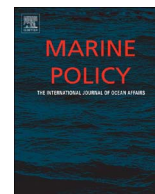




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Towards defining the Blue Economy: Practical lessons from Pacific ocean governance

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ABSTRACT

Governments and regional agencies of the Pacific Islands are strengthening their commitment to sustainable oceans management through proactive policies and programs. The Blue Economy concept is increasingly being invoked, yet clarity on definitions and implementation steps remain vague. This paper reviews reports, academic literature and regional speeches to develop a Blue Economy conceptual framework which is then applied to three case studies from the fisheries sector – small scale fisheries, urban fish markets and onshore tuna processing. The cases illustrate an imbalance in attention paid to key components of the Blue Economy and missed opportunities for integration across scales, time and stakeholders with a few noteworthy exceptions. Issues of power, agency and gender remain weakly addressed even in the most recent initiatives. While clearly defining components of the Blue Economy provides a valuable tool for assessing coverage of key elements of sustainable ocean management, it is less obvious that the new label, Blue Economy, significantly advances practice beyond existing sustainable development frameworks. A proliferation in terms adds more complexity to an already challenging management space. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework is useful for structuring evaluations of practice, and helping to reveal missing ingredients necessary for the sustainable development of oceans.

1. Introduction

Oceans, and the valuable resources they contain, are integral to the lives and identities of Pacific Islanders. Hau'ofa [29] in his seminal article *Our Sea of Islands* argued that it is the oceans and people's relations with them that define Pacific Islanders. A decade later similar sentiments are still being expressed by leaders in the region. In 2015, speaking in her role as Pacific Ocean Commissioner, Dame Meg Taylor described the ocean as central to Pacific lives: "it is our culture, our livelihood, our economy and, for many, the ocean is the mother of all things" [66].

Regional and national policy attention to oceans governance in the South Pacific has sharpened in response to increasing anthropogenic threats, mainly from population growth, intensifying resource use and climate change (c.f. [24,72,49,61]). In response, political leaders are putting oceans on national and international agendas, eager to maximize revenues, sustain livelihoods and minimize coastal vulnerability and ecological degradation. Recently, the leaders of the Pacific island countries (PICs) were instrumental in pushing to have oceans as one

goal of the 2030 Sustainable Development agenda [50,51].

Translating words into action, however, can be complex because of different interpretations of what sustainable oceans governance entails [57], the multiple jurisdictions in the region, and competing interests. In the South Pacific, twenty-two island states and territories share ocean resources with exclusive economic zones (EEZs) that cover an area roughly the size of Africa. Ocean resource management is complicated further by overlapping, and at times competing, institutional arrangements at national and regional levels. At the local level, national governments often fail to adequately resource the necessary governance and management frameworks. Few government agencies, at any level in the South Pacific, have the capacity to actively manage across their areas of responsibility [26].

Regionally and internationally, the PICs and their leaders have begun to invoke the Blue Economy concept (c.f. [44,65,69]) to capture the multi-sectoral and multi-scalar objectives of ocean governance. The Blue Economy aims to balance sustainable economic benefits with long-term ocean health [16,69], in a manner which is consistent with sustainable development and its commitment to intra- and inter-

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generational equity [35,75]. The term has also been used to give greater recognition to the many, though often not priced, ocean values ranging from cultural worth and village-based subsistence economies, to commercial and industrial commodities [30]. Under this definition not all ocean-based activities are consistent with the Blue Economy concept, because many ocean activities are not sustainable.

This paper examines the Blue Economy concept as an analytical frame for assessing initiatives aimed at achieving sustainable oceans development and management, with a particular focus on fisheries as an example of an important sector within a Blue Economy. Fisheries represent an essential economic sector for many PICs. Using existing literature, a Blue Economy conceptual framework is developed and then a case study approach used to assess its utility in analyzing fisheries management and development issues and opportunities. The case studies are drawn from Solomon Islands because of its heightened attention to fisheries and oceans policy in relation to other South Pacific countries. It has recently revised its fisheries legislation, is exploring the development of a national oceans policy, and has a vibrant fishery sector which involves multiple stakeholders operating at different scales. The policy implications of a rapidly evolving Blue Economy, across multiple sectors, are highlighted.

2. Study method

Despite the Blue Economy concept being increasingly invoked as an ideal, it is not well conceptualized with an explicit mapping of its key components, and hence its utility to date has been more conceptual or political, than practical. Literature, policy documents, and speeches by leaders in the South Pacific, are used to map out key components of the Blue Economy in a conceptual framework. The framework is not exhaustive, but rather indicative of the objectives and values of the Blue Economy as regionally defined. As a conceptual framework its utility is heuristic—a means to stimulate discussion that can enable researchers and practitioners to better understand, assess, evaluate and, if necessary, contextually modify, the Blue Economy concept and its implementation for the sustainable development of oceans.

