

**Inaugural lectures of the Philippines Climate  
Vulnerable Forum South-South Centre**

**The Role of SIDS and Vulnerable Countries in  
Influencing Climate Change Negotiations**

**By**

**Dr. James Fletcher**

**Managing Director, SOLORICON Ltd. &  
Senior Climate Diplomacy Advisor, Climate Analytics**

15 August 2016  
Philippines Senate  
Manila, The Philippines

Excellencies, Distinguished Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

## **Introduction**

Thank you for the honour of this invitation to deliver one of the inaugural lectures of the Philippines Climate Vulnerable Forum South-South Centre. It is indeed fitting that we are gathered here in the Philippines for this event, given the very important role this country and its negotiators have played in the international climate change arena over the years. The leadership of the Philippines in the Climate Vulnerable Forum was also very important in directing the CVF to amplify the call, going into COP21 in Paris, for an ambitious Paris Agreement that spoke to 1.5 degrees Celsius as a long term global temperature goal.

Excellencies, I have attended all but one of the Conferences of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change since the infamous COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009. I attended the last four COPs in my capacity as Saint Lucia's Minister with responsibility for Climate Change. Every one of these COPs, with the notable exception of COP 21 in Paris last year, had one very striking thing in common for me, and that is a sinking, despairing realization that despite being universally acclaimed as the moral conscience of the climate change negotiations and the countries most at risk from climate change, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and climate vulnerable countries were the ones least influential in determining the outcome of the negotiations. It appeared that we were always the ones to compromise; always the ones to accept less than what we deserved; and always the ones to have to return to our respective countries to explain to our bewildered citizens why it was that the countries that had caused the problem were so reluctant to take the requisite decisive action to address what was universally acknowledged as an existential threat for SIDS and other vulnerable countries.

Our ineffectiveness was even more frustrating, given the obvious devastating impacts that climate change was having on our countries. In Doha, during my address to the High Level Segment of COP 18, I sympathized with the residents of Cuba, Haiti and the eastern seaboard of the United States who had been ravaged by Hurricane Sandy. One year later, at the Warsaw COP, I had to express deepest condolences to your government and people, who at the time were reeling from the effects of Super Typhoon Yolanda. Little did I know, when I was delivering that speech, that my own country Saint Lucia, together with our sister island of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, would be visited by an out-of-season weather system less than one month later, on Christmas Eve, which left death and destruction in its wake. But the cycle did not end there. At COP 20 in Lima, once again I had to express solidarity and sympathy to you, our brothers and sisters in the Philippines, after the passage of Typhoon Ruby. And at COP 21, my condolences turned to the people of Dominica, who had been devastated by Tropical Storm Erica.

It is said that those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it. Therefore, if there was one thing these COPs taught us was that we could not depend only on science and logic to persuade the recalcitrant that more urgent and meaningful action was required. We had to change our approach, if we did not want Paris to be not just another dismal failure of the multilateral negotiating process, but a depressing inflection point in the history of our planet and the lives and livelihoods of citizens of vulnerable countries like ours.

### **Engagement of Civil Society**

The first thing we recognized that we needed to do was to amplify and diversify the voices clamoring for climate action. On the 21<sup>st</sup> September 2014, a very significant event was organized in New York City and in many cities around the world. Hundreds of thousands of members of civil society in New York, London, Bogota, Berlin, Istanbul, Rio de Janeiro, Lagos, Melbourne, Johannesburg, Paris and New Delhi marched through the main streets of these cities to call for decisive action to fight climate change. The success of these marches made us realize two things: (i) that the world was aware of our plight and wanted action to be taken, and (ii) that it was much easier and more effective to get the message across to the wider population when this message was being promoted and distributed by ordinary citizens. Immediately, therefore, in the Caribbean, we devised a plan to enlist the support of civil society in our countries. We formed a partnership with our young people, through the active Caribbean Youth Environment Network. We brought our journalists and media personalities on board, established contact points and provided them with regularly updated information on the state of the negotiations and the recent findings of the science.

