MH/SI, 24 February 2014

United Nation s Population Fund inputs to compilation document
on small island developing states (SIDS)

This input is in response to UN RES 62/238 Para 13 which “Invites participants in the meetings of the Preparatory Committee to send written inputs on the objectives and substantive theme of the Conference to the Secretariat in advance of the first meeting of the Committee, and invites the Secretariat to make them available electronically;”.

It is UNPFA’s advice that the following elements will be instrumental for ensuring optimal outcomes from the Third SIDS Conference and its associated processes and offers these as inputs in support of such success.

Recalling and Upholding Member States Commitments to Population and Development

UN GA resolution 66/288 (The Future We Want/Rio Outcome Document) sets an overarching commitment to achievement of sustainable development and the lifting of people out of poverty. An entire section of the Rio Document is devoted to health and population in which governments committed themselves to “systematically consider population trends and projections in our national, rural and urban development strategies and policies” and noted that “[T]hrough forward-looking planning, we can seize the opportunities and address the challenges associated with demographic change, including migration.” (Para 144 66/288)

Governments also called for “the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and the outcomes of their review conferences, including the commitments leading to sexual and reproductive health and the promotion and protection of all human rights in this context”. They “emphasize[d] the need for the provision of universal access to reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes” (para 145).

Echoing the Millennium Development Goals, Member States further committed to “reduce maternal and child mortality and to improve the health of women, youth and children.” They reaffirmed their commitment to “gender equality and to protect the rights of women, men and youth to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination and violence” and they pledged to “work actively to ensure that health systems provide the necessary information and health services addressing the sexual and reproductive health of women, including by working towards universal access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable
modern methods of family planning, as this is essential for women’s health and advancing gender equality” (para 146).

SIDS specific agreements further elaborate the criticality of commitments to population and development. In part one of the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA), Member States also affirmed that “full attention should be given to gender equity and to the important role and contribution of women, as well as to the needs of women and other major groups, including children, youth and indigenous people” (para 3). The Programme of Action further notes that the “implementation of the Programme of Action shall be consistent with a number of parallel international processes important to the sustainable development of small island developing States that contain relevant provisions. Those processes include [...] the International Conference on Population and Development…” (para 67).

The Member States, through the BPOA and Mauritius Strategy for Implementation (2005), pay specific attention to issues related to health, family planning, maternal and child health and population dynamics throughout the document (see particularly paras 3, 7, 21, 28, 31, 32, 61, 64 (i-viii), 67, 80 and 88).

The Barbados Programme of Action further highlights the special challenges and constraints that cause major set-backs to the socio-economic development of SIDS, including their small size and geographic isolation that prevent economies of scale. In addition, the BPOA underlines that high population density in SIDS, increases the pressure on already limited resources; overuse of resources and premature depletion; costly public administration and infrastructure; and limited institutional capacities and domestic markets. In this regard, the BPOA commits countries to “integrate environmental, population and development strategies in national and sectoral development planning in order to achieve sustainable development” (para 80).

Member States have recommitted themselves to many of the above matters in numerous resolutions, outcome documents and Programmes of Actions, including the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the decade 2012-2020. *These commitments continue to be important concerns that UNFPA recommends be integrated into the objectives and substantive themes of the Third SIDS Conference. Without progress on these issues, equitable and sustainable development will remain elusive.*

