Key messages

In March 2024, the first ever SIDS Future Forum brought together over 300 participants to debate cutting-edge policy-focused research on Small Island Developing States.

Discussions mirrored priorities in the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS): resilient economies; safe, healthy and prosperous societies; a secure future; environmental protection and planetary sustainability; and the means needed to achieve resilient prosperity.

Participants emphasised the need for: greater interregional collaboration and knowledge sharing; institutional strengthening and new supportive governance mechanisms; enhanced voice, accountability and transparency; novel methods of financing resilient prosperity; and improved data availability and usability.

To support implementation of the ABAS, the authors propose a ‘new knowledge architecture’ comprising institutionalisation of the SIDS Future Forum as a biennial event to support knowledge transfer, a revitalised university network, and a ‘Global Stocktake for SIDS’ to enable real-time monitoring of the ABAS.
The authors would like to thank Simona Marinescu and everyone who participated in the SIDS Future Forum on 4 and 5 March 2024 for their valuable insights on the future of Small Island Developing States and how to advance resilient prosperity. We would particularly like to acknowledge the generous support of the UK Government in funding the Forum under the Small Island Developing States Capacity and Resilience Programme (SIDAR), as well as that of colleagues from the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), Island Innovation and the Government of Antigua and Barbuda in collaborating with us to conceive, design and successfully execute an event that we hope will become a regular feature of the SIDS calendar.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Lessons from the past, imperatives for the future</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Overview of thematic sessions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Resilient economies</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Safe, healthy and prosperous societies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 A secure future</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Environmental protection and planetary sustainability</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 How do SIDS get there?</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Keynote address</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Major discussion points</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Greater interregional SIDS–SIDS knowledge-sharing</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Institutional strengthening and collaborative governance mechanisms</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Enhanced voice, accountability and transparency</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Novel methods to increase resources to SIDS and relieve fiscal constraints</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Improving data availability and usability</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 A new knowledge architecture for SIDS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Institutionalising the SIDS Future Forum</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Revitalising the SIDS university consortium</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 A major independent stocktake for SIDS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABAS</td>
<td>Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>Artificial intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIS</td>
<td>Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOSIS</td>
<td>Alliance of Small Island States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPOA</td>
<td>Barbados Programme of Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFI</td>
<td>International Financial Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Least Developed Countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDB</td>
<td>Multilateral Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MVI</td>
<td>Multidimensional Vulnerability Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCA</td>
<td>Natural capital accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD DAC</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESI</td>
<td>Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAMOA</td>
<td>SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIDS</td>
<td>Small Island Developing States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIDS4</td>
<td>Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCSIS</td>
<td>University Consortium of Small Island States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDESA</td>
<td>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN-OHRLLS</td>
<td>United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNOPS</td>
<td>United Nations Office for Project Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNU-WIDER</td>
<td>United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘The clock had ticked relentlessly for Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Faced with mounting challenges – climate change, crippling debt, and a shrinking resource base – they urgently craved a clear path forward, a roadmap for the next decade that was achievable, ambitious, and actionable. This critical need birthed the SIDS Future Forum 2024, a platform where your voice held immense power.’

The first ever SIDS Future Forum took place in New York over two days, 4 and 5 March 2024. Day 1 welcomed approximately 80 high-level attendees representing SIDS missions, United Nations (UN) agencies, donors and other development partners. In addition, around 250 participants joined virtually from capital cities of SIDS and regional agencies. Day 2, an invite-only online civil society dialogue, welcomed 22 practitioners working on SIDS issues, including youth development, environmental protection, food systems, coastal protection, climate adaptation and gender equality. Policy-makers, researchers and practitioners engaged in productive debate, stimulated by the presentation of original policy papers on a range of issues linked to the four substantive themes of the Fourth International Conference on SIDS (‘SIDS4’) summit communiqué – (i) resilient economies; (ii) safe, healthy and prosperous societies; (iii) a secure future; (iv) environmental protection and planetary sustainability – plus a further session on (v) means of implementation.

This report summarises the immediate discussions and outcomes of the Forum, before proposing a dynamic long-term agenda – involving evidence-gathering, knowledge-building and lesson-sharing – to support ongoing implementation of the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS). Such a work programme is vital, as SIDS4 – which is held on 27–30 May 2024 in St John’s, Antigua and Barbuda – represents a beginning rather than an endpoint. The ABAS is a vessel that, once launched, can be expanded over time through increased ambition, not one that is waiting only to be filled to (and therefore potentially be limited by) its capacity as currently conceived.

The danger with any negotiated political process that culminates in a major decennial conference is that the cathartic and celebratory experience of the summit itself – when the world’s attention is briefly concentrated on it – quickly gives way to other priorities. The SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway, like many other contemporary international agreements, has suffered from implementation deficits as diplomatic and technical capacity constraints have come up against a succession of shocks and crises.

For the ABAS to chart a different path, it needs a broader architecture of knowledge and advocacy that is responsive to rapidly changing global dynamics and to the cutting-edge ideas and narratives around these events.
Key non-governmental partners – including the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) – have a unique responsibility for building the necessary evidence base to contribute to policy-making and advocacy, and to monitor and evaluate progress on implementation even when the international limelight shifts elsewhere after SIDS4. RESI’s dynamic, responsive and engaged work on behalf of stakeholders over the turbulent decade ahead will assist in achieving the ambitious goals in the ABAS.

This report offers three mutually reinforcing recommendations for the stakeholder community to consider:

1. **Institutionalisation of the SIDS Future Forum.** The first SIDS Future Forum was a resounding success. The event has a critical boundary role to play in connecting communities of expertise (including outside traditional knowledge-generating institutions), bringing fresh analytical insights and supporting dynamic implementation of the ABAS. It should therefore be institutionalised as a biennial conference, complementary to the UN SIDS process and supporting activities of the new Centre of Excellence for SIDS.

2. **A revitalised university network for SIDS.** The University Consortium of Small Island States (UCSIS) needs to be reactivated to establish a knowledge- and capacity-building agenda for the ABAS. It should focus on: translating knowledge into action, providing capacity-building opportunities for SIDS, and supporting the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and others to collectively advocate for SIDS on sustainable development. RESI can play a critical coordination role within the UCSIS, bridging different communities of knowledge and expertise to foster implementation of the ABAS.

