Digital diplomacy: Reskilling and upskilling efforts in Small Island Developing States

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Abstract: This work evaluates the reskilling and upskilling efforts from the operational perspectives and strategic perspectives of digital diplomacy in the permanent missions of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Two research questions and two hypotheses are raised. Dependency Theory, Elite Theory and the Global South Perspective are used to build the theoretical support for this study. This study examines the impact of digital diplomacy from an operational perspective based on the technological capacity of personnel in SIDS permanent missions in using digital diplomacy. It also investigates the United Nations (UN) system's support in strengthening policy and partnerships, including the creation of a Tech Ambassador position as part of strategic perspective in digital diplomacy. A mixed-methods approach is used, combining quantitative data from online surveys of 22 participants from permanent missions of SIDS, with qualitative analysis of UN policy documents and reports, high-level statements, and strategic plans from selected UN agencies. Quantitative data from a diverse sample of participants are analyzed using t-test, while qualitative data is obtained through document analysis and thematic analysis of interview transcripts. The findings indicate that reskilling and upskilling are crucial for ambassadors and foreign affairs personnel in SIDS missions to keep up with technological advancements. The UN system plays a significant role in these efforts by creating quality policies and collaborating with specialized agencies, funds, and programs. This study provides practical insights for capacity building and highlights the UN's role in boosting SIDS' institutional and technological capacities, including the potential creation of a Tech Ambassador position in SIDS that will have a long-term strategic impact in international diplomacy and relations

Keywords: artificial intelligence, capacity building, digital diplomacy, digital literacy, global South, small island developing states, SIDS permanent missions, social media, South-South cooperation, reskilling, Tech Ambassador, upskilling

Introduction

Small Island Developing States (hereafter referred to as SIDS) is a collective group of 39 states and is part of the larger United Nations agenda (UN.org, 2025). In a geopolitical order, they align themselves with the Global South, the Group of 77 (G77.org, 2025) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS.org, 2025). SIDS are vulnerable to natural disasters including rising sea levels and extreme drought that derail sustainable development because of severe climate change (Gordon-Strachan, Parker, Harewood, et al., 2024). As nations they still lack the needed international attention when it comes to issues of sustainable development as they collectively face challenges in "technical innovation and job automation leading to unemployment as well as unprotected data" (Meddeb, 2022).

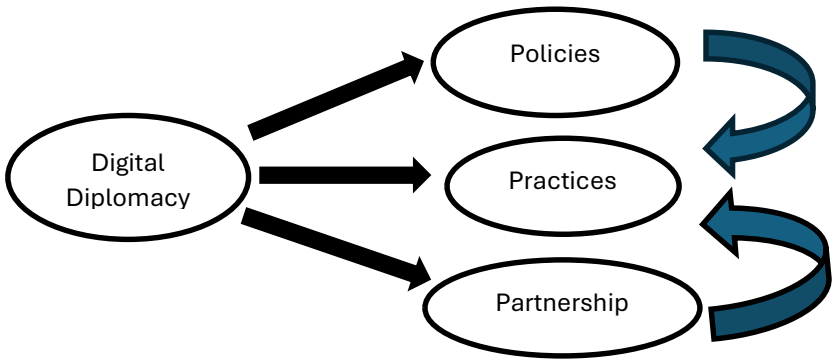
The practice of digital diplomacy has gradually permeated the diplomatic consciousness of the UN system and the various permanent missions and seen "as an important tool in

furthering a nation's foreign policy" (Metzgar, 2012; Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Hayden, 2012) and in securing international attention. This article underscores the operational perspective of digital diplomacy, and briefly transitions into the strategic perspective in considering the role of Tech Ambassador in SIDS permanent missions. According to Manor and Segev (2015, p. 94), digital diplomacy is the "use of social media by a state to achieve its foreign policy goals and manage its national image" and "exists at two levels: with the foreign ministry, and at embassies located around the world". Similarly, according to Adesina (2022), digital diplomacy can also be defined as the "use of technology, particularly the internet and other ICTs-based innovations, in the conduct of diplomacy"; this includes virtual communications and the metaverse, by ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and international organizations (Ios) to communicate with each other and the general public, conduct diplomacy, and advance their foreign policy goals" (Bjola & Manor, 2024, pp. 3-4). In particular, the use of social media platforms has proven to be especially attractive to smaller UN member states, which often struggle to garner attention from international news media (Bouchard, 2020). Several authors (Metzgar, 2012; Manor, 2019; Bjola, et al., 2019) have noted that permanent missions have increasingly turned to popular social media platforms and digital tools such as use of Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, Bots, GoFundMe, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, among others, including Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and more recently TikTok, to conduct their public diplomacy activities" as well as "for network and developing partnerships (Manor & Pamment, 2019; Manor, 2020). Variations and plurality in terms point to include 'networked diplomacy', '21st century statecraft', 'public diplomacy 2.0', 'net diplomacy', 'Twiplomacy', 'selfie diplomacy', 'cyber diplomacy', and even e-diplomacy' (Manor, 2018).

The use of technology, including social media and internet, within the operational perspective significantly influences the discussion and analysis of reskilling and upskilling efforts in SIDS. This includes the day-to-day requirements of digital technology in the practice of diplomacy and consular services. Conversely, the strategic perspective addresses long-term implications substantive diplomatic activities in a digital environment such as *global technology governance, security cooperation on critical technology, cybersecurity and the future of AI*. The creation of leadership role such as Tech Ambassador position, which falls under the strategic perspective, is anticipated to potentially influence major technology companies and the framing of the overall international digital governance

Overall, the study adopts a systemic approach to provide an appreciation of the broader interplay of policy, practice, and partnership in digital diplomacy, drawing on the experiences of SIDS permanent missions from an emic perspective of the researcher. Figure 1 provides the visual on how these three 'P's interconnect:

Figure 1: The three 'P's in digital diplomacy.



Source: Author's own elaboration

Statement of the problem

SIDS's access to technology remains low, and lack of internet access is a core challenge in leveraging the potential of frontier technologies (UNCTAD, 2021) despite the surge in the use of social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. Numerous studies on digitalization of diplomacy have been conducted, primarily in developed countries such as United States and the United Kingdom (Allam, 2021, p. 212). However, there has been limited research on this phenomenon in the context of SIDS particularly in assessing the *operational* perspective of digital diplomacy which includes reskilling and upskilling efforts within the SIDS permanent missions. Additionally, the *strategic* perspective in digital diplomacy on the UN system's support for developing countries, like SIDS, in accessing digital opportunities, including the creation of a Tech Ambassador position, has not been explored. As such, this study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How are upskilling and reskilling efforts, including the creation of Tech Ambassador position impact digital diplomacy in SIDS permanent missions?

RQ2: How do the United Nations (UN) system policies and strategic plans support the reskilling and upskilling efforts, including the creation of Tech Ambassador position in the practice of digital diplomacy in the SIDS permanent missions?

Based on the research questions outlined above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Ho1: The reskilling and upskilling efforts, including the creation of Tech Ambassador position influences the practice of digital diplomacy in the SIDS permanent missions.

Ho2: The United Nations (UN) system policies and strategic plans support the reskilling and upskilling efforts, including the creation of Tech Ambassador position in the practice of digital diplomacy in the SIDS permanent missions.

Review of the literature

The operational perspective in the utilization of digital tools (including usage of social media and internet) in the conduct of traditional diplomacy forms the foundation of the reskilling and upskilling efforts within Small Island Developing States (SIDS). This article centers its analysis on the necessity of updating the skills and competencies of SIDS diplomats to adapt to the rapidly evolving digital technology landscape, as it pertains to the general conduct of traditional diplomacy. Deloitte (2020, p. 29) argue that "there is no one-size-fits-all approach to reskilling [but] regardless of industry, the need for reskilling is urgent". The Digital Competitiveness Index is defined by three main factors: knowledge, technology and future readiness (Bris, Cabolis & Cabellero, 2017). It shows a very minimal representation on how nation-states in SIDS are barely acknowledge on this front. Out of the 39 UN member states from SIDS, only Bahrain (#32 on the IMD ranking) and Singapore (#4 on the IMD ranking) were included in the list, even outpacing known European Countries such as Latvia, Slovenia, Italy, Portugal, and Hungary (IMD, 2023). This only means that countries from SIDS can equally compete if only be given equal access to opportunity and resources in order to improve and make better in the areas of knowledge, technology and readiness. According to Escobari, et al. (2019, p. 15), "reskilling will never be enough without broader structural changes, but it will be increasingly necessary. And the reskilling and adult education landscape as it stands today is ill-equipped to adapt most workers' skills to the jobs of tomorrow". Upskilling is a

longer-term investment in augmenting the knowledge, skills, and competencies that help employees advance their careers (Vroman & Danko, 2022). And to be proactive in their siloed efforts, “workers have already taken matters into their own hands by incremental and just-in-time skill development via social learning tutorial and online education providers” (Stephany, 2021). The Deloitte Canada (n. d.) article underscores “that upskilling enables organizations to build a future-ready workforce; and for individuals, it’s a way to keep their skills relevant and stay future-ready themselves”.

Institutional adaptation, technological readiness, and leadership could pave the way for strategic perspective of digital diplomacy in the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The advancement in digital technologies had disrupted the traditional approach to diplomacy, and the “internet and the rapid digitalization of almost all aspects of society have brought new opportunities and challenges to traditional ways of governing our societies” (Lupton, 2015). According to Meierkord (2023, p. 8), “most governments and social partners now agree that large, and smart investments in upskilling and reskilling are needed to help people adapt to the changing skill requirements of their jobs”.

Central to the strategic perspective in digital diplomacy is the leadership contribution of Tech Ambassador, who will help enhance the traditional landscape of diplomacy and international relations in SIDS. The broader and strategic role of Tech Ambassador extends beyond enhancing technological skills of ambassadors. The role encompasses influencing global technology governance, fostering security cooperation on critical technology, addressing cybersecurity challenges, and shaping the future of artificial intelligence.

Theoretical framework

This section presents the intersectionality of Dependency Theory, Elite Theory, and the Global South Perspective within the contextual background of SIDS nations as colonized nations as they all transition in a digital environment.

