

# Climate resilience in small states

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2015 took place on 23-26 November 2015 and was jointly organised by the Government of Malta (host) and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2015 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of "What Makes Resilient Societies?" It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF2015 series elaborates on the issues covered in the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

## Introduction

Climate change represents a direct and fundamental crisis for the Commonwealths' 31 small states, 24 of which are small island developing states, on the frontline of global climate change impacts. Despite miniscule contributions to the world's cumulative emissions level, climate change and sea-level rise pose one of the gravest threats to small states. In small island states such as Kiribati, sea-level rise now presents an immediate existential threat; and for all others, these threats are escalating rapidly.

## Key discussion points

### An intensely cross-cutting policy theme

Climate change amplifies linkages between land, energy, water, food, agricultural and other policies. For example, climate change directly affects agricultural production and output on which many countries rely, in turn affecting international competitiveness and terms of trade. The lack of predictability of rainfall may fuel domestic and regional conflict and poverty

levels, welfare and put pressure on other services. Water and food insecurity influences educational attainment, with reduced nutritional levels affecting productivity of learners.

**“Several Commonwealth states have set ambitious targets to shift reliance on fossil fuels and move to renewable sources of energy.”**

Small states are acutely dependent on imported fossil fuels as their primary source of energy, resulting in triple adverse impacts: high carbon intensity, high energy costs and the use of a disproportionately large share of available foreign exchange. Shifting to renewable domestic sources of energy can address all three challenges. There are growing efforts in small states to move away from fossil fuels and to develop sustainable domestic sources of energy. Several Commonwealth states have set ambitious targets to shift reliance on fossil fuels and move to renewable sources of energy.

## Challenging the narrative

While the concept of resilience has been widely used to explain the ability to respond to crisis, there is a need for the analysis of climate resilience to be deepened. Mainstream narratives on the impact of climate change emphasise aid and humanitarian assistance, obscuring the root causes of climate vulnerability affecting small states. This failure to address the causes of climate change and to hold governments in high-CO<sub>2</sub> emitting countries to account for their continued investment in fossil fuel industries and levels of consumption supports an interpretation of resilience, that does not help vulnerable countries and societies cope with related adversity.

## Burden of resilience on the most vulnerable

This global power imbalance places the responsibility of climate resilience on the poorest countries and communities and those that are least able to cope. Small states are unable to address these impacts alone. Poor communities, marginalised sectors of society including women and young people, are particularly and disproportionately affected by climate change.

**“Vulnerable voices, once heard, can bring about real change.”**

CPF Participant

The lack of intergenerational equity has received inadequate exposure in public debate. Climate change means that current and previous generations have reduced the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The lack of equity will be felt most by young people in poor frontline communities of small states. Participatory research in the Pacific has found that women are at higher risk than men from climate change impacts due to traditional caring roles intensified during crisis; they are also more likely to die from natural disasters due to their role in protecting children. The current economic paradigm does not countenance a shift towards a low carbon economy. International carbon markets are inadequately developed; at present the market price for carbon, both in advanced economies and internationally has failed to internalise the real cost of negative externalities, mainly due to the lack of a mechanism wherein the polluter pays.

### An excerpt from The Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience

**25.** Climate change is the most defining challenge to building resilient societies in small states which are acutely vulnerable despite contributing minimally to change. They have high levels of exposure to natural disasters and reliance on natural resources.

**26.** The ability to build resilience and achieve transformation will hinge significantly on a successful outcome at the forthcoming UNFCCC meeting (COP21). Current economic models do not permit a realistic shift towards a low carbon economy. This is especially due to the lack of a proper and functioning polluter pays principle. However most small states still heavily rely on fossil fuels for their production and consumption patterns, with active subsidies in place that signal no imminent intentions of reducing this dependency.

**27.** Climate change is blocking many pathways to resilience, including bringing uncertainty to water access and increased food insecurity. In turn this fuels regional conflicts, further plunging affected communities into vulnerability. Furthermore, affected communities are largely excluded from policy processes and negotiations that tend to be elitist.

