CHAPTER 6

Democracy and Social Empowerment in Small Island Jurisdictions

Peter E. Buker and Mark Lapping

6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the question of how we can describe the prospects for democracy and for social empowerment in small island jurisdictions in response to a constellation of possible future changes in the physical, social, economic, and political circumstances of these islands. We offer conceptual explanations of what we regard as the primary factors eliciting changes in small island autonomy found in jurisdictional democracy and social empowerment. Our starting point is the dichotomously opposed tendencies in international politics of the processes of integration and fragmentation of jurisdictional powers.

P. E. Buker (✉)
Yorkville University, Fredericton, NB, Canada

University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PE, Canada

M. Lapping
University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PE, Canada

University of Southern Maine, Portland, ME, USA
e-mail: mlapping@maine.edu

We seek to explain the future of democracy and social empowerment first by describing the phenomena of integration and fragmentation in its relevance to small island jurisdictions. We go on to articulate what jurisdictional democracy and social empowerment mean within the specific context of small island vulnerability in their global contexts. The unique attributes of small islands *qua islands* are discussed, differentiating between the civil society-based ideas of social empowerment versus formalized jurisdictional democracy. We discuss the phenomenon of remoteness of small islands and the constraints and opportunities it creates for jurisdictional autonomy. Given we are investigating social and political dimensions for the future of small islands, we include a discussion of what we coin the *new authoritarianism*, a trend in human organization that may very well have profound impacts on small island jurisdictions. This chapter looks at the variable responses to change, including how we might usefully model our predictions with respect to extreme global changes. Finally, by way of addressing the overall intention of this monograph which is to find a roadmap for sustainable development for small island jurisdictions, this chapter offers suggestions as to what *may* happen in the future, and only indirectly answers what will be sustainable.

6.2   Integration and Fragmentation

All small islands are subject to the same two conflicting political processes of *integration* and *fragmentation* that are present for all state-like jurisdictions globally. Small island jurisdictions, however, are also defined by relatively smaller scale and often by geographic remoteness.

Integration is the process or state-of-being whereby the sovereignty of certain policy instruments of a jurisdiction is incorporated with that of other jurisdictions. In the case of small island jurisdictions, this may often be about incorporating with larger non-island states, but can also include integrating organizations with other small islands, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), which involves 28 island jurisdictions. The degree of integration varies in scope from customs unions to complete shared sovereign powers, and tends to evolve (and devolve) similar to the history of the European Union. Integration typically exchanges greater economic opportunity for decreased or shared sovereignty and in many ways reflects the internationalization of capital markets. For small island

jurisdictions, their level of integration can vary from the lower integration of an independent sovereign state to the status of a colony or a protectorate.

Fragmentation, on the other hand, is the process and state-of-being where a small island jurisdiction is cut off, either by choice or by fortune, from being a part of other jurisdictions. Fragmentation has the same consequences as decolonization and secession, but can occur for reasons that are not necessarily political, and indeed, fragmentation can be a social and economic phenomenon as well.

Hitherto we have referred only to 'jurisdictions' rather than 'states', for the measure of political autonomy among small islands varies enormously, spanning from actual UN-recognized state status to being almost entirely integrated into the polity of a larger state. This is part of the integration-fragmentation nexus that is crucially important to explaining and describing the level of democratization and social empowerment in small island jurisdictions. From a practical point of view, there are two salient variables that matter: one is the level of decision-making autonomy allowed the island jurisdiction relative to *all* powers, political, social, and economic, and the second is the manner in which the domestic or internal polity of the island itself is conducted—whether it follows democratic principles or is some form of oligarchy.

In general, all other things being equal, political integration, even integration with a democracy, will decrease democracy and social empowerment in a small island jurisdiction, while political fragmentation—that is autonomy—will increase democracy and social empowerment in a small island jurisdiction. This rule-of-thumb, however, is not always obvious. For example, the *institutions* of democratic autonomy may exist in a constitutional sense, with free and fair elections, and with citizens actually making the best decision for their wellbeing, but, the real exercise of choice is so circumscribed by other non-political factors as to be no choice at all. Small island jurisdictions can have—and often do have—all of the mechanisms and practices of *democracy* but are so vulnerable economically or militarily that the choice is functionally a *forced choice*. Whether we still want to define this as 'democracy' depends upon our purpose; in any case, we cannot say that there is *social empowerment*, to use our other key definitional term. Social empowerment is derived from the ability to make autonomous decisions.

