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Small States and COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Multilateralism

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This article tests one of the core theses in the burgeoning literature on small states, which asserts that small states must seek shelter within larger organizations or in partnership with large states in order to mitigate their inherent vulnerabilities and build resilience against externally originating shocks. This article tests this theory by conducting comparative case study analysis to investigate how small states have navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the extent to which small states have been seeking shelter that is economic, political, and societal from existing multilateral frameworks, as well as the conditions under which they are developing new work-arounds when the existing multilateral arrangements have not functioned as intended. These ad hoc multilateral and minilateral arrangements, necessitated by the crisis, have filled the gap when the expected benefits of collective security have not been forthcoming from long-standing frameworks, yet they also reveal how a more unified and proactive approach to remedying the failings of existing, credible multilateral frameworks would serve to maximize and spread the benefits more widely, rather than fragmenting efforts and unevenly distributing the gains. Consequently, while the conclusion acknowledges small state successes in coalition building, innovation, flexibility, and proactivity in harnessing multilateralism or developing sovereign initiatives to respond to this crisis in the short term, it also highlights several emergent problems that will require shoring up and remedying the failings of existing regional and international multilateral mechanisms in the long term. The article closes by offering several recommendations, including the critical necessity of commitment from large counterparts to overhaul international financial mechanisms to ensure that no small states get left behind in the pandemic recovery.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, much attention has been paid to the impact of the crisis on the powers that dominate global politics—be that critiques of the lack of US leadership in this pivotal moment (Norrlöf 2020; Ladkin 2020), or the crystallization of anti-Chinese feeling among the biggest economies in Europe (with policymakers debating Chinese culpability, considering the prospect of limiting foreign direct investment, and recognizing the need to reduce Western dependency on supply chains linked to China) (ENTC, 2020; Evenett 2020). Such attention is certainly appropriate, given the primacy of these actors in the shaping of the global economy; however, it is

also necessary to broaden the discussion to consider the impact of this crisis on a significant number of actors who have not been afforded the same level of attention, despite being disproportionately exposed to many of the pandemic's effects.

For this reason, this article focuses on the pandemic experience for small states, predominantly defined¹ in accordance with the membership threshold of the Forum of Small States (an informal grouping at the United Nations) of countries with populations of fewer than ten million people (Ó Súilleabháin 2014). For small states, which are disproportionately vulnerable to exogenous shocks, the COVID-19 crisis, declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, has posed

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¹ While the population of Cuba, for instance, is slightly higher, at 11.33 million in 2019, it is included later in this article as it conforms to the same structural vulnerabilities as many small states (economic size, remoteness, isolation, etc.) yet illuminates surprising agency for small states in its pandemic response.

a unique challenge (Balkhair 2020). The risk of community transmission is heightened in territories that are small and often densely populated, medicine costs per capita are higher, and the public health infrastructure in many small states is ill-suited to cater to high numbers of patients (Briguglio and Azzopardi-Muscat 2016). Yet despite these vulnerabilities, small states also have advantageous characteristics. Often, they can respond more rapidly to changes in the security landscape, and the sense of insecurity suffered by small states sometimes motivates them to adapt more quickly, unencumbered by the many layers of bureaucracy that stymie the agility of greater neighbors (Briffa 2021; Sarapuu, Wivel, and Thorhallsson 2021; Corbett and Veenendaal 2021). The awareness of their structural limitations led many small states to prioritize early prevention, and the experience of crisis management in the face of natural disasters and previous epidemics provided invaluable best practices in emergency response (Richards 2020). Most importantly, the agility and rapidity with which centralized governments in small states have been able to respond to the crisis—be that in repurposing facilities (Boffey 2020), swiftly enacting economic reforms (International Monetary Fund 2021; Briffa and Agius 2021), or coordinating between multifunctional staff (El-Jardali 2020)—has been a testament to the adaptive capabilities of small states.

Resilience building for small states is not limited to the domestic level, however, but also includes multilevel governance as part of the global community (Thorhallsson 2018). More specifically, therefore, this article undertakes comparative case study analysis to understand the extent to which small states across the globe have sought “shelter” during this time of crisis by turning to multilateral frameworks (multilateralism hereby defined as “*the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states*”) (Keohane 1990, 731) to offset their inherent capacity limitations during the pandemic.

Where Peter Katzenstein (1985) has long emphasized the need for small states to “buffer from within”² in order to build resilience and offset inherent weaknesses, Baldur Thorhallsson (2018) argues that this is insufficient: small states cannot survive or prosper without the shelter afforded by an external protector, or regional and international organizations. Just like alliance theory, shelter theory therefore commences from an assumption that small size produces inherent disadvantages (such as the monopoly of services and a dependency on imports and exports) (Baldacchino 2012), the solution to which may be found by seeking external shelter through an alliance with a large state or joining international organizations (Choi 1995). Where Bailes, Thayer, and Thorhallsson (2016) distinguish this theory from traditional alliance theory is on the grounds that alliance theorists are explaining the actions of great powers, whereas the behavior of small states may

stem from more complex considerations and more “*nanced alliance motivation and needs*,” meaning that the concept of alliance “shelter” is more accurate in explaining small state alignment (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2018, 1). Small states are fundamentally different social units than large states (thereby operating distinctly), and domestic factors (predominantly innate structural weaknesses) influence their choices in alignment as much as international factors. The authors test this theory on three case studies—Armenia, Cuba, and Singapore—and find that the concept of alliance shelter is more appropriate in explaining their foreign policy behavior than traditional alliance theory.

They argue that since small states cannot threaten the hegemony of great powers, the prospect of relative gains will not undermine mutual cooperation. Small states may even benefit disproportionately from international cooperation, particularly when engaging with international organizations. Small states require not only security protection, however, but also shelter that is (i) economic; (ii) political; and (iii) societal. This is necessary in order to overcome not only external vulnerabilities but also their intrinsic domestic limitations in infrastructure, knowledge, and administrative capacity (Thorhallsson 2018). This article therefore adopts this framework and tests how and to what extent small states have sought three types of shelter during the COVID-19 crisis—economic, political, and societal—evaluating the benefits and shortcomings of each approach during the pandemic in turn.

The first section, on economic shelter, examines the challenge of supply chain vulnerability, price gouging, and additional difficulties for small states to access personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccines, demonstrating the enduring importance of multilateral organizations as shelter providers for small states during moments of crisis (Wivel and Ingebritsen 2018). The second section, on political shelter, examines vaccine development and diplomacy, revealing the potential of the “small and entrepreneurial state” to innovate when work-arounds become necessary, as well as to establish more ad hoc multilateral frameworks when the formal, long-standing institutions are not up to the task at hand (Pedi and Sarri 2019). Particular attention is paid to the distinct challenges for remote Small Island Developing States (SIDS) on the front lines of the climate emergency and their efforts to secure cross-cutting political shelter through international organizations. Finally, the section on societal shelter acknowledges the identifiable, emergent disparity in vaccine uptake between small advanced economies and small developing economies, so particular attention is paid to the challenge of accessing societal shelter (knowledge, best practices, innovation, etc.) in the area of public health communication as part of the vaccine rollout process. This reveals the leading role the WHO,

² Katzenstein’s notion of “buffering from within” involves small states implementing stable economic policies that will form a domestic buffer, thereby reducing the impact of fluctuating international markets and exogenous shocks.

especially, can still play to maximize impact beyond individual state efforts.

By taking this tripartite approach, the key contribution of the article is that it tests, then reinforces, the understanding in the burgeoning literature on small states that multilateral frameworks remain important for small states seeking shelter to build resilience (Lee 2016; Bailes and Thorhallsson 2013; Thorhallsson 2012). Yet these frameworks do not always function as intended, and this article demonstrates how, since the onset of COVID-19, small states have innovated with a number of work-arounds. These ad hoc multilateral arrangements necessitated by the crisis have filled the gap when the expected benefits of shelter seeking and collective security have not been forthcoming from long-established, more formal frameworks, yet they also reveal how a more unified and proactive approach to remedying the failings of existing and long-standing multilateral frameworks would serve to maximize and spread the benefits more widely, rather than fragmenting efforts and unevenly distributing the gains.

