

Hubs of Island Innovation

A mobility and peer-mentorship program to support capacity strengthening for climate adaptation on Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

An initiative of the RECOVER project

(Resilience to Climate Vulnerability and Environmental Risk)

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1. Context

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are a group of low-lying island states comprised of [39 UN Member States](#) and 18 non-UN Members/Associate Members that are recognized for their unique environmental, economic and social challenges and their extreme vulnerability to climate change (UNDP, 2022). These include geographic isolation, narrow resource bases, dependence on external trade including fossil fuel imports, limited economic diversity, and limited economies of scale (ESMAP, 2024; IPCC 2023; UNDP 2022). Their fragile economies and ecosystems make SIDS vulnerable to external shocks across critical systems including water, food, energy, and infrastructure (IPCC 2023; Singh et al., 2022).

Despite contributing less than 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS face some of the worst impacts of climate change including worsening tropical cyclones, sea-level rise, droughts, changing precipitation patterns, and coral bleaching (IPCC, 2023). Each of these leads to further cascading events such as the damage of critical infrastructure from extreme weather events and increased flooding and saltwater intrusion from sea-level rise (Leal Filho, 2021). SIDS rank high on multiple vulnerability indices including the Commonwealth Universal Vulnerability Index and the United Nations Development Programme's Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (Singh et al., 2022).

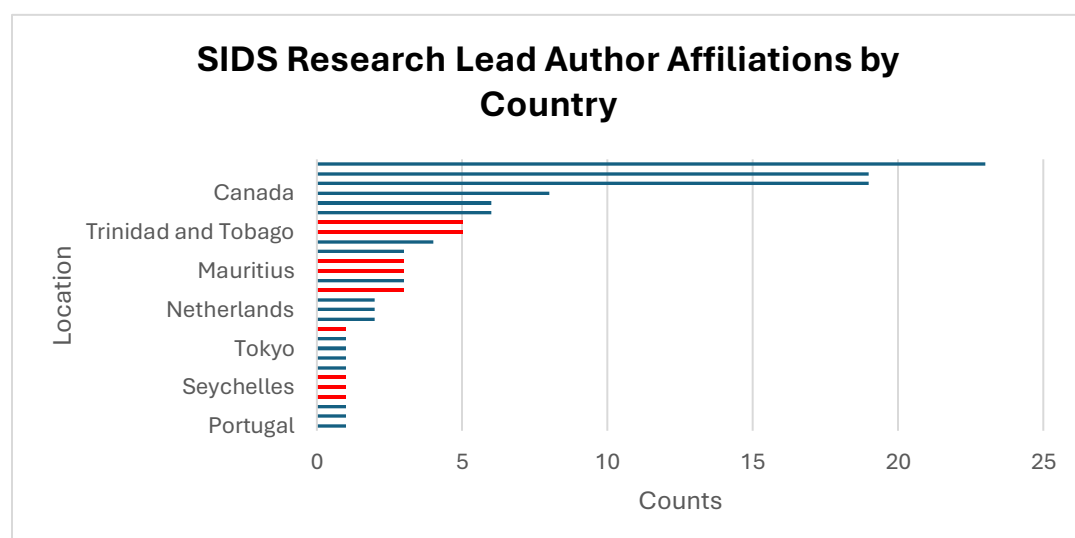
The urgent need to strengthen climate resilience of SIDS has been recognized time and again by scholars and policy-makers. However, significant barriers exist, and critical among them is the SIDS' limited capacity and resources for conducting cutting-edge climate related research, and the number of trained experts living in SIDS in the area of climate adaptation (section 2 discusses this in more detail). This concept note is a response to insights gained from the RECOVER project, and proposes an innovative peer-mentorship and mobility program for SIDS researchers and practitioners. Our findings were validated by 10 semi-structured remote interviews conducted with SIDS experts across sectors. These interviews helped solicit information on existing programs, their strengths and shortcomings, and how might a new intervention look like to achieve maximum impact to build climate resilience.

2. Barriers exist for SIDS to become climate resilient – findings from RECOVER

Findings from the RECOVER project reveal significant barriers for SIDS to effectively conduct solutions-oriented research to adapt to climate change. These relate to limited research capacity, data management and analysis, and systems-based approaches to support decision making. Island institutions and universities – primarily instituted for

teaching – are often overwhelmed with limited financial, personnel, and infrastructure resources while responding to multiple demands. With respect to research, the approach is often reactive than proactive when it comes to setting their own research agenda and priorities. In other words, the pull is in accepting invitations to participate in externally led projects that weren't conceived by island scholars. This even so when the topic is not high priority or locally-led, and there exists an asymmetrical sharing of resources. Even with locally led research by faculty and students, in speaking to librarians and researchers, large volumes of data are lost due to inadequate and poorly resourced data management systems. Brain drain is highest among SIDS, where competent researchers often leave the islands for better equipped environments. Those that remain are frequently subjected to what is referred to as “parachute science” where external institutions bring in resources, set the research agenda, utilize local researchers as data providers, and be lead authors of publications for the most part.

