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Climate Change Crisis: How the Alliance of Small Island States shapes Global Policies?

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the critical role of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in shaping global climate policies, emphasising the existential threats small island nations face due to climate change. Rising sea levels, driven by melting ice caps and thermal expansion of seawater, pose immediate risks to these low-lying nations, eroding coastlines, contaminating freshwater, and threatening their very existence. Climate change is not just an environmental issue for these states but a fight for survival, dignity, and cultural preservation. AOSIS, formed in 1990, has been instrumental in advocating for small island states in international climate negotiations, particularly under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The coalition has pushed for ambitious climate action, including limiting global temperature rises to below 1.5°C and ensuring no island is left behind. Despite internal challenges, AOSIS has successfully influenced global climate agendas, such as the Bali Roadmap and the Poznan negotiations, where they emphasised the need for climate risk insurance and adaptation measures. The 2014 International Conference on Small Island States highlighted the vulnerabilities of SIDS and the importance of collaboration, innovation, and sustainable development. Tokelau, for instance, showcased its transition to renewable energy, generating 90% of its electricity from solar power. The conference also stressed the need for robust mechanisms to monitor commitments and ensure accountability, with the UN playing a key role in supporting implementation. AOSIS has also integrated SIDS' perspectives into the Post-2015 Development Agenda, advocating for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that address oceans' critical role in sustainable

development. However, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, and current pledges are insufficient to limit climate change, disproportionately affecting small island states. The article calls for innovative mechanisms beyond state responsibility, such as climate risk insurance, to provide timely compensation for climate-induced damages. Their future depends on sustained international cooperation and innovative solutions to secure their homes, cultures, and existence for generations to come.

KEYWORDS

Climate Change, Small Island States, Sustainable Development Goals, greenhouse gases.

Climate change is one of the most pressing challenges of our time, driven by the increase in greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide from human activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes. One of its most visible and devastating consequences is the rise in global sea levels caused by the melting of polar ice caps and glaciers and the thermal expansion of seawater as it warms. In the mid-1980s, climate change and its most obvious effect—global warming—started gaining significant attention as major issues of concern. People began to recognise the seriousness of these environmental challenges and their potential impacts on the planet.¹ Climate change, one of humanity's most significant challenges, stems directly from the rise in emissions of industrial-era gases and pollutants. These by-products, released into the atmosphere over time, have become a driving force behind the environmental shifts we're experiencing today.² These gases, called "greenhouse gases" (GHGs), include water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, and chlorofluorocarbons. They're particularly good at trapping infrared radiation trying to escape from Earth while still allowing solar radiation to come in. This imbalance is what contributes to the warming of the planet.³ For small island states, this phenomenon is not just a distant threat; it's an immediate crisis. These islands, often low-lying and surrounded by vast oceans, are on the frontlines of climate change. Rising sea levels erode coastlines, submerge land, and contaminate freshwater sources with saltwater, making it harder for communities to access clean drinking water and grow crops. Coastal flooding becomes more frequent and severe, damaging

¹ John W. Ashe, Robert Van Lierop & Anilla Cherian, *The Role of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the Negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*, 23 NATURAL RESOURCES FORUM 209 (1999).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods. For many island nations, the loss of land threatens their very existence, as shrinking territories could displace entire populations, forcing them to become climate refugees. Beyond the physical damage, the cultural and emotional toll is profound. These islands are not just pieces of land; they are homes, histories, and identities. The fight against rising seas is a fight for survival, dignity, and the preservation of a way of life. For small island states, climate change is not just an environmental issue—it's an existential one.

The unique challenges and needs of small island developing States (SIDS) in achieving sustainable development have been widely acknowledged since they gained prominence on the international stage in the early 1990s during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). As outlined in Agenda 21, the action plan established at UNCED in June 1992, SIDS represent a distinct category in terms of both environmental and developmental concerns⁴. Ecologically, most SIDS are coastal nations with limited land areas, often scattered across archipelagos. They are typically home to a rich variety of endemic plant and animal species but have relatively scarce natural resources. Geographically isolated, with small economies and reliant on a narrow range of exports, these states often depend heavily on international trade. This reliance makes them particularly susceptible to external economic and environmental disruptions.⁵

Back in 1990, a group of small island developing States, worried about how climate change and rising sea levels would impact their low-lying nations, came together to form the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)⁶. Their goal was to amplify their voice and influence in United Nations negotiations, particularly around the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). By 1992, AOSIS broadened its focus to include a wider range of sustainable development issues within UN discussions. While the coalition has been pretty effective in pushing for action on climate change, things got trickier when small island States themselves became the main topic of international conferences. In these situations, the differences and disagreements among AOSIS members started to show, which ended up weakening the group's overall impact. It's a reminder that even when countries share common challenges, finding unity isn't always easy.