Dependency theory

Dependency theory emphasizes power imbalances in global development, where less-developed and developing countries in the Global South, including SIDS, were often marginalized and given lower priority compared to wealthy, developed economies in matters of development and progress. In Dependency theory, the concept of “core/periphery” categorizes countries based on the notion of dependence (Farny, November 2016), and the juxtaposition of the division of “core” and “periphery” is akin to the demarcation of “North” and “South” in the modern era, where the “North” connotes the “core” countries, while the “South” is considered the “periphery” countries. As globalization evolves and technology advances, the concern that these processes are “reducing developing countries' capacity to catch up and reinforcing their dependency” remains relevant (Chaing, 2013, p. 138).

Elite theory

Complementing the scope of Dependency theory, the academic concepts of power, wealth, and influence are central to understanding Elite theory. This correlation reveals how 'dominant states' in Dependency Theory leverage their power, wealth, and influence to gain an advantage over 'dependent states' (Frank, 1972) vis-à-vis the 'power elite' exploits resources and public goods at the expense of the 'marginalized majority' (Mills, 1956) in Elite theory.

Across these scholarly works of Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Burnham, Djilas, Mills and Lasswell (Ambedkar, 1992; Vergara, 2013; Mariotti, 2020), elite theory points to the "concentration of economic, intellectual and cultural resources are concentrated in the hands of small group of individuals which use them to exercise power over the rest of the population" (Mariotti, 2020). In the modern era, this behavior has significant implications, allowing elites to exploit public goods and resources more aggressively, yet subtly, through the power of digital tools as public goods in a digital environment

Global South perspective

Global South is the group that represents the shared and collective voice of the developing and least developed countries in terms of negotiating with rich and donor countries, the Global North. The Global South perspective crystallizes the collective assertion of nation states to "build solidarity against the discriminations of countries in the Global North" (Davies and Boehmer, 2018). It generalizes the various classifications of poor and developing countries based on their level of development. They represent the similar yet diverse realities of countries, not based on geographic context, but a commonality in the challenges they face in the midst of poverty as well as economic and environmental vulnerabilities.

The countries from the Global South are also referred to as "the rest" (Davies & Boehmer, 2018, p. 48), which has the conceptual undertone of insignificance, ineptitude, and subordination. And yet, as Agrawal (2023) asserts, these countries are "younger and faster-growing than the West and becoming increasingly powerful, more visible, and influential - in every arena".

Materials and methods

This chapter outlines the comprehensive methodological approach employed in this study to investigate reskilling and upskilling efforts in SIDS Permanent Missions and the contribution of UN system in the practice of digital diplomacy. A mixed-method approach was utilized, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to achieve a robust and in-depth understanding and awareness of the research questions.

Research design

A mixed-method design was chosen for its ability to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, offering a more complete perspective on the research problem than either method alone (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, n. d.). The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed method "to execute the quantitative inquiry of the study, analyzes then explains the results more elaborately taking aid of the qualitative data" (Hafsa, 2019, pp. 45-46). Through a mixed methods approach, it combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Johnson, et al., 2007, p. 123), to better understand the issue of digital diplomacy in SIDS permanent missions, in ways that are not possible with either qualitative or quantitative data alone.

Participants

The scope of the study includes 39 permanent missions from small island developing states (SIDS) (see Appendix C). Respondents include ambassadors, first secretaries, director and other foreign affairs personnel covering different diplomatic functions such as policy, leadership, operations, and others. They were recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation across age groups, educational backgrounds and years of work in the field of diplomacy and foreign relations. The UN focal points from selected UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes were also included as they shared the public weblinks relevant to the documents on their respective strategic plans.

Quantitative data/survey instrument

A structured online survey consisting of 28 questions was developed and covered the topics related to the practice of digital diplomacy in the three regions of SIDS. The online survey was administered using a secure survey platform called Qualtrics. It was created and administered by the researcher with support from faculty members of Fordham University in New York, and senior officials from the United Nations who are knowledgeable about SIDS. The faculty members had served as the researcher's informal expert advisers who had given guidance in the formulation, cleaning and finalization of the online survey.

The online survey was distributed to all 39 UN SIDS Member States out of the 196 using the UN Blue Book 2023 published in the UN website (UN.org, 2023). The Blue Book is a publication of listings related to all UN officials' titles, contact information such as emails and phone numbers of all Permanent Representatives to the UN and their staff, which is printed and published online on an annual basis. Only officials and staff - who have direct diplomatic role and function were invited to fill out the anonymous online survey.

Participants had the liberty to decide to complete the survey or respond to questions that are more relevant to their functions. If they wanted to participate, they could choose to click on a survey link and complete it as they wish.

The online survey examined the participants' work experience on the use of digital platforms; perception of the importance of digital technology, and institutional adaptation which covers capacity building and digital skills gap including the contribution of Tech Ambassador role in the practice of diplomacy and international relations. The questionnaire was divided into several sections: (1) demographic information: geographic cluster, occupation/title, educational attainment, years being in the field of diplomacy, and diplomatic functions; (2) work experience on the use of digital platforms; (3) confidence in using and understanding digital tools/platforms; (4) perception on the importance of digital diplomacy; (5) technological skills and preparedness for digital diplomacy; (6) awareness of international cooperation and the UN system; and, (7) perceived support to SIDS by the political groups and UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes.

