SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES SOLUTIONS PLATFORM

CONCEPT NOTE
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1. Introduction

1.1 Context

During the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the United Nations (UN) declared that development partners should consider Small Island Developing States (SIDS) as a particular case because of their unique development context (UN, 1992).

Nine years later in 2001, the UN created its Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS) to mobilize international support and advocate in favor of these countries. UN-OHRLLS classifies 38 countries as SIDS based on remoteness from world markets, high exposure and vulnerability to climate change, and fragile natural environments (2021).

Many UN agencies accede to this classification; however, based on membership nuances, for example, FAO (2021) and UNESCO (2021) include Cook Islands – an associate member of UN-OHRLLS – thereby increasing their coverage to 39 SIDS.

The 39 SIDS are spread across three global regions including Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean And South China Sea (AIMS); the Caribbean; and Pacific regions (FAO, 2021). The AIMS region is home to eight SIDS including Cabo Verde, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles and Singapore; while the Caribbean region is home to the majority of SIDS totaling 16. These include Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. The Pacific region is home to the second largest number of SIDS, which include Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.
SIDS are characterized by small populations and numerous atolls that are thinly spread across vast bodies of water. For example, in the Pacific, Tuvalu has a population of about 11 000, while Fiji, the second most populous country after Papua New Guinea has a population of 889 953 (World Bank, 2019) inhabiting 110 of its 330 islands (Mapsland, 2021). In the AIMS region, only 194 of Maldives’ 1,192 islands are inhabited; with 71 percent of them having populations of 1 000 or fewer and a land area of each being less than 50 hectares (FAO, 2019).

In the Caribbean region, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is an archipelago of over 30 islands, islets and cays with a population of 109 000 living mostly on the mainland (FAO, 2015).

Home to some of the world’s extremely rich marine and terrestrial biodiversity hotspots, SIDS thrive mainly on tourism, and marine based natural resources and agriculture. In 2019, tourism contributed 34 and 45 percent of Jamaica (Lopez, 2020) and Palau’s (World Data, 2021) gross domestic product (GDP) respectively.

Conversely, in Seychelles, fisheries is the second most important sector after tourism, contributing 20 percent of GDP (World Bank, 2017). Agriculture is the third largest contributor to Fiji’s GDP bringing in about 10.4 percent (Pacific Community, 2021). Some SIDS are also very rich with natural flora, for example, about 80 percent of Papua New Guinea’s land is covered by tropical forests (FAO, 2018).

The development potential in SIDS therefore lies mainly in optimizing tourism, fisheries, agriculture and entrepreneurship. With the advent of the Internet, many developing countries, specifically in Asia, have drawn on the power of innovation and digitalization to optimize tourism, fisheries, agriculture, etc… to advance social and economic development.

Current levels of agricultural production and value chain development are low in many SIDS, particularly Pacific SIDS, but these sectors provide a very good basis for development by improving the enabling environment. Female coco and vanilla farmers in Samoa are producing chocolates; Fijian farmers are making progress in value addition and agribusiness, while technology savvy locals in other Pacific SIDS are trying to replicate digital agricultural practices from Asia and Africa. The AIMS region SIDS have uniquely diverse opportunities, for example

Singapore has so much to offer in terms of technology, tourism management and economic development, while Seychelles is a hotbed for fish processing (World Bank, 2017), which could benefit other AIMS SIDS and beyond in terms of knowledge sharing.

These opportunities are however, not without challenges, for example, the demographic and geographic context challenges transportation, communications, trade, and learning between farmers within the least developed SIDS, and between several SIDS in general.
SIDSS have unenviable high exposure and vulnerability to climate change induced disasters. For example, annually, Tonga and Vanuatu experience at least two cyclones with high social and economic impacts. According to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) the damage caused by Cyclones Pam in 2015 and Winston in 2016 amounted to 64 percent of Vanuatu’s GDP (PIFS, 2018). Heavy rains across Timor-Leste from 29 March to 4 April 2021 resulted in flash floods and landslides affecting all 13 municipalities of the country to varying degrees (UNICEF, 2021). In 2020, Cyclone Harold’s damage to livelihoods in Fiji exceeded USD40 million (Reliefweb, 2020). The overall impact of cyclones on Pacific SIDS’ GDP increased from 3.88 percent in 2012 to 15.6 percent in 2016 (PIFS, 2018), while in 2017 hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate produced one of the deadliest and devastating tropical cyclone seasons in the history of Caribbean SIDS (UN, 2021). Because of the high frequency of natural disasters, the population of SIDS also have very strong traditional mechanisms for disaster resilience, for example, climate smart agricultural practices, cost efficient food preparation methods, etc… A community in the Federated State of Micronesia can prepare and serve food to more than 100 people without the need to use modern cutlery, while ensuring good hygiene and food safety practices. These present good opportunities for disaster resilience, but also innovation like cultural marketing, and digitalization to advance social and economic development.

