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A better world is something we build.”**

**~ His Excellency David Panuelo
President of the Federated States of Micronesia**

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THE MICRONESIA CHALLENGE SUCCESS STORY

In 2006, five Pacific island leaders of Micronesia committed to the Micronesia Challenge, agreeing to conserve at least 30% of the near-shore marine resources and 20% of the terrestrial resources across Micronesia by 2020. These ambitious long-term goals set by the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, and the two US-affiliated islands - the Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands have been reached this year, and have set an example to the rest of the world.

“We must all congratulate Micronesia for their leadership in sustainability – their vision of nearly 15 years ago, is now coming to fruition. This commitment from Micronesia and the hard work of our five islands had led to immense benefits for their people, and our environment as a whole,” said Mr Kosi Lau, Director-General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).

“A better world is not something we ask for. A better world is something we build. We define a better world through consensus, with a foundation of empathy and love for other human beings. We construct a better world by acknowledging that we are who we choose to be, and then

choosing to take responsibility for both ourselves and our communities,” said His Excellency David Panuelo, President of the Federated States of Micronesia.

Micronesia is a collection of small islands with a population of 650,000 people, 480 coral species and over 1,300 reef fish species. In the last 14 years the Micronesia Challenge has leveraged USD\$82 million, more than 70 areas have been placed under conservation and 20 new fisheries management policies have been enacted based on marine data. More than 3,000 people have been trained in management, planning, marine and socioeconomic monitoring, climate change adaptation, communications and behaviour change, in addition 96 college certificates, degrees and internships for youth and staff have been acquired through the support of the Micronesia Challenge.

Projects include the ground breaking Yela Forest conservation easement, which pays landowners to leave their holdings undisturbed, so protecting the world’s largest remaining stand of the giant ka trees. In 2020 the Palau National Marine Sanctuary was implemented, which covers 80% of Palau’s waters, making it the sixth-largest protected ocean area in the world. Local fishermen are fishing in the remaining 20% of the area. Thirty-eight per cent of Palauans catch their own seafood, which is their primary source of protein, and others are reliant on fishing for their income.

Having accomplished their 2020 goals the Micronesians are now setting targets for the next ten years, as these Pacific islands are still facing threats from unsustainable development, pollution, overharvesting and climate change. The goals of the Micronesia Challenge 2030 increase the conservation of marine resources from 30% to 50% and terrestrial resources from 20% to 30%. The vision for 2030 is that Micronesian communities are resilient and thriving, benefitting equitably from health, well-managed ecosystems with better access to food and water. The details will be announced at the Our Ocean Conference hosted by Palau in December 2020.

Sources: A Pacific Success Story – the Micronesia Challenge Reaches 2020 Milestone Year by Leannem, SPREP, 29 September 2020/ Micronesia Challenge: 30, 20, One Micronesia, The Nature Conservancy, 4 September 2020/ www.micronesiachallenge.org

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COVID-19 AND PACIFIC ISLAND SEASONAL WORKERS

Every year Pacific Islanders travel to Australia and New Zealand to help with fruit picking and other work in regional areas. According to the World Bank, after several months work these workers typically send back to their families about AUS\$8,000, which can be the equivalent of up to three years’ wages that they would earn at home. In Samoa, these remittances make up around 18% of gross domestic product (GDP), which is the equivalent of the manufacturing, agriculture and mining industries combined for Australia. In Tonga, remittances are 40% of GDP, and in per capita terms, and it has been estimated that their net earnings exceed the combination of Australian aid to Tonga and Tonga’s exports to Australia.

New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Australia’s Season Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme provide labour for seasonal employers in Australia and New Zealand and mean that money is going to the most aid-dependent region in the world. However, with COVID-19 causing the closing of borders and virtually no flights, the schemes’ operations have changed dramatically.

Usually, seasonal workers would have returned home over the winter months, but the Australian government extended their visas. Vanuatuans working on a sweet potato farm near Bundaberg are grateful they are able to send money home, but are missing their families, and it may be March 2021 before they see them again.

Farm owner, Russell McCrystal, has employed seasonal workers from Vanuatu on his sweet potato farm since 2015. He has visited Vanuatu to see how the workers’ families have benefited from the

seasonal work in Bundaberg, so fully appreciates the benefits the employment provides for Pacific Islanders.

At the end of September 162 more seasonal workers arrived from Vanuatu, and after two weeks in hotel quarantine, started work picking mangoes in the Northern Territory. And a second plane with 160 more workers flew to Darwin from Port Vila in mid-October. Lucy Felix, a single mother from Port Vila, is one of the people who will be working in Australia for at least nine months to fill labour shortages on Australian farms. She can earn up to \$25 an hour working in Australia, whereas the minimum wage in Vanuatu is \$2.70. Vanuatu has no confirmed cases of coronavirus and the risk of contracting coronavirus in Australia is low for these workers, as the Northern Territory has no active cases.

Under New Zealand's RSE scheme 14,400 Pacific Islanders are allowed to work in New Zealand. There are already about 7,000 RSE workers in the country after Immigration New Zealand extended their visas, when they were unable to return home due to COVID-19 border closures and lack of flights.

