CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN 'SMALL' STATES THINK BIG: ARTICULATING AGENCY THROUGH SEYCHELLES' LARGE OCEAN STATE NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Oceans cover more than 72% of the earth's surface, yet as former Seychellois President James Michel (2016: 10–11) observes, they have 'never been viewed as being as important as land'. De Carvalho and Leira (2022: 1) make a similar observation, suggesting that within the discipline of International Relations (IR), in particular, there has been a tendency to pretend that oceans are not there. If oceans themselves have long occupied a marginal place in global consciousness, islands have been granted an even smaller role, reflecting what Pascaline Alexandre (Chapter 9, Part II) labels 'island-blindness'. At times, islands have 'barely featured in the consciousness of the rest of the world' or, in the rare instances where they have been recognised, it is more the 'idea' of the island rather than lived experiences that have attracted the most interest (Baldacchino 2010: 33; Michel 2016: 11). However, considering the existential threats that these islands face, such as complete submersion by rising sea levels (see Otto and Rydberg, Chapter 6 in Part I), it is imperative to reconceptualise the value attributed to them in IR scholarship.

Indeed, as Michel (2016: 10) poignantly states, 'there are times in history when nothing, but a complete inversion of thinking will suffice'. Adopting the necessity of such an inversion, this chapter examines how Small Island Developing States (SIDS)[49] are contesting this historical marginalisation by reframing themselves as

[49] The SIDS category was first officially recognised by the international community at the 1992 United Nations

Large Ocean States (LOS)[50]. It does so by focusing specifically on the archipelago of Seychelles, located in the Southwest Indian Ocean (SWIO), a region also known as Indianocéania.[51] At first glance, Seychelles appears to exemplify the structural vulnerabilities commonly associated with SIDS. Its economy remains heavily dependent on tourism and fisheries, it is acutely exposed to the impacts of climate change (McDougall 2025: 3), and like many other small and micro-states, it possesses limited administrative capacity (Bueger and Wivel 2018: 183). Yet, these very constraints make Seychelles a particularly significant case to consider given its pioneering role in advancing the Blue Economy agenda (Michel 2016: 30). It was intentionally selected because it contributes to theories of small state[52] agency, while also challenging portrayals of African states as largely reactive actors in international relations (Bach 2013; Acharya 2014; Otto and Moeng 2025). In this sense, it also has the potential to offer insights into how African states can move beyond their traditional land-centric focus.

Writing on the marginalisation and invisibility of islands in the Pacific, Hau'ofa (1994: 152) famously suggested that there is a fundamental difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and a 'sea of islands'. In the first instance, dry surfaces in a vast ocean far removed from the centres of power are emphasised. Such a view is necessary for major powers that benefit from seeing the area as tiny, divided bits, as it helps perpetuate neocolonial relationships of dependency (Hau'ofa 1994: 159). In contrast, the latter view emphasises the interconnectedness of these islands through the ocean, which acts not as a barrier or source of isolation but as a connector. In these instances, SIDS are imagined as LOS. Indeed, it is worthwhile to note that SIDS are approximately 3.5% land and 96.5% ocean (Mead 2021). Viewing the ocean as an enabling force, rather than

Conference on Environment and Development as representing a unique group of states that face distinct social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities (Mead 2021).

[50] Some states also draw on the 'Big Ocean State' (BOS) narrative. This framing has been chosen by those who wish to avoid the acronym LOS (for Large Ocean States), as it resembles the word 'loss' and carries negative connotations (Raguain 2025). By contrast, Big Ocean State echoes the word 'boss', which is seen as more empowering. In this chapter, however, the term Large Ocean State is used, as it remains the more widely adopted label among states.

[51] Indianocéania is a term specifically used by the Indian Ocean Commission to designate the islands of the Southwestern Indian Ocean. The Commission argues that the conventional geographical label 'Southwestern Indian Ocean' neither captures the uniqueness nor coherence of the region. In response, Indianocéania denotes a shared insular space, defined as the 'geographical areas made up of islands and archipelagos that emerge off East Africa' (IOC 2023: 5).

[52] Small Island Developing States fall within the broader category of small states—an analytical grouping that has traditionally received scholarly attention primarily through lenses that emphasise constraint, vulnerability and limited agency. Within much of this literature, small states are frequently defined in deficit terms, portrayed as possessing little capacity to shape their external environment and as being structurally subordinate to major powers (Schwarzenberger [1941] 1964; Vandenbosch 1964; Vital 1967; Rothstein 1968; Keohane 1969; Knudsen 2002). SIDS are subject to an additional layer of marginalisation, as their insularity is often associated with isolation, fragility and heightened vulnerability. As a result, SIDS are characterised by a double deficit: they are understood both as small states, inheriting assumptions of powerlessness, and as islands, reintroducing narratives of exposure and dependence.

as a constraint, has started to gain traction in the thinking of SIDS. Hume et al. (2021) trace the emergence of states identifying as LOS to 2001 when Nauru—a Pacific island—first used the term. Since then, at least fifteen other SIDS have labelled themselves as LOS in official speeches. This category is used specifically to stress the ocean's central role in their development and to reconceptualise SIDS as leaders rather than victims of their circumstances (Raguain et al. 2025: 205).

