

DOES SIZE MATTER?

The challenge of fisheries transparency in Small Island Developing States

Key messages:

- 1** Transparency has an elevated importance for fisheries management in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), due to their high levels of fisheries dependency, their ownership of vast areas of the ocean, and growing international attention towards 'blue growth'.
- 2** At the same time, SIDS face considerable barriers to effective and transparent fisheries management given their biological and cultural specificities, as well as their economic and environmental vulnerabilities. A key challenge is addressing information gaps, particularly on coastal small-scale fisheries.
- 3** Opinions differ on whether the distinctive characteristics of SIDS are conducive to deliberative democracy. However, there may be political challenges hampering open government reforms in SIDS, arising from clientelism, a weak media and civil society landscape, and gendered inequalities.

Edition #8



Introduction

“Together with our exclusive economic zones, the areas of the earth’s surface that most of our countries occupy can no longer be called small. In this regard, Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, and French Polynesia, for example, are among the largest countries in the world... There are no people on earth more suited to be guardians of the world’s largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations. Our role in the protection and development of our ocean is no mean task; it is no less than a major contribution to the well-being of humanity.”

Epeli Hau’ofa²

Depending on the definition used, there are at least 30 sovereign nations located in tropical seas that are usually referred to as Small Island Developing States (SIDS). As lamented by Epeli Hau’ofa, SIDS represent something remarkable. Although they have few people – many have total populations that are equivalent to small cities or even villages in Europe – they own vast areas of the ocean. This includes most of the world’s tropical coral reefs and some of the most productive fishing grounds. SIDS are therefore prominent custodians of our blue planet. At the same time, SIDS also face the most immediate and existential threat from climate breakdown.

As part of our series exploring transparency in fisheries management,³ this tBrief examines two broad themes for SIDS:

- 1) Why is transparency in fisheries management so important for SIDS, not only from an international perspective, but more importantly for their citizens?**
- 2) Do the unique characteristics of SIDS, including their economic and environmental vulnerabilities, influence their ability to implement open government reforms?**

Questioning how public access to fisheries information might work in SIDS is also important because SIDS themselves have committed to strengthening transparency through several regional fisheries agreements. These include the [Third Strategic Plan \(2022–2030\) of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism](#), the [Noumea Strategy](#) in the Pacific (entitled ‘A new song for coastal fisheries’), plus more recently, during the 7th Meeting of the [OACPS Ministers in Charge of Fisheries and Aquaculture in Ghana](#) (5–8 April 2022). But details on how transparency in fisheries management will be achieved are vague, and the difficulties involved could be underappreciated. Our tBrief aims to help push the debate further forward.

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1 (Cover) The ideas, opinions and comments in this tBrief are entirely the responsibility of the FiTI and do not necessarily represent or reflect Irish Aid policy.

2 Hau’ofa, E. (1993) ‘Our Sea of Islands’. In: *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, E. Waddell, V. Naidu, and E. Hau’ofa (eds), 2–16. Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific.

3 In our tBrief series, we focus on the approach towards transparency adopted in the FiTI Standard, which is primarily intended to support participatory governance (in addition to other fisheries transparency initiatives that focus on fighting illegal fishing or the traceability of seafood products).

1. Do SIDS lack transparency in fisheries?

The theme of this tBrief would be odd if SIDS already had excellent levels of transparency and participatory governance in their fisheries sectors. Unfortunately, a comprehensive analysis on this is yet to be done, and a thorough review of current practices is beyond the scope of this tBrief.⁴ Research on levels of government transparency for SIDS in general is quite limited. Organisations that compile economic, social and governance data for countries have often not included SIDS in their lists of countries, or have only recently started to include them. For instance, the [Open Data Barometer \(ODB\)](#), which provides useful in-depth country analysis on open government across the world, includes several Caribbean SIDS, but hardly any SIDS from the Pacific region. Of the current 76 national members of the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#), only five are SIDS.

In the absence of wider data, several examples nonetheless suggest that fisheries transparency is falling short of where it should be in many SIDS.

In the **Caribbean**, the Secretariat of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism gathers data from member states and publishes this on its website. This helps to improve knowledge on selected issues of fisheries across the region. However, their most recent [statistical report for 2020](#) describes many gaps in information, and questions data reliability. Another recent assessment of regional collaboration on fisheries management in the Caribbean found that ‘an absence of data and information, whether due to unavailability or inaccessibility, had the “domino effect” of influencing all other stages of the policy cycle. Even when data were available and accessible, there was the perception of avoiding evidence-based decisions.’⁵

Similarly, studies for the **Pacific Islands** by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) show that government data across many aspects of fisheries is patchy, particularly on coastal fisheries and women’s involvement in the sector. In response to the Noumea Strategy, members of the SPC have launched an innovative ‘report card’ system on coastal fisheries, which – while being a positive step for improving transparency – confirms extensive gaps in government data. Things have greatly improved over the years on government reporting for industrial tuna fisheries, but regional reports issued by the [Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency \(FFA\)](#) – an intergovernmental organisation serving 17 countries and territories of the Pacific Islands – describe that some governments are not sharing information on things such as revenues from licence sales.⁶ Again, this conforms to wider observations, as a review of open government in the Pacific islands found that ‘in general, Island states have focused thus far on hardware and connectivity, and are yet to clarify their information and communication technology goals or establish whole-of-government



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- 4 As is evident from our [‘TAKING STOCK’ transparency assessments](#), in-depth research on a country’s level of fisheries transparency is a time-consuming exercise when done effectively.
- 5 Fanning, L. et al. (2021) [‘Challenges to Implementing Regional Ocean Governance in the Wider Caribbean Region’](#), *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 8.
- 6 Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (2020) [‘Economic and Development Indicators and Statistics: Tuna Fisheries of the Western and Central Pacific Ocean’](#).

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1. Do SIDS lack transparency in fisheries?

machinery, let alone articulate a vision for e-government. While responses vary between states, many government organisations are cautious in sharing information among themselves, and are even less ready to share it with the public, such that many reviews of organisational programmes and projects remain internal documents⁷.



When it comes to **African SIDS**, the Seychelles is implementing the FiTI and has already significantly increased the public availability of fisheries information by publishing several *FiTI Reports*. Cabo Verde is aiming to publish its inaugural FiTI Report by the end of 2023, while São Tomé and Príncipe has made a public commitment to increase fisheries transparency through the FiTI. For other African SIDS, the picture is less encouraging. The FiTI has recently undertaken in-depth *'TAKING STOCK' transparency assessments* for Comoros, Mauritius, and São Tomé and Príncipe, highlighting considerable areas for improvement.



7 Hassall, G. (2018) 'Special Issue on Public Sector Enhancement in Pacific Island States', *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 40(4), DOI:10.1080/23276665.2018.1553276.

2. Defining SIDS




The concept of SIDS was formalised at the first United Nations Earth Summit, in Rio in 1992. Prior to this event, countries formed the *Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)* to campaign for an international agreement that recognised their unique challenges in achieving sustainable development. They were successful. Two years later, the UN held the inaugural ‘Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island States’, which produced the Barbados Programme of Action. This has been reviewed and updated twice since then, with the latest global conference occurring in 2014, leading to the SAMOA Pathway Agreement. The AOSIS continues to serve as an important lobbying body for SIDS in international forums.



There is, however, no internationally agreed definition of what constitutes a small island developing state. In international forums and initiatives, including those conducted under the auspices of the UN, countries self-identify as a small island developing state, rather than having to meet specific criteria. Some international organisations have their own subjective criteria. Consequently, the list of countries classified as SIDS varies depending on its source. The number of sovereign states recognised as SIDS by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is smaller (31) than those recognised by the UN (37).

The result is confusing. The World Health Organisation (WHO), for example, has launched a dedicated programme for addressing health impacts of the climate crisis in African SIDS. Madagascar is a recipient country of this. The African Union is also supporting the establishment of an African platform on fisheries for SIDS, which again includes Madagascar. However, Madagascar – the fourth largest island in the world with a population of more than 30 million people – is not recognised as a SIDS by the World Bank or the UN: it is therefore not eligible for financial assistance through the Global Environment Facility’s Climate Adaptation Fund for SIDS.

