

# Role of Small Islands in UN Climate Negotiations: A Constructivist Viewpoint

International Studies  
56(4) 215–235, 2019  
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in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india  
DOI: 10.1177/0020881719861503  
journals.sagepub.com/home/isq



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## Abstract

This article is about small island developing states (SIDS) and their role in the United Nations (UN) climate negotiations. It presents a discussion about how a constructivist model of foreign policy analysis and international system design can be used to explain the impact of climate ideas of SIDS on UN climate system. The SIDS have been in the UN climate negotiations since the 1980s, committed to a climate agenda with clear ideas about the challenges they face and the type of solutions they seek from the international policy community. In this respect, this article seeks to explain that climate ideas shared among SIDS have established an intersubjective understanding to promote a compelling common voice at international climate negotiations, which is based on an island vulnerability identity. These ideas have shaped the policy thinking and interests of climate negotiators to design institutional frameworks that have given special consideration to SIDS. It concludes that this observation represents a disproportionate impact of SIDS. Despite the weak material powers for being small islands, their climate agenda has influenced the UN system design to address their concerns.

## Keywords

Small island developing states (SIDS), climate change, United Nations climate negotiations, constructivism, international relations, foreign policy

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## Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have moved to the forefront of climate change debates today (Grecequet, Noble, & Hellmann, 2017). Although geographically distant and culturally diverse from each other, the SIDS also share unique physical and material characteristics that create similar environmental concerns and development challenge for them. More importantly, SIDS have reached agreement about their disproportionate and unique vulnerabilities to climate change (Betzold, Castro, & Weiler, 2012, pp. 591–613; OECD, 2015; UN, 2017; UNFCCC, 2005; Voccia, 2012, pp. 101–115). Since their special case was first endorsed by the United Nations (UN) in 1992 (see UNFCCC, 2005, p. 2), UN climate negotiations have become a key platform for SIDS to seek international collective action. They have been committed to a climate agenda with clear ideas about the challenges they face and the type of solutions they seek from the international policy community. However, this behaviour tends to question the material capacity of SIDS to actually make a difference in the UN. This is the case especially considering the realist asymmetries of the international system (Murphy, Tirpak, Drexhage, & Gagnon-Lebrun, 2009, pp. 13, 22). In this respect, this article argues that SIDS have made a difference. This is argued along the theoretical lines of international relations (IR) scholarship that focus on the ideal role of small states in the post-Cold War international political economy (see Bishop, 2012, pp. 942–960; Flockhart, 2016). Current literature agrees that the UN climate negotiations have been influenced by small island diplomacy (Ashe, Lieroph, & Ashe, 1999; Betzold, 2015; Betzold et al., 2012; Grecequet et al., 2017; Parry, Canziani, Palutikof, Linden, & Hanson, 2007; UN, 2010; UNFCCC, 2005). Hence, this article seeks to explain this role of SIDS in terms of how climate ideas constitutive of the island vulnerability identity created an intersubjective understanding among climate negotiators about their special and unique vulnerabilities.

Constructivist ideas can be utilized in a methodological context to explain the climate politics of SIDS. The underlying notion is that ideas can have a causal power to shape foreign policy purposes of states and influence structural changes (Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2016; Wendt, 1992). Ideas generated, shared and agreed between actors (or states) can shape their political and policy interests, and (re) construct their policy structures. This ideational process can establish the UN climate system as a social construction or an intersubjective structure of climate foreign policy of negotiating states. This forms a process of temporal interplay between states involving continuous exchange of climate foreign policy interests (see Flockhart, 2016). This means that despite the pre-existing institutional conditions, ideas tend to shape interests as they are shared among negotiating states during the processes of dispute resolution, crisis management and policymaking. Therefore, this intersubjective structure of climate foreign policy is important to explain how SIDS have performed in and shaped the UN climate system.

The scope of this article is also limited to the role of SIDS in climate change-related engagements in the UN. SIDS presents a notable case when it comes to the UN climate negotiations (Betzold et al., 2012, pp. 591–613; Betzold et al., 2015,

pp. 481–489). SIDS have by far moved beyond neo-realist or neo-liberal barriers and asymmetries of international climate politics (Grecequet et al., 2017; Hoad, 2015). This view runs against the neo-realist or liberal institutionalists' notion about material weaknesses of small states to influence international systems (Bishop, 2012; Hellmann & Wolf, 1993; Rowlands, 2001; Telbami, 2002; Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979). This article does not avoid such notions of main or classical IR theories. However, it claims that their active and influential role in climate debates makes them international players that merit analytical attention. In this respect, the UN climate system is defined with a descriptive sense of the UN system (see Goodman, 1965). It includes member states, the climate negotiation processes and agreements or treaties reached among member states. These negotiation processes include the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and its subsidiary climate conferences held under the UN climate policy guidelines. SIDS have played a significant role in the process and design of this system.

