1.5 to Stay Alive: The Influence of AOSIS in International Climate Negotiations

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Introduction

Although the effects of climate change are already being felt across the globe, some countries are more vulnerable to climate impacts than others. Among the most susceptible are small, low-lying island nations who will be engulfed by the ocean in a mere few decades if climate change progresses at its current rate (UNFCCC 2014). Given the disproportionate impact and the small size of these island nations, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) serves as a single, unified voice to amplify the voices of small island developing states (SIDS) within United Nations (AOSIS 2018). AOSIS encourages developing nations to advocate for international climate action and to prioritize sustainable development (AOSIS 2015a, 3). This paper aims to analyze how AOSIS has been able to substantially influence international climate agreements and discusses ways to capitalize on the significant progress that AOSIS nations have made by further amplifying the voices of vulnerable nations in international climate policy conversations.

Background

While AOSIS lacks a formal charter, a budget, and a secretariat, the 44 member states have made a significant impact on international climate negotiations (AOSIS 2018). The progressive and ambitious voice of AOSIS nations in international climate conversations has been much stronger than might be expected based on the small population and size of the countries. The devastating threats that climate change poses to these nations, however, justify global concern. While the entire world is struggling to adequately adapt to and mitigate global climate change, small island nations are particularly vulnerable and underprepared (Rosales 2008: 1415). The vulnerability of AOSIS nations is complex and tied to multiple factors, including high levels of poverty, geographic locations that will experience especially severe climate shifts, and lack of resilient infrastructure (Nanda 2015: 131). Their unique and blatant vulnerability has allowed AOSIS nations to come together and speak with certainty, strength, and power. Climate change is a matter of life and death for AOSIS members, and their ability to band together for the sake of their own survival has been impressive and productive. However, there remain gaps in engagement and inclusion in international climate negotiations of some of the world's most vulnerable nations (Private Meeting 1, Private Meeting 2).

Developed nations are responsible for releasing 80% of the anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions since the industrial revolution, yet AOSIS nations and other developing countries are already bearing the greatest brunt of the impacts of climate change (Lithgow, 2017). Trends including decreasing precipitation, increasing temperatures, and increasing severity and frequency of extreme weather events are disproportionately impacting low-lying islands (Roy 2018: 1; Brock 2012: 5). Sea-level rise, ocean warming, acidification, and coral bleaching episodes also pose serious threats to islands' limited infrastructure, economies, and food sources, especially for communities living on low-lying atoll reef islands (UNFCCC 2005). The most serious threat to AOSIS nations is land lost due to sea level rise. The lowest-lying AOSIS members, including the Maldives, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and the Bahamas, will disappear completely if sea level rise continues at its current rate (AOSIS 2016). These populations are especially vulnerable to violent storms and sea level rise, and this susceptibility combined with limited access to resources and poor infrastructure is a recipe for not only environmental disaster, but social and economic devastation

as well (Brock 2012: 7, Nanda 2015: 131).

History of AOSIS Engagement in International Climate Negotiation

AOSIS was founded in 1990, two years before the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was drafted, with the aim of strengthening and amplifying the voices of member nations in order to influence more progressive environmental and sustainable development agendas involving the entire international community (AOSIS 2015a). AOSIS nations played a large role in establishing the UNFCCC itself; Article 4.8 of UNFCCC highlights the "specific needs and concerns of developing country Parties arising from the adverse effects of climate change … especially on: (a) Small Island countries; (b) Countries with low-lying coastal areas" (UNFCCC 1992). AOSIS advocacy was essential to inclusion of this language in the Convention, and they have continued to be incredibly vocal about their vulnerability and the need for progressive and drastic climate action in climate negotiations within the Convention since its ratification (AOSIS 2018).

