

# THE CONFERENCE ON SMALL ISLAND STATES 2014

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The Third International Conference on Small Island States (the Conference), jointly hosted by the United Nations and Samoa, took place in Apia on 1-4 September 2014. This note provides a brief report on the events and outcomes.

The Conference attracted 21 heads of state and government, 97 government ministers and 3,500 delegates (including government, private sector and civil society representatives).<sup>1</sup> Like its predecessors,<sup>2</sup> the Conference focused on issues of concern to small island developing states (SIDS). The Conference had the theme of “The Sustainable Development of SIDS through Genuine and Durable Partnerships” and had the overarching goal of focusing the international community’s attention on the particular vulnerabilities and associated sustainable development needs of SIDS. In addition, the Conference looked to influence the United Nations Climate Summit and the Post-2015 Development Agenda through its outcome document, the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway (the Outcome Document).<sup>3</sup>

## I. PLENARY DISCUSSIONS

The Conference agenda allowed for Plenary Meetings to run alongside Multi-stakeholder Partnership Dialogues and Side Events each day. Plenary Meetings gave participants the opportunity to voice their hopes and concerns for SIDS. The small countries of the Realm of New Zealand (Niue, the Cook Islands and Tokelau) were present and visible at the Conference, taking and creating many opportunities for cooperation with other SIDS. For example, as a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand, Tokelau was not allotted speaking time in Plenary. However, the New Zealand Government invited the Government of Tokelau to speak in its place, with Aliki Faipule Kuresa Nasau, the Ulu of Tokelau taking the opportunity to briefly address the Plenary.<sup>4</sup> The Ulu highlighted Tokelau’s vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change, stressing that Tokelau is already seeing signs of coastal

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1 In Samoan terms, the number of attendees was vast. However, not all reports show the same number of attendees. This number has been taken from reports from the International Institute of Sustainable Development <<http://www.iisd.org>>.

2 The First International Conference on Small Island Developing States was held in Barbados in 1994. It focused on translating global sustainable development efforts into action for SIDS through the Barbados Programme of Action. The Second International Conference on Small Island Developing States was held in Mauritius in 2005. It focused on reviewing the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action.

3 Link to text of SAMOA Pathway can be found: <<http://www.un.org>>.

4 Link to text of address can be found: <<http://tokelau.org.nz>>.

erosion and ocean acidification. Despite Tokelau's relatively small global carbon footprint, the Ulu noted that Tokelau is still tackling climate change head-on through renewable energy work. He referenced Tokelau's transition from diesel-generated electricity to solar energy. Since 2012, solar panels have produced 90 per cent of Tokelau's electricity. He challenged SIDS collectively to agree on action going forward to address shared existential threats such as climate change.

As well as participating governments, others were invited to address the Plenary. John Ashe, President of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly took the chance to highlight the long and undulating journey toward sustainable development for SIDS to date. He stressed that, over time, SIDS have remained a "special case for sustainable development in view of their unique and particular vulnerabilities."<sup>5</sup> To address this challenge, Ashe stressed that "a propitious international environment that supports national efforts" and encourages partnership was vital in achieving a durable solution.

## II. THE SIDS OUTCOME DOCUMENT

The Outcome Document was unanimously adopted by the Conference Plenary. In the Outcome Document, States reaffirmed their commitment to the sustainable development of SIDS and expressly recognised that SIDS "remain a special case" when it comes to sustainable development. As such, the text emphasised the fact that although nationally-determined action is the best way forward, the "considerable efforts" of SIDS to date have not managed to overcome all challenges. Accordingly resources, cooperation and other support are required from the international community for progress on sustainable development.

The remainder of the Outcome Document covers a wide range of SIDS-specific issues including the effects of climate change, conserving biodiversity, sustainable transport and marine resource use, with a view to providing an accelerated pathway toward the durable development of SIDS.

## III. PARTNERSHIPS

In line with the Conference's theme, the Outcome Document's means of implementation is to encourage the use of North-South and South-South partnerships based on national ownership, transparency, mutual trust and accountability. Partnership is emphasised as "critical" for the sustainable development of SIDS. The Outcome Document envisages partnerships as being "of various kinds and across a wide variety of stakeholders". As such, the Conference hosted partnership dialogues parallel to plenary discussions

5 Remarks by John W Ashe, President of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States Apia, Samoa (1 September 2014) <<http://www.un.org>> at 2.

on six topics: sustainable economic development; climate change and disaster risk management; social development, health, youth and women; sustainable energy; oceans, seas and biodiversity;<sup>6</sup> and water and sanitation, food security and waste management. All accredited SIDS participants<sup>7</sup> were able to partake in the dialogues and were invited to work with other participants to strike innovative and concrete SIDS-specific partnerships to support the sustainable development of SIDS. By the close of the Conference, 297 existing and new SIDS-specific and SIDS-relevant partnerships had been registered with the Conference Secretariat.

