

SPECIAL SECTION: Small States and the ‘Corona Crisis’

Guest Editorial

Small States and the Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: While the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global problem, small states have faced specific challenges related to their size. The economies of small states tend to be particularly dependent on open borders and the free movement of people: either in the form of tourists or because of mobile workers. The crisis disrupted established patterns in both of these spheres. At the same time, small states also benefitted from advantages. Small size tends to be related to higher social cohesion, flexible crisis management and easier tracking of infection chains. Despite the diversity of small states, their situation in the ‘Corona crisis’ is expected to differ from that of larger states. The aim of the section is to explore the small state governance of COVID-19. The articles focus on the challenges and opportunities faced by small states. The authors raise questions about the sustainability of economies with strong reliance on certain sectors, and emphasize the importance of diversification and digitalisation.

Keywords: borders, COVID-19, governance, interdependence, small states

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Introduction

Within a few months of its discovery in December 2019, the SARS-COV-2 virus, and the disease that it unleashed (COVID-19), became the dominant topic of conversation around the world. Political discourse within and between the states throughout 2020 and into 2021 has circled heavily around the questions of, first, how to ‘flatten the curve’; and, more recently, how to reduce the transmission of viral variants and accelerate the rate of vaccination. The challenge throughout has been on how to contain or manage the ‘Corona crisis’.

This context raises many questions of particular relevance to small states. For instance, to what extent can small states benefit from the greater flexibility and speed that come with small institutions, extensive relational networks and proximity of policy makers to citizens? Is it easier to trace and contain infections in small states? To what extent can small state governments benefit from high levels of trust and solidarity within their societies? How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the economic fortunes of small states? Can small states afford to close their borders to contain the virus? And so on.

As we write, another global ‘experiment’ is taking place. This is the mass vaccination effort where governance, policy efficacy, state structures, political, religious and ideological factors and societal attitudes are likely to determine the uptakes and outcomes of inoculations of populations. Various small states have managed to inoculate large proportions of their populations: Israel, with a population of 9 million, leads the world at the time of writing in terms of administered doses of vaccine per population (Law, 2021). Small states are being tested: access to the vaccines, planning and implementing of the vaccination, as well as resistance and antivax stances ... such and similar factors in small states that may differ from larger states.

The international discussion on the challenges and impact of the new Coronavirus has been extensive; yet, there has been little analysis on these issues from the perspective of state size. Nevertheless, we can expect that the situation of small states in the crisis differs in some significant respects from that of the larger states and deserves special attention. To shed light on these issues and to advance the knowledge on small states and the pandemic, a call for articles was launched by the *Small States and Territories Journal* in April 2020. The call attracted broad interest and six of the proposed abstracts are now published as articles in this special section of the Journal. The articles draw attention to the challenges and opportunities faced by small states during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Small states and COVID-19

Various factors have made the COVID-19 pandemic challenging for any country to manage: its sheer global scale, the time pressure, different kinds of uncertainties involved, the lack of knowledge, and the long duration, to name a few. From the policy perspective, the pandemic has been a ‘wicked’ problem: multi-faceted, spanning sectoral and national borders, constantly evolving and characterised by lack of consensus over its nature and the proper solutions (Head, 2008). Despite an internationally shared catalogue of policy measures to curb the pandemic, the responses of national governments have varied considerably: in terms of the specific policy mix, stringency of different measures, as well as the sequence and timing of mitigation measures (Capano et al., 2021). In a context where COVID-19 related policy choices have been initially shaped by domestic institutional structures, state traditions and administrative cultures (e.g. Kuhlmann et al., 2021), small states can be expected to have special constraints and opportunities related to their size and capacities.

