Many Strong Voices

Arctic • Small Island Developing States • Action on Climate Change

Briefing Note # 5
MSV and Adaptation to Climate Change

While the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol include both voluntary and legally-binding agreements between Governments to progressively reduce emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs), there will continue to be an increase in atmospheric concentrations of GHGs for several more decades. This means that impacts of climate change will continue to accumulate. It also means that mitigation efforts must be coupled with adaptation measures to effectively manage climate change, particularly in highly vulnerable regions like the Arctic and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

There are two ways to respond to climate change: mitigation or reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation, or learning to live with the consequences of the increases we are now experiencing. The dynamic nature of the human and climate systems and biophysical and socioeconomic impacts presents opportunities for adaptation and mitigation to climate change. Efforts to address these impacts through adaptation and to prevent further impacts through mitigation are required at local, national, regional and global levels. It is important to remember that while adaptation will involve significant costs, only some of the adverse impacts of climate change will be reduced by it.

Enhancing "adaptive capacity"

Adaptive capacity is the potential or ability of a system, region, or community to adapt to the impacts of climate change. The ability of human systems to cope with climate change depends on features such as wealth, technology, education, traditional knowledge, information, skills, infrastructure, access to resources and management capabilities. Adaptive capacity is also often associated largely with governance, civil and political rights and literacy. In general, those states or regions with the least resources have the least capacity to adapt and are therefore the most vulnerable.

It is critical for the SIDS and the Arctic to enhance their adaptive capacity if they are to meet the challenges of present and projected climate change. Actions to build adaptive capacity include communicating climate change information and building awareness of potential impacts, as well as maintaining well-being, building community cohesiveness, protecting property or land, maintaining economic growth, and exploiting new opportunities. Further research, monitoring and modelling is needed to refine and extend the findings of regional impact and vulnerability assessments undertaken to date to national and community scales. Collaboration among SIDS and Arctic nations which exhibit common vulnerability and resilience characteristics will be highly beneficial for both regions in the development of mitigation and adaptation strategies.

“Mainstreaming” adaptation

It is increasingly realized that in order to be most effective, adaptation activities must be incorporated into larger planning initiatives related to sustainable development, such as integrated coastal management, disaster management, health care and education planning. Policies that lessen pressures on resources, improve the management of environmental risks and increase the welfare of the poorest members of society can simultaneously advance sustainable development and equity, enhance adaptive capacity and reduce vulnerability to climate change and other stressors. This is true for both the Arctic and SIDS regions.

Incorporating local knowledge

In addition to mainstreaming adaptation, emphasis should be placed on incorporating local perspectives into national, regional and local adaptation plans. The cultures of both the Arctic and SIDS regions are closely linked to the environment. This unique perspective can greatly enrich adaptation strategies and ensure that they work “on-the-ground”.

While it is the responsibility of governments and other high-level bodies to facilitate adaptation processes, most in situ adaptation activities are carried out by individual stakeholders and communities. This further reinforces the importance of including local Arctic and SIDS residents in the development of adaptation strategies. Incorporation of local knowledge will also assist in promoting viable sustainable development practices. A consultative framework that is wide-ranging and underpins the culture and economy of these regions is necessary to properly include local knowledge in adaptation and sustainable development strategies.

Sharing adaptation experiences

The Arctic and SIDS share many characteristics, within their respective regions as well as between the two regions. The sharing of adaptation stories between nations and communities in each region has the potential to benefit both regions tremendously. The Many Strong Voices Programme aims at promoting sustained collaboration between and within Arctic and SIDS regions to achieve effective adaptation to climate change.