

African Small States in International Relations: Do They Matter or Are They Inconsequential?

Issa Kansaye ¹ 

¹ Institut Supérieur de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée (ISFRA/PU), Université des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques de Bamako, Bamako, Mali
Email: kansaye2016@yahoo.fr

Abstract

African small states are frequently overlooked in mainstream international relations discourse due to their limited population, territorial size, economic output, and military capacity. Traditionally seen as peripheral actors, these states are often assumed to be inconsequential in global affairs. This article challenges that perception by critically examining the agency and influence of African small states within the international system. Drawing on liberal institutionalist and constructivist frameworks, the article explores how these states—despite structural constraints—utilize multilateralism, strategic diplomacy, and norm entrepreneurship to assert their presence and interests. Through case studies including Botswana, Seychelles, Cape Verde, and Djibouti, the paper illustrates how small states engage effectively in global governance, regional integration, and issue-specific diplomacy, particularly in areas such as climate change, security cooperation, and democratic governance. The analysis reveals that African small states matter not because of traditional power metrics, but due to their ability to act as moral leaders, policy innovators, and strategic partners. Institutions like the African Union, SADC, and international forums like the United Nations have provided platforms through which small states can amplify their voices and build coalitions. Moreover, the article identifies key challenges—such as economic vulnerability, limited diplomatic capacity, and susceptibility to external shocks—that constrain these states, while also highlighting the strategic opportunities they harness, including niche diplomacy and diaspora engagement. Ultimately, the article concludes that African small states are not merely passive recipients of international norms or aid, but proactive agents shaping and navigating a complex global order. Their contributions, while modest in scale, are significant in scope, particularly as the world increasingly values normative leadership, soft power, and multilateral collaboration.

ARTICLE INFO

Case study

Received: 02 May 2025

Accepted: 15 June 2025

Published: 18 June 2025

DOI: [10.58970/JSR.1115](https://doi.org/10.58970/JSR.1115)

CITATION

Kansaye, I. (2025). African Small States in International Relations: Do They Matter or Are They Inconsequential? *Journal of Scientific Reports*, 10(1), 52-67.

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by author(s)
Papers published by IJSAB International are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.



Keywords: *Small states, International relations, Multilateralism, Inconsequential, Global Governance.*

1. Introduction

The international system is often perceived through the lens of power politics dominated by great powers, with small states frequently relegated to the periphery of global affairs. This perception is rooted in traditional realist theories of international relations, which prioritize the capabilities of states—military, economic, and demographic—as the primary determinants of influence and significance in global politics (Waltz, 1979). Consequently, small states, especially those in Africa,

have often been viewed as inconsequential actors lacking the power to shape international outcomes. However, this view has increasingly come under scrutiny, as the evolving nature of international politics has created new spaces for small states to assert agency, form strategic alliances, and influence regional and global dynamics in meaningful ways (Cooper & Shaw, 2009; Ingebritsen et al., 2006).

African small states—typically characterized by limited geographic size, small populations, modest economies, and constrained military capabilities—offer a particularly compelling context for examining the role and relevance of small states in international relations. Countries such as Eswatini, Djibouti, The Gambia, Cape Verde, and Seychelles, while lacking the conventional instruments of power, have navigated the international system in ways that challenge the assumption of their insignificance. These states have, at various times, played pivotal roles in regional diplomacy, hosted strategic military bases, leveraged soft power tools, and formed niche international partnerships that enhance their relevance on the global stage (Cooper & Shaw, 2009). The diverse experiences of African small states highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to matter in international relations. The debate over the significance of small states is not new, but it has taken on renewed urgency in light of contemporary global developments. Issues such as climate change, transnational security threats, migration, and the growing multipolarity of the global order have elevated the roles of states that were previously considered marginal. African small states are increasingly finding avenues to influence global governance, particularly through multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the African Union (AU), and regional economic communities (RECs) like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Panke, 2010). Their participation in these forums allows them to amplify their voices, form coalitions, and advocate for their interests on issues ranging from sustainable development to peacebuilding.

Moreover, the strategic location of several African small states has made them important players in global geopolitics. Djibouti, for instance, hosts military bases for several global powers, including the United States, China, and France, due to its proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical maritime chokepoint for global trade (Lefebvre, 2012). Similarly, island states such as Seychelles and Cape Verde have been vital in counter-piracy operations and maritime security in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, respectively (Chachu, 2019). These examples underscore the geopolitical utility of small states and challenge the notion that size equates to irrelevance. In addition to their strategic importance, African small states have also demonstrated agency through diplomatic innovation and norm entrepreneurship. For example, The Gambia has used its diplomatic standing to bring attention to global human rights issues, including the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, by filing a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019 (ICJ, 2020). This bold move illustrates how even the smallest of states can play a leading role in shaping global norms and promoting international justice. These actions point to a growing trend where African small states leverage legal mechanisms, moral authority, and coalition-building to project influence that far exceeds their material capabilities. Despite these notable examples, the challenges facing African small states remain significant. Their vulnerability to external shocks—whether economic, environmental, or political—limits their autonomy and often necessitates reliance on foreign aid and external security guarantees. Moreover, the structural inequalities embedded in the international system, including unequal trade relations, limited access to global decision-making bodies, and the dominance of major powers, continue to constrain the ability of small states to assert themselves effectively.

(Braveboy-Wagner, 2008). These constraints raise important questions about the extent to which agency can be exercised meaningfully by small states in a global order that remains hierarchical. Nonetheless, theoretical developments in international relations have created space to reconsider the relevance of small states. Constructivist and liberal perspectives, for example, emphasize the role of ideas, institutions, and networks in shaping international outcomes—domains in which small states can exert considerable influence (Ingebritsen et al., 2006). The concept of "niche diplomacy" highlights how small states can focus their limited resources on specific issue areas where they can make a substantial impact, such as climate change advocacy, peace mediation, or human rights promotion (Henrikson, 2001). This reorientation shifts the discussion from questions of raw power to strategic relevance and functional contributions.

