

Pacific Islands at a cliff edge

by Biman Prasad

11 August 2023



Professor Biman Prasad presenting at the seminar on 9 August

Photo Credit: [Pacific Islands Forum/Twitter](#)

This is an edited version of a speech delivered by Professor Biman Prasad at a seminar on 9 August associated with this week's Forum Economic Ministers Meeting in Suva, Fiji.

The Pacific Islands are now at a cliff edge. As a region, as countries and as peoples, we face some of the hardest and cruellest choices.

First is the growing burden of the climate crisis. The climate crisis impacts on all areas of life, on livelihoods and on human security. It is doing so with fierceness not seen before.

Second, and arising from the first, and for other reasons, the region as a whole has made some progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Nevertheless, our region is largely falling behind. Several of the global goals are gradually getting out of reach altogether.

Third is the growing multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral vulnerabilities touching all aspects of human life. Its impacts are felt most acutely by women, by the disabled and elderly, and by our young.

Business as usual, more of the same and incremental improvements will be the surest way to disaster for the whole of our region.

As our communities, our region struggles, this is a time to ask some hard questions.

Why – at a time when we are so vulnerable to this existential threat – must the region be subject to a new era of geopolitical contestation?

Why is there a growing divide between what our development partners say and what they do? They say they are with us on our existential threat. But there is a disconnect between this and the resources that they offer on the table.

Why is there a disconnect between what multilateral banks and global funds say and what they do? They know too well that the region's adaptation to climate

change cannot be, must not be, financed through loans – soft or hard!

The region knows too well that there are no good and bad guys in the geopolitical contestation. All large economies are equally to blame for the state in which we now find ourselves.

In facing our existential challenge – this gravest challenge of our times – we must work from this premise that all that we have is ourselves, as individual citizens of the Blue Pacific and as countries that make up the Blue Pacific. This is not inconsequential. This is powerful and significant.

In order to turn our “smallness” into our strongest strength we must ask some hard questions of ourselves. Is our regional architecture fit for purpose in the context of the gravity of the challenges before us? Do we have in our institutions that make up the regional architecture what it takes to give to the region the policy frameworks and alternatives in real time? Do we have what it takes to implement policies and decisions at the pace and speed at which this is needed?

We cannot fail our children. Inaction, more of the same and doing nothing because this is too hard all essentially mean the same thing. They all mean that we will condemn our young to a future far worse than we had as children and for our grandchildren perhaps no future at all.

This will not happen on my watch! This will not happen on the watch of the People’s Coalition in Fiji. This must not happen on our watch as leaders of the Blue Pacific.

So where must we look for answers? First is that, in the speediest possible time, the whole of the PIF [Pacific Islands Forum] region must become a fully integrated region. Pacific businesses should be able to shape and expand market opportunities unrestrained – Fijian businesses operating in the North Pacific, PNG businesses operating in New Zealand, Samoan businesses expanding opportunities in Solomon Islands.

Second, full integration must mean that, in the speediest possible time, we must have visa-free travel arrangements between all members of the PIF family. This will be the surest way of expanding employment opportunities for our young. This will also be the surest way of responding to the continuous loss of skills and talents out of our region. A visa-free PIF cannot be a medium-term goal. It must be a short-term goal. The future of the Blue Pacific depends on integration, including, most importantly, free people-to-people movement.

Australia’s initiative to [introduce the Pacific Engagement Visa](#) or PEV, which will allow 3,000 Pacific Islanders every year to settle in Australia with their family, is a

very welcome one. This visa brings Australia into line with New Zealand, which has long operated its very popular Pacific Access Category and Samoa Quota. The PEV is superior in many ways to the temporary visa schemes that both Australia and New Zealand operate, especially since workers can bring their families and are not tied to a single employer, therefore greatly reducing the likelihood of exploitation.

The PEV is a significant and positive step in the direction of Pacific-wide visa-free movement, especially if the quotas are increased over time. In this context, it is very concerning that the legislation to establish the PEV has become stuck in the Australian Senate, and so the PEV, which was to be introduced July 1, has been delayed. We all hope that a way forward can be found so that Australia can deliver on this important initiative, especially since it has already been announced and expectations have been raised. It seems that the proposed lottery mechanism has become the sticking point in Australia. However, this is the mechanism used by New Zealand and widely accepted in the Pacific as fair. Any other approach used by Australia would raise suspicion in the region.

Third, the Pacific's combined diplomacy must be brought to bear on the universe of climate finance. The Pacific's financial needs to adapt their economies between now and 2030 runs into US\$10 plus billion. Fiji's Prime Minister has a razor sharp focus on this. So do I. Fiji's Prime Minister has made it quite clear – we must commence all our adaptation measures now. Our adaptation cannot be pushed into the future for lack of funds. For the window for adaptation is fast closing for all of us. The window for adaptation is closing at warp speed for our low-lying atoll states.

The time for free rides in our partnerships with development partners has long gone. This is a time and moment to deliver finance on the scale and at the speed that is needed. This is not time for more policy commitments. This is not a time for talk. This is a time to deliver and deliver alone.

If you are delivering on scale and at speed – you are with us. If not, you are against us. There is no ambiguity in the People's Coalition Government on this. None. Period.

We have that opportunity to write a new chapter to our region's history. We are committed to the [PIF 2050 strategy](#) – that is our North Star. We are firmly committed to giving hope to our young. However impossible the odds may look, our young should know that we will continue to put up a fight for our lives. We will advance our existential interests as one Blue Pacific that is united in vision and unambiguous in purpose.

I know that the weight is heavy on those who are called to lead today. Lead with

determination we must. Every other option will be fatal.

Read Professor Prasad's [full speech](#) and watch [the video of the seminar](#).

Author/s:

Biman Prasad

Biman Chand Prasad is leader of the National Federation Party in Fiji and currently a Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance in the coalition government. He is a former professor of economics and dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of the South Pacific.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/pacific-islands-at-a-cliff-edge-20230811/>