

Weaving the New Normal: Envisioning a Post-Covid - 19 Oceania

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The Covid -19 pandemic could not have happened at a worst time in the history of the United Nations. For it is happening at a time when President Trump is doing his best to dismantle¹ the global infrastructure that was created after World War II and then painstakingly revitalised by all the members of the United Nations at the end of the Cold War². Trump's cutting of US funding for the WHO in April 2020 followed in the wake of his withdrawal of US participation in the UN Human Rights Council in June, and then UNESCO in December 2018. Funding cuts could not have come at a worst time, as unpaid assessed contributions to the UN as of 4 October 2019 totalled nearly \$1.4 billion, \$299 million higher than in 2018³.

I recall the new passion and energy that national delegations (both state and civil society) from both sides of the previous ideological divide brought to the series of UN international conferences that were convened after the collapse of the Soviet Union beginning with UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio 1992, followed by the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Global Conference on Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in Barbados 1994, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, to name a few. Civil society organisations (as well as transnational corporations!) were allowed for the first time to make an input into these negotiations, although one had to waylay the leaders of national delegations in the corridors or whilst they convened around the ubiquitous ashtrays or the coffee carts⁴ during the breaks with the carefully crafted amendments to the negotiating texts that civil society caucuses had fought over in their own parallel negotiations.

¹This is not to mention President Trump's disdain for the rules of engagement of the World Trade Organisation as he tries to deliver on his election promise to make America great again and his administration's declared intention of dismantling the international architecture that has kept the nuclear peace.

² Asterisked by President Mikhail Gorbachev's dismantling of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and handing over the launching codes for its nuclear arsenal to the newly created Russian Federation's President, Boris Yeltsin

³ "United Nations Confronting Worst Liquidity Crisis in Recent Years", un.org, 11 Oct 19, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gaab4332.doc.htm> (Accessed 3 May 20)

⁴ Yes. Smoking was permissible at UN premises and UN Conferences back then!

Civil society was euphoric about the changes in global politics back then, and of course, had a small hand in bringing it about. I recall being involved in a major gathering called “People’s Plan for the 21st Century” in August 1989 in Minamata, Japan. It brought together representatives from most, if not all the major progressive civil society organisations from South Asia, South East Asia, and the Pacific Islands regions, to discuss our visions and hopes for the 21st century. It was hosted by Professor Muto Ichiyo of the Tokyo based “Pacific Asia resource Centre”. The outcome was the “Minamata Declaration”⁵. Please allow me to quote at length from it because I believe the circumstances in which it was put together are similar, if not identical, to that in which we find ourselves today:

The slogan at the beginning of the 20th century was progress. The cry at the end of the 20th century is survival. The call for the next century is hope. Impelled by that hope for the future and with a keen sense of urgency, we began our concluding gathering of the People's Plan for the 21st Century in Minamata.

It is significant that we met in Minamata, a place which symbolizes to all of us development at its most murderous. As it did to the people of Bhopal and Chernobyl, a giant organization with advanced science, technology and production techniques condemned the people of Minamata to fear, sickness and death, and their beautiful bay to irreparable damage. These three disasters - Minamata, Bhopal, and Chernobyl - can be taken as benchmarks of our time. At Minamata, the industry of a capitalist country poisoned its own citizens. At Bhopal, a U.S. multinational corporation poisoned people of the South. At Chernobyl, a socialist government spilled radiation out over its land and people and beyond its borders to the whole world. There is no need here to repeat the long and mounting list of eco-catastrophes. These three tell the story: there is no place to hide⁶....

The 20th century has brought us more, and more murderous wars than at any other time in history. The technology of killing has advanced beyond the wildest imaginations of any previous era. The state, which was supposed to be our great protector, has turned out to be the greatest killer, killing not only foreigners in wars, but also killing its own citizens in unprecedented numbers. The 20th century has perpetuated and intensified the practices of genocide, ethnocide, ecocide and femicide. These practices have occurred in the name of what we have called 'progress' and 'development.

