



Why Small Island States Punch Above Their Weight in Climate Diplomacy

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Abstract

Small island developing states have little of what usually counts in international bargaining. Their populations, economies and emissions are tiny, and they can neither reward nor punish the large emitters whose decisions determine their future. Yet the temperature goal of 1.5 °C, the treatment of loss and damage as a subject in its own right, and the recent advisory proceedings on climate change before international courts all bear their mark. This Perspective argues that the explanation lies in a combination of four assets that reinforce one another: a moral standing that other parties find costly to contest, a disciplined coalition in the Alliance of Small Island States, the systematic borrowing of legal and scientific expertise, and a habit of procedural entrepreneurship that places specific text on the table early and moves contested questions into new forums. The article sets this argument against the main objections: that island influence is confined to words and has not bent the emissions curve, that it depends on the tolerance of larger powers, and that the coalition's unity is fragile. It concludes that the island experience shows how agenda-setting power can be built without material power, and also where such power stops. The implications for other weak actors in multilateral negotiations are considered.

Keywords: *Small island developing states, AOSIS, Climate negotiations, Small state diplomacy, Loss and damage, Norm entrepreneurship*

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1. Introduction

In October 2009 the cabinet of the Maldives held a meeting on the seabed, ministers in diving gear signing a declaration at desks anchored to the sand. The image travelled round the world. It would be easy to conclude that the diplomacy of small island states is mainly theatre, a matter of drawing cameras to a predicament. That reading misses most of what they have done. Over three decades these states have shaped the wording of the climate treaties, the structure of the negotiating agenda and, most recently, the docket of international courts.

The puzzle is an old one in a new setting. Keohane (1969) observed that small states are those whose

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leaders know they cannot, acting alone, make a significant impact on the system. The island states have no market that others need, no military weight and no capacity to obstruct: their combined emissions are negligible, so a threat to withhold cooperation on mitigation would be empty. The argument of this article is that their influence rests on four assets used together, and that none of the four would suffice alone.

