



PRIME
MINISTER

**SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY PRIME MINISTER
KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO**

ON THE OCCASION OF THE ESCAP SIDE EVENT

‘Pursuing Wellbeing in the SIDS’

Room 11, American University of Antigua
St. John’s, Antigua and Barbuda
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Excellency, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands

Excellency, Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP

Excellencies

Distinguished speakers

Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be at this side event organised by the Cook Islands and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, with the support of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Community.

Thank you for inviting me to this important event.

The Small Island Developing States represent unique and beautiful nations that are vulnerable because of circumstance and geography, but resilient because of the strength of their people.

We face many challenges that threaten both our livelihoods and the delicate ecosystems of our homelands.

That is why this 4th International SIDS Conference, which brings us all to Antigua and Barbuda, is so critical in strengthening cooperation between us.

We must come together to explore meaningful actions to support the prosperity and resilience of our communities in face of pressing challenges, including climate change, sustainable development, and economic stability.

Being SIDS, however, we are not “small”, because together, with a shared perspective and commitment, we are “Big Ocean States” trying to work for the wellbeing of our people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite efforts by the international community to foster dialogue and cooperation to support SIDS’s sustainable development, it is deeply concerning that socio-economic inequalities have widened.

The recent global pandemic shone a bright light on these inequalities, and worstly, the unacceptable war and international conflicts of today threaten peace and security.

Developing countries are struggling. We are taking the lead, ownership and responsibility for our development, but the global threats we face and to which we did not contribute add to an already heavy burden.

In particular, climate change is making us even more vulnerable.

While there has been some improvement in international efforts and coordination, more needs to be done to support developing countries, particularly in meeting our commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Paris Agreement and achieving sustainable development.

The failure of the SDGs, as stated by the Special Report of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, means that we are not on track to protect our people and our environment. It means that we will all be at risk, developed and developing countries alike.

And so, if no one is to be left behind, we will need new approaches.

We will need to adopt more realistic and feasible goals which are properly resourced.

And if the key question is: *“what should be the main policy actions to ensure wellbeing at the national level”*? I would say that we must invest in capacity-building and training programs that make a difference in people’s daily lives.

We need to provide capacity in areas such as governance, healthcare, education and infrastructure, to allow us to be the agents of our own development.

To address the pressing issues that impact the wellbeing of our people, we also need to prioritise the protection and conservation of our unique ecosystems and biodiversity, ensuring sustainable management of natural resources for the benefit of current and future generations.

This brings us to a crucial and urgent need for economic diversification through the promotion of entrepreneurship and sustainable industries that can create new opportunities for growth, employment, and economic stability in the SIDS.

To “*mainstream wellbeing in national development priorities*” we need to improve our mechanisms of data collection, monitoring, accountability and implementation.

We need to take a holistic and integrated view because people's wellbeing cannot be achieved through fragmented and uncoordinated programs and policies.

We need to look people in the eyes, not through the lens of indicators and reports prepared following short international missions that are divorced from local context and needs.

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen,

I had the great privilege of chairing the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for a year, in 2013. Even with the periods of accelerated economic growth since then, we still see huge inequality across the Asia-Pacific region with millions of people living in extreme poverty.

The situation is even more dire in fragile countries that are unable to escape from their history of colonial exploitation, conflict and neglect.

That is why we need to change the international system that was developed by rich countries, for rich countries, at the ongoing expense of developing and fragile nations.

We can start by recognising that one solution does not fit all SIDS. The challenges we face in Timor-Leste are not the same as those faced by communities in the Cook Islands, Seychelles, Maldives, Tuvalu or Kiribati where the threat of climate change is existential.

We need new strategies, we need new mindsets and we need new approaches. Timor-Leste appreciates profoundly the clear remark of the Secretary General of the United Nations, H.E. António Guterres, demanding crucial changes in the international funding system. Only after this happens, SIDS can be confident and trust this vital approach for the sustainable development of SIDS.

In the mean time, we appeal to the United Nations Organisations to accomplish the important message of the UNSG about “**less reports, more results**”.

We therefore call for a global but contextualised response for the wellbeing of people in SIDS. A response that is urgent, but not rushed.

It will only be with dialogue, cooperation and trust, reinforced with the required resources, that we will be able to implement such a transformative agenda.

Thank you.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão