

Concept Note

Side event on the margins of the Second Informal Thematic session of the
Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration

Resilience to climate change: small islands, migration and adaptation

Tuesday May 23, 2017

Mission of Belgium to the United Nations (1:15 – 2:45 pm)

Introductory Remarks:

- Ambassador **Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve**, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations
- Ambassador **Amatlain Kabua**, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Marshall Islands to the United Nations
- Ambassador **Luke Daunivalu**, Chargé d'affaires a.i., Permanent Mission of Fiji to the United Nations

Panelists:

- Dr. François **Gemenne**, The Hugo Observatory of the University of Liège, Executive Director of Politics of the Earth, Sciences-Po, Paris and Co-director of the Observatory of Defense and Climate IRIS, French Ministry of Defense
- Mariam **Traore Chazalnoel**, Thematic Specialist, Migration, Environment and Climate Change (MECC), International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

Research on climate change reveals time and time again that previous projections prove too optimistic: the earth's climate is changing faster than expected. Particularly, sea levels are rising at a faster rate than envisioned. This poses challenges to coastal regions around the world and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in particular, which are by nature already extremely exposed and sensitive to extreme environmental events. This side event will address several issues SIDS are confronted with in relation to climate change, especially current migration flows as well as the prospect of relocation. SIDS are at forefront of the impacts of climate change because they will lose not only large parts of their territories, but are also confronted with the potential loss of their culture, languages, identity and even citizenship. As a consequence, SIDS are often framed as 'canaries in the coal mine' or as 'laboratories of climate change' home to the 'first climate refugees'.

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Moving beyond the contested narratives of 'climate victims', this side event will instead, address several challenges faced by SIDS in relation to human mobility as adaptation to climate change within the 'moving with dignity' framework actively advocated by Pacific leaders and civil society. This panel will thus not only underline the important risks that climate change poses for migration in SIDS, but also, by means of concrete examples, how well regulated and orderly migration can prove to be an essential adaptation strategy to climate change.

SIDS's adaptive capacities should be looked at as 'laboratories of resilience'. Traditionally, retreating from coastal areas in response to environmental challenges has been used for generations by island communities and methods to cope with extreme environmental events has long been a part of their traditional knowledge, culture and practices. However, the vulnerability of SIDS' fragile environments exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change are increasingly inciting islanders to migrate in order to cope with threats to their livelihoods. The result may be the loss of shared social and cultural identities of particular importance for communities governed by customary land ownership structures. The consequences of climate change are inseparable from land issues in the SIDS and more attention should therefore be paid to land tenure practices, community-based social protection systems, traditional governance mechanisms, local capacity and knowledge. Both traditional and modern approaches should be at the centre of regional cooperation that could provide a promising venue to address both state-based and customary law while filling the gap of international protection. Therefore, land tenure and regional cooperation in the SIDS will be primarily addressed by the panel of this side event.

Moreover, SIDS are often considered as a homogenous category of states as they share common vulnerabilities to climate change mostly attributed to their unique natural features. However, these generalisations should be complemented with an awareness of the considerable diversity in terms of population, size of economy, culture and geographical characteristics that is of particular relevance when addressing human mobility as a form of adaptation to environmental challenges.

Finally, the panel will highlight the importance of the Global Compact with regards to the particular migration and displacement situations and challenges that SIDS are confronted with.