



Australian  
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University

# **A transformative blue economy?**

## Discourse, hegemony and passive revolution in the Pacific

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December 2024

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of  
The Australian National University

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# Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Philippa Lee Louey

December 2024

Wordcount: 97,034

This thesis was written on the unceded lands of the Ngunnawal, Ngambri, Gadigal, Birpai and Murramarang peoples. I pay my respects to Elders, ancestors and continuing custodians. Always was, always will be.

# Acknowledgements

My path to, and experience through doctoral studies has been indelibly shaped and made possible thanks to community. This thesis owes its insights to the many people who shared their time, space and thoughts with me these last few years. My deepest gratitude to all whom I had the privilege of speaking with—be that formally or informally. Our conversations are the heart of this work.

I extend a special thanks to my fieldwork hosts who provided me with a base, community, and a home-away-from-home while I was in the Cook Islands and Fiji. To Maria Tuoro, meitaki ma'ata for sharing your office with me—I will forever treasure our trip to Aitutaki where I witnessed perhaps the most awe-inspiring night's sky of my lifetime. To the gang at the Pacific Network on Globalisation, bula vinaka and loloma! You welcomed me with open arms, and I am deeply humbled for the friendship and mentorship you have (and continue) to provide me. Joey Tau, Maureen Penjueli, Lice Cokanasiga, Laisa Nainoka, Epeli Lesuma, Hagino Erasito, Murray Isimeli, Alma Vakatora, thanks for the laughs, the outings and the meals we shared. And to Chethna Ben, I am ever grateful for your generosity and hospitality.

I was incredibly fortunate to be supported by a stellar supervisory team throughout this project. Greg Fry, your mentorship and writings have been a guiding light throughout this journey. I could not have asked for a better role model. Maureen Penjueli, you are one of the fiercest minds, staunchest advocates and generous souls I know. You inspire me to approach research as an act of service, and I am forever grateful for your mentorship. Hugh Govan, thank you for all the insights and resources you shared. Our conversations always raised new avenues for me to explore and this project would not have been the same without you. Anouk Ride, words cannot express how grateful I am for the supervision you have provided me these last few months. For all the careful comments and thoughtful reflections you have offered on this manuscript—it is thanks to you that I've gotten this project over the line. And to Paul D'Arcy, thank you for believing in me and championing my work, particularly through the early stages of this project.

Many colleagues and friends have generously offered their time to read through various sections of this thesis and provide feedback. Your insights have, without doubt, improved this project. I particularly thank Matt Allen who read every chapter of my thesis draft and provided the most constructive comments. Knowing this project would be reviewed under your careful eye helped to settle my mind at a time of great turbulence—thankyou. I also thank Gemma Malungahu, Henrietta McNeill, Oliver Lilford, Soli Middleby, Genevieve Quirk, and Melodie Ruwet who

## Acknowledgements

provided feedback on early (and in some cases, very rough) draft chapters. I am indebted to each of you.

The (extended) PhD community at the Department of Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University, has brought me some of the greatest joy these last few years. From office drop-ins, lunchtime rants, coffee catchups, coastal retreats, weekend BBQs and, of course, Friday kava sessions, you have brought life and laughter to this journey. To Angelika Tuku'aho, Akka Rimon, Almah Tararia, Amelia Faotusia, Anita Togolo, Anna Naupa, David Oakeshott, Eileen Gobu Bobone, Eliorah Malifa, Geejay Milli, George Carter, Henrietta McNeill, Hilary Gorman, Jay Caldwell, Jope Tarai, Lakshmin Mudaliar, Lee Brentnall, Michael Kabuni, Mona Matepi, Natasha Turia-Moka, Opeta Alefaio, Pete Connolly, Mana Tevahitua, Romitesh Kant, Steve Close, Subrata Banarjee, Suz O'Neill, Telusa Tu'i'onetoa, and Theresa Meki, I have learnt so much from each of you and your friendship means the world. A special shout-out to Jay Evett and Athaulla Rasheed—we've walked through every step of this doctoral journey together and the demountable would have been a struggle without you. And to Xueyin Zha and Amra Lee, our catchups have always left me feeling lighter.

This PhD was conducted at the Australian National University, and I am especially grateful to the Department of Pacific Affairs which provided me a scholarly home. This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship and I am thankful for the space this provided for me to pursue these studies full time.

For my friends who have been beside me, reminding me that there is much more to life than doctoral studies, words cannot express how grateful I am to you. Emma, you've been my anchor and I treasure every one of our (often food-related) adventures. You'll never lose your fun. Vana and Mahealani, it has been one of the greatest gifts to enter your orbits. I look forward to much more mischief and mayhem to come. Yodit, Liz, Shirley and Bre—you are some of the most impressive, generous-hearted women I've met. It's such a privilege to grow with you. Gracie, no matter where we are, I will love you across seas, mountains and deserts. Liana, Sanna, Tieri, and Tafa, let the party roll on. Stacey, Tanya and MC, your talents amaze me every time. To the 500 crew, one day we'll get around to playing cards. And to Jenny and Meg, you have always been home. I am enormously grateful to each of you for your support and encouragement—your friendship has held me together.

To my family, you have always grounded me. To the Louey's, Burley's and more recently the Bathurst's and McCoy's, thank you for keeping a bed for me when I come to visit, raising my

spirits over a cup of tea, and putting on a grand feast to fuel my body and soul. What a motley but special group you are.

I owe everything to Robyn Burley and Edward Louey. You have always let me know I'm loved. Thank you for encouraging me and supporting me to walk my own path. My determination, drive and discipline come from you.

Finally, to Ben McCoy—these last few years have been big. You have shown me such patience, kindness and trust for which I am forever grateful. Thank you for standing beside me each step of the way and providing me the safety from which I can muster the confidence to push myself. Greg and Wendy could not have been prouder of you, and so am I.





# Positionality Statement



Taloi Havini (2017) *Habitat*. Art Gallery of New South Wales.  
Three-channel video installation, 16:9, HD, colour, 5.1 surround sound, 10:40 mins digital video installation. Originally commissioned for The National by the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney). Courtesy: Art Gallery of New South Wales.

While I didn't know it at the time, my journey to doctoral studies started with an artwork. I was nearing the end of my undergraduate studies and spending an afternoon at the Art Gallery of New South Wales when I first encountered Taloi Havini's *Habitat* (2017). Centred around the middle and lower tailings sites of the (currently closed) Panguna Copper Mine, this immersive video installation laid bare the ongoing legacies and impacts of resource extraction on the communities and ecologies of Bougainville. It introduced me to the entangled relationships that my home country of Australia has with its Pacific neighbours: many of these revolving around natural resources, of which most—I have since learnt—have been extractive (physically, politically, socially, economically) in nature. Havini's artwork, rich in colours and sounds, pointed not only to the harm wrought by this Rio Tinto operation but also the strength and determination of local ecologies (human and non-human) to fight for their present and vibrant futures. Amidst the destruction, struggles continued for a safe, healthy and just world.

Over proceeding years, I have had the privilege of learning more of these battles for justice by Pacific communities. I've been generously guided and mentored along this path by elders, peers and colleagues who have shown me—in word and deed—what it means to contribute to these efforts and the many ways this can look in practice. They've taught me that it always come down to the nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships; emphasising that solidarity is built over years, not days, and grounded in the quiet acts that support communities as they advocate for themselves. It was Havini's work that first set me down a path to better understand how Pacific

communities are standing up and asserting their rights to social and ecological justice. This doctoral project has continued to carry me in this journey.

In accordance with protocol common across many Pacific communities<sup>1</sup>, let me open this thesis with a brief word on my kinships and connections that shape my positionality both inside and beyond the academy. The daughter of settler/migrants, I was raised on Birpai (Port Macquarie, Australia) then Eora (Sydney, Australia) Countries where the land meets the sea and stretches eastward towards the Pacific. My father's family come from the Dutou village (渡头村) of Zhongshan (中山市)—a relatively small city of China's southeastern Guangdong province—and progressively migrated to Australia during the mid-20th century where they made Sydney their home. It is from this lineage that I derive my surname 雷, or 'Louey' as haphazardly translated into English. My mother's family is of settler-colonial heritage, with links back to Victorian England. Upon arrival in Australia, her family settled on lands around southern Queensland and have since scattered across the continent's eastern seaboard. These are the genealogies from which I descend, each of which arrived on these lands through voyage of the Pacific Ocean.

As a non-Pacific Islander, my connections to the region have been facilitated through mentors, friends and colleagues. Maureen Penjueli, Joey Tau and the wonderful team at the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) have been my anchor—grounding my relationships in the region since the days of my research internship. My colleagues at the Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University—particularly those of the (extended) PhD cohort—have further deepened my connections to and understanding of the Pacific as we have spent endless lunches, dinners and kava sessions sharing stories, deliberating on past and present events, and reflecting on our lived experiences across various and varied contexts. And the friends I have made along the way remind me continually of the importance of service: that it is an honour and responsibility to the communities of which we are a part, and a core value of so many Pacific communities. These are the relations to which I am accountable and obliged in my engagements with the Pacific, and under whose guidance I have come to examine issues of social and ecological justice across the region of Oceania.

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<sup>1</sup> Maima Koro et al., 'Tā, Vā, and Lā: Re-Imagining the Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands', *Political Geography* 105 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102931>.





# Abstract

Spurred by the advocacy of ocean-reliant communities, the blue economy has emerged as a charismatic vision for sustainable ocean development over the last fifteen years. Central to its charm rests a promise to transform human interactions with the ocean wherein extractive, inequitable and polluting ocean practices are transitioned-out in favour of activities that advance ecological sustainability, social justice and economic efficiency. A “paradigm shift,” to echo the World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs,<sup>2</sup> from business-as-usual with an underlying commitment to systemic change.

Reflecting on the blue economy encounters of Pacific ocean development actors, this thesis interrogates the political function of this widely-referenced ocean development vision. I raise the provocation: does the blue economy work to support a transformative approach to ocean development, and if not, what is it doing? Three key case studies provide the empirical base of this research: Pacific regional organisations interfacing with ocean issues, the Cook Islands Government with regards to seabed minerals activities and the grassroots non-government actor, the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network. I engage argumentative discourse analysis<sup>3</sup> to examine both the public performance (document analysis) and private perceptions (key stakeholder interviews) of case study actors. These distinct cases provide insight into the varied strategies Pacific actors engage to (re)negotiate the sustainable ocean visions set out under the blue economy, and the complex political calculations that shape these interactions.

This doctoral research indicates that far from transforming humanity’s relationships with the ocean, the blue economy has provided a powerful political tool for defending, reproducing and extending neoliberal capitalism across maritime spaces and communities. Contrary to its transformative promise, it is a conservative discourse that enables neoliberal capitalism to perform commitments of change in the face of deepening societal unease; acting to restore consent in neoliberal capitalism’s social authority and reassemble it anew for legitimacy in evolving contexts. In this way, the blue economy appears to function in service of passive revolution, which I (re)frame as a process of *revolution-recursion* as consistent with the work of Antonio Gramsci

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ‘The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries’ (Washington DC: World Bank, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Maarten Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

detailed in *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>4</sup> While grounded in the Pacific, this thesis contributes to a larger conversation about the role discourse plays processes of political change; specifically, the impact promises of transformation can have in (re)ordering social relations at moments of rupture.

An equally important finding of my research is the agency of Pacific actors to unsettle the blue economy—be that through direct critique, creative reworking or careful discursive bounding. Rarely have mainstream visions of the blue economy been adopted wholesale, nor endorsed unconditionally. I observe how the politicisation of blue economy understandings and articulations has enabled Pacific ocean development actors to resist external development (and environmentalist) logics. This has not always resulted in a rejection of the blue economy, but such discursive play has provided an avenue for dissent. ‘Holding the political’ is a key strategy for refusing the absorption of discourses promising transformation into processes of passive revolution, and an important insight I take from this doctoral project.

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).







# List of Abbreviations

|         |                                                              |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| ADA     | Argumentative discourse analysis                             |
| BiNGO   | Big non-governmental organisation                            |
| CBAM    | Community-based adaptive management                          |
| CBMRM   | Community-based marine resource management                   |
| CCZ     | Clarion Clipperton Zone                                      |
| CIG     | Cook Islands Government                                      |
| CIIC    | Cook Islands Investment Corporation                          |
| CIIC-SR | Cook Islands Investment Corporation Seabed Resources         |
| CMT     | Customary marine tenure                                      |
| COP     | United Nations Conference of the Parties                     |
| COVID   | Coronavirus disease                                          |
| CROP    | Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific             |
| CSIRO   | Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation |
| DAWN    | Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era            |
| EC      | European Commission                                          |
| EEZ     | Exclusive Economic Zone                                      |
| EU      | European Union                                               |
| FAO     | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations      |
| FSM     | Federated States of Micronesia                               |
| FLMMA   | Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network                     |
| GC/GMEF | Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum       |
| GEF     | Global Environment Facility                                  |
| GFC     | Global financial crisis                                      |
| GSR     | Global Sea Mineral Resources                                 |
| IFIs    | International financial institutions                         |
| IENGO   | International environmental non-governmental organisation    |
| IGO     | Inter-governmental organisation                              |
| ISA     | International Seabed Authority                               |

## List of Abbreviations

|              |                                                                            |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| IUCN         | International Union for Conservation of Nature                             |
| KRA          | Key result area                                                            |
| LDCs         | Least developed countries                                                  |
| LMMA         | Locally-managed marine area                                                |
| LMMA Network | Locally-Managed Marine Area Network                                        |
| LMPA         | Large marine protected area                                                |
| MPA          | Marine protected area                                                      |
| MSP          | Marine spatial planning                                                    |
| NGO          | Non-governmental organisation                                              |
| NSDA         | Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui 2021-2021: National Sustainable Development Agenda |
| OACPS        | Organisation of African Caribbean and Pacific States                       |
| ODA          | Official development assistance                                            |
| OML          | Ocean Minerals LLC                                                         |
| OPOC         | Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner                                   |
| PANG         | Pacific Network on Globalisation                                           |
| PEUMP        | Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership                                  |
| PICT         | Pacific Islands countries and territories                                  |
| PIDF         | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                          |
| PIF          | Pacific Islands Forum                                                      |
| PIFLM        | Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting                                      |
| PNA          | Parties to the Nauru Agreement                                             |
| PPfP         | Pacific Partnerships for Prosperity                                        |
| PRC          | People's Republic of China                                                 |
| PRNGO        | Pacific Regional Non-Governmental Organisations Alliance                   |
| PSIDS        | Pacific small island developing states                                     |
| Rio+20       | United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development                       |
| SBMA         | Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority                                     |
| SDG          | Sustainable Development Goal                                               |
| SIDS         | Small island developing states                                             |
| SOPAC        | South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission                                |

|         |                                                                        |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SPC     | Secretariat of the Pacific Community                                   |
| SPREP   | Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme              |
| SSF     | Small-scale fishers                                                    |
| UBPP    | Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity                                      |
| UN      | United Nations                                                         |
| UNCLOS  | United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea                        |
| UNCLCS  | United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf       |
| UNDP    | United Nations Development Programme                                   |
| UNEP    | United Nations Environmental Programme                                 |
| UNESCAP | United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific |
| UNDESA  | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs               |
| UNGA    | United Nations General Assembly                                        |
| US      | United States of America                                               |
| USAID   | United States Agency for International Development                     |
| USD     | United States dollars                                                  |
| USP     | University of the South Pacific                                        |
| USSR    | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (or the Soviet Union)              |
| WFFP    | World Forum of Fisher Peoples                                          |
| WTO     | World Trade Organisation                                               |
| WWF     | World Wildlife Fund                                                    |



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# CHAPTER ONE

## The blue economy and the promise of transformation

As large ocean states, small island developing states have untapped potential to expand their blue economies. Small island developing states represent some 19.1% of all the world's exclusive economic zones. Their combined ocean area is 20.7 times that of their land territory...

Propelling SIDS' blue economies offers the greatest opportunity for catalysing transformative economic recovery from the socio-economic crisis triggered by COVID-19.

— United Nations Development Programme, Rise Up for SIDS<sup>5</sup>

Many are appeased by “perceived” political will to safeguard and protect, to pursue climate justice and oceans sustainability. But the deeper question we need to ask is ‘are we distracted by the symbols we crave?’ Symbols that point to our connectedness to place and space—that emphasise our spirituality and desire for meaning and purpose. If we are not careful, we might be distracted by ideals of sustainability...

— Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka'uta<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Rising Up for SIDS: Investing in the Blue Economy* (YouTube, 2020), <https://youtu.be/3phudgMJ1ws>.

<sup>6</sup> Cresantia Koya-Vaka'uta and Ligaiula Pita, “We Need Pacific Voices on Oceans Science Decade: Dr Vaka'uta,” *Pacific Community*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2019/07/we-need-pacific-voices-on-oceans-science-decade-dr-vakauta>.

## 1.1 A transformative blue economy?

I first encountered the above words of Pacific educator, scholar, poet and artist Koya-Vaka‘uta in the early months of my doctoral research into the politics of the blue economy in the Pacific. Offered in response to the United Nation’s declaration of the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021 – 2030), her comments point to a darker underbelly of much-touted sustainability visions; of their perfidious predilection to direct attention one way and act in another. In her words, to distract.

As I continued in my candidature, traces of Koya-Vaka‘uta’s provocation resurfaced, time and again, throughout conversations, literature and debates. With surprising frequency, I heard stakeholders voice concern that contrary to its promise of sustainable ocean development, the blue economy appeared to many as a political project doing something quite different. What this difference is and how it is enabled under the concept of the blue economy has since become the puzzle of my research.

This thesis uncovers stories of the blue economy’s more concealed, more submerged political character. Reflecting on the blue economy experiences of various Pacific development actors, it interrogates how visions of transformative ocean development can misdirect ambitions for radical change and insidiously work to uphold the neoliberal capitalist order. Three key case studies provide the empirical base of this research: Pacific regional organisations,<sup>7</sup> the Cook Islands Government (CIG) and the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (the LMMA Network). Each provide insight into the diverse strategies that Pacific actors engage to (re)negotiate the sustainable ocean visions set out under the blue economy, and the complex political calculations that shape these interactions. While grounded in the Pacific, this thesis contributes to a larger conversation about the role discourse can play in processes of political change;<sup>8</sup> specifically, the impact that promises of transformation can have in (re)ordering social relations. With the words of Koya-Vaka‘uta challenging me to look beyond the blue economy’s veneer, I interrogate the ambition and function of this widely referenced vision for sustainable ocean development, raising the

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<sup>7</sup> Namely the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

<sup>8</sup> Maarten Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Epeli Hau‘ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148–61; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “Re-Presenting Melanesia: Ignoble Savages and Melanesian Alter-Natives,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 27, no. 1 (2015): 110–45; David L Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*, 1st ed. (United States: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824864118>; Charlotte Epstein, *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 2008); Paige West, *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea* (New York, U.S.: Columbia University Press, 2016).

provocation: does the blue economy work to support a transformative vision of ocean development, and if not, what is it doing?

### 1.1.1 Definitions of the blue economy and a common promise

While mainstreamed among global development and ocean policy circles through the 2010s, the blue economy remains unsettled in its definition and vision for ocean development. As detailed in Figure 1, this variance largely boils down to differences in how ‘sustainability’ is envisioned and valued by blue economy proponents; with definitions ranging from the firm ecological and social protections demanded by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF),<sup>9</sup> to the United Nations (UN) and World Bank’s aggregative approach to sustainability based on the *overall* impact of various sectors over discrete ocean ecosystems,<sup>10</sup> or dissimilar still, the European Commission’s conflation of the blue economy with the broader ocean economy<sup>11</sup> wherein appeals to ocean sustainability are sidelined in favour of indiscriminate ocean-based development. That is to say that blue economy interpretations are not only numerous but often diverging, as has been widely documented in the blue economy scholarship.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> World Wildlife Fund, “Principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy,” 2015, [https://wwf.panda.org/wwf\\_news/?247477/Principles%2Dfor%2Da%2DSustainable%2DBlue%2DEconomy](https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?247477/Principles%2Dfor%2Da%2DSustainable%2DBlue%2DEconomy).

<sup>10</sup> World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries” (Washington DC: World Bank, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries and Joint Research Centre, “The EU Blue Economy Report 2020,” 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/363293>.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond K. Ayilu, Michael Fabinyi, and Kate Barclay, “Small-Scale Fisheries in the Blue Economy: Review of Scholarly Papers and Multilateral Documents,” *Ocean & Coastal Management* 216 (February 1, 2022): 105982, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2021.105982>; Michelle Voyer et al., “Shades of Blue: What Do Competing Interpretations of the Blue Economy Mean for Oceans Governance?,” *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 20, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 595–616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2018.1473153>.

| Organisation               | Definition                                                                                                                                                          | Focus Areas                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Implications for Small-Scale Fisheries                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNCTAD (2014)              | It aims to improve human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities                                   | Sustainable and inclusive development, technological capacity, innovation, and policy and regulation                                                                                                                                                                  | - The focus on trade subsidies and trade regulation may extend beyond small-scale fisheries, despite the provision for social components in its definition                        |
| OECD (2016)                | The sum of the economic activities of ocean-based industries, together with the assets, goods and services provided by marine ecosystems.                           | Shipping, Industrial fishing and aquaculture, ports and shipbuilding activities, offshore and deep-sea oil and gas, offshore wind energy, marine biotechnology, maritime and coastal tourism, marine manufacturing and construction, maritime safety and surveillance | - Economic activities are prioritised over social and cultural values<br>- MPA and MSP approach may undermine small-scale fisheries                                               |
| European Commission (2020) | A long term strategy to support sustainable growth in the marine and maritime sectors as a whole.                                                                   | Aquaculture, coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, ocean energy, seabed mining                                                                                                                                                                                       | - Fisheries and small-scale fisheries are not considered growth sectors - Provides for increased interest in aquaculture and mariculture                                          |
| FAO (2018)                 | Aim to maximize economic and social benefits while minimising environmental degradation across fisheries and aquaculture sectors.                                   | Fisheries and aquaculture management, sustainable value chains - markets and products, access to trade, food security and nutrition, decent work and livelihoods and community resilience                                                                             | - The pro-poor approach supports more small-scale fisheries visibility<br>- The emphasis on developing countries allows for the expansion of small-scale fisheries                |
| World Bank (2020)          | Sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem healthy                                                  | Aquaculture, renewable energy, maritime transport, tourism, waste management, climate change                                                                                                                                                                          | - The market-based PRO-BLUE fund places a greater emphasis on economic value and therefore may underplay the contributions of small-scale fisheries.                              |
| (PEMSEA, 2012)             | A set of environmentally and socially sustainable commercial activities, products, services and investments dependent on and impacting coastal and marine resources | Fisheries & aquaculture, ports, shipping and marine transport, tourism, resorts and coastal development, oil & gas, coastal manufacturing, seabed mining, renewable energy, marine biotechnology, marine technology & environmental services                          | - For the next decade, focuses on commercial activities, services and investment that may overlook small-scale fisheries values                                                   |
| PIDF (2017)                | Ocean economic activities that are carried out sustainably                                                                                                          | Oceanic fisheries, marine and coastal tourism, coastal fisheries and community livelihoods, marine renewable energy, deep-sea mining, blue carbon and afforestation                                                                                                   | - In spite of the overwhelming contribution of inshore small-scale fisheries to the region, offshore fisheries is more prominent within the Pacific blue economy                  |
| AU-IBAR (2019)             | A new frontier of African renaissance- inclusive and sustainable blue economy that significantly contributes to Africa's transformation and growth                  | Shipping and ports, fisheries and aquaculture, energy, mineral resources and oil and gas, and innovative industries, coastal and marine tourism, blue carbon & other ecosystem services and resilience                                                                | - Small-scale fisheries constitute a traditional sector in Africa, therefore Africa's blue economy emphasis on a 'new frontier' will need to clearly define small-scale fisheries |

**Figure 1:** Summary of selected blue economy narratives from policy documents. Source: Ayilu, Fabinyi, and Barclay, (2022)

Across this array of blue economy definitions, however, weaves a remarkably consistent promise: that the blue economy provides a *transformative* approach for reimagining human interactions with the ocean. We see this promise in the 2014 concept note of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), which describes the blue economy as a new paradigm that “breaks the mould of the business as usual “brown” development model where the oceans have been perceived as a means of free resource extraction and waste dumping.”<sup>13</sup> Or likewise, in multilateral reports and programmes on the blue economy such as the United Nations Development Programme’s “Rising Up for SIDS” offer<sup>14</sup> (from which the opening epigraph derives), the Commonwealth’s *The Blue Economy and Small States*<sup>15</sup> report, and the World Bank’s PROBLUE programme and associated *Riding the Blue Wave*<sup>16</sup> report. These materials celebrate the blue economy as an alternative to established ocean development models premised on unrestrained extraction (e.g. overfishing), pollution (e.g. waste dumping), and asymmetrical benefit

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Blue Economy Concept Paper” (New York: United Nations, 2014), 3, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2978BEconcept.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Didier Dogley and Julian Roberts, “Action Brief: An Ocean of Opportunities - How the Blue Economy Can Transform Sustainable Development in Small Islands Developing States” (United Nations Development Programme, February 2023), <https://www.undp.org/publications/action-brief-ocean-opportunities-how-blue-economy-can-transform-sustainable-development-small-islands-developing-states>.

<sup>15</sup> Julian Roberts and Ahmed Ali, “The Blue Economy and Small States,” Commonwealth Blue Economy Series, No. 1 (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> World Bank, “Riding the Blue Wave: Applying the Blue Economy Approach to World Bank Operations,” 2021.

distribution<sup>17</sup>—with coastal communities (particularly those of the Global South) promised distinct advantages from this new development approach.<sup>18</sup>

It is this promise of transformative ocean development that occupies the central focus of this thesis, and particularly my interest in the political effects of the blue economy discourse. So, how did we arrive at this promise which sits at the heart of the blue economy? How did it emerge and what prompted it? Let me briefly recount this history before turning to the research questions it inspires.

## 1.2 The blue economy and the crises of neoliberal capitalism

Perhaps the most common, arguably insidious, misconception about the blue economy today is that of its origins. As often described in multilateral reports<sup>19</sup> and scholarly literature,<sup>20</sup> the blue economy is said to have emerged under the advocacy of small island developing states (SIDS)<sup>21</sup> at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) where it was presented as a transformative vision for sustainable ocean development oriented explicitly towards the interests of ocean-reliant communities of the Global South.<sup>22</sup> According to this narrative, the SIDS grouping inspired mainstream interest in the blue economy by strategically positioning it as

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<sup>17</sup> J. Virdin et al., “The Ocean 100: Transnational Corporations in the Ocean Economy,” *Science Advances* 7, no. 3 (2021): eabc8041, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abc8041>; Henrik Österblom, Colette C.C. Wabnitz, and Dire Tladi, “Towards Ocean Equity” (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2020), <http://www.oceanpanel.org/how-distribute-benefits-ocean-equitably>.

<sup>18</sup> Sulan Chen, Charlotte De Bruyne, and Manasa Bollempalli, ‘Blue Economy, Community Solutions’ (United Nations Development Programme, 26 June 2019), <https://www.undp.org/publications/blue-economy-community-solutions>; Sonia Gautreau, ‘Blue Economies and Nature-Based Solutions: For Enhanced Action in Latin America and Caribbean Small Island Developing States’ (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Blue Economy Concept Paper”; Roberts and Ali, “The Blue Economy and Small States.”

<sup>20</sup> Kahlil Hassanali, “CARICOM and the Blue Economy – Multiple Understandings and Their Implications for Global Engagement,” *Marine Policy* 120 (October 1, 2020): 104137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104137>.

<sup>21</sup> Particularly Pacific SIDS

<sup>22</sup> Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), “Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States” (Preparatory Committee for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development Second intersessional meeting, New York, 2011); Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries, “Summary of Pacific Preparations for Rio+20: The Evolving ‘Special Case’ of Small Island Developing States [E/ESCAP/68/1],” vol. E/ESCAP/68/1 (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), March 12, 2012); International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), “The Regional Preparatory Committee Meetings for Rio+20: An Analysis of the Outcomes,” *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, December 12, 2011, <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/the-regional-preparatory-committee-meetings-for-rio20-an-analysis-of-the-outcomes/>.

the ‘ocean complement’<sup>23</sup> to the conference’s established “Green Economy” theme,<sup>24</sup> sparking broader adoption by global powers, development actors and the private sector.<sup>25</sup> That actors of the Global North have found value in the blue economy is acknowledged as a welcome outcome, but purportedly secondary to its primary (and supposedly original) function to transform and harness sustainable development to the benefit of the ocean-reliant Global South.<sup>26</sup>

While there are elements of truth in this narrative—such as the leading role countries of the Global South played in popularising the blue economy concept among the global development community at Rio+20 (*Chapter Five*)—it is misleadingly partial. By overlooking earlier blue economy constructs circulating among United States (US) and European policymakers,<sup>27</sup> this narrative implies that the blue economy was born of the Global South and likewise that its vision of transformative ocean development was architected by those typically sidelined in the international order. Not only is such suggestion false but it dangerously obscures our understanding of what issues, and which interests drove the blue economy’s initial conception. It conceals which, and whose crises, the blue economy first promised to transform. Surfacing these histories is critical for contextualising the transformative ocean development promise central to the blue economy and situating it for subsequent political analysis.

### 1.2.1 A crisis on two fronts

The onset of the global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008 profoundly destabilised economies across the globe and exposed the systemic failures of a largely unchecked, unrestrained neoliberal capitalist order. Subprime mortgage-lending practices which had become rampant throughout the US banking sector were revealed for their perilousness when the US housing bubble burst, sending

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<sup>23</sup> International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), “The Regional Preparatory Committee Meetings for Rio+20: An Analysis of the Outcomes”; Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), “Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States.”

<sup>24</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 24 December 2009 [A/RES/64/236]” (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations, 2010), 20(a), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n09/475/99/pdf/n0947599.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Silver et al., “Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance,” *The Journal of Environment & Development* 24, no. 2 (2015): 135–60.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts and Ali, “The Blue Economy and Small States”; World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries.”

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation, “The Blue Economy: The Role of the Oceans in Our Nation’s Economic Future,” vol. 111–46 (Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and Coast Guard of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation United States Senate One Hundred Eleventh Congress First Session, Washington DC: U.S. Government, 2009); Ecorys, Deltares, and Océanique Développement, “Blue Growth Study - Scenarios and Drivers for Sustainable Growth from the Oceans, Seas and Coasts: Study Report on Traditional and Emerging Activities in the Blue Economy” (Rotterdam, Netherlands & Brussels, Belgium, August 13, 2012), [https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/contents/blue-growth-study-scenarios-and-drivers-sustainable-growth-oceans-seas-and-coasts\\_en](https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/contents/blue-growth-study-scenarios-and-drivers-sustainable-growth-oceans-seas-and-coasts_en).



cornerstone economic institutions once deemed ‘too big to fail’ to the precipice of precisely that.<sup>28</sup> The collapse of Lehman Brothers sent shockwaves through the US as fear of financial failure began to ripple across globalised international markets and investors began withdrawing their money from financial institutions, placing these bodies under further strain.<sup>29</sup> The US economy entered a rapid downward spiral and given the interconnectedness of the global financial system, drew other economies into recession with it. As the deepest and most widespread economic crash since the Great Depression (1929 – 1941), the GFC was more than simply a crisis in name, but a brutal exposition of the flaws of a neoliberal capitalist economy.

The crisis brought about by the GFC set much of the backdrop for the emergence of the blue economy, but it was not the only crisis to which this vision was developed in response. On an ecological front, global concern had been deepening about deteriorating ocean health as witnessed across a range of marine ecosystems including fisheries, coral reefs, coasts, mangroves, and the high seas.<sup>30</sup> Scientists, environmentalists and scholars alike warned that poor ocean health posed a major threat to the ocean’s economic productivity,<sup>31</sup> emphasising how an unhealthy ocean resulted in a weakened resource bases for capitalist exploitation—be that for fisheries, marine pharmaceuticals, or tourism. These stakeholders traced a clear line between ocean health and ocean productivity, highlighting how harm to the former imperilled the prosperity of the latter. Critically, they stressed how human activities were driving ocean warming, overexploitation, and pollution (particularly in pursuit of capitalist accumulation and industrialisation).<sup>32</sup> This prompted public

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<sup>28</sup> Tony Ciro, *The Global Financial Crisis: Triggers, Responses and Aftermath* (Surrey, England; Burlington, U.S.: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Dimitris Kenourgios and Dimitrios Dimitriou, “Contagion of the Global Financial Crisis and the Real Economy: A Regional Analysis,” *Economic Modelling* 44 (January 1, 2015): 283–93, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econmod.2014.10.048>.

<sup>30</sup> Brett Clark and Rebecca Clausen, “The Oceanic Crisis: Capitalism and the Degradation of Marine Ecosystem,” *Monthly Review*, July 1, 2008, <https://monthlyreview.org/2008/07/01/the-oceanic-crisis-capitalism-and-the-degradation-of-marine-ecosystem/>; PEW Environment Group, “Protecting Life in the Sea” (Philadelphia, U.S.: PEW Charitable Trusts), accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/peg/publications/report/ProtectingLifeintheSeapdf.pdf>; David Adam, “Suffocating Dead Zones Spread across World’s Oceans,” *The Guardian Australia*, August 15, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/aug/14/pollution.endangeredhabitats>.

<sup>31</sup> Henrike Seidel and Padma Lal, “Economic Value of the Pacific Ocean to the Pacific Island Countries and Territories” (Suva, Fiji: International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Oceania, 2010); Luis Valdés et al., “Our Changing Oceans: Conclusions of the First International Symposium on the Effects of Climate Change on the World’s Oceans,” *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 66, no. 7 (August 1, 2009): 1435–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsp134>; Alan B. Sielen, “An Oceans Manifesto: The Present Global Crisis,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2008): 39–61.

<sup>32</sup> Sielen, “An Oceans Manifesto: The Present Global Crisis.”

discussion in global media and policy forums that focused not only on the symptoms of ocean degradation, but also their causes<sup>33</sup>—namely, activities of extractive neoliberal capitalism.

Thus, as the decade of the 2010s matured, neoliberal capitalism found itself challenged by crisis on two fronts: economic on the one hand, and ecological on the other. It is against this backdrop that the blue economy was conceived.

### 1.2.2 US Senate Committee hearing on ‘The Blue Economy’

In June 2009, the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation convened a subcommittee hearing on ‘The Blue Economy: The role of the oceans in our nation’s economic future’ (S. HRG. 111-46). This was one the earliest public articulations of the blue economy and a key event in the crafting of its promise of sustainable ocean development. In the words of the subcommittee Chair Senator Cantwell, the hearing aimed to “shine a spotlight on the Blue Economy and its contribution to our Nation’s economic health and revitalisation.”<sup>34</sup> It firmly positioned the blue economy as a potential framework for guiding America’s post-GFC pathways wherein ocean-based activities could be leveraged for economic recovery.

The hearing was informed by testimony from a range of senior staff across US ocean-based research bodies and non-profit organisations.<sup>35</sup> These representatives espoused the tremendous potential that ocean-based industries offered for US economic recovery, confirming the enthusiasm of attending Senators who viewed “the economic health of America [as] undeniably linked to the riches of our oceans and coasts.”<sup>36</sup> The session celebrated the “great untapped wealth in our oceans... that will lead to new jobs and new business opportunities,”<sup>37</sup> clearly prioritising jobs growth and technological innovation as areas for investment. For the subcommittee, the blue economy’s appeal rested on its promise to transform US economic fortunes by opening a new space for post-GFC recovery activities.

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<sup>33</sup> Brett Clark and Rebecca Clausen, “The Oceanic Crisis: Capitalism and the Degradation of Marine Ecosystem,” *Monthly Review*, July 1, 2018, <https://monthlyreview.org/2008/07/01/the-oceanic-crisis-capitalism-and-the-degradation-of-marine-ecosystem/>; Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, “G77 to Discuss Deep Ocean Crisis,” *Deep Sea Conservation Coalition*, September 26, 2007, <https://savethehighseas.org/g77-discuss-deep-ocean-crisis/>; Alok Jha, “Total Human Impact on Oceans Mapped for the First Time,” *The Guardian*, February 15, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2008/feb/14/ocean.ecosystems>.

<sup>34</sup> US Government, “The Blue Economy: The Role of the Oceans in Our Nation’s Economic Future.”

<sup>35</sup> Hearing witness list included representatives across sectors including conservation, fisheries, marine pharmaceuticals and offshore renewable energy: Dr. Judith T. Kildow, Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute; Ms. Alexandra Cousteau, Blue Legacy International; Dr. William Fenical, Scripps Institution of Oceanography; Mr. Brad Warren, Sustainable Fisheries Partnership; The Hon. Deerin Babb-Brott, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, State of Massachusetts; Dr. Willett M. Kempton, University of Delaware.

<sup>36</sup> Rockefeller IV in US Government, “The Blue Economy: The Role of the Oceans in Our Nation’s Economic Future,” 51.

<sup>37</sup> Cantwell in US Government, 1, see also statements by J. Kildow, B. Warren, W. Kempton & J. Rockefeller.

Transcripts from the hearing<sup>38</sup> also reveal, however, how ecological considerations came to shape this early formulation of the blue economy. Reflecting on the crisis in global ocean health, speakers impressed the need for sustainable ocean use and management. Climate change and marine pollution were identified as major constraints on the ocean's economic productivity, leading participants to stress the need for environmental responsibility.<sup>39</sup> The subcommittee discussed marine spatial planning practices and marine protected areas<sup>40</sup> as key tools for “balanc[ing] demand for development with the need to protect the environment”<sup>41</sup>—even doing so in the context of leveraging such zoning practices for the development of renewable energy facilities.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, while the subcommittee recognised deteriorating ocean health as a limiting factor for economic growth, they envisioned the blue economy as a way to mitigate further ocean degradation and, with a rising need for renewable energy technologies, even open new opportunities for industrial development. In this way, the blue economy was promised as a vision to address both economic and ecological crises; working from the premise that “Protecting our oceans is an environmental and economic imperative.”<sup>43</sup>

It should be noted that this 2009 Senate hearing conceived of the blue economy exclusively within the US national context. Blue economy opportunities were celebrated for their value for US economic recovery, with challenges related to ocean degradation considered within the narrow framework of their impact on US wealth and prosperity. Given its terms of reference, it is perhaps unfair to critique this hearing for its national insularity—it was, after all, tasked with exploring the role of the oceans in America's economic future. However, such US-centrism sharply undercuts the charismatic narrative of the blue economy as an innovation of the Global South. Though the blue economy may have been mainstreamed among the global development community thanks to the advocacy of ocean-reliant communities of the Global South (*Chapter Five*), it—nor its promise—were born there. As this brief history reveals, the blue economy emerged from one of the most industrially developed countries in the world and in service of *its* economic recovery. Upon conception, the blue economy had little interest in advancing the development opportunities of ocean-reliant communities of the Global South, let alone a future where neoliberal capitalism did not reign supreme.

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<sup>38</sup> US Senate Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation, “The Blue Economy: The Role of the Oceans in Our Nation's Economic Future.”

<sup>39</sup> US Government, 6, 17, 51.

<sup>40</sup> US Government, 29, 30.

<sup>41</sup> US Government, 24.

<sup>42</sup> US Government, 23.

<sup>43</sup> US Government, 2.

### 1.2.3 European Commission's *Blue Growth* study

Around a similar time, the European Commission (EC) was also exploring the potential of ocean-based sectors for economic growth and recovery. The 2008 GFC, coupled with a deepening European debt crisis<sup>44</sup> (2009-2012) crippled many European economies and key financial institutions, driving fears of a collapse of the euro.<sup>45</sup> As part of its response, the EC commissioned a study in 2010 on scenarios and drivers for sustainable growth from the oceans, seas and coasts, which would come to be known as the *Blue Growth Study*.<sup>46</sup> Led by international consulting firms Ecorys and Océanique Développement in partnership with the research institute Deltares, the *Blue Growth Study* was compiled between December 2010 and August 2012. It was thus well under development before the hosting of Rio+20 in June 2012 where the blue economy was first popularised among the mainstream development community. The primary purpose of this *Blue Growth Study* was to build a comprehensive picture of the economic and employment size of the marine and maritime sectors in Europe, complemented by a projection of their future potential.<sup>47</sup> Somewhat unsurprisingly, the study found significant economic opportunity in the ocean economy, which it extolled in its headline finding: “Belgian-sized European Blue Economy shows impressive growth rates.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, similar to the US experience, the blue economy was introduced to the European community primarily through an economic lens with a promise to drive the region’s immediate economic recovery and longer-term growth when the economic crisis subsided. Published in August 2012, the *Blue Growth Strategy* went on to heavily inform the EC’s ocean policies and position statements, including its adoption<sup>49</sup> of two key regional agreements later that year: the *Blue Growth Communication*<sup>50</sup> and *Limassol Declaration*.<sup>51</sup> Wary of getting bogged down in the detail of the EC’s *Blue Growth Communication* and *Limassol Declaration* (neither of which are the focus

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<sup>44</sup>Commonly referred to as the ‘Eurozone crisis’ or ‘European sovereign debt crisis.’

<sup>45</sup> Ciro, *The Global Financial Crisis: Triggers, Responses and Aftermath*.

<sup>46</sup> “Blue Growth Study - Scenarios and Drivers for Sustainable Growth from the Oceans, Seas and Coasts: Study Report on Traditional and Emerging Activities in the Blue Economy.”

<sup>47</sup> EC, “Blue Growth: Commission Presents Prospects for Sustainable Growth from Marine and Maritime Sectors,” September 13, 2012, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_12\\_955](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_12_955).

<sup>48</sup> Ecorys, Deltares, and Océanique Développement, “Blue Growth Study - Scenarios and Drivers for Sustainable Growth from the Oceans, Seas and Coasts: Study Report on Traditional and Emerging Activities in the Blue Economy,” 8.

<sup>49</sup> By Ministerial Decision.

<sup>50</sup> COM (“Blue Growth: Opportunities for Marine and Maritime Sustainable Growth - Communication 494” [Brussels, September 13, 2012], <https://www.eea.europa.eu/policy-documents/com-2012-494-final-blue>), 494.

<sup>51</sup> “Declaration of the European Ministers Responsible for the Integrated Maritime Policy and the European Commission, on a Marine and Maritime Agenda for Growth and Jobs: The Limassol Declaration - A Marine and Maritime Agenda for Growth” (Cyprus Ministerial Conference on the Integrated Maritime Policy, Limassol, Cyprus: European Commission, 2012), <https://maritime-forum.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2018-02/The%2520Limassol%2520Declaration%2520-%2520A%2520Marine%2520and%2520Maritime%2520Agenda%2520for%2520Growth%2520and%2520Jobs.pdf>.

of this thesis), I note that these two documents provided founding agreements for the EC's subsequent blue growth/blue economy policies. Though both the *Communication* and *Declaration* were finalised in the months following Rio+20, we see that the *Blue Growth Study* which informed them was already in the works by late 2010. Clearly, the EC was exploring the blue economy prior to Rio+20 and indeed before we see evidence of the Pacific's engagement with the concept (which I detail in *Chapter Five*). Like the 2009 US Senate hearing, the EC's blue economy focus was inward facing—concerned primarily with the economic recovery and economic growth opportunities available from ocean-based activities for European nations. The importance of sustainable ocean development for ocean-reliant communities of the Global South was not a matter of priority; with none of the aforementioned documents mentioning Europe's position as a leading global development partner,<sup>52</sup> let alone the benefit ocean-based programs could provide for its developing country counterparts.

#### 1.2.4 Unsettling the blue economy's common origin story

The interlaced twin crises confronting neoliberal capitalism in the late 2000s (economic and ecological) spurred the conception of this sustainable ocean vision which, at the time, was primarily geared towards the economic recovery of the US and EU. As I outlined earlier, dominant narratives of the blue economy have skimmed over this history, presenting the concept as a transformative vision for sustainable ocean development geared towards and conceived by ocean-reliant communities of the Global South. I do not deny it may have been possible for the blue economy to be adapted from its original neoliberal orientation to meet this more transformative promise—and indeed explore how the Pacific's regional stakeholders were involved in efforts to recraft the concept as precisely such at Rio+20 (*Chapter Five*)—but transformation (in the sense of systems change) was not its original intent. The blue economy's promise to reimagine ocean relations would be introduced later, providing a charismatic vision that captured the attention of the global development community and propelling the concept into the mainstream.

Looking to the experiences of Pacific ocean development actors, this thesis considers whether and to what extent the blue economy has enabled its proponents to 'think otherwise' about their ocean interactions. In doing so, I take seriously the provocations raised by scholars such as Campling

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<sup>52</sup> The European Union accounts for the largest share of total official development assistance (ODA) among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'European Union Institutions', in *Development Co-Operation Profiles* (OECD Publishing, 2024).

and Colas,<sup>53</sup> Mallin and Barbesgaard<sup>54</sup> and equally, civil society stakeholders of the Global South—namely, those at the Pacific Network on Globalisation<sup>55</sup> and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era<sup>56</sup>—who situate the blue economy as part of a longer history of capitalism’s engagement and construction of the ocean. This brings me to the research questions that guide this thesis and help me interrogate the puzzle of the blue economy’s transformative promise.

### 1.3 Research questions

This thesis is fundamentally interested in better understanding how Pacific actors encounter the blue economy and what these experiences suggest about the political function of this discourse as a promise of transformative ocean development. My inquiry is guided by two overarching research questions, with the first attending directly to this blue economy puzzle and the second, encouraging a broader reflection about the role promises of transformation play in processes of political change. This provides a key bridge that links the close empirical work of this thesis to wider discussions on the politics of sustainable development, transformation and discourse.

The key research questions of this thesis are:

1. What do Pacific experiences of the blue economy suggest about the political function of this discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development?

Facilitated through 3 sub-questions:

- a. How are Pacific ocean development actors engaging with the blue economy discourse?
- b. Why are Pacific ocean development actors engaging with the blue economy discourse?
- c. What do these experiences suggest about the function of the blue economy discourse as it circulates in the Pacific?

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<sup>53</sup> Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World* (London, United Kingdom: Verso, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Felix Mallin and Mads Barbesgaard, “Awash with Contradiction: Capital, Ocean Space and the Logics of the Blue Economy Paradigm,” *Geoforum* 113 (July 1, 2020): 121–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.04.021>.

<sup>55</sup> Pacific Network on Globalisation and Ozeanien Dialog, *Rough Seas: Looming Dangers of the Blue Economy*, 2020; Adam Wolfenden and Maureen Penjueli, “Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?,” *Development* 66, no. 1 (June 1, 2023): 40–45, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-023-00365-4>.

<sup>56</sup> Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*, 2020, <https://dawnnet.org/publication/dawn-informs-on-blue-economy/>.

2. What insights do Pacific blue economy experiences provide about the role of promises of transformation in facilitating (or otherwise) political change?

Close reading of these research questions reveals a key premise that informs my inquiry into the blue economy: its characterisation as a discourse. This is an important and deliberate analytical move that casts my interrogation of the blue economy's function in the Pacific as an endeavour in political theory rather than that of policy or programme evaluation. It is a directive to examine the productive power<sup>57</sup> of the blue economy as a social construct that frames our understanding and interactions with our world. Given the significance of this premise for my research, I will briefly detail why I position the blue economy as a discourse before turning to outline the key arguments I develop through this thesis.

## 1.4 The blue economy as discursive assemblage

This thesis approaches the blue economy as a social construct<sup>58</sup> which frames understandings and approaches ocean-based interactions. As with all social constructs, it is produced through discursive strategies, strategies and subjectivities—or what I find useful conceiving as ‘discursive assemblages’—that are continually under negotiation (and often contestation) among the social body. Specifically, I view the blue economy as an identifiable ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations<sup>59</sup> about society's relationships with the ocean that constructs and shapes how we engage with this aquatic realm and one another through it. Defining the blue economy in this manner is important for my research for two key reasons: the first being practical and the second, ontological.

Firstly, interrogating the blue economy as a discourse enables me to sidestep many of the empirical dilemmas associated with analysing this highly nebulous concept as some form of concrete, consistent ocean development agenda. As introduced earlier, there exists a diverse array of blue economy understandings across development and ocean policy circles,<sup>60</sup> which leads to considerable variation in the activities and industries described under this term. The European

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<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York, US: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>58</sup> Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Drawing on Maarten Hajer, *Authoritative Governance: Policy-Making in the Age of Mediatization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

<sup>60</sup> Ayilu, Fabinyi, and Barclay, “Small-Scale Fisheries in the Blue Economy: Review of Scholarly Papers and Multilateral Documents”; Silver et al., “Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance”; Marleen Simone Schutter et al., “Mapping Flows of Blue Economy Finance: Ambitious Narratives, Opaque Actions, and Social Equity Risks,” *One Earth* 7, no. 4 (April 19, 2024): 638–49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2024.02.009>.

Commission's *Blue Economy Strategy*,<sup>61</sup> for example, includes marine mineral resources (namely seabed minerals) as one of five core blue economy pillars—a view that directly contravenes the blue economy visions of other discourse advocates such as WWF.<sup>62</sup> As I would come to discover over the course of this project, the blue economy also tends to be engaged rather haphazardly by practitioners in the ocean development space as they adopt, avoid or reframe the concept in response to changing funding needs and work priorities. It was not uncommon for ocean development stakeholders to alter their construction of the blue economy for strategic reasons, with the concept resembling something of a moving target (*Chapters Five, Six, Seven*). Against this definitional murkiness arises considerable challenges for blue economy programme or policy analysis.<sup>63</sup>

While problematic for policy and programme analysis, this fluidity of blue economy interpretations is seen as a rich point of inquiry within discourse analysis. Discourse analysis prompts inquiry into varying blue economy understandings among ocean development actors and possible reasons for this difference; in addition to reflection on how and why an actors' blue economy relationship may change over time. It offers an avenue for interrogating the internal incoherence and contestability of the blue economy, recognising such dynamics as outworkings of political negotiation.

This leads to the second reason for my discursive approach to the blue economy: a commitment to analysing the politics of the blue economy construct itself. Developed across a rich and deep lineage of critical scholarship since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, thinkers of the social sciences and humanities widely acknowledge the powerful role discourse plays in shaping one's interactions with the world.<sup>64</sup> This is particularly the case within my scholarly field of political ecology where discourses are held as powerful constructs via which we negotiate our lived reality;<sup>65</sup> at once

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<sup>61</sup> European Commission, "Blue Growth: Opportunities for Marine and Maritime Sustainable Growth - Communication 494."

<sup>62</sup> World Wildlife Fund, "Principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy."

<sup>63</sup> What can be identified as a blue economy activity? Whose perspective is this identification based on? What happens if a previously identified blue economy activity ceases to be described in this manner?

<sup>64</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988); Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*; Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands"; Maile Arvin, "Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania" (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2019); Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*; Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1992); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984).

<sup>65</sup> Richard Peet and Michael Watts, *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development and Social Movements* (Routledge, 2004); W. Neil Adger et al., "Advancing a Political Ecology of Global Environmental Discourses," *Development and Change* 32, no. 4 (2001): 681–715, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00222>; Thomas J. Bassett and Alex W. Peimer, "Political ecological perspectives on socioecological relations," *Natures Sciences Sociétés* 23, no. 2 (2015): 157–65, <https://doi.org/10.1051/nss/2015029>; Aletta Biersack and James Greenberg, *Reimagining Political Ecology* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006); Timothy Forsyth, *Critical Political Ecology: The Politics of Environmental Science* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002),



framing how we see, know and act, while simultaneously reflecting our own assumptions and aspirations for the world. Discourse, then, as both lens and mirror.<sup>66</sup>

Analysing the blue economy as a discourse directs me to interrogate the fundamental components that construct the discursive assemblage itself, acknowledging that how this vision is defined will critically influence what programs and policies are conducted in its name. This ontological commitment to studying root narratives, logics and principles steers my research towards an analysis of the blue economy's construction and negotiation by Pacific actors. By delving into the relationships that Pacific actors have to the blue economy—attentive to the co-constituted nature of these relations (that the blue economy informs the ways Pacific actors approach ocean development, as do Pacific actors exercise agency in defining and recrafting the blue economy discourse)—discovery can be made of the ways this discursive assemblage imagines, facilitates and/or obscures political change. It is Pacific development actors' negotiation of this specific, mainstream construction of the blue economy as a promise of transformation that occupies the central focus of this thesis.

## 1.5 Central arguments

A product of the dual research questions that underpin this doctoral research, I advance two central arguments through this thesis. Like the research questions that prompt them, these arguments are closely related, with the first deeply grounded in empirical observations of the blue economy's circulation in the Pacific and the second—informed by these insights—advancing a more theoretical claim about the political function of promises of transformation.

My first argument is that far from transforming humanity's relationships with the ocean, the blue economy has provided a powerful political tool for defending, reproducing and extending the neoliberal capitalist order across maritime spaces and communities. Contrary to its transformative promise, it is an insidiously conservative discourse that enables neoliberal capitalism to *perform* commitments of change in the face of deepening societal unease over its exploitative, appropriative and inequitable proclivities; acting to restore consent in its social authority and—perhaps most potently—reassemble itself anew for legitimacy in evolving contexts. The select commitments the blue economy makes to change (i.e. greater inclusion of small-scale fishers and their interests, the

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<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/anu/detail.action?docID=215025>; Alex Loftus, *Everyday Environmentalism : Creating an Urban Political Ecology* (Minneapolis, UNITED STATES: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/anu/detail.action?docID=902552>.

<sup>66</sup> Here I am evoking Said's teaching that discourse often reflects far more about the society that constructs it than it does about the object it purportedly claims to describe (1978).

allocation of ocean spaces for ecological conservation) are politically important, but not for meaningfully shifting from the status quo. Rather, these concessions work to partially fulfil, appease and then displace demands for an alternate system: the pacification of dissent.

I develop this argument through detailed exploration of three case studies where I utilise discourse analysis<sup>67</sup> of publicly available materials (predominately policies, reports, social media, media releases and speeches) and key informant interviews (35 in total) to provide in-depth insight into Pacific actors' interactions with the discourse from 2011-2024. While the blue economy relationships active across these case studies are undeniably distinct (as we will see in *Part II*), it has become clear that perspectives both of the discourse as *utility* or, conversely, *threat* rest on a common perception that the blue economy is not a vision of change but that of convention. As I will demonstrate, growing scepticism among regional organisations towards the blue economy (*Chapter Five*), as well as the LMMA Network's long held wariness of the discourse (*Chapter Seven*) reflects these stakeholders' view that the construct has not served (local) Pacific interests but remains beholden to interests of the Global North. The CIG's blue economy experience (*Chapter Six*), though from a starkly different perspective, illustrates similar dynamics. I suggest that the CIG's embrace of this discourse is keenly motivated by the government's use of the blue economy as a political tool for safeguarding and updating its longstanding seabed minerals ambitions in a contemporary context where concerns over the ecological impact of such activities presents a new challenge to the sector. Thus, while arriving at different opinions on the political virtue (or otherwise) of the blue economy, all three case studies suggest that the discourse serves one core function: to facilitate the refashioning of neoliberal capitalism in the ocean realm.

The second argument of my thesis is that discourses promising transformation provide powerful strategies for processes of passive revolution and thereby, key tools in the recursive refashioning of hegemony. Anchored in my empirical research, this second argument enters into close conversation with Gramsci's thinking on power, crisis and processes of political change.<sup>68</sup> I highlight the deep resonances between Gramsci's concept of passive revolution (the pacification of alternate visions of social order via the accommodation cosmetic or "molecular"<sup>69</sup> changes that leave unaltered fundamental relational structures) and the political dynamics observed across each of the three blue economy case studies. This enables me to make the case that discourses promising transformation (e.g. the blue economy) provide potent tools for processes of passive revolution,

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<sup>67</sup> Specifically Hajer's method of argumentative discourse analysis.

<sup>68</sup> Antonio Gramsci, Quintin. Hoare, and Geoffrey. Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

<sup>69</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, 109.

while also reflecting back on Gramsci's political framework to suggest three areas for refinement. I provide detailed discussion of these areas for revision in *Part III*, however, they can be briefly summarised as: (a) emphasis on the 'performance paradox' inherent in promises of transformation, (b) illustration of dynamics of (de)politicisation that are activated upon a discourse's promise of transformation, and (c) (re)emphasising passive revolution as a process of hegemonic *recursion* rather than a closed-loop cycle of 'revolution-restoration.' These theoretical insights attend to my second research question.

Overall, I contend that discourses promising transformation can serve as key (yet always contested) tools through which the established order<sup>70</sup> can reestablish consent in its social authority and, crucially, evolve stronger in the wake of challenge. Here, promises of transformation can turn threatening. If I return to the words of Koya-Vaka'uta's which opened this thesis; discourses steeped in the symbolism of change hold the potential to do more than distract. In the absence of vigilance, they may pervert.

## 1.6 Contribution

For those engaged in critical development debates or discussions of political change, the central arguments of this thesis come as little surprise. They are not new propositions and, in many cases, have long been voiced by actors watchful of the dominant order (particularly, neoliberal capitalism). Scholars<sup>71</sup> of the Pacific have been highly vigilant to the ways discourses of development have acted as tools of (neo)colonial/neoliberal/capitalist domination since the invention of the global development complex.<sup>72</sup> In the contemporary case of the blue economy, it has been civil society who has boldly protested the close affinity between this discourse and the logics, interests and activities of (neo)colonial, neoliberal capital.<sup>73</sup> What this thesis contributes to such critical development and critical blue economy discussions is detailed empirical analysis into the blue economy experiences of *Pacific* actors. Despite being an early proponent of the discourse

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<sup>70</sup> Hegemony

<sup>71</sup> In the broad sense of those engaged in critical, reflective thinking. Including thinkers beyond the academic academy.

<sup>72</sup> Amelia. Rokotuivuna et al., *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony* (North Fitzroy, Vic: [I.D.A.], 1973); Sione Tupouniua, Ron Cocrombe, and Claire Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development* (Suva: Fiji Times & Herald Ltd., 1975); Atu Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth? : Perspectives of Pacific Island Women* (Suva, Fiji: Marama Publications, 1994); Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*.

<sup>73</sup> Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*; International Independent Tribunal on Blue Economy Organising Committee, "International Tribunal on the Impact of the Blue Economy in Indian Ocean Countries: Verdicts of the Six Tribunal Series"; Jennifer Franco et al., "The Global Ocean Grab: A Primer" (Transnational Institute (TNI), 2014).

and one of the key regions promised benefit from this sustainable ocean development vision<sup>74</sup> (*Chapter Four*), Pacific engagements with the blue economy remain under-documented in the academic literature. There has been an encouraging growth in scholarly attention on blue economy financing<sup>75</sup> and policies<sup>76</sup> in the region, however, this work is still modest and often only addresses Pacific blue economies as a small subset of broader global analysis. Rarely are Pacific experiences the central site of inquiry. This thesis' explicit focus on Pacific blue economy engagements offers much needed account of the contextual specificities that shape this discourse's circulation in this region, including the different ways it is encountered and negotiated within this large ocean continent.<sup>77</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, this thesis explores the link between critical discourse analysis and Gramscian political scholarship to account for the specific role discourse plays in facilitating (or in this case, obscuring) transformation of the established political order. This provides for the second key contribution of this research: a detailed account of the role of discourses play in processes of passive revolution. As noted above, critical discourse scholarship has a rich history in scrutinising the political function of promises of transformation—particularly with regards to sustainable development.<sup>78</sup> However, efforts to bridge these discussions with the theory of passive revolution remains nascent. Thomas Wanner's 2014 article<sup>79</sup> on the global green economy/growth discourse is a key intervention in this regard that highlights the generative possibilities of bringing critical discourse analysis and the concept of passive revolution into dialogue. It has inspired multiple studies on the politics of discourse over subsequent years,<sup>80</sup> yet few of these works have moved beyond Wanner's initial bridging of discourse and passive revolution to deeply grapple with why or how the former operates in service of the latter. Subsequent studies have certainly provided

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<sup>74</sup> Roberts and Ali, "The Blue Economy and Small States"; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Rising Up for SIDS: UNDP SIDS Offer" (New York, US: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021).

<sup>75</sup> UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, "Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows" (United Kingdom: UK Aid, 2022); Schutter et al., "Mapping Flows of Blue Economy Finance: Ambitious Narratives, Opaque Actions, and Social Equity Risks."

<sup>76</sup> Michelle Voyer et al., "Assessing Policy Coherence and Coordination in the Sustainable Development of a Blue Economy. A Case Study from Timor Leste," *Ocean and Coastal Management* 192 (2020); Meg Keen, Anne-Maree Schwarz, and Lysa Wini-Simeon, "Towards Defining the Blue Economy: Practical Lessons from Pacific Ocean Governance," *Marine Policy* 88 (2018): 333–41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.03.002>.

<sup>77</sup> This reference to Oceania as a 'large ocean continent' alludes to contemporary political efforts to reframe the region as the Blue Pacific. See the PIFS (2022) *2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent; Chapter Four*, and Hau'ofa (1994) *Our Sea of Islands*.

<sup>78</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London, New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1992).

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Wanner, "The New 'Passive Revolution' of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the 'Sustainable Development' of Neoliberal Capitalism," *New Political Economy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 21–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.866081>.

<sup>80</sup> At the time of writing (10 June 2024), Wanner's (2014) article had been cited 141 times according to Taylor & Francis Online.

valuable empirical contributions that demonstrate neoliberal capitalism's use of (namely sustainability) discourses to facilitate its refashioning within multiple contexts;<sup>81</sup> yet, from a theoretical perspective, they have remained relatively stagnant and done little to push or deepen our thinking on the role discourses play in process of political change (or conservatism).

The final contribution of this thesis is normative in nature. Viewing Pacific blue economy experiences as a cautionary tale for the potential political conservatism enabled under discourses promising transformation, this thesis concludes with some lessons for actors negotiating other such 'transformative' discourses. I impress the importance of staying attentive to dynamics of (de)politicisation, suggesting that these can signal underlying political impulses of discourses promising transformation. Is a discourse committed to imagining a social order otherwise, or does it seek to rework the existing framework of relations? This question that can be interrogated through close scrutiny of dynamics of (de)politicisation. I advocate for framing dissent as 'holding the political' wherein I emphasise the value of keeping open space for political debate and discussion as it is through such public deliberation that it is possible to imagine a society otherwise. Here, the cultivation of vibrant, public debate is critical for resisting the reproduction of hegemonic logics and relations under the guise of 'change.' Discourses promising transformation should not be assumed to be working in the direction of political change, but closely scrutinised to guard against their deployment for passive revolution. For communities of the Pacific, this lesson may be pertinent for the Blue Pacific,<sup>82</sup> which while currently a discourse of self-determined, assertive regionalism, may be challenged by similar political pitfalls to those that have befallen the blue economy. Holding firm in such bold regional vision will be critical for realising the political power of the Blue Pacific and guarding against its retooling as a construct of external geopolitical interests<sup>83</sup> (including, at times, those of Australia and New Zealand).<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Rosanna Carver, 'Lessons for Blue Degrowth from Namibia's Emerging Blue Economy', *Sustainability Science* 15, no. 1 (2020): 131–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00754-0>; Karl Krähmer, 'Are Green Cities Sustainable? A Degrowth Critique of Sustainable Urban Development in Copenhagen', *European Planning Studies* 29, no. 7 (2021): 1272–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2020.1841119>; Dan Brockington and Stefano Ponte, 'The Green Economy in the Global South: Experiences, Redistributions and Resistance', *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 12 (2015): 2197–2206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1086639>.

<sup>82</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Greg Fry, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Terence Wesley-Smith, "'Partners in the Blue Pacific' Initiative Rides Roughshod over Established Regional Processes," *DevPolicy Blog*, July 5, 2022, <https://devpolicy.org/pbp-initiative-rides-roughshod-over-regional-processes-20220705/>.

<sup>84</sup> Philippa Louey, "Competing Regional Visions and Incompatible Priorities: The Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific in the Age of AUKUS," *Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University*, DPA Discussion Paper Series, 2024, <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/315664>.

## 1.7 Thesis outline

Threading between theoretical and empirical analysis, my inquiry into the political function of the blue economy discourse in the Pacific (and promises of transformation more broadly) is developed across three parts. *Part I* establishes the conceptual foundations of this research, *Part II* provides close case study analysis and is the empirical heart of this thesis, and *Part III* draws these two conversations together to consider how the blue economy experiences of Pacific actors speak to theory and vice versa. Eight chapters structure this exploration:

### *Part I: Relations*

This thesis is predicated on a deeply relational understanding of power and politics which informs not only the conceptual frameworks that I engage, but also the methods and methodological commitments I embrace for empirical research. The primary purpose of *Part I* is to detail my rationale for this relational approach, highlighting the compatibility of the theoretical and empirical tools of my analysis.

*Chapter Two* opens discussion with an outline of the core theoretical frameworks central to this thesis. Starting with a definition of power as the interplay of social relations inspired by Reverend Professor Upolu Lumā Vaai's teachings, I build towards a Gramscian understanding of politics that holds social relations and their dynamic, persistent negotiation as the central focus of analysis. I describe Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony, crisis and passive revolution, introducing key concepts that will inform subsequent chapters of this thesis.

*Chapter Three* offers a review of the critical development and critical blue economy literature, with particular focus on studies related to the Pacific. Reflecting on *Chapter Two*, I observe that Gramsci's concept of passive revolution consists with a common caution voiced by critical development scholars since the 1970s; namely, that despite speaking of transformation, the development project often works to stabilise, if not extend, neoliberal capitalist (and often (neo)colonial) systems of relations. While similar arguments have been advanced in the critical blue economy literature,<sup>85</sup> there have been surprisingly few attempts to engage Gramsci's work around passive revolution in this exercise—a key exception being from scholars of the Lancaster

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<sup>85</sup> Zoe Brent, Mads Barbesgaard, and Carsten Pedersen, *The Blue Fix: Unmasking the Politics behind the Promise of Blue Growth* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2018), <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-blue-fix>; Mallin and Barbesgaard, "Awash with Contradiction: Capital, Ocean Space and the Logics of the Blue Economy Paradigm"; John Childs, "Greening the Blue? Corporate Strategies for Legitimising Deep Sea Mining," *Political Geography* 74 (October 1, 2019): 102060, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102060>.

Environment Centre, Lancaster University.<sup>86</sup> Building on nascent efforts to examine the blue economy through a passive revolution lens, the second half of this chapter is dedicated to identifying areas of resonance between the critical blue economy scholarship and Gramsci's notion of passive revolution to highlight their potential for constructive dialogue.

*Chapter Four* reflects on Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka's approach to 'research as relational space,' embracing this methodology to guide my own scholarly praxis. Accountable to this relational approach, I outline five core research values guiding this doctoral project: respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility and reflexivity. These values inform my approach to research across all stages of the project lifecycle, orienting my journey in relational care.<sup>87</sup> The latter half of the chapter describes the core methods I engage: argumentative discourse analysis, diverse case study selection, document analysis, and key stakeholder interviews. I highlight how each of these methods enables me to examine the sociality of power and politics, thereby supporting my theoretical assumptions and commitments.

## *Part II: Promise*

The focus of this thesis turns firmly to empirical analysis in *Part II* where, across three case study chapters, I explore the evolving blue economy relationships of three Pacific ocean development actors between the period of 2011 to 2024. Each case study offers a unique perspective on the political function and power of the blue economy, revealing a diversity of discourse experiences as well as varying perspectives on its utility across the region.

*Chapter Five* recounts the relationship of the Pacific's regional bodies with the blue economy, dedicating close attention to the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping, Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). This case study draws upon twenty-one key stakeholder interviews and analysis of publicly available documents produced over the period of 2011 - 2024 (namely policy documents, speeches, meeting records and programme reports). As I have already alluded, the Pacific's regional blue economy relationships appear to have soured over the decade as stakeholders have grown wary of the discourse's affiliation with the interests, institutions and logic of the Global North—specifically, neoliberal capitalism. The Blue Pacific has emerged as a possible alternative for envisioning sustainable ocean development in the region (among other priorities), however, the murkiness of its current associations with the

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<sup>86</sup> Marleen Schutter, "Networking the Blue Economy in Seychelles: Pioneers, Resistance, and the Power of Influence," *Journal of Political Ecology* 26, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.2458/v26i1.23102>; Schutter et al., "Mapping Flows of Blue Economy Finance: Ambitious Narratives, Opaque Actions, and Social Equity Risks."

<sup>87</sup> Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

blue economy and developing entanglements with foreign organisations raises important questions about the political character and future potential of this construct.

*Chapter Six* sees analysis shift from the regional to state context, with the CIG's engagement with the blue economy in the context of seabed minerals activity providing the focus of this discussion. This chapter reflects on twelve key stakeholder interviews and analysis of publicly available documents produced over the period of 2011 - 2024 (specifically policy documents, speeches, and programme reports). After providing a brief history of the CIG's decades-old vision for an assertive, self-determined Cook Islands made prosperous and powerful through seabed mining, I examine how the state has leveraged the blue economy to defend and further these aspirations in a contemporary context. The central argument I develop through this chapter is that the CIG has strategically deployed the blue economy in service of its longstanding seabed minerals vision; not in pursuit of a particularly new, transformative understanding of ocean development.

*Chapter Seven* traces the complex and highly strategic relationship of the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (LMMA Network) to the blue economy. Analysis is based on publicly available documents over the period of 2011 - 2024 (namely social media posts, policy documents and programme reports) and five key stakeholder interviews. While highly cautious, at times critical of the blue economy's marginalisation of coastal communities, the LMMA Network has developed a working relationship with the discourse over recent years. I contend that this relationship is highly conditional and frequently negotiated in a way that sees the blue economy made accountable to the work and values of the LMMA Network, rather than the LMMA Network adjusting its priorities in accordance with the blue economy. This final case study is an important reminder of the agency of Pacific actors to rework and challenge dominant discourses, even when confronted with political pressure to speak in the language of hegemonic order. It also reminds us that discourses are always internally contested and unstable.

### *Part III: Transformation?*

Reflecting on earlier chapters, *Part III* brings into conversation the conceptual work of *Part I* with the substantive empirical analysis of *Part II*. It opens a space for generative and creative scholarship that sees me directly respond to the research questions driving this doctoral project. I have deliberately punctuated the section title with a question mark to signal my provocation that the blue economy is not as transformational as it so promises.

*Chapter Eight* embodies the discussion section of this thesis. After first distilling the key insights to emerge from case studies analysis (*Part II*), I develop a conceptual framework accounting for the



role of the blue economy in refashioning and extending systems of neoliberal capitalism oceanward. This provides a sketch of passive revolution through the lens of discourse, highlighting key features of this conservative process, including the ‘performance paradox’ and dynamics of (de)politicisation. I then step back to emphasise the recursive nature of passive revolution wherein hegemony reestablishes consent in its social authority not by returning the same, but with some concessions and adaptations made in response to changing political contexts. This urges a pivot away from conceptualisations of passive revolution as ‘revolution-restoration’ and towards—or more accurately, in resuscitation of—understandings of ‘revolution-*recursion*.’

*Chapter Nine* concludes this thesis and is where I take the opportunity to consider lessons learnt from Pacific blue economy experiences then engage these with respect to other popular promises of transformation, most pertinently the Blue Pacific. Positioning the blue economy as a cautionary tale for how promises of transformation can perversely function as tools for political conservatism, I highlight key discourse traits and dynamics to be wary of for those seeking meaningful systems change. With the rise of the Blue Pacific—a discourse distinct from yet related to the blue economy—these blue economy learnings can assist Pacific actors safeguard their vision of a self-determined, assertive and truly alternate framing of the region and approach to ocean development.

Koya-Vaka-uta’s words remind us to be vigilant of charismatic discourses, warning that it is through symbolic appeal that such visions can conceal insidious political ambitions. Looking to some of the most alluring discourses of all—those promising transformation away from unsustainable and unjust systems—this thesis attests to the wisdom of this caution. For those seeking to order relations otherwise, we must remain alert to the possible conservatism of discourses promising transformation, with the blue economy providing a sobering case in point.



