Evaluating Sustainable Development in Small Island Developing States: Lessons from the Pacific and the Caribbean

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Abstract

Small island developing states (SIDS) are particularly vulnerable to environmental stresses, and especially to the impacts of climate change. This is due to numerous factors, including limited geographic size and extensive coastal areas; remote locations; fragile economies that are often dependent on narrow sectors; limited natural resources and access to fresh water and energy; small populations; and weak institutional capacity. Managing sustainable development requires coherent and effective policies and strategies. An essential part of the formulation and implementation of such policies and strategies is effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Evaluation is also needed to ensure that interventions, policies, and strategies are achieving their goals and contributing to sustainable development. This chapter reviews experiences with M&E in the Pacific and Caribbean SIDS. It identifies a number of challenges that need to be overcome, including limited human and institutional capacities, and the perception that evaluation is only important for donor-funded programs, which results in low priority being given to M&E. These challenges are best addressed by crafting M&E systems that are appropriate for a variety of SIDS contexts; that are country-led; and that are supported by external agencies in a coherent manner.

Introduction

Small island developing states (SIDS) are facing unique and often severe challenges to sustainable development. Their small size in terms of geography, economy and population, and their limited capacities render them vulnerable to external shocks. The age-old limitations pertaining to natural resources, water, energy, and waste management have been exacerbated by global environmental change. Although their role in causing climate change has been minimal, they are at the frontlines of facing its impacts. Consequences ranging from increased weather variability and intensified storms to sea-level rise and salinization of groundwater pose serious threats to the sustainability of SIDS.

There are 57 countries classified by the United Nations (UN) as SIDS[i]. Most of them are located in the Caribbean and Pacific regions, but a number of them can also be found elsewhere—in the Atlantic and Indian oceans, in the Mediterranean, and in the South China Sea. The UN has long recognized the special development situation of SIDS. The Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA),[ii] adopted in 1994 at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, identified the unique nature of the vulnerabilities and characteristics of SIDS, including their small size, remoteness, and narrow resource and export base, as well as their exposure to global environmental challenges and to external economic shocks (BPOA 1994). Since then, a series of conferences under UN auspices have focused on devising concrete ways to further sustainable development in SIDS. For example, the 2005 Mauritius Strategy of Implementation (MSI)[iii] built upon BPOA. In 2014, the Third International Conference on SIDS was held in Apia, Samoa, and the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathways[iv] was adopted. Similarly, global processes have taken special note of the situation of SIDS. The 2012 UN report on The Future We Want[v] dedicated a section to SIDS, noting that "small island developing States have made less progress than most other groupings, or even regressed, in economic terms especially in terms of poverty reduction and debt sustainability," (UN 2012, para 178), with member states reaffirming their commitment to providing assistance to implementing BPOA and MSI (UN 2012, para 179).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,[vi] adopted by the UN Member States in 2015, also focused on the specific plight of SIDS, especially in terms of climate change and associated issues related to sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and other impacts that are particularly affecting low-lying countries and coastal areas (UN 2015). The attendant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular Goal 13 (Climate Action) and Goal 14 (Life Below Water), are specifically relevant to SIDS. One of the challenges facing SIDS pertains to their generally limited capacities in terms of human and institutional resources. Consequently, the SDGs also call for "raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management."[vii]

Effective implementation of sustainable development strategies calls for effective M&E in order to determine that processes are on track and that interventions, policies, and strategies are leading to desired change. Evaluating sustainable development in SIDS must take into account the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, while dealing with the considerable risk and uncertainties caused by global climate change, as well as possible discontinuities and tipping points in environmental trends.