The article undertakes a qualitative discourse analysis of climate foreign policy statements. It claims that ideas define the integration and formulation of their foreign policies, and hence, climate foreign policy statements can show the ideas held and shared by SIDS about climate change. This discourse includes formal statements or speeches, government policy documents, memorandum of understandings, and information provided in media material. This article explores the discourse concerning SIDS and the UN climate negotiations during the 1980s and 2015. Using this method of analysis, the article proceeds as follows. The following section presents the constructivist framework to analyze foreign policy and international system design in the context of SIDS. The next three sections present an observation of climate foreign policies of SIDS and show how climate ideas have shaped their policies to individually and collectively engage in the UN climate negotiations. The conclusion discusses the important role of SIDS in climate politics and how a constructivist ideational model is useful to explain international cases concerning SIDS and other small states.

## **The Conceptual Framework**

No fewer than 193 states are at stake when the impact of climate change is considered. Their interests are different and diverse at best. This creates a complex setting for states to agree on problems and solutions (Betzold et al., 2012). As a problem faced by all, it poses challenges in terms of accountabilities of states and their capacity to adopt cooperative approaches. As a complex issue profoundly linked to globalization and the interconnectedness of world economies, it creates further challenges for those most vulnerable to both internal and external shocks including global warming and sea level rise (Underdal, 2017). International action is often divided and disdained by powerful states. However, despite their weak material properties, SIDS seem to have found their way through international climate negotiations (see Bishop, 2012; Chong & Maass, 2010; Harris, 2009; Hey, 2003; Lee & Smith, 2010; Panke, 2012; Simpson, 2006; UN-OHRLLS, 2011). In this respect, foreign policy responses of SIDS to international action against

climate change present a case to reorganize theoretical approaches in IR and foreign policy. This does not mean that important IR theories should be fully ignored. The main claim is that theoretical approaches can go beyond the neo-liberal and neo-realist theories to tell the story of SIDS in climate politics.

The main understanding here is that structural change is no longer an automatic outcome of hegemonic power(s) in the international system (Barkdull & Harris, 2009, p. 33). This understanding mirrors the constructivist approaches in IR, advanced to understand foreign policy practices of the post-Cold War small states linked to the system of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (see Flockhart, 2016, p. 79; Hameiri, Jones, & Ebscohost, 2015; Houghton, 2007). Building particularly on a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis, this article frames the international system as a social construction of interplay between foreign policy practices of SIDS and UN climate negotiations. Instead of only material factors of international system design (Browning, 2006; Hellmann & Wolf, 1993; Keohane, 1969, 1984, 1989; Keohane & Nye, 1977; Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979), it stresses that it is the ideas generated and shared among states that shape foreign policy decisions at states as well as system level (Blyth, 2002, pp. 35–44; Flockhart, 2016; Wendt, 1992). The main claim is that states have the capacity to generate their own ideas as social entities. These ideas shape states' interests to seek certain policy and political goals. In foreign policy process, where two or more states are involved, these ideas are then shared between actors to seek common goals. Here, foreign policy becomes a process of intersubjective understanding between states about their problems and solutions. This intersubjective structure is built on social relations that are shaped by ideas continuously generated and shared between concerned states (Adler, 2012; Blyth, 2002; Widmaier, 2005, 2007). These ideas will reflect the beliefs and expectations of the states about each other and the system they operate in, and hence become a driving force of systemic change and stability (Wendt, 1992).

Ideas have certain effects on how states function with respect to each other and meeting international solutions. As they are shared between states, they merge states' interests to form physical coalitions to materialize collective action. The intersubjective understanding further creates conventions to guide the interplay between states to manage their relations (see Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2016). In moments of crisis, states can have beliefs and ideas about current problems and the type of solutions that could best address their definition of the problems. Such beliefs and ideas can influence their perceptions about one's self with respect to other(s), reshape their foreign policy interests and hence construct the international system as a product of 'intersubjective awareness' (Blyth, 2002, pp. 35–39; Busse, 1999). In that, despite the asymmetries of the international climate system, states that are most affected and least affected can have different sets of ideas that will shape their interests about the solutions they expect to achieve.

In this context, global climate change is characterized by great complexities and uncertainties due to the many number of states involved, with divergent interests linked to the problem of climate change (Mayer & Arndt, 2009; Rowlands, 2001; Wiegandt, 2001, p. 127). Coalitions can enable states to establish common goals on such complex issues by creating group awareness.

