

Snorkelling with *dascyllus aruanus* fish at Rarotonga, Cook Islands.



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Building cooperation among networks of islands:

Redefining large ocean economies

ABSTRACT

Islands have long inspired the imagination of humankind. As unique units of the ecosystem, islands have distinct attributes in both the protection of biodiversity and the utilization and management of resources. Although many islands are isolated geographically, they share characteristics that may make them central within ocean regions and in the broader world. However,

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from the perspective of the marine economy, there are indicators that suggest the importance of islands is declining, due in part to the lack of close cooperation among what could be a network of islands. Based on an overview of the formation and current situation of island networks, this chapter demonstrates that there are country-specific, regional, sector-specific, and globally specialized networks of islands. The current state of island networks might be described as fragmentary, and there is room for much greater cooperation across a diverse range of issues and fields. Communication and mutual benefits are inherent motivators for the cooperation and development of island networks. Large ocean economies can gain momentum in cooperation among the networks of islands. This chapter makes the case that inclusive island networks can lead to infinite possibilities. Based on shared consensus and principles, building the nodes and lines of the island networks in key fields and on shared issues — including scaled up Blue Economy demonstration areas and the construction of central, nodal urban areas among global islands — creates a virtuous cycle for further cooperation within and across island networks. In this way, we may finally be able to achieve economic, societal, and environmental balance for islands and islanders.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a shared understanding of the existence of islands, people have very different perceptions of the word itself, based at least partly on whether they take a legal or geographical perspective (Baldacchino, 2018; Deng & Liu, 2018; Jayewardene, 1990). Stated simply, compared with continents, islands are surrounded completely by water. This may be the reason that they inspire the human imagination (Hage & Harary, 1996) and have been conceived as sites of innovation (e.g., in building free trade ports) (Baldacchino, 2006; Feng & Deng, 2019). In fact, as distinct units of the ecosystem, islands have unique attributes related to their biodiversity and how they utilize and manage resources (Baldacchino, 2018; Deng, 2020; Deng & Liu, 2018; Deng et al., 2020; J. Randall, 2020a).

Islands are magical worlds (M. Randall, 2017) and, compared to mainlands, are relatively more isolated and sparsely populated. However, with progress in ocean navigation and accelerated globalization, they may become regional centres or even central to our world more broadly. There are millions of islands in the world, most of which are uninhabited (Misachi, 2017); among them are the 300+ islands that make up Fiji (Lal, 1992), the ten islands of the Cape Verde archipelago (Gillespie & Clague, 2009), and more than 10,000 islands that are part of China (Deng, 2015). Although terminology has been put forward from legal, geological, biological, and human perspectives (United Nations, 1982; Depraetere & Dahl, 2018), there is no universally accepted definition of “island”. This may be due in part to the incredible number and diversity



Traditional fishing boats at Santa Maria, Sal Island, Cape Verde.

of islands, as well as the range of country-specific standards for defining them. With continued developments in science and technology, and especially since the Information Technology revolution, one might assume that islands are becoming less important, particularly given that there appears to be very little cooperation among them. This may be especially the case if seen from the perspective of the marine economy.

IN THE PAST: FORMATION AND CURRENT SITUATION OF ISLAND NETWORKS

Island networks have evolved dramatically over time. For example, prior to European contact, Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean used the sea extensively for the exchange of goods and ideas (Hofman et al., 2020). This exchange all but disappeared with colonization and only emerged again with globalization in the 20th century. Some oceanic islands, far from mainlands, were, at best, considered as provisioning stations during the early period of European exploration and colonization (J. Randall, 2020a). However, after World War II and what Firth (2007) refers to as a second wave of globalization, islands once again became integrated within a system of global trade and communications. As part of their development strategies, some islands have established strong and diverse transportation relations with the external world, both with

mainlands and with other islands. Over time, persistent relationships have transformed into more established networks. In the context of this research, the core characteristic of island networks is their connectivity. Though some island networks are relatively tangible, others might be described as “silent networks”. For example, “barefoot doctors” (rural physicians) in China have made a great contribution to the health of islanders, but they do not conform to the current Chinese medical management system. Therefore, although they continue to operate in a number of islands for consultation and treatment, they are overlooked in any formal accounting. Despite this, however, these rural doctors have created an important silent network of island health (e.g., Wenming Net, 2015).

This chapter makes the case that inclusive island networks can lead to infinite possibilities. While there are many organizations that identify as “island networks”, for the purpose of this research, we will introduce only a selection of these, providing examples of country-specific, regional, sector-specific, and global island networks.

