



ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Permanent Mission of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations

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Statement

By

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At the

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Small Island Developing States (SIDS)**

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In 1967, the then-Secretary General of the United Nations gave voice to the concerns of large nations and great powers regarding the place of small and island states in international affairs. Identifying so-called ‘microstates’ like Nauru by name, the Secretary General stated “*it appears desirable that a distinction be made between the right to independence and the question of full membership in the United Nations.*” He fretted that the participation of small and island states in the business of the UN “*may lead to a weakening of the United Nations itself,*” and he recommended that our engagement be limited to interactions with specialized bodies, or, at best, observer status in the General Assembly.

Today, much has changed. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) boasts 37 full members of the UN, comprising one-fifth of the General Assembly. The sixty million inhabitants of our Small Island Developing States represent the cultural, biological, historical, geographic, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the world itself. Twenty-seven of AOSIS’ 37 UN members have populations of under one million, and 17 of us have fewer than 250,000 citizens. Yet, despite our size, the contributions of small states have proven to be, in the words of former Secretary General Kofi Annan, “*the very glue of progressive international cooperation for the common good.*”

However, the initial indifference, paternalism and outright antipathy towards our states continue to lurk beneath the thin veneer of diplomatic formalities. The erroneous view that Small Island States should be observers, and not participants, in important matters of international relations is self-evident in our underrepresentation or outright exclusion from the inner sancta of decision-making bodies on international security, economic cooperation, development finance or sustainable development. It is evident here today, in the deeply disappointing absence of high-level representation from many large and developed nations. Their absence has largely left us to talk among ourselves, to preach to the choir, at what is a vitally important international Conference. These slights beg the question of whether some powerful states would prefer that we subsist as full members of the UN in name only, enjoying the legal fiction of sovereign equality, while remaining observers to a geopolitical drama in which we can neither meaningfully act nor contribute to scripting the outcomes.

This week, surrounded by the vast cultural, natural and human wealth of the Independent State of Samoa, this generous and welcoming exemplar of a unique Polynesian civilisation that is at once ancient and modern, we shall reject those jaundiced perspectives and state with clarity and confidence that our time is now. Not for an episodic, once-per-decade engagement, but for a sustained and sincere restructuring of an outmoded one-size-fits-all approach that serves to diminish our nobility and retard our developmental aspirations.

Mr. President,

By almost any measure, the developing powerhouses of India and China are wealthier and more economically powerful than Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, or any other Caribbean state. The lone dissenting metric is that of per capita GDP, which implausibly suggests that my country is either as rich as, or exponentially wealthier than, those global heavyweights. The obvious incongruity of such data should disqualify it as a measure of national wealth and resilience in the Small Island context. Yet it is precisely this measure that misleadingly labels many Caribbean states as middle- or high-income countries – a label that places us beyond the scope of many types of debt relief and concessionary financing.

As others before me have said, the practice of using of per capita GDP as a obstacle to any form of developmental assistance or relief to Small Island Developing States must end immediately. Stripped of context, per capita GDP fails to capture the obvious vulnerabilities and developmental hurdles that

confront us on a daily basis. Any serious analysis of our economic and developmental health must include structured evaluations of our vulnerability and resilience. It is only then that a truer picture of our needs and possibilities can emerge. The time for such a reform is now.

Similarly, the related realities of our existing debt burdens require urgent corrective attention. Our developmental aspirations and manoeuvres are straightjacketed by an acute absence of fiscal space. How can we address myriad climate challenges, the transition to modern modes of production, the adoption of renewable energy, the strengthening of our social safety nets, or the equipping of our citizens to meet tomorrow's challenges, while managing a debt burden that is among the highest in the world? Debt forgiveness, debt for climate swaps, and debt relief based on the magnitude of exogenous shocks are unavoidable elements of any serious SIDS-centred development discussion.

The myopic refusal of International Financial Institutions and their funders to squarely confront SIDS' debt burdens can only yield disastrous consequences. Our steady developmental progress will be halted, and reversed, unless there is international cooperation to lighten the Sisyphean boulder of debt that we have been condemned to push ever uphill. Debt restructuring – not structural adjustment – is the urgent requirement of SIDS' economies in the wake of the global financial crisis. The time for such restructuring is now.

Mr. President,

While Caribbean SIDS have, by and large, been experiencing anaemic post-crisis growth, our GDPs have been battered with regularity and ferocity by the impacts of climate change. Over the last four years, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines experienced four distinct climate anomalies – from flood to drought to hurricane – each of which produced double-digit hits to our GDP. Last December, three hours of unseasonable flooding caused loss and damage amounting to 17% of our Gross Domestic Product.

