

A discussion about SIDS, tourism and the Blue Economy

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)

Interviewee: [Willemijn Peeters](#) – Founding Director, [Searious Business](#)

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Willemijn,

Thank you very much for making the time to talk with me about Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the activities that Searious Business is undertaking to support sustainable tourism for SIDS.

I wondered if we could start with an overview of the overall activities of Searious Business and your mission?

***Willemijn:** Happy to be here Gareth. I started Searious Business five years ago, determined to make a difference in the world of plastics. Having worked in sustainability for years, I knew there was an opportunity to guide businesses into the circular economy. I believe businesses are the natural catalysts of change, and if we want to have an impact on plastic pollution, it has to begin with the producers. I want to inspire business leaders and legislators to accelerate the circular use of plastic by proving the financial and social benefits. Our overall mission is to bring plastic waste entering our ocean back to zero.*

Gareth: Thank you for this overview. Turning our attention specifically to SIDS now, there is a lot of discussion and debate at the moment about how small islands can set themselves up for the future to have a sustainable and resilient approach to tourism as part of a balanced economy. Can a responsible Blue Economy and strategy by SIDS play an important part in ensuring they have a balanced economy as they emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic?

***Willemijn:** The economies of these SIDS are historically very vulnerable. They are largely dependant on fishing and tourism, so preserving the health of the ocean ecosystems surrounding them is their number one priority. At the same time, these industries are major contributors to ocean plastic pollution. Tourists generate a shocking 2/3 of their annual plastic leakage during a 1-week stay on an island. Hotels and tour operators need to stop the flow at the source. The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously had a devastating effect on the island economy, but it has also given the opportunity to pause and take stock of the situation. The islands can reset and change their direction towards a more sustainable future.*

Gareth: I know that you are working with [IUCN](#), supported by [NORAD](#), to stop plastic leakage from SIDS with your [Plastic Waste Free Island project](#) and that your goal is to scale up and apply lessons learnt to achieve plastic waste-free islands on a global scale. Are you seeing good knowledge sharing taking place globally across SIDS so far (appreciating that their resources tend to be stretched)?

I wonder whether organisations such as the UNDP, the Alliance of Small Island States ([AOSIS](#)) and [the Center of Excellence \(CoE\) for small island developing states](#) can help as part of the project uptake.

***Willemijn:** Yes, we have been working with the IUCN and NORAD since 2019, analysing the plastic waste pathways in the tourism, fisheries and waste management sectors on six Caribbean and Pacific islands. The first quarter of this year was about bringing the relevant stakeholders on board, scouting for the most suitable technology, seeking complementary initiatives, and assessing the viability and investor-readiness of the most suitable solutions. This month, the project enters its trial period. Nine solutions designed by 12 working groups will now undergo thorough testing and refinement on Antigua-Barbuda, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Fiji, Samoa & Vanuatu. Each island has selected the solutions they are going to test. Together, we have developed business cases, prototypes, and collection and recycling schemes. Once the data is collected, we will design a blueprint of best practices ready for upscaling. Our hope is that this model, when successful, can be repeated on islands all over the world. Islands represent a closed economy on a small scale, so you can quite accurately determine the consequences of systemic changes. This makes them perfect for serving as ambitious test models for companies and investors. After all, the world is just one big island.*

We would love other organisations to get involved in the upscaling stage. Together we will drive systemic change and stop plastic waste from leaking into the ocean.

Gareth: I know through the [Plastic Waste Free Island project](#) that you have developed three Zero Plastic Waste Toolkits for the tourism industry – for hotels, cruise lines and tour operators.

In my discussions and reviews with businesses in the tourism sector, I have seen the importance that taking proactive action to protect the environment is something that is expected of them by the vast majority of customers ((backed by evidence of [surveys they have undertaken](#))). Can initiatives like your Zero Plastic Waste Toolkits be adopted by any size of business, including small and local tour operators on these islands and independent hoteliers?

***Willemijn:** Absolutely! It's in everyone's interests to reduce plastic pollution. No one wants to sunbathe on dirty beaches! Multiple surveys by tour operators have shown that travellers expect hotels to demonstrate their environmental commitment. They are ready to accept change, especially since COVID-19 has highlighted our impact on nature.*

The principles behind the Zero Plastic waste Toolkits can be applied to any size business.

They allow you to identify problematic plastic use and provide tips and tricks for hygienic and convenient zero plastic waste options. Each toolkit is targeted at different stakeholders in the tourism sector. We tried to address the desire to see the costs and benefits of changing to more sustainable alternatives. Demonstrating best practices from around the world, giving concrete suggestions for implementing change, and information about return on investment.

Gareth: Is involvement from governments of SIDS towards projects like this important, to encourage community participation? For example, I wonder about the linkages that these types of projects have with government sustainability and resilience strategies, such as the government of Dominica's [climate resilience and recovery plan 2020-2030](#), which includes protecting their natural assets.

Willemijn: Of course, local government participation is vital in terms of implementing the project on the ground. We have been working closely with the local authorities throughout this project, engaging the local community and providing resources and information. The challenge for them will be to continue after we leave. We're hoping to persuade legislators to put mandates in place to encourage businesses to commit to lasting change.

Gareth: Your work at Searious Business is a prime example, I can see, of the circular economy in action. Could projects like this help stimulate thinking by people on SIDS about how they can undertake other types of circular economy initiatives which can generate sustainable local employment, including in their tourist industries? I am wondering about various products that they could make and sell, from furniture to gifts and cultural artefacts.

Willemijn: The circular models we are introducing will directly generate employment and additional revenue streams on the islands. Our waste to product solution, for example, will turn the island's waste into valuable items such as furniture and tourist souvenirs. Using recycled plastic not as a novelty, but as a way of keeping value in the local economy. The current waste management systems are often inefficient, and islands are dependant on exporting their waste to the mainland for processing. Hopefully, in the future, they will find a way to make their waste work for them. I'm sure this project will cause a mind-shift in the island's industries towards circular business models in the future.

Gareth: What other projects does the team at Searious Business have in progress or planned at the moment for SIDS, if I may ask?

Willemijn: We are currently in talks to expand the Plastic Waste Free Islands project to other islands in the Mediterranean. It is exciting to think we could work on any SIDS in the world and dramatically impact their environment, biodiversity, and economic prospects. It'll also be nice to work in this time zone for a change!

Thank you very much for your time, Willemijn. We wish you and all the team at Searious Business continued success with your inspiring initiatives.