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Small island developing States: between concept and implementation

Abstract

The concept of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) serves to categorise a group of States which justify, based on certain geographical and socio-economic characteristics, special consideration by the UN. This is a term that, in principle, seems to explain itself by alluding to the elements that make it up. However, for various reasons, implementation has proved problematic as there are a good number of SIDS which do not satisfactorily meet the requirements of the term to be considered as such. Therefore, based on a review of the elements that justify the *raison d'être* of SIDS, this article invites us to reflect on the current usefulness of this concept.

Keywords

Island States, Islands, UN, SIDS, UN-OHRLLS.

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Introduction

The term Small Island Developing State (SIDS) is used to encompass the group of countries that, according to certain geographical and socio-economic characteristics, present common challenges in the international arena. Obviously, the acronym SIDS is – at least in appearance – sufficiently descriptive to understand that it refers to states that are still in the process of socio-economic development and are also small islands. However, while the criteria that comprise the term SIDS seem to be quite clear, in practice it has not always been easy to determine when these criteria are met.

This article explores the basic aspects that are taken into account to define what Small Island Developing States are. To this end, the text reviews the issues that, in principle, delimit this object of study. As will be seen below, this label is not free from a certain amount of subjectivity as regards its consideration, since the aspects that make up this area are not always clearly delimited.

It is essential to bear in mind that the term Small Island Developing State was coined within the UN in a context of growing concern for issues related to economic development, but it was environmental issues that gave it particular impetus from the 1990s onwards. The first major occasion on which the problems of these territories were expressly mentioned was during the United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, held in Paris in September 1981, where reference was made to 'island countries' in a very general way and without highlighting the specific case of the smaller ones[1]. This was also the case at the 1990 Paris Conference – the second historic conference on this particular issue – [2]while at the renowned United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the 1992 Rio Summit, these countries were specifically referred to as Small Island Developing States[3]. The next two milestones in the development of this group of States were: the first United Nations Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in Barbados in 1994, and the creation in 2001 of the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing States and Small Island Developing States – better known as UN-OHRLLS – [4].

1 United Nations. "Report of the United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. Paris, 1-14 September 1981", New York, 1982. https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/%20A/CONF.104/22/Rev.1

2 United Nations. "Report of the Second United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. Paris, 3-14 September 1990". New York, 1991. https://undocs.org/es/A/CONF.147/18

3 United Nations. "Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992. Volume I: Resolutions Adopted by the Conference". New York, 1993. https://undocs.org/en/A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1(Vol.I)

4 GALLEGO COSME, Mario. "De Barbados a Samoa: Repaso a los principales hitos para los intereses de los Pequeños Estados Insulares en Desarrollo desde 1994 hasta 2014" (From Barbados to Samoa: A review of the main milestones for the interests of Small Island Developing States from 1994 to 2014). *Revista UNISCI*, 2015, No. 38, pp. 169-183. http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_RUNI.2015.n38.49650

This Office is attached to the UN Secretariat and works on specific action plans for each of the three themes to which its name refers, and keeps the lists of States that make up these groups up to date. The section on Least Developed Countries focuses on the 47 States that are considered 'the poorest and weakest segment of the international community'[5] based on three criteria for inclusion: low income, high economic vulnerability, and health and education status. For their part, the areas dedicated to SIDS and the Landlocked Developing States delimit their remit towards those States that meet the dual criteria of not being considered developed and, above all, of having island characteristics and/or no sea coast, as appropriate.

Antigua and Barbuda	Dominica	Jamaica	Dominican Rep.	Suriname
Bahamas	Fiji	Kiribati	Samoa	East Timor
Bahrain	Granada	Maldives	São Tomé and P.	Tonga
Barbados	Guinea-Bissau	FS of Micronesia	Saint Kitts-Nevis	Trinidad and T.
Belize	Guyana	Mauritius	Saint Lucia	Tuvalu
Cape Verde	Haiti	Nauru	St. Vincent and G.	Vanuatu
Comoros	Marshall Is.	Palau	Seychelles	
Cuba	Solomon Is.	Papua New G.	Singapore	

Figure 1: Small Island Developing States. Source: UN-OHRLLS[6].

