

# **THE SMALLNESS OF SMALL STATES: BETWEEN POWER AND VULNERABILITY**

**Happy Tracy Stephanie<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

This essay examines the power of small states in global development diplomacy. This essay seeks to address the following things. The power and obstacles of small states in global development diplomacy, how small states can increase their power, and the limitations of small state diplomacy. The most important part of this essay is the analysis related to the strategies to increase the power of small states. This essay argues that the sources of power of small states in global development diplomacy are the rise of non-traditional issues and their inherent resilience. Moreover, small states can use strategies of coalition building, issue prioritisation, and agenda setting to increase their power in global negotiations through intergovernmental organisations, focusing on the United Nations.

**Keywords:** diplomacy, small states, power, vulnerability

## **Introduction**

About two-thirds of the United Nations (UN) members are small states (<https://www.diplomacy.edu/small-states-diplomacy>). According to Diana Panke (2012, 316), a small state is a "state with less than average financial resources in a particular negotiation setting." Just like their bigger counterparts, small states pursue the same interests of security, prosperity, and wellbeing of their citizens. They also conduct their diplomacy using the same diplomatic instruments as larger states. However, how small states conduct diplomacy attracts deep examinations because unlike bigger states, small states can experience some difficulties in conducting international negotiations due to limited budgets (Panke, 2012;317).

In this essay, I shall argue that: First, the sources of power of small states in global development diplomacy are the rise of non-traditional issues and their inherent resilience. Second, small states can use three main strategies of coalition building, issue prioritisation, and agenda setting to increase their power in global negotiations through Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs), focusing on the UN. Due to the

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<sup>1</sup>Happy Tracy Stephanie is a Master of Diplomacy candidate at The Australian National University, Alumni Department of International Relations, UPN "Veteran" Yogyakarta, Email: [happy.t.stephanie@gmail.com](mailto:happy.t.stephanie@gmail.com)

broad issues in global development diplomacy, this essay mainly focuses on how small states diplomacy affect the issues of climate change and ocean. Every country in this world experiences the effects of climate change (Goal 13: Climate Action,” United Nations Development Programme, accessed October 20, 2018, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-13-climate-action.html>). Meanwhile, oceans which cover more than two-thirds of the earth's surface are crucial for global food security and human health (“Oceans and Seas,” Division for Sustainable Development Goals, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/oceanandseas>). Thus, the importance of climate change and oceans for sustainable development is widely recognised by the international community, including small states.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first section examines the obstacles and power of small states in international negotiations. Second, the essay presents coalition building, issue prioritisation, and agenda-setting as strategies for small states to increase their power. The third section identifies the limitations of small state diplomacy. The conclusion as the last part synthesises all sections.

## **Discussion**

### **Obstacles and Power of Small States**

Financial means is the main obstacle for small states in conducting international negotiations. According to Panke, due to financial obstacles, small states can experience three main difficulties: difficulty in developing good instructions, in actively participating in negotiation processes, and in the effectiveness of shaping strategies (Panke, 2012;317). First, because of fewer financial budgets, understaffed small state ministries are more inclined to be slower in developing and preparing national interests than ministries from bigger countries (Panke, 2012;316). Second, small states are more likely to have small numbers of delegations. The logic is that the fewer delegations in IGOs, the lower its activity rate. This condition can lead to the higher the individual for each delegation and the less time to engage in networking with other states to draft bargaining demands, concessions, or compromises. Third, small states do not have enough capability to credibly threaten other states to cooperate through offering side payments. They also have more difficulties in

preparing compelling arguments due to fewer ministries and experts (Panke, 2012: 316-317). However, this does not mean small states are weak states. They can take advantages of the rise of non-traditional issues and their inherent resilience as the sources of power.

The rise of non-traditional issues gives power and opportunities for small states to pursue their interests in international negotiations. The high exposure of interdependencies due to non-traditional issues such as climate change, pandemic diseases, and other threats make it difficult for other states to ignore small states in deciding various international policies (Rienner, 2009: 6). Hence, as interdependence increases, more issues become an international agenda. Small states can use this as the source of power through IGOs. To illustrate, by establishing and advocating the sustainability of ocean as global issue in the UN, Pacific Island states were successful in securing the issue for Goal 14 under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This was a significant political achievement, focusing Pacific Island states as global ocean guardians. The establishment of SDGs in general also illustrates the important roles of small states in achieving global goals (Quirck & Hanich, 2016;68). Second, inherent resilience is the source of small states' power. According to DiploFoundation resilience that small states have to economic vulnerability can affect their bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, especially economic diplomacy. Resilience can be inherent or nurtured. It is the category of inherent resilience that is particularly relevant in small states context in this essay. Inherent resilience emerges "from positive factors of geography or resources over which a state has no direct control." For example, Pacific Island countries waters are known as the world's largest tuna fishing ground (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/sep/02/pacific-islands-fail-to-agree-plan-to-protect-tuna>). It also occupies half of the earth's sea surface. These are natural factors of resilience that offset disadvantages of smallness.