Establishing effective M&E systems requires systematic effort and overcoming capacity constraints. An evaluation conducted by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) in the Pacific found that all GEF projects have M&E protocols, and that the systems have been used effectively for adaptive management in the context of the projects. Yet institutionalizing M&E within the regular operations of the involved ministries and departments has proven challenging, primarily due to limited capacity (GEFIEO 2015, 67-68). An evaluation in the Caribbean had similar conclusions: while project-level M&E has improved over time and has clearly contributed to adaptive management, environmental monitoring and the assessment of impact-level results have been extraordinarily challenging (GEFEO 2012a, 91-92). The reasons for this include a lack of baseline data as well as systematic monitoring data for assessing environmental trends over time. Other evaluations confirm these findings. For instance, in Timor-Leste and in Jamaica, M&E has played a very limited role in managing the GEF portfolio and in providing environmental data to aid decision-making (GEFEO 2012b, 49; GEFEO 2012c, 52).

As is evident from the analysis that follows, a number of factors hamper institutionalizing M&E in SIDS. One is simply the small size of governments and their capacities, combined with the fact that M&E is often seen as an external requirement related to donor-funded projects, thus rendering it low on the list of priorities. There are also significant challenges pertaining to data availability and the capacity to collect relevant data.

This article draws upon experiences in monitoring and evaluating sustainable development in the Pacific and Caribbean SIDS. It focuses on systemic and capacity constraints that need to be addressed in order to make M&E a useful tool for governments. In particular, evaluation is often seen mostly as being imposed by donor-funded projects or by regional organizations. It is important to overcome this perception in order to increase the utility of evaluation in these regions.

Sustainable Development in SIDS in the Era of Climate Change

Recognition of the specific vulnerabilities of SIDS is not particularly new. In 1994, UNESCO's Island Agenda asked rhetorically, "Is Paradise an island?" (UNESCO 1994, 8), and outlined the various challenges facing small islands, ranging from small and subsistence economies to cultural issues and the mixed blessings of tourism. The report also identified limited natural resources, such as fresh water and energy, and the need for conservation of coastal and marine systems and unique island biodiversity as significant constraints to development. Vulnerability to natural disasters, such as cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunamis, and sea-level rise were identified as significant risks to small islands. Global warming, ocean circulation patterns, and climate variability were also mentioned, although at that time they did not yet receive major attention (UNESCO 1994, 44). Similarly, the United Nations University World Institute for Development

Economics Research presented a report to the Barbados Global Conference (UNU/WIDER 1995) that focused on overlapping issues. A chapter on natural disasters detailed the impacts on economic and social infrastructure in SIDS (Obasi 1995). Based on contemporary knowledge, the chapter was careful to note that there was no evidence that there had been an increase in tropical cyclones or their intensity due to climate change, but it also noted the increased risks associated with sea-level rise and its potential impacts on freshwater resources and coral reefs (Obasi 1995, 68-69).

As the body of evidence grew, the international scientific community became more confident in stating that global climate change posed a major threat to low-lying coastal countries everywhere, and SIDS in particular. It was noted that SIDS were the first to pay the price for a problem that they had hardly contributed to (Pelling and Uitto 2001). Today we read reports of the dramatic effects of rising sea levels in island nations. An analysis of aerial and satellite images between 1947 and 2014 shows that in the archipelago of the Solomon Islands, five islands ranging in size from 1 to 5 hectares have already disappeared under rising seas, and another six islands have shrunk by 20-62 percent (Albert *et al.* 2016). Research appears to indicate that tropical cyclone frequency is decreasing, while the intensity of the storms appears to be increasing in ways that may create geomorphological change in the islands (Kelman 2016).

The 2015 United Nations Report on SIDS focused exclusively on climate change, pulling together data from publicly available sources concerning the impacts on island nations (UN 2015). The report identified serious threats to economic sectors that are essential for many islands, notably fisheries and marine resources, and tourism. It also highlighted how climate change impacts affect the social sector, including public health, food security, migration and displacement, and natural and cultural heritage. The report noted that the average annual losses from climate change are proportionally highest in SIDS: it is estimated that annual climate-related losses in Vanuatu are about 6.5 percent of GDP (UN 2015, 9). The cost of inaction is also high. If governments decide against any action toward climate-change adaptation, it is projected that the annual losses in the Caribbean will rise to US$22 billion–10 percent of the current size of the Caribbean economy–by 2050. In the Pacific, the total value of infrastructure, buildings, and cash crops at risk from climate change is estimated at US$111 billion (UN 2015, 10-11).