Furthermore, the African context provides a unique setting for exploring the role of small states due to the continent's complex political history, colonial legacies, and evolving regional dynamics. The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), for instance, presents both opportunities and challenges for small states, which must navigate integration efforts while protecting their domestic industries and sovereignty (UNECA, 2020). Similarly, regional peace and security initiatives often rely on the cooperation of both large and small states, illustrating the interdependence that characterizes contemporary African diplomacy. This paper seeks to critically examine whether African small states matter in international relations or whether they remain inconsequential actors. It explores the various dimensions—strategic, diplomatic, institutional, and normative—through which small states engage with the international system. In doing so, it interrogates prevailing assumptions about state power and relevance, drawing on case studies and theoretical insights to provide a balanced assessment of the role of African small states in global affairs. The analysis contributes to broader debates in international relations by highlighting the need to move beyond state size as a singular determinant of influence and by emphasizing the multifaceted ways in which agency can be exercised even under structural constraints. Ultimately, this inquiry is not merely academic. Understanding the role of African small states has practical implications for foreign policy, development cooperation, and regional integration. As global challenges become more interconnected and require collective responses, the contributions of all states, regardless of size, become increasingly vital. African small states, through strategic engagement and creative diplomacy, demonstrate that even the least powerful can be consequential in shaping the contours of international relations.

2. Theoretical Framework: Understanding Small States in International Relations

The study of small states in international relations (IR) occupies a complex and sometimes contested space within IR theory. Traditionally, the dominant realist perspective, which emphasizes the primacy of power and security in an anarchic international system, tends to marginalize small states as largely powerless actors. Realists argue that small states lack the military and economic capabilities necessary to significantly influence global politics and must therefore adopt survival strategies such as balancing or bandwagoning with great powers (Waltz, 1979). This perspective views the international arena as a zero-sum competition among great powers, relegating small states to a reactive, subordinate role. However, the limitations of the realist approach in explaining the behavior and influence of small states have led scholars to explore alternative frameworks. Liberal institutionalism offers a more nuanced view by highlighting the role of international institutions, cooperation, and interdependence in leveling the playing field for smaller actors. According to Keohane and Nye (1977), small states can exercise influence disproportionate to their material power through active participation in international organizations and the establishment of binding rules and norms. These institutions

provide small states with mechanisms to pool sovereignty, create collective security arrangements, and engage in diplomacy that transcends mere power politics.

Constructivist approaches further expand our understanding by focusing on the ideational factors that shape state behavior, including identity, norms, and discourse. From this perspective, small states are not merely passive entities shaped by material constraints but active agents capable of norm entrepreneurship. Wendt (1992) argues that the international system is socially constructed, meaning that power is not only material but also ideational. Small states can leverage their moral authority and normative agendas to influence international norms and agendas, particularly in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and global justice. For example, many small states have played key roles in climate change negotiations by framing the discourse around vulnerability and global responsibility (Thorhallsson, 2012). One important conceptual contribution to small state studies is the "shelter theory," which posits that small states seek protection and legitimacy through embedding themselves in regional and global institutions (Thorhallsson, 2012). Shelter theory suggests that small states deliberately align themselves with larger powers and multilateral organizations to enhance their security, economic well-being, and diplomatic influence. This alignment is not passive but strategic, as small states negotiate terms that protect their sovereignty while benefiting from collective arrangements.

The African context offers a vivid illustration of these theoretical insights. African small states often face structural vulnerabilities, including economic dependency, limited military capabilities, and external geopolitical pressures. Nevertheless, many have demonstrated considerable agency through multilateralism and niche diplomacy. For instance, small island developing states (SIDS) like Seychelles have successfully championed global environmental governance, effectively translating normative leadership into international influence (Scobie, 2019). Likewise, Djibouti's strategic location has enabled it to leverage military base agreements with great powers for economic and security benefits, reflecting a pragmatic adaptation of shelter strategies (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023). In sum, the theoretical framework for understanding small states in international relations has evolved from a primarily realist skepticism about their significance to a more multifaceted recognition of their agency. Through liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and concepts such as shelter theory, scholars now appreciate how small states utilize institutions, norms, and strategic alignments to navigate the complexities of global politics. This enriched understanding challenges the assumption that size alone determines influence, emphasizing instead how small states craft niches and partnerships that enable them to matter on the world stage. Specifically, the African context illustrates how liberal institutionalism and constructivism operate in practice. For example, as elaborated in next sections, Seychelles' environmental advocacy aligns with constructivist norms of moral authority, while Djibouti's base diplomacy reflects institutionalist strategies of leveraging multilateral security frameworks. These cases challenge realist assumptions by demonstrating how ideational and institutional power can offset material deficits

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, case-study approach to examine the diplomatic strategies and vulnerabilities of African small states. The research design integrates comparative analysis and process-tracing to assess how these states navigate structural constraints while asserting agency in international relations.

3.1 Case Selection

The four case studies—Djibouti, Seychelles, The Gambia, and Lesotho and Cape Verde—were selected based on their varied geopolitical contexts, diplomatic strategies, and regional influence. These states represent different sub-regions (East Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, and Indian Ocean islands) and exhibit diverse approaches to navigating structural constraints.