# **PART I**

## Relations



# CHAPTER TWO

## A theoretical framework for power, politics and transformation

### 2.1 Conceptualising power and politics

The weather in Canberra is slowly beginning to warm as I grapple with writing this chapter and I've found myself meditating on the words of one of the Pacific's great contemporary philosophers, Reverend Professor Upolu Lumā Vaai: "before power was relationships."<sup>88</sup> Why these words strike a chord with me now, I can't say for certain. Perhaps it's because the city's return to outdoor activities is breathing fresh air into my social circles. Perhaps my walks through local bushlands have reminded me how beautifully intertwined earth's ecosystems are and to which we are a part. Or maybe I just like the poetics. Whatever the reason, Vaai's words speak to a collective wisdom regarding the nature of power, to which many thinkers across the Pacific have contributed over the centuries.<sup>89</sup> Firstly, that it is *through* relationships that power comes into being. And correspondingly, that the nature of power is deeply relational and should be attended to as such. Undeniably interlinked, I will attempt to address these two insights in turn, grounding this thesis' thinking around power firmly at the level of social relations.

Holding relationships as the starting point for my discussion on power marks a significant ontological commitment to the sociality of our world and how we come to comprehend it. While the consequence of such commitment may not appear radical at first, a brief pause for reflection reveals just how distinct such an idea stands to many of the more muscular, materialist understandings that dominate much of our everyday vernacular on power in the modern age.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Upolu Lumā Vaai, 'Pasifika Philosophies: Why It Is Both a Challenge and Opportunity' (2023 Pacific Institute Higher Degree Research Masterclass, Australian National University, Canberra, 2023).

<sup>89</sup> Albert Wendt, Epeli Hau'ofa, Teresia Teaiwa, Julian Aguon, Karlo Mila to name but a few.

<sup>90</sup> Anthony Cordesman, 'China's Emergence as a Super Power: A Graphic Comparison of the United States, Russia, China, and Other Major Powers' (Washington D.C: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023); Forbes India, 'Top 10 Most Powerful Countries in the World in 2024', 21 November 2024, <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/explainers/top-10-powerful-countries-in-the-world/87201/1>.

Conceiving of power as a phenomenon that emerges out of social relationships fundamentally implies that the grammar of power is something akin to a verb, less a noun. By this, I mean that power exists when social relationships are put into action; when relationships are activated; where there is interaction between social actors. As such, I define power is the *interplay of social relations*. This definition distinguishes relational understandings of power from those which equate power to the object and/or product of social relations (such as money, military might or voting allocation). For example, people might say ‘this billionaire is powerful because they possess immense wealth,’ or ‘that country holds power because they command the world’s strongest army.’ Power, under these quantitative understandings, can be said to have the grammar of a noun and is something I shift away from through this thesis.

Noun-centred conceptions of power have a long history<sup>91</sup> in political science where power is often conflated with the object of its desire. Not only are these approaches somewhat tautological (power = the outcomes of being powerful), but they propose an exclusionary, commodified model of power: some ‘have’ power, while others do not. In contrast, a relational approach sees power as something that constantly flows between social actors in a negotiated interaction to which all actors play some part. Everyone has some standing in negotiations of power<sup>92</sup>—albeit if some exercise greater leverage than others—and thus, all have some capacity to influence the structure of the social world in which they exist. The constant fluidity of power emphasised through such understanding challenges assumptions of power as static or impenetrable. Here, power is recognised as always capable of reformulation and disruption. Returning to Vaai’s words, power emerges as a phenomenon *because of* relationships and *through* relationships. Any study of power thus requires close attention to such relationships, and particularly the sites of their negotiation.

Approaching power as the interplay of social relationships encourages us to view sites of relational interaction as key points for observation and analysis. This is where the concept of politics enters the frame. Building on an understanding of power as the interplay of social relations, I conceive of politics as the negotiation of these social relations; or the negotiation of power. This understanding resonates closely with scholar of the Pacific Greg Fry’s definition of politics as the ‘struggle over how we live our lives;’<sup>93</sup> (however, with a reduced emphasis on qualities of contest

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan (1588-1679)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill Professional, 1979); Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Penguin Press, 2015).

<sup>92</sup> This is how I read Foucault’s oft-cited idiom “power is everywhere” (1978, p.93): that power is accessible to all actors in the social field. It is not the exclusive commodity of the ‘powerful.’

<sup>93</sup> Greg Fry, *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*, Pacific Series (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019).

and competition in these political interactions.)<sup>94</sup> My expansive approach to politics pushes beyond simply an interest in formal political institutions (though these continue to be key sites of study), to also embrace reflection on socially embedded dimensions of power negotiation, namely discourse. As will be revisited later in this thesis, I contend that politics is always present where there is power regardless of efforts to quieten or silence such relational negotiation. Indeed, as will be explored in *Part III*, I posit that attempts of depoliticisation are particularly acute exercises in politics by virtue of their active stifling of public debate and discussion. Where politics as a phenomenon entails the negotiation of power, politics as a field of study describes the examination of these negotiations. Power and politics, when understood through a relational framework, are intimately entwined as phenomena of social interaction.

While relational understandings of power have deep scholarly and cultural roots across the Pacific,<sup>95</sup> they are not exclusive to this region. Similar respect for the relationality of power is common among many Indigenous cultures across the globe<sup>96</sup> and in some cases, has even found a home in political thought arising from metropolises of the Global North. Scholars across political (and cultural) studies such as bell hooks,<sup>97</sup> Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>98</sup> Stuart Hall,<sup>99</sup> Steven Lukes,<sup>100</sup> Robert Cox,<sup>101</sup> Edward Said,<sup>102</sup> Max Weber<sup>103</sup> and Chantal Mouffe<sup>104</sup> are among some influential figures who have helped to deepen our thinking on power and drawn attention to its more diffuse, socially mediated qualities.<sup>105</sup> Placing Pacific relational approaches into dialogue with these bodies of scholarship can be a fruitful task; with points of complementarity helping to enrich our

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<sup>94</sup> I argue that politics is not always antagonistic, but may involve relatively aligned or compatible relations. It is for this reason that I have emphasised politics as a negotiation rather than a struggle.

<sup>95</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148–61; Upolu Lumā Vaai and Aisake Casimira, *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi* (Suva: The University of the South Pacific Press and Pacific Theological College, 2017).

<sup>96</sup> James Bhagwan et al., *From the Deep: Pasifiki Voices for a New Story* (Suva: Pacific Theological College, 2020); Mander Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006); Wahinkpe Topa and Darcia Narvaez, *Restoring Our Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2022); Vaai and Casimira, *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi*; Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* Tyson Yunkaporta (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2019).

<sup>97</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (London: Sheba, 1989).

<sup>98</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Langage et Pouvoir Symbolique (Language and Symbolic Power)* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

<sup>99</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>100</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, Second Edition, Studies in Sociology (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>101</sup> Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501>.

<sup>102</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>103</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>104</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London, New York: Verso, 1993); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>105</sup> Noting the diverse, at times diverging, approaches represented among this group of listed thinkers.

understanding of power, while areas of divergence pressing us to challenge and adapt our existing frameworks.

In reflecting on the way that the blue economy has come to be engaged by Pacific actors, I find the work of Antonio Gramsci particularly instructive. This is not to assume that the ideas progressed by this twentieth-century neo-Marxist grappling with the rise of fascism in his home country Italy can be simply *applied* to today's operation of the blue economy in the Pacific. Clearly the time, space, context, and issues are different. But if we take a leaf out of Stewart Hall's book and undertake to 'think in a Gramscian way'<sup>106</sup>—doing so in close dialogue with Pacific philosophies of power—we find ourselves traversing fertile ground on which to assemble a conceptual framework for analysing the blue economy, its power and politics in the contemporary Pacific. With a grounding in relational understandings of power, I reflect on how Gramsci's thinking on hegemony, crisis and transformation may usefully frame my research puzzle and equip me with additional tools to grapple with its analysis. I thereby resist the reductive (be that romanticised or colonial) binary that positions Pacific and western ontologies in opposition—noting neither of which are monolithic bodies of thought. Rather, I follow Teresia Teaiwa's teaching to “engag[e] broadly with theory and theorists of all kinds” in order to open possibilities for productive conversation.<sup>107</sup>

## 2.2 Hegemony

The supremacy of a cultural group maintains itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”... A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise “leadership” before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to “lead” as well.

— Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*<sup>108</sup>

Though not the first political theorist to engage with the concept of hegemony,<sup>109</sup> Gramsci has been an influential thinker for its conceptualisation in contemporary scholarship. Pushing formulations of power beyond solely coercion (through military, economic and legislative apparatus), Gramsci argued that the effective exercise of power also necessitated the attainment

<sup>106</sup> *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, 161.

<sup>107</sup> Teresia Teaiwa, 'The Ancestors We Get to Choose: White Influences I Won't Deny', in *Theorizing Native Studies*, ed. Andrea Smith (Duke University Press, 2014), 43–55, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376613-004>.

<sup>108</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 57–58.

<sup>109</sup> Bendetto Croce



of consent among the social body. Taking up Machiavelli's metaphor of the centaur,<sup>110</sup> he proposed a dual model of power that rested on coercion *and* consent;<sup>111</sup> seeing authoritative power as never assured by the former alone, but dependent on popular acceptance for its legitimacy, stability and influence. Gramsci conceptualised this authoritative power as hegemony, or 'leadership' of the social body; powerfully characterising it as "consent armoured by coercion."<sup>112</sup>

For Gramsci and his followers, the real conceptual value of hegemony rests in its attention to the *processes* by which power is negotiated. It is hegemony's insights into *how* power flows, not only its description of an authoritative social status that makes the concept analytically useful. Appreciating hegemony as a dual process of coercion and consent expands our understanding of power and calls for reflection on its socially embedded dynamics. It reflects a conceptualisation of power consistent with the relational grounding earlier outlined wherein social consent is considered an equally important objective and instrument of power as the legitimised use of force. Gramsci's hegemony encourages scrutiny of the ways through which consent is secured, and thus, how social relations are negotiated in an attempt to galvanise broad-based acceptance of a certain order's authority. As I will return to later this chapter, discourse plays a critical role in negotiating this consent given its utility in crafting common frameworks for understanding and imagining future potentialities. It is a powerful tool for organising (and mobilising) society toward a collective vision, including the acceptance of certain social orders.

Though this thesis will primarily focus on discourse as a mechanism for cultivating consent in hegemony, I do acknowledge that the economic, regulatory and security force(s) commanded by the neoliberal capitalist order (the hegemony I identify in this thesis) also impact the way that Pacific actors navigate their work of ocean development. I will occasionally touch on these more coercive faces of hegemony in *Part II* when I examine Pacific actors' interactions with the blue economy discourse. Yet, these strategies largely lay outside the scope of this doctoral project. Discourse and its function in cultivating, shaping and/or destabilising consent is the leading focus of this project.

If we follow Gramsci's characterisation of hegemony as a process in the exercise of power, it follows that hegemony requires constant enactment to maintain authority. It is a dynamic phenomenon necessarily under negotiation in society and because of this, always open to challenge and dissent. This final point is important, especially given Gramsci's motivations when theorising

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<sup>110</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 169.

<sup>111</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, 169–70, 'Prediction and Perspective'.

<sup>112</sup> 1930, see in Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, 263.

on hegemony. A student of Karl Marx, Gramsci's political thinking was heavily informed by his involvement in Italy's socialist movement where, alongside his comrades, he struggled against the rise of fascism through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was within this context that he grappled with the idea of hegemony, penning much of his thinking on the concept while imprisoned for his political activities. Resistance was something Gramsci was deeply acquainted with and committed to, fighting to keep the socialist struggle alive even in the face of extreme state power. It thus comes as little surprise that his conceptualisation of hegemony held space for the simmering of dissent (counter-hegemony); vehemently refusing to accept suggestions of power as unassailable, let alone absolute.

Of particular importance to this thesis, Gramsci recognised consent as a key site of struggle in the negotiation of hegemony. He understood that loss of consent perilously endangered the established order's social authority and thus its overall standing as the hegemonic form. Reflecting across European history, Gramsci observed how periods of crisis consistently resulted in an established order's loss of consent within the social body and subsequently, the budding of political possibility. This provided a generative space for Gramsci's thinking on the renegotiation of power during times of crisis. His work, described by some as "crisis-driven"<sup>113</sup> scholarship, was often threaded with an interest in what becomes of hegemony when social consent is lost, and how hegemony responds in return. These questions are highly relevant to thesis' interrogation of the blue economy, and it is here that I move to the third section to unpack Gramsci's understanding of *crisis* and its corollary, *crisis of authority*.

## 2.3 Crisis and crisis of authority

The turbulence of the current age has prompted numerous claims of crisis: climate crisis,<sup>114</sup> humanitarian crisis,<sup>115</sup> cost of living crisis,<sup>116</sup> gender-based violence crisis,<sup>117</sup> the crisis in public

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<sup>113</sup> Milan Babic, 'Let's Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order', *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 771, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz254>.

<sup>114</sup> United Nations, 'The Climate Crisis – A Race We Can Win', 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/un75/climate-crisis-race-we-can-win>.

<sup>115</sup> Save the Children, '10 Humanitarian Crises That Demand Our Attention Now', Save the Children, 2024, <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/humanitarian-crises-you-need-to-know-about>.

<sup>116</sup> See The Guardian Australia's *Cost of Living Crisis* series: "<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/cost-of-living-crisis-australia->"

<sup>117</sup> Elena Campbell et al., 'Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating Action to End Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024), <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-prevention-potential/national-emergency-and-ongoing-national-priority>.

trust,<sup>118</sup> mental health crisis,<sup>119</sup> misinformation crisis,<sup>120</sup> and the list goes on. Without doubt, each of these crises speak to major societal challenges, with many posing to unsettle the very foundations of we've long accepted as 'normal.' But it is not the concern of this thesis to evaluate these claims to crisis, nor necessarily to examine their specific material dimensions. Rather, I engage the concept of crisis from a distinct Gramscian perspective to explore the consequences such ruptures pose for hegemony and its maintenance of consent; specifically, within the context of the blue economy as a vision born in response to the intersecting ecological and economic crises of the late 2000s (*Chapter One*).

Informed by Gramsci,<sup>121</sup> I understand crisis as a moment where structural failures of the established order are revealed to such an extent that they can no longer be ignored.<sup>122</sup> That is, when the status quo is fundamentally ruptured. Moments of crisis call into the question the accepted order of things and subsequently, prompt an unsettling of consent in the existing hegemony. Crises have the potential to gravely compromise a hegemony's social authority, resulting in what Gramsci's described as a *crisis of authority*:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant,' exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously.<sup>123</sup>

As we learn through Gramsci, the faltering of consent sparked by crisis poses not a minor nuisance for hegemonic forms, but a significant threat to their very existence. Indeed, as noted in the above passage, without consent there is no hegemony—just 'dominance' reliant on the exercise of coercive force. It is because of this close relationship between crisis and consent (or perhaps more aptly, the effect of crisis in unsettling social consent) that moments of rupture present valuable points of inquiry in the study of power and politics; throwing into the open the once-stable weave of social relations and opening space for their interrogation.

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<sup>118</sup> Roy Morgan, 'Australians Now Distrust Many More Corporations, Exposing Corporate "Moral Blindness"' (Roy Morgan, 2023).

<sup>119</sup> Simar Bajaj, 'How Students and Grandparents Could Solve the Global Mental-Health Crisis', *Nature*, 20 November 2024, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-03757-9>.

<sup>120</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'Mapping and Analysis of Efforts to Counter Information Pollution in Europe and Central Asia Region' (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

<sup>121</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*.

<sup>122</sup> From a feminist development studies perspective, Gita Sen and Caren Grown propose a similar definition of crisis: "when a system or structure reaches a stage when it must either undergo major changes or break down." Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>123</sup> 1930, see in Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 275–76.

The disturbance of consent during periods of crisis pose at once a crisis of authority for the hegemonic form while, conversely, a potential dawning of change for the broader social body. This sets in motion a period of incredible dynamism for the (re)negotiation of social relations, with actors from across the political spectrum undertaking to resolve the crisis and put forward new visions for how society will order itself into the future. It is for this reason that political scientist Colin Hay defines crisis as “not merely a moment of rupture, but, more significantly, a moment of decisive intervention.”<sup>124</sup> Alert to the considerable faults and contradictions of the established order, social actors previously isolated from centres of power encounter a strategic opportunity to conceive of a world ‘otherwise’ and mobilise broad based support towards such change. Transformation emerges as conceptually and politically possible, contingent on the obtainment of consent among the social body.

Though it may be tempting here to see crises as moments ripe for social change, if we take history as our guide, we see that transformation upon crisis is far from guaranteed. Naomi Klein’s modern classic, *The Shock Doctrine*, boldly documents neoliberal capitalism’s exploitation of disaster to advance itself and open new market opportunities.<sup>125</sup> From an Indigenous justice perspective, April Anson has similarly detailed how rhetoric of climate apocalypse reinforces and reproduces settler colonial capitalism.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Marx himself has been read as advancing a perspective of ‘periodic crisis’<sup>127</sup>—specifically, that crises are not only an inherent and inevitable element of capitalist accumulation, but *necessary* for its regeneration. These contributions highlight the potential for hegemony to weaponise crisis in service of its own reassembly. Precisely how such manipulation of crisis occurs is a process that Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution proves particularly instructive.

## 2.4 Passive revolution

While crisis and the ensuing crisis of authority encountered by hegemonic forms raises the opportunity for dissenting movements to advocate for social transformation, so too can these periods present an opening for the established order to refashion itself anew. In the flurry of political activity sparked by rupture, crises present hegemonic forms with unique opportunities to

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<sup>124</sup> Colin Hay, ‘Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1, no. 3 (1999): 336, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.00018>.

<sup>125</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

<sup>126</sup> April Anson, “‘Master Metaphor’: Environmental Apocalypse and the Settler States of Emergency”, *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2020): 60–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/res.2020.0037>.

<sup>127</sup> Stephano Agnoletto, ‘Periodic Crises in Capitalism: Pathological or Restorative?’, *Science & Society* 77, no. 4 (2013): 459–85.

adapt their ordering of social relations and/or reproduce this order in spaces previously shielded from their reach. The continuation of hegemony thus emerges as a real possibility during a crisis; an observation that led Gramsci to the framework of passive revolution.

The concept of passive revolution is commonly captured through the phrase “revolution-restoration,” which Gramsci borrowed from the French historian Edgar Quinet and then expanded throughout his *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>128</sup> Simply put, passive revolution refers to the strategies deployed by the established order to tame counter-hegemonic impulses by meeting *some* demands for change, all the while maintaining the fundamental social relations that it depends on for survival. In effect, this means that political changes which can be accommodated within the existing order are often embraced and held up as examples of transformation by hegemonic forms—a manoeuvre that shrewdly diverts attention from more radical visions proffered by alternative movements. Demands for transformation are at once displaced and partially fulfilled in a two-step waltz that ultimately results in the pacification of dissent and, crucially, the refashioning of consent in the existing hegemon. In this way, passive revolution provides the appearance of ‘revolution,’ with the effect of political conservatism (the remaking of the previous social order).

When reflecting on the tension between transformation and passive revolution, one passage from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* stands to particular interest. In writing on the relationship between the state and civil society, Gramsci reflected on the behaviour of hegemonic forms when confronted with a crisis of authority:

The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or reorganising with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class [hegemony], which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp.

Perhaps it may make sacrifices and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises, but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres... The passage of troops of many different parties under the banner of a single party... represents the fusion of an entire social class under a single leadership, which alone is held to be capable of solving an overriding problem of its existence and of fending off a mortal danger.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> 1933, see in Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 109.

<sup>129</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, 210–11.

In this passage, Gramsci identifies the performance of “demagogic promises” as powerful strategies of passive revolution. First reorganising its “men and programmes” under a metamorphosed structure, hegemony then extends impassioned promises of change (even “sacrifice”) to position itself as a key responder to the crisis and centrally shape society’s solution to it. That is, hegemony exploits the promise of change to carefully reassemble itself and return its social leadership. This performance obscures the reality that the hegemonic order is itself the source of crisis (recalling the definition of crisis as the exposure of hegemony’s systemic contradictions and failures) and instead sees the hegemonic form promise change as a strategy for restoring consent in its authority as leader of the social body. When utilised for these purposes, promises of transformation are anything but transformational. Though they may be accompanied by actions of change from the hegemonic form, these changes are deliberately cosmetic, leaving the underlying social order intact. “Demagogic promises” weaponise society’s desire for change to perverse effect: restoring, rather than renegotiating, the established structure of social relations under the guise of transformation.

It is at this point that the perilousness of promises of transformation becomes clear. On the one hand, promises of transformation are a necessary articulation of counter-hegemonic ambitions and visions; especially powerful during times of crisis wherein the opportunity for (re)negotiating social relations is ripe. Yet on the other, such promises (some of which may even be accompanied by actions of change) may perversely function as strategies for passive revolution, with the established order seeking to tame dissent and restore consent in its leadership. Untangling whether promises of transformation are sincerely transformative in ambition, or little other than hegemonic ‘smoke and mirrors’ is a valuable focus for scholarly inquiry—not simply for the purpose of interrogating the honesty of such promise, but also for illuminating the dynamics of power that are set in motion and negotiated upon the articulation of such promises. The politics of transformation is thus about more than the truthfulness of a promise, but how the very proclamation of such promise effects the ordering of our social worlds. This is where Gramsci’s framework of passive revolution meets my inquiry into the political function of the blue economy and its promise of transformative ocean development. It provides a sophisticated account of the potential conservatism that may be facilitated under such discourse, while remaining accountable to the possibility of change.

## 2.5 Conclusion

From a founding understanding of power as the interplay of social relationships and politics as the negotiation of such relations, this chapter progressively introduced Gramsci’s understanding of

hegemony, crisis, crisis of authority and passive revolution. These Gramscian concepts share a similar commitment to the relational underpinnings of power common among many Pacific ontologies,<sup>130</sup> providing a valuable platform for dialogue between these schools of thought. While Gramsci's thinking may have been developed in response to a political and cultural context clearly distinct from the Pacific, I posit that it provides perceptive insight on the political dynamics associated with the blue economy discourse and its negotiation in the region.

This chapter demonstrated how if we begin from a social understanding of power, it follows that the exercise of authority also needs to be reckoned with as a social process—control over material force only paints a partial picture. Here Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony offered a useful account of politics and power, emphasising how social authority rests on both coercion *and* consent, with the former providing the protective armour to safeguard and reinforce the latter. Given that consent holds such a central role in the authoritative exercise of power, it follows that consent emerges as a key site for political struggle. I reflected on how for hegemonic social forms, a core task is to maintain consent in its authority; while for alternate orders, the ability to unsettle this acceptance of the established order is a leading objective. This led me to the question, 'how does hegemony respond when its consent is unsettled or threatened?', where I turned to Gramsci's thinking on crisis and passive revolution.

According to Gramsci, crisis represents a period of rupture in the hegemonic order, resulting in a deep unsettling of its claim to consensus as the potential for alternate social worlds become imaginable, and, for many outside structures of power, desirable. Crises thus pose an acute risk to a hegemonic form's authority—or a crisis of authority. In an attempt to restore faith in its social order, hegemonic forms may pursue the strategy of passive revolution where they seek to accommodate *certain* counter-hegemonic demands for change, while ultimately restoring consent in their authority. Passive revolution thus acts to pacify dissent and refashion anew the hegemonic form for a new era. It is in service of this strategy that promises of transformation prove particularly valuable political tools for hegemonic forms.

The final section of this chapter examined how “demagogic promises” of transformation can be weaponised by the hegemonic form as a strategy in service of its refashioning. By touting a commitment to renegotiate social relations—but only conceiving and permitting such change

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<sup>130</sup> Bhagwan et al., *From the Deep: Pasifiki Voices for a New Story*; Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka'uta, 'Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis', in *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonisation and the Pacific Itulagi*, ed. Upolu Lumā Vaai and Aisake Casimira (Suva: Pacific Theological College, University of the South Pacific, 2017), 65–84.

within a framework designed (and policed) by the established order—promises of transformation can work to pacify dissent and the possibility of meaningful alternatives. This enables the hegemonic form to restore social consent in its authority and refashion itself anew. Under such process of passive revolution, promises of transformation are anything but.

The next chapter (*Chapter Three*) picks up from this theoretical framework to consider how the idea of passive revolution is relevant to the critical development and critical blue economy literatures. The concepts outlined above will continue to guide this thesis' thinking on the political function of the blue economy as a discourse for negotiating crisis, with *Part III* returning to these concepts with a reflection on how the case study findings 'speak back' to, or inform, them. Theory, after all, is always in constant dialogue with empirics. It is with an understanding of this conceptual grounding in the sociality of power and Gramsci's thinking on crisis that the contributions of this thesis are made meaningful.







# CHAPTER THREE

## Debating the development promise

### 3.1 Questioning development

I'm looking at my bookshelf and clustered in the top right corner is a jumble of texts I've returned to time and again throughout this doctoral project. Among these are 'Atu Emberson-Bain's *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?*,<sup>131</sup> Rokotuivuna et al.'s *Fiji: A developing Australian Colony*,<sup>132</sup> a collection of Epeli Hau'ofa's essays, speeches and other writings,<sup>133</sup> David Hanlon's *Remaking Micronesia*,<sup>134</sup> James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine*,<sup>135</sup> Anna Tsing's *Friction*,<sup>136</sup> and Wolfgang Sachs' *The Development Dictionary*.<sup>137</sup> There are some newer titles nestled among these volumes too (such as Julian Aguon's *The Properties of Perpetual Light*<sup>138</sup> and Colas and Campling's *Capitalism and the Sea*<sup>139</sup>), but the overall agedness of this well-thumbed collection is striking.

While true that each of volumes represent touchstone texts in the development scholarship, it is not their canonical status that has led to their housing in my bookshelf's top right corner. Rather, it is the enduring relevance of the questions they pose and arguments they progress that draws me back to their pages. Indeed, Emberson-Bain's biting provocation, "sustainable development or malignant growth?," resonates just as strongly on its thirtieth anniversary as it did upon publication.

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<sup>131</sup> *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women* (Suva: Marama Publications, 1994).

<sup>132</sup> *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony* (Melbourne: I.D.A., 1973).

<sup>133</sup> *We Are the Ocean*.

<sup>134</sup> *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*, 1st ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).

<sup>135</sup> *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>136</sup> *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>137</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London, New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1992).

<sup>138</sup> *The Properties of Perpetual Light* (Mangilao: University of Guam Press, 2021).

<sup>139</sup> *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Verso, 2021).

What does this suggest about the transformative promises espoused by the global development industry over the last few decades? What transformative change have they truly spurred?

This discussion picks up from *Chapter Two* to explore the resonances between Gramsci's thinking on passive revolution and the scholarship of critical development and critical blue economy studies. I find complementarity between the political framework conceptualised under passive revolution and a core contention of the critical development scholarship: that the global development complex functions not to transform the (neocolonial) neoliberal capitalist order, but instead reinforce and extend it. While critical development scholars have drawn explicitly on Gramsci's thinking in their analysis, there remain very few efforts to engage a Gramscian approach in the blue economy literature—with scholars of the Lancaster Environment Centre providing exception.<sup>140</sup> The second half of this chapter explores areas of productive dialogue between passive revolution and the political analysis of the blue economy discourse, particularly regarding its functioning as a promise of transformative ocean development. I find a strong emphasis in the existing blue economy literature on the territorialisation and governing effects of this discourse, which frequently link these to the protection and expansion of neoliberal capitalism. I also identify growing interest in the political factors that contribute to, and result from, the blue economy's broad stakeholder appeal: why has this discourse emerged so popular and how? These two lines of interrogation grapple with similar political concerns to those central to the passive revolution framework, which leads me to *Section Three* where I consider how passive revolution can be constructively engaged in blue economy analysis and in conversation with existing literature. In opening space for this generative dialogue between the passive revolution concept and the blue economy literature, I seek to update and contextualise the former for its possible contribution to the latter.

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<sup>140</sup> Marleen Schutter et al., 'The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales', *Marine Policy* 132 (2021): 104673, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2021.104673>; Marleen Schutter, 'Networking the Blue Economy in Seychelles: Pioneers, Resistance, and the Power of Influence', *Journal of Political Ecology* 26, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.2458/v26i1.23102>.

### 3.2 The perilous development promise: a brief literature review

For as long as the global development complex<sup>141</sup> has pursued a just and fair world realised through the (supposed) steady march of socio-economic ‘progress,’<sup>142</sup> so too have communities across civil society and critical scholarship closely scrutinised the development project’s operations, ideologies and institutions. Over numerous decades and diverse contexts, commentators have questioned the central and supposedly transformative promise of development; asking not only if such promise is being materially advanced (*Does development bring about development?*<sup>143</sup>), but even more critically, what assumptions—even motivations—sit behind such vision<sup>144</sup> (*Development according to whom?*<sup>145</sup> *Development for whom?*<sup>146</sup>). These questions unsettle the foundational promise of the global development complex, which, to paraphrase former US President Harry Truman, commits to relieving the suffering of the Global South by making available the resources, knowledge and capital of the wealthy.<sup>147</sup> Such critical questions challenge characterisations of development as a project of innocuous benevolence to instead emphasise its deeply political character. Does the global development project and the promises of transformation that sustain it truly support the cultivation of a more just and equitable world order? Or, may they more insidiously act to sustain these existing power asymmetries? Put in the terms of Gramscian frameworks: is the development promise as transformative as it proposes, or fraught with peril of passive revolution?

Responses to these questions unsurprisingly return a vast array of perspectives—some in defence of the underlying development vision, others less favourable. Those committed to the fundamental

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<sup>141</sup> Here I engage the term ‘development complex’ to describe the constellation of actors (government, NGOs, private corporations, contractors, volunteers, research bodies, multilateral organisations etc.) that support and drive development programs in the Global South. Also see Agnieszka Sobocinska, *Saving the World?: Western Volunteers and the Rise of the Humanitarian-Development Complex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London, New York: Zed Books, 1997); Meg Taylor and Solstice Middleby, ‘Aid Is Not Development: The True Character of Pacific Aid’, *Development Policy Review* 41, no. S2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12745>; William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

<sup>142</sup> Harry S. Truman, ‘Inaugural Address’ (Washington, D.C., United States of America, 20 January 1949).

<sup>143</sup> William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

<sup>144</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>145</sup> Sione Tupouniua, Ron Cocombe, and Claire Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development* (Suva: Fiji Times & Herald Ltd., 1975); Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*; Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: ‘Development,’ Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*; John Connell, ‘Islands, Idylls and the Detours of Development’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 28, no. 2 (2007): 116–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9493.2007.00284.x>.

<sup>146</sup> Rokotuivuna et al., *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony*; Taylor and Middleby, ‘Aid Is Not Development: The True Character of Pacific Aid’; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London ; Verso, 2018).

<sup>147</sup> Truman, ‘Inaugural Address’.

value of the development project have dedicated many conference debates,<sup>148</sup> reports,<sup>149</sup> and academic studies<sup>150</sup> to improving the industry and its effectiveness. These development proponents generally acknowledge that the industry is far from perfect, but hold that reform is possible and its underlying ambition to bettering the world positive.<sup>151</sup> As a result, we've seen the global development complex undergo many 'turns' across the decades;<sup>152</sup> from the pursuit of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s, to the platforming of human development and sustainable development in the 1990s, the push for good governance of the 2000s, and more recent shifts towards locally-led development. It is notable that across each of these turns, faith in the core promise of development<sup>153</sup> has remained steadfast, with efforts towards change instead directed towards improving strategies of programme design and implementation.

Approaching this puzzle from a starkly different perspective, a sizeable community of thinkers and activists have argued that development is inherently conservative.<sup>154</sup> Central to this provocation is a contention that the development complex functions not to transform the system of relations that affords some social groups greater access to economic security, social services, safety and wellbeing than others. But rather, that development's programs and promises are deeply implicated in extending and reinforcing these very asymmetries and are thus embroiled in the hegemonic

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<sup>148</sup> Consider the UN Conferences on Sustainable Development (1992, 2012), the UN's High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, annual Australasian AID Conferences, or discussions at World Economic Forum Annual Meetings (or 'Davos').

<sup>149</sup> Terence Wood and Huiyuan Liu, 'The 2022 Australian Aid Transparency Audit' (Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, 2022); United Nations Development Programme, '2024 UNDP Trends Report: The Landscape of Development' (New York, 2024); High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, 'Tracking Blue: From Ambition to Action for a Sustainable Ocean Economy', 2022, [https://oceanpanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/OP\\_Progress\\_Full-Report\\_2022.pdf](https://oceanpanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/OP_Progress_Full-Report_2022.pdf); The Office of Development Effectiveness, 'Strengthening Pacific Health Systems: Evaluating Ten Years of Australia's Support' (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020).

<sup>150</sup> A keyword search on Scopus of "strengthen AND development AND effectiveness" across fields of article title, abstract and keywords returns over 800 documents—limited to the subject area of Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities (as of 12/09/2024). A similar search of "improve AND development AND effectiveness" returns over 7,000 documents. A keyword search of "development AND effectiveness" in these same inquiry fields returns over 47,700 documents.

<sup>151</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, 'Towards a New Paradigm for Development' (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 1998); Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Australia's International Development Policy for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific' (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2023); United Nations General Assembly, 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', 2015.

<sup>152</sup> Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips, *Development* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010); Connell, 'Islands, Idylls and the Detours of Development'; Alastair Greig, David Hulme, and Mark Turner, *Challenging Global Inequality: Development Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>153</sup> Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*; José María Sbert, 'Progress', in *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London, New York: Zed Books, 1992).

<sup>154</sup> Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*; Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Victoria. Tauli-Corpuz, Leah. Enkiwe-Abayao, and Raymond. De Chavez, *Towards an Alternative Development Paradigm: Indigenous People's Self-Determined Development*, Indigenous People's Self-Determined Development. (Baguio City: Tebtebba Foundation, 2010).

project.<sup>155</sup> Such critique of the development complex has been progressed on many grounds, but for the purpose of this thesis I draw our attention to two interrelated arguments: development as the continuation of coloniality,<sup>156</sup> and development as an extension of global capitalist networks.<sup>157</sup> These accusations of development's conservative political character align closely with the passive revolution framework described by Gramsci, leading many critical development scholars to explicitly look to this framework for informing their work. Let me briefly sketch the contours of this discussion, highlighting the critical scholarship's longstanding vigilance to the transformative promise of the global development project.

### 3.2.1 Development as coloniality

Official lists classifying nations along the spectrum of 'developed' to 'least developed' status (e.g. UN, WTO, OECD, World Bank) reveal a close relationship between colonialism and socio-economic standing. Nations that were once colonies are overwhelmingly overrepresented among the group of developing countries, while former (and in some cases, contemporary) imperial nations generally benefit from strong state economies and rank highly on development indexes.<sup>158</sup> Bluntly, the old-world order established during the imperial age maps neatly atop the contemporary global system—a reality that is not surprising given that many developed nations acquired their wealth through colonial exploit of communities and lands of the developing world (such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, sugarcane plantations, cotton plantations, rubber plantations, the spice trade). This observed relationship is striking and has led many commentators of decolonial and critical development studies to interrogate whether the development complex sustains, not merely reflects, colonial relations of power.<sup>159</sup> Is development simply coloniality under a new name?

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<sup>155</sup> Andrew Brooks, *The End of Development: A Global History of Poverty and Prosperity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2017); Rokotuivuna et al., *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony*; Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands'.

<sup>156</sup> Here I am evoking Anibal Quijano (2000) and Walter D Mignolo's (2011) concept of coloniality as the logics and practices of colonialism that can continue to circulate long after the political colonial project has fallen. Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America', *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>; Walter D Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, 1st ed., Latin America Otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394501>.

<sup>157</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*.

<sup>158</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'World Economic Situation and Prospects 2024' (United Nations, 2024); World Bank, 'World Bank Country and Lending Groups', 2024, <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519>.

<sup>159</sup> Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*; Claire Slatter, 'Neo-Liberalism and the Disciplining of Pacific Island States—the Dual Challenges of a Global Economic Creed and a Changed Geopolitical Order', in *Pacific Futures*, ed. Michael Powles (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006); Jeffrey Santa Ana et al., *Empire and Environment: Ecological Ruin in the Transpacific* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2022); Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*.

Reflecting on his home country's experiences, Indian political scientist Rajni Kothari, piercingly ruled that "where colonialism left off, development took over—in many ways that proved even more pervasive and potent."<sup>160</sup> Consistent with Gramsci's observation of the ways that transformative promises can be leveraged to advance politically conservative ends, Kothari argues that rather than meaningfully transforming social relations between Global North and Global South, the development project instead extends and intensifies colonial relations in India—refashioning the existing basis of consent for a new political era.

In the Pacific, the civil society sector has been particularly wary of the relationship between development and coloniality, evident through collections such as *Fiji: A Developing Australian Colony*.<sup>161</sup> Scrutinising Australia's development partnership with the then newly independent Fiji nation, Rokotuivuna et al. argued that "Western 'investment' development impoverishes the majority of the population, while enriching Australian companies."<sup>162</sup> Development, Rokotuivuna and her co-authors suggest, did not facilitate a net inflow of economic benefit from Australia to Fiji, but an outflow of profit in the very opposite direction. They detail how through the early 1970s Australian companies leveraged the emergent development program to refashion and intensify their once-colonial ventures in a newly independent Fiji, coming to own and control around two-thirds of Fiji's commercial sector—namely in industries of tourism, real estate, sugar, trade and aid. Put plainly, they revealed that Australia and its companies stood to profit more from development in Fiji than Fijian communities. Half a century later, similar dynamics have been observed in Australia's development relationship with its Pacific neighbours, with some, such as Dame Meg Taylor and Solstice Middleby contending that current Australian aid approaches deliver lucrative profits to Australian-based development consultants while belittling local agents and reinforcing development dependency.<sup>163</sup> From these Pacific perspectives, development not only mirrors colonial systems of relations but perpetuates them.

Advancing this same argument through the lens of knowledge politics, critical development commentators have increasingly challenged the privileging of western 'expertise' over local wisdoms in the global development complex.<sup>164</sup> In his seminal 1994 essay, *Our Sea of Islands*, Epeli Hau'ofa famously charged the global development complex with fuelling the "belittlement" of

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<sup>160</sup> Rajni. Kothari, *Rethinking Development: In Search of Humane Alternatives* (New York: New Horizons Press, 1989), 143.

<sup>161</sup> Rokotuivuna et al., *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony*.

<sup>162</sup> 3.

<sup>163</sup> 'Aid Is Not Development: The True Character of Pacific Aid'.

<sup>164</sup> Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*.



Pacific communities;<sup>165</sup> with his words adding impetus to existing movements<sup>166</sup> that promoted locally-led models of development and a reduction in foreign dependence. Spurred by this call for self-determined development, a rich and varied catalogue of Indigenous and locally-led development practices has emerged within the region.<sup>167</sup> These accounts celebrate Indigenous and local knowledge systems as effective frameworks for socio-economic, ecological and cultural sustenance, while themselves constituting important acts of refusal against paternalistic development narratives which cast Pacific communities as ineluctably reliant on foreign assistance. Tamatoa Bambridge's collection on *rahui* (a culturally sacred practice of restricting access to resources and/or territories) across Polynesian communities,<sup>168</sup> for example, emphasises both the ecological and political dimensions of such Indigenous practices. The contributions in this volume recognise *rahui* as more than simply a Polynesian equivalent of sustainable resource management and development, but a system that is deeply cultural, with associated environmental and political effects. Culture is recognised as a key driver of sustainable resource management practices; not an impediment to it. This insight unsettles classic understandings about what development (or in this case sustainable development) should look like<sup>169</sup>—understandings that too often pit Indigenous knowledges against modern 'enlightenment' under the assumption that the former is primitive and thus inferior to the latter.<sup>170</sup> Bambridge's collection, in addition to works such as that of Ron

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<sup>165</sup> Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands'.

<sup>166</sup> Marco Hans de Jong, 'Kotahi Te Moana, Only One Ocean: Pacific Environmentalism, 1970–1995' (DPhil in History, Oxford, United Kingdom, University of Oxford, 2022); Joeli Veitayaki, 'Traditional Marine Resource Management Practices Used in the Pacific Islands: An Agenda for Change', *Ocean & Coastal Management* 37, no. 1 (1997): 123–36, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0964-5691\(96\)00069-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0964-5691(96)00069-5); Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire*, Critical Perspectives on Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139794688>.

<sup>167</sup> Tamatoa Bambridge, Paul D'Arcy, and Alexander Mawyer, 'Oceanian Sovereignty: Rethinking Conservation in a Sea of Islands', *Pacific Conservation Biology* 27 (2021): 345–53, <https://doi.org/10.1071/PC20026>; David W. Gegeo, 'Indigenous Knowledge and Empowerment: Rural Development Examined from Within', *The Contemporary Pacific* 10, no. 2 (1998): 289–315; R. E. Johannes, 'The Renaissance of Community-Based Marine Resource Management in Oceania', *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 33 (2002): 317–40; Michael Spann, "'Living Other-Wise": The Bushmen Farming Network as an Example of "Alter-Native" Counter Practices to Agriculture and Development', *The Contemporary Pacific* 30, no. 1 (2018): 33–68, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2018.0003>; Simonne Pauwels and Elodie Fache, *Fisheries in the Pacific: The Challenges of Governance and Sustainability* (Marseille: pacific-credo Publications, 2016); Transform Aqorau, *Fishing for Success: Lessons in Pacific Regionalism* (Canberra: Department of Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University, 2019); Lamont Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Gina McGuire and Alexander Mawyer, 'Cultivating the Unseen: Pa'akai and the Role of Practice in Coastal Care', *Ethnobiology Letters* 14, no. 2 (2023): 22–36, <https://doi.org/10.14237/ebl.14.2.2023.1825>; Fiona McCormack and Kate Barclay, *Engaging with Capitalism: Cases from Oceania*, vol. 33, Research in Economic Anthropology (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2013).

<sup>168</sup> *The Rahui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2016).

<sup>169</sup> Truman, 'Inaugural Address'.

<sup>170</sup> Aram Ziai, *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals* (London: Routledge, 2015).

Vave<sup>171</sup> and Joeli Veitayaki,<sup>172</sup> provide an important challenge to development orthodoxy by celebrating the deep wisdom of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices for sustainable resource management past and present.

I should note that critiques of development as an instrument for (neo)colonial hegemony are not exclusive to the Pacific and are similarly voiced by decolonial movements across the globe. One need just consider the works by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz<sup>173</sup> (Kankana-ey Igorot; Philippines), Vandana Shiva<sup>174</sup> (India), Walter Rodney<sup>175</sup> (Guyana), Arturo Escobar<sup>176</sup> (Colombia), Edward Goldsmith<sup>177</sup> (France), and Wolfgang Sachs<sup>178</sup> (Germany) to name a few. In addition to the Pacific contributions interwoven through the above discussion, the rich collection of papers contained in *The Pacific Way*,<sup>179</sup> Ema Maria Bargh's doctoral thesis *Re-colonisation and indigenous resistance: neoliberalism in the Pacific*,<sup>180</sup> Katerina Teaiwa's ongoing *Project Banaba*,<sup>181</sup> David Hanlon's *Remaking Micronesia*,<sup>182</sup> and Santa Ana et al.'s *Empire and Environment: Ecological Ruin in the Transpacific*<sup>183</sup> are among other key contributions pointing to the relationship between development and coloniality in the region. Standing in solidarity with the communities and ecologies of the Global South, thinkers of and allies to decolonial movements remind us that development and coloniality are inherently interlaced; with the former viewed as sustaining, not transforming, the social relationships of the latter.

### 3.2.2 Development as capitalism

A second powerful challenge to the transformational promise of the global development project is its characterisation as vehicle for reproducing capitalist relations of exploitation and expropriation. Largely descending from Marxist traditions that hold alienation as a cornerstone of

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<sup>171</sup> 'Five Culturally Protected Water Body Practices in Fiji: Current Status and Contemporary Displacement Challenges', *AMBIO* 51, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-021-01620-z>.

<sup>172</sup> 'Traditional Marine Resource Management Practices Used in the Pacific Islands: An Agenda for Change'.

<sup>173</sup> "In the post-colonial era of nation-building, development and modernity provided the justification for the recolonization of our territories and attempts to obliterate our identities and culture." Tauli-Corpuz in Tauli-Corpuz, Enkiwe-Abayao, and De Chavez, *Towards an Alternative Development Paradigm: Indigenous People's Self-Determined Development*, 2...

<sup>174</sup> Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (London: Zed Books, 1991); Shiva.

<sup>175</sup> See Rodney's seminal *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

<sup>176</sup> See Escobar's *Encountering Development Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*.

<sup>177</sup> Consider Goldsmith's 2002 article, "Development As Colonialism" 'Development As Colonialism', *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 6, no. 2 (2002): 18–36.

<sup>178</sup> See Sachs' *Development Dictionary The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*.

<sup>179</sup> Tupouniua, Cocrombe, and Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*.

<sup>180</sup> 'Re-Colonisation and Indigenous Resistance: Neoliberalism in the Pacific' (Doctoral Thesis (PhD), Canberra, Australia, Australian National University, 2002).

<sup>181</sup> Katerina Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015).

<sup>182</sup> Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*.

<sup>183</sup> Santa Ana et al., *Empire and Environment: Ecological Ruin in the Transpacific*.

the capitalist system,<sup>184</sup> numerous thinkers have reflected on the global development project as a mechanism through which capital can source and outsource the materials, labour and waste essential for its expansion. World systems analysis was influential in advancing this argument through the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>185</sup> with decolonial scholars coming to rework this thinking over recent decades to place greater emphasis on the agency and heterogeneity of communities in the Global South.<sup>186</sup>

Vandana Shiva's pathbreaking scholarship on the politics of agricultural development offers a potent example of development's entanglement with the capitalism.<sup>187</sup> In her 1991 classic, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology, and Politics*, Shiva details how large-scale monoculture agriculture programs were pressed upon Indian farmers in a global development program known as the Green Revolution—a much-touted agricultural development program promoted by Bretton Woods institutions and the UN across the 1960s to 1980s. Founded on liberal principles of privatisation, trade liberalisation and an unimpeded economic market, the Green Revolution promoted highly industrialised, commercialised food systems in replacement of local food cultures and economies. Not only did this devastate India's longstanding local farming practices, soil fertility and crop genetic diversity, but it also channelled eye-watering profits into the coffers of transnational corporations who monopolised the patents of genetically modified seeds and agricultural chemicals central to this agricultural agenda (e.g. Monsanto). Under the banner of development, the Green Revolution transformed India's agricultural sector into a lucrative market for agribusinesses based in the Global North, to which Indian farmers became increasingly beholden for fertilisers, chemicals and seeds.

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<sup>184</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik Der Politischen Ökonomie*, ed. Friedrich Engels (Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meissner, 1867).

<sup>185</sup> Consider, for example Samir. Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale; a Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967); Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*.

<sup>186</sup> Spann, "Living Other-Wise": The Bushmen Farming Network as an Example of "Alter-Native" Counter Practices to Agriculture and Development'; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, "May God Give Us Chaos, So That We Can Plunder": A Critique of "resource Curse" and Conflict Theories', *Development* 49, no. 3 (2006): 14–21, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100268>; Colin Filer and Pierre-Yves Le Meur, *Large-Scale Mines and Local-Level Politics: Between New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea*, Asia-Pacific Environment Monographs (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.22459/LMLP.10.2017>; Gegeo, 'Indigenous Knowledge and Empowerment: Rural Development Examined from Within'; Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*; Gustavo Esteva, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 1998); Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions* (London, United Kingdom: Thousand Oaks, 2001); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>187</sup> *Philanthrocapitalism and the Erosion of Democracy: A Global Citizens' Report on the Corporate Control of Technology, Health, and Agriculture* (London: Synergetic Press, 2021); *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (London: Zed Books: Kali for Women, 1988); *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (New Delhi: Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, 1998).

Haunani-Kay Trask's commentary on the tourism sector in Hawai'i provides another scathing critique of the devastation wrought by global development projects working in service of capital.<sup>188</sup> Where tourism may afford development opportunities for some groups in Hawai'i, Trask fiercely challenged the impact of such industry on Kānaka Maoli peoples, cultures and lands. Throughout her lifetime, she exposed the industry's destruction of Hawai'i's lands, waterways and oceans, its 'prostitution' of Hawai'ian culture,<sup>189</sup> and its violent undermining of Indigenous struggles for self-determination.<sup>190</sup> For Trask, these abuses were institutionalised in the multi-billion-dollar tourism industry where constructions of Hawai'i as an exotic 'Paradise' feeds global circuits of capital that sustain authority in an extractive and exploitative global order (and settler colonial American state). Like Shiva's work on the Green Revolution, Trask's scrutiny of Hawai'i's tourism sector suggests that the overall benefactor of development is the capitalist system, with local and particularly Indigenous communities left to shoulder the fallout (ecological, cultural, social, political) of its (ad)ventures.

These contributions expose how the raw materials and labour necessary for sustaining capitalism are often sourced from the lands, seas and communities of the Global South under the guise of development programs.<sup>191</sup> Here, the Global North stands as the ultimate beneficiary of such activities. Far from mitigating the global inequalities that beset the capitalist system, the global development projects works to deepen and capitalise from them—all with the added treachery of promising otherwise. In response to the earlier provocation, 'Development for whom?', commentators of these critical schools reply: the extension of capitalist (often also neoliberal) hegemony. The parallels that this argument holds with Gramsci's passive revolution thinking are noteworthy, as has been recently recognised in the sustainable development literature.

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<sup>188</sup> 'The Aloha Industry: For Hawaiian Women, Tourism Is Not a Neutral Industry.' 16, no. 4: Women's Work, Women's Worth (16 March 2010), <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/aloha-industry-hawaiian-women-tourism-not-neutral-industry>; 'Tourism and The Prostitution Of Hawaiian Culture', *Cultural Survival* 24, no. 1: Problems in Paradise: Sovereignty in the Pacific (2 April 2010), <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/tourism-and-prostitution-hawaiian-culture>; *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, Revised edition. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

<sup>189</sup> 'Tourism and The Prostitution Of Hawaiian Culture'.

<sup>190</sup> Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*.

<sup>191</sup> Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

### 3.2.3 Sustainable development as passive revolution

Concern that the global development project works to extend and expand the capitalist social order has become particularly acute within the critical sustainable development scholarship.<sup>192</sup> At the heart of these concerns lays the question: sustainable development or development sustained? As already mentioned, ‘Atu Emberson-Bain’s collection *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?* is an important exploration of this question in the context of the Pacific. From the introduction, Emberson-Bain makes explicit her leanings on this question, stating:

The concepts of sustainable and human development take on board the reassuring (and politically correct) language of the international community but do not appear to have inspired fundamentally new development approaches... [They] continue to be guided by the sacrosanct principles of the market and economic growth.<sup>193</sup>

From this statement it is clear that Emberson-Bain and her collaborators view sustainable development as consistent with neoliberal capitalist principles and social orderings. Their volume demonstrates that despite its promise, the budding project of sustainable development in the 1990s did not inspire fundamentally new development approaches in the Pacific but facilitated capitalism’s refashioning anew. Their indictment of sustainable development continues to echo through many contemporary Pacific speeches and publications,<sup>194</sup> reinforcing the claim of sustainable development’s underlying conservatism.

Following this idea of sustaining capitalism further, many within critical development circles argue that sustainable development functions as a necessary prop for the capitalist order as it grapples with meeting its resource-intensive appetite on a planet with finite limits.<sup>195</sup> According to this thinking, the project of sustainable development necessarily works to ensure a stable and productive resource base for capitalist activities into the future by encouraging more efficient management and use of Earth’s resources. At face value, this argument is far from controversial. Indeed, many of sustainable development’s greatest proponents would agree that a (if not ‘the’)

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<sup>192</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Richard B. Norgaard, *Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Coevolutionary Revisioning of the Future* (London: Routledge, 1994); Martin O’Connor, *Is Capitalism Sustainable?: Political Economy and the Politics of Ecology*, Democracy and Ecology. (New York: Guilford Press, 1994); Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*.

<sup>193</sup> *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*, iv.

<sup>194</sup> James Bhagwan, ‘Tides Are Changing: Opening Speech at the International Conference “The Future of the Oceans and Seas”’ (The Future of the Oceans and Seas, Berlin: Fair Oceans, 2023), <https://fair-oceans.info/james-bhagwan-tides-are-changing-opening-speech-at-the-international-conference-the-future-of-the-oceans-and-the-seas/>; DAWN & PANG, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*, 2020, <https://dawnnet.org/publication/dawn-informs-on-blue-economy/>; Adam Wolfenden and Maureen Penjueli, ‘Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?’, *Development* 66, no. 1 (2023): 40–45, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-023-00365-4>.

<sup>195</sup> David Harvey, ‘Globalization and the “Spatial Fix”’, *Geographische Revue* 2/2001 (2001); O’Connor, *Is Capitalism Sustainable?: Political Economy and the Politics of Ecology*.

central objective of sustainable development is to facilitate continued economic growth; consider, for example, the Brundtland Commission's identification of "reviving growth" as the first of sustainable development's seven foremost critical objectives.<sup>196</sup> The critical scholarship's next contention, however, stirs more resistance. In arguing that sustainable development constitutes an essential crutch for capitalism, these commentators deeply challenge the transformative promise espoused by the sustainable development project.<sup>197</sup> They retort characterisations of sustainable development as a 'paradigm shift' in humanity's (particularly the industrialised Global North's) relations with ecosystems, instead emphasising how this project serves and enables capitalist production. Sustainability is seen as a necessary tool for the longevity of capitalist relations.

Critique of sustainable development's political conservatism has become rather commonplace within the critical development literature,<sup>198</sup> but of particular interest to this thesis are the relatively recent efforts to understand such political conservatism through a return to Gramsci's thinking on passive revolution. In 2014, Thomas Wanner published a key article entitled "Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the 'Sustainable Development' of Neoliberal Capitalism," which foregrounded Gramsci's concept of passive revolution as a key theoretical construct through which to approach analysis of the green economy discourse. In this paper, Wanner argued that "the green economy/growth discourse can be seen as a Gramscian 'passive revolution' whereby the dominant sustainable development discourse, subsumed by capitalist hegemony, is protected in the context of global environmental, economic and development crises."<sup>199</sup> He concluded that far from transforming social relations with Earth's ecosystems, the green growth discourse served to defend neoliberal capitalism by co-opting and neutralising arguments about the limits to economic growth, while simultaneously furthering the commodification of society-nature relations through its market-led agenda (e.g. nature as capital).

To be clear, the central innovation of Wanner's paper was not his overall observation of the entangled relationship between capitalism and sustainable development. Recalling earlier discussion, we have seen this argument before. What was novel, however, was his constructive

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<sup>196</sup> 'Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future' (United Nations General Assembly, 1987).

<sup>197</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*.

<sup>198</sup> Matthew Allen et al., *The Rush for Oceania: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Ocean Governance and Stewardship*, SGDIA Working Paper Series (Suva: University of the South Pacific School of Government, Development and International Affairs, 2018); Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*; Upolu Lumā Vaai, "We Are Therefore We Live": *Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story*, Policy Brief No. 56 (Toda Peace Institute, 2019).

<sup>199</sup> "The New 'Passive Revolution' of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the 'Sustainable Development' of Neoliberal Capitalism", *New Political Economy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.866081>.

engagement with Gramsci's concept of passive revolution to grapple with the political functioning of the green economy discourse in service of capitalism's expansion and defence from global environmental, economic and development crises. Passive revolution facilitated Wanner's conclusion that the function of the green growth discourse was *at once* to defend neoliberal capitalism from a crisis of authority and to facilitate such hegemony's expansionist ambitions. This distinct conceptual approach provided a sophisticated insight into the politics of the green growth discourse to resolve challenges of the neoliberal capitalist order: not by transforming towards a new system, but by pacifying dissent in the old.

Wanner's explicit engagement with Gramsci's passive revolution framework to understand the politics of the sustainable development discourse has informed multiple subsequent academic papers, including contributions to the *Third World Quarterly's* Special Issue on 'The green economy in the global south: experiences, redistributions and resistances' (2015, Volume 36(12)) and the growing body of degrowth scholarship.<sup>200</sup> As I discuss next, interrogation of development's transformative promises via a Gramscian lens of passive revolution remain nascent in the blue economy scholarship. Thus, the existing works on terrestrially based sustainable development discourses—such as those noted above—provide a useful point of reference for scholars examining similar, but ocean-centred discourses. These contributions valuably demonstrate the complementarity between passive revolution and the thinking of early critical development thinkers who have long been alert to the potential perilousness of the development promise (be that as an extension of coloniality and/or neoliberal capitalist hegemony).

### 3.3 Existing debates on the blue economy and its promise of transformation

In the last two decades, we have witnessed an 'ocean turn' in the humanities and social sciences, bringing with it the rise of critical ocean studies.<sup>201</sup> Distinct from earlier scholarship of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which positioned the ocean as an inert backdrop for strategic manoeuvre, commerce and colonial conquest, this new body of critical ocean studies is explicitly interested in exploring the social (co-)construction and more-than-human relations woven across fluid and mobile maritime spaces; the ocean as a cultural and multispecies ecology, as described by Elizabeth DeLoughrey.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Carver, 'Lessons for Blue Degrowth from Namibia's Emerging Blue Economy'; Krähmer, 'Are Green Cities Sustainable? A Degrowth Critique of Sustainable Urban Development in Copenhagen'.

<sup>201</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Toward a Critical Ocean Studies for the Anthropocene', *English Language Notes* 57, no. 1 (2019): 21–36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-7309655>.

<sup>202</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3794589>.

Philip Steinberg's *The Social Construction of the Ocean*<sup>203</sup> has been a touchstone work guiding the emergence of this new scholarship, which has since developed a rich vocabulary of concepts and lenses of analysis including 'wet ontologies',<sup>204</sup> 'ocean ecologies',<sup>205</sup> 'Tidalectics',<sup>206</sup> 'ocean feminisms'<sup>207</sup> and 'terraqueous territoriality'.<sup>208</sup>

It is in dialogue with this critical ocean studies that a small,<sup>209</sup> yet growing, body of scholars have interrogated issues of power and politics animated by the blue economy, producing some impressive insights of relevance to social and political theory. Informed by debates of the broader critical development scholarship, watchful observers contend that far from transforming society's relationship with the ocean, the blue economy works to reinforce longstanding neoliberal capitalist (and (neo)colonial) structures and systems of power.<sup>210</sup> These claims have been voiced by a diverse array of communities across the world and while each of these encounters are distinct,<sup>211</sup> there are some common concepts that commentators have engaged in progressing their blue economy critique.

<sup>203</sup> Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>204</sup> Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, 'The Ocean in Excess: Towards a More-than-Wet Ontology', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 9, no. 3 (2019): 293–307, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820619872886>; Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, 'Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (2015): 247–64, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>.

<sup>205</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>206</sup> Stefanie Hessler, *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science* (London: The MIT Press, TBA21-Academy, 2018).

<sup>207</sup> Celia Bardwell-Jones, Joyce Pualani Warren, and Stephanie Nohelani Teves, 'Ocean Feminisms', *Amerasia Journal* 48, no. 2 (2022): 96–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2023.2260292>.

<sup>208</sup> Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, 'Capitalism and the Sea: Sovereignty, Territory and Appropriation in the Global Ocean', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 4 (2018): 776–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817737319>.

<sup>209</sup> I note that critical blue economy studies remains a small subset of the broader blue economy scholarship.

Martínez-Vázquez et al. provide a study detailing the increase in journal publications referencing the blue economy since 2010. The majority of these do not engage a critical social or political lens to the study of the blue economy.

Rosa María Martínez-Vázquez, Juan Milán-García, and Jaime de Pablo Valenciano, 'Challenges of the Blue Economy: Evidence and Research Trends', *Environmental Sciences Europe* 33, no. 1 (2021): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-021-00502-1>.

<sup>210</sup> Zoe Brent, Mads Barbesgaard, and Carsten Pedersen, *The Blue Fix: Unmasking the Politics behind the Promise of Blue Growth* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2018), <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-blue-fix>; Felix Mallin and Mads Barbesgaard, 'Awash with Contradiction: Capital, Ocean Space and the Logics of the Blue Economy Paradigm', *Geoforum* 113 (2020): 121–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.04.021>; Mads Barbesgaard, 'Blue Growth: Savior or Ocean Grabbing?', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi-org.virtual.anu.edu.au/10.1080/03066150.2017.1377186>; Celine Germond-Duret, 'Framing the Blue Economy: Placelessness, Development and Sustainability', *Development and Change* 53, no. 2 (2022): 308–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12703>.

<sup>211</sup> International Independent Tribunal on Blue Economy Organising Committee, 'International Tribunal on the Impact of the Blue Economy in Indian Ocean Countries: Verdicts of the Six Tribunal Series', 2022, <http://blueeconomytribunal.org/>; Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, 'A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers', 2022, <https://www.cffacape.org/ssf-call-to-action>; Zoe Brent, Mads Barbesgaard, and Carsten Pedersen, 'The Blue Fix: What's Driving Blue Growth?', *Sustainability Science* 15, no. 1 (2020): 31–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00777-7>; Svein Jentoft et al., *Blue Justice: Small-Scale Fisheries in a Sustainable Ocean Economy*, vol. 26, MARE Publication Series (London: Springer Nature, 2022).



This section identifies and discusses five such concepts that have emerged in the critical blue economy scholarship over the last decade, which can be broadly clustered around two arguments. The concepts of *ocean grabbing*, *frontiers*, and *governmentality* have become particularly poignant for scholars arguing that the blue economy reinforces and extends hegemonic relations with the ocean—namely (neo)colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. Relatedly, the idea of the *boundary object* and suggestions that the blue economy *masquerades* under symbols of Pacific identity and ocean connection have helped scholars grapple with how and why the blue economy appeals to ocean stakeholder groups. I examine each of these concepts in turn, considering what utility they offer for close political analysis of the blue economy. In line with the discussion above, each of these concepts question the transformative potential (and ambitions) of the blue economy.

### 3.3.1 Argument Cluster 1: the blue economy as an extension of neoliberal capitalist relations

Concerned by the social, economic and political relationships structured by the blue economy, a growing body of commentators have come to dispute claims of the discourse's transformative potential, arguing instead that it embodies little other than the continuation of established (neo)colonial and neoliberal capitalist logics.<sup>212</sup> Mallin and Barbesgaard's analysis provides a comprehensive illustration of this claim, with the authors tracing the lineage of the blue economy from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea<sup>213</sup> (UNCLOS) to present. Reflecting on the ocean-based activities advanced in the name of the blue economy, the authors determine that this discourse works to deepen capital's longstanding relationship with the ocean, namely by "minimising spatial rivalry, creating stable environments for the circulation of fixed capital, and allowing industrial production to expand in a relatively calm sea."<sup>214</sup> This, they suggest, calls for the blue economy to be "investigated and understood as part of a *longue durée* transformation of capitalist relations with the sea,"<sup>215</sup> thus disputing the claim that such discourse advances (or even seeks) a break from the status quo.

Suggestions of the blue economy's ties to established hegemonic logics, institutions and agents are a hallmark of critical blue economy commentary and are commonly progressed through the concepts of *ocean grabbing*, the *frontier* and *governmentality*. Each of these concepts attend to the twin

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<sup>212</sup> DAWN & PANG, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*; Matthew Dornan, 'Is "Green Growth" Just the Latest Development Fad?', *DevPolicy Blog*, 21 July 2014, <https://devpolicy.org/is-green-growth-just-the-latest-development-fad-20140721/>; International Independent Tribunal on Blue Economy Organising Committee, 'International Tribunal on the Impact of the Blue Economy in Indian Ocean Countries: Verdicts of the Six Tribunal Series'.

<sup>213</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 'United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea', 10 December 1982.

<sup>214</sup> 'Awash with Contradiction: Capital, Ocean Space and the Logics of the Blue Economy Paradigm', 129.

<sup>215</sup> 122, emphasis original.

territorial and governance impulses of the blue economy; acknowledging that under hegemonic orders of neoliberal capitalism and (neo)colonialism, territorial claim and governance are tightly intertwined.

### **Ocean grabbing**

A common critique of the blue economy to emerge in the last decade is the accusation that it constitutes a form of ‘ocean grabbing.’ Building on discussions of ‘land grabbing’<sup>216</sup> that were being had among international development circles through the late 2000s, Bennett, Govan and Satterfield observed similar issues of “control grabbing”<sup>217</sup> within ocean-based activities. In a now-seminal contribution to the critical ocean development literature, Bennett et al. described ocean grabbing as a process of dispossession or appropriation in which an ocean stakeholder’s use, rights or access to ocean spaces and resources is threatened or compromised.<sup>218</sup> They emphasised how ocean grabbing can entail material and/or governance dimensions, holding that both work to compromise Indigenous and coastal communities—be that by undercutting local management systems or attempts to exclude them from ocean spaces altogether. In this way, ocean grabs perpetuate existing power asymmetries, where the rights and interests of Indigenous and coastal communities are too often violated in pursuit of some ‘higher’ purpose (economic prosperity, global conservation, national security, good governance).

Cases of ocean grabbing have been documented in a number of blue economy cases, with charges launched against conservation and extractive ocean activities alike.<sup>219</sup> The proliferation of marine protected areas (MPAs), particularly large marine protected areas (LMPAs), and marine spatial planning (MSP) tools under the blue economy are two activities that have come under particular scrutiny<sup>220</sup>. As tools aimed at reconciling ocean health with continued economic growth, MPAs

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<sup>216</sup> A project to “captur[e] power to control land and other associated resources like water, minerals or forests, in order to control the benefits of its use”. Jennifer Franco et al., *The Great Global Land Grab: A Primer*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute (TNI), 2013).

<sup>217</sup> Franco et al., 3.

<sup>218</sup> Nathan J. Bennett et al., ‘Towards a Sustainable and Equitable Blue Economy’, *Nature Sustainability* 2, no. 11 (2019): 991–93, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0404-1>.

<sup>219</sup> Allen et al., *The Rush for Oceania: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Ocean Governance and Stewardship*; Jasper Abembia Ayelazuno and Jesse Salah Ovadia, ‘Ocean and Land Grabbing in Ghana’s Offshore Petroleum Industry: From the Agrarian Question to the Question of Industrialization’, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 22, no. 4 (2022): 673–702, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12502>; Elodie Fache, Pierre-Yves Le Meur, and Estienne Rodary, ‘Introduction: The New Scramble for the Pacific: A Frontier Approach’, *Pacific Affairs* 94 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.5509/202194157>; PANG & Ozeanien Dialog *Rough Seas: Looming Dangers of the Blue Economy* (Hamburg: Ozeanien-Dialog, 2020); Philip Steinberg and Berit Kristoffersen, ‘Building a Blue Economy in the Arctic Ocean: Sustaining the Sea or Sustaining the State?’, in *The Politics of Sustainability in the Arctic: Reconfiguring Identity, Space, and Time*, ed. Ulrik Pram Gad and Jeppe Strandsbjerg (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>220</sup> Patrick Bond, ‘Blue Economy Threats, Contradictions and Resistances Seen from South Africa’, *Journal of Political Ecology* 26, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.2458/v26i1.23504>; Jennifer Franco et al., ‘The Global Ocean Grab: A Primer’ (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute (TNI), 2014); Alexander Mawyer and Jerry Jacka, ‘Sovereignty,

and MSP inscribe borders (or ‘zones’) over ocean spaces which, in turn, guide how oceans are used and governed. It has been argued that these tools drive a territorialisation of oceans that has not been seen since the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) under UNCLOS,<sup>221</sup> and furthermore, that in introducing (or redefining) governance regimes over ocean spaces, they erode, or even undermine, existing governance systems that may have been in place prior—particularly those of Indigenous and customary rights holders.<sup>222</sup> In drawing new and artificial boundaries over ocean spaces, such conservation and ocean management practices replicate practices of enclosure and rationalisation which have been the cornerstones of neoliberal capitalist and colonial regimes for centuries.<sup>223</sup> They assume Hardin’s infamous *Tragedy of the Commons* thesis,<sup>224</sup> which argued that sustainable management of the world’s finite resources required the privatisation of land and ending of the commons. Like Hardin’s controversial thesis,<sup>225</sup> MPAs and MSPs have been charged with engaging neoliberal logics to facilitate ecosystems grabs in service of a capitalist world order<sup>226</sup>—be that for direct appropriation (e.g. deep sea oil drilling), commodification (e.g. blue carbon), the offsetting of harm resulting from extractive activities conducted elsewhere (e.g. MPAs), or resolving tensions among ocean industries to enable their more efficient cooperation and, in some cases, collaboration.

That the majority of the world’s largest MPAs are located in the Global South or the EEZs of colonial territories only sharpens characterisations of these tools as (neo)colonial ocean grabs.<sup>227</sup> According to recent analysis of the World Database on Protected Areas, over half (57.1%) of the world’s largest MPAs are located across the two regions of the Asia-Pacific and Southern

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Conservation and Island Ecological Futures’, *Environmental Conservation* 45 (2018): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S037689291800019X>; Betty Queffelec et al., ‘Marine Spatial Planning and the Risk of Ocean Grabbing in the Tropical Atlantic’, *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 78, no. 4 (2021): 1196–1208, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsab006>; Paula Satizábal et al., ‘Blue Economy Discourses and Practices: Reconfiguring Ocean Spaces in the Philippines’, *Maritime Studies* 19, no. 2 (2020): 207–21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-020-00168-0>.

<sup>221</sup> Catherine Corson et al., ‘Assembling Global Conservation Governance’, *Geoforum* 103 (2019): 56–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.03.012>.

<sup>222</sup> Philippa J. Cohen et al., ‘Securing a Just Space for Small-Scale Fisheries in the Blue Economy’, *Frontiers in Marine Science* 6, no. 171 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2019.00171>; Mawyer and Jacka, ‘Sovereignty, Conservation and Island Ecological Futures’.

<sup>223</sup> Campling and Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World*; Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*; Fiona McCormack, *Private Oceans: The Enclosure and Marketisation of the Seas* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>224</sup> Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243–48.

<sup>225</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>226</sup> Queffelec et al., ‘Marine Spatial Planning and the Risk of Ocean Grabbing in the Tropical Atlantic’.

<sup>227</sup> Joey Tau, ‘A Pacific Resistance to Blue Colonization’, *Karibu Foundation*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.karibu.no/newsletter/2020/02/a-pacific-resistance-to-blue-colonization/>.

Ocean<sup>228</sup>—regions that are home to many communities of the Global South and those under colonial occupation and/or governance. Indeed, 99% of the United States’ fully and highly protected MPAs<sup>229,230</sup> and 80% of France’s fully and highly protected MPAs<sup>231</sup> are located in “distant waters,” i.e. the EEZs of overseas territories. These figures are revealing. They highlight how communities of the Global South and those subject to colonial rule shoulder the burden for oceans conservation. Clearly, ocean grabbing is not a phenomenon evenly experienced across the globe but distinctly concentrated in communities outside neoliberal capitalist metropolises. As efforts to tie LMPAs into carbon offsetting activities continue to increase through blue economy programs such as ‘blue carbon’, these discussions on the burden of ecological responsibility and remediation will only continue to deepen.<sup>232</sup>

### Frontier

Turning to a closely related concept, the notion of the ‘frontier’ has been engaged by scholars to expose the political effects associated with framing ocean use and management as places of “untapped potential”<sup>233</sup> through the discourse of the blue economy.<sup>234</sup> Popularised by Anna Tsing’s *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*,<sup>235</sup> the concept of the frontier has been retooled as a specific conceptual framework for critical analysis in political ecology and the environmental

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<sup>228</sup> Elizabeth P. Pike et al., ‘Ocean Protection Quality Is Lagging behind Quantity: Applying a Scientific Framework to Assess Real Marine Protected Area Progress against the 30 by 30 Target’, *Conservation Letters* 17, no. 3 (2024): e13020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.13020>.

<sup>229</sup> Jenna Sullivan-Stack et al., ‘A Scientific Synthesis of Marine Protected Areas in the United States: Status and Recommendations’, *Frontiers in Marine Science* 9 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2022.849927>.

<sup>230</sup> Scholars of Oceania have also drawn explicit links between MPA designation and processes of US militarisation. Craig Santos Perez, ‘Blue-Washing the Colonization and Militarization of Our Ocean’, *The Hawaii Independent*, 26 June 2014, <https://thehawaiiindependent.com/story/blue-washing-the-colonization-and-militarization-of-our-ocean>; Gitte du Plessis et al., ‘Sustaining Empire: Conservation by Ruination at Kalama Atoll’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40, no. 4 (2022): 706–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758221102156>; Wolfenden and Penjueli, ‘Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?’

