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The Development of National Sustainable Development Strategies in Small Island Developing States*

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Introduction

A national sustainable development strategy (NSDS) is 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 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.¹

There is no single approach or formula that fits all countries. Countries develop strategic approaches to the preparation, development and implementation of national sustainable development strategies according to their individual needs, priorities and resources. A national sustainable development strategy does not have to be a new document – an established framework such as a national vision, national agenda 21 or poverty reduction strategy can provide a good basis for strategic action towards sustainable development. The particular label is not significant in establishing a national sustainable development strategy: what matters is the approach used in its elaboration and implementation.

The significance of national sustainable development strategies lies in their integrative and comprehensive approach. Sustainable development issues are rarely sectoral and often require multi-disciplinary approaches. National sustainable development strategies address complex development dynamics that require integrated analysis and solutions. They are also participatory, with a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, participating in their design, formulation and implementation.

An 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 process of change. The strategy is not a goal in itself: rather, it should be a living document that needs continuous monitoring and evaluation.

*The author would like to thank Birgitte Alvarez-Rivero of the Division for Sustainable Development, UNDESA for her helpful comments and suggestions.

International frameworks

The first call for the elaboration of national sustainable development strategies was made at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. *Agenda 21*, the landmark document that came out of the conference, calls on countries to adopt an NSDS that

... 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 importance of sustainable development planning has been echoed throughout the follow-up process to the Earth Summit:

- The 1994 Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States recognised that small island states face special challenges in planning and implementing sustainable development because of their limited development options,³ and adopted the Barbados Programme of Action (BPoA) to address their particular concerns.
- The 1997 five-year review of *Agenda 21*⁴ 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 Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002, when countries were urged to take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and to start their implementation by 2005.⁵
- Finally, a major international meeting held in Mauritius in January 2005 called on the international community to support SIDS in developing and implementing national sustainable development strategies by 2005.

Regional frameworks

In October 2005, at a Pacific regional meeting held to follow up the Mauritius Strategy, the importance of a national sustainable development enabling environment was emphasised. The meeting highlighted the need for implementation to be driven and coordinated at national level. Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders 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 on all member countries to develop and implement NSDS by the end of 2008, using appropriate cross-cutting and Pacific-relevant indicators.⁶

Caribbean small states have established a regional co-ordinating mechanism (RCM) for sustainable development, in keeping with the mandate of the sixteenth intersessional meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community

(CARICOM), held in Paramaribo, Suriname on 16–17 February 2005. The mandate states:

... particular attention should be paid to the key issue of an agreed mechanism to co-ordinate the implementation of the sustainable development initiatives in the Region following the Mauritius Strategy, ensuring in the process that maximum benefits are derived from the Region's scarce human and financial resources and that duplication is avoided ...

The mechanism was set up by a Caribbean regional follow-up meeting, hosted by the Government of St Kitts and Nevis on 5–7 October 2005. Its function is to assist in the monitoring and evaluation of the Mauritius Strategy, and it takes the form of a network of governmental, intergovernmental and stakeholder organisations working to provide, *inter alia*, technical expertise, financial assistance and capacity-building opportunities. The mechanism is a key instrument for the design of regional policies for sustainable development and facilitates the CARICOM Secretariat's mandate to co-ordinate policy on sustainable development. It is hosted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC).

The successful implementation of this regional initiative requires concerted efforts and sustained commitment from member governments, and the involvement of sub-regional intergovernmental organisations and regional/international agencies) that are prepared to pool their resources to implement the SIDS Programme of Action and the Mauritius Strategy. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have pledged their support for the Caribbean initiative specifically as it relates to the identification of UNECLAC as the Secretariat for the co-ordination of implementation of the the Programme of Action and the Mauritius Strategy in the sub-region.⁷

Planning for sustainable development

In many SIDS the concept of sustainable development is not new. 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 and the widespread international acceptance of the concept of sustainable development, many small states were already looking seriously 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 governmental priority since 1987, when it passed the National Conservation and Environmental Protection Act. Other countries, for example Papua New Guinea, took initiatives after the Earth Summit to streamline existing national programmes and policies in alignment with NSDS priorities.

Since then, many SIDS have attempted to implement sustainable development strategies, although countries are at different stages. Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, Nauru,

Niue, Tonga and Tuvalu all have developed NSDS or incorporated sustainable development principles into their national strategies and begun to implement 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 a national policy on sustainable development and other Caribbean SIDS, including Belize, Haiti, and St Kitts and Nevis, have begun implementing NSDS. Seychelles is implementing its Environmental Management Plan 2000–2010, which incorporates the principles of sustainable development and cuts across all sectors. A formal NSDS is under development and preparatory activities such as multi-stakeholder consultations and national workshops have already taken place.