Of these last two groups mentioned, it should be noted that the 32 countries considered as landlocked developing States are in fact enclaves – even if they hold rights to use ports in third countries or if such access is by waterway, as in the case of Paraguay – while there is a high degree of internal homogeneity as far as level of development is concerned. However, although UN-OHRLLS, due to its multifaceted work on SIDS, is a global reference in this field[7], from an objective point of view some of the 38 States on its list – shown in figure 1 – would not satisfactorily meet all the criteria for membership of this group.

The main reason that would explain all the inclusions is that, when it began its work, the UN-OHRLLS began to work directly with the list of states that already made up the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), created with the aim of giving voice to 'small islands and low-lying developing coastal states' before the UN itself[8], and which was formally baptised in 1990 in Genoa, during the second Climate Summit. Although we could argue that the list has not been modified since it was established in 2001, we should note that it has had previous changes, even before AOSIS was created.

5 UN-OHRLLS, "Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020". 2011, p. 13. https://issuu.com/unohrlls/docs/istanbul_declaration_and_programme_

6 *UN-OHRLLS*, "List of SIDS" [web]. https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids

7 There are other lists of SIDS, such as those considered by UNCTAD or the Commonwealth, but the reference is the UN-OHRLLS list.

8 *AOSIS*, 'About us' [web]. https://www.aosis.org/about/

Indeed, the birth of this Alliance was raised as a possibility during the Conference of Small States on Sea Level Rise, held in the Maldives in November 1989[9], with the participation of some countries such as Malta and Cyprus[10] which are not members.

In the light of the above, we will examine the aspects justifying the current classification of these States as small island developing States below. To this end, we will review the conditions that can be inferred from the term SIDS – such as statehood, insularity, small size and lack of development – and the problems arising from the practical application of these criteria. Finally, in the section dedicated to conclusions, we will reflect on the usefulness of the very concept of SIDS, while at the same time considering a possible reformulation of the term that would effectively make the specificity of what is insular operational in the international sphere.

Statehood

The first criterion that defines SIDS, which is none other than the State, must be held by these countries in order to be considered as part of this group. In fact, this is the only aspect that the 38 members of the list meet, although it is important to note that the UN-OHRLLS also pays attention to the 20 territories listed in figure 2, which are included under the label of *Non-UN Members/Associate Members of the Regional Commission*. In other words, the Office somehow escapes the stato-centrism inherent in the United Nations system by mentioning these island entities in another list, thus recognising that small developing islands should be treated in a particular way regardless of whether they are States or not[11]. However, as can be seen from this differentiated classification, the scope of this specific group is – for obvious reasons, including all their situations of dependence – very limited, although they have the possibility of participating, as observers, in the regional meetings that serve to prepare the UN Conferences held each decade for SIDS, as well as in their five-year reviews.

At this point we must consider the fundamental reasons for the differentiated treatment of SIDS proper compared to the rest of the small island territories that are not States, since, *a priori*, the latter might appear to be in a worse situation than the former. Nothing could be further from the truth; despite the fact that almost all island dependencies have populations and sizes that are much smaller than those of the vast

9 It is worth remembering the famous and dramatic speech given by the President of the Maldives to the UN General Assembly on 17 October 1987, in which he spoke of the real danger of the disappearance of countries like his if the sea level rose further. Two years later, the Maldives hosts the first international conference on the subject.

10 Male' declaration on global warming and sea level rise, art. 1 (a), 1989. http://www.islandvulnerability.org/slr1989/declaration.pdf

11 This is probably a legacy of the work of AOSIS, whose full membership is made up of states – and Niue and the Cook-Islands – while maintaining another list of observers made up of dependent island territories.

majority of SIDS – which affects their vulnerabilities in the face of a greater range of contingencies – it must be borne in mind that they all depend on developed states that assume certain obligations over them.

Anguilla	British Virgin Is.	Guadeloupe	Niue
Aruba	Cayman	Guam	French Polynesia
Bermuda	Cook Is.	Martinique	Puerto Rico
Curaçao	Northern Mariana Is.	Montserrat	Sint Maarten
U.S. Virgin Is.	American Samoa	New Caledonia	Turks and Caicos

Figure 2: Dependent island entities: Source: UN-OHRLLS[12].