To address the above challenges, reliable data, systematic monitoring, and credible evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of policies, as well as their impacts, will be crucial. The following sections discuss issues pertaining to evaluation capacities in the Pacific and Caribbean island nations.

Pacific SIDS: Developing National Evaluation Capacity in the Context of Diversity

The nature of Pacific SIDS presents a special case for achieving and evaluating sustainable development. SIDS in the Pacific[viii] collectively comprise several hundred islands with remarkable geographic, socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural diversity, spread out over millions of square kilometers of the Pacific Ocean. Numerous threats throughout the region that have the potential to affect sustainable development include climate change; rapid urbanization that is spurring social inequality; deterioration of fragile biodiversity and ecosystem services; fresh water degradation; and resource depletion from growing populations (Duncan 2011; UNEP 2014). Furthermore, Pacific SIDS are often categorically described as being ill-equipped to face these challenges due to their remoteness, small size, and limited access to resources. However, the degree to which these and other factors affect sustainable development and the ability to react to change varies widely from island to island. When speaking of sustainable development in SIDS, it is important to be mindful that different SIDS face different challenges and opportunities. In the first of the following sections, the diversity of Pacific SIDS is emphasized, and the implications for evaluation policy are discussed.

Sustainable development requires sustainable evaluation: this is best achieved when countries have ownership and control of their own evaluation processes, as required by the SDG framework. The

governments of Pacific SIDS face difficult challenges in owning evaluation: understanding their governance structures and processes is an important early step in planning how to fit an evaluation system into their specific contexts. The second of the following sections outlines the case for local evaluation of sustainable development, and provides a brief look at governance structures in Pacific SIDS.

Diversity of Pacific SIDS

A quick glance at geographic and demographic statistics of Pacific SIDS reveals stark differences between countries and territories. For example, the "small" in small island developing states has an indefinite meaning: land areas range from more than 450,000 square kilometers in Papua New Guinea to just 21 square kilometers in Nauru. The distribution of human settlements also varies widely, with the majority of Palauans and Marshallese living in central urban areas, whereas more than 70 percent of Ni-Vanuatu and Solomon Islanders live in rural areas spread across dozens of islands. People living on large volcanic islands often depend heavily on surface water sources and their associated ecosystems, while these do not exist on small atolls, where people depend instead on coastal and lagoon ecosystem services.

Levels of social and economic development also differ substantially. Five Pacific SIDS are classified by the UN as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), that is, countries that exhibit the lowest indicators of socioeconomic development. Meanwhile, some territories, such as New Caledonia and French Polynesia, are relatively developed, with a per capita GDP close to that of New Zealand.

Evaluation policy toward sustainable development in Pacific SIDS must be flexible enough to respond effectively to the variety of settings in which they exist. This requires representation from each of the Pacific SIDS so that they can explain their sustainable development objectives, and learn how evaluation resources can be made available to them, and used coherently. Fortunately, multiple sustainable development agendas for SIDS have already been put forward (for example, BPOA, MSI, and the SAMOA Pathway), and attempts are being made to improve the platforms for regional cooperation in the Pacific, for example with the Pacific Plan and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (Pacific Plan Review 2013). These are useful entry points for the international evaluation community to promote and support the implementation of evaluation systems. These sustainable development agendas and regional platforms currently highlight the importance of evaluation, but there is room for more operationalization in the context of individual SIDS.

One evaluation challenge unique to some SIDS is the small size of governments. Pacific SIDS with very small population numbers often struggle to assess and report on all of the indicators set by external agencies. Human resources may be limited by the small number of government staff, or by a "brain drain" problem, as in the Cook Islands and Niue, whose inhabitants are automatically granted citizenship in developed countries that offer better economic opportunities. Careful thought must be given to prioritizing those SDG targets and indicators that can realistically be monitored.