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the inherent resilience of small states can turn into threats. To illustrate, Pacific Island countries that constantly experience the rise of sea level as the impact of global warming. To overcome such threats and increase their power, small states can apply three strategies of coalition building, issue prioritisation, and agenda setting that will be unpacked on the next section.

## **Strategies to Increase the Power of Small States**

### **1. IGOs and Coalition Building**

Small states can establish coalitions in IGOs to increase their power. The basic question is why would states (big or small) be interested in IGOs such as the UN? The simple answer is that IGOs serve various functions such as coalition building that can help states to achieve their interests. Major IGOs such as the UN provide forums in which small states can engage with relatively low cost with representatives from many states, which can be expensive and difficult if it is done by bilateral engagements (Maley, 2018)). To illustrate, small states with limited budgets can spend less money by sending their delegations to the UN headquarters in which they can meet all 193 representatives of UN member states. The UN and other IGOs provide arenas where states with the same or different interest can meet each other to discuss, argue, cooperate, or disagree (Archer, 2001;73). The UN is the only place where all member states have permanent representatives (ambassadors) throughout the year, so that when an issue emerges (related to national interests of states), formal or informal conversations can take place in a timely manner (Wiseman & Basu, 2013;326).

As Christophe DuPont argues, there are two main functions of coalitions. First, coalitions function as a means for increasing or maximising bargaining power for its members (Dupont, 1996;76). Second, coalitions function as a means for managing the complexity of processes as well as issues within a regime where a common platform that incorporates the minimal demands of each member of the coalition is easier to handle and negotiate than the sum of individual items (Carter, 2015;207). These two core functions are important for small states with limited negotiation resources.

Through IGOs, small states can establish coalitions concerning certain issues that can increase their bargaining leverage (Henrikson, 2018) and collective power, especially when it comes to the decision-making process such as voting (Karns & Mingst, 2013;147). They also can engage in coalition building to constrain the behaviour of other states. IGOs also provide arenas for small states to seek new partners, maintain their coalitions with old partners, or to collaborate in pursuing collective interests. Small states can influence negotiation outcomes if they establish winning coalitions or blocking minorities. In fact, since the 1960s, group diplomacy through coalition building has been spread widely in many IGOs (Panke, 2012;321).

To illustrate, coalitions provides opportunities for Pacific Island countries as small states to leverage a pacific voice in the climate change negotiations. For decades, the global climate change regime has been an arena of complex diplomacy involving various actors and issues. The climate regime is built upon the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which includes 196 states as parties to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Kyoto Protocol (Carter, 2015;205-206). Overall, there are various coalitions that includes 14 Pacific Island states (Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) in the climate change regime (Fry & Tarte, 2015;4-5). Among 21 coalition blocs that have actively participated in the climate change regime, 6 blocs associated with one or more Pacific countries (Carter, 2015;209).

One of the coalitions is Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Founded in 1990, the AOSIS has and continues to be an important bloc in the formal negotiations with resonance to the needs of Pacific Island states. It has a membership of 44 small island states and low-lying coastal states that are very vulnerable to climate change. All 14 Pacific Island countries are part of the AOSIS (Carter, 2015;211). The main function of AOSIS is as an ad hoc for lobbying and negotiating the voice of Small Island Development States (SIDS) within the UN system (<http://aosis.org/about/>).The coalition is important in shaping the climate change regime when it prepared the original draft of the Kyoto Protocol, supporting for 20 per cent cuts in carbon dioxide emissions from 1990 levels by 2005. The ad hoc lobby group provides a voice to the SIDS on environmental and climate change matters. The AOSIS has long been the core focal point for many Pacific negotiators on capacity support and technical matters. The bloc has been successful in lobbying for SIDS as special case In the Rio summit of 1992 that led to the creation of the SIDS conferences (Carter, 2015;211).

