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REFRAMING BLUE GROWTH VERSUS BLUE EQUITY A LITERATURE SYNTHESIS, COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS & POLICY FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Expanding use of Ocean space for energy generation, food production, conservation and preservation, transportation, tourism, carbon markets and other economic activities, leading to a growing debate about sustainable blue economy. This paper draws on a qualitative synthesis and comparative analysis of three case studies (offshore wind in the North Sea, marine conservation in Mafia Island, Tanzania, and Locally Managed Marine Areas in Fiji) to critically review the connections between Blue Growth and Blue Equity. Blue Growth is considered as a development approach based on technological innovation, investments, market mechanisms and spatial optimization; while Blue Equity is one that has a focus on recognition, participation, rights, distribution and protection of small-scale and customary users. Ocean based development has been found to create employment, energy, food and investment opportunities, and environmental benefits, but these benefits are not automatically equitable in distribution. There are specific risks when CA is denied for conservation or privatization or when CA is denied as part of a large-scale investment without meaningful participation or benefit sharing. Through the comparative cases it is clear that exclusion does not have to be a side effect of blue development, but rather depends on governance arrangements that create either concentrated or shared costs and benefits. Thus, the paper suggests a concept of an equity-integrated blue development framework that is based on co-management, legalized small scale fishing and customary rights, social impact assessment, participatory marine spatial planning, and community-oriented finance and measurable equity indicators. The paper suggests that the best policy is not to shun economic uses of the ocean, but to reconfigure blue development to ensure that ecological sustainability, economic value creation and social justice are all mutually reinforcing goals.

KEYWORDS: *Blue Growth; Blue Equity; blue economy; blue justice; marine spatial planning; small-scale fisheries; ocean governance; coastal communities*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is now widely understood that the global ocean is a vital arena for economic growth, environment, technological development and social change. In most of the development thinking of modern times, economic activity was largely linked to land-based resources and sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, urbanization, infrastructure and land-based trade. But the scarcity of land based resources, rising food and energy demand, climate

change and development of marine technology has brought attention towards the economic potential of oceans and coastal areas. The "Blue Acceleration" is referred to by Jouffray et al. (2020) as the swift growth and intensification of human activities in the ocean. Marine areas are therefore being used for offshore renewable energy, fisheries, aquaculture, tourism and maritime transport, as well as biotechnology, conservation and blue-carbon projects.

This ever increasing acknowledgement of the ocean as an economic frontier has helped to shape the blue economy and the concept of Blue Growth. The concept of Blue Growth, in general, highlights the sustainable use of marine resources to create economic value, while preserving the ecological health of marine ecosystems. The methodology deals with the issue of technological innovation, investment and efficient use of resources, combining these with economic development and environmental protection. The blue economy can also offer opportunities for economic diversification for developing countries, job creation and employment, investments, and utilization of under-developed coastal and marine resources. Aijaz and Butt (2021) highlight the potential of the blue economy to support sustainable economic development by bridging marine resources with broader development goals. Therefore, beyond just an environmental idea, the blue economy is now regarded as a development strategy that can help the national economic transformation. The current state of Blue Growth, however, depends on the institutional, financial, technological and human-capital capabilities of various countries and communities. Inclusive blue development cannot be achieved through the development of marine resources alone. The participation of actors in emerging blue industries can be defined by investment capacity, infrastructure, technological capabilities, governance institutions and access to markets. For Pakistan, Aijaz et al. (2021) discuss the need for investment to realize the potential of marine resources as a successful blue growth and the structural challenges that can impede this transition process. This is important in the context of developing economies as the growth of capital-intensive marine industries can offer new economic opportunities, but can also exacerbate inequalities between large investors and resource-dependent coastal communities. This debate has now shifted from the issue of the economic value of the sea to one of who benefits, who is included in decision-making, who is included in the laws dictating their use and who suffers environmental and social damages. All of these concerns have helped shape the perspectives of Blue Equity and Blue Justice.

