



**SIDS workshop**  
**“Healthy Oceans Resilient Islands”**  
**High level segment, Egmont Palace, 7 March 2017**

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**Opening statement by Vice-Prime Minister of  
Foreign and European Affairs D. REYNDERS**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

**It is a real pleasure to welcome you in Belgium** and especially at the Egmont Palace of Brussels **for the opening of our dedicated workshop “Healthy Oceans, Resilient Islands”**. I want to thank especially our distinguished guests representing the Small Island Developing States. Many of you traveled from overseas to discuss here capacity building, an issue of crucial importance to the nations you represent. I am also glad to recognize the Ambassadors accredited to Belgium.

Early January, **I had the opportunity to visit Fiji** and to discuss the low-lying coastal countries’ aspirations and concerns. **Many of your nations tend to share similar sustainable development challenges**, including small but growing populations, limited resources, susceptibility to natural disasters, vulnerability to external shocks or excessive reliance on international trade. It is clear that you face important and crucial challenges on a daily basis.

Although SIDS are a truly global group, representing States from Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, each with specific circumstances, they are all connected by the same waters. **There is a close and deep relationship between SIDS and the ocean** - ranging from the economic dependency of maritime activities, fisheries and tourism; the role the ocean plays in the culture and society; to the specific challenges faced by SIDS in an increasingly globalized and changing world.

As a coastal state, Belgium is always inclined to listen to the voices of comparable nations and to contribute to making their appeals better understood and responded to. **Our diplomatic DNA is all about facilitating the compromises** often needed to encourage other countries to act. And, **when it comes to the ocean, action is precisely what is needed urgently.**

**The health of oceans, seas and coastal areas is indispensable to our sustainable future.** Oceans contribute to poverty eradication by providing opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and employment. Oceans are crucial for global food security and human health. They are essential in enabling progress in many Sustainable Development Goals.

In Belgium, our dedication to the goals of the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea is also materialized in **our Marine Spatial Plan**. We were the first country to adopt such a plan. **The current plan designates one third of the Belgian part of the North Sea as nature conservation area.** North Sea State Secretary Philippe De Backer, present tonight, is stepping up our efforts by preparing a revision of the Marine Spatial Plan and by working towards a long term vision.

**Belgium is also particularly concerned about the impact of climate change** compounded by the effects of overfishing, pollution and habitat loss. We are strongly committed to the achievement of the objectives agreed in the Paris Agreement.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

You are gathering in Brussels and in Ostend this week for a thorough discussion on **Capacity Building**, a subject at the heart of the United Nations negotiations on Biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdictions, also referred to as “BBNJ”.

I thank the **UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission** for being our key partner in organizing this workshop. Belgium hosts the UNESCO-IOC project office in the city of Ostend.

The Project office is a global capacity building hub, where **ocean experts from around the world meet and are trained in data and information management**. It is the center of the world's largest global database on marine biodiversity called "OBIS". The Ocean Biogeographic Information System is recognized by the UN General Assembly and has the potential to become a data and information clearing house for BBNJ.

I really hope that this three days' workshop will help you to develop a better understanding about how capacity building and transfer of technology regarding the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity can be successfully addressed through **a new implementing agreement**. There is a strong opportunity this year to lay the foundations for a new Treaty to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. **Belgium is strongly in favor of the establishment of a Treaty and the launch of the intergovernmental conference to that effect.**

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

We can only succeed by strengthening international cooperation within the framework of the United Nations and by investing in different kinds of global and regional instruments. The upcoming United Nations events as the Prepcom process on BBNJ, the Ocean Conference as well as the COP23 are important fora to advocate for the conservation and sustainable use of the ocean as part of the international agenda.

Belgium welcomes the initiative taken by Fiji and Sweden to organize the **first ever UN Ocean Conference** in June this year under the remarkable stewardship of the President of the General Assembly, Mr Thomson. The New York Ocean Conference will galvanize efforts towards the implementation of global commitments under SDG14. **I will actively take part in this Conference by announcing commitments and also by partnering with you in specific side-events.**

The promotion of the creation of marine reserves, and by extension the development of a **mechanism that would enable the establishment of marine reserves on the high seas** stay crucial. As we did in the past, Belgium will continue raising these issues with its EU partners.

As **an active member of the Friends of the oceans**, Belgium sees a lot of merit in strengthening its bilateral and multilateral relationships with Small islands developing States.

Moreover, to tackle sustainable development challenges **we need a multi-faceted approach** which includes also the private sector, civil society, think tanks and academia. It is therefore my pleasure to provide you today with a unique forum, look around the room **to discover 18 stands representing 12 private companies, 5 NGO's and 2 university departments**. These experts are captains of industry, research and advocacy in a wide range of ocean related topics and the blue economy. Therefore, I invite you to discuss artificial reefs, wave energy, wind energy, hydro energy, dredging, land reclamation, solar energy, blue growth, animal welfare and protection, recycling of ocean waste, desalination, and even loans, credits and investments tailored for SIDS.

Dear friends of the SIDS, ladies and gentlemen,

**Before giving the floor to Ambassador Ahmed SAREER**, Permanent Representative of Maldives to the United Nations and Chair of The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS),

Let me once again wish you all very interesting exchanges and great networking opportunities throughout the coming days. The goal of this workshop is for SIDS to develop capacities to be resilient islands surrounded by healthy oceans!

**Please take ownership of this exercise.**

Enjoy your evening tonight and thanks again for your presence.