Both the SIDS and LOS labels function as multi-oceanic political groupings, with these narratives circulating across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as the Caribbean Sea (Hume et al. 2021: 7). This underscores, at times, the discursive and narrative-based nature of oceanic regions and helps explain the growing resonance of the LOS framing among Indian Ocean island states. The categorisation of LOS has gradually gained traction in the political discourse of the Indian Ocean islands, particularly Seychelles and Mauritius, as a supplement and sometimes alternative to the more conventional designation of SIDS. Seychelles has explicitly adopted this label in various official contexts, including statements by President Danny Faure (2016–2020) in 2017, President Wavel Ramkalawan (2020–2025) in 2022, and Seychelles' Minister for Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment, Flavien Joubert (2020–2025) in 2025. Mauritius adopted this phrasing in its interventions at the United Nations General Assembly, when former Prime Minister Jugnauth (2017, 2018) referred to Mauritius as a 'Large Ocean State', while it has also adopted the concept in its Government Programme 2025-2029 (Government of Mauritius 2025: 7).

However, the use of the LOS framing in the Indian Ocean has not been as prominent as it has been among Pacific Island states, such as Fiji and Solomon Islands, where the term has been used frequently and fervently, especially over the last five years, making it a central element of their diplomatic self-representation. Indeed, about two-thirds of the states that have used this narrative are from the Pacific (Hume et al. 2021: 7). The Prime Minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama (2007–2022), pointed out that 'the change starts with us [...] we are *Large Ocean States* [...] we are the leaders the world looks to here' (Bainimarama 2022). This seems to reflect the views of other Pacific officials. As a Solomon Islands government official, Walter Diamana (2024, personal communication, 24 November), put it when interviewed, 'what the concept of the Large Ocean State means is to tell our friends in the international community that despite the way you see us, we also have another image'.

Against this background, this chapter examines the narrative of the LOS as it manifests in the Indian Ocean, focusing specifically on the African state of Seychelles. Although Seychelles is Africa's most developed country, its high-income status often renders it analytically overlooked (Serumaga 2024), while its small landmass and offshore geographic positioning mean it is frequently excluded from dominant imaginaries of Africa, which tend to end at the continent's shorelines (Hardy 2015). This chapter examines the concept of the LOS and how it is understood and deployed in Seychelles, through an analysis of official government statements, such as speeches and declarations, as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from Seychelles' government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) between June and August 2025. This is especially important since the LOS narrative, although used by government officials and NGOs, is only gradually gaining academic attention.

By engaging with this narrative, this chapter makes two key contributions to the existing body of scholarship. First, it extends the emerging literature on LOS (see also Chan 2018; Hume et al. 2021; Morgan 2022; Raguain et al. 2025) by offering a perspective from Africa within the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). In this sense, it is also able to track how the concept of 'Large Ocean State' travels across regions. Second, by engaging critically with this narrative, it contributes to broader debates on the agency of small states—and specifically small island states—in international politics. The argument is made that SIDS exercise agency by strategically oscillating between the SIDS and LOS labels, demonstrating how narratives can function as a source of power. The chapter begins by reviewing literature that moves beyond framing SIDS solely in terms of vulnerability, highlighting their capacity for influence through non-material forms of power such as narratives. Building on this, the analysis focuses on how the LOS narrative is constructed, how it interacts with the SIDS narrative and how, together, these demonstrate the agency of islands in Indianocéania.

RE-ANCHORING SMALL STATES IN THE LITERATURE: FROM VULNERABILITY TO INFLUENCE

The agency of small island states has received increased scholarly attention. In particular, three themes have emerged that capture this agency: (i) the creative and 'smart' use of diplomatic strategies; (ii) issue-specific engagement; and (iii) the reframing of small island state identity. Together these strands reposition SIDS from vulnerable rule-takers to influential actors.

First, SIDS have exercised agency through their diplomatic strategies. Baruah (2022) shows how islands have demonstrated agency by playing regional powers against one another to pursue growth and opportunity. In the Pacific, Kiribati has, on multiple occasions, switched its diplomatic position on Taiwan to pursue the best economic deal for the country (Baruah 2022: 4). In the Indian Ocean, similar patterns emerge. McDougall and Taneja (2020: 132) discuss the strategic agency of countries such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles. Among these states, the Maldives has not been a passive player in the tussle between India and China but has instead pursued a dual-engagement strategy with both actors. Importantly, the government of the Maldives has demonstrated its ability to make independent decisions, for example, by cancelling an airport contract it had originally allocated to an Indian company and instead awarding it to a Chinese company (McDougall and Taneja 2020: 130).