The concept of Blue Growth is focused on economic opportunity, innovation, investment and sustainable use of resources, whereas Blue Equity is more focused on environmental justice, social inclusion, recognition of rights, participation and equitable distribution of marine resources and benefits. The concept of blue growth can create substantial social risks if it is not paired with adequate protection measures for vulnerable populations and governance structures that are inclusive and equitable (Bennett et al., 2021). Equity is a specific concern as coastal communities and small-scale fishers are often directly reliant on marine ecosystems for their livelihoods, food security, cultural identity and social welfare. Due to the growth of offshore infrastructure, marine protected areas, tourism, aquaculture, conservation programs and other ocean-related activities, the existing access patterns to marine resources may change. Communities may have less control of how marine space is used, where decisions are mostly made by central planning or market-oriented processes. Thus a development program that benefits the nation could also be damaging to the local people's livelihood. Blue Equity thus calls into question the notion that economic growth is always inclusive. Another facet of this debate is whether communities can meaningfully engage in new opportunities to a thriving blue economy. Equity does not just apply to livelihoods not being lost, it also applies to the development of skills and capacities for communities to engage in new livelihoods. Education, skills, awareness and human capital are, as a consequence, key inputs in inclusive blue development. Aijaz et al. (2023) highlight the importance of Blue Education in the

creation of knowledge and societal capacity for sustainable blue growth. This from an equity point of view implies that the people living on the coast should not just be beneficiaries or affected stakeholders. They should be afforded opportunities to develop knowledge, technical skills and capabilities to become active participants in the developing blue economy.

Economic development and social equity becomes more apparent in marine spatial planning and conservation. Marine spatial planning can offer a valuable tool to manage the competing uses of marine space, limit conflicts and help safeguard ecosystems. Planning processes, however, can also be mechanisms of exclusion and the interests of powerful commercial actors are given greater precedence than the interests of the customary users. In the same way, marine protected areas could play a role in conserving biodiversity, but could be highly costly to livelihoods if the communities that depend on them are not involved in the decision making process or if they are excluded from access to their traditional fishing grounds. Bennett et al. (2019) highlight the need to consider social justice as an integral part of marine conservation and not just an afterthought. The underlying concerns are echoed in other relevant literature on ocean grabbing and resource enclosure. Franco et al. (2014) show that it is not just about the physical appropriation of resources, but also the changes in access, control, governance, and allocation to the resources. In sea-based ecosystems, enclosure can happen in many different ways, including large-scale investments, the development of infrastructure, conservation restrictions, spatial zoning, and licensing systems. These processes have the potential to negatively impact small-scale and customary users, as they may have fewer resources to negotiate conflicting uses of marine space, either in terms of money, technology or institutions. Bavinck et al. (2017) also point to the governance obstacles in SSF and the need to consider local knowledge and local institutions.

The real question is not whether Blue Growth or marine economic development should be discarded. Instead, the big challenge is how blue development can be organized in a way that both economic opportunity and ecological sustainability and social justice reinforce, and do not contradict, each other. Governance arrangements that can tackle unequal power and access can deliver benefits for investment, innovation, employment, renewable energy, food production and the environment, but only Blue Growth can do so. Marine resource development processes are participatory and affected communities are recognized as rights-holders, and economic and environmental benefits are fairly distributed for Blue Equity. In this context, this paper critically reviews the relationship between Blue Growth and Blue Equity by conducting a qualitative literature synthesis and comparative analysis of three cases: offshore wind development in the North Sea, marine conservation on Mafia Island (Tanzania) and Locally Managed Marine Areas (Fiji). The study examines the impact of governance structures on access to marine resources, benefit and cost distribution, decision making and the role of small-scale and coastal communities. It also establishes a framework for blue development with an equity lens to balance economic growth and social and environmental justice. The paper holds that the future of sustainable ocean development is not about growth versus equity, but of ensuring that equity, participation, capacity development and rights protection are integrated into the institutional framework of Blue Growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Blue Growth and the Logic of Ecological Modernization

