

THE SPECIAL CASE OF SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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In August this year, the International Community will meet in Mauritius to review the implementation of the Barbados Program of Action, a special program established in 1994 through the United Nations to promote and support sustainable development in Small Island Developing States. This program was based on the recognition by the international community that Small Island Developing States (SIDS) represent a special case for environment and development – in other words, for sustainable development.

Ten years down the road, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) Members have found that this recognition has not in practice been translated into tangible programs which could bring actual benefits to SIDS.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development held from 26 August to 4 September 2002 in Johannesburg the International Community reaffirmed the special case of SIDS and called for a full and comprehensive review of the BPOA in 2004.

It is in this context that AOSIS has undertaken to seek practical and pragmatic solutions that address the special case for SIDS which, for most SIDS citizens is intrinsically linked to our islands culture and environment, to our relationship to the coasts and oceans, - in short to our very “islandness”. For this reason, I have commissioned a special study on the issues affecting SIDS, and, in my capacity as Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC), I have proposed that we convene a special event on SIDS during ECOSOC’s summer session. It is our hope that this will lead to better understanding by the International Community of the special situation of SIDS.

Developing countries both SIDS and non SIDS, all face considerable difficulties in their development paths. We know from economic figures that economic growth and stable markets do not come about without serious efforts by governments and the private sectors. We are also familiar with the images of other stressors on development, such as famine, war and social and health issues in these countries. But SIDS, in addition to all those general problems have certain unique characteristics and specificities that create additional impediments and constraints. SIDS are for the most part, small, remote and geographically dispersed. Because of their archipelagic formation, SIDS, face serious problems of governance, communications, transportation, inter-island equity, as well as urban drift. In two SIDS in the Pacific for example, the citizens have to leave the country in order to fly from one end to the other. As most of the SIDS have small populations, they face higher per capita costs of governance and public infrastructure.

The oceanic nature of SIDS physical geography creates problems of its own. SIDS are prone to natural disasters such as cyclones, hurricanes and tsunamis and the fragility of

their ecosystems is highly impacted by these physical forces. The destruction wrought by Cyclone Heta on American Samoa, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands and in particular on Niue are dramatic examples of what island vulnerability entails. It is also a harbinger of what is to come, as climate change continues to exacerbate the already worsening extreme weather events.

The special case for SIDS becomes most pertinent in the field of trade and commerce. Historical circumstances linked to colonisation have led many SIDS to become single commodity producers and single market exporters, and in present times heavily dependent upon tourism as the single service sector and major source of revenue. In addition to the high cost of production we also have to suffer higher costs of transport and communication taking into account the distances to our main overseas markets. SIDS also have a highly limited internal market and a heavy dependence of imports. Such factors combined with the limited ability to benefit from economies of scale adversely affect our ability to compete with other producers including many of the developing countries.

These unique characteristics of SIDS thus have serious implications on their ability to attain sustainable development, unless appropriate steps are taken in support of their efforts. The vast majority of SIDS will not be able to implement export-led strategies through the production of goods or services the more so since the advice provided and regulations imposed on them by multilateral institutions, are still based on the paradigm of development through expansion of the GDP.

Another aspect of the SIDS special case is the issue of SIDS vulnerability. As stated above, all developing countries face challenges, but because of the vulnerabilities of SIDS these challenges have a unique and disproportionate impact on the economic, social and environmental development of SIDS. The University of Malta and the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) have made extensive and groundbreaking studies in this field. With the assistance of UNDP and the SIDS Unit of the UN we now also have in our hands a series of far-ranging case studies and reports on vulnerability of SIDS. All these studies have come to the same conclusion that the best response to vulnerability is building of resilience.

The building of resilience comes about through the sound management of resources in such a manner that maintains the highest level of diversity, requiring that all products and services be obtained in a synergistic manner. The maintenance of high levels of diversity also allows the environment to recover from external shocks. Sustainable development in SIDS therefore requires sustainable management of the environment and a mainstreaming or integration of sustainable development into national planning strategies. Integrated planning enables a better and clearer vision of opportunities and obstacles, and more productive ways to implement policy development that is sustainable. The work of our experts on vulnerability will therefore be re-focused in the coming months to look at resilience building in the context of the existing challenges as well as the new and emerging issues.

The special case of SIDS can therefore be defined as one of inherent vulnerabilities and national challenges, further exacerbated by external pressures. While sustainable development of SIDS is within the realms of possibility, the present world economic situation does not lend itself to such development. The recognition of SIDS as a group of countries with specific and unique vulnerabilities need to be translated into concrete action which will ensure their survival upon the further integration of the global economy. Consideration of the special case of SIDS would also cause the multilateral institutions to provide a better service for SIDS commensurate with their particular needs.

AOSIS is carefully preparing the 10-year review of the BPOA. In the regional preparatory meetings as well as the Inter regional Ministerial Meeting which took place in Nassau, Bahamas from 26 to 30 January, SIDS have made critical assessments of their own performance, identified the difficulties they have faced and continue to face and have also looked at new and emerging issues which are likely to further affect them.

At the Mauritius International Meeting AOSIS will look for solutions appropriate to SIDS, and will wish to seek consensus with our development partners on a new political commitment for the sustainable development of SIDS. Such consensus will be based on partnership, mutual interest and interdependence. It is our hope that the development partners will respond appropriately and generously.

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