In the case of Mauritius, deepening its relations with China has ensured that India, its main partner, does not take its influence on the island for granted (McDougall and Taneja 2020: 135). According to McDougall and Taneja (2020: 138; 2024: 236), Seychelles has similarly demonstrated its ability to take independent decisions by cancelling a deal with India to build military facilities on Assomption Island. While a security agreement that allowed a major power to establish a permanent military base on its territory might have provided Seychelles with additional capabilities to monitor its expansive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the country has instead invested in regional cooperation mechanisms that enhance its maritime domain awareness and response capacity without compromising sovereignty. Central to this approach is the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), hosted in Seychelles, which serves as a regional operational hub for co-ordinated maritime security efforts within the Maritime Security Architecture of the Western Indian Ocean (Ministry of Homeland Security and Civil Affairs, Seychelles 2025). This framework enables Seychelles to capitalise on collective assets and intelligence, while maintaining full control over its territorial jurisdiction and avoiding the establishment of a foreign military presence on its soil through bilateral agreements.

More broadly, SIDS adopt balancing strategies, cultivating multiple partnerships to extract benefits (Baruah 2022: 4; Marggraff 2026). Traditional frameworks for understanding small state foreign policy[53] need to be expanded

[53] Traditional frameworks describing small state foreign policy posit a limited set of strategic options, most commonly including balancing or bandwagoning (see Karsh 1989; Walt 1987; Reiter 1994), hedging (see Kuik 2021; Koga 2018) and seeking neutrality or non-alignment (see Rothstein 1968). Building on this tradition, Breuning (2007), drawing on Hey's (1993) work, suggests that small states in the Global South can pursue either a compliant, consensus, counter-dependent or compensation foreign policy. This approach rests on the shared assumption that small states are structurally dependent on more powerful actors and therefore orient their

to account for the agency of SIDS like Mauritius and Seychelles, which use strategies like manipulating interdependence, fluid partnerships and issue-specific engagement by drawing on their strategic positioning as well as moral advocacy (Marggraff 2025: 73-74). Thus, SIDS are repositioned not only as rule-takers but also as rule-makers.

This agency is also often conceptualised as 'smart state' foreign policy[54]. By positioning themselves as a practical and reliable partner—particularly in counter-piracy and ocean governance—SIDS secure major power support (McDougall and Taneja 2024: 239; McDougall 2025: 161). Graham and Nagar (2023: 248) posit that Seychelles has 'exploited "smart diplomacy", specifically in the field of ocean governance, to enhance its influence in the international arena', while McDougall (2025: 18) suggests that Seychelles has pursued a 'smart state foreign policy'. Malik (2020: 135) reinforces this perspective, noting that major powers require the backing of small and middle states to sustain leadership claims.

Second, SIDS demonstrate agency through issue-specific leadership. Carter and Corbett (2023: 164–165) argue that island states reshaped global security discourse by urging the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to discuss climate change for the first time in 2007, which led to the body recognising climate change as a threat multiplier in 2009. As a region, the Pacific Islands reconfigured regional security beyond traditional military security, compelling major powers to engage climate concerns as a prerequisite for cooperation (Carter and Corbett 2023: 168). Long (2022: 70) reinforces this, suggesting that small island states have come together to redefine climate change as a moral imperative rather than merely a scientific or economic concern. For example, Morgan (2022: 51) discusses their success in securing ocean-focused Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring that the UN's 2030 Agenda did not retain a terrestrial bias. The ocean has thus become central to SIDS' diplomatic identity.

Furthermore, SIDS have exercised leadership in maritime security. During the Somali piracy crisis, Mauritius and Seychelles hosted piracy trials, positioning themselves as indispensable regional actors (Otto 2022: 6). Seychelles' willingness to prosecute pirates attracted extensive capacity-building support,

foreign policies in response to these asymmetrical power relations. While these frameworks differ in emphasis and analytical nuance, taken together they largely portray small states—hedging being a partial exception—as possessing limited room for manoeuvre and constrained agency in shaping their foreign policy choices.

