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Small Island Developing States,

Large Ocean States

by

Ronny Jumeau

Seychelles Ambassador for Climate Change and SIDS Issues

While oceans play a key role in everyone's lives, no one is more dependent on them than the small, vulnerable and isolated island developing states surrounded by the seas.

Oceans are now firmly established on the global agenda after taking center stage at Rio+20 last year. However, the SIDS' unique dependence on the marine environment means the oceans have commanded center stage in our development since humankind has been on the islands.

We are the ocean people, so to speak: we live off and by the oceans and to varying degrees on and for them as well. The oceans define who we are and the coastal and marine environment is an integral part of our island lifestyle.

Our islands may be small in land area, but we morph into large ocean states when our exclusive economic zones are factored in. Tuvalu's EEZ for example, is 27,000 times the size of its land.

The Republic of Kiribati, the largest small island developing state in terms of ocean territory, has the 13th largest exclusive economic zone on Earth.

SIDS are the custodians of no fewer than 15, or 30 per cent, of the 50 largest EEZs.

Dependence on oceans

In the case of my islands, Seychelles, our no 1 pillar of the economy is marine-based tourism. It provides 26 per cent of GDP, 30 per cent of jobs and 70 per cent of foreign exchange earnings in a country where more than 80 per cent of what we consume is imported, mostly by sea.

Fisheries, our second biggest industry, add another eight per cent to our GDP.

Such a heavy dependence on oceans is repeated across the SIDS. Oceans are central to our sustainable development, to poverty reduction and achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and to our post-2015 development agenda.

And yet, despite our best efforts to help ourselves, the lack of technical, institutional, technological and financial support means we are still to benefit to the fullest from our marine resources. Where we do benefit, it is not necessarily in the most sustainable manner.

Rio+20

It is no surprise therefore, that the small island developing states formed the loudest cheering section when the oceans won big at Rio+20.

Paragraph 158 of the Rio+20 outcome document "The Future We Want" commits to protect and restore the health, productivity and resilience of oceans and marine ecosystems and to maintain their biodiversity, so as to enable their conservation and sustainable use for present and future generations.

Capacity Building

I cannot here cover all the ocean issues, which took the Rio+20 outcome document 20 paragraphs to address, so let me take a stab at elaborating on some key concerns of small island developing states.

Paragraph 160 of The Future We Want recognizes the importance of building capacity in developing countries as a whole, if we are to benefit from the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans and seas and their resources.

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), meeting in New York in September last year, also recognized the importance of building capacity so that SIDS can benefit from the sustainable use and conservation of the ocean and its resources through the provision of finance and technology transfer.

Areas beyond National Jurisdiction

The areas beyond national jurisdiction have always been a matter of concern, especially but not only because of bottom trawling and illegal fishing. We are even more concerned now because of the growing interest in turning the seabed into the last frontier for mining minerals as they become scarcer on land, as well as for extracting other deep sea resources.

In some parts of the world, areas beyond national jurisdiction are stretches of high seas between neighboring countries. This is the case with the Saya de Malha, the world's largest submerged bank in the southwest Indian Ocean. It is located mostly in the international waters between Seychelles and Mauritius.

Our two island countries set an example for the rest of the world when we convinced the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to award Seychelles and Mauritius joint management of the Saya de Malha in 2011.

But the exceptionality of such a case underscores the urgent need to prevent a free-for-all on the high seas, the transboundary environmental repercussions of which will be felt within the EEZs and territorial waters, and on the marine resources and livelihoods, of neighboring countries.

There definitely needs to be an international instrument regulating the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. SIDS therefore welcome Rio+20's call for a United Nations General Assembly decision to develop such an instrument under the Convention on the Law of the Sea by next year.

Marine Pollution

Nowhere are the effects of marine pollution more deeply felt and damaging than in the small island countries entirely surrounded by the ocean. This is especially so in SIDS like mine whose economies are heavily dependent on the state and indeed the attractiveness of our beaches, coastal waters, coral reefs and fisheries.

