



4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States
Antigua and Barbuda
27 – 30 May 2024

Children and young people's concerns from the Small Island Developing States

A CALL FOR ACTION FROM SIDS DELEGATES

“We need to set things right for children of the future. Don’t do it for us, do it for them so that our children can have (...) a clean, happy, healthy and safe environment ... to live in.”
(Samoa, male, 11)

Introduction

Children, who are twelve years old today, will transition into adulthood in 2030, by the time the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are to be attained. Since children and young people¹ are the ones who will inherit this world, it is essential for them to have a say and be heard by adults in important conversations concerning their future. Children and young people need to have the room to safely voice their perspectives and concerns and be meaningfully engaged in decision-making processes. They are the leaders of tomorrow and the outcomes of our decisions today will shape the trajectory of their lives.

This report was developed by UNICEF with the objective of summarizing issues and concerns that children and young people from Small Island Developing States (SIDS) - up to the age of 24 years - have voiced.² The information gathered was obtained through 11 voluntary national reviews and 45 UNICEF, UNFPA and UNESCO reports and materials that included consultations involving children and young people. Data from U-Polls were reviewed for all SIDS countries for which survey results were available (see Annex 1). Documents from 2020 onwards were included. **The findings are intended for national policymakers and delegations who attend the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States: Charting the course towards resilient prosperity to be held in Antigua and Barbuda in May 2024** and are expected to contribute valuable insights to inform the discussions during conference meetings.

Overview of SIDS

Due to their distinct geographical features, many SIDS (see Box 1) grapple with unique challenges arising from their remote and isolated locations, their small population size and limited domestic markets.

Box 1: SIDS consists of the following 39 states and 18 territories:

Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Mauritius, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Sao Tomé and Príncipe, Singapore, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

American Samoa, Anguilla, Aruba, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Curacao, French Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Guam, Martinique, Montserrat, New Caledonia, Puerto Rico, Sint Maarten, Turks and Caicos Islands and U.S. Virgin Islands.³

¹ In line with the United Nations' definitions, a child is defined as any person under the age of 18; youth refers to persons between the ages 15-24 years; and the term 'young people' covers all adolescents and youth between the ages of 10 and 24 years.

² Across the Pacific region, the term 'youth' is widely defined as 15-30 years or more, typically extending beyond the international definition.

³ United Nations. List of SIDS. Available at: <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids> (accessed 11 January 2024).

Many of these countries and territories are facing challenges in reaching the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) due to their restricted human and financial resources on the islands and limited employment opportunities. Furthermore, they are prone to environmental disasters due to climate change.⁴ For example, in 2017, natural catastrophes such as hurricanes, had devastating impacts and led to widespread destruction of infrastructure, schools, health facilities and entire communities.⁵ Many SIDS countries lack the resilience to adequately cope with these disasters, which further challenges their efforts towards sustainable development. Nonetheless, their risk to disasters will only continue to increase over the next years and the effects of climate change may even necessitate relocation of populations.

The 4th International Conference on SIDS has four key areas of discussion that are essential in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals across SIDS:

- **Resilient economies** created through economic diversification, trade and investments, tourism and an enhanced ocean-based economy;
- **Safe and prosperous societies** include strengthening health systems, developing strong institutions, achieving gender equality, empowering young people and leaving no one behind;
- **A secure future** focusing on renewable energies, water-food-energy security, resilient infrastructure, transportation and connectivity and climate security;
- **Environmental integrity and planetary sustainability** that includes urgent action on climate change, conservation and sustainable use of the ocean and its resources, restoring biodiversity and mainstreaming disaster risk reduction.

What children and young people want for their future

This report brings together the voices of children and young people to advocate for their issues and concerns as SIDS delegates debate the priorities of Small Island Developing States to achieve sustainable development, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals. At the SIDS conference, it has been decided that four priority areas will be debated with recommendations made. In each thematic area, young people's concerns are relevant and cross-cutting: their priority issues need to be taken seriously and considered in each thematic area. They are dynamic and have the ideas, the creativity and the energy to shape a better world. Through innovation and imagination, they are problem solvers and have a great potential to generate positive change. Given the right circumstances, a young population can be an engine for economic development, growth and innovation. It could also mean elevating indigenous technology and traditional ecological knowledge and practices. Below, their concerns and demands are summarised for consideration and inclusion in the outcome commitments made at the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States.

⁴ ESCAP. Countries in special situations: Small Island Developing States. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/our-work/countries-special-situations/sids#:~:text=In%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific,populations%2C%20and%20small%20domestic%20markets> (accessed 11 January 2024).

