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THE ISLANDS AND SMALL STATES INSTITUTE: THIRTY YEARS ON*

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Introduction

The Islands and Small States Institute promotes research and training on economic, social, cultural, ecological and geographical aspects of islands and small states. Based at the University of Malta, the Institute evolved from the Islands and Small States Programme which was set up in 1989 at the Foundation for International Studies, Valletta. In 1993, the Programme was restructured as an Institute with the principal aim of enabling it to offer academic programmes of study. The Institute moved its offices from Valletta to the Msida Campus in 2007. Today, the Institute offers a suite of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes of study, undertakes and publishes research on issues relating to islands and small states, and collaborates with many international and local organisations on these issues. In this write-up, I briefly describe my involvement in the Institute and the contribution that the Institute has made states.



The entrance gate of the Valletta University Campus, where the Foundation for International Studies was located and where the Institute was born. The lintel bears a Greek inscription meaning "learning is the gateway to distinction"

Early Beginnings

In 1985, I, together with Professor John Kaminarides, a visiting Rhodes scholar, hailing from the US, with Cypriot roots, organised an international conference on the economic development of small states. The conference was attended by a large number of foreign scholars and representatives of international organisations, including the World Bank, UNCTAD and the Commonwealth Secretariat. One of the speakers presented a graph showing a scatter diagram with GDP per capita linked to country size, from which a trend line was derived indicating that small states tended, on average, to have a higher GDP per capita than larger states. The main message of the speaker was that small states do not seem to fare badly internationally, and therefore, he argued, we should not worry too much about the economic development of these states. The fitted line was heavily influenced by China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and other large states with a very low GDP per capita at that time, and by small countries such as Luxembourg, Malta and Iceland, very small states with a relatively high GDP per capita.

This set me thinking. Did it follow that Malta, which then had a GDP per capita of about US\$4,000, was 6 times economically stronger than India,



Poster of the 1985 International Conference held in Malta.

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which at the time had a GDP per capita of only US\$300. The answer was, to my mind, obviously not. It was true that Malta generated more income per capita than India, but Malta was very economically vulnerable because its existence depended very highly on demand from abroad, and most of its physical resources including oil, wood, textiles and metal had to be imported from elsewhere.

This is how the idea of economic vulnerability of small states originated in my mind, and this led me to construct the so-called Economic Vulnerability Index. The index showed that small states tended to be highly exposed to external shocks due to their very high dependence on international trade. I argued that small states that wanted to develop economically had no option but to depend highly on exports (including tourism), due to their small domestic market; and hence very limited local consumer demand, and on imports due to their limited natural resource endowment

I wrote and published a few papers on this issue, some of which reached an international readership. I believe that this attracted the attention of Professor Salvino Busuttil, then Director of the Foundation for International Studies (FIS) of the University of Malta, who showed great interest in this matter.

In 1989, Professor Busuttil, together with Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, then Rector of the University of Malta, suggested that I set up a programme on Islands and Small States at the FIS, located in the building which is now the Valletta Campus. I was given an office at the &IS, as well as secretarial assistance (Mrs Maryrose Vella) to help me set up and run the Programme. A number of international conferences and workshops were successfully organised and a large number of international contacts were established and nurtured during the initial years of the Programme's existence. In 1993, the programme was upgraded to an Institute, thereby enabling it to also offer academic programmes of study leading to the award of degrees at and by the University of Malta.



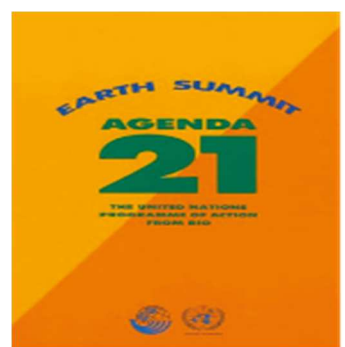
Professor Salvino Busuttil and Professor Peter Serracino Inglott .

