

# Pacific unity is our competitive advantage



by Baron Waqa

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*This is the opening keynote address from the 2025 Pacific Update held at the Laucala campus of The University of the South Pacific (USP) on 3 June.*

When I was invited to speak today, I was asked to share my vision as Secretary General — where I see opportunities for collective progress and how we can work more effectively as one Blue Pacific Continent. It is an opportunity I welcome.

The theme before us — measuring the economic performance of the Pacific Islands — is both timely and provocative.

For us, economic performance must reflect more than numbers. It must reflect how well we respond to challenges, how connected we are across our sea of islands, and how prepared we are to shape our own futures.

For a long time, indicators of our economic performance have been handed to us with little consideration of our Pacific context. As a result, the true reflection of our resilience, of our quality of life, of our well-being, are not captured.

The Pacific region has an opportunity to change this – through fora such as this – and discuss ways to tell our story in the Pacific Way.

Our capacity to be able to gather, manage and analyse data has been an ongoing challenge for us. I know there have been ongoing efforts by institutions such as USP and agencies such as the Pacific Community and UN agencies to build our capacities to do this. However, I believe this is an opportunity for us to rethink and revisit the indicators we are chasing, and consider whether they are the ones that truly reflect our progress.

Looking at our labour market, labour mobility has been one of the most tangible sources of income, skills, and opportunity for Pacific households. Yet, across the region, the systems that support movement are still fragmented and externally shaped.

We must do better.

That is why I have consistently advocated for a future where Pacific peoples can move more freely — for work, for study and for opportunity. This must be a deliberate, regional priority.

To enable mobility, we must invest in connectivity — physical, digital and financial.

This includes tackling the high cost and complexity of inter-island transport. It means removing the regulatory and procedural barriers that prevent our farmers and producers from accessing regional and global markets. Trade is a powerful enabler of economic diversification and we must continue working to strengthen intra-regional trade routes and harmonise trade-related frameworks and standards.

It also means restoring correspondent banking relationships so remittances flow securely and affordably.

As I emphasised at the [Pacific Banking Forum](#) last year: banking is not just about regulation — it is about livelihoods. It is about whether a student can be supported by their family. Whether a business can pay its suppliers. Whether a community can send and receive money without penalty.

We must also broaden how we define progress.

GDP growth is important. But it cannot tell us if a coastal community is resilient to disaster or if our youth are gaining real opportunities to thrive.

The [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#) offers a more complete vision. It helps us look beyond fiscal measures and consider peace and security, environmental health, digital inclusion, cultural identity and people-centred development.

In this context, the recent UN General Assembly endorsement of the [Multidimensional Vulnerability Index](#) (MVI) is a significant milestone. It ensures that global development tools are finally being tailored to the realities of countries like ours.

For the Blue Pacific, the MVI represents a vital step toward ensuring that our structural vulnerabilities are fully recognised and addressed in a comprehensive and equitable manner. It acknowledges our region's acute exposure to climate change and natural disasters, as well as the enduring challenges of geographic isolation including high transport costs and limited access to global markets.

This is the kind of metric that matters. This is the kind of index that must now inform how partnerships are shaped, how financing is allocated and how the Pacific is supported to succeed on its own terms.

To deliver on these goals, we need a regional system that works better. Through the ongoing Review of the Regional Architecture, we are taking a hard look at how we organise ourselves — how we reduce duplication, improve coherence and strengthen delivery.

We must move from fragmentation to functionality. From competition to complementarity. From inwardness to integration.

Let us not allow nationalism dim the power of Pacific regionalism. In an age of converging challenges, unity is not a choice. It is our only competitive advantage.

Let me close by suggesting this: the best indicator of Pacific economic performance is not found on a graph or a chart. It is found in the lives of our people. It is in how easily they move, how well they connect, how confidently they plan for their future.

Let us use this Pacific Update to recommit to a vision of economic performance rooted in connection, inclusion and shared prosperity.

Vinaka vakalevu. T?bwa. And thank you.

*The 2025 Pacific Update continues until 5 June. For more information on the event, co-hosted by the Australia National University's Development Policy Centre and the University of the South Pacific's School of Accounting, Finance and Economics, visit [the event website](#).*

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/pacific-unity-is-our-competitive-advantage/>