⁴ Pamela S. Chasek, *Margins of Power: Coalition Building and Coalition Maintenance of the South Pacific Island States and the Alliance of Small Island States*, 14 REVIEW OF EUROPEAN COMMUNITY & INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL LAW 125 (2005).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

At the December 2007 Bali climate change meeting, Micronesia reiterated the AOSIS stance, emphasizing that "no island should be left behind." This statement highlighted the coalition's commitment to ensuring that all small island nations are included and supported in global climate action efforts.⁷ At the Poznan meeting in December 2008, where climate risk insurance was a major topic, AOSIS took the lead in pushing for insurance to be included in any adaptation agreements.⁸ Later, on September 21, 2009, during the Climate Change Summit in New York, AOSIS made a strong statement by adopting the Declaration on Climate Change. This declaration called for global efforts to keep the average surface temperature rise well below 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels, highlighting the urgent need for ambitious climate action to protect vulnerable nations.⁹ As the December 2007 climate talks in Bali approached, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a coalition of 43 vulnerable nations negotiating together, pushed for a post-2012 agreement.¹⁰ Their goal was to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at well below 450 parts per million, ensuring that long-term global temperature rises stay as far under 2°C as possible. AOSIS emphasised the need for immediate, bold, and measurable short-term actions to achieve these long-term targets. They also stressed that protecting small island developing States (SIDS) from the worst impacts of climate change should be a key measure of success for any post-2012 climate framework. In Vienna, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) outlined a set of guiding principles for any post-2012 plan aimed at tackling climate change. These principles were designed to shape a comprehensive and effective approach to addressing the global climate crisis. The principles are as follows:

1. In line with Article 3 of the Convention, precautionary measures must be taken to anticipate, prevent, and reduce the causes of climate change while mitigating its harmful effects. The climate system must be safeguarded for both current and future generations.
2. Efforts to implement the Convention should prioritize protecting the most vulnerable parties to the UNFCCC, both in the short and long term. Therefore, the ambition for future emission reductions should use the protection of small island developing States (SIDS) from climate change impacts as a key measure of success.

⁷ Poh Poh Wong, *Small Island Developing States*, 2 WIRES CLIMATE CHANGE 1 (2011).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Review of European Community International Environmental Law - 2008 - Mace - The Bali Road Map Can it Deliver an.

3. Actions under the Convention must be urgent, practical, and ambitious.
4. The "polluter pays" principle and the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" should guide the obligations of different parties and groups.
5. Any new framework must be developed within the United Nations system and should build on and expand the Kyoto Protocol rather than replace it.

In addition, in Vienna, AOSIS highlighted that the proposed targets were manageable, especially when compared to the far greater costs of doing nothing. From an equity standpoint, they urged significantly higher investments in mitigation efforts exceeding 0.12% of GDP annually to aim for an even lower stabilisation level.¹¹ This, they argued, would help reduce the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable nations, ensuring a fairer and more effective global response.¹²

The aftermath of the Vienna climate talks had two outcomes. First, AOSIS had the chance to present key points from its Submission during the Dialogue and the Ad Hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP), where applicable. Several ideas and proposals put forward by AOSIS were later reflected in the Co-Facilitators' Note summarising the Dialogue process.¹³ Second, within the AWG-KP, AOSIS successfully ensured that the parties to the Kyoto Protocol acknowledged the lack of IPCC stabilisation scenarios below 450 ppm and recognised the need for additional research in this area. The AWG-KP's meeting report explicitly "noted the concerns raised by small island developing States and the potential for further scientific work on this issue." This marked a significant step in addressing the unique vulnerabilities of SIDS in the climate negotiations.¹⁴

In 2014, the third International Conference on Small Island States was organised jointly by the United Nations and Samoa between September 1- 4. The Conference featured daily Plenary Meetings, Multi-stakeholder Partnership Dialogues, and Side Events, providing a platform for participants to share their hopes and concerns for Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Niue, the Cook Islands, and Tokelau, small nations under the Realm of New Zealand, actively participated, seeking collaboration with other SIDS. Although Tokelau, as a non-self-governing territory, was

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

not allocated speaking time, New Zealand allowed its Ulu (leader), Aliko Faipule Kuresa Nasau, to address the Plenary.¹⁵ He highlighted Tokelau's vulnerability to climate change, citing coastal erosion and ocean acidification as immediate threats. Despite its minimal carbon footprint, Tokelau is leading by example, transitioning to renewable energy, with solar power now generating 90% of its electricity since 2012. The Ulu urged SIDS to unite and take collective action against shared existential threats like climate change.¹⁶ In addition to government representatives, other speakers, such as John Ashe, President of the 68th UN General Assembly, addressed the Plenary. Ashe emphasized the long, challenging journey SIDS have faced in pursuing sustainable development, noting their unique vulnerabilities. He stressed the need for a supportive international environment and strong partnerships to help SIDS achieve lasting solutions. The Conference underscored the importance of collaboration and innovation in addressing the pressing challenges faced by SIDS.¹⁷ Participants at the Conference stressed the need for strong mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the Outcome Document. Many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) voiced concerns about the lack of follow-through on commitments from previous conferences in Mauritius and Barbados, emphasising the importance of ensuring accountability this time.¹⁸ Financing and technology transfer were also identified as critical factors for success. In his closing remarks, Wu Hongbo, the UN Under-Secretary-General, assured attendees that the United Nations would actively support the implementation process. To ensure accountability, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs has been tasked with monitoring the commitments, pledges, and partnerships established in Apia.¹⁹ Progress reports will be submitted to the UN General Assembly. Additionally, various UN agencies will work together to provide coordinated support to countries implementing the Outcome Document, whether through partnerships or other means. For example, Helen Clark, Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), highlighted that the UNDP is exploring ways to support implementation, working closely with regional bodies like the Pacific Islands Forum and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme to tailor solutions to specific country needs. Finally, the UN will integrate participants' concerns into preparations for the Third International Conference on Financing