⁵ United Nations. About Small Island Development States. Available at: <https://www.un.org/ohrrls/content/about-small-island-developing-states> (accessed 11 January 2024).

Key area for action:

- **Improve education.** Many children do [not attend school or drop out](#). There is a [limited supply of quality teachers](#) and insufficient materials and facilities. Adolescent girls often drop out because they become pregnant and need to support their families (especially if married at an early age) - an occurrence that is particularly prevalent in lower socio-economic households. Lack of adequate education makes them likely to stay in [intergenerational cycles of poverty](#) that are difficult to escape. Boys' disengagement from education is also an important area to highlight. In some countries they are at a greater risk than girls of repeating grades, not completing their education, and have poorer learning outcomes. Poverty and the need to work are cited as the most important drivers of boys' dropping out. In particular, adolescent boys are encouraged in some settings to enter the workforce early to earn money for the family, limiting their capacity to engage in further education.
- **The impact of climate change.** Young people call out the insufficient actions taken by governments, lack of protection of communities most at risk and the need for increased investments in [renewable energies](#) and low carbon solutions. [Poor preparedness before climate-related disasters](#) often leads to interruptions in education and livelihoods. They note that investment in [adaptation and mitigation of climate change](#) will create new opportunities and sectors for employment.
- **Health-related priorities.** There is anxiety about the state of young people's [mental health](#). In addition, high teenage pregnancy rates across SIDS countries can be linked to a lack of access to [sexual and reproductive health](#) (SRH) services and limited education about SRH at school. Conversely, many young girls stop their education once they become pregnant or have a child, which negatively compounds their health issues and increases their vulnerability. Young people additionally highlighted a [lack of clean water supply](#) as a challenge that can further contribute to negative health outcomes.
- **Protection from all forms of violence.** Children and young people are facing [physical and domestic violence, child marriage and child labour](#). They want a [peaceful and safe society](#) to live in. All acts of violence can compound their mental health challenges and have other negative health consequences. It also contributes to reducing the ability to go to school, leaving them more susceptible to living in poverty.
- **Adequate transportation.** Lack of adequate transportation [limits the ability to get to school or health facilities](#), affecting school attendance and health outcomes.

While children and young people do not necessarily pronounce their concerns in ways that they will be discussed at the conference; The voices of children and young people have been captured through numerous participatory processes including Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and national and subregional youth consultations. They have also shared their views through U-Polls as a further way to express what they want for their future. Their priorities and concerns are cross-cutting and relate to many of the themes that will be discussed at the conference and need to be taken into account.

Education for all

Despite some progress, challenges to providing quality education remain a priority across 10 VNRs. The most common issue cited in SIDS countries was that some children and young people do not attend or drop out of school (Timor Leste, Chuuk (Federated States of Micronesia), and Vanuatu); for example due to adolescent pregnancy, because they need to work or are not able to access schools. Some VNRs highlight a lack of schools and training opportunities such as a shortage of higher secondary schools (VNR Maldives) and few opportunities for vocational and higher education-level training in rural areas (VNR Timor Leste). Lack of inclusion of children and young people with disabilities and special needs (VNRs Fiji, Jamaica, Maldives) continues to be an issue, especially when we recognise that a lack of quality education is likely to compound problems with poverty, violence and other health problems.

Young people call on their leaders for a removal of school fees, support to staying in school and investment in trained teachers so that they have school materials available to educate the next generation of leaders

Limited financial resources, having to help at home or teenage pregnancy can be reasons for children and young people not to attend school or to drop out.

“Free education is needed so that every child, in all backgrounds, have the chance to attend school.” (Solomon Island, male, 19)

“I would say that to make school mandatory! A lot of children these days - when [they] choose to withdraw from school or choose not to go to school - then the parent and the government let it be! In my neighborhood I see kids be playing and enjoying their life, staying home when they should be in school! We should encourage our kids to stay in school and learn, 20 years later they are the future of our country!” (Micronesia, young male)

“The reason why I left school was because I was embarrassed with my classmates, they started to say, “that girl has a big belly”. So, I would feel afraid and embarrassed about what I had done. And my tummy had become very visibly big. So, I thought of leaving Chuuk because I was embarrassed. Even though I found the courage to still to go to school, even with the visible tummy, I still strongly wanted to go to school until I gave birth. But then my classmates would gossip and criticise me, so that’s when I thought of leaving.” (Chuuk State, FSM, female, 14)

Poorly trained or unmotivated teachers poorly educate or demotivate children and young people on important topics. Children and young people call for more teachers to be hired in schools and increased teacher wages, to keep them motivated and incentivize people for the job.

