

**BRIEFING TO MEMBER STATES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS  
ON  
POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL VULNERABILITY INDEX FOR  
SIDS**

**Wednesday, 17 February 2021 (11:00 am – 12:30pm)**

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UNDESA

Excellencies.

Under Secretary-General Ms. 'Utoikamanu

Assistant Secretary-General, Mr Harris

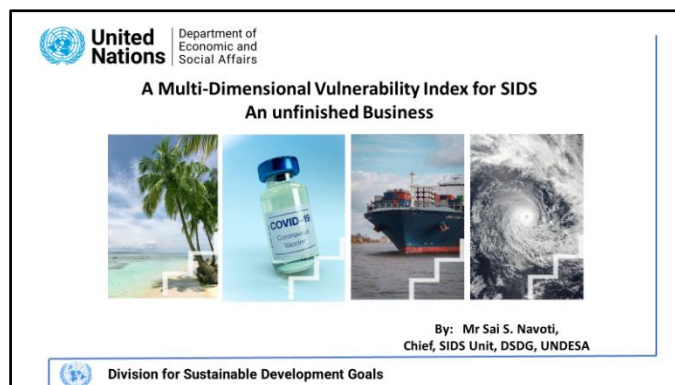
Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

### Introduction

It is indeed an honour and a pleasure for me to be presenting this Brief on behalf of the Secretariat, UNDESA and OHRLLS this morning. I have a PowerPoint Presentation, which I will now share on the screen.

Slide 1



As was mentioned in the Opening Remarks, for many small island developing States (SIDS), the development of a Multi-Dimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) remains an unfinished business.

In 2020, you, the member States, called for immediate and substantial actions to facilitate the responses of small island developing States to recover from the unfolding crisis caused

by the COVID-19 pandemic and address the unprecedented health and economic crisis unfolding in this vulnerable group of States,

You called upon the Secretary-General to provide recommendations, as part of his report on the implementation of the resolution on the SAMOA Pathway, to the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session, on the potential development and coordination of work within the United Nations system on a multidimensional vulnerability index for small island developing States, including on its potential finalization and use.

The importance of this request, the only new mandates to be requested by the Assembly, despite your agreement on roll over resolutions, prompts the Secretariat to conduct this Briefing today.

The overall intension of this Brief is to inform you, of the strategy and of the work programme that the Secretariat has in mind, to implement the request of the Assembly, in the most efficient, most inclusive and most transparent manner.

This Brief itself will be divided into two main parts.

The first part is intended to be a refresher. It will discuss the historical evolution of intergovernmental discussions on the development of Vulnerability Indices. We will revisit the main agreed mandates; we will discuss the various works that were undertaken to fulfil or implement these mandates. We will also reflect on the results of those works and draw lessons from it, as we embark together, on fulfilling this important additional mandate.

Mr Harris earlier said, I am sure members will agree, that we have been on this road before.

The second part of the Brief will explain the work programme of the Secretariat.

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**United Nations** Department of Economic and Social Affairs

### Vulnerability Index

**The Mandates**

- ❖ **Agenda 21**
  - Small Islands & Low-Lying Coastal Areas
- ❖ **Barbados Programme of Action**
  - A/RES/50/116
- ❖ **Mauritius Strategy**
  - Resilience Index
- ❖ **SAMOA Pathway**
  - Vulnerability resilience country profiles

Division for Sustainable Development Goals

Excellencies,

Member States will recall that the first time you asked for the consideration of development of a vulnerable index was in 1992, in paragraph 17.101(c) of Agenda 21. You were very clear then on whom you wanted these indices to apply. To quote you, you said, small islands and low lying and critical coastal areas.

Fast forward, two years, in 1994, Paragraphs 113 and 114 of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (A/CONF.167/9), which was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/122 of 19 December 1994, called for the development of a vulnerability index (indices) for small island developing States (SIDS).

In 1995, by its resolution 50/116, the General Assembly renewed its request that work begin on the index.

