

Event Report

**Small Island Developing States:  
Leading the Battle Against Climate Change**

EIAS Briefing Seminar

*22 August 2017*

Small island developing states (SIDS) are being threatened with extinction because of rising sea-levels. While there has been a heightened focus on the risks SIDS face in recent years, more awareness is needed. Climate change is a stark reality for SIDS communities experiencing water shortages, damage to food crops from saltwater intrusion and an increase in epidemic outbreaks of diseases such as dengue linked to climate-related hazards. The Maldives, in particular, is well placed to raise awareness on climate change, as the chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a coalition of 44 member states, through agreements on sustainable development, climate change, disaster risk reduction, financing for development and sustainable urbanization.

Furthermore, this seminar examined how the European Union can be a crucial partner for the Maldives and other SIDS in their climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts through initiatives such as the Global Climate Change Alliance (GCCA+), which supports SIDS in adapting to the impacts of climate change and integrating climate change resilience in their national development plans.

### ***Opening Remarks by Mr Eddy Laurijssen, Board Member, EIAS***

Mr. Eddy Laurijssen commenced by foregrounding the present reality of climate change as an international issue that continues to confront and cause great concern for the global community. He enumerates the ubiquity of various forms of natural disasters as reported regularly by the media. He also remarked on the semantic inaccuracy of the term “natural disaster” considering industrialization has unfortunately proved to have been the greatest agent of climate change, making the phenomenon rather man-made. Moreover, the tragedy rests on the fact that the devastating consequences of climate change are suffered the most by vulnerable countries who have ironically contributed the least to global warming. The seminar, featuring representatives from Small Island Developing States (SIDS), would then serve as an opportunity to see climate change through the eyes of the most vulnerable.

In addition, the Ambassadors of Maldives, Fiji, and Mauritius would be outlining how they have integrated climate change into their national strategies to combat climate change and to build climate-resilient economies. Considering the recently expressed intention of non-cooperation by some countries in the historic 2015 Paris Agreement, the seminar would also attempt to shed light on how the EU can play a more proactive role in climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Alarming scientific reports by the UN IPCC attest to the seriousness of climate change and SIDS are among those to be hugely impacted by extreme weather conditions – physically, agriculturally, infrastructure-wise, as well as health-wise. While Mr. Laurijssen stressed on the injustice brought about by climate change impacts, he also recognized Mauritius, Fiji and Maldives for their spearheading efforts to combat climate change by being among the first 15 states to ratify the Paris Agreement. Furthermore, he acknowledged the chairmanship of Maldives in the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Fiji’s Presidency in the upcoming COP 23, and Mauritius being the first SIDS country to utilize the revolutionary 2050 Pathways Calculator which allows countries to manage and create their own energy pathways towards a low-carbon economy.

### ***H.E. Mr Ahmed Shiaan, Ambassador of the Maldives to the EU, the Kingdom of Belgium, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg***

Ambassador Shiaan first presented the traditional view of small states having little politico-economic influence in the wider world by virtue of their size, population, and resources, not to mention the entailing peculiar challenges they face. However, he added that small states have nonetheless been present in the political map alongside larger states throughout devastating wars in the last century. The creation of the United Nations enabled them, at least in principle, to gain a foothold in the international community, placing them on an equal footing with the larger states. As a whole, the qualities of small states should rather be seen as “a defining strength of our society that allows small states to see the world and their place in it.”

He then provided an account of the history and struggle of island states before they gained membership in the UN system and have since proved their importance as active players in tackling important international issues. After its British protectorate status was terminated in 1965, the Maldives applied for UN membership that same year. Ambassador Shiaan postulated that the UN initially rebuffed the application due not only to the country’s size but also because of certain Western colonial interests, such as that of, for instance, France and the UK. The US, on the other hand, exhibited a cautious stance against the Soviet

Union's possible proxy scheme, hence the hesitancy in supporting microstates to become full-fledged member states. This case certainly stimulated a debate on the viability of small states but the UN eventually accepted the application based on the principle of sovereignty asserted by an Advisory Opinion. Today, small states are recognized for bringing their unique perspective on the international stage, becoming a major constituency in the UN system. However, remaining challenges in terms of achieving foreign policy objectives have motivated small states to foster regional cooperation and alliances in order to lobby on mutually shared issues. He stressed that this strategy has in fact brought them a wide range of successes during the past decades.