6.3   Democracy, Social Empowerment, and Vulnerability

The political structures—including the degree of democracy interpreted in its widest sense of governing authority derived from the citizenry—and the degree of 'social empowerment', interpreted as autonomy of informal policy creation and implementation in the civil society, are in small island jurisdictions more likely to be functionally driven by non-political structures than in larger and non-island jurisdictions. The reasons for this are that the decision-making distance between functional needs and causes, and the political decision makers is shorter; decision-making is more transparent and less subject to obfuscation by large-scale attributes of multiple levels and large numbers of participants because of the small scale. On the whole, the functional imperatives of the limited resource base of most small island jurisdictions create a heightened criticality/vulnerability for all political decisions affecting citizen well-being.

Small island jurisdictions tend to be much more vulnerable economically and socially when we compare them to larger jurisdictions and to non-island small jurisdictions. Larger jurisdictions, by virtue of their larger scale, are by definition more diverse in terms of their natural resource base, their human resource base, and in their human-created capital base. In contrast, small island jurisdictions often rely on a handful of export commodities, or sometimes even solely on a single export commodity with many extreme instances, such as the Marshal Islands' near-100% reliance on coconut oil as their export.

Small island jurisdictions are also far more vulnerable based on their spatial relation to commodity markets compared to small land-based jurisdictions as export and import products must be shipped over greater distances and, in the case of most low-value high-weight commodities, be transferred between water-based transport and land-based transport at both ends of the commodity's movement. The *friction* of movement of export and import goods including administration and management costs is greater. Also, small island jurisdictions typically do not have the scale of shipping to justify large automated ports and handling facilities, unlike the enormous global shipping traffic of large container ships and bulk carriers moving between continents. Indeed, many small island jurisdictions are not geographically blessed with deep-water ports or well-protected ship harbours and are increasingly susceptible to global climate change and coral reef destruction.

Thus, in *functional* terms, many small island jurisdictions are economically vulnerable both in an 'all eggs in one basket' sense and in the friction of product movement sense. This economic vulnerability affects the degree of democracy and the degree of social autonomy a small island jurisdiction can usefully exercise.

Small island export products are vulnerable mostly because of their small economic scale and the lower levels of economic development, which means export products are unprocessed or only partly processed; it is a truism in international commerce that traded goods that are more processed, refined, or complex give more market power to their producers compared to producers of less sophisticated traded products. Primary production has, in the supply-and-demand mechanisms of economics fuelled by scarcity, far less market power than secondary production. And, sophistication occurs with economies to scale—particularly in technology and in business finance—making larger jurisdictions and larger corporate entities more powerful in their command over trade markets.

Power arguably rests in the symmetry or asymmetry of economic interdependence (Keohane and Joseph 1977), and small island jurisdictions are often, in the hierarchy of a production process, asymmetrically interdependent. That is, they are *relatively* less powerful.

When we look at small island jurisdictional trade in terms of *services*, the level of vulnerability is also relatively higher than in non-island jurisdictions and in larger jurisdictions. Many small islands, particularly tropical islands, rely very heavily on tourism as an export and as a key domestic activity (Lapping 2015). Tourism is a highly competitive global industry that is subject to the vagaries and changes in consumer discretionary spending powers and fickle consumer trends as well as to international air carrier and cruise ship industry decisions. Culturally and socially tourism can arguably limit social empowerment and, within certain parameters, it can be pejoratively likened to cultural prostitution. The money tourism brings in may not offset the cultural damage and social *disempowerment* it potentially causes.

6.4   Social Empowerment Versus Democratic Jurisdiction

Above we have explored the concept of political power in small island jurisdictions as being functionally derived from mostly economic power; that is, the scope of political autonomy or dependency is functionally

related to the amount of market power a small island wields relative to other jurisdictions. In many ways, political democracy and social empowerment go hand-in-hand in achieving the same self-determining autonomy. However, there are many more dimensions to the concept of social empowerment than just what is circumscribed by either the political structure or by a small island jurisdiction's status among other jurisdictions.

