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Report of the field visit to the Pacific Island Countries by members of the UNICEF Executive Board, 10 to 21 March 2012

I. Introduction

1. A delegation representing the members of the UNICEF Executive Board visited the Pacific Island Countries from 10 to 21 March 2012. The delegation consisted of H.E. Mr. Andrei Dapkiunas, Permanent Representative of Belarus to the United Nations; Mr. Jerobeam Shaanika, Minister Counsellor, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Namibia to the United Nations; and Mr. Tleuzhan Seksenbay, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations; as well as Mr. Nicolas Charles Pron, Secretary of the UNICEF Executive Board. While in Solomon Islands, the delegation was joined by Ms. Prudence Reveli, Programme Manager of AusAID.

2. The objective of the field visit was to gain a first-hand understanding of UNICEF work at the country level. More specifically, the visit aimed at demonstrating concrete examples of UNICEF cooperation with the governments of Pacific Island nations and with other partners, including the United Nations country teams. The visit provided an opportunity for members of the Executive Board to better understand the challenges facing children and women in small island countries.

3. The delegation would like to express its gratitude to the Governments of Fiji and the Solomon Islands for the opportunities for substantive dialogue with senior members of their respective Governments as well as local officials.

4. The delegation would also like to thank the UNICEF team in the area office for the Pacific Island Countries for the well-prepared and well-organized visit, and for the ready availability of staff throughout the visit.

* E/ICEF/2012/9.

5. The visit consisted of two main components:

(a) Meetings in Suva, Fiji, with the UNICEF Pacific office, senior-level government counterparts, members of the United Nations country team and key development partners (including Board Member country representatives and ambassadors from the Pacific Island Countries), donors and partners from non-governmental organizations;

(b) Field trip to Solomon Islands, where the delegation had the opportunity to meet senior government officials in Honiara and to visit UNICEF-supported projects in Gizo, Western province, one of the convergence programming areas of the Solomon Islands Government and UNICEF. The delegation appreciated the enormous challenges faced by this disaster-prone small island nation, which is also a least developed country and is recovering from a conflict. Delegates met national leaders, local government representatives, representatives of civil society organizations, users of health facilities, health workers, teachers, school administrators, students, members of community groups, religious leaders and UNICEF staff.

6. The delegation experienced some of the logistical constraints (and the associated expenses) of operating in this part of the world: delegates had to take eight flights to get to the various UNICEF field locations in only two countries. The delegation also travelled by boat to access some of the UNICEF-supported projects.

7. This report summarizes the briefings received by the delegation and concludes with the delegation's observations.

II. Key issues facing children and women

8. Unique programming challenges result from the geographic range of the 14 Pacific Island Countries, which are scattered over 30 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean, combined with their wide cultural diversity, differing population structures, low human and institutional capacity, and high environmental vulnerability.

9. The economies of these countries continue to suffer from the impacts of the global economic crisis. However, in 2010 most Pacific Island Countries (except Fiji, Samoa and Tonga) registered growth in gross domestic product, with Solomon Islands and Vanuatu recovering faster than others. The balance of trade in goods and services for key Pacific partners continues to fall. Poverty levels continue to increase as real incomes decline throughout the region due to inflationary pressure resulting from high global energy and commodity prices. The average inflation rate for the region as a whole is estimated at 5.4 per cent in 2011.

10. The total Pacific population is 2.5 million, of which an estimated two thirds is seen as potentially vulnerable to the impacts of the global economic crisis. Approximately one third of the people live in poverty and lack sufficient income to satisfy their basic human needs. Some of the countries are exceedingly food insecure. They are affected by the impacts of volatile international food and energy prices due to inherent resource limitations, especially a lack of productive agricultural land and are hampered by their geographic remoteness and isolation, which increase transaction costs. Higher expenditures on food and fuel have forced

a reduction in spending on health and education and squeezed funds for agricultural inputs, such as better seeds, fertilizers and tools to expand food production.