He further expounded on the benefits of a strategic alliance among small states, emphasizing the synergy they create by burden-sharing and combining resources, expertise, and intellectual capital, instead of confronting challenges separately. Also crucial to small states is "picking the right battles" and long-term strategic planning, of which climate change holds primary importance. He highlighted the adaptive and innovative character of small states. For one, the formation of AOSIS was triggered by a freak wave catastrophe that swept over Maldives in 1989, prompting the President to broach the subject of sea-level rise before the international community, a time when the phrase "climate change" had not yet been adopted. Maldives takes particular significance as the country which has the lowest highest point in the world (2.3 meters). AOSIS sought to club together small states facing the same predicament over climate change. Ambassador Shiaan stressed that success and strength lie in working together, as well adapting a flexible and compromising attitude, a quality larger states do not always tend to exhibit.

With regard to updates on the historic Paris Accord in 2015, he gave emphasis on SIDS being among the first to ratify the agreement. The implementation phase kicked off at the Marrakech Climate Change Conference in November 2016, and a follow-up meeting was held in Bonn this year with the goal of formulating a rulebook for the implementation of the Paris Agreement by 2018. He particularly expressed disappointment on the recent move by the Trump Presidency, through a letter to the UN indicating its intent to exercise its right to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, but hopes the US will eventually realize the value of its participation. Nevertheless, there is also comforting reassurance given by the EU, China, India, Canada, and other actors in the fight against climate change.

On the substantive issues that will be negotiated by the AOSIS, the alliance has been focusing on areas such as global compliance and transparency in advancing the Paris Agreement Work Program, a mechanism under the Convention which will catalyze the development of knowledge needed to implement adaptation policies. In particular, ongoing work is being done on Facilitative Dialogue, Adaptation Funds, and Loss and Damage. On facilitative dialogue, SIDS are looking forward to receiving updates on the format of the dialogue including the role for non-state actors. After COP 23, AOSIS expects to have the terms of reference already settled as well as a more strengthened focus on the 1.5 degrees goal and its implementation process. Moreover, Adaptation Funds are of critical importance to SIDS and its international climate finance architecture and a decision still has to be made on setting in place specifically outlined institutional arrangements on how the Adaptation Funds will serve the Paris Agreement. On Loss and Damage, which is a serious key agenda item among vulnerable countries already facing the effects of climate change, a strong political focus on this issue is expected of the incoming Fijian Presidency. As a final word, Ambassador Shiaan reiterated the innovative quality of SIDS as well as AOSIS and described the alliance's organizational structure and negotiation procedure in New York. As a consideration of feedback they have received, they are planning to begin incorporating other issue areas related to climate change in their work.

***H.E. Mr Deo Saran, Ambassador of Fiji to the Kingdom of Belgium, Permanent Representative to the European Union***

Ambassador Saran opened his speech by emphasizing the significance of Fiji as the first island state to head the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC. He expressed anticipation on the AOSIS and SIDS being at the forefront of presenting further solutions on the negotiating table. He reiterated that South Pacific countries are among the smallest contributors of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) while receiving the greatest weight of climate change impacts. Fiji, for instance, has recorded a 6-mm increase in sea-level per year since 1993. This has caused salt-water intrusion leading to increased velocity of coastal floods, therefore prompting the nation to relocate some of their inhabitants in 2012. In 2016, Fiji was hit by what it considers to be the strongest tropical cyclone it has ever faced, which resulted in a loss of one third of the country's GDP. These experiences call for a highly visionary Fijian Presidency.

