



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS FOR AFIOGA LAUANO VAOSA EPA
WEBINAR ACCESSING GOVERNMENT INFORMATION IN SAMOA
MONDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2021, 9.00AM – 11.30AM, SHERATON HOTEL**

Mr Jorn Sorensen, Resident Representative, United Nations Development Programme

Distinguished representatives

Ladies and gentlemen

1. It is with great pleasure that I extend to you all our warmest greetings, and to welcome you all to this whole-of-government webinar on accessing government information in Samoa.
2. I would like to extend a special note of gratitude to Mr. Jorn Sorensen and the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Project on Anti-Corruption, and the UNESCO, for partnering with the Government of Samoa to support our efforts in developing our right to information policy and legislative framework.
3. I also acknowledge with appreciation the kind assistance of our regional partners to this initiative, namely the New Zealand Ombudsman, the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, and the Vanuatu Right to Information Unit.
4. The Government of Samoa has made a commitment to provide access to information held by the Government, unless on balance it is contrary to the public interest to provide that information. This is clearly identified in the Public Administration Sector Plan 2020/2021 – 2024/2025. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, together with the Office of the Public Service Commission and the Office of the

Ombudsman, have started parallel but complimentary works to develop Samoa's RTI framework. It is one of many initiatives we have in the Sector Plan to strengthen our anti-corruption landscape, as well as citizen participation and engagement with government.

5. When developing the new Public Administration Sector Plan, the Government recognized the need for a citizen-centered approach to addressing a wide-range of issues affecting service delivery, including corruption in all its forms. This is reflected in the long-term outcome of the Plan, where we've committed to achieve a 'trusted, citizen-focused, public administration'. And today's webinar is a step towards realizing that. We acknowledge that citizen expectations of government continue to grow, and we ought to ensure that our frameworks and our policies evolve accordingly to meet this change in pace.
6. The aim is to make more information available than what is currently accessible by the public, provide equal access to information across all sectors of the community, and provide appropriate protection for individuals' privacy. In hindsight, providing a platform for accessing official information ensures that we play our part in promoting the rule of law, particularly as the Constitution of Samoa guarantees the right to freedom of expression. While this may be the case, we acknowledge that there is work to be done to review and strengthen the current legislative and policy framework in its entirety, to ensure it is aligned in a way that will facilitate public access to information.
7. Government authorities at the moment operate on the principle of maximum disclosure. That is, most, if not all, reports, policies and laws have been made available on agency websites and online portals, and the public may request or obtain copies of the same from the responsible agency. I understand that there is still work to be done to ensure the timeliness of our responses to some requests, but this is work in progress and we do intend to do better.
8. For your session today and others to follow, I encourage you to think about how we can make this framework work for Samoa. We would like to see a framework

that is practical and works to our advantage as a nation. We must ought to think about issues such as balancing the public right to know and the absolute need for secrecy to protect certain key public and private interests. Additionally, we must consider what this would mean for government agencies and yourselves as public servants handling information on a day-to-day basis. How extensive should the obligation to publish and disseminate information be and how can this policy and legislative framework ensure it evolves in line with modern day technology? Have we considered measures to reduce publication costs? How about appeals processes for members of the public that have had their requests for information refused?

9. As Chair of the Public Service Commission but also the Public Administration Sector Steering Committee, I am committed to seeing this through to ensure that we establish and nurture a culture of openness, voluntary disclosure, and transparency. It is only through gaining the public trust and confidence in our institutions that the public service will be able to operate effectively and make a difference in our community.
10. To conclude, I would like to share with you the 'Spirit of Service'. A spirit of service is one that puts the needs of the country before yours. Its ensuring that you're not in the public service for personal gain or benefit, but because you are here for the greater good of our people. When talking about public access to information, we must be reminded that we are only custodians of information that belongs to our people.
11. In closing, I thank again the United Nations Development Programme for this initiative and I look forward to the outcome of this session.