Table 1: List of 39 AOSIS Member States (as of February 2023)

Caribbean	Pacific	Africa, Indian Ocean and South China Seas (AIS)
 Antigua and Barbuda	 Cook Islands	 Cabo Verde
 Bahamas	 Federated States of Micronesia	 Comoros
 Barbados	 Fiji	 Guinea Bissau
 Belize	 Kiribati	 Maldives
 Cuba	 Nauru	 Mauritius
 Dominica	 Niue	 São Tomé and Príncipe
 Dominican Republic	 Palau	 Seychelles
 Grenada	 Papua New Guinea	 Singapore
 Guyana	 Republic of the Marshall Islands	 Timor Leste
 Haiti	 Samoa	
 Jamaica	 Solomon Islands	
 St Kitts and Nevis	 Tonga	
 St Lucia	 Tuvalu	
 St Vincent and the Grenadines	 Vanuatu	
 Suriname		
 Trinidad and Tobago		



The label of SIDS therefore covers a wide range of countries with diverse characteristics, including countries that:

- » are **not small** in terms of their populations (e.g. Papua New Guinea with nearly 9 million people);
- » are **not islands** (i.e. Belize, Suriname, Guyana and Guinea Bissau);
- » are **not developing states**, with several that meet the World Bank criteria as having high per capita incomes (i.e. Singapore, Seychelles, Barbados).

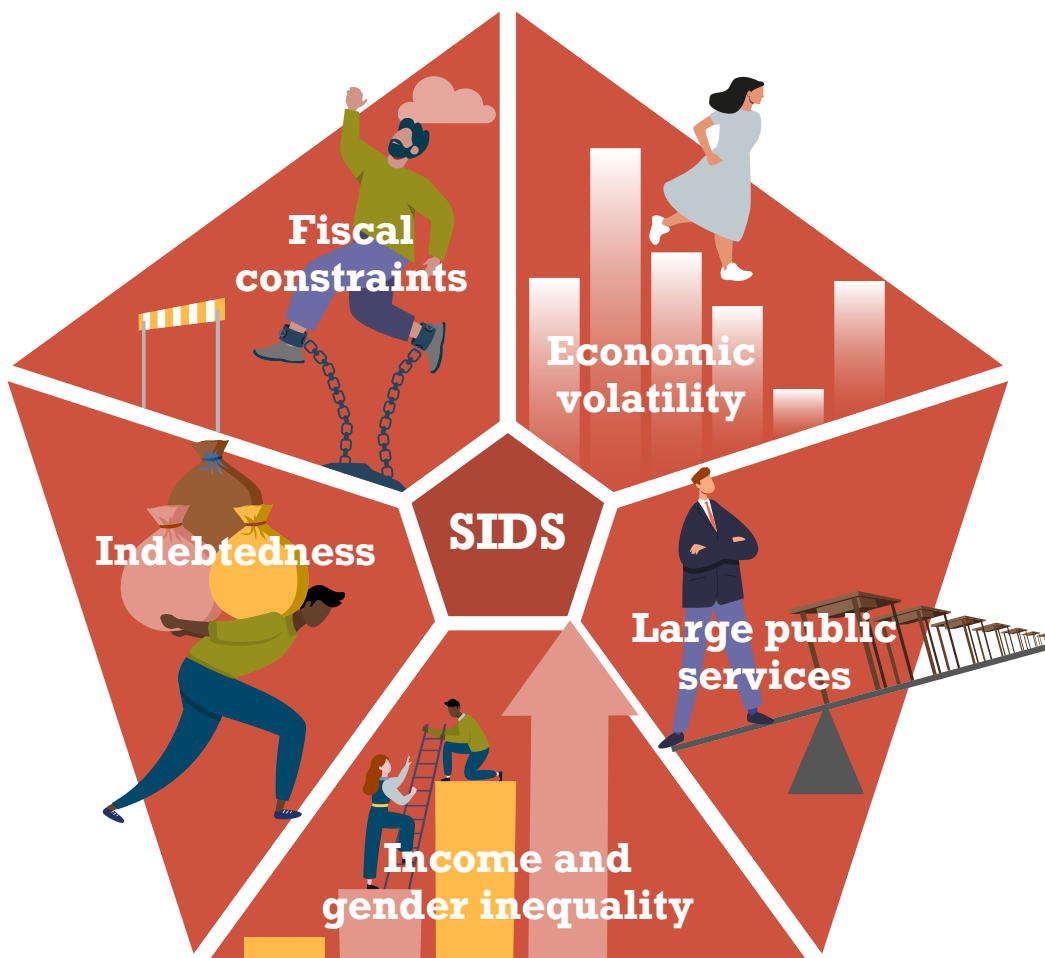
Academic literature questions whether the concept of SIDS is useful given the differences between these countries and that many observations about them apply to other countries as well. This has prompted recommendations that different categories could be developed for groups of small island states based on different criteria.⁸ For example, some international forums and academic literature recognise 'very' small island developing states as a distinct grouping, also known as 'micro-states'.⁹ However, the cut-off point between small and very small is not settled either. Yet the distinction does seem important: while there are a few SIDS with populations above 2 million people, most of them (20) have populations under 500,000 and 15 of these have populations under 200,000.

8 Alonso, J. A., Cortez, A. L. and Klasen, S. (2014) '*LDC and other country groupings: How useful are current approaches to classify countries in a more heterogeneous developing world?*' CDP Background Paper No. 21 ST/ESA/2014/CDP/21. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

9 Everest-Philips, M. and Henry, S. (2018) '*Public administration in small and very small island states: how does smallness effect governance?*', International Journal of Civil Service Reform and Practice, 3(2).

3. Social and economic characteristics of SIDS

Despite valid concerns over the coherency of the SIDS concept – as well as objections to the name itself – literature on SIDS converges on several distinctive social and economic features. It is useful to summarise some of these, as they form an essential background for exploring fisheries governance.



►► **Fiscal constraints.** Although a majority of SIDS are classified as high- or middle-income countries, many nevertheless face pronounced fiscal challenges. This is partly caused by having low economic diversification and small populations, resulting in low government revenues from taxes and fees. But they also experience higher costs of service delivery, caused by a lack of economies of scale, high costs of infrastructure and in-country travel and fuel.¹⁰ This is particularly for the case in SIDS made up of numerous smaller islands.

¹⁰ Atteridge, A., Savvidou, G. (2019) '[Development aid for energy in Small Island Developing States](#)', *Energy, Sustainability and Society* 9(10).

- » **Economic volatility.** Dependency on a limited number of economic sectors and reliance on international trade means that SIDS can experience severe instability of government revenues. Consequently, global financial crises have an exaggerated economic effect. The financial crash of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic hit government revenues harder in SIDS than in other countries. But the major driving force behind economic volatility is climate disasters. In Vanuatu, for example, the combined impact of category 5 cyclones in 2015 and 2020, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, caused economic losses of about 60 per cent of the country's GDP.¹¹ What is worrying for SIDS is the decreasing recovery intervals.¹² In the Caribbean, a disaster resulting in damage and losses of at least 5 per cent of GDP can now be expected every few years.¹³
- » **Indebtedness.** According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), by 2019, *external debt accounted for 62% of GDP on average in SIDS, compared with 29% for all developing countries and economies in transition*. Over the past decade, SIDS have increased borrowing from international capital markets, partly to cover the economic shocks of climate disasters. Difficulties in servicing these debts have led to painful debt restructuring and pressure for public sector austerity across many SIDS. Maintaining debt repayments therefore accounts for a large proportion of government spending in SIDS, further diminishing their ability to afford public services. As such, many SIDS are caught in a crippling debt trap, with a highly precarious future given the intensification of the climate crisis.
- » **Large public services.** On average, the percentage of the population employed by the government in SIDS is more than three times that found in developed countries, such as the UK or Germany.¹⁴ The OECD notes that SIDS spend close to 30 per cent of their GDP on public services, compared to an average of less than 20 per cent in other developing and middle-income countries. More extreme cases are found in very small states. In Nauru, for example, out of a total population of just over 11,000 people, more than 2,000 people are employed in government. The state therefore has a dominant role in society, although the penetration of public services in rural communities and more remote islands is often limited. A reason for a large public sector seems to be social pressures in islands with limited opportunities for private sector employment. Another factor is that the complexities of designing and running a modern public service, including meeting many international obligations, means that SIDS have bureaucratic structures like those found in larger countries, but populations smaller than many mid-sized towns. In Barbados, for instance, there are 19 government ministries, but a population of just over 287,000 people. The Seychelles has 13 ministries with a population of just over 100,000 people.

