CLIMATE CHANGE: Real Threat to Poor and Island Countries

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Climate Change: Real Threat to Poor and Island Countries

By Christina L. Madden, Features Editor, MediaGlobal

The road to Copenhagen has not been easy,” said Cheick Sidi Diarra, High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States in May 2009. “It has taken a lot of effort to convince some nations that the impact of climate change ignores political borders and, that it is in fact real and a serious threat to all of us and future generations.”

Climate change, which to some seems a potential and far-away threat, is already delivering its blows to Least Developed Countries’ economies, health, resource availability, and ecosystems. Although the Least Developed and Small Island States use little fossil fuels compared to other nations, they will suffer the most from climate change.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), predicted sea level rises, if all nations continue with “business as usual,” will submerge low-lying island states, including Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Maldives.

The IPCC also predicts that changing weather patterns, as a result of global warming, could reduce yields from rain-fed agriculture in Africa by as much as 50 percent by 2020.

Social and political disruptions are also a concern as conflict arises over scarce resources and populations are forced to migrate. Already, an estimated 300,000 people die each year as a result of climate change.

All of this requires costly adaptation measures, such as building sea walls, improving infrastructure and technological capacities, and relocating populations. The funds that vulnerable countries receive as development assistance are diverted to deal with natural disasters and other climate-related issues.

“I would like to see developing and LDC nations agree to pursue their own nationally appropriate climate change adaptation and mitigation actions, such as programmes to boost use of renewable energy, carbon trading or energy efficiency, in return for concrete pledges of financial and technological support,” said Diarra.

Speaking at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, which took place in December, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “Now is the time again for common sense, compromise, and courage. It will be your legacy for all time.”

Leaders of Small Island Developing States were hoping that industrialized economies would commit to global temperature rises of no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, a target they say is essential to their survival. Yet the resulting agreement fell short in the eyes of many, capping global temperature rises at 2 degrees Celsius and not setting any binding targets for specific countries. Some called it “half-hearted,” others a “suicide pact” for African countries.

Still others see the Summit as a first step in raising awareness of climate changes global—but uneven—impact and the realities facing Least Developed Countries.

As it stands, the Copenhagen agreement calls for rich countries to provide US$100 million to developing countries by 2020, and pledged US$100 billion dollars for poor, vulnerable nations that are bearing the brunt of climate change’s impact. It did not give a fixed payout plan or legally bind any commitments.

“Copenhagen did not give us everything that we wanted, but we’ve seen the summit as a beginning of a process rather than the culmination of a process,” said Bangladesh’s Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Chairperson of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Climate Change.

This issue of The Commitment looks more in depth at the issues addressed at Copenhagen, an exclusive interview with Maldives’ Ambassador Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed, and much more.
In the wake of the historic Copenhagen conference, I had planned to write about climate change, a major concern for the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing States, and the main theme of this issue of The Commitment.

However, my intention was superseded by the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti on 12 January 2010. Even as I wrote this a week later, it was still unclear exactly how many lives had been lost. Estimates indicated that at least 150,000 people had lost their lives. It was clear that this was one of the worst disasters the Haitian people had faced in recent memory.

Natural hazards cannot be avoided. What can be avoided, or at least minimized, is their effect on people, property and the environment. That is why it is so important for the world to continuously improve its capacity to predict and detect such occurrences, and to take action to prevent or minimize damage. Equally important is enhancing the capacity and mechanisms to respond after the event. Nowhere is the need for such capacity greater than in the poor countries.

As a Small Island Developing State and a Least Developed Country, Haiti embodies the struggles for survival and economic development of the more than 800 million people in these groups of countries.

It is a struggle against many odds, ranging from the natural hazards such as we have just witnessed, to man-made crises which are not of their own making, such as climate change and the global financial and economic crisis.

By their very definition, poor countries lack the resources to cope with such challenges. The ultimate cost for those countries and for the international community can be very high in terms of lives and property.

