OPINION: Climate change and the active participation of small states in international organizations

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Fiji’s role as President of COP23 demonstrates the ability of small states to have an influence on the world stage that is disproportionate to their physical size, be it measured by population, territory or GDP. Traditionally, the limited capacity of small states, especially of those that are remote from the centre of world politics, e.g. New York and Geneva, has been seen as a major obstacle for their participation in multilateral activities. It remains largely true; COP23, although chaired by Fiji who would therefore be expected to host the event, was actually held in Bonn, not Suva, and was essentially financed by the German government. However, putting endogenous limitations to one side, the Fijian Presidency of COP23 does demonstrate a new development in global politics: that with determination and creative diplomacy, small states can gain support from like-minded large or/and rich countries and in doing so place their interests on the global agenda.

Like many small states, Fiji does not have a permanent diplomatic mission to Germany; indeed it has only a handful of staff in Geneva, who represent the country in all UN agencies, neighbouring countries, as well as providing consular services. This is the key challenge most Pacific Island states, as well as those from the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Africa, face. They have a limited number of diplomatic missions in Europe, and very infrequent visits of diplomats from their capitals. Indeed, of the Pacific states Fiji is one of the most diplomatically active in Europe, with missions in London, Brussels and Geneva.

Diplomatic representation matters because the scope of climate related negotiations and discussions is expanding. COP remains the primary forum for deliberations on emissions targets but climate change and its impact has considerable ramifications across policy areas. Many of them are of immediate interests to small states, such as access to affordable medicine, sustainable fishing, or protecting their indigenous knowledge and intellectual property. Yet many small states do not even have diplomatic missions in the countries where key international organisations are based, let alone being engaged in their processes as active participants. Without active participation, there have been few ways for small states—the proverbial canaries in the global climate coal mine—to have their voices heard.

That is changing slowly. Small states, under the banner of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), have long clubbed together in New York. This is the one city where they are all present and have more or less active diplomatic missions. Even some of the poorest small states have been able to establish a presence by accessing subsidised office space at The Commonwealth Secretariat’s ‘Small States Office’, opened in New York in the early 1980s. The success of this coordinated effort has been astounding. It has defied all of the conventional theories of international relationships that assume policy outcomes are exclusively determined by great powers. By working together and leveraging their weight, small states have been recognised as a specific grouping—small island developing states (SIDS)—within the UN system. And they have used this label, and the position it has
provided them in UN processes, to drive a progressive climate agenda. Despite their size, they have unequivocally been a key player—even a leader—in decades of negotiations.

The success of the small state group in New York has led to the label, or a version of it, being adopted by other international organizations (IOs) around the world. The World Bank has a Small States Forum and a published Roadmap for World Bank Group Engagement in Small States. The WTO has the Small and Vulnerable Economies (SVEs) that is often included in Green Room negotiations. In 2016 the IMF published a paper on *Small State Resilience to Natural Disasters and Climate Change: Role for the IMF*. As a result, small states have had some success by working with large or rich countries, (Botswana and Sweden cooperated over health issues) or taking over the chairmanship at multilateral negotiations to assert their presence and participation, (Jamaica chairs the fishery negotiation at the WTO), or taking an active role in regional offices of international organisations, to get their demands met. But, relative to their presence at the UN, the success of these small state groupings has been mixed. There are a number of reasons for this, including the structure of each IO, but a common theme is that small states still do not have the same active presence in these IOs.

For the most part, states open diplomatic missions in places where they have specific interests. It is a strategic calculation that weighs resources against benefits, primarily related to security or trade. Many SIDS, and especially those in the Pacific, are aid dependent. Their diplomatic missions need to generate income. The cost of representation in Geneva or Rome outweighs the potential to secure aid dollars. This is true even despite the Commonwealth Secretariat having opened a Geneva ‘Small States Office’ in 2011.

Small states may no longer be able to afford the luxury of being absent or strategic participation in IOs. COP negotiations will determine the viability of some SIDS, and especially those low-lying atoll states like Maldives, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Marshall Islands, which is why they have attracted so much attention. But, the global economic and political order for the next century, and by extension the future of SIDS, will also be shaped in other IOs. For small states to survive, let alone thrive, they need to shape these discussions in much the same way they have done so via AOSIS in New York.

Recognising this, some small states have opened offices in Geneva with the help of Switzerland and the Commonwealth Office. But, representation remains limited, when compared to New York and thus restricts the ability of small states to exert the same influence. There are two primary reasons for this. First, the success of AOSIS is partly dependent on weight of numbers. When small states group together there are too many of them to be side-lined, or ignored. This is a powerful veto. But weight is contingent on presence. Even a single person mission with limited technical capacity adds to the weight of the group. Second, when SIDS work as a group they are able to burden share, overcoming their individual capacity constraints by nominating focal points for certain issues and IOs from among their number. The quality of individual missions and their staff will always vary, but a large group has options when it comes to SIDS leadership positions in a city like Geneva that is home to multiple IOs. At the moment, the leadership burden in Geneva is falling on the shoulders of a few larger and wealthier SIDS who have a presence and the capacity to be active across several IOs (AOSIS does not have the same presence in Geneva). This is not a strategy for long term success. The lesson from New York is that the active
participation of small states in the processes of IOs matters. But, to make it count it needs to be applied more cogently across all major IOs.