[54] A smart state strategy refers to the ability of a small state to pursue its foreign policy despite its limited resources by focusing on ordered goals, presenting its initiatives as being in the common interest of other states, and being willing to mediate between the conflicting interests of great powers (which allows them to act as agenda-setters) (Grøn and Wivel 2011: 529).

including prison refurbishment, judicial equipment and coastal surveillance systems (Bueger and Wivel 2018: 9). In 2016, it chaired one of the most prominent maritime security governance organisations, namely the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS)—the first time a regional actor assumed this role (Bueger and Wivel 2018: 2). Beyond piracy, Seychelles has further expressed agency by introducing the first ocean debt-swap deal and Blue Bonds (McDougall and Taneja 2024: 239), reinforcing its reputation as a policy innovator.

Third, SIDS increasingly express agency by intentionally reframing their identity from the perception of being 'small, isolated, and vulnerable' to being recognised as LOS (Morgan 2022: 46). Chan (2018: 538) is among the most explicit in developing the idea of LOS. He suggests that 'small islands have traditionally been portrayed as weak states, lacking elements of positive sovereignty' (Chan 2018: 538). However, by reconceptualising their smallness into largeness by including their vast EEZs, they have begun constructing a new sovereignty bargain. According to realist conceptions, a state's territorial size is a measure of power (Chan 2018: 540). By framing themselves as LOS, these islands remind large states of their sovereign rights under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which allows them to explore, exploit, conserve and manage the natural resources within their EEZs (Chan 2018: 540-541). For Seychelles, 99% of its total territory is ocean. Considering this, Raguain et al. (2025: 203–204) suggest that the labels of LOS and Big Ocean States (BOS) are meant to 'accentuate their [SIDS] strength and value'. Indeed, Wiehe, Gray and Silver (2025: 5) point out that when Mauritius is labelled an LOS, it is the nineteenth largest country in the world, while others have suggested an official LOS classification that can be used by international organisations (Hume et al. 2021: 8).

This reconceptualisation of SIDS identity has translated into concrete expressions of agency. Kiribati, an island in the Pacific, established the first significant Marine Protected Area (MPA) in a developing country in 2008. This move has demonstrated its agency in making independent decisions that prioritise the values it espouses, such as ocean sustainability, rather than seeking short-term benefits from tuna-harvesting or fishing licences (Chan 2018: 546). Chan (2018: 538) notes that leaders across the Pacific and Indian Ocean have increasingly adopted the term 'Large Ocean State' to challenge the conventional 'usual "small state" nomenclature'. This shift matters because, as Long (2022: 147) argues, an emphasis on vulnerability alone obscures the way in which such states adapt, exercise agency and engage internationally. He further argues that, historically, Pacific Island communities have been able to adapt to changing environments,

given their experiences with colonisation and world wars; however, this adaptive capacity has not been recognised in external representations of the region (Long 2022: 147). The LOS narrative is therefore an attempt to challenge the label of SIDS, which inherently categorises SIDS as being disadvantaged and possessing limited agency (Raguain et al. 2025: 206–207). Finally, the LOS identity narrative contributes to region-building and the construction of multi-oceanic communities. As van Langenhove (2013: 474) argued, regions are discursively constructed rather than purely territorial. Across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, shared ocean-based identities and vulnerabilities foster narrative coalitions that transcend geography.

STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

The LOS narrative, which is situated within strategic narrative theory, focuses on how actors—in this case, the small island state of Seychelles—use stories to shape the international environment. While the small-state literature provides important insights into how states with limited material capabilities navigate international politics, it is not used here as the central framework. Rather, it provides contextual background for understanding why strategic narratives become particularly salient for small island states. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2017: 105) define strategic narratives as 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'. They distinguish between three specific types: system, identity and issue narratives. The focus here is on identity narratives, since, for small island states, they offer a means of influencing the global environment. Identity narratives 'set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017: 21). The narratives can be analysed by engaging with their formation, projection and reception.

This analysis is limited to the first two, that is, the actors involved in constructing the narrative and how it is communicated. Three specific questions will be addressed. First, to what extent is the identity of a 'Large Ocean State' consciously and intentionally adopted by government officials? This is important to consider, since strategic narratives are aimed at influencing the behaviour of others—there is a clear degree of intentionality behind their use (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017: 3). Absent such intentionality, it is unclear whether they would constitute strategic narratives. Second, given that narratives are rarely constructed without contestation, the focus is on which tensions emerge when this narrative

is pursued. Third, in what ways is the Large Ocean State framing—as part of a strategic narrative—a reflection of the growing agency of small islands?