Social empowerment is still about *power*, but that power may be found in the civil society and may involve non-material assets that are not always obvious to outsiders. Barry Buzan notably defined a state as being based upon the physical basis of the state, the institutions of the state, and, perhaps most presciently in terms of small island jurisdictions, the *idea* of the state (Buzan 1983). In terms of small island jurisdictions, the *idea* of the island and of its separateness from other land masses and jurisdictions is fundamentally significant. Small islands typically are constituted by relatively homogeneous cultures and social norms, and in many cases, citizens are genetically related. The boundary of water—even if historically it constituted a superior pathway of communication to the outside world—is still a boundary. It is visual, physical, visceral, and mental—a threshold with no comparable attributes among land-bound jurisdictions. Citizens of small islands arguably have a more defined sense of territory and thus belongingness than non-islanders. How this sense of self in place affects social empowerment is best thought of as a psychological or even a spiritual attribute rather than a material characteristic. The physical watery boundary creates a compare-and-contrast mental phenomenon that both strengthens self-identity and solidifies island citizen unity.

To underpin social empowerment, there first needs to be a social sensibility, and this is found in geographically circumscribed small and sometimes dense populations that typify small island jurisdictions. Shared values enable cooperation, and cooperation is necessary for social empowerment. This pathway to social empowerment is most obvious when we compare small island jurisdictions to non-island or larger jurisdictions; in these latter cases the competition-cooperation scale tips towards competition with a weakened sense of place, a weakened homogeneity of culture, and a greater scope for anonymous zero-sum power relations.

Social empowerment on the level of civil society, therefore, is likely to be very high in small island jurisdictions. The only limitation in terms of power in general then is about the demarcation between civil society, the political realm, and economic power. Still, it is reasonable to expect that strong kinship-type relations and ethnic commonality will result in a high degree of mutuality and reciprocity in all forms of citizen relations.

6.5   Remoteness and Power

One key attribute of small islands is that they are remote; small islands have survived the onslaught of a globalized culture and economy better than differently configured jurisdictions in part because they have been hidden from the view and attention of larger political, cultural, and economic powers. The very unimportance of small island jurisdictions in the varied realms of global competition and domination has, historically, been one of the saving attributes in terms of preserving island culture and independence. Island jurisdictions that are still legal dependencies of old colonial powers are well-known to cost their former colonial masters more than they return in revenue. Tourists flock to small islands precisely because they have preserved something 'different' compared to an increasingly homogenous global cultural landscape. Again, smallness and remoteness have protected these jurisdictions because of their *unimportance* by global state-power standards. And, in many ways, the costs of paying attention to small island jurisdictions on behalf of middle and large global powers has in the past simply been too high to make them worth bothering about.

The future may very well lead to far lower costs of attention, decreased remoteness, and perhaps a renewed interest in integrating small island jurisdictions with larger states *or* with other larger supranational bodies. The fragmentation-integration phenomenon is not only happening in the political realm, but increasingly *all* states are subject to integration in economic and cultural aspects, more so now because technologies have enabled this. While future speculation is just that—speculation—it does seem likely that the inexorable movement towards globalization of capital markets and towards the attendant unifying of cultures will continue.

6.6   The New Authoritarianism

Given we are discussing specifically the future prospects of democracy and social empowerment in small island jurisdictions, we must acknowledge and explain the possible effects that the *new authoritarianism* may have. We are using the term *new authoritarianism* here to describe a constellation of factors—both intended and unintended/structural—that are arguably moving all polities and societies away from democracy, in its most all-embracing sense and towards political, social, and economic systems that do not respect citizen autonomy in decision-making, but, rather, make decisions for citizens. We use the adjective *new* because of the

changed locus of power and power instruments used compared to traditional historic structures of authoritarianism. Contemporary scholarship variously also tries to analyse the retreat from democracy using the terms inverted totalitarianism (Wolin 2008), illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997) and others, to describe a blend of what we would consider a combination of corporatism and technocracy. In the past, authoritarian political structures were overtly created in only the political realm based on either the manipulation of existing laws or a monopoly on physical violence, or both. In the extreme, authoritarian governments became totalitarian as they controlled all aspects of citizens' lives. The difference between then and now is that the instruments of political, social, and economic control are both more powerful and more insidious. The power of control has increased as a consequence of accretion of complex power instruments to fewer and fewer government or capitalist entities, mostly attributable to digitized information and processing technologies.

