



Analytical Briefing on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action

June 2019

Issue No. 2

Small Island Developing States and Climate Change Towards Addressing Loss and Damage

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Climate change inequities across time and space

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change contains an explicit provision stating that parties should act to protect the climate system “on the basis of equality and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”. This is a reflection of the fact that human induced climate change is caused by the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs), which were 280 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide at the beginning of industrialization and have just crossed 415 ppm this month. Since the overwhelming share of cumulative emissions and concentration of GHGs historically was produced by the developed countries, and the impacts of climate change would be suffered by several vulnerable regions of the developing countries, the “common but differentiated responsibility” (CBDR) clause was meant to restore a degree of fairness, equity and justice. But at the behest of developed country governments, their media and even some non-governmental organizations in those nations, the logic and articulation of the CBDR clause has become muted. They are now emphasizing future growth in emissions from the developing world, and brushing under the carpet their own historical responsibility towards human induced climate change.



The prospect of sea level rise (SLR) which could reach catastrophic proportions with excessive melting of the Greenland and West Antarctica ice sheets would imperil the small island states and low lying areas of the world. Since the developing nations have neither the resources nor the infrastructure for protection against SLR, they would have no choice but to be destroyed by SLR related extreme events or succumb to displacement from the land of their forefathers before catastrophe strikes. What we see as a historical reality is that some societies have altered the geography of this planet, but are now failing to abide by the principle of CBDR. This is patently unfair, inequitable and unethical with consequences across time and space. We have to act on a collective basis in every segment of society to limit temperature increase by 2100 to 1.5 degrees C and ward off the disaster that awaits us if we are complacent.

The Analytical Brief on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action (ABCASA)—jointly brought out by the World Sustainable Development Forum and Protect our Planet Movement—seeks to highlight a topical issue relevant to the realization of the sustainable development goals and ambitious climate actions. The topic of the current ABCASA is on Small Island Developing States and Climate Change in the context of loss and damage mechanism.

Small Island Developing States and Climate Change Towards Addressing Loss and Damage

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Key messages >>>

- While there has been much euphoria around the Paris Climate Agreement, regarding loss and damage, the gap in terms of formal implementation mechanisms including risk management instruments remains.
- What makes the case of SIDS most compelling is the fact that they contribute least to the climate change and sea level rise, but suffer the most. Limited size, proneness to natural hazards and external shocks make these islands particularly vulnerable to climate change, sea level rise and extreme events.
- What is needed is an international financial risk management approach including insurance for achieving the objective of climate justice.
- Five Pacific islands have already been lost to the rise in sea levels due to climate change and it presents the world with a burden of immense “moral crisis”

Upcoming review of loss and damage (L&D)

The Twenty Fifth Meeting of the Conference of Parties under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to be held in Santiago, Chile in December 2019 will also review the Warsaw International Mechanism for loss and damage. In November 2018, echoing the sentiment that the climate negotiations were not devoting as much energy to securing priorities on adaptation and loss and damage as on mitigation ambition, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) Chairman [called for a “new phase” in climate negotiations](#).

Collective voices of SIDS

Despite the relative lack of political power, through their collective strength Small Island Developing States (SIDS) managed to garner attention to their peculiar situation with respect to climate change, sometimes to the annoyance of other states. It was the former President of the Republic of Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who for the first time pointed out the idea of small island nations forming a vulnerable group in his [famous speech](#) "Death of a Nation" in the UN General Assembly in October 1987. Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a coalition of 44 small islands and

Loss and damage in climate negotiations: A timeline



Source: [UNFCCC](#)

low-lying coastal countries developed a common stand on the issue and pushed forward the agenda. AOSIS countries encompassed states from Africa, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, Pacific and South China Sea. Mainly an ad hoc body, this lobbying group negotiated for the concerns of SIDS within the United Nations system.

They tactically used the scientific knowledge generated by [IPCC reports](#) to fight for their claims.

The typical situation of SIDS

What makes the case of SIDS most compelling is the fact that they contribute least to the climate change and sea level rise, but suffer the most. Limited size, proneness to natural hazards and external shocks make these islands particularly vulnerable to climate change, sea level rise and extreme events. Rise in the sea level causes increased inundation, storm surges and erosion, at times harming the vital infrastructure and settlements, which mostly lies by the shore. As a result, these islands are always at a greater risk of disaster compared to the percentage of their economy.

Seychelles, for instance, has about 80 per cent of its infrastructure and population along the coast. Coral bleaching and colonization by invasive species due to rising temperature impacts tourism and food security negatively. On the other hand, limited fresh water resources in most of the island nations indicate their perpetual sensitivity to even a slight change in the sea level. Especially in Maldives and Papua New Guinea where some 50–80 percent of the land area is less than 1 meter above mean sea level, this problem is ever-present. The salt water intrusion into the freshwater aquifers further compounds the problem of crop production. And to add to the above problems, these islands usually have limited economic resources to deal with disasters at such a huge scale. Their relative isolation and greater distance from the major markets adversely affects their competitiveness in trade, thus making it difficult for them to achieve economies of scale. And not to mention the loss of territory which has direct implications for the sovereignty of small island states. Eventually, all these particular kind of vulnerabilities needed a separate instrument to address the problem with urgency which led the SIDS to rally for “loss and damage” as the key mechanism to address the same.