As we rightfully focus our efforts on delivering humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation to Haiti, let us keep in mind that the story does not end there. For Haiti, and indeed for the other vulnerable countries, the best insurance the international community can provide is assisting those countries to develop robust capacity to forecast, plan and respond to both natural and man-made hazards.

I would like to commend the outpouring of support from individuals, organisations, companies, governments and other institutions to the Haitian people. I hope that that level of support will continue long after the news cameras have turned away from Haiti.

Let me use this opportunity, to once again express my condolences and sympathies to the Haitian people and all those who lost their loved ones.

Maldives Strives to Keep its Head Above Water – Literally

Interview with Ambassador Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations

The sun shines year round in the Maldives, a small island nation that sits on the equator in the Indian Ocean, southwest of Sri Lanka. Sometimes called the “Robinson Crusoe islands,” Maldives is comprised of 1,192 small, low-lying coral islands, more than 200 of which are uninhabited. This gives visitors the impression of being castaways on their own desert island, but with five-star luxuries, pristine white beaches, and crystal clear lagoons.

It’s no wonder that tourism is the Maldives’ largest industry, accounting for 30 percent of gross domestic product. The more than 600,000 tourists who visit the low-lying islands each year outnumber the...
Climate Change Turns the Heat on Africa

By Alison Walkley, MediaGlobal Correspondent

Cracked earth, from lack of water and baked from the heat of the sun, forms a pattern in the Nature Reserve of Popenguine, Senegal.

If global carbon emissions continue at their present levels, a United Kingdom’s Meteorological Office study concluded that southern Africa will achieve a record 10 degree Celsius rise within the next 50 years. The same emissions will lead to an average global temperature rise of 4 degrees Celsius in the same time span.

Michael Sanderson, co-author of the Met Office report, told The Commitment, “The exact impacts of such a large temperature rise on Africa have not yet been addressed. However, vegetation and wildlife would be adversely affected.” He said that a temperature rise would lead to decreased crop productivity, extinction of certain plants and animal species, and reduction of freshwater supplies. All of these factors, not to mention a projected decrease in precipitation over South and West Africa, according to Sanderson, could contribute to increased hunger and forced migration.

Sanderson emphasized that this predicted temperature increase “is associated with a ‘worst case’ scenario of global temperature rise, and such a scenario is less likely than other (more moderate) projections of future temperatures.”

Carbon cycle feedbacks, or releases of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere through increased deforestation and the release of carbon dioxide from melting permafrost, for example, have been studied and, according to Sanderson, suggest “even larger cuts in emissions will be needed.”

At present, global temperatures have experienced a 0.7 degree Celsius increase since pre-industrial times. According to the Met Office report, regardless of reductions, another degree of warming is certain since it takes decades for the effects of atmospheric carbon dioxide rises to be felt.

In order for the rise to be quelled, Sanderson said, “Large cuts in global emissions of greenhouse gases are needed. For example, the UK’s Committee on Climate Change scenario of 4 percent annually reduced emissions starting in 2016 would keep the warming close to 2 degrees Celsius, even beyond 2100. Other scenarios to mitigate climate change have also been proposed and used in projections of future climate.”

Countries outside of Africa will also be dramatically affected if the predicted increase becomes a reality. “Many other tropical and sub-tropical regions will experience large temperature increases and reductions in rainfall, with similar impacts to those that may occur in Africa,” Sanderson added. “However, model agreement in some areas is poor, especially over Australia. Outside of the tropics, temperature increases will be smaller in many areas, except the Arctic where melting snow and sea-ice lead to significant additional warming. Some (but not all) climate projections also suggest a large amount of warming over parts of Antarctica, although this result is less certain. Precipitation is projected to increase in many areas outside of the tropics.”

UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Cracked earth, from lack of water and baked from the heat of the sun, forms a pattern in the Nature Reserve of Popenguine, Senegal.
Lakshmi Murdeshwar Puri was appointed Director of the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS) last month.

Puri holds the rank of Permanent Secretary in the Indian Foreign Service. She brings with her 35 years of extensive experience in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, development policy-making, international affairs, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian affairs. With 28 years of service in the Indian Foreign Service and seven years at UNCTAD, she has made contributions in the areas of policy research and analysis, technical cooperation, inter-governmental policy dialogue, consensus building and negotiations.