SEEKING ECONOMIC SHELTER

Given that the most prominent form of shelter-seeking behavior—visible from the outset of the pandemic—was that of economic shelter, it is logical to address this approach first. While all economies are subject to external shocks, the ramifications are grossly amplified for small states. This is because they are disproportionately exposed to externally originating setbacks as a result of (i) a reliance on trade openness (dependence on exports and imports); (ii) high export concentration (with dependence on a limited number of exports); (iii) high dependence on strategic imports due to a lack of natural resources (including food and fuel); and (iv) a susceptibility to natural disasters, which exacerbate the effects of economic shocks (Briguglio 2016). Economic openness is not just a political decision but an inherent characteristic of being a small state. The domestic markets of small states are too small to survive in isolation, but this exposes the small states to outside forces that make them vulnerable. This economic vulnerability is then compounded by the problem of small populations limiting the labor force and high dependency on inelastic strategic imports (imports required even if costs go up, such as fuel, food, and industrial supplies). Economist Lino Briguglio's research has concluded that, as a result of this confluence of factors, small states tend to be more economically vulnerable than other groups of countries. Consequently, small states seek economic shelter from multilateral frameworks that can provide direct assistance, help from an external financial authority, access to a common market, or favorable market access to compensate for high reliance on trade, less sectoral diversity, and vulnerability to shocks and trade disruptions (Thorhallsson 2018).

As expected, based on this challenging picture for small states, during the COVID-19 pandemic a major challenge proved to be the fact that small economies—especially those of remote islands—face a higher risk of being deprioritized in global supply chains (Hackshaw 2020). Early on,

many countries faced a huge shortage of PPE, and smaller states found it challenging to secure their supply chains, which were very fragile across the globe, often relying on very long distances to their source. The unprecedented scale and effects of the pandemic meant that even a small state like Finland, which has been stockpiling emergency supplies since the Cold War, found itself with insufficient stocks (Vaananen 2020).

The size of American air freighters and spending power meant that many small countries could not compete with its nationalistic approach to PPE procurement. Even major European players, such as France and Germany, accused the United States of intercepting and buying out consignments intended for their shores (Willsher, Borger, and Homes 2020).

Concurrently, African and Latin American scientists—already at a structural disadvantage due to fragile and underfunded public health systems—were informed by international manufacturers that they could not fulfill their orders for essential testing kits and masks as all production was bound for Europe or America. Paul Molinaro, then chief for operations support and logistics in the WHO, summarized the challenge: “*When it comes to the sharp end of a hyper-competitive environment with price rises, these low- and middle-income countries are going to end up at the back of the queue*” (Bradley 2020).

America was not the only country to impose export restrictions to prioritize domestic stockpiling. The European Union (EU) mobilized €540 billion for urgent measures at the outset of the pandemic, supplemented by €1.8 trillion in July 2020, but also temporarily introduced restrictions on PPE exports between 15 March and 26 May 2020 to combat shortages within the EU (UN General Assembly 2020). Having established that small states strive to overcome the struggles of the self-help international system by seeking shelter within, or in partnership with, international institutions, this case demonstrates how small states seeking economic shelter within the EU were better positioned to “*meet the challenges of insecurity, limited opportunities for growth and a small market place for ideas following from limited capacity and power asymmetry*” as a result of their membership (Wivel and Ingebritsen 2018).

At the same time, the EU should have been the first provider of “multilateral shelter”—defined by Pedi and Wivel (2020, 614) as “*external arrangements cushioning them from the effects of conflict and crises and, thereby, underpinning their survival and prosperity*”—for many partner countries that are dependent on medical supplies imported from the EU. Instead, it was harshly criticized for withdrawing this assistance from external partner countries, thereby posing a serious risk to the quality of the health-care provision in these states. While some small European states were offered exceptions to the restrictions on 19 March 2020 (including Andorra, Liechtenstein, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, and the Vatican) (Carreño et al. 2020), the countries identified by the Peterson Institute for International Economics as having been the most vulnerable to the effects of these restrictions are still predominantly small states and disproportionately consist of developing

economies. This is exemplified by Greenland and Cape Verde sourcing over 91 percent of their face shields from the EU; the Central African Republic, Albania, Serbia, and Macedonia sourcing over 70 percent of mouth-nose-protection equipment; and the Republic of Congo sourcing over 55 percent of their gloves (Brown 2020).

This episode underscores the aforementioned challenges for small states: their domestic markets are too small to survive in isolation, and problems of indivisibility prevent the production of all necessary goods locally, but this exposes small states to outside forces that make them vulnerable (Cordina 2007). In this case, it epitomized the extreme vulnerability to supply disruptions and export restrictions. The deeply unequal access to shelter afforded to EU member states and nonmember states was clearly illuminated; where the latter turned to existing multilateral institutions to build resilience, the necessary assistance was not forthcoming to outsiders. This simultaneously reinforces the benefits of seeking shelter within international organizations and amplifies the inequality that results from exclusive membership arrangements.

With slow progress on the multilateral level, bilateral negotiations have continued between many small states and manufacturers in the necessary struggle to acquire first PPE, and later vaccines. The secrecy of many of these deals means that it is difficult to ascertain whether countries are receiving a fair price. For instance, where the United States was paying \$4 for a single dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine in February 2021, Uganda's lack of purchasing power means that it was sourcing the same dose for more than double the price at \$8.50 (Adams 2021). This means that many small states negotiating outside transparent and equitable multilateral frameworks likewise risk being exploited by "price gouging," especially when they are of low- or middle-income status (Adhanom 2020).

Consequently, in response to growing international protectionism, many small states took proactive steps (born out of necessity) to remedy the ill effects of the escalating procurement competition and offset the limitations of their dependency on external shelter from these unreliable existing multilateral frameworks. Forced to respond to an international environment where "self-help" is mandated in the classical Waltzian sense, what Pedi and Sarri (2019, 12) refer to as the "small and entrepreneurial state" is able to "*undertake entrepreneurial action as a problem-solving strategy...[and] accepts that it is responsible for its own fate.*" Enterprising companies in countries such as Jordan and Honduras repurposed clothing and textile factories to manufacture PPE (Maylie, De Leon, and Young 2020). Some governments in advanced economies, such as New Zealand and Finland, worked with business leaders and operations groups to commence local production of essential medical supplies. This lends credence to Cooper and Shaw's assertion that "*what small states lack in structural clout they can make up through creative agency*" (Cooper and Shaw 2009,

2). When the existing frameworks were not working as expected or intended, "small and entrepreneurial" states were able to find work-arounds.

However, many developing countries lacked recourse to this action owing to insufficient knowledge, technical expertise, and regulatory guidance. These countries sought external economic shelter once again, and some turned to another existing multilateral framework: the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group.³ Focusing on the three pillars of relief, restructuring, and resilient recovery, the initiatives of the IFC involved launching an \$8 billion Fast-Track COVID-19 Facility to provide the necessary liquidity and trade financing to keep businesses in client companies afloat, together with a \$4 billion Global Health Platform to facilitate access for developing countries to the essential medical supplies necessary to combat the virus (International Finance Corporation 2021). Kyle Kelhofer, the IFC country manager for Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, summed up the role that the multilateral framework could offer during this period of crisis—"at IFC, we're not first responders. We're not doctors. But we're pretty good at knowing what's going on with businesses and banks" (International Finance Corporation 2020)—and in this regard, the IFC has been an active player in supporting developing countries in tackling the economic challenge incurred by the pandemic and gaining the liquidity necessary to secure supplies.

Meanwhile, Small Island Developing States, such as Saint Lucia, have partnered with the Sustainable Development Investment Partnership (a joint initiative of the World Economic Forum and the OECD, which supports developing countries with accessing private investment to pursue the SDGs) to produce a Country Financing Roadmap. These Roadmaps will support the partner countries in identifying new sources of capital to mitigate the adverse impact of COVID-19. This reinforces and reflects the argument made by Bailes et al. that, when seeking to reduce the impact of the economic shock, small states seek the economic "shelter" afforded by international organizations to offset in-built structural weaknesses with external assistance (Bailes, Thayer, and Thorhallsson 2016). By collaborating across the public and private sectors, the Roadmaps initiative will support the building of more resilient socioeconomic structures and will help to offset some of the limitations in capacity for small developing and low-income states in particular (Chastanet, Déau, and Toyota 2020). Saint Lucia is participating in the piloting of this new venture and, if it proves successful, will be instrumental in the development of best practices that can then be replicated by other developing countries.