L&D in climate negotiations

Though the talks and negotiations on addressing the vulnerability of SIDS started in the beginning of 1990s itself, it was only since 2007 at the Bali COP did the technical work on loss and damage start, following which a work programme on L&D was established in Cancun. The Cancun Adaptation Framework, recognized the need to strengthen international cooperation and expertise in order to understand and reduce loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change. Further, it decided to establish a work programme to consider approaches to address loss and damage. The Warsaw International Mechanism, under the Cancun Adaptation Framework aims to address loss and damage associated with impacts of climate change, including extreme events (such as hurricanes, heat waves, etc.) and slow onset events (such as desertification, sea level rise, ocean acidification, etc.) in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. The L&D Mechanism is envisaged to promote the

implementation of approaches to addresses loss and damage in three ways:

- Enhancing knowledge and understanding of comprehensive risk management approaches;
- Strengthening dialogue, coordination, coherence and synergies among relevant stakeholders;
- Enhancing action and support, including finance, technology and capacity–building.

Solutions on the table

From the beginning of UNFCCC process, AOSIS proposed the establishment of an insurance pool for vulnerable countries that would be funded by mandatory contributions from developed countries. However, it couldn't end up in any formal affirmation due to opposition from the developed countries. Members of the developed nations usually lobby for market based solutions. This has led to a major gap, that is, the human-rights based approach to climate change solutions. In a global political environment run by sheer power politics, developed countries are averse to committing to any kind of binding obligations. Even the developing countries shy away from making concessions arguing that being historically underdeveloped, now is their time to achieve “developed” status which would require them to rely on massive economic activity. This collective lack of political will has frustrated SIDS to make louder demands, but with caution as repercussions of the same were stated by the Seychellois Ambassador Jumeau, who opined that “We can't go on a crusade around the world. The more noise we make, the more we scare away investors and tourists and destroy our own livelihood”.

Wither momentum on L&D

However, as further COPs went on, the momentum on L&D has not been maintained in terms of concrete implementation mechanism, very much to the disappointment of SIDS. In the Bonn Climate Change Conference, Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, who also held the presidency of the negotiations, ended up with the “InsuRelience Global Partnership”, which follows a small scale and a traditional insurance system. Though it aims to reach out to 400 million affected people all over the world by 2020, it still falls short of what is required to address a problem of such gigantic scale. Same complaints were reiterated in the analysis report of the Solomon Islands delegation in the COP24 in 2018 stating that there is a lack of clear decision-making and substantive collective action on loss and damage.

Jubilation deserved?

While there was much euphoria around the Paris Climate Agreement, for L&D, the gap in terms of formal implementation mechanisms remained. It is unlikely that the international climate agreements on L&D would result in outcomes based on any kind of liability approaches grounded in historical responsibility. While the key focus of the Warsaw L&D mechanism has been on risk-management approaches, the fact is that these only focus

on scientific information on climate risks and [country-driven risk management strategies and approaches](#). What is needed is an international financial risk management approach including insurance for achieving the objective of climate justice.

The burden of impeding moral crisis

Given the incapacities of the realist power politics and the stalemate on loss and damage, it is now upon social

movements to raise voices of concern, particularly the young activists, in a scenario where civilian voices from relatively unknown and remote islands do not reach the centers of international decision-making, mostly located in the developed part of the world. [Five Pacific islands](#) have already been lost to the rise in sea levels caused by climate change and it presents the world with a burden of immense “moral crisis”.

Photo credits: Caye Caulker Island in Belize. © Falco Ermert in UNDP
<https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/img/Caye%20Caulker%20Island%20in%20Belize%20%20UN-OHRLLS%20Photo.jpg>

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About WSDF

The World Sustainable Development Forum (WSDF) is a not-for-profit organization incorporated separately in Europe, Norway and the U.S. Its North American arm WSDF-NA, headquartered in Washington, DC carries 501c3 tax exempt status. WSDF is a global initiative to promote and mobilize global action for effective implementation of both the Paris agreement on climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN General Assembly. WSDF's relevance and role lies in acting as a facilitator for helping with implementation of actions required under these two sets of agreements.



About POP Movement

Protect our Planet (POP) Movement believes that the impacts of climate change will not affect a single country but the planet, in its entirety. POP believes that the power of the youth of the world will unite and to address this challenge. POP believes that the time to act is now and that knowledge is the true currency of changing the future.



www.thepopmovement.org