

Preparatory meetings for the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States

Participation, priorities and outcomes

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Key messages

The fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4), hosted by Antigua and Barbuda, will bring together world leaders to agree on a bold new programme of action.

The new 10-year plan will focus on practical and impactful solutions to ensure Small Island Developing States (SIDS) maintain developmental gains and give their citizens a sustainable and safe future.

The conference will seek to deliver specific initiatives and concrete deliverables to address SIDS-specific challenges, including the climate crisis, biodiversity and spiralling debt.

The regional and interregional preparatory meetings for SIDS4 have focused on identifying the main development challenges and priorities across the three SIDS regions.

This report reflects on the discussions and outcomes from the four preparatory meetings held in 2023.



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Acronyms

ABAS	Antigua and Barbuda Accord for SIDS
AIS	Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
MDB	Multilateral development bank
MVI	Multidimensional Vulnerability Index
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SIDS4	Fourth Conference on Small Island Developing States
STI	Science, technology and innovation
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

1 Background

SIDS4 will be the fourth decennial conference and action agenda on Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The first was the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS (BPOA), which covered the period 1994–2004. It was followed by the Mauritius Strategy of Implementation (MSI) for the further implementation of the BPOA for 2005–2014, and then the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway (SAMOA Pathway) for 2014–2024. Next year's meeting will usher in the Antigua and Barbuda Accord for SIDS (ABAS) 2024–2034, which will build on these previous programmes of action and govern the SIDS development agenda for the next 10 years.

This conference represents a critical fork in the road and will be the most important of the decennial conferences to have ever taken place. Since the SAMOA Pathway, SIDS have been facing an increasingly intractable cocktail of issues that are threatening to derail progress in social and economic development. These issues also threaten to permanently remove opportunities for future growth.

Conventional problems of debt, lack of economic diversification, exodus of labour and three decades of sluggish growth in most SIDS are merging with increasingly difficult access to predictable, affordable concessional finance, increasingly devastating climate events, and social and economic shocks. SIDS had barely recovered from the 2008 financial crisis when the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic devastated their economies and further increased their debt levels. Added to these difficulties are growing geopolitical tensions among powerful states, high food and energy prices, increases in global interest rates, and the rise in non-communicable diseases, among other challenges. The 10-year agenda that emerges from SIDS4 will need to contain practical, applicable and achievable solutions to set SIDS on an upward development track.

In preparation for the SIDS4 conference, three SIDS regional preparatory meetings were organised by the United Nations between July and September 2023. The first was held in Mauritius for the SIDS of the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS), the second in St Vincent and the Grenadines for Caribbean countries, and the third in Tonga for Pacific SIDS. These meetings brought together various stakeholders to identify and agree on priorities and recommendations to feed into the interregional session held in Cabo Verde from 30 August to 1 September, and ultimately into the SIDS4 Conference, the outcome of which will shape the agenda for SIDS for the next 10 years.

The Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) participated in each of these preparatory meetings. In this report, we offer a summary and overview of each meeting, outline the various regional priorities and sticking points, reflect on how these can be reconciled into a single outcome document, and consider what we may reasonably expect to be reflected in the Antigua and Barbuda Accord for SIDS (ABAS) 2024–2034. The meetings contained similar elements in that all focused on the challenges affecting SIDS. However, each meeting also focused on priority areas for their region or set of countries, and on various unique challenges.

2 AIS regional meeting Mauritius, 24–26 July 2023

2.1 Who attended the meeting in Balaclava?

This SIDS4 preparatory meeting brought together a range of stakeholders representing the countries of the AIS region, including their Permanent Representatives at the United Nations in New York, government officials from foreign ministries and planning departments, and representatives of the business sector, research bodies and youth. Overarching SIDS organisations, such as the Alliance of Small Island States, had a strong presence at the meeting.



Jose Maria Gomez Lopes, RESI Affiliate at the AIS meeting in Balaclava, Mauritius

Also present were a number of other UN Specialised Agencies from New York and/or their bureaux scattered across the AIS or African region, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Population Fund, and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Also present were the International Monetary Fund and International Labour Organization.

Bilateral donor countries present in the room, who participated in the discussions, included the United Kingdom SIDS Hub, the United States Agency for International Development and the Government of New Zealand. Other representatives comprised civil society institutions, including the International Renewable Energy Agency, the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative, SIDS Youth AIMS Hub, and Mauritius Research and Innovation Council.

