

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## "Dealing with Climate Change on Small Islands – Towards Effective and Sustainable Adaptation?"

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Small Islands are often seen as “canaries in the coalmine” in the context of climate change. Fragile ecosystems are sensitive to changes in temperature, rainfall patterns and sea-level rise, while island societies might have insufficient means to cope with climate change impacts. While science provides a robust global “big” picture on climate change and adaptation in general, data at the local scale is still lacking. Furthermore, knowledge on successful (as well as failed) adaptation from one island rarely reaches other islands or island regions. Therefore, Michael Fink and Carola Klöck organised a workshop covering the three Island Regions Pacific, Caribbean, and Indian Ocean titled “Dealing with Climate Change on Small Islands – Towards Effective and Sustainable Adaptation?”. The workshop took place from 25–27 July 2018 at Herrenhausen Palace, Hannover, Germany and received financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation and organizational assistance from Hellena Debelts. Almost 40 scientists and practitioners attended. A small selection of the rich discussions and diverse presentations from the workshop are presented in this brief report.

While small island developing states (SIDS) everywhere struggle with climate change and urgently need to adapt to the challenges brought about by the effects of a changing climate, research on adaptation in SIDS is fragmentary and often divided along disciplinary and geographic lines. Those researchers working on the Pacific islands are not necessarily familiar with similar research carried out in the Caribbean or Indian Ocean, or anthropologists may not be familiar with work in urban planning or coastal engineering. To curtail these shortcomings, the workshop traversed regional and disciplinary divides by bringing together, from across the world's oceans, SIDS researchers and practitioners from a variety of backgrounds including geography, anthropology, political science and also urban planning, philosophy, as well as adaptation practice.

The workshop highlighted both the common challenges of SIDS and the specific circumstances of individual regions, island states, islands and communities. Clearly, there are no one-size-

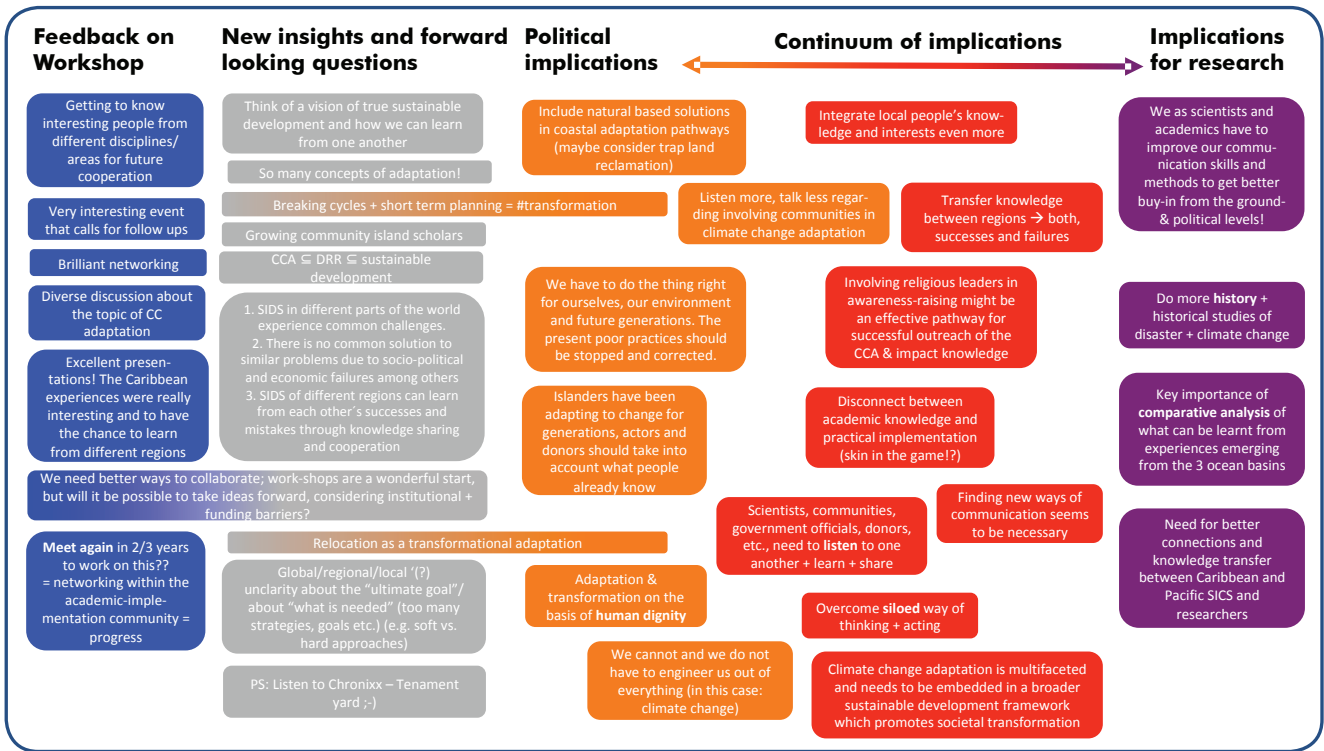
fits-all solutions to climate change, as the impacts of a changing climate are always embedded in and intertwined with complex social, economic and cul-

tural conditions. Nonetheless, there are experiences to be shared and lessons to be learnt from each other. Participants thus appreciated the opportunity to



Figure 1: Group photo of participants at Herrenhausen Palace, Hannover

Source: Hellena Debelts.



**Figure 2: Participatively collected “lessons learnt”**

meet with colleagues from “the other” island region. While scholars and practitioners that work, for example, on the Pacific typically know each other, they are less familiar with their counterparts from the Caribbean or from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and have fewer opportunities to meet.