**28.** Women and young people are profoundly affected by climate change and face specific vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is important to increase awareness at the local level about the harmful impacts of climate change. At the same time climate change can also represent an opportunity to transform production and consumption systems, where for instance the shift towards low carbon economies can offer more sustainable employment opportunities for youth.

**29.** Many actions can be taken to build resilience to climate change, including investing more in renewable energies, reducing subsidies on fossil fuels, creating funds to match those environmentally harmful subsidies to be used for sustainable and greener employment opportunities for young people.

## Governance for resilience

New governance systems are needed to enable collaboration and inclusion in building climate resilience. Civil society and small state governments can also build alliances and momentum for change. They can identify transformative shifts in governance, economic and social systems that can help reduce or remove the burden of climate resilience on small states and the poor.

Supporting the most vulnerable communities in small states in building resilience to climate change requires at least the following: (i) recognition that the burden of climate change falls predominantly on the most vulnerable countries, particularly small states and on the most vulnerable communities within them (ii) developing effective responses to climate change that acknowledge and address the cross-cutting nature of climate change in a small states' context; and (iii) the need to address intergenerational equity and justice as a means for transformation. These challenges are not insurmountable.

### Climate Resilience Initiatives

Participants at CPF 2015 shared examples of initiatives that are being undertaken by women, young people and civil society to counteract climate change in their localities, countries and regions. It was noted that these initiatives may be replicable in small states. International support is necessary to make this happen.

*The People's Test on Climate* is an advocacy platform laying out a set of climate justice goals including clean energy transition, the right to food and land and justice for frontline communities. This is a further illustration of how climate action advocacy can be more effectively strategized, nuanced and developed. In African and Asian small states, a regional youth-led organisation aimed at advancing sustainable development has highlighted the disproportionate exposure of young people to the impacts of climate change. They have identified innovative new initiatives that expand awareness on climate change impacts on youth and have broadened inclusion and participation of young people in building climate resilience, such as creation of a youth index that tracks the impacts on young people, arising from natural disasters in Small Island

Developing States.<sup>1</sup>

Examples shared from Fiji and Cameroon showed that the destruction of mangroves can be halted and reversed, through participatory decision-making processes that encourage local ownership and that incorporate the experiences and knowledge of the poor and people in remote areas. Doing so simultaneously facilitates both climate and energy resilience and builds and strengthens access to alternate sources of sustainable energy.<sup>2</sup>

Participants at CPF 2015 highlighted an array of profound challenges facing Commonwealth and other small states in confronting climate change and building climate resilience.

## Concluding remarks and the role of the Commonwealth

There is need for bold and focused advocacy to hold governments to account in industrialised countries for their climate change commitments. Small state governments, civil society and frontline communities need to work together to achieve this. Communities and small states must use their vulnerability and the concept of intergenerational equity to better formulate their national and international claims and provide evidence to demand transformative policies based on the polluter pays principle.

Prioritisation, focus and the articulation of specific and tangible objectives is needed. The Commonwealth Foundation is supporting the crafting of civil society messaging and the ways in which civil society organises to engage with governments. The Foundation also supports civil society's global policy action and promotes replicability and scalability of initiatives in Commonwealth states and regions.

More needs to be done to highlight the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women, youth and other marginalised groups and to augment their collective civil society interventions in international forums. Current nascent initiatives that facilitate the process of reporting back to local communities on outcomes of international climate negotiations should also be expanded.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.syah.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iucn.org/content/iucn-aids-pacific-islands-improve-mangrove-management>

The Commonwealth will continue to play a role in constructively engaging with national governments and international organisations responsible for international governance for climate change. With a focus on small island states, most vulnerable from climate change impacts, the Commonwealth can build consensus; as well as, a stronger voice for vulnerable countries and promote inclusive decision making that brings unheard voices into national policy discourse.

The Commonwealth can also play a facilitation role in collating, sharing and adapting good practices and policy development for climate resilience across member states. Where appropriate, their scaling up can also be supported.



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