

Small countries, big insights: The role of small states in shaping global public health

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Abstract: Small states, defined by the World Health Organization as countries with populations under two million, are often overlooked in the scientific landscape but provide critical insights into public health. Their centralised healthcare systems, compact populations, and ability to conduct national representative studies enable them to act as pilot sites for scalable health interventions. This article highlights the contributions of small states to managing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and implementing rapid public health policies. Examples from Malta and Cyprus demonstrate their agility during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, showcasing effective vaccination strategies and adaptable governance. Despite challenges in achieving robust sample sizes, small states produce high-quality data that informs global public health strategies. By translating knowledge efficiently into action, they serve as models for larger nations, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping resilient and responsive health systems on a global scale

Keywords: epidemiologic studies, health policy, knowledge translation, noncommunicable diseases, public health, small-area analysis, small states

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Introduction

In the realm of public health, small countries, defined by the World Health Organization as countries with populations under 2 million (World Health Organization, 2024), are often underrepresented in the scientific discourse. Yet, these states consistently punch above their weight, offering critical insights for the field, and acting as scalable models for managing global health challenges.

Small states: uniquely placed

Small states possess unique advantages that position them as key players in public health research and policy implementation. Their centralised healthcare systems, geographic characteristics, and smaller populations enable the conduct of national representative studies, including burden of disease (BoD) research, yielding insights that can inform global health strategies (Cuschieri et al., 2021c; 2022a). Despite the challenges, such as the higher burden of achieving sufficient sample populations and support for representative studies (Calleja and Garthwaite, 2016), the research produced is high-quality, transferable, and readily implementable within national borders. Moreover, these nations often serve as pilot sites, providing tested solutions that can be adapted by larger, more complex neighbouring countries (Cuschieri et al., 2022a).

Due to their compact size and manageable populations, small states are uniquely positioned to act as “laboratories” for testing health interventions and policies. This enables larger countries to observe these programmes and adapt successful aspects to fit their respective contexts. One major advantage of small states’ centralised systems is their capacity to conduct national studies that are both comprehensive and highly representative of the population (Cuschieri et al., 2016). While these studies require proportionally more resources to achieve robust sample sizes, they provide unparalleled insights into population health and uncover unique epidemiological patterns often diluted in larger populations (Cuschieri and Mamo, 2020, Cuschieri and Grech, 2020). Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) argue that small states’ unique structures and conditions reveal patterns and deviations that would otherwise remain invisible in studies dominated by larger countries. Including small states in comparative studies thus enhances the generalisability of findings and strengthens the evidence base for crafting scalable global health policies.

A major contribution of small states to these global health policies is their detailed epidemiological research on non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The high prevalence of chronic diseases, driven by ageing populations and lifestyle changes, provides a concentrated view of global trends. Research by Cuschieri et al. (2021b) highlights shared challenges among small European states such as Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta, and Montenegro, including rising obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and suboptimal diets, which mirror global patterns (Cuschieri et al., 2021b). In Malta, for instance, a decline in adherence to the traditional Mediterranean diet has been documented, replaced by higher consumption of processed foods and saturated fats (Cuschieri and Libra, 2020). Similar trends have been observed in Cyprus (Kyprianidou et al., 2021). These dietary shifts contribute to the rise of multimorbidity, where individuals suffer from multiple chronic conditions. By leveraging their capacity for detailed national data collection, small states provide critical insights into addressing these interconnected challenges, highlighting the value of a syndemic approach that tackles multiple diseases and their shared determinants simultaneously (Cuschieri and Grech, 2021, Cuschieri et al., 2022d).

Once the data has been compiled and analysed, one of the most significant strengths of small countries lies in their ability to quickly implement and adapt public health policies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Malta showcased the advantages of streamlined governance and centralised healthcare systems. Swift lockdowns, widespread testing, effective contact tracing, and an efficient vaccine rollout highlighted the agility of small states in managing public health crises (Cuschieri, 2022, Cuschieri et al., 2022b). Malta’s small size facilitated fast communication between public health authorities and policymakers, enabling timely and coordinated responses. This was bolstered by the rapid implementation of a successful vaccination strategy, achieving high inoculation rates (Cuschieri et al., 2021a). However, size alone does not guarantee success. For example, despite using the same procurement system, vaccination coverage in Cyprus differed significantly from Malta, underscoring the influence of other inter-country factors such as public trust, logistical efficiency, and communication strategies (Cuschieri et al., 2022c). Despite this, the adaptability of small states during crises underscores the importance of strong inter-agency collaboration and governance structures. These experiences provide valuable lessons for larger countries seeking to enhance their preparedness and response systems.

Conclusion

This brief article provides a brief snapshot of how small states play a critical role in the global public health arena. From conducting highly representative studies to demonstrating agility in policy implementation and crisis response, these nations provide scalable and transferable solutions to pressing global health challenges. Their centralised systems, ability to act as “laboratories” for innovative strategies, and capacity for knowledge translation position them as key drivers of public health advancements, and the lessons they provide are indispensable for larger countries striving to improve their own health governance and ensure better outcomes for their populations. Thus, despite their size, small states consistently demonstrate their importance in shaping resilient and adaptable health systems.

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