In 1996, at its fourth session, the Commission on Sustainable Development, in decision 4/16, encouraged “the relevant bodies of the United Nations system to accord priority to the development of the index”.

The General Assembly, in its annual resolutions, on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Priority of SIDS from 1996 to 2003 continued to call and urge for the development of such an index.

The last agreed language pronounced by the General Assembly on this matter, was in 2003, in resolution 57/266, when it urged for the finalization of the work on the vulnerability index by 2004. You will recall, this was when you were preparing for Mauritius – the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on SIDS.

Excellencies,

There was no further pronouncement by any major organs of the United Nations on the development of a vulnerability index from 2004 to 2020. A 16-year silence.

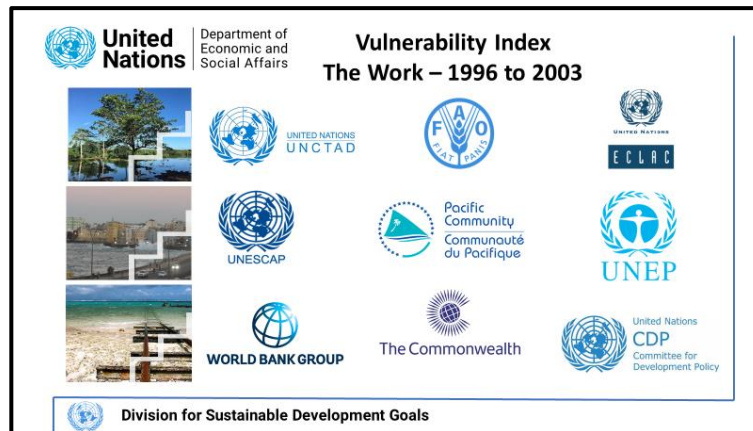
However, it is interesting to note that in 2005, the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation, called for the establishment of a task force to elaborate on a resilience index.

In 2010, at the mid-term review of the Mauritius Strategy, you did not mention anything about Index but instead called for the development of vulnerability-resilience country profiles

In 2014, In the SAMOA Pathway, the same – no mention of Index. Paragraph 114(c) of the SAMOA Pathway makes reference for the development of vulnerability resilience country profiles.

This silence was broken in 2020 – by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## Slide 3



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Let me take you quickly back to the period 1996 to 2003. This period is important because it was when the majority of the work on the Vulnerability Index for SIDS was discussed and decided.

The Organizations whose Logo you see on the screen played important role and made significant contributions to the development of the vulnerability index for SIDS in the late 1990s and early 2000.

It is also important to note, that the ECOSOC, the Commission for Sustainable Development and the Committee for Development Policy also played significant role in steering intergovernmental discussions on this subject – each with their own reports, recommendations and decisions.

In 1996, in resolution 50/116, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to ensure that the Small Island Developing States Unit of UNDESA include in its work programme, along with an indication of the resources of its activities and programmes, provision for the development and compilation of a vulnerability index for SIDS, to be prepared in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and other relevant organizations

Accordingly, UNDESA undertook initial studies in 1996 in order to provide a conceptual framework for the development of the vulnerability index. A background paper was prepared and distributed to small island developing states and organization of the UN system and academia and research institutes for comment.

The paper provided analysis of the inherent vulnerabilities of small island developing states it discussed a possible approach to the vulnerability issue and suggested that consideration be given to the construction of an economic vulnerability index and an ecological vulnerability index each composed of a number of appropriate indicators.

More than 20 responses were received all supportive of the main thrust of the background paper.

In 1997, UNDESA engaged two consultants, one to develop an economic vulnerability index and the other to develop an ecological vulnerability index.

The Department also convened an ad hoc expert group to review the technical work of the consultants and to make appropriate recommendations.

The Expert group reviewed a number of studies on the vulnerability issue, including studies specifically prepared for the meeting and studies prepared for other meetings and examined the conceptual relevance and effectiveness of a number of indicators in capturing long-term economic vulnerability of countries.