The Influence of the Institute in the International Arena

The Economic Vulnerability Index

In June 1990, Malta's Ambassador to the UN (Dr Alex Borg Olivier) intervening during the meeting of Government Experts of Island Developing Countries and Donor Countries and Organisations, and referring to my work on the vulnerability index, stated that such an index would be "important because it reiterates that the per capita GDP of island developing countries is not by itself an adequate measurement of the level of development of island developing countries as it does not reflect the structural and institutional weaknesses and the several handicaps facing Island Developing Countries." Subsequently, UNCTAD engaged me to prepare a paper on the construction of a vulnerability index, which was one of the main documents discussed during a meeting of a Group of Experts on Island Developing Countries, held in Geneva, Switzerland, on 14-15 July 1992.

During the same year, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a coalition of small island and low-lying coastal developing states was set up during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in



In 1992, the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, also referred to as the Earth Conference) titled Agenda 21, referred to the special characteristics of small island states in its paragraph 17.

Rio de Janeiro. AOSIS successfully lobbied the United Nations to hold the first Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which was held in Barbados in 1994. As Director of the Islands and Small States Institute, I was invited to participate at this landmark conference and named as a member of the group of eminent persons for that conference. During the event, the Vulnerability Index featured prominently in the discussions, and there were frequent references to the quality work produced by the University of Malta on this subject. The outcome document of the Barbados global conference, called the Barbados Programme of Action, contained two paragraphs (Paragraphs 113 and 114) referring to the Vulnerability Index.



Left: The UN publicity picture relating to the 1994 Barbados Global Conference. The Vulnerability Index featured in the Barbados Programme of Action, the outcome document of this conference.

Below: The posters used to publicise the 2005 Mauritius and the 2014 Samoa Conference on the Sustainable Development of SIDS.



The reason why so much importance was assigned to the Vulnerability Index was mainly that small island states were mostly middle-income countries, a situation which weakened their calls for sustainable development support from the donor community. Arguments calling for support on vulnerability resulting in high exposure to external shocks strengthened the hand of small island states in the negotiation process.

In 1996, the Commission on Sustainable Development of the United Nations called on the relevant bodies of the United Nations system to accord priority to the development of the vulnerability index and as a result I was engaged, again as Director of the Islands and Small States Institute, to propose methods as to how the Economic Vulnerability Index could be computed. A meeting of a group of experts was held in New York in December 1997, concluding that “Judging from the results of a number of studies using a diversity of approaches ... as a group, small Island Developing States are more vulnerable than other groups of developing countries” (UN document A/53/65-E/1998/5).

Vulnerability and Resilience Framework

In 2000, in the face of clear evidence that a number of small states were developing successfully, the Institute started to develop what is known as the Economic Resilience Index, referring to policy

measures that enable countries to withstand the negative effects of external shocks. The work on the resilience index was supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat, which also funded the publication of four books on this subject and the organisation of three international conferences, all held in Malta. This led to the development of the so-called Vulnerability and Resilience (V&R) Framework, which was used to explain why small states, which are highly exposed to external shocks, manage to be successful economically if they adopt measures (including good governance) that enable them to withstand, recover from or counteract such shocks.

The V&R Framework was referred to in a 2010 report of the UN Secretary-General,¹ on the occasion of the five-year review of the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. Economic vulnerability and economic resilience featured in the two global conferences on the Sustainable Development of SIDS, that followed the 1994 Barbados conference these were respectively held in Mauritius in 2005 and Samoa in 2014. In both conferences, I represented the Institute and considerable reference was made to the excellent research work forthcoming from the University of Malta, which indeed is the oldest university among the world's small island states.

Collaboration with International Organisations

The Institute established various connections with International Organisations during its 30 years in operation, notably with the United Nations and its agencies (including UNEP, UNCTAD, UNESCO and UNDP) which had a SIDS unit or division as part of the organisation and had extended their support for the sustainable development of these states. The Institute also collaborated with the World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat in the interest of small states. The regional organisations with which the Institute collaborated included the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the Indian Ocean Commission and the Pacific Island Forum, all of which dedicate most of their work to the advancement of small states and territories in their respective region. The Institute also worked closely with the Alliance of Small Islands States (AOSIS), (particularly in the run-up to the 1994 Barbados Conference and the 2005 Mauritius conference), as well as with the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA).



