



Biodiversity loss, natural disasters and Small Island Developing States

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Small Island Developing States, also known as SIDS, are arguably among the most vulnerable states to climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental crises. They are microcosms for the large-scale loss of biodiversity being felt by the rest of the world as they are often biodiversity “hotspots” where flora and fauna have been evolving in isolation for millions of years. It was this vulnerability that led to the adoption of the Programme of Work on Island Biodiversity (PoWIB) under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Brazil in March 2006. It was here that the Conference of the Parties (COP) adopted Decision VIII/1 which aimed to reduce island biodiversity loss by 2010. However, in 2013, despite noticeable progress we seem to be further from the goal than ever before.

This article argues that there is a continued need for more support from developed states to support SIDS both financially and through the provision of technical support. This article considers the importance of biodiversity protection in SIDS in the context of the recent cyclone “Evan” which hit the small Pacific island nation of Samoa late last year. It will highlight the importance of biodiversity protection in providing resilience and adaptability to natural disasters, to which SIDS are particularly vulnerable, especially in the face of climate change.

CBD COP 11

COP 11 was held in Hyderabad, India from 8 - 19 October 2012 and resulted in the adoption of 33 decisions. Of greatest significance for SIDS was the decision (UNEP/CBD/COP/11/3) regarding the review of the PoWIB and the agreement to aim to increase international funding for biodiversity in general.

The agreement to set an interim target to double international funding to developing states and countries with economies in transition by 2015 and at least maintaining this level until 2020 is likely to provide continued support to SIDS in terms of implementing the CBD if those commitments are indeed honoured.¹ This commitment was coupled with targets to improve the robustness of baseline data and preliminary reporting framework for monitoring resource mobilization.²

International funding was always going to be a major part of the negotiations at COP 11 considering the ambitious nature of the Aichi Targets. The Aichi Targets include 20 targets agreed at COP10 in Nagoya in October 2010. These targets form the framework for biodiversity conservation over a 10

¹ International Institute for Sustainable Development (22 October 2012) *CBD COP 11 Concludes in India, Adopts Decision on Island Biodiversity*

<http://sids-l.iisd.org/news/cbd-cop-11-concludes-in-india-adopts-decision-on-island-biodiversity/>

² International Institute for Sustainable Development (22 October 2012) *Summary of the Eleventh Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity: 8-19 October 2012*, Earth Negotiations Bulletin Reporting Services, Vol. 9 No. 595

year timeframe until 2020. The funding negotiations at COP 11 were intense but fortunately resulted in a good outcome for SIDS in that developed states pledged their continued financial support for implementation of the obligations under the CBD.³ However, the real challenge is ensuring all the pledges by developed states are honoured.

Whilst resource mobilization was a pivotal consideration at the COP 11, the meeting was also particularly important for SIDS as delegates considered the in-depth review of the PoWIB. The review was conducted by the Convention's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) in May 2012 at the 16th session of the SBSTTA in the lead up to COP 11.⁴ The six priority areas for PoWIB's implementation included invasive alien species eradication, climate change adaptation and mitigation, marine protected areas, capacity-building, access and benefit-sharing; and poverty alleviation.⁵ In the decision on island biodiversity, COP 11 urged Parties to strengthen implementation of the programme of work by promoting high-level regional commitments, expanding mechanisms to strengthen local capacity, and maintaining key databases and information portals.⁶

Cyclone "Evan" - Samoa as a case study

"Nature protects if she is protected" was the theme for the 11th COP to the CBD. This poignant phrase is particularly relevant in the context of SIDS and their vulnerability to natural disasters. The importance of continued financial and technical support for CBD implementation is demonstrated by Samoa's recent cyclone, "Evan", in December 2012. This small Pacific island state experienced one of the worst cyclones in many years and was an ever present reminder of the importance of biodiversity in ensuring a quick recover from such disasters.

David Sheppard of South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) which is based in Apia, Samoa stated, biodiversity is the cornerstone of life in the Pacific... and it is essential for the livelihoods of the Pacific people.⁷ Of particular importance are the ecosystem services biodiversity provides for small islands, including the provision of clean water, fresh air, food and shelter, medicines and resilience to climate change and associated increased threats from natural disasters. SIDS are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters given their relative size, locations and reliance on ecosystems services. These factors also make it difficult for SIDS to recover quickly from the effects of natural disasters and often means the effects are felt long after the event.

More than half of the 25 disaster-prone islands in the world are classified as SIDS and because many of these nations rely heavily on biodiversity for subsistence,⁸ the need for biodiversity protection has never been greater. A single natural disaster event can devastate ecosystems especially where there is already pre-existing deterioration from overexploitation and pollution. The environment and the natural disasters are inherently linked; environmental degradation affects natural ecosystem

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 1

⁵ Ibid. 2

⁶ International Institute for Sustainable Development (5 May 2012) SBSTTA 16 Adopts Recommendations on Marine and Coastal Biodiversity, Island Biodiversity
<http://sids-l.iisd.org/news/sbstta-16-adopts-recommendations-on-marine-and-coastal-biodiversity-island-biodiversity/>

⁷ Sheppard, David (2012) *What COP 11 means to the Islands*
http://www.islandsbusiness.com/islands_business/index_dynamic/containerNameToReplace=MiddleMiddle/focusModuleID=20421/overrideSkinName=issueArticle-full.tpl

⁸ Briceno, Salvano (2009) *The Impacts of Natural Disasters on the Biodiversity of Small Island States*, International Journal of Island Affairs, pp.29-34

processes and reduces the ability to provide ecosystem services and reduces the resilience to natural disasters.⁹ Whilst millions are spent on natural disaster response and prevention strategies in SIDS there is insufficient recognition of the role that biodiversity conservation can play in disaster mitigation and recovery. Biodiversity conservation through the implementation of the CBD could provide a complementary tool to traditional natural disaster strategies.

Unfortunately, Samoa and other SIDS can only do so much to reduce their susceptibility to increased natural disasters in the face of developed countries continued release of greenhouse gas emissions and its associated effects. However, biodiversity protection at a national and regional level is pivotal in ensuring recovery and resilience to such events.

Conclusion

Unfortunately Samoa's story in respect of cyclone "Evan" is becoming increasingly common. Disasters are only likely to increase in frequency and severity as the effects of climate change become more apparent. COP 11 demonstrated that countries do see biodiversity protection as a priority particularly for SIDS, which support some of the most endangered species and some of the most unique, pristine and beautiful environments in the world. Whether COP 11 was a success for SIDS is dependent on whether developed states actually do provide the doubling of funding for implementation of the CBD as they have promised. However, it was successful in the sense that it provided the continued recognition of the importance of protecting these vulnerable states.

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⁹ *ibid.*