Fiji hopes to make progress on strengthening the resilience of the most vulnerable nations as well as forming a broad green coalition between governments, civil society, and other relevant actors to speed up climate protection. Fiji also aims to put forward a base agreement in which to ensure the effective implementation of guidelines and to prepare for the continued facilitative dialogue in 2018. On climate adaptation financing, it wants to boost support in advancing renewable energy, clean water, affordable climate risk and reduction insurance, and to promote sustainable agriculture. In implementing this, he stresses the importance of the role of the youth. In the Bonn consultations held in May, he recalled the presence of youth in big numbers, underscoring its influence on the discussions particularly in the area of education. The involvement of the youth and women in the climate change negotiations are deemed highly beneficial for the implementation of the global work programme on education.

Also part of Fiji's vision is developing a stronger link between the health of the world's oceans and seas and climate protection. Fiji is currently seeking support from Maldives in reformulating a foreign policy based on shared challenges. It also envisions a green economy propelled by a host of climate-friendly innovative enterprises. The Fijian COP Presidency should also demonstrate leadership in terms of local action plans in combatting climate change. At present, Fiji has been aggressive in implementing its national green growth strategy with the help of the private sector, international organizations, the global environmental facility, the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and several youth initiatives. Reforestation policy and mechanisms for climate-related risks are also at work. On a regional level, Pacific island leaders have also recently endorsed a Pacific island action framework for climate change with the aim of strengthening capacity towards resilience.

Ambassador Saran also recognized the EU's lead and proactive role on climate action efforts. Given the EU's high ambition on climate mitigation and adaptation, Fiji counts on the EU's ability to pool together resources from, for instance, the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), especially with the recent lack of cooperation by the US. Moreover, the EU can facilitate capacity building on adaptation practices in countries such as those in the Pacific. Finally, Fiji can also use the help of the EU in the upcoming COP 23 in terms of spurring a highly positive and constructive attitude in the climate negotiations.

***H.E. Mr. Haymandoyal Dillum, Ambassador of Mauritius to the Kingdom of Belgium, Head of Mission to the European Union***

Ambassador Dillum first drew on a philosophical perspective in grasping the issue of climate change as a reflection of the nature-human relationship. In particular, he referred to the law of nature in which there is a reaction to every action. "You disturb nature, there will be a reaction", he cautioned.

He then moved on to explain the complexity of climate change, reminding the audience of the need for coordinated action at all levels if climate change is to be addressed successfully. On the part of vulnerable countries such as Maldives, Fiji, and Vanuatu, they have worked hard to come up with proposed resolutions. But it is also important to raise awareness of the present effects of climate change already felt everywhere and causing fatalities and displacement of thousands of people. Mauritius alone was caught a few years ago by a sudden flashflood which killed 13 people within seconds.

SIDS are significant players with regard to climate change. Statistics show that: SIDS have a population of around 50 million, 60 percent of humanity live on coastal areas, SIDS have particular access to vast ocean territories, 90 percent of SIDS are located in the tropics, and many are affected by seasonal extreme weather patterns. Given that many of these countries have been on the frontline in fighting climate change, more work still needs to be done. One asset of SIDS is that they have the prime natural resources. But in the face of climate change, SIDS are also grappling with the challenges of eradicating poverty by improving economies, to strive to become Middle Income Countries (MICs). However, the trade-off of those with MIC status is the deprivation of technical assistance as well as tedious bureaucratic processes hindering access to funds. Wealthy national funds such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and Global Environment Facility (GEF) must facilitate access to these resources.

