

Building Urban Resilience in Small Island Cities, Towns & Provinces

ICLEI Briefing Sheet - Small Island Developing States

The towns and cities of small island and archipelago-based nations are often overlooked by international urban resilience policies and programs due to the small populations involved. However, these cities and towns are some of the most vulnerable, diverse, and rapidly growing urban centres anywhere in the world, acting as crucial gateways to sustainable development for the citizens of small island developing states.

Key messages

- The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) country group (Table1) was formed through the United Nations 1992 Earth Summit process, comprising 52 nations across 3 regions: the Pacific, the Caribbean, and 'AIMS' (the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea). SIDS were identified by the UN as a '[special case](#)' due to their limited resource development potential, remoteness, disaster vulnerability and dependence on international networks for trade, capital and mobility.
- 42 SIDS have a Gross Domestic Product of less than [\\$10,000 USD](#) per capita (Singapore, Bahrain, Seychelles and 7 Caribbean states exceed this threshold). Of these, three are low-lying continental nations, while a further two have land areas greater than [50,000 km²](#). Nine SIDS are classified as [Least Developed Countries](#) (LDCs), with on average [8%](#) of SIDS inhabitants living on land less than 5 metres above sea level.
- Most SIDS are characterized by one or two major urban centres, which are small by global standards, but significant nationally as they house a growing share – and on average [a majority](#) – of their citizens. Though small, these cities and towns face nearly all urbanization challenges encountered by larger cities.
- The resilience of these cities is critical to each SIDS national ability to bounce back from, and adapt to, the range of natural disasters that they face, as well as facilitate sustainable development initiatives.
- Efforts to enhance urban resilience and sustainable development in these countries present both unique requirements and opportunities. Their small size, isolation, and [disproportionately high exposure to climate-related and natural disasters](#) are further complicated by the rural – and often traditionally-based – livelihoods of these countries' non-urban inhabitants. Conversely the social capital, access to natural resources and interconnectivity between these small nations is a key source of strength that is often under-estimated and under-exploited in urban processes and planning.
- ICLEI is already [actively supporting a number of SIDS cities](#), within partnerships through the ICLEI network linked to other related initiatives and organization such as UN-Habitat, UNISDR, the Compact of Mayors and the Sustainable Development Goals.

What makes SIDS and their cities a 'special case'?

In 2012 the UN General Assembly designated 2014 the 'International Year of Small Island Developing States' in recognition of the Third International Conference on SIDS in Apia, Samoa. Days before the Assembly voted on the resolution Samoa was hit by Tropical Cyclone Evan, which caused over [USD\\$204 million](#) of damage, equivalent to 28% of the country's GDP. The capital's inadequate sanitation infrastructure, weak building codes and depleted mangroves all worsened the effects of extensive urban flooding and wind damage to the city, home to a [fifth](#) of Samoa's population. Subsequent disaster relief efforts centred upon the city, with half of the emergency shelters required for the [6000](#) displaced Samoan citizens located there. Apia's main power station and water supply were severely damaged by flooding and strong winds, resulting in utilities and services being shut down for weeks following the disaster, causing disruption across the country.

Samoa's experience is illustrative of the role that cities and townships play in these island countries, as well as the challenges that they face in striving for sustainable development. Two of the Pacific SIDS' neighbours experienced similar disaster events in 2015 and 2016; [TC Pam](#) in Vanuatu, and [TC Winston](#) in Fiji. In the Caribbean, recovery from the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti, which killed over 100,000 of the capital Port-au-Prince's citizens was still ongoing during the third SIDS Conference, where an estimated [70% of homes](#) were destroyed or damaged. In each case, economic development was set back significantly; Vanuatu having been delayed from graduating out of LDC status twice ([most recently](#) following the impact of Cyclone Pam), despite [meeting Middle Income Country classification requirements](#).

Even though an average of more than half of their populations reside in urban environments, and a third of all SIDS are dependent on a single primary city, urban resilience and sustainable urban development in SIDS have largely been overlooked. Emphasis has instead been placed on either national level initiatives, or local, non-urban settings. As a result, institutional capacity in urban planning and governance is often weak, with infrastructure 'deficits' being present in many cities, compounding issues related to urban growth and disaster recovery.

As noted by UN-Habitat in their seminal report on [Urbanization and Small Island Developing States](#), the narrow resource base that characterizes SIDS, coupled with high energy and transport costs (both internally and to/from export and import markets), limits viable pathways for conventional modes of development. Food, land and water scarcity and energy poverty are heightening insecurity in the face of growing local populations. Global pressures such as resource depletion, climate change and the accumulation of marine pollution disproportionately affect SIDS, which bear minimal responsibility for – and have limited capacity to reduce – their causes.