Before joining UN-OHRLLS, Puri served as Director of UNCTAD’s Division for Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities (DITC), where she steered the work of the organization’s largest department on trade and development policy formulation. She also served as Acting Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD between 2007 and 2009, providing strategic management and oversight of the 500-strong organisation. She guided the substantive, administrative and logistical aspects of the UNCTAD XII Conference of 2008 in Accra, Ghana.

She has first-hand knowledge of national development policy formulation and its international dimensions, having served for several years as Joint Secretary in India’s Ministry of External Affairs, where she was in charge of the Economic and Multilateral Economic Relations divisions. She also managed the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation, one of the largest technical cooperation programmes among developing countries executing projects in Asia, Africa and Latin America. She has served on the boards of institutions such as India EXIM Bank, Export Credit and Guarantee Corporation, India Brand Equity Fund, and Committee for Overseas Indian Investment.

Puri was Ambassador of India to Hungary and concurrently accredited to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1999-2002. In that capacity, she worked closely with its subsidiary bodies. She participated in negotiations on several human rights conventions, including those against torture; on the rights of the child; and the right to development.

Puri has contributed to theoretical and policy-related research in think tanks, academic and development institutions in the fields of trade, investment, labour, migration, environment, energy, intellectual property, health, education and development.

Her recent contribution to development policy thinking include initiatives such as “Towards a New Trade ‘Marshall Plan’ for Least Developed Countries: How to Deliver on the Doha Development Promise and Help Realize the UN Millennium Development Goals?”, “Globalization’s Last Frontier: Labor Integration”, “Trade and Development Perspectives of the Global Energy Economy”; “Addressing the Global Food Crisis – Trade and Development Dimensions”; “Engendering Trade”; “Trade in Services, Gender, and Development – A Tale of Two Modes”; and “Multilateralism and Regionalism: The New Interface.”
Bangladesh Feels the Pain of Climate Change

Nosh Nalavala in conversation with the Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United Nations, Dr. Abdul Momen

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have called for duty-free, quota-free access for all LDCs to world markets by 2010. Do you see that happening?

It is not only duties, but also non-tariff barriers which have been an impediment to the exports of the Least Developed Countries. This is an area we have to work on. And there is evidence that when tariffs are reduced like in the case of USA and Egypt, USA and Israel, or USA and Jordan, the total exports of those countries to the USA has significantly gone up. So naturally we believe it would not only be helpful to the Least Developed Countries, it will also be helpful to the consumers of industrialized countries, because they can get products at a cheaper price.

But Bangladesh’s exports are quite significant?

We have exports in the area of garments and apparel. This is our number one export. I did a calculation a couple of years ago, 2003 or so, and at the time Bangladesh was exporting $3.2 billion worth of garments and apparel to the US. They are paying around $350 million as tariffs to the US government. But compared to that, France was exporting the same amount of products to the USA and was only paying $17 million in tariffs. So, this is Bangladesh, a poor country, financing the US rather than France. So you can see the difference. If there is tariff-free trade for the Least Developed Countries, it would help them.

At the last ministerial meeting in Hong Kong, LDC ministers agreed to develop a common position on commercially meaningful market access and treatment of disproportionately affected countries. Do you visualize lifting all export restrictions by developed economies on food items imported by developing countries to ensure food security, in line with the proposal put forth by Bangladesh?

We hope that this happens. In addition to this, subsidies given on food items in industrialized countries, is pretty worrisome, since these countries do not allow the Least Developed Countries or developing countries to put any subsidy on their products. In contrast, the developed countries have been giving billions of dollars in subsidies, and in the process, LDCs have become uncompetitive. I hope that the industrialized countries will definitely help out in this and level the playing field. And LDCs should get an extra advantage because they have been deprived for years.

