

Small Island Developing States Drive a Green Post-COVID-19 Recovery Agenda

Athulla A. Rasheed

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Despite the impact of the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, the existential threat of climate change for small island developing states (SIDS) remains. This has made SIDS step up in climate meetings to promote a green post-COVID-19 recovery agenda to ensure climate action remains at the forefront of international policymaking. Their main idea is to link economic stimulus and recovery with climate action under the Paris Agreement. Some governments across developed and developing countries have independently incorporated climate-friendly activities in their COVID-19 [stimulus packages](#). SIDS have argued that this green recovery approach can strengthen the international community's collective commitment to Paris targets.

International collective action has often been challenged by larger players' independent policy preferences despite what has been prescribed in climate conventions. However, SIDS have for decades collectively influenced international decisions, notably through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), by highlighting their unique vulnerabilities and the need for international collective action to curb climate change (Rasheed 2019). As the pandemic has progressed, AOSIS members have continued their international advocacy to focus on climate action along with governments' COVID-19 recovery planning.

AOSIS in pre-COVID-19 negotiations

[In November 1989](#), 14 SIDS representatives — including ministers from Antigua and Barbuda, Cyprus, Fiji, Kiribati, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, and Vanuatu — met at the Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise in Malé, the capital city of the Maldives, to discuss their common climate concerns. The outcome of the Malé conference led to the creation of AOSIS. AOSIS had extraordinary success in pursuing SIDS' common voice in the United Nations (UN) negotiations leading up to the 1994 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC incorporated AOSIS's key objectives around the recognition of SIDS' unique vulnerabilities, the need for international cooperation and the provision of international meetings, including the Conference of Parties (COP), to ensure continuity of negotiations on climate action.

AOSIS continued lobbying for climate action in subsequent COPs including the 1997 Kyoto, 2009 Copenhagen and 2015 Paris negotiations. Despite reservations from larger players in the Kyoto process, AOSIS was able to generate momentum for collective action to respond to the special circumstances facing SIDS. In Copenhagen, there were intense differences between the United States and large developing states in the G77 and China group (particularly around emissions reduction targets and state responsibilities). Although this meeting's outcome did not satisfy everyone equally, AOSIS has seen it as a platform for establishing a countervailing narrative on the climate change vulnerability of SIDS. In Paris, AOSIS presented SIDS' collective interests on setting 1.5°C as the emissions reduction target. Although the [Paris Agreement](#) did not set 1.5°C as a formal emissions reduction target, the mere mention of 1.5°C in the Paris Agreement was nevertheless perceived as a success (Rasheed 2019:227–28). AOSIS's engagement in climate negotiations has helped to gain recognition of SIDS' concerns in the COP process during this period. AOSIS members want to keep this momentum, and diplomatic success, alive in driving their climate agenda during COVID-19, and beyond.

AOSIS's efforts during COVID-19 and recovery

AOSIS convened the Placencia Ambition [Forum](#) during 20–22 April 2020 to maintain SIDS' climate dialogue through COVID-19. The forum was hosted virtually by Belize as the chair of AOSIS. This meeting brought together progressive climate negotiators including Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres, high-level climate champions including Gonzalo Muñoz from Chile and Nigel Topping from the United Kingdom (UK), Director of Health and Climate Diarmid Campbell-Lendrum from the World Health Organization, incoming COP 26 President Alok Sharma from the UK, and civil society representatives. AOSIS's main aim was to build agreement among negotiators around further strengthening climate action as governments embarked on the COVID-19 agendas of stimulus and recovery. The AOSIS chair declared that the health and climate crises revealed 'our collective

vulnerabilities to systemic shocks', and that international cooperation was required to tackle the dual crises.

Pacific SIDS have used collective diplomacy since the 1970s within the South Pacific Forum (later renamed the Pacific Islands Forum), to advocate for and advance their interests (Fry 2019). Consistent with views held among the wider AOSIS membership, Pacific Island countries argue that COVID-19 has created an opportunity to build back a post-pandemic 'Blue Pacific'. Representing 12 Pacific SIDS at the Placencia Ambition Forum, Ambassador Satyendra Prasad from Fiji argued that COVID-19 had had a significant impact on their capacity to tackle development and climate challenges, and that there was a need for broader efforts at international level to address a climate-based COVID-19 recovery.

Building international momentum as the way forward

The 'green recovery' idea is evident not only in SIDS' policy advocacy. In the Placencia Ambition Forum, [Secretary-General Guterres](#) urged the international community to '[commit] now to building back better from the pandemic, [so] we can use the recovery from the effects of COVID-19 to secure a more sustainable and resilient future'. Such ideas are present in individual government stimulus packages. For example:

- [Japan's](#) 'Platform for Redesign 2020' supports sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19.
- [Germany's](#) stimulus package includes a US\$45 billion 'Package for the Future' supporting measures for a 'green' transition.
- [Nigeria's](#) COVID-19 stimulus package includes spending US\$619 million on solar home projects.
- [South Korea's](#) 'New Deal' accounts for US\$48 billion in 'green' funding which is 16 per cent of the total stimulus.

With such efforts underway, it was not difficult for AOSIS members to further encourage debate on green responses to the dual crises at the COP meetings. Speaking at the forum, COP 26's incoming president [Sharma](#) from the UK also recognised the need for keeping a clear focus on climate action. He urged forum participants to support collective action on 'a green and resilient [COVID-19] recovery' based on 'a credible and ambitious nationally determined contribution (NDC)' under the Paris Agreement.

The subsequent Petersberg Climate [Dialogue](#), co-hosted by Germany and the UK (as incoming COP 26 chair), was held back-to-back with the Placencia Ambition Forum in April 2020. It focused on 'designing [COVID-19] stimulus programmes that will facilitate a more committed climate policy in future'. More than 30 climate ministers and high-level climate negotiators at the dialogue recognised the success of AOSIS's forum in driving climate discourse despite the challenges facing COVID-19 recovery efforts. Notably, the dialogue focused on enhanced

NDCs (nationally determined contributions), in [Chile's](#) words, as 'the blueprints for designing recovery strategies'. As [studies](#) have argued, the compound of challenges caused by the dual crises also supports the idea of updating NDCs in the context of recovery and ultimately pulling international collective action on both crises in the same direction.

The momentum for a sustainable and inclusive COVID-19 recovery has been established among major emitters. In their November 2020 Summit, [G20](#) Leaders declared their support for an environmentally sustainable economic recovery. Before the pandemic hit, AOSIS had influenced international collective action on climate action. Now in the midst of the pandemic, AOSIS members have successfully influenced international thinking about a green COVID-19 recovery, particularly towards creating common policy discourse for the upcoming COP 26 this year.

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Author notes

Athaula Rasheed is a PhD Candidate at the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs.

Endnotes

1. AOSIS comprises member states from African, Indian and South China seas, the Caribbean plus the Pacific Ocean, with four observer states (including Guam and American Samoa). Pacific members are Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. AOSIS was created 30 years ago, as an ad hoc body, to drive small island developing states' common climate agenda in the United Nations' climate negotiations.
2. Fiji spoke on behalf of the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Palau, Solomon Islands, the Kingdom of Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

References

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