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE *LARGE OCEAN STATE* NARRATIVE

In Seychelles, the origins of the LOS narrative can be traced to the early 2010s, emerging within broader global discussions on sustainability. A key milestone was the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), which popularised the concept of the Green Economy as a pathway to sustainable development (Michel 2016: 30). As former Seychellois Ambassador, Ronny Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) notes, the visual branding of the green economy featured wind turbines, buildings, people and animals, but 'there was no sign of water on it'. This absence underscored a critical oversight: the ocean, despite its centrality to economies, was omitted from the core sustainability imagery. Shah (2015), Chief Executive Officer of Nature Seychelles, recounts a similar experience, albeit ten years earlier: attending the Second Earth Summit (Rio +10) in South Africa in 2002, he noticed that 'the movement to set up Green Economies mysteriously avoided speaking substantively about the oceans, despite our best efforts. Small Island Developing States (SIDS), sitting on small pieces of land seemingly "sea-locked" within large ocean territories, struggled with this concept of the Green Economy'. Thus, within Seychellois policymaking circles, these events were catalysts for a more pronounced effort to incorporate the framing of Seychelles as an LOS.

The importance of including the ocean in sustainability frameworks was also reinforced by the fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis, which severely impacted small island economies, including Seychelles. In response, in 2010 Seychelles began discussions with The Nature Conservancy on innovative financing mechanisms to harness ocean resources for economic recovery (Government of Seychelles 2014; Jumeau 2025, personal communication, 7 August). Indeed, as Didier Dogley, former Minister for Environment, Energy and Climate Change in Seychelles, observed: 'In these islands, we used to think only in terms of our terrestrial area, or maybe the coastal zone up to about 35 km from the shore—and we thought of the rest of our 1.4 million km^2 of ocean territory as something that "sat there" without really needing to be managed' (cited in UNDP 2016: 24).

In Seychelles, the emphasis has transitioned away from thinking of Seychelles purely as a SIDS to also considering how it may be perceived and projected

as an LOS. This culminated in the world's first debt-for-ocean-conservation swap, aligning environmental protection with economic resilience. In this case, practical initiatives emerged in parallel with—rather than as a consequence of—the rhetorical framing of the LOS identity. This momentum was further institutionalised in 2015, when Seychelles established the Department of the Blue Economy (Michel 2015; Dias 2025, personal communication, 5 August), signalling a strategic commitment to ocean-based development. In this sense, the prioritisation of the ocean in policy and governance frameworks provided a foundation for the subsequent adoption and diffusion of the LOS narrative.

The narrative of the LOS in Seychelles has mostly been developed and promoted by three key actors: the government, NGOs and individuals. In an interview, a government official (2025, personal communication, 6 August) pointed out that it is mainly being propagated by the government, and specifically by the Blue Economy Department. This was confirmed by the Principal Programme Development Officer in the Ministry of Fisheries and the Blue Economy in Seychelles, Ashley Dias (2025, personal communication, 5 August). There has been significant momentum from the government, even at the national level, to raise awareness of the ocean's importance. In this sense, it is not always about invoking the LOS vocabulary but about speaking about Seychelles in a way that emphasises the attributes that define this narrative, such as the primacy of the ocean. On another level, NGOs have played an important role in promoting the narrative, albeit unevenly. As former President James Michel (2014) observed in a speech, 'NGOs remind us that we are a large ocean nation'. Indeed, Seychelles Country Director of Parley for the Ocean, Alvania Lawen (2025, private communication, 30 July), who is an ardent advocate of the label, also suggested that NGOs have championed this narrative. However, again, it cannot be said that all NGOs hold this view. Shah (2015) asserts that Nature Seychelles does not advocate for this term and that the label originated overseas, being then adopted by Seychellois as a 'sexy label'.

Finally, influential individuals have adopted and circulated the LOS narrative. Former President Michel (2004–2016) was a firm promoter, stating in a 2017 address that 'we must consider ourselves not as small island states but as Large Ocean States when we consider the extent of our Exclusive Economic Zones'. Indeed, Dias (2025, personal communication, 5 August) points out that the narrative started to be emphasised during the Michel presidency, with support from individuals such as former Ambassador Ronny Jumeau. According to the founder of Parley Seychelles, Alvania Lawen (2025, private communication, 30 July), Jumeau was 'the person who brought this term to Seychelles'. Lawen (2025,

private communication, 30 July) recalls how, when she was 14 or 15, Jumeau told her that, although Seychelles is a small island, it is actually a large ocean state. In this sense, the LOS narrative has also been transmitted across generations.

There does not seem to be an official government policy mandating when or how the LOS narrative should be used[55]. Indeed, the term, although featured in speeches by government officials, appears inconsistently. Furthermore, the 'LOS' label is not officially recognised by the UN and therefore has limited use in international forums where funding can be obtained (Shah 2015). Shah (2015) is of the view that there is therefore limited value in the government promoting this narrative. Nevertheless, two distinct channels through which the label is being communicated can be identified. First, the narrative is articulated explicitly, though inconsistently, in government documents, and most prominently, in speeches. As noted, there have been at least three instances in which the LOS narrative has been directly invoked since 2017. Second, the term has been conveyed implicitly through the practices and policies of the Seychelles government, even when the phrase 'Large Ocean State' is not employed. Such practices embody what Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) describes as instances where the narrative is felt rather than named, as demonstrated by the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) negotiations. A prime example of the LOS narrative being practiced but not named is Seychelles' marine spatial planning and the designation of MPAs. In 2012, the Government of Seychelles made the bold pledge to expand marine protection from 0.04% to 30% by 2020, an ambitious target given that the global benchmark of protecting 30% of the oceans was only set for 2030. Indeed, Seychelles was able to announce by 2020 that it had successfully designated 30% of its ocean territory as an MPA, an area larger than Germany's landmass (State House Seychelles 2020).

