

The expert view: a discussion about small islands and disaster risk

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Image credit: [Island Innovation website](#)

James,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about your work to support small islands around the world – including those that are part of [the Small Island Developing States – SIDS](#). I'm keen to hear your thoughts about the disaster risks facing societies that live on small islands and how they can respond to the threats that exist and be supported in their local efforts.

Can we start this interview with an overview about Island Innovation and your areas of focus?

***James:** It's a pleasure to join you, Gareth. My background is in energy policy, which over time led me into island sustainability. The organisation that I run, [Island Innovation](#), has two core parts – (1) a media platform which hosts our material on events, our blog, our news channel and policy paper, and (2) a consultancy through which we deliver projects. Our focus is on islands and their sustainable development. Our scope of islands includes SIDS, which are sovereign states (as defined by the UN), and also any other island of political status including a local municipality such as Anglesey or the Shetland Islands in the UK, and the Overseas Territories and many islands that sit in a grey area of sovereignty, being autonomous but not fully*

The Disasters Avoided initiative highlights examples of proactive action around the world to avoid disasters.

independent, for example the Azores or Madeira in Portugal; in the UK, the Channel Islands and British Overseas Territories; in the US Puerto Rico and Guam. At Island Innovation we are working to create a network between islands of different political statuses to share information, and to share solutions and opportunities. The reason we formed was that we saw that many islands were trying to reinvent the wheel, and many were struggling with the time or means to find out what is going on elsewhere on other islands that they can learn from and also share their own ideas with them.

Islands all have different contexts, but they also many commonalities and areas of interest that they share. For example, some local island municipality governments have higher populations than some of the SIDS, so population is not necessarily an indicator of their status.

When it comes to energy and many other aspects of how an island functions, you have to take into account all facets of sustainable development that impact them. It is interesting to see the connections between many aspects on islands in a way that is not always so visible in larger mainland states.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, James. Whilst a few islands have quite large populations, many have quite small resources available to oversee everything, in terms of their governance teams.

***James:** This is indeed the case. I think this is one of the key similarities between them. They all have a challenge in the resources available to them. As a result, they can't usually provide all options available to their residents (be it for healthcare, education or other matters) that larger nation states can do (admittedly, to serve larger populations). This is why the pooling of their resources can be very useful.*

We do see resource sharing across the SIDS and some other island groups. For example, in the Caribbean and Pacific regions, expertise in certain areas is shared across multiple island states.

One of the challenges with resources, for SIDS and other islands, is to make sure that the systems they have are fit for purpose and scaled to suit. Systems from large nations do not always fit into these much smaller states / entities.

Gareth: I appreciate the point about scaling to suit, James. One of the things I am reflecting on here is the work I have supported the ODI with, as part of [the SIDS Future Forum that was held in New York in March 2024](#) which Island Innovation co-hosted, on making cities on SIDS dynamic and resilient. In the case of cities and urban areas all around the world, it is useful to use a systems approach to thinking about them, and this system needs to be contextualised for size and scale and location of the city / urban area. For a SIDS city or a city on other classifications of islands, what works in London, Hangzhou or Nairobi can't just be planted into them and be expected to work.

James: *This is certainly true. It's also important to remember that what works on one island won't necessarily work, or not without adaptation, on another. What works in Jamaica might not work in the Faroe Islands. It's sometimes about looking at how problems can be tackled in a low resource setting, at a low level of scale.*

Take the provision of education. eLearning has boomed in availability all around the world since the COVID-19 pandemic forced so many people to adopt this method of teaching and learning. Many of the pioneers of online learning were island universities who were already doing this across their distributed archipelagos or networks of islands before the pandemic occurred. For example, the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland provides education across approx. 100 inhabited islands, some of which have very small populations. There are good opportunities for island universities to share their skills and capabilities with each other, including for disaster risk education.