The Likert scale (e.g., 1 = not important to 5 = very important) was used for most items, providing ordinal data suitable for parametric statistical analysis (Norman, 2010). The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix A for further reference. For those who completed the survey in terms of geographic clusters, over half (59%) were from the Caribbean, a third from the Pacific (32%), and the rest from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and South China Sea (9%).

Qualitative data/document analysis and follow-up questionnaire

The qualitative data employed research strategies including document analysis and follow-up questionnaires. These were further enriched by the researcher's emic perspective and insider knowledge of the UN system as a former staff member.

Data analysis: quantitative

The online survey in Qualtrics had a total of 28 questions under the following major sections: a) general demographic information; b) work experience on the use of digital platforms; c) confidence in using and understanding digital tools; d) perception of the importance of digital diplomacy, e) awareness of international cooperation and the un system, f) perceived support to SIDS by the political groups at the un, g) technological skills and preparedness for digital diplomacy (see Appendix A).

Twenty-six (26) individuals started the survey in Qualtrics. For survey to be deemed complete, participants had to finish at least 50% of the items. 22 participants met the completion criteria. The data analysis includes univariate analysis for all the variables, including the demographic and key variables. Frequency and percentage distribution for each variable were reviewed. For continuous variables, the central tendency, mean, median, and mode were examined. To assess the variability of continuous variables, the standard deviation, range, minimum and maximum scores, and skewness are examined

Data analysis: qualitative

The document analysis (see Appendix B) covers four clusters based on the following: 1) United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's high-level statements delivered and published for the three-year period 2021-2023; 2) UN General Assembly Resolutions covering the 21 years of UN resolutions on South-South cooperation; 3) active Strategic Plans of seven specialized agencies, funds and programmes including ILO, ITU, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNFCCC, UNOSSC, World Bank; and 4) Forward Thinking Policy Documents originated from the UN and UN member states in support of SIDS.

Ethics considerations

Elements of confidentiality and anonymity in data reporting are ensured to protect privacy and maintain ethical compliance in the online survey. Participants who received the email with the online survey link are assured that their responses will be kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes. Additionally, before participating in the online survey, they were informed that the survey data would be reported in a summarized manner, ensuring that no individual person could be identified.

Data presentation and results

This study investigated the operational perspective of digital diplomacy zeroing in on the reskilling and upskilling efforts within the SIDS Permanent Missions structure (Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7). It also examined the strategic perspective of creating Tech Ambassador position in SIDS permanent missions to complement the traditional diplomacy, and lead on issues encompassing *global technology governance, security cooperation on critical technology, cybersecurity and the future of AI*. (Tables 6 and 8).

Descriptive statistics

Among those who completed the survey, the majority (59%) were from the Caribbean, followed by 32% from the Pacific, and the rest from the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea (9%). Respondents represented a diverse range of positions within the permanent missions. Nearly a quarter (23%) held the title of Ambassador, while 14% were First Secretaries, and 9% were Directors. The remaining 54.5% identified with various other roles. Most held advanced degrees, with 68% possessing a master's and 9% a doctoral degree. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1: General characteristics of UN Member States in digital diplomacy (N=22).

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage*	Mean (SD)
Location:			
Caribbean	13	59.1%	
Pacific	7	31.8%	
Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea	2	9.1%	
Current Position			
Ambassador	5	22.7%	
First Secretary	3	13.6%	
Directors	2	9.1%	
Other	12	54.5%	
Diplomatic Function			
Policy	7	43.8%	
Leadership	3	18.8%	
Operations	2	12.5%	
Other	4	25.0%	
Highest Educational Degree			
Bachelor	4	18.2%	
Master	15	68.2%	
Doctoral	2	9.1%	
Other	1	4.5%	
Years in the field			14.8 (SD=10.3)
<5	6	27.3%	
5-10	3	13.6%	
11-15	4	18.2%	
16-20	2	9.1%	
21-25	5	22.7%	
>26	2	9.1%	

Note: Adjusted for missing data

Examining data to understand digital diplomacy from an operational perspective, the use of Instagram showed almost one-third (32%) of respondents used it in their work. About one-fifth (27%) of the respondents stated they used Facebook. Half of the respondents (50%) used Twitter (X) in a professional capacity. LinkedIn saw the highest number of reported users at 68%. Artificial Intelligence (ChatGPT) usage was at 41% whereas Metaverse usage was at a modest 22.7%. Only one respondent (5%) was confirmed to be using Threads at work. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2: Digital tools relevant to the practice of traditional diplomacy and international relations in SIDS

Used of Digital Diplomacy	Frequency of "yes" respondents (f)	Percentage who responded "Yes"*
Used if Social Media		
Instagram	7	31.8%
Facebook	6	27.3%
Twitter (X)	11	50.0%
Threads	1	4.5%
LinkedIn	15	68.2%
Use of Artificial Intelligence (ChatGPT, etc.)	9	40.9%
Used of Metaverse	5	22.7%

- Adjusted for missing data

Respondents' experience with digital tools varied. About 14% had no experience using social media for work, while 59% had low to moderate experience, and 27% reported high experience. Regarding AI, 28% had no experience, 67% had low to moderate experience, and 5% had high experience in its use for diplomacy and international relations. Metaverse adoption showed potential, with 50% having some experience with the platform, while the other half had none. See Table 3 for details.