The concept of Blue Growth is linked to the intellectual capital of ecological modernization and market-led environmental governance. Ecological modernization sees environmental issues as problems that can be solved with technological, institutional and economic change (Mol and Spaargaren 2000). When applied to marine resources, such a view underscores the notion that the capacity of societies to produce economic value may be achieved through innovation, a better regulatory framework, more efficient use of resources, and private investment, which will in turn reduce the environmental stress

associated with the resource. The ocean is an economic space within this, where ecosystem services, energy production, fisheries, aquaculture, tourism and carbon sequestration can be quantified and quantified and become part of development planning. The practical benefits of the approach are that it acknowledges the economic value of marine ecosystems, and provides incentives for investing in technologies and activities that are compatible with low-carbon development. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022) considers blue transformation to be about more sustainable aquatic food systems, and the need to change production and governance practices. But economic assessment of marine resources also poses issues of commodification and access. If a marine space is viewed as an economic resource, then the allocation of that space could give more weight to the interests of those who can afford to participate as well as those who have more technical or political power. Rather than the markets themselves being the problem, it is the assumption that market allocation will generate socially desirable outcomes that is a problem. An environmentally efficient development model may have very unequal outcomes at the local level.

2.2 Blue Equity, Blue Justice, and Political Ecology

Blue Equity is rooted in political ecology, environmental justice, human rights frameworks and small-scale fisheries research. The main idea is that the governance of the environment is never solely technical, since governance over space in the ocean has a bearing on access, authority, livelihoods, and distribution. The distributive and political implications of marine spatial planning, conservation zoning, investments and licensing systems are therefore pertinent. Bennett et al. (2019) make the point that social justice is significant to marine conservation, and so should consider the social circumstances of the people impacted by conservation actions. Bennett et al. (2021) also classify blue-justice issues into three categories: recognition justice, procedural justice, and distributive justice. Recognition relates to the visibility and recognition of the identities, knowledge systems, rights and vulnerabilities of affected groups. Procedural justice is related to communities' ability to meaningfully engage in decision making. Distributive justice is about the distribution of benefits, costs, opportunities and risks. The Blue Equity lens is especially relevant to small-scale fisheries as many coastal residents rely on marine resources for their livelihood, food security, culture and social identity. Bavinck et al. (2017) demonstrate how governance of small-scale fisheries is a multifaceted institutional problem, and how formal policy systems do not always account for the local knowledge and customary arrangements. Equity, therefore, needs to go beyond consultation and to institutional arrangements to enable local communities to influence decisions that affect their livelihoods directly.

2.3 Ocean Grabbing, Enclosure, and Unequal Access

The term ocean grabbing is one of the largest commonalities in the critical literature and the Blue Equity framework. Ocean grabbing is a general term used to describe a range of processes in which marine areas and/or resources are enclosed, privatized, appropriated, or transferred in a manner that diminishes access to or control over them, by customary users. Franco et al (2014) show that the process of resource grabbing can also lead to changes in governance and control processes and not just physical appropriation. The same concept can be extended to the marine environment in the form of licensing, zoning, conservation measures, leases, infrastructure development, and investment schemes. This can therefore lead to conflicting results with marine spatial planning. Spatial planning can help to mitigate conflicts among sectors and enhance ecological governance, on the other hand. In contrast, technical agencies, investors or dominant industries dominate planning processes can result in spatial rationalization as a process of enclosure. The question is not if, but who, is using marine spatial planning and how are communities affected by it protected.

2.4 Conservation and the Problem of Blue-Fencing

Another flash point is conservation. MPAs can have tremendous benefits for the environment, but at the same time conservation can have costs to communities if customary rights and livelihood dependency are not recognized by the limitation of access. Bennett et al. (2019) warn against conservation strategies which focus on local people as pressures to ecosystems, rather than rights holders and possible partners in stewardship. This concern is reflected in the idea of blue-fencing: marine areas are fenced to limit customary access, but permit certain commercial or external activities. These can be seen as an apparent environmental triumph but social costs. Literature, therefore, offers support for the transition from exclusionary conservation to participatory and rights-based approaches to conservation, especially when the local community has an existing body of knowledge and institutions to manage marine resources.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative literature synthesis and comparative case analysis. As methodology, it aims to be able to draw out the concepts, mechanisms and governance patterns that are repeated in literature, not to quantify statistical relationships. The approach is suitable since the research question focuses on the distribution of authority, benefits, costs and access to the ocean among social groups.