A country-specific island network: Hellenic Small Islands Network

The Hellenic Small Islands Network is a non-profit organization established in 2007, mainly made up of Greek island municipalities with populations of less than 5,000 people (Kechagioglou, 2019). This network’s mission is to develop the islands’ human and social resources, and to “support the societies and municipalities of the small islands in all matters relating to their development, including to the Greek administration and the European Union” (Kechagioglou, 2019). The organization aims to empower small islands to take actions on the affairs related to them by supporting the social and administrative authorities of participating small islands, and strengthening their actions by offering assistance where needed (Kechagioglou, 2019).

A regional island network: European Small Islands Federation (ESIN)

In 2001, six national organizations representing small island communities, including those of Denmark, Finland, and France, decided to create the European Small Islands Network (ESIN) (European Small Islands Federation [ESIN], 2021). In 2005, the network was formalized and renamed as the European Small Islands Federation, although it has maintained its original ESIN acronym. At present, ESIN represents the voices of over 355,000 residents on 1,640 islands across 11 national and subnational jurisdictions, “helping them remain alive” (ESIN, 2021). ESIN functions on two levels: at a local level and at a European level. Locally, ESIN strengthens cultural identity among islanders and facilitates knowledge-sharing between its member islands. At a European level, ESIN informs relevant European Union institutions, influencing EU policy “by increasing their awareness and understanding of small islands” (ESIN, 2021; J. Randall, 2020b).

A sector-specific island network: Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the European Union (INSULEUR)

Given the importance in the promotion and realization of sustainable development for islands, the non-profit Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the European Union (INSULEUR) was set up in 2000 with the aim of “improving economic and social conditions in European insular regions” (Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the European Union [INSULEUR], 2021b), addressing the difficulties stemming from the isolated geographical position of European islands, and gradually “evening out the imbalances” (INSULEUR, 2021b) between continental and island regions. With permanent representatives at European Union organizations in Brussels, this association encourages and oversees cooperation between insular Chambers of Commerce in the EU in support of island development (INSULEUR, 2021a).



The Hellenic Network of Small Islands tracks local products of the small islands. The goal is to map and promote local products in an effort to enhance the islands' profile and to increase public awareness of the valuable resources the islands produce.

The Chamber of Development of the Greek Islands (EOAEN)

Global specialized island networks

Global Islands Network (GIN)

The concept of the Global Islands Network can be traced back to the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and its parallel NGO Island Forum held in Barbados in 1994. The Barbados Declaration and the *Action Guideline for Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States* adopted at the Barbados Conference put forward 14 priority areas relating to small islands, and recommended “that regional organisations and networks be created to strengthen the ability of small islands to develop in a sustainable manner” (Global Island Network, 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 1994). In its earlier forms, the Global Islands Network mainly provided services related to the dissemination of information on the internet. Later, all parties agreed to formally set up the Global

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Islands Network (GIN) because a centralized portal website was needed. GIN is committed to promoting the wellbeing of islanders and islands at different levels, primarily through electronic communications, and operated as a non-profit organization from 2002–2015. The objectives of GIN include: “facilitating the capacity of islanders to acquire, disseminate and utilise knowledge resources; improving access to existing data and generating original information about islands; providing technical assistance and supporting initiatives which further integrated development on small islands; encouraging collaborative projects and comparative studies between and among islands; fostering cooperation by sharing good practices and offering a forum for discussion; and strengthening the voice of island communities as well as their representatives in intergovernmental and policymaking bodies” (Global Islands Network, 2021). While GIN now operates primarily as a worldwide network and key source of island-related information, it has undoubtedly made — and continues to make — valuable contributions in addressing issues of information asymmetry and in promoting the voices of islands and islanders globally.

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Local2030 Islands Network

September 27, 2019 was an auspicious date for island networks. Not only was this the day on which the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly carried out a high-level review of the *Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway*, but it was also the day on which the Global Island Partnership (GLISPA) launched the Local2030 Islands Network. Led by islands for islands, the Local2030 Islands Network is intended to “accelerate action on UN Sustainable Devel-

opment Goals (SDGs) and the *SAMOA Pathway*” (Local2030 Islands Network, 2020b). The premise of this network is that islands are unique, producing unique cultures and communities, and play a special role in leading the whole world in coping with climate change and promoting sustainable development (Local2030 Islands Network, 2020b). The goal of this network is “to promote island solutions and leadership based on shared island experiences and perspectives” (Local2030 Islands Network, 2020a).



