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THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN STUDYING ISLANDS AND SMALL STATES



The Islands and Small States Institute at the University of Malta promotes research on the economic, social, cultural, ecological and geographical aspects of islands and small states.

Introduction and brief background

The Islands and Small States Institute (ISSI) 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. During its thirty years of existence, the Islands and Small States Institute was instrumental in producing a considerable number of scientific publications on islands and small states, (some of which are internationally considered as seminal work), organised various international conferences and workshops, collaborated closely with many international organisations, and ran various academic programmes. Today, the Institute offers a suite of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes of study, among which the only Doctoral programme known to specialise in islands and small states studies.

The impact of the Islands and Small States Institute on the small island state literature is significant: there is hardly any noteworthy

publication on islands small states studies that does not cite work produced, or inspired, by academics from the University of Malta affiliated to the Institute. 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 and heft. The work of the Islands and Small States Institute contributed to the development of two key school of thoughts in this regard.

The first advocated, by Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, a scholar of international repute, 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, and governance facilitated due to the possibility that the government would have a ‘helicopter’ view of what’s going on, including an innate tendency for entrepreneurship and resourcefulness. The strong and unavoidable reliance on export markets and international trade, rather than a weakness, is a tonic that obliges the actors in small economies to seek and exploit competitive niches (*Baldacchino and Bertram, 2009*).



Stefano Moncada is Director of the Islands and Small States Institute of the University of Malta.



Godfrey Baldacchino is Professor & Pro-Rector of the University of Malta and Malta’s Ambassador for Islands & Small States.



Lino Briguglio is a Professor of Economics and former Director of the Islands and Small States Institute.



The Parliament of Malta.

The second, promoted by Professor Lino Briguglio, also a scholar of international repute, argues 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 (rather than because) 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 prompted the adoption of the so-called Vulnerability and Resilience Framework, a concept that was referred to by many international organisations, particularly the Commonwealth Secretariat, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in their studies and policy reports relating to small states, to argue that these states need to be supported to enable them to strengthen

their economic governance for resilience- building purposes (*Briguglio et al., 2009*).

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 focusing more on the character of citizens on the ground and the second highlighting the need for appropriate policy measures by the relevant authorities.

These debates, together with the study of the nature and workings of small sovereign states (however defined) and non-sovereign territories, have been captured by a dedicated journal, hosted by the Islands and Small States Institute, the *Small States*



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and Territories, encouraging a truly pluri-disciplinary approach to the study of small jurisdictions.

The Islands and Small States Institute, in the past decade, has also been specialising in teaching and research in the areas of climate change, public health and tourism, dedicating specific research platforms to these three key dimensions for islands and small states.

Climate Change Platform

The Climate Change Platform (CCP) is a collaborative project between different academic entities at the University of Malta. Its main objectives are to facilitate collaboration between academic entities, individual scholars, and students, interested in climate change issues, and to promote research and teaching initiatives relating to climate change. The Platform provides various facilities to encourage such collaboration and promotion of research, including, periodical issue of reports and press releases that provide a summary of climate change related activities by University entities; information about research and teaching activities, as well as participation in climate change related conferences by individual academics and entities, and promotion and show-casing of climate change related research. Some key research areas include climate change mitigation in the transportation sector, climate change adaptation of vulnerable coastal communities in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), energy saving and efficiency in buildings, climate change negotiations, and climatology and climate change impacts, always in the context of islands and small states.

The work of the Islands and Small States Institute has also been instrumental to support the diplomatic work of the Alliances of Small Island States (AOSIS), especially in its early days, assisting in the preparatory work prior to international negotiation meetings, and in assessing the results of the outcomes from a small island states perspective.

Small States Health Platform

The Small States Health Platform (SSHP) within the Islands and Small States Institute aims to promote research on health systems in small states and to provide a depository for such research. The

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work of this platform aims to provide additional scientific evidence to support the work of the World Health Organisation (WHO) related to policy capacity and governance of health systems in small states.