A structured narrative synthesis was used to complete a literature review. The material collected was structured in five analytical themes (1) Conceptual foundations of Blue Growth; (2) The principles of Blue Equity and Blue Justice; (3) Resource allocation and enclosure of oceans; (4) Technological and financial asymmetries; (5) Conservation, participation and community rights. These themes were then analyzed in relation to each other and how they were manifested in the selected cases. This process is similar to the logic for qualitative review research in which evidence is analyzed thematically to reveal patterns and tensions not to identify a single quantitative effect.

Empirical component: three purposively selected cases in different geographical and institutional settings. The North Sea case is a high impact offshore renewable energy project, and is an example of the distribution of marine space between industrial and small scale users. The Mafia Island case is a conservation model that involves restriction in the protected areas and external interests in development. Fiji is an example of community-led marine governance using Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs). The cases were chosen because they collectively offer a range of distinct examples of exclusion, contested access and community-based governance. Four dimensions are used in the comparative analysis: governance authority, rights and access, distribution of economic benefits and costs, and participation in decision-making. This analysis is not intended to be statistically generalizable. Rather, the cases are analyzed to illustrate how inequities are either reproduced or eliminated through institutional design. It is thus interpreted that the cases illustrate the process of theory building and policy development in the study.

One drawback is that it is a qualitative synthesis, not a systematic review with a systematic search of the database, formal inclusion and exclusion criteria and a meta-analysis. Therefore, the results presented should be seen as an analytical synthesis of the literature and cases included in the study, and not as an exhaustive list of all literature published on Blue Growth and Blue Equity.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BLUE GROWTH AND BLUE EQUITY

According to the literature, the key difference between Blue Growth and Blue Equity is the definition of what a value would look like, who would be responsible for the governance, and who would be the beneficiaries of the justice. While Blue Growth focuses on the question of how marine resources can be used beneficially and sustainably, Blue Equity also asks who is defining productive use, who is benefiting, who is incurring costs and whose rights and knowledge is being recognized. Conventional Blue Growth is often state-led, making use of planning, regulatory

zoning, investment frameworks and technical assessment. While some of these instruments are needed in order to manage complex marine spaces, they can be exclusionary if affected communities are only invited in after major decisions are taken. Rather, Blue Equity focuses on co-management and shared authority, working to shift communities from stakeholder/consulate into rights-bearing decision makers.

The disparity is also evident in the allocation of resources. Coastal cooperatives and small-scale fishers may have less financial and technological resources than the large scale industries. This asymmetry may have implications in terms of licensing, spatial allocation, infrastructure development and access to finance. In their political-ecological study on marine aquaculture, Ertör and Ortega-Cerdà (2019) show how narratives on blue-growth can mask power struggles and the differential access to resources and environmental change.

The 3rd dimension is distribution. Economic growth does not always lead to economic equity. A marine investment can be a source of national income and foreign investment and it can limit local fishing opportunities. On the other hand, local communities can suffer from a disadvantage of their environment while enjoying a disadvantageous proportion of economic benefits. Along with the economic indicators, therefore, Blue Equity needs to include benefit-sharing mechanisms, livelihood safeguards, and accountability arrangements.

5. COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

5.1 Offshore wind Development in the North Sea

The North Sea is a case study of spatial challenges caused by the fast-growing offshore renewables industry. The energy transition towards low carbon energy is seen as one of the key areas in which offshore wind can make a contribution, and technological and investment potential for offshore wind development illustrates this. The siting of wind farms in marine areas, however, can limit access to fishing opportunities due to exclusion or safe zones. The environmental advantages of renewables can also come with high local economic and social costs, where customary fishing grounds have been lost.

The question is then not if offshore wind is good for the environment, but if the transition is done fairly. A Blue Equity approach would ensure fishers are engaged before the spatial decisions are made, base assessments of livelihood impacts on transparency, provide livelihood compensation if there is unavoidable displacement, and provide opportunities for fishers' communities to benefit from the economic returns of offshore development.