<sup>231</sup> Joachim Claudet, Charles Loiseau, and Antoine Pebayle, ‘Critical Gaps in the Protection of the Second Largest Exclusive Economic Zone in the World’, *Marine Policy* 124 (2021): 104379, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104379>.

<sup>232</sup> Mads Barbesgaard, ‘Blue Carbon: Ocean Grabbing in Disguise?’ (Transnational Institute (TNI), 2016), <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/blue-carbon-ocean-grabbing-in-disguise>.

<sup>233</sup> Selemán Yusuph Kitenge, ‘Blue Economy: Africa’s Untapped Potential for Economic Growth’, *African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)*, 19 March 2021, <https://www.nepad.org/news/blue-economy-africas-untapped-potential-economic-growth>; Ramiz Uddin and Mohammad Saiful Hassan, ‘Blue Tourism: Exploring Untapped Potentials to Underpin a Sustainable Blue Economy in Bangladesh’, *United Nations Development Programme Bangladesh*, 30 June 2023, <https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/blue-tourism-exploring-untapped-potentials-underpin-sustainable-blue-economy-bangladesh>.

<sup>234</sup> John Childs, ‘Performing “Blue Degrowth”: Critiquing Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea through Creative Practice’, *Sustainability Science* 15, no. 1 (2020): 117–29, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00752-2>; Satizábal et al., ‘Blue Economy Discourses and Practices: Reconfiguring Ocean Spaces in the Philippines’; Pacific Network on Globalisation and Oceania Dialog, *Rough Seas: Looming Dangers of the Blue Economy*; Fache, Le Meur, and Rodary, ‘Introduction: The New Scramble for the Pacific: A Frontier Approach’.

<sup>235</sup> *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*.

humanities over the last two decades.<sup>236</sup> Scholars in these fields have interrogated how the characterisation of spaces as ‘frontiers’ mediates our understandings and interactions with them; revealing how our perceptions of resource rich environments are not objective or neutral, but socially constructed.<sup>237</sup> In defining spaces as frontiers, actors (consciously or not) ascribe these spaces qualities of being rich in resource potential, empty of inhabitants, and ungoverned. These qualities, in turn, pave the way for the commodification of nature, sanction processes of territorialisation, and legitimise the imposition or extension of governing regimes—regardless of systems that may already be established (e.g. customary regimes).<sup>238</sup> In effect, the construct of the frontier works to empty spaces of all prior systems of relation between humans and ecosystem and justify the establishment of systems of extraction.

From these basic assumptions, it is not difficult to see why frontier theory has proved useful for arguments of the blue economy’s entanglement with hegemonic orders. Regarding neoliberal capitalist expansion, frontier theory illustrates how frontier characterisations make spaces legible to capital: their (supposed) untapped wealth renders them ripe for resource exploitation; their (supposed) absence of society insists that such exploitation is not expropriation; and their (supposed) lack of existing governance systems enables the imposition of external regimes that facilitate and legitimise the former two assertions. Frontiers, in short, serve to satisfy the ever-expanding demands of capitalist desire and consumption.

The significance of the frontier concept is perhaps even more pertinent for decolonial scholarship and movements. Looking to the colonial myths of *terra nullius*<sup>239</sup> and *aqua nullius*<sup>240</sup> that were leveraged to dispossess Indigenous communities of their ecosystems, rights, cosmologies, and connections, decolonial scholars are acutely aware of the political effects associated with the designation of spaces as frontiers.<sup>241</sup> On the blue economy, scholars have demonstrated how the

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<sup>236</sup> While the idea of the ‘frontier’ has been reclaimed in the critical social sciences over recent decades, Frontier Theory was first proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner who argued frontierism constituted a key process in the colonial American state-making project. Frederick Johnson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, U.S.: H. Holt and Company, 1920); Frederick Johnson Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (American Historical Association, Chicago, United States, 1983).

<sup>237</sup> Oliver Lilford and Matthew G. Allen, ‘The Historical Assembly of Oceania’s Deep-Sea Mining Frontier’, in *Routledge Handbook of Global Land and Resource Grabbing* (Routledge, 2023), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003080916-25/historical-assembly-oceania-deep-sea-mining-frontier-oliver-lilford-matthew-allen>.

<sup>238</sup> Alexander Mawyer, ‘Floating Islands, Frontiers, and Other Boundary Objects on the Edge of Oceania’s Futurity’, *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2021): 123–44, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2021941123>.

<sup>239</sup> Latin expression for ‘land belonging to no one.’

<sup>240</sup> Latin expression for ‘water belonging to no one.’

<sup>241</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ‘Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 48 (2003): 5100–5106; Fache, Le Meur, and Rodary, ‘Introduction: The New Scramble for the Pacific: A Frontier Approach’; Mawyer, ‘Floating Islands, Frontiers, and Other Boundary Objects on the Edge of Oceania’s Futurity’;

construction of oceans as frontiers under the blue economy perpetuates colonial imaginaries and relations. Satizábal et al., for example, expose how the blue economy's construction of the ocean as frontier marginalises coastal dweller's rights and access to ocean spaces in the Philippines.<sup>242</sup> In the Pacific context, civil society has similarly leveraged the frontier concept to argue that the blue economy provides an “enabling framework” for external powers to “accelerat[e] industrialisation of the oceans as the next frontier for economic domination.”<sup>243</sup> These contributions remind us that the prevailing capitalist system of our contemporary age is built on the back of colonial exploit and relations, resulting in an underlying persistence of many colonial logics—significant among them, the frontier.

The turn to the frontier in the critical blue economy scholarship<sup>244</sup> is unsurprising given the pervasiveness of such language throughout the discourse. As early as 2014, advocates of the blue economy were describing the ocean as the “final frontier for humanity and its quest for sustainable development.”<sup>245</sup> The discourse thus arose with an explicit frontier imagining at its core. Such frontierism remains embedded in the blue economy today; just look to the recent media articles posted by *The Economist*, headlined “A new blue economic frontier: Investing in a blue economy raised the stakes on the role of blue finance for our planet's future,”<sup>246</sup> or the UN document titled “Blue Economy: oceans as the next great economic frontier.”<sup>247</sup> For scholars critically engaging with frontier framings, the blue economy's characterisation of the ocean as the ‘final development frontier’ exposes its deep-seated capitalist logics, and subsequently, the capitalist frame of reference through which the blue economy constructs its development programs. Simply stated, the blue economy is positioning the ocean as the next frontier for capitalist exploit.

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Fiona McCormack, ‘The Kermadec Ocean Sanctuary: Terraqueous Territorialization and Māori Marine Environments’, *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.5509/202194177>.

<sup>242</sup> ‘Blue Economy Discourses and Practices: Reconfiguring Ocean Spaces in the Philippines’.

<sup>243</sup> *Rough Seas: Looming Dangers of the Blue Economy*, 10.

<sup>244</sup> Allen et al., *The Rush for Oceania: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Ocean Governance and Stewardship*; Rajni Nayanthara Gamage, ‘Blue Economy in Southeast Asia: Oceans as the New Frontier of Economic Development’, *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 12, no. 2 (2016): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2016.1244361>; Carsten Pedersen, ‘Troubled Waters: How the “Blue Economy” Perpetuates Historical Injustices in Mauritius’ (Port Louis: Center for Alternative Research and Studies (CARES) and Transnational Institute (TNI), October 2021); Satizábal et al., ‘Blue Economy Discourses and Practices: Reconfiguring Ocean Spaces in the Philippines’.

<sup>245</sup> UNDESA, ‘Blue Economy Concept Paper’ (New York: United Nations, 2014), <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2978BEconcept.pdf>.

<sup>246</sup> ‘A New Blue Economic Frontier’, *Economist Impact: World Ocean Initiative*, 21 December 2021, <https://impact.economist.com/ocean/sustainable-ocean-economy/a-new-blue-economic-frontier>.

<sup>247</sup> ‘Blue Economy: Oceans as the next Great Economic Frontier’, 14 March 2022, <https://unric.org/en/blue-economy-oceans-as-the-next-great-economic-frontier/>.

## Governmentality

Reflecting on the ways in which the blue economy promotes certain approaches to ocean governance, and likewise, how certain governance actors have leveraged the blue economy to extend their rationalities oceanward, some scholars have found value in the concept of governmentality to explain the blue economy's function as a political project.<sup>248</sup> The term governmentality was famously theorised by Michel Foucault as the 'art of government,' or the rationalities and strategies used by social bodies to govern.<sup>249</sup> Governmentality refers to more than simply the conduct of a governing body, but the logics that underlie these actions and that are, in turn, shaped by them.

In the modest, yet growing, collection of critical blue economy scholarship, scholars have usefully drawn upon governmentality to illustrate how the blue economy extends the governing logics of hegemonic systems—namely capitalism, neoliberalism and militarism. With respect to China, Choi<sup>250</sup> and Fabinyi et al.<sup>251</sup> have demonstrated how the People's Republic of China (PRC) has embraced the blue economy discourse in support of a capitalist governmentality wherein new ocean spaces are opened up to state-sponsored economic activity premised on logics of capital accumulation and commodification. The blue economy here is positioned as more than an economy-making project, but "necessarily a governmental project through spatial interventions, opening up new 'governable spaces' and rationalizing particular ways of governing."<sup>252</sup> These particular ways of governing, according to Fabinyi et al.,<sup>253</sup> can be characterised as top-down approaches to ocean governance that consolidate power at the party-state, such as stricter and more expansive law-making or state-led economic modernisation. Though it would be difficult to claim that the PRC's governmentality is neoliberal, it is firmly capitalist, with the blue economy discourse providing the party-state a political tool to extend and reinforce resource commodification logics at sea.

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<sup>248</sup> Young Rae Choi, 'The Blue Economy as Governmentality and the Making of New Spatial Rationalities', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7, no. 1 (2017): 37–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820617691649>; Michael Fabinyi et al., 'China's Blue Economy: A State Project of Modernisation', *The Journal of Environment & Development* 30, no. 2 (2021): 127–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1070496521995872>; Alicia Said and Douglas MacMillan, "Re-Grabbing" Marine Resources: A Blue Degrowth Agenda for the Resurgence of Small-Scale Fisheries in Malta', *Sustainability Science* 15 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00769-7>; Steinberg and Kristoffersen, 'Building a Blue Economy in the Arctic Ocean: Sustaining the Sea or Sustaining the State?'

<sup>249</sup> Foucault in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>250</sup> 'The Blue Economy as Governmentality and the Making of New Spatial Rationalities'.

<sup>251</sup> 'China's Blue Economy: A State Project of Modernisation'.

<sup>252</sup> Choi, 'The Blue Economy as Governmentality and the Making of New Spatial Rationalities', 39.

<sup>253</sup> 'China's Blue Economy: A State Project of Modernisation'.

Blue economy's support of neoliberal governmentalities has also been documented in the literature.<sup>254</sup> Midlen,<sup>255</sup> for example, identifies the blue economy as a form of global neoliberal governmentality in the context of the Western Indian Ocean region of Africa (albeit it one that faces resistance on various fronts from local and Indigenous actors). He identifies evidence of global neoliberal governmentality in the blue economy's commodification of ocean and coastal environments, territorialisation and appropriation of ocean spaces and resources, and the devolution of ocean governance to states and their populations in primary support of free market economies. These neoliberal logics, embedded in the way that the blue economy envisions ocean spaces and their management, pave the way for the certain ocean activities at the expense of others—prominent examples being growing investment in MPA designation or natural capital accounting (as activities of ocean enclosure and rationalisation) counterposed against the continued sidelining of artisanal and small-scale fishers in ocean policy and financing.<sup>256</sup> Midlen finds that the blue economy provides a collaborative platform for African states to work together towards common goals of neoliberal ocean use and management (what he terms 'collaborative blue economy governmentality'). The blue economy thus provides more than merely a trendy buzzword for describing ocean activities, but a powerful vessel for propagating, entrenching and expanding neoliberal logics at sea.

Lastly, a growing body of scholars and civil society advocates have also raised concern over how blue economy activities facilitate ocean militarisation.<sup>257</sup> Conceptualising militarisation as the “step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military,”<sup>258</sup> analyses from these critical development circles characterise the blue economy as a foil for legitimising and extending ocean-based activities ultimately in service of state geostrategic goals. These critiques have been levelled at large-scale marine protected areas, which—under the banner of blue economy conservation—restrict public access to large ocean areas (particularly those that house strategic military bases), violate Indigenous rights and relationships with the ocean, and concentrate governance control into the hands of state

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<sup>254</sup> Barbesgaard, 'Blue Growth: Savior or Ocean Grabbing?'; Tarik Dahou and Brenda Chalfin, 'Governing Africa's Seas in the Neoliberal Era', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Politics*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.904>; Germond-Duret, 'Framing the Blue Economy: Placelessness, Development and Sustainability'.

<sup>255</sup> 'Enacting the Blue Economy in the Western Indian Ocean: A "Collaborative Blue Economy Governmentality"', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2023, 25148486231198010, <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486231198010>.

<sup>256</sup> Andre Standing, 'Is Blue Growth Compatible with Security Small-Scale Fisheries?' (Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA), 2019).

<sup>257</sup> Wolfenden and Penjueli, 'Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?'; Santos Perez, 'Blue-Washing the Colonization and Militarization of Our Ocean'.

<sup>258</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 281.



government.<sup>259</sup> Blue economy activities that, according to such analysis, protect bases—less significantly biodiversity. The pursuit of seabed mining for (critical strategic) minerals has also been challenged as a militarised and highly geostrategic activity presented as socially and ecologically necessary “under the guise of development and the blue economy framework.”<sup>260</sup> Common to these analyses is caution over how the blue economy discourse legitimises, rationalises and advances geostrategic moves consistent with militarism, deploying appeals to ocean sustainability as cover.<sup>261</sup>

### 3.3.2 Argument Cluster 2: understanding the appeal of the blue economy discourse

A second line of inquiry common in the critical blue economy scholarship regards investigations into blue economy’s widespread appeal. Contributions of this nature examine why the blue economy has emerged as an attractive vision for sustainable ocean development, and in many cases, how. Ideas of the *boundary object*<sup>262</sup> and *masquerade*<sup>263</sup> have been picked up by scholars and communities grappling with the blue economy’s discursive charm and though these concepts address this puzzle from distinctly different approaches, each offer a political account of the blue economy’s popular appeal. As I discuss below, these concepts suggest that the blue economy’s popularity is both a product and tool of political design.

#### Boundary object

In an effort to understand the blue economy’s broad uptake among stakeholders of diverse positions and interests, some have employed the concept of the ‘boundary object’ to explain the discourse’s multi-interpretability.<sup>264</sup> Much like its progenitor discourse of sustainable development,<sup>265</sup> the blue economy has been widely described as an indefinite term with varying definitions, objectives and scope.<sup>266</sup> While some (particularly those among the policy community)

<sup>259</sup> Santos Perez, ‘Blue-Washing the Colonization and Militarization of Our Ocean’.

<sup>260</sup> Wolfenden and Penjueli, ‘Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?’

<sup>261</sup> Militarism: the ideology that a nation should maintain and be ready to use its strong military capabilities to advance its national interests. Joseph H. Genz et al., ‘Militarism and Nuclear Testing in the Pacific’, Teaching Oceania Studies (Honolulu: Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Hawai’i–Mānoa, 2016).

<sup>262</sup> Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’.

<sup>263</sup> Pacific Regional Non-Governmental Organisations, ‘Currents of Contradictions in the Blue Economy’, 2020.

<sup>264</sup> Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’; Leah M. Fusco, Marleen S. Schutter, and Andrés M. Cisneros-Montemayor, ‘Oil, Transitions, and the Blue Economy in Canada’, *Sustainability* 14, no. 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14138132>.

<sup>265</sup> Ian Scoones, ‘Sustainability’, *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4–5 (2007): 589–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469609>.

<sup>266</sup> Raymond K. Ayilu, Michael Fabinyi, and Kate Barclay, ‘Small-Scale Fisheries in the Blue Economy: Review of Scholarly Papers and Multilateral Documents’, *Ocean & Coastal Management* 216 (2022): 105982, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2021.105982>.

have sought to reconcile these various definitions,<sup>267</sup> others have posited such ambiguity as a product of design and an essential quality facilitating the blue economy's widespread appeal.<sup>268</sup> It is in accordance with this latter contention that the concept of boundary object enters the blue economy scholarship.

Simply put, boundary objects are concepts that straddle differing meanings and usages: versatile enough to appeal to multiple actors and worldviews, and thus a common communicative tool enabling collaboration between diverse social agents. To borrow the words of Schutter et al., boundary objects “have a strong degree of plasticity in their meaning, take on the role of bridging boundaries—that is, they facilitate cooperation between different social worlds boundaries of different bodies of thought.”<sup>269</sup> The idea of boundary objects spans well beyond the critical blue economy literature and is commonly engaged by scholars in fields of sociology or science and technology.<sup>270</sup> In these spaces, boundary objects tend to be viewed as advantageous for interdisciplinary collaboration and public communication as they offer a mutually intelligible term around which actors can coalesce, discuss and progress (generally) compatible priorities.<sup>271</sup> Critical blue economy scholarship, however, appears to have developed a more sceptical perspective on boundary objects, interrogating how nebulousness functions to obscure the workings of power and provide cover for the extension of naturalised, hegemonic systems with minimal scrutiny.<sup>272</sup>

Examples of boundary object theorisation in the blue economy literature include Schutter et al.'s<sup>273</sup> study of the blue economy in the Seychelles (building on Schutter's doctoral thesis),<sup>274</sup> and Fusco et al.'s<sup>275</sup> examination of the Canadian oil industry's engagement with the blue economy to

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<sup>267</sup> European Commission and Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, *Unsustainable Finance in the Blue Economy – Where Does the Money Come from? – Executive Summary* (Publications Office, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2826/035310>; Simone Smith-Godfrey, 'Defining the Blue Economy', *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 12, no. 1 (2016): 58–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2016.1175131>.

<sup>268</sup> Christian Bueger, 'Shifting Tides: The Blue Economy and Concepts in Practice', in *Concepts at Work: On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics*, ed. Piki Ish-Shalom (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11719182>; Schutter et al., 'The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales'.

<sup>269</sup> 'The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales', 2.

<sup>270</sup> Marta Caccamo, Daniel Pittino, and Fredrik Tell, 'Boundary Objects, Knowledge Integration, and Innovation Management: A Systematic Review of the Literature', *Technovation* 122 (2023): 102645, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2022.102645>; Susan Leigh Star, 'Chapter 2 - The Structure of Ill-Structured Solutions: Boundary Objects and Heterogeneous Distributed Problem Solving', in *Distributed Artificial Intelligence*, ed. Les Gasser and Michael N. Huhns (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 1989), 37–54, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-1-55860-092-8.50006-X>.

<sup>271</sup> Star, 'Chapter 2 - The Structure of Ill-Structured Solutions: Boundary Objects and Heterogeneous Distributed Problem Solving'.

<sup>272</sup> Schutter et al., 'The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales'.

<sup>273</sup> Schutter et al.

<sup>274</sup> Marleen Schutter, 'Ecosystem Services and the Blue Economy: Navigating Power and Values' (Doctoral Thesis (PhD), Lancaster, United Kingdom, Lancaster University, 2020).

<sup>275</sup> 'Oil, Transitions, and the Blue Economy in Canada'.

legitimise its continued development. These studies push beyond simple acknowledgement of the blue economy's definitional malleability, instead embracing the boundary object concept to examine the political function performed through such ambiguity. Identifying the blue economy as a discourse aligned with neoliberal capitalism, these studies contend that the blue economy represents a boundary object that works to facilitate the broad uptake of neoliberal capitalist programs, particularly in contexts where they would otherwise be contested. The blue economy's ambiguity enables neoliberal capitalist programs and logics to expand into social spaces that may otherwise be cautious of such hegemony as its characteristic nebulousness renders it difficult for communities to pin-down, interrogate and challenge. Indeterminacy, as suggested by the boundary object concept, provides for deft social negotiation.

As a basic conceptual framework, the notion of a boundary object is useful for prompting thinking on ambiguity as a political tool. It highlights how, especially when leveraged by hegemonic actors, ambiguity can obscure critical interrogation and thus enable the continuation or expansion of dominant worldviews. This insight can aid the development of the passive revolution framework, alerting us to how vaguely defined promises of transformation are particularly ripe for hegemonic exploitation. However, if we seek to more comprehensively account for the agency and calculations of non-hegemonic groups in constructively engaging with boundary objects (e.g. Why do small-scale fishers' advocates use blue economy language even when wary of the threat this discourse poses to coastal communities' rights? Or, why do Indigenous groups of the Global South adopt blue economy language in their campaigns despite critiquing principles of environmental commodification and eco-centrism?) we require other conceptual tools. In isolation, the boundary object concept is limited in recognising, let alone accounting for, the agency of social groups outside hegemonic centres of power. To address this shortfall, I turn to the thinking of Pacific civil society who raise another explanation for why the blue economy has garnered such broad base appeal through the region: its appeal to Pacific symbols.

### **Masquerading under Pacific symbols**

Perhaps one of the most sophisticated, and necessarily context specific explanations for the widespread appeal of the blue economy in the Pacific is found in the commentary of regional civil society. Led by reputed organisations such as the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) and the Pacific chapter of the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), some among the region's civil society community suggest that the blue economy owes much of its regional embrace to the discourse's resonance with Pacific symbols—such as ocean stewardship, or re-envisioning of Pacific Island states as large ocean states (including most recently, the Blue Pacific).

Expressions of this argument have featured in regional discussions for the better part of a decade. In 2019, for example, PANG and DAWN hosted a public panel discussion at the University of the South Pacific interrogating whether the blue economy was an evolving development framework or “smoke and mirrors.”<sup>276</sup> During this discussion, it was opined: “perhaps, contained in the success of Pacific States in promoting our Ocean-scape [through Pacific delegates’ promotion of the blue economy at Rio+20], have been the seeds of its possible subversion and co-option by economic interests and dominant economic forces.”<sup>277</sup> At the heart of this provocation was a concern that the blue economy discourse threatened to co-opt Pacific principles of ocean connection, stewardship and relationality in service of extending ocean industrialisation.

This concern was again shortly raised by a leading scholar of the region, Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka‘uta, whose reflections on the blue economy’s insidious appeal to Pacific symbols opened this thesis (*Chapter One*). Like PANG and DAWN, Koya-Vaka‘uta recognised that the blue economy’s wide appeal to actors in the Pacific derived less from its ability to mean anything to anyone (boundary object), but because it *specifically* resonated with Pacific worldviews. Her statement warns of how such resonances enable blue economy proponents to position the discourse and its activities as particularly well suited for ocean development in the Pacific—even if the reality of its implementation on the ground suggests otherwise.<sup>278</sup> Though alluring, the symbolic compatibility of the blue economy with Pacific (particularly Indigenous) connections to the ocean may also work to distract.

Over subsequent years, civil society organisations of the region have continued their scrutiny of the blue economy, consistently drawing focus to the risk this discourse co-opts and appropriates Pacific symbols as a strategy for legitimising the oceanward expansion of neoliberal capitalism. In 2020, the Pacific Regional Non-Governmental Organisations Alliance (PRNGO) released a position paper asserting “It is imperative that as Pacific people, we reclaim the language of relationship with the ocean and relinquish the dominant neoliberal concept of a Blue Economy.”<sup>279</sup> And at the current time of writing, PANG is actively pursuing a dedicated work program interrogating the blue economy as a driver of ocean industrialisation through the region. As

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<sup>276</sup> Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, ‘Surfacing the Agendas of the Blue Economy’, 19 March 2019, <https://dawnnet.org/2019/03/surfacing-the-agendas-of-the-blue-economy/>.

<sup>277</sup> DAWN & PANG, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*, 6.

<sup>278</sup> Koya-Vaka‘uta in Pita Ligaiula, ‘We Need Pacific Voices on Oceans Science Decade: Dr Vaka‘uta’, *Pacific Community Workshop*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2019/07/we-need-pacific-voices-on-oceans-science-decade-dr-vakautu>; Bhagwan, ‘Tides Are Changing: Opening Speech at the International Conference “The Future of the Oceans and Seas”’; Tau, ‘A Pacific Resistance to Blue Colonization’.

<sup>279</sup> ‘Currents of Contradictions in the Blue Economy’, 4.

scholars from the Pacific Theological College<sup>280</sup> and Pacific Conference of Churches similarly critique the blue economy discourse as “the use of identity and indigenous references” to “[hide] the explicit intent to access and exploit specific resources,”<sup>281</sup> it is clear that such concern regarding the co-option of Pacific symbols by the blue economy discourse is hardly marginal—at least among regional civil society.

### 3.4 In dialogue with passive revolution

As outlined across the sections above, arguments that the blue economy may function an inherently conservative discourse have been voiced from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and theoretical lenses across the critical scholarship. Common across these is the contention that the blue economy stabilises and reinforces hegemonic relationships with ocean and society, with neoliberal capitalism—entangled with (neo)colonialism—overwhelmingly identified as this hegemonic form. This claim corresponds closely with Gramsci’s thinking on passive revolution outlined in *Chapter Two*, leading me to suggest that while explicit engagement with the passive revolution concept in the blue economy scholarship remains embryonic, there are strong conceptual grounds for its relevance.

So, what does the existing blue economy scholarship have to say on the concept of passive revolution? And how can the existing political concepts common in critical blue economy commentary inform this Gramscian approach? These two questions structure this final section.

#### 3.4.1 Passive revolution in the blue economy scholarship

Analysis of the blue economy through the lens of passive revolution has, to date, largely been confined to the work of a group of scholars at the Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University. Marleen Schutter and Christina Hicks have been particularly instrumental in this analysis, with Schutter’s doctoral research into the blue economy’s perception in the Seychelles providing an important baseline study that has been developed in subsequent articles.<sup>282</sup> Schutter and her co-authors are explicit about their rationale for engaging Gramsci’s thinking on passive revolution, reasoning that these concepts “offer a useful approach to studying how challenges to

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<sup>280</sup> Vaai, “*We Are Therefore We Live*”: *Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story*.

<sup>281</sup> Bhagwan, “Tides Are Changing: Opening Speech at the International Conference “The Future of the Oceans and Seas””.

<sup>282</sup> Schutter, ‘Networking the Blue Economy in Seychelles: Pioneers, Resistance, and the Power of Influence’; Schutter, ‘Ecosystem Services and the Blue Economy: Navigating Power and Values’; Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’.

dominant economic systems are neutralised and absorbed.”<sup>283</sup> Though short, this statement is clear on the value the passive revolution framework offers for critical blue economy analysis. It emphasises how passive revolution directs attention to the *strategies* deployed by hegemonic forms to address (and overcome) challenges to their authority. Like that observed by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*,<sup>284</sup> Schutter and her colleagues recognise how crises can provide windows of opportunity for hegemonic orders to respond, adapt and evolve to changing social contexts. Their studies engage the passive revolution framework to demonstrate this, suggesting that contrary to its promise, the transformative vision of ocean development espoused under the blue economy may indeed be politically conservative.<sup>285</sup> The blue economy discourse, in other words, is a strategic attempt by neoliberal capitalism to *appear* responsive to criticism of its structural contradictions (economic, ecological, development) without seriously committing to fundamentally transform these flawed systems of relations. This enables neoliberal capitalism to reestablish consent in its social order, all the while displacing alternate visions of ocean use and management that may disrupt the status quo.

Outside this work of the Lancaster Environment Centre, the concept of passive revolution remains largely absent in the blue economy literature. This appears a missed opportunity for critical analysis, particularly for our understanding of the political function and effects of the discourse’s circulation. Reflecting on the valuable insights offered in the broader critical blue economy literature, I bring Gramsci’s framework of passive revolution into dialogue with existing analysis—particularly its exploration of ideas of *ocean grabbing*, *frontier*, *governmentality*, *boundary object* and *symbolic masquerade*. These concepts enable me to deepen my understanding of the blue economy as it may relate to passive revolution. I close this section with a brief discussion of key political learnings that can be taken from these complementary literatures, noting that these discussions will guide my unprecedented effort to extend the concept of passive revolution into blue economy analysis of the Pacific.

### 3.4.2 Learnings for the passive revolution framework

Existing analysis of the blue economy encourages attention to both the territorial and governance dimensions underlying this discourse’s construction and political effects. Through engagement with concepts of *ocean grabbing*, *frontier* and *governmentality*, commentators have revealed how the blue

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<sup>283</sup> Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’, 2.

<sup>284</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.

<sup>285</sup> Schutter, ‘Networking the Blue Economy in Seychelles: Pioneers, Resistance, and the Power of Influence’; Schutter, ‘Ecosystem Services and the Blue Economy: Navigating Power and Values’; Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’.

economy facilitates an expansion of neoliberal capitalism's claims to ocean spaces (territorial), while simultaneously perpetuating its core logics in forums of ocean governance and development. Indeed, as demonstrated through tools such as MSP, these territorial and governance dimensions are mutually reinforcing; with principles of rationalisation and enclosure underpinning MSP zoning practices, just as zoning practices enable ocean commodification. This insight highlights the importance of analysing blue economy interactions for both their territorial and governance dynamics: How is the blue economy being engaged to assert or challenge Pacific claims to ocean space? And likewise, how does the blue economy shape Pacific interactions in ocean governance? As both these dimensions deeply relate to the blue economy's political effects, it will be important that I attend to these twin dynamics when grappling with the discourse's function through the framework of passive revolution. This will require a commitment to analysing the ways the blue economy and its promise of transformative ocean development shape Pacific interactions with ocean spaces, as well as the Pacific's negotiation of ocean governance forums and development partnerships. Analysis of these focus areas feature throughout my case studies of *Part II*.

The second key insight offered in the existing blue economy literature is the importance of interrogating 'why' the blue economy achieves broad stakeholder appeal. As outlined earlier, scholars working with the concepts of *boundary object* and *masquerade* dedicate careful thought to this question, arriving at the conclusion that the discourse's popular appeal is not a matter of chance but the product of a highly effective political strategy. Though these scholars reach this conclusion via different analytical routes, it is striking that they converge on this same observation. It suggests that the blue economy's popular appeal—its charisma—is an outcome of social negotiation, thus raising it as an issue for political analysis. This assumption aligns neatly with a key premise of Gramsci's passive revolution framework: the importance of consent for the securing of social authority (hegemony). By engaging passive revolution in this thesis, I attend to the question of 'why' the blue economy has become such an influential discourse of ocean development, highlighting how charismatic discourses (namely, those promising transformation) offer effective tools for building social consent. Like scholars working with concepts of boundary object and masquerade, I see the popular appeal of the blue economy as an important object of political inquiry and seek to deepen our thinking on this issue by approaching through the lens of consent as enabled via the conceptual framework of passive revolution.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Across this chapter I have presented the case for passive revolution as a valuable framework for analysing the political function of the blue economy and its promise of transformative ocean development. I argue that passive revolution sits in constructive dialogue with key arguments of the critical development studies and critical blue economy scholarship, each of which have scrutinised the ways that promises of transformation can be weaponised by established systems to reinforce and refashion the status quo, rather than shift from it as seemingly promised. Thus, while my engagement with passive revolution for blue economy analysis may be relatively novel (though not unprecedented), it builds on a deep lineage of related thought.

The first section examined how critical development scholarship has come to understand the potential perilousness of the development promise. I detail how scholars across diverse contexts and schools of thought have uncovered a tendency for the development complex (logics, institutions, activities) to reproduce (neo)colonial, neoliberal and capitalist regimes at the expense of the very communities it claims to support. In 2014, Wanner's analysis of 'green growth' and 'green economy' discourses introduced Gramsci's framework of passive revolution to the sustainable development literature.<sup>286</sup> This paper demonstrated the utility of engaging passive revolution to understand the conservative political effects of such discourses, in spite of (or perhaps more aptly, under the cover of) their promises of a transformative model of human-ecosystem relations. While this contribution spurred growing engagement with passive revolution in analysis of terrestrially based sustainable development discourse, the blue economy literature has been slow to explore the utility of this conceptual framework.

Noting there remain few attempts to engage passive revolution in the critical blue economy scholarship, *Section Two* discussed five common concepts engaged by the literature to interrogate the political function of the blue economy discourse. Resonant with passive revolution, the concepts of *ocean grabbing*, *frontier* and *governmentality* have been useful for critical scholars arguing that the blue economy works to extend and reproduce ((neo)colonial) neoliberal capitalism at sea. Likewise, characterisations of the blue economy as a *boundary object* and *masquerade* in Pacific symbols share common assumptions with the passive revolution framework; namely, that the popular appeal of this discourse is an important site of political inquiry. By providing a brief overview of these five concepts, I highlight how there exist valuable critical insights on the political function of the blue economy that broadly correspond with the framework of passive revolution—

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<sup>286</sup> Wanner, 'The New "Passive Revolution" of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the "Sustainable Development" of Neoliberal Capitalism'.



even if these are not explicitly identified as such. This led me to *Section Three* where I explored how the insights raised through these five concepts can inform my engagement with the passive revolution framework, while also acknowledging the scholarship of the Lancaster Environment Centre that first bridged blue economy analysis with Gramsci's passive revolution thinking.

Ultimately, I find that while the critical blue economy scholarship has touched only lightly on the concept of passive revolution for understanding the political function of this ocean development discourse, there is a wealth of related scholarship that can help guide and ground engagement with this Gramscian framework. These existing contributions, with their nuanced insights into the potential conservatism of discourses promising transformation, support my critical unpacking of the blue economy as a tool of neoliberal capitalist hegemony. Here I conclude the conceptual components of *Part I* and move to its final chapter on the methods and methodologies I embrace to conduct my study.



# CHAPTER FOUR

## Methodology and relational spaces

### 4.1 Methodological principle: Research as Relational Space

Relationships are everything in the Pacific. As the connective thread that weaves people to place, one another, the ancestors and spiritual realm, relationships are at the heart of Pacific ways of knowing and being. In the words of Vaai and Nabobo-Baba:

... a basic reality is that most if not all understandings of personhood in the Pacific are deeply relational. In these societies, the self is relational or it is nothing. It is shaped by relational values and principles whereby the self is part of the whole and the whole is part of the self. Relationality is needed as a worldview and filter through which to understand the self and the other.<sup>287</sup>

The importance of relationships in research design and praxis has been powerfully asserted by Pacific scholars—particularly over the last three decades—leading to a now expansive literature on the subject<sup>288</sup>. From the path-forging work of regional thinkers who were developing culturally specific research frameworks as early as the 1990s,<sup>289</sup> to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal *Decolonising Methodologies*,<sup>290</sup> or more recent discussions on the concept and practice of relationality in scholarship,<sup>291</sup> leading minds across the Pacific have firmly situated relationships as the foundation

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<sup>287</sup> *The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific* (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>288</sup> Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka’uta offers an excellent summary of Pacific research frameworks: Koya-Vaka’uta, ‘Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis’.

<sup>289</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, *Kakala*, Australasian Literature: Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands (Suva: Mana Publications, 1993); Louisa Crawley, Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann, and Rosaline Tofilau Utumapu Stanley-Findlay, *Strategic Directions for the Mental Health Services for Pacific Islands People*. (Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Health, 1995); Graham Hingangaroa Smith, ‘The Development of Kaupapa Maori: Theory and Praxis’ (The University of Auckland, 1997); Manulani Aluli Meyer, ‘Native Hawaiian Epistemology: Contemporary Narratives’ (Harvard University, 1998).

<sup>290</sup> *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, New York: Zed Books, 1999).

<sup>291</sup> Katrina-Ann R. Kapā’anaokalaōkeola Nākoa Oliveira and Erin Kahunawaika’ala Wright, *Kanaka ‘Ōiwi Methodologies: Mo’olelo and Metaphor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016); Vaai and Casimira, *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi*; Koro et al., ‘Tā, Vā, and Lā: Re-Imagining the Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands’.

of ethical and quality research.<sup>292</sup> While approaching research from their own unique standpoints, these scholars have developed a rich body of methodologies informed by Pacific philosophies which commonly emphasise the collective over the individual and prioritise relational care.<sup>293</sup> Thus, while most Pacific methodologies have only been written about in recent decades, they are often rooted in longstanding Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Reflecting on this growing body of Pacific methodologies, Samoan artist, activist, practitioner and scholar Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka'uta has advocated for rethinking research as relational space.<sup>294</sup> In framing research as relational space, Koya-Vaka'uta pushes against Western scholarly orthodoxies of 'objective' and 'independent' study to instead define research as a phenomenon firmly of and inseparable from networks of relations. Research, in other words, is not considered to stand outside the relationships it studies, nor those that motivate and facilitate it (grant funding, institutional affiliations, professional networks, kinship ties, disciplinary protocols etc.). It is a praxis that is negotiated, informed and responsible to the many relationships woven across it: among researcher, knowledge holders, paradigm and place.

I find Koya-Vaka'uta's thinking on research as relational space compelling for three central reasons. Firstly, as alluded above, foregrounding relationality in one's methodology can constitute a powerful decolonial act that directly challenges and de-centres long espoused Western academic values of objectivity, independence and generalisability.<sup>295</sup> It confronts imposed ontological regimes of Western scholarship that, in their quest for objective 'truth,' too often belittle the deeply situated, embodied and interlaced knowledges of Indigenous communities; if not facilitate activities that directly threaten the relationships Pacific peoples hold with their lands, oceans, communities, ancestors and custom. For examples of such research harm, one need only consider the covert removal of skulls from Pacific communities by Western scientists, missionaries, and collectors little over a century ago for the purposes of "race science."<sup>296</sup> Or the testing (i.e.

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<sup>292</sup> Melani Anae, 'Teu Le va: Samoan Relational Ethics', *Knowledge Cultures* 4, no. 3 (2016): 117–30; Koya-Vaka'uta, 'Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis'.

<sup>293</sup> Anae, 'Teu Le va: Samoan Relational Ethics'; Thaman, *Kakala*; Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann, 'Fonofale Model of Health' (Pacific models for health promotion, Wellington: Massey University, 2009).

<sup>294</sup> 'Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis'.

<sup>295</sup> Koya-Vaka'uta; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*; Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

<sup>296</sup> Megan Gannon, 'Germany, Austria Repatriate Dozens of Human Skulls to Hawaii', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/germany-austria-repatriate-dozens-of-human-skulls-to-hawaii-180979583/>; Marian Kupu and Hugo Hodge, 'Two Tongan Skulls Held in a Sydney Museum Have Been Repatriated to Their Traditional Owners', 17 January 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-17/tongan-skulls-repatriated-from-australia/103324912>; Prianka Srinivasan, "'Race Scientists' Took Human Skulls from Villages in Palau. Now, Indigenous Pacific Islanders Want Their Ancestors Back', *Pacific Beat*, 26 December 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-26/german-university-works-with-palau-to-return-skulls-remains/101791768>.

detonation) of over 300 nuclear devices throughout the northern Pacific between 1946 - 1966 by Britain, France and the United States for the purported ‘good of mankind.’<sup>297</sup> Indeed, the severity of relational violence (ontological, physical, cultural and spiritual) that Western academic activity has inflicted on Pacific communities—and Indigenous communities globally—has been so immense that Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith has described “the word itself, ‘research,’ [as] probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.”<sup>298</sup>

Rather than simply rejecting these Western research values, however, rethinking research as a relational space offers an alternate mode for academic inquiry. In the words of Koya-Vaka‘uta it embraces an anti-colonial perspective that “allows the researcher to centre indigenous knowledge[s], and to resist and engage, *in spite of* colonial histories, rather than in *response* to these histories.”<sup>299</sup> This is where the distinction between decentring and rejecting Western research orthodoxies matters. By refusing to hold values of objectivity, independence and generalisability as its (negative) reference point, the principle of research as relational space opens a new avenue for academic activity that operates upon its own set of values and priorities. It is more than merely an oppositional framework to Western research orthodoxies, but a constructive alternative.

This brings me to the second key strength I find in the research as relational space framework: its emphasis on practical actions as an outworking of relational care. Though Koya-Vaka‘uta’s does not explicitly discuss relational care in her aforementioned paper,<sup>300</sup> her interest in grounding methodological principles in action is clearly infused through the work. This is evident in the paper’s abstract, which raises the question: “how is research as a relational space practiced?” And similarly, across the series of fifteen questions where Koya-Vaka‘uta prompts researchers to not only rethink research as relational space but also act in accordance with this principle.<sup>301</sup> It is this practical enactment of research as relational space that I describe through the term *relational care*, borrowed from Finau, Paea and Reynolds.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Stewart Firth, *Nuclear Playground*, 1st edition, Routledge Library Editions. Nuclear Security (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, *Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2017); Maureen Penjueli, ‘Pacific Futures: For the Good of All (Mankind)’, in *Oceania Rising: A Companion to Territorial Agency: Oceans in Transformation*, ed. Daniela Zyman (Berlin, Vienna: Sternberg Press, TBA21-Academy, 2021); Teresia Teaiwa, ‘Bikinis and Other s/Pacific n/Oceans’, *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 87–109.

<sup>298</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 1.

<sup>299</sup> ‘Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis’, 4 emphasis original.

<sup>300</sup> ‘Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis’.

<sup>301</sup> 6–7.

<sup>302</sup> Silia Paʻusisi Finau, Mele Katea Paea, and Martyn Reynolds, ‘Pacific People Navigating the Sacred Vā to Frame Relational Care: A Conversation between Friends across Space and Time’, *The Contemporary Pacific* 34, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2022.0006>.

Recognition that relationally centred methodologies carry with them an inherent obligation to relational care is common across Indigenous scholarships, both within and beyond the Pacific. The *teu le va* framework first developed by Melani Anae in the mid-2000s,<sup>303</sup> for example, is rooted in the praxis of valuing, nurturing and ‘tidying up’ the relational spaces fostered by research. Here, relational care is a foremost concern of methodological praxis, much as it is in the Kakala framework (Tongan; modelled from garland making),<sup>304</sup> Fonofale model (Samoa; modelled from the *fale* (house)),<sup>305</sup> ‘Iluvatu (Fijian, modelled from the ‘Iluvatu mat),<sup>306</sup> and Bu ni Ovalau (Fijian, modelled from a coconut endemic to Fiji)<sup>307</sup>—each of which employ metaphors centred on cultivating and nurturing relational connections between people and/or ecosystems.

Looking beyond the Pacific, Opaskwayak Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson explores a similar idea of relational accountability in his book *Research as Ceremony*,<sup>308</sup> drawing on conversations with Indigenous Elders from nations across Canada and Australia. Likewise, from the continent of Australia where I write this thesis, trawlulwuy scholar Lauren Tynan speaks poignantly to the idea of relational care in her reflection: “relationality is not a new metaphor to be reaped for academic gain, but a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country.”<sup>309</sup> Across each of these diverse contexts, Indigenous scholars have embraced the idea of research as a relational space and emphasised the need for such commitment to be coupled with action(s).<sup>310</sup> This is where I find value in the action-oriented concept of relational care. Upcoming discussion will detail my specific commitments to relational care that I have endeavoured to honour through this doctoral project. But before I turn to this reflection, let me briefly speak to the third reason for my interest in Koya-Vaka ‘uta’s research as relational space principle: its consistency with this thesis’s founding conceptual grounding in the sociality of power.

Thirdly, rooted in a common understanding of the sociality of our world, the conceptual and methodological frameworks of this thesis offer complementary approaches for research. Both recognise that our understandings and interactions with the world are deeply shaped by social

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<sup>303</sup> ‘Teu Le va: “New” Directions in Thinking about Doing Pacific Health Research in New Zealand.’ (University of Auckland Pacific Scholars Postgraduate Seminar Series, Auckland: Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Auckland, 2005).

<sup>304</sup> Thaman, *Kakala*.

<sup>305</sup> Pulotu-Endemann, ‘Fonofale Model of Health’.

<sup>306</sup> Seuili Luama Sauni, ‘Iluvatu: A Decolonising Research Framework Capturing the “Other” Knowledge.’, in *Proceedings of the International Indigenous Research Conference* (Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland, 2014), 101–7.

<sup>307</sup> Rosiana Kushila Lagi, ‘Na Bu: An Explanatory Study of Indigenous Knowledge of Climate Change Education in Ovalau, Fiji’ (Doctoral Thesis (PhD), Suva, Fiji, University of the South Pacific, 2015).

<sup>308</sup> *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*.

<sup>309</sup> ‘What Is Relationality? Indigenous Knowledges, Practices and Responsibilities with Kin’, *Cultural Geographies* 28, no. 4 (2021): 598, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029287>.

<sup>310</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* Tyson Yunkaporta.

relations; with these relationships being a keen object of study in a Gramscian political framework (*Chapter Two*) while an important site for navigation and care under a ‘research as relational space’ methodology. This consistency is useful as it helps to ensure the methods engaged in this study are capable of ‘seeing’ the effects of power and politics as envisioned at a conceptual level, and likewise, that the insights derived from certain data collection and analysis methods respect the individuals and communities who shared their knowledges as part of this project. In this manner, Koya-Vaka‘uta’s research as relational space methodology is fitting for this project and its inquiry into the blue economy discourse in the Pacific.<sup>311</sup> Together, these three reasons explain my interest in Koya-Vaka‘uta’s research as relational space methodology and the value it presents for this doctoral project.

#### 4.1.1 Enacting relationality through relational care

Guided by Koya-Vaka‘uta’s methodology of research as relational space, I have sought to practice relational care throughout this doctoral project by honouring and enacting five key research values: respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility and reflexivity. Collectively, these values reflect common commitments outlined within Pacific methodologies<sup>312</sup> and provide specific, concrete markers to guide my research activities throughout the doctoral journey. By pursuing each of these five values, I seek to enact a praxis of relational care informed by a methodological commitment to research as relational space.

Table 1 provides an outline of the five core values guiding my approach to relational care. Included is a definition of each value, coupled with a list of associated research actions. Reading through this list it will become evident that each value encourages action across all stages of the project life cycle, from project design to data collection, analysis and dissemination. The close interaction of these five values will also be apparent, with many of the listed actions applicable to multiple values. For the sake of simplicity, I have ascribed each action to one value of relational care, however, I

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<sup>311</sup> Philippa Louey, ‘The Pacific Blue Economy: An Instrument of Political Maneuver’, *Marine Policy* 135 (2022): 104880, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2021.104880>.

<sup>312</sup> Anae, ‘Teu Le va: “New” Directions in Thinking about Doing Pacific Health Research in New Zealand.’; Meyer, ‘Native Hawaiian Epistemology: Contemporary Narratives’; Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, ‘Decolonising Framings in Pacific Research: Indigenous Fijian Vanua Research Framework as an Organic Response’, *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 4, no. 2 (2008): 140–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/117718010800400210>; Kabini Sanga and Martyn Reynolds, ‘Talking about Tok Stori’ (Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), 2020), <https://www.dlprog.org/opinions/talking-about-tok-stori>; Kiwi Tamasese et al., ‘Ole Taeao Afua, the New Morning: A Qualitative Investigation into Samoan Perspectives on Mental Health and Culturally Appropriate Services’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 39, no. 4 (2005): 300–309, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1614.2005.01572.x>; Thaman, *Kakala*; Timote Masima Vaiioleti, ‘Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research.’, *Waikato Journal of Education* 12 (2006): 21–34.

acknowledge that in reality such division is not so simple, with many actions bridging across multiple values.

**Table 1:** Outline of the five core values guiding my enactment of relational care, including practical actions associated with each value.

| Value and definition                                                                                                    | Practical Actions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Respect</b><br>Honour and hold with care the lives, perspectives and cultures of the communities that I engage with. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Learn and develop basic <u>cultural competencies</u> ahead of fieldwork. Key competencies include learning local greetings and key phrases, and respecting cultural protocols.</li> <li>* Work to create a <u>culturally safe environment</u> for key stakeholder interviews by engaging a conversational interview approach that encourages open-ended, storied, and reciprocal modes of interaction. The conversational interview approach aligns with widely used Pacific practices and methodologies such as talanoa<sup>313</sup> and tok stori<sup>314</sup>. Supporting culturally safe research interactions also requires that I respect the times and places where knowledge holders felt most comfortable speaking with me.</li> <li>* Where possible, <u>meet informally</u> with participants prior to interviewing them so as to establish relational connection, provide them with an opportunity to ask questions of myself and my research, and allow them to make an informed decision on whether to participate in the research or not. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Postscript: Of the thirty-five key stakeholder interviews I conducted, twenty-five were preceded by an informal conversation (<i>Appendix V</i>).</li> </ul> </li> <li>* Position myself as an <u>expert-in-the-making</u><sup>315</sup>, acknowledging that research is a negotiated process heavily indebted to the knowledge shared by research participants.</li> </ul> |

<sup>313</sup> Vaioleti, 'Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research.'

<sup>314</sup> Sanga and Reynolds, 'Talking about Tok Stori'.

<sup>315</sup> Teresia Teaiwa, 'Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning', *The Contemporary Pacific* 29, no. 2 (2017): 265–82.



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|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Responsibility</b></p> <p>In the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake.”<sup>316</sup> Be accountable to the impact my research will/could have in community and academia.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Practice transparent and careful <u>data management</u> that observes confidentiality protocols and secure storage practices. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ De-identify all interview transcripts upon collection and only make identifiable upon the express request of research participants. Information shared ‘off the record’ is to be used strictly for backgrounding.</li> </ul> </li> <li>* Be attentive to the <u>potential risks</u> that may be associated with a stakeholder’s participation in my project (e.g. reputational, sharing perspectives that may be viewed unfavourably by their employer and/or community) and consider how to mitigate them. De-identifying data is one important strategy to mitigate this risk.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p><b>Reciprocity</b></p> <p>Research should not only benefit to the researcher but also offer value for participating knowledge holders and relevant communities.</p>                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Continually reflect on the question “<u>who are you doing this research for?</u>” to identify which communities I am conducting research in service of and ultimately responsible to. This leads me to identify Pacific policymakers and civil society as the primary audience for my research, namely those engaged in areas related to ocean development.</li> <li>* Following thesis submission, produce brief, accessible <u>research summaries</u> (2-4 pages) of my doctoral thesis for distribution across the three case study communities and relevant Pacific policymaking and civil society groups. I hope these summaries will provide useful insights from my research that can support Pacific stakeholders.</li> <li>* Employ <u>respectful citation practices</u> that acknowledge the scholars and practitioners whose knowledge my project builds upon. The teaching of Māori scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville is particularly insightful on the role of respectful citation practices as an outworking of reciprocity and relationality: “community exists in our bibliography.”<sup>317</sup></li> </ul> |

<sup>316</sup> *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 5.

<sup>317</sup> Alice Te Punga Somerville, April K Henderson, and Maureen Penjueli, ‘Postgraduate & ECR Workshop: Research as Reciprocity’ (‘To Hell with Drowning’ APPS Conference, Australian Association for Pacific Studies, 2023).

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Relevance</b></p> <p>Work to ensure that my research provides meaningful contributions to Pacific communities in ways that they find accessible and valuable.</p>                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Seek <u>guidance from relevant stakeholders</u> on the direction and insights of this research throughout the project.</li> <li>○ Postscript: These discussions first occurred through informal conversations in 2021 to help steer my project and inform project design. The interview phase (2022) provided a further opportunity to refine my project direction and readjust where necessary. Further informal discussions with key stakeholders were held across February to June 2024 to review research conclusions.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p><b>Reflexivity</b></p> <p>The value of reflexivity requires a researcher to undertake considered and ongoing reflection on their positionality, motives, values and assumptions in relation to their research topic and the communities with whom they are engaging. This reflection should inform project design.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Recognise that my <u>English monolingualism</u> will shape my relationships with research participants and limit the sources I will be able to engage with. It will also impact my ability to engage with Pacific concepts that cannot be adequately translated into English. To help mitigate this limitation, I have selected case studies where my reliance on English will not be a major obstacle for communicating with key stakeholders.</li> <li>* In accordance with reflexivity, it is important to articulate my <u>positionality</u> when engaging with new audiences across the research project. This includes introducing myself and research when approaching potential research participants, outlining my positionality during presentations, and including a positionality statement in this final dissertation that acknowledges how my relationships shape my research (<i>Positionality Statement</i>).</li> </ul> |

Rethinking research as relational space requires a commitment to practical as well as intellectual action. The steps outlined above describe acts of relational care as guided by the values of respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility and reflexivity. Turning to the next section, I outline the specific methods engaged for this thesis' data collection and analysis, holding to attention the ways in which social relationships and the principle of research as relational space inform my pursuit and selection of such methods.

## 4.2 Methods

As the tools of research, methods play a central role in scholarly inquiry. They are the mechanisms through which data is collected, analysed and communicated, with each aligned to certain ways of approaching knowledge production. Our selection and engagement of research methods is thus far from neutral, but a strategic act shaped by methodological and epistemological commitments. Researchers aligned with epistemologies of the interpretivist tradition, for example, often orient towards qualitative methods that enable in-depth probing of how stakeholders perceive and interpret their socialised world. This contrasts the preferred methods of positivists who, in their quest to frame the study of politics as a social *science*,<sup>318</sup> often pursue quantitative, mathematical methods to capture supposed regularities and patterns of political behaviour.

Reflecting on my core methodological principle of research as relational space, this subsection details the four central methods engaged in this research project. As detailed in Figure 2, (1) *argumentative discourse analysis* (ADA) provides the overarching method of this research, with (2) *diverse case study selection*, (3) *document analysis* and (4) *key stakeholder interviews* providing facilitative methods that serve ADA's interrogation of discourse as a social construct. I organise the following discussion around three related questions. The first question—“*what is this research project interested in exploring?*”—leads to my selection of argumentative discourse analysis. The second question—“*where will I look for these insights?*”—directs me towards diverse case study selection. And the final question—“*how do I go about gathering these insights?*”—gives rise to my choice of document analysis and key stakeholder interviews as the remaining two methods.

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<sup>318</sup> Behaviouralism was a popular American social science approach of the mid-20th century that sought to engage philosophies and protocols of scientific research for the study of political phenomenon.

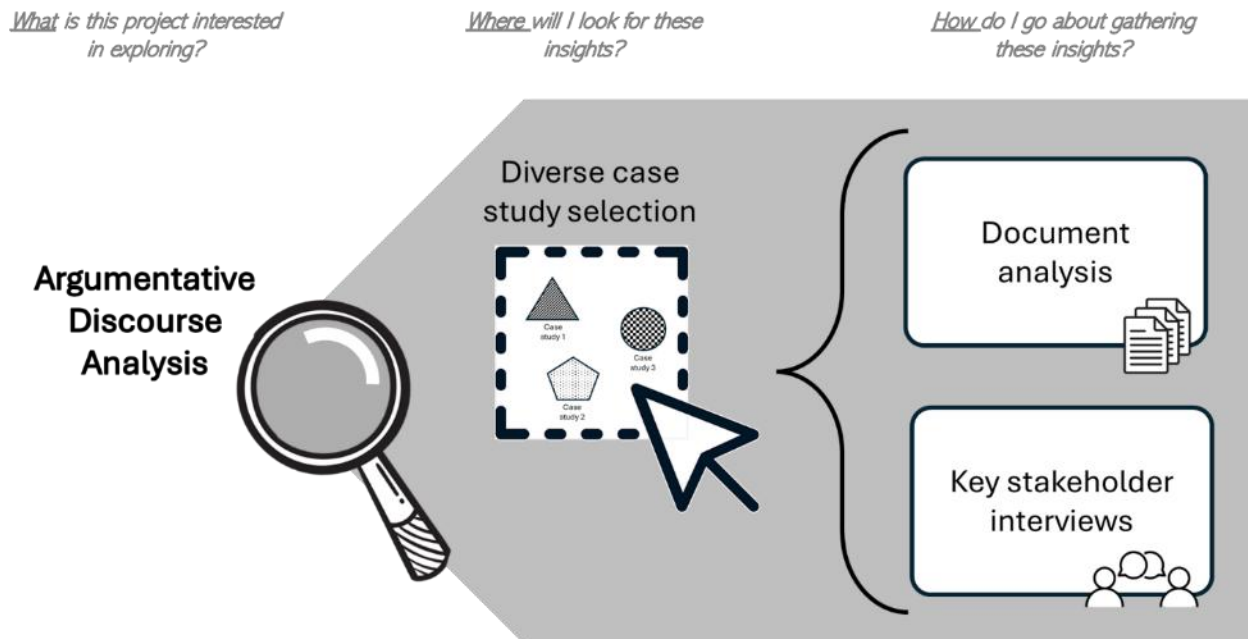


**Figure 2:** *Methods framework*

These questions guide my methods selection, centring my analytical interest in expressions of actor agency, dissent and resistance. They direct me towards methods that facilitate study of the blue economy as a tool for navigating social relations (i.e. as a tool of political negotiation) as consistent with my understanding of discourse as a socially constructed phenomenon (*Chapter 1.4*).

#### 4.2.1 The question of “*what?*”: A turn to argumentative discourse analysis

Recalling the overarching research questions outlined in *Chapter One*,<sup>319</sup> this project is primarily concerned with examining the discursive and political function of the blue economy. I earlier detailed how these questions share an ontological commitment to defining the blue economy as a discourse of sustainable ocean development—less a cohesive agenda or policy programme. However, from a methodological perspective, approaching the blue economy through this discourse lens also has implications for methods selection. First, it directs me towards methods capable of identifying and analysing discursive constructs and second, it encourages a selection of methods attentive to the negotiation of power by and through discourses. In response to these considerations, I have selected argumentative discourse analysis as a core method for this project.

<sup>319</sup> a) What is the function of the blue economy discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development as it circulates in the Pacific?, and  
(b) What does this suggest about the role of promises of transformation in facilitating (or otherwise) political change?

Interest in the role discourse plays in shaping our understandings and relationships with the world around us has grown considerably over the last half century, and today underpins a rich body of scholarship across social and political theory.<sup>320</sup> Central to this scholarship is a belief that “Discourse does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we perceive reality.”<sup>321</sup> Put otherwise, discourses are more than the set of language practices via which we describe the social and physical phenomena around us, but socially constructed and mediated frameworks through which we give meaning to our world and thereby come to engage with it. This growing interest in discourse as an object of political inquiry has given rise to numerous methods of discourse analysis ranging from the deeply quantitative to the highly qualitative.<sup>322</sup> Of these, I find particular utility in Marteen Hajer’s argumentative discourse analysis (ADA) for my study into the blue economy.

### **The performativity of discourse and the argumentative turn**

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century neared its conclusion, a community of scholars of diverse disciplinary backgrounds became interested in the place of argumentation in policymaking and politics. This triggered what has been termed the ‘argumentative turn’ in policy analysis,<sup>323</sup> from which Hajer’s ADA takes its name. The argumentative turn rested on the insight that “[p]olicy analysis and planning are practical processes of argumentation”<sup>324</sup> and must, therefore, be attended to as sites of performance as well as policy construction. As described in Fischer and Forester’s influential volume, *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning*:

In assessing policy analysis and planning as argumentative, we wish to exploit the systematic ambiguity of the term *argument*, for it refers both to an analytic content (“the logic of the argument”) and to a practical performance (“the argument fell on deaf ears”). We argue that all policy analysis and planning is systematically ambiguous in this way, requiring attention to content and performance, to technical analysis and political articulation.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘The Order of Discourse’ (Inaugural Lecture at the College de France, Paris: Inaugural Lecture at the College de France, 1970); Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1978), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-00721-6>; Said, *Orientalism*; Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*; Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*; Maile Arvin, ‘Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai’i and Oceania’ (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>321</sup> Sara Mills, ‘Discourse’, in *Michel Foucault* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 55.

<sup>322</sup> see Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208871>; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1st ed. (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>.

<sup>323</sup> Frank Fischer and John Forester, *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>324</sup> Fischer and Forester, 2.

<sup>325</sup> 4, emphasis original.

In emphasising the performance of policymaking and planning, the argumentative turn centred discourse as an important object of scholarly inquiry. Critically, it also recognised stakeholders as active subjects in discourse construction. Stakeholders were not simply objects of discourse, but influential agents in (re)crafting, performing, and even challenging discourse. Argumentative approaches thus afforded careful attention to stakeholder agency in discourse analysis.

Among the papers of Fischer and Forester's aforementioned volume was a chapter by Marteen Hajer. In this chapter, Hajer argued that "the analysis of discursive constructions such as narrative is especially powerful in the context of the social-historical conditions in which the statements were produced and received."<sup>326</sup> He continued, noting that "[t]he real challenge for argumentative analysis is to find ways of combining the analysis of the discursive production of reality with the analysis of the (extradiscursive) social practices from which social constructs emerge and in which the actors that make these statements engage."<sup>327</sup> From these statements we see how Hajer considered the social and historical contexts in which discourses circulate as critical for their analysis. This prompted his call for a more situated form of discourse analysis that took into account both the form of discourse but also its broader performance within society (Which stakeholders were engaged in discourse construction and negotiation? Who was the intended audience of a discourse? How did specific discourses interact with other discourses circulating through the social body?). In response, Hajer proposed an early model of ADA, which he would expand upon just two years later in his now seminal text, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*.<sup>328</sup>

Published in 1995, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* traced the production and transformation of the ecological modernisation discourse emerging around Europe's acid rain issue in the 1980s. In this work, Hajer identified the slipperiness of the ecological modernisation discourse, ultimately conceptualising it as a multi-element ensemble that remained constantly in motion and, critically, under constant negotiation. This observation sits at the foundation of ADA, which outlines a method for identifying and tracing the constituent components of an individual discourse to reveal its construction and internal contestation. Hajer's method thus provides a granular approach to discourse analysis that is interested not just in a discourse's external circulation but its own internal politics. ADA identifies three discursive components important for analytical inquiry: storylines,

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<sup>326</sup> 'Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of Practice: The Case of Acid Rain in Britain', in *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning*, ed. Frank Fischer and John Forester (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 45.

<sup>327</sup> 45.

<sup>328</sup> *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*.

discourse coalitions and discourse hegemony. I shall briefly outline each of these components below, with an eye to their relevance for my inquiry into the politics of the blue economy.

### Storylines

A powerful innovation of Hajer's ADA was the introduction of the concept of *storylines*. As alluded in the name, storylines represent narrativised statements that condense a broader discourse into digestible accounts. Through often simplified expressions, storylines weave together various ideas, concepts and categories to provide actors with succinct narratives via which they can engage and communicate a discourse. In effect, they work to 'cluster knowledge'<sup>329</sup> around intelligible structures of cognition: the storyline. To illustrate through an example: the blue economy discourse is animated by numerous storylines among which include "technological innovation provides a pathway for environmentally friendly industrial growth," "livelihoods are core to the blue economy," or "protecting the ocean to preserve it." While simultaneously active in the blue economy discourse, these storylines are distinct—each embodying specific assemblages of a discourse's constituent elements (e.g. innovation, livelihoods, conservation). Indeed, it is precisely this multiplicity of storylines that underpins the internal complexity and contestability of discourses, which can be assembled in numerous different ways to advance different understandings.

For Hajer and his followers, the ways in which actors navigate a discourse's many storylines represent an important form of agency and site for inquiry.<sup>330</sup> By appealing to a storyline, actors indicate their support (consciously or not) for specific concepts, ideas and categories that circulate within a discourse. This works to strengthen the legitimacy of select storylines and contribute to their social authority. Returning to the previous example: by engaging with the "protecting the ocean to preserve it" storyline, actors indicate their preference for a preservationist assembling of the blue economy, wherein activities such as MPAs are prioritised. This storyline, however, may be seen to conflict with the "livelihoods are core to the blue economy" storyline that emphasises the importance of oceans (particularly coastal spaces) for subsistence activities, local employment and small-scale fisheries. While some agents may seek to weave these two storylines together (e.g. by arguing that blue economy conservation measures can be monetised to support the local communities who manage and monitor MPAs), others may see them as contradictory (e.g. noting how MPA designation typically demands a ban on fishing activities, which can threaten local livelihoods) and align themselves with one to the exclusion of the other. From this example, we

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<sup>329</sup> Hajer, 63.

<sup>330</sup> Hajer, 56.

see that the ways in which actors position themselves in relation to various storylines (through alignment, co-construction, opposition or simply neglect) enables them to exercise agency over a discourse and its construction. This is one of the critical insights brought into focus through Hajer's argumentative discourse analysis and will feature as a key site of inquiry in this thesis.

### Discourse coalitions

Closely related to the concept of storylines, Hajer's notion of *discourse coalitions* offers a useful account for how agents interact with one another via discourses and exercise influence through these relations. In the words of Hajer, discourse coalitions can be defined as the "ensemble of story-lines, the actors that utter these story-lines, and the practice through which these story-lines are expressed."<sup>331</sup> They are more than simply the actor network which coalesces around specific storylines, but also the expression and performance of such storylines.

Diverging from popular theories of coalition building developed throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (namely Sabatier's framework of 'advocacy-coalitions'),<sup>332</sup> Hajer argued it was not mutually shared interests that form the basis of collective discursive practice, but storylines.<sup>333</sup> The concept of discourse coalitions thereby encouraged a shift in how we think about actor networks, particularly regarding what they look like and what motivates their formation. According to Hajer, actors are brought into coalition not because of commonly held goals or interests but because they find meaning in common storylines. Indeed, while the interests of actors from the same discourse coalition may vary—even diverge—each find value in and are able to leverage a common storyline(s). Simply put, storylines provide the "discursive cement that keeps a discourse coalition together."<sup>334</sup>

This insight can help explain instances where actors of diverse, even contrary interests engage in a shared discourse understanding (storyline), such as in the case of the blue economy. The discourse coalition forming around the storyline of "livelihoods are core to the blue economy" offers a case in point. Coalescing around such storyline appear agents of shipping industry associations,<sup>335</sup> small-

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<sup>331</sup> Hajer in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing, *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan London, 2004), 304.

<sup>332</sup> Paul A. Sabatier, 'An Advocacy Coalition Framework of Policy Change and the Role of Policy-Oriented Learning Therein', *Policy Sciences* 21, no. 2 (1988): 129–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00136406>.

<sup>333</sup> Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*, 66.

<sup>334</sup> Hajer, 65.

<sup>335</sup> L. Fraga et al., 'Strategy Baseline to Bridge the Skills Gap between Training Offers and Industry Demands of the Maritime Technologies Value Chain' (Maritime Alliance for Fostering the European Blue Economy through a Marine Technology Skilling Strategy, September 2019), <https://www.projectmates.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/MATES-Strategy-Report-September-2019.pdf>.



scale fisher organisations,<sup>336</sup> tourism bodies,<sup>337</sup> small island developing nations,<sup>338</sup> and multinational aquaculture empires<sup>339</sup>. On the axis of interests, this collection of actors varies substantially, as do their objectives in engaging this ‘livelihoods’ storyline. Yet in spite of this, each are able to find value in this common storyline, thus reproducing it and reinforcing its power relative to other storylines that animate the blue economy discourse.

This example aligns with Hajer’s observation that the power of a discourse coalition does not derive from its consistency or coherence (of agents, objectives or practices), but from the multi-interpretability of its central storyline.<sup>340</sup> In other words, the more communities that are able to find value in a storyline (irrelevant of how varied their understandings and intentions for such storyline may be), the more powerful that discourse coalition becomes. It is thus breadth of appeal that is the weapon of strength for discourse coalitions, enabling these coalitions to expand the reach of their central storyline and in doing so recruit further support for their discursive assemblage. The similarities that this insight holds with the earlier discussed concept of the boundary object (*Chapter Two*) is striking, with both frameworks identifying multi-interpretability as a leading characteristic for a discourse’s broad uptake among diverse agents. As I detailed through *Chapter Two*, however, it is the *specific* resonance the blue economy’s ‘ocean stewardship’ storyline holds with Pacific principles of ocean use and relationship that underlies its broad uptake in the region. These differing perspectives point to the need for further reflection on why the blue economy discourse (and certain storylines active within it) is engaged by a wide variety of actors, with neither explanation of multi-interpretability nor specificity providing a complete answer. Here we can find value in the idea of discourse hegemony and, specifically, storyline hegemony.

### Discourse and storyline hegemony

In analysing how discourses move through social systems, it is apparent that some discourses (and some storylines within them) carry greater influence than others in shaping how individuals and communities understand the world. This points to the operation of power relations and it is in response to this observation that discourse scholars have turned to Gramsci’s concept of

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<sup>336</sup> Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers’.

<sup>337</sup> D. Tonazzini et al., ‘Sustainable Blue Tourism: Blue Tourism Study’ (Barcelona: eco-union, 2019), [https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/PDF/Publications/Hors%20catalogue%20Iddri/20190620\\_BLUE%20TOURISM%20STUDY\\_EN.pdf](https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/PDF/Publications/Hors%20catalogue%20Iddri/20190620_BLUE%20TOURISM%20STUDY_EN.pdf).

<sup>338</sup> Michelle Voyer and Judith van Leeuwen, ‘“Social License to Operate” in the Blue Economy’, *Resources Policy* 62 (2019): 102–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2019.02.020>.

<sup>339</sup> Thai Union, ‘Thai Union Takes Principled Stand at UN Ocean Conference’, 30 June 2022, <https://www.thaiunion.com/en/newsroom/press-release/1552/thai-union-takes-principled-stand-at-un-ocean-conference>.

<sup>340</sup> Maarten Hajer, *Authoritative Governance: Policy-Making in the Age of Mediatization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.

hegemony.<sup>341</sup> This sub-section considers two forms of discursive hegemony: the first being the classically conceived *discourse hegemony* (why some discourses gain dominance over others) and the second, *storyline hegemony* (why some storylines come to dominate others in assembling individual discourses). While discourse hegemony has received far greater scholarly attention than its counterpart storyline hegemony, it is a point of this subsection to highlight the conceptual value of the latter given its potential for enriching understandings into why and how individual discourses undergo periods of transformation, apparent stability and contestation.

### Discourse hegemony

Developed over a rich body of literature in recent decades,<sup>342</sup> the concept of discourse hegemony is broadly understood as the triumph of one discourse over others for social authority. Such authority is most powerfully witnessed when a discourse becomes naturalised as a ‘common sense’ logic of society and thus indisputable or even invisible. Examples of such hegemonic discourses today include ‘sustainable development,’<sup>343</sup> ‘human rights,’<sup>344</sup> or ‘sovereignty.’<sup>345</sup> These discourses have become cornerstones of our current social and political systems, securing the consent of society as key normative pillars of our world order.

According to Hajer, a discourse achieves hegemony when it fulfils the two interrelated conditions of *discourse structuration* and *discourse institutionalisation*.<sup>346</sup> Together, these conditions stabilise social consent in a discourse, thus affording it political authority. Turning to the first, discourse structuration refers to a situation in which “the credibility of actors in a given domain require them to draw on the ideas, concepts and categories of a given discourse.”<sup>347</sup> It can be seen when actors sense an immense pressure to engage a certain discourse so as to secure their legitimacy in the social order. The dominant discourse, in other words, structures how communities communicate

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<sup>341</sup> Richard Peet, ‘Ideology, Discourse, and the Geography of Hegemony: From Socialist to Neoliberal Development in Postapartheid South Africa’, *Antipode* 34, no. 1 (2002): 54–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00226>; Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’.

<sup>342</sup> Nikhil Aziz, ‘The Human Rights Debate in an Era of Globalization: Hegemony of Discourse’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 27, no. 4 (1995): 9–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1995.10413030>; Linda Dunne, ‘Discourses of Inclusion: A Critique’, *Power and Education* 1, no. 1 (2009): 42–56, <https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2009.1.1.42>; Farida Fozdar and Anne Pedersen, ‘Diablogging about Asylum Seekers: Building a Counter-Hegemonic Discourse’, *Discourse & Communication* 7, no. 4 (2013): 371–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481313494497>; Peter J. Jacques and Claire Connolly Knox, ‘Hurricanes and Hegemony: A Qualitative Analysis of Micro-Level Climate Change Denial Discourses’, *Environmental Politics* 25, no. 5 (2016): 831–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2016.1189233>.

<sup>343</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*.

<sup>344</sup> Eric A. Heinze, ‘Human Rights: Contested, Triumphant, and Hegemonic’, *International Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2011): 167–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2010.01008.x>.

<sup>345</sup> Stephen McCaffrey, ‘Keynote: Sustainability and Sovereignty in the 21st Century’, *Denver Journal International Law & Policy* 507 (2013).

<sup>346</sup> *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*.

<sup>347</sup> Hajer, 60.

with one another by presenting its frame of understanding as the main, if not only, scaffold for intelligibility.