Gareth: You have highlighted that there are a range of different islands and groups of islands, not just the SIDS group. Many of them face major challenges in dealing with disaster risks and threats – for example, cyclones, typhoons and other storms, flooding, wildfires, earthquakes and volcanoes. It's interesting to consider how they can face and prepare for disaster threats by learning from each other, and perhaps by pooling resources.

On small islands, people have restricted space for where they can be located to minimise the risk they face. One of the things I remember from the SIDS Future Forum of March 2024 was the extent of the discussion about the impact disasters have on their populations and their economies.

James: *If we consider the SIDS as one example, when we look at most of the SIDS, disaster risk and the impacts of disasters are always front of mind for citizens and governments. In the Caribbean, for example, it feels almost inevitable that at least one country will experience a disaster of some kind each year such as a hurricane. Relating to my earlier point about pooling resources, there is an advantage to taking a regional approach to understand and address the hazards they face. The Caribbean does this quite well.*

The way I see the conversation changing now about the impact of major events on small islands of all types is through the lens of climate change. There is an increasing pressure on climate adaptation funding to be made available to them. People are not always using the term "disaster" as frequently a climate change, but there are some linkages.

As always, context is key. Up in the Scottish islands or in the Canary Islands, the discussion is different to what is being talked about in the Caribbean or the Pacific. In the Caribbean, the main lens is on hurricanes, for example. There is discussion on sea level rise and other elements, which is much more prevalent for the Pacific, which has many low-lying islands such as Tuvalu and Kiribati.

Part of the conversation is on whether there is an increased strength of natural hazards such as hurricanes in the Caribbean, or cyclones in the Pacific or Indian ocean. This links into their requests for climate adaptation funding. The annual United Nations COP climate conferences are where these discussions play out. The challenges around accessing this funding for climate adaptation are critical for islands.

Gareth: This is a key point, about funding accessibility and how it can be used for disaster risk reduction, linked to climate change. What kinds of discussions are you seeing taking place about climate change and the effect it is having on disaster risks to small islands?

James: We can consider some of the world's major climate funds as a starting point. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) has existed for a number of years. It has been criticised in the past for not being set up to serve the needs of small states like islands to access and benefit from it. It has historically required time and expertise to access, and many islands don't have the resources to do so. Regional bodies now exist for islands networks such as the Caribbean's Community Climate Change Centre in Belize (the CCCCC), which are accredited to access the GCF.

Another challenge is how, in the case of SIDS (separate to other types of islands that I have described earlier), they are classified in the global system. Development aid is frequently linked in some way to GDP per capita, yet many SIDS have some outsized drivers of GDP per capita which does not always reflect the real GDP of their population. Nor does GDP per capita reconcile with the vulnerability of an island to disasters and climate change. As just one example, when [Hurricane Irma struck Dominica in 2017](#) it wiped out the equivalent of 250% of their GDP overnight. Being a small country, they are vulnerable to a single major hazard when it strikes. This is not always fully appreciated by larger nations. Of course, disaster events in large nations are major problems too, but on an island, you may have nowhere to retreat to when it strikes.

Gareth: The vulnerability of islands is, I can see, a critical factor in obtaining support. I know that there are some Vulnerability indices that exist and are being reviewed for potential use. Are these indices helpful for islands or is there a better way to support them?

James: As we discussed at the SIDS Future Forum, [the Multi Vulnerability Index](#) is being put forward by [AOSIS](#) (the Alliance of Small Island States). Other indices are being promoted as potential solutions. No metric is perfect, and agreeing the right one is hard. I do think there is a movement to use better data and more complex measures rather than just GDP. It's a key topic of discussion at the moment.

Gareth: Your point about “using good data” is a key point for us in [our Disasters Avoided model](#). Are there some good examples of good news from small islands to strengthen disaster risk reduction and preparedness? I remember a good news example on the Island Innovation website about [a case from St Vincent and the Grenadines \(published in October 2023\)](#). Are you seeing some examples of innovation to support better disaster risk reduction on small islands, within your network or is it more a case of learning from problems experienced?

