

EVALUATIVE REVIEW ON THE BARRIERS TO DEVELOPMENT IN SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES AND COMBATIVE REFORMS IN THE YEARS 1992, 1994, 2005 & 2024

*Abbien Greene*¹

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Small Island Developing States have seen many barriers to development due to historical occurrences resulting in a delayed state of growth when compared with other countries. The aim of this article is to review four SIDS reports with a focus on various spheres to dissect the progress made between 1992 and 2024.

Materials and Methods: The reports used consist of the 1992 ‘Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development’, the 1994 ‘Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States’, the 2005 ‘Report of the International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States’ and the 2024 “Draft outcome document of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States”.

Results: Steady development is being made and objectives have shifted accordingly over time; however, many of the mentioned barriers have remained consistent in blocking development. Domestic, regional and international aid are encouraged but only with an understanding of the gravity of these barriers.

Conclusion and Summary: As the states gained their independence, they also became disconnected from the previous economic, social and environmental management or agreements, leaving them to simultaneously navigate both internal and external challenges. The strategic plans produced in the SIDS conferences have taken history into account and this is seen in the acknowledgement of economic, social and environmental aspects which have been and continue to be met with combative strategies.

¹ University of Gdańsk, Abbien.greene@gmail.com, [ORCID: 0009-0008-5193-3835](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5193-3835)

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1. Introduction

Small Island Developing States, more commonly known as SIDS, have been a point on the agenda in many governments throughout the world. SIDS are a coalition of governments joined together in recognition of mutual problems, unique to the involved members. SIDS began as part of the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, more commonly known as UN-OHRLLS, which was formed in 2001. While SIDS are still under the supervision of UN-OHRLLS, the commitment to the development of member states began years before and through UN-OHRLLS they have grown into a motivated group of countries aiding each other fully in development towards sustainability. This sub-coalition is currently made up of thirty-nine states located in various regions yet facing similar barriers to development. UN-OHRLLS has made it their mission to “mobilise international support and advocate in favour of the three vulnerable country groups”. The SIDS community meet at conferences to discuss various matters of sustainability as well as propose strategic plans to combat them. Of the resulting reports, this review focuses on the 1992 ‘Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development’, the 1994 ‘Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States’, the 2005 ‘Report of the International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States’ and the 2024 “Draft outcome document of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States”. The 1992 report was the product of a conference held in Rio, Brazil aimed at environmental sustainability and while it was not a SIDS report, it has served as the basis for all succeeding reports. The 1994 SIDS report was the product of a conference held in Barbados and is vital for understanding barriers as it was one of the first conferences entirely dedicated to SIDS. The 2005 report was published after the SIDS conference in Mauritius and holds great importance as it is a strong example of processes that have been created and strategies that were successfully implemented. Finally, the 2024 report from the most recent SIDS conference in Antigua and Barbuda is a modern representation of barriers that currently and persistently present themselves on the path to sustainability in the SIDS community. This topic gains importance as the SIDS counties enter international markets and become major players in various industries such as tourism and agriculture, the

challenges they face have begun to be recognized by international governments and organizations alike. Given their international emergence, the islands have faced comparably unfair treatment as there are barriers to development and therefore growth by which other nations are unaffected. If international players are to expect economic and political partnership from Small Island Developing States, they must in turn be willing to aid in the mitigation of the barriers which they face. The objective of the study is to review the projection and objectives of the SIDS coalition. The primary research topics for this review are to determine what barriers are in the way of SIDS development, what has been done thus far to mitigate them and what frameworks are being implemented to do so in the future. Given the nature of this article, secondary data was used in the collection and evaluation of the topic. The SIDS reports and publications were predominantly the source of information for this review.

