

**Closing Remarks –IORA Women Economic Empowerment Conference, Seychelles
Tuesday 25 August 2015**

Honourable Ministers

H.E. Dr Erna Athanasius, Seychelles Ambassador for Women and Children

Government officials

Honoured Delegates

Distinguished Guests

I am delighted to have been here in the Seychelles once again for such an important event. There is now absolutely no doubt that Womens' Economic Empowerment is an important focus on the IORA agenda.

We have been honoured to have both Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls, HE Ms Natsha Stott Despoja and the Seychelles Ambassador for Women and Children, HE Dr Erna Athanasius as the co-Chairs for this meeting and of course to have such a high level of representation from seventeen of our IORA member countries. You have come from businesses small and large; UN Women, NGOs, self-help groups, collectives and Entrepreneurs' associations; from government, Chambers of Commerce, and academia.

You have brought your ideas, your enthusiasm, inspiration and your stories to share.

Ambassador Stott Despoja as you know, had to depart the Seychelles earlier, to continue her IORA journey to Kenya but has enjoyed her two days with you enormously, representing Foreign Minister Julie Bishop; and both have asked me to thank our gracious hosts the Seychelles once again. Minister Bishop was aware of Seychelles track record on gender parity and together with then Foreign Minister Adam suggested this meeting take place here to really showcase what we can all strive to achieve.

And that was even before the latest accolade received by the Seychelles - the award received for 'gender parity achievements' at the 25th African Union Summit. This recognises Seychelles efforts to actively promote gender equality and empower women and girls in every sector - government, health, education, the legislature the judiciary and, of course business.

This afternoon is not the end, but the beginning of a renewed collaboration between IORA member states to build women's economic empowerment. Now it is up to us – and all our partners in government, civil society and business - to maintain this momentum – of sharing, learning from one another and networking and to keep women's empowerment on the IORA gender.

We heard from Austrade's Women in Global Business Program that any business with Women in their leadership structure is more likely to be a success. We heard from Julie Haw, from Singapore, that in the non-traditional energy sector there, Women's leadership of a top company made competitors sit up and take notice- and start recruiting women.

As we have affirmed in these two days - ensuring women's empowerment is not only the right thing to do – it's the smart thing to do, for economic growth, for national prosperity, and certainly for the Indo-Pacific region.

The Mahé Consensus, which you are supporting, is a statement of commitment to the key principles of gender equality, with a clear focus on women's economic empowerment. The Mahé Consensus also provides recommendations for how IORA as an organisation can further embed women's empowerment into its program of work. As noted during the opening remarks, Australia, Seychelles and other co-champions intend to form an IORA core group on gender equality and women's economic empowerment. The Mahé Consensus will be the foundation document, and the core group will work with all IORA member states to develop a Declaration for consideration and adoption at the next Council of Ministers Meeting in Indonesia.

From a personal point of view, as Australia's High Commissioner to Seychelles and Mauritius, and Ambassador to Comoros and Madagascar, this has been an exciting interaction between these Island States - the Vanilla Islands; together with our African and Middle Eastern sisters from this side of the Indian Ocean – right around the Indian Ocean rim through India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, across to Asia and Australia

In particular I am very glad that the site visits yesterday, which I suggested early on in the very first planning meeting with Seychelles for this event, proved to be such a great way to kick off our work. I thank the Seychelles for their wonderful organisation, in particular Shirley Low-Meng, and the host businesses.

In particular our visits with Isabella Houareau to SOCOMEP and Mary Geers to Sunset Hotel highlighted the important but perhaps as yet under-appreciated role of IORA Women within the Blue Economy- in Fisheries - so vital to the Indian Ocean - and in Tourism, especially important in these island states.

Today we also heard from Professor Bohler-Mueller that South Africa is starting work on Women within the Blue Economy Core Group. I am pleased to hear she will be coming to IORA's first Blue Economy Ministerial Meeting in Mauritius next week. As this is a new growth pillar for so many of our economies, and coming also before September's UNGA adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals including No 14 on the Oceans; this has been a timely discussion. We can look at linking participants such as Isabella Houareau, Ms Mariette Correa from the Indian Fishworkers Association, Ms Helene Echevin, the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce's first Woman President, just elected, who is from the seafood sector - and others we know, into an IORA Women in the Blue Economy network. I am confident this can occur through the Core Group mentioned in Recommendation 7 of the Mahé Declaration, working within the Blue Economy Core Group.

The Australian Government has a steadfast and ongoing commitment to be at the forefront of efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Together with the Seychelles, these are the only two IORA countries with Ambassadors for Women and Girls or Children. Like Meg Jones, I suggest government representatives spread the word about this best practice. But in the meantime we can all perform that role.

We have had the launch of a number of initiatives here over the last two days, including through the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry initiative and the International Trade Centre project.

The High Commission in Mauritius has also been active on this front so I am very excited to follow up this meeting with another launch – or foreshadowing of this Thursday’s formal launch - of a Women Entrepreneurs’ Mentoring and Leadership program, here in the Seychelles, to be followed by Mauritius and Rodrigues next week, and in a second phase we hope, Comoros and Madagascar. Funded by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs, this will be led by one of Australia’s leading Women Entrepreneurs and immediate past President of Women Chiefs of Enterprises International, - Di Tompson. She has been here for this meeting and is partnering with Mauritius’ Association des Femmes Chefs D’Entreprises, including their wonderful Aline Wong, also here with us at the IORA meeting this week. This will be a long term commitment – an on-going program of support to train mentors within the Indian Ocean region, and to encourage mentees to be part of the program. See Di or Aline if you would like further information on this project.

Here in the Seychelles, the High Commission has also over the last few years, and in similar programs across the Vanilla islands, big and small, supported a large number of gender projects. training in conservation and organic gardening and the production of value added goods for groups of vulnerable women; launched a Women in Police Network with the help of Australian Federal Agent, Tina Westra and Superintendent of Seychelles Police Christel Marie; collaborated with the Seychelles Ministry of Social Affairs, and Genderlinks Mauritius, to run a workshop on Gender Based Violence; funded the Seychelles Association of Women Entrepreneurs – SAWE - to refurbish a headquarters office and training facility to conduct business training for women entrepreneurs. Our scholarships program has funded courses in sustainable fisheries, English language training to tackle new export markets, public policy Masters programs for women in mining, agriculture and human resources.

Once again it has been a pleasure spending these last two days with you all, sharing national experiences and best practices and discussing how we can continue to empower women. I hope that the networks that you have formed over these last two days will continue to grow. I look forward to hearing about future collaborations amongst women entrepreneur groups and gender/women ministries in the IORA region. After all, we share the same ocean and can therefore share much more.

I would like to thank HE Dr Erna Athansius for being such dynamic co-chair; the Seychelles Government, in particular the Seychelles Foreign Ministry and the special working committee, in particular SENPA and Penny Belmont, whose representatives came from a number of ministries, organisations and the private sector – thank you, you have done a great job! Thank you for hosting this IORA event and championing women’s empowerment, I would also like to the panelists and speakers for their excellent presentations. I am sure we have all learnt a lot from these.

A special thanks to the dynamic MC Meg Jones and her UN Women team and the IORA teams from Canberra and from Mauritius and also my team at the High Commission in Port Louis. Your dedication and hard work has greatly been appreciated.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of you for making time in your busy schedules to participate in this conference and helping to make it such a success.

Thank you and have a safe trip home!