All these force us to ask, is here not something profoundly wrong with our understanding of historical progress? Is there not something profoundly wrong with our picture of what to fight for? Is there not something profoundly wrong with our image of where to place our hopes? “Janakashaba,” a word in the Minamata dialect, became familiar to all PP21 participants. “Janakashaba” means “a world standing not like this”. It is a beautiful word.... At this gathering, we talked about our aspirations for Janakashaba. Our hope is not an empty one. It is not a mirage. It is born in the midst of injustices, vices and corruption which make us cry and at times make us

⁵ “The Minamata Declaration”, parc-jp.org, 1989 <http://parc-jp.org/english/minamata1989.html> (Accessed 3 May 2020)

⁶ Of course, the jury is still out as to how Covid-19 originated but I hope the point is appreciated.

despair. We discussed the hope which inspires us to fight injustices as well as social, human and ecological decay. We asked ourselves whether there is a basis for such hope.... This is precisely what is being acted out before our eyes today by millions of people in the Asia-Pacific region. They do not accept what has been foisted on them as their fate, they are ready to take the leap, and they are taking it. We witness wave after wave of people's movements, emerging, spreading, defying state boundaries, complementing one another, and sharing an increased sense of urgency fostered by new networks of communication. The major struggles of the Korean, Philippine, and Burmese people have shown explosive power. Recently, we have witnessed the rise of a new democratization movement of the Chinese people⁷.

The recent experience of glasnost has reaffirmed the continuing universal relevance of participatory democracy, undermined the basis for traditional anti-communism and delegitimised the ideology of the Cold War, thus creating new conditions conducive to people's struggles. [T]he changes in the socialist countries provide the opportunity for new alliances with our brothers and sisters in the socialist countries for overcoming the East-West division and for working to establish genuine democratic power worldwide.

Hence, we declare that all people, especially the oppressed people, have a natural and universal right to criticize, oppose, or prevent the implementation of decisions affecting their lives, no matter where those decisions are made. We declare that this right, as a people's right, is more fundamental than any artificial law or institution established by the state. We declare that this right means the right of the people to cross all borders, national and social, to carry their struggle to the exact sources of power seeking to dominate or destroy them. We need to make clear that this right must never be interpreted as justifying the actions of the powerful crossing borders to oppress, exploit and dispossess the people. On the contrary, we are asserting that the people have a right to counter these interventions which are going on all the time.

We have no illusions about the present condition of the peoples of the Asia-Pacific region. The ruling powers maintain themselves by dividing the people and encouraging hostility among them. The rulers not only seek to rule us, but also to manage our mutual relations, depriving us of our right to do this for ourselves. This we must reject and overcome. Transborder political action, support and solidarity campaigns across borders will gradually develop a new "people," that transcends existing divisions, especially between people living in the North and South.

'This is not Utopian: the actions we describe are actually going on all over the Asia-Pacific region, and all over the world. What we assert is that these transborder actions are not merely the proper responses of the people to desperate situations. Taken together, they amount to the people collectively making their own 21st century.

⁷ The Berlin Wall collapsed in November 1989 and signalled the dismantling from within of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe.

I believe there is a real and urgent need for **“a world not standing like this”** right now! And only a global people’s movement working in partnership with the United Nations can revitalise and empower the United Nations in general and the WHO in particular to fight this pandemic. As the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in response to Trump’s announcement of funding withdrawal, “COVID-19 does not discriminate between rich nations and poor, large nations and small. It does not discriminate between nationalities, ethnicities or ideologies. Neither do we. This is a time for all of us to be united in our common struggle against a common threat – a dangerous enemy”⁸. Global victory over the Covid-19 virus can never be achieved through individual and divided state action. And we must not allow President Trump to divide and create hostility amongst the people and the nation states of the world.

