

# Vulnerable Countries Should Take **CENTRE STAGE** at Rio+20

By CHEICK SIDI DIARRA

Island nation of Kiribati affected by climate change: children in the village of Tebikenikora, on Kiribati's main Tarawa atoll. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited Tebikenikora in September 2011 to discuss local people's concerns about the effects of climate change on their low-lying land.

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An aerial view of Marovo Lagoon in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands. Flying over the lagoon and the province's main town of Gizo, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was able to observe the effects of deforestation, climate change and natural disasters on the area.

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**A**s the world's attention turns to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development or Rio+20 in June 2012, we are all reminded of the multiple crises which continue to bedevil the globe. These crises are all the more evident in resource-strapped nations that continue to battle a myriad of challenges related to poverty and under-development.

The overarching question is: what can the world's Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) expect from the historic gathering in Rio de Janeiro this June? Of course we should, as always, remain pragmatic. Rio+20 is unlikely to produce a panacea to resolve the numerous pressing issues these groups continue to face, but it is important that we remain collectively optimistic about the possibility of a constructive and meaningful outcome.

Naturally, there are naysayers who believe the current crises are irreversible, with some going so far as to warn that even if tangible benefits do emerge from Rio+20, its effects will not be realized for the next 20 or so years.

It is appropriate at this point to highlight remarks by Jacob Zuma, President of South Africa, and Tarja Halonen, President

of Finland, who serve as Co-Chairs on the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability. In a February 2012 editorial they stated: "The greatest risk [to our common future] lies in continuing down our current path."

In light of this, Rio+20 then presents a unique opportunity for the 48 LDCs, 31 LLDCs and 52 SIDS, to not only foreground the challenges they face as they struggle to achieve sustainable development, but to also lay down a challenge to the world to address these obstacles.

For the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS, the concept of sustainable development with its three pillars of environmental, social, and economic sustainability is an indispensable guide for their own domestic strategies to leverage international support.

For the LDCs, and especially small islands, the Conference should be a platform to highlight the extent to which these countries are disproportionately affected by the adverse consequences of global climate change—even though they are the least responsible for it. Their exposed geographical locations and current low adaptive capacity make them extremely vulnerable to the physical consequences of climate change, which include drought, flooding, rising sea levels, and more intense and frequent tropical storms.

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Admittedly, these impacts will continue to evolve over the next few decades, even if the developed world makes immediate and massive reductions to its greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the physical consequences of climate change pose not only a severe threat to LDCs and SIDS today, but could constitute an even greater threat in the future if adaptation is not properly thought through. Further delays in mitigation will increase the effort required to adapt to climate change (and thus the cost of adaptation), and reduce the effectiveness of early efforts to mitigate its impacts.

From an economic development perspective, adaptation is crucial in order to maintain or restore the pace of development in LDCs. Their economies and the livelihoods of their poor are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because of their dependence on climate-sensitive sectors, such as agriculture. In order to determine the adaptation priorities of LDCs, analysis of the economic dimensions of adaptation to climate change requires a solid understanding of the development needs, economic issues, and impacts associated with climate change in these countries.

Pursuing a “green economy”, which is one of the themes of Rio+20, entails a global transition away from prevailing ecologically destabilizing patterns of development to modes of development based on environmental protection. With a view to undertaking such a transition, a mix of policies and measures tailored to each country’s needs and preferences will be required. For these vulnerable countries, many of which have not experienced carbon intensive and heavy industrialization, consumption and production, the notion of a green economy offers and opens up many prospects.

In my view, a transition to a green economy will require certain adjustments, which will involve additional costs to the economies of LDCs. We should, however, recognize that these countries are among the poorest, and are already facing severe structural challenges as they attempt to arrest deepening poverty in a bid to achieve internationally agreed development goal posts, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The vulnerability of these countries is multi-layered and multifaceted. While climate change is indeed a major concern, the LDCs remain highly vulnerable to varieties of external shocks, such as spikes in oil and food prices. Most LDCs are lagging behind in the critical areas of science, technology and innovation, which are key stumbling blocks in implementing green economy projects and programmes.

It is, however, imperative that the LDCs find home-grown solutions and adopt several adaptation strategies to prevent climate change from triggering economic decline. By implementing short-, mid- and long-term strategies at the local, national, and sometimes even regional levels, they can use preventive and reactive adaptation measures to counteract increased vulnerability and threats to economic growth caused by climate change. While it may not be possible to

neutralize the physical effects of climate change, every effort should be made to minimize their impacts.

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Given their meagre resources for their own domestic development, I would encourage development partners to step up to the plate and provide adequate financial and technological resources to LDCs in order to enable them to leapfrog into green, environmentally sustainable paths, which would enable them to benefit from the dividends of green industrialization, green technology, and green jobs.