3. **A ‘State of SIDS’ independent global stocktake.** Alongside the SIDS Future Forum and embedded within the proposed new knowledge architecture, there is a need for an independent, biennial stocktake to consolidate research and evidence on SIDS sustainable development, create new knowledge products, and complement the monitoring and evaluation framework of the ABAS 2024–2034 with an independent assessment, contributing the evidence needed for SIDS’ international advocacy in emergent policy areas.
1 Introduction

RESI hosted the first ever SIDS Future Forum on 4–5 March 2024 in New York, in partnership with UN-OHRLLS, UNDESA, AOSIS and Island Innovation. The event was supported by the UK Government and by the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, the host of the SIDS4 summit and custodian of the 10-year programme of action, the ABAS. The first day – chaired by Dr Emily Wilkinson, Principal Research Fellow at global affairs think tank ODI, and Director of RESI – saw fruitful discussions among policy-makers from SIDS missions in New York, UN agencies and other international organisations, and a selected group of expert researchers. Around 80 diplomats and other officials attended in person, and approximately 250 participated online from capitals and regional organisations.

The second day – chaired by James Ellmoor, CEO of Island Innovation – comprised two civil society dialogues hosted at the UN-OHRLLS office. These involved intensive discussions between the subject matter experts who had produced policy research papers for the Forum, RESI Co-Directors, and 22 civil society representatives from the Americas and the Asia Pacific.

The SIDS Future Forum was a cornerstone of the SIDS4 planning process, planned strategically between two Preparatory Committee meetings (held in January and April 2024), and before finalisation of the outcome document, aimed at supporting SIDS negotiators and development partners in three ways:

- **Convening dialogue** between expert researchers and policy-makers. A crucial element of RESI's raison d'être is to bring these sometimes-disconnected communities together, facilitating networking and allowing academics and other analysts to test their ideas against ‘real-world’ policy constraints, while informing policy-makers and diplomats of the latest thinking in accessible, digestible ways. RESI is well positioned to do this as an independent think tank and global advisory network of experts from the academic, civil society, public and private sectors, which operates across all of the regions where SIDS are located.
• **Bridging evidence and knowledge gaps.**
  SIDS stakeholders acknowledge that there is limited data available to support the ABAS. However, this is not always because it does not exist. Rather, it is precisely because expertise about SIDS, and the underlying research, is fragmented globally, distributed across academic disciplines and scattered among universities, international organisations, think tanks and civil society organisations. The key challenge is to consolidate this information, render it useful, bring it up to date and package it in ways that make sense to policymakers – and, on that basis, develop a better understanding of what is missing.

• **Shaping debate.** The event provided a non-official environment – quite literally a ‘forum’ in the widest possible sense – where actors involved in the SIDS4 process could openly discuss ideas and proposals in ways that were neither fully subject to formal diplomatic constraints nor to Chatham House rules. This led to a very amicable, candid and exploratory set of conversations that, because they did not carry the weight of commitment, were consequential in their intrinsic value. With the support of RESI Co-Directors as chairs, and SIDS diplomats as respondents, SIDS and their partners were able to engage in debate and look ahead towards thinking about implementation of the next 10-year programme of action for SIDS.

The agenda stemmed from – and built on – discussions during the four regional and interregional SIDS4 preparatory meetings that took place in mid-2023, at which RESI Co-Directors and Affiliates spoke in plenary and contributed to the conversations that shaped the zero draft of the summit communiqué (United Nations, 2024a). The RESI policy brief A Global Bargain for Resilient Prosperity in SIDS (Bishop et al., 2023), published to coincide with the interregional meeting in Cabo Verde in August 2023, helped to guide some of those conversations (see also Lindsay et al., 2023). It also advanced the notion of ‘resilient prosperity’ which had been circulating informally among stakeholders and has since come to formally underpin the process.

Research papers were commissioned in November 2023 and selected on the basis of quality, regional representation from across SIDS and, crucially, alignment with the different themes in the zero draft. From 25 proposals, which were rigorously reviewed and competitively shortlisted, 11 were selected.

The opening session of the Future Forum on 4 March 2024 featured a series of high-level interventions. Ambassador Walton Webson of Antigua and Barbuda noted his delight at the convening of the Future Forum, which, he suggested, represented ‘a forerunner and complement to the SIDS4 conference’, in turn helping ‘to chart the course towards resilient prosperity’. The UNDESA Under-Secretary-General for Economic Affairs, Li Junhua, commended RESI and ODI ‘for their consistent leadership in delivering research and evidence that has informed the policy-making process by and for SIDS’, further outlining how ‘the Forum presents

---

1 The final version of the summit communiqué was published after the Future Forum in early April 2024 under the title Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States: The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) – a renewed declaration for resilient prosperity (United Nations, 2024b).

2 Initial findings from the papers were presented at an ODI-RESI side event held during the First Session of the SIDS4 Preparatory Committee in New York on 22 January 2024.
an opportunity for us to engage with the latest research and information’ to generate ‘creative solutions’ and ‘inform negotiating positions’ while ‘pooling our collective wisdom to devise strategies and sustainable solutions to the threats and challenges that SIDS face’. The Chief of Policy Coordination, Development, Monitoring and Reporting Services at UN-OHRLLS, Sandagdorj Erdenebileg, described the Forum as ‘a pivotal moment in advance of SIDS4’.

Finally, the UK Special Envoy for SIDS, Rebecca Fabrizi, noted that ‘SIDS do not always fall neatly into the models of development that we use, and there is always a risk that they are left out of discussions and their needs are not met’. She reiterated the UK’s commitment to supporting SIDS advocacy in several areas: supporting the OECD-DAC/AOSIS taskforce, incorporating vulnerability criteria in aid allocations in a more transparent way, and reforming multilateral institutions to improve access to funding while helping SIDS to absorb and manage development and climate finance.