2. Economic Barriers

The 1992 report produced at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development revealed the economic reality of the small developing islands to many of the unaware or otherwise distant nations. It stated the lack of possibility in global economic markets for these developing states on account of reasons such as debt, which had occurred in the post-independence period (UN Rio de Janeiro 1992, p. 5). The report made mention of the expectation of the developing countries to function at full capacity ‘in the midst of considerable social and political tensions’ (UN Rio de Janeiro 1992). The report emphasised the need to classify these nations differently than those states which were considered developed at the time. The report further emphasised the importance of the UN’s intentions by stating that ‘International cooperation in this area should be designed to complement and support – not to diminish or subsume’ (UN Rio de Janeiro, 1992, p. 14). As was the nature of the conference, the report made many suggestions towards restructuring the economy in such a way that allowed for global cooperation towards development and the protection of the environment.

2.1. Barbados

The 1994 Barbados Conference for Small Island Developing States reiterated the principles mentioned in its prior 1992 counterpart with a greater focus on developing connections amongst member states as opposed to the focus on global cooperation. The intention was not meant to take away from the importance of global cooperation, but rather to pinpoint and specify the challenges which SIDS faced. The report approached the economic barriers by stating that ‘the rate of population growth exceeds the rate of economic growth, placing serious and increasing pressure on the capacity of those countries’ ((UN Barbados, 1994, p. 8) which was a fact not mentioned in 1992. While it may have been widely known, it had not been

mentioned in the previous conference and therefore not included in the sphere of importance. The report goes on to mention more economic barriers, such as limitations concerning production as many countries were mono-crop in agriculture and even more limited in services.

2.2. Mauritius

The 2005 Mauritius report approached economics in a substantially different way than its predecessors. In fact it resembles the first SIDS report produced in 1992 in terms of its focus on environmental factors as a means of development. With regard to the economy, it was discussed as part of tourism to ensure that proper economic security was in place to support sustainable tourism. Technology was acknowledged in this report as an economic potential, and in some cases a success for SIDS economies. In addition to the mention of technology, this report also mentions science as a root of economic development, which is in line with the report's aim to focus primarily on environmental sustainability for SIDS. Trade is also mentioned as a key factor for strengthening SIDS economies by pleading for a "non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system" (UN Mauritius, 2005, p. 22). It also referred to the 2004 World Trade meeting in which the affirmation was made to "place the needs and interests of developing countries at the heart of the Doha work programme" (UN Mauritius, 2005, p. 22). It further mentions the barrier of lack of representation in economic affairs such as the mentioned Doha meeting as many SIDS countries simply have no influence and possess a substantial amount of debt. In this report, unlike Barbados and Antigua, tourism, which has always been acknowledged as having a high economic potential, was addressed in terms of environmental sustainability rather than solely for economic gain.

2.3. Antigua & Barbuda

The report produced after the 2024 SIDS meeting suggests that the economic goal of these states should be to create resilient economies. Similarly to the Barbados report, the Antigua and Barbuda report placed a substantial level of importance on fostering connectivity between the SIDS. Furthermore, the report went on to discuss how this should be done and equally, what could be done for SIDS to enter "regional markets and global supply chains, including integrating them into existing and emerging maritime and multimodal transport and economic corridors". It is clear to see that the definition of success has changed drastically throughout the development of SIDS. When comparing this report to those previously published, an efficient economy is no longer simply achieved by being considered in global markets nor by debt being erased. The standards or rather the measure of how to achieve a successful economy given the economic barriers has significantly shifted. The lack of consistent data collection was mentioned as an internal barrier which has repeat-

edly resulted in the denial of financial aid for development. The suggested solution for this barrier was to pay greater attention to “data collection, protection, transparency and data sharing” (UN Antigua 2024, p. 5). The report also drew attention to the need for economic diversification, which was an expansion on the Barbados report’s mention of the limitations of mono-crop economies – diversification through technological and digital economies as well as investment towards “consolidating market opportunities in existing sectors and markets” (UN Antigua 2024, p. 6).

