

POLICY WATCH:

Small islands adrift

With the charismatic former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, behind bars on a widely derided terrorism charge, [Anna Petherick](#) asks whether small island states can really make themselves heard in Paris.

The 2009 meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is hardly recalled as a resounding success. Held in Copenhagen, it marked the last serious attempt — prior to the upcoming Paris meeting in December — to settle on a legally binding global climate agreement. Such a deal proved beyond the reach of the big-hitting politicians in attendance, and the meeting revealed the surprising extent of Chinese obstinacy at the time¹.

But it was not entirely devoid of positive outcomes. Among them was the attention paid to the cause of Mohamed Nasheed, then president of the Maldives, who took to the stage promising a carbon-neutral future for his nation of tiny, low-lying islands and just 340,000 people. This irked many G77 members wedded to a discourse of payments in accordance with historical responsibility. Nasheed's influence in Copenhagen was captured in the documentary film, *The Island President*, which — through awards and the telegenic former president's ability to capitalize on media attention — brought the peculiar challenges of small island states facing rising seas and ocean acidification to audiences in high-emitting wealthy countries.

For a while after that, things went fairly well. The Nasheed government — the first to be elected democratically in the Maldives' two-thousand-year history — worked closely with the climate movement 350.org (<http://350.org>), and set up a carbon neutral club to celebrate countries prepared to join the Maldives in decarbonizing their economies. "A lot of small island leaders started to jump on the bandwagon: Samoa, the Marshall Islands, other Pacific islands... then there was also Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya," recounts Paul Roberts, who handles Nasheed's media. Meanwhile, Mike Mason, an Oxford-based engineer, ironed out the details of the Maldives's own carbon neutral plan. Even China appeared to warm to the Nasheed government, sending delegates on various trips to Malé, the Maldives' capital.

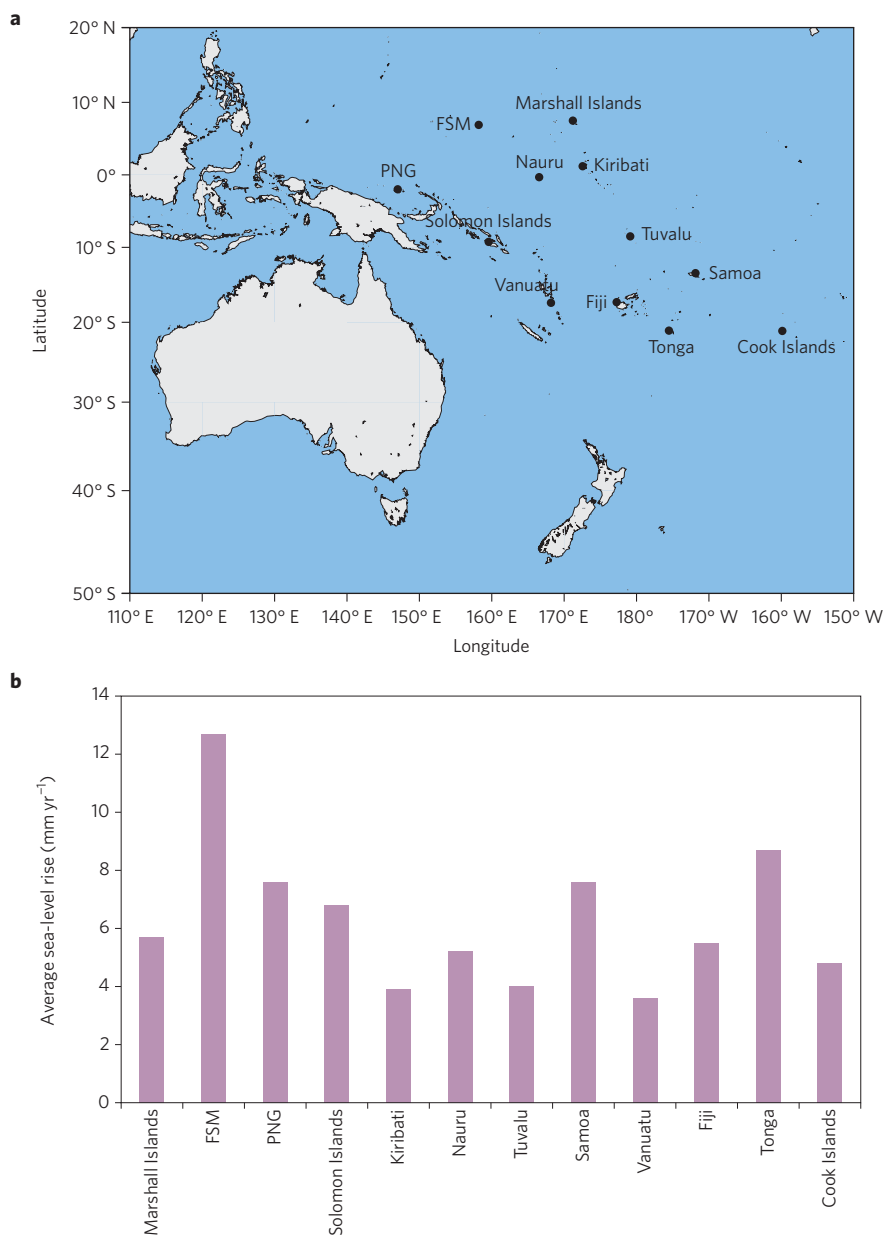


Figure 1 | Sea-level change affecting small island states in the South Pacific. **a**, Map of the 12 measuring stations that make up the Australian National Tidal Centre's SEAFRAME (SEA-Level Fine Resolution Acoustic Measuring Equipment) program for the South Pacific. These stations record sea levels every six minutes, with an accuracy of 1 mm. The locations are labelled on the map. FSM, Federated States of Micronesia; PNG, Papua New Guinea. **b**, Histogram of average annual sea-level rise for the South Pacific stations from the start of data collection to 2014. Figure reproduced with permission from ref. 7, © Bureau of Meteorology.