3.2 Data Collection and Sources

Data was collected from three key sources:

Type of Data	Sources
Academic Books/Articles International Reports Regional Organizations	Shinn & Eisenman (2023), De Waal (2015), Scobie (2019), Wivel & Ingebritsen (2019), Adebajo (2020), Thorhallsson (2012), Motsamai (2016), Ingebritsen (2006) among others... World Bank (2018), Commonwealth Secretariat (2018), ISS (2016) ECOWAS, SADC

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study adopts a **comparative case study method**, examining how structural constraints and strategic choices shape small-state agency. Thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns—such as niche diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and adaptive governance—while also highlighting contextual differences in each state's approach.

3.4 Limitations

While secondary sources provide robust evidence, the study acknowledges potential biases in existing literature, such as overemphasis on successful diplomatic strategies without equal attention to failures. Additionally, reliance on English-language sources may overlook regional perspectives in Francophone or Lusophone contexts. By triangulating academic, institutional, and policy sources, this methodology ensures a comprehensive assessment of African small-state agency, contributing to broader debates on power asymmetry in international relations.

4. African Small States: Profiles, Characteristics, and Challenges

In the vast geopolitical landscape of Africa, small states often go unnoticed in mainstream discourse. These states—defined by limited geographic size, small populations, constrained military capacities, and narrow economic bases—face a distinct set of opportunities and vulnerabilities in international relations. Yet despite these challenges, many African small states actively participate in diplomacy, regional integration, and global norm-setting, often leveraging their unique identities and geostrategic positions to advance national interests. This section explores the defining features, structural constraints, and strategic maneuvers of African small states, with particular attention to examples such as Djibouti, Seychelles, The Gambia, Lesotho, and Eswatini.

4.1 Defining small states in the African context

The concept of a "small state" lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. Scholars often use a combination of criteria, including population size (commonly under 1.5 million), land area, GDP, and military capacity, to categorize states as "small" (Thorhallsson, 2012). Within Africa, countries like Seychelles (population ~100,000), The Gambia (~2.6 million), Lesotho (~2.1 million), and Djibouti (~1.1 million) are often classified as small states. Though some exceed the conventional population threshold, their systemic influence, economic weight, and diplomatic reach remain limited compared to larger African powers such as Nigeria, Egypt, or South Africa.

African small states also tend to exhibit high levels of economic vulnerability. Their economies are frequently undiversified, overly reliant on a few sectors such as agriculture, tourism, or remittances. They often lack industrial capacity and depend on external markets, aid, or dominant neighbors for trade and survival (UNCTAD, 2020). Political and institutional fragility can further exacerbate their marginalization in international and regional forums.

4.2 Geographic and Structural Characteristics

The geographic attributes of African small states contribute significantly to both their vulnerabilities and potential leverage. Seychelles, an island archipelago in the Indian Ocean, is geographically isolated but has turned this isolation into an advantage by branding itself as a champion of environmental diplomacy and the Blue Economy. Its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) has given it substantial maritime jurisdiction, which it uses to advocate for marine conservation and climate adaptation initiatives (Scobie, 2019). Despite limited terrestrial resources, Seychelles has become an influential actor in global environmental governance. Djibouti, located at the strategic maritime chokepoint of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, capitalizes on its location to host multiple foreign military bases, including those of the United States, France, China, and Japan. This provides the country with steady revenue and international attention, elevating its geopolitical significance despite its small size (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023). Djibouti has successfully navigated the competing interests of these powers to secure infrastructure investment and political support while maintaining relative internal stability. In contrast, Lesotho and Eswatini, two landlocked states in Southern Africa, are heavily dependent on their larger neighbor, South Africa. Lesotho, entirely surrounded by South African territory, relies on it for imports, remittances, and labor opportunities. Its economy is heavily supported by the export of water and textiles under preferential trade agreements, and its political stability often hinges on regional intervention through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Motsamai, 2016). The Gambia, surrounded by Senegal except for its narrow Atlantic coastline, has a history of internal political volatility but has shown remarkable diplomatic agility. Following the 2016–2017 constitutional crisis, when then-President Yahya Jammeh refused to concede electoral defeat, The Gambia became a symbol of regional cooperation and democratic renewal, with ECOWAS and the African Union facilitating a peaceful transition of power (Adebajo, 2020). Since then, the country has pursued re-engagement with international partners, including its return to the Commonwealth.

4.3 Common Challenges Facing African Small States

African small states face a constellation of interconnected challenges. Economic vulnerability is a persistent concern. Many of these states are dependent on a narrow range of exports, lack diversified industrial bases, and have limited access to global financial markets. Small domestic markets reduce economies of scale, making local production costly and uncompetitive. In addition, dependence on external aid and remittances renders them susceptible to global economic shocks. Environmental risks are particularly acute for small island states and coastal countries. Climate change poses existential threats to low-lying island nations such as Seychelles, where rising sea levels, extreme weather, and coral reef degradation directly impact tourism, fisheries, and livelihoods. These states must invest disproportionate resources in climate resilience while seeking international climate finance and technical assistance (UNCTAD, 2020). Geopolitical marginalization also impedes small states' ability to shape regional security and economic frameworks. Larger regional players often dominate the agenda in continental bodies such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and SADC, sidelining smaller voices. While small states participate in these organizations, their influence often hinges on the strength of coalitions or patronage from larger states. Furthermore, the lack of robust diplomatic infrastructure and

personnel constrains their ability to maintain active bilateral and multilateral relations (Thorhallsson, 2012).

Governance challenges such as institutional weakness, corruption, and limited administrative capacity further reduce the efficacy of foreign policy and development initiatives. Small states may suffer from political instability or authoritarian rule, which undermines their credibility on the international stage. For instance, The Gambia's reputation deteriorated under Jammeh's autocracy but improved dramatically after the democratic transition. Similarly, Lesotho has experienced recurrent political crises and military interference, necessitating external mediation (Motsamai, 2016). Dependence on regional powers is another structural limitation. Lesotho and Eswatini's economic and infrastructural reliance on South Africa limits their foreign policy autonomy. While such dependencies can provide stability, they also expose small states to policy changes or economic disruptions in their larger neighbors. In this sense, small states must navigate a delicate balance between sovereignty and integration.