In addition to the types of networks described above, there are many other examples of island networks that serve specific functions. For instance, IslandNet is devoted to improving the network of information technology service in the Caribbean and Latin America (IslandNet, 2020), and the Island Travel Network is a platform specializing in providing travel services to tourist destinations such as Fiji, Hawai’i, the Cook Islands, and Vanuatu (Island Travel Network, 2014). In addition, there are many more networks focusing on regional and sectoral dimensions of islands, including the B7 Baltic Islands Network and the Excellence Network of Island Territories/Réseau d’excellence des territoires insulaires (RETI) (J. Randall, 2020b).

Though the networks noted above carry out exceptionally important functions and operate effectively across different scales and issues, they reflect the fragmented nature of island organizations and the possible need for an overarching network. One implication is that there is still room for further cooperation in building a network of islands and island organizations.

COMMUNICATION AND MUTUAL BENEFITS: INHERENT MOTIVATION FOR THE COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAND NETWORKS

Research on network analysis is closely related to mathematical models (Hage & Harary, 1991, 1996). Among these models, the *graph theory* model (Hage & Harary, 1996) is one of the more suitable network analysis tools for examining island networks. The value of this model is that it defines the critical structural characteristics of all networks. For a network of islands, these characteristics include their distance, accessibility, and connectivity, as well as their centre, source, closure, sequence, division of zone, and cross-substructure (Hage & Harary, 1996). Existing research has suggested that island networks are internally connected through many kinds of social, cultural, religious, language, ecological, and research relationships, as well as through the influence of networks on the components (Constantakopoulou, 2007; Hage & Harary, 1996; Sierra & Feng, 2018; J. Randall, 2020a, 2020b). These island connections allow the societies that are part of the network to show their special attributes (Hage & Harary, 1996).

Even with the existence of a network, cooperation and further development among islands still requires an inherent motivation, and at the core of that is communication and mutual benefit. Of course, in actuality, benefits may be asymmetrical or unitary. Nevertheless, because of the existence of a network, islands are not “solitary kingdoms” or marginalized. In the process of driving the communication and mutual benefits among island networks, international politics causes national realism to play an important role. As an example of mutual benefits, inter-governmental

international organizations such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) have united small island states to establish new cooperative island networks to allow their collective voice to be heard, especially as it concerns sustainable development and the consequences of global warming (Alliance of Small Island States, 2021). For the vast majority of small island states, sea level rise due to climate change is an existential crisis (Huang et al., 2018). As such, the case can be made that we need to build a new island cooperation network to promote inclusive growth (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020) and advance sustainable development. In other words, we should construct a more inclusive form of cooperation among island networks based on communication and mutual benefits.

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LARGE OCEAN ECONOMIES: GAINING MOMENTUM IN COOPERATION AMONG THE NETWORKS OF ISLAND

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, many islands have been forced to lead a relatively secluded life to cope with serious health threats. But travel prohibitions and tightened entry policies have dealt a serious blow to the foundational industries on many islands that rely on the flow of people, especially tourists, for their development (see the chapters by Sindico, Huish, and Kelman, this volume). Even without these added obstacles, small island states and subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) face many other challenges (Lanthén & Beyersdorff, 2017). Our world is undergoing changes unparalleled in the past hundred years, however, which may provide islands with greater development opportunities. For those who have lived in mainland areas for a long time, their understanding of islands focuses primarily on the limited resources associated with small island areas, the small population, and high transportation costs, often leading them to conclude that the development potential and opportunities of islands are relatively limited. In fact, many small island states have extensive marine Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) that are not easily understood. Tuvalu's EEZ, for example, is 27,000 times the size of its land area, while the Republic of Kiribati, the largest Small Island Developing State in terms of ocean territory, has the 13th largest exclusive economic zone on Earth (Jumeau, 2013). To better illustrate this feature, and based on the existing literature, we focus on one type of large ocean economy: large ocean states, also referred to as “small island states” or Small Island



Developing States (SIDS) (Cedras, 2020; Govan, 2017; Hind et al., 2015; Jumeau, 2013; United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States [UN-OHRLLS] et al., 2014).

Given the marine territory associated with large ocean states and the natural resources and economic potential they contain, there is a tremendous opportunity for development (United Nations Environment Programme et al., 2012). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is estimated that the marine economy will generate US\$3 trillion by 2030 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; UK Government Office for Science, 2018). In key marine sectors, the investment of one US dollar can generate at least five US dollars worldwide, and the rate of return on investment is up to 450%–615% in some key fields over a period of thirty years (Konar & Ding, 2020).

THE “BLUE ECONOMY” IS A conceptual framework proposed by the international community which takes the sustainable health of the ocean into consideration. This concept promotes economic growth, social inclusiveness, and improved living standards while guaranteeing the sustainability of the marine environment.