The Table below is an outcome of a systematic review conducted as part of RECOVER, that shows that most lead authors who write about SIDS are from affluent, and non-SIDS countries. It is not surprisingly then, despite facing some of the most significant climate change impacts, SIDS authors represented only 4% and 7% of the authors of IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report and 1.5 °C Special Report respectively (Thomas, 2018). As a result, island governments frequently rely on expensive external consultants – often paid for from donor funds or concessional loans by international agencies - to provide the urgently needed data for decision-making on climate adaptation. Insights from such rapid assessments may not indeed be effective, as they often suggest short-term symptomatic solutions. With the limited by time consultants have, budgets, and knowledge of local context, the practical value to support climate adaptation decision-making arising from such studies is questionable.



Our findings from RECOVER are further supported by literature. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Sixth Assessment Report* (AR6) recognized that “a major barrier to adaptation is *limited information* on the feasibility, outcomes and sustainability of adaptation responses in small islands” (p. 2050). Both the 2015 Paris Agreement and the 2019 SAMOA Pathway Mid-Term Review underscore the need to strengthen capacity in SIDS, highlighting gaps in skills and training as a significant hurdle to achieving climate resilience. These gaps include a shortage of analytical expertise, the high costs of obtaining relevant training, and misalignment between national needs and tertiary education institutions (UN DESA & UNDRR, 2022). This misalignment, compounded by competing development priorities, poor planning, and insufficient human resources (Robinson, 2019), may result in programs that are not responding to adaptation. Additionally, the education sector suffers from inadequate funding for research and development, and a low capacity to conduct research, which limits the number of domestically trained experts (UN DESA & UNDRR, 2022). Often, external funding drives research agendas, further marginalizing local perspectives, while “brain drain” remains a persistent challenge, with 11.5 million people from SIDS living outside their countries of origin or birth as of 2020 (UNDESA, 2024).

3. Why a mobility and peer-mentorship program?

SIDS should not only be recognized for their vulnerabilities, but also for their unique capacities to act as hubs for transformative sustainability science (Singh et al., 2020). As of 2022, 90% of SIDS are implementing, or are likely to implement, climate adaptation measures, highlighting the importance and urgency of adaptation for these nations (UNDP, 2022). There is a need for increased amplification and support for SIDS perspectives globally. The proposed peer-mentorship and mobility program fostered through “island hubs of innovation” (or “hubs” in short) is a step in this direction.

The key objective of this initiative is to forge enduring, place-based partnerships that elevate research and teaching capacity through innovative pedagogical advancements. The “hubs” are envisioned as a transformative, SIDS-centered learning experience that brings together need-based and contextual knowledge, with cutting-edge scientific expertise from leading experts and centres globally. These may be located on other SIDS or beyond. The hubs are intended to challenge participants to be exposed to state-of-art knowledge, concepts and methods, engage in dynamic debates, question prevailing assumptions about SIDS vulnerabilities, and grasp the complex trade-offs inherent in various alternatives that exist. By strengthening local research capacity, this initiative will empower participants to become self-reliant in agenda setting, knowledge generation, analysis, and

the development of robust policy pathways—ensuring that innovative, locally driven strategies are at the forefront of climate resilience.

There are, but a few, mobility and fellowship programs available for SIDS, however many shortcomings exist. Challenges identified by SIDS researchers include financial and travel barriers, misalignment between program duration and expected outputs, limited mentorship and a lack of effective follow-up programs.

The goal of this concept note is to outline a structure for a successful, SIDS focused mobility program based on insights from individuals working across SIDS. To develop this document, ten interviews were conducted with professionals working within or on the topic of SIDS including five individuals working in academia, three working with industry and NGOs, and two working in government roles. An initial sample was identified from existing networks and subsequent snowball sampling was conducted to identify additional SIDS practitioners with fellowship experience who could contribute to the project. The interviews focused on the strengths and challenges of existing programs as well as how to structure and deliver a successful fellowship and mobility program. The list of participating experts is appended as Annex 1.