Deriving from their limited scale, small states tend to operate mostly as rule takers in the global arena, with limited capabilities, contingent on the surrounding institutional environment, but with a chance to overcome the limits of small scale by relying on flexible domestic institutions (Sarapuu et al., 2021). There are largely two types of strategies small states can apply to overcome such vulnerabilities and to govern (the potential) crisis: foreign policy related and domestic (*ibid.*). In foreign and security policy, small states seek political and economic ‘shelter’ to prevent crises and secure assistance in crisis situations (Thorhallsson,

2018). Domestically, small states cope with the challenges of scale and reduce their vulnerability by reliance on prioritisation, multi-functionalism, informal communication and personal leadership in policy-making and implementation. The capacity to improvise, to let go of the established procedures, to communicate and collaborate over organisational borders, and to solve problems flexibly based on interpersonal trust, leads small states towards domestic structures that are more resilient towards crises (Sarapu et al., 2021).

Thus, there are a number of factors likely to shape the pandemic-related policy choices in small states. First, small states are economically and politically more dependent on the international arena than larger states. Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) outline three dilemmas that characterise the everyday reality of small state politics: finding the balance between national and international focus, maintaining the plurality of opinions, and keeping national autonomy in the face of international interdependence. Two of the daily political dilemmas of small states relate to the surrounding international context. They are likely to face some common international challenges, also in the context of the pandemic. For example, the first reaction of larger European states to the pandemic was characterised as ‘corona-nationalistic’: limited to the national perspective and not seeking to mobilise trans-European coordination and collaboration (Bouckaert et al., 2020; Kuhlmann et al., 2021). Such a reaction would be much less affordable for small states. Also, small states were more likely to find it more difficult to promptly acquire protective and testing equipment or vaccines from the international market. At the same time, the substantial differences between small states have to be kept in mind. For example, some small island states and territories could potentially isolate their populations and shut their borders fairly effectively.¹ In contrast, other small states with land-borders are economically highly dependent on an immigrant workforce coming from the surrounding states and struggle under the tendency of larger states to close their borders.

Second, beyond international and geographical factors placing constraints on policy choices, there are also differences in the domestic factors: the governance, socio-legal traditions and political and socioeconomic contexts that impact upon the policy mixture between repressive and support measures adopted. For example, due to the absence of economies of scale (Jugl 2018), there are typically limits to the number and local availability of health specialists (e.g. virologists and epidemiologists) and the necessary competence may not be available within public administrations. Moreover, issues pertaining to administrative effectiveness or laxity, bureaucratic frames and social traditions pertaining to nepotism and corruption are relevant. These factors could affect measures to contain the virus, to treat and cure those infected, as well as to inoculate the population.

COVID-19 has influenced the nature of governing and democracy globally and has raised questions on the resilience of democracy. Under the condition of the pandemic, public has often been more ready to give up civil liberties, severe restrictions have been introduced in public spaces and governments have expanded their grip in private spaces (Parry et al., 2020). In the small state context, again, special issues may arise. For example, even general information on those ‘testing positive’ can seriously jeopardise privacy and data protection safeguards. Furthermore, the same core social trait that is expected to make small state governing more responsive and accountable – the closeness of decision-makers to the people – may lead to personality politics, patron-client relationships and a high impact of interest groups on policy-making (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018).

¹ As at February 22, 2021, six small island states and six small island territories were reported as Coronavirus-free. (Hubbard, 2021).

In recognition of the distinctive characteristics of small states, WHO experts have asked how small countries cope with COVID-19 and how can they improve their resilience and strengthen their capacity (WHO, 2020).² According to a study on the Commonwealth Small States (CWSS) small states have been successful at keeping COVID-19 at bay, with low infection rates (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2021). The 32 small states in focus of this study formed less than 0.2 per cent of the known 58 million cases globally. Five CWSS (Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu) had managed to keep the virus out completely. However, the measures used to achieve these health successes – lockdown restrictions and border closures – had a huge economic impact and led to great losses in gross domestic product (GDP), employment and trade. Seven ways forward for CWSS are proposed, given the different ways that COVID-19 is affecting small states depending on their economic structures, including their relative dependence on trading goods or services, their inherent characteristics *qua* small states and unique vulnerabilities:

- (a) Strengthening health care systems: CWSS are all net importers of COVID-19- related medical supplies and equipment;
- (b) Investing in digitisation and bridging the digital divide ;
- (c) Reducing trade costs and facilitating trade: several small states confront excessive trade costs owing to their geographic location and remoteness;
- (d) Strengthening and transforming productive capacity by broadening the base and reducing the dependence of many CWSS on a narrow range of primary sectors;
- (e) Reviving domestic and international tourism for tourism-dependent small states which are required to adjust their business models to undertake a staged, sequential and gradual reopening of the sector;
- (f) Building resilience to climate change and natural disasters; and
- (g) Harnessing the ‘Commonwealth advantage’, i.e. making the best use of the dense trade networks and lower trade barriers in the Commonwealth.

Cuschieri et al. (2020) suggest that the absence of land borders and small population size have played to the advantage of small island states. Policies regarding state border control regimes have become vital aspects of managing the pandemic. The assumption that small states – and particularly small island states – have an advantage in controlling infectious diseases due to their small populations and geographical size seemed confirmed during the first wave of COVID-19 (March-June 2020). Malta, in particular, was perceived as having managed the crisis well. However, a crucial containment measure to constrain the spread of the virus – restricting freedom of movement within territories and those entering the territories of states – became a major trade-off choice for all states, but even more so for small states. For example, whilst almost all small states, respecting the right of citizens to abode, endeavoured to bring back their stranded citizens home with chartered flights to provide safe return during the first wave, some small states refused the right of entry even to their own citizens, mostly students studying abroad (e.g. Samoa, The Guardian 13/02/2020).

² A panel of experts gathered on 2 September 2020 for a webinar organized at the University of Malta (UM) by the WHO Collaborating Centre on Health Systems and Policies in Small States, which provides support to the WHO Small Countries Initiative with input from UM’s Islands and Small States Institute (ISSI).

One has to be cautious with reaching any preliminary conclusions on the effectiveness of different instruments used for curbing of the viral spread. And the evidence gathered so far pertains mostly to the management of the first wave. Also, statistical data on the infection rates has to be approached with care because, in the beginning, very few tests were made and we do not know how comparable is the data being collected at national level. In any case, conclusions about the advantages and disadvantages pertaining to or attributed to the small size of the states are premature before the conclusion of the pandemic. Especially more so as the challenges still relate to the measures of the containment of the spread of the virus and its new variants, as well as the management and policies pertaining to the vaccination of populations. The combination of vaccination, policies regarding spatial distancing and various health protocols in the different stages of opening the countries after the lockdown are proving to be game-changers in containing the spread of the virus and minimising deaths. The next major challenge pertains to how small states manage to eradicate the virus by swiftly, fairly and effectively vaccinating their populations and properly preparing their health systems to deal with similar or other health hazards and other emergencies in what is proving to be a global risk society (Tooze, 2000; Beck & Williams, 2004).

The articles in the section

Olafsson (2021) opens the special section with a study on how information concerning COVID-19 was disseminated in a situation where states needed to make and justify drastic decisions at great speed and secure public cooperation and compliance. His study of Iceland shows that dissemination patterns do indeed differ from those in larger states, like the UK, in that the public appears to have greater trust in the traditional media. He argues that the size of the state may have a bearing on trust and communication within such states.

Hansson and Stefansdottir (2021) examine cooperation between states in the case of Europe's Nordic small states: Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. This group of states is usually perceived as sharing common values, such as a strong attachment to solidarity, socio-economic equality, transparency and the rule of law, and pursues cooperation within the Nordic Council (NORDEFECO). The ambitious current vision for the Nordic region is for it to become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. However, Hansson and Stefansdottir find that, when the Covid-19 crisis erupted, cooperation did not materialise. Instead, the countries started to close borders unilaterally with minimal prior coordination or communication, thus raising questions about the limits of solidarity.