We further note that the Third SIDS Conference will benefit from the outcomes of immediately preceding complimentary forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Population and Development. Likewise, the Third SIDS Conference outcomes an asset to the UNGA and its Special Session on the ICPD beyond 2014 and its ongoing Post 2015 agenda processes.
The SIDS are confronting major challenges related to environmental pressures. They are most vulnerable to environmental shocks, such as typhoons, hurricanes, earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis, exacerbated by rising sea levels induced by changes in climate patterns. Local populations’ strong reliance on, and exploitation of, natural resources is proving unsustainable. Many SIDS are suffering a rapid rate of deforestation and biodiversity loss, as well as from overfishing and further depletion of ocean resources. A large share of the population of SIDS is directly exposed to these environmental challenges, including sea-level rising: on average, about 26.2 per cent of the land area of the SIDS is below 5 meters, and about 29.3 per cent of the population of the SIDS is living in these areas. Both measures are above 90 per cent in the case of the Maldives, Tuvalu and Kiribati. Many countries in the Caribbean and Pacific too are exposed to rising sea levels and are at high risk of flooding. This adds to the erosion caused storm surge damage, impacts on coastal infrastructure, escalates salinity of the freshwater table and low lying crop cultivation areas, degrades habitats and breeding sites and drives loss of land and traditional livelihoods. In combination these challenges negatively impact on the lives of SIDS’ people while the limits these impose on opportunities and choices for SIDS’ people in turn further affects these challenges.

Fundamentally of course, the populations of SIDS have the same needs and aspirations as populations elsewhere such as for access to essential goods and services, including health, education, housing, water, sanitation and energy. However, SIDS confront a number of unique characteristics. These include comparatively small and fragmented markets, which constrain private sector development and bring efficiency and effectiveness challenges for the public sector. The regional integration processes amongst SIDS are more challenging than expected and to date have failed to provide the necessary economies of scale to surmount these challenges.

The costs per person to provide essential goods and services in SIDS are typically considerably higher than in other countries. This is because of relatively high fixed costs, on the one side, and a relatively small and dispersed population, on the other. Also under force of the impact that high outward migration brings to workforce capacity, including on human resources for health, the SIDS public sector struggles to provide adequate health care, education and infrastructure. A weak private sector with strong demands on the public sector means that many SIDS have relatively high government expenditures and high public debt burdens.

While many SIDS have made progress towards many of the MDGs, progress overall has been inadequate and uneven (between and within countries). Reaching the MDGs is unfinished business in many of the SIDS. For example, the average under-five mortality rate of SIDS is 32.5 deaths per 1,000 live births, and progress in improving maternal health is also falling short. Traditional gender roles and norms require that women and girls fulfill primary caregiver roles for young, ill and elderly family members, thus restricting their full engagement in educational, vocational and economic opportunities, which in turn perpetuates the poverty cycle.
Limited access to essential health care and services, including sexual and reproductive health, paired with limited investment in education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and persisting levels of gender inequality and gender-based violence reinforce poverty traps at the level of households, communities and societies. In many Member States, uptake of modern methods of family planning remain relatively low; teenage pregnancies are high; sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and communicable diseases are also high and in critical instances rising, as are non-communicable diseases.

Furthermore, while some SIDS have low population growth or are even loosing populations because of high levels of out-migration, others have high population growth driven by high levels of fertility, a product in turn of high levels of unmet need for contraception. Limited choice for family planning drives high fertility and population growth and in turn raises the stakes for efforts to reduce poverty levels. Efforts to lift large and growing populations out of poverty do not only depend on a more balanced distribution of essential goods and services, but also on higher levels of economic output. This is placing increasingly unsustainable pressures on the finite natural resources of small islands. Without decisive changes in policies and implementation, the current developmental trajectory will manifest humanitarian as well as natural disasters.

Empowering women and investing in adolescents and young people will make a significant contribution to the SIDS’ ability to promote more prosperous and sustainable development pathways. Protecting the human rights of all persons will also reduce inequality and advance inclusive social development. Yet, sexual violence against women and high levels of adolescent pregnancy in some SIDS remain a major concern because of their immediate and lasting impact for the health of the girls, their education and thus income-earning potential. Several Caribbean and Pacific countries are further challenged by issues of citizen security and social protection, due to high level of violence. This negatively impacts on overall human development and poses serious impediments to sustainable development.