Regional civil society organisations were under-represented in this meeting, as were business and private sector associations, despite

many attempts to improve engagement by these actors in SIDS development processes.

2.2 Issues discussed and priorities for the AIS region

This three-day meeting focused on a wide range of issues that have been hindering development in AIS SIDS, while also exploring and harnessing new issues that might unlock the potential to promote growth and prosperity in this region. The meeting addressed some emerging issues deserving closer attention to enhance the economic resilience of AIS SIDS, including debt and fiscal sustainability, access to development finance, climate finance and justice, and the need to redesign the architecture of the international financial system to cater for the needs of SIDS. There was widespread consensus among the member countries and their partners that access to finance to reduce vulnerability and build resilience should be based on a new set of indicators: the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) rather than, or in addition to, the traditional gross national income (GNI) per capita measure.

Youth engagement, access to quality education and employment opportunities for youth, and gender equality are all critical issues to be tackled to promote social inclusion in AIS. Another important issue discussed was the environment. Participants reflected that despite being recurrent topics, climate change and environmental issues (such as biodiversity, disaster risk reduction and the water-energy nexus) still deserve stronger commitment from AIS and other SIDS to make their 'special case' for vulnerability, but also because they continue to face difficulties accessing financial resources to promote sustainable development.

In addition to the discussions on past and current challenges facing the AIS region, new strategic issues and opportunities for the region were raised. Among these were: (1) strengthening science, technology and innovation (STI); (2) improving statistical capacity to culminate in the establishment of a data hub for SIDS; (3) enhancing public institutions; and (4) fostering effective partnerships for AIS and SIDS in general.

2.3 Mauritius final outcome document and implications for the ABAS

The Mauritius outcome document had three main components: (1) reaffirmation of the AIS SIDS case – participants restated the issues that bind them together as a specific region within the SIDS community, while also highlighting their common structural vulnerabilities; (2) calls for more to be done to address AIS common challenges because, despite being a special case, AIS SIDS still feel sidelined in issues such

as access to finance; and (3) future changes that SIDS4 must pursue to reflect the four points above.

The outcome document sets forth the priorities that should be an integral part of the SIDS4 Accord, to address both past and current challenges facing AIS. It also lays the foundations for promoting sustainable development in the region. The key priorities include economic diversification, capacity building, strengthening of partnerships, restructuring of the international financial architecture to favour the case of SIDS, promotion of STI as a catalyst for development, promotion of adaptive capacity and resilience to climate change and, finally, social inclusion. These priorities are not new, nor specific to SIDS, but how they are framed in the SIDS4 Accord – and the mechanisms proposed for addressing them – will certainly define the destiny of SIDS in the next 10 years.

3 Caribbean regional meeting St Vincent and the Grenadines 8–10 August 2023

3.1 Who attended the meeting in Kingstown?

The meeting for the Caribbean featured mainly government officials from foreign ministries and their Permanent Representatives at the UN in New York. However, several UN agencies such as UNEP, FAO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) were also represented, as were regional research and policy development entities such as the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI). Regional intergovernmental entities were present, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat, Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Secretariat and Caribbean Development Bank. Some donor country governments –



Caribbean Meeting in Kingstown, St Vincent and the Grenadines

specifically, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – were represented, as well as the Governments of Canada and New Zealand. Notably absent from the meeting, which has implications for a holistic outcome document, were the private sector and civil society.

3.2 Issues discussed and priorities for the Caribbean

The participants discussed traditional as well as some emerging issues affecting Caribbean SIDS. This prompted some participants to state that the discussion involved recycling of issues and talking points from one international conference to the next, although deepening over time. A

long list of development needs for Caribbean SIDS were discussed, including issues surrounding debt overhang and the need for debt relief, human capital flight and the need for job creation, crime and its deepening impact on social and economic development, and the need for economic diversification. The participants also discussed growing issues, including a lack of data and capacity for data collection, which hinders accurate and timely preparation of assessments for the purposes of national development planning and implementation.

Delegates also highlighted the increased need for social protection, social safety nets and disaster early warning systems against the increasing and devastating impact of environmental, social and economic shocks. These support mechanisms were discussed in relation to the loss of access to correspondent banking services and the growing threat to remittances. The meeting further highlighted the unique case of Cuba, which faces greater restrictions in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals due to decades of economic embargo.

