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To cite this article: Jack Corbett, Mélodie Ruwet, Yi-Chong Xu & Patrick Weller (2020): Climate governance, policy entrepreneurs and small states: explaining policy change at the International Maritime Organisation, *Environmental Politics*, DOI: [10.1080/09644016.2019.1705057](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1705057)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1705057>



Published online: 02 Jan 2020.



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Climate governance, policy entrepreneurs and small states: explaining policy change at the International Maritime Organisation

Jack Corbett^a, Mélodie Ruwet^b, Yi-Chong Xu^b and Patrick Weller^b

^aSchool of Economic, Political and Social Sciences University of Southampton, UK; ^bSchool of Government and International Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

The Marshall Islands (RMI) is one of the world's smallest sovereign states, which should mean they are peripheral to global climate negotiations. Yet, they have recently played a crucial role in negotiating the Paris Agreement and emissions reductions at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). The success at Paris is well documented. Here we explain how they also acted as successful policy entrepreneurs at the IMO. Specifically, we find that RMI's success can be explained by three factors: vision of the entrepreneur; development of capacity within RMI and the region, and commitment of key actors to create and seize opportunities in available forums, to realise that vision; and strategies to mobilise broader international support. These findings have implications for the literatures on policy entrepreneurship in climate governance and studies that highlight the capacity of small states to influence international affairs.

KEYWORDS Climate mitigation; climate governance; small island developing states; policy entrepreneurs; International Maritime Organisation; creative diplomacy

Introduction

In April 2018, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), one of the 15 special agencies of the United Nations, adopted its initial strategy to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The key to breaking this two-decade-long stalemate was a coherent coalition of Pacific small island developing states (PSIDS), led by the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), population 55,000,¹ and supported by European partners. Here, we seek to explain how a group of countries defined by their structural weakness in the international system made a significant impact on decision-making at IMO and by extension climate governance. Specifically, we focus on the role of the RMI, led by the late Tony de Brum, as a policy entrepreneur and show how they overcame strong opposition from larger and richer countries, and from industry lobbies, to achieve an outcome when previous attempts to push for GHG reductions had

CONTACT Jack Corbett  j.corbett@soton.ac.uk

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failed. We build on the growing literature on small states international organisations (IOs) in IOs and on policy entrepreneurship by adding original data in the form of interviews with IMO delegates from both small and large states. Our contribution demonstrates how one of the smallest and poorest states with a direct and existential interest in climate policy has driven the agenda despite opposition from both larger states and industry lobbies; contributes to studies of policy entrepreneurship in climate governance by offering an empirical case of success at IMO, a body too often overlooked by scholars despite its responsibilities; and supports the empirical claim that small states can be effective policy entrepreneurs on specific issues and IOs.

To substantiate these claims, we first review the literature on small states in IOs, highlighting how, even though the traditional theories credit them with limited influence, there are still opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to build coalitions of action. Then we identify the structures and workings of IMO and the reasons it provided an opportunity for entrepreneurial action by the RMI. We then discuss the data and methods used to compile our case study of climate politics at IMO before embarking on an in-depth discussion of the politics of GHG reductions at IMO and particularly of how and why the RMI, along with other PSIDS, was able to exert an influence. We focus specifically on events since the 2015 Paris Agreement, highlighting how the smallest states have ‘reclaimed’ an otherwise low-profile and highly technical institution. We will conclude that the RMI’s success can be explained by three factors: vision of the entrepreneur; development of capacity within the RMI and the region, and commitment of key actors to create and seize opportunities in available forums, to realise that vision; and strategies to mobilise broader international support.

Small states, entrepreneurship and climate governance

The complex regime of global climate governance (Keohane and Victor 2011) is typically described as ‘loosely-linked’ or ‘polycentric’ (Jordan *et al.* 2015). To explain why and how particular issues attract attention in this highly differentiated governance system, and why and how particular sets of policy ideas become policy, scholars use the concept ‘climate entrepreneurship’, which builds on John W. Kingdon’s (1984) ‘policy entrepreneurs’. The term places agents – their motivation, competence, capacity and context – at the centre of analysis. They can be ‘in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organisations ... their defining characteristics, much as in the case of a business entrepreneur, is their willingness to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money’ (Kingdon 1984, p. 123). While policy entrepreneurs are ambitious, their motivation transcends personal gratification. They are driven by a set of beliefs and ideals, become advocates of these ideals, and have

individual and institutional capacities to create opportunities, mobilise support, build networks and push forward the agenda persistently (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Carpenter 2007, 2014).

The literature on policy entrepreneurs emphasises that policy change can occur when actors couple recognition of a problem, identification of an appropriate policy, and adequate political conditions (Roberts and King 1991). The framework has been adopted by scholars who analyse a range of policy areas, such as human rights (e.g. Davies and True 2017), social policies (e.g. Hammond 2013), and climate governance (e.g. Rietig 2014, Hermansen 2015, Boasson and Huitema 2017, Green 2017). Three key features of entrepreneurship are highlighted in the expanding number of studies: vision of the entrepreneur which reflects a set of beliefs and ideas about what can be changed and how that change might be realised; development of capacity to realise that vision, including the preparedness to break through institutional preconceptions, to seize opportunities to change agenda, to consolidate domestic and regional support, and committing resources to overcoming the resistance that stand in the way of doing new things or doing things differently; and strategies to push forward these ideas by convincing others and mobilising wider international support (Weissert 1991, McCammon *et al.* 2007, Bucher 2014).

The idea that the world's smallest states, structurally the weakest members of the international system, could act as climate entrepreneurs flies in the face of existing theories of international relations where the long-held assumption is that power asymmetries dominate global affairs, advantaging the largest and strongest. Keohane, for example, famously argued that small states only mattered when 'America's crusading spirit presented small allies with bargaining influence' (Keohane 1971, p. 163) or when large states allowed them 'to act collectively to help shape developing international attitudes, dogmas, and codes of proper behaviour' (Keohane 1969, p. 297). However, IOs are changing due to the 'greater participation' of a diverse number of states and 'their increased assertiveness' (Keohane and Nye 2001, pp. 269, 271, see also Lyne *et al.* 2009). Recent analysis has shown that small states in the European Union (EU) have acted as successful 'norm entrepreneurs' (e.g. Kronsell 2002, Ingebritsen 2002, Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006). But it is one thing for wealthy Scandinavian countries to shape international politics by providing aid and engaging in conflict resolution and quite another for PSIDS, who often lack the human resource capacity to represent themselves in international forums (Corbett and Connell 2015), to achieve this level of influence.

The key difference between the 1960s and 1970s literature and more recent studies of European small states is the shift from treating these countries as 'objects' in the international system to studying them as 'subjects' capable of exercising agency in creative ways (Neumann and Gstöhl 2004, cf. Jourde 2007, Lyne *et al.* 2009). The nascent and diverse literature on small states in climate negotiations has been at the forefront of these debates. The most common strategy small states employ is to create or join coalitions. Previous studies highlight the role of the Alliance of Small Island

States (AOSIS) at the UN (Ashe *et al.* 1999, Betzold 2010, Betzold *et al.* 2012, de Águeda Corneloup and Mol 2013), and more recently the PSIDS efforts to draw attention to their unique regional vulnerabilities (Carter 2015, Manoa 2015). Capacity-building is important and can be achieved with the support of external stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Panke 2012). Aside from practising ‘niche diplomacy’ by prioritising a particular issue on which to focus their scarce resources (Deitelhoff and Wallbott 2012, Panke 2012), small states utilise framing to gather international support. By shaping discourse leaders can and have used the moral high-ground, scientific evidence, and emphasised their vulnerability to rally NGOs and other states to their cause (Betzold *et al.* 2012, de Águeda Corneloup and Mol 2013). The final strategy open to small states is venue-shopping, but the consensus is that ‘small states often do not have this possibility’ (Deitelhoff and Wallbott 2012) due to capacity constraints (Corbett and Connell 2015). Our empirical case challenges this view.

We add to these studies by focusing on the role of small states at IMO where the RMI, led by Tony de Brum, was able to punch ‘above their weight’ (Boasson and Huitema 2017) to achieve successful policy change. As the existing literature suggests, PSIDS have had a disproportionate impact on climate discussions, in part because of their moral claim to be the first and most severely affected states. Specifically, small states have successfully claimed that they are uniquely vulnerable to climate change (Corbett *et al.* 2019), with some low-lying atoll nations (e.g. Maldives, the RMI, Kiribati and Tuvalu) facing an existential threat due to impending sea level rise. Small island states face an excruciating dilemma in determining their response to climate change. On the one hand, rising waters are an existential threat; on the other, regulating shipping emissions can undermine their living standards as they depend on this industry to maintain island livelihoods. The decision to pursue emission reduction at IMO was not straightforward for RMI. The initial impetuous owes much to de Brum, a veteran politician with substantial experience from the anti-nuclear campaign against the United States.² He mobilised the support of key Marshallese politicians and diplomats, academic experts and the diplomatic advisory group Independent Diplomat to support his vision. He chose IMO as the battleground, leading the RMI in pushing policy change on reducing shipping GHG emissions first and, building on the momentum, persisted onwards to the Paris Conference and after. Our empirical analysis of IMO therefore contributes to, and can be read in the light of, the growing emphasis on the importance of climate entrepreneurship.

The IMO and climate change

To illustrate this claim we investigate recent events at the IMO as a case study of the broader trend that sees small states as important influencers of global climate policy. The IMO is especially interesting as, unlike UNFCCC, for example, it has a reputation as a highly

technical organisation. This should disadvantage small states who tend to lack human resource capacity in negotiations (Corbett and Connell 2015). But, because many small states maintain large shipping registries, they actually have considerable expertise on these issues and greater structural clout in this IO than they do in virtually any other international forum. This context makes the IMO a unique case for studying the policy entrepreneurship of small states.

Created in 1948, the IMO is one of the 15 special agencies of the United Nations, with delegated responsibilities to create regulatory frameworks on ‘practices relating to technical matters of all kinds affecting shipping engaged international trade; to encourage and facilitate the general adoption of the highest practicable standards in matters concerning the maritime safety, efficiency of navigation and prevention and control of maritime pollution from ships’ (IMO Convention cited Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009). The Assembly of all members meets once every two years. The Council of 40 elected members is the executive body in charge of policy deliberation and decision-making when the Assembly is not in session. The Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) is a standing committee of the Assembly with the responsibility to adopt and amend legislation governing marine pollution from ships. As in most IOs, decision-making at IMO follows the principle of one-state-one-vote, yet in practice, consensus is the norm.

Given the nature of shipping operation (e.g. in open seas, beyond national boundaries) and the system of ships being registered in states with open registration, international regulation is especially important. The RMI has an open registry which means any ship can carry its flag regardless of its country of origin. The RMI is currently the third largest shipping registry in the world (see Table 1). Income from the registry accounted for approximately 10% of the RMI government revenue in 2018.³

Table 1. IMO assessed contribution (2017).

Ranking	Country	Amount GBP	% of total assessment
1	Panama	4,896,058	16.26
2	Liberia	2,943,744	9.77
3	Marshall Islands	2,803,537	9.31
4	Singapore	1,829,757	6.07
5	Malta	1,482,973	4.92
6	Bahamas	1,322,304	4.39
7	United Kingdom	1,237,591	4.11
8	China	1,236,270	4.10
9	Greece	942,964	3.13
10	United States	831,412	2.76
Total		19,526,609	64.82

Source: IMO, ‘Financial Report and Audited Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 December 2017.’

By convention, states, both developed and developing, both large and small, either grant shipping registries a formal position as delegates to represent them at IMO or bring corporate officials from shipping registries as advisors. The formal delegates put forward proposals, participate in debates and vote on final decisions on behalf of their states. As a result, ‘the shipping industry has substantial opportunity to influence the shape of global maritime climate change policy’ (InfluenceMap 2017, p. 11). One environmental organisation commented:

The bigger your registry, the bigger clout you have at IMO – when new legislation is being negotiated, everyone is looking in the room to see what bigger registries are thinking and doing. You can design amazing environment legislation, but if the registries don’t want to play then it’s worthless (cited in Hayer 2016).

Until recently the RMI was represented at IMO by its registry, International Registries Inc (IRI), which had started operations in 1948 and become a privately owned and operated corporation in 1991. More recently the RMI, led by de Brum, has on occasion taken to representing themselves.

As in many environmental issue areas, there has been a widespread delegation of authority to international NGOs (INGOs) (Green 2018); at IMO, over 80 INGOs have received consultative status at IMO. These INGOs include representatives of the ship-owners and operators, industry trade associations, cargo owners and charters and environmental organisations (Karim 2015). Although they may not have the right to vote, they can submit documents and often find partners in the ‘flag of convenience’ (FOC) states, such as the RMI:

Their main influence comes via IMO Member States who also share similar interests. The presence of FOC countries in the leading position of IMO created a further avenue for shipping companies to exert influence on the IMO law-making process, as they virtually have a client–service–provider relationship with those countries. (Karim 2015)

With heavy participation of shipping industry players, in formal and informal positions, IMO had achieved little since it was granted the responsibility to regulate GHG emissions from shipping by the countries that signed on the Kyoto Accord in 1997. In 2007–12 shipping GHG emissions rose to 2.8% of the total global emissions and they could grow by up to 250% by 2050 (Smith *et al.* 2015). As a result, some INGOs turned their attention to IMO as part of their broader fight to reduce GHG emissions.

Data and methods

To demonstrate how the RMI acted as climate entrepreneur at IMO we provide an in-depth case study of their involvement. We draw on interviews

with key actors and key policy documents and on media reportage to construct our empirical analysis. We started by reviewing open-source material on the emerging debate about climate policy in the IMO. We conducted 12 interviews with IMO representatives from small and large states, as well as the IMO secretariat and other experts. We then triangulated these perspectives with a thorough search of key documents, meeting records and votes. Our central aim was to, as much as possible, provide an account that key actors would recognise as authentic.⁴

We asked interviewees questions about the role of PSIDS and the RMI, concentrating on their choices and the reasons for changes over time. Interviews were recorded and transcribed but were undertaken on a non-attributable basis. We considered the 12 adequate for understanding this IMO/RMI interaction but note that the material is part of a dataset of 89 interviewees with whom we have discussed our larger project on international organisations and small states (see Corbett *et al.* 2018, 2019, [Forthcoming](#)). The IMO interviews were undertaken in 2018; the interviews for the broader project from 2015–2019. We triangulated the information received from interviewees with documentation available on two platforms, the IMO document portal ('IMODOCS'), and the online reference library of the Micronesian Center for Sustainable Transport (MCST). The latter was particularly useful because amongst the 489 documents uploaded to the database, position papers and aide-memoires circulated amongst the PSIDS were accessible, as well as drafts of resolutions to be submitted. On the IMODOCS portal, we consulted the resolutions for the period 2013–2018.

The RMI as a climate entrepreneur

In this section, we will discuss how the RMI, led by de Brum, acted as an entrepreneur at IMO to secure agreement on GHG emissions reductions.

Vision of the entrepreneur

The stance de Brum took at the Paris Conference in December 2015 was developed in December 2012, during the UNFCCC COP18 held in Doha, when de Brum declared 'It is time the world focused not only on our vulnerability, but on our leadership.' (SPREP 2012). This set the tone for the actions the RMI, along with other PSIDS, was to take in multiple climate forums. de Brum was a persistent voice. One of his colleagues recalled him saying, 'If you have the chance, do what you can do. Take things on and make a difference . . . Where can I go from here? How can I go from here? How can I make this bigger?' (Hardcastle 2017). His beliefs about climate justice and the consequences of calling for capping shipping GHG emissions in 2012–15 might have been seen as unrealistic due to opposition from large states but

also powerful shipping lobbyists. They nonetheless set the goal that RMI would fight for.

de Brum and his colleagues from RMI identified IMO as a place where they could exert influence disproportionate to their size and push forward their interests for two main reasons. First, even though politically controversial issues, such as regulating GHG emissions from maritime transport had been excluded from the discussion at IMO due to the interests of the shipping registry industry and other trade associations, IMO was nonetheless delegated by the Kyoto Agreement to regulate its emission. Second, the RMI has been a 'large' stakeholder at IMO (InfluenceMap 2017).

[...] our cards from the beginning have been a small country, loud voice. We don't really have that kind of leverage on anyone. Even our shipping registry, although large and of substantial importance to our economy, its voice is in the IMO context, and that is still a sort of mystery to small island countries: what the IMO does, how it conducts its business. There's a lot of insistence on anonymity, protection of identity, and all of those things that make working within the IMO not an easy or pleasant task for small island countries. (Tony de Brum cited Yeo 2015)

IRI on behalf of the RMI has always been an active participant in IMO activities since it became a member in 1998, and often co-sponsors resolutions with industry lobbies inside the MEPC.⁵ Indeed, the RMI has been called out by Greenpeace for its role on registering oil rigs active in the Arctic (Greenpeace 2015). In making the move to represent itself de Brum took advantage of the RMI's position at IMO to bring global attention to climate change. He then rallied the support of other PSIDS.

Development of capacity within RMI and the region, and commitment of key actors to create and seize opportunities in available forums, to realise that vision

de Brum's vision was necessary for the RMI to act as a climate entrepreneur but it was not sufficient; the RMI had to develop domestic and regional capacity, create and realise opportunities, and re-define the key agenda. After being elected as 'Minister in Assistance to the President' in 2012 and Minister for Foreign Affairs in 2014 (for the third time), de Brum sought to enhance RMI's technical progress in the UNFCCC negotiations, raise the state's international profile through IOs (such as the security council) and other public and academic events, as well as to 'make noise in the international media'. These strategies ensured that climate change was the central message of every diplomatic opportunity (de Brum 2014).

In March 2015, a small team of academics from University College London (UCL), the University of the South Pacific and representatives from the NGO 'Seas at Risk', received funding from the European Climate Foundation to discuss

shipping GHG emissions with the leaders of RMI, including the opposition (author interview). They were met with enthusiasm by de Brum and developed a strategy to push forward climate issues at IMO by building coalitions among small and vulnerable island states and gaining broader support, especially from large and rich European countries. With the endorsement from the Marshallese cabinet, de Brum decided to attend to the next MEPC meeting at the IMO.

In May 2015, during the 68th session of the MEPC, he arrived in London and gave an impassioned speech:

Our islands lay just an average of two meters above sea level. Day after day, climate change and the resulting sea-level rise and tropical storms take grip on our homes, on our security and on our livelihoods. My colleagues here from our fellow atoll nation of Tuvalu can tell you what it looks like. And Minister Bule, here all the way from Vanuatu, can tell you how it feels to have 70 percent of your capital city wiped away by a cyclone whose winds were whipped up by the quickly warming Pacific Oceans. Any country here that lives an island existence or that has big populations living along low-lying coastlines can, and will increasingly be the victim of such events (IMO 2015).

de Brum's attendance at MEPC68 was significant on two counts: challenging the long-held protocol that IMO was a technical organisation where industry and technical professionals dominate decision-making; and calling for the international shipping industry, from whom RMI draws a large proportion of its revenue, to decarbonise to save small and vulnerable island states. An informed observer (author interview) noted three points of significance in this achievement: it challenged the protocol; showed the changing position of the RMI, however reluctantly; and highlighted that the political battle could be fought at a technical institution, like IMO.

Foreign ministers rarely attend IMO meetings. de Brum was the first minister to address MPEC (Mathiesen 2015) and actively participated at the MEPC 68th session. This was a historic moment for the organization. When he arrived at MEPC68, de Brum was confronted with a protocol issue: 'We had some difficulty convincing the people who were sitting in our seats, literally, that we were the representatives of the Marshall Islands' (Gibbs 2017); RMI had been represented by IRI at the IMO, and IRI was seemingly unaware of de Brum's participation (multiple interviews), and might even have discouraged the government from sending a minister to the subsequent 2016 talks, by suggesting it was far too technical for a minister (Gibbs 2017). According to one delegate, de Brum's attendance at the 68th MEPC session, and the paper submitted by the RMI, transformed the IMO:

(...) it's difficult for all of us ...; the US delegation is mostly the US Coastguard ... the UK delegation is mostly the Maritime Coastguard Agency with colleagues from other departments ... the last meeting and the intersessional there was a whole different group of negotiators – the UNFCCC negotiators came to town. (Interview with a representative from a large European state)

The composition of delegations, shifting in part from technical experts to climate change negotiators, was one indication of RMI's impact. The disruption was intentional, as one other diplomat put it:

Christiana Figueres [Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC] ... [came] to the last negotiation, and she went and addressed the High Ambition Coalition. Things like that were particularly powerful because again it showed that this was no longer a closed-door, quiet, cigar-smoking lounge on the banks of London that people didn't listen to, and that was important. (Interview with a representative of a small state)

At the MEPC 68th session, de Brum presented a position paper on behalf of the RMI: 'Setting a reduction target and agreeing associated measures for international shipping' (MEPC 2015).

(...) for the Marshall Islands, I mean IMO was not going far enough. When they submitted that submission three – four years ago I guess, the – brought back the issue, right, in adopting – I mean stringent measures to reduce CO2 emission and it's thanks to the Marshall Islands by the way, definitely. It's Tony de Brum who brought back this issue here. (Interview with a representative of a small state).

The position taken by RMI was rejected by MEPC (Baresic *et al.* 2015, Marke 2015) for three reasons: it was a last-minute submission even though it was supported by Tuvalu, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands; the outcome of the Paris Conference was yet to be settled; in order to determine the contributions of ships to emissions, the data collection system that had been under debate for several meetings remained to be finalised (UMAS 2016). Moreover, as one observer noted (author interview), the RMI had not yet developed the political machine to support their initiatives. Despite the rejection, the call for decarbonisation brought the issue of reducing shipping GHG emissions back on the negotiation table at the IMO.

