

Handout A: Global Climate Change Debate Roles

Alliance of Small Island States¹

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) is a coalition of 43 small island and low-lying coastal countries which have many development concerns and challenges in common. It works to advocate for and negotiate on behalf of its members and observers² within the UN system.

Although AOSIS countries are amongst those least responsible for climate change, they are extremely vulnerable to its adverse effects – especially sea level rise – and some may even become uninhabitable. Sea levels are currently rising at a rate of over 2mm per year, and the IPCC estimates that, over the course of the next 100 years, levels could rise by as much as 880 mm.³ In AOSIS countries, rising sea levels could contribute to:

- Soil erosion and land loss
- Human displacement
- Increases in the occurrence of extreme weather events
- Reduced resilience of coastal ecosystems
- Saltwater intrusion into freshwater
- The bleaching and reduced calcification of coral reefs
- The loss of mangrove forests
- Damage to coastal ecosystems, reducing biodiversity

Most small island states are in a poor position to adapt to and deal with the implications of climate change, due to small land area, limited resources, low incomes, rapidly expanding populations, and a high susceptibility to natural

disasters. To make matters even worse, despite working in a coalition through AOSIS, they hold relatively little influence in international negotiations. They have little bargaining power, can afford to send few delegates, and struggle in negotiations with well-paid teams sent by richer countries.

“We are not in a position to change the course of events in the world. But what you do or do not do here will greatly influence the fate of my people. It can also change the course of world history.”

~ UNFCCC Representative from the Maldives

AOSIS believes that developed countries should and must take the lead in reducing GHG emissions, and quickly provide financial support to its members – not only to help support environmental sustainability – but also to help adapt to the impacts of climate change which are already being felt in these low lying countries.

¹ For further information about AOSIS countries, please visit www.sidsnet.org/aosis/.

² AOSIS Members: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Cyprus, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Singapore, Seychelles, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. AOSIS Observers: American Samoa, Guam, Netherlands Antilles, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

³ IPCC. *Climate Change 2001: Synthesis Report* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

India and China

India and China are among the fastest growing economies in the world. With considerable populations⁴ and surface areas, these countries are gaining considerable power in international trade and political systems and their growing populations aspire to reach levels of affluence – and private consumption – experienced in developed countries.

The rapid economic development that has taken place in India and China has had the benefit of lifting masses of people out of poverty. However, this has come at a huge environmental cost, as both countries have been relying heavily on burning coal to produce energy, releasing a considerable amount of GHGs into the atmosphere.

Because coal burning power plants are long-term, capital-intensive investments, China and India are likely to continue burning coal in order to meet their rising energy needs. The Pew Centre on Global Climate Change estimates that 86% of the incremental world coal demand between now and 2030 will come from China and India.⁵

Despite their heavy reliance on coal-fired power, both India and China are making some efforts to reduce their GHG emissions. India has been working to develop renewable energy programs, while China is working to slow the rate of its emissions through population stabilisation efforts, transitioning from coal to natural gas, and planting trees.

Because of their sheer size, efforts made by these countries to move to greener sources of energy could shift the economics of energy as we know it, making non-conventional energy sources even cheaper than the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal. Moreover, efforts made by these countries to stem their GHG emissions could have a profound impact on the degree of climate change experienced around the world.

While India and China would like to move away from the burning of fossil fuels altogether, this cannot happen without substantial financial investment. Despite the economic growth that these countries have been experiencing, much of their populations are still living in poverty and they maintain the right to develop, and provide for the needs of their populations, as they see fit.

“There is no way the United States can hope to persuade China and India to adopt more environmentally friendly growth strategies without first acknowledging its own responsibility—and then doing something about it.”

~ Kenneth Rogoth, economist

⁴ India: approximately 1.1 billion; China: over 1.3 billion

⁵ Pew Center on Global Climate Change. “Coal and Climate Change Facts,” www.pewclimate.org/global-warming-basics/coalfacts.cfm.