4.4 Strategic Responses and Adaptive Capacities

Despite these limitations, African small states are not passive entities. Many exhibit considerable strategic adaptability through diplomatic innovation, institutional engagement, and policy entrepreneurship. One such strategy is niche diplomacy, whereby small states focus their limited resources on specific issues or sectors where they can develop comparative advantages. Seychelles, for example, has become a global leader in blue finance and sustainable marine development, using its expertise and moral authority to attract donor support and partnerships (Scobie, 2019). Another important tool is multilateralism. Small African states often rely on multilateral organizations for political protection, economic assistance, and legitimacy. Platforms such as the African Union, the UN, and regional economic communities enable small states to amplify their voices, form issue-based coalitions, and access institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution, trade facilitation, and technical assistance. The Gambia's re-engagement with international organizations following its democratic transition underscores the importance of multilateral diplomacy for small states seeking reputational rehabilitation and policy support (Adebajo, 2020).

Hosting foreign military bases is a controversial but effective strategy some small states have employed. Djibouti's ability to offer strategic real estate to global powers has made it a key player in international security arrangements, especially regarding maritime piracy, counterterrorism, and regional peacekeeping. However, this strategy requires careful management to avoid overdependence or becoming entangled in major power rivalries (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023). Leveraging legal and moral arguments is another avenue of influence. Small states often rely on international law and normative discourses to push for global reforms in climate policy, trade, and human rights. As proponents of the International Criminal Court and advocates for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), African small states often position themselves as champions of global justice, thereby securing solidarity and aid from the broader international community (Scobie, 2019; UNCTAD, 2020). African small states, though constrained by size, geography, and economic resources, are far from inconsequential in international relations. Their structural vulnerabilities necessitate innovative diplomatic strategies and institutional alignments that enhance their agency. By leveraging niche diplomacy, engaging in multilateralism, and strategically aligning with external powers or causes, these states assert their relevance on the global stage. However, persistent challenges such as economic fragility, environmental vulnerability, and political instability continue to hamper their development and diplomatic outreach. Understanding the profiles and characteristics of African

small states thus requires a balanced assessment of both their limitations and their strategic responses. Their experiences underscore the evolving nature of international relations, where influence is increasingly defined not solely by material power but by adaptability, issue-specific expertise, and coalition-building capabilities.

5. Case Studies: Agency in Action

Despite their limited size and power, African small states have demonstrated considerable agency in navigating the complexities of international relations. Through strategic diplomacy, regional engagement, multilateralism, and issue-specific advocacy, these states have found ways to advance their interests and influence global norms. This section presents detailed case studies of four African small states—Djibouti, Seychelles, The Gambia, and Lesotho—to illustrate how they assert agency and relevance in international affairs despite structural constraints.

5.1 Djibouti: Strategic Geography and Security Diplomacy

Djibouti offers a textbook example of how a small state can leverage geography to gain disproportionate influence. Located at the mouth of the Red Sea, near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—a crucial maritime chokepoint connecting the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal—Djibouti has transformed its strategic location into geopolitical capital. Despite its small population (around 1.1 million), the country hosts military bases from multiple global powers, including the United States, China, France, and Japan (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023). By offering basing rights to rival powers, Djibouti has positioned itself as a neutral and indispensable hub for anti-piracy operations, counterterrorism, and maritime security in the Horn of Africa. This has brought considerable economic benefits, such as rent for base facilities and infrastructure investments. In addition, Djibouti has used its relationships with these powers to gain political leverage and development support, enhancing its resilience to regional instability. However, this strategy requires careful balancing. Hosting military powers with competing interests can lead to diplomatic tensions. Nevertheless, Djibouti has managed this complexity skillfully, avoiding entanglement in major power rivalries and maintaining an image of a reliable partner. As De Waal (2015) notes, Djibouti's diplomatic maneuvering reflects a high degree of foreign policy pragmatism and a conscious effort to assert autonomy through strategic alignment rather than dependence. Moreover, analyzing Djibouti's strategy through the lens of "shelter theory" (Thorhallsson, 2012) reveals how the state mitigates its vulnerabilities by forging strategic partnerships with larger powers. Shelter theory posits that small states seek political, economic, and security "shelter" from external actors to compensate for their limited capacity and exposure to systemic risks. Djibouti exemplifies this by offering military basing rights to multiple great powers, thereby securing economic rents, infrastructure development, and security guarantees. This strategy allows Djibouti to offset its small size and resource constraints while avoiding overreliance on any single patron. However, the theory also highlights potential risks—such as dependency or entanglement in great power competition—which Djibouti navigates by maintaining a diversified network of alliances. In this sense, Djibouti's approach aligns with shelter theory's premise that small states can enhance their resilience by strategically engaging external powers without surrendering sovereignty. In addition, Djibouti's ability to generate \$200 million annually from leasing military bases to global powers like the U.S. and China illustrates how small states can leverage geopolitical positioning for economic diplomacy (Jokhio, 2024). This revenue stream has bolstered Djibouti's fiscal stability, showcasing how strategic location can translate into tangible financial benefits. The case reflects how small states can exploit their unique assets to secure sustainable economic gains through astute diplomatic negotiations.