Other SIDS are currently reviewing, or have plans to review, national development plans or strategies with a view to incorporating principles of sustainable development and moving on to the implementation phase of NSDS. Governments have proactively adopted or signed regional and international agreements committing themselves to pursue sustainable development objectives, including the development and implementation of sustainable development policies. Despite the progress that has already been made, challenges still remain in fully integrating sustainable development priorities into national development planning and moving from strategy development to strategy implementation. Many SIDS sustainable development strategies focus on economic and social development, and neglect the environment. Integration of the three pillars of sustainable development requires national planning processes to define economic, social and environmental objectives, revise decision-making systems to reflect and integrate environmental impacts, and ensure horizontal coherence across sectoral policies.

Consultation and participation

Many SIDS, including Cook Islands, Fiji Islands 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 local, regional and national level are held with representatives of 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 circulated widely among all stakeholders. In Tonga, electronic comments on the structure and content of the country's NSDS were solicited through a website.

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

Although in general civil society is consulted in the development of national strategies in many SIDS, few mechanisms are in place to encourage the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in the resource allocation process through the annual budget formulation. Many CSOs and NGOs lack the capacity, skills and experience to engage effectively in a constructive dialogue with the government in relation to prioritising and allocating resources. In addition, in many countries CSOs and NGOs are discouraged from becoming more involved in the budget process because of its technical, abstract and closed nature. By engaging CSOs in the budget process, governments will be better able to monitor the implementation of NSDS.

Institutional challenges

Another challenge for many SIDS is institutional capacity and putting in place effective institutional arrangements to implement sustainable development strategies and programmes. The Johannesburg Programme of Implementation states that an effective institutional framework for sustainable development at all levels is key to the full implementation of *Agenda 21* and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and to meeting emerging sustainable development challenges.⁸ The institutional aspect is often recognised as the fourth dimension of sustainable development. Development cannot be promoted and implemented by a single organisation, as the issues are multi-disciplinary and impact across organisations and sectors.

Many countries, for example Barbados, Belize, Fiji Islands 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 do not have the capacity to respond effectively to challenges, because they are placed at the periphery of national development planning or because their roles and responsibilities need to be revised.

Data and indicators

Monitoring progress towards sustainable development and the implementation of NSDS, using appropriate indicators, is critical in ensuring accountability, aiding prioritisation, and reviewing and adjusting strategies. But SIDS commonly cite the need for assistance and training in data collection, analysis and management, and in the development of appropriate indicators. Lack of data, the low quality of existing data and difficulties in developing a meaningful set of indicators are all barriers to the overall goal of achieving sustainable development.

Partly in response to this challenge, the 1995 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.⁹ Millennium Development Goal (MDG) indicators and other general social and economic indicators are used by many SIDS 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 for measuring progress or useful learning tools from which to develop country-specific indicators. It remains a challenge to monitor and evaluate the complex web of social, economic and environmental developmental interactions that sustainable development encompasses.

Conclusion

For many countries, sustainable development is not a matter of choice: it is imperative. This is especially true for SIDS that are directly affected by climate change. Increases in storm surge, rising sea levels, the degradation of shorelines and the intrusion of salt water into wells – all consequences of climate change – will adversely affect the livelihoods and health of people living on small islands. At the 37th meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in October 2006, government 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, who included more than 80 heads of state, expressed solidarity with the countries, in particular SIDS, that were most vulnerable to its consequences. For many SIDS, the adverse impact of climate change not only poses a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development, but threatens their very existence.

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 societies and peoples. The implementation of NSDS needs to be an integral part of government policies, but it is not only up to governments. Sustainable development can only be achieved through the individual and collective efforts of all responsible actors, including the private sector.

Notes

- 1 *Guidance in Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy: Managing Sustainable Development in the New Millennium*, UN Department for Social and Economic Affairs, New York, 2006, p. 8.
- 2 *Agenda 21*, UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, New York, 1992, para. 8.7.
- 3 Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Barbados Programme of Action), Preamble 11. Bridgetown, Barbados, 25 April–6 May 1994. UN General Assembly, A/CONF.167/9.
- 4 Programme for the Further Implementation of *Agenda 21*, UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, New York, 1997, para. 24.
- 5 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, Chapter XI, para. 162 (b).
- 6 Pacific Plan, Strategic Objective 5.1.
- 7 CARICOM Secretariat Report, February 2008.
- 8 JPOI, Chapter XI, para. 137.
- 9 Mauritius Strategy, Chapter XVI, para. 74 (c).