



Working paper

Policy implementation and the socio-political geography of small island contexts

Challenges and opportunities for creating an enabling environment in Small Island Developing States

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Abstract

The success of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) agenda rests on effective policy implementation. We look to the literatures in public administration and development studies for key insights on implementation. Translating these insights for the socio-political geography of small island contexts, we identify the trade-offs that SIDS encounter in managing coordination and capacity for implementation. We study examples of success and failure in navigating these trade-offs in practice to draw lessons for policy-makers in SIDS. We advocate ‘working with the grain’ to improve implementation by: leveraging social networks; collaborating with external actors; and working with existing institutional structures.



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About this paper

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In each paper, a leading expert analyses one of five themes identified in the preparatory documents for the UN's Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in May 2024. The papers will contribute to SIDS4 as supporting material/annexes to the next 10-year roadmap for SIDS, the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS.

This paper was commissioned under the theme of 'Resilient economies: New strategies for diversification and growth.'

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Acronyms/Glossary

BRICS an intergovernmental organisation comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates.

HIV/AIDS human immunodeficiency virus/ acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

MINT Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey

RESI Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative

SIDS Small Island Developing States

UN United Nations

1 Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have articulated an impressive development agenda on the global stage – one that belies the limited resources and fragmented nature of this disparate international community. However, getting SIDS’ concerns on the agenda is only the first step. Harder work lies in maintaining buy-in for sustained resources to support development for meaningful change. That longer-term mission will inevitably depend on effective and trusted monitoring and implementation of action plans. In the ‘audit culture’ regime that dominates institutions and practices of international development, evidence of value for money is essential (Krause, 2014). On the implementation of their policy agenda, though, the existing track record in SIDS remains weaker. This vulnerability is one that threatens to undermine the vital progress made in the last decade.

The key task, then, is to better understand what makes for an enabling environment to allow for effective implementation of this agenda. In this discussion paper, we turn to insights from the established literatures on implementation in public administration and development. We do so because these literatures have devoted much attention (in the last two decades in particular) to the challenges of policy implementation, identifying common political and pragmatic barriers to the delivery of programmes and services. Yet we remain wary that these general lessons and assumptions – which typically stem from theories derived from analysis of politics in the largest and most intensively studied countries in the world (see Hupe and Hill, 2016) – might not travel well to small states and SIDS in particular. We recognise that small island contexts have distinctive features of population size and socio-political geography that mean the standard rules of implementation might not necessarily apply. What we offer instead is a nuanced account, informed by a synthesis of the literatures on implementation, smallness, and island contexts, that can better interpret and translate the existing evidence base for a SIDS context. We ask: what is distinctive about the challenges and opportunities of implementation in small island contexts, and how can these lessons inform efforts to enhance the enabling environment in SIDS?

The paper proceeds in four sections. First, we outline broad lessons on implementation from public administration and development studies. Second, we reinterpret those lessons through the socio-political geography of small island contexts. Third, we conduct a creative comparison, assessing key examples of implementation of broader strategies in island contexts so as to discern patterns in what allows for more or less effective delivering and monitoring. Fourth, we draw conclusions from this analysis, and outline recommendations for enhancing the enabling environments for effective implementation in SIDS. Our emphasis is on providing a practical guide on what to do for successful implementation, and on how to do it as effectively as possible in the context of real-world constraints.

2 What we know about implementation: lessons from public policy and development studies

Policy implementation is a core concern of governments and international organisations. Whether framed as ‘administration’, ‘oversight’, ‘delivery’ or being ‘outcome-focused’, the concern is the same: that it proves difficult to execute policies, programmes and projects, as the contingencies of dynamic and unique local contexts confound expectations and assumptions.

Academic fashions have seen different analytical foci – a distinction especially between the top-down view from the policy-making centre and the bottom-up view from the ground (Hupe and Hill, 2016) – and different methodological tools: a wide variety ranging from ethnographic explorations to randomised controlled trials (see Ewert et al., 2021). But despite working in different traditions, scholars broadly reveal the same substantive story. In general, the message is that implementation is far from a linear process, often confounded by unexpected developments, unintended consequences and the contingencies of local context. It is instead a perennial challenge, and ‘implementation gaps’ are inevitable, especially in relation to the most complex and contested issues.

