On behalf of the people and Government of Vanuatu I take this opportunity to welcome you all to our country and especially to this Symposium. The theme “Building Local Government Alliances: for Vibrant and resilient Local Economies and Communities in the Pacific”, truly expresses the reality of the need for our small island states to establish alliances in all development efforts.

While the world was recently faced with economic downturn owing to the global financial crisis, the Pacific economies were generally faced with a rather mild economic impact. We were therefore able to pursue opportunities for better governance in our nations. It is perceived that better governance at all levels of our communities is essential for the advancement of our people and our nations.

Let me take some time to reflect on the importance of local government and the role alliances (the theme of this workshop) can play in improving the lives of our citizens.
Our major concern is to establish ways and means of ensuring that the services are delivered to all people in all locations and to people in different areas of life, in the attempt to ensure that our citizens are able to receive the quality of services they need to receive and are able to participate effectively in the social and economic development of our country.

Vanuatu has gone through vast experiences in the process and we have developed the conviction that local government are essential in identifying services and development needs and have better means through which service delivery could effectively be undertaken. One of the major factors in most situations is the lack of resources available to the local and provincial bodies. In Vanuatu, we realize that the provincial authorities may prove to be less adequate in effectively delivering the services to the people without support of area councils operating as their subsidiaries. In most cases central governments do not have the capacity to truly identify the needs of the communities across the country. This is especially the case here in Vanuatu where we have a small population spread across so many islands over a large area. This is where alliances between the Central Government and local government are very important in getting the services to the people and communities. It is therefore important for local government to have strong relationships with the central government and area councils.

Establishing partnership between local governments and communities should not be overlooked. By developing strong alliances and relationship with different communities a lot more could be achieved than would otherwise be the case if local government were to work independently.

Related to this idea of partnership with communities is the partnership between different sectors or groups within communities. There are the chiefs, for example, the youth group, the churches and women that must essentially be involved in the process of development.

The law in Vanuatu appropriately provides for the appointment of chiefs representatives on provincial councils. There are also provisions for the appointment of women, youth
and churches representatives. Although these appointees do not have voting rights, they are able to be involved in decisions that affect the sectors of the community they represent. Shefa provincial council on Efate has recently taken this involvement a step further to have a representative for the disabled on the provincial council. This interestingly demonstrates the support that a local government gives to a country’s international commitments.

Local Government also needs to develop alliances and partnerships with the private sector. This is essential for economic and welfare development of its citizens. In Vanuatu, tourism is increasingly developing to be an important industry in terms of economic development in our provinces. Partnership therefore, between local tourism operators and provincial governments is essential. There is at least one province in Vanuatu which is involved with developing a provincial tourism website. Partnership with private sector is not limited to tourism alone but extends to other private sector developments. Roadside market houses are also an important aspect of alliance between local authorities and communities. In the Sanma Province a major utility company’s social obligations under its supply contract, which it is not able to meet without the assistance of the Provincial Council.

Relationships with NGOs or non state actors can also be useful in the enhancement of the welfare and development of our communities. Developing partnerships with NGOs may at times be less easy due to general lack of willingness to align with other initiatives, though mutual objectives could be identified, agreed upon and work programs aligned after which partnership with NGOs could be achieved.

Some of the larger NGOs, are directly providing welfare assistance to communities in such areas as water supply, sanitation, health and education. One of the great challenges for local governments is to channel and direct the large amount of energy, enthusiasm and drive that exist in many NGOs to ensure that their activities are coordinated with other agencies and that some communities are not disadvantaged or overlooked.
Another very important area of partnership I wish to cover is that of partnering with donors. Here in the Pacific we are often very reliant on donor funding for many of our activities, especially infrastructure development. There are also donor funds directly accessible by communities.

I wish to encourage local governments to make sure they are aware of donor activities in the areas of their jurisdictions and to ensure that donor activities are in line with development and service planning. In that way we can ensure genuine partnership and that agreed domestic and local priorities are brought to the attention of donors.

In Vanuatu, the Prime Ministers Office is responsible for coordinating government development priorities with donors. This is no easy task as even in the smallest of families, communication can be a problem. However, I am pleased to advise that we now have in place a system that all larger development projects are first coordinated through my office and, if approved by government, can be put forward to donors for funding consideration. I believe this is an important first step towards joint coordination of development efforts by a host government and its donor partners.

At this point I would like to acknowledge the excellent work that CLGF Pacific is doing with local government here in Vanuatu coordinated through the Department of Local Authorities in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I particularly want to thank CLGF Pacific for their support in local elected leadership training and also financial management training for local government here in Vanuatu. I understand that the Director of the Department of Local Authorities will be giving a presentation on this tomorrow.

I think we also need to acknowledge that local government doesn’t always run smoothly. Pressures imposed by rapid growth, especially in urban areas means that governance, capacity and capabilities can be strained at times. We have found this repeatedly here in Vanuatu where poor infrastructure coupled with rapid population growth in our main centres can overwhelm local government to the extent that it cannot meet expectations of
its citizens. I am also aware that this is the case in many of your countries, which brings me to my last point about alliances and partnerships.

Symposiums such as this bring together a huge amount of expertise in local government matters. If we want to make the most of these meetings we need to actively form alliances and partnerships between our countries local government to local government. Information exchanges and links between different countries can add a lot of value and give valuable insights into potential solutions to common problems.

I therefore commend CLGF for enabling such a symposium and I look forward to alliances and partnerships being formed in order to achieve vibrant and resilient local economies and communities.

Thank you.