



**PERMANENT MISSION OF JAMAICA  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

**Presentation by**

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**to Lehigh University**

**on**

**Challenges and Opportunities:  
Small Island Developing States (SIDS)**

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**Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is a distinct pleasure for me to be here with you to speak about a unique grouping of countries that have come to be characterised by four simple but powerful letters: SIDS - Small Island Developing States.

To fully appreciate the dynamics and diversity of SIDS, one has to understand the history of what can be described as a very successful movement and the context of its evolution that make it poised to chart the next steps towards the future. I will attempt to do so in the next couple of minutes and trust that you will get an insight into the tremendous opportunities and challenges that beset the over 50 countries and territories that make this group a family, approximately 39 of whom are members of the United Nations.

### **What does it mean to be a SIDS?**

In order to understand the challenges and opportunities for SIDS, one has to understand what defines and characterises a SIDS. There are a number of common elements in this definition - not surprisingly the countries in this grouping are small, low-lying coastal countries with similar sustainable development challenges; some are relatively remote; highly vulnerable to economic and natural shocks beyond domestic control. SIDS are spread across 3 geographical regions: AIMS (Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea); the Caribbean, as well as the Pacific. Collectively, SIDS have a combined population of around 65 million - reportedly less than 1 per cent of the world's population. Cuba has a population of 11.3 million, my own country Jamaica has a population of 2.8 million while there are approximately 1500 persons living in Niue. Their histories are shaped by a variety of experiences that have seen them develop different political systems either as independent territories or as part of existing overseas territories. What is clear is that it is a heterogeneous group that despite its differences, face the same existential threats, albeit to differing extremes.

### **Significant Timelines**

One key timeline that is key to this understanding is June 1992 with the convening of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. It was this Conference that first acknowledged the special case for small island developing states through the inextricable link between the environment and development by accepting their vulnerability to global warming and sea level rise.

This link is reinforced 2 years later with the adoption of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action that elaborates some of the specific action areas that range from climate change and sea-level rise to energy resources, tourism, transport, communication and science and technology.

The importance of the support to be given to SIDS and the need for cooperative and collaborative frameworks were further reinforced with the adoption in 2005 of the Mauritius Strategy for the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

This steady progression continued with the International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Samoa almost 10 years later that generated what has become known as the SAMOA Pathway.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The challenges and opportunities that face SIDS are varied. While SIDS are traditionally conceived in terms of their environment vulnerabilities, their recognised vulnerabilities have extended to a wide range of developmental issues, which largely mirror the realities of the global socio-economic environment. An effective response to these challenges requires the diversion of already limited resources to national development.

The significance of these challenges is magnified by their mutually reinforcing nature and the disproportionate impact across the group. The underlying concept is that any threat is a threat to the very existence of the SIDS. A key principle that underpins this approach is the acknowledged multiplier effect that each threat has on the overall ability of SIDS to effectively respond to and combat the challenge.

One such challenge is peace and security. The threat posed in this context is reflective of the change in the traditional notion of security and the interconnected nature of security challenges. Consequent, these challenges range from “traditional armed conflict to transnational crime and piracy, illicit exploitation of natural resources, climate change and climate- related natural disasters and uneven development” (Concept note for the Security Council open debate on peace and security challenges facing small island developing states). In the case of Jamaica, for example, porous borders make us prime target for the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, and drugs that has fuelled a lucrative underworld of transnational organised crime.

The second challenge is linked to the vagaries of the global economic environment and the limited scope for SIDS to avoid let alone respond to negative developments. SIDS is a group of mixed fortunes, many of whom are categorised based on economic definitions that mask inequalities at the national, regional and international levels. For example, Jamaica is defined as a Middle Income Country, which by specification and based on the criteria employed, makes it difficult if not impossible to secure concessional grants from the global financial markets. By default, it is implied that MICS are economically equipped to sustain themselves. What such an approach does, however, is underestimate or ignore the disparities and structural inefficiencies that might still make access to grants a critical feature of our economic development. Additionally, food-price volatility, the erosion of trade preferences, debt and contracting economies all have security and other implications.

Another threat lies in the fact that SIDS are for the most part based on economies that are not very diversified. While efforts are being made to move away from such scenarios, many SIDS are largely dependent on tourism for their economic viability. For example, Antigua and Barbuda, the UK Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Seychelles and Vanuatu are heavily dependent on the travel and tourism industry - a total contribution higher than 50 per cent (UN Statistics: SIDS). Many are also reliant on remittances that in some instances form the core of their foreign exchange earning capacity. In 2011, for example, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Haiti received the most remittances [US \$3.6 million, 2.1 million and 1.5 million, respectively, (UN Statistics: SIDS)]. This presents a curious situation for many SIDS eager to ensure that their economic fortunes are grounded in more predictable and sustainable earning power. The situation is compounded by a lack of diversified energy sources. Although their energy use per capita varies significantly and pales in comparison with other countries, SIDS are highly dependent on imported fossil fuels for transportation and electricity.

There is also the added challenge of migratory human capital that makes it difficult for SIDS to retain nationals who seek larger, more developed markets in which to fully maximise their earning capabilities. This has the potential to restrict and constrain developmental prospects in the face of heightened concern over the ability to train and retain skilled workers within the wider labour force. It is a difficult situation that confronts us in Jamaica - how do we in an age of heightened globalisation that has been characterised by the increased movement of people ensure that we do not become disadvantaged by this free movement of potential labour? This has forced us to begin work on the development on a National Migration Policy that would, among other things, recognise this movement as an opportunity to benefit from the enhanced exposure garnered from other markets but more importantly compels us to look at how we can create the kind of socio-economic environment in Jamaica that would encourage persons to return and contribute to the development of their homeland. The same consciousness has

fostered the preparation of a Diaspora Policy that will inform the Government's engagement with Jamaicans living overseas.