All Least Developed Countries see themselves graduating out of this classification at some point. Some economists are of the opinion that Bangladesh can sufficiently improve its performance to become eligible for graduation from the list of the Least Developed Countries by 2015, but UNCTAD believes that it will not be able to make it to the status of a middle-income country before 2024. Do you feel that Bangladesh can improve its socio-economic development indicators and raise the human development index ratings and graduate from the LDCs?

Of course, I believe it. We are doing very good work, but 2015 is questionable. We hope that in our 50th year of independence, which will be 2021, we will be a middle-income country. But as you know, we have accidental factors — one is climate change. It is affecting us pretty badly. Currently we are diverting our scarce resources from reaching the MDG goals, to humanitarian purposes, and in the process we’re falling behind.

So you feel like climate change is affecting you to a point where you will not be able to reach the MDGs?

Yes, of course, unless we get additional help and support.

From whom?

From the global community, because in the climate change issue, we have to divert a lot of our own resources. Climate change is a question of existence for us. It’s not a philosophical question.

It’s like the Maldives . . .

That’s right. We have to protect our human beings, our population. And we have to do whatever is possible. As a result, we are diverting our resources.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has identified Bangladesh to be the most vulnerable country in the world to tropical cyclones and the sixth most vulnerable country to floods. The Copenhagen Bangladesh campaign has called on rich countries, who are the most responsible for climate change and have the greatest capacity to act, to sign obligations that commit to: achieving at least a 40 percent cut in domestic carbon emissions (from 1990 levels) by 2020; provide an additional $150 billion for ensuring that developing countries have all the support and resources necessary to reduce their emissions, and adapt to climate change. Do you see this happening beyond Copenhagen or are the LDCs asking for too much?

No, I don’t think they’re asking for too much. The global climate issue is a global issue. Yes, LDCs are suffering, but their contribution to greenhouse emissions is minimal. The countries that have put us in trouble should take a share. Now in the case of climate change, developing countries like us have no contribution to this disaster.

Would you consider Bangladesh an industrialized country?

No, it’s not an industrialized country yet.
But, we are trying our best to cope with climate change. Adaptation, mitigation, all that. But we don’t have enough resources. So we want industrialized countries to come forward and help us. I understand that it will cost trillions of dollars.

Recently, one of your government officials expressed concern that 20 million citizens of Bangladesh could be displaced by climate change, by the year 2020. Under international law, individuals displaced by environmental impacts are technically not considered refugees and therefore do not qualify for certain types of protection and aid. What do you think is the responsibility of the global community in remedying the problem of climate change refugees?

I strongly feel that they should be considered as climate change refugees and environmental refugees. The global community should take responsibility of rehabilitating them. The estimate you gave is an optimistic estimate, that only 20 million will be dislodged from their homes. By the other estimates, it could be 60 million. Now, a country like Bangladesh, which is the most densely populated country in the world, does not have enough land space to accommodate them. We need help.

What could happen to Bangladesh as the result of climate change?

Our people already feel the intensity of the climate change issue. Already people are moving from the southern belt to the northern areas and overcrowding because of erratic flooding, erratic cyclones, and more intensified cyclones. The population is moving away from the southern to the northern part and crowding the cities and urban areas. Eventually many of them will seek out other neighbouring countries, like India. India’s development programme will be hampered.

Are you getting global help?

We are getting very minimal help. In the agricultural sector, we are getting minimal help. We are a country that is motivated to have food security and self-sufficiency. Climate change, food security and energy security are all highly interlinked.

We live in a small village. The whole world is a small village. And all should come forward to help out.

The MaldivesAchieved independence from the United Kingdom in July 1965, and underwent constitutional reform in 2008. Months later, the country held its first democratic elections, which brought President Mohamed Nasheed to power.

“I think there has been a very big change in the psyche of the country,” said Ambassador Mohamed of Nasheed’s election. “It’s a lot more open, a lot more democratic.”

The Maldives ranked 95 out of 182 countries on the 2009 Human Development Index, issued by the United Nations Development Programme. Life expectancy at birth is just over 71 years and there is an adult literacy rate of 97 percent. GDP per capita is almost US$5,200.