5.2 Seychelles: Environmental Leadership and Niche Diplomacy

Seychelles, a small island developing state (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean with a population of about 100,000, demonstrates how small states can shape international discourse through niche diplomacy. Lacking military or economic power, Seychelles has strategically focused on global environmental governance, climate change, and ocean sustainability. It has become a vocal advocate for the Blue Economy—a framework that promotes the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and ecosystem health (Scobie, 2019). Seychelles has hosted high-level environmental summits, pioneered innovative financial instruments like blue bonds, and pushed for stronger global commitments to protect marine ecosystems. Its 2018 sovereign blue bond, backed by the World Bank and investors, was the first of its kind and provided funding for sustainable fisheries and marine conservation (World Bank, 2018). This initiative not only addressed domestic environmental challenges but also positioned Seychelles as a global leader in ocean governance. In addition, Seychelles has played an active role in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), using these platforms to push for climate justice and mobilize climate finance. By framing itself as a moral authority on environmental issues, Seychelles has gained significant diplomatic visibility. As Wivel and Ingebritsen (2019) argue, niche diplomacy allows small states to concentrate their resources and advocacy on specialized issues, thereby enhancing their international standing and influence. Lastly, Seychelles explicitly ties its niche diplomacy to constructivist norms by emphasizing the socially constructed nature of international environmental and climate governance, framing itself as a "small island state advocate" to shape global norms around sustainability and ocean conservation. Through active participation in forums like the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Seychelles leverages its moral authority and vulnerability to climate change to influence collective identities and shared understandings, reinforcing Wendt's (1992) notion that state interests are not fixed but shaped by intersubjective interactions. By promoting norms such as the "Blue Economy" and marine protection, Seychelles demonstrates how discursive practices and normative persuasion can redefine global priorities, aligning its diplomatic strategies with constructivist principles that highlight the power of ideas and social structures in international relations.

5.3 The Gambia: Diplomatic Renewal and Multilateral Re-engagement

The Gambia's political trajectory in recent years underscores how small states can reclaim agency through democratic reform and multilateral re-engagement. Under Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian regime (1994–2017), The Gambia became diplomatically isolated, withdrawing from the Commonwealth and the International Criminal Court (ICC) while engaging in human rights violations that drew international condemnation (Adebajo, 2020). However, following Jammeh's defeat in the 2016 elections and his subsequent exile—facilitated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—The Gambia embarked on a significant democratic and diplomatic transformation. The new administration under President Adama Barrow prioritized rebuilding international relationships, restoring human rights, and strengthening institutional governance. The country rejoined the Commonwealth in 2018 and resumed cooperation with international donors and organizations, signaling its return to multilateral diplomacy (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). This transition also reflected regional solidarity and the role of small states in upholding democratic norms. The ECOWAS-led intervention to enforce electoral results was widely praised and positioned The Gambia as a case study in peaceful democratic change in West Africa. Since then, The Gambia has actively engaged in regional forums, sought justice for past abuses through its Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC), and worked to strengthen civil society participation in governance (Oette, 2021).

The Gambia's experience illustrates that small states can use domestic reforms to rebuild their international reputation and increase diplomatic engagement. As noted by Thorhallsson (2012), small states often gain influence not through coercion, but through legitimacy, alignment with international norms, and active participation in rule-based institutions. Furthermore, The Gambia's successful mobilization of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to support its case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) demonstrates the diplomatic leverage small states can achieve through coalition-building. By securing provisional orders from the ICJ in 2020, The Gambia highlighted how small states can use multilateral platforms to amplify their voices and advance human rights agendas. This case underscores the strategic importance of alliances in enabling small states to pursue impactful diplomatic outcomes despite limited resources (ICJ, 2020).

5.4 Lesotho: Regional Dependency and Mediation Diplomacy

Lesotho, a landlocked country surrounded by South Africa, faces unique challenges of geographical and economic dependency. With limited access to global markets and a fragile political environment, Lesotho relies heavily on remittances from migrant workers in South Africa and preferential trade under agreements such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) (Motsamai, 2016). Nonetheless, Lesotho has shown agency in managing its vulnerabilities through regional integration and diplomatic mediation. A key example of Lesotho's foreign policy activity was its engagement with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) following a series of political and military crises. In 2014 and again in 2017, Lesotho experienced coup attempts and political instability that threatened democratic governance. Rather than facing isolation, Lesotho invited mediation by SADC, which sent teams to facilitate political dialogue, security reform, and electoral stability (ISS, 2016). This strategy of externalizing domestic conflict resolution reflects a pragmatic understanding of the regional environment. By accepting SADC's intervention, Lesotho preserved its sovereignty while leveraging regional mechanisms to restore order. This also signaled its commitment to regional norms of democracy and peacebuilding, bolstering its diplomatic credentials. Moreover, Lesotho has actively engaged in SADC's broader initiatives, including infrastructure development and regional trade, aligning its interests with collective regional goals. As Ingebritsen (2006) argues, small states often act as norm entrepreneurs and regional stabilizers, providing legitimacy to collective processes while benefiting from the support of regional organizations. Lesotho's experience highlights the delicate balance small states must maintain between asserting autonomy and relying on regional mechanisms for political and economic survival.