These examples demonstrate that the LOS narrative is not only a matter of rhetoric but also increasingly embedded in practice. Importantly, while vulnerability-based framing associated with the SIDS narrative remains more effective for mobilising financial resources within the United Nations framework, the LOS narrative serves as a strategic device through which Seychelles articulates leadership, ambition and normative authority in ocean governance. In this sense, actions such as marine spatial planning, the designation of extensive MPAs and

[55] It is worth noting that Mauritius has recently institutionalised the Large Ocean State concept through its Government Programme for 2025-2029, which explicitly states that 'so far considered a Small Island State, Mauritius is positioning itself as a Large Ocean State' (Government of Mauritius 2025). The concept has therefore become part of the country's official developmental and strategic visions. By contrast, there is no equivalent evidence that Seychelles has formally incorporated the concept into a similar domestic policy framework, despite its economy being more heavily dependent on ocean-based sectors than that of Mauritius, whose economy is comparatively more diversified.

leadership in BBNJ negotiations reflect priorities that transcend immediate material gain. The LOS narrative serves to legitimise proactive governance and reposition Seychelles from a recipient of assistance to a pioneer of global ocean stewardship.

REFLECTION ON THE LARGE OCEAN STATE NARRATIVE

LOS as an intentional framing

The LOS narrative has been intentionally and consciously adopted by government officials. While LOS is not always featured in government documents and speeches, this does not indicate that its use is accidental. Indeed, in interviews, government officials from Seychelles indicated that the term was being actively employed to shape how Seychelles is perceived internationally. For example, former Seychellois Ambassador Ronny Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) explained that:

> "People treat you the way you describe yourself. [As SIDS] we are the poor children of the international community. This is where using big ocean states and Large Ocean States is part of punching above our weight and saying, okay, on some maps, you do not even see SIDS. That is how small they think of us. We are going to make sure that when the big ocean states are in the room, you are going to notice us."

Similarly, Christian Faure (2025, personal communication, 17 June), Director General of Regional Affairs in the Foreign Affairs Department of Seychelles, noted that the term is also intentionally used to emphasise the challenges of governance: 'we use terms such as large ocean or large maritime country to make the point and accentuate how difficult it is for us to manage this vast maritime territory.' Importantly, this demonstrates that there is intentionality behind adopting the label, since it is not only about a positive rebranding but also a means of drawing attention to the immense vulnerabilities of these states and the difficulties they have in managing their vast EEZs, especially in terms of illicit activities that take place in the waters. This echoes the view of Dias (2025, personal communication, 5 August), who asserts that 'mechanisms need to be put in place to protect the ocean because we remain vulnerable to so many things beyond our control'. In this sense, the LOS label, while also used to draw attention to the vast ocean space for which Seychelles requires support in management, can be interpreted as a claim to a duty of ocean stewardship. This role is critically important for Seychelles, where 'the ocean is more than just a resource; it is our lifeline, our

identity, and our legacy' (State House Seychelles 2025). Indeed, Seychelles has gone further to assert that it is 'not just a custodian of its waters but a steward of a global marine heritage' (State House Seychelles 2025). These insights illustrate that the LOS narrative functions as an intentional diplomatic framing, operating simultaneously as a tool of empowerment and as a reminder of the structural vulnerabilities associated with the management of extensive oceanic spaces.

Compatibility of LOS and SIDS

No major tensions exist between LOS and SIDS, as the terms are seen as compatible. There are two explanations for this. First, LOS is seen as being able to speak to the SIDS identity (Lawen 2025, personal communication, 30 July). One vulnerability of SIDS is their relatively undiversified economies. In the case of Seychelles, the economy is highly dependent on the ocean, both for its fisheries and for tourism. In this regard, the LOS narrative speaks directly to this, since it emphasises the large ocean space that Seychelles needs to manage. Faure (2025, personal communication, 17 June) points out that LOS is also used to 'accentuate how difficult it is for us to manage this vast zone … this vast maritime territory.' Seen in this way, LOS is an informal category that highlights both the opportunities of the ocean and the challenges it entails. This speaks to what Lawen (2025, personal communication, 30 July) has pointed out, namely, that the LOS label is not about *emphasising* the large ocean zone but about *recognising* that Seychelles has a large ocean. Senior Programme Manager at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Jeremy Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) makes a similar assertion, suggesting that while the SIDS label is purely about vulnerability, which fails to represent the ocean (Shah 2015), the LOS/BOS label could be interpreted as having both elements: vulnerability and untapped potential.

