



WHO country presence in small island developing states (SIDS)



World Health
Organization



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ISBN 978-92-4-002765-7 (electronic version)
ISBN 978-92-4-002766-4 (print version)

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Design and layout by Studio FFFOG

Cover page: © WHO / Yoshi Shimizu

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Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are a recognized group of 38 UN Member States and 20 non-Members/Associate Members of Regional Commissions, located in three geographic regions: the Caribbean; the Pacific; and the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea (AIMS) (see Annex 1).

SIDS face unique social, economic and environmental challenges. Due to their remote geography, many SIDS face high import and export trade costs as well as irregular international traffic volumes, while relying on external markets for many goods. Most of their natural resources come from the ocean. SIDS are particularly vulnerable to climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss owing to their vulnerability to exogenous shocks and fragile land and marine ecosystems. Their remoteness and small population sizes mean high transportation costs and limited opportunity to develop economies of scale in international markets.

Climate change has an especially significant impact on SIDS, through natural disasters that destroy homes, health facilities, schools, communications, and energy and transport infrastructure. Moreover, SIDS face an existential threat from slow-onset events like rising sea levels, and the realistic prospect of drastic measures such as relocation of their populations. Biodiversity is vital for the livelihood of many SIDS, with tourism and fisheries often contributing a significant proportion of their GDP. A more robust biodiversity could help SIDS benefit in the future from a sustainable food supply, clean water, reduced beach erosion, soil and sand formation, and protection from pollution and natural disasters such as storm surges and floods. As many SIDS are tourist destinations, adolescent health—including pregnancies, drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol—also represents a special health challenge for SIDS.

These challenges—compounded by limited institutional capacity and scarce financial resources—have a considerable impact on systems, services and the health status of SIDS populations, making the role of WHO in SIDS especially important. This document provides a quick overview of health sector information and WHO's presence in SIDS in the most recent two-year period (2019–20). The information in this document is presented in the specific context of the Thirteenth General Programme of Work of the WHO (GPW13),¹ with a special section on COVID-19.

When interpreting the data presented here, it is important to keep in mind that while SIDS share common challenges and vulnerabilities, they also vary greatly in terms of population, social and cultural beliefs and practices, economic development, health status and so forth. Average figures presented for SIDS tend to mask these variations.

¹ WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023, available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/324775/WHO-PRP-18.1-eng.pdf>, accessed on 19 March 2021.

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Demography

According to the UN Statistics Division, the estimated combined population of SIDS in 2020 was 72 027 558,² which is less than one percent of the global population. Although SIDS (as the group name indicates) generally have small populations, the population size ranges from 1626 in Niue to 11 326 616 in Cuba. Average annual population growth is somewhat lower in SIDS (0.91%) than in the world (1.09%), as seen in Fig. 1.

The total fertility rate in SIDS has been steadily declining from 5.54 children per woman of reproductive age in 1950–55 to 2.45 in 2015–20; this decline is more marked than that observed globally during the same period (Fig. 2).

The proportion of the population aged below 15 years (28.9%) is higher than the global average (25.6%), and conversely the proportion of the population aged 65 years and above in SIDS is lower (6.12% vs 9.09%). The current trend of lower population growth among SIDS is likely to accelerate population ageing within the next few decades, with consequent potential health impacts.