5.5 Cape Verde's Diaspora Diplomacy

Cape Verde's diaspora diplomacy has been instrumental in securing trade concessions and cultural influence within the European Union (EU), leveraging its Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) ties to overcome the limitations of its small size. As a former Portuguese colony, Cape Verde shares deep historical, linguistic, and cultural connections with Portugal, which serves as a bridge to the broader EU. The Cape Verdean diaspora, particularly in Portugal and other Lusophone nations like Luxembourg and France, has actively lobbied for favorable trade agreements, such as the Special Partnership Agreement with the EU in 2007. This agreement granted Cape Verde preferential access to European markets, facilitated development aid, and strengthened political cooperation—benefits typically reserved for larger, more economically influential states. By mobilizing its diaspora, Cape Verde transformed its transnational identity into a diplomatic asset. The cultural influence of Cape Verde's diaspora has also played a key role in shaping EU perceptions and policies. Cape Verdean musicians, writers, and artists, such as Cesária Évora, have gained international acclaim, fostering a positive image of the archipelago in

Europe. This cultural soft power has reinforced Cape Verde's reputation as a stable, democratic, and culturally rich nation, making it an attractive partner for the EU. The diaspora's integration into European societies—while maintaining strong ties to their homeland—has created a network of advocates who promote Cape Verde's interests. For instance, Lusophone cultural festivals and business associations in Portugal often highlight Cape Verde's potential, indirectly pressuring EU policymakers to consider its strategic value. Lusophone solidarity further amplifies Cape Verde's influence, as it collaborates with other Portuguese-speaking nations through organizations like the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). This platform allows Cape Verde to align with larger states like Brazil and Portugal, presenting a unified front in negotiations with the EU. By emphasizing shared linguistic and cultural heritage, Cape Verde gains visibility and support it could not achieve alone. For example, Portugal frequently champions Cape Verde's causes within the EU, advocating for development funds or relaxed visa requirements for Cape Verdean citizens. These efforts demonstrate how small states can leverage transnational identities to "punch above their weight" in international diplomacy.

Economically, the Cape Verdean diaspora contributes significantly to the homeland through remittances, which account for a substantial portion of GDP. This financial reliance incentivizes the government to maintain strong ties with emigrant communities, ensuring their continued engagement in national development. The EU recognizes this dynamic and has incorporated diaspora engagement into its cooperation frameworks with Cape Verde, offering programs to enhance skills transfers and investment opportunities. By positioning itself as a gateway between Europe and West Africa, Cape Verde has also attracted EU support for infrastructure and renewable energy projects, further solidifying its strategic relevance. The diaspora thus serves as both an economic lifeline and a diplomatic conduit. In conclusion, Cape Verde's diaspora diplomacy exemplifies how small states can harness transnational identities to secure trade concessions and cultural influence. By capitalizing on Lusophone ties, the nation has gained preferential EU agreements, development aid, and political backing it would otherwise struggle to obtain. The diaspora's cultural contributions and lobbying efforts have enhanced Cape Verde's international standing, while Lusophone solidarity provides a collective voice in global forums. This strategy highlights the power of identity-based networks in overcoming geopolitical constraints, offering a model for other small states seeking to amplify their global influence. Cape Verde's success underscores the importance of diaspora engagement as a tool of modern diplomacy.

5.6 Comparative Reflections: Commonalities and Divergences

While each of these case studies reflects distinct national contexts, several common themes emerge in how African small states exercise agency:

- A. Strategic Utilization of Niche Strengths: Whether through geography (Djibouti), environmental advocacy (Seychelles), or democratic legitimacy (The Gambia), small states often identify and capitalize on unique comparative advantages.
- B. Multilateral Engagement as a Force Multiplier: All four countries have shown that active participation in regional and international organizations enhances visibility, security, and policy influence. Multilateralism offers small states collective bargaining power and legitimacy.
- C. Adaptability to Internal and External Shocks: Political crises, environmental threats, or regional conflicts have not rendered these states passive. Instead, they have adapted by seeking external mediation (Lesotho), reforming governance structures (The Gambia), or diversifying diplomatic alignments (Djibouti).

- D. **Soft Power and Normative Leadership:** Small states lack hard power but can wield significant soft power through moral arguments, normative alignment, and issue-specific diplomacy. This is particularly evident in Seychelles' climate diplomacy and The Gambia's democratic rebranding.

At the same time, differences in institutional capacity, leadership, and regional contexts shape the degree and nature of agency. Seychelles' stable governance allows for long-term strategic planning, while Lesotho's recurring instability necessitates short-term crisis management. Djibouti's geostrategic leverage allows it to engage global powers directly, whereas The Gambia relies more on regional alliances and soft diplomacy. These case studies confirm that African small states are neither powerless nor inconsequential. While structural constraints such as economic vulnerability, limited military power, and regional dependency pose real challenges, these states actively seek to shape their environments. Through strategic diplomacy, niche leadership, multilateral engagement, and adaptability, they assert agency in ways that defy traditional IR theories focused on great powers. African small states offer compelling examples of how influence in the international system is not solely a function of size but of strategy, alignment, and resilience.

6. Limitations and Vulnerabilities

While African small states exhibit agency and strategic acumen in international relations, they continue to grapple with profound limitations and vulnerabilities. These constraints, both structural and institutional, pose significant challenges to their capacity to independently shape international outcomes or safeguard their national interests effectively. This section explores the primary limitations and vulnerabilities faced by African small states, including economic fragility, geopolitical dependency, environmental exposure, governance challenges, and limited diplomatic capacity.

6.1 Economic fragility and aid dependence

One of the defining limitations of African small states is their economic fragility. With narrow production bases, limited industrial capacity, and small domestic markets, these states often rely heavily on foreign aid, remittances, and preferential trade arrangements. Such dependence limits their bargaining power and increases their susceptibility to external economic shocks (Briguglio, 1995). For instance, countries like Lesotho and Comoros rely substantially on financial inflows from larger states or international donors, making their national budgets vulnerable to policy changes in donor countries or global downturns. Moreover, their economic dependence undermines autonomy in foreign policy decisions. As argued by Bauer and Rich (2020), small states may find themselves compelled to align with donor preferences or face the withdrawal of aid. In the Gambia, for example, the return to democratic governance in 2017 unlocked international financial support from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, but it also ushered in conditionalities that shaped domestic policy trajectories (Oette, 2021). This dynamic illustrates how economic dependence can translate into constrained sovereignty and limited policy space.