11 Government of Vanuatu (2020) '*Post-disaster needs assessment*'.

12 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021) '*Disasters after disasters: Short recovery intervals and large financial gaps in Small Island Development States*', 14 July 2021.

13 Mclean, S. and Charles, D. (2018) '*A perusal of public debt in the Caribbean and its impact on economic growth*', Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

14 Everest-Phillips, M. and Henry, S. (2018) '*Public administration in small and very small states: How does smallness affect governance?*'

It should also be noted that, albeit somewhat controversial, although service delivery tends to cost SIDS more, this does not mean that they are particularly efficient at it. The World Bank and other international development partners have argued that the bloated size of the public service found in SIDS causes governments and the civil service to be uneconomical and wasteful.¹⁵ Indeed, analysis shows that on average, SIDS have the highest costs for aid implementation compared to other developing countries, while achieving the lowest scores on aid effectiveness.¹⁶

» **Income and gender inequality.** Trends in inequalities exist in SIDS, and across multiple dimensions. This is related to difficulties in ensuring affordable public services, as well as limited economic diversification and high unemployment. Furthermore, high-end tourism and offshore financial services produce substantial wealth, but these industries tend to concentrate that wealth among a small number of people. Inequality is also made worse by the vulnerability of SIDS to economic crisis, which invariably pushes up rates of inequality. In a review of findings from its Human Development Index in 2018, the UNDP states that SIDS tend to have higher levels of income inequality in comparison to other categories of developing countries, and the trend is getting worse.¹⁷

Furthermore, many SIDS also perform poorly on gender equality, although there are regional variances. In the Pacific Islands, fewer than 6 per cent of parliamentarians are women. Despite some success stories (e.g. Fiji), research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that the Pacific Islands have the lowest levels of representation of women in parliament in the world.¹⁸ The situation in the Caribbean is better, but women's representation in the parliaments of Caribbean SIDS is still low on a global scale; 14 per cent compared to an international average of 25 per cent.¹⁹ In African SIDS, the record on gender equality is judged to be much better. According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance on the measure of gender equality, for example, the Seychelles, Cabo Verde and Mauritius are consistently among the top five African states, while Comoros and São Tomé and Príncipe rank in the top half. But gender inequality is also evident in the disturbing levels of violence against women and girls in many SIDS. UN-Women has conducted prevalence studies throughout the developing world and has validated a longstanding view that levels of violence and abuse against women and girls in the Pacific and the Caribbean islands are among the highest in the world.²⁰

15 Hassall, G. (2018) 'Special Issue on Public Sector Enhancement in Pacific Island States', *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 40(4), DOI: 10.1080/23276665.2018.1553276.

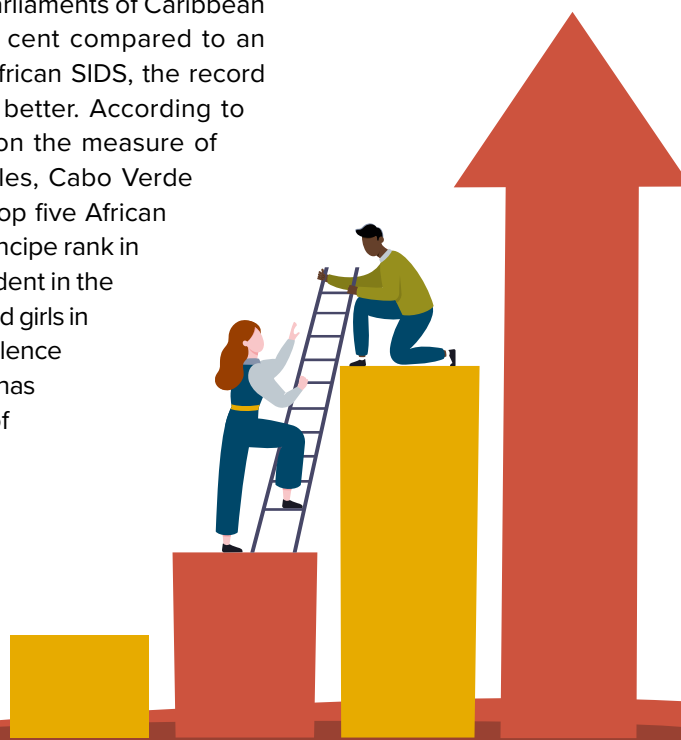
16 Wood, T., Otor, S. and Dornan, M. (2022) '*Why are aid projects less effective in the Pacific?*' *Development Policy Review*, 40.

17 Palanivel, T. (2018) '*Small Island Developing States: A summary of the state of human development*', UNDP.

18 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021) '*Women in parliament in 2021*'.

19 UNDP (2019) '*Where are the Women? A Study of Women, Politics, Parliaments and Equality in the CARICOM Countries*'.

20 UN-Women, Asia & Pacific Region (n.d.) '*Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*'.



4. Why fisheries transparency is so important for SIDS

There is now global consensus that fisheries management should be transparent and based on meaningful public participation. As described in our *first tBrief*, these might be the most important characteristics for determining if a country's fisheries sector is sustainable and well managed. For many SIDS, transparency of fisheries is particularly important.



1. SIDS include numerous small states that are custodians of large ocean spaces and high marine biodiversity

In total, sovereign SIDS cover 30 per cent of the world's ocean (not including the high seas), yet are home to less than 1 per cent of the world's population.²¹ If we include the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of small islands that are counted as the overseas territories of other nations (see below), then the proportion of EEZs under the jurisdiction of SIDS rises to more than half of the ocean.

²¹ UN Office of the High Representative for the LDCs, Landlocked Developing Countries and SIDS (2013) '*Small island developing states in numbers*'.

Table 2: Small islands with the largest share of the ocean

		Size of EEZ (km ²)	Population
1.	French Polynesia [France]	4,787,978	280,904
2.	Kiribati	3,441,810	119,446
3.	Federated States of Micronesia	2,996,419	115,021
4.	Hawaii [USA]	2,474,884	1,420,000
5.	Papua New Guinea	2,402,288	8,947,000
6.	Marshall Islands	1,990,530	59,184
7.	Cook Islands	1,960,027	17,459
8.	Solomon Islands	1,589,477	686,878
9.	South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands [UK]	1,449,532	30
10.	New Caledonia [France]	1,422,956	271,960
11.	Seychelles	1,336,559	98,462
12.	Mauritius	1,284,997	1,226,474
13.	Fiji	1,282,978	911,097
14.	Maldives	923,322	561,762
15.	Pitcairn Islands [UK]	836,108	67

For many SIDS, their ocean domains cover tropical seas with high levels of marine biodiversity and endemic species, including most of the world's coral reefs. This implies, as Epeli Hau'ofa wrote, an important duty to manage marine fisheries and marine ecosystems – not only for their citizens and future generations, but also for the global commons.



Fisheries management in overseas territories

The numerous small islands classified as overseas territories of former colonial powers have an underappreciated role in the governance of marine fisheries. In the case of **France**, the combined EEZ of its overseas territories means it technically holds the title of having the world's largest EEZ, measuring roughly 11.7 million km². However, most of this ocean domain is actually composed of the EEZs surrounding its overseas territories. Only 3 per cent of France's total ocean domain is found adjacent to mainland France in Europe. French Polynesia accounts for more than 5 million km² alone, which is greater than the EEZs of Japan and New Zealand, and nearly six times the size of China's EEZ. Similarly, about only 10 per cent of the ocean space controlled by the **United Kingdom** is adjacent to Britain. The overseas territories of these former colonial powers therefore cover vast areas of the ocean with abundant fish populations, while many island territories are home to extensive fishing sectors, including large numbers of small-scale fishers. Some, such as Reunion Island and New Caledonia, also have industrial ports acting as significant regional hubs for transshipment.

Over the past few decades, the contested process of decolonialisation has seen increasing autonomy granted to many overseas territories across multiple spheres of government. The administration of fisheries is one area where overseas territories can have a high degree of local control: having the powers to issue fishing rights, operate their own flags for fishing fleets and establish fisheries laws and policies. Yet there are many grey areas. For example, some former colonial powers resist their overseas territories' becoming voting members of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, many of which also lack a formal voice in decision-making processes of the United Nations.