This group awareness and understanding(s) can form a group of homogenous actors to pursue a common agenda (Bishop, 2012). Ideas act as coalition builders or coalition magnets (Béland & Cox, 2016; Blyth, 2002). This coalitional power has the capacity to reduce collective action problems in complex systems and power relations. As coalition magnets, ideas can ‘appeal to a diversity of individuals and groups and be used strategically by policy entrepreneurs’ (Béland & Cox, 2016, p. 429). Here, ideas are generated and manipulated by policy entrepreneurs in a way that ‘might awaken a policy preference in the minds of actors who were not previously engaged with a particular issue’ (Béland & Cox, 2016, p. 429) to work together by creating an intersubjective understanding. For example, in the 1930s political and economic ideas of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, *Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti* (SAP), by narrating the crisis as ‘a function of a failure of demand that affected all sectors equally’, convinced a coalition of business, labour, and agriculture to act in harmony (Blyth, 2002, p. 254). Post 9/11 the United States’ foreign policy was constructed around rhetoric of crisis including the threat from ‘weapons of mass destruction’ to convince an intersubjective understanding for pre-emptive action against Iraq (Widmaier, 2007, p. 791).

Here ideas have also acted as an interpretive framework for states to cooperate and coordinate problem-solving (see Blyth, 2002; Widmaier, 2005, 2007). This type of informed decision-making framework helps the collective agenda-setting and policy-framing processes by clarifying the ends of collective action. Scandinavian states are noted as good ‘norm entrepreneurs’ as ideas about their lived experiences of good rights-based practices and environmental image have shaped the intersubjective structure of UN-based systems for women’s rights and environmental protection. Ideas were socialized during UN-based interactions to set commonly agreed agendas. Despite the small size, through presentation of neutral, trustworthy and honest images, they were able to set a policy direction on these issues (Ingebritsen, 2002; Thorhallsson, 2018). Likewise, Portugal has constructed its foreign policy as an intersubjective understanding about a responsible global citizen especially within its alliances by engaging in UN peacekeeping operations (Pinto, 2014). On the other hand, China’s alliance with African countries further explains the competing effects of intersubjective understanding when, for example, ‘63 per cent of Africans in 36 countries consider China to have the most positive influence on their countries’ (Hodzi, 2018). ‘China’s no conditions-attached and non-interventionist approach to development assistance and cooperation’, as Hodzi (2018) explained, are the new intersubjective understandings that are potentially driving African states’ interests for aid cooperation away from Western systems. Here, political and economic ideas of African states about such practices of non-interference align more closely with China’s notion of aid cooperation and hence have an effect of re-socializing relationships.

Furthermore, the socializing or shared ideas that form the intersubjective understandings remain at the core of the new policies, institutions or guidelines set to address the problems through time and space. This way, these ideational blueprints will also guide states to determine the change and continuity of international system design (Flockhart, 2016, p. 84). This means that the direction of

foreign policy outcomes is continuously managed during the interplay between states during negotiations, that is, via the foreign policy process (see Wendt, 1992, p. 399). Here, ideas constitutive of policy interests remain a constant causal variable in the form of conventions or intersubjective agreements that can shape and manage those institutional outcomes in static and changing situations (Blyth, 2002, pp. 41–44). According to Blyth, ‘the concept of ideas as conventions refers to the intersubjective understandings that agents share regarding how the economy is put together and how it should operate in normal times’ (Blyth, 2002, p. 41). This means that states can coordinate and manage their expectations based on those conventions. Table 1 provides a summary of the conceptual stages of the intersubjective structure of foreign policymaking and international system design.

This conceptual framework can explain the process of continuous interactions between states through individual and collective action in international negotiations. This article portrays these interactions in terms of foreign policy engagements of SIDS at state, coalitional and international levels. In this framework, climate ideas of SIDS can generate such conventions during the process of the UN climate negotiations. For example, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its subsequent Kyoto Protocol in the 1990s–2000s can be products of primary conventions that govern the interests of SIDS during negotiations. The subsequent Paris process can portray the evolution of an institutional framework to meet changing expectations of SIDS during the changes in the UN negotiation process (Aginam, 2011; Betzold et al., 2012).

Using this ideational framework, the proceeding sections draw a representative picture of ideational process of climate foreign policy of SIDS and their role in the

**Table 1.** Stages of Ideational Structure and Their Impact

Stages	Impact
Generation and sharing of ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shape interests of state actors and foreign policy actor on a given issue or crisis</li> <li>• Shape relationship between states concerned with a given issue or crisis</li> <li>• Merge foreign policy interests and decisions towards reaching a common goal</li> </ul>
Ideas as coalition builders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make states work together and coordinate on a given issue or crisis</li> <li>• Reduce collective action problem in international cooperation through merging interests of actors concerned with the given issue or crisis</li> <li>• Minimize complexities of interests and reduce uncertainty about the system design</li> </ul>
Ideas as conventions (or agreed guidelines)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish an intersubjective agreement about the system put in place to address the given issue or crisis</li> <li>• Shape and manage the expectations of actors about the system put in place to address the given issue or crisis</li> <li>• Manage the intersubjective structure based on the reality of recent changes to the issue or crisis through time and on changing expectations</li> </ul>

Source: Blyth, 2002.