3. Social Barriers

Social issues, like in many other countries, appear throughout various stages of development. Some researchers may see this as a positive sign of development; however, it could also be categorised as detrimental if those stages were prolonged over a disproportionate number of generations. Due to the interconnectivity of the extensive barriers that SIDS face, societal matters have been heavily influenced by historically staggering development. The reports and plans produced by the SIDS community have made great efforts to include social matters in the agenda, consolidating how important these matters are to the countries in their progression forward. In the 1992 publication, social issues were first addressed in four of the twenty-seven proclamations made by the UN Conference on Environment and Development. Principles twenty to twenty-four spoke of the importance of women, youth, indigenous societies and people under oppression being key agents of development and in turn deserving protection involving governing bodies. Section three of the report, titled ‘Strengthening the Roles of Major Groups’ (UN Rio 1992, pp. 373–411), goes on to discuss these principles in greater detail and would hence become the point of reference for future SIDS conferences and reports. An example of the depth of the previously mentioned third section, the objective to increase the quota of women in decision-making positions, was reiterated many times with regard to decisions of sustainability, and social and economic policymaking. The report additionally made great mention of how SIDS intended to accomplish these principles and objectives. They suggested educational reforms focused on inclusion, the eradication of illiteracy and creating or strengthening programmes dedicated to the future of women in various industries. SIDS were also encouraged to strategise “on ways to end violence against women and to take all necessary administrative, social and educational measures to eliminate violence against women in all its forms” (UN Rio 1992, p. 375). Topic specifications like these were presented with potential solutions.

3.1. Barbados

In the Barbados report of 1994, there is a declaration which reaffirms the principles given in the 1992 report. The report goes on to address social matters in the final section, titled “Human Resource Management” (UN Barbados 1994, p. 34). In

this section societal problems such as poverty, education and minority groups were briefly mentioned; however, significantly less than in the previous report of 1992. This could be due to the nature of the report as it is directed towards the environmental sustainability of SIDS. It should be mentioned that the Barbados report does provide specified solutions to the mentioned problems from a domestic, regional and international field of view. Heightened educational reforms rooted in sustainable development, increased connectivity between SIDS, and support programmes dedicated to sustainability are examples of the solutions suggested in the respective fields. The report makes note of the International Conference on Population and Development, which was to be held in Cairo from 5 to 13 September 1994, where social matters were discussed in more detail, being internally separate from the SIDS development plans.

3.2. Mauritius

The 2005 Mauritius report differentiates itself from the previously mentioned reports as it delves into an aspect of social matters that previous reports have not. This aspect refers to cultural identity and its role in the development of SIDS. In this report, Mauritius makes a declaration of its own objectives while also reaffirming points made by its predecessors. In this declaration, points seventeen to twenty are social matters which were highlighted. These matters include women and youth within sustainable development, children and their protection post natural disasters, the importance of cultural identity, and bolstering AIDS and health aid (Mauritius 2005, p. 7). While there is no section dedicated to some of these mentioned declarations, there are sections on Education, Health and Culture. The education segment, titled “Sustainable Capacity Development and Education for Sustainable Development” (UN Mauritius 2005, p. 23), states the importance of education in the development of SIDS as the need for action plans which are to be implemented by ministries of education in these nations. It also briefly mentions the need to create gender-inclusive educational systems and diversify academic possibilities. The segment on ‘Health’ addresses the various diseases which SIDS face and explains how they are a substantial barrier to human capacity. The most noticeable of these are tuberculosis, malaria, mental health and AIDS. This subsection also suggests increased funding regionally and internationally as well as the provision of medical support whether in terms of doctors or pharmaceutical aid. The segment on ‘Culture’ links identity to resilience in development. It notes that culture should be protected in tangible and intangible forms as well as supported through “national cultural policies and legislative frameworks” (UN Mauritius 2005, p. 27).