All situations cannot be standardised, but the lack of autonomy derived from any of the possible forms of administration, ranging from those considered colonial to those resolved in the form of assimilation into the fundamental structures of metropolises, is usually accompanied by guardianships capable of responding for these territories. On the other hand, in the case of SIDS, they themselves must assume any commitments they may make as subjects of international law, while at the same time they must respond with their own resources to any eventuality that may arise. To a large extent, this approach to the island states by UN-OHRLLS, in a specific manner – segmented from the larger group represented by the rest of the island entities and formations that are not states but which may be subject to attention – is based on the fact that responsibility falls to subjects which, owing to their nature, have scarce capabilities and resources.

As an excerpt from the Declaration emanating from the review of the Third UN Conference on Small Island Developing States, held at the UN General Assembly in October 2019, SIDS continue 'to be a "special case" for sustainable development [...] as they continue to face the combined challenges arising, in particular, from their geographical remoteness, the small scale of their economies, high costs and the adverse effects of climate change and natural disasters'.[13] Although attention to issues related to so-called climate change and natural disasters is relatively recent – and would certainly affect the whole planet in one way or another – concern raised about the limited capabilities of certain states by virtue of their small size, in terms of area and/or population, dates back to the decolonisation wave of the 1960s and 1970s.

In a context in which different countries witnessed a good number of emancipations from colonial territories – mostly from the United Kingdom and France – the

12 *Ibídem*.

13 General Assembly. "Draft resolution submitted by the President of the General Assembly: Political declaration of the high-level meeting to review progress made in addressing the priorities of Small Island developing States through the implementation of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway". 2019. https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/74/L.3

possibility that some new states could be truly viable by virtue of their demographic and geographical characteristics was openly questioned within the UN[14]. This discussion did not prevent the independence of many entities from being consummated in that context which, in terms of population and land scarcity – though mainly due to their location in places that are relatively marginal with respect to the planet's main economic flows – were seen as having less government capacity than the rest of the States.

	Indep.	Area (Km²)	Population		Indep.	Area (Km²)	Population
Japan	—	377.915	125.507.472	Tonga	1970	747	106.095
Iceland	—	103.000	350.734	Bahrain	1971	760	1.505.003
United Kingdom	—	243.610	65.761.117	Bahamas	1973	13.880	337.721
Haiti	1804	27.750	11.067.777	Granada	1974	384	113.094
Dominican Republic	1844	48.670	10.499.707	Papua New G.	1975	462.840	7.259.456
Cuba	1898	110.860	11.059.062	Comoros	1975	2.235	846.281
New Zealand	1907	268.838	4.925.477	Cape Verde	1975	4.033	583.255
Ireland	1922	70.273	5.176.569	Saint Tome and P.	1975	964	211.122
Indonesia	1945	1.904.569	267.026.366	Seychelles	1976	455	95,981
Philippines	1946	300.000	109.180.815	Solomon Is.	1978	28.896	685.097
Taiwan	1947	35.980	23.603.049	Tuvalu	1978	26	11.342
Sri Lanka	1948	65.610	22.889.201	Dominica	1978	751	74.243
Madagascar	1960	587.041	26.955.737	Saint Lucia	1979	616	166.487
Cyprus	1960	* 9251	* 1,266,676	St Vincent and G.	1979	389	101.390
Jamaica	1962	10.991	2.808.570	Kiribati	1979	811	111.796
Trinidad and Tobago	1962	5.128	1.208.789	Vanuatu	1980	12.189	298.333
Samoa	1962	2.831	203.774	Antigua and Barbuda	1981	443	98.179
Malta	1964	316	457.267	Northern Cyprus	1983	3.315	≈ 313,000
Singapore	1965	719	6.209.660	Saint Kitts-Nevis	1983	261	53.821
Maldives	1965	298	391.904	Brunei	1984	5.765	464.478
Barbados	1966	430	294.560	FS of Micronesia	1986	702	102.436
Mauritius	1968	2.040	1.379.365	Marshall Is.	1986	181	77.917
Nauru	1968	21	11.000	Palau	1994	459	21.685
Fiji	1970	18.274	935.974	East Timor	2002	14.874	1.383.723

Figure 3: Basic data of all Island states of the world chronologically ordered by date of formation / independence. Prepared internally[15]

Figure 3, which lists the 48 island states of the world, allows us to analyse that there is a certain correlation between size – both in terms of surface area and population – and functional seniority in the exercise of statehood. The largest and most populous are also, with few exceptions, those that have been independent states for the longest time and therefore have the most institutional experience in exercising self-governance. In these terms, the UN's approach to the problems of small islands is justified insofar as, due to their scarce resources, they are often more vulnerable to contingen-