Above: The head table during one of the sessions of the conference on competitiveness strategies in the EU small states, held in Luxembourg in 2016, in collaboration with the government of Luxembourg.



Right upper picture: One of the many ISSI training workshop in progress, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Right lower picture: Participants at an international conference organised in by the Commonwealth Secretariat in collaboration with the ISSI in November 2011.



¹ https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/65/115

Academic and Research Endeavour

Academic courses

The Institute offers four programmes of study, one of which leads to the PhD degree. Two of these lead to a Master of Arts level qualification, one in Islands and Small States Studies, MA(ISSS), which is mostly taught; and the other in Research on Islands and Small States, MA(RISS), which is mainly online and via distance learning.

A fourth course leads to the Diploma in Island Lace Studies, which is offered at the University of Malta Gozo Campus.

Research

The Institute has been very active in research work, most of which has found its way to publication, locally or abroad. Between 2000 and 2008, the Institute published books in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat, all focussing on issues relating to small states. The Institute was also instrumental in editing books published by Routledge on various matters relating to small states.



MA(ISSS) students who graduated in 2009, with the present author



A group of international students who were following the course leading to the MA(RISS) in 2019, with Dr Stefano Moncada (Course coordinator, fourth from left) and the present author



Books published by the ISSI in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Two books published by Routledge, UK, with contributions by many scholars, on themes associated with islands and small states.

Research carried out by the Institute led to the publication of two seminal papers, one published in 1995 in the journal *World Development* titled “Small Island Developing States and their Economic Vulnerability” and another published in *Oxford Development Studies* titled “Economic Vulnerability and Resilience: Concepts and Measurements”, with over 1,000 citations, the *World Development* paper is one of the most cited for a University of Malta publication.

The Institute also carried considerable research on climate change and was instrumental in the publishing of a special Issue of the *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management* (Vol. 10, issue 2), focussing on climate change in small island developing states. Another area of research in which the Institute excelled relates to health issues in small states. A major publication in this regard is “Resilience and 21st Century Public Health” in the *European Journal of Public Health*, (Vol. 27 Issue 5).

Since 2018, the Institute has been the proud administrative home of *Small States and Territories* (ISSN 2616-8006), a peer-reviewed, open access, on-line journal, published biannually, with Professor Godfrey Baldacchino as its Executive Editor. The Institute also publishes *Occasional Papers on Islands and Small States*, first issued in 1994. Earlier, the Institute was involved in the editing of other journals, including *INSULA: The International Journal of Island Affairs*, in collaboration with UNESCO, which dealt mostly with social, cultural and historical issues relating to small islands.

In its research endeavour, the Islands and Small States Institute has collaborated with many universities, mostly located in other islands and small states, including the University of Prince Edward Island (Canada), the University of the West Indies, the University of Mauritius, the University of the South Pacific, with its main campus in the Fiji Islands), and the University of the Sunshine Coast and Queensland University of Technology (both in Australia). The Institute also represented the UM at the inaugural meeting of RETI, the Network of Island Universities, held in Corsica, France, in 2010



In its research endeavour, the Islands and Small States Institute has collaborated with many universities, mostly located in other islands and small states. Pictures shows a meeting of academics from small islands states, held in the US Virgin Islands in 2004.

[Research Platforms](#)

The Institute has three research platforms. One of these focuses on health issues in small states, and is coordinated by Dr Natasha Azzopardi Muscat. As a result of this initiative, and due to the notable track record of the Institute relating to top-level policy research on health in small states, the Institute was designated in 2017 as a World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre on Health Systems and Policies in Small States.

