

National Sustainable Development Strategies in Small Island Developing States: An Overview¹

The first call for national sustainable development strategies (NSDS) was made at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Chapter 8 of Agenda 21, the landmark document that came out of the conference, states for countries to adopt a national strategy for sustainable development which 'should build upon and harmonise the various sectoral economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country... Its goals should be to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations'.²

The Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA), adopted at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in 1994, indicates that SIDS present special challenges to planning for and implementing sustainable development because of their limited development options.³ Given the limited resources faced by many SIDS, BPOA stressed the importance of regional and subregional co-operative programmes in meeting the challenges of sustainable development.⁴

At the five-year review of Agenda 21 in 1997, the Special Session of the General Assembly reaffirmed the importance of NSDS as a mechanism for enhancing and linking national capacity to bring together priorities in social, economic and environmental policies.⁵ The outcome document set a target date of 2002 for the formulation and elaboration of national sustainable development strategies.

Another target was set at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in 2002, whereby the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) adopted by governments urges countries to take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and to start their implementation by 2005.⁶

At the International Meeting to Review Implementation of the BPOA held in Mauritius in January 2005, states reiterated that the BPOA remains the blueprint for the sustainable development of SIDS and for the international community to support SIDS in developing and implementing NSDS by 2005. In October of the same year, at the Pacific Regional Meeting to follow up on the Mauritius Strategy, the importance of a national sustainable development enabling environment was emphasised, especially the need for implementation to be driven and co-ordinated at the national level.

For the Caribbean SIDS, the Plan of Action for the Sustainable Development of the Americas, adopted by the governments participating in the Summit of the Americas on Sustainable

Development in 1996, explicitly states the need to integrate economic, social and environmental elements towards sustainable development. In 1999, the ministers of environment of the countries of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) requested the OECS Secretariat to develop a regional strategy as a framework for environmental management in the sub-region. One of the 21 principles contained in the St George's Declaration of Principles for Environmental Sustainability in the OECS, adopted in April 2001, states that all local, national and regional development policies and plans will be fully integrated to include environmental, social, cultural and economic factors which affect the small island systems of the region.⁷

In October 2005, the Pacific Island Forum Leaders met and adopted The Pacific Plan, a regional plan with a focus on stimulating and enhancing economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security for Pacific countries through regional integration. The Plan called for all member countries to develop and implement NSDS by the end of 2008, using appropriate cross-cutting and Pacific-relevant indicators.⁸

A sustainable development strategy is defined as a co-ordinated, participatory and iterative process of thoughts and actions to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives in a balanced and integrated manner at the national and local levels. The process encompasses situation analysis, formulation of policies and action plans, implementation, monitoring and regular review. It is a cyclical and interactive process of planning, participation and action in which the emphasis is on managing progress towards sustainability goals, rather than producing a 'plan' as an end product.⁹

There is no one approach or formula that fits all countries. Countries develop strategic approaches for the preparation, development and implementation of NSDS, according to their own individual needs, priorities and resources available. A NSDS does not have to be a new document – established frameworks such as a National Vision, National Agenda 21 or a Poverty Reduction Strategy can all provide a good basis for strategic action towards sustainable development. The particular label applied to a national sustainable development strategy is not important, as long as the common characteristics of the strategy are adhered to.

Why are NSDS important and how are they different from other strategies or plans? A NSDS is important because it is an integrative and comprehensive strategy. Sustainable development issues are rarely sectoral. They are often multidisciplinary in nature, and a NSDS is able to address complex dynamics for sustainable development issues that require an integrated analysis and solutions. NSDS are also important because the process is participatory – a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, participate in the design, formulation and implementation of the strategy.

A NSDS defines the long-term vision and foundation of values for the country and specifies the policy instruments, tools and processes that are necessary to implement the change process. A NSDS is not a goal in itself. Rather, the strategy should be a living document that will need continuous monitoring and evaluation.

The concept of sustainable development is not new in many SIDS. They have long been aware of their small size, limited resources, remoteness from global markets, and environmental and economic vulnerability. Even before the Earth Summit in 1992, with the adoption of Agenda 21 and the widespread international acceptance of the concept of sustainable development, many SIDS had begun to seriously look at their development options. The Conference on the Human Environment in the South Pacific, held in June 1982, decided to establish the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) to promote sustainable development in the Pacific region. St

Kitts and Nevis has considered sustainable development issues to be a government priority since 1987, with the passing of the National Conservation and Environmental Protection Act. Other countries, such as Papua New Guinea, took initiatives following the Earth Summit to streamline existing national programmes and policies in alignment with NSDS elements and priorities.

Since then, there has been considerable progress in many SIDS countries in terms of their pushing forward sustainable development strategies. However, countries are at different stages: Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Niue, Tonga and Tuvalu have all developed NSDS or have incorporated sustainable development principles into their national strategies and have begun implementing them. Trinidad and Tobago has launched its Vision 2020 Draft National Strategic Plan, a national strategy for 28 sectors under the overall umbrella of sustainable development. Barbados has developed its National Policy on Sustainable Development, and other Caribbean SIDS, including Belize, Haiti and St Kitts and Nevis have begun implementing their NSDS. Seychelles is implementing its Environmental Management Plan 2000–2010, which incorporates the principles of sustainable development and cuts across all sectors of society. A formal NSDS is under development, and preparatory activities such as multistakeholder consultations and national workshops have already taken place.

