

REVIEW ESSAY

Reflections on small island states and the international climate change negotiations (COP21, Paris, 2015)

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ABSTRACT: The latest and most significant round of multilateral climate negotiations (COP21) takes place in Paris (30/11 to 11/12/2015). Like other participants and signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, small island states have submitted contributions (INDCs) towards reducing emissions as a precursor to the creation of a post-Kyoto global emissions framework. This reflection outlines their contributions and examines the underlying dynamics of small island INDCs as they attempt to engage with the process of international negotiation. Preliminary findings confirm the need for small island states to be supported financially and technically by global institutional mechanisms in order to develop the capacity to deal with climate change.

Keywords: COP21, intended national determined contributions, small island developing states, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

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Introduction

The 21st Congress of the Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) takes place in Paris (30/11 to 11/12/2015). It is hoped that this hugely anticipated meeting will deliver a binding and universally accepted post-Kyoto emissions reduction framework beyond 2020 in the hope of keeping global temperature increase below the 2⁰C benchmark. Submission of national greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions targets will be the key aspect of these negotiations. As UNFCCC signatories, 195 countries agreed at the previous (COP20) meeting in Lima in 2014 to submit their targets for emissions reductions. In light of political sensitivities and the recognition of doing as much as is practicably possible within national capacities, what had been referred to as ‘commitments’ are now termed ‘intended national determined contributions’ (INDCs). This note focuses on INDCs and provides some flavour of how small island states have responded to this call for action.

The 2014 Lima Call for Climate Action reiterated the invitation to all parties to develop and communicate INDCs as their contributions,

... toward achieving the ultimate objective of Article 2 of the UNFCCC [for] ... stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system (UNFCCC, 2014).

The Lima COP requested that signatories submit their INDCs to the secretariat of the UNFCCC in the first quarter of 2015 in preparation for the Paris negotiations and in readiness for a new global climate agreement.

In preparing national documentation, the UNFCCC secretariat suggested a preferred format, which outlined the principles for each submission, as well as calls for transparency and clarity. Each INDC submission document was to include not only emission reduction commitments but also plans for adaptation, an outline of national circumstances, methodologies utilized and finally an indication of the scope (coverage/sectors) of any action. Significantly, and in light of previous tensions during negotiations, each submission should demonstrate how their contribution might be considered both fair and ambitious (UNFCCC: 2015). To date (30 October 2015), amongst the 196 parties and 165 signatories of the UNFCCC, 127 submissions have been made (UNFCCC, 2015).

Small Island State INDC submission themes

Amongst the total submissions, there have been a significant number from small island states such as the Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands, the Maldives, Samoa, Tonga, St. Lucia, Kiribati, Bahamas, Antigua and Barbuda, Comoros, Dominica and Grenada. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have been recognised by the United Nations, UNFCCC and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as amongst the most vulnerable countries in the face of the effects of climate change, in particular being subject to the immediate impacts of extreme weather events and increasing sea levels. In spite of their obvious limitations and the prospect of operating in the arena of international relations dominated by developed nations, island states, (and SIDS in particular), have been enthusiastic and conscientious contributors to the process thus far.

Whilst small island state engagement and commitment to climate change mitigation is subject to challenges, such as those mentioned above, it is also worth reminding ourselves that small island states have contributed little to the climate change problem. Their emissions have been negligible and reflect their levels of economic development and comparatively low populations. The contribution of the Solomon Islands, for example, to the global total of emissions is approximately 0.01% per annum; whilst the contribution of Dominica up to 2005 was practically nil (UNFCCC, 2015). In fact, any emissions on small island states are largely due to their reliance on the import of fossil fuels rather than large scale industrial activity or land use issues. To a degree, this fact is recognized in international environmental negotiations and subsequent agreements. A theme running through international environmental treaties since the 1970s has been the concept of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ which encapsulates the idea that, though climate change might be a global problem, there are obvious *culpable* parties (I use this term sparingly), and differing impacts and different capacities to engage in mitigation / adaptation. Without pointing the finger of ‘blame’ (another term of contention), some are more responsible for the climate change problem and some suffer more readily than others. At COP21, this will be dealt with in a number of ways through, in particular, the reference to what are considered ‘fair and ambitious’ mitigation commitments. Again, a glance at the small island INDCs suggests that, as a recurring theme in small island state submissions, the ‘fairness’ issue reemerges, framed as a combination of negligible emissions, the costs of adaptation and ambitious reductions.