3.3. Antigua & Barbuda

Similarly to the focus of previously mentioned reports, the Antigua and Barbuda reports begin with a declaration of principles, in which two of 16 points are dedicated to social principles. Points nine and ten declare, respectively, “freedom, peace and security, respect for all human rights, including the right to development and the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food, the rule of law, gender equality, women’s empowerment, reducing inequalities” and “gender equality and women’s empowerment and the full realisation of human rights for women and girls have a transformative and multiplier effect on sustainable development and are a driver of economic growth” (Antigua 2024, p. 3). One key difference in these principles would be the mention of freedom, which stands apart from Mauritius and Barbados and resembles the 1992 report. Segment B, titled ‘Foster safe, healthy and prosperous societies’ (UN Antigua 2024, p. 6), is placed under the second section of the report dedicated to ‘What small island developing states want’ (UN Antigua 2024, p. 4). This section B consists of four points and varying subjections, the highlights being peaceful and well governed states, the eradication of social issues such as poverty and lack of minority group inclusion, and needed development in the health sectors. In the following section, titled “How do small island developing states get there?” (UN Antigua 2024, p. 13), the suggested solutions for social matters include creating quality educational systems which include academia based on technology and health. Culture is mentioned as part of the finance section on account of encouraging governing bodies and aiding institutions to support and protect cultural heritage; however, it is given minimal attention when compared to the Mauritius report.

4. Environmental Barriers

The concept of the environment has been central to the agenda for all SIDS plans, as well as being the basis of the 1992 Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. “Recognizing the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth, our home” (Rio 1992, p. 3) has been a major point of reference for subsequent SIDS plans. Twenty-seven proclamations were made in the 1992 report regarding the environment and sustainability. While some of those points were dedicated to economic or societal matters, the baseline remains that those aspects fall within the realm of sustainability. The section which specifies environmental matters is the second section of the paper titled ‘Conservation and Management of Resources for Development’ (Rio 1992, pp. 111–372). A platitude of focus points are displayed including but certainly not limited to the atmosphere, resource and agriculture management, biodiversity, and ocean and coastal matters. Each subtopic is shown with a description of the threat, objectives and the actions to be taken by the community. This section of the report provides a variety that is unrivaled when com-

pared to other sections. These matters have continued to serve as reference points regarding the barriers to, growth and responsibilities of SIDS.

4.1. Barbados

The Barbados report addresses the environment and sustainability in a similar way to the Rio 1992 report. However, among the topics of focus, 'Tourism' and 'Science and Technology' have been added to the ranks of discussion and are no longer subsections. The report makes great reference to the Rio report as it dissects the problems that have been previously mentioned versus those which are more commonly experienced by SIDS. The Barbados report clearly separates global sustainability barriers from those which arise on account of the limitations of the SIDS communities. As is consistent in this report, problems are mentioned and immediately combated with national, regional and international suggested solutions. On the national level, in many of the topic areas the suggestion is made for the further documentation of trends and occurring problems as the regional and international communities cannot aid what they do not understand. On the regional level, solutions include the facilitation of intergovernmental policies designed for governments to aid each other, while the international level solutions were based on the recognition of and fiscal support for these barriers to development. Beyond the provided solutions, the Barbados plan goes on to state the importance of the careful and effective implementation of suggested plans and strategies.

4.2. Mauritius

In the Mauritius report, environmental aspects are approached in a similar way to the Barbados report in the sense that it focuses heavily on environmental sustainability. However, in this report, the environmental issues presented as barriers to sustainability are also closely linked with economic and social problems. Using 'Rising Sea Levels' (UN Mauritius 2005, pp. 9–10) as an example, the negative impact is clear; however, it is also linked to culture and economics by stressing the importance of the sea to the SIDS communities. Another example of this linkage would be the matter of 'Freshwater Resources' (UN Mauritius 2005, p. 14) where a bilateral economic connection is made between financial constraints and the provision of water to the population. The section dedicated to 'Natural and Environmental Disasters' (UN Mauritius 2005, p. 11) references past events and uses these instances to form future objectives for SIDS in preparation and planning. The dynamic approach of the Barbados report, produced many years earlier with domestic, regional and international solutions, resulted in a somewhat simplified report moving forwards as subsequent reports simply reaffirm what was already declared in attempt not to repeat the preceding data. This report is based on examples of specified barriers and attempted solutions which serve as proof of resilience and strategies to build upon.

