

Opening Statement, ISA Assembly, 30 July 2024

Thank you Mr. President.

Your Excellencies, Ministers, Secretary General, Members of the Assembly, observers, ladies and gentlemen, thank you once again for granting me the floor. I deliver this statement on behalf of my country, The Republic of Vanuatu, and would like to extend our gratitude to the Secretary General for the work done on the Annual Report.

I want to take this opportunity to emphasise the interconnectedness of what we decide here and the obligations our states have under the various global treaties.

We are unequivocally bound by our obligations under international agreements and commitments such as the SDG14, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework of the CBD, the BBNJ Treaty, the Paris Agreement of the UNFCCC, and the Convention on Migratory Species.

Deep Sea Mining would directly contradict these commitments we have made in each of these conventions, and also the future of humanity and the planet.

The recent ITLOS Advisory Opinion obtained by Vanuatu and other small island development states underscores that States have specific obligations to prevent, reduce, and control pollution and other harmful effects on the marine environment. The Tribunal makes it clear that states must collaborate to implement all relevant international agreements to protect the marine environment, including from greenhouse gas impacts.

Therefore, Vanuatu calls for meaningful and enhanced cooperation and collaboration across international agreements and between member states and all other stakeholders to ensure the effective protection and safeguard of our common heritage of humankind. The ocean is not only the world's largest carbon sink, but in the context of the triple planetary crisis that humanity currently faces – of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss – the ocean is far too precious to be jeopardized with new industrial activities that could potentially lead to serious and irreversible harm.

At the 51st Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting in 2022, Our Pacific Leaders articulated their vision for the Pacific in the “2050 Blue Pacific Strategy” - a vision for a resilient Pacific Region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, which ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives.

Under this Strategy, one of our key priorities is the integration of scientific and traditional knowledge and values to inform policy. A recent study published in the prestigious journal Nature Geoscience, which uncovered the presence of “dark oxygen” in the deep sea, underscores the critical need for more time to study the deep sea. This scientific revelation underscores the need for a moratorium or precautionary pause on deep-sea mining as the only responsible course of action.

We acknowledge that we currently do not have sufficient scientific information to better understand the complex web of life and biological diversity of the deep sea. We also recognise the significant advancements and innovations in alternative technologies, which are gaining momentum in supply chains, and are progressively reducing our need to mine deep sea minerals.

Vanuatu calls for increased investment in the independent scientific research needed to fill the current gaps in our scientific understanding of the deep sea, and also for increased investment in innovation towards better alternatives to deep sea minerals to support the green transition, and paving the way for a sustainable and circular blue economy.

Mr. President, another critical element to my delegation is our Indigenous people in the Pacific - they possess both a tangible and an intangible cultural connection to the Pacific Ocean. This is why when we discuss underwater cultural heritage, we need to think beyond the tangible. This intangible heritage contributes to social cohesion, a Pacific identity, and a deep responsibility which connects us to our communities and region. We are very pleased to note that the Council's Intersessional Working Group on Intangible Underwater Cultural Heritage will continue its work.

Mr. President and members of the Assembly, I am proud that my father signed the UNCLOS for Vanuatu in Montego Bay in 1982, two years after our Independence, and I am duty bound to fulfill his vision and that of my people to protect our ocean and its resources.

I want to take the last seconds of my intervention to speak as a Ni-Vanuatu man, a Pacific Islander, and a beneficiary of intergenerational knowledge from my father. I want to speak to the other small island developing states representatives in this room.

I know sometimes we are at a crossroads when we think of the financial future of our countries and the future survival of our heritage, but we have to remember that before any financial exploitation, our connection to our oceans is one that is deeply spiritual.

We are deeply interconnected to our Oceans. When you make your deliberations in the coming days, please think beyond your national boundaries and think as custodians of our Ocean and the real threat mining the seabed poses for the Pacific region. Financial exploitation of our Ocean may be beneficial for the next decade for our nations, but it could be devastating for the future generations who have to carry forward our Pacific legacy of being climate and ocean stewards. We need to do right by them.

The world is turning its attention to our Blue Pacific Continent, and the potential ramifications could be felt for generations, with some impacts being irreversible.

I thank you.