International Conference

"Enhancing Climate Diplomacy in a Changing Political Environment"

Focus Region: The Pacific Islands

Located within the South-Eastern hemisphere, the Pacific Islands region (often referred to as the Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS)), is geographically vast, and made up of small islands including: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Maldives. Climatically speaking, it is the most vulnerable and disaster-prone area in the world; being subject to: cyclones, tsunamis, floods, flash floods, tidal surges, high tides, droughts, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, extreme heat waves, inconsistent rainfall patterns and epidemics as well as overall global sea level rises. Additionally, the region is confronted with accelerated negative impacts of climate change and faces increased environmental degradation.

Main Environmental Challenges

Two major barriers are the islands' **small size** and **geographical isolation**. For example, the smallest island, Nauru is roughly 21 square kilometres (1/2 the size of the Vatican City). These characteristics not only underline their vulnerability to natural disasters caused by climate change, but consequently results in direct and indirect challenges.

A first **direct challenge** includes **sea-level rise** and **fresh water scarcities**. Estimated impacts of sea-level rise on Pacific Islands' coastal communities are quantified to approximately 77,000 km of shoreline affected; with direct costs of 1.5 million USD per year at the sub-regional level. Sea-level rise along with declined average rainfall will also contribute to further declines in the size of islands. This will create additional repercussions such as reduced fresh water lens by as much as 29%. For example, climate models indicate a 10% reduction in Kiribati's average rainfall by 2050, which will likely reduce their freshwater lens by 20%. Water resources also lend to huge economic losses. With the current projected 2 to 4-degree temperature increase, the region can expect up to 1 billion USD in damages in water resources alone. A second direct challenge involves the **degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity**. Biodiversity within the Pacific Island region has been under immense stress with the rapid, intensified rates of climate change. Many of the region's ecosystems are unique for specific reasons to balance and sustain the land. Declining soil fertility and reduced land has led to a diminishment of these needed areas. For instance, mangroves are expected to decline by 1-13% which act as a natural blockade for winds and floods from storms (i.e. tsunamis and hurricanes). Moreover, the associated 2-4-degree temperature increase and tropical cyclone intensities in the north-west Pacific are expected to rise by 12-15% and average rainfall by 12-28%.

As a result, a number of **indirect challenges** become inevitable. Firstly, **energy** will become a scarce resource in the region. With 70% of households not having access to electricity, this has fostered mounting rates of poverty and inadequate livelihood. This is primarily due to the region holding the highest costs for electricity generation in the world, and its high dependency on oil. For example, Fiji's oil imports accounted for approximately 14% of the country's GDP in 2010. However, with global oil prices rising, it places vast pressure on these nations. In addition, ripple effects of land degradation will lead to a decrease in exports on **agricultural** products, and subsequently an increased dependency on imported foods in upcoming decades. This in combination with inadequate investment in agriculture has and will prompt further economic downfalls for citizens. Furthermore, due to geographical positioning of this region, an initial **limited economy** of scale has increasingly created diminished market access.

High costs in transportation to get goods to and from these regions (especially during or post-storm times) is therefore a large economic factor. This has led to mass labour migration (i.e. away from reduced agricultural sector) resulting in shortages of skilled and educated citizens as well as an overall decrease in productivity and employment. Lastly and directly linking all issues, has been an **increase of urban growth** in this region. This is mainly due to rapid losses of coastal land to the ocean, creating concentrated masses. However, some cities for these islands have inadequate infrastructure and housing which poses severe threats to livelihood and survival, as devastating storms are occurring more frequently.

Main Security Threats

The described pressures caused by climate change influences resource competition, while placing additional burdens on economies, societies, and institutions. These effects are threat multipliers that will aggravate stressors such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, and social tensions — conditions that can enable **terrorist activity, piracy and other forms of violence**. Climate-related disasters can affect regional security and lead to local conflicts over limited resources such as food and water. For those Pacific island nations under existential threat, there is a critical need to manage the **security aspects of human migration and displacement**, such as the legal and economic aspects of the pending loss of nationality and sovereign rights to natural resources. **Transnational crime** represents another security challenge, as many pacific states – especially the small islands – lack the capacity to patrol the immense waters surrounding them, impacting their ability to fight criminal networks dealing in drugs and arms. Furthermore, a lack of marine patrolling capacity can also influence the **illicit exploitation of natural resources**, including illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Lastly, coastal flooding and heatwaves can disable military infrastructure, thus undermining defence preparedness and sustainment.

Ongoing and planned initiatives in the region

Platform on Disaster Displacement

A platform aiming at the implementation of the Protection Agenda, which was presented to the international community in October 2015 in Geneva and was adopted by 109 states, as a result of the Nansen Initiative. It lists measures and effective practices ('tool box approach') in relevant areas including disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and humanitarian action.

Asia Pacific Adaptation Network (APAN)

Equips government officials and key actors with critical knowledge to design climate change adaptation measures, access finance and technologies and build capacity to integrate climate change adaptation into national development policies. The APAN is run under the Global Adaptation Network, one of the UN Environment's largest initiatives on climate change adaptation.

Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change (PACC)

The Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change (PACC) Programme is the first major climate change adaptation initiative in the Pacific region. Funded by GEF and the Australian Government, with UNDP as its implementing agency and SPREP as implementing partner, it deals with food production and security; coastal and water resource management.

SIDS Action Platform

Administered by the UN, this represents ambitious commitments made by 115 SIDS leaders to reinforce international recognition of SIDS as a special case for development. The SIDS Partnership Framework will encourage, monitor and ensure the full implementation of SIDS partnerships pledges and commitments.