



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

Islands on the Climate Front Line: Vulnerability and Resilience

9:45 – 11:00 am on Wednesday 20 April 2022

About the session

PANEL: THE LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SIDS are structurally vulnerable countries, but vulnerability has also been imposed upon them. Colonial legacies stripped human capacity and natural resources away from the islands and built systems of exploitation that made resilience building difficult. Plantation agriculture denuded the landscape causing erosion, landslides, and drought. Slavery bled human capacity in the Caribbean. Remote Pacific atolls were used for atom bomb experimentation, with devastating and enduring health consequences for communities exposed. How has such history compounded vulnerabilities in the islands and how might it be addressed?

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What are the impacts of colonialism on island vulnerability in general, and vulnerability to climate change?
- Is climate change an environmental justice issue for SIDS, and what does this mean for policymaking?
- What might the right to repair look like in SIDS?
- Are there policy lessons at the nexus of colonialism, environmental justice, and climate change that might be shared among countries - SIDS and otherwise?

Panelist remarks by Ambassador Webson

Distinguished Panelists and members audience, thank you for inviting me to this panel discussion. I appreciate today's topic, investigating the impacts of colonialism and island vulnerability.

Climate change has its roots in colonial exploitation, because colonialism extracted vast amounts of wealth from small islands. To illustrate just how much wealth, let me share one anecdotal example. In the Treaty of Paris, in 1763, France exchanged the entirety of Canada in order to regain from the British the two Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. In other words, the sugar plantations on these two small islands generated more wealth for France than the entire stretch of Canada. The idea of colonialism is antithetical to the idea of stewardship of the environment and natural resources, and local resources were depleted. As much as ninety percent of land in Antigua was taken up by sugar plantations.

The surplus wealth generated through colonialism financed the industrialization in Europe that resulted in vast amounts of greenhouse gas emissions. Carbon dioxide has a half-life of about 120 years, which is the time it takes for the gas to fall to half its original value, so emissions from the early industrial process still warm our planet today.

According to the global science panel, our planet is already 1.1-degrees Celsius warmer today than it was in 1750, due to cumulative greenhouse gas emissions. Since 2000, more than 335 major natural disasters have occurred in small island developing states, with over \$30 billion in direct damages; damages that we small islands are now forced to self-finance to rebuild and recover. The nexus of colonialism, environmental justice, and climate change runs deep.

How does our multilateral climate change policy architecture take this historical disparity into account?

The UN Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement are guided by a principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities*, which states that we are all moving toward the common goal of net zero emissions but developed countries – which are largely the colonizing countries – have differentiated obligations. Developed countries must reduce their emissions to reach net zero first, and they must provide climate finance to developing countries, with a current goal of mobilizing 100 billion US dollars per year by 2020, and each year thereafter until 2025 when a new climate finance target will be agreed.

This finance is a key element of global climate justice, since it assists developing countries to both cope with legacy emissions from the colonial period causing warming today, as well as to leapfrog the dirty development trend that those countries followed. Unfortunately, due to our limited capacities, the share of climate finance reaching small island states fell in 2019.

This is the global climate governance system that Governments have agreed to in response to the colonialism, environmental justice, and climate change nexus. But it is not working fast enough to safeguard the future of small island states in a changing climate. Today, the biggest economies in the world are pointing fingers at one another, using each other's failure as leverage to escape their own responsibilities. Developed countries have not met their climate finance target, and major emerging economies point to this when asked to reduce their emissions faster.

When elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. Small islands are the grass being trampled, year after year, as we use the UN to voice our demands while, year after year, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise.

And yet the issue gets more complex. Climate change is a justice issue not only due to physical climate risks. Even as small islands demand fast and ambitious climate action, our economies face transition risk.

For example, a tax on carbon dioxide emissions would negatively impact the tourism travel that so many of our small island economies depend on heavily. As developed economies ban high emission technology, the old and soon to be obsolete technologies are being offloaded in small islands and other countries with limited enforcement capacity. This is locking us into a development pathway that maintains the inequity of rich and poor.

What does that mean for policy?

As stated in AOSIS' important issues to reflect in the UN Secretary General priorities, the assistance to SIDS must be accelerated as we cannot do this alone. In the true spirit of environmental justice, it cannot be the case that this unfair exposure to heightened environmental risk persists amongst the already marginalised small island developing states.

I look forward to a fruitful discussion on how to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice, to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King.

Thank you.