Similar success was demonstrated by another long-standing multilateral institution, spearheading impactful response and recovery mechanisms at the regional level. In June 2020, the African Union (AU) launched the not-for-profit Africa Medical Supplies Platform (2021), an initiative

3 For more on the World Bank and inequality, see Ferreira (2022, this special collection).

led by AU special envoy Strive Masiyiwa and powered by social start-up Janngo. Funded by the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) and supported by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), this is a virtual marketplace enabling fifty-five governments across Africa to access vital health-care supplies directly from manufacturers across the continent and further abroad, without third parties. The Institute for Security Studies attests that this has “*revolutionised Africa’s response to the pandemic,*” successfully leveraging Africa’s bulk purchasing power to secure supplies and fix negotiated prices in a transparent manner that curtails fraud (Donnenfeld 2021). Rather than remaining grossly susceptible to the impact of externally originating shocks and the priorities of EU member states, the program enables regional “buffering” (to extend Katzenstein’s logic) that is allowing the AU to become a regional shelter provider in its own right. The scheme has since been opened up to the fifteen Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member states, and countries in Latin America and the Pacific are seeking to develop similar platforms within their regions. If they can replicate the success, this will be a watershed in reducing extraregional dependency and is indicative of the benefits that can be accrued when long-standing multilateral arrangements, with preestablished credibility and capacity, adapt to the crisis and tailor their response to the needs of the region.

Having examined the challenge of shoring up supply chains and cushioning the economy, we can identify a similar pattern in the vaccine development efforts, where the response of many long-standing institutions has been either too slow or insufficient in terms of providing supplies. However, some good practice has once again been visible in the way existing multilateral institutions launched mechanisms to assist with vaccine development. Despite limited infrastructure, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands are co-financing their vaccine programs with the assistance of UNICEF’s Vaccine Independence Initiative. The initiative is pooling vaccine procurement for Pacific Islands, thereby guaranteeing a consistent supply of quality vaccines to the region. At the same time, it acts as a line of credit, in order to facilitate vaccine financing for the partner countries, reinforcing the centrality of economic shelter to offset the structural weaknesses of small, vulnerable economies (Vaccine Alliance 2020).

When establishing supporting mechanisms, multilateral bodies took the important step of tailoring assistance to the particular needs of different groups of countries. To support low-income and emerging market countries, such as The Gambia, the International Monetary Fund launched a \$50 billion fund and reserved \$10 billion interest-free for the poorest members (Coke-Hamilton 2020). Although SIDS are not the poorest members, their distinct vulnerabilities were also recognized, and countries such as Comoros, São Tomé and Príncipe, and the Solomon Islands were targeted with IMF assistance in the form of short-term debt relief through the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT). Such initiatives are important because many small states remain excluded from sufficient, crucial international financial assistance because their per capita

income results in the classification of countries such as Belize and Eswatini as middle-income countries, which does not take into account their specific vulnerabilities. Recognizing this issue, the Commonwealth Secretariat has called for a moratorium on external debt repayments to be extended to all developing countries—including those small and vulnerable states that are classified as middle- or high-income—in recognition that vulnerability is not limited to per capita income but encompasses aspects such as remoteness, economic exposure, and susceptibility to natural disasters (Scotland 2020). Such recognition and targeted assistance will be vital to improving the targeting of aid and will enable multilateral bodies to better offer economic shelter and support small and vulnerable states to recover and progress.

Similar approaches have been visible at a regional level. In Africa, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) (Africa CDC), the public health agency of the African Union, has instituted a range of multilateral initiatives, including the Africa Taskforce for Coronavirus (AFTCOR) to develop and coordinate a continent-wide strategy to contain the spread of the virus; the Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing in Africa (PACT) to enhance testing, tracing, and treatment across the region; and an African Anti-COVID-19 Fund to offset the pandemic’s socioeconomic repercussions. Due to the financial and infrastructural constraints on the continent, however, this multilateral effort must be supported by debt relief and international financial assistance if it is to achieve its ends. In this regard, sustained support from larger counterparts, such as the G20, remains essential for the recovery of smaller actors.

In summary, it is evident that small states sought economic shelter from the very onset of the pandemic to bolster their coping capacity and ability to bounce back from the manifold shocks posed by the pandemic—including the disruption of supply chains, price gouging of PPE, the challenges of funding vaccine development and delivery, and mitigating the impact on employment and livelihoods of populations. Some established, long-standing, and credible multilateral frameworks such as the IFC, the World Economic Forum, and the OECD adapted their program delivery to meet the needs of client states in novel and targeted ways. Access to shelter was not always equitable, however, as demonstrated by the rewards reaped by the exclusive members of the European Union, contrasted with the challenges faced by the external partner countries. Still, the remarkable adaptation and innovation of the African Union has demonstrated a shift toward regional empowerment and developing the capacity to offer shelter that was previously sought from further afield. In this regard, small states are proving their capacity to innovate individually (when shelter is not as forthcoming as desired) as well as collectively to fortify and enhance existing multilateral frameworks and thereby shore up their resiliency and eschew risky dependency on unreliable great powers and partners.

SEEKING POLITICAL SHELTER

Having established that some regional international institutions, such as the European Union, or global bodies such as the World Health Organization either were acting in a protectionist manner or were proving too slow to respond to the crisis, a second feature of the pandemic response was the way many small states turned to more ad hoc multilateral arrangements to stop the gaps (Gontariuk et al. 2021). This period was highly indicative of small states seeking political shelter—understood as the “*direct and visible diplomatic or military backing at any time of need by another state or by an international or regional organisation*” (Bailes, Thayer, and Thorhallsson 2016, 14). Its conceptual proponents—Bailes, Thayer, and Thorhallsson (2016, 14)—specify that this form of shelter may serve to offset not only external threats but also the “*challenges inherent in being a small society*” and emphasize that the provision of external shelter assists small states to “*overcome some of their domestic limitations, such as lack of indigenous knowledge, infrastructure and their limited public administration capacity.*” During the COVID-19 pandemic, this was exemplified by the ministers of the interior of the Nordic countries sharing information on the impact of the virus on their internal security. Civil preparedness authorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden worked to coordinate responses so that rescue services and emergency medical services could still function without hindrance on their shared borders (Kohvakka 2020).

Cooperation and the ad hoc establishment of new multilateral arrangements to seek political shelter also stretched beyond regional efforts. Notably, in stark contrast to the nationalistic and insular approach of larger counterparts, Singapore and New Zealand released a joint declaration pledging the removal of tariffs for essential goods. Taking their collaboration further, they coordinated an emergency agreement to maintain open trade and intact supply chains. The pact, which they described as an “*open and plurilateral*” effort, was joined by Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Myanmar, Laos, Uruguay, and Nauru, which came together as a coalition of the willing intent on keeping trade routes open for a broad range of health, commodities, and services (Jaipragas 2020). This is indicative of how ad hoc collective approaches by small states seeking political shelter may often prove “*more flexible than long-standing multilateral structures,*” prompting Cohen and Fontaine (2021) to sing the praises of “*microlateralism,*” whereby small states may show leadership in coming together to pursue specific, time-bound policy goals in moments of crisis.

This accords with Pedi and Wivel’s (2020, 611) study of small state diplomacy after the coronavirus crisis, which “*illustrates the potential of activist small state diplomacy using smart and entrepreneurial policies to forge plurilateralist small- and middle-power co-operation,*” implementing offensive diplomatic strategies to mitigate the ramifications of a loss of shelter from greater powers. In their research (Pedi and Wivel 2020, 616), they highlight several additional instances of “*like-minded states’ activism,*” signaling states coming together actively at a time when the EU, the

WHO, and the UN were still struggling to coordinate a response. A prime example is the Group of Friends of Solidarity for Global Health Security, consisting of Canada, Denmark, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of Sierra Leone, and the State of Qatar, which is seeking to “*strengthen institutions in our multilateral system*” in recognition that “*no country can overcome this pandemic alone, and the sharing of reliable information, data and experiences will be vital*” (Mohammed 2020). Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the group is intended to address the socioeconomic consequences and human rights dimensions of COVID-19.