Opportunities and priorities were highlighted in, among other areas, digitalisation and the adoption of artificial intelligence, coupled with the use of intellectual property rights to capture gains from regional cultural products such as music and carnival. Eco-tourism was proposed as a form of diversification away from traditional 'sun, sand and sea' tourism, as were opportunities in the blue economy. Greater public-private partnerships were highlighted as a key strategy to drive entrepreneurship and value-added production for regional economic growth.

3.3 The St Vincent and the Grenadines final outcome document and implications for the ABAS

The final outcome document uses the intractable and seemingly permanent nature of the issues confronting Caribbean SIDS as an indication of their uniqueness and vulnerability. In addition to the need to address the issues outlined above, it also calls for the use of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) and promotes the Bridgetown Initiative as a means of increasing financing for Caribbean SIDS. Growing issues – such as the sargassum seaweed plague and plastic pollution – were featured, alongside issues such as the deepening economic impact of energy importation. However, the document mainly speaks to traditional issues, including the need for special and differential treatment for SIDS in international trade, and the need for regional governments to act more fervently in promoting gender equality. These issues will therefore most likely be featured in the ABAS agenda for 2024–2034.

4 Pacific regional meeting Tonga, 16–18 August 2023

4.1 Who attended the meeting in Nukualofa?

After the last-minute withdrawal of Vanuatu due to its government being challenged by a vote of no confidence, Tonga graciously hosted the regional SIDS gathering for the Pacific. It was attended by over 70 international delegates, including ministers and government officials, and Permanent Representatives to the UN in New York. The full breadth



Pacific Region meeting in Nukualofa, Tonga

of UN agencies working with the Pacific were also present. They were joined by regional intergovernmental organisations, such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP). Selected members of civil society and the private sector were present, as were representatives from the

Commonwealth Secretariat and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This was a marked difference to the Caribbean and AIS meetings. A full range of country donors were also represented at the Pacific meeting, including the Governments of the UK, Australia, the United States, New Zealand and European states, who even held a partners' bilateral breakfast meeting.

4.2 Issues discussed and priorities for the Pacific

Participants identified numerous challenges unique to Pacific SIDS that they felt needed to be differentiated from other regions. Over the three days, policy and academic experts were invited to make presentations on key development issues in the region. The final Nukualofa outcome document included similar areas to other SIDS regions – (1) taking transformative action to enhance environmental resilience; (2) revitalising economies and paths to economic empowerment; and (3)

strengthening institutional capacities. However, other issues were identified as being of increasing concern in pursuing the development and environmental goals of Pacific SIDS. Along with traditional issues of climate change and debt, concerns are deepening regarding non-communicable diseases, plastic pollution, increasing migration and illicit drug use, among other issues.

Another area highlighted by Pacific SIDS was the need to amplify the work of regional organisations and increase support for them. The recently approved 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent sets the tone for the work of nine organisations under the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific and outlines how the regional architecture supports the 14 sovereign states and the 9 territories. Supporting the work of UN agencies was important, but all partners from outside the Pacific were encouraged to collaborate with Pacific-designed and Pacific-led frameworks. Participants identified that Pacific global leadership is evident in climate change diplomacy. In recent years, this has been manifested in advocacy for the opinion of the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea on countries' obligations to tackle climate change, and for consequences for failing to take action being acknowledged and supported. There was also a focus on creating and deepening current partnerships and creating new partnerships – not only among SIDS, but also with other countries in the 'Global North' and 'Global South'.

There were some concerns at the meeting regarding the process of developing the outcome document – specifically, how it should be shaped and framed. Government representatives expressed concerns that the UN organisers appeared to have created a template they sought to impose on the meeting, limiting many issues from being included in the final document. This seemed to have been an attempt to keep the document brief and limit the number of items. Nonetheless, the document was 17 pages, much longer than the 11-page documents from the AIS and Caribbean regions.

4.3 Tonga final outcome document and implications for the ABAS

The final outcome document took a bit more time than the three days in Tonga to be completed. But it nonetheless presents an agenda that speaks to the shared development challenges of Pacific SIDS, the unique challenges in the states and communities within the sparse Pacific Ocean, and opportunities for solutions that require genuine support from partners. While climate change and geopolitical rivalry will slow down development in all regions, the Pacific is disproportionately affected, especially given the concentration of low-lying atoll nations who will experience acute impacts on water insecurity, sanitation and hygiene challenges, food insecurity (agriculture and fisheries) and a high reliance on imports that will lead to an increase in non-communicable diseases.

