

Introduction

JAMES RANDALL, *University of Prince Edward Island, Canada*

At last year's Forum, we launched the *2017 Annual Report on Global Islands*. One of the objectives of that Forum and the manuscript that emerged from it was to bring together the collective experience and wisdom of some of the leading international scholars in the interdisciplinary field of island economic change and development. This year we take that one step further. In this *2018 Annual Report*, we focus on the themes of island openness and connectivity. We look at the movement of goods, services, capital, and people between and among islands and mainlands. This includes examining islands as offshore financial centres (see Chapter 6) and the phenomena of islands as free ports or as part of a network of free trade zones (Chapters 5, 8, and 9). We outline the importance of distance and accessibility in understanding the development trajectory of islands (Chapters 2 and 3), some of the policies that help create conducive business environments (Chapter 7), and how the 'marine economy' allows us to better understand how economic change that takes place on the land is closely linked with that which takes place in the surrounding sea (Chapter 4). We hope that this engages

Participants of
the 2018 Islands
Economic Cooperation
Forum, left to right:
James Randall,
Larry Chan,
Wang Sheng,
Carlos Chan,
Jose Chaves Alvarez,
Shen Xiaoming,
John Aquilina,
Willy Ørnebakk,
Chi Fulin,
Godfrey Balddachino,
and Johan Graberg.



readers, inspires further discussion on island development, and strengthens the role that the island of Hainan plays as one of the key sites leading this discussion.

Summary of the 2018 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Islands Economic Cooperation Forum

I had the honour and privilege of moderating this 3rd Annual Islands Economic Cooperation session on 9 April 2018. Consistent with past practice, the session consisted of two parts. First, several senior-level government officials from China and elsewhere in the world gave short keynote speeches. Then a panel of experts from academia, the private sector, and government assembled on stage and were asked to respond to some of the key points raised in the keynote addresses. For this year's session, the keynote speakers and the panelists were asked in advance to address two questions: 1) the role that cooperation and/or collaboration have played in achieving island economic development, and 2) the practices or strategies that island economies could offer to achieve inclusive development through this collaboration. Speakers had the flexibility to examine how partnerships could play out at a variety of scales and among a diverse set of stakeholders, including those internal to one island, those that are part of a network of interconnected islands (e.g., an archipelago in the same island state), or those that might be more applicable across groups of island states or territories. We encouraged



speakers to be more applied in their answers, speaking directly to ‘best practices’ and practical strategies to develop meaningful partnerships that will in turn lead to meaningful economic development.

The keynote speakers included the Governor of Hainan Province, Mr. Shen Xiaoming; the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for the P.R. of China, Mr. Chen Xiaodong; the Minister of Culture, Mr. Vira Rojpojanarat, from Thailand, a mainland country that includes a large number of islands or ‘ko’; and Mr. Willy Ørnebakk, Chair of the Troms County Government in Norway. Like Thailand, Norway’s coastal counties incorporate a large number of near-shore islands, thereby providing them with an appreciation for the significance of islands as part of their cultural identity, economic development, and ecological preservation.

As with many of the speakers, Governor Shen spoke to the importance of openness to further development on islands. In his words: “Openness is not only a development need, but also a survival imperative.” Given his role as political leader on the island of Hainan, it is not surprising that he spoke to the changes that have taken place on this island since gaining its status as a province thirty years ago and how openness is synonymous with progress. This includes a rapid diversification of the economy, moving from a largely agricultural dependence in the past to a much more vibrant and diversified economy now, including the aerospace launching centre at Wenchang and a deep-sea research institute at Sanya. The importance of improving internal connectivity is reflected in the completion of a high-speed rail line encircling the entire island, and the Chinese phrase stated by Governor Shen: “if you want to get rich, build roads first.”

Mr. Chen, China’s Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, noted how the global marine economy is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the world and is estimated to grow to \$3.3 trillion US by 2030. He spoke to the fact that Hainan is in a critical location on the Maritime Silk Road, being a fulcrum between China and other island economies. He expressed strong support for the free(r) flow of goods and factors of production as being essential for development, a point emphasized in several of the chapters in this Report.

