



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

Closing remarks at the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth
Deep Seabed Environmental Management & Monitoring
Workshop

29 JULY 2021

Excellencies, Ladies & gentlemen both here and on-line

Kia Orana and warm Pacific greetings

I would like to thank you for your active participation in this workshop on Deep Seabed Environmental Management and Monitoring.

I am pleased to see that it has been a productive four days of information sharing, learning and robust discussion and that many of you took the time to listen, discuss and learn. And it is a credit to all the organisers that this workshop has attracted a record number of participants. Well done.

We started on the right note, hearing the collective support and commitment for the Abyssal Initiative Project and the importance of this workshop from leaders across the International Seabed Authority, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Government of Norway, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Pacific Community, and of course my Government.

The most obvious and strongest commitment reiterated during this workshop and the discussions that took place is that all of us are bound by the same shared commitment to put the environmental protection of the ocean at the forefront of our responsibilities.

This applies at the global level, and is of particular significance here in the Pacific, where the ocean, our Moana Nui o Kiva, forms part of our identity.

Secretary-General Puna summed up these views when he said, “the ocean is at the heart of our geography, our cultures, and our economies. Enormous responsibility is expected of us to ensure that we, our children, and future generations, continue to benefit from all its bounty.”

And this commitment transcends our own jurisdictions. As Pacific Small Island Developing States, we take our roles and responsibilities in the international seabed Area very seriously – whether as a Sponsoring State, a Member of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or as a Contract holder.

To that end, my government is committed to building a seabed minerals sector based on best principles and practices, supported by a robust legal framework, in harmony with our high environmental, social and cultural values.

The Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth is a key initiative aimed at empowering the four Pacific Sponsoring States to build and strengthen our capacity to responsibly and sustainably manage marine mineral resources in the Area.

I fully support this Initiative and its objectives and wish to reiterate our commitment to its implementation. I will also make this request, here, to the International Seabed Authority and UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs to explore further avenues to expand the project beyond its current lifetime and to continue providing the support and assistance that we need collectively to fulfill our responsibilities.

The theme of this fourth training and capacity-building workshop is particularly important. The topics covered were comprehensive and the sharing of knowledge gave participants a sound and practical foundation on deep seabed environmental management and monitoring.

The workshop covered the fundamental pillars of the international legal regime within which the sustainable development of seabed minerals can take place, as set out under UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and its instruments. One of these pillars is of course the obligation to apply the precautionary approach each step of the way.

It also gave an opportunity to discuss the type and scale of the potential environmental impacts of seabed activities, and more importantly the current and future environmental management tools that permit activities to proceed, again, in a precautionary manner. Hearing different and complementary views from the regulator and contractors was also encouraging and provided interesting perspectives.

The workshop was also valuable in providing an update on the technologies used for exploration, as well as for the testing of mining components.

I was pleased to hear the efforts being made by Contractors to ensure that technology development and innovation are currently being oriented towards the need to minimize any potential environmental impacts.

Let me comment on this further with respect to exploration. As an aside, I am personally very keen to see technology development and innovation in other areas with deep sea application. Here I talk about research in areas such as thermal conversion whereby the significant difference in deep sea temperatures of 0 degrees to ambient temperatures of 25 degrees, can be harnessed to generate electricity. For countries like ours, where the temperature differences of depths are only a short distance offshore to our islands this provides potential.

Understanding the value of the data and information collected and how it systematically informs the decision-making processes of the regulator in the field of environmental management was certainly also a key take-away.

I am particularly pleased and proud that the Cook Islands has been able to share its experiences in this workshop. We have been working very hard on all these matters for years and it is therefore a testament to the efforts invested. We will continue making steady progress developing our legal, institutional and policy frameworks and have clearly identified where to focus our efforts and actions.

In light of this, the session held today on further capacity building and technical assistance needs is essential. Indeed, it is of critical importance that the identification of capacity needs continues to be driven by the Pacific

Small Island Developing States to ensure that we will benefit meaningfully and effectively.

Overall, the presentations and discussions have been robust and inclusive.

There are still many unknowns in this emerging industry and the issues involved are complex, with stakeholders having differing views on seabed minerals development.

In saying that, I am pleased that participants engaged in open and frank discussions, with a respect for and appreciation of our differences. This is welcome and necessary.

The ongoing inclusive and transparent engagement between governments, civil society, the scientific community and other stakeholders is important to ensure meaningful engagement and awareness so that we can reach the best decisions for the benefit of all humankind.

As we conclude this fruitful workshop, it is vital that we continue to build on the momentum gained. This deep seabed environmental management and monitoring workshop has raised important issues, and highlighted the areas we, as Pacific Sponsoring States, need to strengthen both nationally and regionally.

Therefore, my government will continue to engage with all of our stakeholders and partners both domestically and internationally, to work together on bringing forward and sharing fit-for-purpose solutions. As Prime Minister of the Cook Islands I am committed to doing all I can to support these efforts.

Looking forward, we are ready to support the next regional and training workshop to be hosted by the Kingdom of Tonga on yet another important theme: Benefit-sharing.

In closing, allow me to thank all those who worked to make this workshop possible – to the ISA, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Government of Norway for their support of the Abyssal Initiative Project; to our Pacific brothers and sisters from Kiribati, Nauru, and the Kingdom of Tonga for our shared efforts as Sponsoring States; to the presenters for imparting their wisdom and knowledge; to the ISA secretariat and Seabed Minerals Authority staff who ensured everything ran smoothly; and lastly to our participants for contributing so actively throughout this week.

God Bless you all and Kia Manuia,