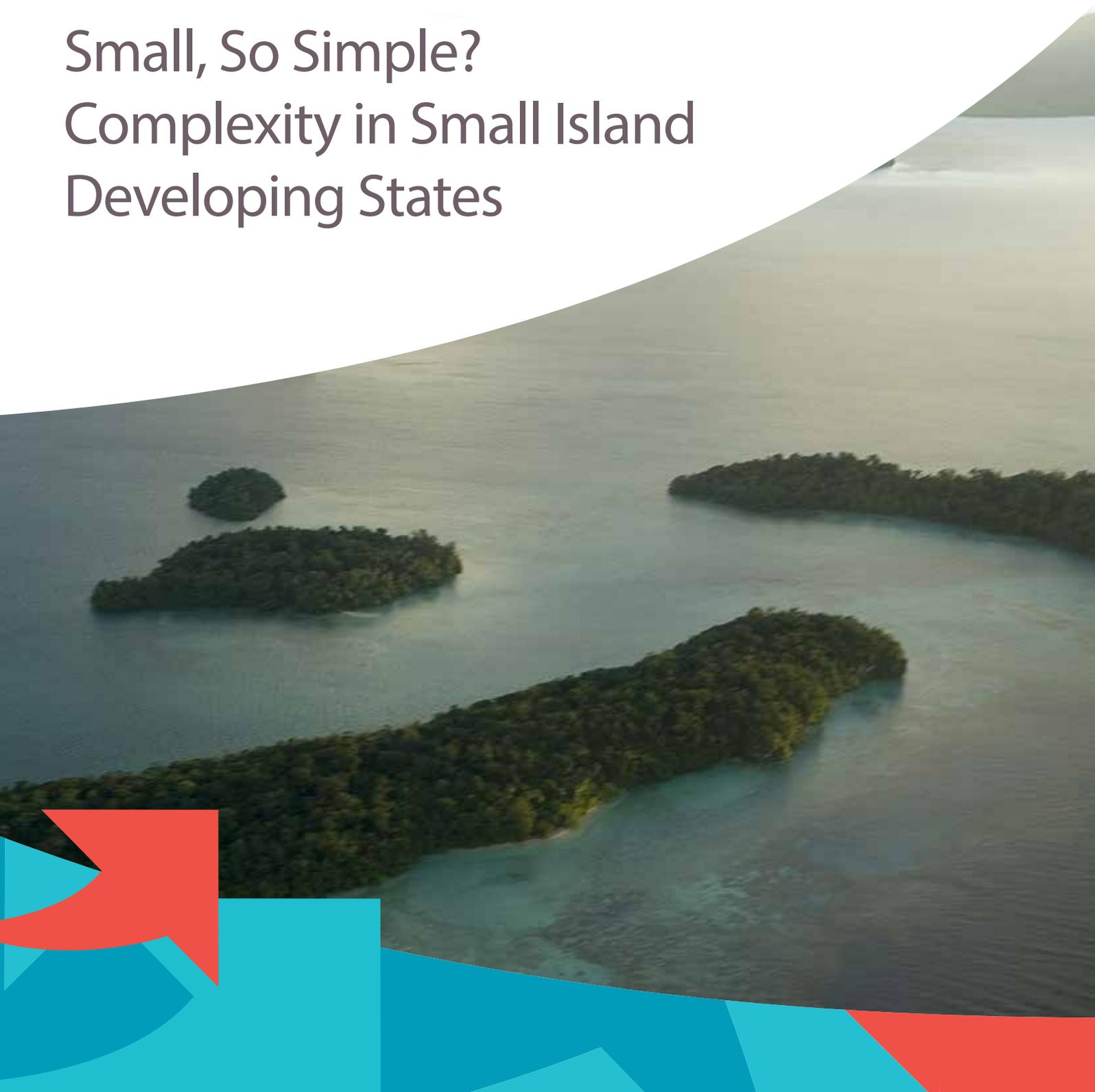




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Small, So Simple? Complexity in Small Island Developing States



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Aerial View of Marovo Lagoon (Solomon Islands)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE), in partnership with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, is holding a conference in Singapore on 29 April 2014 to consider the value of 'complexity-aware' approaches to improving public service in Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

This paper highlights some of the possible factors involved in applying ideas from complexity theory to reforming public service and tackling related development problems in small countries, and especially SIDS. It explores whether such core attributes as the degree of smallness and/or the nature of 'islandness' create specific characteristics of the state that may simplify coordination across government, or make the problems that a public service faces no different, or different but no less complex than in other contexts. It concludes that better planning and foresight capabilities, rooted in effective political economy analysis, may be needed.



Sunset at Nuku'Alofa (Tonga) © BY-NC-ND Robin Ducker / flickr.com/lightknight

1. INTRODUCTION

Complexity has become fashionable in international development. Complexity science, not just respect for complexity, can offer insights on institutions.¹ But is the art of governing small countries less complex, the same or simply different from that of larger nations? Does the 'islandness' of small island states, as well as their 'developing' status, affect public service? And, if there are particular administrative challenges in these small jurisdictions, can insights from complexity theory assist UNDP to help its partner governments more effectively?²

Some 52 countries and 'associate states'³ declare themselves to be Small Island Developing States (SIDS), including 38 UN Member States listed on the website of the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.⁴ But there is no accepted definition—three SIDS are not even islands. SIDS are mainly located in two regions, with 23 in the Caribbean and 20 in the Pacific, and nine in the rest of the world (scattered across Africa, the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea).

The United Nations' purpose in holding conferences on SIDS is "to focus attention on a group of countries that remain a special case for sustainable development in view of their unique and particular vulnerabilities." The Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States will be held in Samoa in September 2014. Its overall aim is to promote "the sustainable development of Small Island Developing States through genuine and durable partnerships." One of its specific objectives is to identify new and emerging challenges and opportunities for the sustainable development of SIDS, "particularly through the strengthening of partnerships between small islands and the international community."⁵

In support of this effort to identify opportunities, the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence in Singapore is organising a half-day conference on 29 April 2014, in partnership with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, to consider the value of 'complexity-aware' approaches to tackling development issues on SIDS.

Such approaches, in exploring the nonlinear nature of development, highlight that there are no simple answers—even in the SIDS context. But public service in SIDS can translate complexity approaches into practical steps. These activities can improve their capabilities to respond to complex interdependencies that are inexplicable, emergent and difficult to predict. The evidence also shows that combining foresight and 'complexity theory' from adaptive systems science can promote anticipatory and agile planning. This matters. For instance, Singapore's extraordinary success over the last 50 years was in no small part achieved by developing the capacity to undertake long-term planning.



Combining foresight and 'complexity theory' from adaptive systems science can promote anticipatory and agile planning.

¹ Thanks, in international development, in no small part to Ben Ramalingam's book of 2013: *Aid on the Edge of Chaos: rethinking international cooperation in a complex world*.

² J. Tanner (2013), 'Complexity Won't Make the Public Fall Back in Love with Development', *Guardian Professional*, 15 November, however cautions: 'There's much to like about complexity if you're long on questions and short on answers, but if you're in the business of trying to communicate messages about how to help others build themselves a brighter future then it is best not to get too fixated on the lament that it's all very hard to explain. The reality is that simplicity is tried and tested—the problem is that we've got the framing all wrong.'

³ American Samoa, Anguilla, Aruba, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Curaçao, French Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Guam, Martinique, Montserrat, New Caledonia, Puerto Rico, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the United States Virgin Islands.

⁴ By the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 'Wu Hongbo Named Secretary-General of 2014 Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States', *UN Conference on SIDS* website, www.sids2014.org.