Climate change affects us all, but it does not affect us equally, nor do we possess the same capacity to respond to its challenges. In the LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS, climate change is already affecting economic growth, health indicators, water availability, food production, and fragile ecosystems. The negative effects of climate change on crop production are especially pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa, as the agricultural sector accounts for a large share of gross domestic product, export earnings, and employment in most African LDCs. Furthermore, the vast majority of the poor reside in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

The World Health Organization has also raised the alarm that while climate change presents serious risks to health and well-being for all, poorer social groups are more likely to be exposed to these risks, with fewer resources to cushion their negative effects and a lack of insurance against them. The net result is a widening in global health inequalities. An unfortunate yet possible outcome of these compounded effects is, in my opinion, likely to give rise to social and political upheavals, including an increase in environmental refugees and internal strife.

Participants and delegations attending the upcoming gathering in Rio would do well to recognize that the LLDCs can benefit from improved trade facilitation: this can allow them to improve international competitiveness of their products resulting from lowered transaction costs through reduced transport time and enhanced certainty in transborder trade. Financial, technological, and capacity-building assistance will enable landlocked developing countries to



address the challenges caused by climate change, land degradation, and desertification. The Conference will also be an opportune meeting space for the LLDCs to partner with developed countries in order to enhance technology development, transfer and access, and capacity building.

The Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020, adopted by the Fourth United Nations Conference on the LDCs in May 2011, outlines LDCs' priorities for sustainable development and defines a framework for renewed and strengthened global partnership to achieve them. The Rio+20 Conference should fully integrate the IPoA into its outcome document and underline renewed and scaled-up global commitment to achieve sustainable development in LDCs.

As an advocate for SIDS, the Rio+20 Conference is expected to be instrumental in determining the way forward. The plight of SIDS is, indeed, a special case which should be front and centre of the debate on sustainable development, given their unique and particular vulnerabilities. Recent studies and empirical evidence have demonstrated that the vulnerability of the small islands has increased over the last two decades, primarily because of higher exposure to external shocks, including the increasing impact of climate change and more frequent and intense disasters, as well as the fuel, food, and financial crises combined with inadequate international support.

For SIDS, the outcome of Rio+20 should reaffirm the need for the fulfilment of Agenda 21, the Mauritius Strategy for Implementation, adopted in Port Louis in 2005, which recognized that small islands constitute a special case for both the environment and development. The international community should, therefore, significantly augment their efforts to assist SIDS in sustaining momentum realized to date in the implementation of the 1994 Barbados Plan of Action, in order to achieve sustainable development.

Sustainable development in LLDCs is constrained by the challenges that these countries face caused by their lack of territorial access to the sea, aggravated by remoteness from world markets, inadequate transport infrastructure and prohibitive transit costs and risks that have continued to impose serious constraints on export earnings, competitiveness of export products on the international market, private capital inflow, and domestic resource mobilization.

The deleterious effects of climate change have already been felt in these landlocked countries. Concerns over land degradation, desertification, deforestation, and destruction of the transport infrastructure have been magnified as a result. Other challenges that are threatening the ability of these countries to achieve the MDGs include commodity price volatility and rising food and energy prices.

As part of the preparations for Rio+20, our advocacy efforts, including through the Executive Committee on

Economic and Social Affairs—one of the United Nations inter-agency mechanisms of which the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLS) is a member—have centred on access to clean water, as well as water for agricultural purposes, and access to affordable energy for the LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS. I am of the firm opinion that more specific global policy guidance, particularly as it relates to transfer of technology, could be agreed upon which further acknowledges the crucial role that energy has in facilitating and accelerating economic growth and promoting sustainable development objectives. Any outcome from Rio should have a strong emphasis on access to water and energy resources by the most vulnerable countries and peoples of the world.

UN-OHRLS will also showcase a side event at Rio+20 to highlight and reaffirm the vulnerabilities faced by all three groups in the areas of desertification, land degradation, promotion of food security, and access to water. The event will also underline the need for capacity building and transfer of technologies to enable these three groups of countries to combat such vulnerabilities.

It is my hope that the Rio+20 Conference identifies a framework of action focused on implementation and full integration of the three pillars of sustainable development in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in order to achieve tangible, concrete, and actionable outcomes. This includes:

- a** Provision of new, additional, stable, predictable financial resources to support adaption and mitigation activities in LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS.
- b** Effective access to and transfer of technologies to the LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS to assist with adaption and mitigation efforts.
- c** The mobilization of a strong political commitment at the highest level to fully enter into the implementation phase of the commitments made.

Any outcome should lead to giving continued priority for the eradication of poverty, and to support the effective national efforts of vulnerable countries in promoting empowerment of the poor. This should include enhancing the productive capacity, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, as well as the creation of income opportunities that must be complemented by effective social policies, with a view to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs. 