

Traditional concepts of size

ber of inhabitants or area, and structural variables with either consequences for or connections with size.¹

As can easily be seen in Table A.1, possible definitions of country size are manifold. Furthermore, the concepts in use are often not very precise, and there is no consensus on the appropriate definition of smallness. The most common characteristic used to define the size of jurisdictions is the number of inhabitants.²

It is probably not possible to find a definition of size that is fundamental in explaining all characteristics of small states in general. This situation might lead to doubt that the small state can become a useful unit of analysis in international relations. An exact definition is, however, not necessary to study various aspects of states and to compare them in terms of size. (Olafsson, 1998, p. 8)

It is not only a daunting task to collect all hitherto used definitions; it is also not meaningful to dedicate too much time to the process of definition. Small countries differ in terms of population (e.g., Nauru with 11,000 inhabitants, Luxembourg with 416,000 inhabitants and Bangladesh, a country which about 122 million inhabitants which is still considered small in comparison to its giant neighbors), in terms of area (compare, e.g., Monaco and Iceland), and in geographic characteristics (compare Liechtenstein and Kiribati) and economic welfare (compare Liechtenstein and Western Samoa). They also differ in many other cultural, economic, political and social characteristics (only some of which are mentioned in Table A.1 as structural variables). Nevertheless, small countries share some important similarities, like problems connected with the provision of public goods or the problem of representation in and/or influence on international politics. Furthermore, the most important common feature is, of course, that they are all internationally recognized, sovereign countries.

To assess certain problems or properties of small countries theoretically, it is often not necessary to refer to an absolute definition of smallness. Most of the problems or questions implicitly offer a natural

¹ E.g., cultural heterogeneity is assumed to be more important in larger countries than in very small countries.

² Note that the list of definitions in Table A.1 is by no means exhaustive.