One of the underlying themes of the keynote presentations and the panelist contributions was the situation of various islands in relation to the rest of the world. Several speakers and panelists seemed to be trying to make the case that their islands were centrally located in relation to the rest of the world. Forget for a moment that there is no mathematical centre on the surface of a round sphere like the Earth. The notion that so many participants from different parts of the world might believe that each of their islands is central seems to contradict the stereotype of islands as inaccessible and isolated, far from the mainstream of trade and population. So what might explain this contradiction? Is it boastfulness or pride on the part of these islanders? Or is it rooted in something else? Perhaps one part of the explanation is that islanders intuitively think of themselves in relation to all other places around them. Because their societies have been open and connected with the rest of the world for so long, the perception

that they are central, regardless of their measured distance to other world ports, may seem natural to them. Dr. Godfrey Baldacchino suggested that, so long as the Boao Forum is taking place, maybe we should consider this the centre of the world!

This concept of centrality or connection extended to a discussion of inter-island transportation, especially between islands within an archipelago. Mr. Larry Chan, the Chairman of the Liwayway (China) company, noted that one of the greatest challenges to improving connectivity was on the smaller, outlying islands in the Philippines. The fact that perishable produce could not be shipped on or off these islands quickly not only meant that these islands could not develop their commercial agricultural sector but also that islanders on these more remote islands were more likely to consume processed food, and this in turn adversely affected their health. Building an infrastructure to assist these islanders requires cooperation but also investment in crops that might be less perishable.

The moderator challenged the panelists to think about how islands and island governments can play a role in showing all jurisdictions of the world how they might achieve the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Mr. Chi Fulin, President of the China Institute for Reform and Development, said that by promoting island interconnectivity or “opening up”, it provides islands with opportunities to achieve these goals. He used the example of Hainan and how much it had changed in the past thirty years. Governor Shen noted that because islands are so sensitive to environmental change, they are able to show the rest of the world the perils of not striving to achieve the SDGs. This idea that islands can serve as “green incubators”



Director General Wang Sheng and Dr. James Randall, UNESCO Co-Chair in Island Studies and Sustainability and Executive Editor-in-Chief of the 2017 Annual Report, with the 2017 Report in English and in Chinese, at the report’s release at the 2018 Boao Forum.

means that some of the most effective solutions can be scaled up and/or adapted to other jurisdictions. He went on to point specifically to the example of using renewable energy in the transportation sector. Although achieving substantial gains in this sector might be challenging in large jurisdictions, starting at a small scale such as on Jeju Island in South Korea may provide us with lessons that can be used on places as large as Hainan.

Since the theme of this session was about cooperation and collaboration among islands, the moderator also asked the panelists how they were able to maintain long-term collaboration among individuals and groups when decisions often create winners and losers. The panelists agreed that this was a difficult issue. For example, even though Hainan has seen tremendous development over the past thirty years, there are likely some sectors of the community that regret the impacts of these changes. The Maltese Ambassador to China, Mr. John Aquilina, perhaps stated it best by noting that in your decision-making you have to create an environment that serves the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Despite short-term disagreements, islanders understand that in the long term they need to cooperate as a matter of survival.

The session ended with two recommendations for the future. First, there was a call to build upon the good work that has taken place at these sessions and as a result of this partnership. One way to achieve this might be to establish a more formal administrative network that would engage in projects between the annual Forums. This could take the form of a Secretariat, based on Hainan, which would focus on important topics, such as regional tourism integration, expansion of markets for island economies, and research collaboration. This Secretariat could also build intellectual capacity by encouraging exchanges of practitioners, faculty, and students across and beyond the Maritime Silk Road.

Second, there was a call for islands in this region to cooperate specifically on international tourism. Tourism was seen as a basic foundation of shared experiences and cultures. There is a perception that every island is competing for the same group of tourists. In reality, the tourist market is highly differentiated. Each island has its own strengths and attractions that appeal to different kinds of tourists. By cooperating, the region as a whole can achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This discussion of cooperation regarding international tourism could form the theme for the next Boao Islands Economic Cooperation Forum in 2019.