Despite great diversity across Pacific SIDS, they do share important cultural characteristics that must be respected by external agencies that are looking to build their capacity for evaluation. Pacific SIDS have some of the highest levels of indigenous populations in the world, and amongst these populations, collectivist values are strongly maintained (Koshy *et al* 2011). As a result, many Pacific islanders strive toward achieving harmony, respect, risk avoidance, and loyalty within institutions even at the expense of efficiency and assertiveness as valued by Western institutions. There is a need to build capacity for evaluation in Pacific SIDS, but external facilitators must be sensitive to the way indigenous values affect the willingness and preferences of the islanders to develop this capacity. (For in-depth discussion of this topic, see Rhodes 2014).

Strengthening Government Capacity for Evaluation

Evaluation is more likely to be sustainable if the governments of SIDS are put in control of the evaluation processes and systems. Country or government-led, as opposed to donor-led, evaluation is believed to help create a culture of evidence-based decision making, and to better reflect the information needs and values of the country stakeholders (Segone 2009, 23). Establishing a sense of ownership over the systems can also help motivate government authorities to maintain evaluation processes, and to apply the results.

With respect to sustainable development, there are additional reasons to encourage government-led evaluation. First, not all sustainable development efforts are driven and funded by donors. For example, Pacific SIDS generally take the threat of climate change very seriously, and have their own sustainable adaptation initiatives and the associated information needs. Governments of Pacific SIDS should be supported in developing evaluation systems that they can use for their own endogenous purposes. Next, the social, economic, and environmental dimensions that make up sustainable development are adaptive and constantly changing. Unlike time-bound bilateral and multilateral programs, government is a permanent fixture, and it is in a better position to assess levels of sustainability over long periods of time if monitoring mechanisms are institutionalized.

Most sustainable development agendas influencing Pacific SIDS are conceptualized at the national or international levels, but governments will also need to think locally. Understanding interactions between human and environmental systems is key to assessing and evaluating sustainability (Rowe 2012), but these interactions are often highly context-specific. Therefore, in addition to top-down evaluation strategies, bottom-up strategies that can capture local nuances of sustainability are also needed. It will be beneficial to consider how local government in Pacific SIDS can be included and strengthened to fill this need.

Many Pacific SIDS governments have adopted decentralization policies, and several have constitutional provisions for local government. The scale of local government that exists varies widely (Hassall and Tipu 2008). In the Solomon Islands the local government is only decentralized to the level of provincial and municipal councils which each oversee currently only tens of thousands of people. Meanwhile, individual islands and island groups in Kiribati have their own councils, some of which may oversee as little as a few hundred people. Some of the larger Melanesian SIDS have tiered national/regional/local government structures, while all government is maintained centrally in microstates like Niue and Nauru. Consideration of potential M&E responsibilities, and the mapping of the potential flow of information through disparate government structures is an important early step in assessing the potential for a comprehensive evaluation system.

Another interesting aspect of Pacific SIDS is that traditional or customary governance systems that date back to precolonial times are often blended with democratic governance systems and empowered through legislation (Hassall and Tipu 2008; Hassall *et al* 2011). For example, village councils composed of the heads of extended families are granted administrative power by the state in Samoa. In Tuvalu, elected local officials are accountable to a traditional assembly of elders who are given power by the state to oversee local affairs. These cases offer interesting opportunities for evaluation at the local level because the methods of inquiry could coalesce with traditional forms of engagement to produce rich, useful data that otherwise might be missed by top-down national approaches.

In order for evaluation systems to be effective within Pacific SIDS governments, they will need to be crafted appropriately to fit a variety of contexts, while working within on-the-ground realities. Sustainable development is a complex issue that plays out at not just at the global and national levels, but also at local levels, where traditional forms of governance are still common. Evaluation approaches need to be adaptive enough to handle both the complexity and variety found in Pacific SIDS, and should respect cultural heritage (Hoey 2015). Furthermore, local governments in Pacific SIDS generally are underresourced financially, and for the smallest islands this will likely continue for the foreseeable future (Hassall and Tipu 2008). The challenge going forward is not just to demand more evaluation and to offer training, but to work

with Pacific SIDS stakeholders to identify which forms of evaluation make sense in each of their given contexts.

