

(31 January 2019)

UNCTAD's input to the preparation of the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly on the follow-up to, and implementation of, the Samoa Pathway, in accordance with resolution 72/307 on "Modalities for the high-level review of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway"

This input is provided by UNCTAD in response to Section 7 ("Other matters") of the questionnaire proposed by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

In its resolution 72/307, the General assembly rightly reaffirms the importance, in the context of the upcoming high-level review, of agreeing "on what needs to be done to further address the vulnerabilities of small island developing States" (para. 3).

It is not the first time that a mid-term review of UN work on SIDS brings member States to voice or reiterate the call for meaningful international action in response to island vulnerabilities. An earlier milestone in this matter was the General Assembly's call in 2010, five years after the Mauritius conference, to "put forward concrete recommendations" and "consider what improved and additional measures might be needed to more effectively address the unique and particular vulnerabilities and development needs" of SIDS (resolution 65/2 of 25 September 2010). A year later, the Economic and Social Council was echoing this call by requesting the Committee for Development Policy to provide "independent views ... on how to further the full and effective implementation of the ... Mauritius Strategy" ... by considering "what improved and additional measures might be needed to more effectively address the unique and particular vulnerabilities and development needs" of SIDS (resolution E/2011/44 of 5 December 2011).

The strong and explicitly proactive emphasis placed by member States then on the need to "more effectively address" the vulnerabilities of SIDS justified, three years later, the UN's commensurate promise to support resilience-building action through the "Samoa Pathway": member States, in September 2014, pledged "to take **urgent and concrete action** to address the vulnerability of small island developing States..." (para. 22 of the Samoa Pathway, part of the Preamble).

With resolution 72/307 now urging the United Nations system "to take timely action for the effective implementation of and follow-up to the Samoa Pathway" (para. 14), there has been a decade of global determination to bring to the fore a true agenda for relevant action.

UNCTAD, which has consistently backed the long-standing plea of SIDS for special international measures to support their resilience-building efforts, welcomes resolution 72/307 and the momentum which the membership seeks to instill in the global agenda to support the resilience-building efforts of SIDS. UNCTAD takes the view that, the focus on the "urgent and concrete action" which the Samoa Pathway called for in 2014 now stands out as the single most important issue on the agenda of the 2019 (Samoa + 5) high-level review. The extent to which the UN system and wider international community have taken this call seriously is the criterion by which the implementation of the Pathway will be judged.

The rationale for UNCTAD action in support of SIDS is based on the recognition of a unique situation in the global development landscape. For most SIDS, the main development challenge is vulnerability to external factors beyond domestic control. The paramount development goal of these countries therefore is resilience-building, a multi-faceted set of objectives, ranging from climate adaptation to economic diversification. A large majority of SIDS need external financial and/or technical support in their resilience-building efforts, and there is a long-standing plea for “SIDS treatment” as the most desirable avenue for facilitating answers to this need. Yet international support measures for these States, contrary to common belief, are limited, essentially because of the non-existence of criteria for identifying SIDS, therefore of “SIDS status” as a basis for special treatment. This has brought leaders of some of the most highly vulnerable SIDS to voice a consistent plea for “breakthroughs” in the treatment of SIDS by the United Nations system.

UNCTAD’s action to contribute to systemic progress along these lines has been two-pronged:

(i) encouraging the adoption of criteria for identifying SIDS

UNCTAD shows a possible way with its list of 28 SIDS, all of which meet the natural criteria embedded in the four letters of the SIDS acronym (smallness --with a 5-million population ceiling; insularity; developing status; statehood); the push for systemic change here consists of creating a framework in which any country on an internationally accepted list of SIDS would be a SIDS status holder, and would accordingly be entitled to SIDS-specific treatment;

(ii) identifying the modalities of special treatment that would respond to the most pressing needs of SIDS

Two particular needs justifying SIDS treatment stand out and should be given urgent attention. First, there is a need to establish a much closer link between the degree of economic vulnerability of a SIDS, and the decisions to be taken by development partners within and outside the United Nations system regarding the way to treat that country. Secondly, irrespective of vulnerability levels, there is a pressing need among SIDS to have access to specialized technical assistance of direct relevance to their resilience-building action.

Regarding the first issue above, UNCTAD proposes a reform of the United Nations rule to identify cases of graduation from LDC status when relevant countries are recognized to be highly vulnerable, which is the case for all least developed SIDS; this reform would consist of giving the vulnerability criterion an exceptionally high weight in the decision-making process regarding the question of graduation, to the extent of ruling out forced graduation for countries above a certain level of economic vulnerability.

Regarding the second issue, UNCTAD already extends, with some regional partners, multi-faceted technical assistance to a range of SIDS, thereby testing the embryo of a future integrated framework of technical cooperation with SIDS, with a developmental focus on resilience-building and the quest for structural economic progress. Important angles of UNCTAD

technical support to SIDS have been: (i) advisory services to those SIDS which are faced with the challenge of graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status, notably to help them negotiate with development partners sound modalities for a “smooth transition” from LDC treatment; (ii) promoting the ocean economy in its trade dimension; (iii) modernizing maritime transport (port efficiency; connectivity); and (iv) making e-commerce a propeller of international trade.

Though General Assembly resolution 72/307 does not explicitly pave the way for systemic progress toward SIDS status, it encourages “new, genuine and durable partnerships” for the sustainable development of SIDS (para. 13). UNCTAD considers the advent of proper “SIDS status” as the most natural avenue for creating a meaningful "new, genuine partnership" with SIDS.