



# Education for sustainable development: Implications for small island developing states (SIDS)



Michael Crossley\*, Terra Sprague

Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies (ICS), Education in Small States Research Group, University of Bristol, Graduate School of Education, 35 Berkeley Square, Clifton, Bristol BS8 1JA, United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Climate change and global recession have especially dramatic implications for small island developing states (SIDS). It is argued that such issues warrant urgent attention from researchers, policy-makers and the international development community. The existing literature relating to sustainable development in SIDS is limited in scope and rarely addresses the educational implications of sustainable development in significant depth. This paper draws upon recent theoretically and empirically grounded research carried out in collaboration with colleagues working within small states worldwide. The analysis examines how SIDS are responding to these contemporary global challenges, how the international community is engaging with such developments, and how education research and development co-operation might play more effective roles in advancing sustainable development in small state contexts. The paper concludes by exploring ways in which the wider international community may learn from the small states experience.

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development is widely recognised as a global priority. While challenging and insightful theoretical analyses abound, and much supportive rhetoric can be found in governmental policy statements and aspirations, multilateral agency goals, NGO agendas and private sector mission statements, in practice, global development trajectories more often run in contrary directions. Such contradictions are not surprising, given the high stakes generated by increasingly competitive national and international economic and political perspectives and ideologies. The central place of ever increasing economic growth and consumption in both the conception and practice of development – increasingly across all cultural contexts – lies at the heart of this dilemma. The search for more sustainable development strategies clearly demands much more than challenging critique and innovative theorising. It requires creative solutions, based upon successful experience, that are also realistically and politically implementable. With the emergence of climate change and global recession as the dominant challenges of the first decade of the 21st century, the need for action is increasingly urgent.

Nowhere is this need greater, or more urgent, than in the small states of the world that are especially vulnerable to such phenomena (Sem, 2007; Nath et al., 2010). In the South Pacific, for example, the nation of Tuvalu is uniquely vulnerable to climate change, and only a small rise in global sea levels would necessitate total evacuation and resettlement of the population ([www.alofatuvalu.tv](http://www.alofatuvalu.tv)). The urgency of climate change has also been highlighted by the *Declaration on Climate Change* produced by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS, 2009) and in wider deliberations, most recently at the Rio + 20 UN Conference on sustainable development. Thus, climate change can be seen to generate significant barriers to the goals of sustainable development for small states worldwide.

This paper focuses upon the implications of the global challenges of climate change and economic recession for small island developing states (SIDS). In doing so, it recognises how SIDS are on the front line in both experiencing the impact of such challenges, and in dealing creatively and innovatively with them. Attention is given to how education may contribute to sustainable development in small state contexts; to examples of successful or emergent practice; to ways in which the international community is engaging with SIDS in such work; and to how others may build upon or learn from this comparative experience.

The analysis draws upon recent theoretically and empirically grounded research carried out in collaboration with researchers and colleagues working within small states worldwide (see [www.smallstates.net](http://www.smallstates.net)). Most recently, this included research on

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 0117 331 4490.

E-mail addresses: [Michael.Crossley@Bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Michael.Crossley@Bristol.ac.uk), [m.crossley@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:m.crossley@bristol.ac.uk) (M. Crossley), [Terra.Sprague@Bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Terra.Sprague@Bristol.ac.uk) (T. Sprague).

<sup>1</sup> [www.smallstates.net](http://www.smallstates.net).

current educational policies and priorities in Commonwealth small states funded by the Commonwealth (Crossley et al., 2011), consultations with Ministers and Senior Advisers at the 2009 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CEEM) held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Crossley et al., 2009), studies of tertiary education in small states carried out in collaboration with UNESCO/IIEP in Paris (Martin and Bray, 2011) and participation in discussions on ESD in small states held in 2012 at the 18th CCEM in Mauritius.

In the following sections we outline some of the major conceptual and theoretical foundations that underpin work on education for sustainable development in small states. This includes background information on development priorities and education in small states, material on definitions and characteristics, and an introduction to existing research on SIDS. This is followed by an overview of the sustainable development and Education for sustainable development movements and how they relate to current research on the contemporary challenges faced by SIDS.