A total of 19 composite indices combining different sets of the indicators were reviewed.

The exercise was done for a maximum of 111 countries, including 30 small island developing States.

In their analysis, the Expert Group concluded the following:

- (a) As a group, small island developing States are more vulnerable than other groups of developing countries;
- (b) The vulnerability referred to is structural vulnerability that depends on factors which are not under the control of national authorities when the shocks occur; the indicators should reflect exposure to shocks, that is to say, their magnitude and their probability;
- (c) A large number of possible indicators of vulnerability can be conceived, but only those consistent with the above definition of vulnerability should be used; some structural handicaps cannot be considered as vulnerability;
- (d) Not all potentially relevant indicators can at present be meaningfully included in a composite vulnerability index because of constraints imposed by insufficient data, the difficulty of quantifying some indicators, and the need for simplicity.

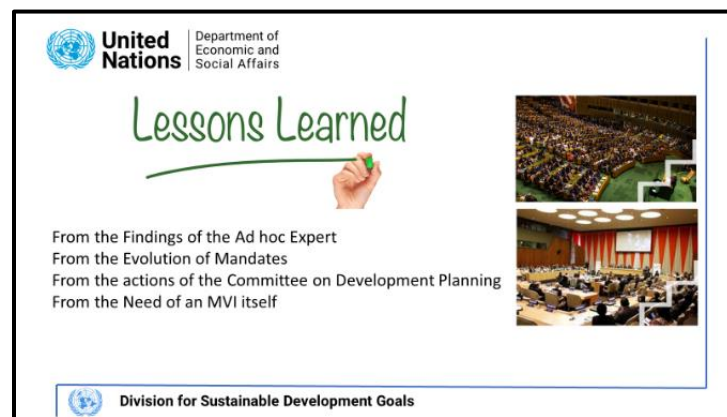
The Expert Group considered that other groups or bodies, such as the Committee for Development Policy, drawing on a broad list of indicators such as those they examine, could build specific composite vulnerability indices based on the two or three indicators which are most significant for their purposes, for example for identification of least developed countries.

Subsequently, Working Group III of the Committee for Development Policy met from 17 to 19 December 1997, reviewed the work of the ad hoc expert group on the development of a vulnerability index for small island developing States and considered the usefulness of the vulnerability index as a criterion for the designation of the least developed countries.

SIDS Group quest for a vulnerability index for their Group – appears to have ended with the Committee on Development Policy in 1998 despite repeated subsequent call by the Assembly and other bodies for its completion.

In a keynote statement, to the ad hoc Expert Group, the Permanent Representative of Samoa, on behalf of AOSIS, spoke of the shortcomings of the indicators currently used for determining the true social and economic strength of small island developing States. He expressed the need for a full and proper understanding of vulnerability based on a technical assessment of the specific variables suitable for building vulnerability indices, which was necessary in order for small island developing States to plan for and seek from the international community vital support for their efforts at sustainable development – thus the unfinished business.

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Colleagues,

Distinguish Delegates

Indices, to a lay person like me, are very complicated things, it is a subject requiring specific expertise.

It may be worth our while to recall that in their analysis, the Expert Group also made other observations which in hindsight could offer lessons learned as we go forward.

For instance, the group observed that an index of human and economic loss due to natural disasters was too broad and would not be operationally feasible and suggested that efforts should continue to undertake systematic assessments of the economic impact of natural disasters which could eventually be used for this purpose.

The group also suggested that future work should consider the feasibility of including services in the computation of the concentration index, as this would increase its relevance to small island developing States and other developing countries.

The group expressed concern at the lack of data needed to compute variables relevant to economic vulnerability for many small island developing States and recommended that emphasis be given to filling those data gaps.

As far as the vulnerability of small island developing States is concerned, it was suggested that a set of data, including time-series data for the separate indicators, should be collected for each country – and specifically requested when data are missing – in order to design a vulnerability profile covering both economic and ecological aspects

The expert group noted that many small island developing States faced vulnerability related to social and cultural diversity and suggested that further studies were needed. The group suggested that for the time being, qualitative work in this area should continue.