Second, there is little conflict between SIDS and LOS because the latter is not meant to replace the former. As Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) aptly observed in an interview, 'Are we a big ocean state? Are we a small island state? We are both!' Yet not all SIDS are necessarily LOS. For example, Samoa has suggested that it sees no point in subscribing to the LOS narrative because it has nothing to gain from it. This echoes what Hume et al. (2021: 8) note: that LOS as a category does not refer to all states that have a large EEZ but rather those that have a disproportionately large EEZ compared to their land size. Therefore, within the grouping of SIDS, if LOS were to be introduced as an official category to replace SIDS, the strength of the island groupings would diminish, since fewer states would be involved. According to Jumeau (2025,

personal communication, 7 August), 'It will not help us at all to have a new group called Large Ocean States'. Another interviewee (2025, personal communication, 6 August) pointed out that 'we cannot be losing the entirety of SIDS because this showcases the vulnerabilities of SIDS and especially towards climate change and the impacts because of our isolation'. Shah (2015) asks: 'What value would it add to use the term *Large Ocean State*? [...] I think the proliferation of labels nowadays is a big problem'. Thus, it may be better to accord the LOS narrative an important advocacy role in raising awareness of the opportunities and challenges that states with large oceans, such as Seychelles, face without attempting to use the label to create a separate, official new category.

LOS as a manifestation of agency

There are at least three ways in which the Large Ocean State narrative exemplifies agency. First, it is used as a strategy to assert and reassert state sovereignty. Lawen (2025, personal communication, 30 July) explains that the LOS label recognises both the richness and challenges of Seychelles as a state at the most basic level. While it is recognised internationally as a sovereign state, Lawen (2025, personal communication, 30 July) explains that it is often difficult to locate on maps because its landmass is so small. This contributes to a sense of cartographic and political invisibility. The LOS label is about affirming the identity, culture and 'statehood' of Seychelles.

Second, the LOS narrative is a strategic move to reaffirm Seychelles' leadership position (Dias 2025, personal communication, 5 August). There has been significant interest from external actors in the potential of Seychelles' ocean (Dias 2025, personal communication, 5 August). In this sense, Seychelles needed to assert sovereignty over its ocean space. This speaks to the broader issues facing many African states, namely the tension between attracting external finance and development assistance, while still retaining control over their natural resources (Caramento, Saunders and Larmer 2023: 342). Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) observes that Seychelles occupies a pivotal position from which to project influence, a fact that is well recognised by major powers and evidenced by the presence of embassies from all five permanent members of the UNSC. Beyond geopolitics, the LOS framing also serves the very practical purpose of attracting investors, donors and potential development projects.

Third, the LOS narrative is an affirmation, demonstration and manifestation of the agency of certain SIDS. Thus, states like Seychelles are strategically using the terms LOS and SIDS interchangeably, depending on, in Jumeau's words (2025,

personal communication, 7 August), 'where we are and whichever suits us'. As Raguain et al. (2025: 207) point out, the BOS/LOS classification has the potential to complement that of SIDS, but there needs to be an understanding of 'what can be gained or lost from such designations'. A case in point is the toggling between 'Large Ocean State' and 'SIDS' in a speech by a representative of the Seychelles Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Blue Economy (2025) at UNOC 3 in 2025. The SIDS label was used to refer to Seychelles' vulnerabilities: 'like other SIDS, we are not spared the ongoing threats of climate change, overfishing, illegal and unreported and unregulated fishing, marine pollution, and biodiversity loss'. This assertion was followed by an appeal for the need to rethink funding, which suggests that SIDS is used when such states require financial support. However, in the same UN speech, Seychelles was referred to as an LOS that is 99% ocean, and striving 'to lead the way by piloting solutions for the oceans'. In addition, the idea of using blue bonds and debt for ocean swaps was broached. Therefore, despite the vulnerabilities of the SIDS label, Seychelles intentionally positions itself as a steward and leader in ocean governance.

In President Wavel Ramkalawan's (2022) keynote address at the high-level segment of the Great Blue Wall, he highlighted the LOS narrative without referring to SIDS even once. In this instance, specific mention was made of Seychelles as a leader and promoter. This indicates that the toggling of these narratives is strategic. The SIDS framing is about legitimising calls for financing and adaptation support, while the LOS narrative is about asserting authority, expertise and stewardship over the global ocean. From a practical perspective, Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) notes that the LOS/BOS label could be used for ocean-related affairs, and that of SIDS for climate negotiations.