But just as the sails of this strategy for an expanded moral authority for small and environmentally vulnerable nations began to fill with the winds of change, Nasheed was forced to resign at gunpoint. Roberts, who was in the president's office on the day of the February 2012 coup, fled to the Holiday Inn. Today, as other island nations prepare for the Paris conference, the former president is stuck on the Maldives' prison island, serving 13 years for 'terrorism' (a conviction which Amnesty International has called a travesty of justice). The current head of the government is the half-brother of the country's dictator for 30 years, and political protest in the Maldives is now routinely met with thuggery².

For other small island states, the timing is inauspicious. With the US and China signalling that they are finally ready to act on climate change, the chair of AOSIS — the Alliance of Small Island States — is for the first time, the Maldives. Many AOSIS members hoping for adaptation payments at some point in the near future must realize that it cannot help their cause to be represented by a government so seemingly unlikely to channel outside funds towards their intended destination, and with a record of swiftly removing from office anyone who accuses its ministers of embezzlement².

This is a shame because AOSIS has much to fight for in Paris. In many ways it is an odd club. Its members have very high (Singapore) and very low (Guinea Bissau) per-capita gross domestic products. They are mostly small (Tuvalu has just 26 km² of land), but not in every case (Papua New Guinea is more than twice as big as New Zealand). They are mostly islands, but not always (Belize and Guyana). And sometimes those involved are not states with formal sovereignty, but territories of more powerful countries (Netherlands Antilles). What unites them, however, is an unusual reliance on the sea for economic activity, and often for cultural identity. The organization is thus pushing for a future warming cap of 1.5 °C, not 2 °C (ref. 3), to avoid sea-level rise that threatens to overwhelm some of its members

(see Fig. 1), as well as for formal acceptance of proposals to address loss and damage.

There are plenty more ideas worth getting across to powerful countries. One intelligent suggestion comes from University of Hawaii law professor, Maxine Burkett, who sees an opportunity to draw on the legal example of a scheme established by the UN Security Council in the wake of Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait⁴. The UNCC (UN Compensation Commission) paid various local parties for damage related to the hundreds of oil wells that burned or spilled their contents during the invasion, using a percentage of Iraq's oil revenues. Its processes were efficient — commissioners were appointed, claim forms distributed, and its first decisions published within only two years — and its scope was surprisingly broad: for example, the UNCC expanded the legal boundaries of environmental harm to include the effects of influxes of refugees. Burkett envisions an analogous 'Small Islands Compensation and Rehabilitation Commission'. This would deal with slow-onset events that typically fall outside commercially available insurance, by making payments when certain thresholds of ocean acidification, and other stipulated impacts, are passed.

Another proposal, from human geographer Jon Barnett, of the University of Melbourne, Australia, is to guard against the common donor preference for swift and demonstrable outcomes, and instead place adaptation funds in trusts like Norway's famous sovereign wealth fund, so they could be invested and spent slowly. While there is a rush for mitigation, adaptation does not need to be so hurried. Barnett suggests using part of these monies up front to train large networks of 'adaptation extension officers', who would offer informed advice directly to locals, by travelling widely within most-affected countries. This kind of program, alongside work visa schemes, could encourage locally appropriate and efficient adaptation without the bossiness of old-school aid conditionality; the visa schemes are likely to actually help adaptation investment given that remittances currently provide

double the cash of development assistance for Pacific island states.

Perhaps most lacking in outsiders' discourses about these tiny and remote countries is the issue of cultural capital. The 44 members of AOSIS have between them a population that is roughly equivalent in size to the UK. "What is unique about them is culture," says Barnett. Uniqueness is certainly valued in climate funding tools, but not that kind of uniqueness — for example, the Global Environmental Facility supports projects to conserve biological uniqueness, but has turned away projects to maintain unique cultural diversity, says Barnett. And problematically for simplistic 'visas and funding' fixes to the small island problem, the cultural uniqueness of island communities is often deeply entwined with their physical location. In Tuvalu, for example, the Polynesian word *fenua* refers to both the physical island and to the people who live there⁵.

These diverse and complex concerns of AOSIS members are likely to get lost in Paris. The ousting of Nasheed has concomitantly ousted faith in the Maldives' carbon-neutral intentions, says Roberts, and with that much of the moral authority that Nasheed built up. Explained in a slightly desperate tone in an online post, Mason, the Maldives' decarbonization architect, has published his recipe for carbon neutrality on the Islands⁶; he hopes that another island nation might make use of it in the future. □

Anna Petherick is a freelance news writer based in Oxford, UK. e-mail: annajpetherick@gmail.com

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