SPECIAL SECTION: Sustainable island futures: A collaborative research project

Guest Editorial

Sustainable development across small island states and subnational island jurisdictions: The role of public perception

James E. Randall
Island Studies Program
University of Prince Edward Island
Canada
jarandall@upei.ca

ABSTRACT: The papers in this special section report some of the results of a larger, twelve-island project examining the role of governance and public perception in addressing questions of sustainability, sustainable development and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Special attention is given to the similarities and differences in attitudes of islanders from small island states (SIS) and subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs). The principal methods for data collection were online surveys and follow-up focus groups of participants drawn from stakeholder groups on the islands. The geographic scope of results include pairwise comparisons of small island states and territories, and broader comparisons across all island units in the project.

Introduction

The differences between small island states (SIS) and subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) is growing increasingly fuzzy. Sovereign states no longer have a monopoly in maintaining and developing international relations. An increasing number of subnational jurisdictions (SNJs) and particularly subnational island units, engage very effectively in comparable (para)diplomacy (Bartmann, 2006; Kuznetsov, 2014). Two-hundred-and-six states and territories have their own National Olympic Committees and were eligible to take part in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics: these include the SNIJs of American Samoa, Cayman Islands and Cook Islands. The Organisation of Eastern Caribben States (OECS) includes Montserrat (a SNIJ) as a full member. The province of Quebec (a SNJ) is a full participating member of the Permanent Delegation of Canada to UNESCO. And the status of Taiwan is subject to debate (e.g. Anderson, 2013; Krasner, 2001). In addition, small island states and subnational island jurisdictions are increasingly proving to be resilient, nimble and entrepreneurial in their political and economic relationships with their metropoles as well as with other states (Adalsteinsson & Steinthorsson, 2015; Baldacchino, 2015; Randall, 2015).

Based on this background, the papers in this special section represent a small part of a larger collaborative research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC). Started in 2017, this larger project pools the knowledge and expertise of researchers and institutions on twelve islands; six island states and six semi-

autonomous island jurisdictions. The overall goal of the initiative was to develop a better understanding of the sustainable development practices and potential of small islands, and especially the role that governance and international relationships play in achieving a more sustainable future. This is important not only for the long-term future of small islands as entities, but also for the lives and livelihoods of individual islanders. This initiative builds upon an existing body of theory and empirical work on the development trajectory of small island states and subnational island jurisdictions, including comparisons of metrics between microstates and larger political jurisdictions (Armstrong, De Kervenoael, Li & Read, 1998; Armstrong & Read, 2000) and, more specifically, between small island states and SNIJs (McElroy & Parry, 2012; McElroy & Pearce, 2006; McElroy & Sanborn, 2005). The evidence from some of this latter research is that SNIJs have outperformed their small island state counterparts across many indicators, including having twice the per capita income and half the infant mortality rate (McElroy & Perry, 2012). Despite this evidence, this debate is not entirely settled (Bertram, 2015).

Moreover, the existing research has rarely approached these questions from the perspective of the relationship between sovereignty and sustainability and has not thoroughly engaged island institutions and peoples in these assessments in any meaningful manner. Despite some discomfort in referring to islands as crucibles or living labs, these labels do allow the public at large to better understand the '*futurability*' of all human spaces (Baldacchino & Niles, 2011). Stated more succinctly, the specific objective of this larger research project was to assess the extent and role of island political status (especially SIS vs. SNIJ) on the sustainability and lives of the people living in these places. The goals stated above parallel those of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and extend this priority to subnational island jurisdictions.

A parallel overarching goal that extends beyond the life of this project is to contribute to changing the rhetoric surrounding the sustainability of small islands. Especially among decision-makers and the media, islands and islanders are too often judged by what they do not have, including people, natural resources and competitive advantages (Baldacchino, 2007). Perhaps starting with Epeli Hau`ofa's (1994) seminal argument that Pacific islanders were not living on "islands in a far sea" but are instead the inhabitants of a "sea of islands", a countervailing narrative has taken hold in academic discourse. This sees many island societies as resilient, nimble, flexible, connected, and adaptable to external events, including climate change, (Lazarus, 2012), global tourism impacts (Scheyvens & Momset, 2008), and the consequences of natural disasters (Kelman & Khan, 2013; Kelman & Randall, 2018). Oceans are increasingly being viewed as routes and highways rather than barriers. Small island states, some now referring to themselves as 'large ocean states', as well as SNIJs, have developed much more sustainable capacities. Rather than being poverty-stricken and destitute, many island jurisdictions might be more accurately described now as innovative and entrepreneurial, including those that follow a Blue or Oceans Economy approach (Campbell et al., 2013; Pauli, 2010; Smith-Godfrey, 2016).