By obesity rate, the first ten spots on the list of the world’s most obese countries are saturated by SIDS (World Population Review, 2021), about 0.4 million children in Pacific SIDS do not consume healthy diets (FAO, UNICEF, WFP & WHO, 2021), and 33 percent of Caribbean SIDS’ population is obese (FAO, UN-HORLLS & UNDESA, 2017). Obesity prevalence is 18 and 7.8 percent for men and women respectively in Southern African where most of the AIMS SIDS are located (Global nutrition report, 2021). The national responses to this common problem are not without nuances - including varied good practices - presenting opportunities for shared learning. This raises questions about the need for a focused and nimble knowledge exchange platform for addressing common challenges in SIDS.

Compared to other countries, COVID-19 cases in SIDS are not high but SIDS are equally affected by impacts of the preventive measures instituted by governments all over the world. For example, Samoa’s GDP for 2020 contracted by 9.2 percent because of COVID-19 (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Moreover, evidence suggests that the pandemic is reversing gains in achieving some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in SIDS, for example, in the Pacific (UNESCAP, 2021).

However, a combination of the bright side of one of the challenges of SIDS (geographic remoteness) and how the populations have lived with climate change over history (traditional disaster resilience capacity) has positively enabled most SIDS to withstand the impacts of COVID-19, for example, by increasing the consumption of local foods. Conversely, local SIDS’ populations have become creative in coping with the impacts of lockdowns on livelihoods, by inventing and using various strategies, some of which demonstrate success and deserve to be analytically documented, nurtured, promoted and scaled up as necessary. However, we risk losing these local innovations because of the lack of a uniquely innovative knowledge incubation and dissemination platform in SIDS. Governments, development partners and communities need to act.
1.2 Existing knowledge exchange platforms serving SIDS

Special research is required to comprehensively catalogue current platforms that are facilitating knowledge sharing in SIDS. The goal here therefore is to look at a few selected case studies of current “uniquely innovative knowledge exchange platforms” for SIDS, and why improvement is needed. FAO in collaboration with national governments manages the biennial Pacific Week of Agriculture (PWA), and although one could question its financial sustainability, the platform is a success, largely because national governments have taken ownership. But as the name suggests, PWA is limited by its particular focus on agricultural policy and the coverage of only 13 of the 39 SIDS recognized by FAO.

Pacific SIDS also have a very successful biennial Resilience Week, focused on strengthening institutional policy and capacity in mitigating the impacts of climate change on livelihoods. And although efforts are increasingly being made to bring local communities to the forum, the Resilience Week remains largely a high level policy forum of government and development partner personnel. There is also room to expand this platform to other SIDS since they have a common set of climate change challenges.

The Commonwealth has a membership of 54 countries and classifies 32 as small states, and states that:

*We push for international policies and rules to be more responsive to small states’ needs; We help small states access financing, build resilience, and have a voice on the global stage; and we deliver our work through economic research and analysis, and put our ideas into action in toolkits for small states (The Commonwealth, 2021, pp.2).*

These activities are an excellent support to small states, but they are limited by the fact that due to its historical and geopolitical set up, the Commonwealth’s small states classification only includes 13 of the 38 or 39 SIDS recognized by UN-OHRLLS and FAO respectively.

There is also the Secretariat of African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), which has an excellent suite of knowledge exchange programs supporting its 79 member states. However, like the Commonwealth, based on its historical and geopolitical set up, the ACP’s member states exclude some SIDS, for example, Maldives, Timor Leste, etc… (ACP, 2021), which points to a strong rationale for creating a more comprehensive knowledge exchange platform for all SIDS. UNDP recently launched its accelerator lab in Samoa with coverage to several Pacific SIDS.

The accelerator lab presents an excellent opportunity for complementarity with several other knowledge incubation and exchange platforms in SIDS.

These five narrowly selected cases of knowledge exchange platforms suggest that there is room for improving local community involvement, geographic inclusivity and diversity, and optimizing complementarity.

Additionally, there is room for pursuing a more programmatic approach with a concrete mechanism for harvesting, incubating, replicating, and scaling up local development solutions. Moreover, with the arrival of COVID-19, there is a need to specifically focus on accelerating achievement of the SDGs in SIDS and based on success, expanding the platform to all developing countries.
2. The SIDS Solutions Platform

2.1. Objective

The objective of the proposed SIDS Solutions Platform is to provide a uniquely innovative intra and interregional knowledge exchange platform to incubate, promote, scale up and replicate locally grown ideas to accelerate the achievement of agriculture, food, nutrition, environment and health related SDGs in SIDS; but to also allow SIDS to copy good practices from other countries.

2.2. Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic is evidently reversing development gains over the past years, and SIDS stand to be one of the biggest losers if aggressive and innovative counter measures are not put in place quickly. The rationale for the proposed SIDS Solutions Platform is to complement ongoing initiatives that can bring increased impetus to achieving the SDGs, specifically those related to agriculture, food, nutrition, environment and health in SIDS. The proposed platform will fill the void of a convener, incubation hub and enabler of locally grown development solutions in SIDS.

A key supposition is that SIDS have replicable and scalable solutions to their development challenges, but they lack the enabling mechanism to make a greater contribution. The theory of change is therefore the belief that development partners only need to create the enabling environment, and local solutions in SIDS will have cascading results and impacts.

2.3. Modality

The SIDS Solutions Platform proposed by FAO is unique because it is not simply a conference or a forum; it is a platform constituted by an active and ongoing facilitation platform for the identification, incubation, dissemination and implementation of development solutions. Specifically, the platform will have two key modalities

Identification, incubation and dissemination of local solutions: Under this modality, the platform will engage local communities, producer groups, entrepreneurs, policy makers, etc. to capture and analyze locally grown solutions that have passed the proof of concept stage and demonstrate success and sustainability, and the potential for scalability in the same country or to other SIDS in contributing to the accelerated delivery of the SDGs. This work will be climaxed by a two-day biennial forum during which several solutions will be showcased to public and private sector policy makers and development partners. The biennial forum will have changing themes, host countries and co-organizers reflecting evolutions within the development context.

Implementation of development solutions: Under this modality, the program will work with national governments over a process that will define and implement a clear path for supporting locally grown solutions. This process will also involve the creation of various partnerships involving governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors, the private sector and local communities.
2.4. Ownership

FAO is designing the SIDS Solutions Platform to be locally (community) and nationally (government) led with strategic support from development partners and donors. The platform will create a unique space where youth and women can provide collaborative leadership with several stakeholders, particularly the private sector, governments and donors. Emphases will be placed on harnessing innovation, technology, entrepreneurship, traditional resilience and skills development to optimize local creativity.

2.5. Opportunities and risks

Today, with increasing access to the Internet, locally grown digital innovation is on the rise more than ever before. For example, in Samoa, female farmers are leveraging social media to expand their access to the local vegetable, fruit and handicraft market. Individuals in several Pacific SIDS are using digital means to barter goods and services, for example, taro for a taxi ride in Fiji, etc. to mitigate effects of COVID-19 lockdowns. Prior to COVID-19 in Fiji, community groups had developed an app that can provide indicative information about the nutritional value of a meal plate via photography whether in a restaurant or at home. Governments and the private sector are also obviously very actively leading in this fledgling space of innovation and digitalization. Vodafone is promoting various e-payment platforms that are very useful for farmers in Samoa, Fiji and Vanuatu. And UN agencies are equally promoting various relevant initiatives, for example, FAO recently launched its Hand in Hand Initiative in Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati. The Hand in Hand Initiative facilitates match making between farmers, fishers, food processors for shared learning and leveraging. Additionally, FAO is expanding its Digital Village Initiative to selected SIDS; UNDP has an accelerator lab in Pacific SIDS; and the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) is aggressively incubating digital payment tools in the Pacific.