Authoritative reviews focus on two key factors that are seen to enable (or, more often, hinder) policy implementation:

- One is coordination – the ability to get a diversity of actors to support implementation of any given law, policy or programme. The foundational text in this vein is Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) magisterial account of How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland. Subsequent studies have shown exhaustively how the ambitions of policy-makers can be thwarted in practice, as local actors and private interests exercise opposition and moderation through tactics such as legal challenge, non-compliance, wilful misinterpretation or continued lobbying ‘downstream’ in the policy process (see Patashnik, 2009; Boswell, 2016; Hupe and Hill, 2016). Implementation, in this sense, is thought to often be hindered by a fractious and fragmented environment in which powerful actors ‘on the ground’ undermine the intentions of lawmakers and administrators in the centre.
- Two is capacity – the (in)ability to follow through in delivery of laws, programmes and services. The most emblematic study in this vein is development anthropologist David Mosse’s (2004) account of how good policy is ‘unimplementable’. The central point here is that policy-makers lack access to adequate information about the conditions on the ground. ‘Seeing like a state’, in the words of celebrated comparativist James Scott (1998), means designing policies that might

work theoretically, on the basis of the stylised information policy-makers operate with, but which are liable to lack relevance for the complex real-world contexts in which social challenges and public problems actually arise (see also Lea, 2020). Implementation, in this sense, is thought more often to be hindered simply by a lack of access to sufficient resources for delivery, enforcement and monitoring.

However, these broad lessons are drawn from analysis of the dynamics of implementation in large advanced liberal democracies or large developing states among BRICS and MINT countries. Small island contexts have a very different social and political geography to these intensively studied areas: divergences that cannot be ignored. What difference might political geography and limited social fields make?

3 Why small island contexts are different: the socio-political geography of implementation

In this section, we focus our attention on pockets of scholarship better attuned to the social and political geography of small island contexts to provide a more nuanced conceptual apparatus for thinking about implementation in SIDS – one focused on the effects of small population size for governance, the other on the effects of peripherality for governance.

3.1 How size matters for implementation

There is an important literature across comparative politics and public administration that stresses the paradoxes of small population size for governance (see Table 1). Put simply, size upends many assumptions about what ‘good governance’ entails, with flow-on implications for how we think of implementation.

Table 1 Paradoxes of small state governance

Paradox	Presumptions of governance	Small state reality
Small vs large governance	Small states are presumed to fulfill the same functions as large states	Small states have limited resources and smaller scales; market for certain services might be missing
Specialist vs generalist administration	Addressing complex policy problems requires specialisation	Small organisations and lack of expertise force towards generalist administrators
Formal vs informal governance	Transparency, predictability, neutrality and equality assume formalisation	High personalism, close social relationships and multi-functionality contribute to informal governance
Centralised vs decentralised governing	Democratic governance assumes decentralisation	Lacking economies of scale, limited resources and personalism pressure towards centralisation

Source: Randma-Liiv and Sarapuu (2019: 166).

3.2 How peripherality matters for implementation

Equally, a more diffuse literature across studies of human geography (see e.g. Connell, 2018) and political economy (see e.g. Read, 2004) stresses the peripherality of small island contexts

within the complexities of a global economy. Put simply, island contexts are cut off from other population centres due to distinct physical obstacles—usually sea, but sometimes rainforest, desert, or mountainous terrain – which renders them particularly vulnerable. They are precariously positioned at the very edge of global supply chains and migration movements, and (just as importantly) less readily able to pool capacities with large neighbouring states.

The upshot is that questions of size and context matter much more than the scholarship on implementation and administration typically imply (see Sarapuu and Randma-Liiv, 2020; Jugl, 2022). Indeed, the literature points to key trade-offs in coordination and capacity that are particular to the experience of implementation in a small island context.