James: *There are some topical examples from different islands tackling different aspects of disasters. For example, there have been a lot of lessons learned after some big recent disasters in the Caribbean. One thinks of the lessons from the Haiti earthquake, and the aftermath of Hurricane Irma that I mentioned just now.*

The attention on the electricity grid in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria struck, and the discussion that ensued about why there were people still without power one year after that event is another example. This particular case put a spotlight on the importance of the electricity grid for resilience on islands. In the case of Puerto Rico, if its electricity generation network had been a more distributed, and not so dependent on fossil fuels power generation, it would have been more resilient. A lot of the power utilities in the SIDS countries are aware of the challenges they face, as are other utilities such as water and sewage treatment. It links to discussions about renewables for these islands – for islands, their use of renewables is a question of resilience and climate adaptation, not climate mitigation. For Puerto Rico, part of the review has been about not relying only a few concentration points for the power network.

Gareth: These examples seem to be yet more evidence of the value of truly learning lessons from disaster events that occur. I remember also the problems Fiji had after [the volcano eruption that severed their Internet lines in January 2022](#) – they spent a long time cut off from the world. On the point of the power sector, it is something that we are reviewing on a general basis as part of our Disasters Avoided initiative.

James: *Also, when we look for good / positive examples of lessons learned and avoiding disasters, we know that there isn't any island country that has solved everything. It's important to learn about the different projects taking place and how they are faring, and to see how the sum of many parts can add up to a greater whole – whether it is food security in St Vincent and the Grenadines or working on electricity resilience or Internet resilience. I think there is a gradual improvement across the islands – we need to keep track of all the positive actions being taken.*

It is not only the economically and financially challenged islands that have problems. Just look at the vulnerabilities of Hawaii. Hawaii, theoretically, has access to a host of US resources, yet when we look at its vulnerability, it is in many ways as vulnerable to the SIDS countries and others due to the same kinds of pressures that it faces. It's worth bearing this in mind when we consider the disaster risk faced by islands.

Gareth: I have spoken with NGOs working on small islands to help them develop small but impactful resilience measures for all groups of people that live on islands, which tend not to make the news in most cases. I have been discussing various aspects of disaster risk reduction and response with international and local NGOs in 2024, and it has been very interesting to learn about their perspectives on the challenges that marginalised and under-represented people face.

James: On this point, we have a project we are working on focusing for now on the Caribbean called the [Caribbean Climate Justice Academy](#). It is framed through the lens of climate and the intersectionality of impacts. Through this initiative we have been looking at impacts to a wide range of the population, including farmers and fishers, women and girls, indigenous peoples, LGBT people. We have been looking at how these groups may be proportionally more affected by climate change and disasters. We see evidence that such factors can compound the effects. One person I have talked with has been working with transgender people in Fiji, and described how receiving aid when they are impacted by climate and disaster events is made harder because of the broader discrimination that they face. This relates to disaster response. For women in general, there are wider economic pressures that they face. There is a group called [CANARI](#), which is a climate justice alliance in the Caribbean. I think there is a lot of discussion on these aspects in many SIDS countries now.

Gareth: You mentioned earlier about some of the non-SIDS islands, such as those off the coast of Scotland and off the coast of Africa. I have read about some of the innovative activities they are pursuing, such as energy with wave power. We talked earlier about the importance of context, and that there are many examples of knowledge sharing that they can engage in with each other.

James: This is a good point to revisit. As it happens, Brexit has made things harder for the UK's island states. There are a few ways that islands linked to the UK can be classified, three in particular are: (1) municipalities adjacent to the mainland UK (such as the Isles of Scilly, Anglesey, Isle of Wight, Shetland and Orkney). There are various initiatives in Scotland and the UK government such as the island growth deal. Then you have (2) the Crown territories – the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey which are autonomous. Third, there are (3) the Overseas territories including Bermuda, the Falklands, British Virgin Islands and others such as in the Caribbean.

