Unseen realities: the states that are missing from our maps

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Image credit: Flanders Marine Institute (2023)

The conventional portrayal of Africa in maps and infographics often overlooks the existence of African Small Island Developing States (ASIDS). For example, **Figure 1** is a typical representation of Africa where the mainland African continent is found in the middle of the map and the island of Madagascar to the right. However, most of these maps do not show the continent's Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Cabo Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles. Maldives usually also does not show up on maps. Although not part of Africa (it is not a member of the African Union and is considered to be in South Asia), it is an important player in Indo-Pacific politics, in addition to its location in one of the busiest sea trade routes in the world. This is not necessarily a deliberate political project with malicious intent (as has been the case in other instances in history) but rather the result of attempting to adapt maps to print and online formats. It is during this process that small states often disappear. Gosling-Goldsmith *et al.* explain that:

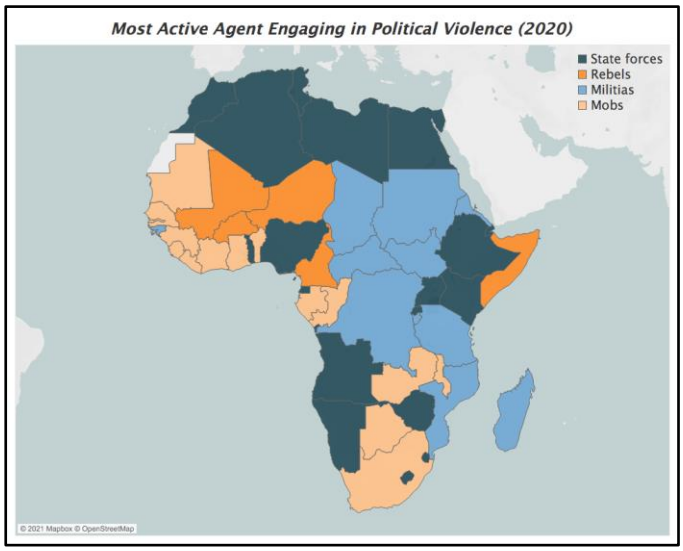

***Figure 1:** Map of Africa*

> *When global data are visualised in small-scale maps, the challenge to see small areas translates to the challenge to see values for small nations or states.*

While these authors maintain that the generalisation process where small areas often disappear is “in itself not the problem”, this piece contends that it contributes to an unconscious reinforcement of an inaccurate perception of Africa. For example, many may not be aware of the fact that South Africa has the Marion and Prince Edward Islands which provide South Africa with an extended Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and enhanced economic opportunities. Similarly, Seychelles, as the most developed country in Africa, is overlooked for its potential development and social integration model for other states. Moreover, countries like Saõ Tome and Principe are often unknown to people (see **Figure 2** for a map that includes the ASIDS). Recognising and including SIDS in maps is not only about accuracy but also about acknowledging the diversity, contributions, and potential of these often-overlooked countries. At the same time, it points to the fact that maps – as visual representations of space – are not objective but rather constructed realities.

Figure 2: *Map of the ASIDS (in red)*

Understanding maps as constructed realities

Maps are not objective realities since they rely on cartographers who are influenced by the political and social milieu of the time. Therefore, a map does not:

> *Re-present the world or make the world, it is a co-constitutive production between inscription, individual and world; a production that is constantly in motion.*

In this sense, maps are never static or complete but emerge overtime and are mutable. For instance, during the 6th century, the Japanese did not travel extensively and were rather concentrated on their identity as a grouping of islands. Consequently, maps of Japan focused on the importance of water, which was highlighted by the exaggeration of rivers and coastal peninsulas. At other times during history, cartographers projected their religious values on maps. Ancient Indians, for example, did not abide by scales when

drawing maps but rather portrayed holiest sites as unrealistically large. On some Christian maps, important sites or routes from other religions were excluded from representation on the maps or displayed less conspicuously. In essence, maps are always created by someone and for someone and are therefore largely subjective. Maps can therefore also be an expression of power.