The commitment of these partners was critical to the success of the SIDS Future Forum. This is particularly so in the case of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda. As Dr Simona Marinescu of UNOPS noted, Antigua and Barbuda is the first host of the UN SIDS process to have systematically sought to infuse the development of the new agenda with non-governmental stakeholder expertise. This bodes well for developing the evidence base required support the SIDS Centre of Excellence and implementation of the SIDS4 agenda itself. This is the key theme to which we return in section five of this report.
2 Lessons from the past, imperatives for the future

After the opening addresses, the Forum looked back at the summits preceding SIDS4 and then forward beyond it. Reflecting on the past, Ambassador Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Dr Pa’olelei Luteru, Permanent Representative of Samoa to the UN and current Chair of AOSIS, focused on three key elements:

- He noted that the first international conference held in Barbados in 1994 had come in the wake of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. The ‘Earth Summit’, as it is better known, acknowledged for the first time the ‘special case’ of SIDS in terms of environment and development, and recommended that SIDS should have their own dedicated conference.
- He indicated that, in the three decades since the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA), SIDS have achieved significant successes, but some challenges are worsening, and one – climate change – is both ‘ever present’ and intensifying.
- He emphasised some crucial lessons emerging from earlier processes. One is that ‘we should not engage in a sectorial listing of challenges to be met as we did with the SAMOA Pathway’, as the process needs to be ‘streamlined and action-oriented’. Rather, ‘a few key optimal areas [can be selected] that can transform SIDS economies and societies to meet current and future demands’. The other lesson is that monitoring of the SAMOA Pathway outcomes ‘came too late’, and this cannot happen again: ‘a credible and scientific approach to map, measure and meet the priorities that we lay out’ is required, otherwise ‘future action becomes unsustainable’.

RESI Co-Directors Dr Courtney Lindsay and Dr Matthew Bishop then reflected on where the SIDS4 process fits into wider historical and political contexts. They discussed three broad themes:

- They began by noting some recurring themes in those earlier programmes of action: the BPOA (emerging from SIDS1 in 1994), the Mauritius Strategy (SIDS2 in 2005) and the SAMOA Pathway (SIDS3 in 2014). This is because the challenges facing small islands are perennial ones that defy easy resolution precisely because they derive from inherent vulnerabilities. However,
those frameworks have also widened dramatically over time to take on greater numbers of components and associated targets. Echoing Ambassador Luteru’s analysis – and, indeed, previous RESI work on the subject – the SIDS4 agenda evidently needs to be ‘radical in ambition, but focused in extent’ (Bishop et al., 2023: 1).

They then reflected on context: previous SIDS conferences, and their 10-year programmes of action, each played out within distinct – and progressively less auspicious – global conditions. Mauritius was defined not by the Earth Summit and a period of economic expansion, but by the global financial crisis and its aftermath. Given that the SAMOA Pathway was bookended by this shock at one end and the COVID-19 pandemic at the other, it is remarkable that it achieved as much as it did during a period of significant global turbulence.

Consequently, the decade-long agenda to which SIDS4 gives rise will itself play out in a distinctive international context. We cannot predict the future, but we already have a sense of its contours. It will be an era of enduring global instability, defined by the continuing reverberations of the pandemic and a decade of global economic transformation, resurgent geopolitical conflict (including war in Europe and the Middle East) and accelerating climate change, as well as other shifts not yet visible (Bishop et al., forthcoming). This underscores why the ABAS will need to be radically ambitious, while at the same time targeted and focused with strong monitoring and implementation mechanisms, if it is to avoid the difficulties faced by its predecessors.

Looking ahead, Tumasie Blair, Deputy Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda to the UN, reiterated the value of the Future Forum, noting that ‘we need more opportunities to bring new ideas to the forefront’. He suggested that it would have been even more valuable had it happened before the regional preparatory meetings in mid-2023. His intervention centred around the idea that SIDS require nothing less than a ‘Marshall Plan’ of their own – a mobilisation of resources on a scale that is fully reflective of the challenges faced over the next decade. This would include:

- a serious scale-up of climate and environment financing
- a dedicated SIDS development financing mechanism, with credit facilities and loan guarantees to facilitate investment
- total debt cancellation.

This unquestionably represents an ambitious vision. But, as Blair noted, it would cost less than the United States presently spends on space exploration, and, if this level of resource is not mobilised, some SIDS might not even exist as viable states by the end of the ABAS in 2034.

Margot St John-Sebastian, Deputy Lead Negotiator at AOSIS and Senior Adviser on Sustainable Development at the Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Maldives to the UN, rounded off the session with a set of insights into what SIDS want to see in the 2024–2034 agenda. She reflected on the content of the zero draft communiqué and the process by which it was developed. Negotiators were keen to avoid a laundry list of challenges to be addressed over the 10-year period; instead, they wanted to create a plan whereby addressing certain key strategic challenges will have positive spillovers and trickle-down effects on other issues. She highlighted that a successful ABAS would require SIDS to have better access to finance; increased use of science, technology, innovation and digitalisation; strengthened data collection; strong partnerships; and increased productivity. Critical, too, is a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for SIDS, early planning for a mid-term review, and a more effective UN that caters to their unique challenges.
3 Overview of thematic sessions

Experts were commissioned to prepare original, thoughtful, forward-looking papers replete with penetrating analysis of the key policy problems facing SIDS. They were asked to offer novel and provocative insights to stimulate conversation at the Forum that could be carried forward to and beyond SIDS4. These were to be aligned with the challenges and themes identified in the zero draft summit communiqué. They were also invited to make use of case studies to demonstrate where progress has been made in overcoming obstacles, and where policy solutions under each of the themes have been effective in particular islands or contexts.

A brief synopsis of the papers and the discussions that took place in response to the author presentations is outlined below.3

3.1 Resilient economies

How can SIDS improve the investment climate, diversify sustainably into new sectors, increase productive capacity and augment their fiscal space?

This session, chaired by Dr Courtney Lindsay with Ambassador Odo Tevi of Vanuatu as a discussant, addressed issues of diversification and sources of economic growth. Dr Preeya Mohan (University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago) examined how SIDS might leverage opportunities in the ‘blue and green’ economy to facilitate economic diversification. Gail Hurley (Independent Finance Expert/ODI-RESI) asked how SIDS might ‘break the cycle of debt’ to increase fiscal space. Dr Dan Hamnett (University of Sheffield, UK) looked at the question of sovereignty sales, exploring how ‘citizenship by investment’ and ‘residency by investment’ schemes might be placed on a more sustainable footing as they encounter intensified metropolitan surveillance.

Mohan’s study (Mohan, 2024) drills into the ability of SIDS to leverage technologies to build climate-resilient sectors. It outlines use cases of technology in building resilience, such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the Seychelles to monitor the health of coral reefs. It confirms a lack of capacity-building, a shortage of data on critical areas of resource availability and utilisation, and limited technology transfer, which inhibits similar efforts from being scaled and adopted across SIDS. These issues, she notes, can be solved through the proposed SIDS–SIDS Green-Blue Economy Knowledge Transfer Hub, as well as the SIDS Centre of Excellence Data Hub. Her work further extracted key case studies highlighting examples of use of innovative financial instruments to build climate resilience, such as the blue carbon market in Barbados.