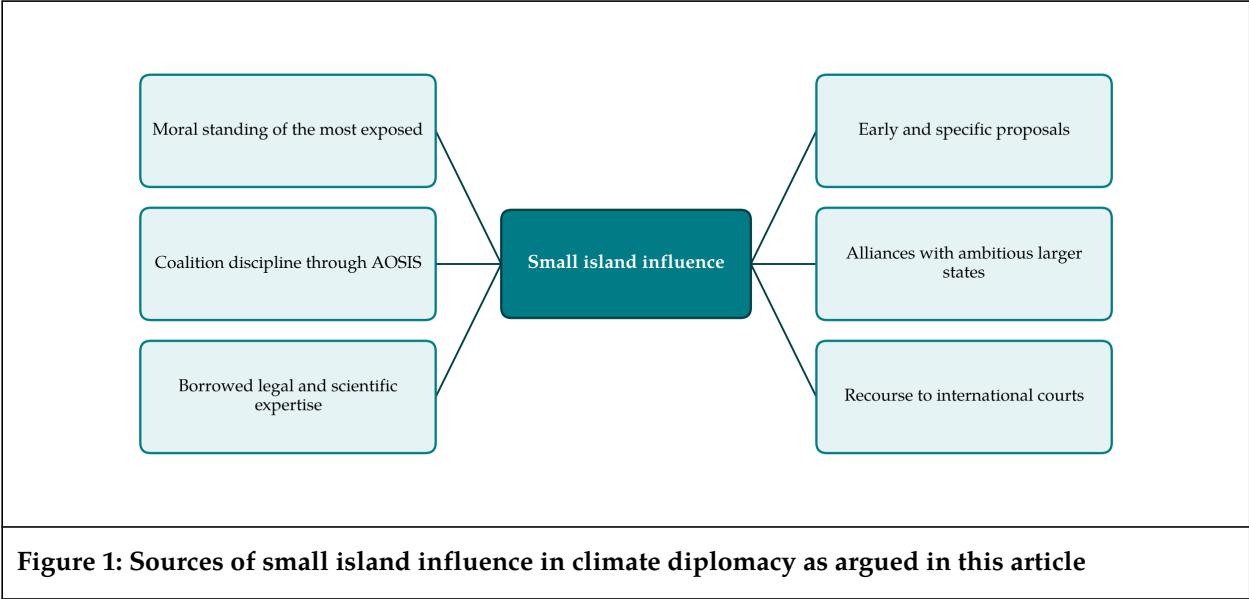
2. A Record That Needs Explaining

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) was formed in 1990, at the time of the Second World Climate Conference, and took part as a bloc in the negotiation of the framework convention ([Ashe et al., 1999](#)). The Convention that emerged names small island countries among those whose needs deserve particular consideration ([United Nations, 1992](#)). In 1991 Vanuatu proposed, on the Alliance's behalf, an insurance pool to compensate low-lying states for sea level rise, which is the origin of the loss and damage agenda. In 1994 AOSIS tabled the first draft of a protocol to the Convention, and its text became a reference point in the talks that produced the Kyoto Protocol ([Betzold, 2010](#)).

The pattern continued. The Paris Agreement commits parties to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 °C and contains a separate article on loss and damage ([United Nations, 2015](#)), both of them long-standing island demands ([Ourbak and Magnan, 2018](#)). The Paris conference also invited the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to report on the lower threshold, and the resulting assessment changed the terms of the scientific debate ([IPCC, 2018](#)). A fund for loss and damage was agreed at the conference of the parties in 2022. In 2023 the General Assembly adopted without a vote a request, initiated by Vanuatu, for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which the Court delivered in July 2025 ([ICJ, 2025](#)).

3. Four Assets That Work Together

General accounts of small state influence point in a useful direction. [Long \(2017\)](#) distinguishes power that is intrinsic to a small state, power derived from a relationship with a great power, and power that is collective. [Panke \(2012\)](#) shows that small delegations compensate for their size by prioritising and by persuasion-based strategies. The island case adds content to these categories. Figure 1 presents the sources of influence identified in this article around a single hub, and Table 1 summarises how each of the four main assets works and where it stops.



3.1. Moral standing

The islands have contributed almost nothing to the problem and stand to lose territory, and in some cases statehood, because of it. This gives their delegates a standing that others find awkward to contest in public. [de Ágüeda Corneloup and Mol \(2014\)](#) describe it as moral leadership and show that it is exercised

deliberately, through framing and through the choice of spokespeople. The mechanism is the one described in the literature on norms: actors without material leverage can still persuade by attaching their cause to principles that the audience already professes (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Ingebritsen (2002) made a similar case for the Scandinavian states as norm entrepreneurs. The island version is sharper, because the entrepreneur is also the victim.

3.2. Coalition discipline

Moral standing needs a voice, and AOSIS supplies one. A group of some forty members drawn from the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean speaks through a rotating chair, coordinates positions before each session and, in the consensus-based procedure of the climate regime, represents a substantial share of the parties. Betzold (2010) shows that from the outset the Alliance spoke with one voice on a small number of priorities and resisted the temptation to cover every item. Concentration of effort is what makes a small delegation effective (Panke, 2012), and the Alliance turned that necessity into a method.

Table 1: The four main assets of small island climate diplomacy, how each works and where it stops

Asset	How it works	Where it stops
Moral standing	Least responsible and most exposed; hard for others to oppose openly	Wins text and sympathy, not enforcement
Coalition discipline	One voice for about forty parties in a consensus procedure	Interests diverge as the agenda widens
Borrowed expertise	Outside lawyers and scientists supply drafting and evidence	Dependence on advisers and their funders
Procedural entrepreneurship	Early, specific proposals; new forums when old ones stall	Advisory rulings do not bind; forums can be ignored
Alliances (supporting)	Joint fronts with ambitious larger states at decisive moments	Partners leave when their own costs rise

