

# Redefining Island Spaces: from *Terra Nullius* to *Indianocéania*

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There is no shortage of television series and movie productions that depict islands as insulated, remote and uninhabitable. Productions like *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960), *Gilligan's Island* (1964), *Robinson Crusoe* (1997), *Survivor* (2000), *Lost* (2004) and *Casteaways* (2018) illustrate this notion well. In such productions, along with the literature that inspired many of these film adaptations, islands are [portrayed](#) as deserted, and effectively as *terra nullius*. In his seminal [essay](#) “Our Sea of Islands,” Epeli Hau’ofa passionately and aptly challenges the portrayal of the Pacific Islands as “islands in a far sea” since such a view, propagated by European and American colonialists, renders islands as “tiny, isolated dots in a vast ocean.” In contrast to the contemporary and prevailing term of ‘Pacific Islands’ which constructs an image of a vast ocean in which small islands are littered, separated and disconnected, Hau’ofa introduces the term *Oceania*.

Hau’ofa explains that before its interaction with nineteenth-century imperialism, *Oceania* denoted a [boundless](#) world - a sea open to anyone who could navigate it. This was a “sea of islands with their inhabitants” which is juxtaposed to descriptions of the region as “islands in a far sea”. This pervasive view of “islands in a far sea” is exactly the sentiment which underlies the above-mentioned productions and contributes to a narrative that marginalises and condemns islands to empty oceanic spaces. In fact, these islands are often depicted as so small that, as argued in an [earlier piece](#), they are frequently omitted from maps, resulting in many people being unaware of their existence. However, if we reconceptualise these islands as not only constituting their land space but also as fundamentally shaped by their oceanic space then, as Hau’ofa aptly suggests, it will no longer be possible to call these islands small.

## *The DNA of the IOC*

A recent visit to the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) headquartered in Mauritius in June, brought to the fore the work of scholars such as [Elizabeth DeLoughrey](#) and [Epeli Hau'ofa](#). In fact, Elizabeth De Loughrey's [argument](#) that “those spaces [islands] deemed the most external to the march of world history may be its sources of production”, could be further developed to suggest that not only are these often marginalised spaces integral to the production of history but they are pivotal actors in shaping the trajectory of the future. In the case of the IOC, it plays a specific role in shaping the Indian Ocean Region or perhaps more accurately, *Indianocéania*. Echoing a similar sentiment as Hau'ofa, the IOC actively promotes the concept of *Indianocéania* as a counter-narrative to externally imposed geographic labels that simply refer to these islands (Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, Réunion and Seychelles) as the Southwestern Indian Ocean islands. Such labels fail to reflect the uniqueness and coherence of the region, as stated in the IOC's [Strategic Development Plan](#) (2023-2033).

But what exactly is this uniqueness and coherence which the IOC's plan refers to? The IOC is the only regional organisation in Africa that is exclusively comprised of islands. Its aim, as expressed in its [mandate](#), is to “strengthen the links between islands of the Indian Ocean region.” Importantly, though, they do not only comprise African islands but because of France's territory of Réunion (more on this later), include islands in the African geographical region. In particular, it is their ‘islandness’ that one participant clearly labelled as being the ‘DNA’ of the IOC. Accompanying this [shared connection](#) of being islands is a common history, shared language as well as a connection by an ocean that is a treasure of biodiversity. In particular, the IOC emphasises that one of the most valuable assets of this region is its [biodiversity capital](#) that must be sustainably exploited for the benefit of the populations of this region. In this sense, the IOC is, as stated by its Secretary-General, Prof. Vêlayoudom Marimoutou, an opportunity for these islands to [signify themselves](#) to the world in all their originality.