UN climate negotiations since the 1980s. The analysis is categorized in different but intertwining negotiation stages. It looks at the late 1980s to identify what ideas were generated to shape climate foreign policies of SIDS. It then looks at the period from early 1990s to mid-2000s to show the coalitional effect of ideas as SIDS formed and negotiated through a coalitional body. It further looks at the most recent stage of the UN climate negotiations up to the 2015 Paris agreement to explore how the ideational process has managed SIDS climate foreign policies and affected the outcomes.

## Climate Ideas of SIDS

The roots of SIDS's climate change agenda are found beyond the UN forums. As one of the first countries to talk about island vulnerabilities, the Maldives raised the issue of disproportionate and destructive effects of climate change on small island and low-lying coastal states at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Vancouver in 1987 (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 86; Sadat, 2009). It specially called for an international response to give special attention to the concerns of island states. Although the Commonwealth does not represent all UN member states, it encompasses a majority of SIDS—the Commonwealth has 25 SIDS and the UN has 37 SIDS as members (The Commonwealth, 2018; UN, 2017). Therefore, this meeting was a crucial point of inception of climate ideas of SIDS. At this meeting, speaking with personal experience about damages caused to island life due to extreme tidal swells (UNFCCC, 2005, pp. 13–16), the then President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom made a special case for small and low-lying island states that had been hit by the phenomenon of climate change. His climate discourse was built on three intertwining elements related to SIDS and climate change. First, climate change was acknowledged as a global event requiring international collective action. Second, there was a claim that SIDS were among least contributors to climate change but experience the greatest damage. Third, as developing countries with limited resources, SIDS cannot combat climate change alone, and hence, seeking solutions through efforts of international collective action was necessary.

President Gayoom's statement made an ideational impact on the Commonwealth states leading to eventual enactment of Commonwealth sponsored programmes. Among some 46 member-states that participated in this meeting, a majority of them, especially the Pacific island states, shared similar views (Barnett & Campbell, 2010). Several Pacific Islanders who attended the CHOGM later raised similar concerns at the 1988 annual Pacific Island Forum leaders meeting, spreading ideas about island vulnerabilities against climate change (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Edwards, 1990). Barnett and Campbell (2010, p. 24) quoted Ravanu's explanation of Fijian socio-natural entities:

The people of Nakorosule wherever they are and in whatever work they are involved are often reminded by their elders not to forget the Vanua, meaning the land and the social system and the *dela ni yavu*, one's house site back in the village ... The Vanua in

terms of the *delani yavu* is the physical embodiment of one's identity and belonging. Land in this sense is thus an extension of the self; and conversely the people are an extension of the land.

The same ideas were stressed in the 1987 summit meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), raising further awareness among regional communities including non-governmental environmental advocates. In 1988, the New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister (and Minister for the Environment), talking in Hawaii, raised concerns about the impact of climate change on the Pacific region. In 1989, a Commonwealth Group of Experts found that 'there was special need for concern for low-lying island countries' (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 86). This group, led by British scientist Martin Holdgate, found in 1989 that 'there was special need for concern for low-lying island countries' (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 86). Holdgate called for 'a "major international initiative" to establish "global responsibilities" for preventing unmanageable rises in the world's temperature' (Barnett & Campbell, 2010, p. 86).

Following the 1987 CHOGM, the same case was read before the UNGA, the same year, problematizing the threats to island nations caused by sea level rise (Conference Secretariat, 1989; Edwards, 1990). Initially, it was the efforts of fewer island nations that brought the issues to the attention of the UN climate negotiators. The Maldives warned the UN about the reality of the dangers posed by sea level rise, as it informed that a 'rise of 2 metres would suffice to virtually submerge the entire country of 1,190 small islands, most of which barely rise over 2 metres above mean sea level' (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN, 1987). At that time, any mitigation efforts could not have prevented the possible rise of sea level and global warming, even without taking into consideration the doubt about reaching international consensus to take drastic mitigation measures that had, up to that point, largely failed (Betzold et al., 2015, p. 482). Any efforts by such small island states were conveniently sidelined at UN forums. Such information, while merely harmonizing with scientific data as presented by the The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Parry et al., 2007), did make an impact on island nations with similar physical characteristics to consider the matter seriously. Their problem became significant with an increasing awareness of the nature of their claim. Initial ideas were to primarily focus on 'equity, impacts and adaptation strategies' that can help similar states with a lack of material resources to combat climate change (Aginam, 2011, p. 82; Mayer & Arndt, 2009). The former president of Maldives alerted UN member states about 'a time of potential crisis confronting [this] planet and its population' and a 'crisis of environmental destruction man has invoked upon himself' engendering 'risks of irreversible damage to the human environment that threaten the very life-support systems of the earth – the basis for man's survival and progress' (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN, 1987).