Evaluating the Effects of Climate Change on Sustainable Development in Caribbean SIDS

The small island developing states of the Caribbean are among the world's most vulnerable countries when it comes to the effects of climate change (UNFCCC 2005; Todd 2011, 2013). This could become critical to their social and economic development, as well as to their terrestrial, coastal, and marine environments if no appropriate action is taken. Many islands are threatened by increases in the number and severity of extreme weather events, rising sea levels and coastal erosion, coral bleaching, and damage to biodiversity. At its worst, climate change could result in substantial loss of life and the damage to property and infrastructure that can easily cripple small and fragile economies. The Caribbean SIDS comprise a substantial part of the membership of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a regional political and economic grouping of some twenty member and associate member states. The World Bank has estimated that about 11 percent of the total GDP of all 20 CARICOM countries could be adversely impacted annually by climate change (Toba 2009; see also, World Bank 1997; IDB 2014).

Although the Caribbean SIDS are not high greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters on the world stage, they do have opportunities for climate-change mitigation, and many countries are pursuing them through such activities as improved energy efficiency of buildings; increased production of solar power; the use of household equipment such as solar water heaters; and the scaled-up adoption of electric vehicles.

A Common Approach for Increasing Climate-Change Resilience, Adaptation, and Mitigation among Caribbean SIDS

In 2009, through the Liliendaal Declaration,[ix] CARICOM leaders presented their vision of a common regional approach that would enhance resilience and adaptation by addressing the threats and challenges of climate change on Caribbean society and economy, as well as by providing support for mitigation-related policies and measures. This approach will be delivered through an overarching regional framework that comprises a set of strategic elements, each with defined goals and indicators, which should contribute to the achievement of the framework's overall objectives. Responsibility for designing and managing a common M&E system for the regional framework and its elements is vested in the Caribbean Community Centre for Climate Change (CCCCC), based in Belize.

The common approach is made up of five strategic elements that embody the key objectives contributing to the longer-term goal of building regional resilience and capacity to adapt to climate change. They are:

- ***Strategic Element 1:*** *Mainstream climate change adaptation* strategies into the sustainable development agendas of the CARICOM member states;
- ***Strategic Element 2:*** Promote the implementation of *specific adaptation measures* to address key vulnerabilities in the region;
- ***Strategic Element 3:*** Promote actions to *reduce GHG emissions* through fossil fuel reduction and conservation, and switching to renewable and cleaner energy sources;
- ***Strategic Element 4:*** Promote actions to *reduce the vulnerability of natural and human systems* in CARICOM countries to the impacts of a changing climate;
- ***Strategic Element 5:*** Promote actions to derive social, economic, and environmental benefits from the prudent *management of standing forests* in CARICOM countries.

This complex array of strategic elements has generated an associated set of 21 goals. It is intended that these should be monitored and evaluated in one M&E framework applied across the 20 member and associated states.[x]

Challenges for Evaluation of the Regional Framework

Establishing, populating, and analyzing such an M&E framework would be a major undertaking for any region, and will pose particularly substantial challenges for many Caribbean SIDS, as outlined below.

Challenge 1: Targets, indicators, and data

Progress toward each of the 21 goals should be measured through sets of baselines, targets, and indicators. The prevailing situation with respect to climate-change targets is consistent across the CARICOM countries: that is, targets are generally only established for donor-funded projects. In many other cases, particularly for government-sponsored policies and activities, progress indicators have been defined, but are not associated with specific targets. Baseline data are generally available for national and sectoral-level frameworks, as well as for donor-funded projects, and are therefore relatively strong compared with targets and indicators.