We reached out to our artists. The Caribbean has a very rich cultural tradition, and music and story telling have always played important roles in our societies. So, we asked our calypsonians, our reggae musicians, our spoken word artists, our poets, our photographers, our dancers and our painters to capture and reflect the climate change messages in their own way and help us reach citizens we had not previously been able to. All of this came together in the Caribbean's One Point Five to Stay Alive Campaign; a rich, vibrant and engaging movement that caught the attention and imagination of our Caribbean people on climate change in a manner unachieved in the past. Now it was not just Environment ministry officials calling for action on climate change, but Caribbean citizens were also demanding that we go to Paris and not return without a strong Climate Change Agreement that reflected all of the issues that were now dear to their hearts. Suddenly, foreign journalists had become more interested in what was happening with the Caribbean delegations and the positions we were taking, and this interest also extended to the other members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), because of the advocacy that had also been taking place in the Pacific, and the islands in the AIMS region. And that is another area where we changed our approach. Our ministers actively engaged domestic and international media to share with them our concerns and aspirations.

## **Cultivating Alliances**

As I stated previously, the Peoples Climate Marches of September 2014 had taught us two important lessons. The first, which I just discussed, was the importance of civil society to our cause. The other was that these marches had been successfully staged in many Annex 1 countries; countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and France. Clearly, therefore, the citizens of these countries were singing a much more supportive tune for climate action than the negotiators who were negotiating on behalf of these State Parties. This meant there was growing internal pressure on many of the Annex 1 countries to be more sensitive to the plight of climate vulnerable countries and we had to find a way to make use of this. Our cause was helped tremendously in June 2015, when Pope Francis released his *Laudato si* encyclical, when he called on the world's 1.2 billion Catholics to join the global fight against climate change. Climate vulnerable countries now had a champion who cut across geographic, political and social divides. In the case of this Pope, one can even argue that he cuts across many religious divides.

We understood that we needed to start a conversation with some of the countries that had been opposing our critical negotiating red lines to see how we could cause the pendulum of consensus to swing to our side. In this regard, the work of my good friend, the then Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands, Tony de Brun, was critical. In the margins of the first informal ministerial that was co-hosted by COP 20 President Manuel Vidal and incoming COP 21 President Laurent Fabius, in Paris in July 2015, Tony convened a meeting of a small coalition of countries interested in securing a successful outcome to the Paris COP. The first meeting was a modest affair, and we spent most of our hour-long engagement discussing what had taken place in the recently concluded Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate Change. However, Tony de Brun persisted and he pounced on every other opportunity that presented itself, and there were several last year, to convene a meeting of the coalition. We met in New York and twice again in Paris before COP 21. At every meeting, our membership grew and the topics being discussed expanded. Suddenly, Todd Stern, the United States Special Envoy on Climate Change, was asking to meet with the coalition to explore areas of convergence. By the time we arrived in Paris for COP 21, the coalition had a place and a purpose. Ironically, it was in a meeting with Todd, at the beginning of COP 21, to discuss issues related to Loss and Damage, that the term High Ambition Coalition was officially coined and adopted and the primary objective of the group crystallized – to ensure the highest possible ambition in the Paris Agreement. Every meeting of the High Ambition Coalition at COP 21 saw new members joining. First it was the United Kingdom, which also allowed the Coalition to use its Pavilion for our meetings. Then it was Canada, Australia, Japan and eventually the United States, among many others. While no actual negotiating took place in these meetings, we sought, as best we could, to place all major issues on the table and identify the areas where we believed consensus was possible.

Not coincidentally, supportive and positive statements were also being made in the Press by Parties such as Germany, France and Australia, which had previously been opposed to the idea of 1.5 degrees Celsius as a long-term temperature goal. The strong position of the CVF on 1.5 degrees Celsius as the long-term temperature goal was very important in helping to build that momentum. Finally, it appeared that climate vulnerable countries were having some success in influencing the tenor of the negotiations.