Table 3: Experience with digital tools relevant to the practice of diplomacy and international relations.

Experience with digital tools	Frequency (f)	Percentage*
Experience with social media (n=22)		
No Experience	3	13.6%
Low-Moderate Experience	13	59.1%
High Experience	6	27.3%
Experience with AI (n=21)		
No Experience	6	28.6%
Low-Moderate Experience	14	66.7%
High Experience	1	4.8%
Experience with Metaverse (n=18)		
No Experience	9	50.0%
Low-Moderate Experience	9	50.0%
High Experience	0	0%

- Adjusted for missing data

Confidence levels in understanding and using digital tools in the practice of digital diplomacy varied, with respondents feeling most confident in understanding and using social media. The level of confidence was lower for Artificial Intelligence, and lowest for the Metaverse, where respondents felt least comfortable. See Table 4 for details.

Table 4: Confidence in using digital tools

Confidence	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (SD)
Confidence in understanding Social Media	0	5	4.67 (SD=1.5)
Confidence in using Social Media	0	5	4.76 (SD=1.4)
Confidence in understanding AI	0	5	3.20 (SD=1.8)
Confidence in using AI	0	5	2.95 (SD=1.6)
Confidence in understanding Metaverse	0	5	2.32 (SD=1.4)
Confidence in using Metaverse	0	5	2.18 (SD=1.3)

- Adjusted for missing data

Overall, this data suggests that respondents highly value both upskilling and reskilling efforts in the practice of digital diplomacy, along with considering digital diplomacy practices important across different contexts, including the UN, South-South cooperation, and multilateral cooperation. See Table 5 for details.

Table 5: Perception of digital tools used in the practice of diplomacy and international relations.

Perception	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (SD)
Importance of upskilling of human capacities in the practice of digital diplomacy	3	5	4.44 (SD=0.8)
Importance of reskilling of human capacities in the practice of digital diplomacy	3	5	4.38 (SD=0.9)
Importance of practices of digital diplomacy in the UN	1	5	4.19 (SD=1.1)
Importance of practice of digital diplomacy in South-South cooperation	1	5	4.18 (SD=1.1)
Importance of digital diplomacy in multilateral cooperation	1	5	4.00 (SD=1.0)

- Adjusted for missing data

To analyze "*Is there a difference in perceived importance of practice in digital diplomacy at the SIDS Permanent Missions to the UN by geographic region that will improve South-South cooperation?"*, an analysis was conducted. Unfortunately, due to very small responses for the Atlantic region (n=2), an independent sample t-test was conducted only to compare the perceptions by the other two regions (Caribbean and Pacific). The t-test was conducted because the region was a categorical variable, and the dependent variable of perception was a continuous score. Results suggest a statistically significant difference by region in overall perception of digital diplomacy, with the Pacific region having more positive perception of digital diplomacy: ($M_{Caribbean}$=19.9, SD=4.8; $M_{Pacific}$= 22.0, SD=2.4; t(12)=-0.9, $p<.05$).

The data indicated varying levels of awareness among participants regarding different specialized agencies, with higher levels of awareness observed for agencies like UNDP, UNFCCC, and the World Bank, while agencies like ILO and ITU demonstrate a slightly lower

but still moderate level of awareness. The variability in responses indicates that awareness levels may differ among individual participants. See Table 6 for details.

Table 6: Level of awareness of UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes.

Awareness of Specialized Agencies	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (SD)
International Labour Organization (ILO)	1	6	3.68 (SD=1.7)
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)	1	6	3.89 (SD=1.6)
UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	1	6	4.00 (SD=1.9)
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	1	6	4.39 (SD=1.7)
UN Framework Conventional on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	1	6	4.29 (SD=1.6)
UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC)	1	6	4.07(SD=1.9)
World Bank (WB)	1	6	4.31(SD=1.6)

- Adjusted for missing data

The data highlights key insights into diplomats' readiness for digital diplomacy. While most respondents perceived diplomats to have moderate technological skills and competency, a significant portion still rated their abilities and preparedness as low. Notably, none considered diplomats to be highly prepared for digital diplomacy. See Table 7 for details.

Table 7: Technological skills of diplomats.

Technological skills of diplomats	Frequency (f)	Percentage*
How would you rate the technological skills of diplomats to practice digital diplomacy?		
Low Skills	3	25.0%
Moderate Skills	8	66.7%
High Skills	1	8.3%
How would you rate the overall competency of diplomats to practice digital diplomacy?		
Low Competency	4	33.3%
Moderate Competency	7	58.3%
High Competency	1	8.3%
How would you rate the preparedness of diplomats to practice digital diplomacy?		
Low Preparedness	5	41.7%
Moderate Preparedness	7	58.3%
High Preparedness	0	0%

From a strategic perspective in digital diplomacy, the data suggests that no SIDS permanent missions plan to establish a 'tech ambassador' role. Such a position could have long-term spinoffs, enabling SIDS to influence *global technology governance, security cooperation, cybersecurity, and AI*, and shape international digital governance. See Table 8 for details.

Table 8: Plans to create a 'Tech Ambassador' position in SIDS.

