

The Cook Islands

National Report for the 2014 Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) Conference and post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

“Navigating Stormy Seas through Changing winds” -

**Developing an Economy whilst preserving a National Identity and the modern
challenges of a Small Island Developing State**

GLOSSARY

AUSAID	Australian Agency for International Development
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADB/CIER	Asian Development Bank/ Cook Islands Economic Report 2001 and 2008
BPOA	Barbados Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIANGO	Cook Islands Association of Non Government Organizations
CINCW	Cook Islands National Council of Women
CIG	Cook Islands Government
CROP	Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific
CSO	Civil Society Organisation/s
ECE	Early Childhood Education
GADD	Gender and Development Division (Ministry of Internal Affairs)
GNI	Gross National Income
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
JNAP	Joint National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Management
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MFEM	Ministry of Finance and Economic Management
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOH	Ministry of Health
MMR	Ministry of Marine Resources
MSI	Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States
NESAF	National Environmental Strategic Action Framework
NES	National Environment Services
NSDP	National Sustainable Development Plan
NCDs	Non Communicable Diseases
MFEM	Ministry of Finance and Economic Management
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PEFA	Public Finance Expenditure Assessment
PICTA	Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement
PACER	Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PSC	Public Service Commission
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRIC	Strengthening Resilience of Island Communities Program
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
TCI	Telecom Cook Islands
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UN	United Nations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cook Islands national development strategy is known as the “Te Kaveinga Nui,” which is translated as the ‘national journey the Cook Islands is making in its development as a country.’ The last decade has seen the largest sea change in the history of the country since self-governance with significant depopulation coinciding with a decade of unprecedented economic growth. The Cook Islands in this respect is quite unique, and there is an obvious need to take a deeper look into the development dynamics in-country to make sense of these changes.

This report provides an opportunity to reflect on the development experience over the course of this period, ascertaining lessons to be learned, gaps in the development framework, key challenges and opportunities in aligning the country’s development approach with its aspirations in future. Accordingly the report is comprised of five sections: 1) Stocktake and Review of Development Progress; 2) Areas for Recommitment; 3) New and Emerging Challenges; 4) Priorities for Sustainable development; and 5) Conclusions.

Stock take of development progress

The stock take on development progress reviewed the Cook Islands development experience through the lens of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Barbados Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (BPOA), the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States - 5 year review (MSI+5) and the regional development themes as identified by the Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP) Agencies. This first section is an overview of the development Cook Islands through different lenses of the aforementioned themes (totalling 38) under the eight priority development areas set out by the National Sustainable Development Plan. The Cook Islands is for the most part on track to achieve its MDG targets and the introduction of the NSDP has greatly augmented the policy and planning framework of government. However, consultations and closer analysis shows gaps assessing the development of the country. Reflections on the country’s recent development experience revealed the following key lessons:

1. The **MDGs have helped** improved planning and resourcing in Education and Health.
2. The establishment of a consolidated national development plan (**NSDP**) **has helped** to align national plans and actions.
3. **Evidence-based policy** has helped to **improve the efficacy of development** efforts over time.
4. **Improvements** resultant from the use **Evidence-based policy require mid to long term commitment** to embed in the institution framework of departments and agencies.
5. Improvements in **Public Financial Management** and the Policy & Planning framework have **improved accessibility** to donor support for development

Our review of development themes and reflections on the development experience also revealed the following gaps:

- Some MDGs and targets were **not relevant** to the Cook Islands context
- Some **development partners are unable or unwilling to use national systems** that could deliver development assistance efficient manner
- Appropriate metrics or **policies to address population movement** do not yet exist
- Non-reporting on the informal economy and its impact undervalues its contribution to national welfare.

Areas for Recommitment

The second section of the report focuses on identifying areas that require further commitment and attention so the country can better approach its development in a holistic manner. The report recommends five different areas that require greater attention in helping the country to address its development needs.

- Governance
- Evidence-based Policy
- Policy Coordination
- Depopulation
- Investment in the Social Sector

The policy development framework is still in its relative infancy and despite improvements with capacity building and planning there is a need for greater appreciation for **evidence-based policy**, thus resulting in a lack of resourcing and commitment to improve information collection and reporting systems. There have been significant advances in the policy framework with development of the NSDP and progress with public financial management improving the Cook Islands ability to manage funds and activities through its national planning systems and in the process negotiate better terms with development partners for the access and use of development funds. However there remains a need to continue to improve and address weaknesses in **governance structures** particularly the **coordination and implementation of policy**, through resourcing of the policy coordination and political commitment to accountability in the implementation of policy. The impact of an unbalanced appreciation of the range of development priorities, with political attention fixated on economic development has seen **investment in the social sector decline** as a percentage of total government expenditure of the course of the last decade. The most pertinent and stark illustration of the neglect of social issues is the **absence of policy directly addressing depopulation**, which is almost unanimously regarded as the country's most pressing issue.

