

Social Policies in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu

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Commonwealth Secretariat



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Foreword

During the 1960s and 1970s, increased interest was shown by international organisations such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat in small states, and especially in small island developing states (SIDS), and the development challenges they faced during the decolonisation period. With over a third of Commonwealth member countries classified as small economies, the Secretariat is committed to the study of small states. The issue of their vulnerability, for example, was first given formal expression within the Commonwealth at the 1977 Finance Ministers Meeting in Barbados. Having noted the special characteristics of small states – in particular their reliance on trade, high dependence on capital inflows and, in some cases, lack of natural resources – ministers urged the international community to show a more flexible approach to their requirements and adopt special measures to assist them. In response, the Secretariat designed a programme to assist in overcoming ‘the disadvantages of small size, isolation and scarce resources, which severely limit the capacity of such countries to achieve their development objectives or to pursue their national interests in a wider international context’.

In 1983, with the political repercussions of the US invasion of Grenada still resonant, Commonwealth leaders meeting in New Delhi expressed their belief that the problems of small states ‘deserved consideration on a wider basis, including that of national security’. A Commonwealth consultative group was commissioned to carry out such an examination. Its report, *Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society*, published in 1985, was the first to highlight the inherent vulnerability of small states to external interference. By reasserting their vulnerability and the threats they faced, and by outlining economic and foreign policy measures to mitigate these, the report raised the political profile of small states in international forums.

Following this publication, the Ministerial Group on Small States was set up to continue the discussion of issues of importance to small states. At the Group’s second meeting in 1995, ministers recognised that the international context had changed dramatically since the end of the cold war. This led to the creation of a Commonwealth advisory group of eminent persons whose report, *A Future for Small States: Overcoming Vulnerability*, was published in 1997.

In 1998 the Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Joint Task Force on Small States was formed. In 2000 it published its seminal report, *Small States: Meeting Challenges in the Global Economy*. The report concluded that addressing the challenges faced by small states required correct domestic policies, regional co-operation, assistance from multilateral and bilateral development institutions, and improvements in the external environment. It highlighted four areas of special relevance to successful development: tackling volatility, vulnerability and natural disasters; transitioning to the changing

global trade regime; strengthening capacity; and benefiting from the opportunities and coping with the challenges of globalisation. It recommended that an annual forum should be held during the IMF–World Bank meeting, at which international donors could report on their activities in small states. Small states have garnered additional support and attention from international donors as a result, but more remains to be done. A 2005/06 review of the task force report established that small states are still vulnerable and that they continue to face development challenges associated with their size.

In adopting Agenda 21, one of the key outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Earth Summit) in 1992, the wider international community also recognised the special challenges that SIDS face in planning for sustainable development. As a result, the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States took place in Barbados in 1994. The plan that emerged, the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA), is the principal international framework for addressing the special challenges and constraints faced by SIDS in their pursuit of sustainable development. The BPOA addresses 14 major themes, ranging from climate change through coastal and marine resources to tourism and human resource development.

The ten-year comprehensive review of the BPOA led to the adoption in January 2005 of the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, which covers 19 thematic areas, including climate change and sea level rise, natural and environmental disasters, and energy resources. The Strategy notes that for its successful implementation SIDS require effective human, institutional and technical capacity development; effective monitoring and co-ordination, including through SIDS regional organisations; and support from the international community, particularly through financial and technical backing.

Finally, Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 8, on developing a global partnership for development, specifically mentions the special needs of landlocked countries and SIDS. Yet despite this attention to small states, there are still major gaps in our understanding of their unique development process and experience. Insufficient study has been devoted to the social and economic issues they face. In particular, there is virtually no comparative research on social policy issues or on how social policies affect economic development. This paper, together with others in this series, attempts to fill this gap by taking a distinctive approach to social policy, which it sees as encompassing concerns about redistribution, production, reproduction and protection. The papers show how some small states have succeeded in improving their social indicators through appropriate social policies, how others are moving in the right direction and how some are falling behind or failing. Despite their inherent vulnerability, some small states have been successful precisely because they have implemented complementary social and economic policies and strategies. By looking at these countries in comparative perspective, we can draw interesting lessons on policy.

The papers in this series are outputs of the research project 'Social Policies in Small States', led by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat from 2007 to 2009. Fourteen country studies were commissioned and their findings were discussed at regional workshops in the Caribbean and Pacific. Four thematic papers framed and complemented the country level research. We hope that the findings of this research will be useful to scholars and policy-makers concerned with the social and economic development issues facing small states.

The research project was designed and co-ordinated by Naren Prasad with assistance from Nicola Hypher and Megan Gerecke at UNRISD, and in collaboration with Constance Vigilance at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

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