In explicitly addressing these issues, this conference is a landmark in three ways. First, it considers the relevance of complexity theory explicitly to SIDS; second, it seeks to investigate whether and how insights from complexity theory may have particular relevance for improving public service in SIDS; and third, by looking at the context of SIDS, it is able to investigate the wider applicability of 'complexity' thinking (such as on dynamics, co-evolution or self-organisation⁶) to development challenges, not least those relating to UNDP's principle of open, democratic governance in different political economy contexts.

The underlying theme of our conference, however, is even more ambitious. Our ambition is to use 'complexity' to confront a fundamental problem underlying all development efforts: that the evidence consistently indicates the messy, poorly understood complexity of the development process. This partly arises from the fact that 'institutions matter' and that behind institutions lie the complexity of politics.⁷ Problems of governance and institutional change display the characteristics of messy, unpredictable and adaptive systems.⁸ As Alina Rocha Menocal at the Overseas Development Institute in London points out, the latest donor thinking is on the need to operate in a more sophisticated manner that is 'politically savvy'; and this relates to finding ways of working around complexity and complex systems.⁹

Too often, governments, bilateral donors and multilateral institutions insist on continuing to pretend, in designing their programmes and projects, that the development process follows the logical sequencing of applying a technical fix (often implicitly dictated by the clear-cut progression of modernisation theory) and is conceptually well defined. Yet research suggests the real problem is not the 'what' but the 'how'.¹⁰

2. COMPLEXITY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A report of the OECD Global Science Forum reflects on big and small changes in a complex system:

In a complex system, it is not uncommon for small changes to have big effects; big changes to have surprisingly small effects; and for effects to come from unanticipated causes. Thus, for example, a continent-wide electrical power grid can suffer massive cascading malfunctions after the breakdown of a single transformer in a small substation; an elaborate multi-year health education programme may yield no discernable effect on health behaviours in one community while having a major impact in another; the emergence of a new pathogen in a remote village can sicken just a few individuals, or give rise to a devastating global epidemic; the adoption of an exotic new financial instrument can eventually contribute to a chain of stock market collapses and business failures. Clearly, any science-based insight into the behaviours of such systems would be of value to policymakers.¹¹

Complexity science is the study of complex adaptive systems—the patterns of relationships within them, how they are sustained, how they self-organise and how outcomes emerge. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, might be regarded as having founded complexity theory over 2,500 years ago when he observed that "everything is connected, and every matter relates to every other."¹²

The core insight of 'complexity' is that all systems of governance defy precise prediction because people, human society and the institutional components of its structures interact in nonlinear ways. Public service works in a non-linear environment because the overall 'system' cannot be understood simply by understanding individual components.¹³ If it was not, of course, history would have little purpose, and 'happenstance' only a limited place in the historical experience.

Moreover, policymakers are dealing with increasingly complex, multi-dimensional issues that are frequently interconnected and interdependent. Globalisation resulting from and combined with technological innovation has accelerated change on all fronts—political, economic and social. In today's global

6 These apply multi-mode, multi-link, multi-level organisational analysis to conditions of uncertainty.

7 M.S. Grindle (2007), 'Good Enough Governance Revisited', *Development Policy Review* 25(5): 533-574. See also Max Everest-Phillips (2012a), 'The Political Economy of Controlling Tax Evasion and Illicit Flows', World Bank.

8 Max Everest-Phillips (2008), 'Beyond "constraints": Promoting the politics of economic growth in developing countries', *ODI Strategic Policy Impact and Research Unit (SPIRU) Papers* 22.

9 A.M. Menocal (2014), 'Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently', ODI Briefing Paper.

10 D. Booth (2013), 'Facilitating Development: An Arm's Length Approach to Aid', *ODI Discussion Paper*, London: ODI.

11 OECD Global Science Forum (2009), Report on Applications of Complexity Science for Public Policy: New Tools for Finding Unanticipated Consequences and Unrealized Opportunities.

12 The 'Tao Te Ching' (or *the Way*), translated by Hua Ching Ni (1995), *The Complete Works of Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching and Hua Hu Ching*, Los Angeles, California: Sevenstar Communications.

13 Systems that can be broken down, understood and precisely predicted are complicated rather than complex.

environment, events and trends in various spheres interact with one another in complex and sometimes mystifying ways.¹⁴ “The growing complexity of ‘the system’ that a particular policy is trying to affect makes it impossible to steer it directly without facing the risk of unintended consequences.”¹⁵

In addition to creating ‘spaghetti bowls of issues’, complex systems and unpredictable environments are also the seedbed of ‘wildcards’ and ‘black swans’, which ultimately generate ‘wicked problems.’ Wicked problems are large and intractable issues that have no immediate or obvious solutions and whose causes and influencing factors are not easily determined.¹⁶ “Most of the pressing threats to global civilisation fall into this class of problems: climate change, terror networks and global crime, extreme poverty, child slavery.”¹⁷ Wicked problems often have many agents interacting with each other in perplexing ways involving stakeholders with different perspectives and goals.¹⁸

At the same time, years of international development experience and research have pointed out with increasing confidence that many development problems, but especially ones like public service where politics, governance and institutional change are highly significant, defy the straightjacket of logframe-type linear logic. Instead they clearly display the trademark characteristics of messy, unpredictable and adaptive systems populated by unpredictable mixes of human traits.

In the field of development, there has been a shift towards complexity-awareness that favours adaptation as “the way to deal with problems in unpredictable, complex systems. Adaptation works by making small changes, observing the results, and then adjusting.”¹⁹ This appears contrary to the ‘planning approach’ widely used in development to design complicated programmes and track implementation milestones. Adaptability combined with foresight allows for quick, insightful decision-making that enables “doing things right versus doing the right things.”²⁰

To approach development through a complexity lens is to accept the ‘unknown unknowns’ of multi-faceted interconnectedness and multi-layered interdependencies of problems and challenges. Surprisingly simple behaviours and rules can result in complex phenomena, and many issues, sectors and challenges have complex characteristics. But not all problems are complex; and while complex problems and difficult problems overlap, they are not the same thing: complex problems pose problems requiring decisions in the face of the risks arising from uncertainty and volatility. Consequently, the term ‘complex’ is sometimes used as an excuse for inaction or failure.

Complexity-aware approaches do encourage resilient and adaptive policies responsive to change. Furthermore, many developing country contexts work in ways that are significantly different from normative concepts derived from the experiences of ‘advanced’ Western democracies. ‘International best practice’ in public service may be particularly less applicable or inappropriate in some of the smallest countries on earth. ‘Best fit’ not ‘best practice’ is needed, so the key is avoiding those ‘toolkits’ and ‘frameworks’ that insist on squeezing the wide variety of governance institutions into fixed problem diagnostics that come up with the same formulaic solutions.



Complexity-aware approaches do encourage resilient and adaptive policies responsive to change.

¹⁴ Peter Ho (2012a), ‘Coping with complexity’, in *Government Designed for New Times: A Global Conversation*, McKinsey&Company, p. 82.

¹⁵ Olivier Da Costa, Philine Warnke, Cristiano Cagnin and Fabiana Scapolo (2008), ‘The impact of foresight on policy-making: Insights from the FORLEARN mutual learning process’, *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies Joint Research Centre / European Commission, p. 2.

¹⁶ United Nations Development Programme Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (UNDP GCPSE) (forthcoming 2014), *Foresight as a Strategic Long Term Planning Tool for Development*, Singapore: UNDP GCPSE.

¹⁷ Jose Ramos, Tim Mansfield and Gareth Priday (2012), ‘Foresight in a network era: Peer-producing alternative futures’, *Journal of Futures Studies* 17(1): 72.

¹⁸ Peter Ho (2012b), ‘Governing for the future: What governments can do’, *RSIS Working Paper Series, no. 248*, Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, p. 3.

¹⁹ O. Barder (2012), ‘Complexity, adaptation, and results’, blogpost from *Centre for Global Development website*, 7 September.

²⁰ Noah Raford (2013), ‘Foresight and surprise’, presented at *The Lift Conference*, CIGG, Geneva, Switzerland, 6-8 February.