4.3. Antigua & Barbuda

The Antiguan report serves as both a plan and a recognition of how much SIDS have developed thus far. The report clearly states the wants and needs of SIDS as well as proposals on how to achieve them. With regard to the environmental aspects of the report, a slightly different approach was taken after the 2024 SIDS conference. The report suggests a “Scale Up” (UN Antigua 2024, p. 14) of already proposed strategies and suggests new ones that should work in tandem with what already exists. This scale-up is proposed as “Accelerated actions towards full and effective implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement” (UN Antigua 2024, p. 14) throughout various subject matters. This recommended scale-up is applied to biodiversity, the conservation of ocean resources, disaster reduction and more. The Antiguan report, while more brief than its predecessors, serves as evidence that many SIDS have successfully implemented or at least initiated the strategies proposed as a result of the SIDS conferences or UN reports towards environmental sustainability.

5. Conclusions

SIDS, like the Caribbean Islands in the wake of the colonial era, had unfortunately been left in various states of disarray. That is not to say that they were the only states affected by such matters. Each emerging state faced both predicted and unforeseen challenges as they entered the economic, social and environmental spheres of the world. These challenges included lack of leadership as the temporary governments which were appointed by the colonial powers no longer held legitimacy and, as a result, lost their power and influence. The lack of clear rule meant that there was no decisive authority to navigate the newly independent economies. Another problem faced by these states economically was the withdrawal of colonial financial aid. Other SIDS members, such as Mauritius, also faced similar barriers after their independence in 1968 following centuries of Dutch, French and British colonial occupation. Similarly to the Caribbean islands like Barbados and Antigua and Barbuda, Mauritius lacked connectivity in the new age of independence. As the states gained their independence, they were also disconnected from the previous economic, social and environmental management or agreements, leaving them to simultaneously navigate both internal and external challenges. The strategic plans produced in the SIDS conferences have taken history into account and this is seen in the acknowledgement of the economic barriers mentioned and tackled thus far. The importance of building resilient economies within SIDS was never in question within member communities; however, the SIDS reports have educated foreign governing bodies on the barriers to do so and suggested ways to aid in economic success for SIDS. Social aspects, according to the reports, have developed in acknowledgement and ambition at a much slower rate than economic aspects. However, that is not to say that they are

nonexistent as there were social revolutions before development could occur, much in a similar fashion to the rest of the western hemisphere. Take the development of women's rights and culture, for example, while they were briefly mentioned in the early years of SIDS, taking a back seat to environmental and economic interest, they have become major points of discussion in recent years, as seen in the 2024 Antigua and Barbuda report. Culture, as is emphasised in the Mauritius report, has been vital in the social sustainability of SIDS countries to ensure that they develop efficiently while retaining the very essence that makes SIDS unique. Environmentally, the SIDS reports have always been rooted in environmental sustainability. The points of action, however, have also developed over time. What simply began as independent resource management has grown into regional and global initiatives on modern environmental problems such as sustainable tourism. Fully equipped with strategic objectives, the SIDS development plans have expanded significantly in producing strategies to combat specific barriers to development for SIDS.

6. Limitations

Limitations to this review appear in the form of the magnitude of history and facts displaced and forgotten. The Antigua and Barbuda SIDS report suggests that there was a significant documentation problem within SIDS which resulted in a lack of global understanding and insight into the problems that were faced (UN Antigua 2024, p. 18). This could also apply to the research and production of work within this field. While there is a more conscious effort to digitise the records which are in existence, there is still somewhat of a problem with connecting the dots effectively leading many invested researchers to over-analyse problems which may only scratch the surface of academic possibility. Another limitation of note is the accuracy of records provided and published. Many centuries of history are known through the records of independent economists, historians and political enthusiasts. There are many institutions which have provided statistical data collected independently without knowing the reasons behind those data, which in turn leads researchers to speculate and be misguided. Furthermore, as is always a barrier to research, the perspective of the sources may be skewed by various factors. Throughout this review paper, publications from SIDS and the UN-associated divisions have been used. However, not all of these states have played a visible part in writing these reports and they have been treated as parts of a collective rather than individual nations. For these reasons, arguments mentioned throughout this review may appear complete, yet this may not be so.

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