Reflections on conspicuous sustainability: Creating Small Island Dependent States (SIDS) through Ostentatious Development Assistance (ODA)?

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1. Introduction

There is a strong association between being a small island territory and receiving aid. It is frequently noted that small islands receive hugely disproportionate levels of aid relative to other states and territories (e.g. Bates & Angeon, 2015; McGillivray, Naudé, & Santos-Paulino, 2010) and that "island states are the most heavily aid-assisted places per capita" (Connell, 2018, p. 114). However, the precise relationship between 'islandness' and aid remains underexamined.

This paper uses the concept of 'conspicuous sustainability' as a framework for understanding the propensity for aid to be directed toward small island territories. We argue 1) that aid donors have reasons for preferring engagement in development projects that are particularly conspicuous, irrespective of actual development outcomes and 2) that small island territories are exceptionally well-placed to produce conspicuousness. We use the case of 'climate-resilient' Dominica following Hurricane Maria in 2017 to illustrate how aid donors and recipients can be motivated to pursue short-term goals aimed at fashionable areas in the

field of development instead of addressing areas with greater potential to foster lasting improvements and build local capacity.

Grydehøj and Kelman (2017, pp.106-107) define 'conspicuous sustainability' as:

> engagement in symbolic sustainability initiatives whether or not they contribute to sustainability processes […] Initiatives undertaken in the name of sustainability and climate change mitigation that also seek to gain competitive advantage, strengthen sustainable tourism or ecotourism, claim undue credit, distract from failures of governance, or obviate the need for more comprehensive policy action.

That is, improving 'development', 'resilience', 'sustainability', or other terms is immaterial, as long as it appears to be happening. This represents a supply-side approach to conspicuous sustainability: state or non-state actors engage in conspicuous sustainability in pursuit of economic, political, and/or social benefits (in addition to the potential sustainability benefits of the projects in question). A demand-side approach is also feasible: state or non-state actors seek to reward other actors for engaging in sustainability, and the more visible (i.e. conspicuous) this sustainability, the better. In the context of this paper's focus, the key act is doing something aid-related that is visible, thereby emphasising conspicuousness over sustainability.

It is not that some sustainable development projects represent conspicuous sustainability while others do not; conspicuousness is a more prominent or less prominent attribute of all development projects. Nor do we claim that projects characterised by a high degree of conspicuous sustainability can never contribute positively. We argue that motivations for funding or undertaking a particular aid-related project sometimes relate to the relative conspicuousness or visibility of the projects, rather than to their sustainable development impacts.

The next section further grounds the links between islands, ODA, and both donor demand for and island supply of conspicuous ODA. We then consider the empirical case of climate-resilient Dominica, followed by a closer analysis of the issues raised by this case. We conclude by recommending greater awareness of the false economies of conspicuous ODA.

2. ODA: Fuelling islandness and conspicuous sustainability?

2.1. ODA and islands

A wide literature identifies exceptionalism in island locations and highlights aspects of islandness as the baseline for vulnerabilities and resiliences (Bassett et al, 2016; Carlsen, 2015; Lewis, 1999, 2009). Examples are small land size, remoteness, high coast/area ratio, boundedness, peripherality, high number of endemic species, small human population size, and small economic size. Many others challenge the importance of island characteristics, for example by rejecting the assumption that small, isolated, bounded territories are especially suitable as laboratories or testbeds for development and sustainability endeavours (Baldacchino, 2018b; Greenhough, 2006). Some such analyses demonstrate that 'islandness'—that which renders small islands different from other small territories—does not seem to be a crucial factor for providing aid (Bates & Angeon, 2015; Easterly & Kraay, 2000).

When considering islands and aid, the development literature has tended to focus on the category of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which emerged within a United Nations development policy framework and for which the number of SIDS, the membership, and the mandate have varied over time (UN 1994, 2005, 2014). Many development studies continue to draw their samples of islands exclusively from SIDS (e.g. Vítová, Harmáček, & Opršal, 2019; Takahashi, 2019). Given that SIDS are apparently 'developing' by definition and that all SIDS lie in the low latitudes, the study of SIDS alone may complicate attempts to discern how 'islandness' is related to vulnerability and underdevelopment (Petzold & Ratter, 2019). After all, the immediate explanation for why SIDS categorically face development problems is that SIDS as a group is self-selective of territories wishing to present themselves as facing these problems (Baldacchino, 2018a). The SIDS designation represents a mechanism for enhancing diplomatic power and connecting particular ODA donors and recipients.