The second condition, discourse institutionalisation is achieved when a discourse is adopted by society's core institutions.<sup>348</sup> This can take the form of formal institutional engagement, such as the United Nation's incorporation of the 'sustainability' discourse into its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But it can also occur through its embedment in customary and social structures, with Hajer noting that "one of the highest forms of discourse institutionalisation occurs if things appear as 'traditional,' 'natural,' or 'normal' ways of reasoning, or are even seen as 'natural social facts.'"<sup>349</sup> The discourse of 'progress' offers a useful example here.<sup>350</sup> Its vision of societal development as a linear process culminating in industrial modernity has become so pervasive through the contemporary world that it not only underpins how communities are characterised (developed/developing) but the very ambitions that many of these communities strive for (capitalist comfort). When both discourse structuration and discourse institutionalisation are accomplished, the potential for alternate discourses to circulate is greatly constrained and the frameworks of the dominant discourse come to be accepted as the status quo. Therein, social consent in the authority of the discourse is established and discourse hegemony achieved.

### Storyline hegemony

The notion of storyline hegemony remains an understudied area of discourse analysis, even by Hajer himself. Where discourse hegemony concerns relations of power between discourses, storyline hegemony points to the struggles for influence *within* a discourse. Central to such analysis is the recognition of discourses as internally contested assemblages wherein differing discourse coalitions (constitutive of their agent networks, storylines and performances) jostle for influence over how the discourse is characterised and projected to the world. Storyline hegemony reflects when one storyline achieves dominance as the leading ensemble of a discourse, while other configurations (or storylines) are rendered mere alternatives or sidelined all together.

A leading methodological contribution of this thesis is the exploration and further development of the idea of storyline hegemony. This is pursued through the empirical chapters of *Part II*, which will unpack the overarching blue economy discourse to identify and describe its constituent storylines. As with the analysis of discourse hegemony, this examination of storyline hegemony will be centrally concerned with issues of power. I explore how specific storylines (as well as their

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<sup>348</sup> Hajer, 61.

<sup>349</sup> Hajer in Howarth and Torfing, *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, 303.

<sup>350</sup> Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*; Sbert, 'Progress'.

respective discourse coalitions) have come to gain authority as leading constructions of the blue economy discourse; as well as the political negotiations that have occurred throughout this process. This more granular approach to discourse analysis enables scholars to better grapple with the internal contestation of discourses. It is hoped this thesis can provide a valuable and timely update to the method of argumentative discourse analysis through its exploration of storyline hegemony, drawing on the blue economy discourse for illustration.

#### 4.2.2 The question of “*where?*”: Diverse case study selection

As a discourse that has obtained considerable popularity in ocean development circles over the last decade, the blue economy has been engaged by numerous actors across the globe with respect to various ocean sectors, geographies and communities.<sup>351</sup> This has resulted an abundance of blue economy articulations, from which emerges the question of “where?” a researcher focuses their attention.

##### **Why the Pacific?**

Comprised of twenty-two Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs),<sup>352</sup> the Pacific region relies heavily on the Pacific Ocean for much of its livelihood and economic development activities. This region manages a combined jurisdiction of over 28 million square kilometres of ocean (or around 20% of global EEZs)<sup>353</sup> in what is not only the Earth’s largest ocean, but also one its most biodiverse.<sup>354</sup> The Pacific Ocean is home the world’s most valuable tuna fishery,<sup>355</sup> a quarter of global MPAs (or over a third of fully or highly protected MPAs),<sup>356</sup> and some of the most valuable

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<sup>351</sup> John Childs and Christina Hicks, ‘Securing the Blue: Political Ecologies of the Blue Economy in Africa’, *Journal of Political Ecology* 26, no. 1 (2019): 323–40, <https://doi.org/10.2458/v26i1.23162>; Childs, ‘Performing “Blue Degrowth”: Critiquing Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea through Creative Practice’; Fabinyi et al., ‘China’s Blue Economy: A State Project of Modernisation’; Pedersen, ‘Troubled Waters: How the “Blue Economy” Perpetuates Historical Injustices in Mauritius’; Gamage, ‘Blue Economy in Southeast Asia: Oceans as the New Frontier of Economic Development’; Satizábal et al., ‘Blue Economy Discourses and Practices: Reconfiguring Ocean Spaces in the Philippines’; Steinberg and Kristoffersen, ‘Building a Blue Economy in the Arctic Ocean: Sustaining the Sea or Sustaining the State?’; Mallin and Barbesgaard, ‘Awash with Contradiction: Capital, Ocean Space and the Logics of the Blue Economy Paradigm’.

<sup>352</sup> American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Wallis and Fortuna.

<sup>353</sup> Hugh Govan, ‘Ocean Governance: Our Sea of Islands’, in *A Sustainable Future for Small States: Pacific 2050*, ed. Resina Katafono (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.14217/9781848599574-en>.

<sup>354</sup> Qianshuo Zhao, Huimin Huang, and Mark John Costello, ‘Systematic Planning Shows More than Half of the Most Species-Rich Ocean Region Is Needed to Include All Species in Representative Protected Areas’, *Global Ecology and Conservation* 53 (2024): e03036, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2024.e03036>.

<sup>355</sup> The Western and Central Pacific Ocean consistently supplies around half of the world’s tuna catch.

<sup>356</sup> Pike et al., ‘Ocean Protection Quality Is Lagging behind Quantity: Applying a Scientific Framework to Assess Real Marine Protected Area Progress against the 30 by 30 Target’.

seabed minerals deposits.<sup>357</sup> It is a key source of national revenue for many PICTs (fisheries accounting for over 70% annual government revenue in Kiribati, largely through fishing licence fees)<sup>358</sup> as well as a critical provider for community livelihoods and nutrition across many parts of the region (fish provide for 50–90% of the animal protein intake in rural communities and 40–80% in urban centres,<sup>359</sup> with coastal fisheries estimated to contribute US\$300m annually to the economies of PICTs, employing around 100,000 people).<sup>360</sup> This is to say that the ocean is of paramount importance for the development of the ‘large ocean states’<sup>361</sup> of the Pacific.

The significance of these ocean development opportunities (current and emerging) for communities of the region underlies the Pacific’s importance for blue economy research. As introduced in *Chapter One* and expanded in *Chapter Three*, the Pacific remains underrepresented in blue economy analysis, particularly from the perspective of critical political or social science scholarship. It has been encouraging to observe a growth in blue economy policy and financing analysis over recent years that include data on the Pacific,<sup>362</sup> yet there remain only a handful of academic papers that *critically* interrogate this discourse in the specific context of this region.<sup>363</sup> Furthermore, from a historical perspective, Pacific stakeholders were amongst the earliest

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<sup>357</sup> Regarding the international seabed (the ‘Area’), the Clarion Clipperton Zone is a particularly rich site of polymetallic nodules. Domestically, Polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides (or seafloor massive sulphides), and cobalt rich crusts are found, variously—and to varying concentrations—in the EEZs of the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Niue, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Palau. SPC-EU Deep Sea Minerals Project, ‘Information Brochure 6 Deep Sea Minerals Potential of the Pacific Islands Region’ (Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), 2022), <https://pacific-data.sprep.org/dataset/spc-eu-edf10-deep-sea-minerals-dsm-project-information-brochure-6-deep-sea-minerals-1>.

<sup>358</sup> Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource Development and Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, ‘Fishing License Revenue’ (Republic of Kiribati, December 2017), <https://www.mfed.gov.ki/sites/default/files/Fishing%20License%20Revenues%20in%20Kiribati%20Report%202017.pdf>.

<sup>359</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘Fish and Food Security’, Policy Brief 1/2008, 2008, <https://www.pacificclimatechange.net/sites/default/files/documents/1.%20Fish%20and%20Food%20Security.pdf>.

<sup>360</sup> Robert Gillett, ‘Fisheries in the Economies of Pacific Island Countries and Territories’ (Noumea, New Caledonia: Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), 2016).

<sup>361</sup> Hau’ofa, ‘Our Sea of Islands’; Albert Wendt, ‘Towards a New Oceania’, in *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1982), 202–15, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-04943-1\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-04943-1_12); Wesley Morgan, ‘Large Ocean States: Pacific Regionalism and Climate Security in a New Era of Geostrategic Competition’, *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 39 (2022): 45+; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, ‘Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order’, in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2021), 41–69.

<sup>362</sup> UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, ‘Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows’ (United Kingdom: UK Aid, 2022); Lucky Wuwung et al., ‘Global Blue Economy Governance – A Methodological Approach to Investigating Blue Economy Implementation’, *Frontiers in Marine Science* 9 (2022), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2022.1043881>; Meg Keen, Anne-Maree Schwarz, and Lysa Wini-Simeon, ‘Towards Defining the Blue Economy: Practical Lessons from Pacific Ocean Governance’, *Marine Policy* 88 (2018): 333–41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.03.002>.

<sup>363</sup> Childs, ‘Performing “Blue Degrowth”: Critiquing Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea through Creative Practice’; Wolfenden and Penjueli, ‘Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?’

champions of the blue economy, advocating for the discourse in the lead up to Rio+20—as I will discuss through *Chapter Five*. The region has thus had a long relationship with the construct, making it an interesting site to explore blue economy engagements, their negotiation and change over time. Attending to this temporal dimension of the blue economy’s discursive assemblage is a key strength of my doctoral research, facilitating more sophisticated political analysis that resists assumptions of discourse stability.

This thesis contributes to expanding and enriching our understanding of the blue economy discourse as it circulates in the large ocean continent of the Pacific. In grappling with the blue economy’s engagement in this context, however, we must remain attentive to the incredible diversity of actors throughout the region and recognise that for each, this discourse may mean different things and be leveraged for different purposes. To lean on the teachings of Teresia Teaiwa, the Pacific is complex and can’t be painted with a single brush stroke.<sup>364</sup> In an attempt to avoid generalising blue economy experiences evident across the Pacific—an impulse that can lead to oversimplified analysis and inaccurate conclusions—I have pursued a case study method to facilitate more precise, specific and detailed research.

### **Diverse case study selection**

One of the most common approaches for contemporary empirical analysis, case study research provides a method for scholars to closely interrogate a focused, usually small, number of cases where they can develop, test, refine and/or challenge conceptual assumptions. This work is often conducted on the premise that insights gained through close case study analysis can shed light on broader trends and phenomena beyond the sample set. Case study methods are particularly well suited for gathering in-depth, nuanced and locally situated understandings of a phenomenon as it operates in its “real-life context,”<sup>365</sup> making it a valuable approach for the study of complex realities. This is a key reason for its widespread use within fields of the social sciences and humanities,<sup>366</sup> including my home field of political ecology.<sup>367</sup> Given this project’s interest in the ways that ocean development actors of the Pacific engage and negotiate the blue economy discourse—a process that is deeply informed by historical legacies, local specificities and evolving

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<sup>364</sup> ‘You Can’t Paint the Pacific with Just One Brush Stroke’, *E-Tangata*, 25 October 2015, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/korero/you-cant-paint-the-pacific-with-just-one-brush-stroke/>.

<sup>365</sup> Sarah Crowe et al., ‘The Case Study Approach’, *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 2011, 1.

<sup>366</sup> Harry Eckstein, ‘Case Studies and Theory in Political Science’, in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1975).

<sup>367</sup> see for example Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (London: Routledge, 1987); Erik Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power*, Oxford Geographical and Environmental Studies (London: Oxford University Press, 2004); Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*.

contemporary relationships—the case study method offers a valuable approach for my research. Here, I find the work of Gerring<sup>368</sup> and Seawright<sup>369</sup> on case study selection helpful.

Looking to strengthen the practice of small-n case study research in disciplines of political theory and science, Gerring and Seawright have provided detailed discussion on a suite of purposive case selection techniques that they compare across factors of theoretical use and sample representativeness.<sup>370</sup> Of these techniques, I find *diverse case study selection* a valuable approach for my research.

The primary objective of diverse case study selection is to exemplify variance across the case study sample so as to recognise and account for possible heterogeneity of a select phenomenon in different contexts. Put otherwise, the method aims to select case studies that capture the breadth of a phenomenon's reality. This interest in case study variability necessarily requires two or more cases to be included for analysis (otherwise there exists no case study diversity to speak of). As noted by Seawright and Gerring, the method can be effective for exploratory research<sup>371</sup> as it requires relatively few assumptions to be established ahead of case selection; as opposed to 'extreme' or 'deviant' case selection techniques where prior understanding of a phenomena's 'typical' operation must be determined to facilitate case selection. In exploratory research where relatively little is yet known on the topic—as is the situation for this study on Pacific blue economy experiences—case selection based on diversity is often easier to achieve than approaches premised on archetype or outlier samples.

It is important to note, however, that while I take guidance from Seawright and Gerring's diverse case selection teachings, I deviate from their recommendation that the *full range* of variation be accounted for in the sample.<sup>372</sup> In a rapidly evolving and expanding landscape such as the blue economy (a space that has shifted significantly since the commencement of this doctoral project in 2021), it would be near impossible to undertake in-depth research across a full spectrum of blue economy case studies in the Pacific. The sample size would simply be too large to be viable for the time, budget and fieldwork restrictions of a doctoral project. Instead, I have chosen three case

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<sup>368</sup> 'Case Selection for Case-Study Analysis: Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, ed. Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199286546.003.0028>.

<sup>369</sup> Jason Seawright and John Gerring, 'Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options', *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>370</sup> Seawright and Gerring; Gerring, 'Case Selection for Case-Study Analysis: Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques'.

<sup>371</sup> Seawright and Gerring, 'Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options'.

<sup>372</sup> Seawright and Gerring.

studies that are diversely situated across the blue economy spectrum, varying across three key axes: (1) scale of ocean development actor, (2) ocean development activity, and (3) site of blue economy engagement (Table 2). These three case studies may not represent the full range of possible cases, but they are illustrative of diversity in blue economy understandings and approaches. This, I argue, is appropriate—and indeed realistic—for in-depth case study analysis that grapples with the complexity of blue economy engagements in the Pacific.



**Table 2:** Case study sample guided by the diverse case study selection method.

|                                                                 | <b>Case Study 1:<br/>Pacific regional<br/>organisations</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Case Study 2:<br/>Cook Islands<br/>Government</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>Case Study 3:<br/>Locally-Managed<br/>Marine Area (LMMA)<br/>Network</b>                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scale of ocean development actor                                | Regional Organisations: Particularly the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping, Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)                                                                | The State: Cook Islands Government                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Grassroots network: Locally-Managed Marine Area (LMMA) Network                                                                                                                                                        |
| Ocean development activity                                      | Ocean development and governance, generally                                                                                                                                                                                                | Seabed minerals activities (exploration and potential exploitation)                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Community-based Marine Resource Management                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Site of blue economy engagement                                 | Regional & International: Consider how Pacific regional organisations engage the blue economy discourse on the international stage and for Pacific regionalism.                                                                            | International, Regional & National: Consider how the Cook Islands government engages the blue economy discourse when engaging on national, regional and international stages.                                                                                               | International: Consider how the LMMA Network engages the blue economy discourse when interacting on the international stage. (Blue economy discourse not used in national or community operations)                    |
| Key line of enquiry as guided by the thesis' research question. | How have the Pacific's regional organisations experienced and negotiated the blue economy discourse since 2011? What does this suggest about the political function of this discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development? | How has the Cook Islands Government experienced and negotiated the blue economy discourse with regards to the seabed minerals sector since 2011? What does this suggest about the political function of this discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development? | How has the LMMA Network experienced and negotiated the blue economy discourse since 2011? What does this suggest about the political function of this discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development? |

### 4.2.3 The question of “how?”: Document analysis and key stakeholder interviews

Having established what this research project seeks to examine (the blue economy as a discourse) in reference to which dataset (the Pacific’s regional organisations, the Cook Islands Government and LMMA Network), the final question informing my methods selection is the issue of ‘how?’ these insights are to be collected. Recalling this project’s central interest in the political function of the blue economy, it is critical I engage methods that enable an analysis of how the blue economy is constructed as well as how it is negotiated. This calls for attention to both public constructions of the blue economy as well as the private perceptions that Pacific stakeholders have of the blue economy and its utility (or otherwise) for their ocean development work. I find two methods particularly useful for grappling with the public and private faces of the blue economy; document analysis for the study of the blue economy’s discursive construction, coupled with key stakeholder interviews for insight into the dynamics of power that Pacific actors observe and experience when encountering this discourse. Together, these methods provide the necessary data I require for ADA.

#### **Document analysis: discourse construction**

As we are reminded by the insights of scholars working in the ‘argumentative turn,’ there is something inherently performative about discourse.<sup>373</sup> To secure endorsement among society, let alone remain active, discourses must constantly be (re)produced in public spaces—a reality that is true of both marginal/unsettled discourses (which tend to be visible given their active debate and negotiation among the social body) as well as hegemonic discourses (that often circulate with little critical attention yet nonetheless require constant performance to safeguard their authority). The same can be said for discourse storylines, which similarly require public performance for their (re)assertion of authority. Such performativity means that discourses and their storylines can often be identified in public texts, such as speeches, media releases, images, policy documents or social media, making such texts rich sites of inquiry for discourse scholars. Document analysis is one of the more common methods facilitating this discourse and storyline interrogation and is a core method I engage in this research project.

Treating texts as social objects, document analysis provides a powerful method for identifying and analysing how meaning is constructed through language. The method is interested in the form and function of texts (how they are produced and whom they are designed for), rather than evaluating texts for their supposed accuracy. For this reason, document analysis has proved particularly useful

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<sup>373</sup> Fischer and Forester, *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning*.

for interpretivist qualitative research<sup>374</sup> and has been engaged in numerous studies of discourse analysis.<sup>375</sup> In this project, I engage document analysis to better understand how ocean development agents of the Pacific construct their blue economy storylines and negotiate these with respect to other discourse assemblages. This involves identifying the storylines that agents construct within public texts and considering how these storylines correspond or differ to other past and present storylines.

This study draws on an expansive range of public documents to understand the blue economy's discursive constructions within three select case studies. I engage a total of 97 texts (*Appendix I, II, and III*), each of which were published or authored by respective case study actors with a specific thematic focus on ocean development and/or governance. These texts derive from a range of sources including social media posts (namely, Facebook posts), newspaper and magazine articles, speeches, media releases, policy documents, research reports and UN SDG commitments—almost all of which were freely available online, with the exception of some Cook Islands News articles that I accessed through National Library of Australia holdings. Given the blue economy's relatively recent emergence, the majority of texts I consulted were produced in the last fifteen years (2009 to 2024). That said, a handful of older documents were also consulted to provide insight into actors' approaches to ocean development activities over earlier decades. These texts were reviewed not for their discursive constructions of the blue economy (noting that the blue economy was not an active discourse at this time), but to contextualise each actor's blue economy storyline(s) as they related to their existing ocean development priorities and practices.

Ultimately, document analysis enabled my study into the public construction and performance of blue economy storylines by Pacific development stakeholders. This was an important first step in this thesis' ADA.

### **Key stakeholder interviews: discourse negotiation**

Centrally interested in the relations of power that are activated and negotiated through the blue economy discourse and its circulation in the Pacific, I selected key stakeholder interviews as a key method for gathering primary data on stakeholder experiences and perspectives. Key stakeholder

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<sup>374</sup> Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey, 'Analysing Documentary Realities', in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Glenn A. Bowen, 'Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method', *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>; Tim Rapley, *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis* (London, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208901>.

<sup>375</sup> Peter H. Feindt and Angela Oels, 'Does Discourse Matter? Discourse Analysis in Environmental Policy Making', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 7, no. 3 (2005): 161–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15239080500339638>; Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*; Satizábal et al., 'Blue Economy Discourses and Practices: Reconfiguring Ocean Spaces in the Philippines'.

interviews offered an opportunity to engage directly with case study stakeholders and, through open-ended conversation, hear their perspectives on the strengths, challenges and strategic calculations of engaging with the blue economy discourse. This provided insight into the messy, entangled and negotiated realities that Pacific actors experience when interacting with the blue economy—insights that can be challenging to ascertain from secondary data alone (e.g. document analysis).

I sought interviews with key stakeholders relevant to each case study, including current or former (departing in the last ten years) case study staff, members, partners, as well as civil society that have been engaged (constructively or critically) with the case study's ocean development activities (*Appendix V*). This helped me to direct my recruitment efforts and identify stakeholders who could offer rich insight into the blue economy experiences of my nominated case studies. Recruiting these stakeholders required identifying individuals who play, and/or have played, an active role in designing or publicising their respective case study actors' blue economy engagement—namely, those documented as attending blue economy meetings and/or workshops, engaged in blue economy projects and/or policy development, or attributed as providing speeches and/or statements where reference to the blue economy is made. This process largely occurred before I commenced fieldwork but was also facilitated during my fieldwork interviews through a snowball recruitment method. The snowballing recruitment process helped me to extend and update my participant list as the project developed and new information arose.

A key feature of my key stakeholder interviews were their design as in-depth conversations between myself and research participants. I approached interviews as an opportunity for relational, collaborative exchange between myself and key stakeholders wherein a participant's reflection on their blue economy experiences could develop dialogically, rather than through a strictly disciplined series of fixed, pre-determined questions. In this sense, the term 'conversation' is perhaps a more apt description of these research exchanges than 'interview.' Conversational interview approaches are common among Indigenous methodologies both within and beyond the Pacific.<sup>376</sup> They embody a more relational approach to knowledge production that is both more consistent with

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<sup>376</sup> Margaret Kovach, 'Conversation Method in Indigenous Research', *First Peoples Child & Family Review* 5, no. 1 (2010): 40–48, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069060ar>; Sanga and Reynolds, 'Talking about Tok Stori'; Tamasese et al., 'Ole Taeao Afua, the New Morning: A Qualitative Investigation into Samoan Perspectives on Mental Health and Culturally Appropriate Services'; Vaiioleti, 'Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research.'

storying customs long practiced in the region,<sup>377</sup> as well as valuable for facilitating intercultural (or cross cultural) learning.<sup>378</sup>

My commitment to research as relational space heavily informed my decision to frame key stakeholder interviews through this conversational approach, encouraging me to seek ways of honouring relationality in my interview method. I designed interviews to be flexible in time (running to the length desired by the knowledge holder and accommodating rescheduling when required), and location (hosted at a location of choice for the knowledge holder including cafes, offices and the home). Where possible, I also made an effort to meet with potential interview participants ahead of the recorded interview for an informal conversation where I could introduce myself (if not acquainted already) and discuss my research project (*Appendix V*). This was an important process in the conversational interview approach, facilitating the building of relationships ahead of interviewing. Without these informal conversations, I likely would not have secured permission to speak with many key stakeholders for formal interviews or have been offered such generous insights.

From the first year of this project (2021) until end (2024), I engaged in 82 research interactions, reflecting both informal (off-record) research conversations and formal (recorded) key stakeholder interviews. Of the 72 informal conversations I had with stakeholders around matter on the blue economy and sustainable ocean development in the Pacific, 25 were followed up with an informal interview (Figure 3). A total of 35 key stakeholder interviews were recorded (34 audio recorded, 1 through notetaking) as part of this research project between August 2022 and January 2023, involving participants across government, civil society, regional organisations and the non-government sector (Figure 3, *Appendix V*). The majority of these interviews were conducted in-person during fieldwork in Fiji (predominately in Suva) (19) and the Cook Islands (predominately in Rarotonga) (12) in the second half of 2022; with two hosted online where the participant was based outside of these locations or unavailable during my time in each location, and one in Canberra when the stakeholder was in town on work travel. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of interviews by case study. I conducted a total of 21 interviews with stakeholders for Case Study 1 (Pacific regional organisations), 12 for Case Study 2 (Cook Islands Government), and 5 for Case Study 3 (LMMA Network). The relatively small interview sample for the LMMA Network case study reflects the lean organisational structure of this grassroots network where only a small group

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<sup>377</sup> See section 4.1, or also Koya-Vaka`uta, 'Rethinking Research as Relational Space in the Pacific: Pedagogy and Praxis'.

<sup>378</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, 'Nurturing Relationships And Honouring Responsibilities: A Pacific Perspective', *International Review of Education* 54, no. 3 (2008): 459–73, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-008-9092-1>.

of personnel are involved with the body's regional and international advocacy activities. It should be noted that not all interviewed stakeholders were representatives of the specific case study organisations (e.g. consultants or civil society). However, each provided insight into how one (or multiple) case study actors engaged with the blue economy—be that through their experience as a former employee, collaborative work undertaken with the case study actor, or as longtime observers from civil society or academia.

Interviews generally lasted between thirty-minutes and two hours, resulting in the collection of 22 hours and forty-nine minutes of audio recorded interviews and one note-taking record. With the permission of participants, interviews were audio recorded, after which I manually transcribed key excerpts and de-identified these recordings in preparation for data storage. De-identified audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely in password protected folders (digital materials) and a locked filing cabinet located in my university office (physical materials). The de-identification process was conducted by attributing participants with a unique, randomly allocated number between 1 and 100. Record of each participant and their randomly allocated number were detailed on a Participant Coding Sheet that was stored in a separate digital file and protected by a unique password.

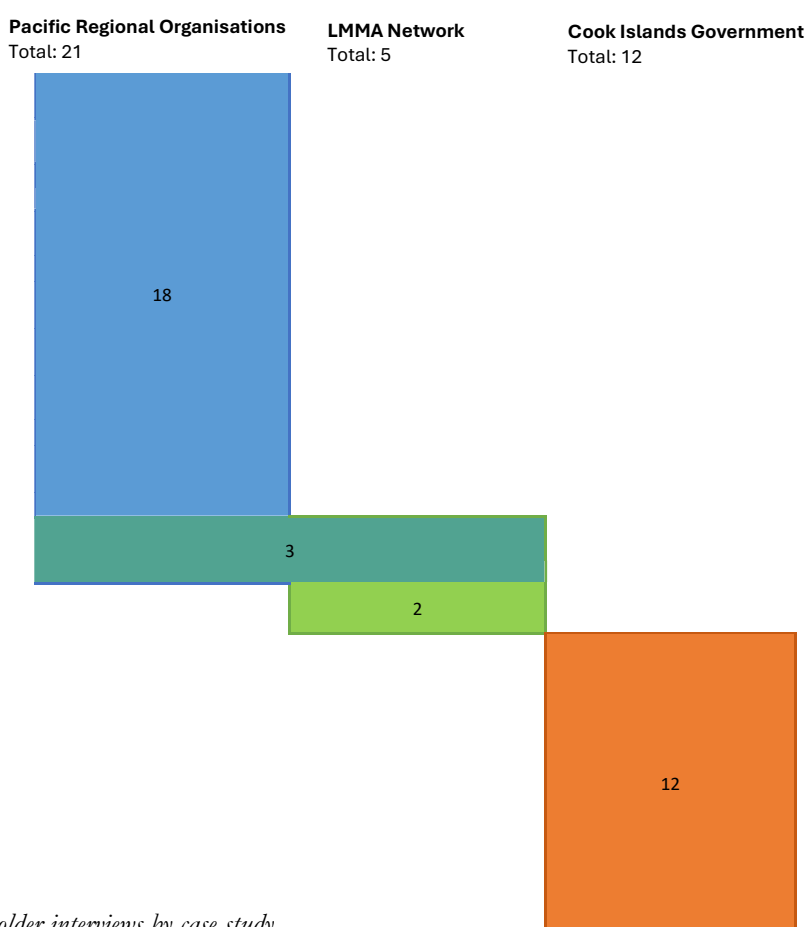


**Figure 3:** Breakdown of key stakeholder interviews by case study.

Analysis of key stakeholder interviews was conducted manually, with key themes identified and refined through an iterative process of transcript review. Interviews were first manually transcribed. I next reviewed each transcript, providing brief annotations that summarised key themes emerging from each interview as identified within the interview itself (inductive thematic analysis). Cross-interview analysis was then conducted by diagrammatically clustering related interview excerpts under broader topics, including ‘Blue economy definition’ or the ‘Division in the blue economy’ as demonstrated in Figure 4. This clustering was facilitated with reference to earlier interview annotations and enabled me to place interview reflections in conversation with one another, organising such perspectives to indicate their relative agreement, variation and/or divergence. Such manual interview analysis was possible given the relatively small number of key stakeholder interviews (35 in total). Interview analysis of the near 23 hours of audio recorded discussions and one note-taken interview occurred over a period of eight months (during which I drafted case study chapters) as I iteratively returned to review and consolidate key fieldwork insights.

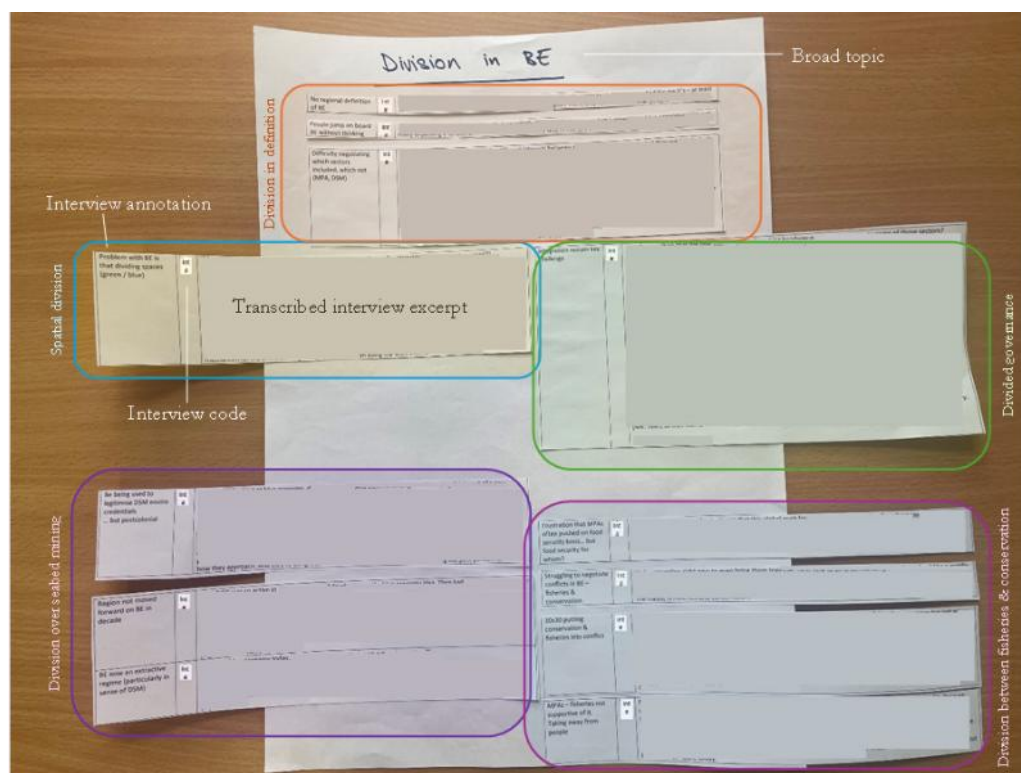


Figure 4: Thematic diagram produced for cross-interview analysis.

Below is a brief outline of the actions undertaken to facilitate my key stakeholder interviews across the project cycle. It offers detail on the summary outlined above.

**Table 3:** Actions undertaken to facilitate key stakeholder interviews.

| Interview stage | Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pre-interview   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Fiji scoping trip (Suva) to hold informal conversations and receive feedback on project design. May 2022, 10 days.</li> <li>* Informal introduction and conversations with key stakeholders across all three case studies (where possible). These informal conversations were hosted in-person or online.</li> <li>* Provide potential interviewees with <i>Participant Information Sheet</i>, <i>Ethics Approval</i> documentation, <i>Support Letters</i>, and copy of the <i>Oral Consent Form</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o The email used to send these documents also included an invitation for key stakeholders to ask questions of the interview process, research project or researcher (myself) ahead of their potential interview.</li> </ul> </li> <li>* Organise a time and location for the interview based on the wishes of the interview participant.</li> </ul> |
| Interview       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* In the majority of cases I provided food/tea/coffee to share during our interview conversation.</li> <li>* Negotiate consent for the interview, including conditions around recording and confidentiality. This was undertaken through a verbal process (<i>Oral Consent</i>).</li> <li>* With consent, interviews were audio-recorded. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o One interview was not audio-recorded but the participant agreed for me to take written notes throughout our conversation.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Post-interview  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* I securely stored interview materials in password protected folders (digital materials) or locked cabinets (physical materials). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Interview audio recordings and transcripts were de-identified.</li> </ul> </li> <li>* Key excerpts of the interviews were manually transcribed and stored securely in de-identified form.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

### 4.3 Conclusion

Looking to the teachings of Koya-Vaka‘uta, I embrace the principle of research as relational space as the methodological foundation for this doctoral project. This principle acknowledges research as situated within and inseparable from networks of relations and subsequently calls on researchers to honour these relational connections as an integral part of their research approach. With an emphasis on relationality, ‘research as relational space’ stands distinct from many Western scholarly traditions that have often espoused values of objectivity, independence and generalisability as



advanced under the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It instead celebrates longstanding ontologies and epistemologies common among Indigenous communities across the world and their understanding of knowledge as a relational and situated praxis. This methodological principle is firmly associated with action, which through this chapter I have defined through the term ‘relational care.’ To help guide my practice of relational care, I outlined five core values and the research commitments I enacted according to each: respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility and reflexivity (Table 1).

In foregrounding relational research approaches, I seek to support efforts in decolonising the academy. I recognise that my contribution to this project is humble and heavily indebted to the efforts of Indigenous scholars, activists and communities before me, but it is my hope that pursuing research through a relational lens will help me stand in solidarity with this decolonial movement.

The second half of this chapter detailed the four key methods I adopted for data collection and analysis: argumentative discourse analysis, diverse case study selection, document analysis and key stakeholder interviews. Each of these methods supported my grappling with this project’s central research questions: *‘What is the function of the blue economy discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development as it circulates in the Pacific?, What does this suggest about the role of promises of transformation in facilitating (or otherwise) political change?’* These methods facilitate my close study of discourse as a site of political negotiation and performance, gathering insight from publicly available secondary (document analysis) as well as primary (key stakeholder interview) sources. They operate in complementarity through this project, together helping me to grapple with politics and power set in motion by the blue economy discourse.



## **PART II**

Promise



# CHAPTER FIVE

## Case Study One: Pacific regional organisations

### 5.1 Introduction

Since the dawning of the international governance system in the mid-20th century, Pacific countries and territories have exercised impressive influence over global negotiations regarding the ocean.<sup>379</sup> One need not look far for examples of such: from the region's advocacy for a 200 nautical mile (nm) EEZ regime under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to the South Pacific Forum's<sup>380</sup> 1989 *Tarawa Declaration* that helped spur the 1992 global drift net ban, the region's contribution to negotiating the 1995 *UN Fish Stocks Agreement*, or current diplomatic efforts to fix maritime boundaries in the face of climate-induced sea-level rise. This is atop regional initiatives and programs that lead the world in sustainable ocean governance, including the *Treaty of Rarotonga* (1985), the *Noumea Convention* (1986), the *Waigani Convention* (1995), and the *Parties to the Nauru Agreement* (PNA). Clearly, the ocean has been a central focus of Pacific political efforts. Indeed, as Judge Neroni Slade has reflected, the region's decades-long experience in global ocean advocacy has honed and strengthened its skills in collective diplomacy,<sup>381</sup> with learnings from ocean-based political negotiations informing its approach to other issue areas such as climate change.

With the blue economy emerging as one of the major discourses in ocean development and governance over the last decade, this chapter considers how Pacific regional organisations navigate

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<sup>379</sup> Marco de Jong, 'Kotahi Te Moana, Only One Ocean: Pacific Environmentalism, 1970–1995'; Genevieve Quirk, 'The Making of an Ocean Continent: The Evolution of Oceania's Institutional Architecture for Ocean Governance (1947–2022) and the Consequences for Ocean Diplomacy' (PhD Thesis, Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security, University of Wollongong, 2023).

<sup>380</sup> Today the Pacific Islands Forum

<sup>381</sup> Neroni Slade et al., 'Pacific Perspectives on the Negotiations of UNCLOS III' (Looking Back to the Future in the Law of the Sea: UNCLOS III and the LOSC at 40, Centre for International and Public Law (CIPL), Australian and New Zealand Society of International Law (ANZSIL), 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP1ZPcFT3lc>.

their engagements with this construct and to what ends. My inquiry is driven by three questions: *what storylines* are Pacific regional organisations constructing around the blue economy?, *why?*, and *to what effect?* Grappling with these research questions through a critical discourse lens helps to shed light on the political function of the blue economy in Pacific regionalism—or more specifically, its role in negotiating social relationships between regional actors, as well as their global counterparts.

Recalling the passive revolution analytic outlined in *Part I*, this chapter develops in dialogue with Gramsci's thinking on crisis, hegemony and the promise of transformation. The first subsection introduces the Pacific's involvement in the early formation of the blue economy discourse around 2010, wherein the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping played a central role in popularising the blue economy among international development forums. I contend that while the blue economy was first developed by agents of the Global North (*Chapter One*), it was significantly reimagined by PSIDS<sup>382</sup> delegates ahead of Rio+20 as they mobilised the discourse to elevate ocean-based opportunities and communities in the global sustainable development agenda. PSIDS delegates thus not only championed the blue economy discourse on the global stage but were actively involved in (re)defining it.

The second section examines the Pacific Island Development Forum's (PIDF) engagement with the blue economy over the years 2013 – 2017. I posit that the crisis in Pacific regionalism which characterised this period powerfully shaped the PIDF's adoption of the blue economy, with the PIDF leveraging this discourse as a point of distinction from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The focus of the blue economy thus appeared to shift during these years, with the discourse utilised as a tool for reimagining Pacific regionalism.

The PIF's uneasy and increasingly tangled relationship with the blue economy discourse is the subject of *Section Three*. Coming to engage the blue economy in 2017, the PIF has fluctuated between embracing the blue economy under its broader Blue Pacific narrative and conversely distancing itself from the discourse. I find the blue economy presents opportunities, but seemingly greater challenges for the PIF as it works to advance an agenda of assertive, self-determined ocean development and governance. The relationship between this discourse and the Blue Pacific

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<sup>382</sup> PSIDS is the primary vehicle for Pacific Islands regional advocacy at the UN. It comprises 14 Pacific Island countries: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Fulori Manoa provides an excellent account of the PSIDS' formation and evolution: Fulori Manoa, 'The New Pacific Diplomacy at the United Nations: The Rise of the PSIDS', in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015).

remains muddy and increasingly in tension as the blue economy remains heavily informed and promoted by external actors, while the Blue Pacific is distinctly a product of Pacific regionalism.

Finally, *Section Four* analyses key stakeholder interviews to consider the strategic calculations and considerations that inform how the Pacific's regional organisations engage with the discourse. These insights deepen our understanding of the power and politics circulating around the blue economy, taking into consideration the lived experience of stakeholders directly involved with regional organisations' use of such discourse. From these insights, I suggest that while the blue economy has helped to build international appreciation for the development potential of oceans, it has fallen short on its promise to usher in a new era of ocean development premised on the self-determination of ocean-reliant countries of the Global South. The blue economy thus appears to be failing in its commitment to institute a new global order of ocean relations, raising serious questions about the political effect of the blue economy as will be picked up for closer scrutiny in *Part III*.

## 5.2 PSIDS: Redefining the blue economy for the Pacific

After years of feeling that oceans and ocean-reliant communities had been sidelined in the global development agenda,<sup>383</sup> representatives of the Pacific came together ahead of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) looking to expand development beyond its terrestrial bounds and towards greater embrace of ocean opportunities. The PSIDS grouping provided the key forum for this collective diplomacy, representing fourteen Pacific countries<sup>384</sup> in close collaboration with the broader Small Island Developing States (SIDS) bloc. Though PSIDS was not the first to engage the blue economy as a vision for sustainable ocean development (recall the activities of the US and EU discussed in *Chapter One*), it was instrumental in mainstreaming this discourse and, perhaps most critically, redefining it as a paradigm of *specific* value for ocean-based communities of the Global South.

### 5.2.1 Rio+20: The 'green economy in a blue world'

The story of the Pacific's regional engagement with the blue economy discourse began in 2011 with the activities of the PSIDS grouping during the Rio+20 preparatory process. High-level preparatory meetings for the conference commenced eighteen months prior, with the first

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<sup>383</sup> Pacific Small Island Developing States, 'Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States' (Preparatory Committee for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development Second intersessional meeting, New York, 2011).

<sup>384</sup> Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

Intersessional Meeting taking place in January 2011, quickly followed by the Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC/GMEF) in February. By this time, Rio+20's planned 'green economy' theme had been established; defined by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) as an economy "that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities."<sup>385</sup> While broadly supportive of the sustainability commitment extended under the green economy idea, Pacific actors raised concerns about the inherent terrestrial bias of this term; intimating that it risked sidelining the unique interest of SIDS and coastal least developed countries (LDCs) who rely heavily on oceans and coastal environments for their social, cultural and economic wellbeing.<sup>386</sup> Thus, in the closing plenary of the February GC/GMEF, Solomon Islands called on delegates to "keep the green economy blue."<sup>387</sup> This marked one of the earliest documented articulations of the 'blue economy' in the context of Rio+20, and the first by an official state representative.

Following Solomon Islands' evocation of the blue economy, Pacific agents quickly rallied around the concept and started coordinating support both within and outside the region.<sup>388</sup> The swiftness of this blue economy embrace was evident, where just two weeks later at the second session of the Rio+20 Preparatory Committee, Fiji (on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States), Nauru (on behalf of PSIDS) and Palau (on behalf of the Pacific Region) each stressed the need for a "blue economy" that prioritised fisheries and oceans.<sup>389</sup> By the July 2011 Pacific Preparatory Meeting,

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<sup>385</sup> 'Towards a Green Economy Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication' (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2011).

<sup>386</sup> Sefanaia Nawadra, 'Pacific Preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - Rio+20' (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), 2011), <https://www.sprep.org/PacificEnvironmentForum/docs/Rio+20%20PEF%20Presentation%20-SN.pdf>; World Wildlife Fund, 'Pacific Islands Roundtable for Nature Conservation Explores the Green/Blue Economy', World Wildlife Fund, 10 August 2-11, [https://wwf.panda.org/wwf\\_news/?201266/Pacific-Islands-Roundtable-for-Nature-Conservation-explores-the-GreenBlue-Economy](https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?201266/Pacific-Islands-Roundtable-for-Nature-Conservation-explores-the-GreenBlue-Economy).

<sup>387</sup> Kate Neville et al., 'Summary of the 26th Session of the UN Environment Programme Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum: 21-24 February 2011', vol. 16, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 28 February 2011).

<sup>388</sup> Over subsequent months, momentum for the blue economy grew within the broader SIDS grouping—particularly among Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and South China Sea (AIMS) Countries. By July 2011, blue economy discussions were being recorded in summary reports of the UN Conference for Sustainable Development Subregional Preparatory Committee for the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and South China Sea Countries, with support for the blue economy adopted in the ensuing *Outcomes Document*. As revealed in Silver et al. (2015), however, the Pacific SIDS grouping remained the most vocal advocates of the blue economy at Rio+20.

<sup>389</sup> Jennifer Covert et al., 'Summary Report, 7–8 March 2011: UNCSD 2nd Session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom II)' (*Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, 11 March 2011), <https://enb.iisd.org/events/uncsd-2nd-session-preparatory-committee-prepcom-ii/summary-report-7-8-march-2011>; IISD, 'The Regional Preparatory Committee Meetings for Rio+20: An Analysis of the Outcomes', *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, 12 December 2011, <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/the-regional-preparatory-committee-meetings-for-rio20-an-analysis-of-the-outcomes/>.



the blue economy appeared to have gained broad support among Pacific leaders, with regional ministers endorsing the PSIDS' proposal to take the blue economy as a core message to Rio+20.<sup>390</sup>

In an act demonstrative of the determined coalition building efforts of PSIDS, representatives of this regional grouping also used the July 2011 Pacific Preparatory Meeting to call on their respective state leaders to support the blue economy at the upcoming PIF Leaders meeting in September.<sup>391</sup> Although the PIF would remain hesitant of the blue economy discourse in the five years following Rio+20 (for reasons of regional politics as will be explored shortly in *Section Three*), this early request by PSIDS delegates for PIF Leaders to support their blue economy campaign was successful<sup>392</sup>—as seen in the Joint Statement from PIF Leaders and UN Secretary-General made on the sidelines of the 42nd PIF Leaders meeting:

They [PSIDS] called for such issues, often referred to as the 'Blue Economy,' to figure prominently at next year's UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). They urged the international community to tackle threats to marine ecosystems and work towards integrated oceans management and a global network of marine protected areas.<sup>393</sup>

One month after the PIF Leaders meeting, PSIDS delegates convened for the Asian and Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting where they brought their blue economy advocacy to an expanded regional grouping (Asia Pacific). Conveying their “wish to ensure that the ‘blue economy’ aspects of sustainable development are featured prominently at the Rio+20 Conference,”<sup>394</sup> PSIDS delegates successfully advocated for the blue economy among their Asian counterparts, with the

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<sup>390</sup> SPREP, 'Final Record of Discussions and Decisions' (Rio+20 Pacific Preparatory Meeting Joint Ministerial Meeting, Samoa, 2011).

<sup>391</sup> Melanie Ashton and Cherelle Jackson, 'Summary Report, 21–22 July 2011: UNCSD Pacific Subregional Preparatory Joint Ministerial Meeting Report PDF' (Earth Negotiations Bulletin, 2011).

<sup>392</sup> While many Pacific Island countries are members to both PSIDS and the PIF, these regional organisations have distinct membership groupings that reflect their differing functions.

PSIDS comprises 14 Pacific Island countries: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. It is the primary mechanism for Pacific Islands representation at the UN.

The PIF comprises 18 full members. This includes the fourteen members of PSIDS as well as two regional metropolitan states (Australia and New Zealand) and the French territories in the Pacific (French Polynesia and New Caledonia). Tokelau and Wallis and Futuna are Associate Members. Four states and seven international organisations hold Forum Observer status (States: American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Timor Leste. International organisations: Secretariat of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP Secretariat), Asian Development Bank, Commonwealth Secretariat, International Organisation for Migration, United Nations Secretariat, Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, World Bank). It also includes 21 Forum Dialogue Partners, among which are Japan, U.K., U.S., China, and the European Union. The PIF is the primary organisation for Pacific regionalism.

<sup>393</sup> PIFS & Ki-Moon, 'Joint Statement of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders and the Secretary-General of the United Nations' (United Nations, 7 September 2011), <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2011-09-07/joint-statement-pacific-islands-forum-leaders-and-secretary-general>.

<sup>394</sup> ESCAP, 'Report of the Asian and Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development', vol. EDD/UNCSD/RPM/5, 2011.

Chair of the meeting, H.E. Mr. Yoon Jong-soo of the Republic of Korea, recognising the need for “greening economies” in the “blue world” context.<sup>395</sup> Another month later, PSIDS took their blue economy message to the global stage at the Monaco Sustainable Use of Oceans in the Context of the Green Economy and Poverty Eradication Workshop,<sup>396</sup> and again at the Second Intersessional Meeting in December.<sup>397</sup> PSIDS were forthright and unrelenting in their blue economy advocacy leading up to Rio+20. Their coalition building efforts, both within the Pacific and beyond, enabled them to lay the groundwork for their blue economy campaign at the Rio+20 conference and rally support for the inclusion of ocean issues on the conference agenda. Of particular interest to this thesis, this preparatory period also provided PSIDS with time and space to craft their blue economy storyline; assembling a coherent and largely consistent approach to the discourse to which we will now turn.

### **Complementarity with the green economy**

Since the early days of PSIDS’ blue economy advocacy, Pacific delegates were careful to frame the blue economy as “complementary” to the conference’s green economy theme.<sup>398</sup> Their positioning of the blue economy as a partner concept to the green economy emphasised the clear parallels between these two terms in an attempt to leverage the latter’s global prominence as means for elevating the legitimacy and appeal of the former. Indeed, PSIDS seemingly made little effort to draw out distinct priorities or principles that differentiated the blue economy from the green economy, preferring instead to frame the blue economy as “*complementary* to the ‘Green Economy’ as it adopts the same principles and applies them to the health of our Oceans.”<sup>399</sup> The blue economy was positioned as the ocean counterpart to the green economy; with PSIDS delegates at once careful to ensure consistency with the global push for sustainable development via the ‘green economy’ paradigms, while expanding the focus of such agenda towards the ocean.

As thinking around PSIDS’ blue economy matured through the Rio+20 preparatory process, the storyline ‘green economy in a blue world’ started to emerge.<sup>400</sup> This phrase leveraged the framing of the Pacific Islands region as a large ocean continent<sup>401</sup> (or blue world) and emphasised that

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<sup>395</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>396</sup> Government of the Principality of Monaco, ‘Monaco Message’ (Monaco, 28 November 2011).

<sup>397</sup> PSIDS, ‘Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States’.

<sup>398</sup> Puna in IISD, ‘The Regional Preparatory Committee Meetings for Rio+20: An Analysis of the Outcomes’; PSIDS, ‘Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States’.

<sup>399</sup> PSIDS, ‘Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States’, 2, emphasis added.

<sup>400</sup> ESCAP, ‘Report of the Asian and Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development’; SPREP, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’.

<sup>401</sup> Wendt, ‘Towards a New Oceania’; Hau’ofa, ‘Our Sea of Islands’.

sustainable development in the Pacific required considerable—if not priority—attention to ocean-based opportunities. Some of the earliest expressions of this storyline were seen at the July 2011 Pacific Preparatory Meeting where delegates proposed that the region showcase “its own political commitment for sustainable development by adopting a ‘green economy in a blue world’ at Rio+20.”<sup>402</sup> ‘Green economy in a blue world’ was shortly reaffirmed at the Asian and Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting (October 2011),<sup>403</sup> and again in March 2012 to the 68th session of the ESCAP.<sup>404</sup> This clear positioning of the blue economy as something of particular value for ocean-dependent nations became a characteristic feature of the PSIDS Rio+20 campaign.<sup>405</sup> It also provided a powerful anchor to which PSIDS could tether their other demands at Rio+20; primary among these being global reaffirmation of SIDS special case recognition.<sup>406</sup>

### **SIDS special case recognition**

Though SIDS special case status had been recognised by the international community since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (the original ‘Rio’), Pacific Islands and SIDS representatives had become wary of its precarity as negotiations progressed towards Rio+20. As Sefanaia Nawardra, then Director of Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme’s (SPREP) Environmental Monitoring and Governance, told regional media: “Over the years there have been challenges to the special case for SIDS. A number of other negotiating groups are arguing that they also have [a] special case. It’s a real challenge for SIDS to continue to keep the ‘special case’ that was agreed to at the initial Rio Earth Summit.”<sup>407</sup>

Special case recognition was (and remains) highly valued by SIDS for its acknowledgement of the unique development challenges and vulnerabilities they face as result of their geography (geographic isolation, narrow resource base, and vulnerability to external shocks such as climate-induced sea level rise). In an attempt to secure a global recommitment to SIDS special case recognition, the PSIDS grouping were seeking support at Rio+20 for the hosting of the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States in 2014. With the support from the

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<sup>402</sup> SPREP, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’, 8.

<sup>403</sup> ESCAP, ‘Report of the Asian and Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development’.

<sup>404</sup> Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries, ‘Summary of Pacific Preparations for Rio+20: The Evolving “Special Case” of Small Island Developing States [E/ESCAP/68/1]’, vol. E/ESCAP/68/1 (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 12 March 2012).

<sup>405</sup> Jennifer Silver et al., ‘Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance’, *The Journal of Environment & Development* 24, no. 2 (2015): 135–60.

<sup>406</sup> Makereta Komai, ‘Fiji And PSIDS Push For Special Case Recognition In Rio+20 Declaration’, *PACNEWS*, 15 June 2012, <https://www.sprep.org/news/fiji-and-psids-push-special-case-recognition-rio20-declaration>; SPREP, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’.

<sup>407</sup> Nawardra in Makereta Komai, ‘Pacific At Rio+20: Q And A’, *SPREP* (blog), 2012, <https://www.sprep.org/news/pacific-rio20-q-and>.

G77, China group, and eventually the EU, this demand appeared to be gaining traction among some in the international community, but was far from guaranteed given ongoing reservations from the US and other regional groupings.<sup>408</sup> In a stroke of ingenuity, PSIDS delegates recognised the potential of interweaving their special case recognition and blue economy agendas at Rio+20 such that each could work in mutual support of one another. In this sense, the ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline became more than simply a call to expand the global sustainable development agenda oceanward, but a dual-pronged political tool through which the Pacific could also demand transformation towards a more equitable, contextually differentiated development complex. Let us consider two examples of such interweaving of the PSIDS’ blue economy and special case campaigns as captured in the ‘green in a blue world’ storyline.

Firstly, the ‘green in a blue world’ storyline advanced by PSIDS at Rio+20 was unashamedly oriented towards the sustainable development of SIDS. This was clearly evoked in the storyline itself, with the ‘blue world’ component providing direct reference to SIDS’ identities as large ocean states (SIDS are custodians of around 30% of the world’s oceans and seas,<sup>409</sup> with Pacific SIDS alone managing 20% of the world’s ocean spaces designated under EEZ).<sup>410</sup> The linkages between the PSIDS blue economy campaign and special case recognition could also be seen in Ambassador Aisi’s statement at the Second Intersessional Meeting for the Rio+20 Preparatory Committee where he expressly identified “enabling the development aspirations of SIDS in relation to the utilisation of marine and coastal resources” as one of three essential components of the blue economy.<sup>411</sup> And again, in the outcomes document of the Pacific Preparatory Meeting for Rio+20, which more specifically situated the blue economy as an agenda for PSIDS ocean development.<sup>412</sup> These framings suggest that PSIDS envisioned the blue economy as an agenda that both attended to the unique circumstances and capabilities of SIDS (i.e. the SIDS special case logic), as well as one that served the ocean-based development needs of these nations as its primary function.

The second element of the PSIDS ‘green in a blue world’ storyline that echoed principles of SIDS special case recognition was its appeal to principles of equitable benefit sharing. Much like how SIDS special case recognition promotes the equitable distribution of and access to global

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<sup>408</sup> Komai, ‘Fiji And PSIDS Push For Special Case Recognition In Rio+20 Declaration’.

<sup>409</sup> United Nations, ‘SIDS GBN - Thematic Areas - Oceans’, Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, 2015, <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sids-gbn-thematic-areas-oceans>.

<sup>410</sup> Pacific Data Hub, ‘Pacific Maritime Boundaries Dashboard’, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), 2024, <https://pacificdata.org/dashboard/maritime-boundaries>.

<sup>411</sup> PSIDS, ‘Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States’, 2.

<sup>412</sup> SPREP, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’, 4.

resources, sources from the Rio+20 consultation process indicate that PSIDS delegates similarly viewed the blue economy as a means for ensuring that SIDS received their “fair share” of wealth from ocean activities.<sup>413</sup> This sentiment was noted consistently throughout PSIDS’ statements and submissions to the Rio+20 consultation process,<sup>414</sup> including in the final report of the Pacific Preparatory Meeting for Rio+20:

The opportunities in marine and ocean resources need to be managed sustainably and equitably so that the Pacific does get its *fair share* of the benefits. The Pacific therefore wishes to ensure that the “blue economy” aspects of sustainable development are featured prominently at Rio+20.<sup>415</sup>

The word ‘share’ in the above statement critically reveals how PSIDS sought not simply to increase the net revenue that they gained from ocean activities, but to actively draw a greater *portion* of the overall wealth generated under the blue economy. Through such statements, PSIDS called out the inequality of the neoliberal capitalist system *and* demanded change to it. Similar conclusions about PSIDS’ mobilisation of the blue economy concept have been reached by Silver et al.,<sup>416</sup> as well as by Sefanaia Nawadra, who in his earlier mentioned interview confirmed that a central focus of the Pacific blue economy was “the equitable sharing of benefits that accrue from the development and use of ocean resources.”<sup>417</sup> In short, it appears that for PSIDS the blue economy represented more than a mechanism for mere profit maximisation. It embodied a desire for reconfiguring global economic relationships and asserted the right of SIDS to secure a greater share in ocean profits and development funding.

Examining the overall agenda of PSIDS at Rio+20 suggests that the blue economy and SIDS special case campaigns were carefully crafted in mutual support of one another. The blue economy with its ocean focus highlighted how the development circumstances and challenges of SIDS are unique, thereby reinforcing the argument for special case recognition. Correspondingly, the SIDS special case campaign buttressed PSIDS’ efforts to assert ownership over the blue economy campaign and (re)craft the nascent discourse as a tool specifically designed to support the development aspirations of small island developing states. To call on the old adage, PSIDS’ interlacing of special case recognition within the ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline provided the Pacific with an advocacy platform greater than the sum of its parts. The ‘green

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<sup>413</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’.

<sup>414</sup> PSIDS, ‘Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States’, 2; SPREP, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’, 9.

<sup>415</sup> SPREP, ‘Final Record of Discussions and Decisions’, 9, emphasis added.

<sup>416</sup> ‘Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance’, 151.

<sup>417</sup> Komai, ‘Pacific At Rio+20: Q And A’.

economy in a blue world' storyline was a construct carefully crafted and advocated by the Pacific with the support of their SIDS counterparts, albeit one that built on the blue economy construct first proposed by the Global North.

By the time the Rio+20 conference rolled around in June 2012, the influence of PSIDS in elevating oceans on the sustainable development agenda was already noticeable. Thirty-five ocean events had been scheduled, in addition to four negotiating meetings for the oceans text that would become part of the conference's outcomes document. In the case of PSIDS, the blue economy operated as vehicle through which this regional body could elevate oceans on the global sustainable development agenda and make room for greater recognition of Pacific concerns and priorities. Their 'green economy in a blue world' storyline, as interwoven with the campaign for SIDS special case recognition, called for more equitable benefit sharing of ocean wealth and resources, and placed SIDS, including those of the Pacific, as the primary benefactors of this nascent concept. These early efforts by PSIDS established a strong foundation for the blue economy as an assertive tool for collective Pacific diplomacy. However, as we will discover next, the discourse would soon be drawn into intra-regional tensions where it came to be leveraged by the emerging PIDF as a unique selling point to distinguish it from the established regional order.

### 5.3 PIDF: The 'blue/green economy' selling point

In the years following Rio+20, the Pacific's blue economy discourse seemingly shifted from its use as a tool of international diplomacy to one of regional politics. This turn occurred between the years of 2013 and 2016 when the discourse was embraced by an emerging regional body: the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). The establishment of the PIDF in response to escalating regional tensions is well documented by scholars including Mawi,<sup>418</sup> Komai,<sup>419</sup> Tarte<sup>420</sup> and Fry,<sup>421</sup> and it is not the intention of this thesis to further expand on this literature. For the purposes of this discussion, I offer a brief summary of the PIDF's establishment to contextualise the political climate within which the blue economy came to circulate.

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<sup>418</sup> 'Fiji's Emerging Brand of Pacific Diplomacy: A Fiji Government Perspective', in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015).

<sup>419</sup> 'Fiji's Foreign Policy and the New Pacific Diplomacy', in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015).

<sup>420</sup> 'A New Pacific Regional Voice? The Pacific Islands Development Forum', in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.22459/NPD.12.2015>; Sandra Tarte, 'Regionalism and Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands', *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies*, 2014, <https://doi-org.virtual.anu.edu.au/10.1002/app5.27>.

<sup>421</sup> *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*.

Two and a half years after Fiji's 2006 military coup that saw then-Commodore Frank Bainimarama overthrow Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, Fiji was suspended from the PIF. Relations between the Government of Fiji and the PIF had been uneasy for some time as a result of the political turbulence in Suva, but it was Bainimarama's decision to renege on his commitment to hold an election in the first quarter of 2009 that ultimately brought about Fiji's suspension from the regional body. PIF's decision was received with indignation by the Bainimarama regime, which directed particular scorn towards Australia and New Zealand for their perceived role in leading the campaign for Fiji's suspension. In response, the Fiji Government led the formation of a new regional body that expressly sought to represent and comprise "only Pacific people and values"<sup>422</sup> to the exclusion traditional metropolitan powers that otherwise held membership to the PIF. This alternate regional body was the PIDF,<sup>423</sup> which established its headquarters just down the road from the PIF in Suva, Fiji.

The establishment of the PIDF in 2013 represented more than simply a reaction from the Bainimarama regime to its suspension from PIF. It also reflected a broader response among Pacific leaders to a crisis in regionalism. Relations between the PIF's metropolitan<sup>424</sup> and PICT members had reached the point of visible strain over the mid- to late-2000s. This was driven, in part, by the fallout from the 2006 Fiji coup, but also from a growing sense among PICT leaders that Pacific regionalism should be led and controlled by Pacific Islands communities, not beholden to the agendas of (neo)colonial regional powers (Australia and New Zealand who are also full members of PIF).<sup>425</sup> Diverging political priorities and strategic objectives within the PIF's membership raised questions about the capacity of this body to represent the interests of its PICT members and effectively manage the influence of Australia and New Zealand, particularly evident in issues surrounding climate action.<sup>426</sup> Australia's and New Zealand's membership in the PIF, as well as being major donors to the PIF Secretariat, was seen to hamstring the regional body's ability to serve the core objectives of its PICT members (strong emissions reduction targets), laying bare the systemic limitations of the Pacific's existing regional order. Pacific regionalism appeared to have reached a point of crisis upon the dawning of the 2010s, with the PIDF embodying visions for a

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<sup>422</sup> Tarte, 'A New Pacific Regional Voice? The Pacific Islands Development Forum', 81.

<sup>423</sup> The PIDF consists of 15 members, including thirteen Pacific Island countries (Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Marshall Islands, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tomor-Leste, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu) and two non-governmental organisations representing the private sector (Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO)) and civil society (Pacific Islands Association of Non-governmental Organisations (PIANGO)).

<sup>424</sup> Australia and New Zealand

<sup>425</sup> Tarte, 'A New Pacific Regional Voice? The Pacific Islands Development Forum'.

<sup>426</sup> Tarte.

‘new Pacific diplomacy’<sup>427</sup> where Pacific voices would be afforded greater prominence and authority. Appreciating this context is critical for understanding how the PIDF negotiated its engagement with the blue economy, and for what purpose(s) it mobilised it.

### 5.3.1 An evolving blue economy storyline

On 5 August 2013, the PIDF launched in Fiji through its inaugural conference, themed ‘Leadership, Innovation and Partnership for Green/Blue Pacific Economies.’ As is evident from the conference theme, the newly formed PIDF embraced the blue economy and made it a central feature of its policy platform.<sup>428</sup> The conference *Outcomes Document* repeatedly referenced the blue economy discourse, always partnering it with the green economy through phrases such as the “green-blue economy”<sup>429</sup>, “green growth in blue economies”<sup>430</sup> or most commonly “green/blue economy.” This explicit bridging of the green and blue economies emphasised the interdependent relationship between ocean and terrestrial ecosystems, while also evoking the PSIDS’ blue economy campaign at Rio+20 that likewise emphasised the complementarity between the two concepts. PIDF’s ‘blue/green economy’ storyline provided a useful platform for the new regional body to celebrate the earlier leadership and success of Pacific agents as international blue economy advocates and commit to continuing this legacy post-Rio+20. In 2015, the PIDF further confirmed the importance of the ‘blue/green economy’ discourse to its operations, with its approved *Charter* mandating that the regional body support “Green-Blue Pacific economies” as part of its central mission.<sup>431</sup>

By 2016, the PIDF started to adapt its ‘blue/green economy’ storyline to engage solely with the ‘blue economy.’<sup>432</sup> The reasons for this transition are somewhat ambiguous, however, it is likely that the growing interest in sustainable ocean activities among the global development

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<sup>427</sup> Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, Pacific Series (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.22459/NPD.12.2015>.

<sup>428</sup> It is worth noting that the PIDF, through its antecedent Engaging with the Pacific (EWTP) grouping, had been earlier engaged with the blue economy concept. This engagement occurred in 2011 at the second EWTP meeting in which participants endorsed the PSIDS Rio+20 campaign, including its introduction of the blue economy concept during preparatory Conference processes. An account of the EWTP’s (later to be regrouped as the PIDF) support of the PSIDS blue economy campaign is discussed in Tarte, ‘A New Pacific Regional Voice? The Pacific Islands Development Forum’..

<sup>429</sup> PIDF, ‘Outcomes Document’ (2013 PIDF Conference, Fiji, 2013), 7.

<sup>430</sup> PIDF, 6, 16.

<sup>431</sup> ‘Charter of the Pacific Islands Development Forum’ (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), 2015), 5.

<sup>432</sup> PIDF, ‘Green Growth for Blue Economies the Future of the Pacific Islands’, 2016, <http://www.pidf.int/green-growth-for-blue-economies-the-future-of-the-pacific-islands/>; ‘Blue Economy and Pacific SIDS Form the Core of PIDF’s Mandate’, 2016, <http://www.pidf.int/blue-economy-and-pacific-sids-form-the-core-of-pidfs-mandate/>.



community<sup>433</sup> helped facilitate this shift. As sustainable ocean development became increasingly mainstreamed within the global development community, the blue economy's earlier reliance on the green economy discourse for social legitimacy and comprehension reduced. The 'blue economy' could stand on its own and be semantically decoupled from the green economy, enabling the PIDF to engage a distinct 'blue economy' storyline in its regional operations.

### **1<sup>st</sup> High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference**

Indicative of its commitment to the 'blue economy' storyline, the PIDF hosted the 1st High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference in Suva on the 23-24 August 2017. According to the preparatory *Conference Information Note*, the event sought "to provide a roadmap for refining the concept and implementing a Blue Economy in the Pacific."<sup>434</sup> It recognised the need for the blue economy discourse to be contextualised within the region so as to ensure that activities and policies promoted under its name were "adapted and aligned with Pacific Islands perspectives, priorities and solutions."<sup>435</sup> The PIDF's conference note also emphasised the need for a Pacific blue economy to "move away from business-as-usual practices to embrace more inclusive, equitable and integrated approaches to the way in which marine resources and ocean ecosystems are valued, used and managed."<sup>436</sup> While a relatively common expression within emerging global blue economy conceptualisations,<sup>437</sup> this positioning of the blue economy as an alternate pathway to sustainable development neatly aligned with the PIDF's founding motivation: to challenge the economic orthodoxies and power structures that had long structured Pacific regionalism and its institutional architecture.<sup>438</sup> In this light, it appears that while the PIDF's updated 'blue economy' storyline loosened its earlier tethering to the green economy, it maintained the political function of its 'blue/green economy' predecessor. Like the 'blue/green economy,' the PIDF's 'blue economy' centred on assertive, independent Pacific regionalism.

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<sup>433</sup> Consider, for example, the UN's establishment of an ocean-oriented sustainable development goal (SDG14) in December 2015 (A/RES/70/226), the proclamation of a Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) in 2017, and the launch of the inaugural UN Ocean Conference in June 2017 (co-hosted by the government of Fiji and Sweden).

<sup>434</sup> PIDF, '1st High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference: Report of Proceedings' (1st High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference, Suva, 2017), 79, [http://www.pidf.int/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PBEC-Proceedings\\_Final.pdf](http://www.pidf.int/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PBEC-Proceedings_Final.pdf).

<sup>435</sup> PIDF, 79.

<sup>436</sup> PIDF, 76.

<sup>437</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Investing in the Blue Economy: Growth, Opportunity and a Sustainable Ocean Economy', 2015, [http://img.en25.com/Web/EconomistConferences/%7B13c8d275-8274-44ab-a620-5d2b026f8e8e%7D\\_Investing\\_in\\_the\\_blue\\_economy\\_Discussion\\_Paper\\_EIU.pdf](http://img.en25.com/Web/EconomistConferences/%7B13c8d275-8274-44ab-a620-5d2b026f8e8e%7D_Investing_in_the_blue_economy_Discussion_Paper_EIU.pdf); World Bank and UNDESA, 'The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries', viii.

<sup>438</sup> Bainimarama in Mawi, 'Fiji's Emerging Brand of Pacific Diplomacy: A Fiji Government Perspective', 103.

Strong alignment can be seen between the PIDF's 'blue economy' storyline of the conference note and the discussion that followed at the conference itself. Speakers across the two days recognised the need for a Pacific blue economy that rejected business-as-usual development paradigms and embraced community-based, people-centred approaches which celebrated Indigenous knowledges and systems.<sup>439</sup> Records of the group discussions held during the final session on 'Developing Blue Economies for the Pacific' suggest that participants shared broadly similar understandings of the discourse (sustainable ocean development), though that they held questions over whether the blue economy truly offered this alternate pathway to sustainable ocean development.<sup>440</sup> Such scepticism of the transformative potential, let alone function, of the blue economy is of central concern to this thesis and has been increasingly expressed by regional stakeholders as the Pacific's engagement with the discourse has continued. Important to note here is that discussion at the PIDF's 1st High Level Conference on the Blue Economy endorsed the blue economy *on the condition* that it aligned with a "community-based definition" that enabled Pacific Islanders to "take ownership of our own development."<sup>441</sup> A Pacific-based, Pacific-inspired and, perhaps most critically, Pacific-led approach to sustainable ocean development emerged as a key conference resolution, weaving together a storyline of an assertive, self-determined Pacific 'blue economy.'

### **A unique blue economy selling point**

So, what purpose did this assertive, self-determined 'blue economy' storyline serve for the PIDF? What function did it perform for this new organisation as it sought to establish itself as an alternate grouping for Pacific regionalism? Dornan et al.<sup>442</sup> have argued that PIDF's embrace of green growth and related green economy terminologies provided the body with a "unique selling point" in a crowded regional landscape."<sup>443</sup> I suggest that a similar conclusion can be drawn about PIDF's construction of their blue economy storyline. Here it is critical to recall how the PIDF was established as an alternate vision for Pacific regionalism that centred the interests and agency of PICTs without needing to also appease the agendas of Australia and New Zealand (who were excluded from its membership). Its appeal lay in its promise to transform the regional order in favour of PICTs and reimagine a Pacific regionalism less reliant on traditional metropolitan powers. The PIDF's legitimacy hinged on its distinction from the PIF—a distinction its supporters

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<sup>439</sup> Pacific Islands Development Forum, '1st High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference: Report of Proceedings'.

<sup>440</sup> Recorded statements indicating blue economy caution include 'Past strategies for economic development have not worked; proposals for the green and blue economy are business as usual and are failing our people,' and 'Who is the development for? Who is going to prosper? Who is going to be left behind or harmed?' PIDF, 64–68.

<sup>441</sup> PIDF, 64.

<sup>442</sup> 'What's in a Term? "Green Growth" and the "Blue-green Economy" in the Pacific Islands', *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 3 (2018): 408–25, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.258>.

<sup>443</sup> Dornan et al., 414.

regularly emphasised by drawing to attention the limitations of the PIF in delivering on the priorities of its PICT members.<sup>444</sup> The PIDF's strong stance on climate change<sup>445</sup> was a prominent feature that set it apart from the PIF. But so too was its emphasis on a Pacific-led, sustainable development pathway,<sup>446</sup> and it was here that the PIDF saw political utility in the blue economy discourse.

As described in Fry and Tarte's *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, the PIF of the early 2000s was seen by many Pacific leaders to have stagnated on the issue of sustainable development.<sup>447</sup> The 2013 *Morauta Review* of Pacific regionalism had identified a lack of “timely and systemic” progress in the PIF's sustainable development policies and approaches<sup>448</sup> and recommended that the PIF “expediate” work on developing concrete sustainable development policies for the region, as well as improve knowledge sharing processes (Recommendations 3 & 4). The Review pointed to a lapse in focus from the PIF on issues of sustainable development, despite clear enthusiasm from PICT leaders for greater progress on regional sustainable development pathways. This, according to Fijian scholar and activist Claire Slatter, resulted from the “overweening role” of Australia and New Zealand in shaping the PIF's regional agenda at the time, which, as evident in its then-guiding framework, the *Pacific Plan*,<sup>449</sup> was geared towards regional market integration.<sup>450</sup> Such oversight of Pacific sustainable development priorities presented an opportunity for the PIDF. By centring the ‘green/blue economy,’ then ‘blue economy’ storylines as core to its agenda, the PIDF could capitalise on the PIF's shortcomings and position itself as a regional champion for sustainable development.

