



Coping with Uncertainty: Small Island Developing States Seeking Green Growth that Goes Beyond Disaster Management

New York, 10 May 2010 - The ground in Haiti trembled and shook for less than a minute on 12 January. When the main tremor ceased, in the horrible days that followed more than 200,000 people had lost their lives, and three more million were left in need of emergency assistance. In addition to destroying lives, the earthquake, measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale that hit Haiti laid waste to much of the country's infrastructure, from the presidential palace to schools and hospitals. According to preliminary estimates, Haiti would need US \$11.5 billion to support rebuilding efforts.

Small Island Developing States are particularly vulnerable to disasters that, in addition to claiming lives, can wipe out a country's economy. The Caribbean nation of Grenada, which had previously thought to be sufficiently south of the hurricane belt, suffered in 2004 and 2005 extensive damage from two major hurricanes. "The 2004 Hurricane Ivan brought home this reality with damages estimated at 204 per cent of GDP at the time," says Peter David, Grenada Minister of Foreign Affairs. "The country is still recovering from this. Grenada is not unique among small island states worldwide in experiencing these impacts."

Small Island Developing States share many of the characteristics of other developing countries. Yet, they face unique and special challenges and the social, economic and natural systems of Small Island Developing States are among the most at risk in the world.

While the financial global crises has affected all countries, Dominica President Nicholas J.O. Liverpool said "the crisis has created the worst set of economic circumstances since the era of independence of the countries of the region; bringing with it depressed commodity prices, decline in agricultural export earnings; contraction of tourism revenues, retreating foreign direct investment, decreased access to external financing, and declining remittances, among others."

Climate change remains a major concern for Small Island Developing States. Micronesia President Emanuel Mori said his country was already experiencing the brunt of the negative impacts of climate change. "Sea-level rise, changing weather patterns and an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters such as typhoons, are all undermining our development efforts."

He added that El Niño years have increased droughts or rainfalls, causing substantial damage to staple crops. "In the first place, our taro patches and arable lands are limited. Compounding the problem is the salt water intrusion, damaging basic crops including taro and coconut trees - our tree of life."

From disaster management to sustainable development

Small island developing states are the world's hotspot for sustainable development. Their fragility was most recently tested by the impacts of the global financial, food and fuel crises, as well as devastating earthquakes, a tsunami, floods and tropical storms. Unfortunately, greater resilience due to improved economic and governance capacities has in many cases been more than offset by greater exposure to natural and man-made shocks, including those related to climate change.

The earthquake in Haiti was just the last in a long series of natural disasters that have devastated SIDS and the list goes on and on.

- In January 2010, the Solomon Islands were hit by a 7.2 magnitude earthquake, which resulted in a tsunami as high as 10 feet in some parts of the islands.
- The January 2009 floods in Fiji killed 11 people and left an estimated 9000 displaced.
- In September 2009 an earthquake of magnitude 8.1 hit American Samoa and caused a tsunami in American Samoa, Samoa and Tonga.
- In September 2008, three storms hit Haiti in less than 21 days killing more than one thousand people, and leaving up to one million homeless.
- In 2004 and 2005, hurricanes Ivan and Emily devastated Grenada, battering and destroying 90 percent of homes, and inflicting damages worth US\$1.1 billion – more than twice the country's GDP.

While disasters may be inevitable, their impacts are not. According to Sha Zukang, UN Under Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, "we may not be able to eliminate hurricanes or earthquakes, but we can prepare ourselves to ensure that the lives and livelihoods of people living in small island developing States are not put in jeopardy by the vulnerabilities of their countries."

The question thus remains how to transit from disaster management towards sustainable development.

This challenge is one of the many that was focused upon during the international Small Island Developing States conference that took place in Mauritius in 2005. The main outcome of that meeting was the Mauritius Strategy of Implementation, which calls for a range of actions to promote sustainable development in the Small Island Developing States.

Building resilience: the way forward

The reconstruction of Haiti offers a unique opportunity - to the Haitian leadership and the international community - to avoid past errors in handling post-disaster situations and address the issue differently.

Once the humanitarian and international organizations leave the disaster-stricken areas, it is essential to move beyond the disaster itself and adopt a strategy that would enable SIDS to be stronger and more resilient.

It is important that reconstruction take into account the principles of sustainable development, which should be factored into all development activities in order to strengthen all sectors – administration, agriculture, construction, education, renewable energy, and environment, among others – thus allowing the SIDS to build strong foundations and better sustainable lives for all, including the future generations.

Such approach would prevent setbacks in progress and perhaps save many lives when inevitable disasters strike again. For instance, specific construction designs for buildings must be developed to withstand hurricanes and earthquakes; introduction of reforestation and a more sustainable agriculture using resilient seeds strains and crop diversity would help sustain populations; and investing in education, training and capacity building.

In this respect, a long-term vision should guide the various stakeholders. Any proposed reconstruction plan must be coordinated and allow for the participation of all forces of the society – state, private, non-governmental organizations.

The UN General Assembly will hold a high-level review meeting this September to review the status of implementation of the Mauritius Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Small Islands States. Leading up to this meeting, one full day (10 May) during this Commission on Sustainable Development will be devoted to discussing preparations and ensuring that the key issues at the heart of the sustainable development challenge of SIDS are addressed.

A number of regional meetings were held to evaluate progress made so far and highlight the continuing challenges encountered in the implementation of the Mauritius Strategy, with special focus on the vulnerabilities of small island developing States. The regional meetings provided an opportunity for both national and regional assessment of actions taken in support of the Mauritius Strategy.