While there are many opportunities, there are also limitations. For example, most of the initiatives are coming from a few countries, like Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu because of their unique capacities. There is an opportunity to nurture and scale up to other countries if they desire. Some of the digital platforms are very basic with enormous room for improvement. Beyond this Pacific context, many digital initiatives are facilitating agriculture, food systems, nutrition and climate change resilience in Asia and Africa from which SIDS could benefit significantly through knowledge exchange.

2.6. Sustainability

The need to accelerate achievement of the SDGs cannot be overstated among governments and development partners; but also, among community and civil society groups. Governments and development partners are running out of patience for getting results from their investments aimed at social and economic development. The sustainability of the SIDS Solutions Platform will draw on the will of local communities and national governments to lead. It will also benefit from development partners’ appetite to explore more options that can accelerate achievement of the SDGs. FAO will establish a steering committee led by governments and civil society groups, development partners and donors to create the winning conditions for the sustainable continuity and expansion of the SIDS Solutions Platform. But more importantly, the steering committee will provide guidance and contribute to resource mobilization to incubate and enable local development solutions that will accelerate achievement of the relevant SDGs.
3. The First SIDS Solutions Forum: 2021

3.1. Overview

The first SIDS Solutions Forum is slated for 30 and 31 August 2021. Because of the current COVID-19 circumstances, the Forum will draw on a hybrid virtual and physical attendance approach. Local health context permitting, participants in different countries will gather at specific locations keeping in mind that Internet access remains challenging, while the rest of the audience will participate virtually. The 2021 gathering will be inaugural, putting in place the biennial SIDS Solutions Platform.

The first day will be marked by two successive two-hour high-level sessions attended by prime ministers/heads of state, the Director General of FAO, and the heads of other UN agencies, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and donors. The purpose is for these leaders to stimulate critical engagements among participants about the value proposition of the new platform in the context of COVID-19 with emphases on accelerating the achievement of the SDGs in SIDS. The expected output is a collective international commitment for supporting and using the new platform to accelerate development in SIDS.

The second day will be technical and allow community groups and individuals to engage institutional policy makers, development practitioners and the private sector over the practical modalities directly associated with the identification, adaptation and replication of proven solutions.

The day will provide a very concrete takeaway for national groups; and because of the multiple layers of planning that are required in formulating this output, FAO will use the preceding months to the forum to engage and facilitate prioritization and planning by national stakeholders.

FAO will also showcase at least ten viable innovative and digital solutions on this day to stimulate exchanges among participants. The expectation is that national groups will leave the forum with clear ideas over which innovation and digitalization solutions they would like to pursue that will accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

3.2. Theme

The overall theme of the first SIDS Solutions Forum planned for August 2021 is centered on COVID impacts on the economy and how digitalization and innovation can be fostered and further supported to enable broader deployment to support faster progress towards more resilient food systems, improved nutrition and health; and enhanced climate adaptation. The Forum will explore digitalization and innovation in a policy and practitioner owned space to identify how digitalization and innovation are, and can catalyze the pace of achieving agriculture, food, nutrition, environment and health related SDGs in SIDS.
3.3. Objective of the 2021 Forum

The 2021 SIDS Solutions Forum is aimed at illuminating the potential of digitalization and innovation in catalyzing and accelerating achievement of agriculture, food, nutrition, environment and health SDGs.

3.4. Rationale for choosing digitalization and innovation

The rationale for choosing digitalization and innovation as the theme for the 2021 Forum is driven by two key imperatives. First, agriculture, food, nutrition, the environment and health systems need to benefit from new and innovative solutions, and digitalization and innovation offer a bright light among the alternatives.

The existing evidence for success is not only in the industrialized world. In many developing countries in Asia and Africa, digitalization and innovation are also improving livelihoods via connectivity, efficiency, productivity, profitability, knowledge exchange and functional partnerships that are unprecedented, specifically for rural development. A farmer in India or China can receive real-time technical guidance about plant production and protection while in the garden from extension officers hundreds of miles away.

Vegetable farmers in Kenya and Uganda are no longer losing time and money traveling to wholesalers to collect the proceeds of their supplies due to digital payment platforms. In the Philippines and Vietnam local decision-making processes concerning preparation of crop fields against impending cyclones have become faster because of real-time alerts from national authorities. SIDS cannot afford to be left behind by the rest of world in harnessing the power of digitalization and innovation in improving rural livelihoods.

