

## SIDS4 Highlights: Monday, 27 May 2024

The Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) began its proceedings in St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda, with a formal opening plenary followed by a general debate the rest of the day. Meeting under the theme, "Charting the course toward resilient prosperity," speakers from 33 countries shared their perspectives on the need for urgent action, including finance. Numerous side events were held through the day and evening.

### Opening

In a video address, King Charles III (UK) said islands are leading the way in tackling climate change, protecting biodiversity, and stewarding the global Ocean. He noted the potential for large investors to contribute to climate financing and highlighted the benefits of collaboration among SIDS. He called for bold action and said, "Your future is our future."

Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda Gaston Browne emphasized that SIDS face unprecedented global challenges, which they did not create. He said large-scale polluters bear responsibility for compensation and urged ending fossil subsidies. He highlighted the establishment of the Commission of Small Island States (COSIS) and the recent unanimous advisory opinion from the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), which affirmed the legal duty of state parties to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to mitigate climate impacts to protect the marine environment.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres called SIDS a "test case" for climate and financial justice, and urged every country to align with the 1.5°C climate targets. He emphasized the need for climate finance to double by 2025, and for significant contributions to the Loss and Damage Fund. He urged swift endorsement of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) to facilitate access to concessional financing and said, "SIDS can make an almighty noise together to deliver meaningful change to benefit the whole of humankind."

UN General Assembly (UNGA) President Dennis Francis (Trinidad and Tobago) noted the historic ITLOS ruling potentially creates an important basis for future climate jurisprudence. Noting less than 1.55% of total global overseas development assistance (ODA) between 2017 and 2021 went to SIDS, he underscored the importance of the MVI.

UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President Paula Narváez (Chile) observed that SIDS are home to 65 million people facing unique vulnerabilities to natural disasters and climate change, including sea level rise, but face substantial challenges in accessing climate finance, particularly for adaptation and loss and damage.

Samoa Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), said the global crises leave little room to maneuver, with SIDS facing unenviable decisions: choose recovery for today or development

for tomorrow. She said the threats to SIDS' development are so great they can only be diminished by a reinvigorated enabling environment.

Li Junhua, Conference Secretary-General, noting the fate of all nations is deeply intertwined, called on the global community to collaborate on the ambitious roadmap set out by the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS).

Rabab Fatima, Special Advisor for the Conference and Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and SIDS (OHRLLS), outlined their efforts to: mobilize resources to implement ABAS; build multi-stakeholder partnerships and leverage the private sector; and coordinate SIDS action across the UN system by networking national focal points with a view to mainstreaming ABAS.

Lutrell John, Youth representative, recalled the devastation caused by Hurricane Irma in 2017 and reported on the outcome of the SIDS Global Children and Youth Action Summit, held from 24 to 26 May 2024.

**Organizational Matters:** Delegates elected by acclamation Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, as President of the Conference. They also adopted the agenda ([A/CONF.223/2024/1](#)) and rules of procedure ([A/CONF.223/2024/2](#)) and elected Antigua and Barbuda as *ex officio* Vice-President and 14 countries as Conference Vice-Presidents: Cabo Verde, Morocco, Seychelles, India, Maldives, Philippines, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Italy, Malta, and the Netherlands. Sanita Pavļuta-Deslandes, Permanent Representative of Latvia to the UN, was appointed Rapporteur-General. Delegates then adopted the organization of work, including the establishment of subsidiary bodies, and other organizational matters ([A/CONF.223/2024/3](#)) and appointed Andorra, China, Grenada, Nigeria, Russia, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Togo, and the US to the Credentials Committee.

### General Debate

The general debate consisted of statements by heads of state and government representatives from SIDS as well as from partner governments. For the webcast of speakers' interventions, please see <http://webtv.un.org>

Many statements called for:

- ambitious climate action;
- rapid adoption and implementation of the MVI;
- reduction of SIDS debt burden and reform of international financial architecture, including the adoption of the Bridgetown Initiative;
- full operationalization and capitalization of the Loss and Damage Fund; and
- adoption of a quantified global goal for climate financing.

Wavel Ramkalawan, President, Seychelles, urged SIDS to stand united in their stances on key issues such as ambitious climate action, the Loss and Damage Fund, and the adoption of the MVI.

Mohamed Muizzu, President, Maldives, suggested it was time to reflect on what has been achieved by 30 years of conferences

and programmes. He called for strengthened and more coordinated support from all stakeholders.

Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine announced joining, on 27 May, the fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty initiative. She highlighted the need for a levy on maritime shipping to ensure this industry finally takes responsibility for climate pollution.

Salvador Valdés Mesa, Vice-President, Cuba, on behalf of the President, called for doubling of finance for adaptation.

Samoa, on behalf of AOSIS, said the time for serious climate action is now—“there is no time left for cat-and-mouse games.”

Cabo Verde Prime Minister Ulisses Correia e Silva pointed to a recent agreement Cabo Verde signed with Portugal to transform debt to climate and environmental financing, calling for political will, trust and joint work at global level to enable similar agreements.

Tuvalu Prime Minister Feleti Teo welcomed the coming UNGA special debate on sea level rise and urged making it a regular UNGA agenda item going forward.