3.3 The co-ordination trade-off

On the one hand, small island contexts typically face unique coordination challenges associated with operating in a geopolitical environment in which the state has few levers to influence powerful actors (both internal and (especially) external) who have their own incompatible agendas. The interaction between administrative units is often characterised by the lack of machinery for formal coordination and heavy reliance on informal coordination (Raadschelders, 1992: 28) leading to coordination and communication problems. SIDS famously represent the most remote, isolated and regionally diverse countries. All these characteristics inhibit actors coming together to pool resources and coordinate activities in ways that are conducive to effective implementation.

On the other hand, the small population size of island states, and the presence of fewer government organisations, hierarchical levels and positions, facilitate coordination via informal networks as well as inclusiveness and citizen participation in design and delivery (Corbett et al., 2021). Flexibility and informality allow SIDS to cope with the constraints of limited resources, adapt to the changing circumstances and prioritise on a running basis.

3.4 The capacity trade-off

On the one hand, capacity is usually thought of as a severe restriction for small polities like SIDS due to economies of scale. While the bureaucracy often represents a high proportion of the population in relative terms, its absolute size is much smaller than those of large states. Research shows that, regardless of background wealth, the absolute size of government is the chief determinant of sector specialisation and analytical capacity (see Jugl, 2022: 11–14). Small states simply lack the human resource and technical infrastructure needed for the effective monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation.

On the other hand, the relatively small scale of small island state governance can have some benefits in terms of capacity for implementation. With smaller size comes greater centralisation and greater agility than the more rigid bureaucracies of large states. In place of technical

specialisation and analytical capacity, they are more likely to rely on informal know-how or ‘dynamic institutional memory’ (see Corbett et al., 2018) and the ability to respond swiftly to changing dynamics on the ground (see Jugl, 2022: 18–20).

The real task that emerges from this conceptual ground-clearing exercise, then, is to understand how these trade-offs might be best negotiated, and ultimately how policy-makers might work ‘with the grain’ (Booth, 2011) of the small island context to produce a better enabling environment for implementation. Moreover, the shared experiences and challenges associated with smallness and peripherality provide fertile ground for lesson-learning and cooperation across SIDS.

4 What we know about implementing broad agendas in island contexts: using creative comparison to unlock key patterns

To parse out the ways population size and ‘islandness’ interact, we dive into relevant cases to deduce useful patterns for analysis and insights for policy-makers. We start by intentionally broadening our scope beyond SIDS. We consider ‘island contexts’ more generally that share features of their general social and political geography. We use the term ‘island contexts’ in the tradition of the study of ‘islandness’ in the social sciences to capture the salient features of SIDS that are often shared by a wider range of polities (see LaFlamme, 1983; Lowenthal, 2007; Baldacchino, 2008). In geographical terms, these contexts are small, peripheral and isolated. They are spaces cut off from other population centres due to distinct physical obstacles—usually sea, but sometimes rainforest, desert, or mountainous terrain. In political terms, island contexts are typically weak and poor, and wield little influence. They are polities that are especially vulnerable to the environmental and economic impacts of globalisation. In social terms, ‘island contexts’ usually exhibit limited but intimate relationships – ‘everyone knows everyone’ (Corbett, 2015). The logic in expanding our analytical horizons in this way – from SIDS to ‘island contexts’ more broadly – is that dedicated studies of policy implementation within SIDS are fairly meagre. Expanding the analytical category enables ‘creative comparisons’ that can expand our imaginary for insight, but also introduces a greater variety of practical ideas and potential models for reform and renewal (see Boswell et al., 2019; Jugl, 2022). We draw lessons from a variety of examples from these diverse contexts that can inform research and practice in SIDS.

We look for examples in public health, on the basis that this policy domain offers an especially useful lens for thinking about addressing the challenges of implementation in SIDS. Public health is of course a major concern substantively in SIDS – famously, SIDS are among the most ‘obesogenic’ environments in the world, with disastrous rates of non-communicable disease, but they are also seen as environmentally vulnerable to the effects of novel pathogens. But our focus on public health is primarily intended to unearth more general lessons for implementation across sectors and settings in small island contexts. This is because the complex dynamics of implementing public health initiatives speak to the challenges that are at the heart of the implementation gap in small island contexts. Some core public health issues offer a test of resilience in the face of rapidly changing policy problems (in the form of measures associated with health protection). Others offer a test of the ability to tackle long-running, wicked social problems (in the form of measures associated with health improvement).