The facilitative dialogue next year should be fruitful and the Fiji COP Presidency has the support of Mauritius in ensuring that the concerns of SIDS are considered. Mauritius also counts on Belgium to be its spokesman within the EU, which is expected to be more proactive. The importance of partnerships in development programs and projects also cannot be ignored. The ACP group (which has set up the ACP-SIDS Forum) and the Commonwealth Secretary (which has come up with a climate financing program) were recognized. SIDS are grateful for the EUR 70 million in support coming from the EU and through the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), SIDS can still submit projects through the ACP Program for climate responses on a regional level, including the work on Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs).

Ambassador Dillum enumerated key «ingredients» in effectively mitigating climate change effects: synergy, complementarity, policy coherence, innovation, and capacity-building, among others, as well as good governance and the proper institutional setup. He also stressed the importance of taking individual responsibility in looking after the environment. Moreover, the strategic team-up of small island developing states rests on many shared characteristics: high-density population and existing socio-economic activities and infrastructure along coastlines, inadequate infrastructure, lack of natural resources to advance economies, and climate change's threat to public health, among others. These characteristics also disturb the pursuit of sustainable development. He also made mention of the developing «blue economies» in SIDS which are maximizing existing local resources in order to advance sustainable development.

As for Mauritius, it has been experiencing droughts since 2011, temperature increases, and decreasing annual rainfall. In fact, coral life will be reduced to 80-100 percent if the temperature rises by 3.28 degrees Celsius. The Mauritian government has taken drastic measures such as agro-meteorological stations, utility scales for wind energy, and tools for wetlands protections. Information drives have also been implemented on a large scale. It is critical to protect the oceans, to act for food security and safety, among many others, and to ultimately stand by a strong conviction that climate change is "critical to our shared future". Finally, it should be followed by determined and urgent action.

***Mr Pascal Delisle, Adviser on Climate Change, European External Action Service (EEAS)***

Mr. Delisle underlined that climate change is of particular interest to the foreign affairs and defense branches of the EU since it hugely impacts security and peace. The new perspective on sustainable development has indeed altered the ingredients of the environment box and it has been admittedly a challenging endeavor to pursue. More and more, the link between climate and security is getting clearer and SIDS have helped in raising awareness on this issue. In fact, both the EU and SIDS have asserted how climate is indeed a question of security. The UN Security Council initially could not adopt a resolution since many countries thought it was a "soft issue" to deal with. The perspective has obviously shifted today and there is that realization of the need for collective action.

In the case of SIDS, there is more focus on adaptation strategies, which poses a challenge for other countries which will benefit less, such as, India, China, France, and Spain. Mitigation is about everyone contributing as well as benefitting equally. Here, the challenge lies in interests not linking well with values. This conflict is more evident in the complexity of the negotiation process within the UNFCCC, wherein multiple interested groups bargain in favor of their specific objectives. So one can only imagine how much the Paris Agreement has achieved. A study of the climate events in the last 10 years revealed several elements that have made the closure of the deal possible. For one, the cooperation of US and China was key. The growth of renewables was also important. Furthermore, the EU and SIDS helped in liaising different interests and values of different stakeholders. SIDS possess the moral authority to seek support for adaptation strategies and funds. A tremendous amount of diplomacy has been required through the years to advance the climate negotiations and more specifically to reach the minimum 55/55 threshold – a legal instrument that requires at least 55 ratifications/acceptances/approvals from states representing 55 percent of total GHG emissions. Now the tasks at hand involve keeping the political momentum and accomplishing specifics such as the completion of the UNFCCC Rulebook.

Graphs show that global mitigation is not that easy to achieve within the framework of balancing GHG emissions with economic development. However, with a Schumpeterian optimism as the mindset of the EU, hopefully the rest of the world moves towards economic decoupling wherein climate triggers a technological revolution that benefits all. Examples are the eventual boom of electric cars. Hence, on the mitigation part, economics and values are converging. As to global adaptation, studies have also been done for the EU on how to reduce different layers of impact. It is very important to translate agreements into on-the-ground action. The EU has tried its best to integrate climate change into its policies including at the member-state level. The European Development Days has also recently come up with a consensus on development cooperation in the era of Climate Change. Climate diplomacy is indeed a policy integrator. Finally, Mr. Delisle asserted the importance of NDCs and how they must be improved, as the EU has shown, since they are

the foundation for effective partnerships with the EU on which implementation will be made possible and successful.

