# **An Address to the UN General Assembly**

By Dominique Williams

Secretary-General of the United Nations, President of the General Assembly, distinguished Heads of Delegations, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen; it is both an honour and a pleasure to be standing here before you. As the leader of a Small Island Developing State, I appreciate the role of the UN General Assembly as a unique forum for critical dialogues regardless of geographic, economic and political differences. The UN also serves as a place where we can speak freely, though respectfully, hold each other accountable, share ideas and establish common goals and solutions. Together, we join under the same goal of the betterment of humanity.

It is in this sentiment that I raise a grave plight affecting our planet. Small Island Developing States, like my homeland St. Kitts and Nevis, are at the mercy of the effects of climate change. Mr. President, what can I say here today that will impact your policies and make a difference to the daily lives of your citizens? There is simply very little that I or my island can do to affect the lives of your citizens. Yet, the actions that you take, and the outcomes of your local policies have immeasurable consequences that surpass your borders and touch the lives of every single Kittitian and Nevisian, Dominican and Antiguan.

Over the past five years, our islands have been grappling with these consequences. In 2017 Hurricane Irma, one of the strongest hurricanes ever recorded, made landfall on the Eastern Caribbean causing unimaginable destruction. At that time, Prime Minister, the Honourable Gaston Browne, described his own island of Barbuda as 'barely inhabitable' due to the destruction of 95% of the buildings. The island was evacuated and left uninhabited for the first time in three hundred years. Who would expect, Mr. President, that less than two weeks later another devastating hurricane would make landfall on our islands? Hurricane Maria would go on to wipe out nearly every standing structure on the island of Dominica.

Then only two weeks after Puerto Rico suffered heavy damage from Hurricane Irma, it would be left devastated by Hurricane Maria, the deadliest in its history. Over three thousand lives were lost in the aftermath. 3.4 million Puerto Ricans were left without power, not for a few days, not even a few weeks, but months. For months, citizens of small islands were displaced, forced to shelter in structurally unsafe buildings without roofs over their heads. For months, we were forced to depend upon foreign aid to feed our populations after crops had been decimated by floods and high winds. For months we have endured a daily struggle for survival, bearing in our hearts the hope that one day we will achieve the normalcy that was stripped away.

Mr. President, in the past, our region anticipated one major storm every active Atlantic Hurricane season. However, this is no longer the case. As the world records new hottest temperatures every year, warmer oceans churn stronger hurricanes and cyclones. Yearly, we now experience stronger storms, each larger and more devastating than the last. Regions that historically only experienced one catastrophic storm every decade are now forced to grapple with devastating, record-breaking storms year after year.

The intense floods in Southeast Asia that endanger hundreds of lives and displace thousands more are due to rising ocean levels caused by melting ice caps at the Earth's poles. Food insecurity, caused by extreme droughts and weather phenomena, only adds to the desperation that at-risk communities experience. Mr. President, our islands in the Caribbean are not the only countries faced with disasters and extreme weather conditions. In 2019 the East African region recorded the highest number of cyclones in a single year in decades. Over 40,000 Kenyans were displaced by the flooding and mudslides caused by these storms. According to the World Bank, three million more Kenyans and twenty million people in East Africa are now experiencing food insecurity due to the swarms of millions of desert locusts awakened from dormancy by these cyclones. Climate experts point to the rising temperatures in the Indian Ocean as the source.

From climate experts to teenage activists, people across the globe are raising their concern for the inaction of world leaders concerning the impending climate crisis. No longer can we allow their voices to go unheard. In the words of the Honourable Roosevelt Skerrit, the Prime Minister of Dominica, “to deny climate change is to procrastinate as the earth sinks”. Quite literally, I would add, as the Indonesian government has announced its plan to relocate its capital from Jakarta to Borneo, due in part to the excessive flooding of the city.

Mr. President, as the effects of global warming worsen and the Paris Agreement goes unheeded, we cannot turn a blind eye to the factors at play. Signed in 2015 and ratified by 197 countries, this agreement aims to lower greenhouse gas emissions and therefore reduce global warming through the implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Mr. President, even though these policies were developed for national implementation by each government, many fall short in meeting them.

Mr. President, developed countries are being allowed to profit from the activities that worsen climate change. Saudi Arabia is currently the world's second-largest oil producer and supplies 12% of all oil consumed globally. Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia is also the highest per capita emitter of fossil fuels. In response to the Paris Agreement, which it ratified in 2016, the government has done exactly the opposite of what it stated in its own NDC by reducing its actions to diversify its economy. The production of oil, the base of their economy, has afforded the country the 17th highest GDP in the world. Mr. President, Saudi Arabia is not immune to the effects of climate change, as rising temperatures have added to the strain of water security in the country. However, it has chosen to prioritize its economy over the well-being of the planet. Joining it in the ranks are other oil producers such as China, Russia, and the USA, which also fall short of fulfilling their NDCs.