Plans to create Tech Ambassador position	Frequency	Percentage*
Does your Permanent Mission plan to create a Tech Ambassador position?		
No	17	100%
Yes	0	0%

Thematic analysis

A desk review to respond to the research questions included the seven Strategic Plans from selected UN specialized agencies, programmes and funds including ILO (GB.340/PFA/1), ITU (RES-071-E) , UNCTAD (A/79/6 (Sect. 12)/Part A, UNDP (DP/2021/28), UNFCCC (FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/16/Add.1), UNOSSC (DP/CF/SSC/7), and the World Bank (DC2023-0004). These Strategic Plans are accessible on their respective organizational websites. The desk review tabulated the frequency of words like SIDS, reskill, upskill, digital, digital technologies, climate change, private sector, knowledge, capacity building, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, metaverse, and social media. The tabulation helped in the overall insights on how these policy documents give emphasis on the research items related to digital diplomacy.

Table 9: Mention of words related to Small Island Developing States (SIDS), digital diplomacy (digital, technologies), capacity building (upskilling, reskilling, digital literacy), sustainable development from seven UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes.

Words mentioned related to SIDS, digital diplomacy and sustainable development	ILO (GB.340/PFA/1)	ITU (RES-071-E)	UNCTAD (/28)	UNDP (DP/2021/28)	UNFCCC (FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/16/Add.1)	UNOSSC (DP/CF/SSC/7)	WB (DC2023-0004)
SIDS; small island developing states	0	3	10	2+4	7	0	0
Partnership; private sector	6+ 0	11+2	8+3	16+13	7+6	14+1	41+60
Knowledge/ knowledge transfer	7	8	11	8	30	34	36
Digital technologies	2	4	0	0	0	3	0
Digital; digital skills; digital literacy	2+0+0	9+3+0	48	1	1	0	1
Upskill; reskill	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Capacity building; capacity development; digital capacity	1	3	9+1+0	1+2+2	25	3+13+0	5+0+0
Digital divide	1	10	0	0	0	1	0
Digital inclusion; digital transformation	0	5+19	0+1	0+4	0+1	0	0
Artificial intelligence; AI	0	1	1	0	3	0	0
Metaverse	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social media	0	0	1	0	0	1	1

The review of seven UN strategic plans revealed key insights on SIDS, digital skills, and emerging technologies. Four agencies (ITU, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNFCCC) prominently referenced SIDS, while ILO, UNOSSC, and the World Bank did not.

None of the strategic plans explicitly mentioned the terms "reskill" and "upskill". However, related concepts like capacity-building and knowledge transfer were frequently emphasized, indicating indirect support for digital skills development. In using the terms "Artificial Intelligence", "Metaverse", and "Social Media", Artificial intelligence was mentioned in only three plans (ITU, UNCTAD, UNFCCC), social media in three (UNCTAD, UNOSSC, World Bank), and the Metaverse was absent from all. Overall, while digital skills and capacity-building are acknowledged, specific references to upskilling, reskilling, and emerging technologies remain limited. See Table 9 for details.

Discussion of findings

Theoretical implications

The lack of resources, technological and leadership preparedness, investment and long term commitment serve as the undertone on how power and wealth play a crucial role in understanding dependency theory, elite theory, and Global South perspective as the traditional diplomacy transitions into a digital environment. Given the enormous technology and economic resources of the Global North, the developing countries, such as SIDS, cannot advance further as long as "as they stay dependent on foreign capital, technology, education and markets for their commodities" (Cepeda, 2021). In the large scheme of things, whoever has the power, influence and the wherewithal will determine the extent of dependency between the dynamics of the Global North (the core) and the Global South (the periphery).

Dependency theory remains highly relevant today, particularly as power and influence remain concentrated in wealthy nations. The Global North continues to dominate technology ownership and global hegemony, while the Global South struggles to keep pace. In particular, SIDS's access to technology remains low, and lack of internet access is a core challenge in leveraging the potential of frontier technologies (UNCTAD, 2021). This underscores the theory's applicability, especially in the context of least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing states (SIDS). In an increasingly digital world, this persistent dependency could exacerbate global inequalities if left unchecked, as technological progress has the potential to deepen existing disparities on a massive scale.

An emerging phase in international relations worth examining is the concept of 'digital colonialism' (Kwet, 2019). In a digital environment, this replicated condition of dependency on power and influence would have adverse effects if not monitored closely, as the enormous contributions of technology can deepen and widen inequality at a global scale. According to Kwet (2019), "we live in a digital colonial world, where digital infrastructure, knowledge, and control of computation are owned by dominant powers, keeping the South in a state of permanent dependence on the North". The Internet, for example, "is not under any kind of international control, but still in the hands of one country, the United States" (Heine and Prado Lallande, 2024). This is not taken lightly by the opposing camps from the Global South.

Practice implications

Reskilling and upskilling efforts in SIDS permanent missions. The utilization of digital tools within the operational perspective of digital diplomacy is acknowledged by SIDS participants as becoming the norm in the general conduct of diplomacy. Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and Metaverse, are recognized as pivotal in shaping the future of

digital diplomacy. On a daily basis, these diplomats are employing these innovative tools to enhance and broaden their diplomatic initiatives and interactions in a digital environment.