The Pacific outcome document was also more specific in areas of challenges and requests for assistance – for example, seeking ways of attracting and retaining good teachers and improving the quality of its education and training systems. While all SIDS are dependent on the blue economy, Pacific SIDS outline ocean biodiversity loss and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing as a critical problem, given that their economies are more heavily tied to fisheries.

The Pacific region made a greater appeal for changes in international politics than other regions. It called for an end to global conflicts and geopolitical tensions, as well as the creation of a global alliance to negotiate a non-proliferation treaty to govern the end of fossil fuel expansion, and a global transition. While all SIDS called for adoption of the MVI, the Nukualofa outcome document was specific in its request for greater funding to go towards more vulnerable countries.

5 Interregional meeting Cabo Verde, 31–3 September 2023

5.1 Who attended the meeting in Praia?

The gathering in Praia, Cabo Verde, was the culmination of a two-month consultative process. The next time small island states will convene in a single meeting will be the 2024 SIDS Conference in Antigua and Barbuda. The meeting was well attended by government representatives (mainly ministers and high-level officials from ministries across all three SIDS regions), as well as Permanent Representatives at the UN in New York who were present at previous regional meetings. A large number of development partners, including donor governments and UN agencies, were also present. A smaller number of representatives from regional organisations, think tanks and civil society organisations also attended and were invited to make presentations in plenary.



Inter-regional meeting in Praia, Cabo Verde

5.2 Issues discussed and priorities for the SIDS4 Conference in 2024

The meeting aimed to maximise coherence and complementarity between the priorities of the three regional meetings, and to create a single outcome document indicating common and integrated priority areas as input for the SIDS4 Conference.

The meeting presented an overview of the three regional meetings and their specific priorities, mapping common action areas and nexus approaches. The meeting focused on optimising key points from each regional outcome document, and on how these can be bolstered in a single language as input to the SIDS4 Conference.

The meeting had a specific session on the enabling environment, which included mention of the MVI, debt management, climate finance and reforms to the international financial architecture. It touched on ways of optimising outcomes from the SIDS4 Conference, including through establishing a Centre of Excellence for SIDS, mainstreaming youth and gender issues, investing in STI and digital development, and facilitating a greater role for civil society and the private sector.

5.3 The Cabo Verde outcome document and implications for the ABAS

The outcome document for the interregional meeting was an amalgamation of those from the three regional meetings, and cemented a common position across all SIDS as the programme of action for moving forward. The pillars, as taken from the outcome document, are indicated below:

- **Revitalising our economies: strategies for dynamic and inclusive growth.** Here, the priorities for the regions were debt treatment mechanisms, improvements to aid and to development cooperation and donor coordination, and reduced costs and better access for remittances. These will increase the fiscal space for SIDS to facilitate diversification and economic growth through private sector development and entrepreneurship building, improvements to the SIDS business environment, and investments in women, youth and culture as sources of innovation.
- **Transformative actions to enhance environmental resilience.** The meeting called on the international community – primarily major greenhouse gas emitters – to take responsibility in accelerating climate mitigation, while also calling on international legal mechanisms such as the International Court of Justice to make this process compulsory. The agreement in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction was evoked as being critical to protecting marine biodiversity in SIDS, alongside other international frameworks to enhance environmental resilience in SIDS.
- **Forging a path to empowerment, equity, inclusion, peaceful societies and safe communities.** Here, the document speaks to strengthening social protection international community to assist with measures at the domestic level to improve mental and physical health outcomes, increase food and freshwater security, further develop education and skills training (including ramping up early

childhood development), accelerate the transition to green energy, and enhance disaster preparedness, management and response. A notable point in the outcome document, which was a sore point at the Caribbean regional meeting in particular, was engagement of civil society and the private sector in implementation of the ABAS.

- **Strengthen institutional and statistical capacity.** The outcome document acknowledges the significant challenges faced by SIDS in data collection and analysis, expressing concern about data gaps and lack of disaggregation in data collection regarding disaster risks and losses. The document calls for international assistance to modernise national statistical systems, and peer-to-peer learning among SIDS to adopt best practices in better integrating data into development and disaster planning. SIDS have expressed their support for the creation of a global SIDS data hub in Antigua and Barbuda, as well as a Centre of Excellence.
- **Means of Implementation: from vulnerability toward a more resilient future.** This is the longest section. It contains measures geared towards increasing financing for SIDS, and local and international efforts to advance digitalisation; research and development; science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics (STEAM); and STI. The document calls for increased climate and development financing for SIDS, through existing commitments such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, as well as through new developments such as widescale adoption of the MVI, operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund and the Bridgetown Initiative. While acknowledging the need for financing for all countries in the 'Global South', SIDS are calling for special attention and consideration. For example, while requesting simplified application requirements for climate funding from donor countries, multilateral development banks (MDBs) and international financial institutions, they are also calling for further reduced requirements for SIDS.