Table 2 Public health interventions in SIDS and other ‘island contexts’: cases compared

Intervention	Cautionary tale	Qualified success story
Health protection in SIDS (COVID-19 vaccine)	Saint Lucia A campaign that generated among the lowest levels of vaccination in the world	Samoa A campaign that generated among the highest levels of vaccination in the world
Health protection in similar ‘island contexts’ (HIV prevention programmes)	Lesotho Persistent high rates (second highest globally) despite multiple policy initiatives	Botswana The ‘Masa’ strategy that eliminated HIV ‘epidemic’ four years ahead of schedule
Health improvement in SIDS (obesity prevention)	Pacific Prevention in Communities (Fiji and Tonga) Initiatives directed at community-based solutions with limited uptake and impact	Farm to Fork (Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Kitts) Initiatives directed at improving dietary patterns of children with small but valuable impacts
Health improvement in similar ‘island contexts’ (alcohol control)	Northern Territory (Australia) A highly controversial ‘intervention’ in this small ‘island’ context with negative social and health impacts	Far North (New Zealand) A collaborative approach in this small ‘island’ context that had small but valuable social and health impacts

Source: Authors

Our case selection identifies a ‘cautionary tale’ and a ‘qualified success story’ of policy implementation in two pairs of contexts in each category: one a pair of SIDS, the other a pair of similar ‘island contexts’ in terms of political geography. This series of pair-wise comparisons allows us to discern key patterns in what makes for an effective enabling environment across the challenges SIDS face in implementation.

Through reference to grey literature, media coverage, published evidence and a sound background understanding, we outline brief pen portraits of each case. The focus of our analysis is to identify how, and how successfully, the trade-offs of coordination and capacity are navigated.

5 Implementing health protection on small islands

The task of running programmes, delivering policies and implementing services to protect the health of citizens from infectious disease acutely exhibits the trade-offs associated with coordination and capacity. Theoretically, it should be easier for small islands to coordinate across sectors and to channel capacity into urgent or emergent health threats, but these polities are also liable to be isolated from broader international coordination efforts and to lack the technical capacity for effective follow-through and monitoring on the ground. We look to two paired comparisons of efforts to navigate these trade-offs in recent times: one in relation to the urgent rollout of vaccination programmes in the face of COVID-19 (Saint Lucia and Samoa), the other a more comprehensive set of policies to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa (Lesotho and Botswana).

Comparing COVID-19 vaccination in Saint Lucia and Samoa: COVID-19 represented an extraordinary threat for SIDS, not just because their populations were susceptible to this novel virus, but because heavy restrictions on global travel threatened the economic livelihood of island nations dependent on tourism (Campbell and Connell, 2021). Pursuing vaccination was key, therefore, both to protecting health and to economic recovery. But the context was one of extreme challenge for implementation. Wealthy states in the Global North put themselves at the front of the queue for vaccine distribution, with small, vulnerable and peripheral states left behind. There were also limits in terms of technical capacity to manage, deliver and monitor vaccine rollout. How did SIDS navigate these challenges?

Saint Lucia represents a case in which the challenges of implementation proved difficult to overcome in practice. The East Caribbean sub-region stands out across SIDS globally as one with low rates of population immunity due to failures in coordinating and rolling out the vaccination programme – and Saint Lucia exemplified the challenges in this region. Coordination was hampered by the circulation of scepticism in local and social media (see UNICEF, 2021). Far from the ‘high trust’ environment that we might expect small island contexts to exhibit in a crisis context, the public sphere was riven with division. The result has been persistent ‘vaccine hesitancy’ among the population. Capacity, meanwhile, was hindered across the sub-region by a failure to capitalise on the time that international lockdowns afforded local authorities to prepare for rollout of the programme. Relative to other SIDS, East Caribbean nations like Saint Lucia often lacked basic equipment and adequately trained staff to deliver the programme on the ground (Wouters et al., 2021).