Such ideas were accepted by more states during subsequent climate engagements. The 1989 Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise, held in the Maldives capital, Malé, signified a crucial phase of the intersubjective awareness among SIDS. Totally, 14 small island states from the Mediterranean, Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans met in the Maldives to initiate a united 'call for action'.

From its participants, Antigua and Barbuda, Cyprus, Fiji, Kiribati, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, and Vanuatu made formal foreign policy statements agreeing on ideas that SIDS were disproportionately and most affected by climate change and that international cooperation was necessary to address the issue (UNESCO, 1989). At the meeting, then Maldives Transport and Shipping Minister Abbas Ibrahim stressed about the growing common concern among small island states about the uneven 'threats and consequences of the changing global climate', and the possibility of becoming 'innocent victims' of and 'first countries to suffer' from the 'actions of industrialized nations' that were threatening the very existence of the 'small, low-lying and fragile countries' (Ibrahim, 1989). He called upon SIDS for collective action to mobilize necessary financial and human resources to 'voice [their] concerns' to 'seek the collaboration and assistance of international agencies' (Ibrahim, 1989). Vanuatu Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Jack T Hopa agreed that all small island states have a 'limited economic base' to address the problem, and called upon the 'industrial countries to recognize these potential problems and work together with small countries in an effort to find solutions and develop a plan of action to take' (Hopa, 1989). In the conference, Malta stated that:

There is a rapidly growing consensus among nations that urgent action is needed to deal with the problem of climate change. In particular, a very broad consensus is emerging in favour of a framework convention on climate change – specifically referred to in the Maldives declaration – on the lines Malta had first proposed in the UN General Assembly just over a year ago. (Malta, 1989)

Participating states agreed in the 'Malé Declaration' about the common consequences associated with sea level rise and the need for international support to address the issue (UNESCO, 1989).

In retrospect, the case of SIDS was formally recognized by the UN in 1992. By that time, ideas about special treatment and international action supporting their climate efforts have started to affect the subsequent international climate-related engagements. The 1992 Agenda 21 portrayed an international understanding about their special case and stressed the commitment to 'adopt and implement plans and programmes to support [and] ... enable small island developing States to cope effectively, creatively and sustainably with environmental change [including climate change]' (UN, 1994). The 1994 Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA) declared SIDS as places with particular vulnerability to natural and environmental disasters and called for international support including adaptation and mitigation measures (UNGA, 1994). It is not within the purview of this article to explore the elements of this programme or Agenda 21, which remained key plans for international action supporting SIDS in the coming years. Focus here is about the global understanding about the particular vulnerabilities of SIDS to climate change (Wong, 2011). While such ideas were generated and shared among SIDS and UN negotiators, they also acted as coalition builders and international conventions that ensured a special agenda for the most affected and vulnerable states.

## **SIDS and Coalitional Impact**

The early 1990s was a time of global climate diplomacy shared between scientific and policy advocates of climate change from larger and small states including industrialized and newly industrialized states (Paterson, 1996). Most of the SIDS were grouped with larger developing states such as the Group of 77 (today the G77 + China) that acquired a set of relatively bigger problems in multilateral contexts such as higher per capita debt, depletion of resources, air pollution, land and water, waste disposal problems and marginal health care standards that cannot be ignored during development process. These bigger issues have often marginalized the issues of SIDS (Ashe et al., 1999). On the other hand, SIDS also individually as developing economies possessed divergent political and economic interests especially considering the geographical, economic and political structures they encompassed (Biuvakaloloma, 1989; Malta, 1989; Paterson, 1996). The effects of climate change were (and have still been) perceived by different SIDS in different ways (Betzold et al., 2012). Pamela S. Chasek (2005, p. 133) explained that:

Many AOSIS [Alliance of Small Island States] members were new to the UN and multilateral negotiations ... Quite often the priorities of the Pacific SIDS did not match those of the Caribbean SIDS, which in turn, did not match those of the Indian Ocean, Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean SIDS. As a result, the preparation of the draft elements to be included in a programme of action proved to be quite a formidable task.

However, under the leadership of the Maldives, Vanuatu, and Trinidad and Tobago, some 39 UN member states founded the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in 1990 to promote SIDS' common interests in UN climate negotiations (Betzold et al., 2012). Maldives President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, in 2015 noted, 'to this day, the "Malé Declaration" remains one of the seminal documents in the international effort to combat climate change, and ultimately inspired the formation of the AOSIS' (AOSIS, 2015, p. 1). The alliance was built on common understanding about the threat of climate change, island vulnerabilities and the need for international action to support SIDS' challenges (Betzold et al., 2012, pp. 7–9; UNFCCC, 2005). The same ideas had earlier shaped their interests to adopt a collaborative approach. To this effect, states at the 1989 Maldives conference agreed to unify on this issue. Fiji stated at the 1989 conference that:

My government would very strongly support any initiatives arising out of this Conference that would lead to strengthen cooperation amongst the [SIDS] from Caribbean, Pacific, Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean regions. ... We would very strongly support the convening of a Small States Summit to set the trend for this cooperation. (Biuvakaloloma, 1989)

President Yameen also later noted that 'AOSIS would go on to earn a reputation for being the "moral voice" of the UN climate negotiations, by advocating for global action that would protect its most vulnerable members' (Gayoom, 2015). With different individual interests among its member states, AOSIS has so far

managed to pursue the desires of SIDS while adhering to shared ideas linked to island vulnerability (Davis, 1996).

