

Statement by Ambassador Jagdish Koonjul
Permanent Representative of Mauritius and
Chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States
at the Opening ceremony of the SIDS Universities Consortium
Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands
August 3, 2004

Your Excellency Mr Turnbull, Governor of the United States Virgin Islands,
Honourable Senators,
Ms Ragster President of the University of Virgin Islands,
Distinguished Representatives of the Universities of SIDS
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour to be invited to say a few words at this opening ceremony.

Many of you will recall the UNDP sponsored vulnerability workshop, held in Montego Bay in 2002 when the idea of SIDS University Consortium was first raised. Few SIDS professionals are actually engaged in Island vulnerability work or on sustainable development, and precisely because of that the need for the SIDS universities to play a more active role in that area was considered.

The AOSIS Summit in Johannesburg encouraged networking among SIDS Universities and provided further impetus to the Consortium Project.

More recently the expert meeting held at the University of the South Pacific in December 2003 discussed this matter again, and reached an agreement to form a core group of Universities comprising the University of Malta, the University of the West Indies, the University of the South Pacific and the University of the Virgin Islands to develop the practical aspects of cooperation within the consortium. I warmly welcome the decision that the University of the Virgin Islands would act as coordinator and judging by the commitment demonstrated by President LaVerne Ragster to SIDS-SIDS cooperation, I feel very confident that under her wise guidance and efficient leadership, this project will successfully attain its objectives.

Distinguished University Representatives, today you are laying the foundations for what should one day become a very important network for information processing, experiences exchanges and research in island development in all its aspects, culture and education in general. The Alliance of Small Island States commends this initiative and will give you the political support that is needed to fully use the potential you represent. As you are aware, we are currently engaged in the ten year review of the BPOA and at the International Meeting which will be held in Mauritius in January next year, we would like to see, apart from a greater commitment on the part of development partners for the full and effective implementation of the outcome of the Mauritius Meeting, a more significant cooperation within the SIDS regions and the SIDS themselves. And here SIDS Universities have an important role to play not only in helping to forge such a cooperation but also to assist SIDS government in their efforts to pursue their sustainable policies.

From the viewpoint of AOSIS, we believe that the Consortium can engage in activities that would

- (1) maximize the in-house academic expertise of SIDS as a group,
- (2) expand on the available training and educational opportunities available to SIDS students at these institutions. For example, a student at USP should be able to have access to economics and trade courses at the University of Malta without traveling there.
- (3) promote other sustainable development activities such as cultural enterprise and exchange.
- (4) Create an appropriate network that would allow career development among SIDS academics and professionals so as to ensure that they remain within the SIDS regions and not seek advancement in other countries.

As we build such a network it would not be unreasonable on our part to, some day in the future expect an arrangement where SIDS Universities would distribute among themselves areas of specialisation so as to make the optimum use of capacities in our respective countries.

In the area of technology development and adaptation for example, the consortium represents an enormous potential. Issues of direct concern to SIDS such Climate Change, rising sea levels, waste management and renewable energies for example can be better addressed through such a consortium and eventually by such specialisation.

From the political and diplomatic angles, this particular potential is of the greatest significance. SIDS, despite their difficulties come up every now and then with tentative new technological developments but we never seem to be able to connect the research with the people who can develop and market them. A case in point is the technology to use coconut oil as a diesel substitute whose success has been established. The problem now will be to find the right entrepreneurs who would be prepared to set up units at local levels and start the operations. In this regard the Consortium would be well placed to exchange and disseminate experiences within the SIDS and thereby enrich further the SIDS SIDS cooperation. And of course this cooperation can eventually cover the whole range of issues of interest to the Small Island Countries.

I am sure that in the discussions which you will have over the next few days, you will give consideration to these aspects of our cooperation.

From AOSIS side I can assure you of our full support and collaboration and I would be happy to take back your recommendations to the group.