Sea Level Rise

The most serious long-term threat to SIDS is of course sea level rise which threatens to cover many of us with the oceans, thus turning the blue planet even bluer…that is if we are not swept away first by coastal erosion which will be made worse by the slow collapse of dying reefs.

Ocean Acidification

Ocean acidification is the single greatest threat to coral reefs which provide SIDS with food and income. They also protect us from the ocean waves and tidal currents which, as extreme weather events such as storm surges and abnormally high tides intensify, threaten to sweep away some islands before they are covered by sea level rise.

Coral Reefs

Rio+20 drew attention to the important economic, social and environmental contribution of coral reefs, especially to islands and other coastal states, and the high vulnerability of coral reefs and mangroves to such impacts as climate change, ocean acidification, overfishing, destructive fishing practices and pollution, among others.

Indeed, the growing pressures on coral reefs may cause them to be the first marine ecosystem to collapse.

Marine Protected Areas

SIDS thus see conservation measures such as marine protected areas not just as a way to protect our ocean biodiversity and resources, but also as a tool for sustainable development, because for us marine biodiversity has significant socio-economic and cultural value.

We thus stand by the decision of COP 10 of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan, in 2010 that by 2020, 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas be conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.

Innovative Financing

The lack of sufficient funding through traditional channels hasn't deterred small island developing states from finding innovative ways to protect our ocean territories in the name of sustainable development as well as conservation.

A growing number of SIDS in the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean are working on debt-for-climate change adaptation swaps. These will raise funds to protect large parts of our EEZs, while easing the debt burden on our future development and tackling climate change as well.

Seychelles, for example, will this year propose to the Paris Club that we exchange US$82 million worth of debt for funds to turn 30 per cent of our 1.3-million-sq-km EEZ (ie 516,000-sq-mi) into marine protected areas, half of which will be no-take zones. Through this partnership we will also introduce spatial planning to our EEZ and continental shelf.

Marine Renewable Energy

Islands are also leading the way in the shift to renewable energy through our innovative SIDS Dock Initiative. Much is said about the abundance of sun and wind in SIDS, while not fully understanding that if we are to harness these sufficiently to slash our dependence on fossil fuels, we need the one thing wind and solar farms require which we don't have: land.

Wind turbines can indeed be installed in the sea, but that adds to their cost.

What islands do have a lot of, is ocean. As the UN Secretary-General's report on oceans and law of the sea pointed out last year, oceans are a vast source of potential renewable energy. However, he also pointed out there are still many challenges to overcome before ocean energy can meaningfully contribute to sustainable development.

The technologies needed to harness ocean energy must be made accessible, affordable and adaptable to the needs and particular circumstances of small island developing states.

Fisheries

Finally on fisheries, I would like to return to the Rio+20 outcome document The Future We Want, specifically paragraph 168. In it we commit to intensify efforts and take measures to meet the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation's 2015 target to maintain or restore stocks to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield in the shortest time feasible.

Once again the effect of illegal, unreported and unregulated or IUU fishing is most felt in those countries that depend most heavily on fisheries like the small island developing states.

We place strong emphasis on paragraph 174 of The Future We Want. This urges that by next year there be strategies to further help developing states, especially the least developed and SIDS, develop their national capacity to conserve, sustainably manage and realize the benefits of sustainable fisheries, including through improved market access for their fish products.

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this to small island developing states. In the Pacific SIDS, for example, the tuna fishery alone contributes more than 10 per cent of GDP and in some islands more than 50 per cent of exports. It is estimated that fish contributes at least 50 per cent of total animal protein intake in some SIDS.

There certainly is no lack of international instruments in fisheries: they cover straddling and highly migratory fish stocks, responsible fisheries and IUU fishing. What has been lacking is the political will to effectively implement and enforce them.

As I showed in the examples I gave earlier, SIDS certainly do not lack political will or innovative thinking: what we lack is capacity – technical, institutional, technological and financial.

I thank you for your attention