The questions that must be asked, what has been done to address these findings and suggestions? Have we conducted those further studies? Has the data situation in SIDS improved?

Lessons can also be learned from the evolution of the Index's mandate itself.

Why did the Agenda 21 make specific reference to the development of vulnerability index for small islands and low-lying coastal areas? This appears to be a geographical categorization.

Why did the Mauritius Strategy focus its emphasis on development of a Resilience Index? Was this an aspect not fully considered by the ad hoc working group?

One could also ask, why did the Outcome Document of the High-level review of the Mauritius Strategy and the SAMOA Pathway, shift the emphasis to the development of vulnerability-resilience country profiles? Could the solution for SIDS needs, lie in the universal application of a formula used for the calculation of such profile?

Moreover, lessons could also be learned from the action of the UN Secretariat, the deliberation of ECOSOC, the work of the Commission for Sustainable Development, the decisions and recommendations of Committee for Development Policy.

Was the process adopted, the best way to discuss topics of this nature and ensures its successful completion?

Why did those discussions end the way they did?

Why did the request of SIDS as a group, faded in the manner it did, when instead what was developed to be their index, ended up being applied as the criteria for determining the graduation of the least developed countries?

Will the continued insistence by SIDS for a specific index for them alone, attract universal consensus?

By the way, do we want the MVI we are about to develop replace GDP or complement it?

Will such an MVI be used to rank countries as some kind of, who's the most vulnerable country type competition?

These are important and provocative questions; answers can provide guidance on the way forward.

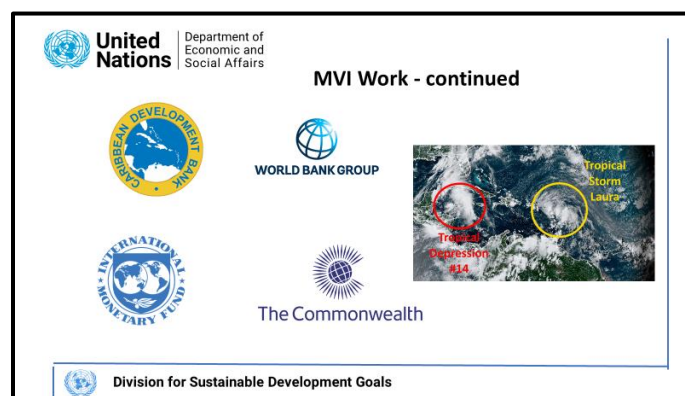
Excellencies

To conclude this part, you may be wondering, why is the Secretariat belaboring on this.

It is because, that we have been down this road together before and a good number of you hold the view that the development of a multi-dimensional vulnerability index, is an unfinished business.

Reminding ourselves of the past, may assist in our future work together.

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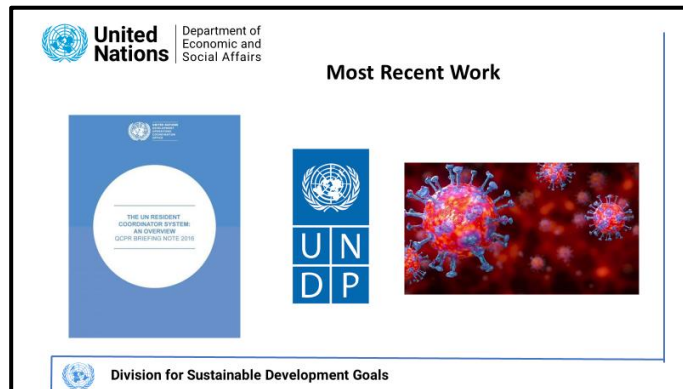
We all know that the work on the MVIs didn't come to a halt just because there was silence for 16 years from the General Assembly.