Challenge 2: Variable resources for monitoring and evaluation

The data landscape is highly uneven across CARICOM member states. Countries with relatively major economies, notably Jamaica, have more resources to invest in national-level data collection and management than much smaller economies, where public administration has limited human and financial resources. Similarly, countries with many externally supported projects, such as St. Lucia, have greater access to external M&E advice, and the funds to support this function, than countries with fewer projects.

In recognition of this variation, it is important to note that M&E models that have been found effective in relatively well-resourced CARICOM countries cannot simply be transferred to other countries in the region, which have fewer resources. It is therefore important to ensure that evaluation activities and systems assess whether specific countries have made acceptable progress toward climate-change targets according to their own unique situations, priorities, and resources, rather than against region-wide standards derived from countries with greater human and financial resources.

Challenge 3: Ability to respond to challenges of the regional framework

Underlying the concept of a unified CARICOM-wide M&E framework is the expectation that each country will have some indicators and targets that reflect the goals of its national priorities and policies. However, a preparatory study for the M&E framework found that many key stakeholders in government ministries dealing with climate change, or in other national bodies with a climate-related mandate, were not strongly aware of the specificities of the regional framework, and still less aware of how it might be evaluated. Furthermore, there is often no clear separation between monitoring activities and evaluation activities, which would only be feasible in much more developed and well-resourced systems. This means that even the limited data collected by monitoring systems are often not suitable for evaluation purposes.

Challenge 4: Low status of monitoring and evaluation

An additional important challenge to overcome is the low status and limited capacity of M&E activities in most of the countries in the region. Monitoring and evaluation are largely conducted in internationally-funded interventions, and are often of a regional or subregional nature. Associated with such interventions,

several regional or subregional M&E frameworks have been proposed or established in various sectors (notably disaster management), usually with limited take up at the country level.

Underlying weak national implementation is the substantial inequality and perceived disconnect between the regional bodies proposing M&E frameworks and the national government departments or units that must conduct the detailed work of designing and implementing data collection and analysis at the country level. Characteristically, the regional bodies have sufficient technical capacity, human resources, and funding to participate in complex M&E exercises. Government departments, on the other hand, are often understaffed and poorly resourced, but have substantial implementation and reporting obligations, including some that are mandatory under the requirements of internationally-funded activities or conventions. At the country level, therefore, evaluation is currently rarely recognized as useful, and has a correspondingly low functional status.

In the context of the constraints outlined above, the all-embracing M&E framework for climate change is often viewed as a largely unwelcome addition to existing tasks for the relevant government offices at the country level and may, in view of insufficient human and financial resources, be undeliverable. The requirements for national-level capacity building need to be carefully incorporated into the development of the overall regional M&E framework: this would include providing substantial financial resources over a period of time, given the low starting point in many countries.

Advancing Evaluation Capacity

The Caribbean SIDS have limited numbers of experienced evaluators, including those with climate-change expertise. The demand for evaluators comes mainly from international bodies, including the countries and institutions that provide funding support to governments and regional institutions. To convert the desire for comprehensive evaluation of the effects of CARICOM policies and strategies to reality will therefore require substantial evaluation capacity development.

However, this capacity development needs to be placed within a fundamental upgrading of the role and implementation of evaluation. Underlying the possibility of such change are the following fundamental questions:

- How can the value and status of evaluation be raised, so that rather than being seen as a function that is of interest only to donors, it is seen as a useful resource for governments?
- How can evaluation support from various external funders be brought together into a coherent package, from its current state of consisting of fragmented bits and pieces?
- How can a more equitable and effective balance between the evaluation capacity of well-resourced regional institutions, and those of “shoestring” national government departments and offices be created?

If evaluation is to have any chance of becoming a viable component of the CARICOM regional approach to climate-change adaptation, resilience, and mitigation, it needs to be very carefully focused on a few critical issues, and realistically scaled, so that it both appears to be, and is, implementable at the country level.