## **Q & A**

Several comments and questions were raised coming from several angles. Having been familiar with the dilemma of Trinidad and Tobago on the energy sector development, a participant inquired on the extent the countries represented in the event are experiencing the economic development vs climate change mitigation dilemma. Ambassadors Dillum and Shiaan gave similar responses stressing the importance of innovation and modernization that can also manifest in diversification. Mauritius, for instance, has diversified from agriculture to tourism; Maldives now has underwater restaurants and floating islands as their signature style of tourism; Fiji tries to apply a 'natural' approach to development. A similar question was also asked later on but the example of the Belt and Road Initiative was particularly raised since it challenges climate change mitigation through the construction of coal-fired power stations in many developing countries. Mr. Delisle addressed this by reminding about the need for developing countries to 'peak' (in the climate change jargon) first. Notwithstanding, China is also trying to retrofit its economy and are cooperative in terms of the Emissions Trading System (ETS), carbon capture and storage. Besides, the EU is only providing funds for energy-efficiency and renewables. He also embraces the idea of an emergent 'energy revolution' along with the idea that market forces will eventually phase out coal use.

Another participant remarked that the idea of the nation was not mentioned in the panel discussion. He asked whether that is because SIDS gave primacy to the sovereignty of states, as in the case of the EU. Other questions he raised were on the representativeness of SIDS countries in the G20, which are high GHG emitters, as well as on defining what an island is. Ambassador Shiaan pointed out how the EU has challenged the indivisibility of sovereignty, and that SIDS countries only resort to the 'state' in their struggle for international recognition – for instance, as State Parties to the conventions. On G20, decisions have not been well-made due to the fact that countries like SIDS were not consulted.

Other questions posed inquired on how SIDS countries negotiate with major countries on climate change, on possible internal negotiations of the EU given that corporations also lobby on climate policies, on more pragmatic measures to address climate change problems of SIDS countries, as well as on their position on adaptation and resilience. Mr. Delisle expressed that there is no new position or target from the EU side and that it remains to be the most ambitious bloc in the world. Ambassador Saran revealed that most negotiations take place outside of the formal process in the form of consultations, workshops and bilateral meetings, and that commonalities with the EU gives them more leverage. Ambassador Shiaan asserted that despite the challenges, SIDS countries will stay put. Again, he reiterated the need for innovation through the use of renewables and 'finding local solutions to international problems.' Ambassador Saran envisions a future for global trade (15 to 20 years from now) wherein climate issues will take center stage and necessarily so. On the COP23 position of SIDS, the difficulties in accessing adaptation funds must be addressed, and that SIDS are working to propose a new model for adaptation financing. Ambassador Dillum underlined the need to level the playing field while an effort at a concerted action from all stakeholders in all sectors must be exerted. In order to do

that, technology transfers, capacity building, innovative financing and addressing trade barriers are critical for SIDS countries. Mr. Delisle clarified that while priority is given on mitigation from the EU side, the EU is also very much consciously working on the adaptation part. As there is the Global Climate Change Alliance working with other countries on adaptation, adaptation strategies of 21 EU Member States are in place, he admits that there is a need for the EU's work on adaptation to be more visible in the international sphere.

*Report prepared by Madeleine Denopra*

European Institute for Asian Studies – EIAS a.s.b.l.  
26 Rue de la Loi, 10<sup>th</sup> Floor, 1040 Brussels/Belgium

Tel.: +32 2 230 81 22 E-mail: [eias@eias.org](mailto:eias@eias.org) Website: [www.eias.org](http://www.eias.org)

 EiasBrussels

 European Institute for Asian Studies

 @EIASBrussels