In central UK government in London, they are all managed separately. Bermuda for example does a good job of liaising with the SIDS countries, whilst not being a SIDS. Brexit has impacted funding for them all: a major access route to funding was removed after Brexit became real. Many UK islands were previously eligible for EU funding from Brussels, and most of this funding has stopped in the last few years. Also, there are good programmes that still exist such as the [European Marine Energy Centre in the Orkneys](#) which is an excellent centre for wave energy, tidal energy and offshore wind to an extent. Most of their programmes prior to Brexit came through Horizon and were collaboration initiatives with other European research institutions. Things got harder for them after Brexit. With Horizon re-opening as a funding channel for the UK, things may improve.

For UK Overseas territories, whilst they are not part of the EU, as a total group the UK Overseas territories made up about 50% of the overall global Overseas territories group. Brexit seems to have had a negative impact on their ability to globally collaborate. Part of this is perception: in the UK there is an image of Overseas territories being wealthy tax havens, which is not the case. Whilst there are some wealthy islands in terms of GDP per capita, it does not reflect the reality of everyone living there.

Gareth: Thanks for this context, James. It makes me wonder about how islands linked to other sovereign states such as France and the Netherlands fare. As we mentioned just now, [the SIDS4 conference](#) takes place in May 2024. What key outcomes are you hoping SIDS4 will achieve to support disaster resilience?

James: I would like to see an opportunity to frame the needs of SIDS outside of the climate change debate at SIDS4. By this, I mean that when it comes to the UN system and the COPs, the SIDS do have a strong voice on climate issues, which is great. One of the challenges is that sometimes economic challenges beyond the climate debate are forgotten. When we go back to the point about funding, resources for education, health and other needs are too often framed through the climate lens, whereas it needs to be seen through broader sustainable resilience such as economic diversification and other challenges they face. We need to ensure we look at the holistic needs of SIDS, including disaster risk reduction and resilience.

Gareth: I tend to use the SDGs as my baseline for sustainability systems thinking. Climate action is SDG 13, as one of seventeen goals. Hopefully the SDGs can help with this discussion.

James: The challenge with the SIDS4 conference is that because it is only held every ten years (to date, at least), there is not enough continuity in the ten-year gap between them. People change roles, other things change. Also, we need to remember that SIDS4 is, by its nature, focused on the UN system of islands, which means of course the group of SIDS and not the many other islands around the world. The framing of the SIDS network is interesting to consider. As we discussed at the start of our interview, not all SIDS (or other small islands) are small. Haiti and Papua New Guinea are something like twice the population size of Ireland, for example. Not all SIDS are developing – consider Singapore. Not all of them are islands – consider Guyana and Guinea-Bissau. For the states question, many of the Overseas territories count themselves as SIDS but through the UN system they are not included.

I'd like to mention that Island Innovation is hosting [a Global Sustainable Islands Summit in May 2024](#), which has attracted a lot of interest from sub-national island jurisdictions. This summit is hosted by the government of Prince Edward Island, a Canadian province. Attendees include people from Turks & Caicos, Bermuda, the Canary Islands and many others. This summit is broader than SIDS, and it focuses on some similar main themes.

Gareth: I also think about some of the small islands that I have visited in my time living in Australia, including the Torres Strait islands those in the Gulf of Carpentaria, some of which are quite heavily dependent on the support from international mining firms that are there for commercial purposes.

James: In Australia, we have invited the Mayor of Norfolk Island speak at one of our events. We would like to engage with some of the indigenous populations living on islands in the north of Australia. The Mayor of Hobart is someone that we liaise with also and has spoken at our events. There is an interesting climate change class action [court case happening with the Torres Islands and the government of Queensland](#).

Thank you very much for your time, James. I look forward to seeing how the work of Island Innovation to support small islands continues to develop, including highlighting activities that help to avoid disasters.