Opening Address at the Regional ECCE workshop, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 26 – 30 March 2007

Hon. Derek Sikua, Solomon Islands Minister for Education (MEHRD)

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the presence of our Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Hon. Toswel Kaua; fellow cabinet ministers; senior government officials; representatives of regional and UN agencies in the Pacific; members of the media; and ladies and gentlemen. Your presence here with us this morning during your busy schedules is greatly appreciated.

I am honoured to accept the invitation of the organisers of this workshop to officiate at the opening of this timely workshop. It is timely for the Solomon Islands as we are about to wrap up the research and formulation of our Early Childhood Education Policy.

At this juncture, I am also honoured to formally convey to the co-sponsors of this workshop, namely PREL, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, SPBEA, USP, UNESCO and UNICEF our most sincere gratitude for the close collaboration with my Ministry on behalf of our Grand Coalition for Change Government.
Early childhood care and education in the Pacific

On this note, I wish to welcome particularly two of our keynote speakers, Ms Maki Hayashikawa, UNESCO Regional Programme Specialist in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Primary Education and Gender, based in Bangkok; and Dr Glen Palmer, Early Childhood Care and Education consultant, who have come to share the global perspective and their experience on the issues listed on the agenda of this workshop.

I would also like to commend the co-organisers of this workshop for their support and decision to co-host this workshop here in Honiara. This is an indicator of harmonisation which is at the heart of the Pacific Plan. This not only indicated to me the confidence that they have in our Grand Coalition for Change Government, but also created that opportunity for the officials of my Ministry and their colleagues to be exposed to best practices and challenges when organising such events.

As many of you are aware, this workshop is a continuation of a similar workshop that was convened by UNICEF and USP in June 2004 in Fiji. This workshop will follow up and build on various initiatives to further develop current initiatives on early childhood care and education for our Pacific children in all our countries, largely through the efforts of other education stakeholders, including our NGOs and dedicated persons in each of our countries.

I am glad to note that many of these dedicated persons are also here to assist the facilitators and panellists of this workshop.

I admire the structure of this workshop as it starts with the global perspective and then shifts to a regional perspective to set the tone of the workshop. This is then continued with issues of ‘brainwiring’, research, culture, language and assessment, which are grounded in theory and global perspectives but will be adapted for the Pacific context.

The theme for this workshop is Supporting learning from 0-8: creating the future. It ties in very well with the Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) and in fact emphasises a very important foundation on which the Plan must be built,
something that has been most difficult to negotiate and implement. I believe that this is an issue that Pacific Ministers for Education need to revisit at our forthcoming Forum Education Ministers’ Meeting planned for Auckland, New Zealand later this year.

The next five days will be an opportune time for our facilitators, panellists, participants and observers to achieve many things: to re-confirm the importance of 0 – 8 year-olds’ learning and lived experiences; to involve government policymakers and practitioners concerned with 0 – 8 years-olds’ education in developing a vision, a policy, a curriculum and a conducive learning environment for this age group; to strengthen national and regional networking amongst 0 – 8 practitioners; and to share assessment techniques used for 0 – 8 year-olds. The facilitators and participants alike will discuss various issues and build on the work that they have started.

In this regard, I wish to remind you to maintain the links between the discussions at this workshop with the two regional programmes, namely Goal One of *Education For All (EFA)* and the Regional Benchmarking endorsed by the Forum Education Ministers in our meeting in 2006 in Fiji.

There is merit in organising such workshops, as they will create opportunities and avenues for our regional educators and carers of children aged 0 – 8 years to contribute to the body of knowledge of best practice for the Pacific, rather than relying solely on speakers from outside the region.

As a starting point for this initiative, you will notice that we have invited keynote speakers both from the Pacific Region and outside our region to guide our discussion, and share their experiences with us as we search for sound policies and best practices of early childhood care and education for our region.

That said, I wish to urge our participants to fully utilise the planned discussion sessions of this workshop, as this will indicate to many of us that you are champions of this subject in your own countries.
This could be that moment or opportunity that many of us have been waiting for to contribute towards quality education and create the means of accessing this quality education in the region and through our own education systems.

In conclusion, I once again wish to thank our co-hosts for the positive response to our proposal to co-host this regional workshop on early childhood care and education here in Honiara. I am confident that the envisaged objectives of this workshop are achievable, given the experiences and expertise of our keynote speakers, facilitators and panellists.

I am sure that our participants will greatly appreciate the envisaged outcomes of this workshop, as these will remind and better inform them of their commitments and responsibilities for the development and advancement of key strategic issues and activities for this sub-sector.

Colleague Ministers, invited guests, keynote speakers, workshop facilitators, panellists, participants, ladies and gentlemen, I wish this workshop every success in its deliberations, and I am honoured to now formally declare the Regional Workshop on Early Childhood Care and Education open.