The foregoing threats magnify and highlight the challenges linked to climate change, around which SIDS have become a rallying force. While climate change affects all states and does not distinguish between rich or poor, North and South, and developed and developing countries, there is no denying the destabilizing and devastating impact it has on SIDS. In our (Jamaica's) case, we have experienced an increase over the past 25 to 30 years in the frequency of natural events including floods as a result of tropical depressions, tropical storms and hurricanes, as well as droughts and landslides. Between 2004 and 2008, five major storm events caused damage and losses estimated at US\$1.2 billion. These have had significant impact on the national economy; the quality of the country's natural environment and the livelihoods of thousands of people, particularly in rural areas. In addition, the country has experienced loss of lives and property; damage to infrastructure; periodic isolation of communities; and disruption to the school system and health services.

It is clear that SIDS are the victims of a problem that is not of their creation. Since 2000, for example, 4 small islets of Tuvalu have disappeared. Resilience, mitigation and adaptation take on new dimensions for SIDS as their ability to effectively respond to climate change without the requisite support become even more diminished. One innovative approach that Jamaica is trying to pursuing is climate debt swap. By so doing, we hope to be able to have a system where funds that would be earmarked for debt repayment would instead and with the approval of the credit, be directed towards climate change initiatives.

### **Opportunities and Next steps**

The challenges I have outlined are difficult but they are not insurmountable, with the enabling framework that provides for cooperation between and among states. There have been a number of significant developments that have enhanced prospects in this regard and which have acted as important rallying points for SIDS concerns.

First, the adoption of the SAMOA Pathway. Through this framework, which reinforced SIDS as a special case for sustainable development, SIDS have reaffirmed their resolve to continue collaborating in several key areas. One significant development, which builds on the commitment made by SIDS in the Barbados Declaration in which they voluntarily committed themselves to achieve certain energy targets through reducing fossil fuel imports and increasing renewable energy consumption, is the SIDS DOCK. Under this initiative, the energy sectors of SIDS will be connected to the global finance market, sustainable energy technologies

and carbon markets in the EU and the US to enable emissions trading. Jamaica is in the process of completing the domestic requirements to facilitate the signing of the SIDS DOCK Statute. In response to our own fossil fuel dependency, Jamaica has adopted a National Energy Policy for the period 2009 to 2030. There are increasingly a number of solar energy plants and more houses are being constructed with solar energy consumption and utilisation in mind.

The adoption last year by the international community of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is also another critical development. By adopting the SDGs, the framework that had been created with the Millennium Development Goals has been augmented and enhanced with objectives and targets that are more comprehensive and holistic, and which provide a more focussed perspective on some key issues of importance to SIDS. In fact, both the Samoa Pathways and the SDGs place people and planet at the centre of all sustainable development efforts in order to realise human potential in a safe and secure environment.

Third and by no means least is the 2014 Paris Agreement, which has since entered into force. For the first time, countries agreed to strengthen the global response to climate change by keeping global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius. SIDS led the way on this issue and were at the forefront of the call for the matter to be addressed. The momentum which has been generated by the Agreement is expected to chart a new era in the Climate Change discourse.

Jamaica has sought to respond to the challenges posed by Climate Change by adoption of a National Climate Change Policy. The Policy Framework creates an institutional mechanism and structures to facilitate the development, coordination and implementation of policies, sectoral plans, strategies, and legislation to address the impacts of climate change.

The important issue around which all these positive developments coalesce is the fact that they seem to connect the dots on many key elements. They mutually reinforce each other because of the comprehensive nature of their envisaged objectives and the corresponding collective will that is required to bring them to fruition. It has fostered the kind of thinking that will be critical to their long term success and for which there is a lot of expectation. In Jamaica, we had come to the realisation that we had to have a comprehensive vision of where and how we wanted to position ourselves and so in 2009, we adopted a bi-partisan National Development Plan called Vision 2030 (you may wish to notice the similarity even from then to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs), with a philosophy that Jamaica is the place of choice to live, work, raise families and do business. There is a central focal point that oversees the implantation towards the realisation of our objective - the Planning Institute of Jamaica - that does so through an inter-

Ministerial/Agency Task Force and a series of working groups. Consultations are also undertaken with members of civil society in an effort to ensure that the process is not purely government-led.

The advantage that SIDS also have is that they have a very active, visible brand that is easily recognisable. They also have a plethora of different fora in which they can participate and advocate. There is the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which has enabled the kind of cross-fertilisation of ideas that takes account of the peculiarities of the various sub-regions. Consequently, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), for example, can work within the context of the AOSIS, as well as with the Pacific Islands Forum without sacrificing any issues of concern.

Additionally, the concerns of SIDS are advocated in the highest multilateral fora - the UN - with a dedicated SIDS Unit, Divisions like DESA and the Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

But this focus is not confined to the United Nations. The Commonwealth of Nations, with its Secretariat in London, also has a tradition of promoting and promotion SIDS. In fact, 25 of its 52 members are SIDS. There is also participation in the context of the Forum of Small States, as well as in regional groups like ASEAN and CARICOM. The prospects, therefore, for maintaining global attention on SIDS are very promising and very bright.