FROM LAND-CENTRIC AFRICA TO LARGE OCEAN STATE THINKING

Underlying the narrative of LOS is a philosophy not of thinking outside the box but of thinking and acting as though the box itself does not exist (Michel 2025, personal communication, 15 August). Traditionally, assessments of a country's wealth have focused on its terrestrial resources and landmass, often resulting in narrow, land-centric policy perspectives. In Africa, the result is that policies are often 'seablind', paying little attention to oceans as a source of prosperity, while also presenting governance challenges (Walker 2015; Mandrup and Vreÿ 2015; Onyenucheya 2023; ADF 2025; Daniels 2025). In contrast, 'thinking as

though there is no box' reorients the locus of value, imagination and governance towards the ocean as an expansive opportunity, identity and source of agency. It involves rejecting the implicit constraints of conventional statehood metrics and embracing the fluidity, interconnectedness and vastness of the maritime realm as intrinsic to Seychelles' national potential. It may be argued that the same logics of extraction and exploitation that govern land can be applied to the ocean; however, as noted, Seychelles clearly emphasises stewardship and protection over resource extraction. In this sense, the LOS narrative is not primarily about legal claims or extraction but about reframing identity, responsibility and political imagination.

Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) provides a pertinent explanation of how this mental shift operates. If an islander stands at the water's edge of their island and turns their back to the ocean, the island appears small, finite, bounded and defined entirely by the visible land. This view reinforces the perception of isolation and limitation. Indeed, Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) points out that 'if we keep saying we are small, then we are going to act small and think small'. However, if that same person turns to face the ocean, with their back to the island, the perception changes entirely: the island becomes vast, extending far beyond sight. From the shore, it is impossible to determine where the island's maritime domain ends or how deep it stretches. In this sense, the horizon should not be considered a constraint but a reminder of infinite possibilities, untapped resources and the boundless connectivity of the ocean space. Former Seychellois President Wavel Ramkalawan (2021) has explained that the oceans surrounding Seychelles should be recognised as 'Africa's most prized natural assets', while also noting that 'our oceans are very strategic economic assets and that could be regarded as the cornerstone of our modern-day development efforts'. In this framing, the sea is not a void that surrounds the island; it is the island's true expanse. This speaks to the seminal work of Epeli Hau'ofa (1994: 152), who stated that the idea of smallness is relative, since it depends entirely on what is included or excluded. Too often, calculations of size are based on the extent of land surfaces that can be seen (Hau'ofa 1994: 152). Thus, the case of Seychelles presents an example to other African states, especially coastal ones with vast shorelines, about the necessity of overcoming seablindness and embracing the ocean as a critical space by fundamentally rethinking how space, scale and value are imagined in African political and economic governance.

CONCLUSION

The LOS narrative provides a more holistic understanding and portrayal of states such as Seychelles. It emphasises, at once, the opportunities that come with being 99% water and the challenges of managing such a large oceanic space. This narrative is a direct assertion of agency by an island state that few would be able to locate on a map. The narrative is strategic, since it affirms Seychelles' sovereignty, draws attention to its vulnerabilities, positions it as an innovator and leader in ocean governance, and makes it attractive to international actors. By adopting this narrative, Seychelles emphasises that SIDS are not merely passive pawns but are actively involved in defining and refining their place in the global order. While the LOS narrative has not yet been institutionalised as an official UN grouping—and it may never achieve such status—its effectiveness lies less in formal recognition and more in its symbolic power. This is not to suggest that the LOS narrative automatically confers either symbolic or material power, nor that it overcomes the structural constraints associated with Seychelles' small population, limited landmass and constrained diplomatic resources. Rather, the narrative broadens the range of resources through which influence can be exercised by directing attention to the strategic, economic and political value of Seychelles' vast maritime domain. In doing so, it opens up new possibilities for thinking about how material capabilities can be derived not only from territorial size or conventional measures of power but also from the opportunities afforded by the ocean.

Given the relatively recent emergence of the LOS framing, it is too early to assess empirically the extent to which it has generated tangible diplomatic or material gains. Nevertheless, even at this nascent stage, the LOS narrative signals that Seychelles is no longer content to be represented solely through the lens of SIDS. It recasts the identity of Seychelles from one of marginality and vulnerability to that of agency, responsibility and strategic significance. More importantly, the significance of the LOS narrative extends beyond island politics. As an African state, Seychelles challenges entrenched imaginaries of African states as passive and without agency in the international arena. Simultaneously, Seychelles' embrace of the LOS identity disrupts the seablindness that has—and continues to plague—the African continent. Therefore, oceans are recast as central to African agency.

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