Högenauer (2021) observes a similar phenomenon in the case of Luxembourg and the "Greater Region": the surrounding French, German and Belgian border regions. Luxembourg took a rare decision not to close its borders, but faced unilateral restrictions of cross-border movements by neighbouring states. The paper argues that Luxembourg's choice is a function of both its size and economic policy, which, in the context of EU integration, has led to strong interdependencies and social networks within the cross-border region. This argument is based on an analysis of the pre-COVID-19 situation in Luxembourg and shows how local newspaper articles can open a window to understand how the disruption caused by the pandemic reconfigured Luxembourg's borders with its three adjoining states of Belgium, France and Germany.

Wood (2021) looks at Iceland's macroeconomic policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. He highlights the challenges of country's smallness, as evidenced by trade openness and economic specialisation. The lack of local manufacturing forced the government of Iceland to procure medical supplies, equipment and pharmaceuticals from the international market at a

time when demand exceeded supply. In addition, Iceland's reliance on tourism resulted in massive economic loss when other countries increasingly turned to restrict travel and close borders. However, the country's smallness is argued to have facilitated the creation of targeted welfare and economic rescue packages and the Icelandic Central Bank succeeded in stabilizing the value of the national currency. In choosing its policy responses, the Icelandic government also benefitted from the relative wealth of the country.

Briffa and Agius (2021) analyse another example of a relatively wealthy island state, Malta. They find that Malta benefitted from a fiscal cushion that allowed the government to enact critical recovery measures. Malta also relied on some other small state advantages, such as institutional coherence, agile decision-making and high social capital inducing public compliance. However, while these advantages facilitated Malta's effective containment of the virus during the first wave, a poorer handling of the second wave highlighted the importance of coherent policy-making for small states to nurture resilience. The paper also stresses the significance of diversification, as Malta's diversified and non-tourism dependent economy allowed some sectors to remain buoyant.

Connell and Taulealo (2021), in contrast, illustrate the effects of an overreliance on tourism in the case of the Pacific island states of Vanuatu and Samoa. In these states, tourism is an important source of employment. Both states largely managed to avoid the pandemic, but they could not escape its dire economic effects: as other countries closed their borders and restricted travel, COVID-19 brought about the demise of international tourism in much of the island Pacific. The authors argue that the losses in employment and income have affected women, markets, car hire, taxis and the urban informal sector particularly strongly. The authors thus recommend a serious consideration of wider economic diversification.

Finally, Rojer (2021) looks at the Dutch Caribbean subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) of Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. These islands are also over-reliant on tourism, and turned to the Government of the Kingdom of Netherlands for financial support to deal with the crisis. However, this led to pressures to reform the economy and cut spending. As a result, the crisis highlighted how the political and economic 'shelter' provided by larger nations (Thorhallsson, 2018) can transform into less popular interventions in times of crisis. The author appeals for the digital transformation of public services and the promotion of virtual business services to circumvent the crisis.

The findings of the special section

Three main themes arise from the articles in the special section. First, several contributions pay attention to the institutions of small states and suggest that it is easier for their governments to stay on top of infection chains, coordinate responses and appeal to their citizens for solidarity, cooperation and compliance. The exact choices depend on the specific political, cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Policies and attitudes may well shift quickly in volatile situations, as the pandemic drags on and citizens and societies start suffering from 'pandemic fatigue'. Possible special characteristics of institutional structures in small states require that we address such matters in academic research and policy analysis, and seek to understand their impact on managing the pandemic.

