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Sustainable Livelihoods on SIDS

By Ilan Kelman

SIDS (Small Island Developing States) life is often seen as being magical, romantic, alluring, and utopian. While reality sometimes matches these stereotypes, many difficulties also occur for those living on SIDS. Small land area, small populations, isolation, and marginalisation are frequently seen to conspire to reduce livelihoods opportunities.

That is a core challenge for sustainable development on SIDS. How can islanders generate local livelihoods that are fulfilling and that reduce consumption given all the island challenges faced? The answer: Because they must and because they can.

SIDS communities, in fact, often have significant advantages for sustainable livelihoods. Strong bonds within the population due to knowing each other, pride in unique cultural and natural heritage, and a wider SIDS population sending back remittances can support creative solutions for living on a SIDS without wrecking the island.

A long memory of tackling social and environmental changes in isolation, with varied degrees of success, provides SIDS peoples with experience and often flexibility to address contemporary changes. Examples are hazards manifesting rapidly such as hurricanes and some volcanic eruptions along with creeping environmental changes personified by climate change along with social trends such as the internet and rapid air travel. Changes bring threats and opportunities along with ethical challenges for balancing the two.

Volcano-based livelihoods

Volcanoes, for instance, have forced the evacuation of dozens of SIDS communities over the decades, from Niua Fo'ou in Tonga in 1946 to Montserrat after 1995. Volcanoes also form the source of many SIDS livelihoods. Good farmland and reliable water supplies often result due to an active volcano.

Volcanic landscapes draw tourists, with St. Lucia being an excellent example. Despite the island catering to large populations of those seeking sun, sea, and sand, tourists also visit the country's only World Heritage Site, the Pitons Management Area with its spectacular volcanic peaks and hot springs. Volcanic activity millennia ago formed a beautiful harbour for Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, supporting fishing and resource extraction livelihoods - with the accompanying dangers of resource overexploitation.

Any use of the volcanic landscape for livelihoods creates further dangers. Many tourists unfamiliar with active volcanic areas might not fully understand the warning signs. Locals, such as on Montserrat and Comoros, have been reluctant to evacuate due to an erupting volcano, or have entered an exclusion zone, for fear of not having livelihoods.

SIDS volcanoes bring sustainable livelihood opportunities. But they also bring threats.

Resource-based products

SIDS products promoting island uniqueness are frequently advertised. Caribbean cuisine is promoted as giving a fresh island flavour, such as from lemongrass. Maldivian spicy seafood is advertised as part of the island experience.

Fiji has sold bottled water by marketing the perception of islands as being pure and untouched. That led to ethical questions regarding the environmental consequences of using bottles and social difficulties regarding resource control, taxation, and fair treatment of employees. Controversies also erupted in the Federated States of Micronesia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines over plans to sell local water overseas.

SIDS resources lead to products supporting livelihoods. The implementation of resource-based livelihoods does not necessarily mean that the livelihoods are ethical or sustainable.

Balancing island life

The successful examples do not imply that island life is idyllic and that all island livelihood challenges can be overcome. The ethical challenges do not dictate abandoning the livelihoods. Instead, a balance must be sought, seeking success without ignoring ethical difficulties.

Through creativity, flexibility, and using island characteristics to their fullest advantage within ethical approaches, many (even if not all) challenges can be overcome to build and maintain sustainable livelihoods on SIDS.

Ilan Kelman is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research - Oslo, Norway (see <http://www.ilankelman.org>)

Photos: Left - The Pitons in St. Lucia's only World Heritage Site. Right- Furniture made on Fiji: A sustainable SIDS livelihood? (Ilan Kelman)