3. WHY SIDS?

Developing small states²¹ and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in particular have long been seen as sharing characteristics that pose specific development challenges.²² In addition to small size and insularity, shared characteristics also may include: a) geography - remoteness, being an archipelago, being mountainous, being landlocked and being tropical; b) society – ethno-linguistic complexity and small but growing populations²³ with high inequalities, a deep divide between urban elites and rural poor, high youth unemployment and deep pockets of poverty; c) political - high public service and institutional costs; and d) a wide range of economic challenges. These shared economic characteristics may include the following challenges: limited capacities in the public and private sectors; high volatility in national incomes, high costs of tertiary education and limited opportunities for high-skilled employment, and high volatility of GDP; 'natural monopolies' leading to market distortions; limited economic diversification with difficult economic transitions to changing world trade contexts; dependence on a narrow resource base, isolation and remoteness from large markets, vulnerability to natural disasters and other external shocks; significant dependence on foreign aid and/or international trade; fragile environments and climate change; inability to find economies of scale; lack of market competition; higher cost of living; excessive dependence upon a few dominant activities, exports and export markets; and small domestic markets. Small domestic markets deter investors, as costs of doing business are higher due to expensive infrastructure development and high communication, energy and transportation costs. Small domestic markets limit any import-substituting industrialisation. As a result, SIDS tend to have highly open trade regimes and be well-integrated with the international economy. The loss of skilled people from small states is extremely high: the percentage of college graduates who migrate is as high as 86 percent in Guyana and 83 percent in Jamaica.²⁴

SIDS pose particularly interesting development challenges. They are small in size and by population thus encountering fewer inter-connections of issues and peoples. Also, because they have no land borders, they are therefore less subject to spill-over problems from neighbouring regimes. Do these attributes mean, however, that the development challenges their public services face may be a) easier to tackle because the number

of issues and their scale makes governance problems less complex (albeit more personal, since in small societies 'everyone knows each other'); b) more difficult (because, with everyone knowing each other, political and administrative leaders cannot depersonalise societal problems enough to make 'rational' Weberian or utilitarian decisions), c) the same as anywhere else, or d) just different?

A comprehensive review by the World Trade Organization (WTO) Secretariat²⁵ of the literature on SIDS over a decade ago observed: "conclusions in the empirical literature tend to be somewhat contradictory and inconclusive on a number of important points" not least because "each small economy is unique." Characteristics such as "higher GDP volatility, greater openness to trade, higher per capita international aid and more concentrated production and export structures" were duly noted. However, it was further noted that "small states do not perform badly in terms of GDP levels, growth rates, social, health and educational indicators, cohesion variables and greater flexibility in the decision-making process." The evidence remains mixed, and the importance of public service in SIDS to the economy and social development not well articulated. One problem is that the *rational-legal-impersonal* model of professional public service may not be fully applicable in SIDS, especially the very smallest of these states.²⁶

One reason the model may not apply is that research suggests a population size of half a million or less may be a critical positive and negative threshold for the quality of governance and public institutions. This seems to be the transition point at which decision-making can move from familial to impersonal. This transition enables political leaders to make tough choices necessary for the long-term development of the state because over this threshold, decision makers rapidly become less likely to personally know people affected.

Their size alone raises questions. Is there a *discontinuum of size*? At a certain point in smallness, do state characteristics suddenly differ, and how would complexity offer insight? Is it a conceit of larger states that small states are less 'capable'? How far is there possibility to reconfigure the scope of 'government'? The World Bank identifies diseconomies of scale:

²¹ This article focuses on independent sovereign states, so excluding colonies and dependencies and other states without fully membership of the UN, such as Niue, Cook Islands or Montserrat.

²² Selwyn, P. 1978. *Small, Poor and Remote: Islands at a Geographical Disadvantage*. Brighton: University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, Discussion Paper 123. 1980 Smallness and Islandness. *World Development* 8:945-951.

²³ 42% of the population was at the start of the 21st century under voting age in Tuvalu: Hughes, H. and S. Gosarevski. 2004. Does Size Matter? Tuvalu and Nauru Compared. *Policy*, 20(2): 16-20. Centre for Independent Studies: Sydney.

²⁴ 2005.

²⁵ WT/COMTD/SE/W/4, 23 July 2002.

²⁶ H. Chittoo (2011), 'Public Service in "Small and Island Developing States": A Debate about the implications of smallness', *Global Journal of Management and Business Research*, September 2011.

Sovereignty entails the state having to bear the fixed costs of providing the necessary range of public services, including central government, regulation, taxation, education, health, social services, judiciary, foreign relations, and national security. Indivisibilities in the provision of these public goods mean that the public sector small states face diseconomies of small size in providing public services and in carrying out the business of government. Small states tend to have relatively larger public sectors than other developing countries and the cost per person of providing these services is higher.²⁷

Small, peripheral island states are natural, self-contained political units of administration, of great diversity but easily idealised as highly sociable and well-run. In academic jargon, they may be 'network-driven' with high 'social capital' and 'island neo-corporatism' that inherently morph into 'good governance'.²⁸ But development outcomes for the SIDS have not been universally impressive: in the Pacific, for example, Kiribati has achieved political and macroeconomic stability since independence in 1979 yet its development record has been weak; between 1998 and 2008, only Samoa and Tuvalu managed to achieve an annual average growth in GDP of 3 percent or more; and only Tuvalu and Vanuata succeeded in converting growth into poverty reduction.²⁹

The picture on the quality of governance is similarly mixed. Tuvalu in the 2010 World Governance Indicators shows mixed results. Tuvalu rates very highly (in the top 10 percent) for the rule of law and political stability, although the Cabinet changed nine times from 1993 to 2006, and very few prime ministers have survived their full four-year term; ranks well (in the 50th-75th percentile) for voice and accountability, and control of corruption; is assessed as weak (in the 25th-50th percentile) for government effectiveness; and ranks in the lowest 10 percent for regulatory quality based on perceptions of the government's ability to formulate and implement sound policies and to promote private sector development.³⁰ Overall the World Governance Indicators may suggest "the smaller the state, the better the record,"³¹ although this may also simply reflect the limited sample and the inverse ratio of country size to available reliable data.

The huge differences in development among small states. One of the poorest SIDS is Kiribati with per capita income of \$2,010 in 2010; the richest include Brunei and four high-income SIDS: Bahamas, Barbados, Malta, and Saint Kitts and Nevis. This disparity confirms the general finding that politics, policies and institutions matter more than just size, geography or natural resources. For example, the Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island of Hispaniola and are broadly similar in geography and history, yet their development trajectory has diverged remarkably. The countries had the same per capita real GDP in 1960 but by 2005 the Dominican Republic's per capita real GDP had tripled whereas that of Haiti had halved because the Dominican Republic enjoyed reasonably effective governance, and Haiti did not.³² The same finding applies across the whole Caribbean—politics, policies and institutions shape improvements in per capita GDP.³³

Smallness by population or territory is also not destiny: within any country it can have different impacts, as described above in Tuvalu. Cross-country comparisons confirm the variation. The Maldives rank 143rd out of 178 countries in the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index. However, the other small Indian Ocean archipelago state, the Seychelles, ranks 49th—nearly a hundred places higher.³⁴ UNDP's Human Development Index ranks the Seychelles 52nd among the 187 countries covered in 2011, but with less than a third of the per capita income of the Maldives at 109th.³⁵ Seychelles, with a population of some 80,000 people, ranked second only to a rather bigger small island state, Mauritius (population around 1.3 million) out of 48 sub-Saharan African countries on the 2010 Ibrahim Index of African Governance and the same two island states—Seychelles and Mauritius—top the Human Development Index for Africa. The Seychelles is one of the few globally to have achieved the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. The economy is diversifying with China, India and the United Arab Emirates as key trading partners and the country has become a leader in environmental conservation. The African island countries highlight that economic growth and social stability are achievable for remote, small island states, and that even with few resources, they can overcome their problems of scale, size, isolation and poverty.