Second, during the January 2019 Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA), about 76 agriculture ministers and high-level representatives from international organizations requested FAO to lead a collaborative process that will result in the creation of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture as a platform for knowledge exchange (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, 2021). SIDS cannot afford to sit on the sidelines of this new thinking.

3.5. Challenges of digitalization and innovation

As with the introduction of all new development tools and paradigms, the prospect of promoting digitalization and innovation is exciting, but we cannot ignore its inherent risks. For example, digitalization has the potential to create a ‘digital divide’ between countries and between families because of socioeconomic disparities. For example, young, literate families, and individuals located in geographies of better broadband coverage are more likely to be competitive and benefit from digitalization and innovation than others. And the negative uses of digital technologies, for example, misinformation, are inevitable.
3.6. Planning the 2021 forum

Prior to 30 and 31 August 2021, the selected dates for the first SIDS Solutions Forum, the following activities will happen as part of the planning process.

**Desk reviews and consultations:** A senior international consultant recruited by FAO for digitalization and innovation will complete a desk review that will identify and analytically profile several trends of locally grown digital innovations in SIDS. The analysis will then be the basis and guidance that local communities and governments can use to identify solutions that have passed the proof of concept, ready for replication, and scale up. FAO will also facilitate a process that will allow communities and national governments to develop concrete plans for the implementation of their selected solutions. Short video clips will be developed as part of the profiling of specific trends of solutions and showcased on the second day of the Forum.

**Partnership building:** FAO will work with relevant partners to create a secretariat to oversee the coordination of the 2021 Forum and the implementation of its recommendations after the gathering. To facilitate the work of the secretariat and ensure the active participation of women and youth, FAO has recruited a consultant for women and youth engagement. A second senior international consultant for event planning is working on the technical preparation of the forum, for example, logistics, platform, speakers selection, harvesting results of the forum, reporting, etc.... One facilitator and one communications specialist will also retained one month each. The former will manage the agenda of the workshop, while the later will provide communications support, for example, marketing of the Forum, etc.... Youth groups through academic institutions and entrepreneurial networks, and women’s groups will be mobilized to play critical leadership roles in the design and running of the Forum.

At the strategic level, FAO senior management will engage global leaders of relevant UN agencies, IFIs, private sector agencies, academic institutions, donors, etc... to support the success of the SIDS Solutions Platform. Additionally, this strategic partnership will be pursued at regional and national levels under the leadership of the FAO Assistant Director General and Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific. A key objective of this strategic partnership building is to provide a mechanism for ensuring that there are resources to incubate, promote and enable the replication and scale up of locally grown solutions that can accelerate achievement of the SDGs in SIDS and other developing countries. As another layer of partnerships, FAO will seek co-organizers for this year’s Forum, and the subsequent gatherings.

3.7. Audience of the 2021 forum

The core audience of the 2021 Forum are local community practitioners from SIDS. Significant efforts – several pre-Forum engagement dialogues - are being made to ensure that youth and women are not only major participants, but that they are also major leaders of proceedings at the Forum. A value proposition for this Forum is the unique opportunity to bring community practitioners and global leaders in the same space to work on local solutions for local challenges. This is because the Forum will bring together world leaders, including Prime Ministers, the Director General of FAO, heads of other UN agencies, IFIs, academic and private sector organizations. Sandwiched by the global leaders and community practitioners will be regional and national technicians and policy makers who can make things happen on the ground.
3.8. Post forum activities

The post Forum activities are a follow up aimed at facilitating the implementation of the Forum results. The first step is for FAO to engage national stakeholders to confirm their choice of a set of solutions and how to implement them. The Forum secretariat, via the senior international consultant for digitalization and innovation, will provide technical guidance so that governments are able to integrate the chosen solutions into their national investment plans. The second step is the actual implementation aimed at providing concrete results in catalyzing achievement of the SDGs. The Forum steering committee and FAO will support resource mobilization to enable the expansion and implementation of the selected solutions.
4. Timeline for Key Milestones

20 April 2021: Invitations for 2021 forum sent out

30 April 2021: Desk reviews and consultations complete and forum agenda formulated

07 May 2021: Speakers confirmed

15 May 2021: SIDS Development Solutions Platform Secretariat established

30 July 2021: Pre-forum dialogues facilitated

30 and 31 August 2021: SIDS Development Solutions Platform Forum

30 September 2021: Forum Report

01 September 2021: Follow of post forum results and implementation begins
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