4. Program objectives

This program aims to address the gaps that exist across current mobility programs and strengthen the research capacity of island institutions in climate change adaptation and green transformation. The following 5 objectives will serve as a guide for the program:

1. Advance professional development opportunities on SIDS through international collaboration.
2. Connect academia, industry and government practitioners within and across SIDS to develop practical solutions to common challenges, share best practices, and build institutional capacity.
3. Strengthen the role of island universities to provide data driven, evidence-based decision support to local government on climate change adaptation and green transformation.
4. Develop a sustainable and growing network of SIDS professionals that promotes continued peer learning and mentorship.
5. Support the development of an open access global database and repository for evidence-based decision making.

5. Overview of the program structure and components

This program will run through 2026, selecting up to 10 participants in total funded by RECOVER / CLARE. Selected participants will be awarded up to CAD\$ 12,000 each for the in-person mobility component. Additional spots may become available if an applicant is selected to be hosted at the University of Augsburg (Germany), as part of their [Green Transformation](#) initiative that runs till the end of 2027.

5.1 Participants

This mobility program is designed for SIDS professionals from academia, industry, and government who are committed to addressing climate adaptation challenges of SIDS. They must be living and working full time in one of the [39 SIDS](#). The role of each participant in the program will be shaped by their interests and experience. The fundamental goal is to conduct solutions-oriented research for practical insights, working collaboratively with researchers and practitioners from industry and government. Involving participants from industry and government will increase the capacity of the program to implement practical solutions in addition to academic outputs.

5.2 Focal areas

Recognizing that all SIDS face unique issues, this program will be targeted towards building climate resilience with respect to resource-use and security. Areas could include, but not limited to, water, energy, and food security, transport, infrastructure, or institutional capacity strengthening related to resource-use governance and policy. Program themes should be co-developed across participating institutions to align with their common priorities, ensuring there are benefits and incentives for participation. Each participant will be assigned a core “hub” to which they belong, while drawing synergies with other hubs as necessary.

5.3 Virtual and in-person components

Each participant will commit a minimum of 6 months, that includes up to a minimum of 1-month, and maximum of 2-months continuous in-person engagement at another institution (the “hubs” – see below), normally in the midst of the program. The timing and exact duration of in-person mobility will be decided based on proposal and need. In order to proceed to the in-person component, a proposal that clearly outlines activities and outputs during the stay at a host institution must be submitted and approved by the mobility program. Prior and subsequent work will be conducted remotely and involve regular meetings with assigned project teams and mentors. The total length of the program is intended to provide adequate time for participants to develop the desired project outputs

while recognizing and allowing time for their professional responsibilities outside of the program.

Teams will be formed based on the participant's research interests, skills, and the themes selected for the program. Where possible, teams will be assigned a mentor to work with throughout the program. Additional opportunities for collaboration outside of project work may be available for participants, such as participating in knowledge exchange sessions and opportunities for teaching and facilitating workshops.

5.4 Location of the “hubs of island innovation”

Host institutions or “hubs of island innovation” will be selected based on the following criteria (noting that a number of institutions have already expressed interest to host, including some associated partners of RECOVER):

- Have a track-record of having expertise on one or more thematic areas (e.g., water, energy, supply-chains, transport, etc.). These “hubs” may or may not be located in a SIDS.
- Demonstrable commitment to SIDS research, climate adaptation agenda, and experience in working with vulnerable geographies and communities.
- Must be accessible to participants in terms of proximity to an international airport, and other practical considerations such as cost of living, accommodation facilities, and language.
- Must have strong mentorship and research capacity, ability to work in teams, and respect diversity and principles of inclusion.

5.5 Award amount and commitment of sending institutions

Selected participants will receive funding for in-person mobility. Funding will be provided to cover flights, accommodation and monthly meal living/meal expenses based on the host location up to a maximum of CAD\$ 12,000. Sending institutions must be willing to contribute in-kind by granting selected participants full time-off for the duration of the in-person activities, and partial time-off during the virtual component.

5.6 Commitment of host institutions (or the “hubs”)

Host institutions / hubs must be committed to host awardees / participants for a minimum of 1-month and a maximum of 2-months, support them in finding accommodation and other local support, commit mentorship and team integration, and if possible and provide access to relevant research facilities.