One aspect of growing importance is the establishment of marine protected areas (MPAs). For countries such as France, the UK and the United States, meeting ambitious global commitments for expanding MPAs is predominantly achieved by declaring MPAs in remote waters of their overseas territories. Other countries without overseas territories face a harder challenge in meeting these goals.

Much global research and advocacy on responsible fisheries management overlooks the role of local administrations in these overseas territories. Yet they are equally important, including for transparency efforts. For example, when assessing the levels of fisheries information published on government websites of a country such as France, it might be easy to miss the amount of information provided by France's overseas territories, covering 97 per cent of its entire EEZs.

2. SIDS include states that are among the most dependent on fisheries in the world

Notwithstanding some outliers (i.e. Singapore), marine fisheries tend to have greater national significance for SIDS in comparison to other coastal states. This manifests itself in several ways.

►► **Food security:** Per capita consumption of marine fish tends to be high for SIDS when compared internationally. The most recent report from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) on its [Global Action Programme on Food Security in SIDS](#) notes that in many Pacific Island states, for example, fish consumption is three to four times the global average.

Historically, this dependency on fish for meeting national food security has been important for SIDS because access to alternative sources of protein is difficult. This is due to their remoteness, lack of agricultural land and lack of purchasing power. However, things are changing. Per capita fish consumption is declining across many SIDS, partly because of growing populations of people and decreasing populations of fish, but also because of increasing international trade. Some islands with extensive international tourism have also seen fish consumption fall among citizens, as more fish is directed to their visitors. Consequently, SIDS are relying more on imported food to ensure national food security – much of which comprises low-cost processed products. The FAO notes that since 1990, the percentage of locally-produced food that is consumed by people in SIDS has on average declined by nearly 30 per cent, and for some countries, such as Vanuatu, there has been a 300 per cent increase in dependency on imported food. In the Caribbean, SIDS also import more than 30 per cent of the fish they eat, from Latin America, the US and increasingly China.²²

Moving from a diet of locally produced food, including fresh fish, to increased consumption of processed food means that SIDS populations are experiencing deteriorating public health. In fact, the shift to eating imported foods means that SIDS have some of the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in the world.²³ Maximising the availability of affordable and fresh fish for local consumption is a critical policy stance throughout SIDS, which was given prominence in the 2021 SIDS Health Summit, hosted by the WHO and the UN-led [Global Action Programme on Food Security and Nutrition in Small Island Developing States](#). Numerous studies recommend that SIDS governments should prioritise local fish consumption over foreign trade and protect local markets from the pressures of selling the best fish to high-paying tourists.²⁴

22 FAO (2014) '[Securing fish for the Caribbean](#)'.

23 FAO (2016) '[State of food security and nutrition in Small Island Developing States](#)'.

24 Bell, J. D., Allain, V., Allison, E. H. et al. (2015) 'Diversifying the use of tuna to improve food security and public health in Pacific Island countries and territories', *Marine Policy*, 51; Connell, J., Lowitt, K., et al., (2020) 'Food Security and Sovereignty in Small Island Developing States: Contemporary Crises and Challenges', 10.1007/978-981-13-8256-7_1

►► **Poverty reduction and employment:** In many SIDS, fishing and fish processing provides employment for a significant proportion of the population, including for many people who have no alternatives. Although fishing is usually thought to be a male-dominated activity, research routinely shows that women play an important role in fishing, fish processing and selling.²⁵ Small-scale or artisanal fishing often employs the most people in SIDS, and produces most seafood for local consumption. However, there are several SIDS where industrial fisheries and fish-processing factories have become important. In American Samoa, tuna canning is the largest private sector employer, accounting for 14 per cent of jobs on the island.²⁶



Maintaining or increasing employment from fisheries is of growing importance in many SIDS. Most have increasing populations but high (and increasing) levels of unemployment, particularly among young people and women. This is exacerbated by the islands' limited economic diversification and high dependency on a few economic sectors, notably foreign tourism – as was vividly exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, while fisheries provide employment and livelihoods for many, it is a sector where incomes are often low and employment insecure. This is due to unfair distribution of profits in fish markets, weak labour rights and social protections. From a historical perspective, customary governance of marine fisheries in SIDS often provided effective systems of community benefit-sharing.²⁷ However, the commercialisation of fisheries, which has occurred across SIDS to varying degrees, can undermine these systems and lead to situations in which most of the increased profits are captured by relatively few people.²⁸ Commercialisation of the fish trade has also been shown to reduce the traditional role of women in fisheries.²⁹

25 Rabbitt, S., Lilley, I., et al. (2020) 'What's the catch in who fishes? Fisherwomen's contributions to fisheries and food security in Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands', *Marine Policy*, 108.

26 US Government Accountability Office (2020) '*American Samoa: Economic Trends, Status of the Tuna Canning Industry*'

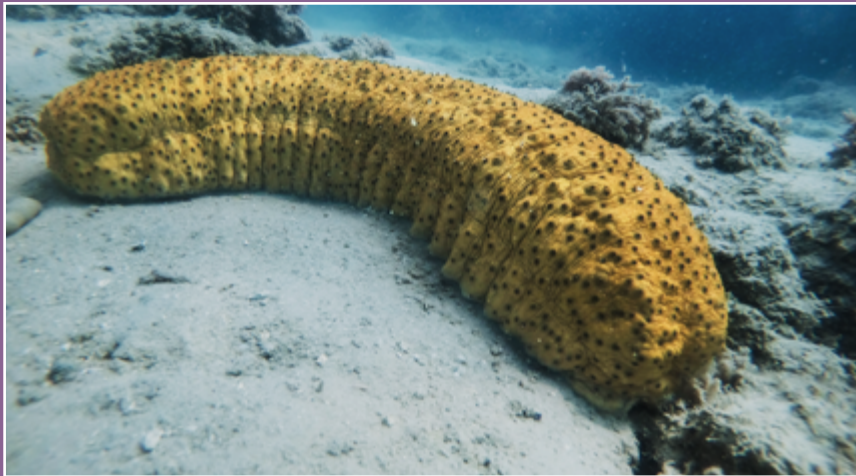
27 Tobin, B. (2008) 'The role of customary law in access and benefit sharing and traditional knowledge governance: perspectives from Andean and Pacific Island countries', World Intellectual Property Organization

28 Gillett, R. and Cartwright, I. (2010) *The future of Pacific Island fisheries*. New Caledonia: Secretariat of the Pacific Community

29 Williams, M. J. (2015) 'Pacific invertebrate fisheries and gender – Key results from PROCFish', *SPC Women Fisheries Inf. Bull.* 26, 12–16.

Unfair benefit-sharing affecting fishers in SIDS: The case of sea cucumbers

Driven by demand in China, sea cucumbers have become one of the most valuable seafood products for many SIDS. In the case of the Pacific Islands, the trade in sea cucumbers is the second-most valuable fishery after tuna and is estimated to be worth well over USD 50 million a year. However, the boom in sea cucumber trade, which is also important for African and Caribbean SIDS, highlights the difficulties that fishers face in capturing the economic wealth from international trade. *Value chain analyses* of sea cucumber markets from selected Pacific islands show that fishers receive less than 10 per cent of the final market value of the products. The largest profits are made by a small number of mostly foreign exporters, who receive more than 60 per cent of the market value.