²⁷ World Bank Small States project website, accessed 22/03/12.

²⁸ G. Baldacchino (2007), 'The Contribution of "Social Capital" to Economic Growth: Lessons from Island Jurisdictions,' *The Round Table*, 94(378): 33-44.

²⁹ R. Laking (2010), State performance and capacity in the Pacific, ADB.

³⁰ On this only Kiribati in the Pacific is rated lower. But as all the Pacific low-income small islands do poorly on this institutional capacity, it could be any one factor or combination of them such as extreme smallness (Nauru, Tuvalu), remoteness, low-income GDP, or 'Pacific-ness' results in the state's crowding out of the private sector.

³¹ P. Sutton (2008), 'Building Good Governance and Economic Resilience in Small states,' in L. Briguglio, et al., (2008), *Small States and the Pillars of Economic Resilience*, Malta and Commonwealth Secretariat, pp.195-216, p.200.

³² L. Jaramillo and C. Sancak. (2007), 'Growth in the Dominican Republic and Haiti: Why has the Grass Been Greener on One Side of Hispaniola?' IMF Working Paper.

³³ V. Bulmer-Thomas (2001), 'The Wider Caribbean in the 20th Century: A Long-run Development Perspective,' *Integration and Trade* 5(15): 5-56.

³⁴ Transparency International's 2010 *Corruption Perceptions Index* coverage of 178 countries includes 10 of the Commonwealth's smallest countries: the other rankings were: 37th Malta; 38th Brunei; 44th Dominica; 62nd Samoa; 73rd Vanuatu; 91st Kiribati; 101st Tonga; and at 110th Solomon Islands.

³⁵ HDI 2011. The other Commonwealth very small island countries covered are: Antigua and Barbuda at 60th; Grenada at 67th; Saint Kitts and Nevis 72nd; Dominica 81st; Saint Lucia 82nd; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines 85th; Tonga 90th and Samoa 99th.

4. PUBLIC SERVICE IN SIDS

The lack of comparative studies of administrative capacity in small developing states has hindered understanding of the impact of state size on the relationship between politics and public service. This was realised more than 20 years ago.³⁶ But little progress has been made in this regard, or in offering practical solutions based on empirical evidence, as a review of the topic concluded: "The number of publications specifically addressing whether the nature of government changes with scale, as opposed to the general problems of smallness, is remarkably limited ... and the amount of empirically based study is negligible."³⁷

The effectiveness of public service within the 'micro-governance' of SIDS matters. It is essential for building state capacity to respond to immediate citizen needs as well as such wider challenges as climate change and economic growth. Nineteen of the 30 smallest sovereign states in the world (those independent countries having a population of less than half a million people) are SIDS:

- ▶ Thirteen of those nineteen SIDS are developing countries consisting of:
- ▶ five lower middle-income countries, all in the Pacific (Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu); and
- ▶ eight upper middle-income countries, of which one is in the Pacific (Tuvalu); five are in the Caribbean (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines); and two are in the Indian Ocean (Maldives and Seychelles).

Together these SIDS contain a combined population of little more than 1.5 million people. Not all SIDS are islands: Belize, Guyana and Suriname declare themselves to have the characteristics of SIDS, and therefore are SIDS, despite being continental countries.

As none of the SIDS are low-income, human development issues in these contexts are less the immediate challenge of poverty reduction, and more the broader range of challenges that face middle-income countries such as how to tackle the poverty of opportunity, high levels of gender-based violence and the worst rates in the world for non-communicable diseases like diabetes. Strengthening the quality of public institutions to deal with these challenges requires improving leadership and strategic direction, developing public sector workforce capability, and achieving higher standards of operational efficiency.

SIDS and other countries with small populations appear, in general, to be better governed than larger countries.³⁸ The threshold of a population of less than half a million has a particularly profound impact, with the smallest countries enjoying a much more effective democracy than larger countries.³⁹ This suggests that in politics and service, small size does matter, probably both in its own right and by influencing other factors that shape the governance of small developing states. The smaller the country, the more closely the state is tied with society.

What actually is different about small state public service? It may be that though capacity is limited, small societies create varieties of government inevitably shaped as much by personal relationships as by formal bureaucratic rules. As a result, small island states may on average enjoy a variety of strengths:⁴⁰

- ▶ participatory democracy, accountability, transparency and trust are all potentially much easier in small countries; and even more so in a clearly distinct and isolated political unit, such as an island;
- ▶ public services can build on strong social cohesion and community solidarity;⁴¹
- ▶ public service may be more responsive and faster to change and more flexible in policymaking;
- ▶ SIDS politics may revolve even more than in larger states around control of the capital: small states usually have population density concentrated in the capital city without alternative major towns as centres of power;

36 J. Schahczenski (1990), 'Development administration in the small developing state: A review,' *Public Administration and Development* 10: 69–80.

37 Chitto (2011), 'Public Administration in "Small and Island Developing States"', p. 22. The literature he cites is: Dommen, E. & Hein, P. (eds.), *States, Microstates and Islands*. Dover, N.H.: Croom Helm, 1985; Hope, K.R., 'The Administration of Development in Emergent Nations: The Problems in the Caribbean,' *Public Administration and Development* No. 3: 49-59, 1983; Jones, E., 'Bureaucracy as a Problem Solving Mechanism in Small States: A Review in Terms of the Current Literature' in V. Lewis Mona (ed.), *Size, Self-Determination and International Relations: The Caribbean*, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1976; Kersell, J. 1985. *The Administration of Government in Bermuda*. *Public Administration and Development* No. 5: 373-84, 1985; Kersell, J. 1987. *Government Administration in a Small Microstate: Developing the Caymen Islands*. *Public Administration and Development* No. 7: 95-107; Khan, J. 1982. *Public Management: The Eastern Caribbean Experience*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, 1982; Murray, D. 1981. *Microstates: Public administration for the small and beautiful*. *Public Administration and Development*, 1: 245–256; Murray, D. 1985. *Public Administration in Microstates in the Pacific*, in Dommen, E. and P. Hein (eds). *States, Microstates and Islands*. Dover, N.H.: Croom Helm; Richards, J., 'Politics in Small, Independent Communities: Conflict or Consensus?' *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 20(2): 155-71, 1982; United Nations. 1969. *Comparative Analysis of the Distinctive Public Administration Problems of Small States and Territories*. New York: United Nations; Baker, R. (ed.), *Public Administration in Small and Island States*, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 1992; Commonwealth Secretariat, *Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985; Collins, P. and Warrington, E., 'The New Public Administration: Lessons From the Experiences of Small and Island States,' A Report on the Seychelles/CAPAM/IASIA Conference April 1997; and UNEP, 'Human Resource Development in Small Island Developing States,' Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, 1998.

38 L. Curmi (2009), 'Governance and Small States,' *Bank of Valletta Review* 40: 53-9.

39 D. Anckar (2010), 'Small Is Democratic, But Who Is Small?' *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*: 1-16.

40 See for example N. Wace (1980), 'Exploitation of the Advantages of Remoteness and Isolation in the Economic Development of Pacific Islands,' in R. T. Shand (ed.), *The island states of the Pacific and Indian Oceans: Anatomy of Development*, Canberra: Australian National University, pp. 87-118.

41 J. Campbell and J. Hall (2009), 'National identity and the political economy of small states,' *Review of International Political Economy* 16(4): 547-572.