We are, frankly, tired of telling major emitters that climate change is an urgent problem. An existential problem. The defining challenge of our times. We are tired because the response to our alarms has been hollow promises, crocodile tears, and studied indifference to the root causes of our distress. To date, the response of major emitters amounts to a reckless and criminal disregard of the consequences and obligations of their actions. Their continuing refusal to meaningfully mitigate their emissions constitutes an act of aggression and climate warfare against Small Island States and our populations. This year, SIDS call for real and substantial commitments of climate financing for mitigation and adaptation. Next year, we demand and expect firm and legally binding commitments to emissions targets that will ensure our continued existence. We have neither the time nor the patience to be further insulted and endangered by excuses or inaction. The time to conclude our global dithering on climate change is now.

Mr. President,

This Conference is wisely convened under the theme of partnerships. That theme implicitly recognises that many of the challenges facing SIDS exist beyond our borders, and that the solutions to these challenges require transnational and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is heartened by the robust presence of civil society, private sector entities and specialised agencies at this Conference. Your attendance, and your willingness to support our goals, is an indispensable component of SIDS' developmental progress.

But the word “*partnerships*” does not and cannot replace words like “*commitments*” and “*obligations*.” Developed partners that have made repeated commitments to development assistance targets cannot extricate themselves from those obligations by talismanic incantations of the word “partnership.” The welcome, necessary and desirable partnerships with new private and public actors must build upon – but

not replace – the bedrock commitments upon which all North-South development cooperation is based. Financing for Development remains for us an unfulfilled promise, and an unmet Millennium Development Goal. As we contemplate the contours of post-2015 development cooperation, let us not forget the pressing need for longstanding commitments to be met. The time for the fulfilment of those promises is now.

At the same time, we are optimistic that civil society, specialised agencies, and mutually beneficial partnerships with the private sector hold immense promise for real and rapid progress in areas as diverse as marine conservation, affordable renewable energy, and the rollout of revolutionary innovations in Information Communication Technology. Together, in mutually respectful partnership, SIDS are a fertile frontier and proving ground for profitable and transformative initiatives. Rest assured, SIDS like Saint Vincent and the Grenadines are open to ideas and open for business.

Mr. President,

Over four decades removed from the initial hand wringing about the place of small and island states in the international community, our ability to survive and thrive in the most difficult of circumstances has repeatedly confounded naysayers and challenged the mouldy conventional wisdom of great power politics. In a geopolitical and financial architecture designed before our decolonization, and solicitous of size, economic wealth, or military might, our very existence is a rebuke to those who first questioned our viability and then doubted our ability to navigate a rapidly globalising world. Our developmental path is people centred. It is creative. It has much to teach the world about respect for the environment, racial and ethnic harmony, and unstinting faith in the limitless potential of our populations. Our challenges are many, but they are not insurmountable. They require only a willingness to understand our unique characteristics, our vulnerabilities, and our limitless possibilities; while maintaining a strong commitment to implement joint actions in accordance with those understandings.

To those trapped in the belief that more weapons are the answer to conflict, that more debt is the answer to poverty, or that more time is the answer to urgent climate crises, we say that there is another way. It is the way of solidarity, genuine cooperation, and full understanding of the needs, peculiarities and contributions of each member of our global family. It is the way of honouring our sovereignty and legitimacy as equals on the international stage, and as irreplaceable manifestations of distinct and authentic civilisations. The time for that other way is now.

Mr. President,

There is a final, fundamental, point to be made: because of our openness and small size, the fortunes of SIDS are reflective of, and responsive to the economic and developmental health of our global architectures in a way that no other group of states can claim. We are the barometer – the canary in the mineshaft – of the global economy and environment. Our development is not simply a discrete regional issue; it is inextricably intertwined and mutually dependent upon global development. As goes the world, so go the SIDS. And vice-versa.

John Donne, a 17th Century poet, is probably best known today for his “Meditation XVII” which begins with the famous words “*No man is an island. . .*” The modern realities of our global village have shaped Donne’s 17th Century meditations into a 21st Century geopolitical truth. Today, no *island* is an island. The waters that surround our shores offer neither solace nor security from myriad external maladies. We are innocent to the whims and winds of distant actors and events, but they affect us nonetheless. However, the challenges we face are not ours to face alone. With that in mind, it is apt that I conclude by revisiting the words of Donne’s “Meditation,” in the context of the theme of this Conference, and the relationship between SIDS and our development partners:

*No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were;
any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.*

As we reflect upon development cooperation in a still-evolving geopolitical and economic order, the unique needs and vulnerabilities of SIDS must occupy a special place in the hearts and minds of our international partners. Not as an act of charity or as the result of moral suasion, but as a matter of justice, of logic, and of our inalienable right to develop and to exist.

I thank you.