

Statement to the Melanesian Spearhead Group Leaders Plenary, 27th

June 2015 – Heritage Park Hotel,

Honiara, Solomon Islands

Chairman Prime Minister of Solomon Islands Hon. Manasseh Sogavare. Outgoing MSG Chair Monsieur Victor Tutugoro, Spokesperson of the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), Hon. Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji; Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea (PNG) Hon. Peter O' Neill; Mr Johnson Naviti, Director General Office of the Prime Minister, Representing the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu. Hon Sato Kilman – Foreign Ministers, Associate members, observers, development partners, Director General Peter Forau, Senior officials, distinguished excellencies, olWantok blo mi, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the Executive Director, Chairman & Board of Directors of the Pacific Institute of Public Policy in Port Vila, Vanuatu...

It is with great pride that I take this opportunity to express the views of many people in our dynamic Melanesian sub-region with whom we have close personal relations, professional links and solid ethnic ties. The Pacific Institute of Public Policy is an independent policy research

think tank. We pride ourselves on providing a powerful platform and window for public expression and opinion by unpacking core public policy issues relevant to our security, development and livelihoods as Pacific Islanders. As regular and key interlocutors with a diverse range of decision-makers in our sub-region we acknowledge the Melanesian Spearhead Group as a core and strategic asset to our development agendas and the benefits to our people.

I speak as an individual when I say that the economic dynamism of our member states and single territory is changing our political landscape also. You our Melanesian Spearhead Group leaders have achieved consensus where speculation and innuendo could have undermined the historic, mature and inclusive path you have chosen on a range of matters from MSG connectivity to finance and economic issues. Private sector development, law enforcement, sports, social policy, environment, disaster relief, youth, gender and ongoing trade negotiations amongst our member states continues to reveal the uniqueness of our underpinning ethnic ties and cultural values that embolden our political, economic and collective sense of ourselves. Regionally a shift is occurring with ambitious plans to transform the regional architecture to facilitate regional integration and cooperation,

much of that will be influenced heavily by the conditions and decisions that emerge from this sub-regional bloc.

The freedoms within that paradigm available to me as a Papua New Guinean, has meant that I can live as a Melanesian in a neighbouring country with certain privileges and rights assisted by improvements in technology and effective transportation routes, customary privilege and language links. Each of these traits and criteria has without a doubt influenced the way we have and will negotiate aid, governance and trade with our development partners. These same features will inform and guide the management of our vast natural and human resources and promote further political and economic links influenced and strengthened by the certainty of our Melanesian ties. Most recently Air Niugini' s direct flights between Vanuatu and PNG has made MSG Connectivity a reality. Those opportunities also provide the timeliness and space for us to contribute meaningfully to international development agendas and strategies with a regional understanding and a clear localized impression of our institutional arrangements, traditional structures and peculiar customary nuance so relevant to how we are measured and discussed globally.

As a Melanesian designing strategies for a regional think tank I have critically examined our individual economic growth and our collective dynamism as a bloc with few opponents and vast human and natural resources. We are regularly criticized, under-estimated and somewhat over-analyzed as Melanesians. Cyclone Pam a recent natural disaster of epic proportions claimed lives and destroyed livelihoods but in true Melanesian spirit, it did not deprive our cousins the ni-Vanuatu of their strong familial and kinship ties that helped the relief effort in ways unimaginable in other parts of the world given capacity and resource constraints. In our sub-region and in my country in particular the transitioning autonomous region of Bougainville has just proudly celebrated the outcome of a successful election that re-installed one of Papua New Guinea's founding fathers Chief Dr John Momis, as the President-elect of the Autonomous Bougainville Government. Yes peaceful transitions are possible and in fact achievable encased in a solid peace agreement and guided by unwavering political and customary leadership, as we've witnessed there – even after a solid decade of conflict amongst our own people. In our sub-region alone extraordinary examples of journeys to self-determination and self-reliance are evident.

My father the Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare may not have foreseen the full economic potential of the diverse country he was leading to political independence 40 years ago in 1975 but he understood the essential nature of human rights and political freedom to genuine democracy and self-determination, on our own terms in our own time. Today with political independence Papua New Guinea continues to rise above its challenges bound by our reconciliatory ways that are undervalued and over-simplified by outsiders – we have not been alone in this predicament. As a sub-regional bloc whose relevance has been questioned in various forms, you as Melanesian leaders have allowed more of our ethnically linked people to share in the value of rights and privileges only available when our history and current political context are truly considered.

Importantly, the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia in the form of its approved Associate Membership to the MSG will allow the opportunity for cooperation and compatibility amongst their culturally diverse society and leadership. Finally, Congratulations on your historic and inclusive deliberations yesterday. You have handed the greatest tool for many sustainable options to our Melanesian cousins in West Papua – you have given them a voice. Thank you