“Most schools in my country need more teachers.” (Vanuatu, female, 19)

“Increase the teacher's salary. Our teachers have invested a lot into making sure the children of our nation can receive a good education and having the lowest salary in our country can be quite a downer. [It] can cause them to lose their passion and motivation in doing their job... Having an increased salary will contribute to more creativity in their lessons as most teachers are already paying from their own pocket if they want more materials to be used in their lessons, which is quite a sacrifice as their salary is already quite low and not enough to sustain their families and support their students at the same time.” (Solomon Island, female, 22)

Schools lack materials and facilities such as books or libraries to provide a quality learning environment for children and young people.

“With a worn-out roof, broken windows and no chairs and desks, the learning process doesn't go well, especially during the rainy season.” (Timor Leste, young person)

“...I would love to voice out my view to the minister of education. In the country, I have noticed that lack of resources in most of the schools is a problem. When I talk about resources it refers to the books in [the] library that must be updated ...” (Solomon Island, male, 24)

Access to digital technology

Efforts to bridge the digital divide between SIDS and other, more developed, nations and between subgroups within the countries were mentioned across five VNRs (Barbados, Maldives, Singapore, Timor Leste, Jamaica). People from rural areas or lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to not have access to devices and the internet readily available and are at risk of being left behind in school, which compounds their susceptibility to poverty.

Children and young people call for enhancing access to, and affordability of, technical devices and the internet to support (online) learning

Technical devices and the internet are not accessible and affordable to some children and young people, in particular those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and in rural areas, which can reinforce disparities and lead to difficulties with learning.

“Provide more devices.” (Belize, male, 16)

“Provide internet and technologies.” (Belize, female, 24)

Leaving no one behind in poverty

Poverty and inequality among subgroups of children and young people such as those living with disabilities, in rural areas, or as migrants in Small Island Developing States are major challenges highlighted across VNRs. Poverty negatively affects their health, access to quality food and clean water and education. It was stressed that those left behind also face increased vulnerability during environmental disasters that will continue to worsen, due to climate change.

Children and young people call on governments to reduce poverty by making education more accessible, and providing training and employment opportunities

As noted, young people who live in poverty often do not attend school for various reasons, which contributes to cycles of intergenerational poverty. Even those that have gone to school find few employment opportunities.

“...[T]here is a lot of youths with education, however, so little employment, which leads to poverty and unable to get health care.” (Belize, male, 21)

“High paying jobs, free and available education are two of the main things that’s gonna put crime and violence to stop.” (Jamaica, female, 21)

Climate change

Climate change and its effects on the economy, environment, migration, food security and education are critical issues raised across all the VNRs, given SIDS unique vulnerability to disasters driven by climate change. This is expected to continue to exacerbate health problems and reduce access to education, due to inaccessibility of schools during flooding periods, making youth more susceptible to poverty and violence, including child marriage. The need to invest more in essential climate change services to mitigate some of the vulnerabilities they face was highlighted (Guinea Bissau).

Children and young people demand to be engaged in decision-making process on climate change and call on their governments for heightened investments in mitigating its effects, protecting those communities most at risk and prioritizing sustainable development. This means investing in the renewable energy technologies and low carbon economies in which young people need to be trained. They further call for financing support for low emitting countries that are at risk of disasters driven by climate change

Inadequate political commitment and inaction limit the ability to minimize the effect of climate change and to reach the Paris Agreement, which will put SIDS countries at increased risk of environmental catastrophes.

"I am still young and I do not want the effect of climate change to ruin my childhood. We can never solve the problem of the impacts of climate change. However, we can take action to minimize the impact of climate change." (Samoa, male, 12)

"We all know that Climate Change is a major threat in our Society and Economy. Everyone has a role to play in fighting these threats to minimize the damages it could cause to our Environment. All we need is a Solution and not the Pollution, if we to maintain our beautiful green environment. It is time for the Action. We need to work as one to help save our mother EARTH." (Vanuatu, female, 23)

Young people are not adequately engaged in discussions related to climate change. Their potential as agents of change and leaders of tomorrow is not being recognized.

"The time for meaningful climate action is now. We have talked and discussed, we know what needs to be done and the solutions are there. It is now time to act, we need your help and likewise, you need our help. We must do this together." (Trinidad and Tobago, female, 15).