In terms of competency, and preparedness for digital diplomacy (Tables 3, 4 and 7) there remains significant room for improvement, particularly in terms of readiness for future challenges. This gap becomes more pronounced when considering that wealthy nations from the Global North are already positioning their human resources to establish critical technological roles within diplomacy, such Tech Ambassador position.

In contrast, while demonstrating technological preparedness, SIDS (Small Island Developing States) lack a clear understanding of the long-term implications of not leveraging strategic perspectives in digital diplomacy. This includes the critical leadership role of appointing a Tech Ambassador to complement traditional ambassadors. Such a position would significantly enhance their capacity to engage in international negotiations, particularly in areas such as global technology governance, security cooperation, and cybersecurity. Based on this study, there appears to be no immediate plan for embassies or missions to create positions like Tech Ambassadors in SIDS permanent missions (Table 8), revealing a potential shortfall in addressing the technological skills necessary for future diplomatic functions. This lack of dedicated roles and functions tailored to the demands of digital diplomacy in international relations and public diplomacy could be seen as a strategic weakness, especially as the global landscape shifts increasingly toward digital environments.

The creation of technologically based diplomatic roles, such as Tech Ambassadors, is not merely a career advancement for diplomats but a strategic necessity for permanent missions and embassies. This role is crucial for bridging the gap between traditional diplomacy and the fast-evolving digital landscape in the UN system.

UN system-wide support to SIDS. The contribution of the UN system is essential to support SIDS as they transition to a digital environment (Tables 6 & 8). By fully integrating digital diplomacy into SIDS foreign policy strategies through reskilling and upskilling efforts, SIDS can effectively navigate global power dynamics, advocate for their interests, and influence international discourse.

Hypothesis evaluation

The findings of this study have been organized and discussed according to the two research questions raised and the two hypotheses formulated to guide the study.

> **Hypothesis 1:** *The reskilling and upskilling efforts, including the creation of Tech Ambassador position influences the practice of digital diplomacy in the SIDS permanent missions.*

The result of hypothesis one indicates that reskilling and upskilling efforts within SIDS permanent missions has a moderate influence on digital diplomacy. However, while respondents perceived diplomats to have moderate technological skills for practicing digital diplomacy the findings also highlight low preparedness, insufficient investment in formal technical training on digital tools, and a lack of long-term commitment to digital diplomacy. This is further reflected in the absence of efforts to establish technology-focused positions, such as a Tech Ambassador.

> **Hypothesis 2:** The *United Nations (UN) system policies and strategic plans support the reskilling and upskilling efforts in the practice of digital diplomacy in the SIDS permanent missions.*

The findings confirm this hypothesis. While 'upskilling' and 'reskilling' are not explicitly mentioned in high-level UN statements or policy reports, they are closely linked to terms like 'capacity building,' 'capacity development,' 'digital skills' and 'digital literacy.' The UN defines these as efforts to strengthen skills, abilities, and resources needed for organizations and communities to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world (UN, n.d.). Overall, respondents highly value upskilling and reskilling in digital diplomacy and see these efforts as essential across various contexts of collaboration, including the UN, South-South cooperation, and multilateral collaboration.

Conclusion

Recognizing the vital connection between policies, practices, and partnerships in reskilling and upskilling efforts in SIDS permanent missions within the realms of digital diplomacy is essential for developing strong policies on digital technology that benefit SIDS as a whole. Additionally, sharing resources, technical expertise, and technology through partnerships and South-South cooperation, can lead to more effective solutions for addressing development challenges and advancing SIDS's foreign policy and national agenda through digital diplomacy. By embracing digital diplomacy, SIDS can gain a strategic advantage in amplifying their presence on the international stage and competing more effectively with larger, resource-rich nations in the Global North.

However, the lukewarm response from SIDS permanent missions toward establishing a Tech Ambassador position, within the realm of strategic perspective, highlights a significant gap in preparing for the technological skills needed in future diplomatic practices. As the world transitions into an increasingly digital environment, the skills gap in SIDS permanent missions could be considered as a weakness as the whole world transitions to digital environment. Overall, institutional readiness through capacity building efforts in digital diplomacy-including reskilling and upskilling, is essential for adapting to technological advancements and ensuring SIDS remain competitive on the global stage.

This study faced several limitations, including the length of the survey. Respondents found it overly long, making it difficult to complete outside their official duties. Another challenge affecting the response rate was the inconsistent maintenance of diplomats' and staff email addresses. Many contacts listed in the UN Bluebook 2023 were outdated, leading to bounced emails and non-responses.

For future research, potential topics could explore the role of digital influence and the digital agenda in SIDS' digital diplomacy. Additionally, broader participation from UN specialized agencies, funds, and programs not originally included in this study could provide more comprehensive insights, particularly regarding their efforts to enhance digital literacy and capacity-building in SIDS.

Lastly, incorporating perspectives from key non-state actors – such as 'Big Tech' corporations, academia, and think tanks – would enrich discussions on reskilling and upskilling SIDS permanent missions, offering a more holistic understanding of digital diplomacy's evolving landscape.

