High Level SDG Action Event
"Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Agenda"
New York, 23 March 2017
Trusteeship Council

Honorable Ministers
Your Excellency, Mr. Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations,
Your Excellency, Ms. Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to today’s High-Level Event on ‘Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Agenda’.

I would like to begin by thanking H.E. Patricia Espinosa and the UNFCCC for joining with my office in presenting this event, and for their ongoing leadership in global efforts to combat climate change.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Two days ago, I met with Professor Petteri Taalas, the Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization, who confirmed that the world is currently on track towards a 3 to 4°C increase in global temperatures.

I have always understood, and have learned nothing to the contrary during my term as President of the General Assembly, that once we reach the 3°C - 4°C range, humanity’s survival on this planet will be put in jeopardy.

Last week I was back in my home country meeting with Heads of State, Heads of Governments and Ministers from 14 Pacific countries, all seized with deep concern on the current course of climate change.

With rising sea levels, prolonged droughts and severe storm surges battering the region with increased frequency and severity, the impacts of climate change are already upon us – threatening our homes, our people, and the very existence of some of our nations.
Cyclone Winston and Cyclone Pam which devastated Fiji and Vanuatu in recent years were amongst the strongest tropical cyclones to ever make landfall in the Southern Hemisphere. In Fiji we have already begun relocating low-lying villages to higher ground, away from the encroaching shoreline and the rising threat of storm surges.

With global average temperatures rising each year, the impacts of climate change are being felt across our world. 2016 was confirmed to be the warmest year on record - breaking the record set the previous year.

With levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere breaking new records, we are already seeing an unprecedented loss of biodiversity and environmental destruction, and catastrophic climate events of increased frequency and severity.

Indeed, the drought and famine currently making its way across Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen brings into sharp relief the gravity of the situation.

Excellencies,
While the prognosis is dire, the scientific community assures us it is possible to bend the curve on current trajectories, if we work together to curb the growth of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Doing so requires that we transform the global economy, and on this front, positive signs of progress are emerging. While some are still whistling Dixie, the great momentum of mankind’s analysis and will to act is moving in the required direction of transformation.

Implementing the SDGs requires massive financial flows into development and therein lies enormous opportunity to leverage these investments into activities that drive action on both sustainable development and climate. Economic transformation of this magnitude is going to drive global growth and job creation while also delivering on the SDGs.

It is in implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change that we will find these exponential opportunities. I reiterate my call for all parties to the Paris Agreement to ratify it without delay and for those of us who have already done so, for us to stay true to our communal course and deliver on our commitments.
Excellencies,
Positive action is taking place. During the last two years, over twenty countries have experienced sustained economic growth de-coupled from greenhouse gas emissions.

Bloomberg New Energy Finance reports that in 2015, global investment in renewable energy capacity more than doubled that allocated to new coal and gas capacity; while the International Energy Agency reports that the generation capacity of renewable energy now exceeds that of coal.

At the same time, the issuance of green bonds and other innovative new ways of mobilizing private climate finance have been steadily growing. Meanwhile developed countries have been scaling-up their financial support to developing countries, as part of efforts to mobilize US$100 billion annually by 2020 in support of climate action. Multilateral Development Banks have also been increasing their pledges, and designing innovative mechanisms to mobilize resources.

While these trends are positive, taking action on the scale necessary to stave off the worst impacts of climate change requires far more to be done.

This includes recognizing the interlinked nature of our efforts to combat climate change, achieve sustainable development, provide humanitarian assistance, manage the flow of displaced people, and sustain peace, and to leverage mutually-reinforcing opportunities for action.

All this requires us to bring a climate action lens to our sustainable development work.

Such an approach recognizes that to help the more than 700 million people across the world currently living in extreme poverty, we must address the drivers of conflict, displacement and humanitarian crises, including water shortages, food insecurity, extreme weather, outbreaks of diseases, the declining health of the Ocean, and rampant inequality – all of which are exacerbated by the impacts of climate change – and all of which are addressed by the Sustainable Development Goals.

It also requires that we look beyond traditional means of implementation.
The new strategic partnerships that are being forged to drive SDG implementation, and which are bringing together actors from across Government, the United Nations system, civil society, business, and the academic and scientific communities, must be leveraged to promote climate action.

The scaled-up resource mobilization efforts which are drawing public, private, blended and alternative sources towards SDG implementation can also simultaneously pursue regulatory reforms that help economies transition to inclusive, low-carbon models.

And the innovative and disruptive technology that is already driving the transition towards cleaner, renewable energy sources must also be harnessed to drive action on SDG implementation.

In all of these efforts, the United Nations has a critical role to play, and under the leadership of Secretary-General Guterres, the organization is already reviewing its structures to ensure that it is able to respond coherently, efficiently and effectively to the emerging challenges of our time, including to support SDG implementation.

Given the closely entwined nature of climate action and the health of the Ocean, I encourage all of you to participate in The Ocean Conference to be held here in New York from 5 to 9 June, and to register bold commitments for action to help reverse the cycle of decline in which the Ocean is currently caught.

Excellencies,
The World Meteorological Organization has said that with ambitious and urgent action, it may be possible to limit global temperature rises below the most dangerous thresholds. But this will require innovative thinking, perseverance, and a steadfast will to succeed from us all.

It also requires that we are held accountable for our actions, and that we are accountable on meeting our commitments.

Excellencies,
You have heard me before quote the response of Count Bismarck when asked to explain the difference between a politician and a statesman: "A statesman is a politician who thinks of his grandchildren", he said.

Today is a day for us all to think of the welfare of our grandchildren. As things stand we are stealing from their future; our demographic trends, our perpetuation of inequality, our consumption and production patterns are driving humanity steadily down a road towards a destination of unsustainability for humanity upon this Planet. We have time to change our ways and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, taken together with the Paris Climate Agreement, shows us how.

Let us use today’s High Level Event to fortify ourselves for the transformational work ahead.

I thank you.