### **Coordination and Preparation**

There were two other areas where climate vulnerable countries were able to positively influence the negotiations. As I hinted previously, the French Presidency hosted three informal ministerial meetings between July and October to bring ministers and senior negotiators from some of the Parties together to discuss the areas that were likely to be the most contentious during the COP. At each of these meetings there were representatives of SIDS, LDCs, the African Group, and AILAC. These meetings gave us opportunities to engage in direct discussions in plenary with our ministerial counterparts from Annex 1 countries, as well as hold bilateral meetings to ventilate many of our concerns. By the time we returned to Paris in December for COP 21, we had already developed enough of a relationship with our Annex 1 counterparts that it was relatively easy to engage them in discussions to resolve problematic issues. This was further assisted by the French Presidency, when some of us were chosen to be part of a small group of ministerial facilitators charged with achieving consensus among the Parties. I was joined on this team by my colleagues from Ecuador, Bolivia, Singapore, Gabon and the Gambia, which meant that ministers from climate vulnerable countries were provided an opportunity to work with the COP Presidency to articulate the new climate change agreement. We worked with ministerial colleagues from Brazil, Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Germany and the United Arab Emirates: Annex 1 and Non Annex 1 Parties, cooperating to craft the Paris Agreement.

The final element I wish to touch on is the issue of preparation. Our countries will always be under-resourced compared to our Developed Country partners. Annex 1 Parties will always have the larger, more specialized delegations. But that should not mean they have the better-prepared negotiators. In fact, my experience has been that our negotiators stand toe-to-toe with the best of what our Annex 1 partners have to offer. Very often, however, for reasons that I will not recite here, our Ministers and Ambassadors are not as prepared as our Annex 1 counterparts. Last year, we sought to address this in the Caribbean. We held four preparatory meetings over the course of the year in Saint Lucia for our negotiators and ministers, during which we dealt in depth with the major issues, discussed the science and the evidence behind our positions, and formulated our negotiating positions. We also had the benefit of excellent technical support from Climate Analytics and the High Level Support Mechanism, which significantly augmented the expertise of our technical negotiators. The result was that in Paris, at COP 21, we had a corps of ministers and negotiators from 14 Caribbean countries who were familiar with each other, current with all

of the negotiating concerns, and working cohesively as one unit, not 14 separate countries, to achieve common outcomes. It was the best we have ever been prepared and coordinated and it showed. This must be the modus operandi for climate vulnerable countries at every COP.

## **Conclusion**

Excellencies, distinguished invited guests, ladies and gentlemen. I stated in my address to the Closing Plenary at COP 21 that for the first time, I was leaving a COP with the feeling that the concerns of Small Island Developing States had been heard and addressed in a COP outcome document. This does not mean the Paris Agreement is a perfect document. However, it is a historic agreement, developed out of a transparent multilateral process, and together with the accompanying COP Decision, it provides a framework to address all of the issues that we identified as critical to our survival. We fought hard to get that Paris Agreement. We showed that it is possible for climate vulnerable countries to positively influence multilateral negotiations.

However, the battle has not been won. There is a long way to go before we can breathe a sigh of relief that our planet, its ecosystems, and our people are no longer in danger. Some of us will not be able to breathe that sigh of relief in our lifetime. There is a saying that “sometimes leadership is planting trees under whose shade you will never sit”. We planted those trees in Paris. Trees that hopefully will shade our planet from the effects of rising global temperatures and provide our children the comfort of a healthier, more hospitable planet. We now have to nurture these trees and give them every possible chance to survive. We the climate vulnerable countries must work more closely together and this South-South Centre is a step in the right direction. We must intensify our efforts. We owe it to our children and our planet.

Thank you.