Hurley’s research (Hurley et al., 2024) examines the ongoing issue of high levels of public indebtedness. This draws on a broader RESI research project funded by the Government of New Zealand and Open Society Foundations, ‘Breaking the Cycle of Debt in SIDS’, which has compared debt trajectories in six different countries. The case studies and overarching report will be published prior to SIDS4. A key finding is that external environmental shocks –
not profligate spending – are a primary cause of debt distress in SIDS. Hurley outlined some of the successes and difficulties experienced by SIDS in achieving debt sustainability. She made seven key recommendations for addressing the issue, including the need to adopt the multidimensional vulnerability index (MVI) for allocating concessional finance (see also Wilkinson and Panwar, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2023).

Hammett’s project (Hammett et al., 2024) spoke to the challenge of using sovereignty sales – the sale by SIDS of residency rights and citizenship in return for economic investments or donations to national development funds – as a revenue stream in a context of increasing consternation (and even condemnation) from local and international players concerned about this niche growth strategy. He made a series of recommendations for how SIDS can most effectively respond to intensified external surveillance and use residency by investment or citizenship by investment schemes to facilitate economic diversification without surrendering political legitimacy, international standing or national autonomy.

The term ‘sovereignty sales’ itself also generated intense debate, as it inadvertently points to states giving away their national assets.

This session fostered fruitful discussion, particularly around debt and whether SIDS actually face a liquidity crisis, in the first instance, rather than a debt crisis. Ambassador Tevi focused his remarks on implementation of the recommendations in the papers. He noted that, since the African Union is now a full member of the G20, perhaps SIDS should push for representation too; this is a long-standing debate in the academic literature on global governance (see Cooper, 2014; Payne, 2010; Bishop and Payne, 2021). Members of the audience also made the case for more research into how AI and technology can help diversification, the need for new resilience-building strategies for SIDS, and how the concept of sovereignty sales might be refined and reframed.

### 3.2 Safe, healthy and prosperous societies

*How can SIDS generate better health outcomes, improve the quality of public institutions, achieve gender equality, empower youth and leave nobody behind?*

This session was chaired by Dr Matthew Bishop, with Ambassador Tania Romualdo of Cabo Verde as respondent. Dr Sarah Peck (Northumbria University, UK) outlined the importance of expanding civic space in SIDS to nurture greater inclusion, equity and empowerment.

Dr José Maria Gomes Lopes (Higher Institute of Economic and Business Sciences, Cabo Verde) discussed how institutional strengthening at all levels of governance can generate substantial spillovers in terms of building social capital for development.

Peck’s paper focuses on the multiple threats to civil society engagement in SIDS, particularly

---

4 RESI explores both the MVI and debt in two separate episodes of the RESI podcast Small Islands, Big Picture: https://odi.org/en/insights/small-islands-big-picture-episode-2-un-multidimensional-vulnerability-index/ and https://odi.org/en/insights/small-islands-big-picture-episode-5-high-debt-burdens/

5 In a recent episode of the podcast Small Islands, Big Picture focusing on the issue of residency and citizenship by investment schemes, Hammett discussed this work in greater detail: https://odi.org/en/insights/small-islands-big-picture-episode-8-citizenship-schemes/
deterioration of the civic landscape and limitations to financial and social resources (Peck and Hammett, 2024). She assesses some current approaches to strengthen civil society – namely network development, capacity-building and support for youth organisations – making recommendations on further expansion and reinforcement of these initiatives. The key to this would be to develop a work programme that supports young people to be active citizens, rather than simply providing spaces in which they can be consulted.

Gomes Lopes continued in this vein, viewing civil society actors as having a crucial participatory role to play as the subjects, not objects, of development policy, and advocating for genuinely collaborative governance (Gomes Lopes, 2024). His research considers how institutional social capital can be strengthened for sustainable development in SIDS. This involves overcoming financial and human resource constraints, administrative failures and weak implementation of previous SIDS agendas. He recommended, among other things, building an integrated collaborative governance framework across SIDS that connects them at community, national, regional and global levels.

Ambassador Romualdo affirmed the salience of the recommendations in the presentations and underscored the importance of SIDS4 engendering a comprehensive, inclusive, integrative and collaborative approach to collective governance, as this is the means by which SIDS will experience positive economic and social transformation for resilient prosperity by 2034. Audience members noted that the absence of women in decision-making processes and leadership is a critical issue to be tackled in the SIDS agenda, as well as inclusion of populations within outer islands in archipelago countries. Claudia Mansfield de LaRue, Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of the Dominican Republic to the United Nations, drew attention to a case study of gender inclusion on an outer island of her own country that could be used as best practice for other SIDS. The discussions also highlighted that not only is funding scarce, but when it does become available to civil society, it is often project-based rather than programmatic, lacking long-term capacity-building components.
3.3 A secure future

How can SIDS transition to renewable energy and engage in successful climate adaptation while building resilient infrastructure and improving connectivity?

This session was chaired by Rachid Bouhia, with Ambassador Ali Naseer Mohamed of the Maldives as the respondent. Research presented by Dr Denyse Dookie (London School of Economics, UK) outlined the importance of building early warning infrastructure for improving decision-making on disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and resilience (Dookie, 2024). Gareth Byatt (Risk Insight Consulting, Australia) brought a new focus to urban centres in SIDS, explaining why building resilient cities is critical for generating dynamism and development (Byatt, 2024).

In highlighting the importance of climate information – i.e. collecting and interpreting credible and usable weather and climate data – Dookie outlines barriers such as constraints to access and data-sharing, and capacity issues such as limited knowledge of data availability and location. Even where data exists, decision-makers frequently lack the expertise required to interpret it. She recommends, among other things, that SIDS advocate for clearer language in international and regional climate documentation.

Byatt’s paper provides examples of how cities in SIDS – urban spaces that house over half the population but which are under-researched as cities – can be rendered more dynamic and resilient, drawing on initiatives deployed in countries such as Singapore and Costa Rica. He recommended establishing a Portfolio Management Office within the SIDS Centre of Excellence that could coordinate a SIDS urban framework. This would facilitate a common systems approach across SIDS, sharing lessons about what does and does not work – in turn leaving no country behind.