14 MCINTYRE, W. David. "The Partition of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands". *Island Studies Journal*, 2012, Vol. 7, no. 1, p. 136. https://www.islandstudies.ca/sites/islandstudies.ca/files/ISJ-7-1-2012-McIntyre.pdf

15 Methodological notes: green indicates populations above 1 million and areas above 10,000 km², and red populations below 100,000 and below 500 km². * Figures for Cyprus are those for the whole island. The table is based on data from the last year available, obtained from CIA Worldfactbook: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/

cies arising from their own geographies, while at the same time they face enormous challenges in terms of government, governability and governance. In relation to this last aspect, we must recall the different forms of affiliation that a good number of SIDS have deployed to link up with other states, thus alleviating some of these shortcomings. Indeed, at present, three of them – Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands[16] – are freely associated with the United States through periodically renewed treaties, and ten others are Commonwealth monarchies sharing a head of state with the United Kingdom[17]. To these cases we could add lesser agreements, such as those of Nauru and Samoa, which have delegated responsibility for defensive work to Australia and New Zealand respectively[18], while the latter are jointly responsible for Kiribati's national defence[19].

Insularity

In the field of international law, the basic characteristics that a territory must have in order to be considered as an island are: to be inhabited – and/or to sustain its own economic life – and to be always emerged, completely surrounded by ocean water[20]. In the specific case of island states, it follows that they should not have any sovereign portion on continental land, and in any case, may consist of one or more islands and/or archipelagos[21]. Intuitively, insularity is understood as the essential variable in considering what should characterise a Small Island Developing State. However, a first approach to the list in figure 1, which shows the countries that the UN-OHRLLS classifies as SIDS, shows us that four of these are not even islands: Belize, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana and Suriname.

Although we could argue that these four states have certain characteristics that are comparable to those of an island, such as a certain population shortage concentrated on the coast or low altitude with respect to sea level, it is no less true that there are other cases which, on the same basis, could also be included such as Kuwait and Qatar, to mention two which, unlike the previous examples, at least have longer coastlines than their land borders.

16 WYETH, Grant. "Why the Compacts of Free Association Matter to Washington", *The Diplomat*, 9 June 2020 https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/why-the-compacts-of-free-association-matter-to-washington/

17 Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Grenada, Jamaica, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St Kitts-Nevis, St Lucia, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu.

18 CIA Worldfactbook.

19 *Ibídem*.

20 United Nations. "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea", 1982, art. 121. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/convemar_es.pdf

21 *Ibid*. art. 46.

While recognising that there may be similarities between the ways of life of island societies and those of certain continental spaces with an ocean façade, we must bear in mind that islands have specific characteristics that merit unique treatment. This is because, to a large extent, insularity must be understood not only as a merely descriptive geographical characteristic, but also as a conditioning factor that affects other factors that usually occur, precisely and repeatedly, in island areas. These other factors, which are often correlated, are: devastation, territorial fragmentation and, above all, small size.

Devastation is, by definition, the geographical factor that best reflects insularity, since the maritime portion that separates them from other inhabited places always entails confinement and is, in turn, a frequent cause of endemism and high levels of biological diversity[22]. Casuistry is extensive, as the whole spectrum ranges from islands very close to areas considered to be continental – the paradigmatic case of Singapore – to island states in the middle of ocean masses, mainly in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean. However, what is interesting to note is that the more distant in relative terms, the higher freight costs are also for economies that are heavily dependent on imports, while there is less connectivity to global communication, financial and decision-making flows. In a way, islands located in remote places are configured as one of the clearest peripheries of the planet.

Territorial fragmentation is another common phenomenon in island states, as it is rare for just one island to be home to the entire population of that state. There are notable exceptions to this, such as Nauru or Mauritius, which are made up of a single island, but most of these states have their inhabitants spread over more than one island formation. This population dispersion in formations that may be very distant from each other radically increases Public Administration costs, especially in the creation and maintenance of critical infrastructures such as those related to the generation or distribution of electrical energy[23]. The situation is more complex in the case of archipelagos, where the need to provide public services would be compounded by the need to structure the state by means of transport and communications.

