

Saint Peter's University High School Model United Nations

United Nations Environment Assembly

Topic A: Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Island Nations and Economies

Introduction

Climate change is affecting every part of the globe, but some places are feeling its impacts more immediately and severely. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) produce less than 1% of greenhouse gases (GHGs) but are most at risk from climate change impacts – including coastal erosion, coral bleaching, ecosystem destruction, and adverse effects on agriculture and fisheries.¹ The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projections estimate that global sea level rise is irreversible and will eventually reach 3-6 feet.² This creates an existential threat to many island nations – particularly atolls in the Pacific and Indian oceans whose low average elevation means that they will become and remain largely underwater.³ Long before such inundation, however, many island nations might become uninhabitable due to saltwater encroachment of fresh water reserves and increased weather disaster events.⁴ It's no wonder then, that SIDS have become some of the strongest advocates for addressing climate change, but their relative lack of resources and influence have meant relying on moral suasion to convince the world to act.

Aside from the ecological and meteorological impacts on SIDS, climate change has already begun to wreak economic damage and put future sustainability at risk. Many island nations rely on tourism for substantial sources of revenue. Increased severity of storms and more frequent flooding has endangered resorts which have attracted visitors. Also, the failure of coral reef systems means less tourism. In a two-decade period, estimates have put the cost of natural disasters to SIDS economies at a cumulative 90% of GDP, imperiling recent development gains.⁵ Island nations are also dependent on the ocean for their food resources and exports. As ocean temperatures rise, fish stocks may decline or migrate away. For example, there is evidence that tuna schools are migrating south to cooler waters away from the Seychelles, which relies on tuna fishing and canning as an important economic activity.⁶ This has led many island states to advocate linking climate change mitigation and adaptation to the development of a “blue

¹ Steiner, Achim. “Reflections” *Our Planet: Small Island Developing States*. September 2014. UNEP: Nairobi, p. 4.

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climate Change 2021, The Physical Science Basis: Summary for Policymakers*. 2021. IPCC: Switzerland, p. 21

³ Cohen, Li. “U.N. climate reports shows island nations on ‘edge of extinction’” CBS News. 11 August 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/island-nations-un-climate-change-report-edge-of-extinction/> Accessed 20 January 2022.

⁴ “Sink or swim: Can island states survive the climate crisis?” UN News. 31 July 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1096642> Accessed 20 January 2022.

⁵ Steiner, Achim. “Reflections”

⁶ Pouponneau, Angelique quoted in “AOSIS Islands on Alert – Episode 6: It’s All About The Blue Economy” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojh7dwFFm1k> Accessed 20 January 2022.

Saint Peter's University High School Model United Nations

United Nations Environment Assembly

economy”, which would base sustainable economic prosperity on social equity and ocean health.⁷

Current Situation

In the face of such serious challenges, one could not blame SIDS for feeling betrayed by a global system that has failed to keep its promises regarding climate action. The most recent IPCC emissions gap report indicates that current commitment to reducing GHGs will fall far short of that needed to keep global temperature rise to 1.5° C or even the more modest target of 2.0° C.⁸ Further, promises to provide funds to assist and compensate island nations for climate impact have not been realized.⁹ Despite these shortcomings, SIDS continue to press the issue. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) – created in 1990 – represents the interests of 39 small island nations and has consistently kept the focus on the impacts of climate change and the needs of island communities.¹⁰ In a strongly worded submission to the 2021 Conference of Parties meeting in Glasgow (COP26), AOSIS asserted that “the scale of funding for climate adaptation and mitigation has been sadly inadequate; it needs to be increased significantly, if justice is to be served.”¹¹ Further, AOSIS called attention to the disparity in financial support stating that:

“the promise made 12 years ago by the developed countries, to provide \$100 billion annually in climate finance, to help deal with the effects of climate change, has not been fulfilled. However, the G20 countries have, since the adoption of the Paris Agreement, provided over 3 trillion US dollars in support to the fossil fuel industry, including excessive subsidies; with only a meagre two billion USD per year, made available through the UN’s climate funds.”¹²

As a result of this lack of action and support, AOSIS and other island groups are not simply waiting for the G20 to act. In 2014, island states adopted the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) pathway. This strategy focuses on a unified strategy to promote sustainable economic growth.¹³ Through the UNEP and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), island states have begun to adopt new strategies for adapting to climate change.¹⁴ Still, SIDS will

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *Emissions Gap Report 2021: The Heat Is On – A World of Climate Promises Not Yet Delivered*. 2021. UNEP: Nairobi, p. xvi

⁹ Gerretsen, Isabelle. “Who will pay for the damage caused by climate change?” BBC Future. 13 December 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211213-who-will-pay-for-the-damage-caused-by-climate-change>. Accessed 21 January 2022.

¹⁰ AOSIS. “About Us.” <https://www.aosis.org/about/chair-of-aosis/> Accessed 20 January 2022.

¹¹ Browne, Gaston. “AOSIS Statement at COP26 World Leaders’ Summit” AOSIS. 1 November 2021.

