

Statement

Thankyou Madam Co-Chair and Bula Vinaka. As this is the first time I am speaking, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of Fiji, to thank and acknowledge our Co-Chairs and the Secretariat, for all their hard work, and for guiding us over the next few days.

Fiji comprises a group of 333 islands in the South Pacific and we are surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, which is greatly affected by the millions of tonnes of plastic that is dumped into it, or drifts into it, on a daily basis.

Pacific Ocean pollution poses a very real threat to our Pacific Islander's survival, and protecting our marine ecosystems is of crucial importance, because we are extremely dependent on marine resources for food (both for subsistence and for export), and other economically relevant activities, such as Tourism.

We feel that the first barrier to combatting marine litter and microplastics is the lack of political willingness by Nations to move away from the status quo; merely revising and strengthening existing framework and adding components.

We must start negotiating a new International, legally binding instrument, concerning plastic pollution in the Oceans.

The issue of marine litter is not a new concept, and has been around since plastic production and consumption started in the 1950s. Some in-depth research was conducted on the issue in the 1970s, but only became prominent when the five massive gyres in the oceans that consist of plastic debris, and microplastics, were discovered in the 1990s. Over the years, various UNEA have attempted to include the discussions on marine litter and microplastics, under some existing instruments.

Discussions on marine plastic debris took place during the UNEA 1 in 2014.¹ At UNEA 2, Resolution 2/11 was adopted which called for a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of relevant International, Regional and Sub-regional Governance strategies and approaches, to combat marine plastic debris, and microplastics. The UNEA 3 in 2017 discussed marine litter and microplastics under the general theme "Towards a pollution free planet."

¹ Ibid

Pollution in all forms whether air, land, waterways, oceans, management of chemicals, and waste, were canvassed together and discussed. Marine litter and microplastics are now included as target 14.1 in Sustainable Development Goal 14. In all three UNEA, there was no resolution passed to create a new 'International legally binding instrument', concerning microplastics.

We feel that it is high time that our leaders of the world recognize, that the issue of marine litter and microplastic, cannot be effectively tackled under the existing instruments, (that also regulate plastic), and that we must start negotiating a new 'International legally binding instrument', with a multi-layered Government approach.

The second barrier to combatting marine litter and microplastics is the voluntary nature of compliance under existing instruments. Ideally there should be a Universal compulsory restriction on the use of single use plastic bags.

At the moment the application of this principle worldwide is inconsistent, with some nations imposing bagging fees, like Fiji²; some nations merely reducing the consumption of plastic bags³; some nations completely banning the use of plastic bags altogether⁴; and some nations like Australia, who, as a whole, don't have a ban on plastic bags, but individual bans are applied within several States and Territories⁵

The most feasible and effective response that should be universally adopted by all nations, is the one that aims at sustainable growth of marine ecosystems, at the same time considering the effects of human activities, on these systems. We need Co-ordination, Co-operation, and Synergy on a grand scale.

An effective integrative approach could ensure that the associated environmental, social and economic costs are either shared equally amongst the polluting nations or for higher polluting nations to take more of the responsibility, and to pay as per the percentage of their contributions.

² Fiji, Denmark, Ireland

³ Brazil, Argentine, Chile, Colombia.

⁴ Rwanda, Somalia, Kenya and China.

⁵ Northern Territory, Tasmania and South Australia.

It is important to raise awareness among people about the importance of this issue and remind them that what is thrown into the sea, does not simply disappear. And it is important that we ensure Private Sector participation. It is welcoming to note that there may be potential, national, regional, and International response options, to the management of marine litter and microplastics. The different approaches should also factor into its strategy the associated environmental, social and economic costs.

Like our Executive Director said this morning – we must seriously look at **AVOIDING, REPLACING and RECYCLING**. We must also take the Lead and Make Bold Decisions, and we must do that **NOW**.

Vinaka vaka levu.