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## **DISCUSSION PAPER**

**PRESENTATION**

**BY**

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## Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs): Meeting Challenges through Regional Development

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COVID-19 has meant that attaining the SDGs in NSGTs proved difficult. Lost tourism and fractured supply chains posed economic problems and service delivery slowed. Even prior to the pandemic, the UN had reported negative global trends in various areas, overwhelming capacities to manage them. The pandemic resulted in more people slipping into poverty and undermined progress on most SDGs, including no poverty, zero hunger (food security) and reduced inequalities, a decline extending at least until mid-2022.

In the NSGTs, concern over the allocation of medical care and border closures contributed to a sense of frustration with assistance, as occurred after earlier hurricane hazards and, for some, a sense of exclusion after BREXIT, adding to climate change problems. COVID-19 revealed how fragile health care (and education) systems were, and how service provision was marked by urban bias and ethnic differences, revealing vulnerabilities of small states and territories. Frustration with external assistance and lost connectivity pointed to a need for greater self-reliance.

As economies struggle to revive, the financing of sustainability goals has become crucial, yet the COVID-19 era has provided an opportunity to achieve greater self-reliance and establish a sustainable and beneficial 'new normal', centred close to the SDGs, despite their being conceptualised and designed for larger states rather than the diverse geographies and development trajectories of much smaller NSGTs.

### The Sustainable Development Goals

The future of the NSGTs is linked into the achievement or otherwise of the SDGs. With 17 SDGs, 169 targets and 231 indicators, across multiple concepts and sectors, a basic problem is having data that might measure and monitor these, difficult enough for many SIDS. The SDGs offer greater recognition of social and environmental issues, evident during COVID-19, and move forward from the more narrow economic and growth dimensions of previous development targets, in favour of health, education and ecosystems. But they offered no strategies for achieving these objectives, while some objectives conflicted with others. The enormous number of indicators necessitated some degree of focus, as the tasks of monitoring every factor is beyond the capacities of small states and territories.

### Towards a New Normal?

In every NSGT, COVID underlined tensions between resilience, vulnerability and dependence. Territories received advice and assistance from administering powers, through

the provision of skilled human resources, technology and vaccines. For small island health care systems, that advice and assistance was invaluable. But support, both logistical and medical, accompanied tensions over policing and regulating the borders, documented in several British, French and American NSGTs and with parallels in analogous territories elsewhere, where tourism collapsed completely, causing increased unemployment and reduced household and government incomes. Disagreements occurred over responsibility, that had previously surfaced over restoration of hurricane damage, with the reduction in autonomy resented as political and economic intrusion, pointing to both the advantages and costs of formal external political ties. That raised wider questions of governance, and over who was ultimately responsible for structures and responsibilities of governance. The dilemma of overlapping responsibilities in every NSGT is at the core of achieving the SDGs.

COVID-19 drew particular attention to deficiencies – and capabilities – in health care provision, and proved a partial marker for assessing other structures of access to and distribution of resources and services. Good health care is one of the most critical of the SDGs, with COVID-19 demonstrating that poor health was the ultimate insecurity, and its arrival drew attention to the relationships between health status and uneven development the limitations of local health care systems, and the paucity of highly skilled human resources. Where high levels of COVID-19 combined with the challenges of climate change, as in Cayman Islands, the pandemic underlined existential threats rather than opening up new possibilities. Similar issues concerned education provision, an equally crucial SDG, and an investment in the future. Otherwise as climate change and hazards have become more evident, achieving sustainable food and water security has become more challenging, as demands have increased, with risks including steady urbanisation and pressures on coastal regions.

The geography of NSGTs implies a necessary focus on coastal and marine issues especially where, as in the larger NSGTs, a population squeeze an urbanisation place pressures on coastal areas, crucial to the blue economy, centred on tourism and fisheries, and thus on environmental management. That has been well expressed by the Minister for Natural Resources of the BVI who pointed out that its government:

has several priorities; to support the sustainable development of the maritime tourism sub-sector; develop the existing fisheries sector; improve the existing knowledge base around the maritime environment and the capacity to undertake future research; and explore new and emerging opportunities that could be developed in the BVI

Implicitly that involves education, health and biodiversity and a more holistic development. Not everything is possible (or perhaps relevant or necessary) but the SDGs point to a more holistic approach to development with a greater focus on environmental matters, equity and gender (which suggest considerations of intergenerational equity).

### Towards Self-reliance?

COVID-19 pointed to the virtues of greater self-reliance, but a 'new normal' of 'green recovery' and some reversion to a more resilient past is challenging. Government services have proved limited in achieving adequate access to service provision, raising basic questions about social justice and the role of government as facilitator or otherwise.

