

# 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum on Business and Human Rights

1-2 December 2020, Suva, Fiji

## Concept Note

### Background

The [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) (UNGPs) provide the authoritative global framework for the respective duties and responsibilities of governments and business enterprises to prevent and address business-related human rights abuses. They also offer a blueprint for how business respect for human rights can [support](#) the implementation of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) in line with international human rights standards.

Pacific countries face both common and unique challenges – e.g., low level of awareness about business and human rights (BHR) standards, governance gaps including related to corruption, gender-based violence, irresponsible exploitation of natural resources, exploitation of migrant workers, disproportionate impact of climate change, unsustainable tourism, and barriers to access to remedy – in implementing the UNGPs and harnessing the power of businesses to contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

With a view to understand these challenges and identify opportunities to promote responsible and sustainable business conduct in the Pacific, on 27 November 2019, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Regional Office for the Pacific and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights (UNWG) organised the first ever session focusing on BHR issues in the Pacific region at the [2019 UN Forum on Business and Human Rights](#). The session entitled [‘Advancing the business and human rights agenda in the Pacific’](#) brought together representatives of various stakeholders such as States, UN agencies, businesses, and civil society organisations (CSOs) to discuss the challenges and opportunities in promoting business respect for human rights in the Pacific region in line with the UNGPs, build linkages between the SDGs and the UNGPs, and encourage Pacific governments to develop [National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights](#).

In recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased unemployment rates, pushed people in poverty, disrupted supply chains, affected normal business operations, enhanced risks of gender-based violence, and dried up tourism in the Pacific region. These unprecedented challenges have affected the ability of States and businesses to comply with their respective obligations and responsibilities under the UNGPs. Moreover, how should the governments, UN agencies, businesses and CSOs in the Pacific work together to ensure that the 2030 Agenda is not derailed by the pandemic? Effective implementation of the UNGPs should be seen critical to turn the current crisis into an opportunity to “build back better”, as the UNGPs provide a roadmap for both States and businesses to achieve a more just, inclusive, and sustainable economy.

## **Business and human rights in the Pacific**

The Pacific region has made some progress in raising awareness about the UNGPs and promoting business respect for human rights. The OHCHR Regional Office for the Pacific and the UNWG, in collaboration with other partners, have organised several workshops in Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) during 2018-19 to raise awareness about BHR issues and standards and to build capacity of various stakeholders to implement the UNGPs. The OHCHR Regional Office for the Pacific has also worked with, and provided training to, the Pacific Business Resilience Network (PBRN), the Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council (FBDR) and Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation (FCEF) around the UNGPs. The Government of Fiji has adopted the 'Green Growth Framework' and recently ratified the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention 2019 (No. 190). The Markets for Change (M4C) project of UN Women and the UNDP aims at ensuring that marketplaces in rural and urban areas in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are safe, inclusive and non-discriminatory environments, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The Pacific Island Forum is also developing the '2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent'. Moreover, Australia enacted the Modern Slavery Act, which requires large Australia companies to report on the risks of slavery in their operations and supply chains as well as the steps taken (e.g., human rights due diligence and remediation processes) to respond to the identified risks.

However, despite all these initiatives, the Pacific region continues to experience significant challenges in addressing adverse human rights impacts of business activities, especially those related to extractives (including deep sea mining), fishing, and infrastructure projects. Individuals and communities across the Pacific have experienced loss of livelihood, forced displacement, environmental pollution, labour rights abuses, intimidation of human rights defenders, the loss of traditional knowledge and biodiversity, increased risks of community conflicts, and gender-based violence. Moreover, the Pacific region is disproportionately affected by the climate crisis which directly and indirectly threatens the effective enjoyment of a range of human rights, including the rights to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, education, self-determination, culture and development. Individuals and communities continue to face significant barriers in seeking effective remedies and holding the involved businesses accountable for human rights abuses.

Given the multitude of BHR challenges as well as different levels of progress in implementing the UNGPs in different world regions, it is critical for all relevant stakeholders to work together in a regional setting to prevent, mitigate and remediate the adverse impact of business activities on human rights. Doing so will contribute to achieving inclusive and sustainable development in the Pacific.