6.2 Limited Military Capacity and Security Vulnerability

Another critical vulnerability lies in the security domain. Most African small states possess minimal military capabilities, which renders them reliant on external actors for defense and internal security stabilization. This dependency exposes them to external influence and limits their ability to respond autonomously to security threats. For instance, Djibouti's security architecture is largely underpinned by the presence of foreign military bases, which, while

offering a deterrent effect, also entrench the country's reliance on external powers (De Waal, 2015). Small states such as São Tomé and Príncipe, Eswatini, and Cape Verde lack the logistical and personnel capacity to effectively manage border security, maritime threats, or internal unrest. As a result, they often turn to regional organizations like the African Union (AU) or international security partnerships for assistance. However, this reliance can compromise national control over security strategies and may also delay response times in times of crisis. As Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) note, the absence of credible hard power often places small states in a position of "reactive diplomacy," where they must accept outcomes shaped primarily by more powerful actors.

6.3 Environmental and Climate Vulnerabilities

Environmental vulnerability represents a particularly acute challenge for small island states in Africa, such as Seychelles, Comoros, and São Tomé and Príncipe. These nations are on the frontline of climate change, facing rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and increasingly frequent natural disasters. Despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, they bear a disproportionate share of the impacts. As Scobie (2019) highlights, climate vulnerability constrains development opportunities and imposes significant fiscal burdens related to disaster mitigation, adaptation, and recovery. Although many African small states have become vocal advocates for climate justice on the global stage—leveraging forums such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—their structural vulnerability reduces their negotiating leverage. While moral arguments may generate international sympathy, the actual delivery of climate finance and adaptation resources remains slow and inadequate. This mismatch between environmental vulnerability and global response further underscores the limits of agency for small states, particularly when global powers deprioritize climate commitments (Betzold, 2015).

6.4 Geopolitical Dependency and Regional Pressures

African small states often exist in close proximity to dominant regional powers, which can either be a source of support or coercion. This geographical reality often results in political and economic dependency. Lesotho, for instance, is entirely surrounded by South Africa, making it highly dependent on its larger neighbor for trade, water exports, and migrant labor (Motsamai, 2016). While this relationship has brought certain benefits, such as regional market access and investment, it also limits Lesotho's foreign policy autonomy. Similarly, landlocked countries such as Burundi and Rwanda face logistical and economic constraints due to their reliance on neighboring coastal states for access to international trade routes. This dependency introduces a level of geopolitical vulnerability that can be exacerbated during regional crises, border closures, or political disputes. As Schoeman (2020) explains, the "vicinal effect" can lead to small states being caught in the crossfire of larger regional conflicts or being pressured to adopt alignment positions that may not serve their national interests.

6.5 Institutional Weakness and Governance Challenges

Many African small states also struggle with internal governance limitations that hinder their effectiveness in international relations. These include weak institutional capacity, limited bureaucratic expertise, underdeveloped legal frameworks, and inconsistent democratic practices. Such governance challenges restrict the ability of small states to articulate coherent foreign policy strategies or engage meaningfully in multilateral forums. For instance, post-conflict states like The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau have faced difficulties in institutional reform, often relying on external actors to guide or finance governance restructuring (Adebajo, 2020). This reliance can lead to externally driven policy priorities that may not align with local needs.

Furthermore, political instability or elite fragmentation can create inconsistent foreign policy positions, reducing credibility and continuity in diplomatic engagements. As Ingebritsen et al. (2006) argue, institutional robustness is essential for small states to punch above their weight in international forums, and its absence severely constrains diplomatic agency.

6.6 Limited Diplomatic Infrastructure and Representation

Due to resource constraints, African small states often maintain limited diplomatic missions abroad, reducing their visibility and engagement capacity in international diplomacy. Most small African states lack embassies in all major global capitals or permanent missions in key multilateral organizations, which can hinder their access to real-time negotiations, coalition-building, and norm-setting processes (Wivel & Ingebritsen, 2019). This diplomatic deficit is particularly acute in global forums where agenda-setting and informal negotiations often occur outside official sessions. For example, smaller states may find it difficult to participate actively in multiple concurrent international negotiations, such as those on trade, climate, and security. As a result, they frequently rely on regional blocs such as the African Union, the Commonwealth, or the Group of 77 to amplify their voices. While these groupings offer some advantages, they also dilute individual state influence and can sideline specific national priorities in favor of broader consensus positions. African small states operate in an international system that presents formidable constraints. Their economic fragility, limited military capacity, environmental exposure, and institutional weaknesses significantly curtail their ability to operate independently or exert sustained influence on global affairs. These vulnerabilities are compounded by geopolitical dependencies and underdeveloped diplomatic infrastructure, which limit their access to decision-making platforms. Nevertheless, these limitations do not render African small states inconsequential. Rather, they highlight the structural challenges that must be addressed if these states are to transform their agency from reactive to proactive. Strengthening internal governance, diversifying economies, enhancing regional cooperation, and investing in diplomatic capacity are essential pathways through which African small states can mitigate their vulnerabilities and elevate their international relevance.