Similarly, the Smart Covid-19 Management Group (known informally as the “*Smart First-Movers group*”) (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020), spearheaded by Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, involves cooperation between Austria, Denmark, Norway, Greece, Australia, the Czech Republic, Singapore, New Zealand, and Israel on restarting their economics, reopening schools, rolling out vaccines, and sharing information about their test-and-trace mechanisms. Rather than competing with international institutions, Kurz views the group as being complementary and well-suited to leveraging the agility of small state diplomacy, explaining that “*besides these big and necessary structures, it is good to have more direct contact with different countries like Australia where you can have a very open exchange of views and where you can learn from each other*” (Shields 2020). Thus, although born out of necessity, these efforts can afford partner countries the benefits of political shelter and “*can function as a safety net and source of resilience for small states*” (Pedi and Wivel 2020, 616).

While the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the urgent necessity to remedy the problems that caused such a lethargic and uncoordinated response from the larger and more unwieldy existing mechanisms, these microlateral arrangements can provide a complementary, more flexible and agile approach in the interim (serving as a stopgap or complementary extension, rather than as a replacement). Crucially, these initiatives have demonstrated the agency and willingness of smaller actors to step up and collaborate multilaterally to pragmatically secure their collective interests at a time when leadership and political shelter was not forthcoming from the United States or China, and when established international organizations were still too slow in responding to the unfolding crisis.

Perhaps one of the most clearly visible cases of small states promoting collaboration and diplomatic backing through multilateral fora to build resilience during the pandemic has been their vocal linking of the crisis to another global emergency. At the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in April 2020, the government of Belize, as the chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), convened the virtual Placencia Ambition Forum to determine means by which the response to COVID-19 can strengthen more sustainable climate action. For small island states, climate change continues to loom large as an existential challenge to their livelihoods, security, and well-being. Troublingly, the dramatic increase in the disposal of single-use plastics,

such as PPE gear and masks, now poses an even more acute problem for the climate, biodiversity, and health security (Fang et al. 2021). Hence, these small states are sounding the need for the global community to maintain sustainability at the heart of the pandemic response.

Climate targets must thus be incorporated into stimulus packages so that resilience-building efforts drive a green recovery. In the same way that a global pandemic requires a global response, the Placencia Ambition Forum emphasized the necessity of restructuring global financial systems to improve access to the finances necessary for all countries to meet the targets of the Paris Agreement. This is particularly important since COVID-19 forced the World Ocean Summit to be canceled and the COP26 negotiations to be postponed to late 2021. The AOSIS members recognize that sustainability will remain fundamental to international security, stability, and prosperity long after the pandemic passes. Hence they stated firmly, in the PAF declaration, that “*what we lack in resources and capacity, we make up for in determination*” to hold industrialized nations to their commitments in the pursuit of actual net zero emissions by 2050 and the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Alliance of Small Island States 2020, 11). By linking the COVID-19 and climate change crises, these small states are keeping long-term sustainability firmly on the international agenda and pushing relentlessly for greater political shelter in this area.

In the meantime, given that small states make up the majority membership of the United Nations, they also constitute the majority of countries that have signed on to the WHO COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access plan, a partnership co-led by the WHO, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Known as the COVAX facility, this mechanism aims to develop and manufacture COVID-19 vaccines and to guarantee their fair and equitable access to all countries worldwide (World Health Organization 2020). While countries must contribute monetarily to benefit from the venture, the program’s funding mechanism is innovative because contributions are adjusted based on the GDP and size of the participating country, making the scheme more accessible and equitable for small states.

Interestingly, at a time of escalating Sino-American geostrategic competition, the fact that China signed on to the initiative may serve to foster some goodwill and to improve its relationship with smaller actors in the international system by demonstrating a degree of commitment to reciprocity through the multilateral processes that they champion (see Woods 2022, this special collection). Indeed, the provision of more than 110 million Chinese vaccines through COVAX has proven instrumental in plugging the gaps in global vaccine provision. Yet this is only a part of the story. Of the 2 billion doses that China pledged to de-

liver to the world in August 2021, the remainder of the 1.26 billion vaccines distributed by October 2021 were predominantly sold through bilateral deals with upper middle-income and middle-income countries such as Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Morocco, among others. The majority of China’s activity in this area is therefore ultimately taking place outside of the multilateral frameworks established by the WHO and GAVI (Wang 2022). Still, the scale of Chinese donations that were distributed through COVAX stands in stark contrast to the “America First” politics of the Trump administration, whose stance was that they blatantly would not “*be constrained by multilateral organizations influenced by the corrupt World Health Organization and China*” (Hopkins Tanne 2020, 370), going so far as to suspend funding to the WHO,⁴ which posed a serious risk for the developing countries that are reliant on its assistance (Fedor and Manson 2020).

With the ascent of US president Joe Biden to power in January 2021, new impetus was given to the multilateral pandemic response as the president retracted the American withdrawal from the WHO and promised \$11.5 billion in new funding from Congress to support countries in the fight against COVID-19 (White House Briefing Room 2021b). Biden also committed to working with partners, such as the EU and the G7, to distribute around 80 million vaccines⁵ and established a partnership with India, Australia, and Japan (the so-called “Quad”) intended to combine financing, manufacturing, and distribution capabilities in order to deliver 1 billion vaccine doses (additional to those pledged to COVAX) to Asia by the end of 2022 (Pal and Rocha 2021). In addition to supporting small states with access to the vaccine, this provision of shelter may serve to geopolitically counterbalance Chinese influence, given that countries such as Singapore and Brunei have both signed deals with China to receive vaccines.

While these measures are a welcome indication that “*America is back*,” it is clear that access to shelter remains troublingly tied to the vagaries of the leadership of the shelter provider, reinforcing the previously identified need for smart and entrepreneurial states to reduce external dependency as far as possible. Even after Biden’s course correction, critics remain skeptical as to how quickly these measures will have an impact, particularly since American donations will arrive only after all domestic citizens have been vaccinated (and not just priority groups) (White House Briefing Room 2021a). Moreover, even with the welcome funding injection, the world still faces the aforementioned supply problem, preventing countries from access to vaccines to buy in the first place. As effectively captured by Thomas J. Bollyky (2021), director of the Global Health program at the Council on Foreign Relations, “*wealthy democracies have generously given money to the multinational COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access program, or COVAX, but*

4 A decision later reversed by Trump’s successor, President Joe Biden, in January 2021.

5 In the wake of a shortfall incurred by India’s rediverting doses to contend with its crippling second wave.

they have been far less eager to part with doses that could quickly go into their own citizens' arms." As rich countries largely continue to secure the available stocks at the expense of developing countries, COVAX is struggling to access the requisite supply necessary to ensure fair and equitable access—a challenge captured by WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus when he attested that "If there are no vaccines to buy, money is irrelevant" (Smith 2021). This exposes the limitations and weaknesses of seeking shelter during the crisis from multilateral sources, given that inequality remains institutionalized (Bambra, Lynch, and Smith 2021).

Reinforcing this central emphasis on inequality, development scholar Courtney Lindsay (2018) reminds us that "small states are not created equal" and while sharing many characteristic vulnerabilities, this research has revealed how many non-European small states suffer from distinct problems. Foremost, their colonial history and short experience of independence has meant that their development is still marked by dependency and social and cultural inequality (Clarke 1983), together with "structural issues not encountered by the larger small states of Europe," such as Finland and Sweden (Lindsay 2018). These include remoteness and insularity costs concomitant to being islands (as is the case for most SIDS and Small Vulnerable Economies), which raise the costs of freight, information and communications technology (ICT), and communications, together with narrow resource bases and a dependence on food imports. Therefore, not all small states commence from the same starting line, and the factors contributing to the vulnerability or resilience of small states are varied and context specific.

In terms of the public health crisis, many SIDS arguably emerged the winners; indeed, as of May 2021, several Pacific Islands, including Palau, Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu, American Samoa, Nauru, and the Federated States of Micronesia, had not reported a single case of coronavirus (World Health Organization Western Pacific Region 2021). This is fortunate, because small island communities may face heightened mortality rates owing to lower levels of immunity to outside diseases, weak public health systems (e.g., Vanuatu has only two ventilators), and the prevalence of a disproportionately high number of residents living with noncommunicable diseases (Roy 2020). At the same time, the pandemic poses an unprecedented economic challenge. Where remoteness insulated many small islands from virus transmission, these islands are also remote in terms of distance from international markets that will be crucial for the global financial recovery.

Across the SIDS, the pandemic has strained limited health infrastructure, disrupted supply chains, and wreaked havoc on the informal sector. Tourism—which accounts for up to 69 percent of the GDP in South Pacific destinations such as the Cook Islands (Scheyvens and Movono 2018) and over 50 percent in the Maldives, Seychelles, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Grenada—was brought to a standstill (Coke-Hamilton 2020). In addition to retailers, accommodation providers, and food and beverage services, this has had a significant adverse impact on suppliers to the tourism sec-

tor, such as transportation companies, producers of foodstuffs and consumer products, and service providers, who all rely on foreign visitors to operate. Alongside this, bans on port entry for boats from infected countries have negatively impacted the fishing industry. As a result, the World Bank identified that small states with high dependency on tourism "have experienced a double-digit decline in their economic output" (World Bank Group 2021, 6). Compounding the crisis even further, countries such as the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga also suffered the effects of Tropical Cyclone Harold in April 2020 (Williams et al. 2021).

Such a significant decline in revenue, without alternative sources of foreign exchange revenue, has left the SIDS without the capital to service external debts and pay for imports. Many of these states thus face the prospect of an acute economic crisis and unsustainable debt. When thinking about the shape of the global economy, it is important to remember that it was looking frail even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, with global trade growth crawling at the slowest pace since the 2008–9 financial crisis. The pandemic is leaving large fiscal deficits in every single major economy. Since the economic impact of the pandemic has induced both demand- and supply-side shocks, it has been shown, above, that small economies—which are already disproportionately exposed to fluctuations in global markets due to their dependency on trade—will suffer heavily from the decline in global growth if larger international actors also enter into recession.

Without the fiscal space and liquidity to compensate in the same way as the small advanced economies, or the leverage to revise the terms of access to concessional finance through international financial institutions, the SIDS will struggle to emerge from this crisis. Small states are predominantly policy takers, not makers, of international financial policies, and there is a limit to what they can do without structural change. Thus, in addition to debt service suspension, H.E. Lois Young (2020), the permanent representative of Belize to the United Nations, has advocated "more systematic, transparent and coordinated steps towards restructuring external debt obligations." In her role as then chair of AOSIS (2019–20), Young has sought political shelter by calling on the international community to work with the SIDS on a host of practical recommendations intended to foster future economic stability.

Although developed nations will still be preoccupied with providing the necessary financial support for their own jurisdictions, H.E. Chad Blackman, the permanent representative of Barbados to the United Nations and the sitting chair of the SIDS Group of Countries in UNCTAD, has similarly pointed to international assistance and cooperation with developing economies as fundamental to building "coordinated and resilient value chains, greater intra-regional trade, and policies that will allow the most creative minds to leverage the use of technology and non-traditional mechanisms to build out the capacity of our countries" (Ewing-Chow 2020). Multilateral international assistance and the provision of shelter should therefore be conceived of as an in-

vestment—specifically, one that will derive positive returns across the international system.

At the same time, in the bid to realize such fundamental changes to international rules and regulations, the support of larger actors within multilateral fora remains vital. Young has called for solidarity and the support of larger actors in raising their needs on global platforms, explaining that “*We need to have some big voices stick up for us. We need to have some big brothers, big sisters. We are not in the league of the big countries in these institutions. We can do our best, but we need some big advocates to speak up for us*” (Cornish 2020). The SIDS cannot enact these changes alone, so concerted and committed bilateral and multilateral assistance from larger counterparts will remain essential for the fiscal position of these small states to be improved.

Even states that do have greater protection from a multilateral security provider have been found to take questionable decisions when assistance has not been forthcoming as quickly as desired. In particular, the ambition to shore up vaccine supply has been shown to have political consequences for small states if reckless decisions are taken. For example, Slovakian prime minister Igor Matovič became the first world leader to resign as a result of coronavirus controversy after the revelation of a secret deal to import 2 million doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, which lacks regulatory approval by the European Medicines Agency (Kalan 2021). While the Czech government also intended to acquire the Russian vaccines, the plan was dropped in the wake of a diplomatic crisis between the two countries over spying allegations (Reuters Europe 2021). Although these doses were ultimately never actually administered in either country, the fact that at least two EU member states were willing to consider this option, despite the lack of EU regulatory approval, is significant, once again underscoring how the speed of assistance from established multilateral frameworks has been deemed too slow, and further revealing how a united EU approach to the crisis has failed to materialize.

These divisive approaches of EU member states are not wholly surprising. Despite all the advantages and evidence to suggest that the collective security system is the most favorable one for small states and a counterpoint to the dangers of balance-of-power policies, it can be difficult for them to take action in practice owing to the divergent interests and approaches to the international system by members of multilateral alliances. In addition to the difficulty in identifying common interests, Choi argues that “*even if there are stakes for all of them, the profit of the alliance does not dispel the problem of responsibility*” (Choi 1995, 39). Pressure is placed on resource contributions, decision-making processes are more complex and less agile, and in times of crisis, it is harder to maintain unity and coherence. All these challenges to the capacity of the EU to provide shelter have been a feature of its pandemic response, bringing into stark relief the prospective failings of a multilateral response to emergencies.

In addition to the impact upon the cohesion of the EU itself, the provision of inadequate regional shelter is troubling because it may incur serious geopolitical ramifications

in the future. Recognizing this prospect, EU foreign ministers have called upon High Representative Josep Borrell and the European Commission to step up commitments to neighbors in the Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, fretting that while “*the EU has mobilised massive amounts of support to the region, other actors were more effective in presenting their support and thus undermining our reliability, credibility and perception of our solidarity*” (Schallenberg et al. 2021). A similar plea was made with reference to providing greater political and economic shelter for the Eastern Neighbourhood Partners—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—who “*on numerous occasions expressed their appreciation for the EU’s COVID-related assistance and pleaded for facilitated access to the vaccine*” (Zaharieva et al. 2021). Limited access to vaccines is leaving countries susceptible to influence from China and Russia, and any conditions imposed upon recipients as part of vaccine supply could have long-lasting and far-reaching effects on regional security and the resiliency of the EU, even after the pandemic passes. This accords with Thorhallsson’s (2018, 27) argument that shelter may be acquired at significant cost for small states.

One approach that some small states have taken to guard their sovereignty has been to develop their own COVID-19 vaccines. Some of these efforts are still being pursued through ad hoc multilateral arrangements, as exemplified by Serbia, which continues to reap dividends by hedging strategically between the East and the West and seeking to secure its own ends through savvy vaccine geostrategy. In October 2020 a greenfield investment in Serbia was announced to build a factory for the Sinopharm vaccine in partnership with China and the United Arab Emirates (Stanisljevic 2021). If successful, this will not only resolve Serbia’s domestic vaccine supply issues but will also enable the small country to roll out assistance to neighbors such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, while pursuing these deals through bilateral and trilateral negotiation can provide Serbia with greater freedom of action and control over the process, it is also a risky approach that may leave it vulnerable to conditions imposed by the larger counterparts in the asymmetric negotiations (Guzansky 2015). Hedging between prospective partners remains a risky strategy that requires the navigation of ongoing strategic uncertainty, which is not ideal for long-term planning; this contrasts with the stability and predictability of operating through established multilateral frameworks, such as the norms and rules of an international institution, again reinforcing the need to fortify existing multilateral processes.

