

Climate Change, International Accountability and Small Island Developing States

Prof. Piyasena Abeygunawardana

Department of Economics, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya

Climate change involves long-term changes in the climate, short-term; annual or seasonal climatic variability and unpredictable extreme climatic events. Today, there is a general agreement in the world that mainly through the UN systems and other regional and sub-regional bodies, that anthropogenic reasons have contributed to the acceleration of these processes largely during the last century or so more than ever. The UN declared 2014 as the international year of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to recognize and celebrate the contributions that these countries and territories have made to the world. SIDSs are home to distinct cultures and heritages. They also provide a wide array of rich and dynamic ecosystems, biodiversities and unique landscape systems across the globe making the earth is an interesting and a unique planet for all of us to live and enjoy.

What are Small Island Developing States?

SIDSs share many of the characteristics of other developing countries but they also face unique challenges. There is no accepted definition for a SIDS, but often it refers to the 38 UN Member States listed on the website of the Office of the High Representative of the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing

Countries and Small Island Developing States. The UNCTAD has defined a sub group of 29 Small Island Developing States used only for analytical work. In any case, there is no clear definition or Universally agreed hard and fast parameters that one can use to classify a country or a territory as an SIDS.

Characteristics of a Small Island Developing State

Nevertheless, one can observe people living in SIDS have high levels of vulnerability mainly to external shocks: These countries are often small in size and are located in remote areas. They are largely vulnerable to external shocks, and their resource bases, both natural and human are quite thin. But, on the other hand, SIDS populations have higher incomes than the least developed nations. Their populations are often educated and outward looking. They look for opportunities elsewhere and a large percentage of people migrate from them to other countries such as regional power centers. Due to lack of critical mass SIDSs are not in a stronger position to form knowledge based economies. These unparalleled characteristics of SIDSs draw unusual attention of the world community in terms of sustainability of their economic development.

Despite high incomes there are many other concerns about SIDS. For example, the recent progress in development made by SIDS might get jeopardized by the major on going shocks that have occurred in the international arena. SIDS' have shown unusual vulnerability towards the global financial crisis (2007 to 2010) and also other global shocks like food price crisis in 2006 to 2009, and fuel crisis in 2010 etc. Their vulnerability has further increased due to climate change. Large-scale natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes and droughts have also made major impacts on these populations. Another unusual observation made in these countries is that in any disaster or calamity, the poor segments of the populations have been the most affected.

In the case of Sri Lanka, it is not small enough to be considered as a SIDS. Its population is fairly large (21.5 million) and land mass is adequate enough to achieve and maintain sustainable development. It can feed its people and income growth is slower than SIDS countries. Sri Lanka's ecosystems are unique and its bio-diversity is among the best. The coastal zone provides livelihood for a large portion of its population, while contributing a major share to the GDP.

In Sri Lanka a clear and comprehensive policy framework provides the basis for development of an effective road map and an action plan to achieve sustainability through successful adaptation. Most of the SIDSs do not have such policies, nor do they

have the capacity to implement them. SIDSs contribution to global environmental pollution or unbalances / unsustainability is much smaller compared to their counterparts among the global or regional economic powers. SIDSs however, bear a disproportionately unjustifiable share of the burden created by global environmental disasters and calamities when it comes to their adverse impacts.

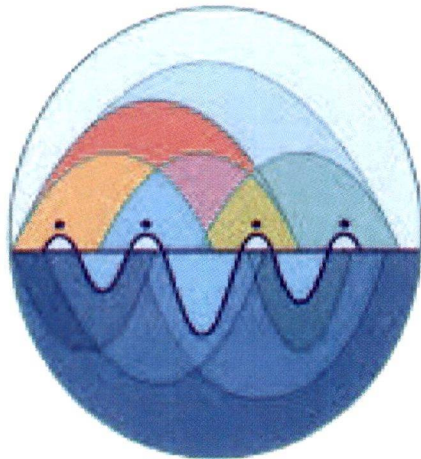
Future Policy Option

In order to develop proper policy options for SIDS, a scientific study based on assessment, quantification and prediction of environmental and climate change must be carried out. Then, a study on their impacts and vulnerability status (on SIDS) must be carried out. Preparation of response options, strategies to face climate change, creating and strengthening the institutional framework, and infrastructure to implement and monitor adaptation measures to climate change are a series of actions that needs to be in place if SIDSs were to face the reality. However, given the scale of operations and considering the importance of having critical mass of young and dynamic professionals, it is unlikely that SIDS can adapt or face the hard realities of the climate change etc. SIDS will have to ask wealthy local, regional and global Powers to genuinely contribute towards their mere survival. These countries should be made accountable for the environmental damage they have been making over the years on the SIDS.

SIDSs situation is really weak. Their plight must be recognized by all parties, especially those who disproportionately damage the world's environment. It is much more than begging for sympathy and empathy from the wealthy nations. It is more to do with asking the wealthy nations to be accountable for their share of environmental damage they

Have been imposing on the SIDS, which have their mere survival at stake. SIDSs are not asking for monetary grants to clean up their solid waste problems or for making sure that they get adequate drinking water. It is not begging for international mercy. They need international environmental justice to be reinforced and fairly meted out ensuring their right to live (and let others to live).

¹ Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, namely: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas , Bahrain, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde , Comoros, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji , Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia, Federated States of) , Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.



International Year of
Small Island
Developing States
2014