From 2013 to 2016, the PIDF effectively held monopoly over the blue economy among the Pacific's regional organisations, with PSIDS falling quiet on the discourse during this period and the PIF—and related Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies<sup>451</sup>—avoiding it until 2017 (as I discuss shortly). The PIDF leveraged the discourse to distinguish itself from the PIF and challenge the influence of metropolitan regional powers which were seen to be

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<sup>444</sup> Tess Newton Cain, ‘A Tale of Two Forums’, *DevPolicy Blog*, 11 September 2015, <https://devpolicy.org/a-tale-of-two-forums-20150911/>.

<sup>445</sup> *Suva Declaration on Climate Change* (2015).

<sup>446</sup> Tarte, ‘A New Pacific Regional Voice? The Pacific Islands Development Forum’.

<sup>447</sup> *The New Pacific Diplomacy*.

<sup>448</sup> PIFS, ‘Pacific Plan Review’, Report to Pacific Leaders (Suva, Fiji, 2013), 65.

<sup>449</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘The Pacific Plan: For Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), October 2005).

<sup>450</sup> Claire Slatter, ‘The New Framework for Pacific Regionalism: Old Kava in a New Tanoa?’, in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>451</sup> The Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) consists of the PIF, Forum Fisheries Agency, Pacific Aviation Safety Office, Pacific Power Association (PPA), Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP), Pacific Community (SPC), Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), and the University of the South Pacific (USP).

obstructing progress on issues of climate change and sustainable development. Here the blue economy provided the PIDF with a political tool to advocate for a transformed regional order founded on Pacific self-determination. Though ecological, economic and development considerations remained central to the PIDF's blue economy constructs, it appears that the discourse primarily served as a 'unique selling point' to distinguish this emerging regional body from its established counterpart. The PIDF's ability to reorient the blue economy in service of regionalism objectives speaks to the craft with which this body mobilised and adapted the discursive assemblage to pursue its distinct needs, with the regional organisation hosting well attended annual summits in 2013 (~300 delegates)<sup>452</sup>, 2014 (~400 delegates)<sup>453</sup> and 2015 (~300 delegates).<sup>454</sup>

Since its 2017 Pacific Blue Economy Conference, the PIDF has not released any major new blue economy material (with the latest blue economy update, "Providing an enabling environment for Green/Blue Pacific economies,"<sup>455</sup> effectively rehashing earlier texts). This silence can be attributed, in large part, to the reduced role that the PIDF has come to occupy in Pacific regionalism<sup>456</sup> as hostilities between the Bainimarama administration and metropolitan powers thawed and the PIF underwent a rejuvenation under the leadership of Dame Meg Taylor. By 2017, the regional influence of the PIDF was seemingly weakening<sup>457</sup> and with it, the threat it posed to the PIF as an alternate regional body. This offered an opportunity for a (relatively uncontested) changing of the guard in regional leadership of the blue economy discourse; a shift that one senior PIDF official relievedly joked: "Blue economy, take it PIFS. Please carry it on! (laughter)" (REG.11). Today, the PIDF sputters along with a lean staff and limited resources, leaving the Pacific's regional engagement with the blue economy largely transferred to PIF (and partner CROP agencies).

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<sup>452</sup> Tarte, 'A New Pacific Regional Voice? The Pacific Islands Development Forum'.

<sup>453</sup> Pacific Islands Development Forum, 'Outcome Document: Pacific Islands Development Forum Second Annual Summit' (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), 2014).

<sup>454</sup> Pacific Islands Development Forum, 'Outcome Document: Third PIDF Leaders Summit' (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), 2015).

<sup>455</sup> PIDF, 'Providing an Enabling Environment for Green/Blue Pacific Economies.', 2019, <http://www.pidf.int/ge/>.

<sup>456</sup> Borrowing a phrase from experienced Pacific regionalists Transform Aqorau and James Batley, the PIDF appeared to be "running out of steam". "The Pacific Islands Development Forum: A Shaky Future?", *Department of Pacific Affairs In Brief* 2019/8 (2019). towards the second half of the 2010s. Despite securing observer status at the UN General Assembly in 2016, the PIDF summit that year was poorly attended by regional leaders, with only three heads of government making an appearance (including the host, Solomon Islands, and Fiji). This was followed by no summit in 2017 or 2018, reportedly because no member state was willing to host one (Aqorau & Batley, 2019). The PIDF also failed to secure universal support among the region, with PNG, Vanuatu and Samoa never committing to the Forum.

<sup>457</sup> Aqorau and Batley.

## 5.4 PIF: A murky blue economy relationship

Over the summer of 2021/22, I published an article suggesting the blue economy was being woven into a project of regional reinvigoration headlined by the PIF's Blue Pacific narrative.<sup>458</sup> I outlined how early conceptualisations of the Blue Pacific narrative expressly referenced the blue economy, while noting the undercurrent of caution expressed by regional stakeholders as to how the blue economy could be practically implemented and made meaningful within the Blue Pacific framework (even from within the PIF itself).<sup>459</sup> In just the last couple of years, the PIF's relationship with the blue economy appears to have only grown murkier as the regional body has vacillated between discourse adoption and retreat, as I detail through this section.

Below, I update my earlier analysis to include reflection on two key developments: the release of the PIF's *2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent* (endorsed by PIF Leaders in July 2022), and the newly launched Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity initiative. The deepening unease around the blue economy's relationship with the Blue Pacific raises important questions about the compatibility (or otherwise) of these two ocean-based visions of Pacific regionalism. Does the blue economy support the self-determined development agenda set out under the Blue Pacific? If not, what can we make of the transformative promise that first attracted Pacific regional stakeholders to the discourse ahead of Rio+20? These questions animate the remainder of this chapter.

### 5.4.1 Entanglements: The Blue Pacific, 'Blue Pacific Economy' and blue economy

A targeted wordsearch<sup>460</sup> through the PIF's public documents over the last five years reveals an abundance of documents referencing the "Blue Pacific" (835), occasional mention of the "blue economy" (47), and even a smattering of appeals to the "Blue Pacific Economy" (12). While it may be tempting to reduce these terms to interchangeable synonyms, there are important differences that underlie each and tell of specific histories and distinct political ambitions. Attention to these details is important for grappling with the complex, at times subtle politics surrounding the PIF's engagement with each of these terms. This subsection wades through the murkiness of these deceptively similar constructs to draw out the relationship they hold with one another, as well as their consequence for Pacific regionalism today. In embarking on this task, let

<sup>458</sup> Louey, 'The Pacific Blue Economy: An Instrument of Political Maneuver'.

<sup>459</sup> See the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner's 2020 and 2021 *Blue Pacific Ocean Reports* 'Blue Pacific Ocean Report 2020: A Report by the Pacific Ocean Commissioner to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders', 2020; 'Blue Pacific Ocean Report 2021: A Report by the Pacific Ocean Commissioner to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' (Suva, Fiji, 2021).

<sup>460</sup> Targeted wordsearch of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat website (<https://forumsec.org/search>) on 18 September 2024. Search inclusive of all document categories.

me begin our discussion in the year of 2017 where the PIF formally introduced the Blue Pacific narrative and with it, engaged with the blue economy discourse for the first time since stating its support for the PSIDS' blue economy campaign of Rio+20 six years earlier.<sup>461</sup>

### Introducing the 'Blue Pacific Economy'

Introduced by the PIF in June 2017<sup>462</sup> and endorsed by leaders in September that year,<sup>463</sup> the Blue Pacific narrative was developed for the purpose of strengthening regional collaboration and asserting Pacific self-determination over its territories, resources, identities and futures. It centres the Pacific Ocean as the basis for regional identity and cooperation, drawing on deep histories of migration, trade, custodianship and kinship that have long connected Pacific communities. This is clear in the remarks of then PIF Chair and Samoan Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sailele Malielegaoi's opening address at the 48<sup>th</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM):

For the Pacific region and its island countries, the ocean is crucial. Exercising a sense of common identity and purpose linked to the ocean has been critical for protecting and promoting the potential of our shared Pacific Ocean. It is this commonality of the fundamental essence of the region which has the potential to empower the region through collective and combined agendas and actions. The Blue Pacific will strengthen existing policy frameworks that harness the ocean as a driver of transformative sociocultural, political and economic development of the Pacific. Furthermore, it gives renewed impetus to deepening Pacific regionalism.<sup>464</sup>

This statement highlights the Blue Pacific's firm origins as construct of Pacific regionalism, with the ocean placed front and centre. It brings to life Pacific leaders' longstanding vision for a regionalism rooted in shared identity, regional solidarity and self-determination as woven through the 'Pacific Way' construct of the early (incomplete) independence era,<sup>465</sup> the 2014 *Framework for*

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<sup>461</sup> New Zealand's listed commitments under the *Palau Declaration* (2014) makes one mention of the "blue economy: "New Zealand priorities and support for the Pacific's 'blue economy' through investments in sustainable fishing." Given that this is a member state's commitment and not that endorsed by the PIF collectively, I do not include the Palau Declaration as an example of the PIF's blue economy articulation.

<sup>462</sup> At the 2017 UN Oceans Conference.

<sup>463</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 'Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum, Forum Communique' (Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum, Apia, Samoa: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2017), [https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Final\\_48-PIF-Communique\\_2017\\_14Sep17.pdf](https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Final_48-PIF-Communique_2017_14Sep17.pdf).

<sup>464</sup> PIFS, 'Remarks by Hon. Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa at the High-Level Pacific Regional Side Event by PIFS on Our Values and Identity as Stewards of the World's Largest Oceanic Continent, The Blue Pacific' (New York, 5 June 2017), 2, <https://www.forumsec.org/2017/06/05/remarks-by-hon-tuilaepa-lupesoliai-sailele-malielegaoi-prime-minister-of-the-independent-state-of-samoa-at-the-high-level-pacific-regional-side-event-by-pifs-on-our-values-and-identity-as-stewards/>.

<sup>465</sup> Tupouniua, Cocombe, and Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*; Kabutaulaka, 'Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order'; Henrietta McNeill and Maima Koro, 'Forging the Pacific Way', *Open Forum*, 11 July 2022, <https://www.openforum.com.au/forging-the-pacific-way/>.

*Pacific Regionalism*<sup>466</sup> and practiced in the ‘Pacific environmentalism’ that has been maturing since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>467</sup> It is from this longer genealogy that the Blue Pacific narrative descends.<sup>468</sup>

Thinking on the Blue Pacific as a contemporary embodiment of collective Pacific regionalism, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka has insightfully described the Blue Pacific as “both a narrative and a strategy for assertive diplomacy.”<sup>469</sup> As a narrative, the Blue Pacific draws attention to the shared Pacific Ocean that connects the region and thus provides the foundation for regional identity and cooperation. It also acknowledges the deep histories and connections that many Pacific communities hold with the ocean, which has long been grounded in an ethic of stewardship.<sup>470</sup> As a strategy, the Blue Pacific represents an exercise in countermapping that resists the dominant cartographies and associated narratives that foreign powers have (and continue to) use to belittle and fracture the region. It aligns with neither AUKUS visions of an Indo-Pacific region, nor Beijing’s aspirations for a maritime silk road under the Belt and Road Initiative, or indeed any other externally formulated regional imaginings.<sup>471</sup> Instead, the Blue Pacific draws an empowered and self-determined region, positioning the Pacific as an expansive ocean continent<sup>472</sup> drawn together by collective political, development and cultural values.

It was into this Blue Pacific narrative that the PIF first situated its engagement with the blue economy discourse via a hybridised storyline of ‘Blue Pacific Economy.’ In a speech given by then-Forum Chair, Hon. Tuila‘epa, at a side event<sup>473</sup> to the inaugural UN Oceans Conference (2017),

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<sup>466</sup> “The expression of a common sense of identity and purpose, leading progressively to the sharing of institutions, resources, and markets, with the purpose of complementing national efforts, overcoming common constraints, and enhancing sustainable and inclusive development within Pacific countries and territories and for the Pacific region as a whole.” PIFS, ‘Framework for Pacific Regionalism’ (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2014), 1, [https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Framework-for-Pacific-Regionalism\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Framework-for-Pacific-Regionalism_booklet.pdf).

<sup>467</sup> de Jong, ‘Kotahi Te Moana, Only One Ocean: Pacific Environmentalism, 1970–1995’.

<sup>468</sup> Damon Salesa, ‘From Blue Pacific to Indo-Pacific: How Politics and Language Define Our “Indigenous Ocean”’, *The Conversation*, 1 January 2024, <https://theconversation.com/from-blue-pacific-to-indo-pacific-how-politics-and-language-define-our-indigenous-ocean-219483>.

<sup>469</sup> Kabutaulaka, ‘Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order’, 41.

<sup>470</sup> Bhagwan, ‘Tides Are Changing: Opening Speech at the International Conference “The Future of the Oceans and Seas”’.

<sup>471</sup> Kabutaulaka, ‘Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order’; Cristelle Pratt, ‘Strengthening the US-Pacific Islands Partnership’ (Center for Strategic & International Studies US-Pacific Dialogue, Nadi, Fiji: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2019); Salesa, ‘From Blue Pacific to Indo-Pacific: How Politics and Language Define Our “Indigenous Ocean”’; Philippa Louey, ‘Competing Regional Visions and Incompatible Priorities: The Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific in the Age of AUKUS’ (Department of Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University, 2024), <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/315664>.

<sup>472</sup> The legacies of Wendt (1982) and Hau’ofa (1994) run deep through this ocean-centric imagining of the region, highlighting the rich body of thought upon which this construct builds.

<sup>473</sup> High-Level Pacific Regional Side event by PIFS on ‘Our Values and identity as stewards of the world’s largest oceanic continent, The Blue Pacific’ (6 June 2017).

the ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ was identified as one of three central pillars of the Blue Pacific narrative:

The Blue Pacific calls for placing our shared ocean identity, ocean geography and ocean resources at the core of Pacific Regionalism and policy making of the Forum. The potential of the Blue Pacific would need to include consideration of a:

1. A Blue Pacific Economy,
2. A Sustainable and Resilient Blue Pacific, and
3. A Secure and Peaceful Blue Pacific<sup>474</sup>

This ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ storyline ostensibly interwove the blue economy discourse into the PIF’s broader Blue Pacific vision. The blue economy was positioned as a component feature the Blue Pacific, acting in service of this newly developed regional construct—not independent of it. Or, as a PIFS post-conference media release titled *The Blue Pacific at the United Nations Ocean Conference* put it: “At the Pacific regional level, three main areas have been identified by Pacific Islands Forum Members as priorities: Pollution, Biodiversity and Conservation of Ecosystem Services; Climate Change and Ocean Acidification; and Fisheries, Fisheries Subsidies and *Elements of the Blue Economy*” (emphasis added).<sup>475</sup>

Months later, Hon. Tuila‘epa opened the 48<sup>th</sup> PIFLM (at which regional leaders would officially endorse the Blue Pacific narrative), again positioning the blue economy as an integrated element of the Blue Pacific narrative:

The Blue Pacific provides a new narrative for Pacific Regionalism and how the Forum engages with the world.

This new narrative calls for inspired leadership by the Forum and a long-term commitment to the benefits of acting together as one Blue Continent, *has the potential to define a Blue Pacific Economy*, ensures a sustainable, secure, resilient and peaceful Blue Pacific as well as strengthens Blue Pacific Diplomacy to protect the value of our Ocean and peoples.<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> PIFS, ‘Remarks by Hon. Tuilaepa Lufesolai Sailele Malielegaoi Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa at the High-Level Pacific Regional Side Event by PIFS on Our Values and Identity as Stewards of the World’s Largest Oceanic Continent, The Blue Pacific’.

<sup>475</sup> ‘The Blue Pacific at the United Nations Ocean Conference’, 2017, <https://www.forumsec.org/2017/10/10/blue-pacific-united-nations-ocean-conference/>, emphasis added.

<sup>476</sup> PIFS, ‘Opening Address by Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi of Samoa to Open the 48th Pacific Islands Forum 2017’ (48th Pacific Islands Forum 2017, Samoa, 2017), emphasis added.



In overlaying the Blue Pacific narrative upon the blue economy discourse via the ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ storyline, the PIF seemingly worked to contextualise and subsume the latter under its overarching Blue Pacific vision. Such contextualisation had become particularly important by the late 2010s given the successful mainstreaming of the blue economy among global development circles since Rio+20 which, while having raised the profile of sustainable ocean development globally, had also loosened the claim that SIDS held over the discourse as a framework *specifically* tailored to ocean-based communities of the Global South. Incorporating the blue economy into *its* Blue Pacific narrative provided the PIF with a strategy for reasserting the region’s leadership of the blue economy discourse and foregrounding their unique interests in discussions of sustainable ocean development. The ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ storyline, working in service of the Blue Pacific Continent, was a distinct, Pacific-based iteration of the broader blue economy—or at least that appeared to be the ambition.

#### 5.4.2 The *2050 Strategy* and the blue economy

Despite having announced the ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ as a central pillar of its Blue Pacific narrative in 2017, the PIF has made only nine<sup>477</sup> public mentions of this storyline in the years following (Table 4). It has been similarly restrained in its appeal to the blue economy during this time (34, Table 5), suggesting the PIF’s retreat from earlier impulses to interweave these storylines alongside its Blue Pacific narrative—as first witnessed in Hon. Tuila‘epa Sa‘ilele Malielegaoi’s aforementioned speeches of 2017.<sup>478</sup> This apparent weaning of the Blue Pacific from its early association with the blue economy and related ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ storyline is powerfully illustrated in the *2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent*<sup>479</sup>—a leading regional policy to guide Pacific regionalism over the three coming decades. As I outline in this section, the *2050 Strategy* is not only sparse in its reference to the blue economy and ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ storylines, but strategic in its repositioning of the blue economy as an object of *external* desire and less of Pacific utility. Its signalling of a shift in the PIF’s blue economy relationship is important and indicative of deepening caution among regional stakeholders.

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<sup>477</sup> As of 16 September 2024.

<sup>478</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘Remarks by Hon. Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa at the High-Level Pacific Regional Side Event by PIFS on Our Values and Identity as Stewards of the World’s Largest Oceanic Continent, The Blue Pacific’; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘Opening Address by Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi of Samoa to Open the 48th Pacific Islands Forum 2017’.

<sup>479</sup> *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, 2022.

**Table 4:** *Pacific Islands Forum documents referencing the 'Blue Pacific Economy' storyline since the start of 2018 to 18 September 2024.*

| Date             | Text                                                                                                                                      | Document Type                                     |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 21 October 2019  | Remarks by the Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor, at the 3rd China - Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum | Speech                                            |
| 11 July 2018     | Pacific Aid for Trade Strategy (PAFTS): 2020 - 2025                                                                                       | Endorsed Strategy (Forum Trade Officials Meeting) |
| 23 July 2021     | Opening Remarks by the SG at the Validation Workshop for Pacific Regional E-Commerce Strategy and Roadmap                                 | Speech                                            |
| 31 August 2023   | REMARKS: Secretary General Henry Puna at the 2023 PIF Women Leaders Meeting                                                               | Speech                                            |
| 28 April 2018    | Civil Society Focuses on Sport for Development as Driver of Blue Pacific Economies                                                        | Media Release                                     |
| 16 October 2021  | Pacific Trade Commission Launches Freight Subsidy                                                                                         | Media Release                                     |
| 31 August 2023   | REMARKS: Secretary General Henry Puna at the 2023 PIF Women Leaders Meeting                                                               | Speech                                            |
| 11 August 2020   | Opening Statement by the Chair of the 2020 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting, Hon Seve Paeniu                                              | Speech                                            |
| 31 December 2020 | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat Annual Report 2020                                                                                      | Annual Report                                     |
| 23 August 2022   | MEETING PAPERS: 2022 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting                                                                                     | Meeting Papers                                    |

**Table 5:** Pacific Islands Forum documents referencing the 'blue economy' discourse from 1 January 2018 to 18 September 2024. (Removing speeches from external actors).

| Date              | Text                                                                                                          | Document Type                         |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 26 April 2019     | PACIFIC OCEAN FINANCE FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM                                                                      | Media Releases and News               |
| 16 August 2019    | Boe Declaration Action Plan                                                                                   | Ministerial Outcomes & Action Plans   |
| 20 August 2019    | Fiftieth Pacific Islands Forum Tuvalu, 13 -16 August 2019                                                     | Leaders' Communiques                  |
| 12 November 2020  | Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Action Now                                                          | Declarations                          |
| 15 July 2021      | OACPS Secretary General Chikoti addresses Pacific OACPS Trade Ministers                                       | Remarks and Speeches                  |
| 16 July 2021      | 2021 Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM) Outcomes                                         | Ministerial Outcomes & Action Plans   |
| 16 July 2021      | MEETING PAPERS: 2021 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting                                                         | Meeting Papers                        |
| 25 September 2021 | UNGA76 statements, Joint Media Release: Pacific Leaders meet with United Nations Secretary-General            | Statements                            |
| 25 February 2022  | OP-ED: In a sea of climate disappointment, the ocean must take centre stage in all future climate discussions | Feature Articles & Opinion Editorials |
| 26 April 2022     | REMARKS: ASG Dr Manoni at the Special Lecture by Honourable Simon Kofe                                        | Remarks and Speeches                  |
| 12 June 2022      | The Second Quadrennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report 2022                                            | Regional Reports and Frameworks       |
| 25 June 2022      | RELEASE: Pacific Ocean Commissioner to champion Blue Pacific Ocean priorities at 2nd UN Oceans Conference     | Media Releases and News               |
| 17 August 2022    | RELEASE: Strong support for Pacific 2050 at FEMM 2022 development partner roundtable                          | Media Releases and News               |
| 23 August 2022    | MEETING PAPERS: 2022 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting                                                         | Meeting Papers                        |
| 23 September 2022 | REMARKS: FSM President Panuelo Statement to the UNGA77                                                        | Remarks and Speeches                  |
| 30 September 2022 | REPORT: Declaration on US-Pacific Partnership                                                                 | Declarations                          |
| 7 October 2022    | REMARKS: Forum SG Puna at Climate Futures Summit, UoM Australia                                               | Remarks and Speeches                  |
| 5 November 2022   | RELEASE: Pacific trade gateways to Africa, beckon with Mauritius business mission                             | Releases                              |
| 1 December 2022   | REMARKS: Forum SG Puna to Asia-Pacific World Ocean Summit                                                     | Remarks and Speeches                  |

|                   |                                                                                                                                     |                                 |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 21 March 2023     | REMARKS: SG Puna keynote to Inaugural Conference of Pacific Education Ministers                                                     | Remarks and Speeches            |
| 22 March 2023     | Pacific: No 2050 without education: SG Puna to Pacific Education Ministerial                                                        | Media Releases and News         |
| 24 April 2023     | Government of Japan's support for the Promotion of Trade, Investment and Tourism in Pacific Island Countries                        | Media Releases and News         |
| 14 June 2023      | REMARKS: PIF Senior Economic Adviser, Denton Rarawa on PRED and 2050 Strategy at ANU USP Pacific Update                             | Remarks and Speeches            |
| 27 July 2023      | RELEASE: New Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide will put Boe Declaration into Action                                         | Media Releases and News         |
| 7 September 2023  | MEETING PAPERS: 2023 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting                                                                               | Meeting Papers                  |
| 28 September 2023 | REMARKS: Forum Deputy Secretary General Nayasi opens Pacific workshop on WTO Fisheries Subsidies                                    | Remarks and Speeches            |
| 30 September 2023 | Private Sector Mapping of Resilience Building Initiatives and Enhancing Public Private Sector Engagement in Climate Finance in Fiji | Regional Reports and Frameworks |
| 25 December 2023  | Mapping of Kiribati's Private Sector Resilience Initiatives and Enhancing Public Private Sector Engagement in Climate Finance       | Regional Reports and Frameworks |
| 27 January 2024   | Mapping of Palau's Private Sector Resilience Building Initiatives                                                                   | Regional Reports and Frameworks |
| 31 January 2024   | Mapping FSM's Private Sector Resilience Building Initiatives                                                                        | Regional Reports and Frameworks |
| 13 March 2024     | REMARKS: Honourable Lord Vaea address at 68th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women                                      | Remarks and Speeches            |
| 27 May 2024       | REMARKS: Nauru President Adeang delivers national statement at SIDS4                                                                | Remarks and Speeches            |
| 27 May 2024       | REMARKS: Tonga PM Hu'akavameiliku delivers national statement to SIDS4                                                              | Remarks and Speeches            |
| 17 September 2024 | MEETING PAPERS: 2024 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting                                                                               | Meeting Papers                  |

Developed over two years of extensive consultation and negotiation, the *2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent* (herein the *2050 Strategy*) launched at the 51<sup>st</sup> PIFLM, 11-14 July 2022. Unlike its predecessor, the *Pacific Plan*,<sup>480</sup> the *2050 Strategy* was determined, designed and firmly led by Pacific communities, maintaining a high level of commitment and buy-in from the region throughout its development.<sup>481</sup>



**Figure 5:** Overview of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Source: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Commitment to Pacific self-determination cuts deeply through the *2050 Strategy*, informing the policy's approach to each of its eight thematic areas, ten political commitments and the five strategic pathways (Figure 5). For an expression of this, just consider the *Strategy*'s description of the 'Strategic Context' within which it operates and how it seeks to respond to such environment:

<sup>480</sup> Which was strongly driven by New Zealand and Australia Nicola Baker, 'New Zealand and Australia in Pacific Regionalism', in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 137–48; Roman Grynberg, 'The Pacific Plan and Other Failures - What Can Be Learned?', *Pacific Media Centre*, 16 January 2013, <https://pmcarchive.aut.ac.nz/articles/pacific-plan-and-other-failures-what-can-be-learned-2254.html>; Elise Huffer, 'Regionalism and Cultural Identity', in *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Stewart Firth, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2006), 43–58.

<sup>481</sup> Audrey Aumua and Soli Middleby, '2050: A Pacific Geostrategic Vision for the World's Only Blue Continent', *Griffith Asia Insights* (blog) (Griffith Asia Institute, 2022), <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/2050-a-pacific-geostrategic-vision-for-the-worlds-only-blue-continent/>.

The 2050 Strategy emphasises that the Blue Pacific is about Pacific peoples, their faiths, cultural values, and traditional knowledge. People who know their needs and potential; plan and own their development agenda; and act collectively for the good of all.<sup>482</sup>

The ‘Ocean and Environment’ thematic area is similarly framed by an assertion of the region’s stewardship of the Pacific Ocean wherein PIF members hold sovereign rights over significant maritime zones (EEZs). As too is the ‘Resources and Economic Development’ thematic area, which outlines the PIF’s commitment to “strengthened ownership” and Pacific-led sustainable management of resources to achieve economic development. Clearly, self-determination is a leading principle infused throughout the strategy.

Recognising this overarching framework for Pacific self-determination, the next issue of interest for this thesis is how the blue economy discourse fits into the *2050 Strategy*. In terms of text-matching, the *2050 Strategy* makes no mention of the PIF’s earlier ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ storyline, and only one reference to the blue economy. Thus, from a basic quantitative analysis, there appeared to be a palpable retreat from earlier attempts to intertwine the PIF’s Blue Pacific narrative with the blue economy—not too dissimilar to the period immediately following Rio+20 where the regional body refrained from engaging the popular discourse and the PIDF instead led the Pacific’s blue economy engagements.

If we focus on the *2050 Strategy*’s one blue economy reference, we find valuable clues as to why the PIF may have distanced itself from the discourse in its flagship regional blueprint. Situated in the section titled ‘Strategic Context: The Influences that Shape Our Region,’ the strategy’s lone blue economy reference reads:

We occupy a vitally significant place in global strategic terms. As a consequence, heightened geopolitical competition impacts our Member countries. Further, there is increasing commercial and state-sponsored interest in our region’s ecological and natural resources. This is reflected in the global community’s present interest in the “Blue Economy” and suggests that there will be growing demand for our resources over the years to come.<sup>483</sup>

Positioned within this ‘Strategic context’ section, this paragraph presents the blue economy as something that external actors seek to grasp—less something that serves the interests of Pacific communities. Here the blue economy is cast as an object of desire and contestation among international actors which Pacific stakeholders will need to carefully manage. The blue economy

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<sup>482</sup> PIFS, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, 11.

<sup>483</sup> 8.

of this *2050 Strategy* appears a distant cry from the self-determined, Pacific-led approach to sustainable ocean development captured under the PIF's earlier 'Blue Pacific Economy' storyline—let alone the 'green economy in a blue world' of PSIDS or 'blue/green economy' mandate of PIDF. Indeed, it is notable that the PIF omitted any mention of the 'Blue Pacific Economy' in the *2050 Strategy*, seemingly delineating its Blue Pacific narrative from the blue economy construct.

The distance that the *2050 Strategy* places between the PIF's Blue Pacific narrative and the blue economy seemingly signals the regional body's deepening caution and retreat from the latter. It suggests an untethering of the Blue Pacific from the blue economy and a recognition of the differences that exist between the two. The renaming of the *2050 Strategy*'s associated regional economic strategy from the once proposed *Blue Pacific Economic Strategy* (BPES)<sup>484</sup> to the *Pacific Roadmap for Economic Development* (PRED)<sup>485</sup> only further confirms this blue economy retreat. This retreat was made clear during key stakeholder interviews where it was suggested to me by a senior regional stakeholder that there was a desire to “wean” the blue economy out of the economic strategy:

REG.71: Sometimes I'm thinking with this Blue [Pacific] Economic Strategy, I'm thinking perhaps to wean it out of the blue economy narrative. Because it's not helping. And I just wonder, a lot of things I'm wondering about is what's behind this? [sic]

We have to talk about solutions that we come up with. Blue economy is not a solution that we came up with. It's not a Pacific bred, born solution. It's a solution that's being forced down on Pacific people.

I will return to this stakeholder's suggestion that the blue economy is “not a Pacific bred, born solution” in the final section. Yet for now, let me continue with the PIF's evolving, or perhaps more aptly described, vacillating blue economy engagement.

### **A blue economy retreat?**

Until recently, the PIF appeared to be continuing in its retreat from the blue economy discourse, evoking the Blue Pacific in place of the blue economy when speaking at regional and international forums. One can see evidence of this in the PIF's participation in key global ocean initiatives and partnerships—the precise places where we would most expect to find appeals to the blue economy given its widespread global interest. When speaking at the 76th UNGA High-Level

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<sup>484</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, '2022 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting: Outcomes', 12 August 2022, [https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/2022%20FEMM%20Outcomes%20Document\\_web.pdf](https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/2022%20FEMM%20Outcomes%20Document_web.pdf).

<sup>485</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, '2024 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting: Final Outcomes', 2 August 2024, <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Final%202024%20FEMM%20Outcomes.pdf>.

Commemorative Event to mark the 40th anniversary of the adoption of UNCLOS, for example, the PIF delegate made no mention of the blue economy but four references to the Blue Pacific.<sup>486</sup> Likewise, former-PIF Secretary General, Hon. Henry Puna, avoided reference to the blue economy when celebrating the adoption of the international High Seas Treaty (or BBNJ Agreement) in June 2023; despite explicitly stating the importance of this agreement for the Blue Pacific region.<sup>487</sup> Puna again eschewed<sup>488</sup> the blue economy when speaking at the 2023 Pacific Tuna Forum, opting instead to frame his opening remarks through the lens of the Blue Pacific.<sup>489</sup> These instances indicated the PIF's evasion of the blue economy in favour of the Blue Pacific—a trend consistent with the *2050 Strategy*'s seeming retreat from this former discourse.

If I were to conclude my analysis here, we would derive a somewhat cyclical image of the PIF's engagement with the blue economy discourse: brief support (endorsing the PSIDS blue economy campaign at Rio+20), followed by hesitancy (2012 – 2016), shifting to brief support (the construction of the 'Blue Pacific Economy' storyline in association with its Blue Pacific narrative), and returning to hesitancy again by the release of the *2050 Strategy*. This would provide insight into the murkiness of the PIF's blue economy engagements over the last decade and highlight the dynamism of the regional body's discourse negotiations. Yet, it may also leave the impression that the PIF is currently at a point of refrain from blue economy engagement.

A key development in the final months of 2023 has again seemingly shifted this relationship, intimating not only the PIF's re-engagement with the blue economy discourse but also the deepening challenge of ensuring such engagements are done on the regional body's own terms and of its own volition. Here I am speaking of the Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity (UBPP) initiative; endorsed by Pacific leaders at 52<sup>nd</sup> PIFLM<sup>490</sup> and shortly launched on the sidelines of COP28 as a new funding coalition to mobilise sustainable financing across the region. What the PIF's

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<sup>486</sup> Samuelu Laloni, 'Statement by HE Samuelu Laloni Tuvalu Permanent Representative to the United Nations on Behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum' (76th UNGA High-Level Commemorative Event to mark the 40th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention On The Law Of The Sea (UNCLOS), New York, US: Pacific Islands Forum, 2022), <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/04/30/unclos40/>.

<sup>487</sup> 'Statement by Henry Puna, Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General on the Adoption of the BBNJ Agreement', 20 June 2023.

<sup>488</sup> Recognising, however, that he did characterise tuna as "the blue-gold of the Blue Pacific." If one considers this a veiled reference to the blue economy, it still stands that Hon. Puna's reference to the Blue Pacific outnumbered any perceivable blue economy engagement 9:1.

<sup>489</sup> 'SG Puna Keynote Address to 8th Pacific Tuna Forum in PNG' (8th Pacific Tuna Forum, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2023), <https://www.forumsec.org/2023/09/06/remarks-sg-puna-keynote-address-to-8th-pacific-tuna-forum-in-png/>.

<sup>490</sup> PIFS, '52nd Pacific Island Leaders Meeting Forum Communique' (Fifty-second Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 2023), <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FINAL-52nd-PIF-Communique-9-November-2023-1.pdf>, §64.



involvement in the UBPP means for its relationship with the blue economy, and *whose* blue economy storylines this initiative draws upon will be the focus of the next subsection.

### 5.4.3 Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity: ocean philanthropy and the influence of external blue economy visions

Meeting on the sidelines of the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), Pacific leaders announced the Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity (UBPP) initiative. To borrow the language of promotional material circulated ahead of the launch, UBPP sought to “rapidly mobilize high-impact investment” for a region-wide conservation effort by establishing a funding coalition that would attract and coordinate funders investing in long-term development plans.<sup>491</sup> It was positioned as aligned with the “Blue Pacific’s 2050 Strategy,” with the PIF, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner (OPOC) forming the program’s core delivery partners.<sup>492</sup> The launch of UBPP at one the year’s most significant gatherings of global leaders aligned with the initiative’s objective to attract global funding (USD500 million by 2030)<sup>493</sup> and partnerships, tapping into the growing sustainable financing sector and drawing it towards the region.

UBPP’s first of three stated goals is the achievement of “100% effective sustainable ocean management, including 30% protection<sup>494</sup> of the Blue Pacific Continent, aligned with Pacific country contexts, priorities and capacities.”<sup>495</sup> Its second goal is “Healthy, productive, Pacific people thriving because of robust food systems underpinned by resilient ecosystems”;<sup>496</sup> and its third to develop “Fit-for purpose sustainable financing mechanisms that support the implementation of the *2050 Strategy* are in place and operational.”<sup>497</sup>

The two founding investors of UBPP also joined the launch event, together committing USD225 million. These were the Global Environment Facility (GEF)—which allocated USD125 million to the initiative through GEF-8 STAR—and the Bezos Earth Fund, which committed “up to”

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<sup>491</sup> SPC, ‘Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity’, December 2023, <https://www.spc.int/resource-centre/publications/unlocking-blue-pacific-prosperity>.

<sup>492</sup> PIFS et al., ‘Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity Business Case’, 2023.

<sup>493</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity’, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), 2024, <https://www.spc.int/ubpp#:~:text=Unlocking%20Blue%20Pacific%20Prosperity%20is,%2C%20regional%20priorities%2C%20and%20initiatives>.

<sup>494</sup> Marine and terrestrial

<sup>495</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity’, December 2023.

<sup>496</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

<sup>497</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

USD100 million (subject to the design and financing of the UBPP).<sup>498</sup> Considering that the Pacific attracted a total of approximately USD417 million in sustainable ocean development funding over the decade from 2012 to 2021,<sup>499</sup> this commitment of USD225 million in seed funding to the UBPP initiative was substantial.

It is not so much the mechanics of UBPP that are of interest to this thesis (indeed, much of these practicalities are yet to be determined), so much as the discourse storylines that the initiative draws together; specifically, its pairing of ‘Blue Pacific’ with ‘Prosperity.’ Given the PIF’s involvement as a delivery partner in UBPP, it is relatively unsurprising that this initiative has engaged the discourse of the Blue Pacific. More curious, however, is the UBPP’s engagement with the ‘Prosperity’ storyline. This storyline seemingly reproduces the ‘Blue Prosperity’ construct of US-based philanthropy, the Waitt Institute, raising questions about the influence of external actors over UBPP’s framing of sustainable ocean development, including the recentring of the blue economy.

### **The Waitt Institute**

Founded in 2005 by the American computer billionaire Ted Waitt, the Waitt Institute has emerged as one of the world’s leading philanthropic partners for ocean conservation and a vocal proponent of MPAs. The Waitt Institute is the lead organisation of the Blue Prosperity Coalition which in 2019, committed USD150 million towards ocean conservation over ten years.<sup>500</sup> To date, the Waitt Institute has led the rollout of three Blue Prosperity programs in the Pacific (Blue Prosperity Micronesia, Blue Prosperity Fiji, Blue Prosperity Vanuatu) and two major national ocean conservation initiatives (the Vava'u Ocean Initiative of Tonga, and support for the 30% MPA target outlined in the *Samoa Ocean Strategy* (2020)). Each of these programs firmly centre ocean conservation as the “north star” of their activities (PHL.38), often with the ambitious goal of securing 30% marine protected area coverage in the respective state’s EEZ by 2030—or “30x30” as this target has been popularly termed among the international environment and development communities.<sup>501</sup>

While these programs support many of the Pacific’s sustainable ocean activities and ambitions, their central ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline emerges not from Pacific communities, but from the Waitt

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<sup>498</sup> SPREP, *Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity at COP28*, 1:30 (YouTube, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRXMeqP8xs4>.

<sup>499</sup> UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, ‘Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows’.

<sup>500</sup> Blue Prosperity Coalition, ‘Blue Prosperity Coalition Commits \$150 Million to Help Protect 30% of the Ocean by 2030’, 24 October 2019, [https://www.blueprosperity.org/150milliontooceanoconservation?fbclid=IwAR2nt6Nh8ONnhp8-FTqzZp4sRg\\_vrHX4xHx3-K9F4EkOFzbOmZoYPMQr9xc](https://www.blueprosperity.org/150milliontooceanoconservation?fbclid=IwAR2nt6Nh8ONnhp8-FTqzZp4sRg_vrHX4xHx3-K9F4EkOFzbOmZoYPMQr9xc).

<sup>501</sup> The 30x30 commitment is enshrined in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), signed at the UN Biodiversity Conference COP15 (2022).

Institute. Indeed, since 2016 the Waitt Institute has clearly and consistently evoked ‘Blue Prosperity’ to frame its blue economy understandings. An instructive example of this can be seen in a statement by the Institute’s founder, Ted Waitt, at the US State Department’s 2016 *Our Ocean* conference:

‘Cause [sic] the blue economy is great. The funding mechanisms are there. But if we work together we can create an era of Blue Prosperity, which it takes it to the next level.<sup>502</sup>

In this statement, ‘Blue Prosperity’ is presented as something akin to ‘blue economy plus’—the ‘next level’ of sustainable ocean development.

Likewise, the Waitt Institute has formally linked ‘Blue Prosperity’ to the blue economy through its Memorandum of Understanding agreements established since 2019. We see evidence of this in agreements signed with the Federated States of Micronesia (2019), Fiji (2021) and Vanuatu (2023). Each of these partnerships include the blue economy as a focus area, thus revealing the Institute’s close aligning of its ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline to the blue economy discourse.

Another clear indication of the Waitt Institute’s alignment of its ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline and the blue economy sits in its organisational structure. In 2020, the institute established a dedicated Blue Economy portfolio responsible for leading the Institute’s “Blue Economy process” (Figure 6) and developing Blue Prosperity Plans in collaboration with government partners. As detailed on the Waitt Institute’s ‘Blue Economy’ webpage, these plans aim to identify “one high-impact idea” that can lead sustainable ocean development in partner nations, “create strategies for implementation,” and guide implementation, monitoring and evaluation.<sup>503</sup> That this Blue Economy portfolio is directly responsible for leading the Institute’s development of Blue Prosperity Plans with respective partners is telling of the close relation between its ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline and blue economy activities. It is this ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline that provides the Waitt Institute’s primary articulation of the blue economy discourse.

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<sup>502</sup> Ted Waitt, “Ted Waitt Speaks at Ocean 2017” (Our Ocean Conference 2016, 1:05:58. Malta: Waitt Foundation, 2016), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_S9YLotuBmc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_S9YLotuBmc).

<sup>503</sup> As of 16 September 2024. Waitt Institute, ‘Blue Economy’, Waitt Institute, 2024, <https://www.waittinstitute.org/blue-economy>.



**Figure 6:** Waitt Institute’s Blue Economy Process. Retrieved from Blue Prosperity Coalition website (<https://www.blueprosperity.org/>) on 29 March 2022.

The close resonance between the Waitt Institute’s ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline and that evoked under the UBPP is striking and more than circumstantial. Just weeks before the UBPP’s launch at COP28, PIF Leaders extended their formal support for the initiative at the 52<sup>nd</sup> PIF Leaders Meeting (PIFLM). Though deceptively similar in name and function to the Pacific Partnerships for Prosperity (PPfP) that was also endorsed by regional leaders at the PIFLM meeting (both seeking to mobilise resources for regional development), the UBPP is distinct; with the former directly associated with the implementation of the *2050 Strategy*<sup>504</sup> and championed by the Cook Islands government, while the latter representing a standalone initiative led by Palau and Tonga (albeit aligned with the new regional strategy).

As noted in the 52<sup>nd</sup> PIFLM’s *Forum Communiqué*, the UBPP had been championed by Palau and Tonga, who encouraged regional members to sign up to the plan.<sup>505</sup> The advocacy of these two nations is of particular interest for this chapter as it hints at the Waitt Institute’s involvement in the development of this project—with both Palau and Tonga holding formal partnership arrangements with the Waitt Institute.<sup>506</sup> Indeed, documents from the ‘High-Level Leaders’ Meeting to Unlock Blue Pacific Prosperity’ convened to rally support for UBPP ahead of the 52<sup>nd</sup>

<sup>504</sup> PIFS, ‘52nd Pacific Island Leaders Meeting Forum Communiqué’, §21.

<sup>505</sup> PIFS, §64.

<sup>506</sup> Kingdom of Tonga, ‘Cabinet Memorandum Number 716’, 22 July 2015; Office of the President, ‘Executive Order No. 476: To Establish Coordinating Mechanisms for the Implementation of Marine Spatial Planning for the Blue Prosperity Plan’ (Republic of Palau, 25 September 2022).

PIFLM and COP28 (19 September 2023) reveal representatives from the Waitt Institute as being in attendance (Figure 7)—despite the institute not being a formally listed partner. That the majority of Pacific representatives present at this meeting came from nations that where Waitt Institute holds formal relationships, including the meeting co-chairs President Hon. Whipps Jr. (Palau) and Prime Minister Hon. Hu‘akavameiliku (Tonga), is far from surprising.

These observations suggest that the Waitt Institute played a role in the development of the UBPP, with the most compelling evidence coming from Palauan media that described the initiative as a “scaled up” iteration of the Palau’s Blue Prosperity Plan.<sup>507</sup> I do not deny that Pacific representatives involved in the UBPP have also been influential in the initiative’s formation, socialisation and ultimate launch (including the PIF as a delivery partner). But the uncanny resemblance that the UBPP has to the Waitt Institute’s ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline gives pause for thought about the entanglements between this external philanthropic body and this multi-million dollar sustainable oceans initiative where the PIF plays a central role. Indeed, the resonances between the Waitt Institute’s Blue Prosperity programs and the UBPP extend to more than discourse storylines. Where the Waitt Institute’s Blue Prosperity programs are committed to 30% MPA designation and whole-of-EEZ MSP processes, the UBPP near identically promotes “100% effective ocean management for the region, including 30% protection.”<sup>508</sup> Similarly, where the Blue Prosperity Coalition is largely comprised of philanthropic organisations, the UBPP is likewise geared towards engaging philanthropic bodies for sustainable (largely ocean) financing. Thus, while the Waitt Institute has not been formally named as a coalition partner of UBPP, its fingerprints appear sprawled across it.

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<sup>507</sup> Leilani Reklai, ‘Whipps “Blue Prosperity Plan” Adopted by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’, *Island Times Palau*, 14 November 2023, <https://islandtimes.org/whipps-blue-prosperity-plan-adopted-by-pacific-islands-forum-leaders/>.

<sup>508</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat et al., ‘Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity Business Case’; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity’, 2024.





**Figure 7:** Participants at the “High-Level Leaders Meeting to Unlock Blue Pacific Prosperity” (2023). Source: Government of the Kingdom of Tonga.<sup>509</sup>

*Hon. Hu‘akavameiliku is standing 7th from left in the back row. Hon. Whipps Jr. is seated 2nd from left in the front row. Executive Director, Waitt Institute, Dr. Kathryn Mengerink is seated 6th from left in the front row.*

In sum, the PIF’s involvement in the UBPP indicates its potential return to the blue economy, despite seemingly distancing itself from this discourse with the release of the *2050 Strategy* (and with it, the institutionalisation of its Blue Pacific narrative). The likelihood that this blue economy understanding of the UBPP is heavily informed by US-based philanthropy, the Waitt Institute, distinguishes it from earlier blue economy assemblages engaged by Pacific regional organisations that were firmly Pacific in origin; be that the ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline first introduced by PSIDS, the PIDF’s ‘blue(/green) economy’ construct and even the PIF’s ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ vision of 2017. Across each of these earlier assemblages, the blue economy was crafted as something staunchly committed to safeguarding Pacific self-determined ocean development *as envisioned by* Pacific stakeholders themselves. How the blue economy espoused through the UBPP can be used as a tool to advance self-determination when it is principally

<sup>509</sup> “‘High-Level Leaders Meeting to Unlock Blue Pacific Prosperity’”, 19 September 2023, <https://pmo.gov.to/index.php/2023/10/09/high-level-leaders-meeting-to-unlock-blue-pacific-prosperity/>.

informed by actors external to the region is an inconsistency that demands attention. It does not foreclose the possibility that the PIF leverage the blue economy constructs of external development partners to secure support for initiatives aligned with its ocean agenda. However, it does point to the prickly strategic calculations made in pursuit of this objective: namely, discourse sovereignty. As would become clear during my fieldwork, this conundrum was on the mind of many of Pacific regional stakeholders who likewise reflected on the questions of blue economy ownership, authority and utility. Let us turn to these reflections now, considering how they can enrich and deepen our understanding of the Pacific's regional engagement with the blue economy, for what purposes and to what perceived effect.

## 5.5 Power: An uneasy relationship with the regional blue economy

A few months after the release of the PIF's *2050 Strategy*, I had the privilege of speaking with twenty-one regional stakeholders about their perspectives on the blue economy as a discourse of value (or otherwise) for ocean development in the Pacific (Table 6). This included conversations with individuals who were currently working, or had previously worked, in the ocean departments of the Pacific's regional organisations (PSIDS, PIDF, PIFS and CROP agencies), as well as representatives across civil society, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who had participated in, or closely observed these discussions. Many of these stakeholders came to our conversation having watched the rise of the blue economy over the last decade and a half, if not themselves involved in the Pacific's navigation of the discourse. As such, I was fortunate to hear reflections on the region's longer history with the blue economy: how understandings of the discourse had changed over the years, and likewise, the shifting engagements that regional stakeholders had with this ocean development construct.

**Table 6:** *List of key stakeholders interviewed for the Pacific regional organisations case study.*

| Interviewee # | Sector                                            | Identification in Thesis |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 83            | Regional organisations                            | REG.83                   |
| 16            | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.16                   |
| 71            | Regional organisations                            | REG.71                   |
| 60            | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.60                   |
| 11            | Regional organisations                            | REG.11                   |
| 45            | Regional organisations                            | REG.45                   |
| 5             | Regional organisations / Fiji Government          | REG/FJ-GOV.5             |
| 40            | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.40                   |
| 88            | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.88                   |
| 63            | NGO                                               | NGO.63                   |
| 9             | Regional organisations                            | REG.9                    |
| 35            | NGO                                               | NGO.35                   |
| 82            | NGO                                               | NGO.82                   |
| 17            | NGO / Philanthropy                                | NGO/PHL.17               |
| 38            | Philanthropy                                      | PHL.38                   |
| 49            | Philanthropy                                      | PHL.49                   |
| 57            | Philanthropy                                      | PHL.57                   |
| 31            | Fiji Government                                   | FJ-GOV.31                |
| 7             | Civil Society (regional) / Consultant             | rCS/C. 7                 |
| 39            | NGO / Civil Society (regional)                    | NGO/rCS.39               |
| 27            | Regional organisations / Civil Society (regional) | REG/rCS.27               |

Many of the reasons proffered for the Pacific's adoption of the blue economy at the regional level have been noted in the sections above, each speaking to the value this discourse serves as a strategic political tool. These can be summarised as:

- a) The blue economy offers a useful instrument for the region to renegotiate global development agendas such that they better attended to ocean-based opportunities and equitable benefit sharing, for example:

REG/FJ-GOV.5: The priority then [during the regional organisations' early development of the blue economy] was to try to incorporate some of the economic side of development of the ocean, while [still] trying to strengthen the governance side... Equitable sharing of resources. That was one of the principles that came in the policy document.



- b) To access funding channelled through blue economy pathways such that the region can strengthen its ocean-based sectors and move towards a future of greater economic independence, for example:

REG/FJ-GOV.5: We want to be less reliant on donors. ‘Cause [sic] that’s what we want to move away from.

- c) The view that the ocean-centric nature of the blue economy vision aligns with longstanding Pacific engagements with the ocean and thus provide an appropriate framing for regional stakeholders to advocate for sustainable ocean development:

REG.83: As a vision for the Pacific, it just makes common sense... We’re surround[ed] by the ocean and therefore let us ensure that the ocean is... that we protect the ocean, plus be guided by the ocean, plus benefit from what the ocean can provide us... We’re people of the ocean. So, it goes without saying, it’s just that we’re using the blue economy now to describe how we used to describe the ocean before. And we always said that we want to make sure that we benefit from the ocean.

However, while often acknowledging the blue economy as a valuable tool for political negotiation, it became evident across my conversations that many stakeholders (13)<sup>510</sup> had developed a sense of unease towards this discourse in recent years (if not already sceptical). Unease in the sense of awkward (rCS/C.7: I think they’re [politicians] very caught up in the global politics and again, you have to pick up the language, you have to chase the way that money is going to flow like that.), but also in the sense of sceptical (REG.11: They made it [blue economy] popular without realising what it meant). This appeared true for those both inside the Pacific’s regional organisations,<sup>511</sup> as well as those observing from the outside.<sup>512</sup> Perhaps most surprisingly, it was even noted among stakeholders who were relatively supportive of the blue economy’s value for the region.<sup>513</sup> Consider, for example, the following exchange that I had with an individual involved in PSIDS’ early formulation of the blue economy and a continuing advocate of the discourse:

*Myself: What is the value in this blue economy idea for the Pacific?*

REG/FJ-GOV.5: Because we are large ocean states, and the blue economy represents the ocean. The ocean represents our survival, you know.

<sup>510</sup> rCS.60, rCS.16, rCS.40, rCS.88, rCS/C.7, REG.71, REG/rCS.27, REG.11, NGO.35, NGO/rCS.39, NGO.82, NGO.63, REG.83

<sup>511</sup> REG.71, REG/rCS.27, REG.11

<sup>512</sup> rCS.60, NGO.35, NGO/rCS.39, rCS.16, rCS.40, rCS.88, rCS/C.7, NGO.82, NGO.63, rCS/C.7

<sup>513</sup> REG/FJ-GOV.5, REG.83

And not only that, it's the ocean. It's the ocean between us.

*Myself: Does it give the Pacific a bit of power on the international stage as well?*

REG/FJ-GOV.5: It does. It gives us lots of power. Because our survival is dependent on the ocean. It gives us power. It creates that emphasis that we look for ... It connects us to the world... *[but] it should be led by us.* (emphasis added)

Across my conversations, support for the blue economy (where present) was always qualified: it depended on whose blue economy definition was being engaged,<sup>514</sup> what sectors were included,<sup>515</sup> the governance structures placed around blue economy programs and agendas,<sup>516</sup> and which actors were driving it.<sup>517</sup> Not once did I encounter unconditional blue economy endorsement. This careful (often conditional, if not critical) blue economy engagement reflected a seeming uneasiness around the discourse that, for multiple interviewees,<sup>518</sup> had deepened over the years as they watched the discourse circulate through the region. This raises the question of '*why?*' regional organisations continue to adopt blue economy language and calls attention to the politics of this discourse: the relations of power that are set in motion through the blue economy and likewise, are animated by it.

In this final section, I examine three key themes to have emerged from my conversations with regional stakeholders that speak to the politics of the Pacific's regional blue economy: (a) debates over what the blue economy is, (b) questions over who is leading the discourse and its associated programs, and (c) engagement with longstanding discussions on what sustainable development means—or should mean—for the region. I suggest that insights shared around each of these themes point to a larger concern about the Pacific's continued control of the discourse. Specifically, that regional stakeholders are becoming wary of the growing influence external actors and logics are developing over the Pacific's regional blue economy construct(s); leading some to caution that the blue economy is not strengthening, but instead compromising, the region's pursuit of self-determined ocean development.<sup>519</sup> If such is the case, the blue economy risks failing in its promise to transform global ocean relations through a 'new paradigm' of sustainable ocean development—the very commitment that attracted Pacific regional organisations to the discourse in the first place. Thinking with Gramsci, could the blue economy be part of a contemporary

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<sup>514</sup> NGO/PHL.17, REG.45, FJ-GOV.31

<sup>515</sup> PHL.57, PHL.38, PHL.49

<sup>516</sup> REG.9, REG.83

<sup>517</sup> REG.45, REG.83, REG/FJ-GOV.5

<sup>518</sup> REG.71, REG.11, CS.88, REG.45

<sup>519</sup> REG.71, REG.11, NGO.82, REG.45, rCS.60, rCS.16, rCS.88, rCS/C.7, NGO.35

passive revolution working to re-establish the status quo of inequitable economic and political relations?<sup>520</sup> If so, what does this mean for the Pacific?

### 5.5.1 Debates on definition

Consistent with observations around the globe,<sup>521</sup> a leading point of unease for Pacific regional stakeholders regarding the blue economy was its basic definition. Although in circulation for over a decade, the blue economy is yet to achieve consensus among Pacific stakeholders on precisely what it means by ‘sustainable ocean development’—let alone how it seeks to achieve it. Consider the two following reflections offered by regional stakeholders:

REG.45: We need to define and clearly unpack what it [blue economy] means here in the Pacific. What does the blue economy mean in the Pacific? We need to work out our context and our priorities. What does it mean?

Different agencies interpret it differently, and different people. We don’t have a common narrative or even a definition clearly articulating what it needs.

And similarly,

REG.71: To be honest, it [blue economy] hasn’t—it hasn’t been helpful. Because it doesn’t matter how many forums we come and talk about the blue economy, we still come out with big questions of what it is?

Stated in 2022, over ten years since the PSIDS grouping first rallied around their ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline, these insights suggest not only that regional agreement on a blue economy definition is yet to be achieved, but also that it remains a distant goal. A common explanation offered during interviews for the blue economy’s continued ambiguity in the region was the challenge of defining which sectors were included (and excluded) from the discourse (REG.71, REG.11, REG.45, NGO.82, REG.9, rCS/C.7). Interviewees recognised how a sector’s acceptance as a legitimate component of the blue economy afforded it considerable social, political and economic capital,<sup>522</sup> with the sectors successful in identifying themselves as aligned with the blue economy’s ‘sustainable oceans’ vision being better able to position themselves as key actors in the region’s forward agenda and thus attract greater funding, social license and access/authority in governance spaces. Successful identification with the blue economy was thus recognised as a

<sup>520</sup> Henrik Österblom, Colette C.C. Wabnitz, and Dire Tladi, ‘Towards Ocean Equity’ (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2020), <http://www.oceanpanel.org/how-distribute-benefits-ocean-equitably>.

<sup>521</sup> Schutter et al., ‘The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales’; Silver et al., ‘Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance’; UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, ‘Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows’.

<sup>522</sup> rCS.60, REG.11, REG.45, NGO.63, NGO.82

distinctly political goal, leading—in some cases—to contention between industry stakeholders, civil society, policymakers and community within the Pacific region.<sup>523</sup>

Interviewees pointed to multiple examples of sectoral competition yet to be resolved in the region's blue economy vision; some of the most prominent being tensions between fisheries and conservation,<sup>524</sup> as well as debate on the legitimacy of seabed minerals activity, particularly mining, as a blue economy sector.<sup>525</sup> I will return to a more detailed discussion of the debates surrounding the sustainability of these sectors, of these sectors. But for now, I emphasise that much of the uncertainty surrounding the Pacific's blue economy definition(s) circle around debates on which sectors are 'in,' and which are 'out' of regional understandings. During our conversations, regional stakeholders also disclosed that regional organisations often avoided discussing matters of sectoral inclusion/exclusion when meeting on the blue economy. This was evident in the following exchange that I had with a representative of one regional organisation:

*Myself: And how are you balancing different interests between different nations around what they want to include in the blue economy? I suppose some of the big ones being do you have those marine protected areas or do you not? Or, I mean, seabed minerals is another clear example. Is that in; is that out? I imagine that is really tricky to try and balance.*

REG.71: Oh, it's the big white elephant in the room!

Personally, I would like the conversation to take place around deep sea mining. I think research, not just into the science [but] into the economics as well. Governance structures... That discussion needs to take place, but people are not talking about it.

Stakeholders outside the regional organisations similarly noticed this aversion to debate on which sectors (and which development partners, as will be discussed in the following section) should be involved in the Pacific's blue economy discussions and activities:

rCS.16: I think the biggest observations that we initially had was that everyone just jumped onto the blue economy, without really unpacking it to look at where the tension sits and who needs to be involved in policy making for the oceans.

This lack of debate on legitimate blue economy sectors appears to be one key reason for the blue economy's continued ambiguity at a regional level in the Pacific. It speaks to broader issues around what regional stakeholders accept 'sustainable ocean development' to mean (e.g. can it include non-renewable extractive industries?), and how blue economy outcomes are to be balanced or

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<sup>523</sup> UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, 'Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows'.

<sup>524</sup> REG.9, NGO.35, REG.71, rCS/C.7

<sup>525</sup> REG.11, rCS.60, REG.71

prioritised relative to one another (e.g. are ocean conservation activities permissible if they infringe on customary fishing rights and marine tenure?). Without meaningful conversations around which sectors are included, excluded, or prioritised in a regional blue economy vision, consensus on an agreed discourse definition remains elusive. Herein, the fractures, at time fault lines, in the Pacific's blue economy understanding persist.

An interesting observation arising from key stakeholder interviews was that while over half (12)<sup>526</sup> of the participants identified definitional ambiguity as a leading characteristic of regional blue economy understandings, there were mixed perspectives about the political utility of such indeterminacy (Table 7). One interviewee, for example, recognised the vagueness of the blue economy as a useful quality that could be leveraged by regional organisations to bring diverse ocean sectors and interests into conversation with one another (REG.71). To this effect, the discourse functioned as a boundary object (recall *Chapter Three*) that opened space for multi-stakeholder discussions and thereby facilitated integrated ocean management efforts.

Yet, in almost the next breath, this same interviewee also identified the blue economy's nebulousness as a factor for their hesitancy in engaging the discourse within regional discussions:

REG.71: My fear is that we are moving from something that was clear to something that's more vague [sic]... So, I'm a bit, ah, rethinking this blue economy framework.

From this more sceptical perspective, definitional ambiguity was seen as a limitation of the blue economy discourse and what's more, something that has only deepened with time. This account of the blue economy as having progressed from "something that was clear to something that's more vague [sic]" suggests that the regional blue economy assemblage of the early 2010s—namely that of the PSIDS grouping ('green in a blue world')—were better understood among Pacific policymakers and decision-makers than the current conceptions. This is relatively unsurprising given the fluctuation of the PIF's blue economy engagement over the last five years; shifting across 'blue economy' to 'Blue Pacific Economy' to 'Blue Pacific Prosperity.' Rather than moving towards a clearer, more consolidated definition of the blue economy as time has progressed, regional understandings of the discourse have only become increasingly oblique, especially as the blue economy has been intermittently associated with, then distanced from the PIF's Blue Pacific vision. Such definitional ambiguity ultimately prompted this aforementioned regional stakeholder to limit their engagement with the discourse.<sup>527</sup>

<sup>526</sup> NGO.63, NGO.82, REG.9, REG.45, FJ-GOV.31, NGO.35, REG.71, rCS.60, REG.11, rCS.6, rCS.40, rCS.88

<sup>527</sup> Mixed perspectives on the utility of the blue economy's opaqueness have also been observed in UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, 'Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows'.

**Table 7:** *Mixed interviewee perspectives on the political utility of the blue economy's definitional ambiguity*

| Interviewee                     | Sector                                | Perspective on blue economy's vague definition                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| REG.71                          | Regional organisations                | Can provide a useful framework around which to convene discussions with diverse ocean-based sectors and interests.                                                                                                                                      |
| REG.9                           | Regional organisations                | Challenge for integrated ocean management.                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| rCS/C.7                         | Civil Society / Consultant            | Ongoing discussions pursuing definitional consensus are a distraction from “just getting on and doing the [ocean development] work.”                                                                                                                    |
| rCS.60, REG.11                  | Civil Society, Regional organisations | A strategy of blue-washing or “capture” of the sustainable development agenda to accommodate the inclusion of extractive ocean industries and mask harmful their harmful impacts.                                                                       |
| NGO.63, NGO.82, NGO.35, rCS/C.7 | NGO, Civil Society / Consultant       | Blue economy reflects the latest buzzword among ocean donors and while sceptical of the overall value of this repackaged sustainable oceans discourse, its inexact definition makes it relatively easy to package existing activities under its banner. |

In sum, the blue economy discourse understood in the Pacific today continues to be ambiguously defined and, in the eyes of some,<sup>528</sup> even less clear than it was a decade ago. A key factor underpinning this ambiguity is the issue of identifying which sectors ‘belong’ to the blue economy and which do not. Some regional stakeholders have found value in the blue economy’s ambiguity as it provides them with a tool to bring varying interest groups to the negotiating table in pursuit of a common goal: sustainable ocean development (REG.71). Yet, others have suggested that such indeterminacy is too unclear to usefully guide collective and coordinated action (REG.9). Regardless of one’s perspective, it is likely that while regional organisations remain averse to debating what constitutes the blue economy, this discourse will only continue to be claimed by a variety of ocean actors looking to position themselves as aligned with the growing ocean sustainability movement. The danger for the Pacific here is that authority over blue economy definition(s) may come to reside less with its regional organisations and stakeholders, and instead be claimed by external actors who are prepared to put forward their own determinations of the discourse. This insight leads me to the second key theme to emerge from interviews regarding the politics of the blue economy discourse: questions over who is driving its storylines and agendas?

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<sup>528</sup> REG.71

### 5.5.2 “Who’s who in the blue zoo?”: Questioning blue economy leadership

The rise of the blue economy discourse over the last decade, coupled with a broader ‘ocean turn’ in global development circles, has resulted in a marked expansion of ocean activities and agents.<sup>529</sup> A vast oceanic continent, the Pacific region has borne witness to these trends, as powerfully captured by one regional stakeholder:

REG.45: I never realised how congested the blue economy space [was] until I started looking at this project. So many actors! So many actors.

... There are so many competing forces at play in terms of the blue economy space here in the region. The UN agencies—all of them—are doing everything, the World Bank is doing their stuff, CROP agencies are doing their stuff funded by those big IFIs [international financial institutions].

Indeed, in a pointed quip, this stakeholder went on to describe an upcoming blue economy mapping project as an attempt to understand “who’s who in the blue zoo?”—a phrase I borrow for the title of this subsection. This characterisation speaks to the crowding of the Pacific’s ocean development space and the extraordinary diversity of interests within it. This stakeholder was not alone in their observation of the expanding stakeholder group moving into the Pacific’s ocean development realm, with others describing (in a less humorous tone) such growing interest as a “rush for Oceania.”<sup>530</sup> This ‘rush’ framing emphasises the gaze, or lens(es) of desire, with which agents are viewing Pacific ocean spaces: be that for securitisation, commodification or conservationism. Put simply, “The world wants Oceania like never before.”<sup>531</sup> Considered in the context of growing blue economy activity within the Pacific,<sup>532</sup> this raises the question of *who* is leading the blue economy in the region and, of interest to this thesis, exercising influence over its storylines?

While not shared by everyone (REG/FJ-GOV.5, FJ-GOV.31), a common opinion among the regional stakeholders whom I spoke with was that over the last decade and a half, the blue economy had come to be led by external actors (REG.71, rCS.16, rCS.40, rCS.88, REG.83, NGO.35, REG.11, rCS/C.7, rCS.60, NGO.63, NGO.82). Consider the following interview insight:

<sup>529</sup> Jean-Baptiste Jouffray et al., ‘The Blue Acceleration: The Trajectory of Human Expansion into the Ocean’, *One Earth* 2, no. 1 (2020): 43–54, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2019.12.016>.

<sup>530</sup> Allen et al., *The Rush for Oceania: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Ocean Governance and Stewardship*.

<sup>531</sup> Allen et al., 3.

<sup>532</sup> UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, ‘Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows’.

REG.83: All of that international global environmental movement I think has given rise to the blue economy.

And likewise:

REG.71: Because lots of blue economy initiatives... are the big NGOs, philanthropies [sic]. They are the ones who are coming in quite strongly and push for this blue economy concept.

These suggestions are substantiated by economic data. The OPOC's Pacific Ocean Initiatives Registry<sup>533</sup> reveals how of the forty-eight "Blue Finance and Economy programs" active in the Pacific, thirty-seven are funded by external agents (primarily IGOs (25)) (Table 8)<sup>534</sup>. Externally funded programs thus constitute three-quarters of blue economy programs active through the region, and all but one of the fifteen largest programs (Table 9). The picture becomes even starker when considering program budget, with the combined budget of Pacific-funded initiatives (across regional organisations, Pacific states, Pacific-based NGOs and private entities) equivalent to just 5% of that invested by externally funded programs. IGOs are the most active funders of the blue economy in the Pacific, with the Global Environment Facility providing USD225 million in funding across seven programs, and the World Bank investing USD168 million through nine programs. The collective budgets of Pacific funded programs (USD38.33 million) do not even approach the blue economy investments of these IGOs.

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<sup>533</sup> Last updated November 2021.

<sup>534</sup> Excluding the Government of India's "South-South Cooperation with SIDS" program, which is listed in the Registry as contributing USD1 billion in funding. This listing is both inaccurate and misleading as (a) this program provides South-South development assistance to SIDS, of which Pacific Island nations are a subset (and thus receive only a portion of the allocated funds), and (b) the program was initially earmarked to provide USD500 million in grant-in-aid and USD1 billion in soft loans on its announcement in 2017. It appears that the program has now been folded into the USD150 million India-UN Development Partnership Fund, of which USD12 million is allocated to PSIDS for a broad range of development programs. Indeed, none of its listed Pacific projects are reported as addressing SDG14, suggesting that none specifically target ocean issues. For this reason, I have excluded the South-South Cooperation with SIDS program from analysis.



**Table 8:** Summary of “Blue Economy & Finance” programs listed on the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner’s Pacific Ocean Initiatives Registry\*, by Funding Entity.

|          | Funding Entity      | Projects |            | \$M (USD) |            | Projects |            | \$M (USD) |            |
|----------|---------------------|----------|------------|-----------|------------|----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|          |                     | Number   | % of total | Amount    | % of total | Number   | % of total | Amount    | % of total |
| External | IGO                 | 25       | 52.08      | 449.03    | 55.62      | 36       | 75.00      | 768.94    | 95.25      |
|          | External Government | 4        | 8.33       | 312.75    | 38.74      |          |            |           |            |
|          | Philanthropy        | 2        | 4.17       | 4.39      | 0.54       |          |            |           |            |
|          | UN Agency           | 3        | 6.25       | 2.47      | 0.31       |          |            |           |            |
|          | INGO                | 2        | 4.17       | 0.30      | 0.04       |          |            |           |            |
| Pacific  | Pacific Government  | 6        | 12.50      | 25.90     | 3.21       | 12       | 25.00      | 38.33     | 4.75       |
|          | Pacific Regional    | 3        | 6.25       | 10.77     | 1.33       |          |            |           |            |
|          | Pacific Private     | 2        | 4.17       | 1.65      | 0.20       |          |            |           |            |
|          | Pacific NGO         | 1        | 2.08       | 0.01      | 0.00       |          |            |           |            |
| Total    |                     | 48       | 100        | 807.27    | 100        | 48       | 100        | 807.27    | 100        |

*\*These figures exclude the Government of India’s “South-South Cooperation with SIDS” program, which is listed in the Registry as contributing USD1 billion in funding. As explained in footnote 533 I have removed this program from the dataset to provide a more accurate account of blue economy financing in the Pacific.*

**Table 9:** Fifteen largest “Blue Economy & Finance” programs listed on the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner’s Pacific Ocean Initiatives Registry\*.

| Program                                                                                                                   | Funding Agency              | Entity              | \$M (USD) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| The US Multilateral Treaty                                                                                                | US Government               | External Government | 276.00    |
| Economy-wide Integration of Climate Change Adaptation and DRM/DRR to Reduce Climate Vulnerability of Communities in Samoa | Global Environment Facility | IGO                 | 102.50    |
| 4th Operational Phase of the GEF Small Grants Program (RAF2)                                                              | Global Environment Facility | IGO                 | 89.71     |
| Pacific Regional Connectivity Program 2; Palau-FSM Connectivity Project                                                   | World Bank                  | IGO                 | 72.50     |
| To advance the sustainable oceans and Blue Economy agenda in developing countries                                         | World Bank                  | IGO                 | 40.00     |
| Sustainable Economic Development of Pacific Islands Fisheries                                                             | NZ MFAT                     | External Government | 36.00     |
| Pacific Islands Regional Oceanscape Program                                                                               | World Bank                  | IGO                 | 31.46     |
| Sustainable Financing of Marae Moana - Cook Islands Marine Park                                                           | Cook Islands Government     | Pacific Government  | 20.00     |

|                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                             |     |       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|
| To support 39 LDCs and SIDS prepare and submit good quality initial biennial update reports to the UNFCCC that comply with the convention's reporting obligation | Global Environment Facility                                                                 | IGO | 15.90 |
| Umbrella Programme for National Communication to the UNFCCC                                                                                                      | Global Environment Facility                                                                 | IGO | 13.30 |
| Solomon Islands Sustainable Energy, Additional Financing                                                                                                         | World Bank                                                                                  | IGO | 13.00 |
| Pacific Ocean Accounts Platform (pipeline project)                                                                                                               | UNESCAP & Esri                                                                              | IGO | 11.00 |
| sciCOFISH                                                                                                                                                        | Delegation of the European Union for the Pacific;<br>Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency | IGO | 10.91 |
| TA on sustainable finance for Large Scale marine Protected Areas                                                                                                 | Asian Development Bank                                                                      | IGO | 10.00 |

*\*\*Table 5 excludes the Indian Government's South-South Cooperation with SIDS program as explained in footnote 533.*

When it comes to philanthropic investment, studies undertaken by the Our Shared Seas project,<sup>535</sup> Blackwatters et al.<sup>536</sup> and Enrici et al.<sup>537</sup> detail the growing role of private institutions in global ocean funding—particularly for ocean conservation. According to Our Shared Seas, philanthropic funding for marine conservation doubled over the decade of 2010 – 2020, from roughly USD20 million to USD1.2 billion.<sup>538</sup> While the Pacific receives a relatively small portion of this philanthropic ocean funding (1.9%<sup>539</sup>)—especially compared to the 13% of ocean-related official development assistance (ODA) it receives<sup>540</sup>—the region has benefitted from one of the fastest average growth rates in philanthropic investment over the last decade at around 53% per year.<sup>541</sup> This is to say that philanthropic funding for ocean-related activities in the Pacific may not yet compare to that granted under ODA, but it is rapidly expanding. Considering the popularity of

<sup>535</sup> Our Shared Seas, 'A Decade of Ocean Funding: Landscape Trends 2010–2020' (Our Shared Seas, 2021), <https://oursharedseas.com/funding/>; Emily Peterson, Forest Lewis, and Aaron Saliman, 'Funding Trends 2023: Tracking Grantmaking in Marine Area-Based Conservation' (Our Shared Seas, 2023).