Another research platform deals with climate change in islands and small states, coordinated by Dr Stefano Moncada. It smoothens and brokers collaboration between UM entities and individual UM academics interested in climate change issues and to promote research and teaching initiatives relating to climate change at the University of Malta and elsewhere.

The third research platform relates to island tourism, with the objective of promoting research and teaching initiatives relating to island tourism at Um and elsewhere. It is coordinated by Dr Marie Avellino, who is the Director of UM Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC).

Two Main Strands of Research on Small States

One of the main areas of the research work undertaken by the Institute is to answer the question as to why small states succeed economically, in spite of the constraints faced by these states in view of their small economic size.

There are two main explanatory strands in this regard. One strand is based on the argument that there are many advantages of being a small island state: such as a higher degree of social cohesion in the face of adversity, more flexibility in decision making, governance facilitated due to the possibility that the government would have a “helicopter” view of what’s going on, and an innate tendency for entrepreneurship. This stance is represented by Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, a researcher of international repute in island and small state studies, who argues that these tendencies are not essentially policy induced, but triggered spontaneously among various actors in such small Jurisdictions. Professor Baldacchino associates the economic success of many small island states with the resourcefulness, flexibility, street wisdom and economies of scope practised by islanders and small state citizens.

Another strand, which is often associated with the present author, is that there are major disadvantages associated with and inherent to small country size, notably a limited ability to benefit from economies of scale. Given that small states have no option but to rely on international trade due to their very small domestic markets and limited natural resource endowments, they are highly exposed to economic shocks, and therefore to economic vulnerability. This is exacerbated by a relatively high dependence on a very narrow range of exports, such as tourism, finance, sugar and bananas and an equally high dependence on strategic imports such as food, fuel and industrial supplies. According to this strand of research, many small states succeed economically in spite of their small economic size, with the success being attributed mainly to policy measures aimed at withstanding or recovering from such shocks. It is argued that small states that do not adopt such policy measures often end up as failed or almost failed states.

This summary of the two stances would seem to indicate that the difference between the two is that the first assumes that islanders and small state citizens are innately resourceful, and that their success is due to an inherent sociocultural and political ecology, activated automatically among individuals, households and organisations whereas the second stance assigns more importance to policy measures, suggesting that actions conducive to economic resilience need to be developed within a policy framework. It needs to be said here that the first stance does not exclude the benefits of good governance and associated policy measures, and the second does not exclude the possibility that there is an innate resourcefulness in the citizens of islands and small states. The main difference would seem to be one of emphasis, with the first focussing more on the character of citizens on the ground and the second emphasising the need for appropriate policy measures by the relevant authorities.

Conclusion

In its thirty years of existence, the Islands and Small States Institute has made important contributions to the teaching and research on island and small state issues, and has made its voice heard in international fora on the sustainable development of these states and territories. It has helped to enhance the body of research of the University of Malta, and placed the University as one of a few ‘world class’ teaching and research institutions of matters relating to islands and small states; and indeed, the University of Malta is the only university in the world offering doctoral degrees in this subject. The Institute remains well-positioned to continue playing an important role locally and internationally in this regard.

I wish to acknowledge and salute all members of the current and past Boards as well as the current and past administrative staff of the Institute for their contribution to its success throughout the years.

I have no doubt that the Institute will continue to develop and intensify its teaching and research endeavours, under the wise direction of Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, who chairs the Board of the Institute, with the energetic drive of Dr Stefano Moncada, who coordinates the post-graduate courses of the Institute, with the guidance of the other members of the Board of the Institute, and with the support and assistance of its administrative staff and research officers.



Meeting of the Board of the ISSI in May 2019. From left to right: Dr Mario T. Vassallo, Mr Robert Tabone, Professor Lino Briguglio (Director), Professor Godfrey Baldacchino (Chairperson), Dr Stefano Moncada, Dr Charles Youssif, Professor Roderick Pace. Missing from the picture (inset): Dr Natasha Azzopardi Muscat, Professor Saviour Formosa and Mr Raphael Axiak.