Each of the six dialogues began by inviting countries to showcase results and share success stories with reference to the three pillars of sustainable development. For example, in the dialogue on sustainable economic development, countries were asked to explain how economic development was achieved through action that also balanced the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development. Sessions then considered these lessons and sought to apply them to new and emerging partnerships on the topic at hand.

Partnerships struck over the duration of the Conference were diverse geographically as well as in terms of participants and subject-matter. For example, a new partnership which was developed in the sustainable economic development sphere – the Tourism Resilience Partnership – brings together international and regional intergovernmental organisations with academic institutions to address risks and vulnerabilities affecting sustainable tourism in the Pacific.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, under the sustainable energy topic, the newly-struck Lighthouse Initiative between the International Renewable Energy Agency and the Marshall Islands aims to support the strategic uptake of renewable energy generation in SIDS.<sup>9</sup> The Partnership Platform on the SIDS 2014 website provides useful detail on all of the registered partnerships.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. SAMOA AS HOST

Samoa was commended by the international community for its hosting of the Conference. New Zealand ensured that enough beds were available for the large number of attendees by providing a cruise ship moored in the

6 Oceans have frequently featured on the international agenda this year e.g. the 45th Pacific Islands Forum Palau Declaration was entitled “The Ocean: Life and Future” <<http://www.forumsec.org>>.

7 Governments, international and regional organisations, multilateral institutions, civil society, UN organs, NGOs, private sector participated in what proved to be a relatively inclusive international conference.

8 The partners are the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR); the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO); the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP); Griffith University (Griffith Institute for Tourism and Climate Change Response Programme), Australia; and Lincoln University, New Zealand.

9 Since the Conference, a number of SIDS have signed on to be involved in the project. See <<http://www.sids2014.org>>.

10 <<http://www.sids2014.org>>.

harbour to supplement the capacity of local accommodation. The Samoan Government supported this move, extending the offer of free transport between hotels and the Conference to delegates who were staying on the ship.

Wu Hongbo, Secretary-General for the Conference, the International Labour Organisation and other governments, such as the New Zealand Government, were among those to praise Samoa for the Conference's success. To celebrate, Samoa declared 8 September a national holiday. As well as a successful Conference outcome, praise extended to the fact that particular effort had been made to extend a warm Samoan welcome to delegates. One such example is that of Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations being conferred the title of Tupua during a ceremony at Si'upapa Sale'apaga.<sup>11</sup> The ceremony involved Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi, the village of Sale'apaga, Conference delegates and international media. With the title of Tupua, Sale'apaga is now Ban Ki-moon's home village in Samoa.

## V. IMPLEMENTATION

Participants at the Conference called for robust mechanisms to be put in place to monitor implementation of the Outcome Document. Many SIDS had expressed concern that there had been a lack of follow-through on commitments made at previous conferences in Mauritius and Barbados and emphasised the need to make the most of the Outcome Document. Financing and technology transfer were also highlighted as vital for success. In his closing remarks, Wu Hongbo assured participants that the United Nations would actively support the implementation process.

First, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has been charged with monitoring the commitments, pledges and partnerships made in Apia. Reports on progress of implementation will be made to the General Assembly.

Second, the various organs of the United Nations will provide coordinated support to countries working to implement the Outcome Document through partnerships or otherwise. One example of such coordination can be found in what Helen Clark, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) told the *Samoa Observer*.<sup>12</sup> The UNDP is looking at how it can best support the implementation of the Outcome Document.<sup>13</sup> Helen Clark emphasised that country-specific thinking would take place in concert with the Pacific Islands Forum and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

Third, the United Nations will feed participants' concerns into preparations for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development that will be held in Addis Ababa in 2015.

11 Sale'apaga is in the Prime Minister's constituency of Lepa, an area badly affected by the 2009 earthquake and tsunami.

12 Clark had been in Apia for the Conference. She addressed the Plenary on 2 September 2014. Her speech can be found at: <<http://www.undp.org>>.