A typical survey on level and type of submissions and statements from AOSIS and its members during 1995–2011 indicated that, despite different interests and objectives sought by individual member states, AOSIS sought to promote and pursue a common agenda for SIDS and minimize collective action problem in the adoption of the UNFCCC (or framework convention) (Betzold et al., 2012, p. 594). SIDS decided to utilize AOSIS to produce a compelling common voice at the interactive process of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) in 1992—the UN negotiating body for UNFCCC—to convince negotiators about their interests and to ensure that the outcome document addressed their common concerns (Ashe et al., 1999). The outcome documents of pre- and post-UNFCCC negotiations, including the framework convention and its subsequent Kyoto Protocol reflected the views of SIDS. For example, according to Article 3(2), ‘the specific needs and special circumstances of developing country parties, especially those that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change ... should be given full consideration’ (Aginam, 2011). Its 12-point negotiating objectives in INC negotiations called for equity and ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities’ of states, recognizing the special needs of developing countries against the disproportionate vulnerability of SIDS to the effects of climate change, and a greater responsibility from developed states to combat climate change. As the separated interests of participating states challenged the 12-point negotiating objectives, mostly developed countries, on issues like emissions targets and taking fiscal (Betzold et al., 2012), the AOSIS was able to incorporate most of the objectives in the outcome document. These are reflected in UNFCCC Articles 3(1), 3(2), 3(3), 3(4), 4(1), 4(2), 4(4), 4(5), 4(8), 6(a)(ii), 7(2), 9, 10, 11(3), 17, 21(3) (Ashe et al., 1999).

Due to the reality of the situation, AOSIS can obtain a moral voice speaking about the dangers of climate change not only to SIDS, but also to other nations. The coalitional force enabled SIDS to increase their negotiating powers and maximize negotiation outcomes by pooling their resources (Betzold et al., 2012, p. 832; Starkey, Boyer, & Wilkenfeld, 2008). Especially when working with larger powers or states, a coalition also enhances the individual bargaining powers in multilateral settings to maximize gains from international outcomes. As Betzold et al. concur, ‘with a better understanding of climate change and its implications, as well as of the negotiation process, individual states may be better aware of their interests and how they relate to group positions’ (2012, p. 595). As their interests vary, individual members can seek agenda items meeting similar interest areas with other groups, including G77 + China and EU (Betzold et al., 2012). For example, during the 2011 Durban negotiations, the EU took a stand supporting the interests of AOSIS, more importantly because the coalition of SIDS became important to promote what the EU wanted when merging interests of AOSIS and larger groups like G77 is considered (Schaik, 2012, pp. 15, 17).

During the post-UNFCCC process, this coalitional impact was shaped by ideas constitutive of central objectives of strengthening the UN-base climate process. In 1995, the final session of INC called to start the Conference of

Parties (COP) process as mandated by the framework convention. Divergent interests between developed and developing states in negotiations have always been the driver of the lack of commitment to implement mitigation policies (IISD, 1995). However, the coalition provided a meaningful way for SIDS to continually understand and engage with the COP negotiations. It is worth to note that this informal body of SIDS is enjoined by the larger group G77 + China, which formed a larger negotiating body of over 130 states at the negotiating tables. In this case, the multilateral aspects of the negotiations become crucial and useful for SIDS. Here, their central climate ideas helped to shape their homogeneity during the post-UNFCCC negotiations.

### **Impact of Conventions and Intersubjective Climate System**

The 1995 UNGA meeting on 'Protection of Global Climate for Present and Future Generations' showed negotiating aspects of SIDS that represented an intersubjectivity. Several SIDS made policy submissions to ensure effective implementation of post-UNFCCC process, which also aligned with interests of larger groups including G77 + China. Most claims included suggestions about commitment (IISD, 1995). In effect, their special case about equity and common but differentiated responsibilities of states were institutionalized through UNFCCC and subsequent agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol. The legally binding Kyoto Protocol was adopted following the COP negotiations during 1995 and 1997 (see IISD, 1997). One of the key outcomes was that Parties in Annex I of the framework convention agreed to commitments with a view to reducing their overall emissions of six greenhouse gases (GHGs) but by 'at least 5% below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012'. The protocol established provisions to encourage joint emissions reduction projects (IISD, 1997, p. 1). SIDS originally wanted stronger targets for industrialized states (IISD, 1996, p. 13). Although targets adopted were not exactly what they wanted, the ideas about having targets and legally binding enforcements mechanism reflected the interests of SIDS to uphold a collective action plan.