Through this initiative, the Islands and Small States Institute brings together the academic experience of researchers on health systems in small states and encourages a multidisciplinary approach to such research. In addition, the SSHP organises activities relating to such research, and supports the Islands and Small States Institute in its role as a WHO Collaborating Centre on Health Systems and Policies in Small States. Due to its notable track record of top-level policy research on resilience, economy, environment and health in small states, the Institute has been working with the WHO as a centre of excellence, especially to develop frameworks and policies for strengthening resilience in small state health systems.

Some of the recent activities carried out by the platform and the WHO Collaborating Centre refer, specifically, to small states and access to medicines, discussing the relatively higher costs incurred by small states and the possibility to promote a *small state alliance* to increase the bargaining power when purchasing medicines. Other initiatives range from tackling the issue of rare diseases in small states to addressing cancer policy from a small states perspective. The SSHP also offers specific training programmes, building on its unique areas of expertise, to other small states and generally to existing WHO networks.

Further initiatives of the SSHP include socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on small states. The disproportionately over-dependence of small states on few(er) resources, such as international tourism, and the challenges to maintain high quality in their health services, pose a serious threat to many small states.

This is even more of a concern if the World is about to enter a new era of pandemics (Ågerfalk *et al.*, 2020), which many small states in the medium and long-term might find difficult to sustain, both financially and from a societal point of view. This is why current work of the SSHP is looking at ‘Planetary Health Approach to Recovery in Small States’, prompting a profound rethink of how to invest in resilient health systems, and how to inform policy to identify ‘win-win’ measures to support climate change adaptation and healthy systems, especially in SIDS.

Island Tourism Platform

The Island tourism platform (ITP) was set up in 2017 as a collaborative project between the Islands and Small States Institute and the Institute for Tourism Travel and Culture (ITTC), also at the University of Malta. Its mandate is to facilitate collaboration between these entities and individual academics interested in island tourism issues and to promote research and teaching initiatives relating to island tourism. The activities of the ITP range from specialized workshops and seminars to collaborative projects and publications, conducting research, among other fields, of over- and under-tourism, and sustainable tourism development. The ITP also cooperate with other organisations in research and dissemination of knowledge. In this regard, the ITP collaborates on an ongoing basis with the Observatory on Tourism in the European



The historic buildings of Valletta, capital of Malta.

Islands (OTIE), mostly in the organisation of a tourism summer-school.

Current and future research activities include various assessments of the COVID-19 crises on tourism development, investigating how, and to what degree, tourism in islands and small states is being impacted, is adapting, and whether innovation in the offer and the formulas of tourism services can provide new avenues to foster sustainable development, especially in the context of SIDS.

Future research

The future of islands and small states studies is bright. There is a growing interest in this specific area, and many international actors are increasingly recognising the features that can hamper the economic development of islands and small states, including their economic vulnerability. However, it is also recognised that governance in these jurisdictions as well as their inhabitants' resourcefulness, cultural practices, traditional knowledge and skills (Nunn & Mimura, 1997), often enable them to build their resilience - especially in the face of external shocks.

The Islands and Small States Institute has initiated a series of cooperation agreements with many islands and small state universities and research centres, conducting collaborative research, offering training and consultancy in the interest of islands and small states. This has the potential of possibly fostering steadier and more effective cooperation than traditional ones, stemming from a common understanding of concepts like

islandness and *smallness*, often not completely accounted for by large international donors.

With its 12,000 students and long history, the University of Malta is the oldest and largest small state university in the world. Islands and Small States Institute takes pride in serving as UoM's focal point to advance an epistemology grounded in an appreciation of a specific geographical and political predicament, shared also by many other jurisdictions in the Commonwealth and the world beyond.

For further information please visit www.um.edu.mt/issi or email stefano.moncada@um.edu.mt.

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