

Pacific islands at a cliff edge

This is the full speech delivered by Professor Biman Prasad at a public seminar on 9 August 2023 associated with the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting in Suva, Fiji.

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

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 SDG's. 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 across touching all aspects of human life. Its impacts are felt most acutely by women, by 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.

Climate change weighs the whole region down – from the smallest to its largest. We know too well when it impacts in catastrophic ways as with Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu – when some 70 percent of Vanuatu's GDP was wiped out.

We know as well that at other times, climate change impacts slowly and creepingly as with the severe droughts in Kiribati over past two years.

We understand better how climate crisis impacts across our infrastructure. This has taken time – but we now understand this well. The maintenance costs for our roads have increased several hundred-fold because of increased and more intense rains. Our critical infrastructure – from digital infrastructure to wharves and jetties to key governance service centres such as health centres stand exposed to floodings and storm damage.

The impacts of climate change on our regions resources are growing. Pacific's tuna are migrating from our regions to cooler waters off South America as a consequences of rising ocean temperatures.

Cost to businesses; the cost of doing business and the cost of providing goods and services to Pacific Islanders – all of these increase as a result of climate change. These increases were slow and incremental before. They are now rapid and significant.

The impacts of climate crisis on our food and nutrition security – both on land based agriculture and aquatic foods are substantial and worsening. Stunting among children in PNG; malnutrition across the region; and nutrition and food insecurity for our most vulnerable populations are growingly worrisomely.

Climate change now threatens our reef systems. This new era of “global boiling” has the potential to trigger near total collapse of in-shore aquatic food systems. It is already a reality across much of the urban Pacific that low quality imported canned fish has replaced fresh sea food as the regular meal for dinner.

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 regions 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 no bad guys in the geopolitical contestation. All large economies are equally to blame for the state in which we now find ourselves. Some such as the UK may have contributed more greenhouses gases in the past; others like US and China contribute nearly 40 percent of the greenhouses gases as I speak.

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?

Hon. Prime Minister, Brown, you and I are both aware that 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 region must become a fully integrated region. Pacific businesses should be able to shape and expand market opportunities unrestrained – Fijian businesses operating in 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 that we must have a 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 the family, is a very welcome one.

This visa brings Australia into line with NZ 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 \$10 plus billion USD. 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 measure now. Our adaptation for lack of funds cannot be pushed them into the future. For the window for adaptation is fast closing for all of us. The window for adaptation is closing at warp speed for our low laying atoll states.

The time for free rides in our partnerships with our development partners has long gone. This is a time and moment to deliver finance on the scale and on 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 speed – you are with us. If not, you are against us. There is no ambiguity in the Peoples 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 to today. Lead with determination we must. Every other option will be fatal.