

## **Pacific finds strength in numbers at world climate change talks**

A strong and unified voice marks Pacific island interventions as the world gathers in this Polish city for the Fourteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP14.

Five island countries – Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu – are ensuring the voice of the Pacific is heard in the 50-member Least Developed Countries, a sub-group of those attending the talks.

These five countries, as well as the remaining Pacific island nations of Cook Islands, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea and Tonga are also attending COP14 in Poznan as members of AOSIS – the Alliance of Small Island States.

Vanuatu was the inaugural chair of AOSIS when its ambassador to the United Nations, Robert Van Lierop was appointed in 1991.

Since then, two other Pacific islanders have served as AOSIS chair, namely Ambassador Tuiloma Neroni Slade of Samoa (now Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat) and Ambassador Enele Sopoaga of Tuvalu.

Ambassador E. Angus Friday from the Caribbean island nation of Grenada is the current chair.

As negotiations for a new climate change convention began in Poznan on Monday, four island journalists who are members of the Pacific Communications Team are covering the talks in the Polish city spoke to one of the region's experts on climate change.

Espen Ronneberg is the climate change adviser at the Samoa-based Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP).

Below is a transcript of the press conference with Mr Ronneberg.

### **Pacific Journalists: What is the role of AOSIS in this important climate change negotiations?**

Ronneberg: Its one of the key group of countries, recognised as being the most vulnerable to climate change, they have also been a driving force in the negotiations because they have a lot more at stake, a lot more to lose. There are a lot of commonalities between the different island countries even though there are differences even within the Pacific, they have a lot of common issues. They found earlier on that it is much more convenient to work together with island countries. AOSIS is recognised as a major group of developing countries in the negotiations, it has been from the beginning, as a result we got a lot of access into different negotiation bodies, we are always asked to provide input, to provide a Vice President to the bureau, to provide a co-chairman, so the group is very significant in the negotiations even though we are all very small countries.

### **Pacific Journalists: Why is AOSIS important to the Pacific?**

Ronneberg: AOSIS provides another level of voice for the Pacific to express itself. If we were to go in simply as the Pacific, we will still have to negotiate with other groups. But by going another step, cooperating with other small island regions, we magnify our ability to influence the negotiations. It's also important because AOSIS represents pretty much lots of common ground with the Pacific. So it's to our favour that we work with like minded countries, to try to move the process forward.

### **Pacific Journalists: What is the strength of AOSIS?**

Ronneberg: The strength of AOSIS in the negotiations is that we pretty much hold the moral high ground in the sense that we contribute the least to the problem, but we will be facing the brunt of the problem first. So part of the strength of our group is in the clarity with which we bring to the question. We don't take very ideological view of the issues but rather we try to work on the practical things and come up with more practical solutions.

**Pacific Journalists: What is the position of AOSIS on adaptation?**

Ronneberg: All AOSIS countries have adaptation to climate change as their priority. There are other smaller issues that we also consider important but primarily it's the work on adaptation, the work to ensure that the mitigation targets that we are going to be getting are strong enough to allow us space to adapt, and we are also looking at other areas of support. For example, we want greater financial and technical support for capacity building, strengthening of human resources for our countries, working on climate change awareness, in education and training and also on how to strengthen the scientific base within the islands so that we don't have to rely too much on scientific input from outside the region.

**Pacific Journalists: You said AOSIS play a significant role in negotiations but are we equally taken seriously? Are they listening?**

Ronneberg: Well sometimes it's frustrating, you don't always get your point across but it's a matter of perseverance, maintaining the clear logical arguments, maintaining clarity in what we trying to negotiate. I think when we have been able to persuade the other groups, it's largely because of the conviction and the logical work we have been putting forward. We have a lot of common ground for example with the African Group so that the major papers that are being discussed by the Group of 77, the larger group of developing countries, is on the basis of a paper that AOSIS drafted together with the Africans. So we do get some xxx (tractions?) and by cooperating with other groups who have similar concerns, we can actually make a lot of headway. When we have a large majority of countries supporting our point of view, it helps.

**Pacific Journalists: Are these AOSIS meetings formal or informal?**

Ronneberg: The AOSIS meetings are formal meetings in one sense but they are pretty informal in how they operate. Everybody can have a say, everybody can bring their point of view. You tend to find the more experienced people speak the most but it's always like that in any political process. May be there is a tendency for some of the newcomers to be intimidated by that.

**Pacific Journalists: In addition to mitigation and adaptation, I noticed the representative for LDCs, the Maldives mentioned at the plenary the matter of environmental refugees. This is also something Kiribati wants recognised, the legal rights of climate change refugees. Has AOSIS come to grips with this?**

Ronneberg: It's a very complicated issue because environmental refugees are not recognised as such. The complexities of the issue, really is what is challenging us at the moment. We recognise also that the issue as raised by Kiribati and the Maldives is a very real issue, its something that has to be dealt with in some way but at the same time, some of the other countries in the Pacific are saying that what we need to do is to ensure that the industrialised countries mitigate sufficiently, that we get developing countries to mitigate sufficiently so that we can have space at which we can actually adapt. But if that fails, that's when relocation becomes the final option. But as you have heard from the Maldives and you probably heard from Kiribati, they probably want some assurances now that there will be a system in place if that worse case scenario was to happen. I guess that is where discussion is still going on, it's a

friendly discussion, it's not discussions in an atmosphere of animosity. It's just trying to work through the different issues.

**Pacific Journalists: AOSIS in its intervention did say it has some difficulty understanding the delays in certain phases of the negotiations. What are these difficulties?**

Ronneberg: Yes the adaptation fund board is suppose to establish rules and procedures and a lot of legal working arrangements between the board, the GEF (Global Environment Fund) and the World Bank as trustee of the fund but there has been very slow progress and that was what Grenada (AOSIS representative) was referring to. The financial commitment is there in the sense of the shares of proceeds from the xxx development will flow to the board. The other issue is how those funds are to be accessed, and there have been a number of differences of opinions. Some groups are calling for direct access. Many AOSIS countries have called for that. But that requires the adaptation fund board to have the status as a legal entity which it doesn't have as yet. So there are a number of technical and legal issues that are being battled over and its something that is the cause of frustration for a number of the countries.

**Pacific Journalists: So is AOSIS going into this first day of COP14 with some sense of hope of success?**

Ronneberg: We had a preparatory meeting in Singapore before coming here and I think there's a level of optimism that we can make a breakthrough. But we have to be realistic on what we can achieve within this two week period. As you know there's this whole heap of different working groups and contact groups. We have six distinct processes that are actually quite interlinked. There will be meetings in separate sessions and separate working groups so there's a lot of work ahead of us. But I think there's a sense of positiveness, at least at the moment.