



Island Nations Demand Climate Security at COP26

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Despite the challenges to keep the 1.5 degrees Celsius target alive at the 26th meeting of the United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP26) held in Glasgow this year, small island developing states (SIDS) have continued to step up in promoting international cooperation and sustainable efforts to build climate security. After decades of action through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), international leadership on climate change action is not new to SIDS (Rasheed 2021a). SIDS have played a leading role in raising international awareness about the existential threat caused by climate change. In 1987, the Maldives warned the United Nations General Assembly that a sea level rise of 2 metres will be the 'death of a nation'. Recently, in 2018, the Pacific Islands Forum declared that climate change poses the 'single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific'. For SIDS, keeping the 1.5 degrees Celsius target alive means keeping *them* alive, and the way to secure their sustainability is to keep the international ambition alive.

After analysing 18 statements from SIDS' leaders from the Caribbean, Pacific, Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea at the opening of the high-level segment of COP26, I explain how policy narratives of island nations have promoted ideas about their fight for survival. This fight needs urgent action, supported by financial cooperation to address the costs of loss and damage caused by climate change. My analysis focuses particularly on the climate security bases of SIDS' policy discourse.

Why climate security?

COP26 is a United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process, not a Security Council process. It allows greater political engagement and policy development through holistic and collaborative governance approaches under United Nations climate programs. For SIDS, addressing climate change is a matter of survival, to achieve and sustain development, political stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The global nature of the causes of climate change calls for international cooperation,

through democratic and collaborative efforts between states and affiliated organisations including the UNFCCC and Security Council. Despite the efforts of larger actors like the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Canada and China, SIDS' engagement in the ongoing debate has brought forward the existential element of the climate crisis.

In 2007, the climate emergency was raised for the first time in the Security Council, by the United Kingdom. Both permanent members and non-permanent members have joined Security Council climate change debates over the years, and realised the need for urgent and extraordinary measures against this existential threat. Security studies in international relations recognise an issue posing an existential threat can create a security issue (Scott 2012). However, Security Council debate has achieved little progress in institutionalising climate security in the international context as nations fail to agree on aspects of climate security. The United Kingdom, United States and most European Union states, for example, have moved to incorporating climate change in the international peace and security space. But 'Brazil, China, India and Russia, along with collective groupings such as the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement' have remained cautious about using Security Council mandate to address climate change due to the 'unrepresentative nature' of its membership (McDonald 2013).

Despite differences on securitising climate change, Security Council debate has remained crucial in bringing the concept of security, with its emphasis of existence and survival, to the centre of the climate debate, raising the need to take extraordinary measures. Alongside this emergency claim, the call for climate action has remained consistent and unchanged across major international conferences, particularly in the contexts of SIDS. Even before security was expressly uttered in the climate policy context, a number of SIDS made a declaration at the 1989 Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise held in Malé, Maldives: man-made environmental events threaten the survival of island nations, they said, and effective and immediate measures were necessary.

This existential and survival discourse has remained an integral part of international negotiations over the years (Rasheed 2021b).

SIDS at the COP26 opening

COP26 was a stage to further SIDS' leadership and promote a discourse for greater climate security. The following is an analysis of SIDS' statements at the opening of the high-level segment of COP26. They highlight SIDS' conceptions of the climate emergency, the existential threat, loss and damage due to climate change impacts, and financial commitments to take action.

Climate emergency

Addressing climate change has been considered an urgent matter because it has created, in the words of the Seychelles, 'an increasingly dire emergency that challenges all aspects of our chances for future survival'. SIDS leaders have expressed the urgency of acting through international cooperation, because SIDS alone cannot address the crisis, and international action is needed for their survival.

Existential threat

Mauritius stated that rising sea levels 'will cause tremendous damage and lead to massive displacement of people especially from low lying islands'. Leaders raised concerns for their survival, including the Maldives expressing it as one of the many 'low-lying countries that could disappear off the map because of the climate crisis'. Tuvalu described as 'utmost priority' the 'building [of] raised reclamation lands to preserve our physical existence as a viable state'. Antigua and Barbuda highlighted that 'our very existence now depends on urgent attention to our perilous situation'.

'1.5 to stay alive'

The 1.5 °C to stay alive campaign has been an integral part of SIDS climate discourse, and setting this target in Paris in 2015, as Fiji reiterated at COP26, 'ensured, at the very least, that low-lying island nations and communities would survive'. Achieving the target under the Paris Agreement remains a challenge. SIDS have agreed that 1.5 degrees Celsius is a requirement for most low-lying island states to stay alive. As Palau reiterated, 'we are veering off the path of 1.5 degree warming limit'. Samoa warned that 'even with limiting warming to 1.5 °C, SIDS will continue to incur severe loss and damage. Exceeding this will be catastrophic for us'.

Loss and damage

With changes in climate, SIDS suffer the most — yet they have contributed least to the crisis. SIDS stepped up at COP26 in their commitments to address the loss and damage. However, this is not a job that needs only their leadership; it requires support from larger actors and bigger emitters both for mitigation and to finance adaptation. As the Seychelles explained, 'the world

must build a vision for a climate resilient future that puts adaptation and loss and damage at the centre of decision-making, and take immediate action now to protect people, the economy, and the environment'. While funding for adaptation has been inadequate to cover loss and damage, the AOSIS chair also called for the 'phasing out of fossil fuel subsidies, scaled up and accessible adaptation and mitigation funding and a firm mechanism for loss and damage'.

Financial commitment

Leaders agreed that financing for climate action has been an important criterion to address climate change at both the national and global scale. For SIDS, financing is also a matter of survival, and it is required to address existing and future loss and damage that potentially threaten their lands, infrastructure and livelihoods. Barbados declared that 'failure to provide this critical finance and that of loss and damage is measured in lives and livelihoods being lost in our communities'.

Conclusion

SIDS raised issues of insecurity and security at COP26. Climate change has created high risks and posed potential threats to their survival. In 2021, COP26 presented another platform for SIDS to articulate their challenges and build on their existential and survival discourse. Although climate security takes a centre stage in Security Council debates, in global negotiations SIDS have continued highlighting aspects of climate security. The US–China joint declaration at COP26, recognising 'the seriousness and urgency of the climate crisis', portrays a positive development of climate security discourse as part of international diplomatic talks.

Author notes

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