Conversely, Cuba, the only Latin American country that has not joined COVAX, has been pursuing vaccine production entirely on its own. Subject to American embargo, Cuba has been forced to be “*creative and self-reliant*” by virtue of necessity (Wyss 2021). Spurred by the socialist tenets of global solidarity, Wenham’s research has highlighted the strength of Cuba’s domestic public health situation and access to universal health care, as well as the success of its “*medical internationalism*” abroad by serving as

one of the principal responders to epidemic outbreaks, such as the 2014 Ebola virus crisis in West Africa (Wenham and Kittlesen 2019). This long-standing commitment to health diplomacy has allowed Cuba to establish its presence and authority in this area, and to build up prestige in this sector for decades. Here, Cuba epitomizes the “small but smart” state that possesses the necessary “*creativity, innovativeness, flexibility, adaptability, proactiveness, expertise and a good reputation*” and that makes “*effective use of its limited resources, harnesses favourable circumstances, creates space for action, cooperates with others in order to serve its interests, brings about a change or changes and acts in a way that is beneficial for itself and for others*” (Pedi and Sarri 2019, 8). With its vaccine—tellingly named *Soberana*, the Spanish word for “sovereign”—entering the final stage of clinical trials, Cuba may soon be in a position to not only vaccinate its own population but also provide assistance to other developing countries, such as Iran, Mexico, and Venezuela (Beaubien 2021). In this, Cuba’s story is one of remarkable independent fortitude as a largely isolated small state in the midst of the global crisis, abjuring the dependency of other small states on multilateral support.

In summary, the pursuit of political shelter by small states during the pandemic has evidenced the enduring importance of multilateral organizations and partnerships to pledge, offer, and deliver crucial assistance, as well as to signal commitments and priorities, despite the fact that the requisite action has not always matched political declarations. Importantly, however, it has once again been shown how access to shelter is rooted in inequality, which poses specific and amplified problems for Small Island Developing States, in particular, which cannot be resolved without the concerted support of large states to enact structural change to international financial institutions, regulations, and mechanisms. In the interim, the unique case of Cuba—which is overcoming dependency by developing its own vaccine—demonstrates how a small state can be smart on its own when truly forced to and, challenging existing norms, may also prospectively become the provider of specialized international “shelter” to other counterparts on its own terms instead.

SEEKING SOCIETAL SHELTER

Thus far, it has been demonstrated how small states seek political or economic shelter to overcome vulnerabilities through alignment with stronger states or joining international organizations, and this featured in their COVID-19 response. At the same time, Vaicekauskaitė argues that these forms of assistance tell only part of the story; small states also need “*access to innovations or modernization*” (Vaicekauskaitė 2017, 13). This is central to Bailes, Thorhallsson, and Thayer’s (2016, 7) argument that the third type of shelter sought by small states is societal shelter—referring to cultural relationships to prevent isolation and gain access to knowledge, innovation, and information that offsets administrative, infrastructural, and knowledge limitations. They argue that a small society “*relies on cul-*

tural relations to avoid isolation and social stagnation and to make up for its lack of indigenous knowledge.”

In this regard, Cuba’s demonstrated success in the development of its own vaccine program is an outlier, because many small states lack access to the same technical expertise and established credibility to replicate its sovereign initiative and therefore require access to societal shelter. On 5 May 2021 a major breakthrough took place in this regard, as the United States declared it would support negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) seeking to waive the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which provides intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines for the duration of the crisis. The initial proposal, put forward by India and South Africa, called on “*WTO Members to work together to ensure that intellectual property rights such as patents, industrial designs, copyright and protection of undisclosed information do not create barriers to the timely access to affordable medical products including vaccines and medicines or to scaling-up of research, development, manufacturing and supply of medical products essential to combat COVID-19*” (Council for Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights 2020). Should their proposal succeed, it would prove significant for the provision of societal shelter to developing WTO member states.

Conceptually, the proposal is not unprecedented; in 2001 the WTO issued the Doha Declaration on TRIPS, which waived certain patent rights. This empowered member states, particularly low-income countries, to access antiretroviral drugs and their manufacturing processes in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. However, the Indian and South African COVID-19 proposal, co-sponsored by Eswatini, Kenya, and Mozambique, initially received pushback from middle powers, such as Japan, Australia, Brazil, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as well as small advanced economies with significant pharmaceutical interests, such as Norway, Singapore, and Switzerland. The EU was also being withholding, arguing that the scheme disincentivizes innovation and that improving vaccine delivery should take precedence over waiving patents (Eliassen et al. 2021). Here, the discrepancy in negotiating positions is clearly linked to development rather than state size.

Fortunately, with the newfound American support, the proposal has gained new traction, and on 17 May 2021 the European Parliament passed a motion to support the waiver (Urbán Crespo et al. 2021). The WTO also adopted the TRIPS waiver decision on COVID-19 vaccines at its 12th Ministerial Conference in July 2022, albeit in a significantly watered-down manner when compared with the original proposal. Significant implementation issues remain, and even with the changing tides of support for the mechanism, it will not be a panacea for the challenges in vaccine production and distribution. However, it still constitutes a significant step in the right direction regarding the provision of societal shelter to member states, and may lead to better ways of undertaking research and development in the future. In the meantime, while the WHO has instituted the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) and the mRNA technology transfer hub (a transparent multilateral mech-

anism allowing developers to share intellectual property), no pharmaceutical companies are participating in this initiative (Zarocostas 2021). Consequently, the TRIPS waiver would prove a revolutionary move in the sphere of intellectual property rights that would meaningfully enhance access to diagnostics and therapeutics.

If the waivers in TRIPS—specifically intended for a global emergency—are not implemented owing to resistance from the pharmaceutical industry, the confidence crisis in international institutions such as the WTO will only deepen, and opposition to the waiver will further call into question the point of such multilateral agreements in the first place, if they are not even honored and fit for purpose during a global pandemic (Rees 2021). But if it does work, and if it is implemented in a targeted and effective manner, then this will lay the foundation for stronger provision of societal shelter in the form of more public health autonomy in the long term, more equitable local manufacturing and distribution capabilities, and further advances in scientific research, enabling small states (specifically low- and middle-income countries) to be not only passive recipients but also inventors of science.

In the interim, one area where existing multilateral frameworks can provide more societal shelter in the form of knowledge exchange and best practices is in relation to public health communication and vaccine rollout strategies. It has been established that much of the success of multilateral approaches such as COVAX in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic hinges on the ability to provide vaccines to the smallest and most vulnerable states, which are unable to flex the same muscle in negotiations as their larger and more prosperous counterparts. Ambitious aid programs must clearly be backed by finances and support for program delivery; however, another crucial aspect that has received less attention is that these efforts must also be backed by community demand. In securing this, communication—underpinned by credible knowledge and information—is vital (see Dumdum 2022, this special collection). This is one area where small states can seek societal shelter from regional and international bodies, who should pay more heed to this dimension and play a bigger role than has been witnessed thus far.

First, it is important to acknowledge the successes of some small states in this area. On the domestic level, when Lilleker et al. (2021) studied the political communication responses to the global pandemic within twenty-seven countries across five continents to determine the extent to which citizens could understand and trust government response measures, some of the most successful political communication during the first wave of the virus was found in small states. These included Sweden and Iceland, which both followed the expert appointee prominence model, whereby “*decision-making and media efforts are delegated to the experts*” (Hatcher 2020, 618). Scientific experts (such as Swedish chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and Icelandic director of emergency management Víðir Reynisson, chief epidemiologist Þórólfur Guðnason, and director of health Alma Möller) communicated updates on the evolving public health situation and restrictive measures to the

public through press conferences and media outlets, and were all credibly received (Lilleker et al. 2021). This centralized and personalized approach conforms to many of the structural advantages of small states in confronting a public health crisis. In particular, it reflects Baldacchino’s theory that many small societies with effective democratic state institutions and high public confidence can strengthen their response by drawing on their higher “*social capital*”—defined as the “*resourcefulness of a people to respond positively, collectively and responsibly to an identified challenge*”—in order to brave external pressures in unity (Baldacchino 2005, 32).