The seasonal labour schemes not only provide labour when and where required in Australia and New Zealand, but provide the people of the Pacific Island countries with an effective means to enhance their livelihoods. In contrast to backpackers, who worked for three months in rural areas of Australia to gain an extra year on their Working Holiday visa, the Pacific Islanders return each harvest season, understand the requirements of the work, and because they are supporting families at home are generally regarded as more committed and productive.

Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme is open to people from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu and they have become an indispensable workforce for Australia's agricultural industry. The program is seen as Australia's greatest form of foreign aid, which simultaneously fills a domestic workforce shortage.

But with the current uncertainties, such as not knowing when they can return home, moving from farm to farm, these workers are at risk of exploitation, including being underpaid and unacceptable living conditions. On 6 October 2020 the Australian Government announced a package investing \$9 million to ensure the Seasonal Worker Programme continues to protect the welfare of the Pacific and Timorese workers. Pacific Labour Mobility Officers will undertake additional welfare, monitoring, compliance and accommodation checks.

Sources: Covid-19 and Pacific Labour by Murray Ackman and Tautalasso Taulealo, 15 April 2020, The Interpreter, The Lowy Institute/ Australia needs the workers, the Pacific needs the job by Grant Wyeth, 27 August 2020, The Interpreter, The Lowy Institute/ Meet the stranded Pacific Island workers who are keeping Australians fed by Brad Marsellos, 13 August 2020 ABC Wide Bay/ Call for NZ to turn to Pacific for more seasonal workers, 17 September 2020, RNZ Pacific/ After two weeks in hotel quarantine 162 seasonal workers from Vanuatu begin their work at Northern Territory mango farms by Prianka Srinivasan, 27 September 2020, ABC's Pacific Beat / The Fruit Pickers: Inside Australia's Seasonal Worker Program by Helen Davidson and Carly Earl, The Guardian, 18 October 2020.

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THE DEADLY LEGACY OF BOUGAINVILLE'S PANGUNA MINE

In the 1970s and 80s Panguna Mine was one of the largest copper and gold mines in the world, and was run by Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL), a subsidiary of the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto.

Between 1972 and 1989 over a billion tonnes of mine waste was discharged into local river systems, devastating the environment and affecting the health and livelihoods of local

communities, says the report, *After the Mine: Living with Rio Tinto's deadly legacy*, released by the Australian Human Rights Law Centre in April 2020.

Anger at this environmental destruction and the unequal distribution of the mine's huge profits, led to its closure and the decade long civil war, and deaths of up to 20,000 people. Bougainville's recently elected president, Ishmael Toroama, was a commander in the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), and at the forefront of BRA's war against the PNG government, until he was wounded by grenade in 1997. He later helped bring about the Bougainville Peace Agreement that was signed in 2001.

In 2016, Rio Tinto divested its interest in the mine, transferring its BCL share to the Papua New Guinea and Bougainville governments.

But at the end of September this year more than 150 Bougainville residents petitioned the Australian government to investigate Rio Tinto, claiming its failure to clean up millions of tonnes of waste from the Panguna Mine has caused severe environmental damage and human rights violations.

The *After the Mine* report says the Panguna Mine is like an open wound in the centre of the island. Polluted water from it flows into local rivers, and almost 40 kilometres of grey tailing waste and rock extend down the Jaba-Kawerong river valley. The contamination of the Jaba and Kawerong rivers has limited local people's access to clean water, and washing in and wading across the polluted rivers is causing health problems such as sores and skin diseases, diarrhoea, respiratory problems and pregnancy complications. The tailings waste in the Jaba river valley is causing ongoing erosion, which has led to flooding downstream, the displacement of villages and destruction of forest and agricultural land.

"We live with the impacts of Panguna every day. Our rivers are poisoned with copper, our homes get filled with dust from the tailings mounds, our kids get sick from the pollution. Some communities now have to spend two hours a day walking just to get clean drinking water because their nearby creeks are clogged up with mine waste.

"We urgently need Rio Tinto to do what's right and deal with the disaster they have left behind," says Theonila Roka Matbob, a traditional landowner from Makosi village who has just been elected to the Bougainville parliament.

The complaint, signed by 156 Bougainville residents has been lodged with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Australian Contact Point in the Australian Treasury Department, which has the power to investigate complaints made against Australian companies operating overseas. Rio Tinto has acknowledged the filing of the complaint and a spokesperson from the company said it was "ready to enter into discussions" with the people of Bougainville.

Sources: After the Mine: Living with Rio Tinto's deadly legacy, Human Rights Law Centre, 2020 / 'Our rivers are poisoned': Residents raise Rio Tinto human rights claims by Nick Toscano, The Sydney Morning Herald, September 29, 2020 / The deadly legacy of Bougainville's Panguna mine after Rio Tinto left by Tahlea Aualiitia, Pacific Beat, ABC / Bougainville independence high on agenda as Ishmael Toroama elected president by Leanne Jorari and Ben Doherty, 23 September 2020, The Guardian

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Network Coordinators: Alison Healey (grailsydney@ozemail.com.au) and Mary Boyd (maryboyd@live.ca)

Editor: Rosamund Burton (grailsec@ozemail.com.au)

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