- ▶ more effective democracy than larger states by being closer to the populace, so gaining greater legitimacy from perceived fairness and equity;
- ▶ co-ordination is easier in often relatively homogenous populations;
- ▶ smaller states enjoy more political freedom;⁴²
- ▶ smallness and 'islandness' may foster a collectivist ideal of community solidarity, and dependence on both imports and exports requires staying internationally competitive by promoting export-led growth;
- ▶ personal relationships may explain why in many places economic dependence on mineral wealth is correlated with civil war,⁴³ yet Nauru is perceived to be at relatively low risk of politically driven unrest, according to the World Bank's governance indicators.⁴⁴ (This robustness may in part however be due to its exceptionally huge aid receipts.)

Smallness therefore has positive attributes:

The citizens of small states tend to enjoy above average levels of GNI per capita, as well as high levels of literacy, health and life expectancy. But they also enjoy what typically remains unmeasured: high stocks of social capital; family and community bonding; a disposition toward economies of scope and multi-functionality; vibrant democratic participation; a dynamic diaspora; political stability; and relatively large public sectors which promote more egalitarian societies.⁴⁵

Perhaps because of such reasons, as a group, small island states are nearly 40 percent richer than other states.⁴⁶ For example, the only low-income country in the Caribbean is Haiti, one of the largest with a population of over 8 million; whereas there are two high-income SIDS in the region—Bahamas and Barbados.



Mangrove shoots planted by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and others (Tarawa Atoll, Kiribati).
 © BY-NC-ND Eskinder Debebe/UN Photo / flickr.com/un_photo

⁴² The political rights index (Freedom House 2005) for small states was 3.5 against 4.3 for large African states (decreasing numbers show greater rights in this index).
⁴³ P. Collier (2007), *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Falling Behind and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
⁴⁴ Its political stability indicator measures perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilised either by external forces or from within, including through politically motivated violence and terrorism.

⁴⁵ G. Baldacchino, R. Greenwood and L. Felt (2009), 'Geography, Governance, and Development: Challenges Facing the Small, Insular and Remote,' in G. Baldacchino, L. Felt & R. Greenwood (eds.) *Remote Control: Governance Lessons for and from Small, Insular and Remote Regions*, St John's NL: ISER Press, pp. 1-16.
⁴⁶ W. Easterly and A. Kraay (2000), 'Small States, Small Problems? Income, Growth and Volatility in Small States,' *World Development* 28: 2013-2027.

5. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SMALL STATES AND SIDS

It is also important to consider distinguishing factors between small states, including SIDS, that shape the character of their public service. Differences in the capacities of public service may be shaped by many influences. External factors such as regional, geographic and historical differences all come into play.

A) Difference by region

Specific regional characteristics may affect all countries in the region, independent of whether they are a small state. For example, a UNDP study a few years ago on the Caribbean concluded:

Lack of political will is a recurrent and underlying theme of all studies and evaluations of reform and institutional development in the Caribbean. ... Linked to this is the absence, in most Caribbean jurisdictions, of consensus on the role of the state and, by extension, a clear vision of the kind of public sector that is “fit for purpose”. Indeed, there is seldom any meaningful discussion on the role of the state at all in political and bureaucratic circles; Caribbean governments pride themselves on being “pragmatic”. The upshot of this is that ... there is no demand for good governance from within Caribbean societies themselves.⁴⁷

However, regional characteristics are not limited to similarities in political practices. Traditional and cultural outlooks also have an impact on regional characteristics. For instance, perceptions of gender roles vary from region to region. The strong matriarchal culture of the West Indies is reflected in the region’s political administrations. Women are not only active in Caribbean politics, but are increasingly filling leadership roles. Antigua and Barbuda named their first female Governor General in 2007 and Grenada in 2013. The first female Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago was elected 2010.⁴⁸

B) Political geography

Different physical geography may matter politically, such as the number of islands that make up the state. SIDS include: single islands such as Dominica, Nauru and Saint Lucia; pairs of islands such as Antigua and Barbuda, and Saint Kitts and Nevis; small consolidated groups of islands including Grenada and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; and many islands spread over vast territorial waters. For example, Seychelles is made up of 115 islands, the Solomon Islands includes nearly 1,000 islands, and

⁴⁷ D. Brown (2009), ‘Institutional Development and Reform in Public Services: The Experience of Small Caribbean States’, paper for the Small States and the ‘State’ conference, Estonia, p.19.

⁴⁸ Caribbean Elections (2014), ‘Women in Caribbean Politics,’ *Caribbean Elections website*, 24 April 2014.

Kiribati contains 33 atolls over 3.5 million square kilometres. This affects capacity and political will to provide services—often a function of distance from the government capital. This gap has traditionally been taken up, at least in part, by non-state actors like churches.

C) History

Many SIDS were decolonised late: Dominica and Solomon Islands in 1978; Kiribati, Tuvalu, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in 1979; Vanuatu in 1980; Antigua and Barbuda in 1981. Perhaps the public service was better prepared for independence than the larger countries decolonised during the first ‘winds of change’ era of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Tonga was never colonised and, as a result of that history along with its unified geography and society, has a strong national identity and sense of national purpose among its senior officials.

D) Degree of smallness

One set of quantitative data that might suggest differences in extreme smallness of small states matter is the Corruption Perceptions Index.⁴⁹ Does the ranking of the Maldives (population 395,000) at 143rd out of 178 countries in the Index in contrast to the Seychelles (population 90,000) at 49th reflect a difference between a small state and one four times larger? Does the ranking of Dominica at 44th with a population of 72,000, Kiribati at 91st with 101,000 and Tonga at 101st with 105,000 suggest an inverse correlation of population size to institutional capacity to control corruption? Perhaps, but Samoa at 62nd with a population of 194,000 and Vanuatu at 73rd with 225,000 indicate such simple impressions are unlikely to hold. The quality of governance institutions is not dictated by smallness alone. Some forms of corruption, however, are particularly difficult to define in small societies where gift-giving is a strong tradition and politicians are expected to give money at social events.

E) Climate change

Climate change is a major challenge for some SIDS. It is not investigated here, but it is worth noting that in some small societies obtaining political public support may not be easy. In low-lying Kiribati, for example, the Tong brothers Anote and Harry stood against each other in the presidential campaign in July 2003: Anote won and as president did much to emphasise the need to adapt to climate change warning that Kiribati might disappear beneath the ocean. The defeated brother, Harry Tong, however, vigorously opposed him, telling a newspaper that the seas would never rise to a critical level in Kiribati and citing his religious beliefs: “God promised Noah there would not be another flood after the last one.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ 2010 Corruption Perception Index.

⁵⁰ *The New Zealand Herald*, October 2008.

6. PUBLIC SERVICE COMPLEXITIES

Smallness can be a limiting factor for public service. SIDS and other small countries are often portrayed as suffering weak governance—the product of size, the political economy and colonial legacy.

A) Diseconomies of scale

The smallest countries tend to have the biggest relative size of government due to diseconomies of scale in the provision of public goods. These diseconomies can undermine public services such as protection from invasion, infrastructure, public health, public education or tax collecting. They can also undermine exercising the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, such as repressing rebellion.

B) Patronage politics

'Personality trumps policy' nepotism and patronage politics flourish. Deep political fragmentation creates bitter divides (in some countries along ethno-linguistic lines), accompanied by widespread corruption. The 'village' nature of small states often creates extensive personalisation of politics. The rational-legal process of effective institutions impartially applying laws and processes is undermined in this context of SIDS/small states by some obvious potential constraints.

In a SIDS small society, the capacity and the political will to act against wrong-doing is undermined when every official is related to or well-acquainted with everyone on the island. This carries an implicit threat of unmanageable social violence if well-connected large groups in society mobilise in a small state with limited policing.

C) 'Democracy surfeit'

An excess ratio of politicians to voters means politicians in small states have the greatest difficulty resisting pressures for public spending. An example of a 'democracy surfeit' is Nauru where there is one Member of Parliament (MP) for every 500 people; in the United Kingdom, by comparison, the ratio averages around one MP for every 92,000 people.

