

HABITAT III
A High Level Event on
"Urban resilience and Sustainable urban development
in Small Island Developing States"

8.30 am - 10:00am on Tuesday 18 October 2016
Room B, One UN Pavilion
Quito, Ecuador, at the occasion of Habitat III,
Organized by Maldives (Chair of AOSIS), UN-DESA, UN-OHRLS, and UN-Habitat

BACKGROUND NOTE

Overview

Small Island Developing State (SIDS) are often low-lying countries that share similar sustainable development challenges, including small size but growing populations, limited resources, remoteness, vulnerability to natural disasters, excessive dependence on international trade, and fragile environments. Being amongst the countries that are most exposed to climate change, SIDS historically have had a strong voice and a leading role in global efforts in addressing the climate challenge.

In the last years, we have seen several events or agreements acknowledging SIDS unique vulnerabilities and their needs to improve resiliency to their specific and complex problems. Rio+20 (2012), the SAMOA Pathway (2014), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), the Sendai Framework (2015) as well as the Paris Agreement (2015) and others all include particular references to SIDS. Now, with Habitat-III, the overlap in different agendas — climate, sustainable development and cities — offers clear synergies. Habitat-III presents an opportunity to align priorities and strategies such that policies, programs, and partnerships take into account the urban dynamics of the new century.

Not enough attention has so far been given to SIDS' urban contexts, where most cities, towns, and villages share the common characteristic of being coastal. Habitat-III should be regarded as a chance for SIDS to discuss the status and challenges of their human settlements. The concerns and commitments highlighted by the New Urban Agenda have interlinkages with SIDS biggest challenges, such as coping with climate change and building resiliency in order for local settlements to survive, adapt and evolve in a sustainable way.

SIDS Urban Context

It is evident that SIDS are urbanized, with urbanization rate at 61.7%¹ in 2014 where the global average is at 53.6%. We however, see extreme variation of urbanization rates within SIDS – some countries are 100% urbanized such as Singapore, whereas some countries are below 10% (for example, Trinidad & Tobago). It is worth mentioning that despite limited land availability, five cities in SIDS have now a population of over one million inhabitants (Singapore, Port-au-Prince (Haiti), Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), Havana (Cuba), Kingston (Jamaica)).

¹ United Nations, World Population Prospects, 2014.

HABITAT III
A High Level Event on
"Urban resilience and Sustainable urban development
in Small Island Developing States"

Due to limited land resources, several SIDS concentrate a considerable amount of their populations in the largest urban agglomeration. This is a distinctive feature in some SIDS, offering several challenges and multiple opportunities. However, in-line with global trends, secondary settlements are also growing rapidly in most SIDS. Hence, urban populations are concentrated in small and relatively low-density cities, with high levels of sprawl. Even rural areas tend to have relatively high densities and normal urban/rural differentiation is often not applicable.²

Land scarcity and demand in both urban and rural areas also increase the pressure on good governance of land administration and management systems. Population growth and urbanization drive up land value, which affects housing and property and makes implementation of planning and zoning regulations more difficult.

In the Caribbean for instance, more than half the population lives within 1.5 km of the sea, mostly on low-lying land. Like settlements and populations, the infrastructure base that supports vital socio-economic sectors of island economies tends to occupy coastal locations. High concentrations of infrastructure development, including important seaports and airports, public service facilities and attractive tourism infrastructure are located at low elevation along the coast.³

Common issues identified in SIDS include unplanned rapid urbanization, limited resources and capacity, remoteness and challenges of connectivity, and issues of management including but not limited to inadequate land administration systems for customary and other lands, difficulty in searching land titles because of manual land registration systems, delays in registration or customary land declarations, and lack of direct public access for all land information currently stored manually.

The lack of capacity of local and national governments to regulate building standards and land use plans exacerbates the risk of those living in vulnerable conditions. The urgency for SIDS to develop new and improved urban management systems and methods is even greater than those in other developing countries as SIDS are the more vulnerable and face more extreme challenges. At the same time, improving the systems could provide opportunities to implement other areas of sustainable development. Most SIDS have seen rapid urbanization in the last years, inducing uncontrolled and densely populated informal settlements in hazard-prone areas. Furthermore, it is important for these cities, towns, and villages to preserve their historic and cultural resources, which include not only land but also oceans and seas. This preservation can be achieved through waterfront and urban regeneration, amongst others.

² UN-Habitat, Urbanization and Climate Change in Small Island Developing States, 2014.

³ Ibid.

HABITAT III
A High Level Event on
"Urban resilience and Sustainable urban development
in Small Island Developing States"

Traditionally coastal management and urban planning were treated separately, without a common ground for an integrated perspective of coastal cities. In particular, urban planning sometimes ignores environmental issues that characterize a coastal ecosystem, and has created land use conflicts and environmental aggravations. Urban development in SIDS should recognize the implications on land and coastlines, as well as oceans and seas, and address:

- Damage to the quality of coastal resources that offer cities their distinctive characteristics
- Impacts on water quality
- Decreasing of opportunities for new urban infrastructure
- Public spaces
- Privatization of open spaces and foreshores
- Transport systems not satisfying urban mobility requirements
- Lack of planning capacity and integration

It is increasingly acknowledged that efforts to adapt to climate change and increase urban resilience are a necessary (and cost-effective) component of sustainable urban management and development. Several "low-hanging fruit" type of interventions - whether in infrastructure, housing, informal settlements, ecosystems and energy - are possible in urban and rural areas, and provide significant benefit, particularly when paired with efforts to mitigate climate change, for example, through building codes that encourage both resilience and energy and water efficiency.⁴

Guiding questions

- How are "cities" and smaller settlements issues addressed in different SIDS and how are they managed? How is the resiliency component being specifically applied to urban spaces in SIDS and how can the approach be adapted to human settlements of differing sizes?
- What are examples of good (and innovative) practices and policies of sustainable urban development and what are some challenges for the implementation?
- How can the United Nations and member states partners assist SIDS in their sustainable urban development, to achieve SDG11, the SAMOA Pathway, the New Urban Agenda, and Sendai Framework?

⁴ Ibid.