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Epilogue: Conclusion and discussion of emerging issues and policy agenda

'Man aspires to the stars. But if he can only get his sewage and refuse distributed and utilized in an orderly fashion, he will be doing well.' Roy Bridger

Post script

This collection of chapters is not intended as the last word in the debate on policy for saving small and island states, but rather as an introduction to the principal issues that are inherent in it and a guide through the expanding literature at the inter-face between theory and practice.

Despite the range of this book and its exposition of the state of the art, it is only too apparent that in trying to save small and island states both the development of theory and the evidence base for intervention is fragmentary and insufficient for comprehensive, effective action. Many of the issues have been clearly identified in international policy reviews and lists of appropriate actions specified. But the process of effective action for sustainable development remains in its infancy. In particular, further studies are needed to explore the interface between policy and implementation and the cost and benefit functions of sustainable development for saving some of the most vulnerable economies and ecologies on the planet.

The implications of population growth in many small and island states needs greater attention in policy development having regard to its impact on the use of natural resources and the changing patterns of consumption which will leave a heavier footprint on their small and fragile environments. Strangely enough, population is excluded from the MDG system of indicators, along with much else that is crucial to the future of SIDS and other small states.

The current global financial and economic crisis will take a further toll by deflecting attention away from the challenges of better environmental governance as the ecologies of these states move ever closer to the limits of their carrying capacity. Environmental tax reform (ETR) is being introduced tentatively and the text calls for tourism, an area which the smart money has attracted, to be carefully assessed in terms of its externalities and devices such as tourism taxation explored. To address the problem of global pollution and global development finance, proposals such as a global carbon tax would need urgent attention. It is nevertheless important to note that such global tax measures require glob-

al co-operation and international political economy factors come to the front seat in any discussions or negotiations on the matter.

It has been the fate of small and island states to be neglected in global forums. But the narrative in this book suggests that it may be from these very states that the best evidence can come of the evolution of survival and alleviating strategies in the face of economic and environmental threats. Darwin did not uncover the roots of the survival of species in his native land. So the benefits of small size and the rapid responsiveness of the ecology and the economies of small island states to incremental global change may well bring these minor league states onto the front of the world stage and help in establishing firmer foundations for the theory and practice of sustainable development. Market and policy failures, however, may be their fate. Like the dodo, some small states may rapidly decline and, with land degradation, sea level rise due to global warming, and climate change, many may become overwhelmed by the externalities of the dominant social paradigm.

The skills for environmental and natural resource analysis are in short supply. More regional and international support is needed to supplement what can be promoted by these small states themselves. The Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Bank are doing much to support the process, but progress with the UN 2005 Mauritius Strategy for SIDS has been tentative at best with much rhetoric but less evidence of systematic programmes and adaptation to a new environmental paradigm.

Two processes are essential for further progress. First, small states must consolidate their commitment not merely through the signing of treaties but with the implementation of programmes for sustainable development with a strong, lively community sector stimulus. Second, they must then carefully evaluate the results by building up the evidence base of what works and at what cost. But in many places this can only be effective with a revived positive role of international and regional bodies in promoting constructive critical review of what achieves the best results in saving small and island states and what are the critical conditionalities. High on the agenda must be: a strengthened policy forum to follow through the strategic accords; a more extensive and accredited evidence base adapted to the varying needs of the countries; development assistance for promoting better practice in policy and action; frank transparent reporting of progress; and a fresh agenda for producing and using relevant indicators of thematic performance and overall progress.

This volume illustrates the gathering capacities of expertise and advice for south-south support. Yet the momentum must be raised and the commitment transformed into rapid and sustained action. Without this, more of these beautiful small and island states will be trapped and engulfed by the pressures of western traditional development, which neglects the proper management of environmental and natural resources as their most critical assets. All this needs sound and realistic management at several levels. Getting safe water¹, sanitation and refuse disposal for all the people would be a good start. Thereafter, the rest of the Agenda for the 21st century could be built on a surer foundation.

Note

1 In 34 SIDS with UN reported data, 10 million people (21 per cent) are without safe water.