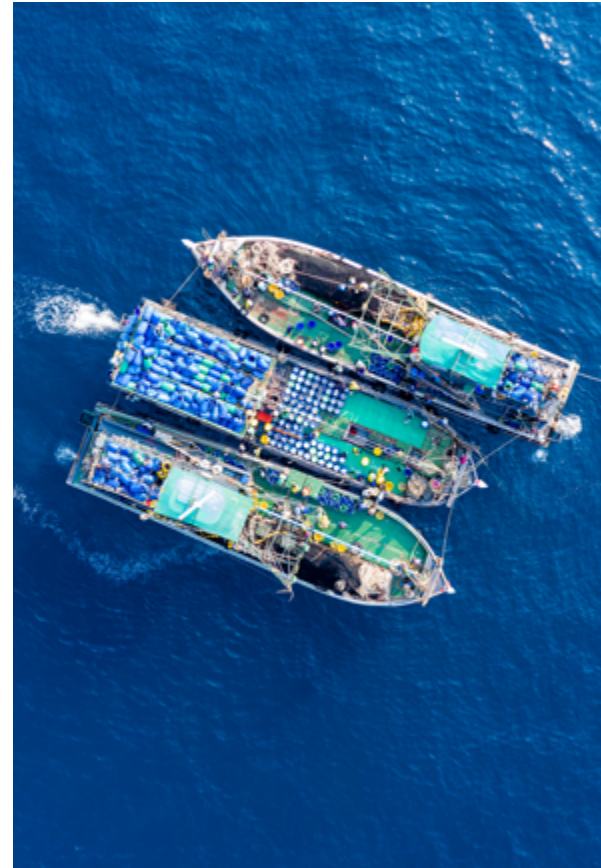


One of the problems identified in value chain analyses of the sea cucumber industry is the lack of public information surrounding the prices of dried sea cucumber, which is thought to undermine the bargaining power of local fishers. Research by the *World Conservation Society* on sea cucumber exports from Fiji in 2016 also highlighted a staggering level of unreported harvests, with actual harvests estimated to be up to 30 times larger than government reports. Wild populations of sea cucumbers are now thought to be heavily depleted in the waters of most SIDS. Solutions for sustainable and equitable sea cucumber trade highlight the need for increased transparency on market data and effective participation of local fishers in policy forums. It has also been recommended that published government information could be strengthened by cross-checking catch data held by fisheries authorities with exports/imports recorded by customs officials.

» **Economic development through fish trade:** Many SIDS are dependent on international fish trade for economic development. This includes the processing and export of high-value fish species (e.g. tuna, sea cucumber, lobsters) as well as selling access for fishing rights to foreign distant water fishing fleets (e.g. from China, Japan and the EU). According to data compiled by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), seafood accounts for 70 per cent of all exports of goods in Cabo Verde, Kiribati, Maldives, Micronesia and Tuvalu.³⁰

However, many SIDS have struggled to capture a substantial part of the wealth from fish trade. The price charged for industrial fishing licences is considered by many experts to be low for SIDS and many face multiple barriers to exporting processed fish, thereby missing out on any value addition. Pacific SIDS have partly responded to this situation through regional collaboration, which led to a transformation in the way in which licences are sold to foreign fishing vessels that target tuna for canning factories. The so-called Vessel Day Scheme, which has introduced competitive auctions and trading for licences, has dramatically improved government revenues, increasing nearly threefold from 2010 to 2020. Additionally, many Pacific Islands have been successful in increasing the amount of tuna processed locally for export, with members of the FFA more than doubling this amount since 2012. At least 10 SIDS in the Pacific are now considered 'tuna-dependent'; their income from the commercial tuna sector making up nearly 40 per cent of annual government revenues.³¹

These (often overlapping) dimensions of fish dependency highlight not only the importance of fisheries for SIDS, but also the difficult balancing acts that their governments face. Securing high-quality fish for people's diets, improving fisheries employment and incomes, while maximising government revenues through foreign trade (as well as supplying high-quality fish for tourism), are policy goals that are often in competition. If we add into this mix the demand for SIDS to conserve marine ecosystems and to limit fishing intensity – for example through enlarging marine protected areas – then problems of 'policy coherence' become manifest and potentially divisive. High levels of transparency and public debate are critical in this context.



30 UNCTAD (2021) *'Small island developing states face uphill battle in COVID-19 recovery'*, 10 June 2021.

31 Bell, J. D., Senina, I., Adams, T. et al. (2021) *'Pathways to sustaining tuna-dependent Pacific Island economies during climate change'*, Nat Sustain 4.

3. SIDS see fisheries as part of wider 'blue growth' strategies

Another theme that highlights the importance of fisheries transparency for SIDS is the impetus surrounding the blue economy concept. This gained global recognition through meetings held at the UN Earth Summit in 2012, where SIDS argued that the idea of the *green economy* – the main theme of the conference – was less relevant to them given their status as large ocean states (nowadays also referred to as big ocean states, or BOSS). If the world is transitioning to green growth, then it must be 'blue' growth for SIDS. Since then, SIDS have been at the forefront of developing and implementing the idea of the blue economy and sustainable blue growth.



At the heart of the blue growth idea is optimism that SIDS can diversify and grow their economies through a range of maritime sectors. It would combine traditional sectors such as eco-tourism, fisheries and shipping, with emerging sectors such as marine aquaculture, offshore energy production, marine bioprospecting and, controversially, ocean mining. There is also momentum for SIDS to receive international payments for ecosystem services, with 'blue carbon' storage being at the forefront of these proposals.

While blue growth for SIDS is actively supported by SIDS themselves together with many partner organisations, including the UN, the World Bank and regional development banks, there is trepidation that national blue growth strategies will raise competition for resources targeted by coastal fisheries. In fact, small-scale fishers are thought by many people to be disadvantaged within blue growth programmes, where such strategies focus primarily on economic growth. As was described in our [tBrief No. 6 on small-scale fisheries](#), a source of their vulnerability is a lack of visibility in official government data, as well as a lack of appreciation of their full range of social, cultural and economic values. Making sure that governments collate, publish and distribute data on the fisheries sector must therefore be amplified as blue growth receives more attention.

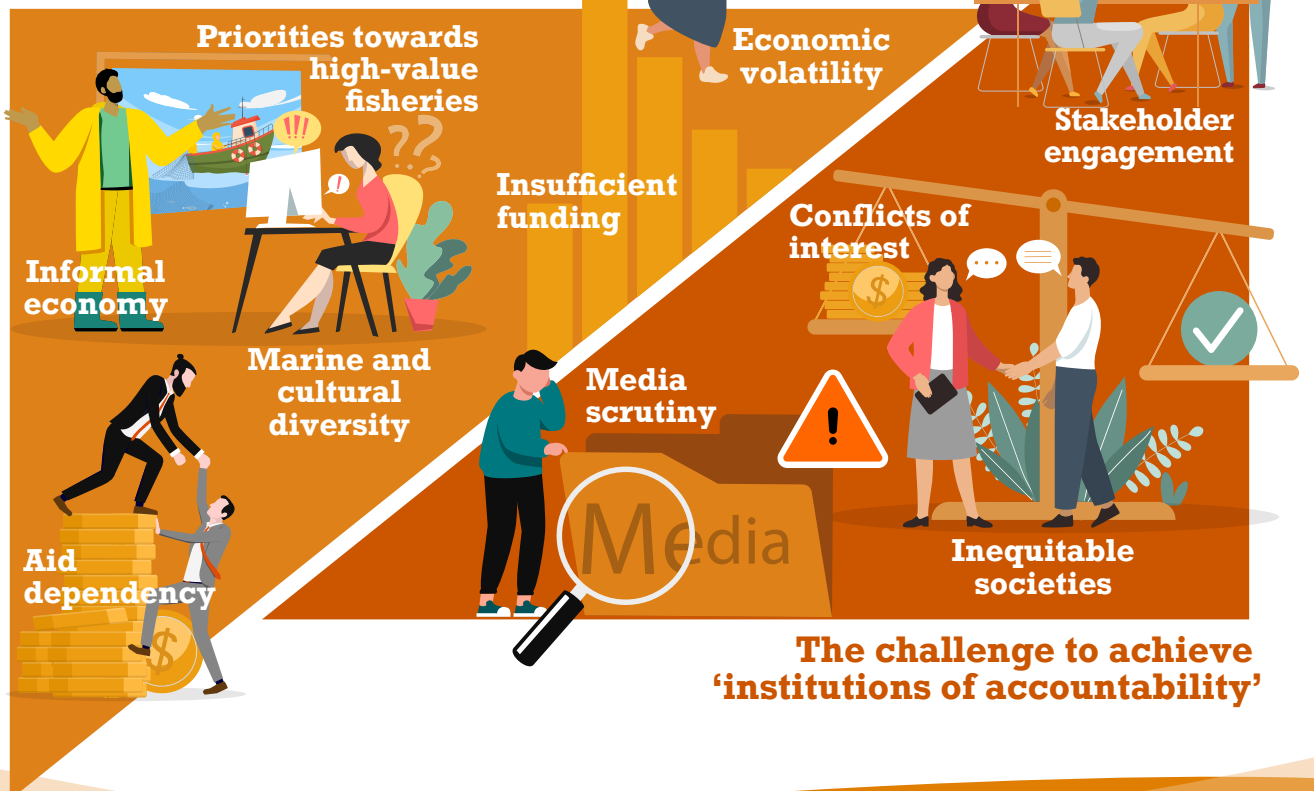
5. Do SIDS face unique advantages/disadvantages in achieving transparency in their fisheries?