The 'developing' label is sometimes carelessly equated with 'vulnerability', lack of 'sustainability', and lack of 'resilience'. These concepts have been critiqued within development studies and island studies, as researchers highlight the self-reproducing and tautological nature of the discourses surrounding them (Pugh, 2018; Malatesta & di Friedberg, 2017; Petridis et al, 2017). Such purported island characteristics cannot, however, simply be ignored since they remain a focus of policy attention directed at islands, often without serious attempts to understand islander perspectives (Beyerl et al, 2018; Perkins & Krause, 2018; Perumal, 2018).

A further complication is aid to subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs), with examples being Barbuda (within the country of Antigua and Barbuda) and La Réunion (a department of

France). Depending on how they are calculated, the regular monetary transfers and other contributions that SNIJs receive from their metropolitan states frequently exceed and substantively differ from those received by subnational jurisdictions on the mainland, especially for SNIJs that possess a degree of autonomy (Amoamo, 2018; Baldacchino, 2015; Baldacchino & Milne, 2009). Such transfers are not, however, always conceptualised or defined as aid. It is indicative of the association between islandness and aid that many SIDS *and* relatively well-off SNIJs are major recipients of development-orientated contributions. The common focus on SIDS means that development scholarship's investigation of the drivers and impacts of island-related ODA is often incomplete, notwithstanding extensive literature covering non-SIDS archipelagos such as Indonesia and the Philippines. It also means that the development needs of non-SIDS SNIJs are frequently overlooked by donors and the international community, as Ferdinand (2018) illustrates with regard to France's non-European island territories.

Thus, a broad perspective on 'aid' is needed, encompassing not just formally accounted bilateral or multilateral ODA but also internal transfers, such as from metropolitan states to dependent overseas territories (Overton et al, 2013). Here, we henceforth use the terms 'aid' and 'ODA' interchangeably, recognising that some literature disagrees with this conflation.

There are also disagreements regarding ODA's role in island economies. On the one hand, McGillivray et al (2010) state that "these flows [of aid] are most unlike trade […] They result from conscious decisions of foreign donor governments and private overseas citizens to transfer resources to SIDS." On the other hand, while ODA requires conscious decisions by overseas donors, this does not mean islands are passive recipients; many small islands actively seek out and make themselves competitive in attracting ODA. Much literature has explored geostrategic factors that contribute to islands' propensity for attracting and/or receiving ODA (e.g. Grydehøj, 2018; Overton & Murray, 2014; Baldacchino, 2006; Bertram, 2006; Poirine, 1998; Baldacchino, 1993; Bertram & Watters, 1986). It is thus necessary to consider the interests and motivations of both donor bodies *and* island peoples.

For example, the economy of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), not a SIDS but an autonomous SNIJ of Denmark, is dependent on an annual direct transfer from Denmark to support its state sector. Kalaallit Nunaat's economy is strongly influenced by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for property/housing development and management, external and internal freight transport, retail in remote communities, fishing operations, seafood/meat processing, energy production and supply, and a range of other industries. While SOEs are present in territories of all sizes, small island territories are exceptionally dependent on them to provide

services and channel aid into the economy (Connell, 2016; Grydehøj, 2018). This can in turn create the necessary economic base, infrastructural network, and industrial ecosystem for private enterprise.

Many SIDS inherited large and complex state sectors from their times as colonies: remnants of the colonial administrative apparatus are frequently redeployed in the service of the independent or self-governing small island territory. Similarly, colonial industries may become the backbone of island economies even after decolonisation—and even though the colonial systems and processes that made such industries incredibly profitable may not make sense from the perspective of the island community (rather than from the perspective of the extraction-seeking coloniser). Thus, for example, colonial powers established chattel slavery-dependent sugar plantations on many Caribbean islands. However, sugar production remained the primary export industry for many of these islands even following the abolition of slavery, necessitating technical and social adaptations and repurposings of the former colonial economic framework (Knight, 2015; Meniketti, 2006).