¹⁵ Conference on Small Island States 2014, The, N.Z. Y.B. INT.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

for Development, scheduled for 2015 in Addis Ababa.²⁰ This reflects the global effort to address SIDS' unique challenges and ensure sustainable development goals are met.

The Conference also sought to integrate the unique perspectives of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) into the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which aims to address emerging global challenges and build on the outcomes of the "Rio+20" UN Conference on Sustainable Development.²¹ The Agenda process is working toward a unified framework focused on eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development. As part of this, an intergovernmental effort is underway to create a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are universal and comprehensive. New Zealand and SIDS have collaborated to ensure that a dedicated goal highlighting the critical role of oceans in sustainable development is included in the final framework.²² During the 69th UN General Assembly, SIDS, like Palau and Nauru, emphasised the vital importance of oceans to their economies, cultures, and livelihoods, reinforcing the need for global recognition and action.²³

Global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are projected to keep rising without significant mitigation efforts, and current country pledges up to 2020 fall short of limiting climate change. This means the adverse effects of climate change will worsen, disproportionately impacting those who contribute least to the problem, such as small island states. For these nations, the threat is existential, with no immediate compensation in sight.²⁴ Establishing a right to remedy climate-related damage could incentivise countries to reduce emissions. While holding emitting states legally responsible for damages is one approach, it faces significant legal hurdles, such as proving direct causation of climate-induced harm, which is technically complex and often impractical.²⁵ A more effective solution might be creating a mechanism separate from state responsibility, where emitters contribute based on their emissions, and victims receive timely and adequate compensation. This approach could better address both sudden disasters and slow-onset events like sea-level rise, which are harder to handle under traditional state responsibility frameworks. Innovative tools, such as climate risk insurance,

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Climate Change and Small Island Claims in the Pacific from Climate Change: International Law and Global Governance: Volume I: Legal Responses and Global Responsibility on JSTOR,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv941w8s.25> (last visited Mar 6, 2025).

²⁵ *Id.*

could play a key role in this system.²⁶ Collaboration with organisations like the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), which has expertise in extreme events, would be essential to ensure comprehensive support for those affected by climate change. Ultimately, a full remedy for disaster damage, whether climate-related or not, is crucial for vulnerable populations.

The lack of human, financial, and institutional resources in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) for integrating necessary climate actions can no longer be overlooked by external funders. Addressing these gaps requires training, technical assistance, and public education, which pose significant developmental challenges for SIDS policymakers.²⁷ Climate change impacts, including sea-level rise, extend beyond coastal zones, affecting energy systems, industry, transportation, human settlements, tourism, insurance, and cultural values. These changes also threaten human health and could lead to significant loss of life.²⁸ SIDS face additional barriers to implementing adaptation measures, such as limited technological and human resources, cultural and social acceptability of solutions, and varying political and legal frameworks. These challenges place heavy burdens on decision-makers, who must carefully evaluate available options.²⁹ Despite these obstacles, SIDS have started planning for climate adaptation, both individually and regionally, to address rising sea levels. Projects in the Caribbean and Pacific regions are examples of efforts to mitigate climate impacts. To tackle these challenges, SIDS are building effective institutions and administrative capacities to promote sustainable development. Many have established high-level policy bodies to coordinate sustainable development strategies, while others have created specialized agencies for areas like coastal zone management.³⁰ Some are also adopting tools like environmental impact assessments and economic incentives to encourage sustainable practices. These steps reflect SIDS' growing commitment to combating climate change and fostering resilience.³¹

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) represents the collective voice of some of the world's most vulnerable nations in the fight against climate change. Despite their minimal

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Small island developing states and global climate change: overcoming the constraints, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com-christuniversity.knimbus.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1477-8947.1999.tb00908.x> (last visited Mar 6, 2025).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

contribution to global emissions, small island states face existential threats from rising seas, extreme weather, and environmental degradation. AOSIS has been instrumental in pushing for ambitious global climate action, advocating for stronger mitigation, adaptation, and financial support. Looking ahead, their future depends on sustained international cooperation, innovative solutions, and equitable policies that prioritize their survival. For these nations, climate action isn't just about sustainability—it's about securing their homes, cultures, and very existence for generations to come.