Ambassador Mohamed spoke to the need for SIDS to believe in their own ability to effect (and affect) change, and to approach and implement big transformational ideas with confidence. He highlighted the need for SIDS to build their productive and institutional/state capacity, with each driving the other forward. The audience discussion for this session touched on, among other things, challenges at the multilateral level in terms of transmitting downscaling and granulating data for SIDS, and whether the efforts to do so would unlock improved financing for building climate resilience.

3.4 Environmental protection and planetary sustainability

How can SIDS achieve global action on climate change, sustainably conserve ocean resources and restore biodiversity?

This session was chaired by Gail Hurley, with Ambassador Stan Smith of the Bahamas as respondent. Viliame Kasanawaqa (Shipwrecked Lab, Fiji) explored the problems posed by deep-sea mining, and asked whether SIDS could be better compensated for engaging in environmental protection and the provision of ecosystem services (Kasanawaqa, 2024). Carl-Ann Blackman (Independent Consultant, Barbados) explained the vital role that natural capital accounting (NCA) can play in enhancing climate resilience in SIDS (Blackman, 2024). Karuna Rana (Big Ocean States Initiative, Mauritius) made the case for a Blue Innovation Fund to close the blue funding gap and support community development.
Kasanawaqa’s report recommends that finance be unlocked through conservation efforts, specifically that SIDS be compensated for keeping their seabed minerals unmined. He demonstrates how the potential costs of deep-sea mining to the environment and to the livelihoods of Pacific Islanders far outweigh the financial benefits—which are likely to accrue to external investors rather than the local populations who absorb the negative externalities in any case. In terms of solutions, Kasanawaqa advocates a network of centres that develop and expand the geographical reach of deep-sea policies and conduct further in-depth cost–benefit analysis to make the case for ‘keeping the ocean blue’.6

Blackman’s work addresses the issue of NCA, proposing a systematic approach to quantifying and valuing ecological assets. Her research explains both why and how this crucial information can be integrated into economic development planning. Blackman deployed Belize and Anguilla as case studies to demonstrate how NCA aids in balancing economic development with environmental preservation, in turn helping both to identify priority areas for resilience building and to obtain blue carbon credit finance.

Rana’s research (Rana, 2024) explains how large-scale blue economy initiatives in SIDS tend to prioritise economic gains at the cost of natural marine and terrestrial environments, as well as often excluding local communities. This limits the ability of island states to participate actively and sustainably in the broader move towards ‘blue acceleration’. To address these challenges, one of her recommendations is for a Big Ocean States Innovation and Impact Fund. Integrated with the SIDS Centre of Excellence, this should generate capital to finance community-led initiatives seeking to blue local economies.7

---

6 Kasanawaqa’s insights also feature in a recent episode of the RESI podcast Small Islands, Big Picture, looking at where SIDS fit into the global shipping industry: https://odi.org/en/insights/small-islands-big-picture-episode-7-changes-in-global-shipping/

7 Rana’s insights also feature in a forthcoming episode of the podcast, on the ‘Blue Economy’, which will be released in mid-2024: https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/small-islands-big-picture-podcast/
Ambassador Smith’s response focused on some of the financial implications of the recommendations above. He suggested that creating an investment bureau for each SIDS region could be a good way of supporting these agendas, while at the same time linking the different regions to new bodies such as the Centre of Excellence. He also stressed the need for a world authority for the ocean, including an ocean trust, to improve management and ensure equitable sharing of ocean resources within and beyond national jurisdictions. During the audience discussion, it was pointed out that whatever SIDS achieve by way of preserving their marine and terrestrial resources, the resulting economic or social gains will be erased if the planet breaches 1.5°C of heating. Put simply, environmental protection in SIDS is dependent on planetary sustainability. Consequently, global mitigation has to remain at the centre of advocacy strategies.

### 3.5 How do SIDS get there?

**What kinds of international support and data do SIDS need to achieve resilient prosperity?**

This final thematic session was chaired by Dr Simona Marinescu (Senior Advisor on SIDS, UNOPS), with Tumasie Blair as respondent. William Waqavakatoga (University of Adelaide, Australia) analysed how SIDS might create a stronger enabling environment for effective implementation of the SIDS4 agenda. Dr Kalim Shah (University of Delaware, USA) focused on ‘big and small data’, proposing ways that institutional capacity could be strengthened to improve evidence-based decision-making.

Waqavakatoga’s research outlines the unique policy context in SIDS, where the facts of being small and being an island have an important influence on development (Boswell et al., 2024; Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018; Foley et al., 2023). The nature of personalised politics in small islands, where government is part of the community, is unavoidable. Waqavakatoga’s research describes how, by better recognising these unique characteristics and their implications – frequently and wrongly seen by outsiders to be a developmental barrier or problem – we can inform efforts to enhance implementation-enabling environments. In pointing out the trade-offs, such as the costs and benefits of recognising and using the informal networks prevalent in SIDS (see Corbett, 2015), he made several recommendations on how these can be shaped and deployed to support the creation of enabling environments. One recommendation involves leveraging social networks and cultural institutions to coordinate implementation effectively.

Shah’s paper (Shah and Kelman, 2024) highlights several interesting findings from his work as it relates to institutional capacity, usability of data, and evidence-based decision-making for sustainability in SIDS. For example, governance of national data and information does not effectively leverage traditional, indigenous knowledge. In addition, there are broader data gaps due to a lack of adaptable policies and institutional frameworks to strengthen data management capacity. To remedy these issues, he recommends establishing integrated, comprehensive data management systems that are capable of systematic data collection, storage
and analysis. These should be aligned with international data management standards, with ongoing training for end users.

In his response to these presentations, Blair argued that development finance is wholly insufficient in SIDS. It is, however, essential for building capacity, especially in complex areas such as technology that require expensive investments and transfer of advanced solutions (see also Mohan, 2024). During the discussion, it was further noted that some concessional finance is available for some SIDS in some areas, but that they need to develop their own capacities in areas such as data collection in order to make the case for and gain access to it.

3.6 Keynote address

How can SIDS sustain developmental progress in a turbulent world?