A key methodological step in this project was the development and delivery of a perceptual survey of representatives from stakeholder groups on the twelve island units. Participants were asked about their level of satisfaction with their island institutions (e.g., the judiciary, civil service, police), how government has managed the delivery of services, their relationships to other jurisdictions, and the participants' own personal attitudes towards sustainability and the Sustainable Development goals (SDGs). A total of 782 responses were received from six stakeholder groups on the twelve islands. The results reported in two of the papers in this section rely extensively on this survey data. Another key element of the

larger project was to adopt a pairwise comparison of islands that exhibited similarities in one or more characteristics, including population size, colonial and/or post-colonial history, geographical region, economic structure, and area size. In one of the papers in this section (Stoddart et al., 2021), Iceland is paired with Newfoundland and Labrador to compare their experiences surrounding their respective financial crises; while in another paper (Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2021) public perception of the SDGs is compared between the Indian Ocean islands of La Réunion (a SNIJ) and Mauritius (a SIS).

The articles in this section

Although occurring years apart, Iceland and the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador have each experienced financial crises that have shaken the economic sustainability of companies and government institutions, and adversely affected the well-being of island households. For the island state of Iceland, it was the 2008 global banking crisis that cascaded into political upheaval and widespread public protest. Although mitigated somewhat by federal government assistance, Newfoundland's crisis is still unfolding: it has been precipitated by the decisions of past and present provincial governments to build and financially support a hydroelectric megaproject in Labrador (Muskrat Falls), resulting in massive cost overruns that have threatened the financial solvency of the province. Stoddart et al. (2021) point out that it is not uncommon for small island jurisdictions such as Iceland and Newfoundland & Labrador to depend on natural resource extraction, and that social identities and political cultures on small islands tend to include a form of island nationalism or what they refer to as political hubris. The paper makes the argument that the crises on both of these islands were associated with a failure to heed the warning signs of experts that were then worsened by communications gaps: a phenomenon not unusual in territories associated with informal processes of social interaction and communication. However, while public anger in Iceland led the government to take proactive and, arguably, transformative political steps to contain the crisis, public anger in Newfoundland has not (yet) forced a similar fundamental political crisis.

While it may not be portrayed as a crisis in the same manner as above, the success or failure of states and territories to meet the Sustainable Development Goals may also be viewed as a crisis in-the-making. As with the financial emergencies in Iceland and Newfoundland, public attitudes can shape the nature of the response to inaction. In the paper by Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al. (2021), the authors use the context of Mauritius and La Réunion to show how perceptions of government action on the SDGs might lead to stronger policies. One of the contributions of this research is that, despite the recognized importance of public perception in shaping policy, relatively little is known at the national level about public attitudes regarding the SDGs (Guan et al., 2019). The SDGs can serve as a powerful framework to enhance a jurisdiction's goals and aspirations. However, as Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al. (2021) note, there are major gaps on both island units in how stakeholders believe government is addressing issues related to the SDGs and the perceived importance of these goals, including addressing persistent inequalities, climate change and the protection of the physical environment.

The paper by Russell et al. (2021) explores the existence of a shared islander identity, especially as it pertains to perceptions of government institutions and public services and self-reflections of islander quality-of-life. Using responses to a set of closed-ended survey questions, as well as follow-up focus groups on ten of the project's island states and territories, it was found that there was a consistent and significant gap between perceptions of the importance of government institutions and their ability to deliver public services. This gap does not bode well for the goal of obtaining citizen support for government action.

Conclusion

The premise of all the papers in this section is that public participation and perception of government institutions and planning is critical to the success of island institutions. Although there may be commonalities in island responses, governing systems still need to adapt to the unique characteristics of island life. Too often, policies and plans are adopted from continental jurisdictions, often much larger in size, without a critical assessment of the particularities of small island jurisdictions and the input of island populations. This approach, and the poor outcomes associated with it, will likely continue to result in unsustainable island futures.

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