

TONGA PARLIAMENT TAKES TANGIBLE STEPS IN FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

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(UNDP/Nuku'alofa Times):

Members of the Parliament of Tonga took a great step forward in the fight against corruption in this Pacific Island nation by launching a local chapter of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption and later unanimously voting in Parliament to create a Standing Committee on Anti-Corruption.

Once operational, the Standing Committee is expected to press for the signing of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC). Also among anticipated committee activities is the creation and appointment of the country's first anti-corruption commission and an anti-corruption commissioner.

Facilitated by GOPAC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN Development Programme (UNDP) and supported by the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the workshop saw MPs explore the benefits of establishing a GOPAC chapter and the benefits of signing on to the UNCAC. MPs also engaged in South-South information sharing while learning about the anti-corruption experiences of the Cook Islands from local MP Nandi Glassie.

Legislative Speaker Lord Tu'ivakano commented that as lawmakers, "MPs must recognize the importance of combatting corruption. Our support towards the enactment of good governance legislation aimed at fighting corruption is a priority and as such would be instrumental in stamping out corrupt practices and upholding the rule of law that should underpin our democratic society."

The workshop was also attended by the Prime Minister of Tonga, 'Akilisi Pohiva, who told MPs that more attention needs to be paid to ensuring the public understands the impact that corruption has on the nation and supports counter measures.

Annika Wythes, UNODC's Regional Anti-Corruption Advisor – Pacific and Isikeli Valemei, UNDP's Governance Associate, led discussions on using UNCAC as a framework for tackling corruption. UNDP and UNODC, with funding from the Australian Government, are working together to combat corruption as part of the UN Pacific Regional Anti-Corruption Project.

"By helping MPs better understand the benefits of countries signing the UNCAC, we also demonstrated the support and guidance that Tonga would receive from the international community particularly other Small Island Nation States that have also signed and ratified UNCAC," said Ms. Wythes.

John Hyde, Chair of GOPAC Oceania and a GOPAC International Board Member, in partnership with Cook Islands MP and anti-corruption champion MP Glassie, introduced MPs to the benefits of GOPAC.

With the creation of a local chapter, "Tonga now joins GOPAC national chapters in Cook Islands, Kiribati, Australia and New Zealand and as regional MPs assert their key role as advocates against corruption, which robs communities of sustainable development," said Mr. Hyde.

The workshop was facilitated by the UNDP Tonga Governance Strengthening Programme (TGSP). Douglas Armour TGSP Manager commented that the workshop was "an opportunity to galvanize MPs around corruption and help members collectively understand that tackling corruption has clear and tangible benefits for the country."