Considering AOSIS nations' relatively small size, minimal wealth, and lack of international clout, they have had a disproportionately large impact on international climate policy (AOSIS 2018). This has been achieved largely through advocacy efforts to raise awareness of the devastating impacts of climate change that AOSIS nations experience. One of the most dramatic effects will be the disappearance of island nations because of sea level rise; many low-lying nations will soon be completely underwater if global warming and the resultant sea level rise progresses at the current rate (AOSIS 2018). The Maldives, one such nation facing the threat of disappearance due to sea level rise, held an underwater cabinet meeting in the lead-up to the Copenhagen conference in 2009 to illustrate the threat that climate change poses to their very existence (BBC 2009). This was largely a media stunt, but it was extremely effective as it garnered international attention and shone a spotlight on the Maldives ahead of the Copenhagen negotiations.

Despite discouraging amounts of progress within the UNFCCC throughout the 2000s, AOSIS nations kept fighting for increased recognition and greater international commitments to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Ambassador Dessima Williams, Grenada's Representative to the UN, led AOSIS nations in Copenhagen in meetings with over 120 heads of state, but developed and developing nations were unable to reconcile their differences in climate policy goals, and no legally binding agreement was signed despite high expectations (AOSIS 2015a, 7). Grenada's leadership extended into the 2010 Conference of the Parties (COP) in Cancún, Mexico, where AOSIS members helped to establish the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and secure a review process to strengthen the global goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels (Ourbak and Magnan, 2017). The COP held the next year in Durban, South Africa, was pivotal; with the major global economic powers split on how to navigate the disparity of emission reduction obligations between developed and developing parties, a compromise was achieved with the help of AOSIS two days into overtime (UNFCCC n.d.). This included two tracks called workstreams, with workstream 1 focusing on a comprehensive, long-term agreement to be signed at the Paris Conference in 2015 and workstream 2 focusing on the short-term emissions reductions that are necessary to protect especially vulnerable regions, including AOSIS member states (Ourbak and Magnan, 2017).

AOSIS's Influence on the Paris Agreement Negotiations

AOSIS nations had a huge presence at the COP in Paris and had a multitude of priorities that they tirelessly championed. First, they fought for the recognition of the SIDS's unique needs as nations that are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which is highlighted in the fifth paragraph of the Paris Agreement's preamble (UNFCCC 2015a). Within the agreement, SIDS are given special consideration, along with least developed countries, a number of times. Article 4.6 of the Paris Agreement states that, "The least developed countries and small island developing States may prepare and communicate strategies, plans and actions for low greenhouse gas emissions development reflecting their special circumstances" (UNFCC 2015a), which codifies the necessity of communication of AOSIS priorities and strategies within international climate action.

In addition to having special status due to their vulnerability, AOSIS nations asked for special financial consideration, especially for adaptation efforts. Their voices were heard, and Article 9 in the Paris Agreement specifically addressed

the specific financial needs of small island nations (Ourbak and Magnan 2017). This can be seen as a success not only for AOSIS nations, but for other developing nations that were included in the language of the agreement. Article 9.4 states that the "priorities and needs of developing country Parties, especially those that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and have significant capacity constraints, such as… small island developing States" (UNFCCC 2015a) ought to have specific financial support, and Article 9.9 states the necessity of "simplified approval procedures and enhanced readiness support for developing country Parties, in particular for… small island developing States" (UNFCCC 2015a). This financial consideration of especially vulnerable states due to their limited capacities was a huge victory for AOSIS nations. There is now legal recognition of the limited capacities that nations like AOSIS members have to deal with the effects of climate change, which is evident in Article 11.1 that highlights areas in which nations like those in AOSIS require the most assistance (UNFCCC 2015a). AOSIS advocacy was critical in the identification and inclusion of these areas in the agreement, and thanks to AOSIS efforts, there are comprehensive economic and social considerations for highly vulnerable nations codified in the language Paris Agreement (AOSIS 2015a, 24).