Samoa represents an international success story – with among the highest rates of vaccination in the world, especially important in a context of high rates of underlying comorbidities that threatened to increase Samoa’s relative case fatality rate many times over. The same fundamental

challenges to implementation applied, so how did Samoa navigate them so much better? One answer lies in coordination. Samoan authorities drew on longstanding ties to powerful regional neighbours in Australia and New Zealand to coordinate timely access to vaccines. The particular advantage for Samoa lay in pre-existing relationships and common experience forged by the relatively recent drive for vaccination to tackle the local measles epidemic, where these regional partners and local policy-makers and cultural organisations (especially the Church) had already developed rapport with each other and with local communities (see Bailey and Malungahu, 2022). Leveraged in this way, the informal ‘everyone knows everyone’ social trust was a key asset in getting buy-in. The other answer lies in capacity. Local authorities, again with support from their higher capacity regional partners, used the advantages of smallness to work quickly and informally to shore up capacity for rollout. They were able to develop, at speed, bespoke training for community health workers to greatly improve workforce numbers and ensure – for service users – timely and convenient execution of the programme.

The lesson here for SIDS is about the importance of coordination in making best use of advantages to cover for relative disadvantages in implementation. Local leaders need to be primed to capitalise on ‘windows of opportunity’ like those created by the COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions – and deliberately tapping into and leveraging the informal networks and social ties that typify island contexts is the quickest and most productive way of optimising the benefits.

Comparing HIV prevention in Lesotho and Botswana: While the COVID-19 crisis presented a stark set of dilemmas, the more routine work of health protection has its challenges for implementation, too. Small island states can struggle to coordinate the many contributing factors – across settings and borders, with internal and external stakeholders – that contribute to public health threats. They also lack capacity to deliver healthcare on the ground, monitor resource need, and evaluate the success of interventions. The comparatively slow-burn, long-duration HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1990s and 2000s in sub-Saharan Africa offers a case in point. We turn here to a comparison of the ‘island’ contexts of Lesotho and Botswana – metaphorical island states that share key geopolitical characteristics of smallness, isolation, peripherality and social intimacy. By the early 2000s, Lesotho and Botswana had among the highest rates of HIV infection in the world, driven by a mix of economic, environmental and cultural determinants over which each national government had limited oversight or control. Both reported humanitarian crises and pushed forward a similar set of agendas for reform. Yet they have had very different levels of success in implementing emergency response strategies in the intervening years. Botswana recently declared the HIV/AIDS epidemic ‘over’, four years earlier than forecast, while Lesotho continues to exhibit high rates of infection. How might we explain this discrepancy?

The Lesotho experience offers a cautionary tale in the difficulties of implementation in an ‘island’ context. Rhetorical commitment to coordination across services – a seeming strength of relative smallness and informality – was not met here with adequate resourcing of capacity. A key pillar of the Lesotho government’s plan to address HIV in the 2000s was to mainstream efforts to

address this public health crisis across multiple public services. The logic here is sound, based on a long history of research (from at least Marmot (2004)) showing that solutions to improve public health are best found and addressed in other sectors. But the logic on the policy planning documents did not play out in practice, in a context of messy real-world constraints. The policy had a reliance on schools to promote awareness and deliver culture change in sexual health and social practices. In practice, however, studies reveal that this reliance was hindered by persistent gender-based discrimination, threadbare funding and overlapping demands on the education sector (Ansell, 2008; Khau, 2012).

The Botswana experience represents the flipside of how improvements to coordination and capacity can go hand-in-hand, with the 'Masa' ('New Dawn') strategy to address the HIV/AIDS crisis becoming one of the great 'success stories' of public health and development intervention in recent times (see CDC, 2005; Farahani et al., 2014). Fundamentally, 'Masa' was not hugely different from Lesotho's policy package to deal with the crisis. The difference lay in effective implementation. Here, efforts to coordinate across sectors within Botswana were reinforced with resources and expertise from key international donors and partner organisations. The result was that the 'mainstreaming' of solutions to address HIV in education and other sectors was backed up by adequate capacity in the form of training, guidance material and medical interventions (both pharmaceutical and community-based). As research on SIDS has shown, sometimes extreme vulnerability to crisis can be an asset in efforts to attract resource and attention – and Botswana's government showed the nous to use this investment to enhance capacity for action on the ground.