Research on SIDS has grappled with the question of how their distinct political, social and economic characteristics (as described above) influence their governance. While there are rival theories, the literature can help with assessing whether SIDS have unique advantages or disadvantages when seeking to achieve transparency in their fisheries management.

One aspect that is easy to overlook is whether in very small states, the idea of open government receives less attention. Internationally, open government is associated with organising information online; there is now a basic recommendation that online government information is organised through a centralised government portal. However, in small states, attitudes towards sharing government information may be influenced by the dense community networks and familiarity that exist between people. Sharing information on a more personal face-to-face basis may seem sufficient. Yet this is not necessarily an optimal approach to transparency. A more formalised approach to recording and publishing information prevents problems of unequal access to information, of possible misinformation, and the spread of rumours. However, the demand and urgency for e-government may be greater in larger societies than in very small ones, which may partly explain why few SIDS have well-developed e-government platforms or why some are slow to implement them.

There are many other elements to explore. To simplify and set a focused scope for tackling this subject, this tBrief will focus on two challenges in more detail.

The challenge of data deficiency



The challenge of data deficiency

Even today, in the age of information, a lack of transparency in some countries is still often deliberate because their governments fear being scrutinised. At the same time, it needs to be recognised that many governments face challenges in collecting or compiling information on their fisheries sectors. While such information gaps vary significantly depending on the national context, our experience shows that there are several common areas under the FiTI Standard where public authorities tend to struggle to produce regular, complete and reliable data:

- » Information on the health of fish populations, including historical trends;
- » Information on the activities of fishers, including their by-catch and discards;
- » Information on employment in small-scale fisheries, including gendered information in the post-harvest sector and data on the informal sector;
- » Activities and outcomes of law enforcement efforts, including the labour rights of people working in the fisheries sector;
- » Information on subsidies, including their value and beneficiaries;
- » Impact assessments of public projects funded by foreign aid.

Without such information, critical questions surrounding national fisheries policies are hard to answer. For example, it becomes extremely difficult to discuss how national policies will achieve sustainable fisheries in the absence of consistent and regularly updated government data on fish catches. Likewise, while national fisheries policies routinely include objectives of supporting livelihoods – as they usually do in SIDS – progress is impossible to measure without regular and reliable gendered data on employment or information on labour standards.

Both political and practical reasons underpin why these data gaps persist. An obvious problem lies with **insufficient funding** for fisheries management. Fisheries management, including research and monitoring of fishing activities, is expensive to do well. This is often poorly understood by laypersons.³²

But there is more than just the monetary aspect. There are multiple reasons why collating fisheries data is a daunting exercise for SIDS.

- » **Marine and cultural diversity:** The enormous marine diversity of SIDS puts them among the most complex and costly states for which to generate data. There are now cost-efficient methods of collating information on the health of fish populations tailored to tropical multi-gear small-scale fisheries.³³ Such solutions can reduce the costs for collating fisheries data and successful applications of these methods have occurred in countries such as Fiji, where collaboration between the Ministry of Fisheries, fishing communities and a group of local and foreign NGOs helped to gather data for more than 90 per cent of reef fisheries.³⁴ Nevertheless, it is often much easier to collate fisheries data in northern countries than it is in tropical regions.



32 Mangin, T., Costello, C., Anderson, J., Arnason, R., Elliott, M., et al. (2018) *'Are fishery management upgrades worth the cost?'* PLOS ONE 13(9).

33 Herrón, P., Castellanos-Galindo, G. A., Stähler, M., Díaz, J. M., Wolff, M. (2019) *'Toward Ecosystem-Based Assessment and Management of Small-Scale and Multi-Gear Fisheries: Insights From the Tropical Eastern Pacific'*, Frontiers in Marine Science, 6.

34 Prince, J. et al. (2021) *'Spawning potential surveys in Fiji: A new song of change for small-scale fisheries in the Pacific'*, Conservation Science and Practice.

Moreover, most surveys of coastal fisheries used by governments and fisheries scientists are dependent on information being shared by fishing communities. Yet in several SIDS, these communities are scattered and a high level of cultural and linguistic diversity exists. Vanuatu, for example, has a population of roughly 300,000 people, but its communities speak more than 100 distinct local languages. The country comprises 83 islands spread out over an area roughly the same size as India, and 65 of these islands are inhabited.

Furthermore, smaller islands often lack dedicated landing sites, in particular for commercial artisanal or subsistence fisheries, making endeavours to capture landing and catch data more complex. This aspect becomes even more challenging when seeking to collate data from outside the country. For example, catches of Senegalese fishers operating in Guinea Bissau, and landing their catches in Senegal, are difficult to determine, as none of the statistical systems of the two countries takes them into account.

- » **Economic volatility:** Another difficulty facing many SIDS lies in their extreme economic volatility. With intensifying catastrophes caused by extreme weather events, public sector austerity and countries' problems with the debt trap, it is easy to understand why SIDS struggle to collate consistent fisheries data. It may not be given priority in periods of national crisis. However, it is important to appreciate that the value of data on the fisheries sector likely becomes even greater in such a context. This is particularly true for coastal fishing communities for whom a lack of government information on their activities may hinder their efforts to receive adequate financial support for recovery and adaptation. In Dominica, for instance, the World Bank provided cash transfers to fishers to help them recover from the economic shock of Hurricane Maria in 2017, while the FAO and the Red Cross provided further emergency aid. But research led by academics at the University of the West Indies on Dominican fishers raised concerns that 'data on past activity of individuals that could provide the basis of decisions about the allocation of relief are often unavailable'.³⁵
- » **Informal economy:** Although not unique to SIDS, many states have large informal and subsistence sectors – a defining feature of their coastal fisheries. Research by the International Labour Organisation in 2017 estimated that in countries such as Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, between 60 to 80 per cent of the population work outside the formal economy, predominantly in fisheries and agriculture.³⁶ Obviously, data on informal and subsistence employment and productivity is more difficult to produce than for the formal sector, due to the lack of opportunities for self-reporting to government authorities and also because many people engaged in informal work do not want to declare this. It therefore requires well-designed, time-consuming and often expensive household surveys to generate such information.

35 Turner, R., McConney, P. and Monnereau, I. (2020) '[Climate Change Adaptation and Extreme Weather in the Small-Scale Fisheries of Dominica](#)', Coastal Management, 48(5): 436-455.

36 International Labour Organization (2017) '[A Study on the Future of Work in the Pacific](#)'.

- » **Priorities towards high-value fisheries:** Other factors may affect data deficiencies as well. One of the dynamics observed in the Pacific, for example, is that the focus of national fisheries authorities has disproportionately been on high-value industrial tuna fisheries. According to a report published by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the allure of working in the tuna fisheries, which involves regular overseas travel and the associated perks of this, means that coastal fisheries management receives less funding and is serviced by more junior staff.³⁷ This is a problem as coastal fisheries produce more fish for local consumption, and employ far more citizens.
- » **Aid dependency:** Another potentially problematic characteristic of SIDS derives from their dependency on overseas aid and the fact that a great deal of public work on ocean conservation and fisheries is reliant on foreign partners, including donor agencies, international NGOs and academia. In fact, SIDS are among the most aid-dependent countries in the world. The same report from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community also described that coastal fisheries management has been highly dependent on foreign aid, meaning that good data is produced when aid funding is available, but governments fail to maintain these efforts when funding ends.

More controversially, however, some studies argue that aid dependency can be detrimental to the health of political institutions. Governments (and local NGOs) may end up prioritising the agendas of foreign donor' over local challenges in order to secure aid.³⁸ For example, studies on the experience of indigenous fishing communities with donor-driven initiatives aiming to create marine protected areas suggest that the issues that matter most to these communities are not always aligned with those of foreign donors and consultants.³⁹

Similarly, there are also concerns regarding local ownership and usability of information, which is particularly relevant for transparency efforts. A group of leading fisheries scientists argued that SIDS have been subject to a large amount of research, confirming the idea that SIDS receive intense interest from a global perspective.⁴⁰ However, these scientists also pointed out that a lot of research and resulting data on fisheries in SIDS fails to be used by national authorities, but ends up published in obscure technical reports or restricted to academic publications that are largely inaccessible to local people. Contributing to this problem is the fact many SIDS do not have well-developed online portals of information on fisheries where research findings can be documented. Furthermore, raw data that is available to national authorities is often guarded by few statistical agencies within the government, without granting access to the general public.



