

Special Section: Comparing Small Island Developing States and Subnational Island Jurisdictions

Editorial Introduction

Sharing stories of island life, governance and global engagement: Research from a conference on island states and territories

James E. Randall

Institute of Island Studies

University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

jarandall@upe.ca

&

Arno Boersma

Island Impact

Former Director, Centre of Excellence for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, UNDP

arno@islandimpact.co

Abstract: The papers in this special section of *Small States & Territories* journal emerged from a conference held in Aruba during March 2019. Titled “Island states and island territories: Sharing stories of island life, governance and global engagement”, the conference attracted over one hundred Aruban, Caribbean and international scholars and practitioners to share their research and stories on how the political status of island jurisdictions – and specifically small island states (SIS) and subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) – approached issues of sustainable development, climate change and everyday life. These six papers reflect the nature of the conference and are a microcosm of Aruba itself: culturally and intellectually diverse, incorporating the influences of several regions and peoples, and reflecting an age range in authorship that bodes well for the future of island enquiry and island life.

Keywords: Aruba, conference, island governance, small island states, small island developing states, SIDS, subnational island jurisdictions, SNIJ

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Introduction

Over March 26 to 29, 2019, the first international conference on *Island states and island territories: Sharing stories of island life, governance and global engagement* was held in Oranjestad, Aruba, Dutch Caribbean. The conference was co-organized by UNDP’s Centre of Excellence for the Sustainable Development of SIDS, the University of Aruba, and the UNESCO Chair in Island Studies and Sustainability (University of Prince Edward Island, Canada; and University of Malta, Malta) (UNDP, 2020; UPEI, 2020). It brought together more than 100 local, regional and international practitioners and scholars with a passion for, and an intellectual curiosity regarding small island states and subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs). Part of the rationale for this conference was to provide a platform for those examining the similarities and differences between island states and territories, the relative capacities of these jurisdictions to implement sustainable practices, the relationships they have developed with

their respective metropolises, and the impacts of island political status on the daily lives of islanders.

Although there have been many conferences on island issues, this was the first to focus explicitly on the ways in which the political status of islands interacted with institutions, stakeholders and the everyday lives of islanders to produce social, economic, political and environmental outcomes. To give more specific direction to potential participants, we as organisers posed several leading questions that brought to life the kind of topics that might be addressed by participants. For example:

- To what extent are SNIJs less autonomous and sovereign than SIDS?
- Why has the impetus for small island independence stalled since 1984 and why are island independence referenda planned only for the SNIJs of New Caledonia and Bougainville?
- Are United Kingdom SNIJs more autonomous than French or Dutch ones?
- Is offshore banking better regulated on SIDS than on SNIJs?
- Can SIDS and SNIJs just as competently achieve the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals?, and,
- Is there better climate change preparedness in sovereign island states (because of localised decision-making) or in non-sovereign ones (because of easier access to metropolitan funding)?

The Conference Organizing Committee wanted to make sure that this event was not about foreign experts coming to share their latest research findings with other foreign experts, in a setting devoid of any local input, commentary or relevance. Therefore, there was an explicit effort to incorporate the research and stories of Aruban and Caribbean practitioners and academics. For example, the Prime Minister of Aruba and Minister of General Affairs, Integrity, Energy, Innovation and Government Organization, the Hon. Evelyn Wever-Croes, delivered a keynote address on good governance; while the Prime Minister of Sint Maarten and Minister of General Affairs, the Hon. Leona Romeo-Marlin, delivered a keynote on island resilience and governance in the aftermath of the devastating 2017 hurricane season. Both addresses spoke to how their islands and island governments were trying to navigate the relationships with their metropolises in response to sustainable development challenges and the consequences of extreme weather events. Many of the keynote presentations were livestreamed and the general Aruban public was invited to attend an evening keynote presentation. There was also an attempt to include the work by young and emerging researchers. More than one-third of the conference papers were presented by students. It is interesting to note that the location for the conference was impacted by one of the key threats to small islands; extreme weather events. Originally scheduled to take place at the University of Sint Maarten in 2018, it had to be moved due to the catastrophic effects of Hurricane Irma in September 2017. Fortunately, Aruba, a sister island within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, agreed to host the event.

Aruba was keen to welcome the international participants as it positions itself at the crossroads of Europe (being a Dutch Caribbean island), North America (as its main source of economic revenue) and South America (so close, it is visible on a clear day). Aruba was a fitting location as it has its own challenges and opportunities as a subnational, autonomous country within the Kingdom, as well as being a pioneer among small island jurisdictions in adopting and implementing the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. Its open,

curious and diverse culture made it an appealing location to host the UNDP's Centre of Excellence for SIDS as well as many conferences fostering island-to-island, and island-to-mainland knowledge exchange (Aruba Today, 2019a; 2019b).