Various coalition blocs in climate change negotiations provide two main benefits for Pacific Island countries. First, according to George Carter, by joining coalitions, Pacific Island countries have access to a wide network of negotiators. Coalitions are able to bring various actors (including non-state actors) from country representatives such as ambassadors, ministries of foreign affairs, academics, and scientists. As a result, delegates from Pacific Island countries are able to talk about

climate change issues fluently in various negotiations. The coalition blocs such as the G77 (Schiavone, 2008;162) and AOSIS have facilitated various functions such as research, assembled advisory capacity, and technical regulatory frameworks for its members (Carter, 2015;214). Second, coalitions present opportunities for Pacific leaders to lead in climate leadership. The increased participation of Pacific leaders as chairs of various blocs such as Robert van Lierop from Vanuatu and Marlene Moses from Nauru as the chairs of AOSIS, Papua New Guinea's Michael Somare and Fiji's Ratu Inoke Kubuabola for the G77 Plus China has instilled more attention to the vulnerability of the Pacific Island countries in climate change issues. At the UN Third SIDS 2014 meeting, Pacific leaders made sure that they negotiated to have the climate change issue contained in outcome document and pushed 4,500 participating delegates from states and non-state actors to contribute to a legally binding agreement in Paris (Carter, 2015;214). In this sense, coalition-building through IGOs provides benefits for small states.

## **2. IGOs, Issue Prioritisation, and Agenda Setting**

Issue prioritisation can help small states to increase their power in the UN. Starting with a relatively small number of members, the UN nearly tripled in size, from 51 to 193 member-states, between 1945 and 2018. It goes without saying that the UN has become one of the principal venues through which most states pursue their national interests. By focusing on issue prioritisation and agenda setting in the UN, small states can leverage their influence (no matter how small they are). Like what Panke (2015) says, the precondition for small states for success in international level is issue prioritisation. Due to the limited budgets, small states cannot follow every issue simultaneously with equal attention. Instead, they can prioritise and invest their resources in issues of particular importance. For example, as small states, Pacific Island states tend to focus on climate change in the UN level. Pacific leaders made major efforts to establish and advocated climate change as a global issue. Another small state, Seychelles, successfully gains international reputations because of its role in maritime security and ocean diplomacy (Buerger & Wivel, 2018;177-181). It even recognised as an innovator in ocean governance, through initiatives such as marine spatial planning initiative (Buerger & Wivel, 2018;177-181). Small states can focus on

the main problems that they experience and find creative ways through diplomacy to establish their issues as global issues. So that, it can attract other states and indirectly fulfil small states' interests. In my opinion, it is crucial for states to know what their problems are so they know what to prioritize. This issue prioritization can lead to agenda setting as another strategy.

Agenda setting as small states' strategy to increase their power in world politics. Steven G. Livingston (1992; 313) defines agenda setting as "the process of raising issues to salience among the relevant community of actors." Agenda-setting is the process of small states raising and communicating their priority issues at the global level. The reality is small states cannot claim to be global powers, even if they share in global governance at the UN. However, there are other international roles (such as agenda setting) where smallness is no disqualification (Thorhallsson & Bailes, 2016;298). Many small states can choose the highest priority issues on which to focus their limited resources. In the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Article 10 of the UN Charter gives opportunities for member states (including small states) to address any matter within the scope of the Charter. This opens opportunities for small states to bring their priority issues and try to leverage their influence. To illustrate, Malta was the first nation to propose the principle of deep seabed, as well as high seas, were part of the "common heritage of mankind," which contributed to renegotiation of the law of the sea. Other small states such as Uganda has established HIV/AIDS as its niche issue and Seychelles which widely recognised as a major facilitator, policy entrepreneur, and advocate concerning the sustainable development of the oceans (Bueger & Wivel,2018;170).

The Seychelles uses issue prioritisation and agenda setting to leverage its influence in ocean diplomacy. According to Christian Bueger and Anders Wivel (2018), the Seychelles is "an archipelagic state in the middle of the Western Indian Ocean with a population of less than 100,000." It is highly dependent on the ocean and maritime resources for economic development. The Seychelles is recognised as a microstate due to its small size, landmass, Gross Domestic Product, and the small size of its diplomatic service. Consequently, the Seychelles as a microstate may be viewed as an acute form of the small state, which is always the weak state in asymmetric relationships when interacting with other states in the international level. However,

Seychelles is one of the exceptions. Despite its smallness, it is a broker in international organisations and an agenda setter in ocean governance.