Fig. 1. Population growth rates SIDS vs the World²

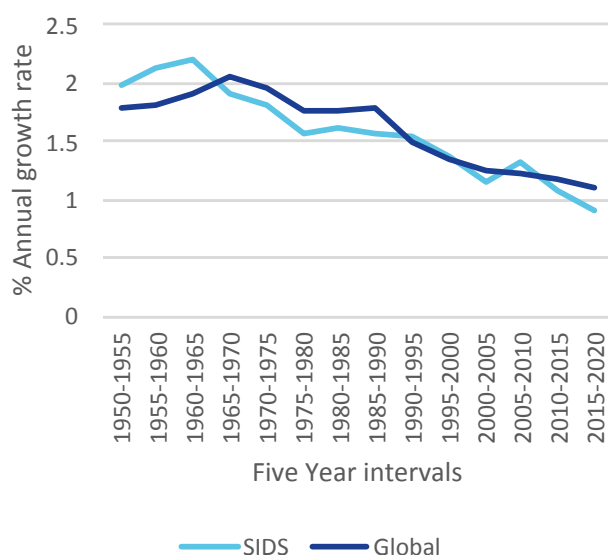
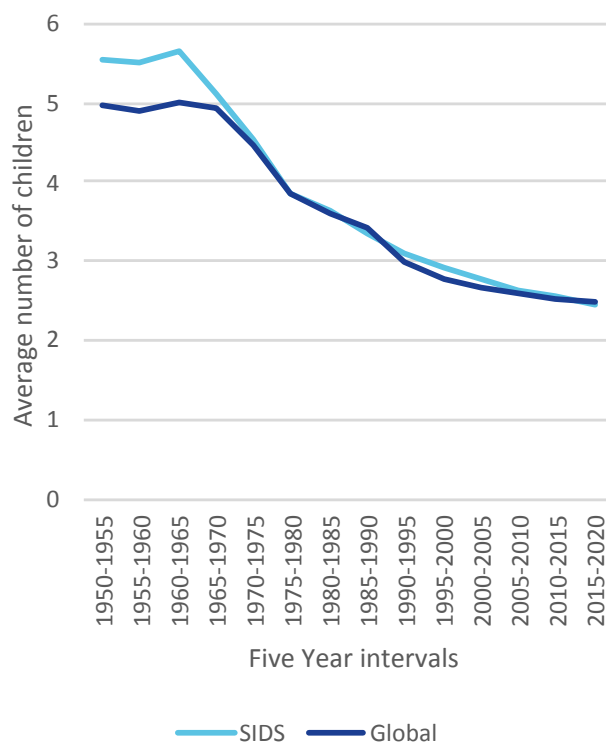


Fig. 2. Trends in total fertility rate²



² UN Data, available at <http://data.un.org/Search.aspx?q=small+island+developing+states>, accessed on 19 February 2021.

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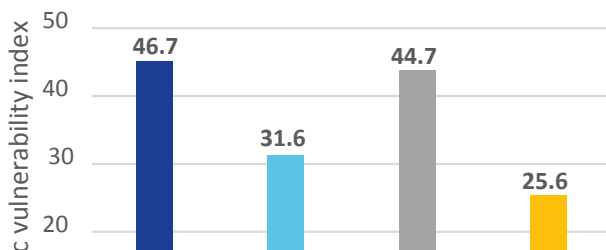
Economy

Most SIDS are either upper-middle (17) or high income (24), while nine are lower-middle and two low income status.³ The rationale for classifying them as “developing” therefore reflects the special vulnerabilities to which they are exposed.

SIDS vary in terms of their economic strength. The average per capita GDP of SIDS is US\$ 14 620.43. This figure ranges from US\$ 697.29 in Guinea-Bissau to US\$ 117 089.30 in Bermuda (2019). In 2019, half of all SIDS had a per capita GDP of less than US\$ 8000 and 15% had a per capita GDP of over US\$ 20 000.⁴

However, measuring economic growth of SIDS using the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) “does not adequately capture the unique features of SIDS that are relevant to their sustainability.”⁵ Given their geographic remoteness, small size and vulnerability to natural disasters, the economic vulnerability⁶ of all SIDS is more pronounced than that of all other developing countries as is the vulnerability of upper-middle income SIDS compared to other upper-middle income countries (Fig. 3).⁷

Fig. 3. Economic vulnerability index⁷



Climate change and the economy

As their ocean territories are 20.7 times greater than their land area, SIDS see themselves as Large Ocean States, and are pioneering the Blue Economy paradigm which promotes the sustainable use of ocean resources while preserving and restoring ocean ecosystems and combating climate change.⁸ A recent analysis shows that every US\$ 1 invested in the sustainable ocean economy could yield as much as US\$ 5 in return.⁹ Expanding marine and coastal activities to diversify their tourist-reliant economies, accelerating the digital transformation, investing in digital infrastructure and developing innovative solutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are examples of the way forward.

Since 1970, it is estimated that SIDS have lost US\$ 153 billion to climate-related events.¹⁰ UNDP’s “Rising up for SIDS” is an integrated approach to support SIDS as a vehicle for green recovery and beyond.⁸ Climate change affects the social and environmental determinants of health such as clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter. People living in SIDS are particularly vulnerable to the health effects that climate change—in the form of exposure to natural disasters and new patterns of water- and vector-borne diseases—can have on population health.¹¹

Health and the economy

The average total expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP in SIDS countries, territories and areas is 7%, although this percentage varies greatly from 2% GDP in Papua New Guinea to 19% in Tuvalu.¹² Variations also exist with respect to per capita health expenditure, ranging from US\$ 53 in Guinea-Bissau to US\$ 2824 in Singapore. In 2018, six SIDS spent less than US\$ 100 per capita (Guinea-Bissau, Papua New Guinea, Haiti, Comoros, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands) while another six spent over US\$ 1000 per capita (Trinidad

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