13 <<http://www.samoaoobserver.ws>>.

## VI. SIDS CONFERENCE SIDE EVENTS: LEADERS OF THE REALM MEETING

On the margins of the Conference, there were a variety of side events before, during and after SIDS. One such event was the First Meeting of the Leaders of the New Zealand Realm Countries (Leaders of the Realm Meeting) between Niue, the Cook Islands and Tokelau on 30 August 2014. Toke Tukufia Talagi, Premier of Niue; Henry Puna, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands; and Aliko Faipule Kuresa Nasau, Ulu of Tokelau and their officials met to discuss what the Realm of New Zealand means to each country. Although it was noted that the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau are all at different stages of development in terms of transition to full statehood, common problems could still be addressed through information sharing and dialogue. In particular, discussions highlighted the challenges faced by the countries in trying to participate at international meetings in their own right. It was agreed that efforts to continue to pursue membership in international organisations would continue. It was proposed that the next such meeting will coincide with the 50th anniversary celebrations in the Cook Islands in August 2015.

## VII. THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONFERENCE

Looking forward, the Conference aimed to influence the outcome of the Secretary-General's Climate Summit on 23 September 2014 (Summit) and the ongoing refinement of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. In both respects, SIDS hoped to have their unique vulnerabilities and needs reflected in any considerations and agreements.

### *A. Climate Change*

John Ashe's Plenary address at the Conference emphasised the programmed nature of the events. He reminded participants that the Conference would be followed by the Summit, a meeting offering "real prospects" to influence a new climate agreement. He noted that, in turn, the Summit was timed to take place just over one year ahead of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris in 2015, where it is hoped countries will finalise and sign a new, legally binding climate change agreement that is ambitious and effective. As part of a global call-to-arms against climate change, Ban Ki-moon invited heads of state and government, as well as business, finance and civil society representatives to the Summit in New York. Governments were invited to table ambitious national carbon reduction pledges.

Overall 100 heads of state and government attended the Summit, along with 800 representatives of business, finance and civil society. Addressing the Summit in his capacity as the Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States, Baron Waqa, President of Nauru highlighted the ambitious and

effective work done by SIDS in introducing renewable energy and energy efficiency targets. Emphasising the success of the Conference, Baron Waqa noted that over 100 partnerships on sustainable energy were registered. In light of the circumstances of SIDS, Baron Waqa urged Summit participants to take action. Also addressing the Summit, Enele Sosene Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu highlighted Tuvalu's commitment to renewable energy as cause for inspiration for other countries working to tackle climate change.

Work undertaken by SIDS at the Conference continued at the Summit. For example, the partnership between the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and the Marshall Islands on the Lighthouse Initiative was announced in an effort to increase ambition in combating climate change. IRENA has pledged to mobilise US\$500million to deploy solar, wind, hydro and geothermal energy production technology in SIDS over five years.

As the Chair of the Summit, Ban Ki-moon's summary<sup>14</sup> gives a good overview of discussions. Of particular interest to SIDS was the reaffirmation of a commitment to limit global temperature rise to less than 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels, vital in terms of sea level rise and the very existence of some Pacific islands in particular.

### *B. Post-2015 Development Agenda*

The Conference also aimed to feed SIDS' unique voices into the Post-2015 Development Agenda (Agenda) process. The Agenda seeks to reflect new development challenges and continue the work of the "Rio+20" United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The Agenda process will work to achieve a single development framework that seeks to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development. To do this, an intergovernmental process is underway to establish a set of Sustainable Development Goals that are universally applicable and far-reaching. New Zealand and SIDS have worked together to ensure that a standalone goal emphasising the importance of oceans to sustainable development survives the intergovernmental process. In the recent 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, SIDS such as Palau and Nauru stressed the importance of oceans to SIDS' economy and way of life.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The Conference was a success for Samoa, the Pacific and the wider SIDS community. As well as the good hospitality provided by Samoa, the Conference had concrete results. Overall, 297 partnerships seeking to solve issues of concern to SIDS were registered. As well as partnerships, the consensus and political goodwill generated in Apia will ensure SIDS' voices are heard and

14 Link to summary can be found here: <<http://www.un.org>>.

included in the context of global decision-making, particularly with regard to climate change and sustainable development. The next conference will likely take place in 2024. In the meantime, SIDS will undoubtedly continue to influence the international agenda on the issues that matter most to them.