37 Gillet, R. (2014) 'Hot issues on Pacific Island coastal fisheries', SPC Fisheries Newsletter, 144.

38 Overton, J., Prinsen, G., et al. (2012) '[Reversing the tide of aid: Investigating development policy sovereignty in the Pacific](#)', Journal de la Société des Océanistes, 135.

39 Cornier, S. and Leblic, I. (2016) '[Kanak coastal communities and fisheries meeting new governance challenges and marine issues in New Caledonia](#)'

40 Hind, J., Steven, M., Green, J., et al, (2015) '[Fostering effective international collaboration for marine science in small island states](#)', Frontiers in Marine Science, 2.

These examples show that there are many structural and political reasons why SIDS may be prone to neglecting fisheries management – including the need to collate and publish data. None of these reasons prevent SIDS from having excellent data on their fisheries sectors. They do suggest, however, that one of the key barriers to progress on open government initiatives in SIDS will be the inconsistent, ad hoc approach of collating and publishing information online. Changing this situation may not simply be a matter of budget allocations, but also of shifting attitudes and priorities.

The challenge to achieve ‘institutions of accountability’

While lack of data presents one barrier to transparency, more difficult challenges may stem from two interrelated problems:

- » Governments resisting publishing information that may expose them to criticism.
- » The ability of society to use information to hold governments accountable.

If a country lacks basic political freedoms, thereby inhibiting deliberative democracy, transparency efforts could be perceived as a waste of time. Indeed, for initiatives like the FiTI, coaxing governments to publish data is only part of the challenge. Equally important is that this information is credible, and then used to stimulate informed and critical national policy debates that are inclusive of the views of marginalised groups.

One of the most explored subjects on the governance of SIDS is the extent to which their unique characteristics promote or hinder democracy and participatory governance. One view is that SIDS are too heterogenous to generalise on this debate.⁴¹ Given the multifaceted and disputed factors that likely shape political institutions of any state, this view seems reasonable.

However, another view is that their small size and the resulting hyper-personalised character of political life in SIDS are relevant, and that the distinctive characteristics of SIDS might be advantageous for fisheries transparency. This view corresponds with political ideals of decentralisation and devolution. Regarding participatory governance, some believe that a small political unit has advantages over a larger one.⁴² Scores on various global indexes, such as the one produced by *Freedom House*, indicate that SIDS appear to be more democratic and suffer less civil conflict than other countries. Some SIDS have suffered extreme political turmoil (e.g. the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Fiji), but in general SIDS appear to be relatively peaceful, and most have a history of fair and free elections. The *Ibrahim Index of African Governance* consistently finds that the top three states in Africa are SIDS – Seychelles, Cabo Verde and Mauritius. São Tomé and Príncipe falls slightly lower down the list, while only Comoros is found towards the lower half. It is noteworthy that in Africa, population size might not be a determining feature; many countries in Africa have small populations but have a history of troubled governance and authoritarianism. There seems to be something unique to being both small and an island that confers a positive political effect.⁴³

41 Corbett, J. (2015) ‘Democracy in the Pacific Islands: Comparable Practices, Contested Meanings’, *Democratic Theory*, 2.

42 Srebrnik, H. (2004) ‘Small Island Nations and Democratic Values’, *World Development*, 32.

43 Sanches, E. R., Cheeseman, N., Veenendaal, W. et al. (2022) ‘African exceptions: democratic development in small island states’. *J Int Relat Dev*, 25.

While small might be beautiful to some, others argue that it brings distinct disadvantages for SIDS in achieving what we refer to loosely as ‘institutions of accountability’. Again, there are several challenges for SIDS:

►► **Conflicts of interest:** Imposing a rigid separation of public office from private interests is understandably very difficult in very small states. Consequently, clientelism – where the authority of leaders is based on providing gifts and favours to people in a discretionary way – is an attribute used to describe the politics of small islands with some frequency, including by leading political scientists in SIDS.⁴⁴ A recent survey by [Transparency International in Pacific SIDS](#), based on interviews with more than 6,000 people from 10 island states and territories, found that government favouritism and conflicts of interest were common in the private sector, particularly regarding government procurement contracts and the issuing of licences in high-value sectors, such as mining, tourism and fisheries.

This obviously has a direct impact on transparency. Intuitively, clientelist societies are not conducive to open government because the patrons may be reluctant to invite public scrutiny over how revenues are used, for instance, or how resources are distributed. In our [tBrief No. 5](#), we discussed the importance of different types of corruption in fisheries and how these increase the need for transparency. Anecdotal evidence and several ‘scandals’ suggest that corruption is likely to be a significant obstacle in some SIDS. At the least, it might mean that transparency reforms are resisted by those in positions of authority.

This challenge might be even greater when considering that in SIDS, the characteristic of clientelist politics works in combination with the civil service having an outsized role in providing employment.⁴⁵ This combined effect may also contribute to a subdued demand for public government audits and performance reviews. The Asian Development Bank, through its work on assistance to Pacific Island states on governance and accountability, describes the small dense populations found in SIDS as being a particular challenge for undertaking independent public sector audits, because *‘auditing in tight-knit social and cultural environments involves significant political, professional and personal pressures’*. Similarly, in a study on SIDS produced by the UNDP, in which the baffling complexity of their political dynamics was explored, the authors affirmed that:

*The ‘village’ nature of small states often creates extensive personalisation of politics. The rational-legal process of effective institutions impartially applying laws and processes is undermined...the capacity and the political will to act against wrong-doing is undermined when every official is related to or well-acquainted with everyone on the island.*⁴⁶

44 Veenendaal, W. and Corbett, J. (2020) ‘Clientelism in small states: how smallness influences patron–client networks in the Caribbean and the Pacific’, *Democratization* 27.

45 Everest-Phillips, M. and Henry, S. (2018). ‘Public Administration in Small and Very Small States: How does Smallness Affect Governance?’, *International Journal of Civil Service Reform and Practice*, 3.

46 Everest-Phillips, M. (2014) *‘Small, so simple? Complexity in Small Island Developing States’*, UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, Singapore.

This characterisation of political life in SIDS suggests that attempts to increase transparency in fisheries may be resisted – or if achieved, increased transparency may not generate critical debates on fisheries management or policy coherence to the extent that is hoped for. Logically, these might be difficulties that occur to a greater degree in SIDS that are particularly small and insular, and less so in the larger and more diverse states.

This theory adds weight to a core belief held by the FiTI. The approach to transparency should avoid emphasising the confrontational idea of *naming and shaming* (and fighting corruption), which sometimes seems to be the focus of international transparency agendas. Rather, international advocacy for transparency in fisheries should emphasise other themes when framing the value of public access to information, such as for equitable fisheries, food security and building resilience for fishing communities in the face of the climate crisis. This seems particularly important in SIDS characterised by small hyper-personalised societies where the government plays such a dominant political and social role.

» **Inequitable societies:** Noted already above are the worrying trends of inequality in SIDS. The consequences of this on deliberative democracy are important. A theory, albeit with contested evidence, is that more inequitable societies tend to be less democratic than more egalitarian ones. The problem has a specific dimension to fisheries management, in that within the competitive environment of access to marine resources in SIDS, fishers are among the poorest groups in society.

High levels of gendered inequality in SIDS are also a potentially serious impediment to deliberative democracy and the effectiveness of transparency reforms. Women's lack of political voice observed in SIDS underlines the critical need for transparency on information about their role in the fisheries sector, while also promoting their voices in decision-making forums.

In the Pacific region, there are promising signs of improvements, such as the efforts by women in the fisheries network in Fiji, launched in 2016.⁴⁷ Increased awareness of the need for women's empowerment in the fisheries sector has also led to multiple regional initiatives, such as the women in fisheries bulletins published by the Secretariat of the [Pacific Community](#) and the [Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership](#), which has a dedicated programme on mainstreaming gender and human rights in the fisheries sector. The latter has recently produced a report in the Federated States of Micronesia, which showed that women play a much larger role in fisheries than was reported by the government, with women landing more than 50 per cent of fish catches. However, despite some positive progress, an in-depth study into current practices in the Pacific Islands describes substantial problems of women's exclusion across all countries, and how projects are often intended to 'reach' women, but not to empower or benefit them.⁴⁸

47 For more information, see [Women in Fisheries Network – Fiji](#).

48 Sangeeta Mangubhai, S. and Lawless, S. (2021) '[Exploring gender inclusion in small-scale fisheries management and development in Melanesia](#)', Marine Policy, 123.