11. Performance on achieving the Millennium Development Goals across the region is mixed and generally weakest among the Melanesian countries (especially Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu), which account for the bulk of the population. Most Micronesian countries (including Kiribati, Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Nauru) struggle to maintain their gains. The Polynesian countries (including Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tonga), which all started from a much higher base level, have been performing relatively well.

12. Most Pacific countries are on or near track to achieve universal primary education. However, net enrolment ratios drop significantly for secondary and higher education in nearly all countries, and education quality remains a major concern everywhere. While HIV/AIDS infection rates are very low, a number of indicators suggest a high risk of increase. Non-communicable diseases are a major and rapidly increasing problem. In terms of both health and education, the biggest challenge in the Pacific is the capacity to deliver basic services, particularly to outer islands.

13. Climate change poses fundamental challenges to livelihoods in the Pacific region. The Pacific Island Countries are acutely aware that they will feel its major impacts, despite their lack of responsibility for it. They recognize that they have little control over carbon emissions that result from unsustainable production and consumption patterns in industrialized countries. Responses to acceleration of temperatures and sea-level rise within the past 10 to 15 years have generally been inadequate, not least because they have been seen as regional (rather than local) and as a product of climate change (rather than climate variability). It is likely that climate change will challenge already weak food security in the Pacific region over the next few decades. It seems unavoidable that large numbers of people will be displaced from their present homes and livelihood bases due to sea-level rise and forced to relocate to less vulnerable locations elsewhere.

14. The Pacific is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. The Pacific Islands are susceptible to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, cyclones, mudslides and droughts. All of these have the potential to cause serious human suffering, threaten livelihoods, frustrate development efforts and reverse development gains. Because of this exposure and limited adaptive capacity, the Pacific Island Countries need to view climate change and disaster risk reduction in an integrated manner. In 2010 alone, the Pacific Islands faced five tropical cyclones, two volcanic eruptions and one tsunami. The Executive Board delegation visited Gizo, in the Western province of the Solomon Islands, where dozens of people were killed and thousands displaced by a tsunami in 2007. In response, UNICEF has been supporting local authorities to rehabilitate health and education infrastructure.

15. The Pacific region is characterized by diverse religious, traditional and formal governance structures and is undergoing rapid social, economic and political changes. Despite the region's long tradition of peace and stability, the incidence and pervasiveness of social tensions, conflict and violence have been increasing. These phenomena manifest themselves in a wide variety of forms, including high levels of domestic violence; increasing crime and urban violence; social, ethnic and religious tensions; and corruption. While the underlying causes and triggers of violence differ

from country to country, common elements include weak governance capacities and institutions unable to mediate change and tensions in non-violent ways.

Maternal and child health

16. Weak health and health information systems are common across the Pacific Island Countries, as well as low coverage of family planning and antenatal care in the larger archipelagos (Solomon Islands, Vanuatu). This affects both the delivery of appropriate services and the tracking of progress. Malaria is endemic in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Five countries (Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu) have a high burden of tuberculosis. Significant supply and demand bottlenecks remain in ensuring a cost-effective response to addressing the double burden of under-nutrition and infectious diseases on the one hand and over-nutrition and non-communicable diseases on the other.

17. Progress in reducing under-five mortality has highlighted disproportionate numbers of preventable newborn deaths. Maternal mortality remains high and morbidity even higher, considering that for every death, an estimated 30 women suffer significant disability.

18. Non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes are at crisis levels in the Pacific Island Countries. These diseases cause up to 75 per cent of all deaths and a similar percentage of long-term illness and disability. The prevalence of non-communicable risk factors in the Pacific are among the highest in the world – up to three of every four adults are obese and up to four of every five adults smoke. Non-communicable diseases also drain limited national budgets and reduce worker productivity. In particular, high childhood obesity rates, if left unchecked, will likely result in a true health catastrophe in just a generation.

19. The UNICEF programme aims to achieve the following key results: accelerated reduction of neonatal, infant and under-five child mortality; improved maternal health with equity; improved access to equitable, sustainable safe water and sanitation; and improved hygiene practices. The programme addresses major killers of children (neonatal conditions, pneumonia, diarrhoea and malnutrition) and risks to maternal health through identifying supply and demand bottlenecks and providing advocacy and support for their removal. It also works to demonstrate, document and support scale-up of good practices.

20. The delegation visited health facilities in the Western province of Solomon Islands. At the Vonunu health facility on Vella Lavella Island, delegates heard directly from practitioners about UNICEF support following the 2007 tsunami. Equipment and training provided by UNICEF helped to improve the quality of services, including the expanded programme on immunization, safe motherhood, post-natal care and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS. UNICEF is also supporting training of health staff, and delegates had the opportunity to interact with health staff members working on remote outer islands. In Gizo the delegation visited the provincial hospital and was briefed by nurses and doctors about reproductive health activities and breastfeeding counselling. The Gizo hospital was certified baby-friendly in 2010.

21. Delegates also heard how UNICEF supported the introduction of an innovative approach to birth registration, using cellphone technology. In the Kukuminner-city health clinic in Honiara, delegates interacted with the medical staff, who expressed

their gratitude for UNICEF support, especially with the expanded programme on immunization, breastfeeding and HIV counselling. Ministry of Health officials also discussed their request for UNICEF technical expertise to help plan the use of a large donor grant, which was used to establish interventions for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Nutrition

22. The 2010 Pacific Food Summit, supported by UNICEF in partnership with the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, emphasized the value added by nutrition security of children and women. Progress has been made in promoting care practices: four countries joined the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, and 30 of their 36 hospitals received accreditation. Maternal and newborn care policies and guidelines have been updated and level 2 neonatal intensive care units set up in Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Water and sanitation

23. Overall, the region has poor prospects for achieving environmental sustainability (Millennium Development Goal 7). Despite the substantial resources invested, effective development-monitoring mechanisms either do not exist or are weak. With climate change exacerbating the vulnerability of most Pacific Island Countries to sea-level rise, all are contemplating more immediate adaptation and mitigation measures to reduce risks and strengthen resilience, particularly among communities, drawing upon traditional and indigenous knowledge while some (particularly the atoll archipelagos) consider relocation in the medium- to longer-term.

24. With UNICEF support, the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) project has been enhanced in schools and communities in Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. UNICEF supported governmental and non-governmental organizations to celebrate Global Hand Washing Days in Fiji and Solomon Islands. As the cluster lead for WASH, UNICEF also strengthened capacities and partnerships for effective response and support to communities affected by emergencies.

25. In Fiji, members of the delegation heard how UNICEF is helping to improve access to safe water and sanitation in schools through an innovative partnership between local government and the private sector. In Gizo, delegates heard provincial officials welcome UNICEF efforts to support the systematic integration of WASH and education activities.

Education

26. Literacy rates in the Pacific are among the highest in developing countries, above 90 per cent. However, net enrolment ratios drop significantly for secondary and higher education in nearly all countries. Geographic disparities within countries are quite high, partly due to the challenge of delivering basic services, including education, to rural areas and remote outer islands. While some of the indicators demonstrate good progress quantitatively, the quality of education is a major concern in Pacific Island Countries.

27. Progress has been made towards achieving universal primary education, but major bottlenecks remain. A high proportion of children are unable to read or write

upon completing the primary school cycle, investment in early childhood education is low and there are enduring disparities due to geography, economic status and disability. Six countries have achieved primary school enrolment rates of over 90 per cent, but these gains are at risk of decline in Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia. Progress is mixed in terms of the number of children completing basic education, with inadequate retention rates in seven countries and high repetition rates in early grades. Gender parity has largely been achieved in primary and secondary education.

28. The education programme seeks to invest in two result areas: equitable early childhood education and quality basic education services for improved learning outcomes. In collaboration with development partners, notably Australia and New Zealand, the programme aims to increase the proportion of children with adequate literacy and numeracy skills. UNICEF continues to engage with joint education sector programmes. Pooled funding partnership arrangements serve as a key strategy to expand and sustain results.

29. In Gizo, Solomon Islands, the delegation visited UNICEF-assisted schools in Titiana and Ngari villages. Members of the delegation were particularly impressed by results of UNICEF support to the Government for rehabilitation of school facilities after the 2007 tsunami. Very high school attendance rates were maintained, especially of girls, even in secondary education. This was achieved due to community outreach, greater involvement of parents in the learning process, improvement of the school environment and innovative approaches.

HIV/AIDS

30. The prevalence of HIV in the Pacific Island Countries remains low, although surveillance is inadequate to ascertain the precise status. Due to very high teenage pregnancy rates, pervasive gender-based violence and high prevalence of non-HIV sexually transmitted infections in many of the countries, there is a real danger of rapid increase in HIV, which governments must be supported to avoid. Other drivers of HIV risk and vulnerability include transactional sex, mobility and alcohol and drug abuse.

31. The UNICEF-supported HIV/AIDS project focuses on increasing access of the most vulnerable young people and pregnant women to quality voluntary counselling, testing and treatment. It also addresses prevention and reduction of sexually transmitted infections and HIV transmission, specifically to newborns.

32. In both the Gizo provincial hospital and the Honiara Kukum clinic, the delegation visited HIV/AIDS counselling facilities supported by UNICEF. Delegates learned that the Kukum clinic will offer point-of-care testing using rapid tests. Support includes staff training, procurement of medical supplies, assistance for laboratory quality assurance activities and provision of improved data collection tools.

Child protection

33. The protection of children and women is a continuing concern. Violence and abuse of children is widespread, with over 70 per cent of caregivers admitting to engaging in practices that physically harm children. In addition, research shows that two of every three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from

their partner. A recent study in Solomon Islands indicates that women who experience abuse are 4.5 times more likely to abuse their children. In some countries, new laws and policies have given a mandate and structure to government and civil society organizations to address violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children. As a result, services have been expanded to detect and care for victims, and communities are taking action against violence and abuse. However, several countries lag behind, with limited legislation and few systems to protect children and women.

34. The UNICEF-supported programme aims to engage a broad range of partners for the progressive advancement of a protective environment for children that is increasingly free from violence, abuse and exploitation. The programme also focuses on ensuring implementation and enforcement of newly amended or developed laws and continued support to areas where legislative reform is still required. To support child and family welfare and services, the programme builds on positive cultural and traditional practices and existing local resources to ensure sustainability and economic viability of systems.

35. In Solomon Islands, UNICEF is supporting the development of a modern, computerized data management system and protocols on storage, access and issuance of birth and civil registration data. UNICEF also facilitated new partnerships between key government agencies, religious institutions and community-based organizations. Awareness-raising initiatives are under way with the introduction of new birth notification procedures in selected health facilities. In Gizo, the delegation heard about UNICEF activities to promote the use of innovative technologies, such as mobile phones, to enhance birth registration efforts. During their visit to the Kukum health clinic, delegates witnessed the key role in birth registration awareness played by health staff through antenatal and post-natal services.

Youth in the Pacific

36. The 15-24 age group accounts for 20 per cent of the region's population. This 'youth bulge' represents both a challenge and an opportunity for governments to ensure access to education, employment and the support services that will guide young peoples' transition to productive adulthood. The challenges facing young people in the Pacific – high unemployment, poverty, growing inequalities and government instabilities – result in conditions ripe for social conflict.

37. At the Kukum clinic, delegates saw the results of efforts to ensure that health facilities provide integrated ante-natal care/prevention of mother-to-child transmission (of HIV) and youth-friendly services, especially in urbanizing areas. In Solomon Islands, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to develop sets of guidelines for strengthening HIV testing and counselling, and youth-friendly services with data collection and a monitoring and evaluation framework.

III. The United Nations system in the Pacific

38. The delegation had the opportunity to meet with the United Nations country team in Fiji as well as the United Nations country presence team in Solomon Islands. In 2011, in partnership with the governments of all 14 Pacific Island

Countries and in consultation with major donors, the country team of agencies, funds and programmes designed the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for the Pacific Sub-Region for 2013-17. Its focus results from the development aspirations and priorities of the countries themselves. The following key outcome areas were agreed following a thorough consultation and priority-setting process with all concerned partners:

- (a) Disaster risk management, environmental sustainability and climate change;
- (b) Inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction;
- (c) Gender equality;
- (d) Basic services;
- (e) Governance.

39. Since 2008, the United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF and the United Nations Development Programme have adopted an innovative strategy, the Joint UN Presence Initiative aimed at maximizing geographical coverage of the region through establishment of joint presence offices. These liaise with host governments, support United Nations coordination at the national level and assist United Nations agencies in managing and monitoring their programmes. To date eight joint presence offices have been set up, in Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. In each country, one of the three agencies hosts the office and represents the interests of the other two agencies on the basis of mutual agreements. A country development manager supports the joint presence office and acts as a liaison officer. Experience thus far highlights the benefit of this approach in terms of stronger communication and liaison between the United Nations and the host Government, more effective aid through improved coherence among United Nations entities and a more efficient platform from which to explore and launch joint programmes and implement the UNDAF.

40. The delegation saw for itself the catalytic role UNICEF has been playing in engaging other United Nations agencies in this effort. In Honiara, Solomon Islands, the delegation visited the joint presence office and observed how this innovative approach has enabled the United Nations to enhance its visibility and to strengthen the coherence of its interventions, in alignment with the government's national priorities.

Observations

41. Having had a close look at the activities of UNICEF in the Pacific, the delegation commended the high degree of dedication and commitment, hard work and efficiency of the area office staff, especially in the sectors of mother and child health, education and protection. The delegation noted the high degree of preparedness and initiative of UNICEF Pacific in responding to emergencies, as demonstrated in the prompt reaction of the UNICEF team to the 2007 tsunami in Gizo.

42. The delegation noted with concern the extreme degree of hardship in the subregion, especially in remote outer islands, as well as the cumulative effect of

developmental and environmental challenges facing the Pacific island nations, compounded by the enormous logistical difficulties of operating in the region.

43. The delegation believed that the continuing development challenges in the Pacific, especially in terms of disaster preparedness and logistics, invited larger-scale humanitarian and development assistance to the countries, to be carried out on a sustainable and long-term basis. The delegation suggested that UNICEF be engaged in a more systematic fundraising and advocacy effort to raise the visibility of the Pacific Island Countries among international donors and highlight the gravity of the continuing risks and threats to Pacific children and their families.

44. The delegation appreciated the fact that the UNICEF multi-country programme is duly aligned with the UNDAF, major Pacific-wide plans and strategies, and the national strategic development plans of all Pacific Island Countries. The programme will also contribute to strengthening the capacity of national governments to support community resilience and mechanisms to cope with adverse effects of climate change and natural disasters.

45. The delegation was satisfied with the excellent cooperation and partnerships that UNICEF has forged with governmental institutions at all levels, from central government to local authorities, to achieve results for children through evidence-based advocacy and action. UNICEF engagement with the governments, United Nations agencies, civil society and key international development partners provided good examples of the added value and multiplier effect UNICEF can bring by acting as a catalyst and a unifier. The delegation recommended broader dissemination of the experience of the Joint UN Presence Initiative, as it could potentially be implemented in other regions. It would also inform the ongoing discussions on the United Nations quadrennial comprehensive policy review.

46. The delegation welcomed UNICEF efforts to influence policies, legislation and public spending while programmatically supporting the most vulnerable areas.

47. The delegation noted with appreciation the cooperation among the governments, local authorities and UNICEF on child-friendly schools and the efforts to encourage girls, especially those from remote areas and outer islands, to attend school. The delegation underlined the importance of ensuring that all children, especially girls and children from remote areas, have access to a quality education, not only as a fundamental human right but also as a key investment in the future of the countries.

48. The delegation appreciated the critical role UNICEF has played in supporting the governments of the Pacific Island Countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and to protect and fulfil the rights of children and women.

49. The delegation regarded as deserving of praise and encouragement the thoughtful attempts of UNICEF Pacific to set priorities for its work, geographically (through a three-tier classification of programme countries) and thematically (through definition of key thematic areas of regional activity in cooperation with United Nations team members through the UNDAF).

50. The delegation saw that the primary comparative advantage of UNICEF in the eyes of development partners lies in its technical expertise and advanced solutions. As in other regions, UNICEF is proving its ability to lead, first and foremost, by encouraging innovation and forging effective new partnerships.

51. The delegation's contacts during the visit showed that, notwithstanding impressive and innovative efforts to increase synergy among development partners, the likelihood remained of informational bottlenecks, overlap and duplication of efforts, and poorly aligned policy messages and advice to national governments. Such organizational imperfections are less noticeable in more conventional development environments, but in the Pacific, with its extremely high cost of delivery, these organizational imperfections stood out and invited prompt action.

52. The delegation believed that data collection, sharing, analysis and dissemination was one area that could benefit from improved engagement of development partners. The delegation thought that ensuring full and timely access of all development partners to the pool of basic information on development, especially regarding the situation at community level, as well as on policy thinking, was critical for successful development efforts at all levels.

53. The delegation believed that, against the background of steadily increasing regional coherence and coordination of actions, the current fragmented arrangement of the United Nations resident coordinator system in the Pacific (with resident coordinators in both Fiji and Samoa) seemed at the very least outdated. The need to maximize cohesion of efforts among United Nations partners in a single region invited a fresh look at the expediency of a single decision-making and coordination centre for the United Nations Pacific region.

54. The delegation believed that the extreme distances between the Pacific islands, which significantly strain logistics, invited the use of: (a) a special regional correction factor in calculating funds for regional UNICEF operations; and (b) wider use of videoconferencing (assuming sufficient bandwidth) between the regional office and distant islands as a tool for reducing costly transport expenses.

Annex**Summary of the programme of the field visit***Suva, Fiji***Saturday, 10 March**

1. UNICEF Pacific briefing

Monday, 12 March

1. Meeting with Honourable Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Government of Fiji
2. Meeting with United Nations country team members
3. Meeting with Mr. Peter Wise, Permanent Secretary for National Planning, Government of Fiji UNICEF Executive Board member countries represented in Fiji (China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, United Kingdom and United States), Pacific Island Countries represented in Fiji (Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Tuvalu).

*Honiara, Solomon Islands***Tuesday, 13 March**

1. Meeting with H.E. Mr. Gordon Darcy Lilo, Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands
2. Meeting with the Ministry of Development Planning and Aid Coordination
3. Meeting with the United Nations country team
4. Meeting with UNICEF staff

*Gizo, Solomon Islands***Wednesday, 14 March**

1. Meeting with provincial government officials
2. Visit to primary and secondary schools in Titani and Ngari villages

Thursday, 15 March

1. Visit to health facilities on Vonunu Island
2. Visit to health facilities in Gizo

*Honiara, Solomon Islands***Friday, 16 March**

1. Meeting with development partners: AusAID, New Zealand Aid Programme, European Union

Saturday, 17 March

1. Visit to health clinic and school

Suva, Fiji

Monday, March 19

1. Debriefing with United Nations country team, UNICEF Executive Board member countries represented in Fiji (China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, United Kingdom and United States); Pacific Island Countries represented in Fiji (Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands and Papua New Guinea) and other development partners (AusAID, New Zealand Aid Programme, European Union and Asian Development Bank).
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