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Senior UN official calls for increased social protection in Pacific island region



10 February 2010 – The ongoing economic and financial crises are an opportunity to implement social protection programmes in Pacific island countries that address the needs of the vulnerable, particularly of women and children, the United Nations development chief said today at the start of a conference about the impact of the global downturn on the region.

“The crisis presents an opportunity either to initiate or to broaden existing social protection programmes. Measures which could be considered include school feeding programmes cash and in-kind transfers to the most vulnerable and cash-for-work programmes,” said UN Development [Programme](#) (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark in her keynote address to the Human Face of the Global Economic Crisis Pacific Conference, held in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

More than 220 delegates from the Pacific region are attending the three-day conference to discuss specific policies and joint actions that countries in the region can take to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis.

Miss [Clark](#) said that while such measures were not cost free, the evidence suggested that they can have results which go beyond the temporary alleviation of suffering.

“Well designed, they can help make societies more crisis-resilient over the longer term, and contribute to more stable and equitable growth,” she said.

Miss Clark added that there is much to be gained by exchanging experiences and cooperating in the design of social protection programmes within the Pacific and beyond and emphasized that the UN supports such efforts.

The cumulative effects of the food, fuel and economic crises have adversely affected progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the anti-poverty targets world leaders have pledged to achieve by 2015.

The UNDP Pacific Centre, based in Suva, Fiji, calculates that in the 12 Pacific island countries for which data are available, the poverty rate has worsened over the last two years as the incomes of the poorest and most vulnerable people declined.

The meeting follows a high-level [forum](#) organized by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), also held in Port Vila earlier this week.

Seventeen-year-old Danielle Willis from Palau, who spoke on behalf of Pacific youth at that conference, told officials today that the global economic crisis and the unemployment that followed has had severe impacts on the lives of Pacific islanders.

“Frustration, tension and violence at home and within communities is increasing. Increased substance abuse worsens these situations. Girls and women are the most vulnerable due to existing gender inequality,” said Ms. Willis.

“Please listen carefully to what the voices of the vulnerable are telling you. Your decisions made this week can change their lives,” she urged the leaders at the conference.

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