At the same time, not all small states have been as successful in communicating with their publics during the crisis (Schwarzinger and Luchini 2021; Fly Lindholt et al. 2021; Warren and Lofstedt 2021), and it is also important to recognize where efforts fell short, particularly since these failures reinforce the role that existing multilateral bodies can play to have greater impact. In this regard, the global pandemic response has also demonstrated that if communication of public health measures is insufficient or contradictory, or if community members are not reliably informed of the benefits of vaccines, then even when these do become available, uptake is not guaranteed (Kelp, Witt, and Sivakumar 2021). Nachega et al. identify the particular challenges in Africa, arguing that the continent is “*unique in having large young and mobile populations, a large informal job sector, and hotspots of political instability and insecurity, all of which will pose substantial challenges to vaccine roll-out strategies*” (Nachega et al. 2021, e746). Promisingly, a survey of fifteen thousand adults across fifteen African countries on their perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines, carried out by the Africa CDC in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine between August and December 2020, found that the majority of respondents would be willing to take a COVID-19 vaccine if it were proven to be safe and effective. However, more must be done to build greater confidence among the more dubious community members. For instance, 24 percent of respondents in Gabon (almost one in four) would refuse to take a new vaccine, while 8 percent expressed uncertainty (Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). There is scope here for other small states to collaborate and share their best practices in communicating scientifically credible information to combat local misinformation; and working through established and credible multilateral frameworks to provide societal shelter and distribute knowledge will be key to this process.

Indeed, where public communication and scientifically informed policy-making have been successfully aligned, the states that have recorded the most successful vaccination rates in the world are all small states.⁶ The rates, reflected in [figure 1](#) below, are significantly higher than much larger, vaccine-producing states such as the United States (90.55) and China (55.17).

Given that the WHO is often the most trusted source for approving a new COVID-19 vaccine (with 60 percent confidence among respondents in Gabon),⁷ the multilateral health organization should be the vehicle through which

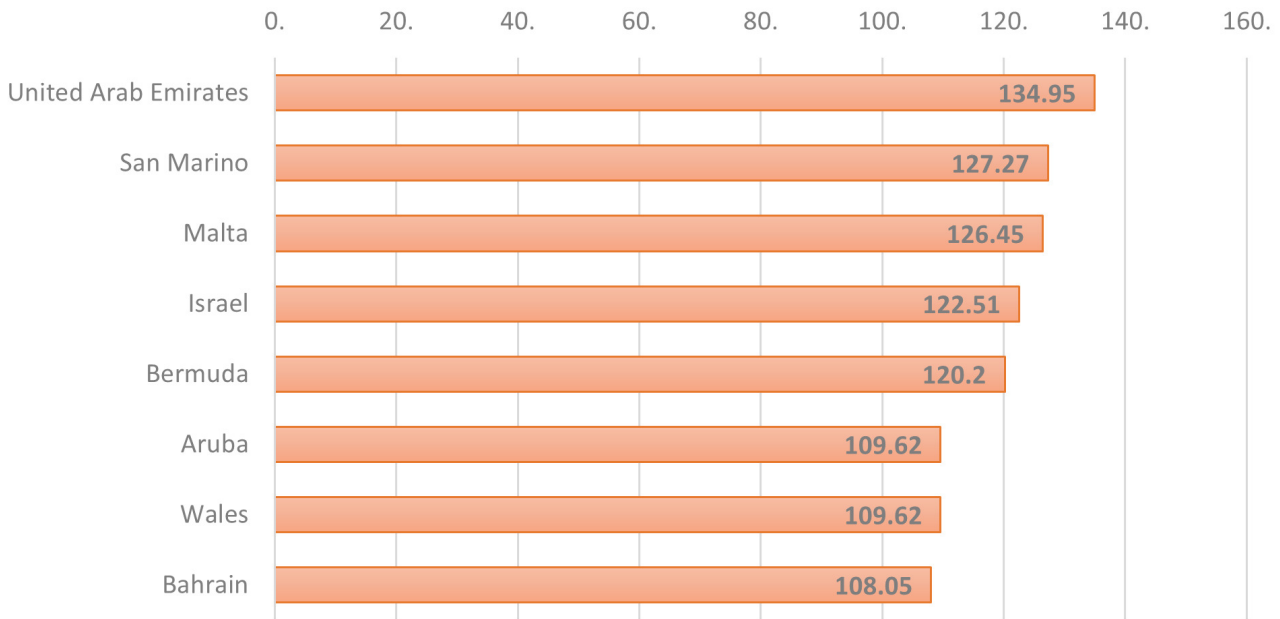


Figure 1. Rate of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered worldwide as of 7 June 2021, by country or territory (per 100 people)

such knowledge sharing is facilitated.⁸ The organization must do more to fund communication as part of immunization strategies, as well as leveraging its authority and credibility to work with regional bodies and national governments in order to persuade communities that vaccines are beneficial to them (Samarasekera 2021).

At the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated how small states will not only seek societal shelter to develop resilience but can also become the providers of societal shelter in their own right. By sharing their best practices on public health communication, vaccine rollout, and successful test-and-trace programs (such as those operationalized in Singapore, New Zealand, and Iceland), other small states can assist countries like Gabon to benefit from the aforementioned structural advantages for small states in navigating the pandemic. Such practice has already been taking place by small state researchers in multilateral fora. Indeed, researchers have been sharing their expertise internationally on an unprecedented scale, perfectly encapsulated in the assertion by Apuzzo and Kirkpatrick that “*while political leaders have locked their borders, scientists have been shattering theirs, creating a global collaboration unlike any in history*” (Apuzzo and Kirkpatrick 2020). The contribution of small states—such as Icelandic human-genomics com-

pany deCODE genetics’ sequencing of the genetic material of each viral isolate to inform global policy-making concerning how the virus spreads through communities—has demonstrated the ability of small states to influence multilateral decisions on international security not through military might but through the “smart state” strategy of offering specialized technical expertise (Smed and Wivel 2016).

Notably, small state scientists are playing a pivotal advisory role in multilateral initiatives such as COVAX and advising on the scalability of the program. This demonstrates a successful multilateral response to the pandemic and the successful provision of societal shelter as a result of policymakers’ willingness to draw upon the technical and specialized knowledge of epistemic communities to disseminate knowledge. Where María Esther Coronado Martínez’s research on the relevance of epistemic communities in the international response to disease outbreaks revealed mixed success in addressing previous epidemics between 2009 and 2016,⁹ this successful approach to addressing COVID-19 supports her core thesis that epistemic communities can be a powerful actor in responding to a pandemic and fostering high levels of international cooperation if they are able to institutionalize their bureaucratic power in the policy-making process.

6 These figures reflect the total number of single doses administered as of 7 June 2021. The chart has been compiled by this author from data sourced from Statista; see “Rate of COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Administered Worldwide as of June 7, 2021, by Country or Territory,” 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1194939/rate-covid-vaccination-by-county-worldwide/>.

7 (Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention 2021)

8 The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook, published on 7 January 2021, is a step in the right direction in supporting countries with best practices to improve communication with their publics. This is currently available in twelve languages and is a work in progress. It has been made available by the coordinating lead authors to organizations such as the WHO, UNICEF, the US Food and Drug Administration, and the Royal Society. See Lewandowsky et al. (2021).

9 Coronado Martinez studied influenza H1N1 in 2009, MERS-CoV in 2012, Ebola in 2013–16, and Zika in 2013–16.

In summary, small states have sought societal shelter from multilateral organizations during the pandemic to compensate for a lack of indigenous knowledge. Still, more must be done by existing, large-scale, and trusted multilateral organizations such as the WHO when it comes to promoting vaccine take-up and public health communication, particularly in small developing states. Some small states that have proven particularly adept at responding to the crisis have themselves been in a position to contribute to societal shelter for other members of international organizations and have harnessed their niche expertise to foster greater collective security. This has been especially prominent in the scientific research communities. At the same time, William Haseltine points out how “*scientists have not only worked together to develop COVID treatments and vaccines, but they are among the loudest voices calling for rich countries to collaborate and to deploy their wealth across all countries to end the disease,*” demonstrating how the international contribution of small state scientists to combating the pandemic and extending the umbrella of societal shelter has not just been restricted to knowledge production and dissemination, but has furthered the agenda for a more just and equitable response to the pandemic, where small and developing actors will not get left behind (Haseltine 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article set out to test one of the core theses in the burgeoning literature on small states, which asserts that small states must seek shelter within larger organizations or in partnership with large states in order to mitigate their inherent vulnerabilities and build resilience against externally originating shocks. This article tested this theory by investigating how small states navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. It examined the extent to which small states sought shelter that was economic, political, and societal from existing multilateral frameworks, as well as the conditions under which they developed new work-arounds when the existing multilateral arrangements did not function as intended.