In fact, most, if not all, of the Organization whose logo you see on the screen have been advancing the work on MVI in one form or another during this period. Other institutions may or have in fact been applying some sort of Index in their decision making to facilitate their assistance to developing countries, including SIDS.

The Assembly's call for recommendations on the possible development of an MVI for SIDS now warrants the Secretariat to reach out to these organization, and perhaps other UN systems agencies working on this issue, to gather information on all these initiatives, for your consideration.



## Slide 6



### Excellencies

COVID-19 has and continues to put pressure on the financial and economic viability of most SIDS, particularly those with high debt-to-GDP ratio. The Chair of AOSIS, in 2020 wrote to the UN Secretary-General reiterating the need to move forward the work on the MVI.

As you may know, responding to the request of AOSIS, the United Nations Resident Coordinator Network in SIDS, led by the Resident Coordinator in SAMOA, in collaboration with the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, have commenced the most recent work, towards the development of an MVI for SIDS.

The Secretariat wants to especially highlight this effort, it was also referred to in the Opening Remarks, The role and leadership by the SIDS RCs on this matter is a manifestation and a visible evidence that your decision to invest, re-aligned and reinvigorate the RC system is yielding positive results in SIDS.

We too, under our 2021 Work Programme will be gathering information from the RCs and their work, the outcome of which, will be fully made known to you in due course.

Similarly, the UNDP has made available a Discussion Paper on this subject, which they intend to be their contribution on this matter under this new mandate. UNDP's Paper is the most recent completed piece of observation and suggestion to be formulated on this subject, to date.

## Slide 7



The slide features the United Nations logo and the text 'United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' in the top left. The main title is '2021 Work Programme'. Below it, two bullet points are listed: '❖ Series of Technical Webinars' and '❖ Series of member States Briefing and Consultations'. To the right of the text are two photographs: the top one shows a large assembly hall with many people seated at desks, and the bottom one shows a smaller meeting room with people seated around a table. At the bottom left, there is a small globe icon and the text 'Division for Sustainable Development Goals'.

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To deliver on the request of the General Assembly, within the short time Frame given, and to ensure open, inclusive and transparent proceedings, the Secretariat, UNDESA and OHRLLS, within their respective mandates, have agreed on a strategy and a work programme to carry their responsibilities forward.

This includes a series of technical webinar, organized by UNDESA whereby invitations will be issued to all entities and organizations working on an MVI for SIDS to come forward and articulate their work, share their experience and lessons learned, challenges and opportunities. They will also be invited to share their views on potential development of an MVI for SIDS; the coordination of work by the UN system; the potential (duration) finalisation of the work on the MVI; and the potential use of such MVI.

Information gathered from this Technical webinar series will be used to form the basis of the recommendation of the Secretary-General pursuant to the 75/215 resolution.

Additionally, organised by OHRLLS, a series of informal member States Briefings and consultations will be held to inform members of the progress of consultation in the technical webinar series and to solicit views and share ideas on preference on the finalisation (duration) and the Use of the MVIs.

This series of briefings will also include the participation of National Focal Points from SIDS.

A record of these proceedings will be made available either through recorded videos or written summaries.

UNDESA will create a dedicated MVI webpage under the SIDS window of the Division for Sustainable Development Goals Website to record the progress of the consultations, briefings and development of the MVI

This briefing is a part of the Work Programme.

Excellencies,

We really do trust that this time around, together, member States will come to a consensus on a Multi-Dimensional Vulnerability Index. As Secretariat, we will ensure that the implementation of our Work Programme on this issue, will result in a credible set of recommendations that will facilitate your deliberation on the use, coordination and finalisation of an MVI for SIDS.

I am reminded of the words of former Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros-Boutros Ghali, who back in 1992 observed:

*“the GNP per capita index does not adequately capture the special vulnerabilities of island developing countries. For this reason, the establishment of a family of indicators of vulnerability of island developing countries is a useful exercise. This is especially so in the case of small ones that are being disqualified from certain financial and technical assistance owing to their relatively high GNP per capita ranking”.*

Thank you