3.3. Borrowed expertise

A delegation of a handful of people cannot follow dozens of parallel negotiating tracks or draft treaty language unaided. From the beginning the Alliance drew on lawyers and scientists from non-governmental organisations and universities, an arrangement that Betzold (2010) characterises as borrowing power. The draft protocol of 1994 was a product of that collaboration. The same practice explains the role the islands played in bringing the science of the lower temperature limit into the process, and it places them in the category Long (2017) calls derivative power, with the difference that the patron is a transnational network of experts and not a great power. Barnett and Campbell (2010) caution that this reliance has a cost, since outside knowledge can crowd out the islands' own accounts of their situation.

3.4. Procedural entrepreneurship

The fourth asset is the least noticed. Island delegations have repeatedly been first with a concrete proposal, which gives a text the advantage of being the one others must amend. They have also moved questions to forums where their numbers count for more or where the rules favour reasoned argument. The alliance with European and other states in the High Ambition Coalition at Paris, convened by the Marshall Islands, cut across the usual division between developed and developing countries. The turn to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the International Court of Justice took a dispute that was stalled in negotiation and restated it as a question of legal obligation (ICJ, 2025). Fiji's presidency of the conference of the parties in 2017 showed a small state using the chair itself as an instrument.

4. Objections

The strongest objection is that this influence is confined to words. Global emissions have continued to rise since AOSIS was founded, and the temperature goal the islands secured is close to being breached. On

this view the islands have won the text and lost the climate. The point is fair as far as it goes. Agenda-setting power is not the power to compel, and [Roberts and Parks \(2007\)](#) documented how deeply the distribution of responsibility and vulnerability in the climate regime reflects wider global inequality. But the objection sets a standard no actor has met. The relevant comparison is with what the regime would contain had the islands been absent, and on temperature goals, loss and damage and legal accountability the difference is visible.

A second objection holds that the islands succeed only when larger powers allow it. [Benwell \(2011\)](#), in a sympathetic account of small states as climate champions, recognises the limits that scarce resources place on them. The inclusion of 1.5 °C at Paris required the support of the European Union and eventually the acquiescence of the largest emitters; the article on loss and damage was accompanied by a decision stating that it provides no basis for liability or compensation ([Mace and Verheyen, 2016](#)). This is true, and it is the reason the argument here stresses combination. Alliances were available because moral standing made refusal costly and because a specific text was already on the table.

The third objection concerns unity. [Betzold et al. \(2012\)](#) traced a movement from cohesion towards fragmentation as the agenda expanded to include finance, forests and markets, on which a wealthy city-state and a low-lying atoll nation do not share interests. The coalition has held on its core demands, but its discipline cannot be taken for granted, and the growing number of island-led initiatives outside AOSIS may be a sign of strain as much as of vitality.

5. Implications

Three implications follow. For the study of small states, the island case suggests that the categories of intrinsic, derivative and collective power should be read as complements. Each island asset is weak in isolation: moral appeals without text are ignored, text without a coalition is sidelined, and a coalition without expertise cannot draft. For practitioners in other weak coalitions, such as the least developed countries, the lesson is to concentrate on few priorities, arrive early with language, and invest in the relationships that supply technical capacity.

For the climate regime, the lesson is less comfortable. A process in which the most affected can shape norms but cannot enforce them will keep producing commitments that outrun performance. The move to the courts is a rational response to that gap. Whether advisory opinions change the behaviour of large emitters is unknown, and it would be premature to claim that they will. What can be said is that the islands have again altered the setting in which others must justify themselves.

6. Conclusion

Small island states punch above their weight because they have assembled a form of power suited to the arena in which they fight. Consensus procedures reward coalitions, treaty drafting rewards those who come with text, and a regime built on professed principles is vulnerable to those who can hold it to them. The islands' achievement is to have combined standing, organisation, expertise and procedural skill so that each covers the weakness of the others. Their limits are equally instructive. Words can be won by the weak; the reduction of emissions remains in the hands of the strong.

Conflict of interest

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