

Presentation by Kiribati PR on Climate Change: the Challenges

Thank you Madame Facilitator

I thank the organizers of this Panel Discussion on:

**“Strengthening the Resilience of Small Island Developing States within the context of Sustainable Development”**

The objective of which is to discuss potential initiatives that can help with the strengthening of the SIDS abilities to address their vulnerability and structural challenges.

The special case of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) for sustainable development and their unique and particular vulnerabilities is now well recognized and acknowledged by the international community starting at the Rio Summit in 1992. This was reaffirmed in Barbados in 1994 with the adoption of The Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, then the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, adopted in 2005. Most recently, the special case of SIDS was again reaffirmed in “The Future We Want”, during the Rio+20 deliberations.

But recognition of vulnerability is not an end in itself. The real question for Small Island Developing States, mine included is “what do we do to address these vulnerabilities.” The road from Rio in 92 to now, 21 years later in 2013 has been a long winding and uphill one, and we cannot continue to sing the same vulnerable message. It is time for action.

At the recent High Level segment of this 68th UNGA, my President, His Excellency Anote Tong posed the question **“How can we meaningfully talk of sustainable development without first addressing these key vulnerabilities in our countries?”**

Small Island Developing States have been discussing this very issue in our different regions, starting in July at the Caribbean Regional Meeting in Jamaica, followed by the Pacific SIDS and AIMS Regional Meetings in Fiji and the Seychelles and then in Barbados for the final Interregional Session in August this year. The outcome document from this interregional meeting is the one which the SIDs will use as the basis of preparations for the land mark Samoa Conference next year and which will be tabled shortly before the Second Committee.

Madame Chair,

I particularly welcome this opportunity to share some thoughts from Kiribati at this special SIDs event. My presentation today will address 2 aspects of the priorities addressed in this SIDS outcome document.

- The first and single most pressing challenge for us in Kiribati, that is climate change
- and how we are responding to this major overarching challenge that affects all other aspects of sustainable development for us.

Climate change is the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of our region and one of the greatest challenge for the entire world. For us it is a critical issue for the survival of our people. Because of this, we continue to call with urgency on our development partners to assist in our efforts to deal with the impacts of climate change and sea level rise now being experienced in our countries, and in our efforts to prepare our people for an uncertain future.

The delivery of international adaptation finance and resources are however taking much too long.

Much of the international work and funds that have been made available to us for Climate Adaptation, are used for studies, research, consultancies, institutional or more so individual capacity building with some adaptation programs on the ground. At any point in time in Kiribati, there would be at least 20 experts or consultants on climate change from regional and international institutions working with different Ministries on various climate change reports. Then there are the students descending upon us from Universities all over the world studying climate change and its impact on a nation and a people that may no longer be around for much longer. Then there are major media representatives from around the world. And these interests we welcome because it helps us develop empirical data that can substantiate our concerns to the rest of the world. It helps us focus global attention on our plight as a nation and as a people. Beyond that we are just as vulnerable, even more so today than when our first National Communication report was completed and sent to UNFCCC in 1999.

We have to be the most studied, most researched and most media covered nation relating to Climate Change. We have volumes of the most glossy of reports on the impact of climate change and proposed adaptation measures, seriously enough reports to build a bridge between New York and Kiribati. We could have just driven over!!

These reports were developed in a process of consultation with our people, so:

- they have contributed to a heightened national anxiety pulse,
- raised expectations of the people on the national Government on what it can do to alleviate adverse effects of climate change,

- These reports share the same fate, the recommended adaptation programs have remained just that, recommendations for a lack of resources and adaptation funds, which have not materialized,
  - That these changes which our people have observed over recent times is because of a larger phenomena, a result of activities that we have no control over and which only gets worse with time; and
  - Most of these reports tell us what we already know and are now experiencing nationwide, not only in my own country, but in other similar low-lying coral atolls like Tuvalu, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Maldives, who are in the frontline of the climate change crisis.
- That our sea levels are rising, For a nation where all (except one 1) of our islands lie not more than 1 meter above sea level (the highest point being 3 metres) this is frightening. It is even more frightening to know that it will only get worse.
  - That our coastlines are fast being eroded due to the rise in sea level and the more frequent higher than normal tides that come in once a month and the increased storm surges, and that this will only get worse. With this realization, the national anxiety pulse rises even higher especially when whole villages have had to be relocated,
  - Frequent, prolonged, intense disasters and extreme events are becoming a common phenomenon, and we all suffer at an unprecedented scale putting pressure on families, on villages and on an already challenged national economy.
  - That these changes are posing a major threat to our supply of freshwater, with the vast majority of our people drawing water requirements from limited groundwater sources which have increasingly become brackish and salty.
  - That our traditional food crops grown in pits are harder to grow and in some areas have had to be abandoned because of the greater salinity in the water. This is a major cause for concern .
  - That climate change has resulted in higher sea temperatures and greater ocean acidification threatening our coral reefs and the source of our sustenance, our coastal fisheries which provides for our daily livelihood. In a nation where more than half of the population live a subsistence life style, this is cause for great concern on food security.
  - That we have no higher grounds to move up to as the sea level rises;
  - That our limited resources, insufficient technical and institutional capacity grossly limit our adaptive capacity to address these challenges;

- Funds allocated for adaptation is rarely available although adaptation should be given equal importance to mitigation and should proceed in tandem with each other.