Although the size factor will be reviewed in the next section, for the time being it is worth pointing out that scarcity of area in territorial terms is another aspect closely linked to insularity and probably the one that most enhances the negative aspects of production and economy. It is not just a matter of measuring emerged area, but also what this implies in terms of territorial depth of island spaces, which in turn must be analysed in terms of average territory height compared to sea level. In fact, it is in these variables that, in the opinion of the writer, the comparison be-

22 VERON, Simon *et al*. "Distribution and relative age of endemism across islands worldwide", *Scientific Reports* No. 9, 11693, 2019. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-47951-6

23 SHUMAIS, Mohamed & MOHAMED, Ibrahim. "Dimensions of energy insecurity on small islands: the case of the Maldives". *Asian Development Bank Institute*, 2019, No. 1049.
https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/543261/adbi-wp1049.pdf

tween island and continental states is most problematic, as the former always suffer from a lack of depth.

The lack of physical space multiplies the costs of opportunity associated with decisions on land and limits the range of resources that can be extracted or exploited. However, the associated lack of depth has wider implications in relation to the scarcity – or absence – of fresh water and possible responses to extreme climatic contingencies. The absence of territorial depth – and of elevation – complicates the generation of streams or any other water flow resulting from rainfall, thus limiting the possibilities of access to this resource. Similarly, this absence poses conditions for actions that could be taken in the face of devastating contingencies, such as hurricanes or rising ocean waters as the most verifiable effect of so-called climate change.

It is true that the four non-island States included in the list of SIDS have certain island characteristics, such as low population, a tendency for large population hubs to be located on the coast or low altitude with respect to sea level, as well as settlement patterns that could be equated, on different scales, with the devastation experienced by many islands. However, the territorial depth of these four examples allows them a potential use of their land that cannot be compared to most island states on the planet.

Size

Size is equally ambiguous, since in the absence of a clear criterion on what should be qualified as small in this area, it is difficult to discern which countries would fall under this heading, particularly since this variable can be understood not only in terms of surface area, but also in terms of population. If small size is considered from the perspective of extension, the inclusion of some of these countries in the list opens the door to questioning the usefulness of this dimension as relevant to the objectives of UN-OHRLLS, since it seems that lack of development is the most important criterion for this entity. Given that size is a critical aspect of understanding the resource scarcity of SIDS, as the Office has stated on numerous occasions, the inclusion of a country such as Papua New Guinea in the list is highly questionable, since, with its 462,840 km^2, it ranks as the third largest island state in the world second only to Indonesia and Madagascar.

If size is considered from a population perspective, again there are major differences between the 38 members considered to be SIDS. At one end would be the big three of the Caribbean – Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti – each with populations close to 11 million. At the other end of the list are Nauru, Tuvalu and Palau, all of which have less than 25,000 inhabitants.

In general, it can be said that state capabilities are highly related to size, due to the economic aspects mentioned in the previous section and, because of the shortage of trained human resources capable of performing in the most diverse productive sectors, especially in public administration tasks. Likewise, the expected relationship between the education system and productive sectors is, to a large extent, dependent

on demographic factors, especially in the case of small populations with a tendency to emigrate. For contexts considered as critical for society, achieving human resources in sufficient quantity and quality can be a challenge.

Against this background, SIDS have achieved some success through international cooperation. A clear example is the Regional Security System which is, in essence, a shared army for seven Eastern Caribbean states[24], although the most significant is in relation to higher education, through international universities with campuses on different islands[25]. If, in terms of basic education, investing in sustaining a universal quality system can be a challenge for many of these economies, one can imagine that sustaining a modest university system is not even within the reach of many of these SIDS, at least not on an autonomous basis.

As an example of the close link between state capabilities and size, we can again refer to Figure 3 to see how, with few exceptions, the dates of independence or national formation are older the larger the islands are. All island states over 35,000 km² – except Papua New Guinea – had been emancipated before 1950, and these generally have the largest populations. The scheme is repeated in the same way during the second half of the 20th century – although in a more attenuated way, as each decolonisation process had its own times and dynamics – , becoming evident when analysing each oceanic field separately.

In the case of the Pacific, by 1970 Samoa, Tonga and Fiji had become independent, island states that, compared to their area, could be considered medium or large in terms of population and/or size. By 1980, after the emancipation of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the remaining territories to become states were all less than 1,000 km² in area. Exceptions to this pattern were small Nauru and Tuvalu, owing to very particular circumstances: the former being exceptionally rich at the time of independence, while the latter is explained in the context of a fairly rapid decolonisation process achieved by a sudden split in these islands from what used to be the same unit together with Kiribati.