The success factors of Seychelles in the global level are issue prioritisation and agenda setting. First, the Seychelles fully recognises its position as a small island state. By recognising this, the state started to play its role as a leading advocate of the concept of blue economy, an emerging concept which realises and encourages better management of our ocean or 'blue' resources (as a result of issue prioritisation) (<http://thecommonwealth.org/blue-economy>). Second, concerning agenda setting, the Seychelles Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) started to work on a blue economy campaign and making the issue as the core concept of its foreign policy. Blue ocean had started to be part of the main concept relating to the developmental and environmental challenges associated with the oceans during the Rio+20 conference (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2978BEconcept.pdf>). The government of Seychelles made great efforts to clarify the concept of blue economy and advocated for its utilisation globally. The government gave a series of presentations about blue economy in various events. The MFA also drafted a larger study on the blue economy and published it as a book. As the Seychelles President stated that the country utilised the blue economy concept as a tool to access the world political stages, highlighting that the state is being invited to share their thoughts at various international conferences as well as political meetings. As an outcome of issue prioritisation and agenda setting, the blue ocean was included as the main concept in the African Union's African Integrated Maritime strategy. In 2015, various international reports affirmed the importance of the blue economy concept and also established this microstate as a leading advocate and innovator in the implementation of blue economy. Seychelles' advocacy work was also crucial in organising the coalition to include an ocean goal in the SDGs, even though the campaign was mainly lead by the Pacific. Moreover, the limitations of small state diplomacy also need to be considered.

### **The Limitations of Small State Diplomacy**

Like two sides of a coin, small state diplomacy also has limitations. First, small states may be aware that there are many interests in coalition building such as 14 Pacific



Island countries among 44 members of the AOSIS. In this sense, each small state has to make sure that its national interests can be included in the collective interests of the coalitions. In fact, a greater number of coalitions players lead to multiple interests, rules, and issues that are constantly changing. These all complicate the processes of establishing common ground for reaching agreements (Karns & Mingst, 2013;144). Consequently, it is important to make sure that the position of each small state does not be ignored or sidelined. This depends on the ability of small states' representatives in establishing and communicating their national interests through negotiation strategies. The second limitation is the dependence on expertise. To illustrate, even though Seychelles has become world-leading expertise in blue economy, this specialist knowledge is in the hands of few people only. In other fields, this country has to rely on external experts and consultants (Bueger & Wivel,2018;183). It is similar with Pacific states that also depend on research facilitation provided by G77 and AOSIS.

Lastly, the success of small states diplomacy also depends on the willingness of other great powers such as China, France, Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States as the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Article 27(3) of the UN Charter demands the concurring votes by permanent members (Thakur, 2006;33). Consequently, each permanent member can veto resolutions that contain issues that are detrimental to their interests. Thus, it is important for small states to consider how their proposals can bring benefit or at least do not threaten the interests of great powers. The success of the blue economy agenda of Seychelles was a result of the state taking advantage of existing agenda and actively seeking for problems recognised by major powers (Bueger & Wivel,2018;183). However, these limitations should not be viewed as stumbling blocks for small states to keep moving forward.

## **Conclusion**

This essay illustrates that financial means is the main obstacle for small states in conducting international negotiations. However, small states can take advantages of the rise of non-traditional issues and inherent resilience as the power sources in global development diplomacy. To increase their power in global negotiations through various IGOs (especially the UN), small states can use three main strategies of

coalition building, issue prioritisation, and agenda setting. The UN and other major IGOs provide forums in which small states can engage with relatively low cost with delegations from many states. Small states can establish coalitions concerning certain issues that can be beneficial to them such as AOSIS in the climate change negotiations. Meanwhile, concerning limited budgets and small size of representatives, small states can focus on issue prioritisation and agenda setting to leverage their influence. Article 10 of the UN Charter provides opportunities for the small states to address any issue within the scope of the UN that important to them. The essay has provided the Seychelles as an example of a small state that has successfully utilised issue prioritisation and agenda setting to leverage its influence in ocean diplomacy. Finally, as there is no perfect human being, small state diplomacy also has limitations. However, these limitations should not be seen as an obstacle, but an opportunity for small states to find creative ways in turning weaknesses into power.

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