7. Conclusion

African small states, despite their structural vulnerabilities and constrained capacities, are not inconsequential actors in international relations. This paper has demonstrated that while these states face significant limitations—such as economic fragility, security dependency, environmental vulnerability, and limited diplomatic reach—they also exhibit considerable agency through strategic diplomacy, regional engagement, and normative advocacy. Theoretical frameworks on small states illustrate that power in international relations is not solely defined by material capabilities but also by the ability to leverage soft power, form coalitions, and influence norms (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Wivel & Ingebritsen, 2019). Through case studies such as Seychelles, Botswana, and The Gambia, this paper has highlighted how small African states can act decisively and shape international outcomes when conditions align with their strategic interests. These cases challenge the traditional realist assumption that only great powers matter, instead suggesting a more nuanced interpretation that accounts for the diversity of strategies employed by small states in global politics (Ingebritsen et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the capacity of African small states to consistently influence international agendas remains uneven and highly context-dependent. Overcoming structural and institutional limitations requires sustained investment in governance, economic resilience, regional integration, and climate adaptation. Furthermore, their agency will be most effective when buttressed by collaborative frameworks such as the African Union and international normative regimes.

Thus, African small states do matter in international relations—not as dominant powers, but as consequential actors capable of shaping discourse, influencing decisions, and advancing their national interests through diplomacy and resilience. Recognizing their unique roles and addressing their vulnerabilities is essential for a more inclusive and representative global order. In a multipolar world, where power is more diffuse and transnational challenges require collective action, the role of small states is likely to grow. Recognizing and supporting the contributions of African small states is not only a matter of equity but also of global governance effectiveness. Future research should further explore the comparative experiences of small states across continents to enrich our understanding of it.

On their side, in order to strengthen their global influence, African small nations should prioritize bloc voting in multilateral forums like the AU and UN to amplify their bargaining power, as seen in initiatives such as AOSIS for climate finance. Investing in niche diplomacy—such as Seychelles’ focus on maritime security or The Gambia’s leadership in human rights—can help smaller states gain disproportionate influence in specialized areas. Additionally, diversifying economic partnerships through South-South cooperation, like UAE investments in Djibouti’s ports, can reduce aid dependency and foster sustainable growth. Finally, leveraging digital diplomacy by expanding virtual consulates and e-governance tools can help overcome the limitations of physical embassies and broaden diplomatic reach.

References

- Adebajo, A. (2020). *The curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War*. Oxford University Press.
- Bauer, P., & Rich, T. S. (2020). Foreign aid and political autonomy: Small states in a big world. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16(2), 157–175. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa002>
- Betzold, C. (2015). Adapting to climate change in small island developing states. *Climatic Change*, 133(3), 481–489. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-015-1408-0>
- Braveboy-Wagner, J. (2008). *Small states in global affairs: The foreign policies of the Caribbean community (CARICOM)*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chachu, S. (2019). *Seychelles and maritime security in the Indian Ocean*. Institute for Security Studies.
- Briguglio, L. (1995). Small island developing states and their economic vulnerabilities. *World Development*, 23(9), 1615–1632.
- Cooper, A. F., & Shaw, T. M. (2009). *The diplomacy of small states: Between vulnerability and resilience*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Commonwealth Secretariat. (2018). *The Gambia rejoins the Commonwealth*. <https://thecommonwealth.org>
- De Waal, A. (2015). *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power*. Polity Press.
- Henrikson, A. K. (2001). Niche diplomacy in the world public arena: The global ‘corners’ of Canada and Norway. In M. Kuus & J. Agnew (Eds.), *The geopolitics reader* (pp. 67–75). Routledge.
- ICJ. (2020). *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)*. <https://www.icj-cij.org/>
- Ingebritsen, C., Neumann, I. B., Gstöhl, S., & Beyer, J. (2006). *Small states in international relations*. University of Washington Press.
- Ingebritsen, C., Neumann, I., Gstöhl, S., & Beyer, J. (2006). *Small states in international relations*. University of Washington Press.
- ISS (Institute for Security Studies). (2016). Lesotho’s political crisis: A test case for SADC intervention. <https://issafrica.org>

- Jokhio, EZ (2024). Strategic Significance of Djibouti: A Geopolitical Playground for Global Powers, accessed 2025.06.16 through <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/02/21/strategic-significance-of-djibouti-a-geopolitical-playground-for-global-powers/#:~:text=Hosting%20all%20these%20foreign%20military,and%20China%20every%20single%20year>.
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). *Power and interdependence: World politics in transition*. Little, Brown.
- Lefebvre, J. A. (2012). China's military role in Djibouti. *China Brief*, 12(13), 10–13.
- Panke, D. (2010). Small states in the European Union: Coping with structural disadvantages. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 17(6), 799–817.
- Motsamai, D. (2016). Lesotho's political crisis and SADC's mediation. *ISS Today*. <https://issafrica.org>
- Oette, L. (2021). Transitional justice in The Gambia: Turning promises into reality. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 15(1), 1–12.
- Scobie, M. (2019). Global environmental politics and small island developing states: The role of regionalism. *Environmental Politics*, 28(6), 1044–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1519870>
- Schoeman, M. (2020). Small states in southern Africa: Threats, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 27(1), 1–15.
- Shinn, D. H., & Eisenman, J. (2023). *China's relations with Africa: A new era of strategic engagement*. Columbia University Press.
- Thorhallsson, B., & Steinsson, S. (2017). Small state foreign policy. In C. Reus-Smit & D. Snidal (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations Theory* (pp. 1–18). Oxford University Press.
- Thorhallsson, B. (2012). Small states in the UN Security Council: Means of influence? *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 7(2), 135–160.
- UNCTAD. (2020). *The vulnerability profile of small states in Africa*. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. <https://unctad.org>
- UNECA. (2020). *The African Continental Free Trade Area: Towards the realization of the African Economic Community*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. McGraw-Hill.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425.
- Wivel, A., & Ingebritsen, C. (2019). Small states in world politics: Explaining foreign policy behavior. *International Politics*, 56(1), 1–20.
- World Bank. (2018). *Seychelles launches world's first sovereign blue bond*. <https://www.worldbank.org>

Published by