The key point is about marrying coordination efforts to capacity needs. If the lesson from the SIDS-based comparison is about the need to get stakeholders together and agreeing on a course of action, then the lesson from the broader 'island context' comparison is that this is only the first step. Those stakeholders need to also be adequately resourced and helped to execute key elements of that plan.

6 Implementing health improvement on small islands

Epidemics like COVID-19 and HIV tend to command attention, but equally challenging governance issues surround health improvement. Indeed, with the exception of tobacco control, implementing health improvement measures is something governments even in the wealthiest states in the world struggle to deliver. The challenges in SIDS are acute. In particular, SIDS have exceptionally high rates of non-communicable disease driven by lifestyle factors. Efforts to combat these challenges demand long-term action that is even harder to coordinate and track. How might these difficulties be navigated?

Comparing obesity prevention via Pacific Prevention in Communities (Fiji and Tonga) and Farm-to-Fork (Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Kitts): Obesity prevention is high on the list of ‘wicked problems’ that governments struggle to control. The complex causes are felt more acutely in SIDS because of their political and social geography. These are tiny markets at the end of huge global supply chains, with limited capacity to make and store their own food. The result is a reliance on highly calorific ‘ultraprocessed’ foods of limited nutritional value. In fact, many SIDS suffer the ‘double burden of malnutrition’ – with populations that exhibit high rates of obesity and have deficient intake of healthy nutrients (Foster et al., 2018). National governments, international organisations and researchers have been recognising this humanitarian crisis for at least two decades. There has been agreement around an agenda for reform, but significant challenges in realising these changes. Efforts to coordinate are hampered by competing priorities around trade/economy and health. Implementation is also hindered by a poor evidence base for evaluating interventions, and limited expertise in delivering policies and programmes. A comparison of two projects – one in the Pacific and one in the Caribbean – highlights more and less productive ways of navigating these challenges of implementation.

The Pacific Prevention in Communities project was a typical expert-led intervention to pilot policy change. Led by experts and organisations in Australia and New Zealand (the research also included the Pasifika diaspora in those two countries), the logic underpinning intervention was that local communities themselves should buy into and help deliver solutions. However, the execution of the project in Fiji and Tonga revealed the real-world problems that undermine good intentions – and later analysis showed negligible impacts on food intake in either site (Schultz et al., 2011; Thow et al., 2011). Why? First, the ‘community’ was operationalised in narrow terms that did not take into account the wider geopolitical context in which rising obesity in Fiji and Tonga was occurring (excluding, most obviously, the import and food retail sectors). Moreover, analytical capacity remained rooted in Australia and New Zealand, with limited local expertise for delivery and monitoring.

The Farm to Fork initiative, undertaken in Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Kitts, was a local manifestation of a wider global movement focused on improving the food supply chain. The idea – imported again by external experts and organisations, this time from Canada – is to encourage local food systems to rely on locally grown and sourced foods, rather than ultra-processed imports. Evaluations show that Farm to Fork has successfully (if modestly) improved the nutritional intake of affected children in both countries. How? Coordination in this case was more comprehensive, incorporating local agriculture, markets, and schools and school food providers (Granderson et al., 2014). This coordination also ensured that demand could meet production capacity and channel that towards a key target (schools) – an important consideration in island contexts that have often become highly reliant on food imports, with limited arable land and local food production.

A key take-home from this comparison is that governments in SIDS seldom have the luxury of excluding powerful interests from efforts to deliver policies and programmes – the resources that lie in the private sector can make up for shortfalls in resources and capacity.

7 Comparing alcohol control in the Northern Territory (Australia) and Far North (New Zealand)

Reducing alcohol harms is, like obesity prevention, a ‘wicked problem’ in health improvement that presents significant implementation challenges – not just in SIDS, but almost everywhere, including wealthy liberal democracies of the Global North (see Moodie et al., 2013). Our last comparison focuses on a couple of ‘islands’ within two such states – the Northern Territory in Australia and the Far North in New Zealand. Both represent ‘islands’ in the sense that they are remote rural areas marked by high rates of poverty and with significant indigenous populations. Alcohol harm – as one of the many complex and problematic legacies of colonisation in so-called ‘settler societies’ – has long represented a major public health concern in both. Nearly two decades ago, the national governments of Australia and New Zealand approached strategic intervention in very different ways, with implications that can illuminate ideas about implementation in island contexts.