"It is crucial to involve youths in decision-making processes related to climate action. By empowering the next generation with a seat at the table, we acknowledge the power they hold in steering the course towards a sustainable future. This isn't just about safeguarding the environment; it's about nurturing the leaders who will shape it." (Guyana Youth Declaration)

Renewable energy and low carbon economies are currently underutilised and important avenues to mitigate the effects of climate change. Transitioning economies will create new jobs, in which young people need to be trained.

"If I were Prime Minister, I would make a law that every company and household should use solar energy as the source of power light because it is safe for human health and also for the environment....with that it also helps to reduce toxic gases into the atmosphere.....I would not let people use electricity because it contributed to greenhouse gases and leads to the changes in weather patterns of a region and can cause some natural impact of climate change on humans such as cyclone, flooding, etc.... so it's best if everyone uses solar as the source of generate lights to our homes or work place." (Vanuatu, male, 17)

"Prioritize a long-term national development plan, which paves the way to renewable energy, climate-resilient infrastructure and transport systems, disaster risk reduction and to ensure participation and involvement of frontline communities such as young people and youth-led organizations in the design and implementation of the plan." (Maldives, COP28 Youth statement)

Young people, as well as marginalized groups, are not adequately protected from environmental disasters, such as flooding. Their education is often interrupted during emergency situations. In a Maldives COP28 Youth Statement, they highlighted the need to protect climate refugees and define the term, in case people need to be relocated.

“Ensure children nationwide learn about climate change and their basic human rights in school or through other government programmes. Ensure there are financial and social support services available to any child who is affected by climate change.” (Vanuatu, female, 17)

Unequal global contributions to climate change and vulnerabilities to environmental disaster driven by it call for greater financial support from high emitting countries to support those most affected.

“Call for equity -high emitting states to contribute more through global funding schemes and highlight the global linkages.”

(Maldives: Climate action: Amplifying youth voices, inspiring action).

Health

The health crisis in SIDS was mentioned across most VNRs. Key issues include high rates of maternal and neonatal mortality, teenage pregnancy, non-communicable diseases, and malnutrition. Child malnutrition is a concern - either in the form of stunting, which was mentioned in the majority of VNRs (Jamaica, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste) - or children and young people's overweight (Barbados, Samoa). Again, teenage pregnancy, a pressing issue across many SIDS, often leads to children and young people dropping out of school, worsening their employment prospects. Likewise, poor health impacts the society's ability to advance the economy and country's development. The long-term effects of poor health limit family resilience and economic viability. To mitigate the impact of poor health among young people, preventative and curative health services need to be accessible and available.

Young people call for upholding adolescents sexual and reproductive health and rights and for governments to invest in mental health and well-equipped health facilities

Limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services and commodities including contraception and a lack of education about SRHR increases adolescents' risk of becoming pregnant and dropping out of school.

“I know there are those items from the hospital like condoms and other medicines we take so we can have sexual contact but without conceiving a baby. But that's only after being [pregnant] – now I start to understand, since I have a child.”
(Chuuk-FSM, female, 15)

Health facilities are inadequately equipped and lack supplies and health personnel.

“The health centre is available; however it lacks medicines, and there is no ambulance so it is difficult to transfer pregnant women to the nearest hospital which is better. Patients who are in need of urgent care cannot be helped.” (Timor Leste, young person)

Mental health issues concerned children and young people. They report worries about climate change, domestic violence or feeling overwhelmed at school. They request more education and counselling on a variety of mental health concerns to help them become more resilient to face the stresses in their lives.

“... [A]s a country we often focus on physical aspects of health. However, we lack the support of mental health issues that is dominant and rampant in our country. There are many people who suffer from many different illnesses that prevent them from thinking like a neurotypical person. I think that in order to assist with this issue we Belize should create more options for support, facilities for diagnostics and therapy; more medical aid in that specific area.” (Belize, female, 16)

“The Jamaica school systems need more guidance counselors and also social workers to help break the vile epidemic that is mental health. More campaigning for awareness needs to be done to break the stigma that surrounds mental health. Our youths desire a brighter future.” (Jamaica, female, 18)

Violence

All forms of violence against children and young people, including sexual violence, domestic violence, child marriage, child labour and human trafficking were highlighted as key challenges raised across all VNRs (Jamaica VNR, Maldives VNR, Micronesia VNR, Samoa VNR, Timor Leste).