5.2 Mafia Island Marine Park, Tanzania

The Mafia Island case provides an example of how social hazards can occur when conservation is managed through a centralized zoning approach that is characterized by regulation. The Mafia Island case is representative of the social risks that may result from the implementation of conservation via a centralized zoning approach with restrictive regulation. Protecting the marine environment may be critical for biodiversity, fisheries sustainability and environmental resilience. But if the artisanal fishers in a given area have limited opportunities to continue fishing, and there are significant opportunities for other tourism activities like commercial fishing, conservation can create unequal results. This case is an example of the need to keep conservation goals separate from conservation governance. It is not necessary to exclude the people who rely on an ecosystem in order to protect the ecosystem. A Blue Equity approach would include local communities in conservation efforts; value local ecological knowledge; provide opportunities for inclusion; and make sure that income from tourism and conservation benefits the local communities.

5.3 Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) in Fiji

Fiji provides a contrasting example of community-oriented marine governance. Customary marine tenure and community participation are linked to LMMAs. Communities can set up temporary/permanent closures (also called tabu areas), where marine resources can recover while

local authorities control management. Not just that protected areas are there, but also in the distribution of the decision making power. The Fiji case indicates that local ownership and customary institutions, ecological knowledge and scientific knowledge can be integrated as one and not be antagonistic. Conservation becomes tied to livelihood security and stewardship when communities have known, recognized authority and can keep the economic benefits. This is a real-world illustration of the possibility for equity to be a facilitating factor for sustainability, not an impediment to development.

6. TOWARD AN EQUITY-INTEGRATED BLUE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Comparative evidence indicates that the best policy response is an equity-integrated blue development strategy. It's not an investment, technology, and renewable energy, aquaculture, tourism, or conservation no-go zone. Rather, it creates institutional environments in which these activities can enhance common wealth and nature's vitality. Firstly, marine governance should shift from consultation to effective co-management, in a legal sense. Consultation may enable communities to voice their concerns without providing them with any influence. Co-management establishes a shared responsibility and decision-making power. Therefore, LCI (Local Community Institutions) should be included in marine spatial planning, licensing, and management of conservation and monitoring. Secondly, customary tenure should be legally protected as well as small scale fishing grounds. Historical relationships of communities to specific marine places should be acknowledged in planning and property arrangements. This is especially significant as marine space can be lost, impacting food security, income, cultural identity and intergenerational knowledge. Thirdly, social impact assessment must be conducted in conjunction with environmental impact assessment for major marine projects.

Thirdly, major marine projects should be accompanied by a social impact assessment. Social assessment should help to recognize, prior to project approval, the potential for displacement, the effects on livelihoods, gender issues, food-security implications, and access to resources. For those cases where the displacement cannot be prevented, projects should offer livelihood restoration, compensation, benefit sharing, or community ownership. Fourth, blue finance need to be more inclusive. Financial systems should continue to be important for investing in capital intensive industries, but also in cooperatives, small-scale producers, community conservation efforts, sustainable aquaculture, mangrove restoration and local tourism. Technological and financial disparities in participation can be diminished by the use of community-managed blue funds, marine trusts, concessional finance and local credit. Fifth, there must be equity indicators that are quantifiable in the development process. The classical indicators of the blue economy focus on output, investment, employment, exports or energy production. The indicators should be complemented by indicators of community participation, access to marine resources, distribution of benefits, livelihood security and recognition of customary rights and gender inclusion and social impacts. An equity adjusted blue development framework would mean that social outcomes would become explicit in national planning for the ocean economy. Last, but not least, marine spatial planning must be participatory and transparent. Ecological and commercial priorities, customary use areas, fishing grounds, cultural sites, community dependence, and cumulative livelihood impacts are all key aspects of spatial planning that should be considered. This would help to avoid the process of 'silent enclosure' by means of spatial planning.

