



The EU, CELAC and SIDS – Last-Ditch Partners in the Multilateral Fight Against Climate Change

*By Camillo M. Gonsalves**

It is difficult to imagine a global issue upon which more words have been expended, to produce comparatively few meaningful results, as Climate Change. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have talked ourselves hoarse over the years in various efforts to raise the alarm, put a human face on what was an esoteric scientific debate, and push multilateral negotiations towards a conclusion that would save lives and safeguard the very existence of nations.

Today, we continue to raise our tired voices to encourage urgent action on climate change. But our voices are now tinged with frustration and anger as the toll of death and destruction continues to increase; as climate events grow more frequent and severe with each passing year; and as the window of opportunity for decisive action shrinks rapidly.

In Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, whose experience is hardly unique among SIDS, our citizens have been battered by one hurricane, two droughts, and two floods over a four-year period. Lives have been lost to flash flooding. Livelihoods have been swept away by hurricane winds, swollen rivers, landslides, and the slow strangulation of drought-parched farmland.

State finances have been stretched to their breaking point by the need to house those rendered homeless, rebuild roads and bridges destroyed *en masse*, and prepare for inevitable future disasters. In our most recent experience with unseasonal flooding, three hours of torrential rainfall washed away 17% of the country's Gross Domestic Product. The World Bank Estimates that over the past decade, damages from major natural disasters in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines exceed the accumulative sum of damages from the 40 previous years.

The initial optimism and faith that we invested in annual negotiating conferences to confront climate change was, at best, naïve and premature. Twenty Conferences of Parties (COPs) to the UNFCCC have yielded incremental progress where decisive change was required. Five years removed from the Copenhagen COP – which was supposed to “seal the deal” on Climate Change – successive hosts have sought to dampen expectations and kick the can down the road towards a new horizon: COP 21 in Paris, at which we hope to arrive at a binding agreement.

However, the signs are not promising. The gathering and deepening crisis that is climate change cannot continue to be confronted at the glacial pace of business-as-usual multilateral diplomacy. Round after round of inconclusive global summitry, whatever its intent, has only served to allow major emitters to defer the radical actions that are necessary to restructure and reinvent their economic bases and modes of production. The vacuum created by our multilateral stasis has allowed various countries or blocs to champion unilateral or bilateral



initiatives that make headlines, but achieve little genuine progress towards the cuts and commitments that are actually required.

Nevertheless, however imperfect, multilateralism is the only process that will allow SIDS a seat at the table and a voice in discussing our own destiny. The current incrementalism, lack of ambition, and multilateral gridlock must be broken in the interest of small states, developing nations, and those countries with a genuine interest in solving our climate conundrum.

An EU-CELAC partnership could play an indispensable, game-changing role in redefining this process. The EU has been almost alone among major industrialised nations in signalling a genuine willingness and flexibility to meet the challenges posed by climate change. As SIDS have been the conscience of the climate change negotiations, the EU has been a practical embodiment of action; charting a course for change that has confounded the predictions of those who defend the status quo.

The climatic COP that is intended to secure a binding agreement on Climate Change occurs within EU borders, and the penultimate preparatory COP happens in CELAC. Our two blocs therefore, have a special responsibility to create an environment that brings this meandering process to a successful conclusion.

Similarly, CELAC states are, by and large, both more vulnerable to Climate Change and less politically beholden to those states that have been the primary stumbling blocks to global consensus on this issue to date.

Therefore, between the EU and CELAC, we have the necessary ingredients for a transformative partnership in an 11th hour salvaging of multilateral climate diplomacy: A critical mass of countries, populations and economies; logistical responsibility and opportunity to shape the final stages of the process; a mix of developed and developing states; willingness to act collectively and to take practical steps in pursuance of reduced emissions and increased adaptation financing; independent and genuine commitment to a successful conclusion of our climate engagement.

Success has a clear definition: Emissions targets that ensure global temperature increases below 1.5 degrees Celsius, in relation to pre-industrial levels; Urgent, predictable, new and easily accessible adaptation financing, whose parameters will be determined not by the comfort of developed countries, but instead the actual needs of those most affected; A legal basis to penalise the non-compliant.

Traditional North-South negotiating blocs have, to date, proven inadequate to tackle Climate Change. There is still limited time and opportunity to reach beyond the traditional comfort zones to achieve success in Paris. The EU and CELAC are now fortuitously thrust together in what could be the final opportunity to meet the defining existential challenge of our age. The EU and CELAC should consult with each other formally on this matter in the months leading to



Paris. We should harmonise ambitious positions and coalesce into a new, decisive negotiating bloc. The EU should target its expertise, technology and financing assistance on the island and coastal states of CELAC, as a tangible and compelling example of what is possible in North-South climate cooperation.

Together, we can change the course of the climate negotiations, and, by extension, the fate of our shared planet.

The stakes are that high. And the time is now.

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