It is in this context that the OHCHR Regional Office for the Pacific and the UNWG are organising the 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum on Business and Human Rights to highlight key BHR issues as well as identify opportunities for effective implementation of the UNGPs in the region. This regional forum will build on past BHR workshops in Fiji and PNG as well as the session at 2019 UN Forum on BHR issues in the Pacific. It aims to foster races to the top in the Pacific region, similar to the UNWG's strategy in other world regions.

## **Objectives**

The 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum seeks:

- to raise awareness and build capacity of various stakeholders around BHR standards, especially the UNGPs;

- to take stock of the key challenges, opportunities and progress made in the Pacific in implementing the UNGPs, including through the development of national action plans;
- to explore linkages in the implementation of the UNGPs and the 2030 Agenda in times of COVID-19;
- to encourage peer-learning amongst States, national human rights institutions (NHRIs), businesses, industry associations, international organisations, trade unions, CSOs and academics in the Pacific facilitating the regional exchange of good practices in implementing the UNGPs and the SDGs; and
- to explore ways to strengthen access to effective remedy for business-related human rights abuses.

The Pacific Forum will also provide an opportunity to various stakeholders in the Pacific region to feed into the [Working Group's project that is taking stock of the implementation of the first ten years of the UNGPs and developing a roadmap for global implementation in the next decade](#). Discussions during the Forum will help in a better understanding of BHR challenges, good practices, and opportunities for implementation of the UNGPs in the Pacific.

## Programme

The organisers will develop the programme of the 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum in consultation with the relevant stakeholders. We envisage issues such as the following to feature in the programme:

- General introduction to the UNGPs
- Pathways to implement the UNGPs through national action plans or other measures in the Pacific
- Achieving policy coherence between realising human rights and promoting trade and investment
- Linkages between the UNGPs, the right to development and the 2030 Agenda
- Building back better in times of COVID-19
- Human rights due diligence, including environmental/social impact assessment
- BHR challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises, including those working with overseas companies operating in the Pacific region
- Gender dimensions of BHR (including sexual harassment and gender-based violence)
- Occupational safety and health at the workplace
- Protecting the rights of migrant workers in, or from, the Pacific
- Modern slavery and other labour rights abuses in supply chains
- Protecting the rights of indigenous peoples
- Environmental pollution and biodiversity
- Climate change and green finance
- Managing sector-specific human rights impacts (e.g., extractive, forestry, fishing, manufacturing, agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure)
- The role of CSOs, human rights defenders, trade unions and NHRIs in promoting business respect for human rights
- Access to remedy and corporate accountability

## Forum format

In view of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, the organisers at this stage envisage that the 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum will be organised on 1-2 December 2020 in a hybrid form (participants from Fiji and/or Pacific countries joining in person as per the social distancing rules, while participants from other countries joining virtually). Alternatively, the Forum may be organised completely in a virtual form in during times convenient for the Pacific. Apart from plenary sessions and sessions on various thematic

issues, safe space will be provided to CSOs and businesses to have separate conversations under the [Chatham House Rule](#). In addition, the organisers aim to provide some space to external partners to organise side events, workshops, consultations or meetings during or around the Forum. A draft programme of the Pacific Forum will be available in October 2020.

### **Practical information**

The 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum is organised jointly by the OHCHR Regional Office for the Pacific and the UNWG. If COVID-19-related travel restrictions allow in person participation of delegates from the Pacific, a limited number of sponsorships may be available to support the participation of individuals who are unable to fund their travel or secure funding from their organisations. Sponsorships will be on the based on encouraging a gender balance and the participation of marginalized or under-represented voices.

If you require any additional information about the 1<sup>st</sup> UN Pacific Forum, please contact the relevant member of the OHCHR Regional Office for the Pacific.

### **Forum secretariat**

Queries related to programme, sessions, speakers, participation, side events etc.

Mr Robert Vaughan, Human Rights Officer, OHCHR: [robert.vaughan@one.un.org](mailto:robert.vaughan@one.un.org)

Or

Ms Hee Eun Ahn, Climate Change and Environment Associate, OHCHR: [heeeun.ahn@one.un.org](mailto:heeeun.ahn@one.un.org)

Assistance with logistics, invitation letters, travel information etc.

Ms Samita Singh, Administrative Associate, OHCHR: [samita.singh@one.un.org](mailto:samita.singh@one.un.org)