<sup>536</sup> 'More than Funders: The Roles of Philanthropic Foundations in Marine Conservation Governance', *Conservation Science and Practice* 5, no. 5 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.12829>.

<sup>537</sup> 'Who's Setting the Agenda? Philanthropic Donor Influence in Marine Conservation', *Ecology and Society* 28, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-14091-280302>.

<sup>538</sup> Our Shared Seas, 'A Decade of Ocean Funding: Landscape Trends 2010–2020'; Peterson, Lewis, and Saliman, 'Funding Trends 2023: Tracking Grantmaking in Marine Area-Based Conservation'.

<sup>539</sup> Peterson, Lewis, and Saliman, 'Funding Trends 2023: Tracking Grantmaking in Marine Area-Based Conservation'.

<sup>540</sup> Peterson, Lewis, and Saliman.

<sup>541</sup> Our Shared Seas, 'A Decade of Ocean Funding: Landscape Trends 2010–2020: Trends in Philanthropic Funding' (Our Shared Seas, 2021), <https://oursharedseas.com/funding/funding-foundation-funding/>.

the blue economy discourse among the global philanthropic community, it is likely that such enthusiasm for ocean-related investment can be similarly mapped onto an interest in financing blue economy initiatives. Indeed, we have already seen how two of the Pacific's largest philanthropically funded ocean programs have been framed in the blue economy discourse: the Waitt Institute's Blue Prosperity programs, and the UBPP (co-founded by the Bezos Earth Initiative). Suggestions of philanthropy's role in driving blue economy activity in the Pacific thus appear sound—albeit if such claims need to be tempered by recognition of the greater economic role played by IGOs at present.

As this brief foray into economic analysis has shown, it appears that external agents do hold considerable influence as funders and thus advocates of blue economy activity in the Pacific. By allocating funding to programs couched in the blue economy discourse, these external actors encourage Pacific stakeholders to speak in frameworks that reflect such discourse and, critically, along storylines that are intelligible and/or acceptable to these external bodies. Recalling Hajer, this resembles a form of discourse institutionalisation (*Chapter 4.2.1*). Blue economy engagement may therefore be less an expression of regional organisations' continued advocacy of the discourse and more a strategy of discursive mimicry to signal the regional organisation's alignment with development partners' ocean priorities and secure access to financial and technical support (rCS/C.7, NGO.35, NGO.63, NGO.82). This suggestion provides one possible explanation for why the Pacific's regional organisations—namely the PIF—continue to engage the discourse despite their own seeming hesitancy over the construct.

Economic analysis of blue economy activity in the region is useful for demonstrating the funding influence carried by external actors. However, it would be remiss of me to overlook some of the more nuanced reflections that stakeholders shared on the question of “who leads the blue economy?” In the following discussion, I reflect on three further claims regarding the blue economy's leadership: (a) that the region's authority over the blue economy has gradually eroded as the discourse has been taken up by the global mainstream, (b) increasingly authoritative external blue economy constructs are driving a reprioritisation of ocean development commitments in the Pacific, and (c) any blue economy that is to effectively serve the region must be locally-led. Let me address each in turn.

### **The blue economy's global takeover?**

Firstly, a handful of interviewees lamented that while regional Pacific agents had exercised considerable discursive control during their PSIDS campaign at Rio+20, such authority—in their eyes—had been quickly undermined as global actors adopted the blue economy over subsequent

years.<sup>542</sup> A refrain that I encountered was that the blue economy had been “taken over by the developed world” following Rio+20 (rCS.88, REG.45)—particularly as actors of the Global North came to find value (or at least promise) in ocean development activities. In this sense, Pacific actors were seen as having been left behind or pushed to the side as the blue economy entered the global development mainstream and larger, often better resourced bodies (such as IGOs and BiNGOs) crafted their own discourse storylines.

This dynamic can be observed in the key role that IGOs have come to occupy as blue economy advocates, with the likes of UNDP<sup>543</sup> and the World Bank<sup>544</sup> leading flagship blue economy publications and programs over the last decade that heavily inform how the discourse is understood and enacted today. The World Bank’s definition of the blue economy, for example, is one of (if not *the*) leading discursive assemblages that actors draw their blue economy understandings from.<sup>545</sup> Though this definition recognises the value of the blue economy for SIDS and coastal LDCs, it returns to US and EU understandings that are equally invested in expanding sustainable ocean development opportunities for the Global North: “The blue economy is relevant *to all* countries and can be applied on various scales, from local to global”.<sup>546</sup> Thus, the Pacific’s early appeal for a more equitable system of ocean use and management is somewhat overshadowed by an indiscriminate and rather conservative vision of global ocean development that supports developed and developing interests alike.

It could similarly be argued that the UBPP likewise erodes the authority of Pacific actors over not only the blue economy discourse but also the Blue Pacific. While contextualising the blue economy discourse in a Pacific setting through its hybridised ‘Blue Pacific Prosperity’ storyline, the UBPP sees the PIF drawn back into dialogue with this ocean development discourse. While likely doing so for strategic purposes (access to development support), the PIF’s return to the blue economy

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<sup>542</sup> rCS.88, REG.45, REG.11

<sup>543</sup> Chen, De Bruyne, and Bollempalli, ‘Blue Economy, Community Solutions’; Didier Dogley and Julian Roberts, ‘Action Brief: An Ocean of Opportunities - How the Blue Economy Can Transform Sustainable Development in Small Islands Developing States’ (United Nations Development Programme, February 2023), <https://www.undp.org/publications/action-brief-ocean-opportunities-how-blue-economy-can-transform-sustainable-development-small-islands-developing-states>; ESCAP et al., ‘Green Economy in a Blue World: Pacific Perspectives’ (Suva, 2012).

<sup>544</sup> World Bank, ‘PROBLUE: Supporting Integrated and Sustainable Economic Development in Healthy Oceans’, 2020, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/cf572b85d0dc34f7d8466ce09a8ed884-0320072021/original/72979-Problue-factsheet-20210630.pdf>; World Bank, ‘Riding the Blue Wave: Applying the Blue Economy Approach to World Bank Operations’, 2021; World Bank & UNDESA, ‘The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries’.

<sup>545</sup> e.g. Waitt Institute, ‘Blue Economy’, 2023, <https://www.waittinstitute.org/blue-economy>.

<sup>546</sup> World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ‘The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries’, viii, emphasis added.

through the UBPP runs contrary to its measured retreat from such discourse during the finalisation of its *2050 Strategy*. Moreover, the particular blue economy assemblage the PIF today engages under the UBPP appears not a storyline of its own making, but a construct originating from philanthropy (particularly the Waitt Institute). This raises questions about the influence external actors may be able to exercise over the Blue Pacific vision when this construct is partnered with the ‘Blue Prosperity’ storyline; will the Blue Pacific hold steadfast to its vision for self-determined Pacific regionalism and development, or be reshaped by external development ideas?<sup>547</sup> Though the politics (and details) of the UBPP are still emerging, there does appear the risk that the PIF may be challenged in its discursive authority over both the blue economy and, perhaps more concerning, the Blue Pacific<sup>548</sup> when appealing to funders under the UBPP and its associated storylines.

### **A reprioritisation of the Pacific’s ocean development commitments?**

Secondly, some interviewees suggest that the rise of an external blue economy discourse has resulted in a reprioritisation of ocean development commitments that contrasts, at and at time counters, the interests and rights of Pacific communities (rCS/C.7, REG.71, REG.11, NGO.35, NGO.82, rCS.16, rCS.40, rCS.88, NGO.63). This reflects a form of ‘agenda creep’ wherein actors of the Global North can expand and infuse their priorities in Pacific contexts under the banner of the blue economy. I most frequently encountered this concern among regional stakeholders with respect to seabed mining and large marine protected areas (LMPAs); two sectors that have been positioned as core elements of the blue economy by many global actors (e.g. the European Union for seabed mining, and global environmental NGOs for LMPAs).<sup>549</sup>

Starting with seabed mining, multiple regional stakeholders identified foreign interests as powerful drivers of the seabed minerals sector in the Pacific (REG.11, rCS.60, rCS.88, rCS.16). These stakeholders argued that the blue economy discourse has been a useful tool to for industry advocates (particularly those external to the region) to legitimise the sector’s environmental credentials—be that as a source of the critical minerals required for the transition to a low emissions future, or the (supposedly) minimal environmental impact of seabed mining relative to terrestrial mining—and align it with the Pacific’s vision for sustainable ocean development. For

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<sup>547</sup> Wallis, Koro and O’Dwyer similarly explore the threat of narrative appropriation confronting the Blue Pacific due to deepening geopolitical competition. Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O’Dwyer, ‘The “Blue Pacific” Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?’, *The Pacific Review* 37, no. 4 (2024): 797–824, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2253377>.

<sup>548</sup> Similar concerns around the potential undermining of the Pacific’s authority over the Blue Pacific vision are raised by Wallis, Koro, and O’Dwyer; Meg Taylor, ‘Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined’, *Asia Society Policy Institute* September (2023), <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/pacific-led-regionalism-undermined>.

<sup>549</sup> rCS/C.7, REG.71, REG.11, NGO.35, NGO.82

these stakeholders, the blue economy was viewed as a dangerous discourse leveraged by external actors to advance their own respective interests, often to the sacrifice of Pacific communities:

REG.11: For me, I'm looking at the blue economy, [and I think] deep sea mining. And then I'm writing and I'm saying this is sort of a new postcolonial method of, again postcolonialistic eh. [sic]

And then you're looking at extractive industry and then where is the community for equity? ... The equity component is not there for the community.

In likening seabed mining to “a new postcolonial method,” this stakeholder evoked the legacies of (neo)colonial resource exploitation in the region that exported considerable profit and materials to metropolitan centres (Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, China) while providing minimal benefit to Pacific communities—if not leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.<sup>550</sup> For example, phosphate mining on Banaba, copper mining in Bougainville, sugar plantations in Fiji, tuna fisheries prior to the establishment of PNA's vessel day scheme, or logging in the Solomon Islands. Like these examples (some of which remain an active threat), seabed mining was viewed by some interviewees as a perilous challenge for Pacific communities and ecosystems—yet, one being propped up and promoted by external blue economy discourses.

Equally concerning for at least four interviewees was the way in which global conservation programs, particularly the establishment of LMPAs in pursuit of the 30x30 ambition, were being established through the region on the back of the blue economy discourse (NGO.35, REG.71, rCS.60, rCS/C.7). As we have already seen through the Waitt Institute example, external actors have engaged the blue economy discourse to advocate for the establishment of expansive MPAs in the Pacific; evoking the logic that a healthy ocean is a prosperous ocean and thus, ocean closures are necessary for protecting long-term ocean profits. The impacts that such ocean closures pose for Pacific communities, however, was a key point of tension raised by interviewees.<sup>551</sup> These stakeholders raised concerns about the threat no-take MPA fishing restrictions pose for the region's commercial fisheries—a key revenue stream for many western and central Pacific nations—as well as the potential threat that inshore MPAs present for local communities, their customary rights and access to marine resources and spaces. Such restrictions on Pacific ocean activities (namely resource extraction) in the name of global ocean health reflected, for some, a disproportionate conservation burden that was being shouldered by the region. Or, as one interview put it:

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<sup>550</sup> Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island*.

<sup>551</sup> NGO.35, REG.9, REG.71

rCS.60: I trust that all the environmental NGO's intentions are good intentions. You're doing it for the environment.

But all the complication of rights that get violated in the process. And it's always Global South, brown peoples' rights that [they] are more willing to trad[e] off in the grander scheme of things. The grand environmental protection.

Others whom I spoke with were even less accepting of the motivations of external actors in their MPA advocacy, going so far as to suggest that the blue economy provided foreign interests with 'entry points' for 'modern day colonialism'.<sup>552</sup>

rCS/C.7: They [Waitt Institute] fundamentally came out of wanting to do marine protected areas. And I think that still, unless it's shifted, that's still their core interest.

But now, like everyone else, they're using this blue economy as entry points. I feel that their ultimate goal is still no-take marine protected areas.

... they're [using] this very different model of control [sustainable ocean governance through MPAs] and, what I call now for me, modern day colonialism. And this [Waitt Institute] is an example.

From either perspective, these concerns speak to the broader question of 'who's conservation agenda?', or perhaps more fundamentally, 'who's understanding of sustainability?' is reinforced by the blue economy discourse. These questions underlie much of the interrogation into which development and sustainability narratives sit at the heart of today's blue economy discourse, as I discuss shortly.

### **The need for a locally-led blue economy**

Finally, though not all regional stakeholders believed that the blue economy was, or could be, an advantageous discourse for the Pacific,<sup>553</sup> those who did hold such hope were clear that such could only be possible if the blue economy was locally-led and contextually specific.<sup>554</sup> As concisely noted by one regional stakeholder:

REG.11: For a blue economy to address the development challenges that we face in the Pacific, it has to be driven as a local development solution.

This emphasis on local development solutions was, on multiple occasions, argued as necessitating the acknowledgement and celebration of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices

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<sup>552</sup> rCS.88, rCS.16, REG.71, rCS/C.7

<sup>553</sup> rCS.16, rCS.60

<sup>554</sup> REG.11, rCS/C.7, NGO35, NGO.63, NGO.82, REG.83, REG.45, REG/FJ-GOV.5

(NGO/PHL.17, REG.83, REG.11). Thus, meaningful Pacific blue economy approaches were seen as being rooted in existing wisdoms born of and for the region.

Given the sheer scale of external involvement in current regional blue economy program, this desire for a locally-led blue economy discourse and associated agenda will likely require continued assertiveness from Pacific communities as ever more actors seek to engage in ocean activities through the region. For some whom I spoke with, the proverbial horse had already bolted; with certain stakeholders—particularly those of civil society—seeing global agents as having already wrestled away the Pacific’s authority over its blue economy discursive assemblages (REG.45, REG.11, REG/FJ-GOV.5). Yet, even for those more optimistic about the region’s ability to maintain (or regain) control over the blue economy discourse,<sup>555</sup> the threat of external co-option was often recognised: “The leaders need to be vigilant you know. If the leaders are not vigilant then some of these things [issues of foreign exploitation] will fall through the cracks” (REG/FJ-GOV.5). Regardless, regional stakeholders generally agreed that the blue economy discourse would only facilitate a transition to more self-determined ocean development *if* it was rooted in the Pacific’s knowledges, practices and leadership.

### 5.5.3 Same message, different bottle? Narratives of sustainability

Striking at the discursive heart of the blue economy, eight interviewees expressed concern about the underlying narratives that have come to be embedded in Pacific blue economy understandings.<sup>556</sup> For these stakeholders, a central point of unease was that the way in which the region’s blue economy storylines had been increasingly shaped by and interwoven with external development narratives that, they argued, often sat at odds with Pacific approaches to ocean engagement and relation. In the words of one senior regional figure:

REG.71: I think we’re being sold these narratives that we got caught up in it without really just taking a pause and think about whether these are the things that work for us. And there’s no harm in questioning it, I think.

This final subsection engages with the insights of these interviewees who have come to question the narratives associated with the Pacific blue economy. I address three primary themes raised during conversations: (a) concern over the privileging of economic growth in blue economy visions, (b) caution around *whose* narratives of sustainable development are promoted under the

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<sup>555</sup> REG.45, REG.11, REG/FJ-GOV.5

<sup>556</sup> NGO.63, NGO.82, rCS.60, REG.71, REG.11, rCS.16, rCS.88, rCS/C.7



discourse, and finally, (c) concerns that the discourse risked coopting Pacific ontologies in service of external economic and development interests.

### **Economic centrism?**

Though Pacific assemblages of the blue economy have always included an emphasis on ocean-based economic development,<sup>557</sup> some regional stakeholders cited the deepening prioritisation of economic growth within blue economy storylines as a matter of concern. Throughout my conversations, it was suggested that the blue economy's growing economic centrism not only diverged from Pacific conceptions of ocean custodianship, but actively undermined them (rCS.16, rCS.60, rCS.88, rCS/C.7). By way of illustration, consider the following reflection:

rCS/C.7: For me, if it [the blue economy] does provide an opportunity to talk about real stewardship and real Pacific Islands, I guess I haven't seen it yet.

... If it [blue economy] was going down that direction, [it] would sit with me. About valuing the ocean, about valuing our connection to the ocean as people, as Pacific Islanders. And not going down this, just this economic vision and valuing of the ocean [sic].

Because that's not where we came from. That's where the modern world is going and that takes us further away from our roots and our values.

It is useful here to emphasise this stakeholder's inclusion of the word "just" when referring to the blue economy's economic vision. Rather than reading their insight as an expression of essentialism—in which economic development is presented as incompatible with 'traditional' Pacific custodianship—careful reflection leads us to see that this regional stakeholder protested the advancement of a blue economy that *just* focused on economic outcomes. It is when economic objectives displace commitments to ocean health and relationality that this stakeholder viewed the blue economy as "tak[ing] us further away from our roots and our values"; not simply its attention to the ocean's economic potential. After all, as we saw in *Chapter Three*, Pacific communities have long understood the livelihoods and economic value of oceans and integrated this into their ethics of custodianship. The crux of this stakeholder's concern regarded prioritisation; namely, that evolving blue economy storylines were placing too much emphasis on economic growth to the sacrifice of longstanding, holistic Pacific engagements with the ocean.

Critique of the blue economy's economic centrism is not isolated to the Pacific but has been similarly challenged by communities across the globe, particularly those of the Global South. The

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<sup>557</sup> PSIDS, 'Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States'; SPREP, 'Final Record of Discussions and Decisions'.

International Tribunal on the Impact of the Blue Economy, a coalition of civil society organisations from across the Global South, describe the blue economy discourse as nothing other than “a neoliberal growth model; led by market based growth that is export oriented leading to erosion of food sovereignty, favouring accumulation of profit, commodification of natural resources, change in policy and legislation to serve commercial interests, creation of institutional mechanisms at national and international levels to support this.”<sup>558</sup> Their observations correspond with the Pacific’s blue economy critics who suggest the discourse leverages sustainable development narratives to push and legitimise the expansion of new industrial ocean sectors (e.g. seabed mining, aquaculture), while perpetuating market logics through its assumption that commodifying nature will lead to more effective management solutions.<sup>559</sup> Or, as one interviewee cynically put it: “We still buy into the idea that the market, it’s what’s gonna [sic] save us. Economics is what will save us. (laughter)... And that’s the problem” (rCS.16).

I emphasise that these such critiques of the blue economy discourse are not necessarily opposed to the idea of economic development—in the sense of providing greater and more equitably distributed economic benefit(s) to communities. What they do fundamentally question, however, is ‘how,’ ‘to what extent’ and ‘for which communities’ the blue economy delivers benefit for the Pacific. This is not a new conversation for communities, activists, scholars and decision-makers of the region.<sup>560</sup>

### **Whose narrative of sustainable development?**

As a region rich in natural resources, the Pacific has long been exposed to global discourses of sustainable development and engaged in debates on its merit for regional contexts and communities. From discussions on sustainable development as a means for reducing aid dependency that were key to the Pacific Way’s development,<sup>561</sup> to piercing critiques of sustainable development as a cover for expanded economic growth and industrialisation agendas of the Global North and IGOs,<sup>562</sup> or examples of local agents reclaiming the sustainable development discourse as a means of asserting self-determined practices of resource management and use;<sup>563</sup> communities

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<sup>558</sup> ‘International Tribunal on the Impact of the Blue Economy in Indian Ocean Countries: Verdicts of the Six Tribunal Series’, 2.

<sup>559</sup> DAWN & PANG, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*; PANG, ‘All That Blue, That Is My Dream’ (Suva, 2023), <https://www.blue-resourcing.net/map-launch>.

<sup>560</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Tupouniua, Cocrombe, and Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*.

<sup>561</sup> Tupouniua, Cocrombe, and Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*.

<sup>562</sup> Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*.

<sup>563</sup> Spann, “‘Living Other-Wise’: The Bushmen Farming Network as an Example of “Alter-Native” Counter Practices to Agriculture and Development”; Lincy Pendeverana, ‘Pursuing Livelihoods and Re-Imagining Development in the Oil Palm Regions of the Guadalcanal Plains, Solomon Islands’ (Canberra, Australia, The Australian National University, 2021).

of the Pacific are well versed in the risks and opportunities associated with global sustainable development discourses. This was evident in many of my conversations with regional stakeholders, whose perspectives on the blue economy were clearly informed (explicitly or implicitly) by longstanding debates on the function and politics of development. Take, for example, the following querying of the blue economy's foundational understanding of development:

REG.71: I think policymakers [are] at fault as well because we always sell unrealistic goals that, you know, "we want development." Yeah, but what kind of development are you looking at? What does that mean?

Such reflective questioning of the blue economy's foundational promise hails from a long legacy of Pacific activists, scholars and leaders who asked these same questions of earlier development discourses, such as the green economy, good governance, locally-led development or sustainable development.<sup>564</sup>

The region's familiarity with global development discourses has led some stakeholders to characterise the blue economy simply as a repackaging of earlier paradigms:

NGO.82: So, you've moved from blue economy to sustainable blue economy.

(Laughter)

NGO.63: But that's to the point that we keep making up new words for all these concepts that we haven't been able to fully demonstrate!

NGO.82: Yeah, that's true.

NGO.63: I think if you just do a simple desktop research, you can see every other framing and language of this same concept over the last hundred years.

NGO.82: I know right.

NGO.63: 200 years!

*Myself: It's just remade?*

NGO.63: Remade into what's the sexiest thing right now.

This characterisation of the blue economy as a rehashing earlier development discourses, with minimal change to its underlying assumptions, priorities or *modus operandi*, fundamentally challenges

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<sup>564</sup> Cliff Benson, *The Green Pay-Off: Sustainable Development = Economic Growth*, 2002 Parkinson Memorial Lecture Series (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2004); Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Rokotuivuna et al., *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony*; Tupouniua, Cocrombe, and Slatter, *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*.

portrayals of the blue economy as a new development agenda promising to transition the world to a path of sustainable use and management. Instead, it suggests that the blue economy follows into lockstep with long-established legacies and frameworks of development that all-too-often derive from agencies of the Global North for implementation in the Global South.<sup>565</sup> In this sense, the blue economy is suggested by some as a re-weaving of old development storylines that retains relations of power eerily similar to the paternalistic narratives of belittlement so derisively described by Hau'ofa three decades ago<sup>566</sup> (NGO.63, NGO.82, REG.71, rCS.60, rCS.16, rCS.88).

### **Coopting Pacific ontologies**

Finally, at least five interviewees voiced hesitation about issues of narrative co-option in their encounters with the blue economy (rCS.60, rCS.16, rCS.88, REG.11, rCS/C.7). These stakeholders raised concern that the blue economy appeared to be co-opting Pacific ontologies and ocean relations to drive a primarily economic-centric ocean agenda. One exchange in particular captured the complexities surrounding the Pacific's navigation of the blue economy narrative; pointing both to the appropriation of Pacific wisdoms within this discourse, as well as the difficulty felt by regional stakeholders seeking to confront such capture:

rCS.60: I'm an angry Pacific Islander because of that exact fact [the dominance of western framings of the blue economy]! Because, I don't know, we got used or we intently used this framing; our framing of the ocean, our relation with the ocean.

... It was like we had a bigger holistic understanding of the oceans, and we took that power and ability to have that, to funnel it down into an industry package. And that's a huge loss.

Because we went from this richness to this limited thing.

... I don't know. When I read Epeli Hau'ofa and Teresia Teaiwa on oceans stuff, it's so powerful. And it does not link to the oceans discourse that we have now. But when I look at the oceans discourse that we have now and they have quote from Epeli, I can see how they use it, but when I read it outside of that there is a total disconnect.

So, I don't know if we have done this, or someone has come and taken bits and pieces and done it. Because it doesn't sound the same. It's not Epeli's voice in those words.

... And the thing is with Pacific narrative is that we can't critique it because it's what has been said by our forbearers. So, if we were to critique that narrative, we would be

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<sup>565</sup> Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*; Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*; Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*.

<sup>566</sup> 'Our Sea of Islands'.

critiquing our narrative. So, we have to sit here and talk about, how do we talk about the fear of oceans now without undermining the words of Epeli and stuff.

I include this extended reflection because it speaks to the complex politics surrounding the blue economy's sustainable ocean development narrative. How the Pacific's rich, holistic understandings of ocean use and engagement can be reduced through simplistic narratives. How assertive narratives of self-determination can be appropriated and stripped of their political potency when mainstreamed for global audiences. And the hazardous path that Pacific communities must navigate if they seek to challenge the appropriation of such narratives without being mistakenly read as challenging the narratives themselves. In short, the tangle of power relations captured in the lament: "it's not Epeli's voice in those words."

This stakeholder was not alone in their concern that the blue economy had a darker underbelly:<sup>567</sup> appealing to Pacific values of sustainability and stewardship to drive the ocean's economic exploitation. Indeed, my conversation with one senior figure involved in PSIDS' early blue economy adoption even alluded to the possibility that the region had been 'used' to popularise the discourse at Rio+20 only after which its economic emphasis came into full view:

*Myself: The blue economy was a term that was really popularised by Pacific Island states in those early days around 2012. Do you think that the Pacific still owns that concept?*

REG.11: One, they made it popular but even without realising what it meant. They made it popular because for them it's a narrative that sits with us. And we have been ocean people for so many years. So, their understanding was in that.

What blue economy we're talking about now [compared] to 2012 is a totally different narrative. Now it's a more extractive industry. Because what happened from then 'til now, a lot of people have joined the bandwagon.

As intimated in this reflection, the twin ocean and sustainability foci of the blue economy provided an appealing narrative for Pacific leaders to rally around ahead of Rio+20 given its seeming compatibility with the values and practices of ocean custodianship active within the region for centuries (in some cases, millennia). However, as time has progressed and the blue economy was adopted by a growing crowd of actors outside the region, the discourse's economic objectives rose to the surface and took precedence over ecological and social commitments. Like the stakeholder quoted here, some regional figures today ask if the blue economy continues to align with Pacific

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<sup>567</sup> Also evident in conversations with REG.11, rCS/C.7, rCS.88, rCS.16

ontologies and priorities, or if its storylines have been coopted in service of the longstanding neoliberal capitalist objective: economic growth.<sup>568</sup>

## 5.6 Conclusion

Though a region that has long championed the blue economy, the Pacific and its regional organisations have also navigated a shifting, at times turbulent relationship with this discourse since 2011. The story of the Pacific's blue economy engagements is not simple, but knotted with periods of tension, ambiguity and increasing uneasiness.

As detailed through this chapter, each of the region's three key organisations to have engaged the blue economy (PSIDS, PIDF, PIF) have seemingly done so via varying storyline assemblages, motivations, and according to differing strategic calculations. The PSIDS grouping first embraced the blue economy around Rio+20 for the purpose of elevating Pacific interests on the global stage and, perhaps most critically, advocating for a transformation in the mainstream development complex such that it better served the unique, ocean-centric needs of ocean-based communities of the Global South. In doing so, PSIDS leveraged the blue economy to respond to a systemic failure of the global development project: namely, that mainstream development agendas with their firm terrestrial focus were ill-designed for serving coastal and island communities where support was often needed. PSIDS' 'green economy in a blue world' construction reworked earlier blue economy conceptions that were formulated in the US and Europe, adapting it for utility in contexts of the Global South.

The discourse was next picked up by the PIDF during a period of rupture in Pacific regionalism. Though the immediate impetus for the PIDF's establishment was Fiji's suspension from the PIF, deepening discontent with Australia's and New Zealand's influence in regional affairs created broader conditions from which the PIDF could emerge and position itself as an alternative regional organisation. Here the blue economy, via a 'green/blue economy' then 'blue economy' storylines, provided the PIDF with a unique selling point to distinguish itself from the PIF and the established model of regionalism it represented. During this period, the blue economy transitioned from a political tool leveraged on the international stage to one deployed in a context of turbulent regional

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<sup>568</sup> Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka`uta, Lingikoni Vaka`uta, and Rosiana Lagi, 'Reflections from Oceania on Indigenous Epistemology, the Ocean and Sustainability', in *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science*, ed. Stephanie Hessler (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 2018), 127–32; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, 'Surfacing the Agendas of the Blue Economy'; Bhagwan, 'Tides Are Changing: Opening Speech at the International Conference "The Future of the Oceans and Seas"'.

politics. As the PIDF has idled in more recent years, so too has the agency's work on the blue economy, opening space for a changing of the guard in Pacific blue economy leadership.

In 2017 the PIF embraced the blue economy as a component feature of its Blue Pacific narrative in the form of the 'Blue Pacific Economy' storyline. This association both emphasised the blue economy's commitment to assertive, self-determined development and positioned it within a project of regional reinvigoration. However, by the release of the *2050 Strategy* (2022) it appears that concern had arisen within the PIF over the blue economy's vulnerability to external influence and development agendas. The regional organisation appeared to be retreating from the discourse until 2023 when it became involved with the UBPP initiative and entered into negotiation with the hybridised 'Blue Pacific Prosperity' storyline—a storyline that seemingly interweaves the PIF's Blue Pacific narrative with the 'Blue Prosperity' construct of the US philanthropy, the Waitt Institute. How this external 'Blue Prosperity' storyline aligns with the PIF's commitment to Pacific-conceived and Pacific-led development is challenging as—even if engaged for strategic reasons by the PIF—such storyline reflects the discursive authority of external agents to frame ocean development of the region. As I heard throughout conversations with key regional stakeholders, this challenge was among their foremost concerns regarding the blue economy.

Building on the storyline tracing of earlier sections, the final discussion of this chapter reflected on the insights offered by key regional stakeholders regarding their experiences negotiating the blue economy discourse. Though not all stakeholders looked negatively upon the blue economy, my conversations revealed an overwhelming unease with the discourse that circled around three key themes: (a) debates over what the blue economy is, (b) questions over who is leading the discourse and its associated programs, and (c) engagement with longstanding discussions on what sustainable development means—or should mean—for the region. Each of these themes were underpinned by a wariness of the growing influence that external actors and logics are having over Pacific blue economy constructs, leading many to worry that the blue economy is not strengthening, but instead compromising, the assertion of self-determined ocean development. In this sense, the blue economy risks functioning as a perverse political tool for the region: one that undercuts rather than advances its promise to collective, self-determined Pacific development.

To return to Gramsci's thinking on passive revolution, the observations of this chapter give rise to the question: what transformation, if any, is the blue economy discourse advancing for Pacific ocean development? Though it may be true that the region has witnessed a growth in ocean-based activity and financing since its championing of the blue economy, it appears these activities have only intensified within existing systems of relations and their logics (neoliberal capitalism). External

understandings of development, often steeped in economic-centrism, continue to pervade activities through the region, often with weak appreciation for the more holistic understandings of ocean relations and custodianship embedded in Indigenous Pacific approaches. Moreover, these development activities and their priorities continue to be heavily shaped, if not led, by external agencies. The struggle for self-determined ocean development for which PSIDS, the PIDF and PIF each engaged the blue economy thus appears little progressed, with the most recent 'Blue Pacific Prosperity' storyline seemingly the furthest from visions of a Pacific-conceived and Pacific-led ocean future. Rather than reimagining the established international order as oceans and ocean-based communities come to be of increasing concern in global development agendas, it may be suggested that the blue economy has facilitated the continued authority (economic, discursive, ideological) of actors of the Global North. Here the blue economy not only falls short of its transformative promise to reimagine the Pacific's place and relations with the international order, but perversely acts to undercut it. This final point will be the central matter for interrogation in *Part III*.







# CHAPTER SIX

## Case Study Two: Cook Islands Government

### 6.1 Introduction

One of the earliest proponents of the blue economy on both regional and international stages,<sup>569</sup> the Cook Islands Government (CIG) has been a pivotal stakeholder in the crafting of this discourse over the last decade. From its influential contribution to the PSIDS' blue economy campaign at Rio+20 to its current status as one of the few Pacific states to explicitly reference the blue economy in national policy,<sup>570</sup> the CIG has been a leading advocate of this ocean development construct. At least, that is, until recently.

Particularly striking about the CIG's blue economy relationship is its clear embrace of this discourse in support of seabed minerals activities and ambitions. This places the CIG in a rather unique position among blue economy proponents—many of whom have publicly challenged the use of this discourse in relation to seabed minerals activities due to concerns over the latter's potential ecological impact.<sup>571</sup> Indeed, while the CIG has engaged the blue economy with regards to other marine sectors (such as its Marae Moana marine park),<sup>572</sup> it most frequently articulates the discourse in reference to the seabed minerals sector (Table 10). The seabed minerals sector is

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<sup>569</sup> Ashton and Jackson, 'Summary Report, 21–22 July 2011: UNCSD Pacific Subregional Preparatory Joint Ministerial Meeting Report PDF'; Liz Wright-Koteka in Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 'Pacific Island Countries Appeal Exclusion from Rio+20', *Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme*, 12 June 2012, <https://www.sprep.org/news/pacific-island-countries-appeal-exclusion-rio20>.

<sup>570</sup> Cook Islands Government, 'Draft Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy' (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Government, February 2019); Cook Islands Government, 'Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui: National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+ (2021–2121)' (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Government, December 2021).

<sup>571</sup> World Wildlife Fund, 'No to Deep Seabed Mining', accessed 23 April 2024, [https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our\\_focus/oceans\\_practice/no\\_deep\\_seabed\\_mining/](https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/oceans_practice/no_deep_seabed_mining/); Julian Roberts, 'Harmful Marine Extractives: Understanding the Risks & Impacts of Financing Non-Renewable Extractive Industries' (Geneva: United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative, 2022).

<sup>572</sup> Cook Islands Government, 'Marae Moana - Cook Islands Marine Park: #OceanAction40829' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2012), <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/marae-moana-cook-islands-marine-park-0>.

deeply embedded in the CIG's blue economy vision, making this association a valuable analytical focus for this thesis. *How* the CIG approaches its blue economy engagements with respect to the seabed minerals sector and *why* are the primary puzzles I grapple with in this chapter.

The central argument I develop through this chapter is that CIG has strategically deployed the blue economy in service of its longstanding seabed minerals aspirations; not in pursuit of a particularly new, transformative vision for ocean development.<sup>573</sup> I detail how the CIG has leveraged the blue economy to update its framing of seabed mining's legitimacy, purported necessity and potential value in response to both growing global interest in the sector and rising public concern.<sup>574</sup> This at once defends and enables the CIG's continued pursuit of such activities (within its own EEZ and the Area),<sup>575</sup> which is particularly critical today as seabed mining nears realisation after decades of speculation. *Section One* illustrates how the dream of an active seabed minerals sector in the Cook Islands has long shaped the consciousness of CIG officials and their understanding of how Cook Islands sovereignty could be realised. From Sir Albert Henry's advocacy of a 200nm EEZ regime at UNCLOS negotiations (1974) to current efforts to diversify the Cook Islands economy through the establishment of a domestic seabed mining industry, government actors have long held visions of a seabed minerals future alongside assertions of state sovereignty. This leads me to suggest that seabed minerals ambitions have been fundamental to the CIG's state-making project ever since the dawning of self-determination in the 1960s.

*Section Two* turns focus to the CIG's construction of its blue economy storylines since 2011, with particular emphasis on the discourse's engagement in relation to the seabed minerals sector. I identify two key storylines: a 'green economy in a blue world' construct that emerged in dialogue with the PSIDS' blue economy campaign of Rio+20 (*Chapter Five*), and a more recent 'net-zero leader' storyline which appears to represent an evolution of the former. How this evolution occurred and what factors prompted it will be considered through a tracing of the CIG's blue economy articulations across national, regional and international forums. I contend that the blue economy discourse provided the CIG with a useful political tool to refashion its seabed minerals

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<sup>573</sup> John Childs and Julie Hearn explore similar resource-based development imaginaries of Ghana and Ecuador. John Childs and Julie Hearn, "New" Nations: Resource-Based Development Imaginaries in Ghana and Ecuador', *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2017): 844–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1176859>.

<sup>574</sup> Talaia Mika and Rashneel Kumar, 'Poll: Cook Islanders Oppose Deep Sea Mining', *Cook Islands News, PacNews, Islands Business*, 23 September 2024, <https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/poll-cook-islanders-oppose-deep-sea-mining/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20the%20Cook%20Islands%20is,Cook%20Islands%20Exclusive%20Economic%20Zone.%;WeMoveEurope,SeasAtRisk,andDeepSeaConservationCoalition,Report:ResearchonPublicOpinion%20towardsDeepSeaMininginEurope%20,July2024,https://seas-at-risk.org/press-releases/a-majority-of-polled-europeans-oppose-deep-sea-mining/>; Aline Jaeckel et al., 'Deep Seabed Mining Lacks Social Legitimacy', *Npj Ocean Sustainability* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-023-00009-7>.

<sup>575</sup> The Area refers to the seabed sitting underneath international waters.

aspirations in response growing climate action and emissions reduction demands of the 2010s, enabling the state to refashion anew its decades-old seabed minerals vision in a shifting global context.

Drawing on key informant interviews and public speeches, *Section Three* tackles the question of ‘*why?*’ the CIG appears to be stepping away from the blue economy discourse in favour of the Blue Pacific in recent years. While *Section Two* evidences the political utility of the blue economy for the CIG, recent observations of government speeches and policies suggest it may be disengaging from this discourse. This prompts my suggestion that the blue economy may be of diminishing political utility for the CIG, with the government turning instead to the Blue Pacific as a discourse for advancing—and reworking—its longstanding vision of a self-determined Cook Islands made powerful and prosperous through seabed minerals mining.

**Table 10:** Record of the Cook Islands Government’s articulations of the blue economy 2011 – 2024.

| Date             | Sector          |           |             |         | Text                                                                                        | Event                                            | Publisher                                                                                        | Scale                                                                                           |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  | Seabed Minerals | Fisheries | Marae Moana | Tourism |                                                                                             |                                                  |                                                                                                  |                                                                                                 |
| 1 July 2011      | X               | X         |             |         | Greening Our Blue World: Report on Cook Islands National Assessment On Greening the Economy |                                                  | Cook Islands Government ; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific | Domestic, regional & international (informing the CIG’s engagement at Rio+20 as a PSIDS member) |
| 26 July 2011     |                 |           | X           |         | Achieving Sustainable Development In The Pacific                                            | SPREP Joint Ministerial Meeting                  | Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme                                        | Regional                                                                                        |
| 30 November 2013 | X               | X         |             |         | Bishop reflects on UNESCO address                                                           | 37th UNESCO General Conference                   | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization                                 | International                                                                                   |
| 5 March 2014     |                 |           | X           | X       | Cook Islands Marine Park Legal Analysis Workshop                                            | Cook Islands Marine Park Legal Analysis Workshop | Cook Islands Government                                                                          | Domestic                                                                                        |
| 14 February 2019 | X               |           |             |         | Draft Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy                                          |                                                  | Cook Islands Government                                                                          | Domestic                                                                                        |
| 6 March 2019     | X               |           |             |         | Brown attends seabed mining workshop                                                        | SBMA Media Release                               | Cook Islands Seabed                                                                              | International                                                                                   |

## Chapter Six

|                    |    |   |   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                  |                                                                                                   |               |
|--------------------|----|---|---|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
|                    |    |   |   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                  | Minerals Authority                                                                                |               |
| 8 June 2020        | X  |   |   |   | Nauru, Cook Islands, Tonga support transition to green economy                                                                                                                                                                                                 | SBMA Media Release                                                               | Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority                                                            | International |
| 26 July 2021       | X  |   |   |   | Mark Brown: Opening Remarks at the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth 2021                                                                                                                                                                                     | Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth                                               | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; International Seabed Minerals Authority | International |
| 7 December 2021    | X  |   | X |   | Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                  | Cook Islands Government                                                                           | Domestic      |
|                    | X  |   | X |   | Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui NSDA 2020+ Te Akapapa'anga Uki                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                  | Cook Islands Government                                                                           | Domestic      |
| 29 June 2022       | X  |   |   |   | Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the Seabed Minerals Authority at the Fostering international and regional cooperation in support of the sustainable development of the blue economy of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS United Nations Ocean Conference Side Event | UNOC22 - Abyssal Initiative side event (LDCs, SIDS)                              | Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority                                                            | International |
| 29 March 2023      | X  |   |   |   | Te-Ara Henderson                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Achieving Ocean Equity Conference                                                | Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority                                                            | International |
| 12 April 2024      | X  |   |   |   | Opening Remarks by Honourable Prime Minister Mark Brown "Leveraging knowledge, innovation and empowerment in deep-sea research in support of the stewardship of the Area for the benefit of humankind."                                                        | International Seabed Authority Side Event at the UN Ocean Decade Conference 2024 | Cook Islands Government                                                                           | International |
| <b>Total Count</b> | 11 | 2 | 4 | 1 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                  |                                                                                                   |               |

## 6.2 History: A state-making dream of seabed minerals activity

Since achieving self-governing status in August 1965, aspirations for seabed minerals extraction have powerfully shaped the CIG's vision for a self-determined, economically independent and politically powerful state.<sup>576</sup> Home to around 15,000 residents,<sup>577</sup> the Cook Islands encompasses 15 islands in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, which amount to 240 km<sup>2</sup> in land area but generate an EEZ of 1,830,000 km<sup>2</sup>. This vast ocean space, or *Moana Nui o Kiva*, is central to Cook Islands' identity and culture,<sup>578</sup> and is a vital contributor to the state's economy through sectors of tourism (contributing around 70% of GDP),<sup>579</sup> fishing (around 77% of total exports)<sup>580</sup> and pearl farming. The Cook Islands' limited land resources make these ocean-based opportunities particularly important, with seabed minerals mining long envisioned by CIG stakeholders as a key avenue to economic prosperity and global political standing. It is valuable to read the CIG's recent progress towards domestic and international seabed minerals extraction, as well as its engagement with the blue economy discourse, within this longer history.

### 6.2.1 Seabed minerals discovery and the seeding of a dream

Polymetallic nodules were first discovered in Cook Islands waters in 1963, seeing these deep-sea formations enter the consciousness of CIG representatives on the cusp of the state's attainment of self-government in 1965. The nodules were confirmed by the Soviet Union (USSR) vessel *R/V Vityaz*, which—building on the nearby expedition of *HMS Challenger* nine decades earlier (Figure 8)—identified seabed minerals in the Cook Islands' northern waters (Figure 9). Such discovery could not have come at a more opportune time for the CIG as it prepared to transition to self-government. Additional to presenting the Cook Islands with a promising avenue for future economic growth and development (via seabed mining), the presence of seabed minerals in the

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<sup>576</sup> The Cook Islands is a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand. Under this arrangement, Cook Islanders hold New Zealand citizenship, and the Cook Islands Government retains the right of self-government, with New Zealand responsible for defence. The Cook Islands receives economic assistance from New Zealand through budget support, infrastructure investment and partnerships. There has been little appetite among the CIG to pursue full political independence over the last six decades, with the government and Cook Islands community finding benefit in 'flexible sovereignty' arrangements (Baker 2021)—or the exercise of "Islandian" sovereignty, as described by Prinsen and Blaise (2017). The significant political autonomy and self-determination exercised by the CIG over Cook Islands affairs underlies my decision to employ the term 'state' rather than 'territory' to describe the Cook Islands. See Baker, 'New Zealand and Australia in Pacific Regionalism'; Gerard Prinsen and Séverine Blaise, 'An Emerging "Islandian" Sovereignty of Non-Self-Governing Islands', *International Journal* 72, no. 1 (2017): 56–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702017693260>.

<sup>577</sup> Cook Islands Statistics Office, 'Vital Statistics and Population Estimates: June Quarter 2023' (Cook Islands Government, 2023), <https://stats.gov.ck/vital-statistics-and-population-estimates/>.

<sup>578</sup> Liam Koka'ua and James Nikitine, *Moana Irakau* (Blue Cradle, Sustainable Ocean Alliance, 2022).

<sup>579</sup> Cook Islands Tourism, 'Cook Islands Visitor Economy Factsheet', 2024.

<sup>580</sup> United Nations, 'The Cook Islands: Demographic, Economic and Gender Profile' (Cook Islands Trade Portal, 2020).

Cook Islands' near seabed also informed the CIG's engagement in negotiations at UNCLOS (one of the most influential agreements for global governance and international law of the contemporary era), as I discuss through this section.

Four key seabed minerals developments occurred during this early period of Cook Islands self-government, each of which helped to strengthen the CIG's interest in a seabed minerals future where the Cook Islands could occupy a central, if not leading role as a pioneer of this sector. I discuss each of these developments below, exposing how the CIG's seabed minerals dream holds deep historical roots that are tightly entangled in the Cook Islands state-making project.

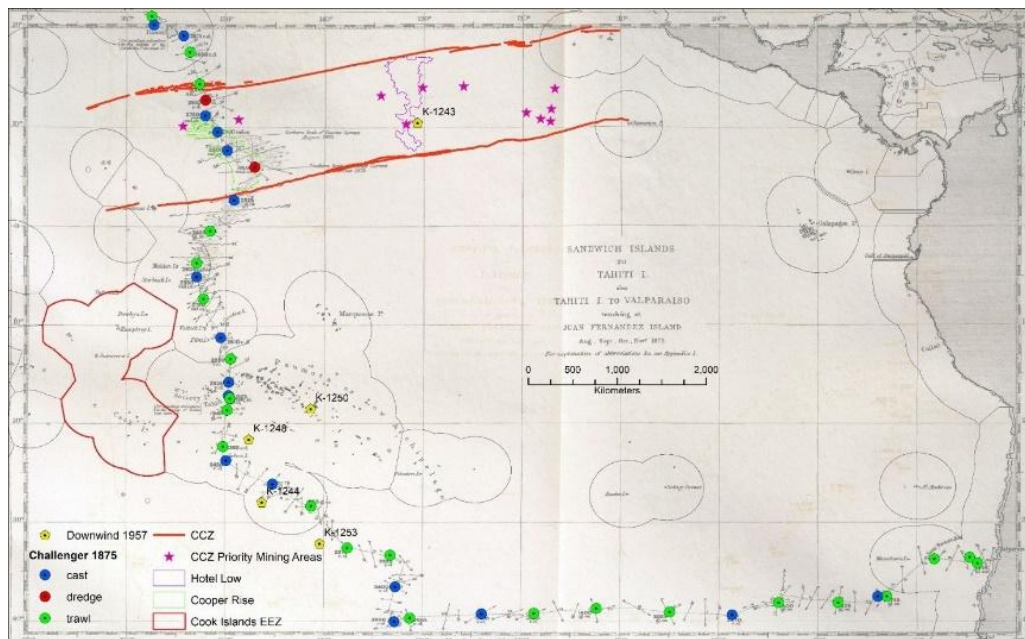


**Figure 8:** South Pacific transects and sample stations for HMS Challenger 1875 and Downwind 1957. Location data from Natural History Museum UK, (2014) and (Menard and Shipek, 1958); CCZ features from (Parianos and Madureira, 2021). Source: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority

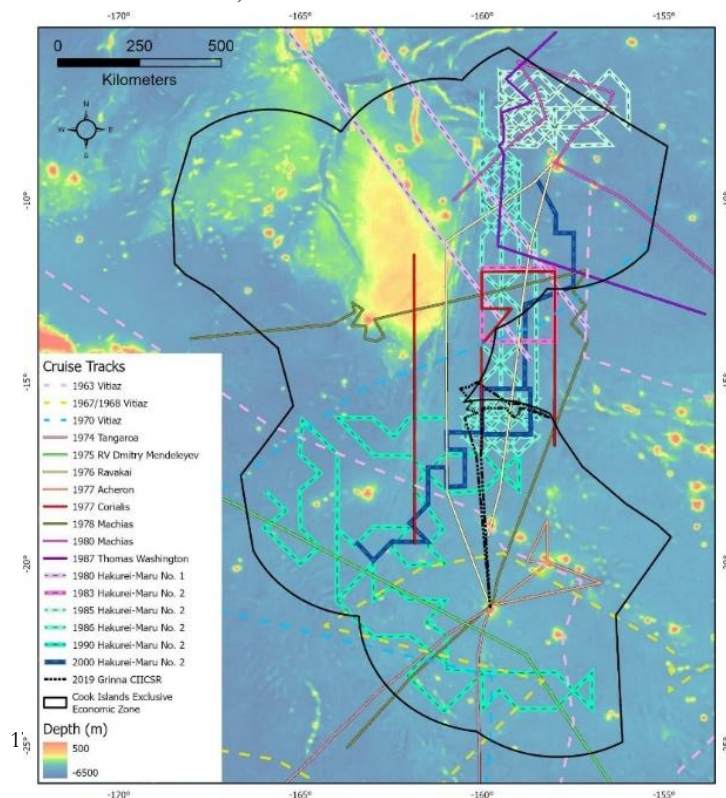


**Figure 9:** Cook Islands nodule sampling expeditions. Source: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority



### **Cook Islands' involvement in SOPAC**

Created in response to growing interest in the offshore seabed mineral potential of Fiji and Tonga through the late 1960s, the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) launched in 1972<sup>581</sup> with Solomon Islands, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Samoa as founding members. Supported by funding from the UNDP but led by its Pacific members, SOPAC was tasked with investigating the mineral potential of the seabed in the South Pacific Ocean and offering a “coordinated regional approach” for Pacific states’ engagement with this emergent seabed minerals sector.<sup>582</sup> The Cook Islands joined SOPAC one year later in 1973.

The CIG’s early involvement in SOPAC highlights the government’s keen interest in establishing the Cook Islands as an active participant in the seabed minerals sector. Having hosted foreign expeditions within its waters through the 1960s and early 70s, the CIG’s membership to SOPAC enabled it to shift from observer to participant. The first SOPAC cruise through Cook Islands waters was undertaken in 1974 aboard *RV Tangaroa*, followed two years later by *RV Ravakai*.<sup>583</sup> Numerous SOPAC expeditions in the Cook Islands EEZ would ensue (1977, 1978, 1980), including those launched in collaboration with the Government of Japan under the Japan-SOPAC Cooperative Study (1985, 1986, 1990 and 2000) (Figure 9).

Embracing the opportunity to actively participate in seabed minerals research, the CIG’s involvement with SOPAC can be viewed as an exercise in self-determination. It placed this newly self-governing country on the forefront of global seabed minerals activity, enabling the CIG to (co-)lead and (co-)study the minerals of its own seabed. Since SOPAC, the CIG has continued to exercise authority over the seabed minerals activities occurring within Cook Islands waters (as I detail shortly), asserting its claim to self-determined statehood.

### **Tom Marsters aboard the USSR’s *Vitiaz***

In 1974, a young officer in the Cook Islands Central Administration by the name of Tom Marsters was supplied as an observer to a Soviet expedition conducting seabed research in the nations’ waters.<sup>584</sup> Astonished by the nodule samples that he witnessed aboard the expedition, Marsters has become a key advocate of seabed minerals exploration and exploitation in the Cook Islands over

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<sup>581</sup> Then known as the Committee for Co-ordination of Joint Prospecting for Mineral Resources in South Pacific Offshore Areas (CCOP/SOPAC).

<sup>582</sup> Russell Howorth, ‘Metamorphosis of SOPAC: A Short History of Change in a Pacific Regional Organisation 1972 – 2009’, SOPAC Miscellaneous Report 704, October 2009.

<sup>583</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, ‘Exploration History’, 2022, <https://www.sbma.gov.ck/history-1>.

<sup>584</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority; Michael G. Petterson and Akuila Tawake, ‘The Cook Islands (South Pacific) Experience in Governance of Seabed Manganese Nodule Mining’, *Ocean & Coastal Management* 167 (2019): 271–87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2018.09.010>; Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, ‘SBMA 10 Years Celebration Booklet’ (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, 2023); Interviewee CIG.74.

the years. From a young government official, Tom Marsters has gone on to occupy some of the most prominent positions of state; serving as Deputy Prime Minister (2010 – 2013) and Monarch’s Representative (2013 – present). While elected to government, Marsters also served as Minister of Mining and Natural Resources where he oversaw the establishment of the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority (2012), the bringing into force of the *Seabed Minerals Act* (2009) and commissioning of the Cronan study (2013)—each of which will be discussed later in this section.

As we will see through this chapter, Marsters has remained an ardent supporter of the seabed minerals sector since his 1974 voyage and has often been directly involved in CIG decisions surrounding it. His patronage has had a powerful and enduring influence over the CIG’s seabed minerals policies and programs, directly contributing to the state’s pursuit of this sector. Simply put, Marsters’ influence in shaping the CIG’s seabed minerals journey has been significant.

### **Sir Albert Henry: Seabed minerals and the development of the EEZ regime**

After decades of complex and far-reaching negotiations, UNCLOS opened for signature on 10 December 1982 and entered into force in November 1994. The Convention marked a landmark agreement in international law, with its negotiation providing some of the earliest opportunities for newly independent states to exercise political power and self-determination in global affairs. Having achieved self-governing status in 1965, the Cook Islands entered UNCLOS III deliberations determined to secure favourable ocean governance arrangements for island nations of the Global South. Prominent among these was the issue of the EEZ regime, which had emerged as a particularly challenging area for securing global consensus. The fault line for debate on EEZ designation broadly lay between coastal developing states and established maritime powers; with the former advocating for an expanded EEZ regime that extended the control of coastal states over their waters and resources to 200nm from the baseline, while the latter sought to preserve the freedom of the high seas to the greatest extent possible and thus constrain EEZ limits.<sup>585</sup> It was into this debate that Sir Albert Henry—the first Premier to the Cook Islands—entered, with a speech<sup>586</sup> that continues to be remembered with pride through the Pacific today.<sup>587</sup>

Speaking on 29 July 1974 at the Second Session of UNCLOS III, Sir Albert Henry presented a powerful case for the adoption of a 200nm EEZ regime.<sup>588</sup> There are many notable aspects of his

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<sup>585</sup> Satya N. Nandan, ‘The Exclusive Economic Zone: A Historical Perspective’, *Food and Agriculture Organization*, 1987, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/s5280T/s5280t0p.htm>.

<sup>586</sup> Albert Henry, ‘Statement by Sir Albert Henry, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, to the 3rd United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea’ (Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, Caracas, Venezuela, 1974).

<sup>587</sup> Slade et al., ‘Pacific Perspectives on the Negotiations of UNCLOS III’.

<sup>588</sup> Henry, ‘Statement by Sir Albert Henry, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, to the 3rd United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea’.

statement, but for the purposes of this thesis, I focus our attention on one: the influence that Sir Henry's knowledge of seabed minerals in the Cook Islands' surrounding seabed had over his advocacy for an expanded EEZ regime. This relationship is important as it highlights the formative role seabed minerals had in the CIG's understanding and exercise of sovereignty, across both political and territorial dimensions.

Early in his remarks, Henry outlined the Cook Islands' newly acquired self-governing status, stressing his nation's *choice* to "to continue as a free association with New Zealand" in favour of full independence. Self-governance, according to Henry, constituted an exercise in self-determination from which the Cook Islands "should not be prejudiced in any way by its free choice of a status less than that of a sovereign state." This assertion of statehood was important for Henry's next argument: that "the Cook Islands should have the same benefits as sovereign states with regard to the matters before this Conference and particularly with regard to the [exclusive] economic zone." As a nation heavily reliant on the ocean, ensuring the authority of the CIG over any territory established under UNCLOS was critical. Thus, while the Cook Islands had agreed to continue in free association with New Zealand, Henry was careful to stress that his state be afforded the same sovereign rights as independent states—namely, ocean sovereignty. Having tied the Cook Islands self-governing status to its rights for EEZ access and control, Henry next detailed how the CIG's advocacy for a 200nm EEZ regime was rooted in its vision for potential seabed minerals extraction:

With the advance in technology, the discovery and extraction of minerals from the seabed around our Islands may become a possibility. In the event of that possibility becoming a reality, it would be only fair and just for the Cook Islands to receive the benefits from the seabed immediately around its islands... [A]n economic zone of 200 miles around each island would embrace the areas between one island and another. The Cook Island[s] strongly support the concept of such an economic Zone.<sup>589</sup>

In this statement, Henry evoked a vision of future seabed mining operations to argue for the establishment of an expansive 200nm EEZ regime. This hinged on his appeal to principles of fairness and justice, which he and the CIG believed would enable the Cook Islands to benefit from its surrounding ocean and pursue self-determined development through the realisation of the seabed minerals sector.

Recalling the early seabed mineral expeditions through Cook Islands waters, it is not surprising that Henry was captured by the economic potential promised by nodule mining. Indeed, just two

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<sup>589</sup> Henry.

months prior to his UNCLOS III speech, Henry had entertained the New Zealand research team of *R/V Tangaroa* after their recovery of nodules in Cook Islands waters.<sup>590</sup> While the technical feasibility of seabed mining would remain decades in the making, it is clear that the vision of a prosperous, self-determined Cook Islands supported by an active seabed minerals sector had taken seed among key CIG representatives from the very early days of Cook Islands self-governance. This vision actively shaped the CIG's assertion of political and territorial sovereignty on the international stage, leading Henry to advocate for a 200nm EEZ regime during UNCLOS III negotiations, and, with it, the designation of generous maritime boundaries delineating Cook Islands territory.

### **The 1995 East-West Centre Economic Feasibility Study**

While speculation on the seabed minerals wealth sitting in the Cook Islands EEZ had been growing over the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>591</sup> it wasn't until the mid-90s that economic analysis was undertaken to inform this vision. Under commission from the CIG, the East-West Centre published a study in 1995 defining the economic potential of nodules in the Cook Islands, including an outline of potential development options for a domestic mining regime. The report based its analysis on data collected through SOPAC, finding that of the approximately 7.5 billion tonnes of nodules in Cook Islands waters, recoverable reserves constituted at most 30 – 40%.<sup>592</sup> Looking to the “simultaneously low metal prices, oversupply, and uncertain demand”<sup>593</sup> of global metals markets of the early 1990s, researchers concluded that nodule mining in the Cook Islands presented a 10% internal rate of return (based primarily on global cobalt markets). This led them to classify nodule mining in the Cook Islands as “marginally economic”<sup>594</sup> and stress future metals prices as the “most important factor”<sup>595</sup> that would determine future economic viability.

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<sup>590</sup> M. A. Meylan, ‘R/V Tangaroa Mn-Nodule Investigations in the Southwestern Pacific Basin’, 1974.

<sup>591</sup> Ian Thomas Lipton, Matthew John Nimmo, and John Michael Parianos, ‘NI 43-101 Technical Report: TOML Clarion Clipperton Zone Project, Pacific Ocean’ (AMC Consultants Pty Ltd, 4 July 2016).

<sup>592</sup> A.L. Clark et al., ‘Economic and Development Potential of Manganese Nodules within the Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)’ (Honolulu: Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP), Program on Resources: Energy and Minerals, East-West Center, 1995), 30.

<sup>593</sup> Clark et al., 25.

<sup>594</sup> Clark et al., 31.

<sup>595</sup> Clark et al., 31.

Though not exactly a compelling conclusion on the economic potential of nodule mining the Cook Islands, this study was received with enthusiasm by the CIG and seabed minerals advocates. These proponents embraced the study as confirmation of the sector’s future domestic potential, which they envisioned as facilitating the state’s economic prosperity and self-determined development.<sup>596</sup> This response may seem overly optimistic given the modest conclusion of the study; however, it is important to read this reaction in the context of the CIG’s decades-old interest (and investment) in seabed minerals activity. Having actively pursued seabed minerals research and development for over three decades, this study was viewed as validation for the CIG’s efforts and aspirations. Its findings—though far from resounding—were nevertheless positive and the CIG (needing little encouragement) capitalised on this to sustain its continued seabed minerals efforts through a decade of weak and worsening global metals markets (Figure 10).

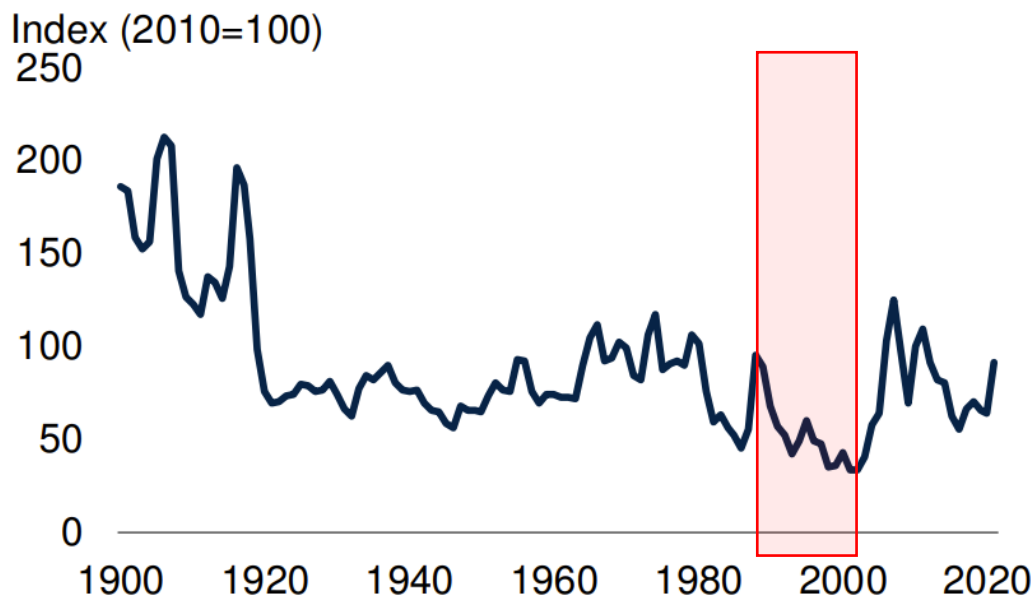


**Figure 10:** Real Metal Price Index since the 1900s. Source: Baffes, Chian Koh, Nagle (2022). Red box annotating the slide in global metals prices over the 15 years from 1986 – 2000.

## 6.2.2 Revived seabed minerals interest

The onset of the commodities ‘super cycle’ through the 2000s saw a revival in global seabed minerals interest and returning focus on the Cook Islands EEZ as a site for potential extraction. Between 2008 to 2012, the CIG was visited by delegations from China, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Norway, the US, Singapore, Belgium, Canada, Japan and New Zealand, all of which

<sup>596</sup> Stuart G. Kingan, ‘Manganese Nodules of the Cook Islands’ (South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), 1998); see also Hon. Henry’s Foreword in Clark et al., ‘Economic and Development Potential of Manganese Nodules within the Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)’.

expressed interest in engaging in seabed minerals activities in the Cook Islands.<sup>597</sup> In an effort to capitalise on these engagements, the CIG approached the Commonwealth Secretariat in March 2008 for support in developing domestic regulations for the sector.<sup>598</sup> This assistance was obtained, and the CIG promptly began drafting the world's first national legislation for seabed minerals activity.

One year later, the Cook Islands Parliament unanimously approved the *Seabed Minerals Act* (2009). This Act outlined the rules and conditions for the prospecting, exploration and exploitation of seabed minerals in the Cook Islands EEZ and, critically, provided for the establishment of the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority (SBMA)—the national regulatory body responsible for all seabed mineral activities in the nation's EEZ. The *Seabed Minerals Act* entered into force on 26 June 2012, with the SBMA formally inaugurated the same day. This flurry of domestic governance activity sought to pave the way for the commencement of commercial seabed mining in the Cook Islands.

While seabed mining remains an unrealised sector in the Cook Islands (with current activities confined to exploration as discussed below), the passing of the *Seabed Minerals Act* represented an important exercise of sovereignty for the CIG. It signalled the CIG's capacity to develop a regulatory regime expressly for this emergent industry and furthermore, to be world's first jurisdiction to do so.<sup>599</sup> It positioned the CIG as a global leader in the seabed minerals space, which, as we will see through this chapter, would continue as a recurrent theme in the narrative that the government cultivated for itself.

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<sup>597</sup> Tom Marsters, 'Cook Islands Position on Deep Sea Minerals Sector (DSM): The Cook Islands Perspective' (The ACT EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) Meeting, Brussels: Government of the Cook Islands, 2012), 6, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/acp/dv/paper\\_deep\\_sea\\_minerals\\_/paper\\_deep\\_sea\\_minerals\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/acp/dv/paper_deep_sea_minerals_/paper_deep_sea_minerals_en.pdf).

<sup>598</sup> Paul Lynch, 'Towards the Development of a National Regulatory Framework for Deep Sea Mining in the Cook Islands', 2011, 14.

<sup>599</sup> The Cook Islands was the first country to adopt explicit seabed minerals regulations. Papua New Guinea and Fiji amended their terrestrial mining acts to address potential seabed activities. See Tomoko Kakee, 'Deep-Sea Mining Legislation in Pacific Island Countries: From the Perspective of Public Participation in Approval Procedures', *Marine Policy* 117 (2020): 103881, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.103881>.

### Cronan Study (2013)

By the time this *Seabed Minerals Act* came into force, Tom Marsters had been re-elected to government where he was serving as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Mining and Natural Resources. With the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Marsters led the CIG and SBMA to engage Professor David Cronan of the Imperial College of London to conduct analysis on the distribution, abundance and composition of nodules in the nation's EEZ.<sup>600</sup> Cronan announced the results of the study in March 2013, making front-page news in the national masthead<sup>601</sup> (Figure 11). His study concluded that the Cook Islands' seabed contained 10 billion tons of nodules, which were richer in cobalt (+30%), nickel (+45%) and copper (+25%) than previously estimated.<sup>602</sup> These findings positioned the Cook Islands EEZ as "second only to the Clarion-Clipperton Zone<sup>603</sup> in the north Pacific in terms of manganese nodule mining,"<sup>604</sup> with the nation's abundant and resource rich nodule fields rendering it an attractive place for seabed minerals activity.

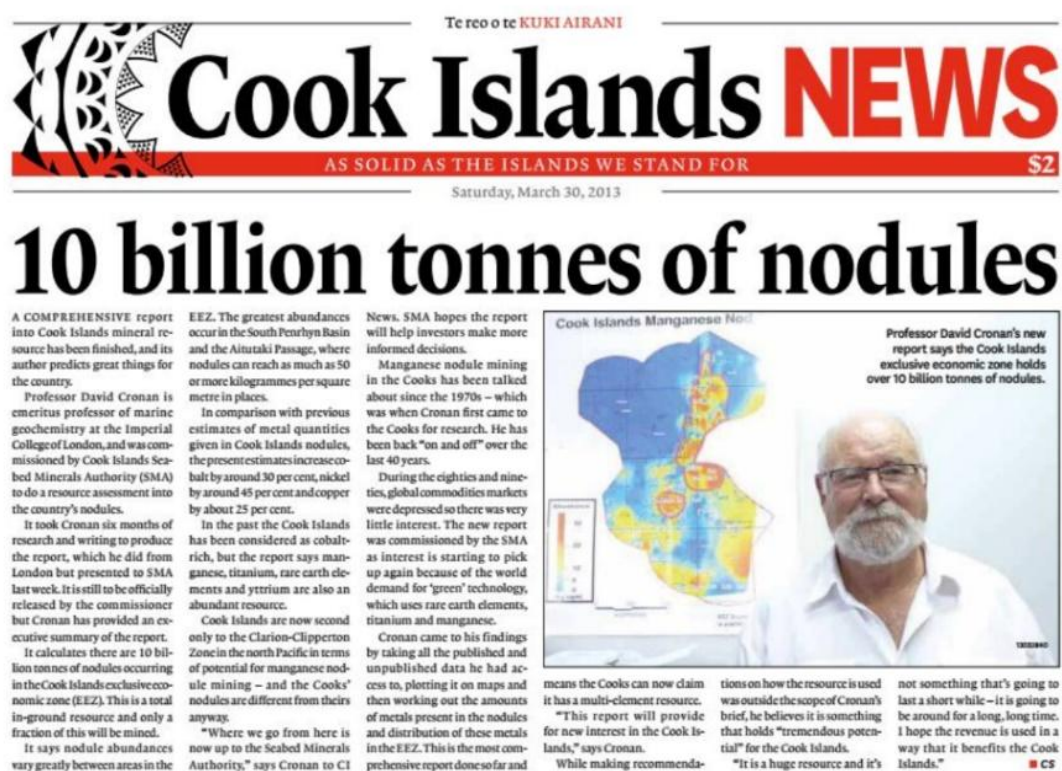


**Figure 11:** Cronan study makes the front page of the *Cook Islands News*, 30 March 2013.

<sup>600</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, 'SBMA 10 Years Celebration Booklet'.

<sup>601</sup> Calida Smylie, '10 Billion Tonnes of Nodules', *Cook Islands News*, 30 March 2013.

<sup>602</sup> David Cronan, 'The Distribution, Abundance, Composition and Resource Potential of the Manganese Nodules in the Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone' (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, May 2013).

<sup>603</sup> The Clarion Clipperton Zone (CCZ) is a mineral rich area of the international seabed. It is located in the Pacific Ocean to the southeast of Hawaii and northeast of Kiribati.

<sup>604</sup> Smylie, '10 Billion Tonnes of Nodules'.

For the CIG, this study could not have been more welcome. The strong global metals market of the late 2000s and early 2010s created a favourable context within which to receive Cronan's study, with high metals prices and high demand creating a far stronger economic case for seabed mining than that outlined in the 1995 East-West Centre analysis. Cronan's study was seen to validate the CIG's recent efforts at establishing a domestic seabed minerals governance regime and helped to generate optimism about the potential of such sector in the Cook Islands EEZ.<sup>605</sup> For perhaps the first time in the Cook Islands' history, the CIG could pursue its seabed minerals vision in a context where favourable economic *and* governance<sup>606</sup> conditions were present. The dream of an active seabed minerals sector in the Cook Islands was moving ever closer, with key enabling conditions seemingly falling into place.

### **Extended continental shelf claim**

During this period of revived seabed minerals interest, another important, yet often overlooked, development in the Cook Islands' seabed minerals journey was unfolding: the CIG's application to extend the country's continental shelf claim. As we saw in Sir Henry's reference to polymetallic nodules when advocating for the 200nm EEZ regime, ambitions for an active domestic seabed mining industry have long shaped the CIG's understanding of its territorial boundaries. Thirty-five years later, this again would prove the case in the CIG's extended continental shelf claim.

With the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat and SOPAC, the CIG lodged a submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS) on 16 April 2009 outlining its claim to an additional 413,000km<sup>2</sup> of seabed to the north of the country's EEZ (Figure 12). With this, the Cook Islands became the first Pacific Islands nation to make such a submission. Meeting and media records from the time clearly detail how the prospect of expanding the available area for domestic seabed mining activity motivated this extended continental shelf claim. Consider, for example, the Record of Proceedings from the Thirty-Seventh Session of SOPAC wherein the CIG's statement reads:

Deep Sea Minerals (DSM)

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<sup>605</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community and European Union, 'Information Brochure 11: Cook Islands Deep-Sea Minerals Potential' (SPC-EU EDF10 Deep Sea Minerals (DSM) Project, 2013), [https://dsm.gsd.spc.int/public/files/brochures/11\\_CK.pdf](https://dsm.gsd.spc.int/public/files/brochures/11_CK.pdf); RNZ Pacific, 'Huge Potential for Deep Sea Mining in the Cooks - Seabed Minerals Authority', *Radio New Zealand*, 4 September 2013, <https://digitalpasifik.org/items/584537>; Rupert Neate, 'Seabed Mining Could Earn Cook Islands "Tens of Billions of Dollars"', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/aug/05/seabed-mining-cook-islands-billions>.

<sup>606</sup> Recalling CIG's passing of the *Seabed Minerals Act* (2009)



The Cook Islands like many PICs have been approached with requests for licenses in progressing the Cook Islands Deep Sea Mineral potential into an industrial reality.

The Cook Islands has been supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat in view of engaging assistance in furthering its potential in Deep Sea Mining and that of the eCS [Extension of the Continental Shelf, sic].<sup>607</sup>

Or similarly, the comments of Sir Tom Marsters to Radio New Zealand on the CIG's update to its extended continental shelf claim: "Basically what we're looking at is the future possibility of prospecting for deep sea minerals where at the moment we are basically asking for an extension of the continental shelf which extends beyond our EEZ."<sup>608</sup> Between these statements it is clear that like in 1974, the presence of polymetallic nodules in the Cook Islands' near seabed spurred the CIG to assert an extended territorial claim over ocean space. The prospect of a Cook Islands seabed minerals future thus underlined not only the political and economic dimensions of the CIG's state-making project, but territorial dimensions too.

