FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 07.06.2024 | Oliver Hasenkamp

# A sea of opportunities

## Climate change isn't the only threat — superpower conflicts also endanger small island states

Almost a fifth of all United Nations member states belong to the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) group. Their 4th UN International Conference (SIDS4) took place in the Caribbean island state of Antigua and Barbuda from 27 to 30 May 2024. The conference shed light on the group of 39 independent states, which still receive too little attention from the international community.

The resolution document of SIDS4, the so-called Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS), emphasises that the next 10 years will be decisive for the development of SIDS. It emphasises the urgent need for action to enable island states to achieve sustainable development — despite the massive impact of climate change and the disadvantages resulting from their insularity and small size.

In Europe, too, many people now realise that island states are among the countries most affected by the consequences of climate change. The unhelpful image of completely sinking islands still dominates. On the one hand, this only applies to low-lying islands, which become uninhabitable long before they actually sink into the sea due to soil salinisation and a lack of food and water. Many overpopulated atoll islands are at this point as we speak. On the other hand, it neglects other consequences of climate change, such as increasing storms, droughts and water shortages, changes in vital fishing grounds, erosion and land degradation, which affect many SIDS equally. Barbuda, the smaller of the two islands of the SIDS4 host country, was so badly destroyed by Hurricane Irma in 2017 that the entire population had to be temporarily relocated.

## Achieving lasting development

Germany has taken an important step towards enhancing cooperation with SIDS on climate change through its climate foreign policy concept. Positive examples include Germany's support for the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law and the initiative promoted by SIDS and local civil society for a legal opinion on

climate change by the International Court of Justice. However, as Germanwatch rightly criticises, the approach to foreign climate policy and, above all, the financing of this policy remains too vague. Many SIDS also believe that Germany's climate foreign policy is at odds with the country's inadequate climate protection measures at home. It is crucial for the credibility of Germany's climate foreign policy that it is orientated towards the actual needs of the people affected by climate change. Island states must not just serve as a nice backdrop for government visits. In particular, they urgently need more financial resources to adapt to the already unavoidable consequences of climate change.

However, the lack of funding highlights a bigger problem: Although SIDS have been increasingly important to Germany's foreign policy for years, this has so far had little impact on the government's development policy efforts. For SIDS to achieve lasting development and to take the UN Sustainable Development Goals (leaving no one behind) seriously, it is essential to look beyond climate change and recognise the close links between climate change and other development challenges. Limiting co-operation to climate change does not do justice to the far more diverse challenges faced by these island states. To a certain extent, current co-operation is merely focussed on not further worsening the – leaving climate change aside – already difficult starting conditions.

***The development opportunities of island states are not only threatened by debt and climate change, but also by increasing geopolitical polarisation.***

The particular challenges of SIDS include limited natural and financial resources, economic disadvantages due to remoteness from important markets, long distances and transport routes, even within countries, and dependence on imports. Some island states consist of hundreds of small, barely populated (or sometimes overpopulated) islands, which makes it considerably more difficult and costlier to provide people with education or healthcare. SIDS4 therefore calls on the global community to better integrate island states into the global economic system, to support them in diversifying their economies and to invest more in health and education.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to overlook the versatility of island states. They differ significantly in terms of their location, size and geographical characteristics, which is why one-size-fits-all solutions do not work. A country like Papua New Guinea, with a land mass larger than Germany and a population of well over 10 million people, where a devastating landslide with thousands of deaths occurred just during the

SIDS4 conference, faces very different development challenges than low-lying atoll states like the Maldives or Tuvalu.

The SIDS4 final declaration ABAS places a strong focus on making private sector investment in SIDS more attractive. For small islands in particular, however, this will remain a lofty goal in the future. And it won't be possible without state funding. If climate justice and the UN Sustainable Development Goals are to be taken seriously, then Germany also has a duty to provide more funding, even during times of budgetary difficulties. This is all the more true when you realise how heavily indebted many SIDS are in the face of climate change and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Even if ABAS does not directly call for debt cancellation, which is probably unavoidable in some cases, dealing with debt plays an important role in the final document.

The development opportunities of island states are not only threatened by debt and climate change, but also by increasing geopolitical polarisation. A power struggle between the US and China has been coming to a head in the Pacific for years. This harbours the danger that, in the worst case, the people and their needs will become pawns in an externally controlled power struggle. This is another reason why ABAS rightly emphasises that SIDS must retain ownership of their development opportunities. This requires both reforms of the UN to make it more effective in taking into account the special circumstances of SIDS but also better opportunities for SIDS to participate within the UN. Even though island states are much more visible in international politics today than they were 10 years ago, they and their issues are still significantly underrepresented in many multilateral processes.

***Without denying the many challenges of island states, such positive narratives are important to emphasise the potential of island states.***

As small states, SIDS are particularly dependent on international cooperation. The extent to which SIDS now utilise international institutions and international law in particular is once again demonstrated by the legal opinion of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, which was published on the initiative of the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law shortly before the SIDS4 conference.

As early as 1994, the Tongan author Epeli Hau'ofa wrote in his essay *Our Sea of Islands*, which is still an important document for regional identity in the Pacific Islands region, that it makes a big difference whether the states of the region are seen as scattered islands in a vast sea or as a 'sea of islands'. The latter view sees the ocean less as something that divides and

more as a unifying element. Even if the land mass of many island states is indeed relatively small, the term SIDS is problematic in itself. In recent years, the term Large Ocean States has therefore emerged. This term emphasises the potential of island states and their mostly large ocean zones. Kiribati, for example, may only have a land mass smaller than the area of the city of Berlin, but it is eight times the size of Germany if the country's exclusive maritime economic zone is taken into account.

Without denying the many challenges of island states, such positive narratives are important to emphasise the potential of island states. Indeed, islands can be pioneers in international development, as shown by Tokelau, for example, which was the first nation in the world to achieve a 100 per cent renewable energy supply over 10 years ago.

---



**Oliver Hasenkamp**

Oliver Hasenkamp has been a board member of the Pacific Network e.V. since 2012 and was its chair from 2015 to 2019. He is currently a public relations officer for development, climate and sustainability at the German United Nations Association.