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Appendix A - Questionnaire

General demographic information	1	Identification of Geographical Cluster: (a = the Caribbean, b = the Pacific, c = the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea)
	2	Current Position title:
	3	Educational attainment: (a = High school or equivalent, b = Bachelor's degree, c = Master's degree, d = Doctoral degree, e = Other)
	4	Approximate years being in the field of diplomacy:
	5	Best description of diplomatic functions: (a = Policy, b = Programme, c = Operations – Finance/ Administration, d = Information and Technology, e = Communication, f = C-suite, g = Strategic Team, h = Leadership, i = Other)
Work experience on the use of digital platforms	6	Use of digital platforms relevant to practice of diplomacy and international relations: (a = Social media – Instagram, b = Social media – Facebook, c = Social media – Twitter/X, d = Social media – Threads, e = Social media = LinkedIn, f = Artificial Intelligence (ChatGPT, etc), g = Metaverse).
	7	Experience with each digital platform of Social Media, Artificial Intelligence, Metaverse: (no experience, low experience, moderate experience, high experience)
Confidence in using and understanding digital tools/ platforms	8	Confidence level in using Social media, Artificial Intelligence and Metaverse: (0 = Not confident, 5 = Very confident)
Perception of the importance of digital diplomacy	9	Perception of the importance of digital diplomacy in SIDS permanent mission: (1 = Not important, 5 = very important)
Technological skills and preparedness for digital diplomacy	10	Does mission/consulate provide technical training on digitalization of diplomatic processes and procedures: (Yes, No)
	11	Have you ever engaged in practice of digital diplomacy: (Yes, No, If Yes, check all of the purposes that apply: public diplomacy, public engagement, international audience, trade negotiations, private sector engagement, private sector investment, political negotiations)
	12	Level of skills in using social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X, Threads, LinkedIn), Artificial Intelligence (ChatGPT, etc), Metaverse: (0 = Lack of skills, 5 = High skills)
Awareness of international cooperation and the UN system	13	Awareness of concepts and practices of South-South cooperation: (Yes, No, Not Sure)
	14	Level of awareness for select UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes: International Labour Organization (ILO), International

		Telecommunication Union (ITU), UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), World Bank (WB), Others: (0 = lack of awareness, 5 = extremely aware)
	15	Multilateral cooperation in SIDS can be enhanced through digital diplomacy: (Yes, No)
Perceived support to SIDS by political groups and UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes	16	Private sector support & investment in SIDS will increase through digital diplomacy: (Yes, No)
	17	UN Policy Statements and Frameworks are clear for private sector to understand: (0 = not clear, 5 = extremely clear)
	18	Rate the level of support for SIDS for each statement – UN policies for SIDS by my permanent missions, UN policies for SIDS by Group of 77, UN policies by AOSIS, UN policies by private sector, UN policies by UN specialized agencies: (0 = not supported, 4 = very supported)
	19	Plan to create Tech Ambassador position to enhance use of digital diplomacy in consulate/mission: (Yes, No)
	20	UN helps amplify the collective voice of SIDS through digital diplomacy: (Yes, No)
	21	Political groups such as G-77 and AOSIS help increase visibility of SIDS: (Yes, No; If yes, briefly describe)
	22	Digital diplomacy further strengthens South-South cooperation: (Yes, No)
	23	Perception of digital diplomacy influence public diplomacy and international relations in SIDS: (Yes, No)
Technological skills and preparedness for digital diplomacy	24	Rate technological skills of diplomats in digital diplomacy: (1 = Lack of skills, 2 = Low skills, 3 = Moderate skills, 4 = High skills)
	25	Competency of diplomats in digital diplomacy: (1 = Lack of competency, 2 = Low competency, 3 = Moderate competency, 4 = High competency)
	26	Technological preparedness of diplomats in digital diplomacy: (1 = lacking, 2 = low, 3 = moderate, 4 = high)
	27	State your opinion how to better prepare diplomats in digital diplomacy
	28	Rate how UN agencies reflect partnership priorities of SIDS – ILO, ITU, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNFCCC, UNOSSC, WB, Others: (0 = no partnership, 5 = strong partnership)

Appendix B – Document Analysis

7 Strategic Plans from UN specialized agencies, programmes and funds including ILO, ITU, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNFCCC, UNOSSC, and the World Bank

Documents selected	Data Contents Analyzed
7 Strategic Plans from UN Specialized Agencies, Funds and Programmes 1. International Labour Organization (ILO) -GB.340/PFA/1 2. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) - RES-071-E 3. United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) - A/79/6 (Sect. 12)/Part A 4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) - DP/2021/28 5. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) - FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/16/Add.1 6. United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) - DP/CF/SSC/7 7. World Bank (WB) - DC2023-0004	The document analysis includes various policy and programmatic priorities of the UN Specialized Agencies, Funds and Programmes in support of SIDS. The analysis is based on how frequent the mention of words related to the following: small island developing states, SIDS, digital diplomacy, digital skills, digital technologies, digital divide, knowledge, knowledge transfer, capacity building, reskill, upskill, digital literacy, digital inclusion, digital transformation, social media, artificial intelligence, metaverse, and other peripheral research items relevant in this study.

Appendix C – List of Permanent Missions under the SIDS Three Regional Clusters

(a) Pacific SIDS: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu
(b) Caribbean SIDS: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago
(c) Africa, Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea SIDS: Bahrain, Cape Verde, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Mauritius, São Tomé y Príncipe, Seychelles, Singapore