As per the principles of sustainable development, islands have been seeking a balance among three aspects of their development goals: the economy, society, and the environment. The “Blue Economy” is a conceptual framework proposed by the international community which takes the sustainable health of the ocean into consideration (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). This concept promotes economic growth, social inclusiveness, and improved living standards while guaranteeing the sustainability of the marine environment (United

Nations Development Programme, 2019). But what merits the most attention is that, because the Blue Economy is defined in different ways (e.g., Hassanali, 2020; Smith-Godfrey, 2016) and is relatively new, it is still at the stage where it is not generally observed in all jurisdictions (Hassanali, 2020) other than in some specific cases (Keen et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2019). Despite this absence in application in all islands, ocean and coastal states have a long history of participating in the marine economy. Therefore, in this chapter we regard the Blue Economy as a development pursuit similar to that of the marine economy. As far as SIDS are concerned, the concept of the Blue Economy seeks to transform their geographic location from what might be perceived as a liability into “an asset for ocean-based economic development” (Halais, 2019, para. 3). Of course, compared with continental states, small island states often have a specialized industrial structure that may make it difficult for them to build on the opportunities of the marine economy. There are, however, opportunities for change.

Marine industries that facilitate and utilize cooperation across island networks may support successful development of SIDS for the following reasons:

- **Contributions made by the network to connectivity.**
Paradoxically, islands are isolated yet also connected by the sea (Sen, 2010). The connection among islands allows for an effective exchange of resources. For example, to many Pacific islanders, the sea is their main economic, social, and cultural lifeline (Seidel & Lal, 2010). These tangible and intangible exchanges have formed more efficient networks of industries.
- **Enormous achievements within marine related sectors.**
Development of the traditional marine fishery and island tourism, both of which are influenced by and dependent on the presence of the sea, have enormous potential. Although the value of the contributions of these sectors may vary significantly among islands, for many it is substantial. For example, Peterson and DiPietro (2021) note that for the Caribbean region, international tourism constitutes 20% of exports, 15% of Gross Domestic Product, and 14% of labour. In fact, the issue in some cases is not the lack of achievements in this sector but rather that it may be so large that it adversely impacts local society and the physical environment (i.e., overtourism; Peterson & DiPietro, 2021).
- **The ability and willingness to cope with common challenges.**
With the development of marine industries, islands face common challenges, including the impacts of climate change and sea level rise, frequent natural/environmental disasters, difficulty in the management of wastes, shortage of fresh water, heavy dependence on traditional fossil fuel-based sources of energy, endangered bio-diversity resources, difficulties in transportation and communications, and deficiencies in science and technology (Ault, 2016; Deng, 2016; Deng & Fu, 2017; Huang et al., 2018; Matak, 2011; United Nations General Assembly, 1994). Coping with these challenges, including implementing creative solutions in the areas of disaster prevention and mitigation, desalination, offshore wind power, and green science and technology, creates a foundation for the exchange of knowledge across a network.
- **The development of marine technologies.**
The development of new energy technologies, including offshore wind power and hydrogen energy, may help to solve the problems of energy shortages and high energy prices on islands. Some SIDS are aspiring to achieve 100% renewable energy by 2030 (Wehner et al., 2017). To accelerate the realization of this goal, island governments need to cooperate by increasing

“monitoring efforts, knowledge sharing, and the transfer of technology and digital infrastructure” (Winther et al., 2020, p. 1453). Although any one single island might have little impact, a network of islands working together is more likely to make substantial advances. Therefore, it is important to strengthen this aspect of cooperation among islands.

IN THE FUTURE: THE LASTING CONNECTION OF ISLAND NETWORKS

Existing linkages among islands may have stagnated as a result of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we know that achieving mutual benefits is an inherent motivation for cooperation among — and development of — island networks, a lack of communication may hinder knowledge sharing (Lanthén & Beyersdorff, 2017). A new route is needed to build stability and cooperation among island networks, and this new and inclusive islands network has tremendous possibilities. We will now highlight four key strategies to achieve this goal.

Form cooperation based on a shared consensus and principles

In addition to shared cultural characteristics, trade relationships, and/or systems of governance, island networks are linked on the basis of common interests. It could be argued that this is what brings SIDS together as a coherent entity (United Nations General Assembly, 1994). However, more can be done to bring islands together under a shared consensus. The idea of “building the community of shared future for mankind” (Xi, 2017) can give us some inspiration. Though this approach was first proposed by China (Xi, 2017; Zhao, 2018), its value and rich connotations originate in and have developed from common practices, to the point that it is now included in relevant United Nations resolutions (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2017). In order to build cooperation among networks of islands, we argue that large ocean economies could coalesce around a shared principle such as “building the community of shared future for all islanders.”

