



A L L I A N C E O F S M A L L I S L A N D S T A T E S

Expert Leaders Discussion: Islands on the Climate Front Lines – Risk & Resilience

10:15 – 11:15 am on Thursday, 21 April
Venue: Global Forum

Keynote Address by Ambassador Webson

It is my pleasure to address you this morning on the critical topic of the future that small island states want, and how to realize it.

As the Chair of an Alliance that represents the interests of 39 island nations in the United Nations, our combined economies represent just a sliver of the global economy, but our countries are a full 20 percent of the sovereign nations that make up the UN.

When it comes to living on the frontlines of climate change, the future that we want is simple: we want the right to live our lives and grow our economies as though climate change were not eroding the very viability of our existence.

The right to self-determination is important because we are not one homogenous group. Our vision for the future ranges from highly localized self-sustaining communities to economic powerhouses in our own right.

On the former, the fabled “island life” is culturally important to preserve for some. For example, traditional Rastafarianism in the Caribbean does not believe in property ownership and follows a vegan diet grown locally on the land. And yet, it becomes increasingly difficult to carve out space in a small island for subsistence living when a Category 5 hurricane wipes out essential infrastructure, and the Government must figure out how raise funds to rebuild.

Small island nations are already borrowing money to cope with, and recover from, extreme and slow onset climate costs, forced to tap into pension funds, relocate communities, manage internal displacement and external migration. That is why our group has championed “1.5 to stay alive”, which became the temperature goal in the Paris Agreement. And yet, as the latest climate science reports show, even limiting warming to 1.5 will be damaging to small islands; and beyond that is a death sentence.

To realize the future that we want – the right to live and grow as though climate change were not happening – we must fix the problem we have, which is a global regime that externalizes the cost of each unit of pollution to the most vulnerable countries and people.

The United Nations Climate Change Convention must protect and preserve island nations given the existential threats that we face. Yet, safeguards are not in place. When the few hectares of an island’s arable land are lost to seawater intrusion, and imported food now costs five times as much, what next? When a hurricane destroys our hospitals and schools, what next?

Island states can no longer absorb the costs of pollution from others.

For the past 30 years, our Alliance has been calling for a concept that we coined Loss and Damage. In a nutshell, Loss and Damage is compensation by the major emitters for the costs associated with climate-induced impacts. These are costs that cannot be avoided even if we adapt our physical and social systems to cope with more extreme weather patterns, such as a hurricane or drought.

Loss and Damage would reflect the costs of climate change on the world's balance sheet, not just liabilities on our own balance sheets.

Financing for Loss and Damage, if designed properly, would achieve two goals: first, it would provide a more systematic response to climate risk, such as covering the costs of parametric insurance, disaster response, debt forgiveness or climate-induced migration if people need to resettle elsewhere. Second, Loss and Damage would be paid by polluters for their greenhouse gas emissions, for example through a carbon tax, thereby making zero emission technologies even more cost competitive and speeding up the transition.

There is extensive academic literature on the topic, and civil society groups are also rising to the challenge of amplifying the voices of the most climate vulnerable countries. Parties to the Convention will be discussing funding arrangements for Loss and Damage at the upcoming Glasgow Dialogue in June.

Climate change is not a problem that we as small islands caused, but it is a problem that our people and our countries are disproportionately burdened by. We are championing Loss and Damage because it is our right to live our lives and grow our economies in a changing climate.