Following review, the UNCLCS eventually denied the CIG's extended continental shelf claim on the basis of technical and procedural grounds<sup>609</sup>—much to the frustration of the CIG.<sup>610</sup> Refusing to be deterred, the CIG committed to revising its extended continental shelf submission<sup>611</sup> and in December 2021 lodged a revised submission. At the time of writing, the UNCLCS is yet to reach a decision on the CIG's revised submission, however, with exploratory seabed minerals activities having now commenced in the state's EEZ (to be discussed shortly), the significance of this decision today is arguably greater than it was upon first application. Should this submission be successful, the CIG will not only extend its territorial maritime claim but in doing so, open up an additional polymetallic nodule field for exploration and potential exploitation.

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<sup>607</sup> Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission, 'SOPAC Proceedings from the Thirty-Seventh Session: 22-30 October 2008', June 2009, 66, Appendix 4.

<sup>608</sup> Radio New Zealand, 'Cooks to Ask UN for Extension of Continental Shelf', *Radio New Zealand*, 6 February 2013, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/210043/cooks-to-ask-un-for-extension-of-continental-shelf>.

<sup>609</sup> Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, 'Summary Of Recommendations Of The Commission On The Limits Of The Continental Shelf In Regard To The Submission Made By The Cook Islands In Respect Of The Manihiki Plateau On 16 April 2009', 19 August 2016, para 95.

<sup>610</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of the Government of the Cook Islands, "Note from the Government of the Cook Islands Addressed to the Secretariat of the United Nations Dated 30 November 2016," November 30, 2016; "The Ministry regrettably wishes to place on record that the Government of the Cook Islands is disappointed that the Commission, for the various reasons states in the Recommendations, has reached the conclusion that it could not approve the location of the outer limits submitted by the Cook Islands in the region of the Manihiki Plateau."

<sup>611</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of the Government of the Cook Islands.

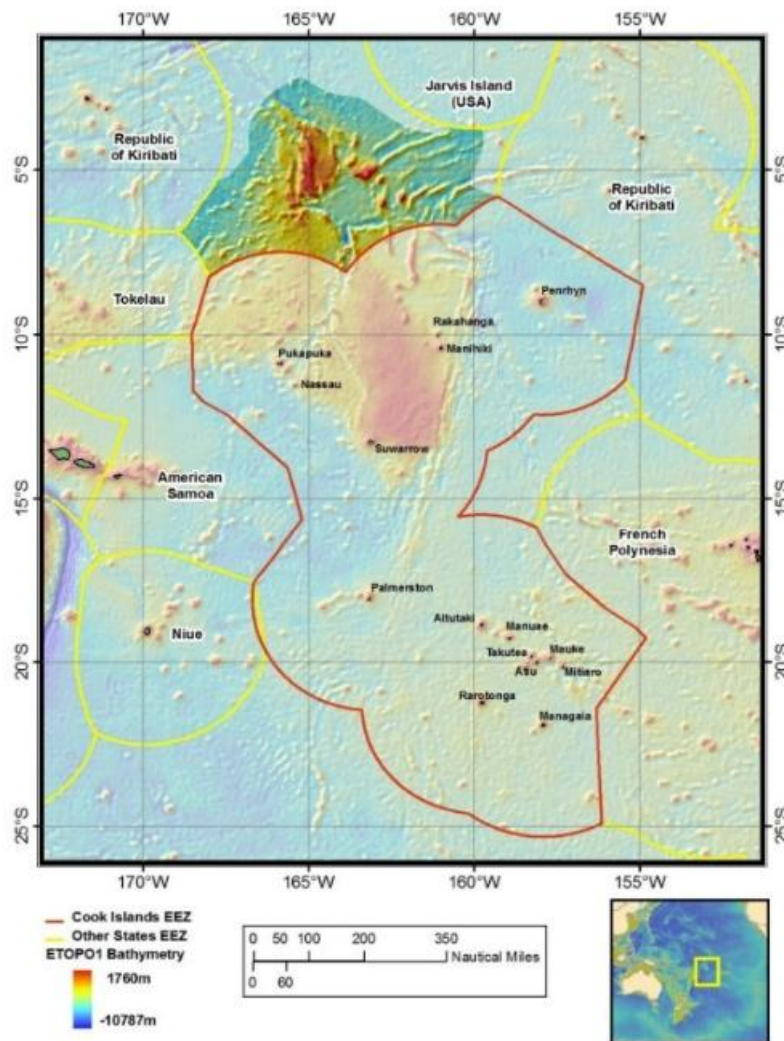


**Figure 1** The outer limit of the continental shelf of the Cook Islands in the Manihiki Plateau region showing the outer limit line and area of extended continental shelf.

CKI-ES-DOC-MAP 1

**Figure 12:** Cook Islands Government's extended continental shelf application. Source: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority.

### 6.2.3 Seabed minerals partnerships and agreements

Having spent much of the late 2000s developing an enabling regulatory environment for domestic seabed minerals activities, the CIG entered the 2010s in a strong position to negotiate partnerships and agreements that could support the commencement the sector. The Cook Islands Parliament's passing of the *Seabed Minerals (Prospecting and Exploration) Regulations* (2015) and *Seabed Minerals Amendment Act* (2015) updated the earlier *Seabed Minerals Act* (2009) and, critically, paved the way for the CIG to open the Cook Islands EEZ to tender for exploratory seabed licences (13 August 2015). For the CIG, however, the timing of this tender process was ill-fated.

Since its peak in 2011, the global metals market had been tumbling towards a ten-year low, which it reached in December 2015 (Figure 13). As with the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, investor interest in seabed

minerals activity evaporated and despite earlier international interest in the Cook Islands EEZ, the CIG received no applications to its 2015 tender round.



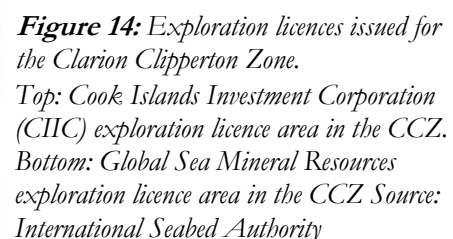
**Figure 13:** Global price of metal index. Source: Federal Reserve Economic Data, International Monetary Fund. Annotation of the December 2015 low.

If one had expected the disappointment of the failed 2015 tender process to have dampened the CIG's seabed minerals pursuits, the events of 2016 indicate otherwise. On the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016, the Cook Islands Investment Corporation (CIIC)—the national body tasked with managing Crown assets—signed a 15-year contract with the International Seabed Authority (ISA) for the exploration of polymetallic nodules in the Clarion Clipperton Zone (CCZ). As part of this process, the Cook Islands became a 'sponsoring state' for seabed minerals activities in the Area where it could sponsor the activities of a non-state contractor to facilitate their operations in the international seabed.<sup>612</sup> Less than one week later, Mark Brown (who had now been appointed the Cook Islands Minister for Natural Resources and Minerals) signed a Joint Venture Agreement with Global Sea Mineral Resources (GSR)—the deep-sea division of the Belgian engineering company, DEME Group.<sup>613</sup> This Agreement established CIIC Seabed Resources (CIIC-SR).

This new joint venture (CIIC-SR) propelled the Cook Islands closer to realising its seabed minerals vision in four important ways. First, it established a partnership through which the CIG could directly participate in seabed minerals exploratory activities via the CIIC rather than watching from the sidelines (as would be the case were it to be solely a sponsoring state). Relatedly, the joint venture afforded the CIG with access to the technical expertise of GSR, which promised to

<sup>612</sup> The sponsoring state system established under UNCLOS (*Article 139*, *Article 153(4)* and *Annex III, Article 4(4)*) enables seabed minerals contractors that are non-state actors to be brought into compliance and made accountable to international law that is premised on a state-based system. Sponsoring states carry responsibility for ensuring that contractors are compliant with UNCLOS and meet their necessary obligations and are thus liable for any breaches by the contractor.

<sup>613</sup> Eusebio Fatialofa, 'CIIC Seabed Resources Ltd: Application for Exploration Licence - EEZ - The Cook Islands: Non-Technical Summary', 24 October 2021, 4; Petterson and Tawake, 'The Cook Islands (South Pacific) Experience in Governance of Seabed Manganese Nodule Mining', 284.



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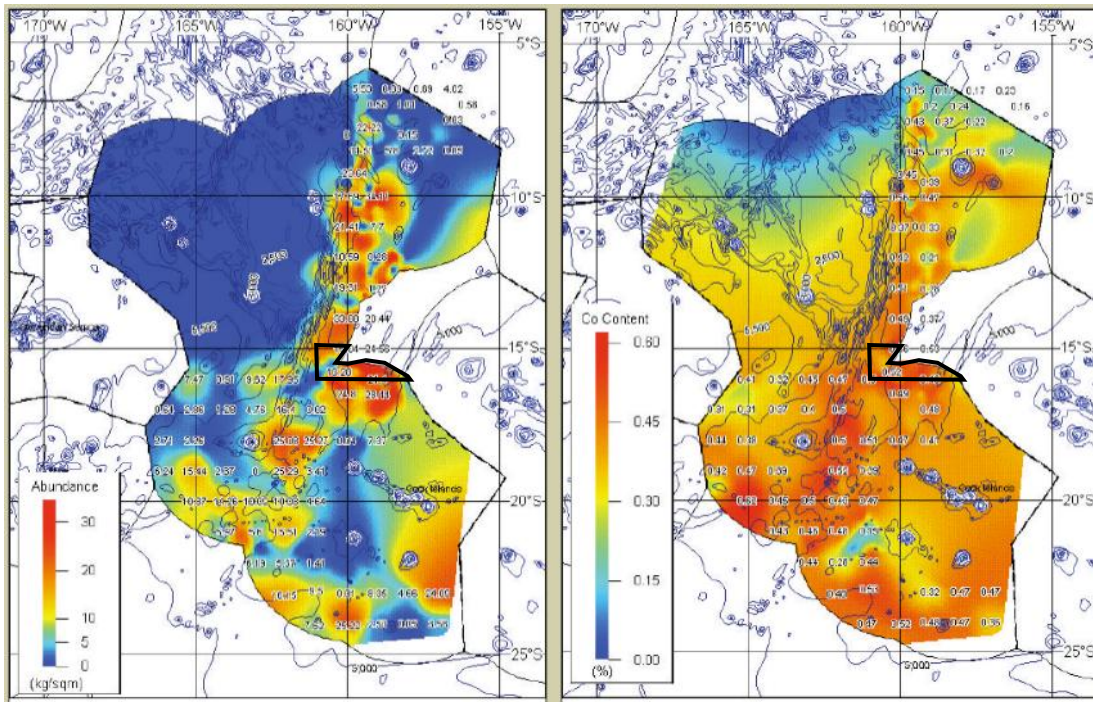


**Figure 15:** Polymetallic nodule maps generated from the 2000 Japan-SOPAC Survey. Left: Variation in nodule abundance in the Cook Islands EEZ. Right: Cobalt content of nodules in the Cook Islands EEZ. Source: SPC-EU (2013)

Area outlined in black representing CIIC-SR exploratory licence area.

#### 6.2.4 Realising a dream: The commencement of domestic seabed exploration

Sixty years in the making, the CIG's dream of a domestic seabed minerals sector appeared to be moving towards realisation in the late 2010s. The government's efforts in developing seabed minerals legislation through the decade had laid the groundwork for the sector's commencement in national waters, and in 2016 the CIG signed an agreement with the US-based Ocean Minerals LLC (OML) to reserve approximately 12,000km<sup>2</sup> of the Cook Islands EEZ for minerals exploration (primarily rare earth enriched sediments), with first rights of refusal over an additional 48,000km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 16).<sup>615</sup> In return, OML committed to pay the CIG a statutory licence fee, monthly fee and funded annual training programs for Cook Islanders. One year later, the government signed a second reservation agreement with OML, setting aside an additional 23,000km<sup>2</sup> of the nation's EEZ for polymetallic nodule prospecting and exploration.<sup>616</sup> The deal,

<sup>615</sup> Rashneel Kumar, 'Cook Islands Signs Seabed Minerals Deal', *Cook Islands News*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/local/cook-islands-signs-seabed-minerals-deal/>; Petterson and Tawake, 'The Cook Islands (South Pacific) Experience in Governance of Seabed Manganese Nodule Mining'; Radio New Zealand, 'US Company to Explore Cook Islands Seabed for Minerals', *Radio New Zealand*, 2016, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/314512/us-company-to-explore-cook-islands-seabed-for-minerals>.

<sup>616</sup> Cook Islands Investment Corporation and Ocean Minerals LLC, 'Joint Media Release' (Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 29 September 2017), <https://www.omlus.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Joint-OML-CIIC-Media-Release.pdf>; Petterson and Tawake, 'The Cook Islands (South Pacific) Experience in Governance of Seabed Manganese Nodule Mining'.

worth USD100,000, required OML to apply for an exploration licence should they wish to commence activities in the reserved area.



**Figure 16:** Signing of Ocean Minerals LLC exploration agreement, September 2016. Source: Ocean Minerals LLC  
Front row: Brian Mason, Legal Counsel, OML; Hon. Mark Brown, Minister of Financial and Economic Management, Cook Islands.  
Back row: Lloyd Miles, Legal Manager, CIIC; Michael Henry, Chairman, CIIC; Alex Herman, Legal Counsel, Cook Islands Crown Law Office; Garth Henderson, Financial Secretary of the Cook Islands Ministry of Finance and Economic Management; Tamarii Tutangata, CEO, CIIC; Paul Lynch, Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Commissioner, SBMA.

These reservation Agreements with OML represented key milestones in the CIG's seabed minerals journey, moving the prospect of seabed minerals activity beyond speculation and closer to reality.<sup>617</sup> While these advancements were met with enthusiasm from some,<sup>618</sup> it prompted others in the Cook Islands community to question the strength and transparency of the nation's new seabed minerals laws should OML (or subsequent contractors) activate these agreements and apply for exploration (let alone mining) licences.<sup>619</sup>

These growing concerns ultimately led the CIG to place a hold on seabed minerals activities in May 2018 to allow for a review of the nation's existing legislation.<sup>620</sup> Secondary sources suggest that the CIG's plan to revise domestic seabed minerals legislation was poorly publicised to the Cook Islands community, with the government's announcement that it would table new legislation

<sup>617</sup> Liam Ratana, 'One Step Closer to Mining Sea Floor', *Cook Islands News*, 28 March 2018, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/one-step-closer-to-mining-sea-floor/>.

<sup>618</sup> Kumar, 'Cook Islands Signs Seabed Minerals Deal'; Rashneel Kumar, 'Seabed Deal Hauling in \$1m', *Cook Islands News*, 15 May 2017, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/local/seabed-deal-hauling-in-1m/>; Cecilia Jamasmie, 'US Miner Goes after Rare Earths in the Cook Islands', *Mining.Com*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.mining.com/us-miner-goes-after-rare-earths-in-the-cook-islands/>.

<sup>619</sup> Radio New Zealand, 'Cooks Opposition in the Dark over Seabed Mining', *Radio New Zealand*, 10 December 2018, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/377921/cooks-opposition-in-the-dark-over-seabed-mining>; Liam Ratana, 'Strong Opinions on Deep-Sea Mining', *Cook Islands News*, 16 April 2018, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/strong-opinions-on-deep-sea-mining/>; Cameron Scott, 'New Seabed Minerals Laws on Way', *Cook Islands News*, 6 November 2018, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/new-seabed-minerals-laws-on-way/>.

<sup>620</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, 'SBMA 10 Years Celebration Booklet'.

later that year being met “with surprise” at a public consultation meeting in November.<sup>621</sup> These criticisms aside, the government pushed forward with its legislative review process, hosting consultations on its proposed regulations in Rarotonga (November 2018), Mangaia, Penrhyn and Pukapuka (December 2018), and Rakahanga (April 2019).<sup>622</sup> Throughout this (rather short)<sup>623</sup> consultation process, local civil society organisations voiced concerns about the potential environmental impacts associated with seabed minerals activity and queried the transparency of legislative changes.<sup>624</sup> These concerns were noted but largely sidelined by the CIG, with the government passing the *Seabed Minerals Act 2019* (June 2019) and in doing so, replacing the 2009 Act.

### **CIG’s issuing of exploration licences**

On 22 October 2020, the final piece of legislation required for the commencement of the Cook Islands exploration licencing process entered into force: the *Seabed Minerals (Exploration) Regulations 2020*. That same day, Mark Brown (now Cook Islands Prime Minister) launched the seabed minerals exploration tender process at a major public event hosted at the National Auditorium, Rarotonga (Figure 17). Unlike the Cook Islands’ first tender opening of 2015, this second attempt attracted far greater interest—a product of both improved global metals prices (Figure 13) and the Cook Islands’ governance, partnership and capacity building efforts in recent years. By the beginning of 2021, four exploration licence applications had been received, initiating a process of licence application review, assessment, consultation and drafting managed by the SBMA.

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<sup>621</sup> Cameron Scott, ‘Govt’s Seabed Minerals Plan Meets Backlash’, *Cook Islands News*, 14 November 2018, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/govt-s-seabed-minerals-plan-meets-backlash/>.

<sup>622</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, ‘SBMA 10 Years Celebration Booklet’.

<sup>623</sup> The *draft Seabed Minerals Bill 2019* was released for public review on 22 December 2018, with the deadline for public comment initially set for 6 February 2019. Under pressure to provide more time for public review, the CIG extended the deadline for comment until 27 February, and again extended to 14 March. Part 8A of the *Bill* was issued separately on 23 January 2019, following a similar deadline for comment.

<sup>624</sup> Korero o te ‘Orau, ‘NGO Comments on Draft Bill’, *Cook Islands News*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/ngo-comments-on-draft-bill/>; CJ Iorns Magallanes, ‘Submission on Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Bill 2019 Consultation Draft’ (Te Ipukarea Society Korero o te ‘Orau, 2019), <https://tiscookislands.org/wp-content/uploads/Submission-on-the-Seabed-Minerals-Bill-final.pdf>; Te Ipukarea Society, ‘Legal Opinion on Seabed “Goldrush”’, *Cook Islands News*, 30 March 2019, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/legal-opinion-on-seabed-goldrush/>; Te Ipukarea Society, ‘Transparency Needed in Seabed Mining Process’, *Cook Islands News*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/environment/transparency-needed-in-seabed-mining-process/>.





**Figure 17:** *Seabed Minerals Exploration Tender launch, 22 October 2022, Rarotonga. L-R: Bishop Tutai Pere, Chair, Seabed Minerals Advisory Committee; Sir Tom Marsters, Queens Representative, Cook Islands; Hon. Mark Brown, Prime Minister, Cook Islands; Alex Herman, Commissioner, SBMA. Source: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority*

On 23 February 2022, seabed minerals advocates and many Cook Islanders returned to the National Auditorium to celebrate the awarding of three seabed minerals exploration licenses at a ceremony of great fanfare (Figure 18). Three successful applicants emerged through the licensing process: CIIC-SR<sup>625</sup> (the joint venture first established in 2016 between CIIC and GSR), Moana Minerals Limited (a subsidiary of OML and its parent company Odyssey Marine Exploration), and CIC Limited (a private seabed minerals consortium where Odyssey Marine Exploration also owns a significant share) (Figure 19).<sup>626</sup> As the government's joint venture, CIIC-SR was granted a five-year<sup>627</sup> exploration license for an area (19,479 km<sup>2</sup>) of the South Penrhyn Basin particularly rich in polymetallic nodules (Figure 15, black outlined area). This allocation of the Cook Islands' finest nodule field to CIIC-SR is unsurprising given the government's longstanding ambition to be actively involved in seabed minerals activities in their waters. In short, the CIG kept what was best for its own joint venture. Moana Minerals was also granted five-year exploratory license over a nodule-rich area (23,630 km<sup>2</sup>) of the South Penrhyn Basin. This lucrative deal was facilitated, at least in part, by leveraging the earlier *Reserved Area Agreements* of its parent company, OML. CIC received by far the largest (211,545 km<sup>2</sup>), but least rich license area.

<sup>625</sup> CIIC-SR has since been rebranded its domestic exploratory operations under the name 'Cobalt Seabed Resources' (CSR).

<sup>626</sup> Note that the US-based Odyssey Minerals Limited has significant interest in both Moana Minerals Limited (via its purchase agreement of Ocean Minerals LLC (OML) where Odyssey Minerals Limited has acquired a 13% share in OML, with the potential to acquire up to 40%) and CIC Limited (where it has a 14.5% share of CIC and is a member of the CIC Consortium as well as a marine operations partner).

<sup>627</sup> All three license holders can apply for extensions of up to twenty-five years if they continue to meet the Cook Islands licensing requirements.





**Figure 18:** Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Exploration License Granting Ceremony, 23 February 2022, Rarotonga. SBMA staff; Alex Herman, Commissioner, SBMA; Hon. Mark Brown, Prime Minister Cook Islands; Sir Tom Marsters, Queens Representative, Cook Islands; Bishop Tutai Pere, Chair, Seabed Minerals Advisory Committee. Source: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority

At the time of writing, the Cook Islands remains in the exploration phase. All three license holders have conducted scientific surveys in their respective license areas and are in the process of, or preparing to, undertake environmental assessments and studies. If the results of these environmental assessments are deemed satisfactory by SBMA, these exploratory activities will next move into the testing of mining technologies and prototypes. The CIG and SBMA remain adamant that the current exploration phase is no guarantee of future seabed minerals mining. To cite SBMA Commissioner, Alex Herman: “I wish to reiterate that the Cook Islands has made it clear we are only allowing exploration activities, and the onus remains on the licence holders to demonstrate to us that they can collect our nodules without causing serious harm to the marine environment.”<sup>628</sup> That said, if this current exploration phase does successfully ‘prove’ to the CIG that seabed mining is ecologically, socially and economically acceptable, it is highly possible that the Cook Islands will be among the first places on Earth for seabed mining to occur.<sup>629</sup>

While there remain many ‘ifs’ to be resolved before seabed mining can become reality in the Cook Islands, it is clear that the current exploration phase places the CIG within touching distance of its

<sup>628</sup> Alex Herman, ‘Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the Seabed Minerals Authority at the Fostering International and Regional Cooperation in Support of the Sustainable Development of the Blue Economy of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS United Nations Ocean Conference Side Event’ (United Nations Ocean Conference, Lisbon, Portugal, 2022).

<sup>629</sup> Nautilus Minerals Inc. was granted the world’s first seabed mining licence in 2011 by the PNG government. The company, however, filed for bankruptcy in 2019 before its project, Solwara 1, extracted any minerals. Three exploratory drilling operations were conducted during Solwara 1’s time of operation.

state-making seabed minerals vision. The CIG's exercise of sovereignty over seabed minerals activities in its EEZ (wherein it is actively involved as a joint-venture licence holder through CIIC-SR) reflects an assertion of self-determination from both territorial and political perspectives. Furthermore, because of its first-mover efforts over the last five decades, the state has positioned itself as a global pioneer of the sector where it is now poised to lead the world in (potential) seabed mining activities. The ISA's decision to slow the finalisation of its *Mining Code* until 2025 (at the earliest) has only further strengthened the CIG's position as a leader in the sector wherein its exclusive authority to make determinations on seabed minerals activities within its sovereign jurisdiction renders it an attractive place for industry stakeholders to engage. This point is important and the focus of discussion below.

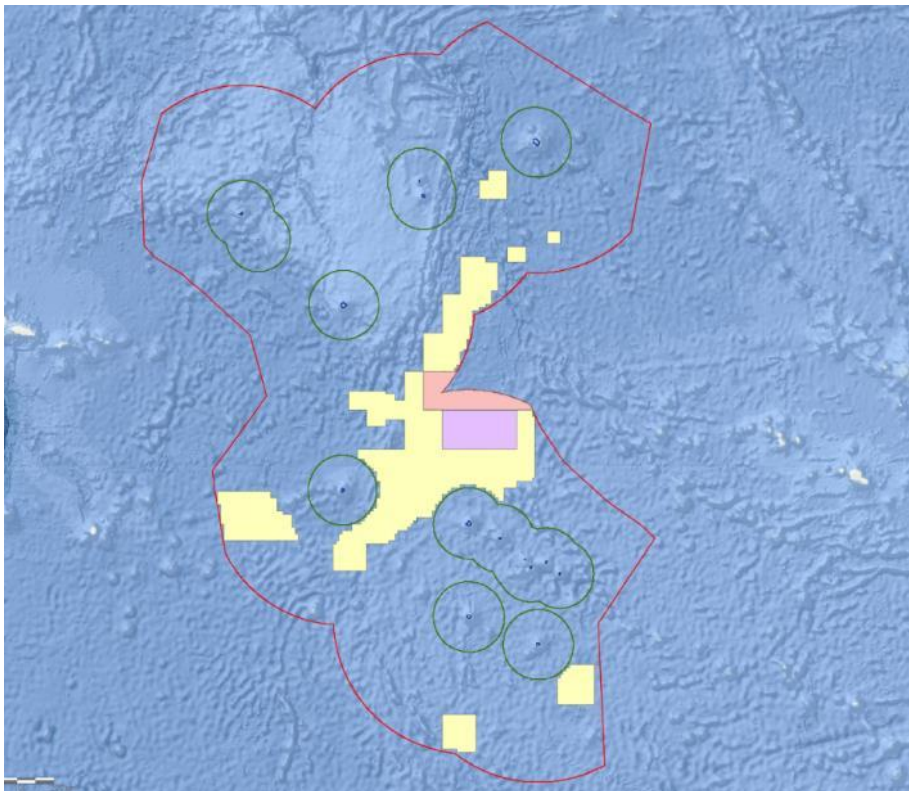


**Figure 19:** Map of the Cook Islands Exploration License Areas. Red: CIIC-SR. Purple: Moana Minerals. Yellow: CIC. Source: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority

### Nauru's triggering of the 'two-year rule'

In July 2021, the Nauru government sent global leaders, seabed mining advocates and its opponents scrambling (albeit for differing reasons) when it triggered an UNCLOS treaty provision known as the 'two-year rule.' The 'two-year rule' is outlined in section 1(15) of the *1994 Implementing Agreement* and requires the Council of the ISA to finalise and adopt the necessary regulation for seabed mining within two years of its invocation. Prior to mid-2021, seabed minerals activity in the Area has been restricted to exploratory ventures and though the ISA had initiated the process of drafting regulations for seabed minerals mining (the *Mining Code*), these negotiations had been

slow and difficult. Nauru's invocation of the 'two-year rule' sought to pressure the ISA and international community into concluding these negotiations and establish regulations for seabed mining activities in the Area—without which, such exploitation cannot legally occur. From the position of the Cook Islands, there are advantages to both the *Mining Code*'s swift finalisation yet also its continued negotiation. On the one hand, the CIG is an active stakeholder of seabed minerals activities in the Area through its joint-venture with GSR (CIIC-SR), which places it in a firm position to progress its current exploration license towards activities of exploitation should the *Mining Code* reach finalisation.

On the other hand, however, the continued negotiation of these international regulations offers arguably greater opportunity for the CIG—namely, the increased attractiveness of the Cook Islands EEZ for seabed minerals prospectors. As the ISA's current struggle to finalise the *Mining Code* demonstrates, there are considerable challenges associated with securing agreement among the international community over the issue of seabed minerals. The multi-stakeholder environment requires deft and often prolonged negotiations to arrive at decisions (customarily by consensus) on almost all issues—let alone such a divisive matter as seabed mining. By contrast, the CIG's longstanding interest in domestic seabed minerals activities, its establishment of an enabling legislative and governance environment, and relatively smooth management of the exploration phase to date positions the Cook Islands as an attractive place for seabed minerals actors to engage. This is in addition to the Cook Islands being a self-governing nation where in the CIG alone is vested with the authority to determine whether seabed mining will proceed or not. With the *Seabed Minerals (Minerals Harvesting and Other Mining) Regulations 2024* passing parliament in October 2024, prospective contractors need only the CIG's approval for seabed mining to occur.

The ISA's recent decision<sup>630</sup> to slow its finalisation of the *Mining Code* in spite of the 'two-year rule' ultimately works to strengthen the CIG's position as a global leader in the seabed minerals industry and relatedly, its ability to exercise authority over such activities within its EEZ. This decision positions the Cook Islands as a particularly attractive site of seabed minerals activity and a favourable environment for potential seabed mining.

### 6.2.5 Section Summary

Amidst the rapid progress (technological and regulatory) of today's seabed minerals industry, it is important that we do not lose sight of the deep history that underlines the CIG's relationship with this sector. As this section has shown, interest in seabed minerals activity is nothing new for the

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<sup>630</sup> International Seabed Authority, 'ISA Council Closes Part II of Its 28th Session' (Kingston, Jamaica: International Seabed Authority, 24 July 2023), <https://www.isa.org.jm/news/isa-council-closes-part-ii-of-its-28th-session/>.

CIG, but a longstanding agenda that has been carried forward by generations of leaders. Since the identification of polymetallic nodules in Cook Islands waters just years before the nation's attainment of self-governance in 1965, visions of domestic seabed minerals activity (particularly mining) have been a consistent and powerful imaginary for CIG leaders who have championed the sector as a vehicle for economic independence and the assertion of state sovereignty. Indeed, even from a physical state-making perspective, ambitions of seabed minerals activity have informed the CIG's efforts to enlarge its maritime boundaries—think Sir Henry's advocacy of a 200nm EEZ regime, or the current application for an extended continental shelf. Appreciating the extent to which seabed minerals are embedded in the CIG's state-making imaginary is necessary for contextualising the government's current engagement with the blue economy. It alerts us to the resilience of the CIG's state-making seabed minerals vision (through periods of technical unfeasibility, collapsed global metals markets, and political opposition), and the government's ability to adapt its engagements with the sector in response to changing circumstances. These are key insights to take forward into our thinking on the CIG's relationship with the blue economy and the political function it serves as a promise of transformative ocean development.

### 6.3 Storylines

First seeded in the era of self-governance, the dream that seabed minerals extraction would one day serve as the cornerstone for Cook Islands' economic and political self-determination has only grown among the CIG over the decades. Regardless of one's opinions on the sector, the resilience of the CIG's state-making dream is little other than remarkable. Notwithstanding a brief pause in the sector's domestic development around the turn of the 21st century, leading CIG representatives have remained steadfast in their commitment to seabed minerals activities, adapting their justification of such pursuit in accordance with the norms and interests of the time. This responsiveness to changing circumstances is abundantly clear in the case of the CIG's engagement with the blue economy, where the state has leveraged this prevalent ocean development discourse to frame its seabed minerals aspirations in a contemporary context of heightened sustainability consciousness.

This section traces the CIG's engagement with the blue economy discourse via its associated storyline constructions. I examine the CIG's blue economy engagement across regional, domestic and international forums, detailing how the CIG's 'green economy in a blue world' storyline of 2011 evolved into a 'net-zero leader' construct as the decade matured. The CIG's ability to adapt its blue economy storylines over the decade reminds us of the elasticity of discourse, as well as the

agency of actors to modify their engagements in response to changing circumstances. I contend that throughout the 2010s, the blue economy provided the CIG with a useful political tool to rework and refashion its longstanding seabed minerals vision—at once defending this vision from challenge and further advancing the state’s pursuit of seabed mining in a contemporary age. Why the blue economy appears to have lost its political utility for the CIG in recent years will be the subject of *Section Three*.

### 6.3.1 Regional engagements: Early blue economy advocacy and the ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline

As detailed in *Chapter Five*, the ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline was central to the PSIDS blue economy campaign at Rio+20. Here, Pacific leaders led the global mainstreaming of the blue economy and, critically, assigned it a new commitment to elevate the concerns and priorities of ocean-based communities of the Global South by expanding the global sustainable development agenda oceanward. While multiple Pacific delegations played a role in constructing this ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline, the CIG appear to have been particularly active in this process. This subsection outlines the CIG’s early engagement with the discourse, exposing how the government’s contribution to the PSIDS ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline was motivated by more than simply its advocacy of an ocean-inclusive global development agenda, but also its interest in securing the place of seabed minerals in this blue economy vision and later, as a strategy for asserting state sovereignty in the international system.

#### **Rio+20 preparatory process**

The first suggestion of the CIG’s contribution to the PSIDS’ ‘green in a blue world’ storyline can be seen at Rio+20 Pacific Subregional Preparatory Joint Ministerial Meeting convened in Apia, Samoa, 21–22 July 2011. It was on this stage that the Cook Islands Prime Minister, Henry Puna, indicated his support for the “green economy in a blue world” campaign, while encouraging greater clarity on the concept, so as to ensure a clear and effective Pacific voice at Rio+20.<sup>631</sup> Puna’s support brought the Cook Islands into alignment with earlier efforts by the Solomon Islands (UNEP GC/GMEF, February 2011), Fiji, Nauru and Palau (PrepCom II, March 2011) to expand Rio+20’s planned ‘green economy’ focus towards an inclusion of ocean development opportunities.<sup>632</sup> This marked the CIG’s first public articulation of the blue economy, wherein it

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<sup>631</sup> Ashton and Jackson, ‘Summary Report, 21–22 July 2011: UNCSD Pacific Subregional Preparatory Joint Ministerial Meeting Report PDF’; Christina Newport, ‘Greening Our Blue World: Report on the Cook Islands National Assessment on Greening the Economy’ (Government of the Cook Islands United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, July 2011), 2–17.

<sup>632</sup> Covert et al., ‘Summary Report, 7–8 March 2011: UNCSD 2nd Session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom II)’.

advocated for a united regional approach to the promotion of sustainable ocean development at Rio+20.

### ***Greening our Blue World* report**

Months before Puna's engagement with the 'green economy in a blue world' storyline at this July 2011 meeting, the CIG had been internally engaged in discussions about the value of the blue economy concept for the Cook Islands. In partnership with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the CIG commissioned Cook Islander consultant, Christina Newport, to prepare a report on sustainable development opportunities available to the nation, which resulted in the production of *Greening our Blue World: Report on Cook Islands National Assessment on Greening the Economy*. This report was expressly tasked with "assist[ing] the Cook Islands with its national and regional preparations for and participation in the Rio+20 process in 2012"<sup>633</sup> and was provided to CIG representatives (in draft form) ahead of the July 2011 meeting. The report was publicly released just weeks after the July meeting where it became a key point of reference for the CIG's engagement in Rio+20. Thus, while the CIG's advocacy of a 'green economy in a blue world' storyline was first publicly articulated at the July 2011 meeting, its support for such discourse construct had been developing months prior.

As evident in the title, *Greening our Blue World* presented the case for framing sustainable development through a 'green in a blue world' framework.<sup>634</sup> This framing was seemingly informed by the Terms of Reference wherein the CIG and UNESCAP outlined:

The Pacific Small Island Developing States have stated that in their context a green economy is really a blue economy calling for the highlighting at Rio+20 of ocean governance and fisheries issues. The Pacific Preparatory Meeting will also seek to further elaborate and consolidate the blue economy concept.<sup>635</sup>

These Terms of Reference reveal how the CIG was aware of growing blue economy interest within the Pacific, with this report commissioned as an attempt to clarify the discourse and explore its applicability for the domestic Cook Islands context. Though *Greening our Blue World* evaded a precise definition of its "green in a blue world" framework, it did advocate for an expansion of the sustainable development agenda to encompass both "land and ocean development" wherein economic development is 'decoupled' from environmental degradation.<sup>636</sup> As we saw in *Chapter*

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<sup>633</sup> Newport, 'Greening Our Blue World: Report on the Cook Islands National Assessment on Greening the Economy', 1–3.

<sup>634</sup> Newport, 1–4.

<sup>635</sup> Newport, 8–44.

<sup>636</sup> Newport, 2–16.



*One*, such decoupling ambition has come to be a central part of the global blue economy narrative.<sup>637</sup>

Of particular interest to this thesis, *Greening our Blue World* reveals how the CIG has always envisioned seabed minerals activity as a pillar of its blue economy. First noting the CIG's interest in "ocean management of potential frontier industries such as seabed mineral mining and...fishing regimes,"<sup>638</sup> the report proceeded to position the seabed minerals sector as a potential avenue for sustainable ocean development in the Cook Islands. It endorsed the government's ambition to present seabed minerals activity as compatible with the blue economy, despite some in the Cook Islands community raising concerns about the sector's impact on ocean health.<sup>639</sup> Precisely how the CIG defended its inclusion of seabed minerals activity within this early blue economy vision was poorly addressed in the report, with little explanation offered beyond the suggestion that this sector offered a lucrative "frontier industry"<sup>640</sup> for the nation's economic development. The CIG's 'green economy in a blue world storyline' thereby appeared more concerned with positioning seabed minerals within the emerging blue economy movement than it did with justifying its inclusion. This focus would soon shift with the CIG's crafting of a 'net-zero leader' storyline, as I discuss shortly.

### **Negotiating the revocation of Cook Islands speaking rights at Rio+20**

By the time of the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012, Pacific leaders had endorsed the 'green economy in a blue world' storyline as the basis for their blue economy campaign (*Chapter Five*). Similar to the CIG's *Greening our Blue World* report, this PSIDS storyline identified seabed minerals activity (often explicitly mining) as a key blue economy opportunity for the region and encouraged greater international support for the emerging ocean-based industries of island nations.<sup>641</sup> This was a major political achievement for the CIG as it recognised seabed minerals activity as a legitimate sector of the blue economy and reflected the effective influence of the CIG in regional discussions. A less anticipated advantage to arise from this close alignment in CIG and PSIDS blue economy storylines, however, was the proxy-like relationship it facilitated between these discourse

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<sup>637</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'Blue Economy Concept Paper'; World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries'.

<sup>638</sup> Newport, 'Greening Our Blue World: Report on the Cook Islands National Assessment on Greening the Economy', 2–16.

<sup>639</sup> Jacqueline Evans, 'Seabed Mining Meeting', *Te Ipukarea Society*, 23 December 2011, <https://ipukarea.blogspot.com/2011/12/seabed-mining-meeting.html?m=0>.

<sup>640</sup> Newport, 'Greening Our Blue World: Report on the Cook Islands National Assessment on Greening the Economy', 2–16.

<sup>641</sup> PSIDS, 'Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States', 3; SPREP, 'Final Record of Discussions and Decisions', 4.

constructs; with any articulation of the latter effectively evoking visions of the former (and vice versa). I describe this advantage as unforeseen as it wasn't until late in the Rio+20 preparatory process that the full political value of such storyline enmeshment became clear. Here our discussion turns to a last-minute decision of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) regarding conference speaking rights, which greatly complicated the CIG's participation at Rio+20 and with it, its exercise of sovereignty in international diplomacy.

In December 2011, the UNGA passed a resolution (66/197) limiting participation at Rio+20 to full UN member states. This resulted in the withdrawal of Cook Islands' speaking rights for the conference, handing a significant blow to the CIG and its exercise of sovereignty on the international stage. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the Cook Islands' status as a territory in free association with New Zealand has rarely inhibited its assertion of sovereignty and statehood in the international community. Indeed, for many Cook Islanders, this political arrangement has often been viewed as precisely just that: a calculated and strategic arrangement that affords the nation and its citizens access to the benefits associated with a close relationship with New Zealand (economic assistance, New Zealand citizenship and the associated rights to freely work and live in the metropolitan power), while exercising sovereignty much like that of an independent state.<sup>642</sup> The UNGA's 2011 resolution was a harsh reminder of the limitations of such flexible sovereignty arrangements, which in the eyes of the international system remain secondary to the sovereignty of fully independent states.

Had the Cook Islands proverbially been an island to themselves, this removal of its speaking rights could have spelled disaster for its participation in Rio+20. The CIG's active participation in Pacific regionalism via the PSIDS grouping, however, afforded the state an alternate avenue for engaging in conference discussions and outcomes—albeit if indirectly. It meant that each time a PSIDS delegate leveraged their speaking rights to advocate for a 'green economy in a blue world,' so too were they evoking a blue economy vision shared by the CIG. Thus, while officially constrained in their conference speaking rights, the CIG was able to leverage Pacific regionalism to circulate its ocean development vision and aspirations (including the realisation of seabed minerals activity). This use of regionalism (and SIDS solidarity more broadly) as a means for exercising Cook Islands sovereignty is clear in the comments offered by Cook Islands Chief Policy Advisor, Liz Wright-Koteka, in an interview ahead of Rio+20:

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<sup>642</sup> Kevin Sobel-Read, 'Sovereignty, Law, and Capital in the Age of Globalization' (Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University, 2012); Henry, 'Statement by Sir Albert Henry, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, to the 3rd United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea'.



Given the Cook Islands may not be accorded the opportunity to speak as a state in Rio, we urge our fellow SIDS to highlight that SIDS are already undertaking actions and have made some strong commitments to pursue the pathways towards transformation to a green economy.

The Cook Islands also strongly aligns itself with the position advocated by the Pacific SIDS to add the colour blue to the green economy debate – synthesised as a 'green economy in a blue world' to ensure that issues related to ocean and islands are given prominence in the Rio+20 agenda.

... The Cook Islands urges that SIDS advocate at Rio+20 for an agreement by the international community to improve access to funds for the transformation to green economies and to ease the reporting burden faced by small islands administration in line with the special case for SIDS.<sup>643</sup>

Wright-Koteka's comments reveal that while the UNGA's decision to revoke Cook Islands speaking rights hamstrung the CIG's assertion of sovereignty at Rio+20, the CIG's deft negotiation of Pacific regionalism helped it ensure the state's voice was not completely silenced at the conference. By closely aligning its 'green economy in a blue world' storyline with that of PSIDS, the CIG continued to shape global discussions on sustainable ocean development and the popularisation of the blue economy concept. In this way, the 'green economy in a blue world' storyline performed an important state-making function for the CIG: facilitating the CIG's exercise of sovereignty in the realm of international diplomacy, even when its official ability to do so was constrained.

### 6.3.2 National engagements and debate: the rise of the 'net-zero leader' storyline

Having embraced the regional 'green economy in a blue world' storyline at Rio+20, the CIG set out in crafting its own blue economy storyline as the decade matured. This resulted in the formation of what I term the 'net-zero leader' storyline. This new storyline was composed of two core and interrelated elements. The first, a framing of the seabed minerals sector as a necessary source of critical minerals required for low carbon technologies. And the second, the casting of the Cook Islands as a global champion in the global net-zero transition given its world-leading activities as a jurisdiction and contractor (CIIC-SR) in the evolving seabed minerals sector. Woven together, these storyline elements reinforced the CIG's assertion that seabed minerals extraction

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<sup>643</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 'Pacific Island Countries Appeal Exclusion from Rio+20'.

was a sustainable ocean development activity, and perhaps even more critically, one that could strengthen Cook Islands' status as a self-determined, sovereign member of the international community.

### **Marae Moana, seabed minerals and debates on the Cook Islands blue economy**

Though having successfully established the seabed minerals sector as a core component of the regional blue economy discourse ahead of Rio+20, it wasn't long before the CIG faced resistance over its framing of this sector as a *sustainable* ocean development opportunity. In the years proceeding Rio+20, a small but vocal group of Cook Islanders questioned the CIG on its inclusion of seabed minerals in the nation's blue economy vision; grounding their concerns in the argument that the sector's potential impact on ocean systems and ecologies rendered it environmentally *unsustainable*. These concerns were similarly articulated by broader regional civil society including Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) and Act Now! PNG,<sup>644</sup> who stood alongside local groups in cautioning of the potential environmental harms caused by seabed minerals activity. These critiques challenged the CIG to more explicitly address how it justified seabed minerals activity as a sustainable ocean sector and exposed the insufficiencies of its existing 'green economy in a blue world' storyline.

Tensions around the CIG's sustainable ocean vision became particularly apparent during the mid-2010s when the CIG moved to establish its Marae Moana Marine Park (herein Marae Moana). Espoused as a project of marine conservation, Marae Moana is a multi-use marine managed area spanning the entirety of the Cook Islands EEZ announced in 2012 and established in 2017. In 2014, the CIG hosted a Cook Islands Marine Park Legal Analysis Workshop where documents reveal heated debate around the relationship between this marine conservation initiative and seabed minerals activity. Of interest to this thesis, these debates came to be animated around the CIG's blue economy discourse—namely, whether seabed minerals activity held legitimate claim as a sector of the blue economy or not. This episode offers valuable insight into the evolving context and concerns that the CIG required its blue economy storylines to respond to, and the limitations of its existing 'green economy in a blue world' construct to adequately do so.

Hosted in Rarotonga on 5 March 2014, the Legal Analysis Workshop gathered stakeholders from across Cook Islands civil society, government, and the House of Ariki,<sup>645</sup> to discuss the findings

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<sup>644</sup> Rachael Reeves, '8000 Sign PANG Petition in Bid to Block Pacific Deep Seabed Mining', *Papua New Guinea Mine Watch*, 29 August 2012, <https://ramumine.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/8000-sign-pang-petition-in-bid-to-block-pacific-deep-seabed-mining/>.

<sup>645</sup> The House of Ariki is a parliamentary body of the Cook Islands that is composed of Cook Islands high chiefs, appointed by the Monarch's Representative. It is a key body providing customary leadership to the nation.

of a recent legal analysis into the establishment of the Marae Moana. The workshop, facilitated by IUCN Oceania, was tasked with identifying issues and options for the legal designation, establishment, design and management of the Marae Moana<sup>646</sup> (which at that time the CIG sought to formalise by 2015).<sup>647</sup>

Discussing the objectives of the Marae Moana, one workshop participant commented that “the marine park could be an impetus for looking into the blue economy and green tourism.”<sup>648</sup> Critically, this suggestion was coupled with the contention that such centring of the Marae Moana in the Cook Islands blue economy could be done “*instead* of relying on the current projections with fisheries and deep sea minerals, there are other possibilities that need to be looked at outside the box.”<sup>649</sup> Necessarily read together, these statements capture the dissatisfaction that some Cook Islanders felt about the CIG’s positioning of seabed minerals activity at the heart of the state’s blue economy vision. Rather than pursuing seabed minerals as a core blue economy activity, these individuals advocated for Marae Moana as an initiative that could displace the sector—a proposal that would significantly reorient the Cook Islands’ blue economy understanding.

For the CIG, such attempts to remove seabed minerals from the nation’s blue economy vision exposed a dangerous weakness in its existing discourse engagements, which at the time remained assembled around a ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline. They revealed how the environmental sustainability commitment central to the blue economy could be leveraged against the seabed minerals sector given continued uncertainty and growing concerns about the sector’s impact on ocean systems. These environmental concerns also indicated that the CIG’s existing ‘green economy in a blue world’ construct was poorly equipped to counter these claims. Thus, while the ‘green economy in a blue world’ construct had been useful for the CIG in the Rio+20 context, the CIG recognised the need to assemble a new understanding of the blue economy discourse if it were to retain seabed minerals activity as a central pillar. As the decade matured, the CIG came to evolve its blue economy storyline, ultimately arriving at the ‘net-zero leader’ construct by early 2019.

### ***Draft Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy***

With the reinvigoration of the Cook Islands seabed mineral sector in the late 2010s, the CIG’s draft *Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy* was first publicly released in early 2019 as part of the consultation

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<sup>646</sup> Cook Islands Government, ‘Cook Islands Marine Park: Legal Analysis Workshop’ (Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 2014).

<sup>647</sup> Australia Network News, ‘Huge Marine Park in Cook Islands on Track for 2015’, *ABC News*, 22 April 2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-22/huge-marine-park-in-cook-islands-on-track-for-2015/5402636>.

<sup>648</sup> Cook Islands Government, ‘Cook Islands Marine Park: Legal Analysis Workshop’, 9.

<sup>649</sup> Cook Islands Government, 9, emphasis added.

process on proposed amendments to the *Seabed Minerals Act (2009)*.<sup>650</sup> The draft was also provided to interested industry parties, with the CIG looking to build interest and confidence among potential stakeholders ahead of its planned opening of another tender round regarding exploration licences in its EEZ.

Consistent with the CIG's earlier 'green economy in a blue world' storyline, this draft *Strategy* celebrated seabed minerals activity as a key economic development opportunity for the nation. Its 'Preface'—written by then then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Natural Resources and Minerals, Mark Brown—noted the potential of the sector in leading the nation's economic diversification efforts:

Our seabed sector has the potential to diversify our tourism focused economy and create positive and transformative change for our nation. It is important that we develop and grow the industry our way and sustainably into the future, for the benefit of our people now and for future generations.<sup>651</sup>

This message was again articulated in the document's section on 'Benefits of the Deep Sea Minerals Sector (Green Economy)',<sup>652</sup> which only further reinforced the CIG's suggestion that an active seabed minerals sector could afford the Cook Islands with an unparalleled economic development opportunity. The draft *Strategy* thereby continued the CIG's established 'green economy in a blue world' storyline, which since Rio+20, had remained assembled around the idea that ocean-based activities presented a critical economic development opportunity for the Cook Islands.

Additional to this vision of economic development, however, the draft *Strategy* also progressed a new blue economy claim. It suggested that through an active seabed minerals sector (particularly mining), the Cook Islands could champion the global decarbonisation transition by provisioning the world with the critical metals necessary for building renewable energy technologies:

I[n] terms of the green or blue economy, it is anticipated that seabed minerals from the Cook Islands could assist in the delivery of new minerals to the global market to assist developments in fossil free and carbon-free technology, vehicles and facilities, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>653</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, 'Seabed Minerals Draft Bill Released', 22 December 2018, <https://www.sbma.gov.ck/news-3/seabed-minerals-draft-bill-released?rq=Seabed%20Minerals%20Sector%20Strategy%20>.

<sup>651</sup> Cook Islands Government, 'Draft Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy', 2.

<sup>652</sup> Cook Islands Government, 16.

<sup>653</sup> Cook Islands Government, 16.

This marked the CIG's first public expression of 'net-zero leader' storyline and an important milestone in its blue economy negotiation. It reframed the CIG's relationship with the seabed minerals sector such that it was not only the Cook Islands that stood to benefit from the sector, but the global community more broadly; with the former emerging as a major stakeholder in the global green transition, and the latter gaining access to a new critical metals market through which it could build low carbon technologies. The storyline envisioned seabed mining as a sector that could elevate the Cook Islands' standing in the international order and afford it a level of political influence unprecedented in its modern history.

Though the draft *Strategy* has never been finalised into state policy, it does mark an important moment of the CIG's blue economy evolution. The draft *Strategy* highlights how the CIG's 'net-zero leader' storyline reflected more an evolution in its blue economy thinking than it did a fundamental shift. The economic development tenet central to the CIG's 'green economy in a blue world' storyline remained a core focus in this new discourse assemblage, with the added suggestion that if realised, the seabed minerals sector could radically strengthen the Cook Islands standing in the international community. In this manner, the new 'net-zero leader' storyline became a blue economy construct unique to the Cook Islands, and more specifically to the CIG. Its distinct nationalist character set it apart from the regionally relevant 'green economy in a blue world' storyline, all the while tethering it to the CIG's longstanding vision of seabed minerals activity as a central pillar of the modern Cook Islands state.

### ***Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui 2021-2021***

As the world stepped into a phase of COVID-19 recovery towards the end of 2021, the CIG released its *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui 2021-2021: National Sustainable Development Agenda* (NSDA). Developed under the leadership of Valery Wichman, Director of the Cook Islands Central Policy and Planning Office, the NSDA provides the guiding document for the Cook Islands' sustainable development journey over both the near, medium and long-term.

Composed of three strategic documents,<sup>654</sup> the NSDA's primary engagement with the blue economy discourse occurs within its overarching 100-year Vision, *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui*.<sup>655</sup> *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui* makes four references to the blue economy: once in its articulation of the Cook Islands' relationality with people and place ('To Tatou Piri'anga Mou – Our Connectedness'),

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<sup>654</sup> The NSDA outlines a 100-year sustainable development vision comprised of three temporal frameworks: the overarching 100-year Vision (*Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui*), a 25-year generational Strategy (*Te Akapapa'anga Uki*), and 5-year Scorecard (*Te Kaveinga Ihi*).

<sup>655</sup> Cook Islands Government, 'Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui: National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+ (2021–2121)'.

and in three of the commitments outlined in ‘Ta ‘Tatou Aka’atinga 15 – Our 15 star pledge.’ Each of these articulations provide insight into the CIG’s evolving blue economy understanding, with all seemingly aligned with the ‘net-zero leader’ storyline. Thus, while *Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui* makes no mention of the seabed minerals sector, I suggest that its engagement with the blue economy is structured according to a ‘net-zero leader’ storyline. This enables one to read the CIG’s seabed minerals aspirations into the text; inferring, if you will, where and how the CIG positions this sector in its long-term development vision. To illustrate, let me address each of these blue economy references in turn.

In a discussion on the Cook Islands’ connection to the environment (‘To tatou Aorangi – Te Moana, Te Enua, Te Mareva’), the NSDA states:

We are a proud large ocean state. As a large ocean nation we will protect and sustainability utilize Te Moana Nui O Kiva. We will be at the forefront of innovation for the purposes of the blue economy and the benefit of our people, environment and culture.<sup>656</sup>

This statement clearly links the blue economy to innovative ocean activities and the CIG’s desire to occupy a leading role in such space. It is aligned with the ‘net-zero leader’ storyline earlier introduced in the draft *Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy* where the CIG similarly positioned the realisation of this sector as an opportunity the Cook Islands to take a leading role in the global net-zero transition. Furthermore, as we witnessed throughout *Section 6.2*, such language around innovation has regularly been evoked in relation to the seabed minerals sector. I thus suggest that this statement on innovative ocean activities is a thinly veiled reference to the seabed minerals sector.

The NSDA makes three further references to the blue economy in the later section ‘Ta ‘Tatou Aka’atinga 15 – Our 15 star pledge.’ Here the blue economy is woven into Pledge #2: To Tatou Ao Ora Natura – Our ocean and environment, Pledge #9: To ‘Tatou Akamana’anga – Our empowerment, and Pledge #12: To ‘Tatou Kite Pakari – Our knowledge and innovation (Table 11). In short, Pledge #2 commits the blue economy to values of environmental and cultural responsibility, Pledge #9 engages this discourse in a broad description of sustainable development (economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing), and Pledge #12 again links the CIG’s blue economy ambitions to innovation and emergent technologies. The central theme of these pledges—environment, empowerment and innovation—all correspond neatly with the CIG’s ‘net-

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<sup>656</sup> Cook Islands Government, 10.

zero leader’ storyline, seeing the NSDA further embed this storyline as its leading articulation of the blue economy discourse.

If we take a closer look at the ‘Ta Tatou Aka’atinga 15’ section, what is perhaps most interesting is the *absence* of any blue economy references in the pledge on prosperity (#11: To Tatou kimi’anga puapinga – Our prosperity). Considering the CIG’s longstanding interest in economic potential of the seabed minerals sector, this lack of blue economy reference in the prosperity pledge is notable. Possible reasons for this decision will be returned to in *Section 6.3*, yet for now I hint that it may have something to do with the drafters’ blurring of blue economy and Blue Pacific concepts. Nonetheless, the NSDA clearly continues the CIG’s blue economy storyline of aspiring to the role of ‘net-zero leader,’ with less than subtle hints that such ambition will be achieved through seabed minerals activity. At the time of writing (April 2024), the NSDA remains the final domestic reference to the blue economy made by the CIG.

**Table 11:** *References to the blue economy in Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui’s section: Ta Tatou Aka’atinga 15 – Our 15 star pledge.*

| #  | Pledge                                              | Blue economy reference (verbatim)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2  | To Tatou Ao Ora Natura – Our ocean and environment  | We will support a clean green and blue economy which is respectful of nature and our culture.                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 9  | To Tatou Akamana’anga – Our empowerment             | We will create sustainable and safe communities where jobs, housing, comprehensive services, sustainable transport systems, the use of information and communication technology, and green/blue areas support economic, social and cultural wellbeing, as well as the wellbeing of the environment. |
| 12 | To Tatou Kite Pakari – Our knowledge and innovation | We will support the development of cutting edge green/blue technology, innovation and creativity for the benefit of our communities and country. We will capitalize on all opportunities in the telecommunications and technology fields to create sustainable employment opportunities.            |

### 6.3.3 International blue economy engagement: The CIG’s surprising restraint

In the years following the CIG’s contribution to the PSIDS blue economy campaign at Rio+20, the government’s engagement with the discourse on the international stage has been rather restrained. Considering its early blue economy advocacy, one may expect the CIG to have remained a vocal proponent of the discourse in the international community. Such expectation, however, is quickly confounded by empirical evidence, which reveals the CIG’s international blue economy engagements have been restricted almost exclusively to its involvement in the ISA-UNDESA Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth.

### **The Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth: Asserting leadership within storylines of capacity building**

Recalling discussion in *Section 6.2.4*, the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth is a capacity building program designed to support of Pacific Island nations “benefit from the blue economy through the sustainable development of deep-seabed resources.”<sup>657</sup> It is led by the ISA in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), providing legal and governance support for the four Pacific nations sponsoring seabed minerals activities in the Area: the Cook Islands, Nauru, Kiribati and Tonga. The Abyssal Initiative first launched at the 2017 United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC)<sup>658</sup> and was operationalised in February 2019 upon the hosting of its inaugural regional workshop in Nuku’alofa, Tonga. Since its launch, the CIG has been an active participant in the program.

As evident from the name, the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth expressly evokes the blue economy discourse under the ‘blue growth’ storyline. This ‘blue growth’ framing echoes that engaged by the European Union through the late-2000s to mid-2010s (*Chapter One*), but it is not the only blue economy storyline articulated by this Initiative. Over recent years, the Abyssal Initiative appears to have also woven the Pacific’s ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline into its discourse engagements. Consider, for example, the following opening statement of a 2021 Abyssal Initiative promotional video:

As large ocean states, the Pacific Small Island Developing States—or Pacific SIDS—rely heavily on the sustainable use of the ocean and its resources.

For this reason, the Pacific SIDS have been at the forefront of the development of the concept of blue economy through which Pacific leaders are committed to harness the opportunities of the ocean.

It is within this context that several Pacific states have been weigh[ing] the potential of deep sea mineral exploration and exploitation to support national and regional development priorities.<sup>659</sup>

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<sup>657</sup> International Seabed Authority, ‘Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth’, 2023, <https://www.isa.org.jm/isa-voluntary-commitments/abyssal-initiative-for-blue-growth/>.

<sup>658</sup> International Seabed Authority and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), ‘Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth: #OceanAction40974’, 2017, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/abyssal-initiative-blue-growth>.

<sup>659</sup> International Seabed Authority, *ISA Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth #OceanAction16538*, 3:46 (YouTube, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=va8GaRby7QU&t=48s>; see also International Seabed Authority, ‘Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth’; United Nations Oceans Conference, ‘Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth: Advancing SDG 14 and the Quest for a Blue Economy through the Promotion of Socio Economic Benefits for Developing Countries, Including SIDS, and Increasing Scientific Knowledge and Research Capacity: Perspectives on Deep-Sea Minerals’ (United Nations, 2017), <https://oceanconference.un.org/commitments/?id=16538>.



From this excerpt, we see the Abyssal Initiative heavily frames its activities through a blue economy storyline similar to that of the PSIDS Rio+20 campaign. Like PSIDS’ ‘green economy in a blue world’ construct, the Abyssal Initiative positions the blue economy as a key sustainable development pathway for SIDS given their socio-political identities and physical qualities as large ocean states. It promotes seabed minerals activity as a promising sector of this blue economy vision, making the case for the inclusion of seabed minerals as a part of the region’s—and globe’s—sustainable development future.

Narrowing our focus to the CIG’s interactions with the Abyssal Initiative, it is interesting to observe the government’s consistent evocation of its ‘net-zero leader’ storyline within Initiative forums (Table 12). This is particularly clear in the way the CIG frames its engagement in the capacity building components of the Abyssal Initiative; resisting suggestions of a capacity ‘gap’ in the Pacific’s seabed minerals expertise, to instead characterise capacity building as a way for Abyssal Initiative members to *further* strengthen their existing pioneer status. Prime Minister Mark Brown’s opening remarks at the 2021 Abyssal Initiative workshop offer an illustration of this nuanced framing:

We in the Cook Islands, and across the Pacific, are a people of the ocean. What we call our Moana Nui O Kiva, it is our lifeblood. It provides us with food, income and prosperity, and it is part of our identity. It is also the foundation of our Blue Economy. We take its stewardship and management seriously, ensuring that we proceed with caution to allow both the conservation and the sustainable use of our marine resources. This includes seabed minerals, where again *the Pacific region has been at the forefront of developing a sustainable deep-sea minerals industry*, based on the precautionary approach and the promotion of good governance.

... Now, in order to achieve our Blue Economy objectives, and meet our governance responsibilities under the Convention—it is of critical importance that we, as Pacific Island Sponsoring States, have the necessary capacities to do so. As such, the *continuing* development of our people is our priority.<sup>660</sup> [emphasis added]

In this statement we see how it is only after first asserting the leadership of Pacific nations in the global seabed minerals space, that Brown moves to recognise the value of capacity building programs for region. He frames the Abyssal Initiative’s support of Pacific Islands capacity building

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<sup>660</sup> Mark Brown, ‘Opening Remarks at the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth Deep Seabed Environmental Management & Monitoring Workshop’ (2021 Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth Deep Seabed Environmental Management & Monitoring Workshop, Online: Office of the Prime Minister, Government of the Cook Islands, 2021), emphasis added.

as a continuation of the region's pioneering status—not a 'catchup' endeavour. This careful sequencing of Brown's opening remarks works to resist the reading of the Abyssal Initiative's capacity building focus through a deficit lens (i.e. the view that the Pacific's seabed minerals approaches need to be improved/raised/strengthened to meet international standards of good governance). Instead, capacity building is positioned as a means for Pacific nations to maintain their leadership in the sector, driving forward global best practice. For the CIG, capacity building and its continued leadership of the seabed minerals sector are presented as compatible, enabling it to navigate a blue economy interaction that preserves its sense of agency and empowerment.

**Table 12:** *List of the Cook Islands Government's explicit engagements with the blue economy discourse in international forums.*

| Date          | Event                                                                                                                                                                                  | Abyssal Initiative related | Author                    | Media release / speech title                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6 March 2019  | Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth. Inaugural Workshop, Tonga.                                                                                                                         | X                          | Seabed Minerals Authority | Browne attends seabed minerals workshop                                                                                                                                                        |
| 26 July 2021  | Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth. Environmental Management & Monitoring workshop, Online                                                                                             | X                          | Mark Brown                | Opening remarks at the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth Deep Seabed Environmental Management and Monitoring Workshop                                                                         |
| 29 June 2022  | United Nations Ocean Conference Side Event: Fostering international and regional cooperation in support of the sustainable development of the blue economy of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS     | X                          | Alex Herman               | Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the SBMA at the Fostering international and regional cooperation in support of the sustainable development of the blue economy of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS |
| 29 June 2022  | United Nations Ocean Conference Side Event: Ensuring the stewardship of seabed mineral resources and the protection of the marine environment of the Area for the benefit of humankind | X                          | Alex Herman               | Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the SBMA at Ensuring the stewardship of seabed mineral resources and the protection of the marine environment of the Area for the benefit of humankind |
| 29 March 2023 | International Conference on Achieving Ocean                                                                                                                                            |                            | Te-Ara Henderson          |                                                                                                                                                                                                |

|               |                                                                                            |   |            |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|               | Equity: Innovative, Fair, Inclusive and Sustainable Strategies and Blue Impact Investments |   |            |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 12 April 2024 | International Seabed Authority Side Event at the UN Ocean Decade Conference 2024           | X | Mark Brown | Opening Remarks by Honourable Prime Minister Mark Brown: Leveraging knowledge, innovation and empowerment in deep-sea research in support of the stewardship of the Area for the benefit of humankind. |

### DEME's 'net-zero transition' storyline

Aside from events related to the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth, the CIG's international engagement with the blue economy discourse (post Rio+20) has been notably sparse (Table 12). Indeed, across the last decade it has been rare to witness the CIG reference the blue economy in international forums. This scarcity of blue economy articulations is all the more surprising when one considers the enthusiasm with which DEME—the CIG's joint venture partner in CIIC-SR—promotes the discourse.

Over the last decade, for example, DEME and its parent company Global Sea Mineral Resources (GSR) have participated in multiple global blue economy initiatives, including the Blue Mining Consortium, the Blue Nodules project, the Blue Economy Cooperative Research Centre, the Blauwe Cluster, and Ghent University's Blue Growth Summer School. This is in addition to express engagements with the blue economy discourse in the company's public communications materials, such as DEME's 2021 promotional video entitled "Blue Economy - Duurzame oplossingen voor wereldwijde uitdagingen" (Blue Economy – Sustainable solutions for global challenges). Composed in Dutch, this video outlines the "innovative activities and techniques" DEME is undertaking to support the global sustainability transition. Its closing segment provides a particularly insightful articulation of how DEME positions its seabed minerals activities within the blue economy:

The sustainable approach to the major challenges that humanity now faces is part of our vision.

Soft coastal protection, land reclamation and elevation against the consequences of a rising sea level for increasingly populated coastal areas; renewable energy and green hydrogen against CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; *deep-sea mining against the scarcity of raw materials*.

We have the people, techniques and experience in-house to make a substantial contribution to this.<sup>661</sup> [emphasis added, translated to English]

In highlighting the capacity for “deep-sea mining” to guard “against the scarcity of raw materials,” this video signals DEME’s construction of a ‘net-zero transition’ storyline. Similar to the CIG’s ‘net-zero leader’ construct, DEME’s storyline presents seabed minerals activity as a necessary sector for the provisioning of metals required for the development of net-zero technologies as the world transitions away from fossil fuels. It is through this logic (the sector’s contribution to the global green transition) that DEME rationalises the inclusion of seabed minerals activity in the blue economy, articulating such via a ‘net-zero transition’ storyline.

Curiously, however, despite clear synergies between DEME’s ‘net-zero transition’ storyline and the ‘net-zero leader’ construct of the CIG, the joint venture between DEME and the CIG (CIIC-SR) appears to make no express engagement with the blue economy discourse. This includes in licensing applications and media releases. This observation is surprising not only because both DEME and the CIG are active users of the blue economy discourse, but also because the storylines they each craft are so seemingly compatible. It raises the question of why CIG (and DEME for that matter) avoid engaging the blue economy discourse in their joint venture? As I explore in greater detail through *Chapter Eight*, I suggest that such absence of blue economy engagement in the CIIC-SR joint venture indicates that the CIG does not feel compelled to engage the blue economy discourse when discussing its seabed minerals activities among international audiences. That is, the government appears to be in a position to *choose* whether it engages with the blue economy discourse or not. This differs from the experiences of Pacific regional organisations and the LMMA Network who frequently reported a sense of overwhelming pressure to engage this discourse if they were to be recognised as legitimate ocean development actors<sup>662</sup>. This is an observation I will return to in *Part III*, reflecting on what it reveals about the politics of discourse and how it may be experienced differently by actors across the social order.

#### 6.3.4 Section Summary

The blue economy storylines crafted by the CIG over the twelve years from 2011 to 2024 points to a sophisticated understanding among government officials of the political power of discourse. In tracing this storyline evolution, I distil three themes that characterise the CIG’s engagement with the blue economy discourse. Firstly, the CIG’s transition from a ‘green economy in a blue

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<sup>661</sup> DEME, *Blue Economy - Duurzame Oplossingen Voor Wereldwijde Uitdagingen.*, 2:43 (YouTube, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sVboaT6Anc>, emphasis added.

<sup>662</sup> rCS/C. 7, rCS.20, rCS.55, REG.71, NGO.63, NGO.82, NGO.35

world’ to ‘net-zero leader’ construct reflects a process of storyline evolution. It was evident that core tenets of the former remained embedded in the latter (seabed minerals as a key sustainable development opportunity for SIDS) yet reframed in response to growing political opposition to the CIG’s longstanding seabed minerals vision in an age of ecological ocean crisis. Such storyline evolution enabled the CIG to better defend its inclusion of this ocean sector in its blue economy vision through the argument that such activity was necessary for the global net-zero transition. Here we see the strategic agency of the CIG: adapting its discourse engagements in response to changing contexts and the political demands they present.

Secondly, ever since its early engagement with the blue economy, the CIG has found ways to leverage this discourse for state-making purposes. Whether that be through its contribution to the ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline crafted by PSIDS for Rio+20 as a way to remain active in global discussions when its conference speaking rights had been removed, or by espousing the Cook Islands critical importance for the global net-zero transition as a provider of critical minerals. In both these formulations, the CIG infused its blue economy engagements with an assertion of state sovereignty as linked to its seabed minerals aspirations. Recognising this assertion of sovereignty within the CIG’s blue economy storylines is critical as it reveals how the discourse is more than simply a framework for sustainable ocean use and management, but a shrewd political tool of state-making.

Finally, it is evident that the CIG has been highly selective and surprisingly restrained in its blue economy engagements in the wake of Rio+20. On the domestic stage, the CIG has confined its blue economy articulations to state policies, legislation and the high-level workshops that feed into the development of such texts. The discourse does not feature in its materials designed for mass public consumption, such as social media posts or media articles. Its blue economy engagements in the international space have been even sparser, with the CIG almost only articulating this discourse in Abyssal Initiative forums despite being actively involved in other ocean development and seabed minerals forums. Such restraint is surprising and suggests that the blue economy, while useful, is not the only discourse through which the CIG advances its state-making seabed minerals dream. As I uncover in the following section, the rise of the Blue Pacific discourse in recent years appears to have attracted greater interest from the CIG, with early observations indicating that it may be displacing the blue economy as the CIG’s preferred ocean development (and seabed minerals) rhetoric.

Sitting above all these themes is the observation that the CIG has leveraged the blue economy discourse to at once defend and advance its long-standing seabed minerals dream. Through the

storylines of ‘green economy in a blue world’ then ‘net-zero leader,’ the CIG refashioned its seabed minerals aspirations in response to an evolving global context where the deepening ecological crisis presents both opportunity (the net-zero transition’s demand for increased critical minerals supplies) and challenge (concerns regarding the ecological impact of seabed minerals activity) to the sector. Under the blue economy, the CIG presented the seabed minerals sector as a key development opportunity for the Cook Islands (‘green economy in a blue world’) wherein the Cook Islands—as a key stakeholder in the global critical minerals supply chain—could provision the world with the metals required to resource the net-zero transition (‘net-zero leader’). At no point has the CIG been seen to fundamentally question whether such a vision of a market-led sustainability transition premised on ocean commodification and enabling state mechanisms (e.g. legislation, favourable licencing conditions and financial regimes) meaningfully diverges from the existing neoliberal capitalist system. Indeed, if anything it appear little other than an oceanward extension of it. I thus suggest that in framing its seabed minerals aspirations through blue economy storylines, the CIG leveraged this discourse to not only perpetuate its decades-old state-making vision but also the neoliberal capitalist logics that are deployed to justify the sector’s advancement. Far from transformative, the CIG’s blue economy relationship serves to reinforce a state-making vision long in development.

## 6.4 Power: Strategic and selective engagement

Having engaged the blue economy as a key framing for its seabed minerals vision throughout the 2010s, more recently the CIG appears to be stepping back its blue economy articulations in favour of a new construct: the Blue Pacific. This shift is evident across domestic, regional, and international forums where CIG representatives have drawn on the Blue Pacific discourse in seeming preference to the blue economy—including in spaces historically steeped in blue economy rhetoric, such as the Abyssal Initiative. This final section grapples with why this shift may be occurring, with an interest in what it suggests about the limits of the blue economy for the CIG. My discussion is informed by interview insights offered by key stakeholders active in the Cook Islands seabed minerals conversation, engaging proponents of the sector as well as those opposed to it (

Table 13). These insights are necessarily diverse, assembling an understanding of the CIG’s blue economy engagement from multiple standpoints and interpretations.