Population concerns, and over-urbanisation, exist in some larger NSGTs but SDG 11 is the only one that mentions housing: 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' and 'ensure access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums'. Such typically lofty goals offer little on how to attain them. It is an open question over what combination of economic growth and welfare provision will get the NSGTs (and every other state) closer to achieving the SDGs, and, at least as important, whose responsibility is it.

Sustainability requires a shared goal, alongside trust, empowerment, engagement and participation, none easily achieved or implemented, and conservation, care and well-being must somehow balance competition and ambition. Equity is essential to the SDG principle of 'leaving no-one behind' and 'closing the gap' but translating words into policies and practice has never been easy. A complex task exists in linking environmental management with managing urbanisation, achieving greater resilience to potential hazards and pandemics, and recognising the multi-scale dynamics of marine socio-ecological systems especially.

Development is ultimately a local phenomenon but consensus over strategies is required at every scale. But 'think global, act local' translates poorly into local practice. Values and virtues that enabled localised autonomy, resilience and self-reliance are not easily transferable into a more globalised world. It thus makes only limited sense to consider sustainability for a single island or NSGT, let alone a particular sector.

Establishing effective development strategies that combine sustainable development with resilience has been difficult in constantly changing circumstances. More effective capacity building has been limited, and has an obvious analogy in efforts at mitigating climate change. Ultimately the tasks are beyond what is manageable in most NSGTs (as in all other states) and complicated by diverse structures of power and governance. Making progress requires strategic collaboration and cooperation beyond NSGT borders.

### A Role for Regional Organisations?

A core theme of the SDGs is 'multistakeholder partnerships'. For most NSGTs, regional organisation (ROs) can provide valuable technical assistance and offer 'models' of development that might be shared (such as the Partners to the Nauru Agreement that involves Tokelau along with several SIDS). ROs enable diversification of sources of support, providing informal and institutional links that strengthen partnership and collaboration, with NSGTs benefiting from complementary and parallel skillsets, expertise, shared languages and issues, and nearby experience (positive and negative) of policies and projects.

NSGTs have increasingly diversified partnerships beyond the administering power. That will prove of greater value in support of development within the emergent blue economy, applying as much to the need for adequate data as to the development of policies and practices.

Partnership, support and cooperation are possible at different scales, with ROs, neighbouring states, the private sector, NGOs and universities- albeit with the possibility of complicating the human landscapes of NSGTs. Each NSGT is unique and development strategies and modes of collaboration vary, with caution required over what is promoted, by whom and why. Focus on coastal management (including urbanisation and biodiversity) and the blue economy is relevant. Caribbean SIDS have combined resources and ideas 'to create a brighter (bluer) future' that may easily extend to NSGTs. BlueDigital supports small Caribbean fisheries by connecting them more effectively to outlets, and enabling fishers to become more financially literate. At this scale multiple possibilities exist.

More distant possibilities include taking advantage of international organisations such as ICLEI (a global network of more than 2500 local and regional government) that is focused on urban sustainability through five themes and pathways, including nature-based and circular development. Likewise GLISPA (Global Island Partnership), established in 2006, by five political entities (including the BVI) has focused on working to reduce the loss of biodiversity on islands, since 'healthy ecosystems underpin sustainable livelihoods, health and poverty eradication' by bringing 'Governments and civil society organizations together'. Grenada offers a possible model as a small Caribbean island state embracing the SDGs along with the blue economy. Universities can offer means of shared learning and development, thus UWI's evolving Centre of Excellence for Oceanography and the Blue Economy, in Antigua, could become a source of useful studies, models and policies. Multiple other possibilities exist, that might also involve engaging and involving technical skills from the diaspora.

Shared regional interests and concerns were emphasized in the Caribbean after the 2017 hurricanes that devastated many islands, but brought them closer together. It is not only after hazards that one voice and one approach are valuable. But NSGTs are only tangentially linked to many such initiatives and trends, however much working together in coping with hazards is at the core of resilience.

Presently only fragmentary data exists on SDGs in NSGTs, hence there is no accessible data for comparative analysis and assessing relative progress. It could be valuable for this UN Special Committee to commission such a report covering this, that might cover data collection, practical progress and whether the present SDGs are appropriate for small NSGTs, or should focus more on certain key factors.

### Conclusion

All the SDGs are valuable but choices must be made to focus on local issues. Ros organisations can assist this process. That implies a geographical focus on the blue