When turning to multilateral arrangements to mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19, there were two options available to small states: multilateralism as an approach availing of existing and often long-standing international institutions, and more ad hoc groupings of three or more countries, which came together out of necessity. The former was the obvious and favored choice, yet the latter often proved more effective when the first option did not yield the desired results. Examining the efforts of small states to seek shelter—particularly sourcing the necessary PPE and vaccine supplies to contend with the outbreak of the virus—provided a clear case study to demonstrate these developments.

In all three areas, it was evidenced that small states have indeed sought shelter from multilateral frameworks in order to overcome their individual limitations. Regarding political shelter, many small states demonstrated openness and trust by cooperating diplomatically and pursuing mul-

tilateral arrangements that stand in stark contrast to the protectionism of larger counterparts. They have continued to draw upon, and even begun to offer, collective security assistance in the form of new trade agreements and vaccine delivery programs, and in the bid to keep the concurrent challenge of climate change on the global agenda. As small states such as New Zealand, Singapore, and Austria have spearheaded new, open multilateral and plurilateral arrangements, they have reinforced the importance of multilateralism for small states as a means of amplifying their voice, pooling resources, safeguarding access to supplies, and building more equity into the pandemic response. Yet their development of new ad hoc mechanisms is not a sign that the existing and long-standing frameworks are wholly unfit for purpose or should be abandoned. The ad hoc coalitions are not being conceived of as an alternative to larger regional and international bodies, but as complementary minilateral groupings that facilitate a quick response from like-minded countries with shared short-term needs.

Such work-arounds were prompted by the fact that assistance was not always forthcoming from long-standing multilateral frameworks—such as the EU or the WHO—as readily, quickly, or equitably as desired or required. In this regard, times of crisis proved to be times of great creativity; during the COVID-19 pandemic, many entrepreneurial small states managed to maneuver as “small but smart” states (repurposing facilities to begin manufacturing PPE, developing vaccines, establishing minilateral trade mechanisms and regional platforms for supply, etc.). Where the multilateral frameworks on which they typically depend to provide shelter fell short, many have proven resilient and demonstrated the capacity to rapidly adapt to meet the needs of their populations. Although the political, economic, and societal shelter of multilateral mechanisms will always be required (particularly due to the fact that small economies must be open, trade is essential, and knowledge transfers to compensate for a lack of indigenous knowledge are necessary), small states have shown that they have more agency than might have been presumed to improvise and stop the gaps when that shelter is limited or not forthcoming at the requisite pace.

In the medium and long term, however, the scale of support, reach, resource provision, and expertise offered by existing organizations such as the WHO and UNICEF has been shown to remain integral to small states’ pandemic response, as well as their capacity to weather other national security storms in the future. This was particularly evident in the discussion of small states seeking societal shelter and exemplified by the need for more credible, clear, and scientifically informed public health communication in small states with low vaccine uptake, such as Gabon, in order to make greater strides in this area. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that small states have not only taken on the role of shelter recipients within these frameworks but also increasingly played the important role of shelter providers themselves. This is clearly visible with reference to the way scientists and epistemic communities in “smart” small states have been sharing knowledge and influencing global policy-making on combating COVID-19.

One area where existing multilateral frameworks proved particularly effective and necessary in response to the pandemic has been in the provision of economic shelter in response to the concurrent economic crisis. A range of new mechanisms have been instituted regionally in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa to combat price gouging, support vaccine development, provide access to the necessary liquidity and capital requisite for small states to enact recovery measures, and empower states to take a regional approach and reduce extraregional dependency. However, funding alone is insufficient if the necessary resources—such as vaccine doses—are not being made available. While the Biden presidency has reinvigorated COVAX and the prospects for more equitable shelter provision during the pandemic response, it remains to be seen how rapidly vaccine donations will reach their intended recipients and whether promising policies, such as the proposed TRIPS waiver, will gain enough support to constitute a sea change in the ability to offer societal shelter and secure populations globally. Whether the proposal will be implemented meaningfully will be a critical moment in understanding whether the WHO (or, more specifically, its members from advanced economies) is truly committed to serving vulnerable communities—or the interests of big pharma, thereby only deepening the prevailing crisis of multilateralism.

At the same time as acknowledging the invaluable provision of economic shelter by well-established multilateral organizations such as the IFC and the African Union, this article also exposed the limitations of current mechanisms for the provision of economic shelter by international financial organizations. Notably, comprehensive reforms to international financing mechanisms—such as conditions for access to concessional finance and a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability—remain necessary to enable small states to build capacity. The experience of AOSIS member states lobbying at the United Nations has reinforced the need for widespread socioeconomic and environmental vulnerability to be addressed in concert to ensure an inclusive recovery that does not privilege the advanced economies over the vulnerable or those with fewer resources. Small states—and, particularly, small developing economies—cannot resolve all their challenges alone, and as long as the largest and most wealthy powers continue to adopt protectionist and insular strategies, the world will struggle to realize the inclusive, rights-based, participatory, and green development envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, this article has exposed inequality even among small states, given how many small developing states continue to face amplified challenges of access to vaccines, risks of price gouging, and vulnerability to influence from larger, more dominating international players in exchange for access to vital resources (ranging from PPE to vaccines).

Even when small states offer the international community important proposals to mitigate their challenges and offset power asymmetry in international negotiations, such as the recommendations put forward by the SIDS to restructure international financial regulations in credible and long-standing multilateral frameworks and international institutions in order to facilitate recovery, these ideas cannot be realized unless larger, more influential actors add their weight to the debate and eschew nationalistic responses (see Pritchett 2022, this special collection). COVID-19 demonstrated the ability for populations to adapt to new measures, yet it also exposed stark failures in the global appetite for international collaboration in the face of a universal existential threat and revealed the limitations of the multilateralism that is such a lifeline for the provision of shelter for many small states. Even where the adverse effects of the pandemic were explicit, national responses initially proved largely preferable for many large and influential actors, instead of countries working collaboratively through international organizations. This poses a serious problem because universal threats like a pandemic or climate change evidence how the biggest and the wealthiest country is only as resilient as the smallest or the least wealthy.

Given the extent of the economic problems concurrent with the public health crisis, the launch of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) by the G20 in May 2020 has been a welcome move, freeing up resources for small states to address socioeconomic and public health priorities during the crisis. However, such mechanisms are only one part of the larger, complex vulnerability and development puzzle facing small states. The current international financial structures in particular, instituted at the end of the Second World War (when many SIDS were not even independent yet), have been revealed to be ill-suited to confronting contemporary problems, and while some small states have managed to develop work-arounds to stop gaps during the pandemic, more long-term solutions should be sought to make assistance more accessible and equitable.¹⁰ In their July 2020 Statement on Debt, AOSIS put forward a comprehensive proposal to address the challenges faced by SIDS. These require debt relief, including cancellation, suspension, rescheduling, restructuring, and debt for climate swaps, among other mechanisms. Such measures are absolute necessities—not only during the pandemic but also to ensure long-term security. While small states have shown their resilience and ability to adapt and develop work-arounds in the short term, in the long term only a fairer, more inclusive multilateral system that builds in resilience to the effects of climate change and other long-term or black swan challenges will empower small states to both recover from the ill effects of COVID-19 and achieve sustainable development moving forward.

¹⁰ As Singh and Woolcock (2022) argue in the introduction to this special collection, “The future of multilateralism and global development demands a reconsideration of both constitutive and functional elements.”

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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