To realise their ambition, and build regional capacity, RMI and the PSIDS had to generate political support for their position. Since 2012, the Marshall Islands had worked towards consolidating climate diplomacy in the Pacific region. In 2013 the leaders of the Pacific Island Forum, at a meeting in the RMI, signed the Majuro Declaration which committed them to 'climate leadership':⁶

To lead is to act. In supporting this Declaration, a government, economic entity, company, civil society organization or individual commits to demonstrate climate leadership through action that contributes to the urgent reduction and phase down of greenhouse gas pollution (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2013).

Sustainable sea transportation was specifically mentioned in the declaration. That same year, Fiji, which was suspended in 2009 from the Forum due to its political situation, founded the Pacific Island Development Forum (PIDF).⁷

Sustainable transportation was one of PIDF's 10 priorities. In 2014, the S. A.M.O.A. Pathway, the outcome of the third UN conference on SIDS held in Samoa, included a provision on Sustainable Transportation (SIDS Action Platform 2014). In 2015, the Suva Declaration on Climate Change – an outcome of the third Pacific Islands Development Forum leaders' summit – included the participating countries' positions ahead of COP21 in Paris, and their wish to see sea transport included in the agreement:

We the Leaders of the Pacific Islands Development Forum following consultation with and the agreement of all stakeholders at the Pacific Island Development Forum Third Summit therefore call for: (...) an integrated approach to transitioning Pacific countries to low carbon transport futures, in particular sea transport given its central role in providing connectivity for Pacific Small Island Developing States, including a regional strategy to advocate for and monitor implementation of sector targets through relevant UN agencies commensurate with the 1.5°C threshold (PIDF 2015).

Later that year, at the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP21), de Brum led the High Ambition Coalition (HAC), a grouping of over 100 countries demanding a binding agreement (King 2016). GHG emissions for the shipping and aviation sectors were not included in the outcomes of the conference.

PSIDS had not previously acted as a grouping at IMO. Indeed, unlike other IOs, and with the important exception of the EU, the IMO has not had a culture of strong groupings (multiple interviews). As the above discussion highlights, technical knowledge rather than political clout was an important factor in IMO deliberations and so the voice of key individuals carried considerable weight, regardless of where they were from. In light of the statements and declarations by PSIDS, this was about to change as the group became more active and organised at IMO. The PIDF helped coordinate between the positions of the PSIDS's members, by providing briefing documents, guidance and a position paper before the UN COP sessions, as well as briefings for the IMO MEPC sessions, starting from MEPC69 (e.g. PIDF 2016). This organisation of the PSIDS at the IMO is consistent with a wider tendency of Pacific states to raise their profile inside IOs since 2009, such as at the United Nations in New York, where they secured a stand-alone sustainable goal on oceans (Manoa 2015).

Strategies to mobilise broader international support

The momentum created by the initiatives at IMO gained the RMI and PSIDS international attention. Yet, for small states, seeking broader support beyond their peers is critical for the success of their cause. The following section explains how the regional grouping of the RMI and PSIDS, supported with the technical knowledge provided by INGOs, sought the support from large and rich countries. The strategies they adopted included snowballing the

support and pairing small island countries with EU countries, known as the ‘buddy system’, to secure both financial and technical assistance inside and outside IMO meetings.

Before the MEPC68 in May 2015, the RMI delegation could not rally the support of western European countries because the IMO negotiators did not believe that the organisation would ever de-carbonise (author interview). But in September 2015, at the next intersessional meeting, the RMI, with the help of UCL academics, hosted a meal with European countries (Norway, France, Belgium, and Germany) and other PSIDS (author interview). This led to regular collaboration between some of these countries and the PSIDS in their IMO activity. At MEP69 in April 2016, the Solomon Islands submitted a position paper on behalf of PSIDS, supported by the RMI, together with Belgium, France, Germany and Morocco. An observer noted that the fact that the Solomon Islands, rather than the RMI, led the submission, added credibility to the call made earlier by de Brum for regulating shipping (author interview).

The submission MEPC 69/7/2 promoted the adoption of a work plan to define the shipping sector’s ‘fair share’ in GHG emission reductions. MEPC69 occurred after Paris; this led to a notable change in mood towards the GHG issue in the room (interview with PSIDS adviser). At MEPC70, an even larger coalition, in addition to the original Solomon Islands, RMI, Germany, Belgium, France and Morocco,⁸ now including Tonga, Antigua and Barbuda, Cote d’Ivoire, Monaco, and Denmark, submitted MEPC 70/7/6. The coalition presented a similar line illustrated in the MEPC69 submission, but further clarified that the proposed GHG emissions reductions would be complementary to the three-step approach of the data collection method⁹. During that session, the IMO agreed on a roadmap to adopt a strategy on GHG emissions reduction from shipping by 2018 (and MEPC72).