The situation was similar in the Caribbean. In 1958, all the UK's island dependencies in this region were inserted into the short-lived Federation of the West Indies[26] as

24 GALLEGO COSME, Mario. "El Sistema Regional de Seguridad del Caribe oriental" (The Eastern Caribbean Regional Security System), in REQUENA Y DÍEZ DE REVENGA, Miguel (Coord.), *Luces y sombras de la seguridad internacional en los albores del siglo XXI' (Lights and shadows of international security at the dawn of the 21st century)*, Madrid: Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado, 2010, Vol. 2. pp. 103-20. https://iugm.es/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/LUCES_Y_SOMBRAS_II.pdf

25 See University of the South Pacific [https://www.usp.ac.fj/] and University of the West Indies [https://uwi.edu/], present in 9 and 4 SIDS in Oceania and the Caribbean, respectively, as well as online programmes that would extend that reach.

26 The Federation inherits the pre-existing administrative structure, as it includes virtually all the islands that made up the colonies of Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, the Leeward Islands and the Windward Islands. In short, the British Virgin Islands was the only territory which, although part of the colonial structure of the time—in this case the Leeward Islands—never became part of the Federation.

a prelude to their possible independence from the whole. London's intention was to achieve a viable decolonisation of all islands by creating a single entity. However, this union lasted until Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago – the largest colonies – split up in 1962 to achieve separate self-determination, thus breaking the possibility of such a federation as a feasible project. The next two to be emancipated were the colonies with most inhabitants and comparatively better capabilities: Barbados and the Bahamas, in 1966 and 1973 respectively. The decade after Bahamian independence – which never belonged to the Federation – saw the completion of the remaining emancipations recorded to date.

Development

The last defining characteristic of SIDS to be reviewed is development, which is not free from verifiable paradoxes either since in any cursory review of SIDS as a whole, the presence of Bahrain or Singapore – to mention two of the most obvious, although the latter is not a recipient of funds[27] – would be striking, mainly because nine on the list are also considered Least Developed Countries[28]. It is true that the case of Bahrain can be qualified in terms of contrasts that may arise from the comparison between macroeconomic figures with other development variables, but this is a situation that also occurs in other island states that are not on the list, such as Brunei or Cyprus.

Based on the Human Development Index – probably the most recognised of the three criteria traditionally considered for the measuring and considering SIDS, together with the purely monetary criterion and the criterion that accounts for the UN-OHRLLS list of Least Developed Countries[29] – it could be argued that most SIDS could be considered, simply, as Small Island States. Figure 4, which shows this indicator, highlights that at least 21 of the SIDS would have sufficient levels of development according to the four possible HDI classifications: very high, high, medium and low. Indeed, if we count the 38 states listed by the UN-OHRLLS – which we must recall includes four non-island states – , 23 of them would have high or very high development quotas, with their average group HDI standing at 0.723 points. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the vast majority of the island states not considered SIDS have values above these, while only two of the four non-island states could be considered moderately developed.

27 BALDACCHINO, Godfrey. "Seizing history: development and non-climate change in Small Island Developing States". *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management*, 2018, Vol. 10, Issue 2, p. 220. https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJCCSM-02-2017-0037/full/html

28 Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, São Tomé and Príncipe, Solomon Islands, East Timor, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. *UN-OHRLLS*, 'List of SIDS' [web]. https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids

29 HEIN, Philippe. "Small island developing States: origin of the category and definition issues", UNCTAD, *Is a special treatment of small island developing States possible?*, Geneva, 2004, pp. 2-4. https://unctad.org/en/Docs/ldc20041_en.pdf

Although these figures invite optimism on account of the position of SIDS and their progress over the past three decades – which in 1990 averaged 0.595 points in the HDI[30] – it is no less true that they also show this group of states as not so deserving of special consideration. The average HDI for SIDS is similar to the world average of 0.731 and, of course, is well above the 0.528 of the Least Developed Countries group[31]. Given this situation, it is difficult to justify that, in quantitative terms, development should be a variable to be considered when characterising small island states.