The ‘Northern Territory Intervention’ is one of the most controversial episodes in recent Australian political history (see Altman and Russell, 2012). Delivered as a militarised ‘intervention’ in 2007, the policy imposed heavy-handed bans on alcohol in remote First Nations communities, provoking much controversy both in the Northern Territory and throughout Australia. Subsequent reviews have revealed that coordination with the Territory government and indigenous groups was unequal and inadequate. The result was that, though initial capacity to impose the policy was high because of the deployment of resources from the Commonwealth government, long-term implementation suffered due to a lack of local buy-in (O’Mara, 2010). Policy implementation on the ground in the Northern Territory depends on committed individuals with strong ties to community (see Lea, 2020) – and most were not in support of the aims and methods of the Commonwealth.

By comparison, the Far North Co-Location project (2006–2011) was a much softer and subtler intervention to address problem drinking. Rather than the heavy-handed approach of total bans, the ethos of the project was more about improving compliance among licensed premises, with new regulations that placed restrictions on sales of alcohol to address binge and underage drinking. Along with coordination across public health and policing agencies, collaboration and engagement with local iwi (tribes) and community leaders was also baked into the approach. Indeed, these local stakeholders had been central in getting the issue on the agenda in the first place. While interagency collaboration across local and national government allowed better data collection, partners outside government were relied upon to work with local business to increase uptake and improve compliance in the absence of monitoring capacity over such a

large geographical area (AACNZ, 2010). The project was not a panacea – alcohol harms remain a significant public health problem in the Far North today – but it did enable modest improvements in the ability of government to understand and work on the problem.

The lesson from this comparison reinforces that coordination requires community buy-in in its most capacious sense, and that this approach to coordination has a significant flow-on effect on capacity to deliver, enforce or monitor on the ground.

8 Conclusions: key lessons for effective implementation of the SIDS agenda

This series of comparisons offers useful insight into success and failure in managing the trade-offs associated with smallness and peripherality. Our conclusion supports the long tradition of ‘working with the grain’ (Booth, 2011) in development by best maximising the resources and relationships that already exist, rather than imposing new ideas, tools or institutions from the outside. In practice, for policy implementation in SIDS, that will mean working with the natural advantages of smallness and peripherality – in the form of close-knit networks, informal relationships, personal influences and organisational agility – to offset the disadvantages of asymmetric coordination and low bureaucratic capacity. What are the key take-away lessons for practice? We drill down into what ‘working with the grain’ really means for better policy implementation in SIDS: what to do, and how to go about it.

8.1 Leveraging social networks and cultural institutions

Our first point is about navigating the coordination trade-off. It has become almost cliché in public administration and development circles that policy-making must be done with rather than on communities. But our analysis only reinforces how important this well-worn maxim is. Failure to coordinate with community partners can result in a lack of buy-in, with consequences in the form of non-compliance. But here the advantage of smallness comes to the fore: ‘everyone knows everyone’ (Corbett, 2015) amid a high degree of personalisation. Whereas large states typically have a professionalised ‘third sector’ enmeshed in formal governance networks to help connect citizens to programme oversight, deliver services and monitor public needs, SIDS – which typically lack anything remotely approaching that sort of civil society capacity – can turn instead to informal relationships and the intimate ties of kin and community.

What does this mean for efforts to coordinate for effective implementation? In SIDS, we think coordination with community-based organisations might not look anything like the principal-agent ‘contracting’ that typifies policy implementation in larger states. That transactional logic, suitable for large and impersonal bureaucracies at significant distance from ‘the ground’ of delivery and evaluation, fails to translate to SIDS in important ways. It implies assigning monetary value to activities grounded in the social and cultural fabric, and ascribing performance measures and monitoring protocols at odds with an informal local context. Coordination in SIDS might instead be better rooted in culturally appropriate practices to build and sustain the rapport and trust needed for meaningful buy-in. This is not to naively wish away the realities of ‘audit regimes’, but to resist the oversimplified application of approaches to public sector accountability developed elsewhere. That will involve:

- the early and ongoing engagement of community actors – especially faith-based organisations – in the development of implementation plans in order to build local buy-in for reform actions
- senior politicians and decision-makers articulating and defending an alternative approach to coordination grounded in the value of informality, cultural familiarity and personal rapport
- public officials developing and sharing ways of demonstrating the robustness of these approaches that can go some way towards satisfying ‘audit regime’ norms and expectations.

