

Opening of EMPLOYMENT POLICY WORKSHOP

Holiday Inn, Suva

28th November, 2012

Salutations

- Representatives of the ILO
- Representatives from Papua New Guinea and Samoa
- Representatives of the various Government ministries here in Fiji
- Members of academia

I am glad to be here this morning at the inauguration of this very important workshop for Fiji.

At the outset I would like to thank the ILO for its willingness to put this programme together, and I am glad that we are able to get our friends from PNG and Samoa to also be with us for this programme. Mr. David Lamotte, the ILO Director for the South Pacific has asked that I convey his apologies on the fact that he will not be with us today, as he has been required to be in Australia, but he will be with us over the last two days of this three day programme.

Around the world today, most countries are facing the effects of the global financial crisis and the problem of unemployment. Rates of unemployment are exceedingly high, and even the global growth powerhouse of China has not been immune to this trend. Rates of Youth Unemployment around the world have been very high and have indeed been a major cause of the drama in the Arab Spring. Unemployment is a major cause of concern for all Governments.

The traditional models of growth in the world have often focused almost exclusively on economic growth . Coupled with this has been the belief that the benefits of economic growth will always automatically trickle down to everyone in the economy. This however is not always true. We will never be able to ensure that the lives of everyone in Fiji benefits from economic growth unless we have proactive measures to ensure that the fruits of economic growth get into the pockets of ordinary Fijians.

Our Government here in Fiji has recognized the importance of focusing on jobs in order to achieve a number of important aims. This has been seen in a number of initiatives over the years and is especially seen in the development of the National Employment Centre which is designed to be a one stop shop overseeing the efforts to have our people employed. Over the past few years the 4 components of the Employment Reform have been put in place. The Formal Employment Services programme now actively registers all unemployed people in Fiji. Through this programme we provide additional life skills training, job specific skills and industrial attachments .

The Fiji Volunteer Service is currently housed under the Public Service Commission and through this programme we have been able place retired teachers in the Marshalls and I understand that there have been approaches from other Pacific Island countries to access these retired teachers. Our retired civil servants are an excellent pool of labour that can be made available to our sister countries in the pacific.

The Foreign Employment Services programme has just been established and been commissioned and has already commenced its work . We are now looking to send the details of 8 hospitality workers to Dubai. There has been further interest expressed from Dubai for sourcing workers from Fiji in security and sea faring.. There are opportunities opening up for our people through the Melanesian Spearhead Group Skills Movement Scheme which entered into force in September of this year.

We have also encouraged the setting up of private employment agencies and some of these have been registered with the Ministry.

The Self Employment Services of the NEC have been operational but most of the actual operations are carried out by the National Centre for Small and Micro-Enterprise Development (NCSMED) a, micro finance agencies, the Look North Project and the Integrated Human Resource Development programs. We are aware that there are other programs undertaken under the Ministry of Women and Youth that encourage self employment.

The recent 2013 budget announcement by the Prime Minister has described a range of initiatives to be undertaken by Government that will have a direct impact on employment. Some of the major budget decisions that will have an impact on employment include the new tax free zones between Korovou and Tavua, the decision to assist the dairy industry, the reduction of Corporate taxes for companies that have their headquarters in Fiji, the additional funding for Integrated Human Resource Development programme, the Look North Programme, the massive investment in upgrading Fiji roads to commence from next year and so forth.

The Land Reforms are designed to make available productive land to those who are willing to make use of them. The recent announcement in the budget that Government will sponsor students to study agriculture and assist them start their farms is a demonstration of Governments commitment to the Agriculture sector, and notes the importance of this sector in providing sustainable livelihoods for our people.

I propose that one of the challenges and indeed one of the opportunities of this particular workshop, especially for those us from Fiji will be to analyse the recent budget announcement and identify the initiatives outlined there that can be further developed to generate employment. Many of the measures maybe outlined in purely economic terms. We need to see how these can be translated into employment terms. We need to identify what

HRD elements can be included to enhance employment prospects. How do we maximize on the Budget proposals to create employment and to create jobs.

From the Ministrys viewpoint, I believe that one of our key challenges will be to position employment creation at the heart of all macroeconomic policies. I say that again, we need to position Employment to be at the very heart of all macroeconomic policies. As we grow the economy we need to ensure that there is adequate growth in employment to spread the benefits of such growth.

We are fortunate to have access through this workshop to all the work that the ILO has been doing in this area and the knowledge that it has on global best practices in this area.

We will need to consider innovative policy approaches that have been used in other countries. For instance, we may consider requiring all Government companies to engage apprentices. We may consider requiring community and social benefit clauses to support public employability through public sector contracts. We have already seen some developments like this taking place this year, as recipients of social welfare are encouraged to register with NEC

I look forward to this workshop looking into these areas and developing new employment policy options for all the countries that are in attendance at the workshop, and with these words I declare this workshop open.