A case study approach was considered most suitable to the exploratory nature of this research [17], and the research aim to examine contemporary approaches taking account of context [79]. Case studies also provide rich and nuanced insights into how policies and regulations are implemented, and the real world political-economy factors affecting practice [21]. This approach is also well suited to data poor areas of inquiry where more in-depth understanding is captured through a combination of observation, interviews and document analysis.

Three case studies were conducted, based on an “information-oriented selection approach” which aims to maximize the utility of information from a small selection of cases [22]. To achieve this, the case studies varied on one core element, scale. They include small-scale fisheries management (local), national fisheries markets (national, linking rural-urban areas), and industrial fisheries development (national – international)—these being priority areas for national development in Solomon Islands. The case studies are used to examine how linkages work across jurisdictions, across agencies (horizontal integration) and between levels of governance (vertical integration).

This article draws extensively on published literature and reports to analyse the cases using the Blue Economy framework. This was complemented by local insights. Two of the authors are well placed to observe the evolving ocean management processes in Solomon Islands, being employed in the local fisheries and environment sector. The authors also validated findings with local experts to gain further insights.

3. The Blue Economy conceptual framework

The term ‘Blue Economy’ first gained traction in PICs in 2011, largely as a complement to the ‘green economy’ concept – a discourse

where ecosystems integrity is embraced as being fundamental to sustainable socio-economic resource use [57]. The Blue Economy, while a relatively new term, is reflected in regional initiatives aimed at sustainable oceans management. For example, the Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Policy [59] and the Framework for Pacific Oceanscape [49], never explicitly mention the Blue Economy, but do espouse some of its values, calling for improved oceans governance through the sustainable use of ocean resources, the better coordination of management across scales and time, and the protection of oceans’ cultural and natural integrity.

The specification of ‘blue’ makes explicit the focus on oceans, as opposed to land-based resources. For PICs, the Blue Economy refers to the sustainable management of ocean resources to support livelihoods, more equitable benefit-sharing, and ecosystem resilience in the face of climate change, destructive fishing practices, and pressures from sources external to the fisheries sector (Pacific SIDS 2011). The ideas are not new to the region, Pacific islanders have been implementing elements of coastal resource management for thousands of years through traditional practices like harvesting limitations, closed seasons, limited use rights, and the protection of ecologically and culturally significant sites [32,55].

In this context, the Blue Economy concept does not sit comfortably with conventional definitions of economy (c.f. [74]) with their focus on production and allocation processes. Instead, ecological economics definitions with their greater emphasis on scale, context and socio-ecological relations are better aligned:

“... the interaction and co-evolution in time and space of human economics and the ecosystems in which human economics are embedded. It uncovers the links and feedbacks between human economics and ecosystems, and so provides a unified picture of ecology and economy” [78].

Using the ecological economics lens to better define the Blue Economy term makes it more compatible with sustainable development concepts promoted in the region and by UN agencies that strive to integrate ecological, social and economic systems (c.f. [70,75]).

The Blue Economy focus on the sustainability–food security–economic development nexus is relevant in the region where reliance on subsistence fisheries is high, and revenues from national fisheries can generate as much as 68% of GDP, for example Kiribati [31]. Fish make up 50–90% of the animal protein intake [7] in PICs and artisanal fishing provides the primary or secondary source of income for up to 50% of households [61]. As pressures mount from current and new economic activities, as well as changing demographics and climate, concerns about sustainable use of oceans are coming to the fore, with some pushing for better local access to the revenues from ocean based activities [28].

The examination of the Blue Economy presented here draws on many key policy framework documents from the South Pacific aimed at achieving more sustainable ocean management. A sectoral example includes a Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries produced by two regional agencies—the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) and the Pacific Community (SPC) which outlines goals and indicators for sustaining fish stocks, livelihoods and food security, and is monitored through an annual fishery report card [62,63]. Multi-sectoral frameworks include the SAMOA Pathway (2014) which incorporates an oceans agenda in its broader sustainable development framework, calling for actions to sustain ecosystem services, livelihoods, economic development and food security. It promotes the importance of institutional integration across national, subregional and regional scales, and better, cost-effective monitoring and surveillance.

These themes are also strongly reflected in more targeted papers and strategies such as the regional technical paper for biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction [47], and the Noumea Strategy [61] for coastal fisheries with its desired outcomes relating to: sustainable

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