Whether Member States can also cater for the needs of a large and growing share of older persons also critically depends on investment now in the younger generation. If young people are unable to find productive, remunerative employment or entrepreneurial opportunities, they will not be able to support themselves or their dependents. They will live a life of diminished expectations, stuck in poverty, or they will pursue a better life elsewhere.

Amongst the SIDS, Niue has the highest rate of out-migration, but other SIDS are also rapidly losing population and suffering a brain drain. Many times it is the youthful, best-educated and most industrious people that are migrating to other countries. In the Caribbean and Pacific, for example, the emigration of trained nurses weakens the capacity of health services to provide good quality care. Stark socioeconomic disparities drive measures taken to block the migration of the population from a poor SIDS to one that can offer more opportunities.
However, outward migration also brings positive implications for the home country, as many emigrants are sending money back home. In absolute terms, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Haiti are receiving the highest levels of personal remittances. Remittances, which are often counter-cyclical in nature, can help the receiving households in times of crisis. Many households are using this money to put food on the table and their children through school; they are also using this income to cover out of pocket health care costs. However, distribution of remittances is very uneven between countries, and within countries many households do not benefit from the receipt of remittances. While remittances make important contributions to the food security, nutrition, health and education of the receiving households, they cannot substitute for public spending in these areas.

Regionally, the SIDS are clusters with notable differences and disparities that should be acknowledged and need to be understood in order to facilitate regional integration. However, as elsewhere, breaking out of the poverty trap depends on universal access to essential health care, including sexual and reproductive health, the elimination of gender-based violence, the empowerment of women, and investment in young people including in their education. The combination of these measures will help to reduce infant, child and maternal mortality; fight unwanted pregnancies; arrest the spread of communicable diseases; reduce the financial and social burden of dependencies; empower women to fully engage in social, economic and political life; support the development of human capital; and ensure that younger generations can realize their potential.

However, it is also critical to encourage productive investment, which is essential to create employment opportunities for people. Such investments should be cognizant of the need to ensure sustainability by orienting their initiatives towards a green economy. Efforts to mitigate the negative effects of climate change must be complemented by efforts to lessen human pressures on the natural environment. While many SIDS have relatively low greenhouse gas emissions, many SIDS are suffering from other pressures on their natural environment, including rising sea levels, deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

A healthier and better educated population, together with a fall in fertility levels, will create opportunities for a demographic dividend and help harness the potential of SIDS’ youth bulge. Countries will need to focus more directly on addressing the challenges and harnessing the opportunities that are provided by these demographic changes. To do so countries need to systematically collect population data through vital registration, surveys and census to get a better understanding of their populations. Furthermore, population data will need to be integrated in geo-referenced database together with other social, economic and environmental data. The collection and systematic use of population data will enable SIDS to better understand the vulnerabilities of their populations to various shocks, including sea-level rising and other natural disasters, and it will help the public authorities in the SIDS to support the creation of more resilient communities and cities.
Without knowledge of how many people are living in the different islands and how their numbers will change; where these people are living today and will be living in the future, and what the age structure of the population is today and how it will evolve, countries will not be able to understand or address the needs of their populations, and they will not be able to formulate development strategies, policies and programmes that will make a real difference in their lives.

UNFPA is deeply committed to supporting the strengthening of national capacities of the SIDS in these areas of population issues, in helping countries collect population data and address and harness population dynamic sand to ensuring the protection and realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender equality specifically for women, adolescents and young people. To this end, UNFPA’s interventions will build on the outcomes of the Caribbean Regional Preparatory Meeting, Pacific Regional SIDS Meeting, the Pacific SIDS Youth Meeting, the Moana Declaration (2013), the ICPD Global Youth Forum in Bali (2013), the Hague ICPD Human Rights Conference and the Jamaica Youth Meeting (2013) sponsored by UNFPA, UNICEF and UNESCO, Montevideo consensus (2013) as well as the outcomes of high level political engagement to reduce adolescent pregnancy in SIDS.