Thematically, the workshop focused on four specific topics, with a panel dedicated to each of these topics: migration and (im)mobility, livelihood security, extreme weather events and coastal management. Additionally, the workshop included three keynote addresses, a roundtable discussion with practitioners, and a poster session. This report is unfortunately too short to do justice to the rich discussions and diverse presentations of the workshop; the following can thus only present a small selection of contributions. Note that some of the workshop contributions will be published in an edited volume with Göttingen University Press and will be available in open access.

### Migration, governance and local participation

Relocation, displacement or migration are of course central concepts that figure prominently in the debate on adaptation in island contexts. Workshop participants highlighted different approaches to questions of migration and (im)mobility. The work of Virginie Duvat and Alexandre Magnan, for

example, shows that atolls – arguably the most exposed and threatened places – are not “sinking” as the media and public discourses often misreport. In fact, the land area of the vast majority of atoll islands is fairly stable and may even be increasing due to land reclamation. In their presentation, Duvat and Magnan highlighted the potential of nature-based solutions that can, under certain conditions, effectively protect settlements and infrastructure. Endorsing this position, Carol Farbotko focused on how communities may be supported in-situ and how communities can maintain links to their ancestral lands. Others were more pessimistic. Patrick D. Nunn and Elizabeth McNamara argued that relocation will become inevitable at some point. Their position was that island communities had better plan for relocation as of today to make the process as smooth as possible. Discourses on migration as necessity in the future, an option of last resort, are also very present in Kiribati, as Elfriede Herrmann and Wolfgang Kempf explored. The new Kiribati government won precisely because their new official policy takes up hopes to stay in the homeland, rather than “migrate with dignity”.

Indeed, how government and other stakeholders plan for and manage adaptation was conferred as another important aspect for the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of adap-

tation. Here, contributions highlighted that governance is often short-sighted and not aligned such as the examples presented about the Caribbean where there are a wide range of policies, guidelines and tools to help adaptation planners, yet vulnerability and risk assessments are almost completely absent from adaptation planning and implementation. Different adaptation options are not properly identified and appraised, as Adelle Thomas found out in a review of policy documents from across the Caribbean. Similarly, Michelle Scobie emphasised that silo thinking dominates planning and implementation. Even where synergies could be realised across issues, there are not necessarily links between climate change and for example sustainable development or biodiversity. This is all the more pertinent for small islands where administrative and human resources are limited and silo mentality can hardly be afforded. These shortcomings were also discussed in the roundtable discussion with practitioners. Participants noted the very real constraints imposed by the institutional setting, such as yearly accounting that makes it impossible to adapt projects to the often slow-moving discussions with local stakeholders. Implementing long-term adaptation solutions and participatory approaches is difficult in such a context.

Yet, local participation is key to success, particularly in archipelagic coun-

tries, where the local level is far removed from national, let alone, regional planning and policy making. Several workshop participants therefore examined experiences with adaptation at the community level. Stefano Moncada and Hilary Bambrick identified different responses to climate change impacts that the local population on Rabi Island (Fiji) had developed, but classified these responses often as short-term coping rather than long-term transformational adaptation. Arno Pascht and Desirée Hetzel found that the local population at two sites in Vanuatu (Siviri on Efate, and Dixon Reef on Malekula) is eager to experiment with different gardening techniques. Residents tried out and appropriated (or dismissed) new practices introduced by an NGO in order to diversify and expanded their livelihood options. Learning and tailoring adaptation opportunities is key for success, yet learning often takes place over the short term, while the *longue durée* is often forgotten. Yet, as Rory Walshe showed, long-term historical accounts of extreme weather events may be helpful in identifying best practices and learning from mistakes. Mauritius is here an interesting case in point as there a variety of written archival material begun during their colonization that can be researched and analyzed.

The workshop discussed many more aspects of climate change adaptation in the specific context of islands. Yet, regardless of what measures are taken at the local level, they are not enough. To address climate change in SIDS and beyond, the international community needs to act and drastically reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. In this context, H.E. Mr. Deo Saran, the Ambassador of the Republic of Fiji in Brussels, shared his insights from the Fijian presidency of COP23 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that took place in Bonn in 2017. He showed how Fiji is very active on climate change domestically – the relocation of Vunidogoloa village for example is well-known. Further, Fiji is increasingly becoming a climate leader internationally. Even small states can influence international politics; in the words of Deo Saran, “If this presidency has taught us one thing,



**Figure 3: Interregional exchange at poster session: Heitea Terorotua explains results from French Polynesia to Michelle Mycoo from the University of the West Indies**

it is that small island states can make a real difference in climate action.”

### Workshop Conclusion

In a concluding session, impressions, comments and implications from the workshop were collected (see Figure 2). Apparent from the feedback received, participants appreciated the network opportunities and in particular meeting colleagues from different regions and disciplines. The workshop concluded that more such inter-regional and inter-disciplinary meetings were needed, both in research and in practice. SIDS can learn from one another, and from their histories. To facilitate exchange, communication and learning, the workshop reiterated the need for local participation, for listening and acknowledging the role that local populations can and should play in adaptation. Regarding research, participants called for more attention to local knowledge, to history, and again to inter-regional exchange. Closer collaboration with policy and practice can be mutually beneficial.

Sadly, climate mitigation, notably in the industrialized world, is too slow and insufficient to prevent climate change, whose impacts are already acutely felt in SIDS across the world’s oceans. SIDS are already coping with and adapting to the adverse effects of climate change. While adaptation in island contexts is increasingly receiving attention from academics and key political figures, research and policy remains fragmentary. More exchange and dialogue across research and practice, across academic disciplines, across geographic regions and across levels of government are thus urgently needed. The Hannover workshop was a first step in this direction, and hopefully will be followed by similar events.

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