

Q&A on SIDS and Sustainability

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#) and Associate at [Satarla](#)
Interviewee: [Cathryn MacCallum](#) – Director, [Sazani Associates](#) and Associate at [Satarla](#)

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Cathryn,

Thanks for making the time to talk with me about Sustainability and [Small Island Developing States \(SIDS\)](#). I'd like to start by asking about your background, and the activities of the organisation that you are a director of, Sazani Associates.

***Cathryn:** Thanks Gareth, yes I'm a founding director of Sazani Associates, we actually achieved a milestone of having our 15th birthday this week but sadly with the current pandemic, no in-person celebration.*

Sazani was set up by a group of practitioners and academics, all advocates of participatory and inclusive methods for enabling positive social change. As a non-profit organisation, we combine grant funded development work, supporting sustainable livelihoods through education and training, with providing technical advice and support to the private sector to manage what is widely regarded as social risk, social licence to operate and / or social performance. In addition to our Wales, UK office, we are registered in Zanzibar, Belize and Sierra Leone.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview of Sazani Associates, Cathryn. I know that you have a passion for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and also “small states” that are not islands.

Can I ask about how long you have been involved in activities related to and for SIDS, and what these activities entail?

***Cathryn:** My professional and personal interest in sustainability and SIDS started in 1989, following a trip to Tanzania to visit friends from college, which led me to work on a dairy farm on Mafia Island, in the south of the country, making cheese to Zanzibar and also becoming a research officer for UNDP and ILO, focusing on income generating activities in rural communities and then providing strategic advice to the Government of Zanzibar.*

Returning to Wales in 1995, I worked across west Wales supporting rural development initiatives and developed a realisation of the similarities of both rural communities and their values with those of small states (including small islands).

This eventually led to me undertaking a masters in international development planning and management, in which I focussed on tourism and the impact of globalisation on SIDS and after that, my PhD on adaptive capabilities of small island states resulting in a model for enabling sustainable change.

Gareth: I can see the natural flow and progression here regarding your work with and for SIDS. Have you been able to apply your research work that relates to SIDS for your clients in the private sector?

Cathryn: *Over the years I have become increasingly critical of the approach often taken towards Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – particularly its tendency to focus on philanthropy towards, instead of the development of, communities hosting large-scale projects. I believe the philanthropic approach stems largely from the need as it is perceived by industry, which should be re-examined. It results in a dependency culture that private sector companies struggle to escape from. If the focus was to move away from ‘perceived need’ towards what people have, value and their strengths, then individual and community capacities and capabilities in SIDS and other small states could be developed, which would disentangle community: company relations and promote greater autonomy. I extended this thinking through my doctoral research resulting in my model for sustainable change. While my research focus was on small states, in many ways a large mining project or hydropower project has similar characteristics to a SIDS member, especially where physical and / or economic displacement occurs and livelihood restoration is required.*

Gareth: This is a very interesting perspective, Cathryn. Perhaps we can build on this discussion point. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 [has been huge to all SIDS members](#). Due to their small size, everyone who lives on a small island sees an immediate impact when travel is locked down, for example. What do you see as some of the key challenges – and opportunities – for SIDS as we move forward in today’s uncertain world? Do you think they will be able to reset their societies to deal with the important challenges of climate change and overall sustainability?

Cathryn: *Many SIDS have developed a dependency on tourism as their prime economic driver. We hear names such as the Maldives, Zanzibar, Barbados, Bali and can almost smell the suntan lotion. Very few SIDS are food secure and most rely on food imports. March 2020 saw the collapse of global tourism and a number of restrictions on the global trade of commodities. Already extremely vulnerable to climate change and struggling to adapt, the arrival of COVID-19 and its global nature has been a huge shock to many SIDS and has challenged their resilience and capability to adapt.*

In parallel to this, while the populations of London, Sydney and New York heard birdsong during lockdowns, for many (perhaps most) small states, the dependency they have on their fragile natural resources and eco-system has increased exponentially, with many conservation and protected areas being used for food and fuel, as cash and revenue from tourism and associated conservation efforts have come to a halt.

I remember many years ago, a rural villager told me, “Yes I know I’m not supposed to cut down a tree, but if it’s a choice between my son getting new trousers for the Eid festival and the tree, my son comes first.” This contributed towards my thinking about “what if the tree could have more value in situ than chopped up for firewood?” I started to explore Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation ([REDD](#)) schemes and similar initiatives where the carbon absorption value of a tree reaped economic benefit. Unfortunately, REDD schemes rarely benefit the communities that depend on the natural resources they target, but Payment for Ecosystem Services ([PES](#)) schemes can.