Power dynamics in mapping

Klinghoffer (2006) explains that "maps represent power and are not just schematic devices". They are "geared toward representing selective portions of the total reality". That is to say, different persons require maps for different purposes and thus want different features accentuated. For example, navigators would prefer to have great coastal detail, religious establishments seek accuracy in terms of information about holy sites and pilgrimage routes, and military planners are concerned with the terrain. Considering this, the way that a map is drawn will always lead to the prioritisation of certain features and the subsequent marginalisation of others. For example, in centering world maps in the Pacific, the Chinese accentuate their own position, but at the expense of the Atlantic Ocean, such that the Atlantic is marginalised and not depicted in its full width. The Mercator projection is probably most well-known for distorting reality, with Greenland being a similar size to Africa on the map when in reality it is actually only one-fourteenth of its size. In some instances, maps have intentionally been drawn incorrectly so as to fool others. During the late 1930s, the Soviet Union intentionally altered coastlines and moved rivers, railroad hubs, and bridges to mislead the enemy. In this sense, maps are not simply neutral representations of geographic reality but they can be used to yield power that is shaped by various agendas.

Rethinking cartography for inclusivity

As mentioned earlier, this piece does not go so far as to claim that islands are intentionally omitted from maps or that this a deliberate political project. Rather, this piece suggests that its omission is a reflection of what we currently consider as important. Hegel once suggested that each historical period possesses its own unique spirit or worldview, known as the "*Zeitgeist*", which influences the cultural, political, and intellectual landscape. In the same sense, maps can be understood not as static representations but as dynamic reflections of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. That is, maps are imbued with the ethos of their creation era, influencing what is included, highlighted, or omitted.

Perhaps then, the question that needs to be asked is: what does the way that maps are currently drawn tell us about the worldview that permeates our thinking? This piece is of the view that currently, world maps focus on the territory as opposed to 'merritory'. This may potentially reflect the *Zeitgeist* of our time which emphasises a prioritisation of the land over the ocean. To correct this, this piece suggests a counter-cartography based on more egalitarian principles that emphasise ocean size equally to land size and that recognise the existence of small island states, especially as part of Africa.

Consider for example, how the same map presented in the beginning would look if, instead of focusing only on land as a characteristic that qualifies it for visibility on a map,

Figure 3: *Map of the world including maritime territory (Flanders Marine Institute 2023)*

a country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) was considered too. As seen in **Figure 3** all of a sudden islands that were usually omitted from existence are now brought to life. Spaces that were previously projected as void and empty are now accurately represented as actually existing. A further example is provided in **Figure 4**. Instead of just omitting those countries that have too small territory, they are drawn on the map based on their exclusive economic zone. Such maps are far more inclusionary than maps that are based on pure territory.

What is the cost of the current invisibility of islands?

On the one hand, there is a moral argument to be made in terms of increasing the visibility of SIDS on maps. There is something inherently immoral about failing to recognise the existence of groups and countries. In this sense, equal visibility on maps is a matter of respect and fairness. On the other hand, in a much more pragmatic sense, there is a massive cost too if we continue to comply with the invisibility of these islands on maps. Li Junhua, the Secretary-General for the SIDS4 Conference recently stated that “Small Island Developing States represent a small percentage of the world’s population, but their fate has consequences for all of us”. That is why the SIDS4 conference that will be taking place between 27 and 30 May 2024 in Antigua and Barbuda is of pivotal importance, not only to SIDS but to all countries. The future of these islands has an impact on other states, yet they remain invisible on most maps.