6. Eligibility criteria

To promote the development of practical solutions, the program will be open to both early and advanced career participants from academia, industry, non-profit and government. While the program is intended to support a diverse group of participants from different sectors, backgrounds, and stages of career, applicants should meet the following basic criteria:

- Demonstrated interest and experience in the program's focal area of resource-use and security on SIDS, and clear alignment with future career goals.
- Submission of a compelling proposal for the mobility program, with clearly defined milestones for virtual and in-person activities, and outputs.
- Are living and working full time in one of the 39 UN Member SIDS.
- The CV reflects a track record of accomplishments corresponding to the stage of career, and sector.
- Willingness to commit at least 1-month of in-person mobility to the assigned hub. Exception to this can be made on compelling and accessibility grounds.

7. Program roll-out and selection process

The selection process will include a written application and interview. Results of the selection process will be confirmed at least 2 months before the start of the program to allow adequate time for successful applicants to organize time off with their institutions for the in-person component, and other logistical arrangements as may be necessary.

Step 1: Program Promotion (January 2026)

Efforts will be made to connect with universities, NGOs, industry and governments across SIDS to promote this program. The RECOVER and CLARE network, as well as those interviewed in developing this concept note can be used as a starting point to promote the program across existing networks of researchers and professionals in SIDS.

Step 2: Applications received (9th March 2026)

Interested candidates will be required to submit an application package that speaks to the above-mentioned eligibility criteria. This includes a cover letter, a CV, and a research or activity proposal with defined milestones and outputs for the duration of the program, and a written endorsement / support letter by the sending institution / employer.

Step 3: Shortlist, interview, selection, and confirmation (March – April 2026)

Short-listed applicants will be interviewed by a selection committee to ensure the research interests, skills, and commitment of those selected for the program align with one another and the objectives of the program itself. Two professional reference letters will also be requested if successful at interview, as the final selection requirement. Once host institutions (the hubs) have confirmed acceptance, selected participants will be informed of the outcome by first week of April 2026, with hubs assigned to each participant. Participants will be expected to reconfirm their participation and assigned hub, with all paperwork completed by end of April 2026.

Step 4: Start and duration of mobility program (May – October 2026)

It is expected that selected participants will begin their 6-month mobility program by early May to continue through October. The in-person component is expected to be somewhere in the middle of the 6-month program (months 3-4). Final outputs / deliverables are submitted by end of October 2026.

8. Expected outputs

At the application stage, the proposal should clearly define outputs from participation in the program, where the participant is lead author of at least one, and contributing author to a second. Outputs must either be significant advancement in climate adaptation research and/or has policy relevance and support decision-making for climate adaptation. Some of the expected outputs are listed below, but not limited to:

1. High-profile academic article(s) contributing to new knowledge/empirical analysis on climate adaptation.
2. Policy briefs or policy focused white papers related to climate adaptation.
3. A set of open access geospatial maps (flood risks, extreme events, infrastructure, etc.) to support decisions on climate adaptation.
4. Models or simulation tools to support climate adaptation.
5. Product related to databases/portals that can be hosted on the Metabolism of Islands open access database.
6. Practical application of the research through pilot programs or workshops or a clear plan for application of the research findings.

The program also aims to achieve a series of less tangible outcomes including knowledge transfer and sharing of best practices across SIDS and networking to build collaborative capacity within and across SIDS.

9. Exit strategy

Ensuring the continued impact of the program beyond its end is of great importance. To achieve this, a follow-up program will be designed for participants to discuss their learning, what is being done at their institutions following the program, and reflect on progress towards program objectives. Efforts will be made to secure additional resources to sustain the program and maintain durable partnerships based on a shared commitment from existing partners of the program.

If the program continues, alumni will be invited to participate as mentors for the current cohort. Depending on the capacity of alumni, this participation could involve acting as a mentor for project teams or contributing to skill development through teaching and workshops. Continued alumni involvement will help ensure the research network established during the program continues to grow and sustain itself.

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Annex 1 – Interview Participants, Positions and Affiliations

Name	Position	Affiliation
Nadhiya Abdulla	Senior Research Fellow	The Maldives National University
Shazla Mohamed	Senior Research Fellow	The Maldives National University
Crystal Drakes	Senator	Government of Barbados
Andrea Clayton	Senior Lecturer	Caribbean Maritime University
Lowine Hill	Consultant	Independent
Mahendra Gooroochurn	Associate Professor	University of Mauritius
Laurent Sam	Consultant and Project Manager	Sustainability 4 Seychelles
Adelle Thomas	Senior Director, Climate Adaptation and Environmental Health	Natural Resources Defense Council
Danielle Evanson	Program Coordinator, Roofs to Reefs	Government of Barbados
Stephanie Boulloc	Founder and Director	La Déchetèque