



SOUTH PACIFIC:

‘Poverty Measures Need Support of Rich Nations’

By Shailendra Singh

SUVA, Feb 16, 2010 (IPS) - Social protection programmes could help alleviate poverty in the Pacific Islands region, but without the help of developed countries, they will not materialise, said an economic expert in this capital of Fiji.

Dr Sunil Kumar, a lecturer in economics at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, was reacting to calls by a United Nations official for such programmes in order to alleviate the plight of the poor, who are reeling under the impact of the global financial crisis in the region.

He said that the scale of the problem makes it impossible for this impoverished and vulnerable region to pursue poverty alleviation programmes on its own.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark, in her keynote address at the recently concluded ‘Pacific Conference on the Human Face of the Global Economic Crisis’ in Vanuatu, an island nation in the South Pacific Ocean, said the financial crisis, which swept across the globe from 2007 onwards, presented an opportunity to pursue social protection programmes in the Pacific to address the needs of the vulnerable.

"The crisis presents an opportunity either to initiate or to broaden existing social protection programmes," said Clark, who was New Zealand's prime minister from 1999 to 2008.

The UNDP Pacific Centre in Suva estimated that at least 6.44 million Pacific Island people are potentially vulnerable to the impacts of a global economic crisis. This comprises individuals less than 15 years of age and people over 60 years old, representing 67 percent of the population.

It added that the poverty rate in the 12 Pacific countries has worsened over the last two years as the incomes of the poorest and most vulnerable people declined.

"Measures which could be considered include school-feeding programmes, cash and in-kind transfers to the most vulnerable, and cash-for-work programmes," Clark said.

But while "resources will have to be generated from within the communities," said Dr Kumar, "funding will also have to come from richer countries, particularly if leaders want to see a better world order in the coming decades.

"Definitely these two groups need some special mechanisms to take care of their problems."

Dr Kumar, however, echoed Clark's call for effective and efficient public expenditure, the advancement of gender equality, encouraging business investments and reorienting economies to low-carbon

development.

But he added that these were "motherhood statements" and specific action plans were needed. "A lot of funds can be made available if governments stop being wasteful," he said. "Dollars can be saved and utilised for such programmes. But other sources need to be tapped at the same time.

"We need specifically designed programmes to be put on the table for action. A lot of the people who make motherhood statements scurry away when it comes to making the financial commitments.

"The fact is that countries like Australia and New Zealand will have to fork out more resources in aid of small Pacific Island countries."

The conference, held Feb. 10-12, heard 17-year old Danielle Willis, a Pacific youth representative, outline some of the difficulties that poor families were facing. She said parents were unemployed, families had started to skip meals, children were being pulled from school and put to work and were left without appropriate care as parents struggled to make ends meet.

"Frustration, tension and violence at home and within communities is increasing," said Willis.

According to Dr Kumar, Willis had painted an accurate picture of what was happening at the ground level in many Pacific Island countries.

"There are some extreme cases of abject poverty, examples of what we call 'food poverty', exploitation, violence, disease and outright human misery."

Dr Kumar, who is currently writing a research paper titled, 'The Consequences of Global Economic Crisis on the Small Pacific Island Economies,' said the economic meltdown has seriously impacted the Pacific Island communities.

This is because despite their smallness and isolation, they are linked to the global economy through trade agreements. The economies of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa also rely heavily on remittances from their people living abroad, he explained.

Dr Kumar added that despite the paucity of data, there were many other bits of evidence showing that poverty had increased.

Clark said that with the exception of countries with mining and hydrocarbon exports, and those who had benefited from increased tourism or pursued economic reforms such as Vanuatu, the global recession had adversely affected the economies of other Pacific Island countries, "mostly because the global recession has eroded their income from exports, tourism, and remittances."

In Tonga, for example, the value of remittances fell by 14 percent last year, she added.

Dr Kumar also noted that the conference's focus on women and children was significant and welcome as these two groups are the most vulnerable and in most need of assistance.

"Meeting the needs of women and children, an area of focus for this conference, is especially important," Clark said during the meeting.

She conceded that the measures she was proposing would not be cost-free but in pushing for them, she said that they could yield results that would 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.

Vanuatu Prime Minister Edward Natapei, in his opening remarks, said the region was faced with difficult choices.

"A good distribution of public resources and in many cases scarce resources is vital if we are to address social development problems in our countries," he said. "The ability of leaders to promote social cohesion in our societies will depend on how they are able to promote the development of basic needs and capabilities of all their people."

More than 220 delegates, including government ministers, parliamentarians, development partners, U.N. agencies, youth, women's groups, private sector representatives and civil society organisations, came together to explore specific policies and actions that countries in the region could pursue to mitigate the effects of the crisis.

The conference, held Feb. 10-12, specifically focused on protecting the most vulnerable communities in the Pacific against the impact of present and future economic crises. It was organised by the Government of Vanuatu, with support from the U.N., Asian Development Bank, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the University of the South Pacific.

"The problem is that a lot of flares that emerge from such meetings die out fast, even before the planes touch down back at home. So we need to act fast," Kumar said.

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