Already, countries such as Australia have to address questions relating to displaced citizens from these islands. In the future, issues of climate refugees (for whom there is currently no legal status) will become of paramount importance. Furthermore, while issues such as rising sea levels may not pose an existential threat to mainland countries such as South Africa at the moment, they may pose significant challenges in the future when combined with storm events and spring tides, can lead to the extensive damaging of infrastructure especially in coastal areas that are experiencing a large population boom. Furthermore, in financial terms, SIDS are currently leading the way in innovative financing. Seychelles, for example, has become the first country to make use of blue bonds, which allows it to direct funds to support fisheries, marine conservation, and other blue sustainable economy sectors. It furthermore became the first country to introduce a ‘debt-for-nature’ swap deal in the ocean domain, where parts of its debt repayment are channeled to invest in blue economy initiatives. In the future, Seychelles can become a valuable partner to other countries in terms of information sharing and capacity building.

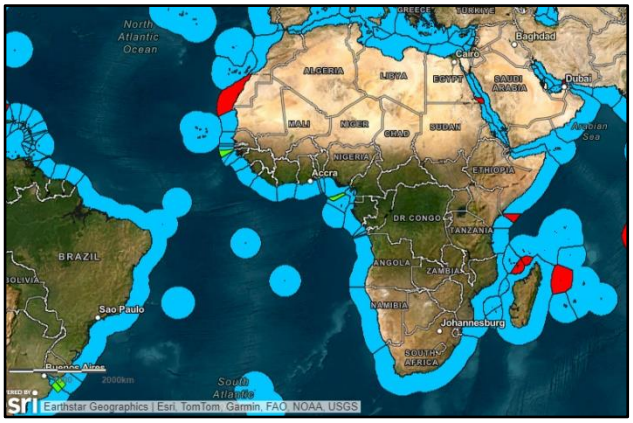

Figure 4: *Map of Africa including maritime territory (Flanders Marine Institute 2023)*

The issues that impact SIDS are *not* confined to these spaces and places. Increasingly, issues such as high sea level rises will have implications for other states as well, specifically in the legal domain. Currently, under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) maritime zones are calculated from baselines such as low-water lines along the coast or other geographical features such as rocks, low tide elevations, and reefs. Traditionally, there has been a domination of the land over the sea in terms of maritime delimitation, where the baseline will move as geographical changes occur in the coastline. As a result, maritime zones may become smaller or disappear completely. Geographical features may be reclassified such that a country loses its right to its exclusive economic zone. Chen and Xu (2022) explain that:

> *It is, therefore, possible that sea-level rise may, under some circumstances, cause significant changes to islands' capability to 'sustain human habitation or economic life of their own' and turn a full-rights island into a 'barren rock'.*

In response to this, leaders in the Pacific have decided to establish permanent maritime boundaries notwithstanding high sea level rise. While islands undoubtedly face these issues now, other countries are going to be facing these same issues in the next 10 to 50 years. In essence, the cost of overlooking SIDS extends beyond just geography. The issues that affect SIDS resonate globally and should not be ignored.

Towards a paradigm shift: a maritime Zeitgeist

While this piece started by outlining the issue that SIDS are invisible in certain map projections, there is a deeper point to be made, namely that there is a need for a Kuhnian paradigm shift – a shift from a traditional territorial paradigm to a maritime paradigm – one that reflects a maritime *Zeitgeist*. The traditional territorial paradigm focuses on land-based sovereignty and boundaries, often leading to the exclusion or marginalisation of maritime territories such as small islands and archipelagos. Such a paradigm may prioritise larger land masses and overlook the unique challenges and contributions of maritime regions. In contrast, a maritime paradigm entails a recognition of the intrinsic value and importance of maritime territories in global discourse, policymaking, and representation. Such a shift would espouse a maritime *Zeitgeist*, or perhaps, and more accurately, a terraqueous *Zeitgeist* that reflects an awareness of the interconnectedness of oceans, islands, and the land, as well as a true reflection of exactly what Africa 'looks like', which is fundamentally important as it creates a more holistic approach to the challenges the world faces in the 21st Century.

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.

Cover image: ARCGIS (publisher) and the Flanders Marine Institute (2023) (base map).
Note: Figure 3 and **Figure 4** were created using the ArcGIS software. The original base map which shows the exclusive economic zones is credited to the Worldwide Fund for Nature (2017) as well as the Flanders Marine Institute (2023).

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