In countries with small legislatures with few MPs, most or all government MPs become ministers. This is because, even in small states, cabinets often contain many ministerial posts in order to consolidate the loyalty of those MPs backing the government.

D) Capacity constraints

SIDS and other small states face a generalised lack of governing capacity from limited human capital and financial resources. Inevitably, technical capabilities are weak as a small number of people mean a limited range of talent, and that talented people cannot specialise but are called upon to fulfil many roles and undertake a wide variety of duties.

Significant problems in public service can result:

Over-extended personnel, small spare/reserve capacity, few specialists attracted or retained, inadequate compensation level, inappropriate and infrequent training, low turnover rate, small establishment, limited promotion and mobility, limited alternative employment, low morale and motivation, low job satisfaction, low productivity, low adaptability to changing conditions, shortage of management skills, low problem-solving capacity, high level of fear and frustration, absenteeism, weak decision making, continued systemic uncertainty, low level of innovativeness and entrepreneurship, excessive routine dependence, small size inhibiting the realization of rational-legal management systems.⁵¹

E) Challenges at the political-administrative interface

After independence, many SIDS public services moved away from traditional bureaucratic procedures to 'de-neutralise' public servants in an attempt to hasten change. Political advisers were put in place to provide alternative advice, but the lines between politics and service began to blur. Politicians felt that the bureaucracy was too powerful and independent, and not focused on political needs. Public resources became controlled by politics rather than public policy. Politicians began involving themselves in service, project management and senior appointments, frustrated by the psychology of the precursor colonial bureaucracy with its pronounced resistance to change and innovation and a slow adaptation to technological, information and socio-economic changes.

This undue political interference was due in part to the imprecise demarcation of political and administrative roles, but also to an unhealthy quest by some politicians for excessive administrative involvement or power. Costly and heavily bureaucratic structures of government were sometimes adopted: for example, prior to the restructuring of its government in 1997, Vanuatu had 34 ministries. The situation has improved since the late 1990s when, as a result of severe fiscal crises in most countries, there have been serious attempts to professionalise the public service, notably in the Cook Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu.

F) Effect of 'bureaupathology'

Many public services in SIDS still suffer from 'bureaupathology', or the condition of anxiety and insecurity due to alienation, limited promotion prospects, less-than-adequate pay and conditions of work, pessimism, sense of powerlessness, and the apathy of 'muted frustration' over the erosion of independence and professionalism with the blurring of roles between politics and bureaucracy.

⁵¹ 'Unavoidable Issues of Politics and Democracy in Small Island Developing Countries like Maldives' <http://maldivesreformwatch.tripod.com/id41.html>

New graduates can feel they 'know it all,' wanting to be at the top without learning procedures and systems. Within departments, lines of authority and discipline may collapse, due to frequent changes in leadership, lack of direction on priorities, and an increasing lack of accountability and transparency in the public service system. As service delivery has been adversely affected, qualities such as honesty, trust, dedication and the ethics of public service are no longer upheld.

G) Policy constraints

Policy development can be difficult to achieve in the face of several factors: short-term concerns on close-knit communities; the direct connection of the leadership to the affected population; the lack of the confidentiality needed to take difficult or unpopular decisions; and the lack of data and skills to devise evidence-based policy.

H) Aid curse

Extreme smallness may generate the 'aid curse.' For example, Nauru is the country with the biggest ratio of aid to GDP, at 116 percent.⁵² In Nauru, aid dependency risks replacing phosphate as a source of a long-term 'resource curse,' since states funded by aid rather than taxation are less accountable to their citizens and under less pressure to maintain legitimacy. They are therefore less likely to invest in effective public institutions.⁵³ In the Pacific nine out of the eleven countries sit above the average aid to gross national income ratio of 10% for low-income economies. In fact, eight Pacific countries are now among the top 20 most aid dependent nations in the world, double the number compared to ten years ago.⁵⁴

I) Vested interests

Small economies dominated by government can foster 'monopoly capture' resulting in corrupt politics. According to Reddy (2008), wealth in the Pacific is often accumulated through political influence securing monopoly rents, with close-knit relations between political and private sector leadership in small societies amounting to 'capture' by vested interests leading to maintenance of protective tariffs and barriers to entry.⁵⁵ Competition policy is almost impossible in such small economies, and operating on such small scale local firms would struggle to find any competitive advantage against large foreign companies. Equally, with the government dominating the economy, the direct reach of the political elite over the population is much greater than in larger countries where the

state has a less all-encompassing role. The elites in very small states are consequently also very small. The elite in Kiribati was estimated in the mid-1990s to constitute around 700 people,⁵⁶ and the July 2003 presidential election in Kiribati was a contest between two brothers—so the political and economic elites are extremely inter-linked where these do not represent ethnic divides.

J) International obligations

Challenges also exist to implement obligations to the international community, such as to comply with United Nations obligations such as the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, ratify complex treaties and fulfil all the subsequent reporting and enforcement requirements.⁵⁷

K) Impersonality of public service

Public service is shaped by the 'managed intimacy' of 'enforced propinquity' of society in small states. This physical proximity, kinship and similarity between people affects the impersonality of the bureaucracy without which a modern public service of strong adherence to rules is unlikely, or more difficult to achieve—even more so where society is ethno-linguistically diverse. The rational-legal, impersonal and objective Weberian model of public service, with its focus on individual merit, neutrality and the rights of the individual, therefore may not be fully applicable in smaller developing states and least applicable in the smallest nations. For instance, the Constitution of Kiribati upholds the rights and freedoms of the individual, subject to "limitations designed to ensure that the enjoyment of the said rights and freedoms by any individual does not prejudice the rights and freedoms of others or the public interest."⁵⁸

Ethno-linguistic homogeneity may make governance simpler, yet Singapore is the prime example of a small state overcoming the challenges of diversity to be highly successful in all indicators of development. Nation-building efforts were a key pillar of the national strategy after independence in 1965, with the government adopting measures to promote a shared sense of national identity and a harmonious society that was collectively working to achieve prosperity for Singapore as a whole. As the past was wrought with ethnic tensions and corruption, Singapore's founding fathers (there were no women in top posts) elevated the concepts of a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious society governed through meritocracy as the key founding principles essential for Singapore's economic success and remain important pillars of the Singaporean identity today.

⁵² OECD data 2009, for 2007: the average for all developing countries is 0.9 percent.

⁵³ M. Everest-Phillips (2011), 'Tax, Governance and Development,' *Discussion Paper 11*, UNDP Secretariat.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Pryke (2013), 'Rising aid dependency in the Pacific,' *Development Policy Centre's devpolicyblog website*, 17 September 2013. <http://devpolicy.org/rising-aid-dependency-in-the-pacific-20130917/>

⁵⁵ Reddy, M. 2008. *Governance Issues in the Pacific Island Countries*, in: Briguglio, L. et al. 2008. *Small States and the Pillars of Economic Resilience*. Malta and Commonwealth Secretariat, pp.248- 253.

⁵⁶ MacDonald, B. 1996. *Governance and political process in Kiribati*: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University

⁵⁷ P.S. Chasek (2009), 'Mind the Gap: Confronting the MEA Implementation Gap in the Pacific Island Countries,' paper submitted to the International Studies Association 50th Convention New York, NY, 15-18 February 2009.

⁵⁸ Ch.2, Article 3, of Constitution (Amendment) Act 1995.

7. ISLANDNESS

What makes SIDS different, of course, is clearly geography. This may foster a collectivist ideal of community solidarity, and dependence on both imports and exports requires staying internationally competitive by promoting export-led growth.⁵⁹ Clarifying the link between smallness, 'islandness' and development outcomes has proved problematic.⁶⁰ 'Islandness' or the concept of 'insularity' implies isolation and narrow mindedness, but also the self-sufficiency and strong 'social capital' that might account for the higher average standard of living in many small and peripheral island societies.