I am grateful for the fact that the Tonga government, like several of our Pacific Island neighbours, had locked down our international borders early in the ballgame, for it has so far kept us Covid -19 free, and more importantly it had bought us valuable breathing space to prepare our national health system for its inevitable arrival on our shores. But so far the governments of the region have not been as forthcoming on the impact of the economic fallout from the pandemic which will hit us like a slow-motion tsunami as the remittances from our seasonal workers and overstaying relatives and the tourism dollar dry up.

So, although we may have goosed the agony of the first wave of infections through the early lockdowns of our borders, there is no guarantee that our fragile economies can sidestep the repercussions of long term unemployment due to the economic downturn. We are already witnessing its ugly impact in our Pacific countries today!

I believe our governments should take bold and decisive action to help the families of people who have lost or will lose their sources of livelihood due to the economic downtown. In addition to providing food parcels, the governments must initiate discussions with national financial institutions that will put in place a Biblical-style jubilee scheme on all the debts of the poorer sections of society, so as to allow them to start anew.

The 1918 influenza epidemic devastated quite a few of the Pacific Islands including Tonga and Samoa. It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world’s population became infected and the number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide⁹. With no vaccine to protect against infection and no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections control efforts worldwide were limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions such as isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, and limitations of public gatherings. That is essentially where we are today in Tonga as we await our first infection and the development of a vaccine. The government declared a national emergency at the end of March and placed the country on lockdown effectively shutting down, ‘All public facilities, events and gatherings such as educational institutions, religious, kava clubs, bingo, sports clubs, gyms, sporting events and activities, celebrations of birthdays, marriages and other recreational or related gatherings’¹⁰. All funeral gatherings are restricted to a total of 10 people indoors and 20 people

⁸ “WHO reviewing impact of US funding withdrawal amid COVID-19 pandemic”, news.un.org, 15 Apr 20, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061822> (Accessed 3 May 20)

⁹ “History of 1918 Flu Pandemic, cdc.gov, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm> (Accessed 4 May 20)

¹⁰ “National Lockdown Notice”, Prime Minister’s Office, pmo.gov.to, 26 Mar 20.

outdoors ‘with an authorised officer to be present’. This last restriction is of course impossible to maintain, even with authorised officers present. The restriction on religious gatherings in churches has so far been diligently observed but the focus of worship has been enthusiastically relocated to the living rooms of individual families. The restriction on kava clubs is a different story with lot of men drinking kava in groups on the sly. How long can we maintain this public distancing is a poignant question to ask but amidst all this, there is no shortage of laughter!

As the race for the development and production of Covid-19 vaccines gathers momentum and intrigue I am reminded of the Maltese Ambassador to the United Nations, HE Mr. Avid Pardo’s proposal to the United Nations in 1967, during the negotiations on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, that the sea-bed and ocean floor, and the subsoil thereof, beyond the limits of national jurisdictions, as well as its resources, should be declared the “common heritage of mankind”. This proposal eventually became entrenched¹¹ in the Convention on the Law of the Sea that came into force in 1994. The sea-bed and ocean floor is rich in cobalt, nickel, manganese, copper, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, and possibly also platinum, tellurium and rare earth elements. The question that springs to mind is, can we not start with the vaccines for Covid-19 and declare them as “common heritage of mankind” so that everyone everywhere can have access to it as a right, and not as a privilege? It ever there was a time for such a magnanimity from the global North, it is now!

About the author

Lopeti Senituli is a political activist from the Kingdom of Tonga having served as Director of the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (the secretariat of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) Movement) in Auckland and Suva, and founding Director of the office of the Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement in Nuku’alofa. He also served as Political Advisor to two former Prime Ministers of Tonga, and as CEO of the government’s Ministry of Internal Affairs. He served as the representative from the Pacific churches to the World Council of Churches Commission on International Affairs, as well as the Polynesian governments sub-regional representative to the Pacific Islands Forum’s Specialist Sub-Committee of Regionalism. He is a current member of the UNSW Diplomacy Training Program Advisory Council – International and is an on-line USP student.

¹¹ See Article 136 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.