Mr. President, if these developed countries are unwilling to sacrifice an element of their economic prosperity to protect themselves and their citizens from climate change, then why should smaller, less developed countries with vulnerable economies be forced to adapt to the crisis to which we contribute very little? Each country should be held accountable for its role in our current climate crisis. If that cannot be achieved by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as aimed by the Paris Agreement, then another agreement should be established. This agreement would mandate each country to contribute to a relief fund based on their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. This fund would be used to rebuild from the devastation of natural disasters and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure for vulnerable developing countries. However, it is still my firm conviction that the best way to tackle this climate crisis is for every country to play its part in attacking the problem at its very source.

Presently, Caribbean islands lack the capital and resources required to achieve the infrastructural reform needed to achieve our environmental goals. Vulnerable countries are left to ask what else can be done to coordinate the international collaboration required to fight this war against climate change? While laws do exist, they are not widely implemented or enforced. Mr. President, in the United Nations conference of 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals were established and are used as a roadmap for many countries as they chart a path for national sustainable development. At the heart of these Sustainable Development Goals is the pledge of developed countries to lend their more vulnerable counterparts a helping hand.

Currently, the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions lies in the burning of fossil fuels for the production of energy for commercial and domestic purposes. Sustainable Development Goal Seven (SDG7) refers to the development of affordable, reliable and sustainable energy for all. According to studies, energy production makes up 73% of all carbon dioxide emissions. Larger countries have access to an abundance of resources to develop renewable energy. Something as simple as a large area of land for the construction of solar and wind farms is not possible for my Federation, whose entire landmass is less than one third the size of New York City. In addition to the large upfront capital, Caribbean islands do not readily possess the human resource necessary to install and maintain renewable energy plants.

In collaboration with The Republic of China (Taiwan), a solar farm was constructed in my home country of St Kitts that supplies 0.5 megawatts of energy to our grid. This makes up less than 1% of our total energy consumed. The United States is one of the largest manufacturers of solar panels. However, according to the Energy Information Administration, solar energy makes up only 2.3% of all energy consumed in the US. Other Small Island Developing States have also been able to implement renewable energy infrastructure with foreign assistance. Not only is it crucial that developed countries assist with our conversion to renewable energy, but one could also argue that it is only fair that they do so. While islands like St. Kitts and Nevis are some of the lowest emitters of greenhouse gases, we are amongst the most affected by climate change. Renewable energy is widely known for its reliability. These factors, Mr. President make it a vital component of building resilience in our region.

This, however, is not the only area in which developed countries fail the developing country members of the global community. For decades the illustrious and glamourous Western culture of more, has been idolized as the model for all industrialized nations. However, the disastrous consequences of this are the impact on the environment and the acceleration of climate change. The WTO has published a troubling statistic that the world's richest 20% consume 86% of the world's resources. The United States of America makes up five per cent of the global population, but consumes sixteen percent of global energy and produces twelve percent of global waste. It has been projected that if present trends continue, by 2030 we will require two Earths just to meet human demands.

Much of the overconsumption taking place leads to wastage, pollution and exacerbation of greenhouse gas emissions. The waste that ends up in landfills produces methane, which has 21 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide. Additionally, fighting overconsumption and overproduction, which is goal thirteen of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, directly benefits the environment. Less production reduces the use of plastics and the emissions produced in manufacturing and shipping. Reducing overconsumption decreases the waste that populates our landfills.

Mr. President, no country can point fingers at another as the sole cause of this climate crisis. We have all contributed in some shape or form to the current state of Earth’s detriment. Therefore, the responsibility falls upon each of us. The resources exist. We know what must be done to rectify our mistakes before it becomes too late. As we charge to the point of no return, impending disaster looms nearer each day. I say this not to instil fear but a sense of purpose. It is now up to us globally, regionally, nationally, locally, in our communities, and as individuals, to make the hard choices, some big and some small, but each essential if we wish to secure a world for future generations.

We all should be held accountable. Those who profit from their inaction should now have to compensate those who suffer at its expense in the formation of a new agreement that fines the largest carbon emitters.

In our relatively short existence, we have been through countless disasters in which we each laid our differences aside and bound together for the common good. While we face what may be our greatest crisis yet, it is crucial now more than ever that we lay aside our differences and come together to save this planet, the home we share.

I thank you.