An additional contribution to the Paris Agreement that is largely due to AOSIS lobbying was the ambitious limit on warming to a 1.5 degrees Celsius increase from pre-industrial levels by the end of the century. Before COP21, AOSIS initiated a negotiating agenda item called the "structured expert dialogue" that culminated in a report supporting the 1.5-degree temperature target (Benjamin and Thomas 2016). AOSIS also coordinated efforts in support of the 1.5-degree goal from other vulnerable countries, including nations in Africa, Asia, and multiple Least Developed Countries. By the time the Paris Conference was held, there were over one hundred countries advocating for a 1.5-degree limit on global warming, the inclusion of which is one of the greatest successes of the Paris Agreement (Ourbak and Magnan 2017). These countries had to work against some of the largest, most powerful nations in the world who contribute the most to global emissions, which makes this victory even more impressive. Throughout the negotiations, AOSIS stressed the importance of a balanced outcome, with equal treatment to mitigation, adaptation, and reiterated the dire need to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius (AOSIS 2015a, 9). The slogan "1.5 to stay alive" highlights the absolute necessity of cutting GHG emissions and became a battle cry for AOSIS nations that eventually prompted change from a 2 degrees Celsius warming limit to a 1.5-degree limit (Benjamin and Thomas 2016), as codified in Article 2.1 of the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2015a). In addition to the goal stated in the Agreement, paragraph 21 of decision 1/CP21 "invites the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to provide a special report in 2018 on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways" (UNFCCC 2015b). This report has been leaked, and the projections from the draft make it clear that even warming limited to 1.5 degrees will have devastating international consequences, especially for low-lying island nations (Gabbatiss 2018).

AOSIS nations also fought tirelessly for losses and damages to be included in the Agreement, a provision which has been a focus of AOSIS nations since the 1990s. AOSIS nations want financial support from developing countries for the damages that climate change inflicts on them, especially in light of the fact that developed countries are largely responsible for global climate change (AOSIS 2015b). During the Paris negotiations, AOSIS nations helped to negotiate Article 8, dedicated entirely to loss and damage, which gives the COP authority to act within the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts (UNFCCC 2015a). Decision 1/CP.21 builds upon this, although paragraph 58 of the decision "agrees that Article 8 of the Agreement does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation" (UNFCCC 2015b). Paragraph 58 in conjunction with the lack of clear mechanisms to facilitate payment for losses and damages reduces the success of the inclusion of the losses and damages language in the decision and in Article 8. Despite this, the Paris Agreement strengthens the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage, and the decision attached to the Agreement establishes a task force tasked with "develop[ing] recommendations for integrated approaches to avert, minimize and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change" (UNFCCC 2015b). Without the efforts of AOSIS members, it is likely that losses and damages would not be included at all in the language of the Agreement or the decision (AOSIS 2015a).

Current Challenges for AOSIS Nations

The IPCC special report on 1.5 degrees of warming, which created international media waves upon its publication in

October 2018, specifically highlights the inequities in the distribution and severity of the effects of climate change and the gravity of the disaster that global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels will bring (IPCC 2018). According to the report, if a 1.5-degree Celsius global temperature increase occurs, those "experiencing multidimensional poverty, persistent vulnerabilities, and various forms of deprivation and disadvantage" (IPCC 2018, Gabbatiss 2018) will be most severely impacted, and small island nations were underscored as being a particularly vulnerable group (Darby 2018). Unfortunately, the world is on track to reach 1.5 degrees of temperature change as early as 2030 even if the commitments outlined in the Paris agreement are met (IPCC 2018; Lithgow 2017; Mooney 2016). Significant and institutional behavior change and effective multilateral governance will be necessary to have adequate adaptation and mitigation efforts, and with current climate governance and policy, it is likely that global warming will exceed 2 degrees. The Paris Agreement certainly legitimizes the necessity of climate mitigation and adaptation, but there is limited time for climate action and the Paris Agreement does not promote change at the sufficient scale and speed to avoid climate disaster, especially considering the vulnerability of AOSIS members (Clemencon 2016: 3).

One key component of effective climate negotiations is the inclusion of diverse voices in decision making. Today, there is rampant inequity in the power and representation of different groups in climate negotiations. Back in 2001, United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) Executive Director Klaus Toepher released a report which stated that developing countries carry a particularly heavy burden within the framework of current climate governance (Nanda 2016: 135), and while AOSIS nations have been incredibly vocal, there remains work to be done in regard to the inclusion and engagement of small nations that are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Many developing countries, including some AOSIS nations, lack the resources to fully participate in the development of new international norms and policies, and there is currently no framework to enhance their capacity to have meaningful participation in the development of climate policy or implement and monitor agreements at the national level (Private Meeting 2 2018). Furthermore, there is no existing framework that will help developing nations establish the technical power necessary to participate in the development of or enforce climate policy (Nanda 2016: 135). These limitations pose insurmountable barriers for small countries with limited financial resources and preclude them from having their needs heard at the international level.

Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), such as the Paris Agreement, compose a particularly significant area in which small countries with limited financial resources struggle to fully participate. The differing locations of secretariats for conventions and venues for COPs make it difficult for small countries with limited budgets to send representatives (Private Meeting 1 2018), which poses challenges for implementation and participation in policymaking. There are also challenges for smaller countries like AOSIS nations in terms of compliance; the national reports required by MEAs are often so burdensome that they are submitted late, if at all (Nanda 2016: 136; Private Meeting 1 2018). These challenges are difficult to grapple with because they arise as a result of limited resources. Participation, engagement, and implementation is expensive, and small, developing countries frequently lack the financial resources to have their voices heard.

The power disparity between developed and developing nations has not gone unrecognized, and there are concerted efforts to include traditionally marginalized voices in international climate negotiations. The UN General Assembly adopted implementation measures for strengthening and upgrading the UNEP after the 2012 Rio Conference. These new measures established universal membership in UNEP's Governing Council and requested UNEP support to developing countries for their full participation in Governing Council meetings (Nanda 2015: 150). Current efforts are also being undertaken to strengthen UNEP's financial resources by requesting more money from the regular UN budget and encouraging donations. While these reforms are certainly a step in the right direction, they ultimately will not be enough to encourage the requisite response to climate change and will have limited impact on the inclusion of countries that bear the greatest burden of climate change (Nanda 2015: 150). Many of these issues surrounding disparities in engagement were addressed by the Paris Agreement, which indicates significant progress in the inclusion and engagement of countries like those that are members of AOSIS, but more progress is necessary (AOSIS 2015b).

Policy Recommendation

One way to include and amplify the voices of those disadvantaged, disproportionately impacted countries while also curbing GHG emissions would be the implementation of national carbon pricing systems that allocate a portion of the revenue towards especially vulnerable nations. Carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions make up over 80 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions (Chen and Hafstead 2016), and increasing the price of fossil fuel combustion through a carbon price would disincentive this method of energy production. Experts are looking towards carbon pricing to reduce carbon footprints, especially in developed countries that are responsible for the greatest proportion of carbon emissions (Carbon Tax Center 2018). A carbon tax of $75 per ton in developed countries and $35 per ton in other countries could decrease carbon emissions by up to 5.6 metric gigatons, which would bring the world approximately 20 percent closer to bridging the emissions gap between what is currently emitted and the emission levels that are necessary to avoid the worst impacts of climate change (Nunez 2016).

While carbon pricing programs have received criticism for increasing the costs of energy for citizens, the costs of addressing the effects of climate change are projected to be astronomical. Carbon pricing will likely have a small negative impact on national economies that implement them (simulations predict the loss of a fraction of a percent of the annual GDP in the United States under a carbon tax, for example) (Chen and Hafstead 2016: 12), but the addressing damages, lost business, and overall economic slumps following natural disasters already cost billions of dollars a year (UNFCCC 2014). These costs will only continue to increase as climate change intensifies and natural disasters and extreme weather patterns get more severe. Despite this, the idea of a carbon pricing is politically charged in many countries, and there is often significant pushback from businesses and individual citizens alike (Chen and Hafstead 2016: 3). However, countries that have already implemented carbon pricing have seen great success in emissions reductions and still have thriving economies (Carbon Tax Center 2018). Denmark, for example, has had a carbon tax since 1992, and its emissions decreased by 15 percent between 1990 and 2005 (Nunez 2016). Sweden also has a carbon tax, and the Swedish government estimates that the nations emissions would have been at least 20 percent higher than they were in 2000 if they had not implemented a carbon tax in 1991 (Nunez 2016).