Terrance Drew, Prime Minister, St. Kitts and Nevis, emphasized infrastructure as a cross-cutting issue, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) 25 by 25 initiative for increasing food security, and the negative impacts of extreme weather events on health.

Mark Phillips, Prime Minister, Guyana, noted his country’s Low Carbon Development Strategy 2030 and efforts to transform the agriculture sector for increased food security.

Rwanda Prime Minister Édouard Ngirente said SIDS have led and even outpaced many other countries in advancing the climate agenda, advocating for reforms of the financial architecture and development financing.

David Adeang, President, Nauru, stressed the issues of relocating vulnerable communities in exposed coastal areas and the sustainable use of critical metals contained within the seabed.

Philip Davis, Prime Minister, Bahamas, called for a new global tax treaty to be negotiated and for financial flows to be regulated to ease the crippling debt burden impeding many SIDS from fully developing their potential.

Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, Prime Minister, Timor-Leste, said developed countries only comply with international law “when it fits them” and appealed to SIDS to speak with one voice.

Siaosi Sovaleni “Hu’akavameiliku,” Prime Minister, Tonga, called for the MVI to be complemented by regional funding mechanisms.

Mark Brown, Prime Minister, Cook Islands, on behalf of the PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM, called for a starting target of USD 500 million in support for the new Pacific Resilience Facility.

Sahiba Ali gizi Gafarova, Speaker, National Assembly, Azerbaijan, on behalf of the President, said her country will host a SIDS Summit during the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change COP 29 and push for a COP 29 outcome that meets the needs of SIDS.

Vanuatu, on behalf of the PACIFIC SIDS, called for enhanced support for SIDS to integrate digital technologies and a more responsive UN framework for SIDS.

Botswana, on behalf of the GROUP OF LAND-LOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (LLDCs), stressed that LLDCs and SIDS share common challenges and together should harness synergies to amplify their collective voice on the global stage.

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA urged “moving from paper to people”: translating ABAS policies into tangible benefits, ensuring development assistance reaches SIDS faster, and projects that empower youth, women, local leaders, and communities. SAINT LUCIA hailed the unanimous ITLOS opinion.

GHANA, as Climate Vulnerable Forum Chair, committed to ensuring implementation of the Paris Agreement’s USD 100 billion annual climate finance target and Loss and Damage Fund.

The US underscored her country’s commitment to scale up international public climate finance to over USD 11 billion annually by 2024. FIJI mentioned that his country would have to relocate 250 communities by 2050 due to coastal erosion and

sea level rise. The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC emphasized the catastrophic effects of a warming ocean on island and coastal communities.

Jutta Urpilainen, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, recalled the European Union’s support of SIDS in climate negotiations and mentioned the importance of strengthening trade ties and involving the private sector in implementing ABAS.

JAMAICA announced her country’s intention to sign the UN agreement on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. SURINAME called for investment in SIDS human capital that furthers climate resilience. TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO said climate finance for SIDS is not charity, but “a moral imperative and a commitment under the Paris Agreement.”

Characterizing the 1994 Barbados Plan of Action as a template for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, BELIZE listed the ways he considered “SIDS have delivered” and showed leadership and asked other countries to also deliver and show leadership.

SINGAPORE announced a new technical package for SIDS, called “SIDS for Change,” which includes a new customized program for emerging issues like blue carbon and digitalization. MAURITIUS urged the Green Climate Fund and Global Environment Facility to establish a dedicated desk to support SIDS in preparing National Adaptation Plans.

Evelyn Wever-Croes, Prime Minister of Aruba, on behalf of KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS, announced enabling additional short-term technical assistance dedicated to SIDS on water management and climate adaptation and allocating EUR 2.1 billion in special drawing rights to provide additional concessional financing for SIDS.

TANZANIA commended the work of the high-level panel of the MVI and called for intensified support for SIDS, ensuring access to necessary resources, technology, and funding to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

### *In the Corridors*

Mixed feelings marked the opening of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States. The cultural presentation featured rhythmic drums, and brightly-costumed young dancers showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Antigua and Barbuda, while simultaneously capturing the urgency underlining the purpose of the conference: “We will give the youth of these nations a chance.”

While delegates were overheard appreciating the campus setting and beautiful islands of the host country, a deep sense of unease among the assembled diplomatic community was also palpable. Since the last Conference in 2014, the climate crisis has become an emergency and the existential threat long warned-of is now a daunting reality for many SIDS. With climate finance falling critically short of global commitments, one delegate noted, “You cannot pay your way out of climate annihilation.”

The speed at which the environment is deteriorating also led some delegates to question the sense of meeting only once a decade. “How many SIDS will still be here by 2034?” one frustrated observer pondered, pointing out that the proposed ten-year ABAS may be outdated in just a few years. Doubling the frequency of SIDS conferences and creating five-year plans to shorten the time horizon were mentioned by several delegates.

As the conference kicked into full swing with the general debate, and despite the outcome document having been agreed in advance, it remained to be seen how the upcoming interactive dialogues can help spur the implementation of the ABAS. Whether the many calls for faster and more effective action heard in the first day will cause any significant shifts at SIDS4 remains to be seen, but it is clear that the perspectives and voices of SIDS are growing in strength and urgency, and will continue to shape the international response to climate change and other environmental challenges.