Of course, to turn a shared consensus into actuality, there must be some form of agreement on what this means for islands, and how it helps them to address their challenges. The following principles are suggested:

- 1) **That island networks are for every islander, and island networks are within every islander.** Although the contents of the island networks are rich and diverse, the goal of cooperation based on island networks is for every islander. By involving every islander in one or more island networks, the breadth and depth of islanders’ participation can be reemphasized.
- 2) **Where applicable and appropriate, borrow the development plans of large countries.** While internal cooperation within island networks in SIDS

is important, it is also important to cooperate with mainlands, especially large countries that have large markets. In the process of building cooperation among networks of islands, we suggest that it would be beneficial to make good use of external resources, actively participate in the development plans of large countries, and build up the strength of large ocean economies by “free riding”.

- 3) **Promote inclusive growth of the marine economy.** Instead of simply charging for using resources on the basis of “investment licensing”, we suggest emphasizing the inclusive growth of the marine economy. Relevant managers can consider participating in the marine industry value chain by means of resource investment, labour, and management service, so as to complete the transformation from resource provider and exporter to resource user and active participant. This suggests that more of the development value chain remains on the island. In addition, relevant rules should be formulated requiring the participation of multiple actors so as to prevent countries or investors from monopolizing the use and development of certain resources, which could harm the connectivity of the island network.

Highlighting key fields among islands

Cooperation within island networks should be practical within the marine economy. As has been stated by Seychelles Ambassador for Climate Change and SIDS Issues Ronny Jumeau (2013, p. 2), islanders are “ocean people” with a “unique dependence” on oceans. In his 2013 report to the United Nations, Ambassador Jumeau proposed several key areas for island cooperation, including capacity building, shared interest in caring for areas beyond national jurisdiction, marine pollution, sea level rise, ocean acidification, coral reef protection, marine protected areas, innovative financing, marine renewable energy, and fisheries. Similarly, Govan (2017) notes that key issues among Commonwealth small island states include fisheries, transport, emerging sectors (e.g., deep sea minerals, bioprospecting, and marine genetic resources), environmental pressures and threats, geopolitical interest, and gender perspectives. When discussing international collaboration in marine science in small island states, Hind and colleagues (2015, p. 2) have argued that “well-meaning engagement by foreign marine scientists can have limited or even negative impact if it does not meet locally identified needs.”

Perhaps this conclusion can also be applied to key fields among island networks. Identifying key fields is a dynamic process. Based on the Belt and Road Initiative, we suggest the following areas can be considered for large ocean economies: maritime transport and trade, a competitive fishery, leisure and tourism, low-cost ocean energy, port infrastructure development, and marine disaster mitigation and risk management. Supported by advanced information and communications technology (ICT) and renew-

able sources of energy, new platforms could be established that may result in greater cooperation among islands. Large ocean economies choosing among the key fields can use these new platforms to maximize benefits for their island populations.

Joint construction of Blue Economy demonstration areas

The development of the marine economy requires considerable capital investment, often involving foreign investment. The development of the marine economy should not repeat the traditional exploitative, resource-intensive model used in the past by many continental states (Stevens, 2015). The pursuits of the Blue Economy may be an appropriate choice for developing the marine economy. A first step may be the joint construction of Blue Economy demonstration areas that would attract the capital needed to develop the marine economy.

Planning global central island cities

In the process of cooperation among island networks, some islands may focus their attention on developing key nodes (M. Randall, 2017). Given the influence of marine economy activities on coastal areas and mainlands (Meister, 2015), having a global central island city may be useful. We are not advocating for every island to become a modernized city, since not all islands can successfully support this kind of development. However, those island cities that have the greatest potential may wish to unite under formal legal agreements. In doing so, they may develop connectivity advantages comparable to those of continental metropolises.

CONCLUSION

Island networks are starting to form but, at least to this point, are often fragmented, with little cooperation across networks. Through reconceptualizing large ocean economies, a greater level of stable cooperation could be built among networks of islands. Based on shared consensus and principles, large ocean economies could highlight key fields to promote this cooperation. Furthermore, establishing joint construction of Blue Economy demonstration areas and planning centralized global island cities represent valuable opportunities. The final, overarching goal of this process is to achieve economic, societal, and environmental balance for all islands.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this chapter, and especially the corresponding author Deng Yuncheng, thank Professor James Randall, Maggie J. Whitten Henry, Cai Qinghong, Li Liyun, and Peng Xiaoyang's discussion with the authors, together with their valuable advice, in writing this chapter. Of course, the authors are responsible for any errors or omissions in the chapter.

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