The Lima meeting in 2014 (COP20) agreed that special provisions would apply to LDCs and SIDS, i.e. that their INDCs “may communicate information on strategies, plans and actions for low greenhouse gas emission development reflecting their special circumstances” (UNFCCC, 2014). In practice developed countries have included absolute or economy-wide emission reduction INDCs whilst LDCs (and SIDS) can draw on specific strategies, plans or projects to formulate their contributions. Furthermore, the notion of different responsibilities is dealt with through conditional and unconditional contributions whereby LDCs and SIDS are likely to specify the component of the contribution that would be conditional upon receiving international finance or other support. In the light of this dependency on conditionality a cursory reading of many SIDS commitments shows that they are heavily skewed towards adaptation strategies, characterized in many of their national climate change plans. This is hardly surprising, given their increasing and immediate vulnerability.

Island INDC overview

Preliminary analysis of submitted INDC¹ data suggest that, in spite of their size, their respective levels of economic development and their restricted capacities for action, SIDS have been ambitious in their declared intended contributions and their strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change. It is heartening to see their submissions reflecting their commitment to being full members of the international community and that, in many cases, the INDCs of SIDS are in direct proportion to the precariousness of their plight.

The examples below are illustrative and typical in scale, scope and intention of small island INDC submissions scrutinized. Pacific island states (like the Solomon Islands) and atoll nations (such as the Marshall Islands) facing existential catastrophe exacerbated by climate change, have submitted ambitious plans and reduction targets. Never has the notion of ‘accomplishment through joint effort’, the national motto of the Marshall Islands, been so appropriate. Their submission to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases to 32% below 2010 levels by 2025 and their intention to reduce their emissions to 45% below 2010 levels by 2030 should be given significant credit (UNFCCC, 2015). Similarly, the Solomon Islands has committed to reduce emissions by 12% below 2015 levels by 2025 and 30% below 2015 levels by 2030, compared to the ‘business as usual’ projection for 2015 (UNFCCC, 2015).

Having submitted their INDC, Trinidad and Tobago have focused on the power generation, transportation and industrial sectors, these being the major emitting sectors of the economy. The country has set a 30% reduction target for 2030 in comparison to ‘business as usual’ in 2013 (UNFCCC, 2015). In some cases, small island states have not given absolute figures for emission reductions. The island state of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea, Africa, one of the poorest signatories of the UNFCCC, and also most under threat from climate change, has committed to a range of schemes and policy initiatives which cumulatively would reduce emissions by 24% by 2030 compared to 2005 (UNFCCC: 2015). Kiribati submitted its INDC with telling honesty,

¹ INDC submissions are the basis of this note and provide the background to the Paris COP21 negotiations. Retrieved from <http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Submission%20Pages/submissions.aspx>

Kiribati is a LDC SIDS with limited resources, that will nonetheless commit to reduce emissions by 13.7% by 2025 and 12.8% by 2030 compared to a business as usual projection (UNFCCC, 2015).

In its submission, the archipelago state of Vanuatu makes no reference to absolute emissions but commits the country to 100% conversion to renewable fuels by 2030. As a final illustrative example, the Maldives - as one of the world's most threatened island chains – intends reducing unconditionally 10% of its GHG below 'business as usual' by the year 2030 (UNFCCC, 2015).

Many SIDS have submitted INDCs that have drawn attention to the challenges they face, particularly financial constraints and lack of technical capacity. Consequently, their INDCs are conditional upon the receipt of technical and financial support from global climate funds and the notion of conditionality is a significant feature of planned policy implementation. The contribution from the Maldives cited above suggests greater reduction in emissions (up to 30% of total) if support from the international community is secured (UNFCCC: 2015). Similarly, whilst the Marshall Islands considers its INDC as a full national commitment to be undertaken without preconditions, it makes the point that,

... the country is at present heavily reliant on external assistance for capacity and financial resources in key national sectors ...while longer-term national projections are uncertain, and private sector growth is imperative ... external assistance will continue to be important in achieving many national development objectives (UNFCCC, 2015).

Samoa commits to generating 100% of its electricity from renewable energy sources by 2025. This is conditional on Samoa receiving external assistance to maintain the contribution of renewable sources at 100% through to 2025. Required assistance includes human, technological and financial resources. Further, economy-wide emissions reductions are conditional on Samoa receiving external financing from the international community.

Conclusion

COP21 in Paris may prove to be a milestone in climate negotiations; and small island states can play their part in the global effort. Many SIDS may be drinking in the last chance saloon; yet they lead with ambitious proposals, significant reduction targets and adaptation. Hopefully, their example will prompt developed nations to pledge both similar reduction levels, and financial support for SIDS' much-needed climate adaption programs. Early scrutiny of SIDS' INDCs reveals major emission reductions contributions, emphasis on fairness and justice, and calls for financial aid. How will these play out during and after negotiations? We wait to see.

References

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