7. DISCUSSION

The arguments that are summarized in this paper indicate that the Blue Growth – Blue Equity debate is, in essence, a power distribution institutional issue. Economic growth, technological innovation and equity investment are not mutually exclusive. Instead, conflicts arise when there are structural inequalities in the allocation of marine resources based on financial resources, technical skills, political power, or legal rights. This discovery has significant implications

for the notion of sustainability itself. Sustainability must not be perceived only as the sustainable protection and conservation of marine ecosystems, or the development of ocean-based economic sectors. It should also be inclusive of aspects of livelihoods, rights, institutions and social relations sustainability. Marine policy that is effective with respect to protecting an ecosystem may have a negative impact on social and economic sustainability of a community relying upon that ecosystem. The comparative cases also show that governance issues are key to shaping the distributional impacts of blue development. The North Sea and Mafia Island cases highlight the capacity of industrial and conservation-based governance mechanisms to be exclusionary when local rights, participation, and decision-making authority are low. The Fiji example is an alternative where local institutions, customary rights and ecological knowledge are integrated into resource management. While these cases do not purport to demonstrate the superiority of community-based governance in all contexts, they do indicate that the community-based approach has proved to be effective in the contexts they understand. Instead, they illustrate the potential of institutional pluralism, meaningful participation and the recognition of local authority to generate meaningful pathways to more inclusive and equitable outcomes.

The overall policy message is that equity should be integrated from the start of blue development and not as an afterthought when conflict and inequities have arisen. Incentives for livelihoods after displacement, for consultation after zoning decisions, and for compensation after conservation restrictions have been made can never be as effective as participation, recognition and rights at the planning phase. Equity thus should not just be a remedy, but already be a rule of good marine governance a priori. Designing with equity can help make sure sustainability and economic development goals are met without disproportionately passing costs on to the least institutionalized populations.

8. CONCLUSION

Increasingly, as economic activity moves rapidly into ocean "waters," there are many opportunities, but also complex and growing governance challenges. There is potential for Blue Growth to make many contributions to renewable energy development, food security, technological innovation, investment, employment and environmental sustainability. The findings of this study, however, suggest that these benefits are not guaranteed and not always uniform. Without appropriate institutional safeguards, blue development can lead to ocean enclosure, traditional livelihood disruption, inequitable distribution of economic benefits, limited access to resources, and vulnerable populations' marginalization in the decision-making process. By putting recognition, participation, rights and distribution at the heart of marine governance, Blue Equity offers a much-needed conceptual and policy pivot. This paper's comparative cases show that the conflict between economic development and social equity need not be a necessary feature of blue development. Instead, they are determined by the institutional structures that govern marine resources - legal systems, property rights and access rights, financing systems, spatial planning systems, marine resource conservation systems, and the degree of decision-making power coastal/ resource-dependent communities have.

The need for a shift from traditional Blue Growth towards an equitable approach to blue development is thus advocated in this paper. A transition of this kind demands equity to be institutionalized in the planning, financing, implementation and monitoring of marine development. Some of the key measures to be considered include: improving co-management arrangements, safeguarding customary and small-scale fishing rights, conducting systematic social and distributive impact assessments, broadening the use of blue finance, enhancing participatory marine spatial planning, and creating measurable indicators to reflect distributive, procedural and recognition aspects of equity. Future research will need to focus on creating effective and applicable Blue Equity indicators that are both persistent and context-based, which will measure who benefits

from, is involved in, and who pays the costs of blue development. More focus also needs to be given to the distributional aspect of blue finance, gender and intergenerational issues in marine development, and how power plays a role in marine spatial planning and resource allocation. These studies can contribute to the discourse of the Blue Economy extending beyond investment, production and environmental outcomes to provide a more holistic grasp of 'inclusive and sustainable ocean development.

The bottom line of the central policy principle is that the development of the ocean should be sustainable to create economic and ecosystem benefits, while avoiding the undue burden of social, ecological and livelihood costs, and costs to the communities that rely most directly on the ocean. Economic opportunity, ecological integrity, social justice, and institutional recognition are mutually reinforcing and can only be achieved as a whole, and not as goals competing with each other.

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