

SIDS, Oceans and Climate Change

The role that oceans play in regulating regional and global weather is universally recognized as established science. Climate Change is exacerbating this natural cycle accentuating rainfall, droughts, flooding, melting glaciers and the polar regions that would result in sea level rise. The effect that climate change will have on the ocean will greatly impact SIDS. As recognized in the SAMOA Pathway, SIDS are particularly vulnerable to global climate change and sea level rise continue to pose a significant risk to small island developing States and their efforts to achieve sustainable development. For some SIDS climate change represents the gravest threat to their survival and viability¹.

SIDS climate is influenced by large ocean-atmosphere interactions such as trade winds, El Niño, monsoons and tropical cyclones. With populations, agricultural lands and infrastructures tending to be concentrated in the coastal zone, any rise in sea level will have significant and profound effects on the lives of SIDS.

Typically, oceans, more specifically the oceanic and coastal fishing industry, represent an important source of nutrition and revenue for SIDS populations.

In the Pacific SIDS, the fishing industry contributes up to 10 percent of total GDP. Of the total 2.4 million tonnes of tuna caught in the Western Pacific Ocean, 58 percent had been caught in the waters of Pacific SIDS, generating a total USD 2.8 billion in revenues⁴

In the CARICOM countries alone, more than 64,000 people are directly employed in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture, with another approximately 200,000 people working indirectly in fishing related activities including: processing, retail, boat construction and net repair. The main fish producing countries in the Caribbean were Guyana (31 percent of total production), Suriname (21 percent), the Bahamas (11 percent) and Trinidad and Tobago (7 percent)⁵

The impact of climate change could fundamentally alter the fishing industry in SIDS. Marine species are gradually moving away from the equator into cooler waters, and, as a result, species from warmer waters are replacing those traditionally caught in many fisheries worldwide. These shifts could have negative effects including loss of traditional fisheries, decreased in profits and jobs, conflicts over new fisheries that emerge because of distribution shifts, food security concerns and a large decrease in catch in the tropics⁶

The other adverse impact associated with climate change and global warming is sea level rise could have implications that may affect rights and obligations of State Parties

⁴ FAO, 2014

⁵ FAO, 2014

⁶ Cheung, Watson & Pauly, 2013, Nature, Signature of ocean warming in global fisheries catch

including SIDS, to UNCLOS, especially in relation to the breadth of the territorial sea, the contiguous zone and the EEZ. Obviously such an effect will be felt by those affected in varying degrees. Low lying countries including SIDS and their atolls are the most vulnerable to such a scenario. The loss of territorial integrity may pose potential legal and conceptual dilemmas that may need addressing in the future, but for SIDS in particular, the loss of already limited terrestrial territory would force stringent adaptation measures to be taken including possible abandonment of some their islands and homes which consequently would adversely impact on their culture and way of life.