This is the reality that our people live with, the families, the women and children and the men, young and old living on our 33 islands. This is the uncertain future, the insecurity, the anxieties, the sense of helplessness and the grave concerns our people face today about real changes that are now affecting them caused by events happening elsewhere beyond their control.

Madame Chair,

Climate change is posing urgent security challenges for countries like mine. We are in the front line of all this. Climate change is happening for us, it is already causing loss of territory, severe coastal erosion, involuntary displacement of communities, decrease in food and water security, and more importantly, has become a survival issue. These impacts are putting enormous pressure on domestic institutions, the national budget, the families, the sense of well-being of the people, and these will continue to grow worse for the foreseeable future.

#### **So what are we as a nation doing about it?**

- We have mainstreamed climate change and our responses into our national planning and development framework;
- We have embarked on a program of mangrove planting on coastlines to help protect and alleviate erosion to our coastal areas, the UN Secretary General planted a whole section of these mangrove plants during his recent visit to Kiribati;
- We are building seawalls to protect infrastructure, roads and public areas and are encouraging communities to build sea walls to protect their village providing labour while Government provides machinery and materials. But resources are finite. Do we keep building sea walls to protect our people's homes?. Do we keep diverting resources from other equally pressing priorities such as health and education programs?
- Adaptation is important as it provides us with some short term solutions to help cope with the changes brought about by climate change. But how can we adapt to the already brackish and increasingly salty water from ground wells which is the major source of drinking water for the majority of our people?

Scientific evidence project that our islands will no longer be able to sustain life in the not too distant future. We must prepare our people for this eventuality, and the eventual need to relocate.

- Government has taken a policy position that it would be irresponsible to acknowledge this reality and not do anything to prepare our community for eventual migration in circumstances that permit them to migrate with dignity. That said, relocation will always be viewed as an option of last resort.
  
- We have bought land offshore
- To prepare our people, Government has placed a major focus on education including vocational and technical education. We have embarked on a major program of overhauling our education system in line with Government's policy on relocation and migration with dignity.
  - This means our people would have become more equipped through education and would have acquired more skills
  - If they do chose to migrate, they do so with dignity and can contribute meaningfully to their new homes and be good citizens rather than "climate refugees" who stand at the corner street of their new homes asking for help.
- We have facilitated overseas employment and permanent emigration opportunities for our people.
- we have explored long term survivability and self-reliance options that ensures sustainability of nationhood, culture and identity of Kiribati.
- We are looking at the various options available to a "disappearing" state, the legalities, the precedents
- We have embarked on a nation- wide community consultation program to emphasis the importance of education and acquiring marketable skills

Madame Chair, we can only do so much, WE CANNOT DO IT ALONE. We thank our partners who have assisted us thus far...but much much more needs to be done.

Because of climate change, our future as a nation and as a people as well as so many others within the UN family of nations is uncertain. We present a whole new security challenge for this family of nations. We also bring a whole new meaning to human rights and the right to a secure future? What secure future can we really talk about for the people in Kiribati? Climate change has raised a new dimension of human rights, the right to clean drinking water, the right to education, the right to survive. It has also brought a new dimension to the definition of the word refugee.

Madame Chair

We are the early warning system, The UN and the international community, must take heed of what is happening in our countries, in Kiribati, in Tuvalu, in the Marshall Islands, in the Maldives, for what is happening in our countries is also happening in other SIDS, in other parts of the globe, although not at the national scale we are facing. Most of the world's large cities are on coastal low-lying areas and they too will eventually face these and other security challenges caused by climate change. And the scope of the problem will only increase with time. The time to act is now.

As our challenges grow in magnitude, we have sadly observed the almost clinical and legalistic way these challenges are being addressed, that is best left to the UNFCCC process....that is Second Committee matter....that is addressed in resolution 68/7... that is not UN language. It reminds me of being in surgery, lying on that surgery table with doctors talking above you as if you are not there...as if the patient is already dead. This is how our people are feeling.

As we prepare for the Third International Conference on SIDS in 2014 in Samoa, the Small Island Developing States have called for genuine and durable partnerships that is people centred and is based on mutual respect, trust and accountability.

As we also prepare for COP 19, I urge all delegations to focus on the urgent need to address the security implications of climate change, including violation of territorial integrity, existential threat, more frequent and severe climate-related disasters, threats to water and food security, increased natural resource scarcity, and forced displacement and the human dimensions of climate change, including, where necessary, initiatives for preparing communities for relocation

Madame Chair

“Business as usual” cannot be the way forward. Indeed a paradigm shift is required! Starting from within our nations and moving out to regional and international processes, including the UN and its agencies, and partnerships. We need to do some more thinking outside the box, focusing on innovative, integrated, tangible, targeted and implementable action on the ground that can have a positive impact on those who we are here to represent...OUR PEOPLE.

I thank you.