Despite the vagaries of small island economic circumstances, perceived shared island characteristics have led to the formulation of a number of theories purporting to shed light on island economies. Bertram and Watters' (1986) so-called MIRAB model (**MI**gration, **R**emittances, **A**id, **B**ureaucracy) signified:

> an economic situation in which current-account transfer payments (remittances, dividends, interest earnings, social welfare payments, government budgetary subventions, and a wide variety of other official transfers generically categorized as 'aid') and nontradable production (generally dominated by government, hence the term *Bureaucracy*), function as the leading sectors in economic development, in place of the World Bank's preferred mix of export-led tradable production and private-sector investment (Bertram, 1999, p.105).

Poirine (1993) identified ARABE, a distinctive version of MIRAB, at work in French Polynesia, highlighting the flexibility of Bertram and Watters' initial theorisation. Others perceived MIRAB economies undergoing a transformation into so-called TOURAB economies, supplementing income from MIRAB sources with a significant tourism industry (Apostolopoulos, & Gayle, 2002). Baldacchino (2006) criticised how MIRAB-type theories could become self-fulfilling prophecies, i.e. could be seen as prescriptive rather than descriptive. In response, he advanced PROFIT (**P**eople, **R**esource management, **O**verseas

engagement, **FI**nance, **T**ransportation) as a description of island economies dependent on high-level and highly skilled services (Baldacchino, 2006). McElroy (2006) proposed the SITE (**S**mall **I**sland **T**ourism **E**conomies) classification scheme to better understand distinctive aspects of tourism-dependent islands. Clark (2013), however, has criticised such ideal type 'acronym models' of island economies, noting their fundamental circularity and a reliance on neoliberal assumptions.

2.2. Donor demand for conspicuous ODA

Within these theories of island economies, ODA may be helpful for recipients, but for it to be given at all, it must first be helpful for donors. From Kapoor's (2008, p.78) postcolonial perspective, ODA not only provides donors with direct reputational benefits as being "benevolent and generous," which assists with nation-building, but it also helps conceal the economic and geostrategic benefits that donors accrue through ODA provision. Overton et al (2013, p.117), too, see aid as involving an "explicit imbalance of power and the construction of a relationship between donor and recipient which implies a one-way flow of resources. In reality, aid is used as a tool to extract returns from recipients for the benefit of donors." More mundanely, "Every donor country wants visibility [due to] a domestic public demand to 'fly the flag' or 'show face' through its aid assistance" (Chun, Munyi, & Li, 2010, p.798). Visibility and conspicuousness are more than simply incidental to donor determinations regarding where and how to give ODA. The greater the conspicuousness of the ODA, the better donors are able to argue for commensurate domestic or overseas returns.

One immediate problem is that certain abstract, long-term developmental impacts related to quality of life may be relevant and evident to islanders without appealing to donors or matching development orthodoxy (Jacobs & Overton, 2017). This is especially so given that many donors prefer ODA to cover so-called 'basic needs', despite the potentially pernicious manner in which this reinforces "paired hierarchies—rich-poor, culture-nature, luxurious-basic—that conveniently fit its North-South orientation" (Kapoor, 2008, p.23).

ODA's difficulty in achieving long-term development is frequently bemoaned (Moyo, 2010; Hubbard & Duggan, 2009; Riddell, 2007), yet long-term projects struggle when it comes to management and accounting that works for donors. Khang and Moe (2008, p.74) argue that the nebulousness and difficulty of periodically assessing the results of development projects with long horizons can mean using metrics of resources provided, irrespective of efficiency, efficacy, and accountability. In addition, ODA appropriations are often made on a year-by-year basis or in accordance with timeframes, funding cycles, and ministerial priorities that are

disconnected from on-the-ground realities in recipient countries. This causes unpredictability (OECD, 2009, p.62) and a 'spend it while you have it' mindset, the latter in part with the "objective of maximizing aid budgets" (Canavire-Bacarreza, Neumayer, & Nunnenkamp, 2015).

Although the need for ODA visibility, accountability, and short-term impact can drive donors to focus on resource mobilisation itself, it can also, perhaps counterintuitively, push donors to the opposite extreme of prioritising exceptionally tangible one-off projects, for their visibility value and often at the expense of longer-term local needs. Knack and Rahman (2008) highlight possible consequences, including using ODA to hire external consultants without training or supporting locals, undermining local governments, and supporting construction but not repair or staffing.

Thus, although the long-term success of ODA-financed projects requires them to involve stable programmes and systems, donors have good reason to invest in infrastructural change but little incentive to invest in structural change. The channelling of ODA into acclaim-providing infrastructure projects and other material interventions has the additional benefit of resulting in achievements that can be photographed, videoed, and signposted, creating visual links between donor and project while providing illustrations for an aid agency's website and promotional materials. Similarly, ODA for crisis response tends to garner far more donor visibility than crisis prevention.

ODA conspicuousness is also influenced by the problem being targeted and the language with which the problem is described. Various scholars have noted how the proliferation of near-meaningless buzzwords (adaptation, resilience, transformation, risk, vulnerability, *etc.*) at the intersection of science, policy, and aid may take for granted particular hierarchies of wealth and power, constructing communities as helpless victims, obfuscating the issue at hand, and drawing attention to certain fashionable areas at the expense of others (Meerow & Newell, 2019; Nightingale, 2017; Evans & Reid, 2014).

In providing ODA, conspicuousness is often prioritised over sustainability. Conspicuous sustainable development may be the ideal result, but from the donor's perspective, conspicuous ODA may be even more important than long-term sustainability, given that donors struggle to keep claiming credit for old achievements. It is not that donor desire for sustainable development is insincere; it is simply that the system by which ODA is funded and distributed necessitates that donors consistently deliver visible achievements. It may thus be that ODA represents not just 'Official Development Assistance' but also 'Ostentatious Development Assistance'.

2.3. Island supply of conspicuous ODA

If donors demand conspicuous results for their ODA, it is no surprise that potential ODA recipients have proven adept at supplying eminently fundable development projects that engage in conspicuous sustainability. As discussed above, many small island economies in particular have—with varying degrees of government intent—adapted to a steady inflow of ODA. However, the consequences of ODA depend on the manner in which it is distributed and the projects undertaken as a result. Islands have been particularly successful at engaging in conspicuous sustainability by harnessing their supposed island characteristics to provide visibility to policies and projects that suit donor needs (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017).

A combination of 1) island smallness (which makes things occurring on islands appear relatively larger) and 2) island boundedness (which assists in artificially externalising factors and circumstances that complicate the picture or narrative) potentially enhances the *perceived* efficacy of island development projects. As Baldacchino (2018a) writes, "The optics of undertaking such measures on a small island state add to the fascination of securing quick and visible results." Small island spatiality can make it easier to represent project success.

Of equal importance, small island spatiality can make it easier to represent the need for ODA. Many SIDS and even SNIJs of 'developed' states seek to adapt their economies, their methods of measuring their economies, and their representational strategies to enhance the appearance of vulnerability and need for aid (Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009, p.142). For example, many SIDS governments have taken to highlighting particular kinds of vulnerability (especially involving climate change) that are attractive to potential donors while downplaying less profitable or less marketable developmental problems (Baldacchino & Kelman, 2014). Similarly, the economic and political benefits of belonging to categories such as the SIDS and Least-Developed Countries (LDC) can disincentivise some small island territories from achieving too much *visible* development, lest they lose access to vulnerability-dependent ODA streams (Baldacchino, 2018a).

SIDS are thus prone to transition from being 'Small Island Developing States' to being 'Small Island Dependent States'. Islands are well-placed to serve as conspicuous examples of 'development' and 'sustainability', with the conspicuousness then supporting and increasing dependency.

3. Conspicuousness in practice: climate-resilient Dominica

Category 5 Hurricane Maria made landfall in the SIDS of Dominica on 18 September 2017 as the strongest recorded storm over or near the country (Blake, 2018). At least 60% of infrastructure, including houses, was unusable afterwards; a high proportion of trees across the island was felled; and 30-31 people were killed immediately, out of a population of 70,000-74,000 (Blake, 2018; Cloos & Ridde, 2018).[1] The country's Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit was providing live updates via Facebook as the roof ripped off his house, and his dwelling flooded, followed by him being rescued (Samuelson, 2017). Just five days later, Skerrit (2017) began his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York with the words, "I come to you straight from the front line of the war on climate change." National legislation was passed at the end of 2018 to "rebuild Dominica as the first climate resilient nation" (Government of Dominica, 2018, p.270). This tagline received worldwide media coverage and prompted financial assistance from overseas.

Lost among the rhetoric and conspicuousness of Dominica's Maria-related plight and response were more fundamental questions about ODA and disaster risk reduction. Dominica has a long history of hurricanes, with the consequences of Hurricane David in 1979 demonstrating remarkable parallels to Hurricane Maria in 2017. In Dominica, Hurricane David (reported as perhaps the most intense hurricane of the 20th Century up to that year) killed 42-56 people and left three-quarters of the 73,000-83,000 population homeless (Barclay et al, 2019; Hebert, 1980; Wit & Gooder, 1981) while tree damage was "the most extensive reported to date anywhere" (Lugo et al, 1983, p.201). More than a dozen other hurricanes are confirmed to have hit Dominica since 1503 (Barclay et al, 2019). Given this experience, the work published on hurricanes in Dominica, the fact that Dominica lies in the hurricane belt, and the fact that Hurricane Maria struck during hurricane season, one might ask: Why was the country apparently so unprepared for Hurricane Maria in 2017?

Anecdotal evidence, such as from Prime Minister Skerrit, suggests that many houses were destroyed after the roof blew off. This is despite the extensive engineering knowledge, including vernacular approaches, to protect structures in storms, some long-standing and cheap (e.g. Reardon, 1992) and others using recent technology and more expensive (e.g. Aly, Chokwitthaya, & Poche, 2017). Irrespective of wind, it is difficult to build structures to withstand hurricane-related debris damage, especially trees, as well as to avoid floodable areas, given the country's small land area and steep slopes. The question therefore becomes why so many people remained in their homes in dangerous locations, despite one or two days' warning, rather than evacuating to prepared shelters built in safer areas of the country, as has long been implemented in both island states such as Cuba (Aguirre, 2005) and non-island states such as

Bangladesh (Haque et al, 2012). Where was the attention, impetus, and aid for long-term disaster risk reduction, especially based on the recent experience of Hurricane David, compared to what is available for climate resilience post-Maria?

It is also intriguing that Dominica's prime minister's internet connectivity apparently remained while his roof did not. Without decrying the need for internet connectivity—after all, conspicuous development can still be constructive development—just months before Maria, Dominica was one example within a highly visible report on the importance of the internet for the Caribbean (Internet Society, 2017). The Internet Society later founded a chapter in Dominica stating "One of the key goals is to support the Dominica government's idea to create a climate resilient country following the passage of Hurricane Maria in 2017. The disaster helped realize the importance of communication post-disaster" (Froncek, 2019). While the importance of telecommunications pre- and post-disaster is a truism, the narrative for internet connectivity shifted from "sustainable economic and social development" (Internet Society, 2017, p.2) to "a climate resilient country" (Froncek, 2019) without mentioning 'sustainability'. Presumably this is due to the conspicuousness of post-Maria reconstruction and bandwagoning onto the narrative created by the Government of Dominica.

Yet Dominica has long experienced a variety of environmental hazards, not always linked to weather or climate, including earthquakes, landslides (potentially triggered by either geological or meteorological drivers), tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions (Barclay et al, 2019; Parham et al, 2015). Making the country climate resilient and blaming climate change for the Hurricane Maria disaster would not address these other hazards, especially given that poverty—rather than climate change or other environmental inputs—is identified as the greatest impediment to disaster risk reduction in Dominica (Ferdinand et al, 2012).

Interestingly, the preamble of the 'climate resilient' legislation (Government of Dominica, 2018, p.270) refers to "a climate resilient nation which is better able to withstand future hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters," as if all disasters are linked to climate and are thus worse today than they were in the past. Even though Hurricane Maria was labelled with superlatives, the comparable Atlantic/Caribbean hurricane dataset is not long, with consistent records for parameterising hurricane strength and intensity generally not preceding 1970 (Webster et al, 2005). Consequently, comparing Hurricane Maria's parameters with the data available for all of Dominica's previous hurricanes yields little of value.

Contrary to the statements of Dominica's prime minister and government agencies, climate change is poorly correlated with hurricane-related damage. Climate change affects Atlantic/Caribbean hurricanes and is projected to continue affecting them in ways similar to

those observed now by reducing hurricane frequency, increasing hurricane wind and rainfall intensity, slowing hurricane movement along their tracks, and potentially shifting the zones in which hurricanes can form and track (Kang & Elsner, 2015; Kossin, 2018; Sharmila & Walsh, 2018). There might, however, be a climate-conditioned maximum intensity that hurricanes cannot exceed (Kieu & Moon, 2016). Irrespective of how climate change does and does not affect hurricanes, the disaster and development literature has long demonstrated how consequences of natural hazards such as hurricanes, sometimes seen as disaster impacts, are due more to vulnerability than to hazard parameters (Hewitt, 1983, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Wisner et al, 2004). For hurricanes, for instance, flood mortality is poorly correlated with flood parameters (Jonkman & Vrijling, 2008). Exceptions do exist, for example, heat waves exacerbated by climate change to the point that human survival outdoors becomes tenuous (Watts et al, 2018).

Given that the Dominican legislation defines that "'climate resilient' means resilient to natural hazards which may cause climate-related disasters" (Government of Dominica, 2018, p.271), Dominica's attempt at climate resilience seems to diverge from science. However, inaccurately linking the Hurricane Maria disaster to climate change while highlighting climate resilience above all other forms of resilience without factoring in critiques and challenges (Pugh, 2014; Reid, 2019) plays well into today's political discourse and garners attention from development-orientated policymakers and practitioners, such as the World Bank and United Nations, both of which responded positively to Dominica's 'climate resilient' promise.

The situation represents both donor demand for conspicuous ODA (Section 2.2) and island supply of conspicuous ODA (Section 2.3). Donor demand appears through the buzzwords of 'resilience' and the domination of 'climate change', which override more fundamental causes of development challenges and force recipients to adopt these flavours (Baldacchino & Kelman, 2014; Gaillard, 2012; Pugh, 2014; Reid, 2019). Island supply appears because Dominica is presented as poster child for what a "tiny country" with "nowhere to run" could achieve, leading to substantial donor interest (Flavelle, 2018). This is not to say that the initiatives are unhelpful; rather, it is to say that they garner attention more for the conspicuousness of Dominca's tagline than for their sustainability. This point is reinforced by Flavelle's (2018) subtitle that "Progress so far is hard to see" despite the assessment occurring less than ten months after Maria: quick visibility is more important than correctly implemented, long-term endeavours.

In aiming to be the world's first climate-resilient nation, Dominica demonstrates how conspicuous sustainability can contribute to the production of Small Island Dependent States

(SIDS) and Ostentatious Development Assistance (ODA). Rather than querying why Dominica was unprepared for known hazards in 2017, continued dependency is created through ODA and through external and flawed constructions such as 'climate resilience' and attributions of hurricane damage to climate change.

Discourse and action are shifted away from more successful development approaches of 1) localised disaster risk reduction with bottom-up action (e.g., Gaillard, 2012 provides an example in Kiribati) and 2) creating the enabling conditions for successful local approaches by tackling fundamental development concerns such as poverty and inequity (as demonstrated for Haiti by Mika, 2019). Instead, blame is placed on the widespread, ephemeral, global topic of climate change, seeking top-down, external solutions (Baldacchino & Kelman, 2014; Gaillard, 2012). Aid is then provided in response to Dominica's prime minister's incorrect assertion that dealing with hurricanes is about fighting climate change, alongside the marketable phrase 'first climate resilient nation'. This ODA was not about doing what would work for Dominicans and reducing dependency, but was about what was making headlines and nation branding within contemporary populist notions of climate change. Climate-resilient Dominica thus represents conspicuous development and conspicuous sustainability.