Secondly, articles in the special section analyse to what extent and in what ways different types of small states depend on open borders, how they managed their border flows, and how they perceived, and were impacted by, the policies of other states. As a common theme, the pandemic highlights the fact that small states are particularly dependent on open

borders and the free movement of people. These interdependencies with other states manifest themselves in different ways for states with land borders as against island states. The economies of small states with land borders are often dependent on the ability of commuters to move across borders on a daily basis, as, for instance, in the cases of Andorra, Liechtenstein and Luxembourg. Island economies, on the other hand, tend to (over)rely on tourism as a source of economic growth and employment. Thus, one type of small state is concerned with the ability of its essential employees to access their workplace, for example in the healthcare sector; whereas the other type of small state may boast plenty of workers, but the restrictions on international travel forcibly shut down its tourism and hospitality sectors.

Thirdly, the special section looks at economic responses to the pandemic. Several articles analyse the economic and societal challenges that arose from the collapse of the tourist sector during the COVID-19 crisis and the response of small states with different levels of resources and pools of economic and fiscal resilience. In general, the findings suggest that small states with a certain level of economic development and some economic diversity found it easier to weather the crisis. In contrast, states that relied heavily on (invariably international) tourism were in a particularly vulnerable situation, because this sector was hard hit by travel restrictions. It is not clear how long the travel restrictions will last, but it looks like we are heading into a second year with almost no long-distance tourism. In addition, it is not clear whether tourism will immediately resume once the crisis comes under control, or whether it will take several years for people to allay fears and resume their old habits. These are major challenges for small states, particularly those dependent on tourism and services, which may generate additional pressures to prematurely ‘open up’ their economies, therefore exposing their populations to infections before inoculating them. Prematurely opening the economy and allowing tourists may loosen preventative measures, resulting in further economic hardship in the longer-term. Moreover, there are immediate challenges facing small states regarding the policy-frame for stimulating economic growth and addressing the rise in inequality and other negative socio-economic effects on the poor and most vulnerable during the pandemic. In particular, investments in technology and digitalisation are perceived as the way forward for small states, as they allow them to overcome some of the limits to their capacity, while also providing an opportunity for much-needed economic diversification.

Conclusion

The pandemic rages on: attempting to draw any overall or final conclusions would be premature at this point. We have already seen how the outcomes of the handling of the first wave differ from those of the second or third wave. Several governments priding themselves for good handling of the first wave are today facing much greater challenges than before. At the time of writing, we are at a stage of uncertainty as to whether the emergence of new variants may undermine the vaccination efforts and the hope for some kind of normalcy to return. In many ways, it is a policy and implementation race against time.

The contributions to this special issue show that small states were affected differently by the crisis, and this is not likely to change. On the one hand, the need to restrict the movement of people to limit the spread of the virus had a particularly strong impact on small states. The economies of small states tend to be highly dependent on foreigners: whether in the guise of tourists (as in the case of small island states) or cross-border workers (as in the case of land-locked states). For many of them, the nationalist reflexes triggered by the crisis amounted to a removal of the shelter that is normally provided by larger neighbours, traditional alliances or

international organisations. Even well-established, highly institutionalised organizations with broad policy remits – like the European Union – were unable to coordinate a common approach.

On the other hand, small states are diverse. It is far easier for island states to control the movement of people (even if it comes at an economic price) than for small states with land borders. Nevertheless, small states had the overall advantage of greater social cohesion and solidarity in the crisis. Also, their communication on crisis measures was more coherent, compared to the relative chaos of some larger states, where not only different regions enacted different sets of rules, but even cities could at times implement their own strategies and exceptions.

On the whole, the crisis has highlighted the need for adaptation. Some of the future challenges are general in nature and affect all states: such as the need to invest in digitalisation. Some challenges are, however, specific to small states, such as the need to diversify their economies to make them more resilient to shocks. This is particularly true in the case of states with an over-reliance on tourism. At the same time, in the wake of the very costly COVID-19 crisis, the ability of states to invest in their economies and administration will be reduced and will depend greatly on their general economic strength. Thus, those that were hit hardest might struggle the most to transform their economies.

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