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EBD/83/325
Supplement 1

January 26, 1984

To: Members of the Executive Board

From: The Secretary

Subject: Small Tropical Island Countries - An Overview

There is attached a supplement to the paper on an overview of small tropical island countries (EBD/83/325, 12/19/83), prepared by Mr. Legarda, Consultant, listing more detailed geographic criteria for insularity and which is presented on the basis of an additional paper received from UNCTAD.

This subject has been tentatively scheduled for discussion at a seminar to be held on Monday, April 16, 1984.

Att: (1)

Other Distribution:
Department Heads

Small Tropical Island Countries: An Overview

Supplementary Information

By Benito Legarda

January 25, 1984

In connection with the discussion of insularity or islandness (pp. 15-17 in EBD/83/325), an UNCTAD paper on "Viability of Small Island States," by Professor Francois Doumenge (TD/R/950, dated July 22, 1983), received after the paper was finalized, brings up some pertinent considerations from a geographic point of view. The following extracts are relevant:

2. The more isolated an island is from other islands, and in particular from a continent, the greater the emphasis that will be placed on its insularity.

4. True insularity only exists, where the emergence is entirely exposed to the influence of the sea. "True" islands are primarily areas of land which have emerged at a sufficient distance from the continent to escape its direct influence, in terms of physical, as well as human and economic factors. Emergences of less than 10,000 km², in area are too small to give rise to phenomena unrelated to the influence of the ocean; these are true islands. With an area in excess of 50,000 km², on the other hand, the mass of the island itself will generate its own reactions, which places it in the category of continental islands. Between these two limits are "large areas of land" which become progressively less insular as their surface area, and in particular their above-surface volume, increases.

5. It has also to be borne in mind that an island will always have a long coastline in relation to its surface area.

6. The smaller the surface area, the higher will be the coastline/surface area ratio, and it is this ratio that affords a good measure of the degree of insularity. With ratios of only 1 km of coastline to 25 km² surface area, a degree of continentality begins to be discernible. A ratio of less than 1 km per 100 km² brings us unequivocally into the continental island category. Conversely insularity becomes clear with a ratio of 1 km or more of coastline per 10 km².

7. In the case of island societies, there are again fairly clear numerical dividing lines between territories where the population is too small to enable them to escape the effects of isolation by reliance on their own size and those which have a sufficiently large population to enable them to continue to function independently.

8. It would appear that a population in excess of 1,200,000 constitutes the dividing line where the number of human beings sufficient in itself to compensate for the worst constraints of insularity, which however, are clearly present where the population is less than 600,000.

9. Accordingly, the subject matter of this report applies to islands having a surface area of less than 20,000 km² and a population of less than 1,200,000 inhabitants.

By the population criterion of this paragraph, all small tropical island IMF member countries have been included in EBD/83/325, with the exception of Trinidad and Tobago which, however, was excluded for the totally different reason that its type of economy more properly put it among the oil exporting developing countries covered in another Fund study by Dr. J. Amuzegar (EBD/82/127, Rev. 1, dated October 1, 1982).

By the area criterion, only the Solomon Islands (with an area of 28,446 km²) might possibly have been excluded, but it may be noted that this criterion applies to individual islands, not to aggregate areas of archipelagos, whose component islands would experience the problems of insularity even if their total areas exceed Professor Doumenge's benchmark.

The two other criteria, namely, distance from a continent and ratio of coastline to surface area, are not given operational numbers and are not further specifically applied. They would, however, appear to be promising avenues of research for geographers. They, and perhaps other criteria, may implicitly have been used in selecting the areas which were included and excluded in the study, as may be gathered from the following paragraph:

10. The report will also be confined to consideration of islands in the intertropical zone and a number of archipelagos close to the tropics (the Bahamas, Bermuda, the Canary Islands and the Azores), since the existence of large atmospheric and ocean masses, in conjunction with the levels of solar radiation at low latitudes, gives rise to specific reactions which have a critical effect on the existence of all human communities. Islands in arctic and extreme southern latitudes differ so strikingly as to justify their exclusion from this study. The Mediterranean islands can also have been omitted even though some of them, like Malta, have a number of features analogous to those of tropical islands.

If empirical studies were focused on island economies that meet Professor Doumenge's criteria, it is possible that there could be greater convergence on what special characteristics and problems arise from insularity.