However, locally the opportunities for alternative development pathways such as sustainable tourism that leverages biodiversity and the marine economy, and renewable energy development (which has co-benefits of increasing energy resilience and reducing long term energy and transport costs) are emerging. Ecosystem-based adaptation and traditional knowledge-based disaster risk management techniques are also potentially high value pathways in SIDS.

Photo 1: In April 2014 Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, experienced its heaviest rainfall event on record. The Mataniko River, which runs through the centre of the city, flooded severely.



Photo: Alexei Trundle

Who else is working with SIDS?

As set out in SIDS Action Platform, almost [300 partnerships](#) were registered at the Third International Conference on SIDS, as part of a global [call for action](#), with a formal General Assembly Resolution setting out a partnership framework for the sustainable development of SIDS.

All partners were obliged to report on their contributions to the SAMOA pathway objectives by 1 July 2016 in order to be reported through the [Platform](#) (please see Table 2).

Table 1: Small Island Developing States (by region)

The Pacific Region	American Samoa, Cook Islands, Cwth. Northern Marianas, Fed. States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu
The Caribbean Region	Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Netherlands Antilles/Curacao, Puerto Rico, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, U.S. Virgin Islands
The AIMS Region	Bahrain, Cape Verde, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Mauritius, Sao Tome & Principe, Seychelles, Singapore

Photo 2: Pictured below is damage to make-shift housing which occurred when the Mataniko River flooded. The flooding killed 22 people, destroyed 675 homes, damaged critical infrastructure and cut off supply chains.



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ICLEI & SIDS

"Through its Resilient Cities agenda, ICLEI mobilizes, guides and supports its members to assess risks, define resilience measures and embed such strategies into local development plans and processes" (ICLEI Seoul Plan 2015–2021). ICLEI has been working in Asia, the Pacific and elsewhere on resilience-building initiatives over the last eight years, through partners such as The Rockefeller Foundation, UNISDR, GIZ, European Union and UN-Habitat. Recently, ICLEI Oceania has developed a Pacific Islands Climate Resilience approach, incorporating Disaster Risk Reduction, Low Emissions Development and Climate Resilience Building into island development planning.

ICLEI has now established a Community, or voluntary grouping, of interested towns and provinces of small island states for information exchange and collaboration. This Briefing Paper is the first step towards the development of a comprehensive ICLEI Small Islands Strategy.

There is a clear need to strengthen city-level institutional and technical capacity in SIDS. ICLEI is ideally placed to leverage existing city-to-city networks, technical assistance, and institutional partnerships in order to strengthen urban resilience in these small island states, with a focus on minimizing urban risks associated with natural hazard related shocks and stressors.

Table 2: SIDS and their cities (important international frameworks)

SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway (2014):	Builds on the SIDS Barbados Programme of Action (1992) & the Mauritius Strategy (2005). Emphasizes the need to build resilience and sustainable development through a rights based approach leveraging SIDS citizens, and the rich ecosystems of these nations.
The Paris Climate Agreement (2015):	Agreement to limit warming to 2°C with an aspirational limit of 1.5°C. Capacity building, support and targeted financing of SIDS.
The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015):	Builds on the Millennium Development goals for eradicating poverty within planetary bounds and enabling universal human rights. Notes the vulnerability of SIDS, and their uneven progress towards the MDGs, and proposes specific resourcing through ODA, training & education.
The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030)	Acknowledges the disproportionate impact of natural disasters on SIDS, and proposes specialist support through the SAMOA Pathway, mainstreaming DRR and multilateral relationship-building.
Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy (2016):	A city-driven commitment to pro-active climate change mitigation and adaptation, building on the UN Compact of Mayors and the EU Covenant of Mayors.
The New Urban Agenda (2016)	Finalized at Habitat III, Quito, October 2016. The Quito Implementation Plan, specific voluntary commitments by various partners intended to contribute to the implementation of the outcomes New Urban Agenda. emphasizes the support of infrastructure in SIDS cities in light of their unique urban processes and settings.

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Further Reading

- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2014). [Emerging Issues for Small Island Developing States – Results of the UNEP Foresight Process](#). Nairobi, Kenya.
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (2007) [Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change in Small Island Developing States](#). New York, United States.
- United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) (2015). [Urbanization and Climate Change in Small Island Developing States](#). Nairobi, Kenya.

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