At a later stage, speaking on behalf of the AOSIS, Granada expressed that:

We [AOSIS members] are participating in this process [Kyoto Protocol negotiations], because we believe that this multilateral rules-based system is critical to the survival of our countries ... once we find the political will to do so. We in AOSIS approach these negotiations concerned that our very survival is at stake and that time is running out to take action ... We need this protocol and also believe that it is necessary to develop and finalize a complementary Protocol to cover the countries that are not parties this Kyoto Protocol. (UNFCCC, 2011)

SIDS stressed a multilateral approach that sought a collective action plan through the UN climate system. A coalitional force reduced uncertainty among negotiators about the problem and their expectations about solutions, making it possible for

broader negotiating pools to understand the collective stories of SIDS. Former president Gayoom stated:

The Maldives believes that climate change poses as the most pressing developmental and security challenge of the 21st Century. As one of the world's lowest lying island nations, our country faces potentially devastating impacts if bold climate action is not taken immediately. While my Government is committed to undertaking all necessary efforts to strengthen the Maldives' resilience to this global phenomenon, we cannot do this alone. Every nation has a role. I am confident that through the engagement of all stakeholders, along with a genuine commitment by world leaders to take decisive climate action, COP21 [negotiating body of UNFCCC] will succeed in providing a foundation for an ambitious post-2015 climate governance regime. (Gayoom, 2015)

While its coalitional impact reduced collective action problems among climate negotiators, the shared ideas that gave it force acted as conventions that manage the climate agenda to act collectively during changes and challenges in climate negotiations. This can be explained in terms of the Paris negotiations, when they called for an emissions target of 1.5°C.

Outcomes of pre- and post-Paris negotiations are the most recent testimony to the impact of SIDS on UN climate negotiations in shaping and managing special provisions to ensure international collective action. Since post-UNFCCC negotiations, there has also been growing consensus among SIDS to ensure international action to reduce uncertainties in the climate system (Aginam, 2011). One of the main problems has continued to be the greenhouse gas emissions, which however has little to do with the activities of all SIDS combined (Hoad, 2015). In the Paris negotiations, SIDS were acutely committed to convince climate negotiators to 'scale up and deploy' provisions to set the temperature goal below 1.5°C (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN, 2015), an objective that also reflected the general ideas held by SIDS initially. AOSIS focussing on emission targets in Paris does not show any deviation from its original interests in climate negotiations. Rather, it shows an act of adapting its expectations to ensure continuity of a stronger UN-based climate system addressing the concerns of SIDS.

As Paris negotiations proceeded to encompass less promising collective action from the 195 states, subsequent provisions of the final agreement did accomplish 'keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels' (UNFCCC, 2015). Although this was not what SIDS wanted—none of the 195 states achieved exactly what they wanted—the agreed terms to 'pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius' (UNFCCC, 2015) can only make SIDS a happier group walking out of the final meeting for having made this impact. Amanda Little wrote in the *New Yorker*:

Just before negotiators at the United Nations Climate Change Summit, in Paris, released the final text of their agreement, on December 12th, the members of the Alliance of Small Island States [or AOSIS, a formal coalition of SIDS] started to sing. They continued for five minutes, a group of more than eighty delegates from forty-four low-lying coastal and island countries, through weeping and cheering and bursts of applause, until

the chorus of Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds" had been repeated many times over ... For all the promise of the agreement, the alliance still has plenty to worry about ... And yet the leaders of many nations, including those that the U.N. categorizes as least developed countries (LDCs), described the agreement as a victory. (Little, 2015)

Paris outcomes can only be inspirational for SIDS, as their battle is not over—no battle against climate change is over. As the Chair of AOSIS, Maldives Minister of Environment and Energy Mr Thoriq Ibrahim was quoted saying:

We continue to believe that the agreement is not only central to averting the worst impacts of the climate crisis, including the loss of entire nations to sea-level rise, but also our ability to address problems that can only be solved by the international community working together. (McGrath, 2015)

This will have the causal effect of providing long-term solutions in addition to adaptation efforts of SIDS. Initial conventions (or shared ideas) about international cooperation and collective action remained the dominant driving force in subsequent stages of SIDS climate politics through AOSIS's engagements. There has been a continued challenge linked to the so-called 'north-south' divide in climate debate as in other international issues involving developed and developing states. As shared ideas have blurred this divide to engender international cooperation, SIDS have been able to merge interests and work within negotiating blocs, notably G77 and the EU in UN negotiating processes. For example, from the very initial stages (in the 1990s and 2000s), the EU had similar views supporting emissions reduction commitments. In the NIC negotiations in the 1990s, the EU pushed an emission reduction agenda until superpowers watered down the targets (McGrath, 2015). Although the EU was less forthcoming in the negotiations leading up to the Copenhagen Accord for a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol, in Durban in 2011, they readjusted their view to align with the commitment terms expressed by AOSIS (and others) (Schaik, 2012). It has been expressed that the EU needed to partner with AOSIS, as SIDS, and similar ideas had the potential to make a collective impact on international decisions. The point here is that SIDS have collectively gained a greater consensus among major players in UN climate negotiations and that their shared ideas as conventions shaped their expectation to maximize benefits from the UN climate system. According to Gupta source:

The Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) has always had a strong presence in climate negotiations, pointing out that the survival of their countries is at stake, as sea levels rise due to global warming. The group made a valiant attempt to bring down the acceptable temperature rise from two degrees Celsius to 1.5. At times the AOSIS group has aligned with EU to push for stronger emissions reductions action by all countries and has thus invited the ire of emerging economies in the BASIC group ... The position of this group is closest to that of climate activists from rich countries. (Gupta, 2015)

In Paris AOSIS became vocal on mitigation commitments. Their efforts on differentiated responsibilities of GHG producers in the turn of the twenty-first

century could portray their efforts to sustain confidence in the existing climate system. Speaking on behalf of AOSIS in 2017 at the UN, Ambassador of the Maldives Mr Ahmed Sareer noted:

... [U]nless we decouple economic growth from the burning of fossil fuels, worsening climate change impacts will undermine our development gains and make it difficult, if not impossible, to create a healthy and prosperous future for all ... This is particularly true for Small Island Developing States [SIDS] on the frontline of climate change ... To that end, AOSIS will continue to work to accelerate adaptation and mitigation efforts to set our development pathways to a low greenhouse gas and climate-resilient development ... I assure you that AOSIS will provide our full support to ensure that COP 23 will take a significant step towards implementing the Paris Agreement. (Sareer, 2017)

From the very initial stages of the negotiations concerning the Paris Agreement, AOSIS members have aimed to ensure that the outcome document will include the concerns of small island states and place provisions that will disproportionately support their interests. Representing the Maldives as the Chair of AOSIS, Minister of Environment and Energy Mr Thoriq Ibrahim noted that:

We continue to believe that the agreement is not only central to averting the worst impacts of the climate crisis, including the loss of entire nations to sea-level rise, but also our ability to address problems that can only be solved by the international community working together. (McGrath, 2015)

As Betzold et al. noted, '... the reduction in uncertainty regarding the reality of climate change may have served to emphasize the overarching common interest: a strong climate change regime in the face of island vulnerability' (Betzold et al., 2012, p. 595).

Three stages of ideational interplay set an agenda to identify and explain how ideas have shaped climate foreign policy of SIDS and influenced the UN climate negotiations process. It is observed that ideas generated and shared among SIDS in the 1980s and 1990s became foundations to their climate politics over the years. The special case of SIDS and the need for special treatment through UN-based institutions have remained at the core of their intersubjective structure. These analytical stages tell the story of how ideas, rather than material effects, have functioned in SIDS' climate politics.

## Conclusion

This article has identified UN climate negotiations as a key platform for SIDS to seek climate solutions. Since the late 1980s, SIDS have been committed to a climate agenda, with clear ideas about the challenges they face and the type of solutions they seek, which has called for collective action at an international level. Today it is evident that SIDS have moved far beyond the sidelines of climate negotiations, through island diplomacy, influencing universal climate change

declarations and UN-based institutional establishments, including the 1992 UNFCCC, its subsequent 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement. In this respect, there is also the need for a better understanding of their role in shaping UN climate negotiations. Employing a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis, we explain that SIDS have made a significant impact on the UN climate system design. It claimed that, despite pre-existing international institutional conditions, ideas can be generated and shared among SIDS to form coalitions to reduce collective action problems; and establish ideational conventions to manage their climate agenda during changing negotiations.

Ideas about what can best serve their interests have been a dominant force that has shaped their climate foreign policy to seek international cooperation and ensure privileged treatment on policy actions. We show that the climate politics of SIDS in the international context makes little more sense considering their climate ideas. The changing intersubjective understanding can reshape policy directions depending on the magnetic powers of different ideas. Although this article may have limitations in tracing the effect of the interplay of competing ideas as such, it more importantly has presented a generic conceptual framework to explain a disproportionate impact of actors (notably SIDS) on international cooperation. This conceptual framework can be used to explain other negotiations concerning SIDS and/or similar groups, including the LDCs on climate change and other issues including human rights and development. Comparably, future studies using the experience of other actors or SIDS in other issues can further extend the present framework and application of constructivist approaches to explain state actors in international politics. The main point is that ideas will condition and shape the present and new constructions of the intersubjective foreign policy structure concerning actions and other developmental issues.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

Author acknowledges that this article includes part of his post-graduate research conducted in Griffith University.

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