



Small Island Developing States

Small Island Developing States

From Cape Verde to the Maldives, St Lucia to Tuvalu, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) now account for 43 of the 191 Member States of the United Nations (UN). Spread across the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, and the Caribbean and Mediterranean Seas, each with their own unique characteristics, they nevertheless share many features in common. Some of their particular traits may work both to their advantage and disadvantage. Smallness and isolation may be perceived as disadvantages representing limited terrestrial resources and large distances to markets, but they may also be seen as positive factors corresponding to a sense of community-wholeness and a tradition of self-reliance.

As SIDS face the challenges of sustainable development, they have one major advantage over larger continental countries, namely that islanders can always relate to other islanders. This sense of island identity, which can overcome the constraints imposed by language and culture, is one of the factors that make SIDS such a distinctive negotiating group in international circles.

Education for sustainable development

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a dynamic concept that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future.

Shaping a vision for sustainable development

Faced with their special constraints and circumstances, and including their particular vulnerability to natural hazards and disasters, islanders seek to cope with, adapt to and shape change in a number of different ways.

Building Human Resource Capacity

Human resources are the most valuable asset of SIDS and must be given every opportunity to fulfil their potential. This entails promoting access to and improving the quality of basic education and especially technical/vocational skills training; maximising the opportunities offered by distance education; strengthening local knowledge systems and unique cultural and resource knowledge; sharing skills and experiences through south-south cooperation; embracing new information and communication technologies.

Promoting Greater Self-Reliance

Today's global monetary economy has transformed the scale and nature of relationships among island states and between islands and the wider global community. While small-island nations cannot be expected to become totally self-sufficient, the dependence of a number of countries on outside support and on narrowly based economies (e.g. economies based solely on tourism or the export of a single monoculture crop) renders them particularly vulnerable. Measures to alleviate this dependence of small-island states include policies to reduce competitive disadvantages and diversify exports, promoting sustainable energy use and resource management, and developing sustainable tourism. Eradicating poverty and maintaining and developing sustainable livelihoods are other interlinked priorities contributing to greater self-reliance.

Communicating and Linking

Readily accessible knowledge and information increasingly determines patterns of growth and wealth creation and opens up possibilities for more effective poverty reduction and sustainable development. New information and communications technologies have a crucial role to play in altering perceptions concerning sustainable living across all sectors of society and in sharing experience and insights from one island to another and from one region to another.

Governments and peoples of small island developing states have also joined together through bodies such as the Alliance of Small Island States to effectively argue that their countries encounter specific developmental problems that call for special treatment at bilateral, regional and international levels. Ways to further develop and optimise these mutually supportive actions need to be explored.

Promoting Socio-Cultural Diversity

Small islands are crossroads of human cultural interaction. The histories of the islands of the Caribbean and the Mediterranean Seas, and those of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, testify to the rich and important economic, social and cultural exchanges that small islands have given the world. Many island peoples and communities have an in-depth appreciation of the cultural and biophysical dimensions of development. This is reflected in the priority given in certain islands to preserving traditions, using local languages, promoting island identity, and conserving specific food sources. Sharing the knowledge and wisdom of local users and interest groups is one way to strengthen socio-cultural diversity.

Managing Natural Resources

Natural resources - water, air, soil, flora and fauna - play crucial roles in determining the capacity of an island to adapt to change and improving the quality of life for islanders. The supply of good quality drinking water, one of the fundamental requirements for life, is a major problem in many islands. Pollution, biodiversity loss, and agricultural decline are among the many critical environmental concerns. Land shortages, insecurity of tenure, and squatter settlements, combined with over-fishing and degradation of coastal resources contribute to an overall picture of declining natural resources. Efforts to provide for the sustainable management of natural resources of SIDS include promoting community-based resource management and planning strategies, managing tourism growth, protecting coastal ecosystems from pollution and over-fishing, developing sources of renewable energy, addressing the loss of forest cover, and developing and sharing eco-friendly practices.

Addressing Environmental Vulnerability

Many SIDS are vulnerable to environmental threats including climate variation and climate change; rising sea levels; hurricanes/cyclones/typhoons and storm surges; tsunamis; volcanic eruptions; droughts; and alien invasive plant and animal species. These events and trends often affect all inhabitants of small island states. Preparation for environmental disasters has greatly improved in many islands over the past two decades, reducing mortality rates, however, some new and inappropriate building practices have rendered infrastructure increasingly vulnerable during natural disasters. Many small islands have integrated adaptation to climate change into national development plans. Learning from recent and past events, sharing the knowledge and experiences, and adapting lifestyles, represent the way forward to cope with these changes and build resilience.

International Commitments

Beginning with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the special circumstances of SIDS have increasingly gained global attention and been included on the international agenda. The 1994 United Nations Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States held in Barbados brought together governments, international and regional agencies, non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector to prepare a Programme of Action addressing 15 priority areas for sustainable development. The 2000 Millennium Summit, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development further affirmed the special situation of SIDS. Most recently, in Mauritius, January 2005, the United Nations International Meeting to Review the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS reaffirmed the validity of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action as the blueprint for sustainable development in small islands. Furthermore, the Mauritius Declaration and Strategy specifically emphasised the need for capacity development and education for sustainable development.

UNESCO's Role: SIDS and Education for Sustainable Development

In the context of small islands, ESD may be seen as a framework through which to work whereby existing programmes and networks can be incorporated, rather than as a new, all-inclusive package. For instance, with the Education for All programme, all member states in the Pacific are in the process of implementing action plans, and the challenge will be to relate this programme to ESD. However, before the concept of ESD can be fully realized in the three main island regions (Pacific, Caribbean and AIMS¹ regions), they must each embark on a comprehensive, interdisciplinary and intersectoral dialogue to define ESD in their contexts. It may prove to be that the three regions converge after this effort.

With such a comprehensive, all-encompassing concept as ESD, it is essential for SIDS to identify core issues, the specific stakeholders for each core issue, and ways in which to monitor and evaluate ESD efforts during the decade. Already in the Pacific in May 2005, Ministers of Education identified quality technical and vocational education as critical for increasing economic independence and creating a sustainable society with a skilled workforce.

¹ AIMS is the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea region

During an ESD meeting in the Asia-Pacific region (January 2005), the role of environmental education in ESD was discussed. It was noted that in small islands generally, the last two decades have seen considerable effort directed toward environmental education for all sectors of society. While ESD has a much wider scope than environmental education, there may be a risk of confusing practitioners if ESD is not introduced holistically.

The scope for the decade of ESD is almost limitless, and because of this there is a need for a very carefully designed targeted approach to ESD among SIDS.

The following examples are ways in which SIDS are already undertaking ESD:

- Developing public understanding and awareness of sustainability: an inter-regional internet forum (www.sivglobal.org) involving the general public in small islands, with more than 20,000 individuals connected, has since 2002 been discussing issues such as increased crime and violence among youth, the impact of foreign investment in small islands, and the problems of solid waste disposal in the small island context, within the framework of the Small Islands Voice cross cutting project. (www.smallislandsvoice.org).
- Guiding and promoting the involvement of youth, the future island leaders, in sustainable development: UNESCO, in close co-operation with various strategic partners has been facilitating a Youth Visioning for Island Living process whereby young people articulate how they want their islands to develop in the future and how they plan to make this happen. After initial activities spanning 2004, 100 young people from SIDS and islands with other affiliations met in Mauritius in January 2005 to present their collective visions and commitments to world leaders. Presently they are embarked on realising their commitments and implementing their sustainable development projects. (www.islandyouth.org).
- Re-orientating existing education at all levels to address sustainable development: Sandwatch is such an initiative, which, since 2001, has provided the framework in fifteen small-island nations, for school students, with the help of their teachers and local communities, to work together to critically evaluate the problems and conflicts facing their beach environments and to develop sustainable approaches to address these issues. (www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/inter-reg/sandw.htm).
- Incorporating local and indigenous knowledge into ESD both through the formal and informal education system is necessary, not only for the sustainable development of SIDS, but also for the preservation of island cultures and identity: Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) project. (www.unesco.org/links).

UNESCO has a dual role in relation to ESD: first as a substantive implementer of ESD - accelerating education reforms and coordinating activities of multiple stakeholders to implement ESD at international, regional, and country levels. Second, UNESCO also acts as the lead agency in the promotion of the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Decade offers an opportunity for UNESCO and its partners to advance progress made in human resource development, education and training to ensure results in meeting current and future needs of small islands.

* * * *

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section for Education for Sustainable Development (ED/PEQ/ESD)</i> <i>Division for the Promotion of Quality Education, UNESCO, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France</i> <i>fax: 33 1 45 68 56 35 -- email: esddecade@unesco.org -- web: www.unesco.org/education/desd</i></p>
