



GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT WORKING PAPER SERIES

Small States in the Pacific: Sovereignty, Vulnerability, and Regionalism¹

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Working Paper 2023/1

The Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs) are a unique and valuable area for the analysis of small states. These islands exhibit layers of diversity in terms of sovereignty, development, dependency, political activity, and regional interaction. Understanding the role and influence of small states in international politics can be greatly enhanced by studying the Pacific region. This Working Paper explores the concept of small states in the Pacific, the ongoing process of decolonisation, how small states use their sovereignty to guard against vulnerability, and the opportunities presented by regional organisation in addressing common challenges.

What Constitutes a Small State in the Pacific Islands?

Before delving into the specific characteristics of small states in the Pacific, it is important to understand what constitutes a "small state" in this context. The traditional understanding of state sovereignty as being either independent or dependent does not adequately capture the diverse political arrangements in the Pacific Islands. Factors such as geography, land and sea areas, and populations play a significant role in determining the status of a Pacific Island polity.

The Pacific Islands exhibit a range of political arrangements, from fully independent states to territories with varying degrees of autonomy. Some islands have achieved independence through the decolonisation process, while others remain under the governance of larger nations.

It is important to note that decolonisation does not always result in full independence. The ongoing process of decolonisation in the Pacific has led to a complex landscape of political arrangements that defy simple categorization.

Sovereignty and Guarding Against Vulnerability

Small states in the Pacific face unique challenges due to their limited resource bases and vulnerability to external forces. Sovereignty plays a crucial role in how these states navigate these challenges and guard against vulnerability. Despite their size and limited resources, small states in the Pacific have employed various strategies to assert their sovereignty and protect their interests.

One such strategy is the use of diplomatic and political engagement with larger nations and international organisations. By actively participating in international relations, small states can influence global agendas and advance their specific national interests. This engagement can take the form of bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral agreements and arrangements, allowing small states to assert their sovereignty and pursue mutually beneficial partnerships.

Another strategy employed by small states in the Pacific is the development of regional organisations. These organisations provide opportunities for small states to address common challenges and cooperate in areas such as trade, development, and security. The Pacific

¹ This Working Paper is drawn from C. Hawksley and N. Georgeou, (2023). 'Small states in the Pacific: Sovereignty, Vulnerability, and Regionalism', Chapter 8 of Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff (eds) Agency, Security and Governance of Small States: a Global Perspective (Routledge), pp. 139-157. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003356011>

region has seen the emergence of regional organisations like the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which have facilitated collaboration and collective action among small states.

Addressing Common Challenges through Regional Organisation

Regional organisation in the Pacific has presented small states with opportunities to address common challenges and vulnerabilities. The integration of global trade and development, urbanisation, and climate change have posed significant challenges for small states in the region. Through regional cooperation, small states have been able to develop strategies and initiatives to tackle these challenges.

One of the key areas where regional organisation has been instrumental is in addressing food systems and food security. Small states in the Pacific heavily rely on agriculture and fisheries for their food supply, making them particularly vulnerable to disruptions in these sectors. Regional organisations have facilitated cooperation in areas such as sustainable agriculture, fisheries management, and trade to ensure food security for small states in the face of global integration and changing environmental conditions.

Additionally, regional organisations have provided platforms for small states to collectively address issues related to urbanisation and climate change. Rapid urbanisation in the Pacific has created unique challenges in terms of infrastructure, housing, and social services. By working together, small states can share experiences, best practices, and resources to effectively manage urbanisation and create sustainable and resilient cities.

Climate change presents a significant threat to small states in the Pacific, particularly in terms of rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and the degradation of natural resources. Regional organisations have played a vital role in advocating for the interests of small states in global climate negotiations and facilitating cooperation in adaptation and mitigation

efforts. By leveraging their collective voice, small states have been able to influence global climate agendas and secure support for climate resilience and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Small states in the Pacific use their sovereignty, both individually and collectively, to influence larger global agendas and address common challenges. Through diplomatic engagement, regional organisation, and cooperation, these states are able to guard against vulnerability and advance their specific national interests. The Pacific region serves as a dynamic laboratory for understanding the complexities and opportunities of small-state politics in an interconnected world.

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Full article available at:

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