Violence impacts health, development and education and may perpetuate intergenerational levels of violence. The 2023 Caribbean Youth Summit discussed gender-based violence as a critical issue in the context of how to strengthen a peaceful and sustainable Caribbean.

Young people demand accelerated action to protect their rights and prevent all forms of violence against children and young people, including domestic violence and early marriage

“Parents cannot afford to send their children to school because they are paying more attention to cultural practices” (Timor Leste, adolescent)

“Our nation's children are becoming more victims of violence every day whether in their school, community or even in their home, this violence can be in the form of bullying or harsh punishment from parents, even though it is good to spoil not the child and spare not the rod parents/caregivers sometimes take it too far. Due to this, children tend to be rebellious and

resort to violent acts, they also have little to no help as resources are limited within our Jamaican society.” (Jamaica, female, 21)

“Dedicate articles to prevention and education initiatives that equip children, youth, parents and communities with the necessary tools to identify, prevent and address violence. This can include promoting anti-bullying programmes, conflict resolution training, mental health support and fostering healthy relationships.” (Jamaica, female, 15)

Transportation and infrastructure

Across all VNRs, the need for improvement to transportation is raised. Some countries highlight the urgent need to enhance transportation systems and improve roads, while others prioritize making transport more accessible and climate-friendly. Poor transportation systems can restrict children and young people’s mobility and their ability to get to school, health facilities and even home. Climate-related disasters compound infrastructure and transportation challenges.

Children and young people demand improvements in roads, school and health system infrastructure including adequate transportation

Due to inadequate transportation, environmental issues (flooding, for example), insufficient support from the government and poor infrastructure (missing bridges, drainage, etc), people are restricted in their ability to move and travel to school, health facilities and to work.

“The reality here is that when someone is in critical condition and needs to be taken to Dili, immediate emergency care cannot be provided due to the bad roads, which don't allow vehicles to run fast.” (Timor Leste, adolescent)

Clean water

Although some progress has been made, strengthening access to clean water was raised as an issue across eight VNRs, mainly affecting rural and disadvantaged households. The inaccessibility of water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) further compounds the poor state of health of the population and contributes to poverty. Supplying clean water is even more challenging during emergency situations and climate change will likely worsen the ability to access it.

Children and young people call for improvements in clean water supply and sanitation

Clean water is often unavailable and water supply and sanitation inadequate, particularly in rural and disadvantage households and should be provided in schools and health facilities.

“We want a water tap in every household.” (Timor Leste, adolescent)

Conclusion and recommendations

Children and young people raise important issues across SIDS, mainly related to education, poverty, climate change, health and violence. It is essential that they are part of the conversation and decision-making processes on all topics discussed during the conference. They can contribute as agents of change and leaders of the future. The demands that they have raised in SIDS are cross-cutting. They can and should be discussed within the relevant working groups at the SIDS conference.

Ensure our voices are heard during the SIDS Conference in all working groups.
Here are how our issues connect

Children and young people's demands per topic		Topics discussed at the SIDS conference
Education Young people call for the removal of school fees, investment in trained teachers that have the school materials available needed to educate the next generation of leaders.		Resilient economies Safe and prosperous societies A secure future Environmental integrity and planetary sustainability
Technology Children and young people call for enhancing access to, and affordability of, technical devices and internet to support (online) learning.		Safe and prosperous societies A secure future
Poverty Children and young people call on their governments to reduce poverty by making education more accessible, training young people and increasing employment opportunities.		Resilient economies Safe and prosperous societies Environmental integrity and planetary sustainability
Climate change Children and young people demand to be engaged in decision-making processes on climate change and call on their governments for heightened investments in mitigating the effects of climate change, protecting those communities most at risk and prioritizing sustainable development, including investing in renewable energies and low carbon economies in which young people need to be trained. They further call for financing support for low emitting countries that are at risk of climate change disasters.		Resilient economies Safe and prosperous societies A secure future Environmental integrity and planetary sustainability
Health Young people call for upholding adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights and for governments to invest in mental health and well-equipped health facilities.		Resilient economies Safe and prosperous societies A secure future Environmental integrity and planetary sustainability

Violence Children and young people demand the acceleration of actions to protect their rights and protect them from all forms of violence, including domestic violence and early marriage.		Safe and prosperous societies A secure future
Transportation and infrastructure Children and young people demand improvements to infrastructure including transportation.		A secure future
Clean water Adolescents call for improvements in the water supply and sanitation.		A secure future Environmental integrity and planetary sustainability

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