6 Where do SIDS go from here?

Reaffirming the case for development in SIDS is of utmost importance for the SIDS4 preparatory process, as these countries are at a critical juncture. At a time of geopolitical reconfiguration and accelerating climate change, while the world is still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, SIDS are facing deepening vulnerabilities – environmental, economic and social. SIDS are the most disadvantaged group of countries with regard to access to climate and development finance. These vulnerabilities are at the root of the widening inequalities between SIDS and other groups of states, and act as a bottleneck to SIDS' achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, achieving their aims might not be straightforward.

There are issues SIDS will have to contend with. For example, they will have to reconcile the practicality and feasibility of asking to be equal partners in global politics at all levels, while declaring themselves special and in need of differential treatment. This will require a review of the diplomatic approach and strategies used by SIDS to optimise their gains in international negotiations. SIDS are aiming for economic restructuring of climate resilience finance, but hinging this on external reforms to the international finance mechanisms to allow for cheaper debt, capacity building and technology transfer, an international trade environment that offers differential treatment for SIDS participation, and a geopolitical and economic environment that is more stable and conducive to their development. They are thus highlighting their continued dependence on reforms to the behaviour of external parties to secure their own long-term survival.

There are increasing numbers of initiatives by SIDS to secure their development, which may have the effect of confounding and overwhelming donors and MDBs. This is exacerbated when we add the number of initiatives emerging both within and outside of the UNFCCC system that call for reforms in the international finance architecture and relate directly to financial support for development in SIDS. As an illustration, Antigua and Barbuda has called for the creation of a Centre of Excellence for Oceanography and the Blue Economy within its territory – the development of which is in discussion – as well as a global SIDS data hub. SIDS also support the development of the SIDS-SIDS Green-Blue Economy Knowledge Transfer Hub in Barbados. This plethora of initiatives may begin to feel overwhelmingly for donor countries, particularly those experiencing greater calls for spending at home. It may even be overwhelming for SIDS themselves, many of

whom struggle with human capacity issues. A solution could be for some of the individual initiatives in single regions to be rolled together to reduce donor funding requirements.

A reading of the various regional and interregional outcome documents indicates that the UN is pushing SIDS towards a two-track process of focusing on economic and environmental issues as a means to enhance their productive, institutional and human capacities, while building climate resilience – with the ultimate goal of building safer, healthier communities and societies. At the regional meetings, however, there were issues with the outcome documents being pre-determined by the UN, who some believe are trying to push a one-size-fits-all approach on SIDS. It is nonetheless easy to understand the difficulty of catering for 38 SIDS who, while they share many common issues, also differ in the types and levels of problems they face.

While SIDS are calling for the MVI, it should be examined closely (as currently being done by the Bridgetown Initiative) to ensure that it does not further disadvantage some countries who may be caught in the middle. Additionally, some form of differentiation in creditors should be considered, where higher income countries do not borrow from the same credit sources as lower income countries, to prevent the latter from moving towards more expensive debt. This will require SIDS as a whole to seek out more innovative finance away from traditional sources, such as seeking and enticing green, private investment that would otherwise target larger markets.

Based on the outcomes of the regional and interregional meetings, SIDS should consider four propositions to optimise the profile, and ultimately the success, of the SIDS4 agenda:

- 1 Consolidate common positions and, where appropriate, align with other global initiatives such as the Bridgetown Initiative and MDB reform agenda, and/or seek to inform and improve these in light of SIDS-specific needs.
- 2 Avoid presenting a shopping list of items that the international community will be asked to help finance; instead, identify areas where various challenges can be merged into single umbrella programmes to attract funding, then disaggregated again at the point of implementation. For example, merge improvements to education outcomes, skills learning and vocational training with development of early childhood education, under the umbrella of human resource development.
- 3 Seek clarity on priorities by being more direct, precise and succinct in demands to the international community. It would also help to present the list of items in order of priorities. This will involve identifying items that are important for all SIDS.
- 4 Finally, the Antigua and Barbuda Accord should demonstrate clearly to the international community how SIDS will be taking autonomous action and investing their own resources in building resilience and sustainable development, as well as how the SIDS4 agenda will generate global public goods and benefit the planet.