The system is more insidious because of the sophistication of control exercised over individual thought and over public discourse based again on a technological control. At its most benign we might consider that what democracy had historically existed in the world has been sliding into technocracy that is mostly amoral and without an agenda beyond technological efficiency and material production. In this sense, we could think of new authoritarianism as simply inadvertent and unintended. That being said, footloose global capitalism has historically demonstrated the ability to make or break dependent and vulnerable small island jurisdictions and the indifference of new authoritarian structures may exacerbate these kinds of effects.

Furthermore, however, the very existence of technologically created instruments enabling economic and social authoritarian/totalitarian policies may very well lead to a *led* movement away from democracy and towards other types of governance structures such as dictatorship or theocracy.

6.7   Responses to Change

As technological advances at a geometric rate *à la* Moore's Law, or perhaps as the world approaches the 'all bets are off' point of technological singularity, democratic values and processes may, in reflection, be too slow and unwieldy to deal with accelerating changes and challenges, and governance, by default, will be done as a technocracy. There is also, however,

potential for small island jurisdictions to leapfrog large jurisdictions because of the criticality of their vulnerabilities and because of their pliancy attributable to their small size. Democratization—the derivation of political authority from the citizenry—has historically worked well in non-crisis situations where changes in society and the economy occur at a relatively slow rate.

Democracy has, as its unique strength, relatively low costs of voluntary mass citizen compliance to governance and the vigorous potency of enabling diverse and inventive ideas. But democracy's very messiness in terms of obtaining consensus is historically known to be undervalued by those same citizen masses. In a situation where self-help is possible or needed—as in a climate-caused crisis—the underpinnings of social empowerment found in the sense of islandness and the commonality it fosters—may be increased and prove to be a valuable asset. At a certain threshold, however, the vulnerabilities of small island jurisdictions, based on the lack of diversity intrinsic to small jurisdictions with poor physical access to outside resources, may very well overwhelm the small island jurisdiction's population.

There are, indeed, two possible 'future' scenarios for small island jurisdictions. One is that they are very much a canary in the coal mine, and like a canary they are particularly fragile and vulnerable. Any severe stresses, such as climate change or technologies that destroy the protecting insular boundaries, might lead to their demise.

The second scenario is, however, that improvements in technology may productively integrate and diversify small island economies into the global system, allowing them more agility and choice. Even if this is the case, however, it is unlikely that integration will occur without strings attached, and the needed underpinnings for both democracy and for social empowerment—autonomy—will disappear even as the small island's citizens more fully participate at a grander global scale.

Indeed, we can think about political jurisdictional power—and likewise civil society social empowerment—as a pie that is always the same size, but divided differently. Integration will lead to less island-based public policy power but to more influence off-island. Integration may also increase asymmetrical interdependence, with the potential for extortion by bigger, more diversified jurisdictions. Fragmentation will lead to more island-based power, but will open the small, simple economies to damage through neglect or lack of access to needed resources. Similarly, political power and civil society-based social empowerment may be trade-offs: what the

political jurisdiction does, society does not, and vice versa. The difference is that the authority of the political jurisdiction relies on democratic mechanisms whereas the working of social empowerment is based on reciprocity, ethnic commonality, and kinship. It is not clear which of these two sources of cooperation is the more powerful.

6.8   PREDICTION AND EXTREMES

Hypothetical predictions are supported by reasonable and parsimonious Occam's Razor-like explanations. Prediction in terms of the future of small island democracy and social empowerment is easier when the stresses and changes forced upon the small island jurisdiction are themselves predictable. There exist a gamut of extreme stresses and changes about which we can speculate.