The small islands they got together; they became a block and then Tony de Brum lobbied for them all. So, it really was the Marshall Islands [paper] and statements that kicked it all off (Interview with a representative from a large European state).

As the preparations for MEPC72 drew nearer, coordination between PSIDS and some EU partners grew deeper. A Shipping High Ambition Coalition (SHAC) was initiated in April 2017 at a side event to the Third Pacific Regional Energy & Transport Ministers’ Meeting in Tonga and includes countries from the Pacific and the EU. It has since developed into a ‘(...) really well-communicated, coordinated group’ (interview with a representative of a small state). The EU helped finance PSIDS representation at IMO and initiated a ‘buddy programme’: France is helping Fiji, Belgium is helping the Solomon Islands, Tonga with the Netherlands, and the RMI with Germany. Tuvalu and the UK, and Kiribati and

Sweden might set up similar programmes in the future. In February 2018, France and Fiji organised a technical seminar in Suva, with MCST, USP and UCL.

Meanwhile, the IMO Intersessional Working Group on Greenhouse Gas (ISWG-GHG) met three times. The first meeting took place in June 2017, and the second was held right before MEPC71, during which they worked on the draft of the strategy. On both occasions, the SHAC, and more especially the PSIDS were active in the discussions. During ISWG-GHG the RMI and the Solomon Islands co-submitted ISWG-GHG 1/2/2 to press the committee to have high ambitions on the issue of Greenhouse Gas emissions reductions (ISWG-GHG 2017). At the same session, the two countries also co-submitted 1/2/12, which offered a potential method for quantifying emissions with Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and ICHCA.

During the second ISWG-GHG, the PSIDS were equally active with two other submissions. Kiribati, the RMI, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu submitted a draft text for a high ambition GHG reduction strategy, which focused on three objectives: the imminent peaking of GHG emissions at 2008 levels, the rapid decline in GHG emissions starting as soon as possible, but no later than 2025 and full decarbonisation (to zero GHG emissions) by 2035 (ISWG-GHG 2017). The PSIDS also co-sponsored another document with less ambitious objectives, along with Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and IAPH and ICHCA.¹⁰

In April 2018, MEPC met for its 72nd session. Stakes were high, as an agreement was to be adopted by the states on GHG emissions reductions for the shipping sector. Before the session, the PIDF issued a position paper which advocated the need for the upcoming agreement to be consistent with the 1.5° goal and the Paris Agreement. PSIDS and EU states were pushing a 70–100% emissions reduction agenda. In the end, the SHAC managed to secure a reduction of more than 50% (with a 2008 baseline). While it was not the 70–100% from their submission, obtaining a de-carbonisation commitment from the shipping industry was a success, and the outcome was more ambitious than the coalition was expecting (author interview). Aside from the GHG issue, the RMI, Palau and Vanuatu have submitted (together with Iceland) MEPC 72/15 which invited the IMO to act on plastic marine litter in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 14, and MEPC has agreed to put it as an output on its agenda (IMO 2018).

These successes are remarkable for small states and would have been considered impossible only a few years earlier. PSIDS have not had it all their own way and there are considerable tensions within the group. While climate change is a danger to all small islands, rising sea levels are an even more pressing threat for atoll nations such as the RMI, Tuvalu and Kiribati, which sit roughly three meters above sea level. At the same time, because of their locations, PSIDS are uniquely reliant on shipping. As a result, any

change that might lead to an increase in the cost of shipping will have a disproportionate impact on consumers in PSIDS. PSIDS are regularly lobbied by members of the shipping industry in this respect and some representatives believe that the people who set policy in capitals are not sufficiently attuned to this dynamic, having been influenced by INGOs. For this reason, some PSIDS like Cook Islands have not joined the SHAC. The technical nature of the IMO renders agreements binding, not mere generic statements, and this contributes to thwarting consensus inside the PSIDS and the SHAC.