## 2. Development priorities and education in small states

A distinctive literature on aspects of development in small states did not emerge until the 1970s and initially this was related to economic and political fields. Stimulating this was the creation of numerous newly independent small states with, for example, 12 new nations with populations of fewer than 1.5 million people joining the Commonwealth between 1965 and 1977. Subsequent meetings of Commonwealth Heads of Government repeatedly called for work in this area and acknowledged that the international community had not paid adequate attention to the distinctive needs and vulnerabilities of small states (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985). With regard to the literature on education it was not until the mid 1980s that a distinctive body of work began to emerge. Again, much of this seminal work was initiated by the Commonwealth and, most notably, following the impetus of a highly influential pan-Commonwealth meeting of experts on education in small states that was convened in Mauritius during 1985 (Bacchus and Brock, 1987).

Early work on education considered the challenges of scale, isolation and dependency, recognising that small states were not simply scaled down versions of larger countries but have a socio-cultural ecology of their own (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985). In the light of recommendations from the Mauritius meeting, seven priority themes that were seen to be common to many small states, were incorporated into subsequent Commonwealth Secretariat work plans. These included ongoing conceptual research, studies of the organisation and management of Ministries of Education, work on examinations and assessment, on post-secondary education, and on the role of telecommunications in small states (Brock, 1984; Crocombe and Crocombe, 1994; Bray and Steward, 1998). The 1985 Mauritius meeting is an important benchmark, and an event that created an international network that inspired other organisations and individuals, such as UNESCO/IIEP and the Islands and Small States Institute at the University of Malta, to engage in related work and studies (Mayo, 2008; Atchoarena, 1993; Bray and Packer, 1993).

### 2.1. Small states: characteristics and definitions

Since this seminal work, the Commonwealth has generally defined small states as those with populations smaller than 1.5 million. Their grouping of small states, however, extends to Botswana, The Gambia, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia and Papua New Guinea (with a population over six million) as these states share many common characteristics of smaller states, including issues of

remoteness, insularity and their susceptibility to natural disasters. While the Commonwealth and the World Bank both adopt a 1.5 million population threshold to categorise small states, others choose broader definitions. These include population counts of up to five million (Bacchus, 2008), as well as arguments for the use of less restrictive definitions including attention to land mass and economic criteria in identifying small states (Bray and Packer, 1993; Hindmarsh, 1996; Crowards, 2002).

Using a 1.5 million benchmark, the Commonwealth currently has 25 small states as fully independent members, while the global total is 47. In addition to these 47 sovereign small states, are 40 territories, which are in forms of dependency or association with larger countries. These include, for example, British Overseas Territories (BROT), French Overseas Regions and Departments (FRORD) and self-governing territories in association with the USA and New Zealand. Table 1 shows the small states and territories by region.<sup>2</sup>

As seen in Table 1, the majority of small states can be found within the Pacific and Caribbean regions. It should be further noted that small states include rich and poor nations in both the North and South. There is a vast range of income levels and rankings among the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) represented amongst the Commonwealth small states alone. Table 2 shows that the largest proportion of Commonwealth small states with populations smaller than 1.5 million are in the upper middle income level (US\$3,856–11,905 GNI per capita) and have high and medium HDI rankings. Significantly, all of the Pacific Commonwealth small states are in the lower-middle or lower income brackets with medium HDI rankings.

In 1999, a review of Commonwealth work on education in small states was carried out (Crossley and Holmes, 1999) which highlighted work undertaken in Commonwealth small states between the 1985 pan-Commonwealth Mauritius meeting and 1998. The review proposed a framework for future Commonwealth initiatives relating to educational development in small states while highlighting the importance of recognising their distinctive cultural and economic needs. The research reported in our 2011 book can be seen as a follow up to the 1999 study, and as work that emphasises how contemporary challenges differ in scale and scope – arguing that:

Today, priorities are more concerned with how small states can respond meaningfully to major external shocks and challenges – economic, environmental, cultural, and political (Briguglio and Kisanga, 2004; Pillay and Elliott, 2005). Small states need to secure the human and financial resources to enable their citizens to meet these challenges in their own societies and in the wider world. Co-operation and education are important means of addressing such challenges. (Crossley et al., 2011, pp. 5–6)

We return to these and related issues later in the article.

### 2.2. Conceptualising small island developing states (SIDS)

As indicated earlier, the present article reflects upon the processes of international development cooperation and conceptions of Education for sustainable development. In doing so, we focus attention upon the implications of key global challenges for SIDS. UNESCO has pioneered much of the existing conceptual and theoretical work relating to SIDS. Although UNESCO identifies no formal definition based upon size or other characteristics, it maintains a list of 52 SIDS (UNESCO, 2013). These were first officially recognised as a distinct group at the June 1992 UN

<sup>2</sup> This table does not include some territories which are not permanently populated or which have populations with few or no students.

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