advisory Group and its role in providing advice on how our government might achieve our goal for the welfare system. I have asked Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade based in Fiji to continue to discuss how they might be able to support the Minister on this point.

Pacific Disability Forum – Panel Discussion

21. In the lead up to my keynote address I was hosted by the Chief Executive Officer of the Pacific Disability Forum, Setareki Macanawai, to engage in discussions with conference participants- particularly youth, around the key issues impacting people with disabilities in the Pacific region. Around 25 participants attended the discussion a number of whom were funded to attend the conference through the MFAT Pacific Island Countries Participate Fund (PICTicipate).

22. At the discussion were representatives from Palau, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea as well as other executive members from the Pacific Disability Forum including the Co-Chairs Villany Remengesau (Palau), Simon Dolaianov (Solomon Islands) and Deputy Chief Executive (Savina Nongebatu).
23. There were many issues canvassed in the discussion which reflected the often complex nature of how disability support is funded and provided for in the Pacific region. Participants discussed that often relaying concerns or issues relating to disabled people will require contact with multiple government agencies, local NGOs and networks as well as multinational NGOs and multilateral agencies like the United Nations. This complexity can often mean that progress can sometimes be slow, requires a lot more coordination and often can dilute the voices of disabled people by the time a number of agencies have had input into how disability issues might be addressed. They noted that because of this having a body like the Pacific Disability Forum in the region can often support the voices of disabled people to be heard at a more senior decision making level.

24. More specifically, participants talked about the need to support greater access to fundamental human rights like education and the freedom from discrimination and prejudice in the workplace. They equally discussed the need to work with Pacific communities, schools and employers to develop the tools to better understand how to nurture the potential of disabled people.

25. We also discussed the need to understand ‘hidden’ disability and that often mental health and other cognitive disorders whilst physically less apparent are an important part of the disability sector that communities in the Pacific should be supported to understand better.

Pacific Disability Forum Key Note Address

26. At the opening of the Pacific Disability Forum Conference I was joined by three other speakers The Deputy High Commissioner for the Australian High Commission Fiji Office – Ms Anna Dorny; Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Development Forum Mr Francois Martel; and the Under Secretary General and Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund Dr Natalia Kanem.

27. My address focused on the challenges we face in the New Zealand disability sector that we share with Fiji, some of the insights we are learning and the approach we are taking to address these challenges. In particular, I explained some of the current discrimination in employment settings and our intention to do further work on dis-establishing Minimum Wage Exemptions for disabled people, the work we have been mandated to progress in terms of accelerating progress towards a fully accessible New Zealand and the work being done to provide easier access to support for people with disabilities through the Mana Whaikaha prototype in the mid-central region.

28. In the lead up to the conference I participated in a radio interview with New Zealand media and made a press release on the importance of the Pacific Disability Forum Conference. A number of participants at the conference also requested copies of my address for their respective NGOs and my bilateral with Hon. Vuniwaqa was also profiled in the local media.

Onward Travel to Kiribati and Tuvalu

29. Following my attendance at the conference in Nadi, on 28 February 2019 I travelled to Kiribati and Tuvalu with a delegation led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. I returned to New Zealand on 3 March 2019. A report back for my travel as part of this delegation will be provided separately by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.
Proactive Release

I intend to proactively release this Cabinet paper subject to redaction as appropriate under the Official Information Act 1982.

Recommendation

I recommend that Cabinet:

1. **note** this report

2. **note** that I intend to proactively release this Cabinet paper subject to redaction as appropriate under the Official Information Act 1982.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Carmel Sepuloni
Minister for Disability Issues
Associate Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage