



United Nations

## Small Islands, Big Stakes: Vulnerable Island Nations Seek Stronger International Support at Mauritius Meeting

(New York, November 2004) – A crucial United Nations conference on the future of small island nations worldwide will take place from 10 to 14 January 2005 on the island of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean. Faced with challenges ranging from hurricanes and climate change to trade losses and threats from HIV/AIDS, small island nations are counting on the Mauritius meeting to present their case to the international community, to seek partnerships and innovative ways to improve their situation.

More than 2,000 participants from the islands, their traditional donor partners and other countries, including some 25 heads of State and Government, are expected to take part in the United Nations International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, which was agreed a decade ago at a Global Conference in Barbados.

The vulnerability of small island nations gained attention in 2004 after hurricanes and major storms devastated Haiti, Grenada and others in the Caribbean region, as well as other island countries in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In an increasingly globalized world, their economies are also highly vulnerable due to both their smallness and their distance from export markets.

“The Mauritius conference provides a critical window of opportunity for the future of small islands,” commented the Secretary-General of the International Meeting, Anwarul K. Chowdhury. “If this occasion to extend the international community’s support to small island developing States in their development efforts is not successful, it might take decades before such an opportunity arises again.”

For the forty-plus small island nations, the Mauritius meeting carries big stakes, as they tackle serious threats and seek ways to boost and support their efforts to achieve sustainable development and to improve their inhabitants’ lives. Some of the challenges they face include that:

- climate change’s adverse impacts are already striking islands;
- fragile ecosystems require urgent protection;
- islands need more market access and better terms of trade;
- renewable energy is vital to lessen dependency;
- tourism has to be made more sustainable;
- information technology can reduce isolation;
- island cultures remain an untapped asset;
- diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria must be fought;
- security challenges are a burden; and
- islands’ intrinsic vulnerabilities have to be surmounted.

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The preparations for the Mauritius Meeting began in 2003 with regional meetings, followed by an inter-regional ministerial session in the Bahamas in January 2004, where island governments adopted a strategy document that became the basis for future talks. Negotiations with the international community on the texts to be adopted in Mauritius started in March 2004 and continued in April, May and October in New York. Although these talks have been cordial, agreement has not yet been reached on thorny issues such as climate change, trade, market access, proposals for new financing mechanisms and modalities of implementation. Informal negotiations will resume on 8 and 9 January in Mauritius, just prior to the conference. Joined together in the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), small islands are represented during the negotiations by the “Group of 77” (G77), which includes 135 developing countries.

In addition to the official conference, several parallel events will be held in Mauritius: a Civil Society Forum (6-9 January), a youth gathering called “Youth Visioning for Island Living” (7-12 January), and a large event aimed at promoting exchanges among small islands, the “Community Vilaj” (6-14 January), which will include a dialogue and performance space as well as an “Island Market” to showcase the diversity of island products. (Information on parallel events is available at [www.un.org/smallislands2005](http://www.un.org/smallislands2005).)

### **Long-standing challenges, emerging issues**

The Barbados Programme of Action, agreed at the first islands conference in 1994, focussed mainly on environmental problems such as climate change, natural disasters, wastes, marine resources, freshwater, land resources, energy, biodiversity, transport, tourism and science/technology. In addition, the Mauritius International Meeting will address a few emerging issues that increasingly affect small islands, including market access, HIV/AIDS, culture, information technology and new security concerns.

Small island and donor nations had agreed in Barbados to tackle islands’ challenges in partnership. The Barbados Programme of Action has been only partially implemented, though, partly due to a reduction in foreign aid. While foreign aid represented 2.6 per cent of small islands’ gross national income in 1990, it gradually diminished to only 1 per cent in 2002. At the same time, small islands did not attract the levels of foreign private capital and foreign direct investments that they had anticipated, mainly because they lack the market size, skilled labour and indigenous technological development to compete with larger developing countries for such investment flows.

In a recent report on small islands, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan enumerates factors that contribute to the specific challenges of small island developing States: small populations and economies, weak institutional capacity in both the public and the private sector, remoteness from international markets, susceptibility to natural disasters and climate change, fragility of land and marine ecosystems, high costs of transportation, limited diversification in production and exports, dependence on international markets, and vulnerability to external economic shocks. “As a result, their economies, including trade, financial flows and agricultural production, show greater volatility than those of other countries,” said Mr. Annan.

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