Differences in kind rather than just degree are technologically more and more likely; for example, an international crypto-currency will modify state sovereignty in a way that will limit state control and augment the control of large capital. Climate change can potentially cause crises for small island jurisdictions, rendering them utterly dependent on external aid or, destroying them entirely. In these cases social empowerment will likely be a useless resource, as will any autonomy derived from democracy. Today's vulnerability of many small island jurisdictions may increase substantially with global climate changes, leading to water levels rising and more severe storms. The political and cultural resilience of small island populations may be a moot point if the geographical basis sustaining the jurisdiction is damaged or destroyed. 'Power' will transfer to whoever has the will and resources to provide or deny aid.

Lower costs and higher qualities of communications sawill also modify the characteristics of power relations and small island jurisdictional autonomy.

Arguably, some of what we have offered here by way of possible future scenarios is predicated on an all-too-common but fallacious narrative of 'too big to fail'. In our discussion of the forces leading to either fragmentation or integration of a small island polity, we have stated above the basic contention that larger jurisdictions, whether island or mainland, are less prone to failure because of their larger and more diverse land and population base. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that small islands are more vulnerable in almost all analytical categories, as we have argued above. In imagined future scenarios of *extreme* threats, however, 'too big to fail' is

incorrect. In the twentieth century, the two world wars, Stalinist Russia's brutality towards its own citizens, the demise of the Soviet Union, the catastrophes of China's famine-inducing 'Great Leap Forward' and inhumane 'Cultural Revolution' were all instances of disastrous loss of life and of very large political entities failing. Unfortunately, in the extreme, size does not protect a polity from what we can properly consider collapse even if the state in name survives.

6.9   Climate Crisis and Citizen Migration

The most widely predicted future crises affecting small island jurisdictions are based on the effects of natural physical calamities—in particular, rising sea levels, tsunamis, and severe weather consequent on climate change. Crises are defined by the fact they affect 'core values', and there can be no more basic core than the physical sustainability of the geographic island themselves. While, globally, small islands vary greatly in their geography, a great number of them have only marginal sustainability in terms of fresh water supply, energy resources, and arable land. Typically, many tropical islands have been formed by coral, and are thus very low-lying and extremely vulnerable to rising sea levels, tsunamis, coral death, and storms. Small islands that have higher geographic reliefs typically are rugged and rocky to the extent that habitable and accessible 'level' land is at a premium; harbours may be non-existent and physical infrastructure precariously sited.

In the extreme cases of a natural event causing crisis, the response in terms of either democracy or social empowerment would be of an 'all bets are off' variety. Democracy and democratic institutions are likely to be unsustainable in a crisis only because the decision-making is too slow and, thereby, ineffective. Similarly, social empowerment functions only when long-term reciprocity is expected; the short timeframe of a physical crisis makes such relationships moot.

The typical response of populations to such major crises is to evacuate if they are able. Non-crisis stressors on the population, such as lack of economic opportunity or fear of foreseeable future crises can be met by citizen migration. In both cases, however, the *ability* to choose to move is highly variable among the citizenry. The history of human migration typically is about the movement of the suffering but able; the very poor, sickly, and families of low status and power are not, typically, the people who migrate. Instead, those citizens who still have some resources—economic,

social, and political—are the ones who migrate, albeit often becoming dispossessed of resources because of migrating. And, also typically in the cases of island elites, they will choose to remain on their island as long as they retain most of their relative power and status, while they are also the first to leave—and also the most able to leave—in a catastrophic crisis. What this status-differentiated movement of people means for democracy and social empowerment is that the most egregiously low-status individuals and the most bloated high-status individuals remain, destroying the spirit and fact of social levelling that allows for both democracy and social empowerment. Add in the fact that high-economic-status citizens are often *compradors*, and the relationships among citizens become even more polarized given competing self-interests.

6.10   FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY

We can surmise, therefore, that many small island jurisdictions have the makings for both strong social empowerment based on island identity and weaker political autonomy given the functional economic bases for power in a structure of integration and fragmentation where outside capital tends to integrate and asymmetrically limit political choices. How are we then to answer the question: what is the future map for the sustainable development of small island jurisdictions—at least from a political and social empowerment point of view?