The SIDS Future Forum ended with a keynote address from Professor Jack Corbett, RESI Co-Director and Head of the School of Social Sciences at Monash University, Australia. Corbett’s presentation previewed a co-authored RESI book to be published later this year, *Sustaining Development in Small Islands* (Bishop et al., forthcoming). In it, the RESI Directors offer a detailed exposition of an argument rehearsed in earlier collective and collaborative publications (e.g. Bishop et al., 2021; 2023; Corbett et al., 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2021). The book contends that SIDS have benefited from a multilateral order that, although far from perfect, balances three vital norms: sovereign equality, non-interference and the right to development. Although these are often disregarded, and SIDS face a world that is frequently stacked against their interests in practice, it is still vastly preferable to the imperialism of the past or the kind of system that might have emerged after 1945 had the Second World War turned out differently. This is because it is a ‘permissive liberal order’ that presents SIDS with choices rather than imperatives. However, this permissive liberalism is under collective threat from economic stagnation, crisis and transformation; intensified geopolitical upheaval; and accelerating climate change.

Corbett described three future scenarios for SIDS: the return of an anarchic ‘self-help’ system where outcomes are determined by great power conflict and brute force; a reinvigorated ‘muscular liberalism’ defined by the expansion of global technocratic governance; and a repurposed permissive liberal order. The RESI team concludes that the first two scenarios would ultimately be to the detriment of SIDS because they involve the abrogation of at least one of the three key underpinning norms. Consequently, it is only a reinvigorated permissive order that can continue to hold them in productive tension and facilitate the best (or least bad) context in which SIDS can continue to pursue development as sovereign equals.

Of course, in the messy real world that lies ahead, elements of all three trends are likely to be partially visible over time. This is why it is so important that the international community does all it can to recognise and reinforce permissive liberal tendencies in support of SIDS. These theoretical arguments provide an intellectual framework for a broader assessment of the global upheavals that are likely to face the SIDS stakeholder community as it grapples with implementing the ABAS over the next decade, the rationale for the Future Forum itself, and, indeed, the suite of recommendations presented in the final section of this report.
All of the SIDS Future Forum sessions stimulated lively discussion. There were detailed reflections from each of the respondents on the specific recommendations made by the authors of the papers, and numerous interventions from the floor.\(^9\) Recommendations for operationalisation of the ABAS stemming from the discussions coalesced around five overlapping themes:

2. Institutional strengthening and collaborative governance mechanisms.
3. Enhanced voice, accountability and transparency.
4. Novel methods to increase resources to SIDS and relieve fiscal constraints.
5. Improving data availability and usability.

These ideas echoed the aspirations outlined in the final SIDS4 outcome document (United Nations, 2024a), and were in turn reflected in the agenda and discussions at the Technical Workshop in support of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4), held in Apia, Samoa, on 11–13 March 2024. We summarise them here as a basis to inform recommendations in the final section of the paper.

### 4.1 Greater interregional SIDS–SIDS knowledge-sharing

The first group of policy recommendations revolved around developing partnerships between all stakeholders at international, national and subnational levels. Contributors noted severe disconnects in terms of information dissemination within SIDS themselves – particularly in archipelagic states – and this is only magnified at the regional and global levels. Therefore, more thinking

---

\(^9\) For further detail, see session recordings: [https://islandinnovation.co/events/sids-future-forum/](https://islandinnovation.co/events/sids-future-forum/) and [www.youtube.com/@IslandInnovation](www.youtube.com/@IslandInnovation)
and action is required to build and enhance partnerships, particularly cross-regionally so that SIDS can leverage their shared knowledge to influence global debates as a collective. This is already happening, with AOSIS coordinating action in specific policy areas, but more resources and expanded institutional capacities are required to extend it across the spectrum of challenges facing SIDS collectively.

Examples from the thematic sessions included an interregional SIDS–SIDS ‘blue-green’ knowledge-sharing mechanism to consolidate lessons and underpin shared action in terms of exploiting emergent opportunities in the blue economy, with the proposed Centre of Excellence used as a vehicle for this purpose (Mohan, 2024). Similarly, Byatt (2024) recommended creating interregional agencies to work across SIDS, such as a Portfolio Management Office within the Centre of Excellence to coordinate city resilience strategies and plans. Overall, it became evident from the discussions that SIDS may require more than one Centre of Excellence, or that the proposed Centre may need both a wide remit and sister branches elsewhere, to cover the full range of issues faced in different regions.

Another focus related to cross-SIDS network-building, especially at the civil society level, where capacities are particularly limited and subject to inconsistent project-based funding (Peck and Hammett, 2024; Gomes Lopes, 2024). Greater capacity-building is also required to help civic groups – especially youth, women and critical voices – to be included as active participants in official processes, rather than primarily as resources to be consulted. A key part of this work could include creating (or re-creating) SIDS-wide networks for women and youth and the UCSIS. In sum, stronger partnerships are key to any forward-looking SIDS agenda.

4.2 Institutional strengthening and collaborative governance mechanisms

The second set of demands relates to institutional strengthening. There is significant support for new institutions to be established within the proposed SIDS Centre of Excellence, such as a SIDS Data Hub, a technology and innovation mechanism and an Island Investment Forum. However, more thinking is needed about how specific ideas and proposals could be anchored within these institutions. In general, there was a sense that institutions that could benefit SIDS need to be strengthened and rendered more transparent at all levels. A good example related to the analysis of citizenship by investment schemes (see Hammett et al., 2024). There was significant interest in how these might be placed on a more sustainable footing. Part of the answer relates to enhanced public reporting and transparency, and clearer strategic designation of revenues via the development of well-managed community development funds. Alongside this, the Island Investment Forum has a proactive role to play in identifying, transmitting and replicating best practices across SIDS.

These are evidently principles that could be applied to many other sectors where stronger institutions and greater transparency offer a win–win situation across the board. In general, discussion at the Future Forum reiterated the need to formulate robust principles and strategies, and to adhere to them consistently, as well as to establish frameworks that span across SIDS. This was identified as particularly important during discussions on infrastructure and sustainable SIDS cities. An urban development framework for SIDS could, for example, improve the planning, execution and financing of infrastructure projects (see Byatt, 2024).
4.3 Enhanced voice, accountability and transparency

A third area of consensus emerged around the need to amplify the voice of SIDS in global agendas. Despite their ‘special case for sustainable development’ having now been recognised for decades, global initiatives and institutions still do not fully account for their distinctive needs (Bishop et al, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2021). This may be changing – albeit slowly – as there is greater awareness on the part of (some) donors of the need to reform how global governance functions, so as to render meaningful in practice the theoretical right to sovereign equality and pursuit of development that SIDS enjoy as independent states. Moreover, despite resistance in some quarters to the notion that vulnerability should become a basis for concessions, this idea is increasingly accepted by the multilateral development banks (MDBs) and other organisations.

