

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

Is a special treatment of small island developing States possible?



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*“The real Caribbean is not a fun place.
It’s a place that has had its hard living...”*

Mary Eugenia Charles (1988)
Prime Minister of Dominica (1980-1995)

“... All efforts must be made to ensure a successful outcome of the International Meeting for the 10-year Review of the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in Mauritius in January 2005, which should contribute to the beneficial integration of small island developing States ... into the international trading system and the world economy.”

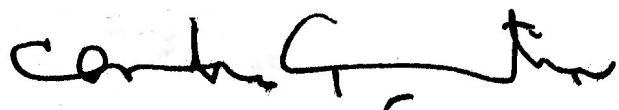
UNCTAD XI
(São Paulo Consensus, 18 June 2004)

Foreword

Globalization offers small island developing States (SIDS) valuable economic opportunities in the same way as it does with other countries. However, because of their intrinsic disadvantages, most SIDS will be unable to seize these opportunities unless certain special measures to compensate their disadvantages are granted to them by their development partners.

UNCTAD has been advocating the cause of small island developing economies for the past three decades. It was the first body to have noted the fallacy of per capita income as the primary yardstick for determining the way these countries ought to be supported. It was also a pioneer in bringing to the international community's attention the importance of economic vulnerability as a more meaningful criterion for guiding development partners in their treatment of SIDS. One of the eight Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, in calling for a "global partnership for development", specifically seeks to answer the "special needs of ... small island developing States".

This publication was prepared in the context of the decennial review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. I take this opportunity to thank the Government of Ireland for having generously supported UNCTAD in its work in favour of SIDS over the last five years, particularly toward this publication as well as a forthcoming, more substantial volume on the challenges and opportunities that are relevant to this group of countries.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carlos Fortin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Carlos Fortin
Officer-in-charge of UNCTAD

Geneva, 14 December 2004

Preface

Probably no category of countries has ever been more commonly misunderstood than small island developing States (SIDS). When Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica, in 1988, pointed out that “the real Caribbean is not a fun place”, but rather “a place that has had its hard living...”, she was illustrating what is now recognized as one of the most striking paradoxes of international cooperation.

Indeed, there is a pervasive notion that small islands are privileged to be situated in a heavenly natural environment, and that this is the main determinant of the quality of life of islanders. This convenient vision has been fuelled, not only by the way international tourism has portrayed insular destinations, but also by the fact that a majority of SIDS have demonstrated a relatively enviable socio-economic performance, compared with many continental or large developing countries. Overall, the international community has tended to view island societies as relatively prosperous, and has not been inclined to appreciate the intrinsic reality of “small islandness”, which is characterized by environmental and social fragility, and a high degree of economic vulnerability to many possible external shocks beyond domestic control.

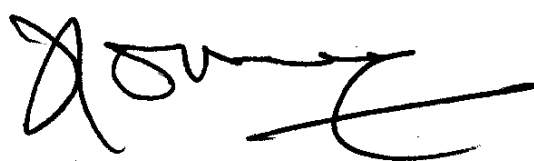
Here is where the paradox hurts: the international community recognizes the exceptional disadvantages island societies face, but it has failed to translate this recognition into island-specific support. The vulnerability of SIDS to external factors is not disregarded, but the modest elements of special treatment that would help them become more resilient are not being made available to these countries, even though their costs to the international community would be insignificant.

The scope for any particular group of countries to gain more favourable treatment in the multilateral trading system or in the sphere of development financing is generally limited. In this context, a prerequisite for any gain by SIDS is that their category be clearly defined, naturally on the basis of criteria.

If SIDS, once defined, are to pursue efficient advocacy to promote their cause in the framework of international cooperation, they need to do so on the basis of a few key issues, on the grounds of undisputed island-specific disadvantages.

This volume touches on three areas of particular relevance to the decennial review of the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action: (i) the issue of erosion of preferential market access, which is one of the most difficult challenges SIDS are faced with; (ii) the importance of the relationship between trade and the environment in the context of the vital objective of diversifying island economies; and (iii) the question of the definition of SIDS and need for criteria to enhance the credibility of the United Nations in its support to the category. As such, the book provides only a partial answer to the question raised in the title: “is a special treatment of SIDS possible?”. Ingenuity will be needed to make alternative preferential measures in favour of SIDS acceptable in the context of erosion of trade preferences. At the same time, progress in that direction is unlikely to take place unless significant efforts are made to improve the conceptualization of the SIDS category.

As noted earlier, the opinions expressed in this publication are only those of the four authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNCTAD on the relevant subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Habib Ouane', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Habib Ouane
Director,
Special Programme on the Least Developed Countries,
Land-locked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States
UNCTAD

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