Evaluation capacity development needs to be part of a comprehensive package that will include in-person engagement of national stakeholders in its development through regional planning meetings of operational staff, and capacity building and financial support for national M&E functions. This process should place increased emphasis on evaluation, rather than focusing exclusively on indicators for results-based management.

Future Monitoring and Evaluation in the SIDS

Experience in both the Pacific and Caribbean SIDS suggests that monitoring and evaluation as analytical tools are currently underutilized. However, we propose that M&E can be very powerful in promoting sustainable development in the island states, if it is institutionalized at the governmental level and integrated into government policies, strategies, and programs. Monitoring is needed to ensure that the various interventions are on track, and are completing their stated activities on time and in a cost-effective manner. Evaluation is needed in order to ascertain that the policies, strategies, and other interventions are reaching their goals and contributing to sustainable development without causing unanticipated negative consequences.

There are a number of prerequisites in order for this to happen. The first pertains to the fact that currently M&E is seen mostly as a requirement from donors and/or regional organizations. It consequently receives low priority at the level of national government ministries and departments. It is important to change this perception: this will require M&E functions and activities to demonstrate their added value. Building the capacity of national stakeholders to appraise and use evidence will contribute to creating demand for M&E. National stakeholders must be engaged in the development of these capacity-building efforts in order to promote country ownership, and a special focus on the utility of evaluation beyond monitoring indicators is needed.

A closely-related challenge concerns the limited human and institutional capacities in SIDS. Well-resourced regional institutions and donors can most effectively contribute to addressing these limitations if their M&E assistance is coordinated, cohesive, and holistic. Regional cooperation between M&E stakeholders is needed to ensure that resources are spread efficiently and fairly. However, even with effective external support, it may not be realistic to expect all SIDS to develop M&E systems that function similarly to those in larger continental countries, especially in the SIDS with the smallest populations. M&E models developed in other regions of the world cannot necessarily be scaled down to an island level. Rather than simply attempting to build human and institutional capacities to fit preconceived national M&E models, the majority of which have been developed in continental countries, effort is needed to developinnovative models that fit existing island contexts.

There is also significant scope for cross-learning between SIDS in other regions: that is, not only in the Pacific and the Caribbean, but also in the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the Mediterranean, and the South China Sea. Existing mechanisms could be used for this purpose, including the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which has a membership of 44 states and observers covering all oceans and regions. Similarly, the UN manages the Inter-Agency Consultative Group (IACG) on SIDS, which brings together regional SIDS organizations[xi] as well as international, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental partners, and could ensure that all M&E activities pertaining to the agency work are coordinated. Another existing platform that could be used more effectively to share M&E experiences and lessons learned between the regions is the GEF International Waters Learning Exchange and Resource Network (IW:LEARN),[xii] which already provides an established forum for learning shared among a large number of environmental programs and projects across regions.

It is important to tailor M&E systems to the specific situations at hand. One size does not fit all, and top-down approaches that impose uniform frameworks on countries and departments regardless of their needs and capacities are counterproductive. It will be essential to choose the targets of monitoring and the subjects of evaluation carefully, based on the utility of these actions in helping to meet national priorities. It will also be important to adjust and design M&E systems to the particular institutional and cultural systems that are prevalent in each country.

Promoting country-led monitoring and evaluation will best serve the need for countries to manage sustainable development. Sustainable development issues involve balancing social, environmental, and economic costs and benefits: this means making value judgments about what exactly is most important to sustain in each country. Ultimately, it is the countries involved that should be making these judgments, informed by robust evidence and in recognition of the fact that sustainable development looks different at different scales and means different things to different people. Furthermore, climate change, which is one of the biggest threats to sustainable development in SIDS, is insidious because of the uncertainty about how society and nature will react to it in the coming decades. This makes consistent implementation and use of M&E all the more important: SIDS will need to be active learners as they adapt to constantly changing environments.

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[iii] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/conferences/msi2005
[iv] http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1537
[v] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/futurewewant.html
[vi] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf
[vii] Target 13.b.
[viii] American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Marianas, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.
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