Yet there is a sense that SIDS still have to continually: (a) fight to have their voices heard to a greater degree than larger states; (b) relitigate arguments, especially around vulnerability, that they have already won; and (c) resist their marginalisation (or even exclusion) from processes in which they have a significant stake. For example, despite comprising some of the most heavily indebted states globally, their voice is not as loud as it might be in reform of the international debt architecture (see Hurley et al., 2024).

The same is true in other areas of global policy. It is difficult to envisage specific recommendations here, although one might be for SIDS to demand collective representation at the G20, especially now a precedent has been set with the African Union joining – not least since they comprise a fifth of the world’s states and yet are entirely excluded from the major global steering body which was, perhaps ironically, established specifically to increase representation after the global financial crisis (Bishop and Payne, 2021).

The wider point is that finding ways to increase voice – including the voices of excluded communities within SIDS themselves (see Peck and Hammett, 2024; Gomes Lopes, 2024) – can only lead to greater accountability. The need for a greater representative force for the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS) region on the international stage was also frequently articulated. For historical and geographical reasons, the countries in the AIS region do not have the same depth of integration to amplify their regional voice in wider SIDS debates, compared to the Caribbean or Pacific regions. Overcoming this would help to reduce fragmentation among SIDS as a whole when it comes to developing shared learning and institutions, and in defending shared positions at the global level.

4.4 Novel methods to increase resources to SIDS and relieve fiscal constraints

Despite carrying high debt burdens, SIDS are not generally perceived by the international community to be in a debt crisis. Participants agreed that – due to high debt servicing costs, lack of access to concessional finance, and limited fiscal space constraining investments in resilience (see Hurley et al., 2024) – there is very much a debt crisis, regardless of how it might be perceived in, or defined by, the international financial institutions (IFIs) and MDBs. Writing off debt would cost official creditors very little in relative terms, but the benefits to SIDS would be enormous, accruing rapidly in terms of augmented fiscal space. This would also represent the ‘best’ kind of development assistance, helping to lessen...
the huge disadvantage SIDS face in making investments while stimulating productive capacity (see Bishop et al., 2023). At the very least, it is vital to create some kind of novel ex ante debt cancellation mechanism to be triggered in the event of a qualifying shock (see Hurley et al., 2024).

A consensus emerged on the need to build capacity to nurture long-term economic growth, seen as the ultimate solution to debt distress but also to many other hardships affecting SIDS. Throughout the meeting, various types of capacities were highlighted – including institutional, productive and adaptive capacities – each representing distinct concepts yet intricately interconnected in practice. The overarching notion is that SIDS require capacity-building initiatives to promote economic diversification, advance structural transformation, and consequently spur job creation and income generation, in a manner that is both inclusive and sustainable and addresses all forms of poverty, inequality and exclusion. Such capacities must be finely tuned to the unique characteristics of SIDS, particularly considering their inherent vulnerabilities and considerable exposure to climate-related shocks and stresses. In particular, SIDS will need specific support to address emerging challenges in newer sectors, including the blue economy, the digital sector and sovereign sales, due to heightened market concentration or pressure from larger states (Rana, 2024; Hammett et al., 2024). The Bangladesh Climate and Development Platform, launched by a group of international financial institutions at COP28, could be replicated for each of the SIDS regions to help them leverage finance for climate resilience and sustainable development.
4.5 Improving data availability and usability

The final area of consensus that emerged from discussions was around the need for a scaled-up and sustained effort to harness data and information across a daunting array of sectors and priorities. Indeed, just beginning to consider what SIDS require in only two or three areas – such as climate early warning systems (Dookie, 2024; Byatt, 2024), marine resources (Kasanawaka, 2024; Rana, 2024), and biodiversity and natural capital (Blackman, 2024) – immediately demonstrates the scale of the challenge. The full gamut of data needs – whether economic, social, political, environmental, technological, at all levels of analysis and across SIDS as a whole – is staggering.

Moreover, these extend well beyond just collecting and creating the data itself. Shah and Kelman (2024: 9) note how decision-makers in SIDS face ‘a slew of questions’ pertaining to standards in generating evidence: how to balance different sources of evidence, and how to understand and deploy both ‘big’ and ‘small’ data (including vernacular knowledge). All of these carry implications for ‘expected and proposed new innovations in data acquisition, analysis, management and application’. Put simply, SIDS still do not know what they do and do not know.

They sometimes have data and information but do not know its value or meaning, or how to use it in decision-making processes. Overburdened policymakers frequently have little idea as to what data and information exists or does not exist – and how it might be deployed – in their domain.

SIDSS need strategies for dealing with all stages of data treatment, from collection to dissemination, including data storage and sharing. So, while there is a need for more and better data, and delegates welcomed the creation of a SIDS Data Hub, further ancillary work will be required. Support is needed to generate, store and make data available, but also format it in ways that render it usable, disseminate it effectively, improve its interpretability and interoperability with other systems, and all the while scale up the requisite technology and support programmes (Dookie, 2024; Shah and Kelman, 2024). It is only by undertaking this daunting and laborious work that such information can be harnessed to support the long-term implantation of the ABAS (Boswell et al., 2024).

Overall, delegates at the SIDS Future Forum agreed the need for global-, regional- and national-level collaboration for capacity building in these areas, and it is to this we now turn in elaborating core recommendations for operationalising the ABAS.
A new knowledge architecture for SIDS

The SIDS4 outcome document is now complete in the form of the ABAS, and the Future Forum helped to shape it. However, its implementation will require the aspirations, commitments and declarations within the outcome document to be turned into a viable and impactful programme of action. This requires measurable, scientific forms of evidence-based evaluation, but also other forms of knowledge, as well as in-depth analysis, reflection and learning. Some key concepts, narratives and understandings of sustainable development challenges and opportunities in SIDS may need refining along the way. For this, a new (or enhanced) knowledge architecture is needed: one that acknowledges indigenous, traditional and local vernacular knowledge systems as well as elite scientific ones. It should enable real-time learning embedded in mechanisms that feed back into ABAS implementation and, crucially, inform course correction. This architecture should be inclusive, making connections between knowledge producers and knowledge users, as well as focused and organised around a set of ambitious, achievable outcomes for the ABAS.