Conclusion

We have provided an in-depth empirical case of how the RMI and the PSIDS acted as a policy entrepreneur at IMO to achieve progressive policy change on GHG emissions. In doing so they have overcome two decades of gridlock. This demonstrates that small states can be important and constructive players in IOs. Of course, they have not acted alone – in multilateral diplomacy, nobody can. RMI has employed a number of strategies commonly used by small states in climate diplomacy: they have formed a coalition, they have engaged in capacity-building, supported by academics and the diplomatic advisory group Independent Diplomat, they have prioritised the issue of climate change for their foreign policy, and they have employed issue framing that emphasises the moral urgency of their vulnerability. They have also employed a strategy typically unavailable to PSIDS with limited foreign service capacity: venue-shopping. They have also exploited the existing, advantageous norms, including the sovereign equality of states, and institutional rules to their advantage. These norms and institutions have been in place for decades; the key change has been the RMI and other PSIDS activism at the IMO, and their willingness to work as a group to achieve these objectives. The implications of this case study are threefold.

Firstly, it demonstrates how some of the smallest and poorest states with a direct and existential interest in climate policy have driven the agenda despite opposition from larger and richer states, and industry lobbyists. This argument is significant because much of the discussion on climate governance presumes that movement towards a global regime is dependent on the leadership of a few large and rich states. In this case, the smallest and poorest have led and the large and rich have followed.

Second, given the polycentric nature of climate governance, it is important to look at all the different venues where states can discuss the issue, including those traditionally considered as overly technical. Different arenas provide different opportunities for action. Kingdon's concept of policy entrepreneurship offers a helpful analytic framework for conceptualising how more specific policies are steered successfully in different forums.

Third, ‘policy entrepreneurship’ is particularly well suited to understanding the creative diplomacy of small states. Because of their resource constraints (in terms of human, monetary resources and geographic remoteness) as well as their small size, they cannot lead on multiple issues in multiple forums. They may also depend on talented individuals. de Brum died in 2017, but by that time he had created momentum that survived him. If the one test of a successful entrepreneur is the legacy bequeathed, then his legacy is ensured both through the activities within the IMO and in the coalitions beyond.

Sceptics might argue that this case is a one-off that will never be repeated. As we have been at pains to illustrate throughout, the conditions at the IMO are certainly unusual. However, they could be replicated. Indeed, the emerging literature on climate entrepreneurs discussed above highlights that such instances are perhaps much more regular than is commonly presumed. These cases are not identical but each instance shares a family resemblance captured in Kingdon’s initial work. We cannot say whether this can be replicated across other IOs. For now, we take the intermediary step of providing an empirical example where this has occurred to the benefit of progressive climate policy. If nothing else, the fact that the policy entrepreneur framework can explain what is at face value such an unlikely case highlights its considerable potential to account for the ways in which change can occur in a complex, ‘polycentric’ climate governance regime.

Notes

1. 23rd smallest in terms of population, 7th in land-size (World Fact Book 2016).
2. In 2016 he was named ‘Arms Control Person of the Year’ by the Arms Control Association and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on this issue. When he passed away in 2017 the New York Times and The Guardian ran extended obituaries, which is virtually unheard of for a leader from the Pacific Islands (Harvey 2017, Friedman 2017). Both heralded the key role he played in negotiating the 2015 Paris Agreement.
3. See The Republic of the Marshall Islands Budget book 2016–2021, p. 13. Available from: <http://rmi-mof.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/MTBIF-RMI-2016-2021-2.pdf>
4. To achieve this, we sent the draft manuscript to some of them so they could comment on our analysis. We received detailed feedback on the sequence and significance of key events and actors which has informed our empirical analysis.
5. See for instance resolutions MEPC 64/2/18, MEPC 67/2/13, MEPC 67/4/9.
6. Australia, Cook Islands, Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.
7. The issue had been having Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Island Forum, whereas in this new forum PSIDS could discuss amongst themselves.

8. Morocco was hosting COP22, and it was a period where it was more 'receptive' to these submissions (interview with an academic aware of the events).
9. The three-step approach is one according to which, before taking any measures on GHG reduction there would be a need to: collect data regarding emissions from shipping; analyse the data collected; then the data collected will form the base for policy decisions. It was adopted at MEPC68.
10. The objectives contained in this second document are much more detailed and less ambitious, the long-term pathway proposed is: to maintain international shipping's annual CO₂ emissions below 2008 levels; to reduce CO₂ emissions per tonne-km, as an average across international shipping, by at least 90% by 2050, compared to 2008; and to reduce international shipping's annual CO₂ emissions by at least 70%, pursuing efforts for 100% reduction by 2050 compared to 2008, as a point on a continuing linear trajectory of CO₂ emissions reduction.

Acknowledgments

We thank reviewers for their constructive suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was funded by the Australian Research Council [grant number DP160100897].

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