## *The IOC as a counterweight to sea-blindness*

During my research stay in Mauritius and conversations with various persons it became increasingly clear to me that ‘[sea blindness](#)’ is not something that is necessarily only restricted to littoral or land-linked countries. Even in countries that are surrounded by vast oceans, ‘sea-blindness’ can remain an obstacle (both at a societal and political level). In one such a discussion in which Mauritius was spoken about specifically, the interviewee noted that ‘sea-blindness’ in their view stems from a colonial history in

which the population was not made to recognise the ocean - the ‘sea’ was absent in ‘being seen’. In the case of Mauritius, the colonial focus on [agricultural monoculture](#), particularly sugar cane, directed attention towards [land-based activities](#). Furthermore, the ocean was not something that the majority of the population could control - it was for the ‘haves’ of society. This historical context could be one (of the many) reason that explains why the sea might not always be central to the national consciousness, despite the island’s maritime surroundings.

If one takes the lack of control over the seas (by both society and political actors) to be one of the contributing factors to sea-blindness, then efforts to reengage and give these actors control over the seas could be seen as efforts to curb sea-blindness. In this sense, I propose that the IOC could be understood as an organisation that counters sea-blindness since it challenges the narratives imposed by colonial history that focused attention almost exclusively on land-based activities.

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It does this by promoting cooperation between its member states in the maritime domain so that they can have better control over their seas. The IOC specifically [states](#), for example, that its “aim is to ensure the IOC Member States, by having greater control over their ocean spaces, take better advantage of regional fishing sectors to meet local needs.” In pursuit of enabling better control over the ocean spaces, there are two very practical manifestations of this, namely the establishment of the Regional Coordination of Operations Centre (RCOC), based in Seychelles, and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar, the former of which, I had the privilege of visiting previously. The RCOC, which is the only of its kind in the world, aims to [promote cooperation](#) with agencies responsible for safety and security at sea. The RMIFC promotes a culture of [maritime information](#) sharing and exchange in the Western Indian Ocean. Together, these two regional agreements contribute to establishing regional ownership over maritime capacity by specifically building [Maritime Domain Awareness](#) (MDA).

## *The ocean as a ‘hyphen’*

Perhaps one of the most [central themes](#) promoted by the IOC is the notion of [solidarity](#) - a shared sense of identity which in many ways could be seen as contrasting the perception of islands as insular and isolated. In fact, the IOC aims to strengthen the links between the islands in the region as stated in its [mandate](#). In this sense, the IOC’s promotion of solidarity may be interpreted as a further counter-narrative to the historical portrayal of islands as only insular entities. In its [Strategic Development Plan \(2023-2033\)](#) the IOC explains that “the ocean is a hyphen”, perhaps alluding to the fact that although islands are geographically insular they are nonetheless still connected. This perspective acknowledges the impacts of insularity but emphasises that it can be mitigated through, for example, the pooling of resources and cooperation. Prime examples of such resource pooling are the abovementioned RCOC and the RMIFC.



**Figure 1: The Indian Ocean Commission [Logo](#)**

In fact, the theme of the ocean as a hyphen, that is, as a connector, is also vividly depicted in the logo of the IOC (see **Figure 1** above). The logo of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is circular, symbolising the unity and cooperation among its member states. The outer circle is interrupted by an orange dot representing the islands, and placing the dot within the circle illustrates the interconnectedness of these islands. They are not dispersed and unconnected but rather, as pointed out earlier, connected by the hyphen which is the ocean. Along with this, the logo features stylized waves, emphasising the maritime identity of the commission. Finally, the design cleverly incorporates the letters "IOC": the orange dot forms the 'i', the inner circle represents the 'o', and the left curved line signifies the 'c'. This logo reflects the theme of connection, unity and solidarity, with the circular motif reinforcing the idea that nobody is excluded.



## Oceanroots governance

In a [message](#) by the Secretary General of the IOC, he explains that the islands comprising the IOC are the sentinel islands of East Africa. During my time spent at the IOC, I realised that it is doing exemplary work in this regard. I was for example, fortunate to attend the [signing ceremony](#) of the new Safe Seas Africa (SSA) programme on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2024. The SSA, with a total budget of 45 million euros, is a new EU programme for maritime security in Africa, which aims to strengthen the Regional Maritime Security Architecture which includes the RCOC and RMIFC mentioned earlier. With the RMIFC responsible for the daily monitoring and tracking of vessels passing through the region and the RCOC responsible for the physical inspection of vessels, such initiatives are a testament to the guarding role the IOC plays.