The United States

The United States has long held the title of being the world's leading emitter of GHG emissions. While this title has now been passed on to China, the US continues to be a major contributor to the problem of climate change. American automobiles, numbering approximately 130 million in total, constitute about 25% of the world's vehicles and, together, emit roughly as much as the entire Japanese economy (which is also one of the world's top GHG emitters).⁶

While the United States had undoubtedly contributed the most to the climate change crisis facing the global community, it has been the least cooperative player in international climate change negotiations. It chose not to commit itself to the Kyoto Protocol – a legally binding addition to the UNFCCC developed in 2005.

That said, the United States is now under the leadership of President Barack Obama, a change many people think, or hope, will bring about greater leadership and commitment on climate change. President Obama seems committed to creating jobs while investing in clean and renewable energy and large scale reductions in GHG emissions. For the United States to sign onto a legally binding climate change instrument it will have to align closely with domestic policies focused on job creation and energy independence and balance both environmental and economic aims.

As one of the world's richest countries, the United States is also one of the least vulnerable to climate change impacts, with abundant resources available to fund adaptation measures.

It remains unclear whether the United States will agree to any legally binding legislation developed at the next UNFCCC meeting. What do you think?

“The issue of climate change is one that we ignore at our own peril. There may still be disputes about exactly how much we're contributing to the warming of the earth's atmosphere and how much is naturally occurring, but what we can be scientifically certain of is that our continued use of fossil fuels is pushing us to a point of no return. And unless we free ourselves from a dependence on these fossil fuels and chart a new course on energy in this country, we are condemning future generations to global catastrophe.”
~ US President Barack Obama

Least Developed Countries⁷

Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are those which, according the UN Human Development Index, have the lowest indicators of socioeconomic development in the entire world. The current list of countries classified as LDCs includes 49 countries: 33 in Africa,⁸ 15 in the Asia Pacific region,⁹ and 1 in Latin America.¹⁰

⁶ Worldwatch Institute. “Questions and Answers about Global Warming and Abrupt Climate Change,” (2008). www.worldwatch.org/node/3949#d3.

⁷ For further information about LDCs, please visit www.unohrrls.org/en/home/.

⁸ Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia.

⁹ Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu, and Yemen.

Representing the poorest and weakest segment of the world's population, LDCs are characterised by:¹¹

- **Extreme poverty:** Almost 50% of the population in LDCs live on less than 1 USD per day, and in slums.
- **Weak economies:** In 2004, exports from LDCs accounted for a mere 0.6% of world merchandise exports.
- **Heavy debt burdens:** LDCs' debt burden increased to USD 158.9 billion in 2003.
- **Lack of basic infrastructure and social services:** Less than 60% of the population in LDCs have access to clean, safe drinking water.
- **Poor health indicators:** The average life expectancy in LDCs is the lowest in the world, at 51 years of age.
- **Rapid population growth:** The average annual population growth rate in LDCs is the highest in the world, at 5%.¹²

LDCs are also struggling to battle diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS, raise low education levels, and tackle environmental problems like desertification, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity. The range of challenges

facing LDCs leave them more sensitive to climate change and less capable of adapting to it. This is a cruel irony, considering that LDCs have contributed very little to the problem of climate change. Unless global trends in GHG emission are reversed, these struggling countries will pay the price of the development and prosperity enjoyed by industrialised states.

“Climate justice means pollution has a cost and those costs must be borne by the polluter. The 15 least developed countries contribute less than 1% of global carbon emissions, and yet it is they who suffer the most.”
~ Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General

Many LDC leaders have only recently started to see climate change as a priority issue on the same level as pressing development concerns. It is now becoming increasingly clear to LDCs that climate change is a development issue, and not just an area of concern to industrialised countries. Unlike developed nations, however, LDCs are more concerned about what can be done to adapt to the impacts of climate change that are already being felt than to reduce emissions – as their emissions are already minimal.

Like AOSIS countries, LDCs believe that developed countries should take strong steps to reduce GHG emissions while also providing necessary financial support to impoverished countries ill equipped to deal with the climate change that is already taking place. That said, even working as a coalition, LDCs hold very little power in international governmental negotiations.

¹⁰ Haiti

¹¹ The statistics that follow were compiled from UN-OHRLLS.

¹² The average annual population growth rate in other developing countries is 1.2%.