It could be argued that there are problems in measuring HDI[32], or that HDI may not accurately reflect what it is trying to measure when there are distortions in any of its calculation dimensions as is the case, for example, when natural resources are largely available affecting GDP. However, it is paradoxical to note that, despite all the studies and reports generated about the disadvantages arising from the factors associated with insularity, it is no less true that acceptable levels of a certain degree of relative well-being are found in a large number of island states.

Island States included in the list of SIDS				Island States not considered as SIDS	
Singapore	0.935	Fiji	0.724	Ireland	0.942
Bahrain	0.838	Maldives	0.719	Iceland	0.938
Palau	0.814	Tonga	0.717	United Kingdom	0.920
Barbados	0.813	Samoa	0.707	Japan	0.915
Bahamas	0.805	Marshall Is.	0.698	Malta	0.885
Seychelles	0.801	Cape Verde	0.651	Cyprus	0.873
Trinidad and T.	0.799	East Timor	0.626	Brunei	0.845
Mauritius	0.796	Kiribati	0.623	Sri Lanka	0.780
Cuba	0.778	FS of Micronesia	0.614	Philippines	0.712
Saint Kitts-Nevis	0.777	São Tomé and P.	0.609	Indonesia	0.707
Antigua and Barbuda	0.776	Vanuatu	0.597	Madagascar	0.521
Granada	0.763	Salomón Is.	0.557	Non-island States Considered as SIDS	
Dominican Rep.	0.745	Papúa-Nueva G.	0.543		
Saint Lucia	0.745	Comoras	0.538	Surinam	0.724
St Vicente y G.	0.728	Haití	0.503	Belize	0.720
Jamaica	0.726	Nauru	ND	Guyana	0.670
Dominica	0.724	Tuvalu	ND	Guinea-Bissau	0.461

Figure 4: Human Development Index for the world's island states and non-island states considered SIDS. Prepared internally[33]

30 *UNDP*, "Human Development Index 2019" [web] http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/137506

31 *Ibídem*.

32 WOLFF, Hendrik *et al.* "Classification, detection and consequences of data error: Evidence from the Human Development Index", *Economic Journal*, 2011, 121 (553). https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/338/

33 Methodological notes: According to the UNDP, HDI values between 0 and 0.555 are considered low, those between 0.556 and 0.699 are medium, 0.700 to 0.799 are high, and 0.800 to 1 are very high.

This reality has not gone unnoticed in the international community, where there is often some scepticism about the legitimacy of SIDS as a category that deserves special attention[34]. However, it seems fair to recognise that, while it is true that – compared to their regional environments – the situation of a large number of island states may be acceptable in terms of quality of life, it is the extreme eventualities that best reflect the inherent vulnerabilities of this group.

Conclusions

The review of the attributes that, in principle, characterise Small Island Developing States shows that there are difficulties in objectively categorising the territories that can be considered as such. Although it might seem that, beyond semantic issues, this circumstance does not present major implications, in operational terms this lack of definition is probably the main reason why it is difficult to have a differentiated and specific treatment for this group of States, beyond mere declarations recognising their common challenges[35].

This does not mean that SIDS should not be the subject of special consideration, as the island conditions associated with many of them can actually affect their development, even if they have improved over time. Due to questions of scale and response capacity, experience shows that the aspect in which the negative impact of insularity – and the factors associated with this condition – is best appreciated is in emergency situations or in the face of high-impact events, whether climatic or geological. Contingencies such as tsunamis, changes in rainfall patterns or tropical cyclones can be catastrophic in low-lying coastal areas[36] [37], as seen relatively often in the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean. The same applies to the rise in ocean waters as a result of global warming, as this is a process that slowly but surely threatens

The table highlights each of these ranges with the colours red, orange, black and green, respectively. Likewise, three groups of States are differentiated according to the UN-OHRLLS list: islands on the SIDS list, islands not listed as SIDS, and non-islands considered as SIDS. Data obtained from: UNDP, "Human Development Index 2019" [web] http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/137506

34 HEIN, Philippe, *Op. Cit.,…* p. 12.

35 ENCONTRE, Pierre. "SIDS as a category: adopting criteria would enhance credibility", UNCTAD, *Is a special treatment of small island developing States possible?*, Geneva, 2004, p. 92. https://unctad.org/en/Docs/ldc20041_en.pdf

36 ZIELINSKI, Sara. "Small Islands May Make Tsunami Danger Worse", *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4 November 2014 https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/small-islands-may-make-tsunami-danger-worse-180953241/

