

**Statement delivered by  
The Honourable Vainetutai Rose Toki-Brown  
Minister for Agriculture of the Cook Islands  
on the occasion of the  
41<sup>st</sup> Session of the FAO Conference, Rome, Italy (22-29 June 2019)  
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Kia Orana tatou katoatoa I te aroa ranuinui o to tatou Atu.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

It is my honour to address you all today as the Minister responsible for Agriculture and Head of Delegation for the Cook Islands. On behalf of the people and Government of the Cook Islands, I extend a warm Kia Orana and Meitaki maata to FAO for facilitating this 41<sup>st</sup> session.

May I also extend our congratulations to our new Director-General elect Dr Qu Donghu and farewell our outgoing Director-General. I also acknowledge the two candidates that ran the race – “many will run the race, but only one will take the crown”. We wish you all the best in your tenure as Director-General and we look forward to working closely with you in unity for the benefit of our people.

Agriculture was once the foundation of the Cook Islands economy, it was the backbone of the country, but for so long, the sector has been in decline with virtually no growth recorded, and a decline in production, competitiveness and exports.

Contributing factors to this situation include outmigration, reduction in available arable land, an ageing farmer population, farm work force constraints and climate related extreme weather events, including longer drought periods and unusual seasonal trends. Agriculture is now, essentially a part-time and subsistence driven sector.

In recent years, we have seen new demands and challenges on our available resources, loss of arable land, and the flourishing of alternative employment and business opportunities fuelled by a healthy tourism industry. This has challenged us to think outside the box.

Our Ministry of Agriculture’s vision focuses on an approach that drives production to sustain our common livelihoods to meet the social and cultural obligations of our people and society, by ensuring food security and nutrition; and using the resources we have been blessed with, to effectively enhance the potential of agriculture to play a greater role in providing for our people and our economy.

We struggle with the imbalance of what is produced locally with what is imported! More specifically, our import bill for fresh produce equates to \$48 million New Zealand dollars annually.

Our vision seeks to unlock and tap into our potential, formulating new pathways to invest, and resource initiatives that will contribute to positive growth in the Agriculture sector. We aim to nurture and support young and emerging farmers, women in agriculture, and small medium enterprises by building capacity and developing mechanisms that will ensure sustainable outcomes for our Agriculture sector.

The Cook Islands, like many other Pacific Islands, are faced with extraordinary climate challenges. This demands that we build resilience, and we are doing so through the introduction of superior crop varieties resistant to pest and diseases, flooding and salt inundation, and heat resistant crops. We are establishing crop banks in our outer islands to ensure livelihood recovery and to support the re-establishment of agriculture practices, minimizing disruption to production from the impacts of climate change.

We are building our networks and forming close relationships. We support initiatives that seek to expand agricultural trade, exchanges in technology and technical services, and support avenues for access to resources that will help us to achieve our vision.

We are engaging with our tourism industry as a development partner, to help foster growth in other sectors in our society. And we welcome initiatives that will help build business platforms that involves farmer to market strategies, as it is our belief that private sector cooperation and support will underpin our ability to achieve our goals, as cannot be achieved by Government alone.

Furthermore, all sectors, especially Agriculture, must work in hand in hand with Health to provide for a healthy population and reduce the burden of NCDs.

The Cook Islands is a small island nation with an even smaller population base, surrounded by an immense ocean. Maintaining partnerships and a collaborative effort with all sectors of the economy, advocating and encouraging farming activities – “from the soil to your table” - to all people living in the Cook Islands, I am certain our island nation can curb outward migration and increase opportunities for growth in our agriculture sector. This, is our vision to pursue.

And we can only achieve this with the support of FAO and our partners. No-one should be left behind and therefore I implore, do not forget about my small island nation, the Cook Islands.

Thank you for your attention.

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia