

**Keynote Address by  
James Alix Michel, Former President of the Republic of Seychelles**

**THE GREATEST OCEAN, THE GREATEST CHALLENGE**

*Keynote address for Pacific Blue Economy Conference, 23-24 August 2017,  
under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Development Forum*

Hon. Josaia Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji,  
Hon. Enele Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu,  
Mr. François Martel, Secretary General of PIDF,  
Hon. Milner Tozaka, representing the Chairperson of PIDF,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Fellow islanders,  
Dear friends,

A very good morning to you all.

I am deeply grateful for the invitation to attend this conference and to be asked to share with you some of my ideas and experience on the subject of the Blue Economy.

I am especially indebted to The Right Honourable Manasseh D. Sogavare, MP, Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands and Chair of the Pacific Islands Development Forum for his invitation to the Pacific Blue Economy Conference, some two months ago. We applaud his initiative and give him credit for convening this conference.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to His Excellency George Konrote, President of the Republic of Fiji, and to The Right Honourable Frank Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji, for hosting this important conference, which comes at an opportune time. We are grateful to them, to the Government and to the people of the Republic of Fiji for their gracious hospitality in this beautiful and enchanting island of the Pacific.

I said earlier that this conference could not come at a more opportune time. Indeed this is the case. We, as islanders, are proud and honoured that one of our own, Prime Minister Bainimarama is the incoming chairman of the 23rd session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 23) to the UN Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which will be organized by Fiji and hosted at the headquarters of the UNFCCC Secretariat in Bonn in November of this year.

We congratulate him, convinced that the voice of small island states will continue to resonate throughout the world. We wish Fiji and Prime Minister Bainimarama every success in their mission. In this context, I am sure that Fiji conference will not only work on a Blue Economy roadmap for the Pacific but will also contribute to concrete results at the COP23 conference in Bonn.

Your Excellencies,  
Fellow Islanders,

We live in different oceans but we have much in common. Like our conference hosts here in Fiji, and participants from neighbouring Pacific nations, the Republic of Seychelles is itself a small island state surrounded by a great ocean. And as we look seawards, I am sure you will agree there are times when we all have conflicting thoughts. On the one hand we see the threat posed by rising sea levels, but we also see the enormous potential that the sea can offer. No human being is more respectful of the sea than islanders like us, no human being has a keener sense of what is needed. The sea holds the key to our future and, as such, island societies are flag-bearers of human development. This is why I am sure we will, at this conference, have a valuable dialogue – we face formidable challenges but we can also see new opportunities.

Three years ago I made a similar journey from Seychelles to the Pacific, on that occasion to Samoa for the landmark United Nations conference on Small Island Developing States. It was an important gathering, giving recognition to the unique perspectives and needs of islands like ours. We are not major powers in a conventional sense but we cannot be ignored; we have much to offer. No-one knows more about the sea than we do. That is why, in Samoa, I asserted that we had come together not to beg but to give, not to be overwhelmed by the challenges that face us but to respond positively. Indeed, in the presence of international powers we asserted our very right to exist. This right remains central to what I want to say today.

### *An Idea Was Born*

I am convinced that the Blue Economy holds the key to our future. It is a transformative concept but its origins are simple. Let me start by putting this in personal terms, although I am sure the circumstances will be familiar to you all.

Seychelles is an archipelago in a remote stretch of the Indian Ocean. There are few places on our islands where one is out of sight of the sea and throughout my life I have spent many hours looking towards the distant horizon, reflecting on what it all means. I am always in awe of the sea and yet we know so little of what it contains and what more it can yield. The mighty oceans cover the greater part of our planet's surface but human attention has always been focused primarily on the land. More than that, we have for generations treated the sea with disdain, as little more than a dumping ground for waste created elsewhere, and as a place to exploit without thought for tomorrow. Whole areas have been poisoned by human activity and can no longer provide a natural habitat for fish; the recent case of a whale that died as a result of consuming plastic waste is a poignant story of our times. This surely cannot continue.

Why not, instead, attach the same importance to the sea as we have placed on the land, but without making the same mistakes? Yes, we will always fish but let us now do so sustainably. Tourists will continue to be drawn to the world's coastlines but not at the expense of the

pristine environment they come to enjoy. And shipping will remain essential to our livelihoods but no longer a source of pollution. Things that we have done for centuries must be done better. And so, in my mind, the idea of the Blue Economy took shape.

It is an exciting concept because it is about so many things that are new. How much do we really know of what lies beneath the surface of the sea? Most of the seabed remains unmapped; there will be species in deep waters that are yet to be discovered; and perhaps sub-marine plant life with healing powers that we cannot yet imagine. We know that the power of the waves and currents are a source of constant energy but the ways to harness this are as yet poorly developed; we must put every effort into advancing the technology. And we cannot turn our backs any longer on the vast residue of waste that we have dumped in the sea; the time is long past to redress our harmful practices.

The oceans are the planet's unexplored frontier, extending well beyond our shorelines. Small island states are on the frontline of this new challenge and have a leading role to play. As I will show, much progress has already been made – in just a few short years – to bring the Blue Economy onto the world agenda. And if this progress continues we are poised to make a real difference to our island economies.

### *Onto the World Agenda*

In the last quarter of the twentieth century the world finally woke up to the fact that the wanton use of our environment could not be allowed to continue. The concept of sustainability was introduced as the basis for a new approach and this, in turn, led to the over-arching idea of the Green Economy. Yet, while the spotlight was at first turned on the land, the sea remained in the shadows. More recently that, too, has started to change and it is no coincidence that important initiatives to take a fresh look at the sea originated in small island states.

If one is to point to a critical step in the emergence of the Blue Economy, then surely it must be the United Nations Rio+20 Conference in June 2012. This important event was held for the world community to continue discussions about the institutional framework for sustainable development, and to explore more fully the potential of the Green Economy. While supporting these main themes, representatives of island nations also saw this as an opportunity to bring the still-evolving concept of the Blue Economy into the same world arena. Arguments were marshalled in a pre-conference report, 'Green Economy in a Blue World', and three basic principles were proposed:

- the ocean's great resources should be used sustainably;
- economic benefits should be distributed fairly; and
- the carbon footprint of the maritime states should be reduced.

In other words, even before the Rio 20+ Conference, the idea was already taking shape and winning support not only amongst small island developing states but in a larger forum too.

As a pioneer of the idea of the Blue Economy, I was actively involved in shaping the idea and in attracting wider international interest and support. Looking back now, I cannot believe that it is only five years since this important breakthrough. So much has happened since then: resolutions have been passed, policies developed, reports and learned papers published, student dissertations written.

Not long ago, people would ask me to define the Blue Economy and to explain what is different compared with past uses of the oceans. It is my belief now – especially in an informed gathering like this – that lengthy definitions are no longer necessary. Suffice to say that the Blue Economy embraces not one set of activities but many. It is also not confined to any one part of the world. There is something of interest for all nations, large and small, north and south. Certainly, they will not all approach it in the same way, and different aspects will appeal more in different circumstances. There is a common core of ideas but also the potential for numerous variations.

The Blue Economy is not simply about making *greater* use of the sea but about making *better* use of it too. And the way this will be done is by recognising the importance of sustainability. That is why I think that everyone engaged in work on the Blue Economy should have a framed copy of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 14 above their desk:

*Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources*

Without the inclusion of this key word, *sustainably*, the Blue Economy would be incomplete; with it, the future is bright, an approach that will benefit future generations as well as our own.

The recent United Nations conference in New York to review progress on Goal 14 was another landmark in the development of the concept. Seychelles sent a strong delegation to this, under the leadership of the Vice-President, and work continues at home to ensure that the momentum is not lost. I have myself established a Foundation in Seychelles so that I can maintain my own support and raise awareness about the related issues of the Blue Economy, Sustainability and Climate Change.

We have all made good progress but cannot afford to rest on our laurels. Words are fine but what about actions?

### *Making a Difference*

Given the enormity of the challenge it would be all too easy to wait for a concerted effort by the international community. But the challenge is too urgent to leave for the future – we must act now. We know that most of the world's oceans – the High Seas – remain beyond the reach of effective controls. This must change and we await details of the UN's ongoing efforts to do so. But in the meantime there is much that can be done within our own designated waters. We have made a start in Seychelles and I would like to tell you of a number of initiatives that illustrate how progress is being made.

(a) Bring the Blue Economy into the Centre of Government

One action I took as President was to create a separate department for the Blue Economy. My successor has continued this initiative and now it answers directly to the Vice-President. Even though it is a small department it helps to ensure that all of the Ministries incorporate the Blue Economy in their own thinking. It is a concept that belongs to us all.

(b) Work with Neighbouring Nations

We all have our own boundaries but these have little meaning in the oceans; they are mostly lines on a map, invisible to the eye. Thus, Seychelles has secured a unique agreement with our southern neighbor, Mauritius, to jointly care for and develop a submerged feature known as the Mascarene Plateau, which connects our two nations. Launched in 2012, Mauritius and Seychelles undertook to jointly manage some 400,000 square kilometres of seabed. There is the possibility of extracting natural gas and oil from this continental shelf and, if that occurs, both parties want it to be done responsibly. For now, though, the very fact that two nations are willing to work together in this way is a source of encouragement.

(c) Keep Our Seas Safe

We can never take for granted the security of our shipping lanes and fisheries, and sometimes we must take direct action to protect them. In Seychelles, over most of the past decade we have faced an ongoing threat from pirates, emanating from the lawless regions of Somalia. Given that the twin pillars of our economy are tourism and fishing, and because we rely on a constant flow of imports, we could not allow the incidence of piracy to continue. At its height, the direct cost to my nation was equivalent to 4% of our GDP and, if allowed to continue, that figure would undoubtedly have grown. As a result, we at first relied on our own naval patrols while, at the same time, urging the international community to play its own part. Largely through our diplomatic efforts this eventually happened and we were able to contain further activity. But the point I am making is that there are times when small island states have to take a lead, if only to show larger and more distant nations how their own interests are closely bound up with the good management of the oceans.

(d) Convert International Debt to Fund Marine Management

Another initiative originated with the support of the then French President, when we were able to broker a deal with the Paris Club whereby repayment of an international debt of some \$21.6 million could be cancelled and the amount progressively invested in a local Trust Fund managed by representatives of all parties in the deal, i.e. The Nature Conservancy and other philanthropists. This Trust manages our investment in Blue Economy measures. Known as the Debt-to-Adaptation Swap, it is a formula that might well be used by other island nations with debts to repay. We would have

had to spend the money in any case, but investing in the ocean is a more rewarding process. Through this mechanism, for instance, we have been able to fund an innovative exercise in marine planning, as explained next.

(e) Zone the Use of our Designated Waters

Most countries have a land use planning system but the use of the sea is too often left to chance. Because of the geography of our archipelago, Seychelles has a very extensive area of territorial waters and EEZ, and this is now the subject of a plan designed to achieve a balance between conservation and development. Following extensive consultation with stakeholders, a marine development plan is being prepared to distinguish between areas where fishing and other activities can be maintained and extensive reserves that will be left as they are. The main goal is for 30% of the territorial sea and EEZ to be zoned in high and medium biodiversity protection areas. The 'no go' areas will not only provide a natural breeding ground for fish where stocks have been depleted but will also be a sanctuary for biodiversity.

(f) Issue Blue Bonds as a Further Source of Finance

A final example of how we need not wait for a world-wide initiative is through our plan to issue Blue Bonds, a device that is based on the well-tried international example of Green Bonds. Guaranteed by Government and supported by international financial institutions, this offers a means of attracting private sector funding through public-private partnerships. The first issue of our ten-year sovereign bonds will be used to fund improvements in the management of fisheries across the Mahé Plateau, an area that is close to the main island and most of the nation's population. It offers the prospect of a classic 'win-win' outcome, repaying investors while at the same time increasing fishing yields.

*Fellow Islanders, Ladies and Gentlemen*

I have given just a few examples of what nations like ours can do. Of course, there are other things that can be done and individual island states will come forward with new ideas of their own. The point is that we cannot afford to wait for the big powers to determine our priorities. We must continue to engage in international forums, and look for help where this is available, as these are global issues that affect us all – large and small states alike. We must consider ourselves not as small island states but as large ocean states when we consider the extent of our Exclusive Economic Zones. But we must also be prepared to act now, to chart our own course as island nations. The main thing, I believe, is that we should move ahead together, sharing knowledge and offering mutual support.

It remains for me to thank the organisers for bringing together participants not only from across the Pacific but even from different oceans. It is events like this which remind us of how far our problems are interlinked and how much we have in common in our quest for

solutions. At the heart of it all, we share the understanding that the waters from one ocean flow into another. We inhabit a blue planet. There is really only one ocean, only one agenda. We are the children of the ocean. The sea is our future. Let us do all we can to realize, in a responsible way, its true potential.