37 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climate Change 2014: impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability Part A: Global and sectoral aspects*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK & New York, USA, 2014, pp. 17, 68, 364-6, 1069. https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-PartA_FINAL.pdf

the very survival of smaller island states and those with less height above sea level. If this phenomenon does not stop, the entire national territory of some SIDS such as the Maldives, Tuvalu or Kiribati could be submerged in a few decades[38], although it is foreseeable that these States will reach a point of non-viability much earlier[39] since soil loss is occurring gradually but accompanied by other factors that make human settlement difficult[40], such as the loss of drinking water as a result of saline intrusion into aquifers.

The geopolitical consequences of the possible disappearance of these SIDS are difficult to specify, but it is clear that the most important consequences would be explained by the new drawing of the oceanic borders and the significant migratory movements that would occur. We should bear in mind that, with the Law of the Sea in hand, these extinctions would entail a modification of high sea portions and a reallocation of ocean sovereignty between contiguous States. In the case of the three SIDS mentioned above for this example, this would also involve other powers with adjacent dependencies – particularly the United States, France and the United Kingdom – , but also other states with interests in the region, such as the People's Republic of China, which has an increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific. The migratory aspect also has various aspects – such as the modalities in which it could be carried out or the hypothetical extension of refugee law to these cases – , but there is one that, in certain circumstances, could be related to the aforementioned distribution of the jurisdictional waters of the extinct states: the question of the specific place where population flows could go. This case is particularly interesting because the transfer of exclusive economic zones could possibly serve as compensation.

In view of the specific nature of SIDS, especially in relation to certain contingencies and the risks that affect them most because of their conditions, it is important to find greater precision in terminology for an effective approach to this group of states, especially as this exercise can produce lessons that can be replicated in other latitudes with similar problems. However, if the term SIDS is justified solely on the basis of parameters based on resource scarcity and geographical constraints, the range of inclusion will be too blurred, and it will be possible to infer from the interpretation of the term that virtually all island states – particularly small ones – are already manifestly incapable of responding to extraordinary events. For this reason, we must find greater rigour in the application of the criteria that establish them as such, agreeing on better defined scales. This would mean including only island states in this group, as well as

38 YAMAMOTO, Lilian & ESTEBAN, Miguel. "Atoll islands and climate change: disappearing States", *United Nations University*, 2012.
https://unu.edu/publications/articles/atoll-islands-and-climate-change-disappearing-states.html#info

39 BERRINGER, Andrea. "Climate change and emigration: comparing 'sinking islands' and Jamaica", *Views in Motion*, No. 1, 2012 https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/4422873.pdf

40 MCSWEENEY, Robert. "Low-lying atolls could become 'uninhabitable' earlier than thought", *Carbon Brief*, March 2018 https://www.carbonbrief.org/low-lying-atolls-could-become-uninhabitable-earlier-than-thought

finding an acceptable limit to the small size variable[41], including finding specific ways to measure social economic development in SIDS[42].

Another alternative could be to completely reformulate the concept, perhaps renouncing the term SIDS itself in order to seek a more restrictive one in its application, so that the essence of what it intends to protect is not undermined. One of the most promising terms in this respect in recent years is that of Large Ocean States[43], as it infers aspects such as the devastation and the link of these territories to vast maritime areas. The concept can be even better delimited – explicitly including islands – but, at least, this theoretical conceptual construction highlights certain issues of special concern for societies more closely linked to oceans, such as fishing, climate change and sea level rise, environmental protection or the management of exclusive economic zones[44].

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41 *Ibid*. pp. 97-9.

42 *UNEP*, "Emerging issues for Small Island Developing States. Results of the UNEP/UN DESA Foresight Process", 2014, pp. 7-8. https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/file/19799/download?token=ENufPnc

43 CHAN, Nicholas. "Large Ocean States: Sovereignty, Small Islands, and Marine Protected Areas in Global Oceans Governance", *Global Governance A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 2018, Vol. 24, Issue 4. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02404005

44 JUMEAU, Ronny. "Small Island Developing States, Large Ocean States", *Expert Group Meeting on Oceans, Seas and Sustainable Development: Implementation and follow-up to Rio+20*, United Nations, 2013. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1772Ambassador%20Jumeau_EGM%20Oceans%20FINAL.pdf