The aforementioned examples are carbon taxes implemented in similar, wealthy Northern European countries, but carbon pricing systems make sense for other countries as well, and can differ depending on the specific needs of any given country. Carbon pricing will generate revenue while also reducing CO_2 emissions; this revenue could be used for a number of things, including subsidizing renewable energy or funding national welfare programs (Private Meeting 2 2018). However, in order to engage disadvantaged countries like AOSIS nations that frequently have difficulty attending negotiations and conferences and need financial assistance to adapt to climate change, a portion of the revenue from carbon taxes ought to go to a separate fund to finance these disadvantaged and disproportionately impacted nations. If this were to happen, the benefits of a carbon tax would be two-fold for these nations like AOSIS members; overall CO_2 emissions would be reduced (thus decreasing the speed at which global climate change occurs), and there would be increased funding directed towards facilitating representation and adaptation assistance for the countries that need it the most in order to adapt to a problem that they contributed very little to (AOSIS 2015b). The challenges to practically implementing national carbon pricing systems that would feed into this kind of fund cannot be underestimated. There would likely need to be a body responsible for overseeing the various national taxes or pricing systems and allocating resources within the development fund appropriately, and the issue of political will within individual countries remains a powerful disincentive. Despite this, carbon pricing is certainly possible, and the long-term benefits can be quantified as billions of dollars annually, not to mention the social costs of forced migration, drought, famine, and poor health (UNFCCC 2014). However, time is of the essence. For the United States, waiting until 2020 to implement an economy-wide carbon tax to meet the US's 2025 emission targets increases the costs of implementation by 12 percent compared to implementing the tax in 2017; the longer countries take to implement a carbon tax, the costlier implementation will be if they eventually decide to do it (Chen and Hafstead 2016: 3).

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that many groups that are not AOSIS members will also be disastrously impacted by climate change, including indigenous nations and many countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia that are already experiencing devastating droughts, food shortages, and unprecedented desertification. These groups have similar financial and technical obstacles to adapting to climate change as AOSIS nations, yet they lack the

powerful advocacy and organization of AOSIS members. These groups and countries might be able to learn from AOSIS actions, because although climate change will not result in the disappearance of their land from sea level rise, it will result in social and economic collapse if drastic action is not taken soon (UNFCCC 2016). These disproportionately impacted groups ought to have the same bargaining power in international climate negotiations that AOSIS members have, but this power can only be achieved with funding to allow for sustainable development, adaptation methods, and meaningful participation in climate negotiations.

While the AOSIS nations have had a substantial influence on climate negotiations, current climate mitigation and adaptation efforts are not enough to ensure the long-term survival of these nations. Acknowledging this is essential, and expanding the purview of these disproportionately impacted countries is equally important. AOSIS is a powerful alliance, but without adequate funding, their advocacy cannot lead to the results needed to avoid the disastrous impacts of climate change. While AOSIS members continue to champion climate action through the lens of SIDS, developed countries have a responsibility to listen and respond appropriately. Alliances like AOSIS organize vulnerable nations to clearly advocate for what they need in order to survive in the face of climate change, and developed nations have the technical and financial capacity to deliver on the vast majority of the requests of these nations – what is missing is political will from developed nations (Private Meeting 3 2018; Private Meeting 4 2018). Climate change is everyone's struggle, but it will have the most pronounced impact on nations who contribute the least to its causes. This means that those who contribute the most have a moral responsibility to help, to the best of their ability, with emission reductions and financial and technological support to those nations that are on the frontlines of climate disaster. That the United States, one of the world's largest GHG emitters, has pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement is reprehensible, and the United States and other heavy-emitting developed countries must use their power, influence, technological capacities, and wealth for good (Clemencon 2016: 3). That starts with investing in climate adaptation and mitigation. While the Paris Agreement was a monumental turning point in international climate change policy, more must be done to avoid the worst impacts of climate change (AOSIS 2015b). AOSIS contributions to international climate policy are proof of the influence that these vulnerable nations can have if they have the resources to mobilize, and their contributions illustrate the fact that listening to, engaging with, and empowering those most severely impacted must be a cornerstone of global governance of climate change now and in the future.

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