Yet many small islands are deeply divided. The Antiguan experience between 1967 and 1981 was that "Antiguan was pitted against Antiguan, household against household, resulting in an extraordinary degree of polarisation."⁶¹ Division can be reflected in coups d'état or de facto political hegemony by a particular ethnic group. In such situations the construction of 'social capital' and 'good governance' may be difficult but not impossible, as Mauritius and Barbados illustrate. Overall it appears that "'islandness' does appear to be negatively related to the economic performance of small states but ... its impact is considerably weaker than is implied in much of the theoretical literature."⁶²

Pacific islands with long-standing indigenous and consensual cultures and traditions have more consensus politics than in the Caribbean, but this may in part reflect that dispersed geography also promotes consensual politics.⁶³ But smallness can also create an over-concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister, along with a surfeit of ministerial and other government posts: the former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Sir Kamuta Latasi, has suggested that small states like Tuvalu could not afford both a Governor-General and a Prime Minister, and could sensibly save money by having a President.⁶⁴ By contrast, the 14th Conference of Presidents and Governors-General of the

Caribbean Community held in Jamaica in 2011 recognised the expanding and evolving role of the Presidents and Governors-General, so that: "while maintaining neutrality, by displaying a high level of integrity, transformational and visionary leadership, Heads of State can play critical roles in fostering national unity, maintaining stability, fostering political maturing, and having an impact on nation-building."⁶⁵

The quality of leadership may be particularly important where it is relatively easier for one determined individual to dominate politics—Lee Kuan Yew's long central role in Singapore is an obvious example; Malietoa Tanumafili II is credited with steering Samoa to independence in 1962 and then as head of state keeping the country politically stable. The Pacific endorsed the Forum Principles of Good Leadership⁶⁶ to develop a shared understanding between leaders and the people on their roles and responsibilities through developing leadership codes in the region but progress has been slow and limited except for Tuvalu, which adopted a leadership code in 2007, though it has yet to be endorsed. Kiribati's attempt to enact a proposed leadership code failed to gain the mandatory two thirds majority support of Parliament.

Vulnerabilities to economic and natural shocks are very much intertwined in many SIDS, which tend to be more vulnerable to them than both other developing countries: for instance, in the Caribbean the top five export commodities account for between 70 percent and 96 percent of the region's exports. A study published by the United Nation University on economic vulnerability and resilience indicates that four of the top ten most economically vulnerable countries in the world are Pacific SIDS.⁶⁷ Furthermore, a recent World Bank report highlights that, in relative terms, the Pacific Island countries are the most affected by natural disasters in the world.⁶⁸

59 P. Selwyn (1980), 'Smallness and Islandness,' *World development*, 8(12): 945-951.
60 E. Dommen and P. Hein (eds.) (1985), *States, microstates and islands*. Beckenham, England: Croom Helm Ltd; R.T. Shand (1980), 'Island smallness: some definitions and implications,' in R.T. Shand (ed), *The Island States of the Pacific and Indian Oceans: Anatomy of Development*, Canberra: Australian National University, pp. 3-20.
61 T. Thomdike (1987), 'Antigua and Barbuda,' in Clarke and Payne (eds), *Politics, Security and Development in Small States*, London: Allen and Unwin, p.104.
62 R. Read (2001), 'Growth, Economic Development and Structural Transition in Small Vulnerable States,' *WIDER Discussion Paper No. 2001/59*, p.22.
63 D. Anckar (2000), 'Westminster Democracy: A Comparison of Small Island States Varieties in the Pacific and the Caribbean,' *Pacific Studies*, 23(3): 203-222.
64 Comment addressing Commonwealth/PIFS Conference: *Commonwealth Pacific Regional Consultation on Strengthening Democratic Institutions in the Pacific* Brisbane 29 February 2012. On the costs of government jobs in Tuvalu, some created to shore up government majorities, see The Loneliness of the Pro-Government Backbencher and the Precariousness of Simple Majority Rule in Tuvalu, p.9. On the debate in Tuvalu since 1977 on the Governor-General see: http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/library/online/texts/Pacific_archive/Tuvalu/Proposed%20Review%20of%20the%20Constitution%20of%20Tuvalu,%20A%20report%20on%20the%20Issues,%20November%202024,%201998.PDF

65 Communiqué of the 14th Conference of Presidents and Governors-General of the Caribbean Community: Jamaica, November 2011.
66 To articulate regional principles of good governance and democratic processes contained in the 2000 Biketawa Declaration, the Forum Economic Action Plan Eight Principles of Good Governance and the 1997 Aitutaki Declaration.
67 L. Briguglio, G. Cordina, N. Farrugia and S. Vella (2008), 'Economic Vulnerability and Resilience: Concepts and Measurements,' *UN-WIDER Research Paper No. 2008/55*, Helsinki, Finland: UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER).
68 A.K. Jha and Z. Stanton-Geddes (Eds.) (2013), *Strong, Safe and Resilient – A Strategic Policy Guide for Disaster Risk Management in the East Asia and the Pacific*, Washington D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

8. SIZE IS NOT DESTINY

SIDS and other small countries may be more subject to extremes, good or bad, in their governance characteristics. A comprehensive review of the literature by the WTO secretariat in 2002 observed:

Conclusions in the empirical literature tend to be somewhat contradictory and inconclusive on a number of important points” not least because “each small economy is unique”. Characteristics such as “higher GDP volatility, greater openness to trade, higher per capita international aid and more concentrated production and export structures” were duly noted. However, it was added that “small states do not perform badly in terms of GDP levels, growth rates, social, health and educational indicators, cohesion variables and greater flexibility in the decision-making process.⁶⁹

Size therefore is not destiny. This can best be seen in the example of Tuvalu, another Pacific small island state of similar size of population to Nauru yet acclaimed as the ‘most successful government in the Pacific’.⁷⁰ Tuvalu since its independence in 1978 has prospered under good leadership, generally cautious management of its public finances and increasingly effective public administration.⁷¹ As a result over the last decade Tuvalu has managed to achieve an annual average growth in GDP of 3 percent or more; and succeeded in converting growth into poverty reduction.⁷²

The comparison of Tuvalu and Nauru suggests that ‘micro-governance’ has potentially both effective and ineffectual characteristics. The political economy of Nauru demonstrates that smallness does not predetermine poor ‘micro-governance’. Their size however does make SIDS more vulnerable to limitations of skills, capacities and weak institutions. Nauru also demonstrates that small states can have surprisingly complex governance institutions with strong pride in their political traditions. Size therefore is not destiny. This conference aims to put UNDP at the centre of international efforts promoting better public service in small states.

⁶⁹ WT/COMTD/SE/W/4, 23 July 2002.

⁷⁰ H. Hughes and S. Gosarevski (2004), ‘Does Size Matter? Tuvalu and Nauru Compared’, *Policy* 20(2): 16–20.

⁷¹ M. Goldsmith (2005), ‘Theories of governance and Pacific microstates: The cautionary tale of Tuvalu’, *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint* 46: 105–114. Tuvalu learnt too from its early mistakes: Soon after independence the Prime minister of Tuvalu, for example, was persuaded in 1979 to invest the country’s entire national reserve fund in semi-desert real estate in Texas called ‘Green Valley Acres’.

⁷² R. Laking (2010), *State performance and capacity in the Pacific*, ADB.

9. SIZE, ‘ISLANDNESS’ AND COMPLEXITY

Research is increasingly drawing links between complexity and the nature of development: “... weak governance, poverty, poor access to basic services such as education and health, a lack of social cohesion, among others—cannot be addressed in isolation from one another. They require an integrated and multi-sectoral approach.”⁷³ A challenge of development, then, is grasping the relationship and interplay between seemingly diverse social and public issues, and creating strategic policies to deal with them that are adaptive yet sustainable.

