

SIDS

Environmental Concerns of Small Islands

by Tuiloma Neroni Slade*

No crisis in history has so clearly demonstrated the interdependence of nations as the environmental crisis. The added pressures brought about by the forces of economic globalisation and technological change are transforming the global environment as never before.

There is no shortage of ideas on what should be done. We need only look at some of the proposals put forward in the Millennium Summit, for instance. Nor is there a shortage of specific programmes of action.

What is needed, as the UN Secretary-General has said time and again, is a better understanding of how to translate principles and values into practice, and how to make new instruments and institutions work more effectively. We all need to face up to the alarming discrepancy between commitment and action.

The inspiration, and ground-breaking efforts of the Stockholm Conference and the Earth Summit of Rio have worked to produce better and growing understanding of the causes and dynamics of environmental degradation. There is also now appreciation of the essential inter-relationship between environment, national security and the economy. There is, I believe, a basis for global consensus that the environmental harm caused by some is a threat to all.

The challenge for diplomacy is thus to continue to build global public awareness, so that Governments, individuals and groups all around the world can see clearly what is at stake, and join in the effort.

For small island countries, the environment is both central and encompassing. Nothing could be more totally at stake. Their feelings and concerns about it are deep seated. It is concern that provides insight to the initiatives of island-State personalities, Professor Arvid Pardo of Malta and President Gayoom of the Maldives first among them, and their remarkable personal contributions to the modern regimes of the ocean and atmosphere.

Environmental diplomacy for small island communities is conditioned by their feeling of vulnerability. We found the response from Rio encouraging, with the recognition in Agenda 21 of small island developing states (SIDS) as a special case for both environment and development, because they are ecologically fragile and vulnerable, and their small size and other characteristics place them at a disadvantage. Significantly, small island countries are covered in Chapter 17 of Agenda 21, which deals with the protection of oceans and seas.

Their environmental outlook

Developments since Rio point to a less than promising environmental future. The Environment Outlooks for the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and the Pacific regions released by UNEP just over a year ago suggested that all small island regions will continue to face steady, and sometimes serious, decline in environmental quality. The driving forces behind this deterioration include climate change and associated natural disasters, increasing populations and their resultant impact on resource use, depletion and disposal.

Climate change is by far the most severe factor in its consequences and challenge. Sea-level rise poses the most critical threat, for it touches the very life force of island communities, directly affecting their territory, freshwater supplies, agriculture and biodiversity. Fundamentally, it is an issue of survival.

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)

Their shared vulnerability was a strong factor in establishing the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) that I now have the privilege to lead. AOSIS is an informal group now consisting of 43 small island States and low-lying countries that share a deep concern about the dangers of climate change. For small countries, AOSIS is an essential forum that allows for identity, security and strength in numbers. Thirty-seven AOSIS member States are represented at the United Nations. That is almost 20 per cent of the membership of the Organisation, and close to 28 per cent of developing countries.

Convened in 1990 initially to ensure that the position of small island States was fully represented and reflected in the Climate Change Convention, AOSIS has since served as the negotiating platform for small island States in a range of other environmental fora, including biodiversity, law of the sea, the Commission on Sustainable Development and the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action on the sustainable development of small island States.

The concerns being voiced by the members of AOSIS possess the genuine quality of those facing real and immediate jeopardy. It is the voice that strives also to put forward cultural and ethical dimensions.

There is immediate reason for the concerns about climate change. The latest climate assessment from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) re-confirms not only that human activity is contributing substantially to the warming of the planet, but that the warming over the next century (3 to 11 degrees Celsius) could be much worse than previously estimated. The important statement of the Environment Ministers of the G-8 in

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Trieste at the beginning of March is the latest political acknowledgment of that assessment.

AOSIS climate change objectives

In our strategy in over a decade of negotiations, AOSIS has developed objectives that have guided our approach to the implementation of the Climate Change Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. They include: the strengthening of commitments for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; reducing scientific and methodological uncertainties associated with the commitments and the mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol; commitment to binding energy conservation and the development of renewable energy sources; development of strong monitoring and compliance regimes; and development of mechanisms for meeting the costs of adaptation.

As a group we believe we have an important and substantive contribution to make to the development of international law and principles. What we have said in the past has helped ensure the incorporation and reflection of important principles such as equity, the precautionary principle and the unique requirements of small islands and vulnerable States in a range of international instruments including the Convention on Biodiversity, Climate Change and the UN Highly Migratory and Straddling Fish Stocks Agreement.

In climate change, our overall aim is to ensure early and effective action. The existence of the Kyoto Protocol is the international recognition of the need for action. We believe, however, that the commitments provided for are not strong enough. The science is overwhelming, the consequences of inaction are clear. The IPCC has repeatedly described mitigation actions that are not only technologically feasible, but also economically beneficial. For those of us preparing to watch our crops, our land, our ecology, and our cultures disappear, it is impossible to contemplate failure to take action. The future of small island States represents the future of the planet. Islands are the planet's coral reefs, offering early warning signals, which only the negligent would ignore.

Compliance

The AOSIS countries regard the Kyoto Protocol as a very significant first step in the global effort, and we are determined to help bring it into force and make it work. We are especially concerned to ensure that monitoring, verification and compliance arrangements are in place at both the national and international level. There is clear need for a sound compliance system, with binding consequences to ensure the effectiveness of commitments undertaken. This is essential, especially with the extra-territorial operation of national obligations through emissions trading at the global level and the involvement of corporate entities in the private sector.

Adaptation

AOSIS played a direct role in the formulation of the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol. This is an innovative measure, aimed at taking real and practical steps to assist with sustainable development efforts and to assist with concrete action to help especially vulnerable countries to adapt to the effects of climate change. As time goes on, and with the impacts of climate change already alarmingly evident, we believe adaptation has become an essential area for policy concentration.

I have taken time to indicate these few approaches in our negotiating and diplomacy efforts not simply to underscore our case, but to demonstrate the need for all constituents engaged in the global environment debates to reach beyond their own positions in order to make constructive and substantive contribution to the global effort. Climate change is not a small island State issue. It is certainly not one of our making. Yes, our islands would be

the first to be overcome. But what happens to us will, inexorably, happen to larger countries. Let me also say that while the evidence points to the far greater contribution by industrialised nations to the primary cause of global warming, the growth rate in the developing world is such that, unless effective measures are deployed immediately, the level of emissions from developing countries may well exceed that of industrialised countries. We think it is imperative that steps be taken not only to strengthen the language of the Kyoto Protocol, but also to further enable the participation of developing countries. We believe this to be consistent with

the ultimate objective of the Climate Change Convention. The principle employed must be that of common but differentiated responsibilities. Recognition should be allowed for the fact, as acknowledged in the G-8 Ministerial statement of Trieste, that many developing countries are already undertaking significant action in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

This award (see page 163) comes at a time when we are beginning to take stock of our stewardship of Earth's resources ten years after Rio. There cannot be any question, given the magnitude of mounting problems, of the need for far greater effort in the cause of the global partnership launched in Rio. It is essential, even in partnership, that countries should do what they can for themselves.

Our own countries, through AOSIS, have embarked on a programme for the development of skills and capacities among island States. In the past several months we have held workshops to inform our membership and help improve our advocacy and negotiating strategies on issues relating to climate change and the Biosafety Protocol, and on energy, which is to be the focus of the Commission on Sustainable Development in its forthcoming session in April.



Ambassador T. N. Slade at CSD-9

Courtesy: IISD