For the University of Aruba, the conference meant engagement by many of its staff as well as students in topics of sustainable development. Twenty local University of Aruba students joined the sessions as part of their curriculum. The gathering was especially timely as the University was preparing for its new European Union-funded SISSTEM program, short for Sustainable Island Solutions through STEM studies (University of Aruba, 2019a). This new program addresses the premise that the vulnerability of small island states and territories to environmental and economic shocks requires a multidisciplinary, collaborative response among institutions and disciplines to achieve sustainable development. By connecting future innovators, educators, researchers and leaders of islands to solve the most pressing challenges, the goal of this new program made the University a perfect match to co-host the conference.

Review of the papers in this special section

This special section is the outcome of a call to those who presented their research at the Aruba conference. The six papers address topics related to islands from the Pacific, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, all within the general topic of sustainable development.

The first paper by Godfrey Baldacchino is an extension of his earlier work describing the entrepreneurial nature of small islands. In this collection, his paper focuses less on the characteristics and behaviour of island institutions and more on the behaviour of households and individuals. In keeping with the conference theme of sharing stories, he asks us to look beyond the political parties, the corporations, and the media outlets to examine how being a resident of a subnational island jurisdiction affects their day-to-day lives. What does living on a SNIJ mean for an islander's prospects for employment, education and mobility? More so than the (already fairly mobile and connected) residents of island states, those who call SNIJs their home, and have the social and economic capital available to do so, lead trans-territorial lives. This means that they are more likely to have second homes in their metropolises, send their children to metropole universities, and maintain strong social relationships with family and friends overseas, reinforced by frequent travel (Baldacchino, 2020).

Off the western coast of Italy, the two islands of Corsica and Sardinia are separated by a strait of only thirteen kilometres. Despite their geographical proximity, these two SNIJs have faced contrasting political trajectories. In his article, Marcel A. Farinelli provides us with a picture of how their relationships with their respective metropolises of France and Italy have affected the political and cultural evolution of these two territories differently. He takes special care to describe how nationalist movements have waxed and waned over the centuries, and how the characteristics of nationalism and their association with their continental states continue to have a lasting impact on the governance of the two neighbouring islands (Farinelli, 2020).

In his paper, Patrick Lévêque takes the theory of political personalism that has been applied to small states and considers whether it can also be applied to subnational island jurisdictions. By evaluating the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island against the six dimensions of personalism, he concludes that the theory can be applied more broadly to a variety of small political entities. By expanding the scope of personalism theory, this paper provides a foundation for future research on how characteristics such as the level of autonomy, development, or interjurisdictional governance may interact with personalism on many kinds of polities (Lévêque, 2020).

Much has been written about the benefits of being a SNIJ, including assistance from the metropole during political and environmental crises, access to investment capital and employment opportunities, and funding for health, social services and education. Loïza Rauzduel's paper on the social and environmental development of the two French overseas island territories of Guadeloupe and Martinique points to several of the possible disadvantages of this territory-metropole relationship. In particular, she suggests that progress by Guadeloupe and Martinique on meeting their Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) may have been hampered because they have relied too much on using a continental French approach and too little on adopting paths that were based on their own unique characteristics and contexts. Despite this criticism, Rauzduel concludes that the situation is changing, and that these two island territories are increasingly focusing their sustainable development strategies on their own island environments and strengthening their relationships within the Caribbean (Rauzduel, 2020).

Hall, Kostka and MacDonald focus on a topic that is relevant to the governments of all small island states and territories; the capacity to manage international political regulatory responsibilities with little money and few public employees. In their paper, they focus on the Pacific archipelago of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and its obligations as a signatory to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Using a series of semi-structured interviews with representatives of environmental organisations in the FSM, their paper asks those who are responsible for managing conservation whether they believe the benefits of being a signatory outweigh the resultant challenges. One of their overall conclusions is that while most of those interviewed believe participation in the CBD holds value, this still may not lead to any substantive positive impacts on conserving and preserving endangered species on the archipelago (Hall, Kostka and MacDonald, 2020).

In the context of sustainable development, the concept of the circular economy has been gaining prominence conceptually and empirically. If indeed we can minimise waste and reduce pollution in the production and consumption chain, we will be much closer to achieving the UN SDGs. Given that small islands have so often been conceptualised as closed systems, it should come as no surprise to find them being used to analyse the feasibility of the circular economy. In their paper, Bauke Feenstra and Luc Alofs assess the feasibility of the circular economy by looking at the operations of four waste management companies on Aruba. They conclude that the small scale of the island, the limits on the flow of goods and capital on the island, and the weak regulatory environment make it very difficult to achieve circular entrepreneurialism on Aruba. However, they also recommend ways in which the goals associated with the circular economy can be realised (Feenstra & Alofs, 2020).

Conclusion

Although the papers in this section constitute only a small number of the papers presented at the conference, the topics represented cover many of the objectives envisioned by the organisers. They are comparative; they address island life at the level of the household, the company, and the community; and they allow us to better understand the relationships between islands and metropolises. Although islands from many different regions of the world were represented at the conference and in this special section, it is encouraging that regional Caribbean issues and student authors were so strongly represented. It bodes well for the future of research on island life as we plan for the second international conference on island states and island territories.

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The full conference programme is available (University of Aruba, 2019b).

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