New and Emerging Challenges

The report identified three key emerging and cross cutting issues that the Cook Islands must respond to in effectively addressing its development needs.

1. **Climate Change** is a cross cutting issue that will require coordinated policy response from the public sector and civil society in addressing adaption measures, food security and in the longer term, sea level rise.
2. **The Global Economic Crisis** has and will continue to influence the policy environment of the country for the foreseeable future. In addressing development needs, there must be consideration of the wider costs of the current stimulus approach and the perceived trade off between investment in economic growth and investment in the social sector and environment.
3. **Societal and Cultural Changes** have impacted the development needs of the country significantly with depopulation and the increase of immigrant labour and its resulting diversity substantially altering the context for policy in this area. The erosion of the traditional extended family unit and community support system with cultural change has also drastically reshaped the expectations and demands on Cook Islanders and government in ensuring the welfare of the country.

Priorities for Sustainable Development

To align current development priorities with those identified in the report as needing recommitment, as well as meet the challenges mentioned in the previous section, the report outlines six priorities for sustainable development.

1. **Good Governance**; being a prerequisite for the effective and efficient administration and allocation of resources to support the country's development efforts in accordance with long term aspirations.
2. **Population and People**; with the need to protect and invest in the people that are the target beneficiaries from the country's development program.
3. **Self Sustainability**; with a view to reduce economic dependence and vulnerability by developing capacity to cater to the nation's own energy needs and food security through investment in renewable energy and food security initiatives respectively.
4. **Climate Change and Disaster Risk management** ; in being proactive in addressing and mainstreaming policy responses to the various short and long term impacts of climate change.
5. **Infrastructure**; to safeguard and improve the welfare and wellbeing of the country in the long term whilst administering its development and management in an efficient and sustainable manner.
6. **Economic Development**; to secure and grow the economy in the short to mid-term focusing on tourism whilst making efforts to diversify the economic base in the longer term (Deep sea minerals, fisheries and revitalising agriculture) for reinvestment into the country's long term development needs.

Conclusions

In synthesizing lessons and reflections from the Cook Islands experience the report offers the following recommendations that are relevant to various forums that this report addresses:

National:

- Identify key metrics that are relevant, applicable and reflective of development at the community and national levels
- Continued strengthening of budgetary and performance management national systems
- Build capacity and capabilities in policy development analysis, monitoring and evaluation
- A review of development priorities for the country

Pacific Preparatory Meeting:

- Research and development of metrics to reflect the contribution of the subsistence economy, culture and society as part of national output and productivity
- Development of a key metric/metrics for climate change adaptation
- Promotion of the use of country systems
- Need for consistency in messages relating to development from the Pacific to the global arena
- Clear linkages between Pacific regional and national development frameworks

SIDS Conference 2014:

- Guidance on development mix (between donor funds and tax revenues) for the sustainable development of SIDS in different scenarios/ stages of development
- Maintaining the special case for SIDS and reflection of the unique challenges faced in the development of the SDGs and Post 2015 Development Agenda, particularly in the case of narrow economic base for most islands; and the threats of climate change and natural disaster to development

SDGs and Post 2015 Development Agenda:

- Including both non-economic and economic indicators into the SDG framework to provide a holistic/realistic view of development priorities
- Guidance in prioritising between development areas and targets in the SDG framework

It is also suggested that in cultivating **effective development relationships**, the Cook Islands with recent improvements its aid coordination and financial management framework, will increasingly pursue bilateral arrangements over regional and multilateral relationships due to inefficiencies in dealing with multilateral and regional mechanisms in accessing developments assistance.

With the various challenges and vulnerabilities outlined in this report, the Cook Islands is fortunate to be in a position where it still is able to be proactive in reassessing its approach to development. By taking initiative and pursuing the above recommendations, the Cook Islands has the opportunity to secure its own development aspirations as well set an example for other SIDS in developing a holistic policy development framework that reinforces sustainable development principles.

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