► **Stakeholder engagement:** Most SIDS do not only have small populations to recruit from – for public service delivery as well as non-governmental activities. They also experience high levels of ‘brain drain’. Past research (from 2013) on 32 SIDS found that on average half of their high-skilled workforce emigrates – with this proportion rising to over three-quarters for several states.⁴⁹ This is a much higher rate of emigration than other developing or middle-income countries. Many of their best marine scientists and statisticians, as well as IT professionals, are likely working abroad.

Furthermore, those government administrations in SIDS that receive multiple aid programmes can become overloaded and overwhelmed. As the OECD describes,

‘while many SIDS experience dependence on very few providers for the bulk of their concessional finance, they also display a long trail of small projects from multiple sources, which strains already stretched institutional resources’.

The fact that there are very few professionalised NGOs and consultants in SIDS also means that a small minority of people are relied on for project implementation. This is not only a problem for data collection; it also becomes potentially problematic for multi-stakeholder initiatives (such as the FiTI), as the same people are continuously called upon. It could create fatigue and raises concerns over conflicts of interest.

Also, regularly engaging stakeholders can be a costly endeavour, in particular in those SIDS with a geographical dispersion. For example, summoning stakeholders for the FiTI implementation process in Cabo Verde requires the provision of ferry or even airfare tickets for several stakeholders. Furthermore, due to unreliable internet services, online meetings are often not a suitable option for regular meetings.

49 de la Croix, D., Docquier, F., Schiff, M. (2014) *‘Brain Drain and Economic Performance in Small Island Developing States’*. In: Artal-Tur, A., Peri, G., Requena-Silvente, F. (eds) *The Socio-Economic Impact of Migration Flows*. Population Economics. Springer, Cham.



►► **Media scrutiny:** One of the basic ideas surrounding transparency reforms is that they allow for greater media scrutiny of government actions and policies. But if the media is weak or co-opted by political elites, this avenue for accountability becomes diminished. A robust and critical media is needed to advance informed national policy debates on fisheries. This is particularly important given that fisheries seem prone to sensationalism driven by a narrative of crisis.

Problems surrounding media freedoms and integrity are evident in many countries, and there is no evidence that SIDS experience problems that are more extreme than others. For example, the ranking of countries in the world for media freedoms and the safety of journalists, as measured by *Reporters Without Borders (RWB)*, puts several SIDS – such as Jamaica, the Seychelles and Cabo Verde – above countries such as Australia and the US. However, other research indicates that the media in many SIDS is not particularly strong and many likely fair worse on criteria that RWB pays less attention to.

For many SIDS, the dominant role of the state in service provision means that state-owned national broadcasters provide most of the local news reporting. However, various academic studies and reports by organisations such as the *International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)* underline that regulation assuring independence of public media organisations is weak or poorly enforced across many SIDS. The inevitable hazards of political control over national media are amplified because in SIDS there are so few independent media companies and those that do exist suffer very low levels of profitability and staff remuneration. This is unsurprising given the limited revenue streams from advertising or print sales in small states, as well as the scarcity of public grants for investigative journalism. Independent media companies are therefore excessively reliant on government contracts and advertising income from a small group of companies, whose owners may also be aligned with the interests of ruling parties.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ See for example, Wickham, P. W. (2018) 'Challenges to Media Freedom in the Caribbean Sub Region,' The Round Table, 107(2): 247–249.

The quality of independent media in many SIDS is therefore often described as poor, involving much content that is simply ‘copy-and-pasted’ from the international press. Researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute drew attention to this following the announcement in 2022 of the ‘Partners in the Blue Pacific’ by the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia and Japan.⁵¹ Their analysis of local media in the Pacific found that most local news stories were bland coverage copied from foreign media websites, despite the obvious geopolitical questions that this multilateral partnership raises for SIDS.

In many SIDS, the independence of private media is being further undermined by laws that work to suppress media freedoms, including those that expose journalists to sanctions for writing content that is critical of the government. These seem to be growing in prevalence across SIDS, but for reasons that are hard to understand. In 2022, on World Press Freedom Day, the [Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers](#) issued a statement saying that the

‘environment within which journalists in the Caribbean operate is becoming increasingly perilous’.

Similarly, in their 2021 report on media freedoms in six Pacific Island states, the IFJ warned that recent draconian laws curtailing media freedoms (i.e. in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Nauru) are severely blunting the role of the media in holding governments accountable.⁵² For example, the Government of Fiji has been subject to international and national criticism over the 2018 Media Industry Development Act that allows the government to impose harsh sanctions and imprisonment for journalists who publish media stories considered to be against national interests. In 2019, an in-depth report by investigative journalists from New Zealand into the environmental destruction caused by a Chinese infrastructure project on Malolo Island in Fiji, described intimidation and police interference for local journalists, who were therefore unable to cover the story in local papers.⁵³

In the same report the IFJ notes that in many Pacific islands, ‘self-censorship is widespread, based on concerns about offending powerful figures, sparking government retaliation, losing revenue or disturbing social harmony’. This last point is echoed in other reports, indicating that SIDS may also experience cultural norms that inhibit critical media content. In an article published by ABC News for the Pacific, a journalist from Vanuatu noted that in Pacific Islands, ‘there is a prevailing social pressure to get along, that is to maintain peace and good order, sometimes at the expense of justice’.⁵⁴

51 Johnson, B. and Dunne, J. (2022) [‘Australia, the US and their partners need to engage with local media in the Pacific’](#), 5th August, Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

52 International Federation of Journalists (2021) [‘A way forward: Pacific media consultation report 2021’](#).

53 Murphy, T. (2019) [‘That’s why you need journalism’](#), 13 April 2019, Newsroom.

54 Faa, M. (2022) [‘Press freedom under increasing threat in the Pacific, local journalists say’](#), 5 June 2022, ABC News

Conclusion

Transparency has a heightened importance for fisheries management in SIDS, and this tBrief provided several reasons as to why public access to fisheries information should be improved in SIDS. The importance of doing so is intensifying with the climate crisis as well as with growing international focus on blue growth. At the same time, making observations on the governance challenges facing the fisheries of SIDS is challenging, as it requires making generalisations about diverse and complex states. However, we have highlighted several issues that could act as barriers to transparency reforms.

The economic and social vulnerabilities experienced by SIDS, which are occurring amid catastrophic climate disasters of increasing frequency, means that these states will face acute difficulties in generating data across numerous facets of fisheries management. However, the very nature of fisheries in SIDS makes collating data a daunting prospect: the rich marine biodiversity matched with cultural diversity, the remoteness of fishing communities, and the predominance of the informal economy in the fisheries sector. Data deficiencies may also reflect skewed priorities, causing abundant data on the lucrative offshore industrial sector, but leaving coastal fisheries sometimes neglected.

Certain dynamics within SIDS might also be undermining the potential for implementing transparency reforms and achieving gains in deliberative democracy. These derive from (albeit contested) observations about the distinctive political economy of SIDS: their small, personalised populations, their large public sectors, a tendency towards clientelist politics, a strong donor dependency and weaknesses of local media. The problem of inequalities in SIDS also seems relevant when seeking to understand how transparency can support marginalised groups, and particularly women, in the fisheries sector.

None of these challenges are insurmountable, and they will not apply to all SIDS equally. There are also positive attributes of SIDS to appreciate. For example, the hyper-personalised nature of their societies could provide fertile ground for efforts to strengthen deliberative democracy, more so than in large and impersonal ones. The growing frustration over the marginalisation of women in the fisheries sector means that women could be ideal leaders and implementers of open government campaigns.

And most importantly, there are no other groups of countries where the need for transparency is so obvious, not only for their citizens, but for the global commons. As Epili Hau'ofa said, the role of large ocean states in the protection and development of the ocean is 'no less than a major contribution to the well-being of humanity'.



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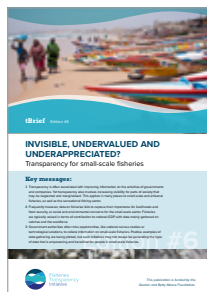
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