President Nasheed has been at the forefront of bringing the plight of small islands to the international stage. In addition to his innovative responses to climate change, President Nasheed held a cabinet meeting underwater – the world’s first – in October 2009. He also suggested relocating the Maldives entire population of the Maldives to another country before they become displaced by the rising sea. “I think he was trying to make the point that this is really a serious problem for the Maldives, that we need to address this issue and the world needs to address this issue of what happens to these vulnerable countries if they go underwater,” said Ambassador Mohamed.

The Ambassador assured that the Maldives has already received international support. The Japanese government provided assistance for a US $50 million sea wall that was built over a ten-year period. Recently, the International Monetary Fund approved a loan of US$92 million dollars, which the Ambassador hopes will help attract foreign direct investment in the Maldives.

“We do not see ourselves being underwater in the future,” said the Ambassador, who remains optimistic in the face of global warming. “We believe that the international community will come together.”
THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON THE DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS OF THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES AND SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES

“Climate change affects all, but it does not affect us equally,” reads the preface of the UN-OHRLLS publication, “The Impact of Climate Change on the Development Prospects of the Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States.” This detailed and informative report describes the circumstances that make Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) particularly vulnerable to the adverse affects of climate change, and advises that more emphasis be placed on incorporating climate change into development priorities.

The report outlines recommendations for the international community, such as increasing financial and technical support to help LDCs and SIDS adapt to climate change. It also gives recommendations for actions to be taken by national and local governments, such as pooling resources through regional arrangements and lobbying for greater reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in international negotiations.

An excerpt from the publication:

Compared to other developing countries, LDCs emit relatively small amounts of greenhouse gases, the main cause of global warming and climate change. However, LDCs are extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change as they lack the resources necessary to adapt. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2001) describes the requirements for a high adaptive capacity as follows:

- A stable and prosperous economy;
- A high degree of access to technology at all levels;
- Well delineated roles and responsibilities for implementation of adaptation strategies;
- Systems for the national, regional and local dissemination of climate change and adaptation information; and
- An equitable distribution of access to resources.

Clearly, the LDCs do not meet this requirement, which speaks to their low adaptive capacity. The international community has recognized the vulnerability of LDCs to climate change and their low adaptation capacity. This is evident in the Marrakech Accords where a special LDC Fund has been established for the purpose of assisting LDCs to adapt to climate change. According to the recently published Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC AR4), most of the anticipated climate change effects would be felt across the African continent, which contains 33 LDCs. The IPCC concluded that:

a. Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change and climate variability — a situation aggravated by the interaction of multiple stresses occurring at various levels, and including low adaptive capacities;
b. Current adaptations to climate change and variability in farming may not necessarily be sufficient for future changes of climate;
c. Agricultural production and food security in many African countries and regions will most likely be severely compromised by climate change;
d. Climate change will aggravate the current state of water stress that is present in some African countries, and will place other African countries at a higher risk of the same, owing to alterations in water resources as a consequence of climate change and climate variability;
e. Changes in the structure and composition of the ecosystem are taking place at a rate that was not anticipated;
f. Climate change and sea-level rise could result in the inundation of low-lying coastal areas and settlements;
g. Human health could be further negatively impacted by climate change and climate variability – as evidenced by occurrence of malaria in Southern Africa and the East African highlands.

Over 70 percent of the population in the LDCs resides in rural areas and is dependent on income from agriculture. People in LDCs are therefore more exposed than those in other countries to the effects of land degradation, drought, desertification, deforestation, as well as water and air pollution, which are associated with climate change. The effect of climate change on agriculture is likely to deprive large sections of the population in the LDCs of their livelihoods, condemning them to perpetual poverty.

In relation to SIDS, the report concludes: “Climate change will impact the social and economic fabric of life in small islands, affecting key sectors such as tourism and agriculture, and placing critical infrastructure at risk. The size and relative isolation of the islands will make them feel the effects of climate change more than other countries. Indeed, climate change will place the viability and very existence of many island states at risk.”

MEDIAGLOBAL is an independent news service, based in the United Nations Secretariat, designed to create awareness in the global media for the countries of the global South, with a strong focus on Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

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