

**The 16th Annual Session of the
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SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS
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***Accelerate Green Transformation and Innovation towards
Healthy, Resilient and Carbon-neutral Cities***

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Thematic Session 2A: IOI/UNCTAD

**A Sustainable Blue Economy to
Support the Green Transformation of Cities**

COMMENTARY by Dr. Awni Behnam

The long-awaited report of the current UN Secretary General about sea level rise (A/75/70) was before the ICP, the informal Consultative Process on oceans and the law of the sea end April of this year (2021).

There is no doubt as the SG Report shows that the ocean has warmed unabatedly since 1970 and that 90% of the increase in energy in the climate system has been stored in the ocean and that it is virtually certain that the global mean sea level is rising and there is also high confidence that the rate of rise is accelerating.

The report states clearly that coastal ecosystems are already affected by the combination of sea level rise, other climate related ocean changes and adverse effects of human activities on ocean and land. Thus, stressing rising sea levels are having a projected wide ranging and significant environmental, economic and social impacts on the planet.

On the environmental impact the higher exceptional levels are projected to increasingly threaten coastal zones through a range of coastal hazards including permanent submergence of land by higher means of sea level tides ,more frequent coastal flooding recession of shorelines and coastal wetlands through coastal erosion including bio loss, and changes due to consistent salination etc will result in adverse social cultural and economic ramifications for various communities including uncontrollable environmental refuges this is not really new.

Two former UN Secretary Generals predicted the existential threat of sea level to our planet and humanity starting from Kofi Annan to Ban-Ki Moon who predicted at the tipping-point that more than 20 mega ports centers of maritime trade will go under. Just consider the unimaginable disruption to world

maritime trade, the saying goes if that happens half of the world will die from hunger and the other will freeze to death.

In his Compact, former UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon alluded to the number of coastal major ports that may go under if we continue to underestimate the violence of this existential threat of spatial impacts on the urban hinterland, where humans must adapt to living with the ocean and from the ocean in a sustainable relationship.

This symbiotic relationship between ocean and coast is to be understood as an incorporation of two opposing directions; that of making sustainable use of the abundant goods and services of the ocean and coast blue economy and that of the mitigation and adaptation to dangers the ocean presents to prosperity and human well-being including tsunamis tidal waves storm surges, upwelling, hurricanes, extreme weather invasive species the list is infinite. So, we must ask what are we doing in terms of resilience, adaptation mitigation and resolution?

The consequences of COVID-19 economic, social, and environmental costs of sustainability have been enormous and beyond the resilience of most developing, least developed countries and countries in transition. COVID-19 revealed the extent of the absence of preparedness of humans in facing this scourge of an epidemic.

Coastal cities and the coastal urban nexus of cities which rely on the Blue Economy in their urban/coastal interdependence of economic, environmental, and social interaction and in such engagements as in maritime trade, maritime transport, ports and harbours, shipping, inland logistical connectivity, fisheries, access to the ocean's natural resources (living and non-living) and services, energy, recreation, tourism, hospitality etc. which are the narratives the Blue Economy offers.

Then the question must be raised as to the consequences of thriving over-populated coastal cities being port cities, centres of maritime trade, tourism, and recreation, dependent on ocean services which as consequences of sea level rise suffer unimaginable loss of habitat leading to unaccountable number of refugees without a place of refuge.

Science tells us without doubt sea level will rise slowly at first, speeding up and continuing beyond the 21st century. Gradually many coastal areas cities and coasts will become uninhabitable. People will lose their homes income and part of their culture and way of life. According to the same UN reports, rising sea levels threaten over one billion people in Asia alone. Such population displacement is a recipe for conflict and a threat to global security. Militating against climate change is not sufficient and there is an urgent need to begin the process of adaptation, climate protection and risk minimization for

which investment in coastal management with view to sea level rise must be adequately budgeted. Globally, an increase in the frequency of natural and human-induced disaster.

Now place that in terms of what we learnt from the COVID-19 epidemic, and in that context the global existential threat of sea level rise because of climate change. There is no doubt when sea level rise reaches the tipping point, as is forecasted, this will result in global economic and social costs far more tragic in total consequences when compared with the aftermath cost of the current epidemic. Consider the enormous plight of refugees from submerged islands who have no territory or nation.

Given in comparison the economic and social cost of the current pandemic then we must wonder how will it be possible for the less privileged members of the international community, developing and least developed countries be able to mitigate with resilience the consequences of such combined hazards to survive?

Secretary General Antonio Guterres in his opening statement in this September said *the world is on the edge of an abyss and moving in the wrong direction. He painted a stark picture of unsustainable inequalities, runaway climate change and feckless leadership ...the world must wake up. He felt the world is slipping towards two different sets of economic trade, financial, technological rules two divergent approaches to development of Intel artificial intelligence and ultimately the risk of a Cold War, to restore trust and inspire hope we need cooperation we need dialogue we need understanding. we are on the edge of an abyss.*

The much awaited ICP (Informal Consultative Process on the Law of the Sea) which addressed the report of the Secretary General on Sea level Rise had an opportunity to set a momentum towards dealing with the inevitable sea level rise unfortunately it did not rise to the challenge. Although it is an informal consultative process did not rise to the occasion for starters it was clearly declared by powerful countries that there was not an agreement to address legally based solutions. The fact that that highly developed countries representative spoke strongly against any legal obligations speaks loudly to time framework will await us before we effectively address the solutions to one of the most challenging fate of our planet.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and amplified the vulnerability of least developed countries to external shocks.

This leads me to a supposition that science and technology as mitigating tools should become more conjectural and not solely observatory. Furthermore, to implement precautionary, adaptation and mitigation measures there needs to

be ample international financial and empowered human resources available. The critical need for financial and qualified human resources to mitigate COVID-19 caught the developing, least developed countries without a safety net to mitigate the economic and social resources needed to fight the epidemic. Hence there is a critical need for new financial instruments to evolve by the international financial institutions and multilateral policies of reasons to become the cornerstone of genuine multilateral cooperation in anticipation of sea level tipping point.

Therefore, I say that the user pay principle should be mandatory as where those who enjoy free access to ocean resources and services simultaneously contributing contribute to it degradation and service begin to pay for that privilege. It is a moral issue that has been absent in the current pandemic. We do need to change the tune of promises as in the past such as carbon credit permits, blue bonds, or promissory market solutions. ***They are footprints in the sand.***

At the ICP several experts/ delegations/panellists noted that, combined with sea level rise, these threats could have numerous impacts on vulnerable areas, including flooding, coastal erosion, salinization of aquifers, river mouths and agricultural land, increased risks to food security and livelihoods, displacement of peoples, and the destruction of important coastal infrastructure, ecosystems and habitats of important flora and fauna. However when it came to solutions experts differed where some were prompting eco- system approaches while others considered it is ineffective.

IOI raised a question as to whether a country-by-country vulnerability index for sea level rise existed or in the making, which may be considered as requisite instrument in allocating priorities for action and financing. surprisingly response that given the ways in which sea level rise affected coasts depended on multiple factors and local contexts, producing such indices was quite complex, and existing attempts at doing so were incomplete.

We believe that such Risk Vulnerability Index (CORVI) relating sea level rise highlights the importance of capacity-building, innovation, and international partnerships priorities.

The IOI is committed to advocate the needs to prioritise capacity development in all its manifestations interms of resilience and adaptation prior to the tipping point is ever being reached.

We do sound the alarm

Do not ask for whom the bell tolls it tolls for thee.

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