<https://www.aosis.org/aosis-statement-at-cop26-world-leaders-summit/> Accessed 21 January 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ United Nations. “Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, 1-4 September 2014, Apia, Samoa: Background” <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/small-islands/apia2014> Accessed 22 January 2022.

¹⁴ “Island nations on climate crisis frontline ‘not sitting idly by’” UN News 26 September 2019.

Saint Peter's University High School Model United Nations

United Nations Environment Assembly

need more support to adapt to climate change and create thriving “blue economies”, and the UNEP can have a role to play in helping to bring this about.

Questions to Address

- What help can UNEP give to SIDS to better assist them in adapting to climate change?
- How can UNEP convince member states to meet their emission targets and funding commitments in response to climate change?
- What steps can UNEP take to raise the profile of SIDS and their plight?

Topic B: Democratizing Climate Change Strategy: COP26 and the Citizens' Assembly

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the response to climate change has been through high-level meetings of government representatives and scientists. Nevertheless, global climate change will impact everyone on earth and the United Nations has begun to take more seriously the views and experiences of the average citizen. As governments in member states struggle with political considerations and entrenched interests, the views of individual people have become harder to hear. As part of the COP26 process, delegates heard from ordinary people around the world through the Global Assembly, a process designed to represent the views of average citizens from around the world.¹⁵ The Global Assembly represented the people of earth through the randomized selection of 1,000 participants representative of the world's ethnic, racial, gender and socio-economic makeup.¹⁶ At the same time, local communities could apply for grants to host “citizens assemblies” to discuss and gather testimony on the impacts of climate change and how to respond to it.¹⁷ As the project states: “Right now, we the people are ahead of the politicians. Creating policies far more ambitious than anything politicians have come up with on their own...It's up to us to light the way for politicians.”¹⁸

This is not the UN's first foray into garnering citizen input on climate change. The UNEP conducted a survey and consultation with 10,000 global citizens as part of the COP21 process.¹⁹ In 2020, the UNDP conducted a global public opinion survey of over 1.2 million people called the “People's Climate Vote.”²⁰ These surveys found broad support across the globe for labeling climate change as an emergency and for taking necessary steps to address it. Nevertheless, the Global Assembly represents a much more bottom-up approach. Taken together all these

¹⁵ Global Assembly. “About us”. <https://globalassembly.org/about-2> Accessed 16 January 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “The Global Assembly for 2021” 24 June 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PUrN07Q50w> Accessed 16 January 2022.

¹⁹ UNEP. “Largest Ever Citizen Consultation on Climate Change” Press Release. 28 August 2015.

<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/largest-ever-citizen-consultation-climate-change> Accessed 14 January 2022.

²⁰ UNDP. *People's Climate Vote: Results*. January 2021. University of Oxford, p. 6.

Saint Peter's University High School Model United Nations

United Nations Environment Assembly

initiatives demonstrate the desire of the UN to hear more directly from people around the world and take seriously their views in formulating climate strategy.

Current Situation

In addition to the testimony from world citizens at COP26²¹, the Global Assembly released its “People’s Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth” approved by the assembly on 18 December 2021.²² The declaration endorsed the Paris Agreement and called for the UN to include the right to “a clean, healthy and sustainable environment” in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²³ It also calls for fair and just energy transition, recognizing that the largest burden for emissions reductions should fall on those countries that have historically contributed the most to GHGs.²⁴ Local citizen assemblies are still meeting and the Global Assembly will continue to work on creating a final submission in March 2022.²⁵

In October 2021 Secretary-General António Guterres endorsed the participation of the Global Assembly in COP26 stating that it is a

“...practical way of showing how we can accelerate action through solidarity and people power. People everywhere want bold, ambitious climate action, and now is the moment for national leaders to stand and deliver.”²⁶

Nevertheless, citizen assemblies have no formal place within the UN structure. While many agree on the importance of garnering public opinion and expanding the inclusivity of work on climate change, the reality is that the UN is a representative organization and not a direct global democracy. Thus, it is important to strike a balance between expanding access to the climate debate and not appearing to do an “end run” around member states. Still, the UNEP can perhaps find ways of partnering with initiatives like the Global Assembly to help convince governments to act with greater urgency.

Questions to Address

- What role should public opinion and experience play in climate change strategy?
- Should the UNEP experiment with more initiatives similar to the Global Assembly?
- How can the UNEP leverage the work of groups like the Global Assembly to help instill greater urgency on climate change action among decision-makers?

²¹ “Citizens from the Global Assembly present their statements: COP26” 2 November 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyNGACjlbQ0> Accessed 16 January 2022.

²² Global Assembly. “People’s Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth”

<https://globalassembly.org/declaration> Accessed 16 January 2022.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Global Citizens Assembly – i4Policy” 23 November 2021. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

<https://gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch/project/global-citizens-assembly-i4policy/> Accessed 16 January 2022.

²⁶ Harvey, Fiona. “Global citizens’ assembly to be chosen for UN climate talks” *The Guardian* 5 October 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/05/global-citizens-assembly-to-be-chosen-for-un-climate-talks> Accessed 18 January 2022.