Other SIDS are currently reviewing, or have plans to review, existing national development plans or strategies with a view to incorporating principles of sustainable development and moving on to the implementation phase of NSDS. SIDS governments have proactively adopted or signed regional and international agreements that have committed them to pursue sustainable development objectives, including development and implementation of sustainable development strategies or policies. Despite progress made by many SIDS, challenges still remain in terms of fully integrating sustainable development priorities into national development planning and moving from strategy development to strategy implementation. Many SIDS's 'sustainable development strategies' focus on economic and social development, while neglecting the environmental aspects. Integration of the three pillars of sustainable development requires national planning processes to define economic, social and environmental objectives, revising decision-making systems to reflect and integrate environmental impacts, and ensuring horizontal coherence across sectoral policies.

Many SIDS countries, including Cook Islands, Fiji and Tonga, indicate that broad public participation in the development, formulation and implementation of national policies and strategies, including NSDS, have become standard practice in government initiatives. In these countries, extensive consultations at the local, regional and national levels are held with representatives from the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), including youth, women and church leaders. Their comments and feedback are reflected in revised plans and strategies, and are circulated widely among all stakeholders. In Tonga, electronic comments on the structure and content of their NSDS were solicited through a website.

For other islands, multistakeholder consultations are held, but on an ad hoc basis. For example, Nauru reports that consultations with broad participation of stakeholders are held, both at regional and national levels. However, such efforts are fragmented, with limited systematic feedback of public participation into national programmes and policies. Many countries cite the dispersity of island populations and limited financial resources as major challenges, which hinder the full participation of representatives from different groups in decision-making processes.

Although in general civil society is consulted in the development of national strategies among the many SIDS countries, few mechanisms are in place to encourage the participation of a wide range of stakeholders when governments formulate budgets. Many CSOs and NGOs lack the capacity, skills and experience to effectively engage in a constructive dialogue with governments in relation to their prioritising and allocating resources. Moreover, CSOs and NGOs are often discouraged

from becoming more involved in the budget process, because of the technical, abstract and closed nature of that process in many countries. However, by engaging CSOs in budget processes, they will be able to better monitor the progress of implementation of NSDS.

Another challenge for many SIDS countries is institutional capacity and effective institutional arrangements to implement sustainable development strategies and programmes. The JPOI states that an effective institutional framework for sustainable development at all levels is key to the full implementation of Agenda 21, the follow-up to outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and meeting emerging sustainable development challenges.¹⁰ The institutional aspect is often recognised as the fourth dimension of sustainable development. Sustainable development cannot be promoted and implemented by a single organisation, as the issues are multidisciplinary and impacts across organisations and sectors in a country.

Many countries, including Barbados, Belize, Fiji and Jamaica, have established institutional structures, such as national councils of sustainable development or commissions, to promote the formulation and implementation of NSDS. Many of these new institutions do not have the capacity to respond effectively to challenges posed by sustainable development, since they tend to be placed at the periphery of national development planning or their roles and responsibilities need to be reviewed and revised.

A common challenge cited by SIDS is the need for technical assistance and training in data collection, analysis and management, as well as development of appropriate indicators. Lack of data, the low quality of existing data and the difficulty faced by many countries in developing meaningful sets of indicators are barriers to the overall goal of achieving sustainable development.

The Mauritius Strategy calls upon states to develop appropriate national targets and indicators for sustainable development that can be incorporated into existing national data-collection and reporting systems.¹¹ MDG indicators and other general social and economic indicators are used by many SIDS countries to monitor and measure sustainable development efforts. However, as Papua New Guinea reports in its National Assessment Report, MDG indicators do not provide a critical yardstick to measure progress or useful learning tools from which to develop country-specific indicators for sustainable development. Monitoring progress towards sustainable development, as well as monitoring the implementation of NSDS with relevant, appropriate indicators is critical to ensure accountability, prioritisation, and to review and adjust the NSDS. Assessments play a central role in a NSDS, as part of the cyclical process of continuous improvement towards sustainable development.

For many countries, sustainable development is imperative rather than being a matter of choice. This is especially true for SIDS that have been directly impacted by current global climate change. Increases in storm surge, sea level rise, shoreline degradation and saltwater intrusion into wells – all consequences of climate change – having a devastating effect on the livelihoods and health of people on these small islands. At the 37th meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in October 2006, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the implementation of the Pacific Plan, including placing priority on mainstreaming climate change into their national sustainable development strategies. At the first ever high-level event on climate change convened by the UN Secretary-General in September 2007, participants, including more than 80 heads of state, expressed solidarity with the most vulnerable countries, in particular the SIDS, as they face the consequences of climate change. For many SIDS, the adverse impacts of climate change not only pose major obstacles to achieving sustainable development goals, but also threaten the very existence of some islands.

Sustainable development principles in SIDS are not new. However, a common challenge remains to address sustainable development issues over the long-term and to translate policies and strategies into programmes and initiatives that make a positive impact on a country's society and people. The implementation of a NSDS needs to be an integral part of government policies, but such strategies are not only the responsibility of governments. Sustainable development can only be achieved through individual and collective efforts by all responsible actors, including the private sector.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Birgitte Alvarez-Rivero of the Division for Sustainable Development, UNDESA, for her helpful comments and suggestions regarding this chapter.
2. Agenda 21, para. 8.7.
3. BPOA, Preamble 11.
4. Ibid.
5. Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, para. 24.
6. Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, Chapter XI, para. 162(b).
7. St George's Declaration of Principles for Environmental Sustainability in the OECS, Principle #2.
8. The Pacific Plan, Strategic Objective 5.1.
9. Guidance in Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy: Managing Sustainable Development in the New Millennium, p. 8.
10. JPOI, Ch. XI, para. 137.
11. Mauritius Strategy, Chap. XVI, para. 74(c).