4. Analysis

For Dominica, the focus on grandiose phrases such as 'a climate-resilient country' present superficial and conspicuous ideas. It exemplifies a tendency to move away from long-term and challenging yet achievable sustainability goals on islands in favour of near-term, buzzword-filled notions pushed by external forces. Where challenging, long-term objectives are the focus of attention, for example in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, they too are frequently bound up with buzzwords and complex histories of unequal power relations (Briant Carant, 2017; Ziai, 2015). Although islanders often resist external attempts to cast them in particular roles, they often also find it useful to adopt and adapt to such external expectations (Baldacchino, 2008). Short-term gain is sought without much focus on long-term benefits. Given how much ODA is then provided for these short-term approaches, there might be some success in improving quality of life through ODA expenditure, much as, for example, remittances and spending on bureaucracy can keep an economy ticking over without making much long-term difference. Little is provided for the long-term, especially as donor priorities, funds, and ideologies change with donor governments and development paradigms.

SIDS like Dominica prove especially appealing to donors. Not only did Dominica's small land area, small population, and small economic size mean that its lack of hurricane preparedness resulted in relatively comprehensive—and hence dramatic and visible—need, but they also meant that the ODA-financed projects themselves had the potential to be disproportionately large. Whereas ODA with long-term objectives targeted at a much larger (ostensibly 'climate vulnerable') state like Bangladesh will be swallowed up with relatively little immediately visible and marketable impact—Bangladesh's cyclone warning and shelter system (Haque et al, 2012) required decades to implement and to be shown as effective—a similarly sized ODA investment in a place like Dominica simply looks bigger.

Whether conspicuous sustainability, conspicuous development, or conspicuous aid, the visibility and the act of being seen to do something, especially in line with contemporary buzz paradigms, is used to attract and perpetuate ODA and hence dependency. This combines the ostentatious dimension of ODA with the dependent dimension of SIDS. Such a situation may suit the immediate needs of both donors and recipients yet ultimately at best represents a lost opportunity to make a lasting positive impact—and at worst can be detrimental.

The experiences of Fiji, another SIDS, demonstrate how these approaches, in failing to contribute to sustainability, can undermine local and traditional livelihoods and abilities, which might otherwise have achieved what the ODA sought in the first place. Kaloumaira (2002) and Lightfoot (1999) discuss how the cash crop of sugar cane was introduced into Fiji, yet drought during El Niño periods can drastically reduce income from this resource. Sugar cane took land away from local and more subsistence livelihoods, creating dependence on international pricing, transportation, and markets. Rather than improving warning systems and responses to drought and other climate-related variabilities, which would likely require some level of external assistance, Kaloumaira (2002) and Lightfoot (1999) suggest tackling the points we have raised regarding dependence and ostentatiousness. They recommend increased crop diversity, especially to meet local needs, decreasing dependency by reducing assumptions about what ODA will be provided; improved water management (especially since many droughts are about water use, not precipitation deficits, e.g. Glantz & Katz, 1977); and research into the causes of and solutions to widespread malnutrition.

Diet and food have become major issues due to dependency on and sometimes preference for unhealthy, imported food (termed 'gastrocolonialism'), causing obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and malnutrition among island populations in the Pacific (Fresno-Calleja, 2017), Arctic (Sharma et al, 2010; Bjerregaard & Jeppesen, 2010), and Caribbean (Paddock, 2017). As such, the best form of aid might be to cut off certain external

supplies and support (such as of high-fat, low-nutrient food imports) and to cut off external markets for cash crops. Rather than using Ostentatious Development Assistance to support Small Island Dependent States, the best move toward SIDS 'development' and 'sustainability' might be to end or substantially reduce certain external connections in order to reconstruct older self-sufficiency approaches, in combination with positive aspects of modern technology.

