GLOBAL LAND OUTLOOK

Small Island Developing States Thematic Report

Executive Summary

United Nations
Convention to Combat Desertification

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are a diverse group of countries that boast some of the world's most extraordinary natural assets, cultural heritage and traditional ecological knowledge, which form the basis of their long-term sustainable development. Comprising 39 states and 18 territories, SIDS are home to around 74 million people in the Caribbean, Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans, as well as the South China Sea. These states and territories are custodians of unique and valuable natural capital on land and at sea.

Healthy soil, biodiversity and water resources form the backbone of island economies, shaping the productivity and resilience of key sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, tourism and energy. For SIDS, land is much more than just a productive economic asset. Land is integral to their community identity and social cohesion, as well as their commitment to intergenerational equity. Their land supports rich biodiversity, vegetation, forests, mangroves and wetlands which are essential for sustaining food systems, freshwater supplies, diverse livelihoods and marine environments.

SIDS face unique challenges regarding their land and water resources, arising from their inherent characteristics, such as small landmasses, extreme isolation and stark geomorphology. Their vulnerability to natural hazards and disasters is further exacerbated by the intertwined impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels and more intense hurricanes (typhoons), droughts and floods.

SIDS must overcome numerous barriers, including limited human, technical and financial resources, which hinder effective planning and responses to the confluence of development challenges. A lack of institutional capacity and access to high-resolution spatial data, skills shortages, and high emigration rates limits investments in long-term planning and policy support for inclusive land governance. Furthermore, the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge continues to undermine the potential of customary land and water management practices that have long sustained highly productive island ecosystems.

In 2019, SIDS reported that 18.8 million hectares — equivalent to 16.5% of their total land area — was degraded to varying extents. The consequences of land degradation and drought are rapidly felt across tightly interconnected ecosystems, with significant repercussions for human health, livelihoods and economies. This leads to a growing competition for increasingly scarce natural resources, exacerbated by urbanisation, unsustainable agricultural practices, mining operations and rapid growth in the tourism sector.

Transformative Levers for Enhancing Resilience in SIDS

Despite these challenges and barriers, SIDS have unique comparative advantages that can enable them to pursue integrated, nature-positive, climate-resilient and culturally grounded sustainable development. This report describes how SIDS can restore their natural capital, strengthen climate adaptation and achieve economic prosperity by using seven transformative levers that place land at the centre of sustainable and inclusive economic development. These levers refer to integrated land and water management approaches that are rooted in local contexts and strive for long-term sustainable development outcomes. They are strategic, mutually reinforcing points of influence that enable systemic change by reshaping decision-making, resource allocation and implementation processes.

Restoring Land and Natural Resources: The limited landmass of SIDS and the strong ecological connectivity between the highlands and coastal areas make soil health and water conservation key policy priorities. Restoring farmland, forests, wetlands, mangroves and coral reefs is akin to rebuilding the natural infrastructure that underpins food security, freshwater availability, diverse livelihoods (e.g., traditional agroforestry systems) and resilient island economies.

Mainstreaming Sustainability: Integrating sustainable land and water management practices into multiple sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, tourism, energy, construction, waste management and urban planning, can help to diversify the green and blue economies of SIDS and reduce environmental pressures at their source (e.g., build resilient infrastructure to increase water use efficiency and adopt circular approaches to water management).

Inclusive Governance and Integrated Land Use Planning: Responsible land use practices and inclusive governance frameworks that combine supportive policies and long-term spatial planning with secure tenure and resource rights are critical for scaling up integrated land and water management practices. This can include incorporating customary tenure systems into formal land administration and adopting ridge-to-reef approaches that can transform the management of natural resources from fragmented to coherent.

Technology Transfer and Digitalisation: SIDS require high-resolution, locally relevant and openly accessible spatial data to budget, plan, design, implement and monitor integrated landscape and seascape programmes. The co-design of data and information systems that combine Indigenous knowledge with robust scientific methods can also help ensure cultural grounding and the consideration of social equity in decision-making.

Advocacy and Partnerships for Regional Cooperation: Despite their small geographic and economic size, SIDS have developed a strong, coordinated voice that commands significant global attention. It has increased their visibility and moral authority in international fora and sets an example for other vulnerable or neglected groups. The SIDS Partnership Framework unites governments, the private sector, multilateral institutions and civil society organisations to strive for more coordinated, long-term engagement that is specifically tailored for SIDS contexts.

Finance for Integrated Land and Water Management: SIDS require adequate, predictable and flexible financing from public and private sources to support the conservation, restoration, and integrated management of land and water resources. Experience across SIDS shows that, no matter how successful they are individually, isolated or scattered initiatives cannot overcome the structural drivers of land degradation, drought and water scarcity. Innovative financing will be essential to break cycles of debt and transition away from fragmented, short-term project funding.

Synergies across Conventions: Significant opportunities exist for SIDS to strengthen synergies across the Rio conventions — the UNFCCC, the CBD and the UNCCD — by leveraging complementarities in their national strategies and action plans, such as spatially explicit targets for land-based restoration activities. This could enable greater access to limited finance, while reducing duplication and administrative burdens. This is particularly important for SIDS, which have high reporting requirements relative to their size and often have limited capacity and dispersed institutions.

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