At the 1992 Environment and Development Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) were formally recognised as “…a special case both for environment and development.” Highlighting the strategic importance of the ocean and coastal environment for SIDS, the Summit’s outcome document ‘Agenda 21’ included a specific section on these states (Chapter 17, Section G), providing formal acknowledgement that SIDS were a distinct category of state worthy of further attention and support. Indeed there are more than 50 million people who live in the 52 Island countries and territories categorised as SIDS, representing approximately 5% of the world’s population. Taken alongside the vast sways of the Oceans that SIDS have responsibility over, it is very apparent that getting maritime security right in these islands is of utmost importance for attaining sustainable development.

Yet despite the obvious significance of the maritime domain there has been, to date, a relative dearth of research examining the maritime security considerations of SIDS beyond the justified concerns around Climate Change. What makes this situation even more perplexing is that a number of SIDS sit in important geostrategic positions and have demonstrated a clear interest in maritime security issues. In recent months, for example, the Seychelles has taken over the chairmanship of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia. Against this backdrop the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations is seeking to make a contribution.

A new research project seeks to shed further light on the way in which SIDS conceptualise their maritime security in order to facilitate efforts to better understand maritime security policy and associated security practice relating to these states, alongside the role of SIDS vis-à-vis efforts to improve oceans governance as a whole. As part of this process on April 1st, the initial findings from a content analysis of the way in which SIDS publicly articulate their maritime security needs were delivered in the Netherlands as part of The Hague Institute’s Global Oceans Governance conference.

After analysing the content of outcome documents from major UN conferences on the Sustainable Development of SIDS over the last 24 years a fuller picture of the maritime security considerations of SIDS was outlined. Amongst other things the presentation highlighted the explicit acknowledgement of the relationship between sustainable development and security by SIDS, alongside the consistency of concerns around Illegal Fishing. The presentation also raised questions over the extent to which it is possible to suggest there is a ‘SIDS Collectivity’ in terms of identity and threat recognition, and suggested that more research was needed to consider the extent to which SIDS may find their opportunities for development limited by getting stuck in a ‘vulnerability straitjacket’.

Speaking in Samoa in 2014 the UN Secretary-General powerfully argued that SIDS are “…a magnifying glass. When we look through the SIDS lens we see the vulnerabilities we all face. And by addressing the issues facing SIDS we are developing the tools we need to promote sustainable development across the entire world.” The CTPSR project on SIDS moves forward with these words firmly in mind.

To learn more about CTPSR’s work on the maritime security of SIDS, please contact the author, James. malcolm@coventry.ac.uk at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations. (Twitter: @jamesamalcolm)