Campbell (2009) describes how Pacific islanders have frequently accepted development aid even though it enhances island characteristics as vulnerabilities while pushing islanders toward a view that they are vulnerable and dependent. One pattern is that the less post-cyclone ODA received by Fijian islands (typically because the islands were smaller and farther from the capital city), the more they implemented initiatives to cope on their own, i.e. constructed their own 'resilience' (Campbell, 2009; Johnston, 2015). This reiterates longstanding work suggesting that aid to Papua New Guinea has undermined local coping mechanisms for frosts, thereby creating worse disasters in subsequent frosts (Waddell, 1983).

These local examples demonstrate how the top-down constructions of ODA and SIDS can filter through to local levels, including SNIJs. As a result, monetary transfers and ODA often occasion discourses of dependency and political disempowerment among both islanders and their donors (Grydehøj, 2020). Hechter's (1977, p. xiii) approach to internal colonialism is significant here, although he too imposes colonialist thought through sentiments such as "European history is longer than the history of most other areas of the world, due to the depth and richness of its written records."

As Karides (2017) notes, numerous social forces shape how colonialist and postcolonial attitudes influence islanders differently at the local level. These differences then influence how aid and its projects affect islanders, including who gains, who loses, who seeks ostentatiousness, and who uses ostentatiousness. The key is understanding the local consequences of aid-related dependencies, as shown above for disasters and which are also valid in other topics, such as supporting tourism projects for development without considering the impacts on unpaid labour and gendered social structures (Lama, 2018; Momsen, 1994; Shakeela et al, 2010; Stonich et al, 2009).

Island territories and donors may benefit in the long run from reducing certain ODA dependencies. However, aid is a socially and economic complex phenomenon, and one purpose of ODA from a donor perspective is precisely to encourage economic dependencies, maintain hierarchies, and sometimes straightforwardly boost donor country exports through tied aid or simple reinforcement of existing supply chains (Kapoor, 2008).

5. Conclusion

Small islands—both sovereign states and SNIJs—have a complex relationship with aid. Some argue that islands are no more deserving of ODA than any other type of territory, yet islands tend to receive a disproportionate amount of aid relative to mainland territories. We have argued that this is because islands possess spatial advantages in rendering ODA and the results of ODA visible and comprehensible. This production of conspicuous ODA is useful both for donors (which are pushed to justify their choice of expenditure and gain value from their operations) and recipients (which are pushed to justify the continued wisdom of targeting ODA locally). The resultant production of specifically *conspicuous* sustainability may have little to do with sustainable development as it is generally understood. By creating donor-recipient dependencies, this Ostentatious Development Assistance may tie islands to conditions of vulnerability, transforming island territories into Small Island Dependent States.

This is not to argue that ODA is always negative, that it cannot be beneficial to island territories, or that the potential for donors to benefit from ODA means that islands should never accept ODA. Reliance on even 'spend it while you have it'-style ODA can be a reasonable strategic option. Similarly, when a disaster occurs or when structural problems prevent an economy and society from improving 'development' or 'sustainability', then appropriately targeted and applied ODA may prove extremely valuable. In these cases, islands' ability to supply conspicuous ODA and conspicuous sustainability may indeed represent a powerful strategic advantage.

We nevertheless recommend that both donors and recipients examine their true motives when selecting ODA projects and programmes on the basis of their relative visibility, communicability, and marketability. Conspicuous development, conspicuous sustainability, and conspicuous aid endeavours may still do good, but it is unlikely that their long-term contribution will result from their conspicuousness *per se*. Conspicuous ODA can offer false economies. Both ODA donors and recipients could benefit more in the long run by refocusing on local needs (a basic and long-accepted tenet of development studies) even when the results are not particularly flashy. Examples are often projects increasing self-sufficiency and livelihood diversification, which could provide islands with lasting benefits, rather than allowing elites in both donors and recipients to set the agenda and, conspicuously, reap most of the rewards.

Endnote

[1] The ambiguous phrasing here is due to differing accounts in contemporary situation reports and subsequent peer-reviewed literature.

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