



A L L I A N C E O F S M A L L I S L A N D S T A T E S

CHAIR'S STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE MEMBERSHIP

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Address by Honourable Sir Molwyn Joseph, Minister of Health, Wellness, and the Environment.

27 June 2022 – 3-6pm

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I'm speaking today on behalf of the 39 small island developing states that are members of the Alliance of Small Island States. Our islands are beset by all manner of environmental disasters to which we have contributed little. And now we are facing the scourge of marine pollution.

The recent release of the Yale Environmental Performance Indicator report included a new indicator on ocean plastic pollution. Of the 10 states that create the least ocean plastic pollution, 9 of them were small islands. In the next 10 states, 5 of them were small islands. This is not to say that we don't need assistance with domestic waste management and recycling, because we do. But rather, once again, there is a global environmental problem that we contribute little to but are disproportionately affected by.

AOSIS welcomes the international efforts to address plastic pollution, both by states and private actors. We see the upcoming intergovernmental negotiations on a new international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, to be a critical step to solving this problem. But we must be sure that it is a global agreement that speaks to the needs of all states. It must cover the full lifecycle of plastic and plastic pollution, including the elimination of plastic that is already in the marine environment. It is not enough to just reduce new pollution. For the small islands, we need the global community to clean up what is already there.

I'd like to speak today about the effects that existing plastic pollution is having on small islands. This will illustrate that it is important to attack all aspects of this problem.

The special circumstances of small island developing states—our size, remoteness, narrow resource bases, reliance on tourism and susceptibility to external environmental and economic

shocks—mean that the plastic pollution problem is one that will have an outside impact on our islands.

We are already seeing the impacts of this pollution on our livelihoods, tourism, health, and culture.

First, on livelihoods. As large ocean states, our economies revolve around the marine environment. Significant portions of our populations derive their livelihoods from marine resources, primarily from fishing. In the Caribbean alone, fisheries production brings in almost half a billion USD annually. However, fisheries in the maritime zones of some of our Members are in decline, with marine pollution as a significant contributor. We also know from academic studies that we are seeing increasing bioaccumulation of the harmful components of plastics in marine animals. This is particularly pronounced in species further up the food chain, like tuna—a species that is critical to our states in the Pacific.

But the impact isn't just on marine species, but also to our boats and other marine equipment, including that which we use to travel between our islands or for tourism. Increased marine pollution is causing faster wear and tear on this equipment, greater repairs, and higher cost of operation.

Second, and linked to the first, is tourism. Small islands are paradises. People visit to experience our beaches, reefs, and island hospitality. UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) has reported that 2/3rd of SIDS' populations are employed in the service industry and that coastal and marine tourism is the SIDS's largest economic sector. Anecdotally, we know that increased plastic pollution washing up on our beaches is harming tourism. It is also requiring increasing financial outlays from governments and private industry to clean up beaches, restore reef and to mitigate other effects. While we don't have studies on the magnitude of these costs, we know from other countries that these costs can be significant and the decline in tourists real.

Third, our health. Plastic pollution in our food and water sources can pose severe risks to our mental and physical health. Recent studies show that microplastics can cross the blood brain barrier. This is a grave concern in island societies, where our diets are dominated by seafood. We also know that marine plastic pollution is an effective vector for disease and pests—a potent consideration after our global experience these past two years.

Lastly, our culture. For many small islanders and our societies, the ocean is an intrinsic element of our identity. It provides not only aesthetic value to our populations, but also cultural and spiritual. Harms from plastic pollution to a large number of marine species that are culturally significant for our island societies, including whales, sharks, turtles, and tuna, threaten to worsen in the absence of robust and swift action.

As I have described here, the impacts of marine plastic pollution are dire for small islands. But many of these impacts are felt by other countries and other populations.

So, what do we need to do about this?

First, we must conclude a new international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. This must cover the full lifecycle of plastics and very importantly must include all relevant actors. We must include the private sector and civil society in our efforts, but never forgetting that governments can and must take this issue seriously within their own countries and internationally.

Second, we must seriously consider the elimination of existing plastic pollution in the new instrument, particularly from the marine environment. We know that many states would like to primarily focus on upstream or production measures, but that will only slow the flow of plastic into the ocean, not clean up what is already there.

Third, recognizing that we too are contributing to plastic pollution, we need assistance from other states to upgrade our waste management and recycling systems. As small islands, we produce almost none of the raw materials of plastics and very little finished plastic products. Our contribution to the global effort is to even further reduce our plastic pollution from getting into the marine environment. But we need assistance to do that.

Fourth and finally, there is still much that we don't know about this problem—the sources, the science, the impacts and the solutions. We need a significant increase in global knowledge of this problem and SIDS would like to be a part of that effort. Earlier today, we launched a Declaration for the Enhancement of Marine Scientific Knowledge, Research Capacity and Transfer for Marine Technology to SIDS. We would encourage everyone to sign onto this declaration and help us to be a part of the solution.

This global problem is dire. We are already feeling the effects in SIDS. We are thankful that the global community has recognized this and are acting. We thank you for this opportunity to explain our perspective on this problem.