Gareth: This is an interesting point. I remember talking with people about PES schemes for some research into the cocoa and chocolate industry. Have you been directly involved in conservation plans and sustainability initiatives for and with small islands?

***Cathryn:** Yes, I have participated in a number of projects over the years, ranging from supporting implementation of the 2005 Mauritius Strategy (a climate change adaptation initiative with the Indian Oceans Commission) to developing strategic guidance and conservation management plans for the Government of Belize, and to being a focal point for a UNESCO flagship supporting Education for Rural People (ERP). Sazani’s educational initiatives were acknowledged as a model of best practice by UNESCO and resulted in the development our Healthy and Sustainable Schools Programme, a whole school approach to developing healthy and sustainable life skills.*

Most recently, climate smart initiatives that Sazani has piloted in Zanzibar have been included as examples of good practice in the Marine Conservation area plans for the Zanzibar archipelago.

Gareth: This is great to see, Cathryn! Picking up on your point about your work related to oceans, SIDS are of course dependent to a large degree on their coastal biospheres and [the Blue economy](#) (including for tourism, as we discussed earlier). I’m wondering about opportunities and threats related to the Blue economy for SIDS – which is such an important part of their economies and general way of existence.

***Cathryn:** The blue economy, blue carbon, conservation and restoration of mangroves and sea grasses present huge potential for SIDS. I think COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the frailty of single sector economies, large scale operations and not knowing where your food comes from. Across Europe we are seeing a resurgence in reconnections with rural space, smaller scale diverse rural economies. Community based and focused PES schemes that add a financial value to the carbon absorption / sequester role of mangroves and sea grasses, present a huge opportunity for SIDS to both increase/ maintain their natural sea defences as well as generate income for those most vulnerable to global shocks.*

Gareth: I do hope that we can see opportunities that you describe realised, across all SIDS. I’m interested to know how this type of activity can link into the SDGs.

When we look at the full spectrum of sustainability and the 17 SDGS, is there an opportunity for islands to truly rethink their approach to sustainability (linked to some of the points you have mentioned)?

Cathryn: *The SDGs, like the MDGs before them, present a global compact on priorities for our world. They differ from the MDGs in that they include every country and are not focused on the Global South or Less Economically Developed Countries. 2020 was supposed to be a year when the world took stock and looked at what had been achieved in five years. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a distinct lack of cooperation and an increase in protectionism in various areas of the world, with borders being closed for various reasons.*

As one example of knock-on impacts (whether they are ‘unintended consequences’ or not is open to opinion), as the UK pushes forwards to separate itself from its largest trading and cooperation partner (the EU), SIDS like Barbados are seeking to distance themselves from the perceived last vestiges of imperialism, removing Queen Elizabeth’s as the head of state. Mauritius was the last SIDS to do this, in 1992. It is too soon to tell what implications this will have for Barbados, but Mauritius as a SIDS presents a good example of an economic and societal model to follow.

Gareth: It will be very interesting to see how those SIDS that are still attached to kingdoms move forward in the coming years.

I’d like to talk about the private sector now, and how it can assist SIDS. Businesses, large and small, play an important role in achieving good sustainability outcomes, all around the world. Are there some good examples of how large, international businesses are helping SIDS to achieve long-term sustainable outcomes?

Cathryn: *Not really, I’m afraid. I see the oil & gas and mining companies, when they have activities / operations on / around SIDS, taking more than giving back. There are however opportunities for change, linked to my comments above on adopting asset based instead of needs based approaches.*

Gareth: Hmm – related to this point, and as a final question – have small islands been ‘forgotten about’ somewhat this year, as all nations around the world deal with COVID-19 and fend for themselves? Maybe it’s just me, but I see less coverage on and about small islands in the news than I have done in previous years, plus of course there are no tourists visiting them this year. I wonder if a “lowering of their profile” is having an impact on the support they are being provided.

Cathryn: *I think SIDS are realising that they are on their own, and within the neoliberal global capitalism that drives the world, their oceans, beaches and hotels are just another commodity. How the situation pans out in the next year and coming years will be very interesting to see.*

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Cathryn. I look forward to seeing how your work with SIDS continues to develop.