As a general observation, decision-making quality is best when it is disaggregated following the principle of *subsidiarity*—devolving decisions to the lowest level in a hierarchy whilst maintaining competence—and so the greater the degree of *genuine* democratization and the more highly developed the social empowerment in a small island jurisdiction, the better. The way small island jurisdictions achieve sustainability, or at the very least, plan for sustainability, is probably to be found in the agile autonomous decision-making that is consequent of some combination of island-specific democratic jurisdictional institutions and civil-society-based social empowerment.

6.11   CONSTRUCTED SUSTAINABILITY

Hitherto we have addressed the question of small island jurisdiction sustainability in terms of democracy and social empowerment from the perspective of *forced* change, because of either globalism, or technology, or

natural phenomena. Many of our speculated scenarios bode poorly for such sustainability. But, what might the situation look like if we addressed our question in terms of *chosen* change?

Already we have many instances—particularly in the Caribbean—where the specialness of islands has attracted citizens for reasons of desirable aesthetics and lifestyles. Sustainability of small islands need not be home grown, but rather, with infusions of capital, technology, and the *ideas* of sustainability, small island jurisdictions can conceivably become democratic paradises with a high degree of social empowerment. That is, small islands can be *constructed* to be sustainable, especially given their small size and their attractiveness as places to live.

We already live in a world where financial capital is geographically disconnected from physical capital; unlike humanity's historical past, built environments now separate where we live from where we create goods. Increasingly in the hierarchy of productive activities, abstract brain-work—manipulating symbols—is proportionately more important than physical production. Because of the increased level of human intellectual and skills development and because of the enabling communication and information processing technologies, contemporary high-productive employment can be, like the capital that finances it, footloose. This makes small island jurisdictions as viable for tertiary productive activities as any other geographic place and allows small island jurisdictions to attract and retain migrant citizens.

Ignoring for the moment the possibilities expressed above that small islands are geographically vulnerable to natural phenomena, we can speculate that all other vulnerabilities can be addressed by active choices and by importing infrastructure and ideas. For example, technological progress in nuclear power or wind turbines can easily address small island energy needs; attendant technologies using these energy sources can desalinate water and provide an information technology infrastructure that allows full participation in the global economy. Other technologies such as hydroponic food production or transportation of people as holograms are examples of the enormous potentialities for small island jurisdictions.

More subtly, the power of crowdsourcing ideas can be enabled using electronic computational infrastructure, and this crowdsourcing can be applied to jurisdictional decision-making in any small island. Arguably, these tools—intentionally used—can enhance democratic structures and decision making, and socially empower citizens in a network far more precise and powerful than mere ethnic/kinship-type face-to-face interactions.

The power and possibilities of capturing cognitive surplus (Shirky 2011) to develop societies, economies, and ultimately human well-being is enormous, and is as easily accessible to small island jurisdictions as it is anywhere on earth. But it needs be a choice, and a choice that involves importing the necessary infrastructure and perhaps people. The archetypal 'island paradise'—one that is sustainable, democratic, and socially empowering—is a genuine possibility.

6.12   CONCLUSION

In terms of sustainability into the future, small island jurisdictions almost certainly will need to embrace and indeed race against, change. Their best asset as a jurisdiction may be their agility, and in this case the integration-fragmentation question may matter less than the ability to use eclectic policies and actions to address challenges. It is clear that any small jurisdiction must rely either on isolationism or on a disproportionately adept diplomacy with outside jurisdictions, if it is to survive. It seems unlikely that isolation is an option as small-island jurisdictions are universally already dependent upon imports of goods and cultural products to an extent from which there is no going back. What 'sustainable' requires in the future for a small island jurisdiction may be impossible to predict; that being said, fostering agile public policy choices through democratic values and institutions and through social empowerment remains the best option in terms of decision quality and respect for the citizenry.

REFERENCES

Buzan, B. (1983). *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. London: Wheatsheaf Books.

Keohane, R., & Joseph, N. (1977). *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston: Little Brown.

Lapping, M. (2015). Geography at Risk. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago Tourism: Policies and Practices* (pp. xvi–xxiv). Burlington: Ashgate.

Shirky, C. (2011). *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaborators*. New York: Penguin Press.

Wolin, S. (2008). *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zakaria, F. (1997). The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs, 76*(6), 22–43.