The challenges for SIDS are indeed complex and many.⁷⁴ Among other issues, they include: climate change, health, trade, science and technology, sustainable capacity development and education for sustainable development, knowledge management and information for decision-making, and culture. The struggle of many states to implement the *Barbados Programme of Action* (BPOA)⁷⁵ suggests that even in smaller country contexts, coping with complexity proves difficult.



Life for students is set to change with the arrival of high-speed broadband internet in Tonga.

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⁷³ United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) (2013), ‘Reducing the impact of urban violence’, *Human Security at the United Nations Newsletter* Issue 9, UN OCHA.

⁷⁴ The Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (UN Doc A/CONF.207/11) identifies 20 actionable areas of concern for SIDS, requiring political and administrative leadership towards its realisation.

⁷⁵ *The Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States* (UN Doc A/CONF.167/9) was the outcome of The Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of SIDS, 1994.

10. COMPLEX CONCLUSIONS?

Such experiences should be kept in mind more broadly as the level of complexity undoubtedly increases in larger countries. Decision-makers in SIDS, and larger developing countries alike, must therefore consider and commit to appropriate strategies to address complex and cross-cutting issues in order to ensure sustained economic growth and human development.

One way to tackle the challenge of complexity is complex adaptive thinking, which asks “not how to solve problems, but how to navigate them and adapt to them.”⁷⁶ In the field of development studies, there is a shift towards a complexity-aware approach that favours adaptation as “the way to deal with problems in unpredictable, complex systems. Adaptation works by making small changes, observing the results, and then adjusting.”⁷⁷ This appears contrary to the ‘planning approach’ traditionally used in development to design complicated programmes and track implementation milestones.

In the face of accelerating change and complexity, it is important for policymakers and foreign aid or technical cooperation programmes to avoid normative solutions. Prescriptive approaches to development and administrative or public sector reform are likely to fail in today’s organic contexts. Decision makers and donor agencies are encouraged to apply adaptive thinking and complexity-aware approaches in the policy-making process, as well as in the implementation of programmes of action. The links between emerging thinking about development through the complexity, the importance of political economy issues underlying that complexity, and how applying these insights might help SIDS navigate complex challenges. If so, how can an international organisation like UNDP embrace the principles of complexity theory by escaping the linear mind-set of log-frames, and genuinely embrace risk but do it professionally and sensibly?

This requires considering whether public service in SIDS including in delivery, organisational management, institutional development and politico-administrative relations, if generally based on neo-Weberian principles of de-politicisation, neutrality, professionalism, continuity and anonymity as the founding values and goals of a rational-bureaucratic public administration are, as Murray (1981, 1985) observed, ‘scale neutral’. Smallness and insularity can also mean adapting the administrative and institutional mechanisms of larger countries to small states, as Baker (1992) described, “trying always to fill

in the gaps of the conventional model, paste over the cracks, and generally pretend that Antigua is really Madagascar.” Neo-Weberian narratives often treat smallness as a difficulty, such as in promoting professionalism, specialisation and performance management in the civil service.

So what really works? Where challenges exist, GCPSE aims to find practical solutions that countries can apply on their own, can apply with UNDP help, or can apply via other international help with UNDP support.

In every field of development better political economy analysis is needed to answer key questions such as: What is the interplay of formal and informal institutions? Are outside interventions working with or against the grain? Do institutions limit the space for agency? How are institutions changing in response to the interests and material incentives of key stakeholders? How are networks of individual and group interests and coalitions changing the availability of rents, and how are rent-seekers responding?

SIDS will require support in developing capacities to access the skills, knowledge, resources and funding required for more adaptive and holistic policies of sustainable development. The resulting ‘networked governance’, by promoting horizontal rather than vertical approaches to decision-making, is potentially the first step towards ‘whole-of-government’ approaches at every level of governance.

In SIDS, pervasive interpersonal relations, and difficulty in attaining anonymity in public affairs and a strict dichotomy between ‘state’ and ‘society’, mediated by efficient and impersonal institutions is practically non-existent in small states where formal institutions coexist with informal networks and the distinction between public and private realms of administrative behaviour remain intertwined. ‘Smallness’ could serve as potential ‘bottom-up’ public administration. Greater access to decision makers helps mobilise public opinion and oversight and the presentation of more efficient services.

⁷⁶ B. Ramalingam (2013), ‘Book launch—Aid on the Edge of Chaos: rethinking international cooperation in a complex world’, presented at Overseas Development Institute, 6 November.

⁷⁷ O. Barder (2012), ‘Complexity, adaptation, and results’, blogpost from *Centre for Global Development website*, 7 September.

Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, the long-serving Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, has pointed to the centrality of a 'compelling narrative' in engendering effective development, particularly so in the SIDS context of limited resources. It is worth citing him at length on this point:

In politics, leadership is an intellectual, creative, and people centred activity. Without a compelling narrative about our condition and the way forward for the people, the leader would not only mark time, but regress into a host of "ad hoc" interventions of little or no positive consequence. Inertia would inevitably set in; defensiveness and backwardness would prevail. Trivia and side-shows would preoccupy the leader's agenda. A debilitating malaise of "learned helplessness" would set in. Public administration would be reduced to the routinisation of stasis without any developmental thrust; and the very routinisation process itself would become mired in lethargy, petty corruption, and even mere malicious compliance.⁷⁸

"The 'systems' approach of complexity science, not just respect for complexity, can offer significant insights on institutions."

⁷⁸ R.E. Gonsalves, (2012), 'Political Leadership, National Vision and the Political Will to Foster Effective Public Administration,' paper presented to the Regional Preparatory Consultation on Governance and Development in the Smallest of Small Island States, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, June 2012, p. 13-14.

Complexity thinking should facilitate the clear and forward-thinking agenda for development needed for effective leadership in these SIDS:

The 'compelling narrative' of the political leadership in these Caribbean states ought to be comprised of: a clearly articulated people-centered vision of sustainable development, a political philosophy of socio-democracy applied to the national Caribbean conditions; a socio-cultural framework of the legitimacy of our Caribbean civilization and its trajectory for further advancement and ennoblement; an economic framework in quest of building a modern, many-sided competitive post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional and global; a package of relevant public policies and practical programmes derived therefrom for overall socio-economic development, enhanced good governance and citizen security, a practical commitment to deepening regional integration; a foreign policy which focuses on international solidarity for the people's benefit but lodged within the framework of the principled details of the charter of the United Nations; and an effective system of public management (administration) to implement this overarching yet specific, 'compelling narrative.'⁷⁹

A complexity approach could help translate such a vision into action, boost the ability of SIDS to manage the complex dynamics of globalisation and internal processes of change. Where the answer to 'complicated' problems has all too often been to impose the technocratic 'certainty' of Log-frame Linear Logic (LLL), 'Complexity' theory and thinking recognises that 'real life' is much more – er – well yes, complex. It offers a 'systems' approach that avoids the trap of LLL, and can apply political economy analysis to the international development discourse. But thinking and working politically in development, working 'with the grain' of existing institutions without imposing external norms and expectations, still eludes most development practice.

Smallness and/or 'islandness' creates specific characteristics of the state that may simplify coordination across government. However, the problems that a public service faces are often different but no less complex – than in other contexts. The 'systems' approach of complexity science, not just respect for complexity, can offer significant insights on institutions. It can enable building resilience by tackling 'risk dumping' and inequality, as well as by 'sowing diversity' in the approaches to problems. The evidence shows there are no simple answers in the nonlinear nature of development. A variety of possible factors are involved in applying ideas from complexity theory to reforming public service and tackling related development problems. Better planning and foresight capabilities, rooted in effective political economy analysis, may be needed. But much remains to be resolved by further research and policy development on how best to make public service 'fit for purpose' in all small states, but especially SIDS.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 14-15.

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