Other projects, such as the [Port Security and Safety of Navigation](#) programme, works towards building and reinforcing the capacities of Maritime Affairs Authorities<sup>1</sup>. In an interview with the Regional Coordinator for Port Security and Safety of Navigation, he explained the importance of ensuring that ports are compliant security-wise to the International Maritime Convention and that the crew on board vessels are trained to deal with any issues or crises that may occur. In particular, the approach of this programme is centred on multi-agency, with different departments of national authorities involved, such as the Coast Guard Officers, the Criminal Police, the Fisheries Inspectors, and Environmental Inspectors.

Apart from this, however, it can also be argued that the IOC is a guard of the region in an epistemological sense: it plays the role of epistemological sentinel states. They are not only guarding over the physical security of the region but also promote the preservation and protection of an *Indianocéania* cultural identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Countries included in this programme are Angola, Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, and Tanzania.

Through projects such as the [SWIOFISH 2](#), the IOC has organised events bringing together fishermen from Comoros, Madagascar and Mauritius not only to receive training in advanced fishing techniques but also to create a space of unity where they could share their respective cultures and traditions. Other attempts to incorporate the thinking of the member states is the [Resilience of Indian Ocean Coastal Zones](#) programme for strengthening the management of marine and coastal ecosystems by, amongst others, offering doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships for nationals of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. The aim is specifically to include community associations, individuals, NGOs and public authorities when it comes to promoting expertise in integrated coastal zone management. In this sense, the IOC is promoting an approach to governance that is based on grassroots, or should one perhaps say, oceanroots involvement. Through these efforts, the IOC fosters a shared cultural identity and ensures that the knowledge and traditions of the region are preserved and celebrated.

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### ***A French anchor: propelling or restraining the IOC?***

A notable aspect of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is the membership of Réunion, which makes France a member of the IOC. On the one hand, the presence of France brings significant [funds](#) to the region, contributing 40 per cent of the IOC's operating budget, with the Agence Française de Développement as the IOC's second-largest partner. On the other hand, France's membership via Réunion may raise concerns about the organisation's authenticity in representing Africa, given that France is a European power. Additionally, while the IOC's Strategic Development Plan does not mention militarisation – the word "military" does not appear at all – France's Indo-Pacific strategy explicitly includes military elements. In its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), France notes that it "maintains a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific" while one of its objectives, under "Pillar 1: Security and Defence" is to contribute "to the security of regional areas by promoting military and security cooperation." To some extent, it could be argued that there is a measure of incongruence between the IOC's developmental focus and France's strategic military objectives.

It is also interesting to note that no African organisation or regional body has [observer status](#) at the IOC, while several non-African entities, such as China, India, Japan, the European Union, the United Nations, the International Organisation of the Francophonie and the Order of Malta do hold this status. While the reason for this has not been explicitly stated, [Chelin and Reva](#) suggest that this could allude to “some African governments’ fears that foreign states are impinging on their territory.” Indeed, France’s membership to the IOC, via Réunion may, to some extent, hinder more meaningful engagement between the IOC and the African continent. In this sense, the opportunities that France’s membership presents, such as providing funding, need to be balanced with the potential restraining impacts its presence has, namely that it invokes suspicion among African countries regarding the IOC’s authenticity as a representative voice of Africa.

## Conclusion

Moving beyond the cinematic clichés of islands, the IOC champions a vision for the region that bridges past insularity with interconnected futures. As epistemological sentinels, the IOC safeguards not only regional human security but a vibrant *Indianocéania* identity. Such an identity is not ignorant of the challenges that the islands in the region face. With a refreshing pragmatism, defined by the pooling of resources and strong sentiments of solidarity, the IOC demonstrates that insularity does not imply infinite isolation but can be transformed into a resilience that promotes shared stewardship of the oceanic commons.

This Op-ed was compiled by Daniela Marggraff within the context of the Ocean Regions Research Programme of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

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