This section presents three interlocking, overlapping and mutually reinforcing recommendations for such a knowledge architecture. Collectively, they will help to generate and consolidate the requisite evidence base on which the ABAS will deliver on its substantial promise over the next decade. These recommendations build on discussions at the SIDS Future Forum and look ahead to the immediate period after the SIDS4 conference, as delivery gets under way for the new 10-year agenda – by far the most critical of the decennial programmes of action to date (see Bishop et al., 2023). They are the kinds of propositional ideas necessary to ensure continued momentum towards resilient prosperity.

5.1 Institutionalising the SIDS Future Forum

The inaugural SIDS Future Forum has effectively demonstrated proof of concept, in terms of both demand from participants and supply of expert knowledge. However, it only scratched the surface in terms of available ideas. There were many areas of research about which stakeholders wished to be informed, and papers that the RESI Co-Directors could have commissioned. Although the Forum provoked a rich and varied discussion, there were still numerous issues left undiscussed and much research that can be shared through this multi-stakeholder forum. The need for such analysis to inform policy – and attendant need for a framework to create and consolidate it – will only continue to grow over the coming decade.

Since its inception, RESI has consolidated a large (and still-expanding) network of affiliated experts, with skills and insights that can be brought to bear on most policy problems facing SIDS and their stakeholders. Institutionalising the Future Forum as a biennial event would ensure that key actors have the freshest thinking at their fingertips in a usable format. The SIDS Future Forum is a critical component of the ‘new knowledge architecture’, taking stock of progress on the ABAS at frequent intervals during its lifetime.

Some aspects of the Forum will likely be modified: further thought should be given as to the ideal format, size and location of subsequent events. This could also vary from event to event,
depending on prevailing stakeholder requirements (reflecting the wider imperative of ongoing learning and course correction). It should, though, continue to be organised collaboratively, while preserving its independence and unique character as a ‘forum’ in the classic sense.

5.2 Revitalising the SIDS university consortium

Central to the new knowledge architecture for the ABAS are the research and educational institutions across SIDS regions, and SIDS experts based in universities around the world. These will need to work collaboratively to support effective implementation and real-time learning over the next 10 years, coordinating appropriately with anchoring institutions such as UNDESA and the new SIDS Centre of Excellence. For this, the UCSIS – established under the SAMOA Pathway but inactive in recent years – needs to be reinvigorated and expanded to include more research and educational centres and SIDS experts around the world, and to extend its activities to provide training and support to advocacy, in and for SIDS.

A revitalised UCSIS should ideally do four things:

1. Continually produce and package the latest knowledge and evidence produced by academics and other non-traditional knowledge providers, in ways that can be used by policy-makers and practitioners, feeding into a dynamic process of implementation.
2. Support a sustained process of capacity-building for SIDS government officials and stakeholders grappling with the ever-widening
spectrum of policy and project formulation and implementation issues.

3. Provide negotiations support to AOSIS and other SIDS advocacy groups. AOSIS is having to deal with a proliferating range of policy domains beyond its traditional climate remit, while coping with enduring resource constraints. A partnership is needed, building on the excellent work of the AOSIS Fellowship, to provide negotiators in the sustainable development track with knowledge and technical skills.

4. Provide coordination to the fragmented landscape of research and evidence on sustainable development in SIDS across geographic regions, types of institutions, academic disciplines and levels of governance.

RESI is unique as a global advisory network. We have a footprint in almost every small island state and region. Our affiliated experts are located in dozens of global universities and policy think tanks. They traverse the academic–practitioner divide, and all have close connections with an array of local, national, regional and international stakeholders. In short, RESI has already created a network that can keep absorbing more partners, with increasing returns to scale by acting as a fulcrum for collaborative activity. As such, it is well placed to play a critical role in coordinating the UCSIS, ensuring connections are made between universities and other communities of knowledge and expertise in SIDS. Through its workstream on ‘international alliances’, RESI will connect universities to support the SIDS outcome on monitoring and evaluation, to be finalised in 2025.

A revitalised UCSIS could be a powerful tool to support a new knowledge architecture for SIDS: generating research and curricula on SIDS sustainable development; consolidating and brokering knowledge and expertise; expanding the capacity of key SIDS advocacy and negotiating bodies; and facilitating collaborative partnerships at all levels. This, in turn, will bolster the dynamic implementation of the ABAS.

5.3 A major independent stocktake for SIDS

Running alongside the SIDS Future Forum and embedded within the new knowledge architecture, there is a need for a major, independent, biennial stocktaking process for the ABAS. The ‘State of SIDS’ (or a similar title) would complement the formal monitoring and evaluation system in three ways:

1. Consolidate new research and evidence produced by partners and other non-traditional forms of knowledge and through the Future Forum.
2. Provide an independent and broader assessment of progress in ABAS implementation, alongside the UN monitoring and evaluation process.
3. Underpin international advocacy in emergent policy areas.

Since the First International Conference on SIDS in Barbados in 1994 and promulgation of the BPOA, we have seen increasing convergence between SIDS and the creation of shared agendas and institutions, with AOSIS being the most visible. But this process is incomplete, and there are many areas of global policy where SIDS diplomacy lacks sufficient collective evidence to inform
collective action. We know that SIDS punch above their weight, but they could hit even harder were their collective weight augmented by a deeper and broader evidence base. To obtain this, SIDS require the kind of global stocktake that has only ever been undertaken for particular regions, or globally on specific issues.

An independent SIDS commission of inquiry, with teams of experts in every region, should be set up to assess research and evidence across areas of concern for SIDS. Further consideration is needed as to the structure and process for producing a ‘State of SIDS’ report, but it would certainly integrate the networks of individual experts, universities and think tanks to be engaged in the revitalised UCSIS. Products would include major reports at the beginning, middle and end of the ABAS, plus a series of real-time assessments (to be published to coincide with the Future Forum).

In sum, if the ABAS is to bring long-term benefits to SIDS over the next decade – and beyond to the middle of the century – it needs a new knowledge architecture, underpinned by structured dialogues with experts for knowledge exchange, a coordinated research and education network, and a properly resourced, big-picture evidence-gathering and stocktaking process.
References


ODI is an independent, global think tank, working for a sustainable and peaceful world in which every person thrives. We harness the power of evidence and ideas through research and partnership to confront challenges, develop solutions, and create change.