8.2 Working collaboratively as much as possible with external interests

Our second point is about navigating the capacity trade-off – and especially the importance of tapping into the capacity of external interests. The trend in recent decades in development has been to seed expertise and human resource within administrations to build their own capacity for implementation (Eade, 1997). More recently, the hope has been that advances in technology and computing power can give even small teams big analytical insight (see Ndou, 2004). The reality is not that simple. Our analysis lays bare that complete analytical independence is not a feasible strategy within SIDS – there will never be the absolute capacity for effective planning, analysis and monitoring of policies, programmes and projects across the wide range of social, environmental, economic and health problems that SIDS face, and the data on which digital technologies rely will remain especially threadbare and incomplete due to the social and political challenges of island geography (see Cullen and Hassall, 2017). The key instead is leveraging the resource and expertise that others can bring and using that to complement more targeted efforts to build internal capacity. In SIDS, some of that external resource and expertise lies in the private sector (often transnational corporations), some within international organisations, and some within powerful regional partners.

Leveraging this external expertise well in practice, our analysis suggests, will mean extracting a capacity legacy from engagement with external support. External partners can help attract resource and expertise for the initial start-up costs of major policy intervention and programme development. But SIDS need to use their relative agility to maximise the ‘window of opportunity’ created by these moments. To improve capacity for the long haul of monitoring and enforcement:

- policy-makers should dedicate set-up efforts towards training a sustainable local workforce targeted for core work that has to be carried out in-country, i.e. delivering services and gathering effective data for evaluation
- policy analysts should seek to cement relationships with well-resourced regional and international research organisations to assist with monitoring and analysis of that data
- private sector interests should be engaged, where possible, with effective forms of industry self-regulation and data sharing as well.

We note an important caveat here: there is an obvious threat that external interests capture the agenda. Naturally, the aims of external actors will not always be in alignment with each other, or with elements of the SIDS agenda. ‘Working with the grain’ for implementation will mean effective

orchestration of conflict (front-stage) and cooperation (backstage) to mitigate the threat of capture. Again, here, the relative smallness and informality of SIDS polities can be an advantage in building relationships of trust and understanding.

8.3 ‘Working with’ existing governance arrangements

Our last key recommendation focuses on the interrelationship between coordination and capacity in policy implementation. As in some of our ‘cautionary tales’, even good faith and warm rhetoric around coordination can be undermined by a lack of effective capacity, just as a major injection of expertise and resource can falter on poor coordination. Uniting efforts to improve coordination and capacity depends on using the governance arrangements and tools that already exist, rather than trying to generate programmes or institutional solutions anew. SIDS’ smallness, informality and personalisation mean that the proliferation of ad hoc innovation seen in large states is unfeasible – SIDS cannot afford to waste scarce resources on bureaucratic duplication. But these characteristics of ‘islandness’ also mean that existing arrangements are not the monolithic and inert bodies associated with most ‘institutionalist’ understandings of public sector organisations. SIDS’ institutions are already malleable and dynamic, and therefore have potential to be reshaped without significant architectural reform.

What might it mean to ‘work with’ existing governance arrangements to improve the enabling environment for implementation? In practice, as we have seen in some of our qualified success stories, it will mean using the advantageous features of ‘islandness’ in the following ways:

- Political decision-makers should leverage the agility of small organisations for a ‘strategic state’ approach that can align missions and incentives quickly and effectively (see Elliott, 2020).
- Senior public sector leaders should ensure cross-sectoral expertise and analytic capacity is directed to improve delivery and monitor compliance with new programmes and policies.
- Policy officials should draw on smallness and informality to perform interagency cooperation in their work through everyday practices of information sharing.

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