**Table 13:** List of key stakeholders interviewed for the Cook Islands Government case study.

| Interviewee # | Sector                       | Identification in Thesis |
|---------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 74            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.74                   |
| 91            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.91                   |
| 52            | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.52                 |
| 94            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.94                   |
| 26            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.26                   |
| 41            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.41                   |
| 12            | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.12                 |
| 66            | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.66                 |
| 78            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.78                   |
| 23            | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.23                 |
| 96            | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.96                   |
| 4             | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.4                  |

This section proceeds across three subsections. *Subsection One* examines evidence suggesting that the CIG has recently turned away from the blue economy in favour of the Blue Pacific. *Subsection Two* reflects on the CIG’s characteristically restricted and selective engagement with the blue economy during the 2010s. I then examine the case for the Blue Pacific’s comparative advantage over the blue economy in *Subsection Three*, emphasising how the Blue Pacific’s strident assertion of Pacific sovereignty and stewardship offer powerful storylines the CIG can engage in service of its state-making seabed minerals vision—more powerful, it appears, than those available through the blue economy discourse.

#### 6.4.1 A turn to the Blue Pacific discourse

##### **CIG’s international Blue Pacific engagements**

In July 2023, seabed minerals policymakers, advocates and critics alike convened in Kingston, Jamaica for the 28th session of the ISA. This session was particularly significant as it marked the ending of the “two-year rule” triggered by Nauru under which the ISA was technically obliged to finalise its *Mining Code*. During this gathering, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown delivered a speech to the General Assembly outlining the nation’s long seabed minerals journey, its domestic exploration activities and future ambitions. This speech made no mention of the blue economy, despite the Cook Islands being an active participant in the ISA’s Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth. Instead, Brown engaged heavily with the Blue Pacific narrative:

Within our Blue Pacific Continent, deep seabed minerals hold immense potential for our growth and prosperity. If we are to develop this potential – it is our duty to do so responsibly and sustainably, for the long-term well-being of our people and the preservation of our unique marine environment.

As Pacific peoples, we are acutely aware of the pressing challenges we face in protecting and managing our Blue Pacific Continent. As the custodians of nearly 20 percent of the earth's surface, we are committed to combating the ongoing threats of climate change, loss of biodiversity, waste, and pollution. To significantly reduce humankind's contribution to climate change, the global community needs to use every tool at its disposal. Critical metals are a tool that we can help with, today.<sup>663</sup>

This excerpt is one of many Blue Pacific references throughout Brown's speech, each of which emphasised the Cook Islands' connection to the Moana Nui O Kiva (the ocean) and the CIG's commitment to its sustainable management. Interestingly, Brown also used his speech to articulate many key tenets of the CIG's 'net-zero leadership' storyline, which it had formerly assembled under the blue economy discourse—consider the final sentence of the above excerpt: “Critical metals are a tool that we can help with, today.” Thus, far from discarding its 'net-zero leadership' storyline, this speech suggests a loosening of the storyline's former association with the blue economy and its affixing instead to the Blue Pacific.

While it could be suggested that such shift indicates an evolutionary relationship between blue economy and Blue Pacific (that the latter is a direct descendent of the former), I see these two discourses as distinct—albeit if aligned in certain places. My discussion across *Chapter One* and *Five* details the different origins of these discourses, but to put it briefly: the blue economy is a sustainable ocean development discourse developed by the Global North in response to intersecting economic and ecological crises, while the Blue Pacific is a distinctly Pacific articulation of a shared regional identity and vision for its collective future wherein sustainable ocean development is an important, though only partial component. In this sense, I read the CIG's recent turn to the Blue Pacific less as a continuation of its earlier blue economy engagements but rather a shift in approach. Drawing this distinction between the blue economy and Blue Pacific is undeniably messy, yet important for appreciating the broader and self-determined vision of the latter as I will return to in *Subsection Three*.

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<sup>663</sup> Mark Brown, 'General Statement Delivered at the 28th Session of the International Seabed Authority' (28th Session of the International Seabed Authority, Kingston, Jamaica, 2023).



Brown's speech at the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of the ISA is not an isolated example of the CIG's embrace of the Blue Pacific in seeming preference to the blue economy. Reflecting on this same event, the SBMA issued a media release on 3 August 2023 where it celebrated the Pacific's representation and participation at the ISA session. While making no comment on the blue economy, this statement evoked the Blue Pacific Continent with reference to the region (and CIG's) commitment to the protection of ocean ecosystems.<sup>664</sup> Months later, in September 2023, Brown again engaged the Blue Pacific discourse when delivering a keynote address at a high-level event launching the 'Global call to action for accelerating progress under the 2030 Agenda through deep-sea research, technology and innovation.' Like the aforementioned SBMA media release, this Blue Pacific articulation occurred within the context of celebrating regional efforts in the seabed minerals space; namely, the PIF's agreement to establish a Pacific Centre for Excellence on Deep Ocean Science at the USP campus of the Cook Islands.<sup>665</sup> Brown's Head of State remarks at the 9<sup>th</sup> Our Oceans Conference 2024 again made no mention of the blue economy, instead framing the Cook Islands seabed minerals exploration through the Blue Pacific<sup>666</sup>—despite the conference theme explicitly addressing 'sustainable blue economies.' These examples reinforce my argument that the CIG is increasingly turning to the Blue Pacific in place of the blue economy when discussing its seabed minerals activities and ambitions across international and regional stages. This trend, however, begs the question of why?

To understand the CIG's embrace of the Blue Pacific discourse over recent years, it is important to acknowledge Prime Minister Brown's appointment to PIF Chair in February 2023. As detailed in *Chapter Five*, the PIF has been the primary architect and advocate of the Blue Pacific narrative—formalising its endorsement of the vision in the *2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent*. Brown's appointment as PIF Chair has thus—unsurprisingly—carried with it greater responsibility to promote this Blue Pacific vision when engaging in international forums; even when Brown may not be speaking explicitly on behalf of the regional body. The marked uptick in Brown's and the CIG's engagement of the Blue Pacific discourse over recent years reflects this, emphasising the importance of contextual factors in shaping the government's discourse choices. As I discuss in *Subsection Three*, there are also strategic reasons for the CIG's shift towards the Blue Pacific in place of the blue economy. I hold this discussion for upcoming reflection, disclosing now that it relates

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<sup>664</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, 'SBMA Release: Cook Islands Participates in International Seabed Meetings', 3 August 2023, <https://www.sbma.gov.ck/news-3/article-114>.

<sup>665</sup> Mark Brown, '78th UNGA High-Level Side Event: Launch of a Global Call to Action for Accelerating Sustainable Development through Deep-Sea Research, Technology Development and Innovations' (United Nations Headquarters, New York: Office of the Prime Minister, Government of the Cook Islands, 2023).

<sup>666</sup> Mark Brown, '9th Our Oceans Conference 2024 High-Level Segment with Heads of States; Address by Honourable Prime Minister Mark Brown' (Athens, Greece, 16 April 2024).

to the Blue Pacific's strident assertion of Pacific sovereignty and self-determination—seemingly to a greater extent than that afforded under the blue economy.

### **CIG's domestic Blue Pacific engagements**

Turning to the CIG's engagement with the Blue Pacific in the domestic space, conversations with key government stakeholders indicated both growing interest in this discourse yet also a lack of clarity on the distinction between it and the blue economy construct (e.g. CIG.78). One interview with a senior CIG official on the CIG's then-recently published NSDA was particularly illustrative of this dynamic; suggesting not only that the NSDA's blue economy references were heavily influenced by the CIG's exploration of the Blue Pacific vision, but that they may potentially align more closely with the understandings of ocean connection and custodianship woven through the Blue Pacific vision than that offered in the blue economy:

*Myself: How did the blue economy language come into the National Sustainable Development Agenda?*

CIG.78: I think the first thing to talk about when we talk about the NSDA is Akapapa'anga - and Akapapa'anga is basically genealogy. And so, in our Cook Islands Māori world view, we can papa ourselves, or link ourselves to the ocean, to the land, to the air, to the living entities. And so that connection and that worldview is important in the first instance in understanding why we've included this type of language. So that's the starting point.

... We see the Moana Nui o Kiva—or the Pacific Ocean, or the Ocean in general I guess—as a source of life, and also a highway towards the future. And so, when we were researching for our NSDA it was sort of at that time that they started talking about the 2050 [Strategy for a] Blue Pacific Continent. And so, we started to look more into that and what that meant and it was in more alignment with our values and with our conception of the Blue Pacific. And so that's why we use that language in our policy documents.

After going through the research there was a lot on the green economy: green economy, low carbon, resource efficient, and recycling. And then what we were seeing was actually maybe we should be—our values align to a more regenerative approach rather than sustainability in the sense of you just replace what you take out.

So that's why we use blue economy and that's our understanding of what the blue economy is. It's about regeneration.

From this statement I derive two key observations. Firstly, we see a blurring of the Blue Pacific and blue economy discourses, with the stakeholder centring the Blue Pacific in the second

paragraph and only then—without explanation or seeming distinction—reverting back to the blue economy in the final sentences. Close inspection of this second paragraph provides useful clues for understanding such discourse murkiness. In particular, consider the statement: “When we were researching for our NSDA it was sort of at that time that they started talking about the 2050 Blue Pacific Continent. And so, we started to look more into that and what that meant and *it* was in more alignment with our values and with our conception of the Blue Pacific.” I emphasise the term ‘it’ in this comment as it is here I understand the stakeholder to be speaking of the PIF’s Blue Pacific narrative. Translated through this assumption, the stakeholder appears to be suggesting that it was primarily the Blue Pacific narrative that caught the attention of the CIG; with references to the blue economy only entering policymaking discussions *because of* their perceived derivation from this regional discourse.

Noting that the NSDA was released in December 2021—prior to the PIF’s publication of its 2050 Strategy (July 2022)—it is highly likely that CIG officers were developing their understanding of the Blue Pacific under the guidance of Hon. Tuila‘epa’s 2017 speeches where, in his role as then-PIF Chair, he introduced this regional construct and linked it to the ‘Blue Pacific Economy’ (*Chapter 5.4.1*).<sup>667</sup> Taking these speeches as their guide, it is understandable that CIG representatives crafting the NSDA viewed the blue economy as associated with the Blue Pacific. Indeed, this is even intimated in *Te Akapapa’anga Uki* (the NSDA’s 25-year strategy) where the CIG expressly links its commitment to the Cook Islands ‘blue ocean, environment and natural heritage’ (Pledge 2) to the PIF’s 2050 Strategy.<sup>668</sup> What is critical to take away from the insight quoted above is that such appeals to the blue economy in the NSDA were included because of their perceived relationship with the Blue Pacific. The Blue Pacific, in other words, was the leading discourse informing the CIG’s domestic articulation of the blue economy by the turn of the decade. Here, we start to see a perceptible, albeit it tangled movement from the blue economy to the Blue Pacific.

The second insight I take from this stakeholder’s comment is that the Blue Pacific was seen as a discourse which resonated with the Cook Islands Māori world view. This is a compelling argument for the CIG’s engagement with the Blue Pacific at the domestic level, with this construct enabling the government to frame its seabed minerals vision within a philosophy of custodianship that been long held and practiced by the Cook Islands community.<sup>669</sup> I will return to this point in the next

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<sup>667</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘Remarks by Hon. Tuilaepa Luepsoliai Sialele Malielegaoi Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa at the High-Level Pacific Regional Side Event by PIFS on Our Values and Identity as Stewards of the World’s Largest Oceanic Continent, The Blue Pacific’.

<sup>668</sup> Cook Islands Government, ‘Te Ara Akapapa’anga Nui NSDA 2020+, Te Akapapa’anga Uki - One Generation • 25 Years’ (Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Government, December 2021), 11.

<sup>669</sup> Bambridge, *The Rabui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories*; Liam Koka’ua and James Nikitine, *Moana Irakau*.

subsection, drawing it into dialogue with the comparative illegibility of the blue economy for local residents. For now, I acknowledge how the socio-cultural resonance of the Blue Pacific in the Cook Islands is a clear strength of this discourse and reason for the CIG's apparent turn toward it.

While still in its early phases, the CIG appears to be strengthening its engagement with the Blue Pacific discourse to the apparent expense of the blue economy. The government's transition between these discourse constructs has been murky (as seen with the NSDA), but it is becoming increasingly clear. Such retreat from the blue economy raises important questions about the utility of this discourse for the CIG as it progresses through the 2020s.

#### 6.4.2 Restricted blue economy engagement

For a government that participated so actively in the development of PSIDS' 'green economy in a blue world' storyline in the early 2010s, it is rather surprising that the CIG has been so selective in its blue economy engagements as the decade matured, restricting its articulation of the discourse to only a handful of forums (Table 12). As I detailed earlier, the years following Rio+20 saw the CIG largely confine its blue economy engagement to two spaces: domestic policy and international forums related to the ISA-UNDESA Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth. Outside of these, the CIG has been conspicuously quiet on the blue economy. This raises the question of why the CIG has restricted its blue economy engagement, and perhaps more instructively, what this suggests about the limits of the discourse for the CIG?

##### **Restricted blue economy engagement in domestic forums**

Reflecting on the CIG's blue economy engagement at the domestic level, document analysis confirms one clear trend: that the government's articulation of the blue economy is almost exclusively limited to high-level policy documents,<sup>670</sup> with notably few appeals to the discourse in public communications materials or community forums. To unpack why this selective engagement may be the case, I return to a brief but instructive comment offered by one CIG representative: "It's just not a concept here." (CIG.26). Similarly reflected by other interviewees (CIG.94, CI-CS.12, CI-CS.4), this insight piercingly suggests that the blue economy discourse holds relatively little appeal or cultural authority among the Cook Islands community. As a result, it remains largely disconnected from and illegible to the national context. Aware of this, the CIG has remained measured in its domestic engagement with it.

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<sup>670</sup> Cook Islands draft *Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy* (2019), Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui 2021-2021 (2021)

When saying that the blue economy discourse does not hold much traction with the Cook Islands community, I do not mean sustainable ocean use and management are poorly recognised within the nation. Quite to the contrary, sustainable ocean development principles and practices have long been a core tenet of Cook Islands cosmologies.<sup>671</sup> Cook Islands communities have deep and proud cultural connections to the ocean that, while shaped by encounters with colonialism, capital and globalisation, remain firmly in place today. The rahui systems active through much of the Cook Islands<sup>672</sup> are testament to this, as are the continuing seafaring cultures cultivated through bodies such as the Cook Islands Voyaging Society. The sustainability principles captured within the blue economy are thus nothing new for Cook Islands communities whose longstanding Indigenous systems provide more mature, situated and culturally authoritative frameworks for the local context. This appears to be a significant reason for why the blue economy offers limited value for the CIG at a domestic level, preferring instead to speak in locally meaningful terms and ideas. In the words of one CIG representative:

CIG.96: You can describe it in 101 ways but you know, our Moana Nui o Kiva which [is how] we refer to it, is our life-force and our pantry... Call it what you want, it's our ancestral, through to the now, through to tomorrow there's that [sic]... It's a different cultural context, which hopefully you've unravelled in your research.

Recognising the relative weakness of the blue economy as a socially meaningful and culturally authoritative discourse among the Cook Islands community is also useful for understanding why the CIG has more recently leant towards the Blue Pacific. As outlined already (*Chapter Five*), the Blue Pacific is a distinctly Pacific construct that foregrounds Indigenous relations with the ocean as a source of collective identity, provider of life, and sacred space. Though necessarily regional in scope, the Blue Pacific is closer aligned to the knowledge and cultural systems of Cook Islands communities than the global blue economy construct. It thus offers a more compelling discourse within which the CIG can frame its seabed minerals activities for domestic audiences. I should note that the Blue Pacific is far from the only discourse deployed domestically by the CIG to promote its seabed minerals vision, with theological frameworks providing a common and powerful point of reference for the CIG.<sup>673</sup> Yet in comparison to the blue economy, the Blue Pacific is a discourse better suited for speaking to Indigenous Cook Islands value systems and

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<sup>671</sup> Liam Koka'ua and James Nikitine, *Moana Irakau*.

<sup>672</sup> Bambridge, *The Rahui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories*.

<sup>673</sup> Mark Brown, 'Address by Honourable Mark Brown, Prime Minister & Minister for Seabed Minerals at the Exploration Licence Granting Ceremony 2022' (Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Exploration Licence Granting Ceremony 2022, Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, 2022).

practices, presenting it as an attractive alternative that the government appears to be increasingly turning towards.

### **Restricted blue economy engagement in international forums**

From an international perspective, the CIG has been highly constrained in its engagement with the blue economy following Rio+20, which is rather puzzling given the government's strident advocacy of the 'green economy in a blue world' storyline in 2011/2012 (Table 12). Recalling earlier discussion, the CIG has almost exclusively restricted its articulation of the blue economy to forums related to the Abyssal Initiative. This is despite its regular participation in other seabed minerals events and conferences abroad, and the active deployment of this discourse by its joint-venture partner, DEME. To comprehend why this may be the case, it is useful to consider the role discourse plays as a vector for relational connection; assembling shared understandings of the world that can facilitate the interaction and collaboration of distinct actors.

Of all the international seabed minerals programs that the CIG is involved with, the Abyssal Initiative is most explicit in its blue economy framings. Though it is common for blue economy references to feature in the language of UN events and texts, it is *SDG14: Life Below Water* that has emerged as the UN's leading framework for describing sustainable ocean development since its introduction in 2015—not the blue economy. These ocean constructs are often engaged in complementarity to one another (e.g. the Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles), however, it is primarily SDG14 that guides the UN's ocean-related work. Similarly, the Cobalt Institute—where the CIG has been particularly active—has increasingly expanded its discussions around the sustainability of minerals and metals mining. Here, the discourse of the green economy is the dominant framework through which Cobalt Institute discussions take place (which is unsurprising given that the majority of the Institute's members manage terrestrially based operations, with only a handful active in the ocean environment).<sup>674</sup> In neither of these global communities is the blue economy the primary discourse for discussing seabed minerals activities (or indeed ocean development activities more broadly).

Hajer's thinking around discourse coalitions (*Chapter Two*) can be usefully engaged to unpack this observation. According to Hajer, discourse coalitions form when a group of distinct actors coalesce around a shared storyline. They represent not only the group of actors, but also the storyline around which the coalition forms; effectively constituting the relational space wherein diverse actors gather around a mutually intelligible framework. In the case of the Abyssal Initiative,

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<sup>674</sup> Cobalt Institute, 'Cobalt: Powering the Green Economy' (Cobalt Institute, 2023). The 2022 Cobalt Conference was similarly themed 'Powering the Green Economy'.

the blue economy (via a ‘net zero transition’ storyline) operates as this primary discourse coalition. In other forums, however, different discourses provide this basis for mutual intelligibility: SDG14 in the case of the UN, and green economy in the case of the Cobalt Institute. In these latter forums, it is not necessary for actors to speak in the terms of the blue economy to be intelligible to one another as other constructs provide this relational space. As such, the incentive for actors to engage the blue economy in these spaces is relatively weak. This may help to explain why the CIG does not engage the blue economy in international forums outside the Abyssal Initiative where other mainstream ocean and sustainability discourses provide the leading platforms for collaboration and coalition. Quite simply, the CIG does not perceive that it is necessary to do so. The CIG instead appears to be strategically tailoring its discourse engagements to reflect the primary discourse coalitions of each international forum it is engaged: evoking the blue economy when it is valuable for coalition building (Abyssal Initiative) while abstaining from its use in other spaces where the discourse features less centrally (Cobalt Institute).

Such dynamics speaks to the autonomy of the CIG in its discourse deployments and reaffirms my suggestion that discourse provides actors with a powerful political tool. It is notable how the CIG’s apparent freedom to choose its international discourse engagements differs from the experiences reported by Pacific regional stakeholders and representatives of the LMMA Network who commonly expressed a sense of compulsion to evoke the blue economy when interacting in global forums. I will return to this puzzle in *Chapter Eight* where I consider if discourse hegemony is experienced differently by actors depending on their position in the hegemonic order. For now, however, I note that in the years following Rio+20, the CIG appears to have withdrawn from its forthright advocacy of the blue economy to instead engage it strategically only where and as it finds it useful for coalition building.

Unlike its selective blue economy engagements, the CIG has been far more vocal in its articulation of the Blue Pacific across international stages in recent years.<sup>675</sup> It has engaged the Blue Pacific in forums where it never previously mentioned the blue economy (e.g. COP27),<sup>676</sup> as well as the one

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<sup>675</sup> By way of indication, a customised Google search on 20.09.2024 returned 235 results for [Mark Brown and “Blue Pacific”] on the domain “.forumsec.org” (i.e. Pacific Islands Forum website) since 1/1/2022. An additional 108 results of the same search terms on the domain “.gov.ck” (i.e. CIG websites) over this same period. Searches for [Mark Brown and “blue economy”] on the domain “.forumsec.org” (i.e. Pacific Islands Forum website) since 1/1/2022 only returned 4 results. The same search on the domain “.gov.ck” returned 35 results. The Pacific Islands Forum website and CIG websites are the primary repositories for Mark Brown’s speeches, particularly on international stages.

<sup>676</sup> Mark Brown, ‘Statement by Prime Minister Hon. Mark Brown’ (COP27 National Leaders Statement, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2022).

forum where it did (Abyssal Initiative).<sup>677</sup> The next subsection will consider why the Blue Pacific may be a more widely deployed discourse of the CIG at the international level, affording particular emphasis on its inherent assertion of Pacific sovereignty and self-determination.

#### 6.4.3 Asserting Cook Islands sovereignty

Throughout this chapter we have seen the intimate relationship between the Cook Islands journey of self-governance and the CIG's vision for seabed minerals activities. I have detailed how the entanglement of Cook Islands sovereignty and seabed minerals runs deep, with the latter an inherent pillar of the CIG's state-making project. From Sir Albert Henry's advocacy for a 200nm EEZ regime during UNCLOS negotiations, to the CIG's establishment of the world's first seabed minerals legislation and subsequent launch of the most advanced domestic exploration regime in the world, the seabed minerals sector has often been central to the CIG's assertion and exercise of self-determination; an integral component of the CIG's vision for a powerful and prosperous Cook Islands state. This subsection grapples with how the blue economy fits into this longer state-making project, approaching discourse as an important political tool for framing such state-making visions and ensuring they remain pertinent in evolving social contexts.

The CIG's engagement with the blue economy over the decade since 2011 reflects an astute political framing of its longstanding seabed-minerals vision within ideals of sustainability and self-determined development. As outlined in *Section Two*, the discourse provided more than a trendy buzzword for the CIG to pedal its seabed minerals aspirations, but a sophisticated political tool through which the state could refashion and adapt its commitment to this sector in an evolving socio-political context where principles of sustainability and environmentalism were firmly established in the mainstream. The CIG's 'net-zero leader' storyline was a particularly skilful articulation of this, enabling the CIG to at once defend the sustainability credentials of the seabed mineral sector (by presenting it as necessary for the provisioning of metals needed for the global net-zero transition), while asserting the importance of the Cook Islands to the international community (given its control of some of the most abundant and high-grade polymetallic nodule deposits in the world). This was evident in my exchange with a senior CIG representative who clearly evoked the 'net-zero leader' storyline to frame the government's pursuit of the sector:

*Myself: What would the nation like to achieve by being involved in this sector?*

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<sup>677</sup> Herman, 'Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the Seabed Minerals Authority at the Fostering International and Regional Cooperation in Support of the Sustainable Development of the Blue Economy of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS United Nations Ocean Conference Side Event'.



CIG.96: I think at a very high level, on the global stage you have – we need to start addressing reliance on fossil fuels and so forth. So, what we have is the ability to, in our backyard, our minerals to address climate change [sic]. Being able to harvest those nodules sustainably, safely, in a well thought out [way] will cater for the world’s demand for cobalt and other minerals; to turn the world’s need for fossil fuels.

So that’s exciting. As a nation, we have this abundance of resource *to change the force of mankind*. [emphasis added]

This stakeholder’s conclusion that seabed minerals mining could enable the Cook Islands to “change the force of mankind” is striking. It reveals how through the logic of a ‘net-zero leader’ storyline, the CIG continued to leverage the vision of seabed minerals activities as an assertion of Cook Islands sovereignty. In this way, the blue economy was put into service of the CIG’s political objectives to both sustainable ocean development as well as a self-determined, sovereign future. This observation is helpful for understanding the utility the blue economy offered the CIG throughout the 2010s. But how are we to read this in light of more recent developments which indicate the CIG has turned to the Blue Pacific in place of the blue economy? To this I proffer two responses.

First, the CIG’s Blue Pacific turn should not be seen as an indictment of the blue economy’s value for asserting Cook Islands sovereignty. There is clearly a case to be made—as I have advanced above—that the blue economy was effectively leveraged by the CIG last decade to advocate for the Cook Islands’ position in the global community. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that the Blue Pacific may facilitate such assertiveness *more* strongly.

Here we arrive at my second point; that the Blue Pacific appears better positioned than the blue economy to assert Cook Islands sovereignty in current global and regional contexts. As we saw in *Chapter Five*, the Blue Pacific is a stridently Pacific construct that advocates for collective diplomacy, Pacific self-determination and autonomy in an era of intensifying geopolitical tension and intersecting challenges for Pacific communities and ecosystems (climate change, biodiversity loss, widening fiscal deficits). Unlike the blue economy, the Blue Pacific is a discourse developed by the region, for the region. It also appears less vulnerable to universalisation as a global framing for sustainable ocean development given its express ‘Pacific’ orientation—though this is not to deny the possibility of mis/appropriation (see the Blue Pacific Prosperity discussion of *Chapter*

*Five*, or commentary around the Partners in the Blue Pacific mechanism).<sup>678</sup> These qualities suggest that it will be difficult for ‘Pacific-ness’ to be diluted from the Blue Pacific construct; at least to the same extent that SIDS and their interests have been displaced from the core of the blue economy as this discourse has been globally mainstreamed post-Rio+20.

For the CIG (and other actors of the region), articulation of the Blue Pacific immediately evokes an understanding of their nation as a large ocean state. The discourse challenges belittling notions of the smallness<sup>679</sup> of PICTs and associated assumptions that work to disempower the Cook Islands as an insignificant actor in global affairs. Instead, the Blue Pacific enables the CIG to allude to the vast seabed minerals wealth of its EEZ, the critical role the Cook Islands occupies in future critical minerals supply chains (should seabed mining commence), and the political importance of the CIG as the governing body managing such activities. These logics are evident in the Prime Minister Brown’s comments on the 52<sup>nd</sup> PIFLM decision to hold greater regional dialogue on seabed minerals activity. Though these comments speak to seabed minerals activities and governance at the regional level, they illustrate the CIG’s association of the Blue Pacific discourse with assertions of sovereignty and global seabed minerals leadership:

“The cornerstone of our Pacific Islands Forum is respect for *sovereignty*, and our regional unity and collective advocacy and actions,” said Prime Minister Brown. “This has amplified our voices and impact globally for decades and delivered transformative outcomes for our Pacific people.”

... “I am pleased that our Pacific Leaders support a constructive dialogue on deep sea minerals led collectively by our countries, rather than external actors – which acknowledges our different national views and sovereign rights, whilst upholding our shared common stewardship values for our *Blue Pacific Continent*.”

... “The upcoming Talanoa Dialogue in 2024 will allow for inclusive preparations and ensure our collective voices and perspectives are accommodated. It will enable us to have this important discussion on deep sea minerals while presenting an opportunity for the Pacific Family *to bring to the fore our global leadership once more on sustainable oceans management*” shared PM Brown.<sup>680</sup> [emphasis added]

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<sup>678</sup> Wallis, Koro, and O’Dwyer, ‘The “Blue Pacific” Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?’; Greg Fry, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Terence Wesley-Smith, “‘Partners in the Blue Pacific’ Initiative Rides Roughshod over Established Regional Processes’, *DevPolicy Blog*, 5 July 2022, <https://devpolicy.org/pbp-initiative-rides-roughshod-over-regional-processes-20220705/>.

<sup>679</sup> Hau’ofa, ‘Our Sea of Islands’.

<sup>680</sup> Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority, ‘SBMA Release: Pacific Leaders Agree to Greater Regional Dialogue and Cooperation on Deep Sea Minerals’, 16 November 2023, <https://www.sbma.gov.ck/news-3/article-117>.

These comments capture an assertion of Pacific sovereignty that, I argue, appears stronger than that capable of the blue economy. They suggest how through the sheer utterance of the Blue Pacific, the CIG is able to evoke understandings of Cook Islands self-determination; both in the broad political sense but also with specific reference to seabed minerals governance and activities. The Blue Pacific is firmer, stauncher, more explicit in its assertion of sovereignty than the blue economy, and it is perhaps for this reason that the CIG is leaning towards this discourse as the current decade progresses. The CIG's positioning seabed minerals activity within this Blue Pacific discourse may also be seen as a strategic leveraging of the discourse's collective values to encourage other PICTs to recognise this sector as a legitimate—or at least acceptable—part of the future regional order. Securing such regional acceptance (albeit if not agreement) on seabed minerals activity would be a major achievement for the CIG given the deep tensions that currently fracture the Pacific's position on this industry—particularly the prospect of mining.<sup>681</sup> With the CIG's Blue Pacific turn only becoming clear through 2023, we remain in the early stages of this apparent shift. Whether, how and why this Blue Pacific adoption has occurred are questions for further research.

#### 6.4.4 Section Summary

Reflecting on the CIG's seeming turn to the Blue Pacific in recent years, this section grappled with the question of why the blue economy has been displaced as a core discourse framing in the CIG's seabed minerals vision and aspirations? I outlined early evidence to support the case that such a turn is underway, identifying an increase in the CIG's Blue Pacific articulations since 2022 alongside a near silence of blue economy references. Prime Minister Brown's assumption of the role of PIF Chair in 2023 is likely a key driver for this shift. Yet, I suggest it is not the only. The Blue Pacific's alignment with Indigenous Cook Islands understandings of stewardship and ocean connection positions it as a meaningful framework through which the CIG can discuss seabed minerals activity among the local population. This domestic legibility had seemingly evaded the blue economy, which the CIG rarely engaged at home outside of high-level policymaking forums.

Furthermore, the Blue Pacific's strident assertion of Pacific sovereignty renders it an appealing construct for the CIG in international forums. I suggest that such sovereignty is more powerfully captured in the Blue Pacific than the blue economy, particularly given the former's development as a discourse by the Pacific and for the Pacific. From a global outlook, the Blue Pacific may be better equipped to guide the CIG through the current decade where its longstanding dream for a

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<sup>681</sup> Patrick Kaiku, 'Deep Sea Mining—Can It Sink the Visions in Pacific Regionalism?', Regional Outlook Paper No. 72 (Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2022).

self-determined seabed minerals futures faces growing challenge from the environmental and climate justice movements who oppose the commencement of commercial seabed mining.<sup>682</sup>

## 6.5 Conclusion

This case study tells the story of the CIG's use of the blue economy to defend and advance its decades-old vision of a seabed minerals future. It shows how far from pursuing a new vision of ocean development and use, the blue economy engaged by the CIG has been crafted in service of a longstanding state-making project premised on ocean (specifically seabed) commodification. I suggest that the blue economy provides but the latest discursive tool for the CIG to refashion its seabed minerals dreams anew; at once defending and legitimising the sector in an era where the principle of sustainability is achieving global endorsement, while positioning the Cook Islands as a leading, sovereign and necessary stakeholder of this emerging ocean industry. Close analysis uncovered how both the CIG's blue economy storylines—'green economy in a blue world,' and 'net-zero leader'—were deeply entangled with articulations and assertions of Cook Islands sovereignty; be that as a platform for actively participating in Rio+20 discussions when its speaking rights had been revoked, or positioning the state as a pioneer and necessary provisioner of the global net-zero transition. Identifying this state-making function of the blue economy is a critical insight of this case study.

Thinking in dialogue with Gramsci's work on crisis, hegemony and transformation, the CIG's blue economy relationship highlights the potential for promises of transformation to be deployed for conservative ends. It highlights the strategic agency of the CIG to adapt the blue economy and its promise of sustainable ocean development for its own purposes and in response to pointed critique. Far from a rupture in the government's approach to ocean use and management, the blue economy instead appears part of a process of passive revolution wherein the CIG seeks to safeguard its vision for a prosperous, sovereign seabed minerals future in response to changing political contexts and challenges. I will return to this observation in *Part III* where I draw together

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<sup>682</sup> The Pacific Blue Line, 'Deep Sea Mining Is Not Needed, Not Wanted, Not Consented!', 2021, <https://www.pacificblueline.org/pacific-blue-line-statement>; Pacific Elders' Voice, 'Statement by Pacific Elders' Voice on Deep Seabed Mining', 24 February 2024, <https://pacificelders.org/statement/statement-by-pacific-elders-voice-on-deep-seabed-mining/>; World Wildlife Fund, 'No to Deep Seabed Mining'; Reeves, '8000 Sign PANG Petition in Bid to Block Pacific Deep Seabed Mining'; Te Ipukarea Society, 'Te Ipukarea Society – Deep Sea Mining Position Statement', 11 May 2022, <https://tiscookislands.org/wp-content/uploads/Te-Ipukarea-Society-Position-Statement-5-November.pdf>; Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, 'DSCC Position Statement on Deep Seabed Mining', July 2019, [https://deep-sea-conservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/DSCC-Position-Statement-on-Deep-Seabed-Mining\\_July2019-1.pdf](https://deep-sea-conservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/DSCC-Position-Statement-on-Deep-Seabed-Mining_July2019-1.pdf); Melanesian Spearhead Group, 'Udaune Declaration on Climate Change by Members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG)' (North Efate, Vanuatu, 24 August 2023).

the insights of all three case studies to piece together a picture of the blue economy's broader operation as a political tool within the Pacific.

On a final note, the CIG's shift from the blue economy to Blue Pacific discourse in recent years hints to an interesting trend that only further confirms the government's deftness in leveraging discourse to reframe and legitimise its seabed minerals vision across changing contexts. Where the blue economy was useful for the CIG to further its seabed minerals dream over the decade of the 2010s, its utility appears to be fading as new political calculations come into play. Today, the Blue Pacific appears to have replaced the blue economy as the CIG's primary discourse for ocean development and seabed minerals activity. This presents an emerging challenge for the PIF's regional Blue Pacific construct given the diversity of perspectives on this sector among Pacific states, civil society and community.<sup>683</sup> The Blue Pacific's incorporation into a process of passive revolution aimed at stabilising the CIG's state-making seabed minerals vision appears a real possibility, and one that regional actors should remain vigilant of as they work to engender unity and consensus in their new regional discourse. Whether the Blue Pacific will be destabilised by its association with seabed minerals activity will remain a question to be grappled with by Pacific communities and delegates.

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<sup>683</sup> Kaiku, 'Deep Sea Mining—Can It Sink the Visions in Pacific Regionalism?'



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Case Study Three: Locally-Managed Marine Area Network

### 7.1 Introduction

Starting as a loose collection of local groups engaged in marine conservation and management, the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (LMMA Network) has emerged as a global champion for self-determined, community-led marine area management. The handful of sites upon which the LMMA Network was founded in 2000 has expanded to over nine hundred<sup>684</sup> located across seven country networks and approximately twenty-four supported nations of the Pacific and Southeast Asia (Figure 20). Collecting around a common vision of “vibrant, resilient, and empowered communities who inherit and maintain healthy, well-managed, and sustainable marine resources and ecosystems,”<sup>685</sup> the LMMA Network is first and foremost a grassroots learning collective comprised of a diverse group of local communities interested in effectively managing their marine and coastal areas. Second to this function, the LMMA Network is a vocal advocate of locally-managed marine areas (LMMAs) across national, regional and international fora wherein it participates in high-level meetings and conferences,<sup>686</sup> engages with policy development processes,<sup>687</sup> builds partnerships with like-minded community fisheries coalitions,<sup>688</sup> and contributes to research on LMMAs.<sup>689</sup> It is in this advocacy role that the LMMA Network

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<sup>684</sup> Arundhati Jagadish et al., ‘Scaling Indigenous-Led Natural Resource Management’, *Global Environmental Change* 84 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2024.102799>.

<sup>685</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Locally-Managed Marine Area Network Social Contract’, 2003.

<sup>686</sup> United Nations Oceans Conferences (UNOC)

<sup>687</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up Community-Based Fisheries Management: 2021–2025’ (Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community, 2021).

<sup>688</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘A Call to Action for Artisanal Fisheries’, 5 April 2022; Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers’.

<sup>689</sup> Jagadish et al., ‘Scaling Indigenous-Led Natural Resource Management’; Hugh Govan et al., ‘Community Conserved Areas: A Review of Status & Needs in Melanesia and Polynesia’ (ICCA regional review for CENESTA /TILCEPA /TGER /IUCN/ GEF-SGP, 2009); Stacy Jupiter et al., ‘Locally-Managed Marine Areas: Multiple

predominantly encounters and navigates the blue economy discourse and accordingly, this is the main branch of the network's activities considered in this chapter.

As a body dedicated to supporting LMMAs and the communities that manage them, the LMMA Network offers important insight into the political considerations and calculations negotiated by grassroots actors in their interactions with the blue economy discourse. The LMMA Network's experience speaks equally to the challenge that the blue economy poses for the protection of community rights and self-determination, as it does to the agency of grassroots actors to unsettle and disrupt mainstream development visions. It thus provides a valuable case study into the nuances of blue economy engagement, reminding us of how acquiescence does not necessarily mean acceptance and that an actor's discourse interactions often reflect strategic calculation. Looking beyond the binary of discourse rejection or endorsement, this chapter details a case of a cautious, yet pragmatic, blue economy interaction; highlighting how for some Pacific actors, blue economy engagement may be fraught but can nevertheless be strategically negotiated.

This chapter unpacks *how* and *why* the LMMA Network engages with the blue economy discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development. Following a brief introduction to the LMMA Network in *Section One*, *Section Two* provides close analysis of storyline construction as it has evolved over the last decade. I detail the LMMA Network's crafting of two distinct but increasingly interwoven storylines: a 'critical' storyline and an 'instrumental' storyline. While the 'critical' storyline voices concern over the blue economy's potential to reproduce and extend coastal communities' marginalisation and exclusion from ocean spaces (physical and governance), the 'instrumental' storyline strategically positions coastal communities as critical actors in the blue economy and calls for their centring in global development and governance forums. The LMMA Network's increasing interlacing of these two storylines over the last decade has enabled it to craft a highly conditional relationship with the blue economy wherein constructive engagement is extended on the condition of safeguarding coastal communities rights. Blue economy engagement, in other words, is always qualified and strategic.

Drawing on key stakeholder interviews, *Section Three* turns to reflect on *why* the LMMA Network engages these 'critical' and 'instrumental' blue economy storylines. My analysis treads a careful path through the agency/structure debate, ultimately arguing that while particular blue economy constructions appear to have achieved hegemony in ocean development and governance spaces,

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Objectives and Diverse Strategies', *Pacific Conservation Biology* 20, no. 2 (2014): 165–79; Joeli Veitayaki et al., 'Mainstreaming Resource Conservation: The Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area Network and Its Influence on National Policy Development', *Resource Management in Asia-Pacific* (Canberra: Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program, Australian National University, 2003).



this does not foreclose the possibility of discourse resistance and disruption. Looking to the LMMA Network's careful storyline engagements, I observe that the mainstream blue economy narrative promoted by powerful external actors (namely intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), big non-governmental organisations (BiNGOs) and ocean philanthropy) can be unsettled, even confronted through the mobilisation of 'critical' storylines (either in isolation, or creatively interwoven with more instrumental constructs). The persistent presence of the 'critical' storyline within the LMMA Network's blue economy interactions suggests an ongoing simmering of dissent and refusal to concede to mainstream visions of ocean development that have too often disempowered—if not harmed—coastal communities, particularly those of the Global South.<sup>690</sup> The final section distils key learnings developed across this chapter, with specific focus on what LMMA Network's blue economy experience tells us about the nature of this discourse as a promise of transformative ocean development. I bring these insights into conversation with the Gramscian concepts of crisis, hegemony and transformation, laying the necessary groundwork for *Part III*.

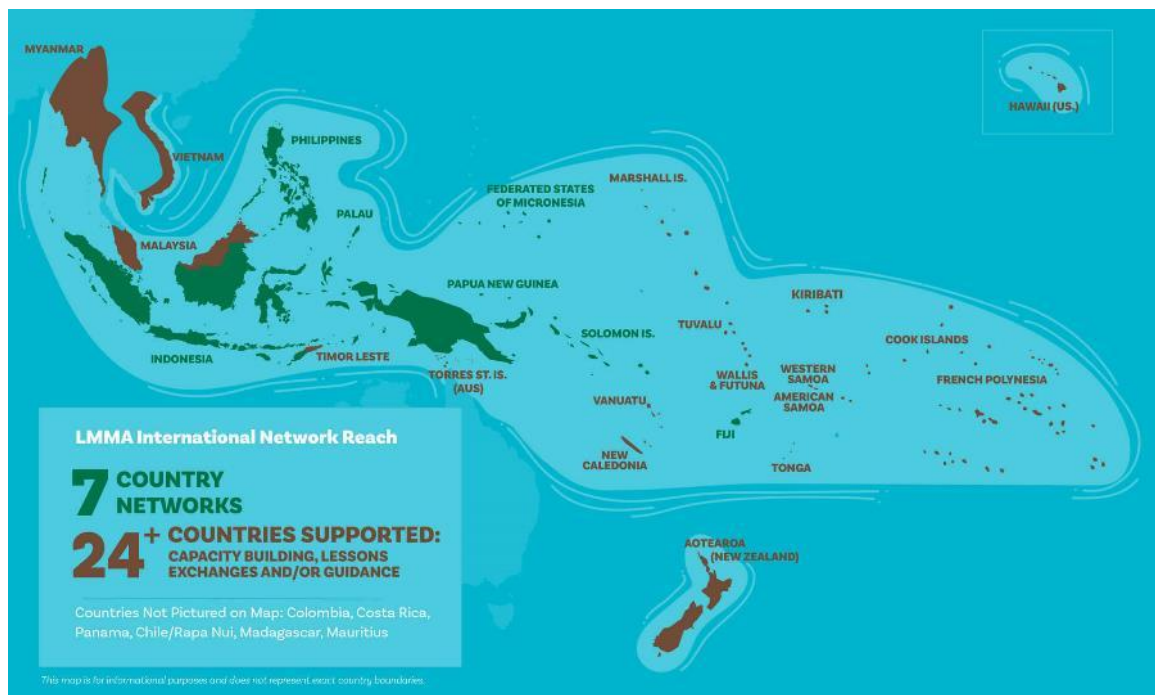


**Figure 20:** Locally-Managed Marine Area Network locations. Source: Locally-Managed Marine Area Network

<sup>690</sup> Tor A. Benjaminsen and Ian Bryceson, 'Conservation, Green/Blue Grabbing and Accumulation by Dispossession in Tanzania', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012): 335–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.667405>; du Plessis et al., 'Sustaining Empire: Conservation by Ruination at Kalama Atoll'; Annette Lees, 'Review and Analysis of Fiji's Conservation Sector' (The Austral Foundation, 2007); Mac Chapin, 'A Challenge to Conservationists', *World Watch* (Washington, D.C.) 17, no. 6 (2004): 17–17; Paige West, *Conservation Is Our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*, New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 978-0-8223-3749-2.

## 7.2 Background: Origins, Community Heart and the 100% Solution

### 7.2.1 The renaissance of community-based marine resource management in the Pacific

Formed in 2000, the LMMA Network emerged at a time of renaissance in community-based marine resource management (CBMRM). As recounted by Johannes, the story of CBMRM's revival, particularly within the Pacific, was nothing short of impressive given its rapid decline a quarter-century earlier under pressures of colonisation, globalisation and the introduction of western governance structures.<sup>691</sup> These compounding pressures had weakened centuries-old practices of marine resource management; undermining the authority of customary governance systems, dismissing the effectiveness of customary marine resource management practices and, in many cases, replacing them with external approaches transplanted from contexts afar. Yet, over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tide turned and a wave of renewed CBMRM swept across the region. Two key factors fuelled this CBMRM revival: (a) growing recognition of the need for sustainably managed ocean and coastal ecosystems, and, perhaps most critically, (b) increasingly assertive movements of self-determination and the protection of customary tenure among Pacific communities. Both these factors would inform the LMMA Network's formation—albeit if in somewhat unexpected ways. Indeed, they continue to shape the network's blue economy engagements to this day.

Turning first to the matter of sustainability awareness; recognition of the need for more ecologically responsible marine management had grown over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as the pressures of human (specifically capitalist) activity on global ecosystems became unavoidably apparent. Rachel Carson's account of the environmental harms resulting from widespread pesticide use in *Silent Spring*<sup>692</sup> helped to spur the global environmental movement of the 1960s that, under the somewhat sensationalist influence of Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*<sup>693</sup> and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*,<sup>694</sup> raised concerns about expanding resource demands associated with global population growth. This early environmental movement questioned narratives of the earth as an inexhaustible site for exploitation which had characterised the thinking of industrial societies throughout the modern age, impressing instead the need for measured and socio-ecologically balanced activities. This saw the rise of the sustainable development discourse, famously described by the Brundtland

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<sup>691</sup> Johannes, 'The Renaissance of Community-Based Marine Resource Management in Oceania'.

<sup>692</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

<sup>693</sup> Paul R Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

<sup>694</sup> Donella H. Meadows et al., 'The Limits to Growth; a Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind' (New York: The Club of Rome, 1972).

Commission as “meet[ing] needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future.”<sup>695</sup> By the 1990s, sustainable development had become a core focus of the mainstream development agenda, with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit cementing its widespread adoption among global audiences.

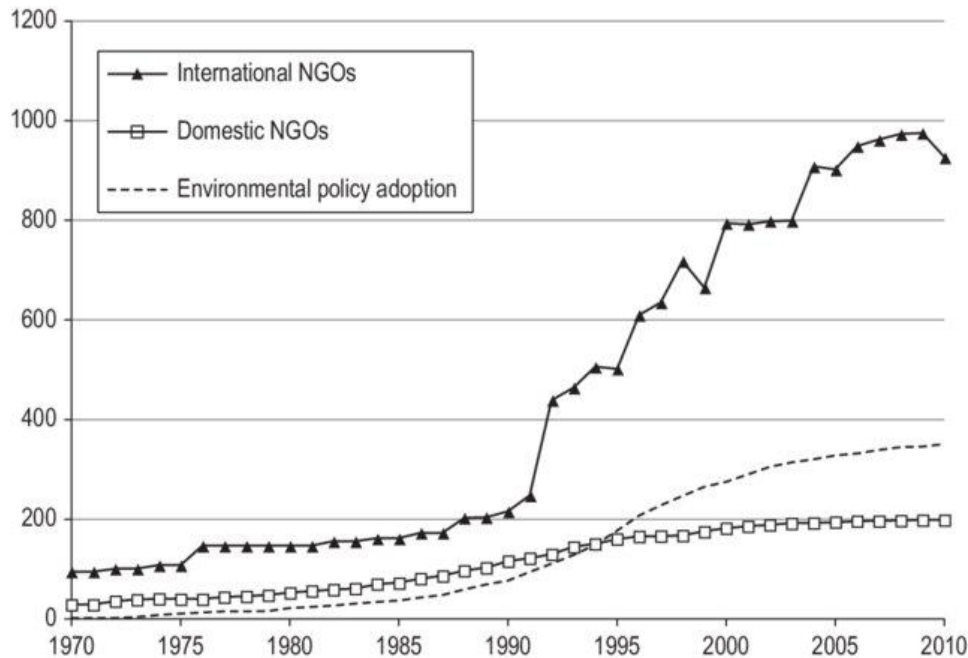


**Figure 21:** Trends of international environmental NGOs, domestic environmental NGOs, and policy reform in developing countries 1970 – 2010. Source: Longhofer et al. (2016)

While at first glance, it may appear that this burgeoning sustainable development movement provided a favourable backdrop for the emergence of the LMMA Network, closer analysis into precisely *who* was leading this agenda reveals a different picture. As documented by Longhofer et al., the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an explosion in new international environmental NGOs (IENGOS), particularly those establishing offices in the Global South (Figure 21).<sup>696</sup> Their analysis exposed how the number of IENGOS working in developing nations quadrupled over the ten-year period of 1990 to 2000, vastly outstripping the rate of growth in domestic ENGOS 2:1. This resulted in many new sustainable development programs active throughout the Global South coming under the leadership of external agents—a significant portion of whom had little experience or knowledge of the contexts in which their programs were operating. Thus, when an interest in community-based marine development and conservation programs emerged in the

<sup>695</sup> Brundtland, ‘Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future’, 24–25.

<sup>696</sup> Wesley Longhofer et al., ‘NGOs, INGOs, and Environmental Policy Reform, 1970–2010’, *Social Forces* 94, no. 4 (2016): 1743–68.

1990s,<sup>697</sup> too often these programs were precisely that: community-*based* and not community-*led*. Or, as recounted on the LMMA Network's 'Our History' webpage:

In the mid-1990s, scores of community-based projects were underway throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. While communities were increasingly being engaged, the approaches were largely top down and largely led by outside scientists with little knowledge of local communities, cultures and priorities. The end result was little benefits for the resources and the people who depended on them.

Meanwhile, a new movement was emerging.<sup>698</sup>

From this reflection, we see how the 'sustainability turn' in the global development complex was less an advantage from which LMMA Network sought to build upon, but a trend that posed serious challenges for the self-determination and authority of ocean-reliant communities of the Global South. Wary of this risk, a group of development practitioners long engaged (and in many cases from) the Pacific and Southeast Asia began discussing the potential for an alternate approach to marine resource management premised on local contexts, customary rights and longstanding management practices. This brings me to the second key factor underpinning the CBMRM renaissance in the Pacific, and, likewise, the LMMA Network's formation: an increasingly assertive movement of self-determination and customary marine tenure.

Beginning with Samoa in 1962, successful campaigns for political independence progressed across the Pacific through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, establishing new states and with them, new governance systems that were (more heavily) determined by Indigenous and local communities as opposed to former-colonial administrators. In multiple cases, these newly independent Pacific states adopted some form of legal recognition for Indigenous customary (or *kastom*) systems,<sup>699</sup> which although challenged during the era of colonisation had often remained active and respected frameworks guiding community relations with their surrounding world. For coastal communities, customary marine tenure (CMT) was—and remains—a central component of these customary systems, defining when, how and who has access to marine spaces and resources.<sup>700</sup> The protection of CMT in independent Pacific nations acknowledged the role of local Indigenous communities as legitimate managers of marine ecosystems: (rein)vesting authority in communities to manage

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<sup>697</sup> Govan et al., 'Community Conserved Areas: A Review of Status & Needs in Melanesia and Polynesia'.

<sup>698</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'Our History', 2022, <https://lmmanetwork.org/about-us/our-history/>.

<sup>699</sup> AusAid, 'Making Land Work' (Canberra: Australian Agency for International Development, 2008), 4.

<sup>700</sup> Bambridge, *The Rabui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories*; Jupiter et al., 'Locally-Managed Marine Areas: Multiple Objectives and Diverse Strategies'; Govan et al., 'Community Conserved Areas: A Review of Status & Needs in Melanesia and Polynesia'; Jagadish et al., 'Scaling Indigenous-Led Natural Resource Management'.

their marine resources and safeguarding their rights to do so. On paper, this provided a firm base for CBMRM, however, the reality of CMT and CBMRM on the ground was often more complicated.<sup>701</sup>

Across the newly independent nations of the Pacific, protection of customary marine rights was generally pursued via the recognition of CMT either in law (*de jure*) or in practice (*de facto*). As illustrated in Table 14, CMT is broadly recognised within the independent nations of Melanesia and Polynesia and protected to some degree in Micronesia. Such acknowledgement of CMT established a system of legal pluralism through much of the Pacific wherein customary rights holders were (theoretically) positioned alongside the state as legitimate actors in the governance of marine spaces and resources. Though empowering for local communities on paper, the reality of legal pluralism often fell short of ambitions for co-management, with communities struggling to secure support (resourcing) or acknowledgement (governance) of their rights as marine resource managers among government and development partners.<sup>702</sup> As a result, coastal communities often found themselves in the curious situation of having their customary marine rights protected in principle (and constitutionally in Vanuatu's case) yet obstructed in practice. This raised challenges for local communities who, over recent decades, had witnessed a deepening scarcity of their marine resources owing to the growing demands of export markets and local populations.<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>701</sup> See for example, Bambridge, *The Rabui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories*.

<sup>702</sup> Hugh Govan, *Preliminary Review of Public Expenditure of the Fisheries Agencies of Pacific Island Countries and Territories: Policy, Operational Budget and Staffing Support for Coastal Fisheries*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4949.9363>.

<sup>703</sup> Johannes, 'The Renaissance of Community-Based Marine Resource Management in Oceania', 327.

**Table 14:** Historical and contemporary *de facto* (F) or *de jure* (J) existence of customary marine tenure in the Pacific Islands and evidence for traditional use of closed areas in managing marine resources. Source Govan: 2009, p. 17.

| Region/country/island<br>(country of association) | CMT<br>historical | CMT<br>current | Traditional<br>closures |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| <b>MELANESIA</b>                                  |                   |                |                         |
| Papua New Guinea                                  | √                 | F              | √                       |
| Fiji Islands                                      | √                 | F/J            | √                       |
| Solomon Islands                                   | √                 | F              | √                       |
| New Caledonia (Fra.)                              | √                 | ?              | ?                       |
| Vanuatu                                           | √                 | J              | √                       |
| <b>POLYNESIA</b>                                  |                   |                |                         |
| French Polynesia (Fra.)                           | √                 | ?              | √                       |
| Samoa                                             | √                 | F              | √                       |
| Tonga                                             | √                 | X (1887)       | ?                       |
| American Samoa (U.S.)                             | √                 | ?              | √                       |
| Wallis and Futuna (Fra.)                          | √?                | ?              | ?                       |
| Cook Islands (N.Z.)                               | √                 | F              | √                       |
| Tuvalu                                            | √                 | F              | √                       |
| Niue (N.Z.)                                       | √                 | √              | √                       |
| Tokelau (N.Z.)                                    | √                 | √              | √?                      |
| Pitcairn Islands (U.K.)                           | ?                 | ?              | ?                       |
| <b>MICRONESIA</b>                                 |                   |                |                         |
| Guam (U.S.)                                       | √?                | X              | ?                       |
| Federated States of Micronesia                    | √                 | Some           | √                       |
| Kiribati                                          | √                 | F              | √                       |
| Northern Mariana Islands (U.S.)                   | √                 | X?             | ?                       |
| Marshall Islands                                  | √                 | X              | √                       |
| Palau                                             | √                 | ?              | √                       |
| Nauru                                             | √                 | X?             | ?                       |

It was against this backdrop that the LMMA Network was born, “founded on the belief that local communities are best positioned to manage coastal resources, but are often left unempowered through international initiatives or government efforts.”<sup>704</sup> By leveraging the reestablishment of CMT in a new era of political independence, regional practitioners and community representatives rallied around strengthening customary rights in practice. Herein laid the seeds for network’s formation at the start of the new century.

### 7.2.2 Establishment: Founding commitments to *locally-managed* and *adaptive* marine area management

The origins of the LMMA Network trace back to a 4-day ‘Fish for the Future?’ meeting held at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, in August 2000. The meeting involved over 100 marine

<sup>704</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Our History’.



management practitioners from Southeast Asia and the Pacific,<sup>705</sup> the vast majority of whom had extensive professional experience working with and alongside local communities in their marine and fisheries management efforts (Figure 22). Having observed a ballooning of community-based marine conservation programs across these regions since the 1990s, yet that there remained few opportunities for information and resource sharing across them, these practitioners convened to discuss their learnings and consider how they could better work together and “introduce the idea of forming a learning network.”<sup>706</sup> The sharing of best practice became a key focus for the meeting, with participants hoping to leverage these insights to support more effective marine resource management projects and explore the potential for strategic scaling up.<sup>707</sup>



**Figure 22:** “Fish for the Future?” meeting hosted at the University of the South Pacific, Suva between 8-11 August 2000. Out of this meeting the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network was born.

An important outcome of this initial meeting was agreement on the phrase ‘locally-managed marine areas’ in preference to CBMRM<sup>708</sup>. Recalling earlier discussion on the growing frustrations with the global trend toward community-based yet externally-*led* sustainable development programs, participants at this 2000 ‘Fish for the Future?’ meeting sought an alternate term to reinstate local leadership at the heart of community marine management. The term LMMA provided this alternative, and with it a paradigm shift for thinking about marine management. Firstly, ‘locally-managed’ was seen to convey a more accurate account of the management approaches endorsed by meeting participants; namely, approaches in which local communities

<sup>705</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘2004 Annual Report’ (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Applied Sciences, The University of the South Pacific, 2005); Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Learning Framework of the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network: A Foundation of Success Learning Portfolio’ (Suva, Fiji, June 2004).

<sup>706</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘2004 Annual Report’, 2.

<sup>707</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Our History’.

<sup>708</sup> Govan et al., ‘Community Conserved Areas: A Review of Status & Needs in Melanesia and Polynesia’, 28.

took the lead in managing their respective marine areas, albeit if supported by government, NGOs or universities.<sup>709</sup> It thus better defined a co-management approach wherein local communities were positioned as primary agents in marine management. The second shift enabled through adoption of the LMMA phrase was a move to a more expansive understandings of marine *area* management, rather than a narrow focus on ‘marine resources’ as described under CBMRM. LMMA broadened the vision of marine management to include more holistic understandings of ecosystem governance that took into consideration resource and non-resource factors alike (such as social and cultural factors alongside economic and subsistence considerations). This has been a strength of the LMMA approach in the Pacific where customary marine management is often closely related to, if not motivated by, cultural practices and values.<sup>710</sup> For these reasons, ‘Our Fish our Future?’ participants settled on the LMMA term as preferable to CBMRM.

Alongside the shift towards LMMA terminology, meeting participants also expressed their support for the idea of community-based adaptive management (CBAM). In short, CBAM refers to a management approach of “‘learning by doing’ rather than ‘getting it right’ at the outset.”<sup>711</sup> It encourages an iterative process wherein communities commence marine management activities with the evidence that they have on hand, then strengthen these approaches over time through a cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring and reflection (Figure 23). CBAM expressly seeks to move away from top-down approaches to marine management that often encourage reliance on external expertise and support, and instead promote more locally-managed approaches where community agency and learning is celebrated.<sup>712</sup> This concept was thus seen to offer a valuable complement to the LMMA approach, each of which foregrounded self-determination as a core principle for marine management, empowering communities as the managers of their own ecosystems.

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<sup>709</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘2004 Annual Report’.

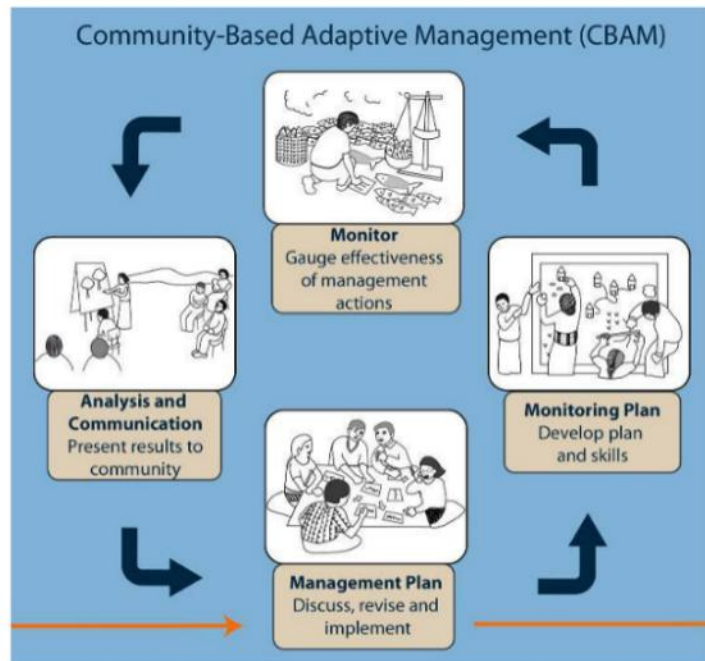
<sup>710</sup> Vave, ‘Five Culturally Protected Water Body Practices in Fiji: Current Status and Contemporary Displacement Challenges’; Jupiter et al., ‘Locally-Managed Marine Areas: Multiple Objectives and Diverse Strategies’.

<sup>711</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Locally-Managed Marine Area Network Social Contract’, 2003, 5.

<sup>712</sup> Hugh Govan et al., ‘Locally-Managed Marine Areas: A Guide to Supporting Community-Based Adaptive Management’ (The Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 31 March 2008), 1.



**Figure 23:** *Community-based Adaptive Management. In Guilbeaux et al. (2008)*



This ‘Fish for the Future?’ meeting marked a key moment in the LMMA Network’s conception. Just months after this meeting, many of the participants reconvened in Indonesia for the 9th International Coral Reef Symposium where they publicly launched the LMMA Network.<sup>713</sup> Like in Fiji, these participants (now founding LMMA Network members) emphasised the principles of LMMA and CBAM, with an overall desire to strengthen and scale-up LMMA activities across regions of the Pacific and Southeast Asia.<sup>714</sup> Indeed, the LMMA Network’s commitment to self-determined, locally-led management continues to shape its engagement with the blue economy discourse, as will become apparent as we progress through the subsequent sections of this chapter.

### 7.2.3 The LMMA Network today: ‘Community Heart’ and the 100% Solution

Approaching twenty-five years of operation, the central objectives and vision of the LMMA Network today remain closely aligned to those it originally launched with in 2000. Primary of these is the LMMA Network’s continued support and advocacy for LMMAs as an effective, appropriate and critical marine management approach—particularly within contexts such as the Pacific where active customary tenure systems and the weak presence of the state beyond urban centres mean that responsibility for ecosystem management rests heavily on local communities.<sup>715</sup>

<sup>713</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘2004 Annual Report’.

<sup>714</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Our History’.

<sup>715</sup> Hugh Govan et al., ‘Status and Potential of Locally-Managed Marine Areas in the Pacific Island Region: Meeting Nature Conservation and Sustainable Livelihood Targets through Wide-Spread Implementation of LMMAs’, *SPREP/WWF/WorldFish-Reefbase/CRISP 2* (2009).

As since its launch, the LMMA Network is a grassroots collective of local communities who have taken measures to manage their own resources as well as practitioners and partners facilitating these CBAM efforts. Local communities are represented on the LMMA Network Council through nominated Country Networks representatives (e.g. the Solomon Islands LMMA Network, the Belau Palau LMMA Network). Each Country Network has its own governance structure generally comprised of an Executive Committee (high-level guidance and oversight) and a Secretariat (day-to-day operations). Looking to the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (FLMMA) as an example, local communities are represented via a Division representative (one from each of Fiji's four divisions) who are appointed by FLMMA members at an Annual General Meeting. This representative structure provides an avenue for communities to exercise agency in LMMA Network discussions and decisions, recognising however, ongoing challenges in many communities regarding imbalanced power relations across areas such as gender and age.<sup>716</sup>

Before moving to analysis of the LMMA Network's blue economy interactions, I dedicate the following subsection to a brief outline of the *Social Contract* and 100% Solution—two key frameworks that guide and frame the network's current activities. The LMMA Network's steadfast commitment to communities and their management rights is essential for contextualising its engagement with the blue economy over the last decade.

### **The *Social Contract* and 'Community Heart'**

Endorsed in 2003, the *Social Contract* has long functioned as the core guiding document defining the LMMA Network's operation at each level of its activities, partnerships and operational structure. It outlines the “mutually agreed principles and commitments fundamental to achieving the LMMA vision”<sup>717</sup> and has remained largely unchanged since its initial agreement.<sup>718</sup> While not a legal document, compliance with the *Social Contract* is necessary for participation in the network. Indeed, acceptance of the *Social Contract* is the only formal requirement for stakeholders seeking to engage with the LMMA Network, whether that be as affiliates or partners. The *Social Contract* thereby provides an important foundation for mutual accountability wherein LMMA Network stakeholders are responsible to one another and likewise responsible to local communities. Or, as

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<sup>716</sup> Sangeeta Mangubhai and Sarah Lawless, 'Exploring Gender Inclusion in Small-Scale Fisheries Management and Development in Melanesia', *Marine Policy* 123 (1 January 2021): 104287, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104287>.

<sup>717</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'Locally-Managed Marine Area Network Social Contract', 2018, 1.

<sup>718</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'Vision, Goals, Values' (Way Back Machine, 16 August 2009), [https://web.archive.org/web/20090816205049/http://www.lmmanetwork.org/Site\\_Page.cfm?PageID=9](https://web.archive.org/web/20090816205049/http://www.lmmanetwork.org/Site_Page.cfm?PageID=9); Veitayaki et al., 'Mainstreaming Resource Conservation: The Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area Network and Its Influence on National Policy Development'.

captured in the *Social Contract*'s subtitle: 'Our Promises to Each Other: Our Commitment to Communities.'

As defined in the *Social Contract*, the “fundamental value of the LMMA is “Community Heart” meaning that communities’ interests, aspirations and well-being are central to all our work.”<sup>719</sup> This underlies the central assumption of the LMMA Network: that local communities are the lead drivers and authorities of their marine managed areas and must be respected as such by other network affiliates and partners. Underpinning this ‘Community Heart’ value sits ten related principles: teamwork, respect, commitment, transparency, integrity, accountability, quality, fun, sharing and learning.<sup>720</sup> Each principle informs the LMMA Network’s engagement with communities, emphasising its role as a grassroots learning network that is committed to community empowerment and CBAM.

Alongside ‘Community Heart,’ the *Social Contract* details four additional core values that directly inform its LMMA work. These are: community engagement, community empowerment, CBAM, and ongoing communication and skills development.<sup>721</sup> The relationship between ‘Community Heart’ and each of these four values is clear, with all foregrounding the self-determination and agency of local communities. This is to say that respect and empowerment of communities—across diverse contexts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific—is integral to the LMMA Network’s work and deeply woven through its *Social Contract*.

### **The 100% Solution**

Scaling-up LMMA practices via bottom-up approaches has long been a central objective of the LMMA Network. Across its near twenty-five years of operation, the LMMA Network has variously described its scaling-up vision as “promot[ing] learning locally and globally about the LMMA tools,”<sup>722</sup> strengthening CBAM to “increase conservation impact,”<sup>723</sup> “Outreach and Upscaling” (one of five strategic result areas in the Network’s *Programme Framework*),<sup>724</sup> or more recently, “Scaling Down to Scale Up.”<sup>725</sup> The most influential and longstanding articulations of such vision, however, has been the ‘100% Solution,’ which, now ten years since its inception, continues to frame the network’s LMMA scaling activities. As we will see through the following

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<sup>719</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Locally-Managed Marine Area Network Social Contract’, 2018, 2.

<sup>720</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 3.

<sup>721</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 9.

<sup>722</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘2004 Annual Report’, 6.

<sup>723</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘What We Do’ (Way Back Machine, 6 October 2011), <https://web.archive.org/web/20111006051534/http://lmmannetwork.org/whatwedo>.

<sup>724</sup> Per comms, 31 March 2022.

<sup>725</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Scaling Down to Scale Up’, 2024, <https://lmmannetwork.org/our-work-peump/>.

sections, the 100% Solution has also been a key site for the LMMA Network’s interaction with the blue economy discourse, particularly thanks to its inclusion as a key objective in major blue economy partnerships that the network has established with the European Union (EU) (Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (OurFish OurFuture). Given this, it is worth outlining the 100% Solution as background for upcoming analysis.

One of the earliest public articulations of the LMMA Network’s 100% Solution dates to the Third UN International Conference on Small Island Developing States held in Samoa, September 2014. Gathering leaders from government, NGOs, civil society and philanthropy, the conference considered how SIDS could transition towards a more sustainable development pathway and cultivate partnerships in support of this vision. Etika Rupeni attended as the LMMA Network’s representative, calling on Pacific leaders and partners to adopt a regional goal to support one hundred percent of coastal communities establish and strengthen LMMA practices<sup>726</sup>—a demand that would become the foundation of the LMMA Network’s 100% Solution.

It is important to highlight that this call for 100% LMMA support emerged in direct response to the growing momentum of the 30x30 campaign—or, as described by one LMMA Network representative, “international large-scale MPA fever” (per comms 9/5/2022)—evident at the 2014 SIDS meeting. Contrary to the conservation approach of the 30x30 campaign (which at the time was predominately focused on expanding no-take fisheries and harvesting in MPAs in offshore areas), the network’s 100% LMMA vision sought to emphasise the critical role communities play in sustainably *managing* ocean spaces. LMMA tools can include no-take measures such as permanent MPAs, however, they also encompass a broader range of strategies including gear restrictions, periodic closures or species restrictions.<sup>727</sup> The 100% vision was concerned with far more than ocean conservation. It also supported sustainable management approaches that permitted ocean use and exploitation for livelihood purposes, all while remaining responsible to ecosystem health. This positioned the LMMA Network’s 100% vision as distinct from the 30x30 campaign, each embodying different philosophies of sustainable development. As we will come to see shortly, these differing understandings of sustainable ocean management motivate much of the LMMA Network’s uneasiness towards the blue economy; particularly with regards to its impact on coastal communities rights and ocean access.

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<sup>726</sup> Per comms, 9 May 2022

<sup>727</sup> Hugh Govan and Stacy Jupiter, ‘Can the IUCN 2008 Protected Areas Management Categories Support Pacific Island Approaches to Conservation?’, *Parks* 19, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.2013.PARKS-19-1.HG.en>.

In 2015, the LMMA Network Council passed a resolution formally adopting the 100% Solution (rCS.20). As was repeatedly emphasised to me in interviews<sup>728</sup> and key stakeholder interactions,<sup>729</sup> the 100% Solution aims for more than simply an expansion of LMMA coverage (geographic component); it also attends to the need for integrated, holistic CBAM (integrated management component) and improved governance arrangements (governance component).<sup>730</sup> From an integrated management perspective, the 100% Solution hinges on holistic ocean management across the entire interconnected land-ocean ecosystem. It thus extends the focus of ocean management beyond simply marine spaces to include terrestrial factors and the impacts of climate change (e.g. watershed management, fertiliser use, erosion, waste management and disaster preparedness). Attending to the deeply interconnected nature of coastal ecosystems is an important feature of the 100% Solution—not to mention one that sets it apart from the ocean-focused discourse of the blue economy.

The governance piece of the 100% Solution is equally important to the LMMA Network's scaling-up vision. For the LMMA Network, the effective scaling-up of LMMAs is considered to rest heavily on supportive governance arrangements across both horizontal (local) and vertical (provincial, national, regional, and partnership) axes.<sup>731</sup> Put otherwise, governance is considered a key enabling factor for LMMA scaling. The 100% Solution first demands the safeguarding and strengthening of local rights, coupled with efforts to support equitable and effective local governance systems (e.g. advocating for the inclusion of women, youth and other marginalised groups in local decision-making forums). This can be seen as the horizontal governance axis. The vertical governance axis then emphasises the importance of external institutions in enabling LMMA activities and their expansion. Here, the 100% Solution holds local communities as the basis for CBAM, while acknowledging that effective scaling-up cannot be achieved through local communities alone. It advocates for the recognition of local rights within state legislation and policy (be that customary rights or local user rights), the sufficient and consistent resourcing of national and subnational fisheries agencies, and opportunities for local communities to 'speak for themselves' at national, regional and international forums.<sup>732</sup> It thus directs attention to the critical

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<sup>728</sup> rCS.20, REG/rCS.27, rCS.55

<sup>729</sup> Alifereti Tawake et al., 'Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) and Small Scale Fishers Essential in a Blue Economy: Fiji, Oceania and Globally', 2023, <https://fb.watch/m718Gswe5U/>.

<sup>730</sup> rCS.20, rCS.55; Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'The 100 Percent Solution', 2022, <https://lmma.network.org/the-lmma-100-percent-solution/>; Tawake et al., 'Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) and Small Scale Fishers Essential in a Blue Economy: Fiji, Oceania and Globally'.

<sup>731</sup> Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'The 100 Percent Solution'.

<sup>732</sup> ICCA Consortium, 'Recap of 2022 UN Ocean Conference: The Power of Collective Action and Community Resilience in the Face of Local-to-Global Challenges', 20 September 2022, <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/2022/09/20/recap-un-ocean-conference/>.

role that government, regional and international agencies play in creating enabling environments where LMMA can grow and strengthen.

With its *Social Contract* and the 100% Solution, the LMMA Network has remained steadfast in its advocacy of communities as legitimate and critical marine area managers. This conviction is important for understanding the LMMA Network's complex relationship with the blue economy and its associated storyline constructions, to which discussion will now turn.

### 7.3 Storylines: A tale of fluid engagement

First engaging with the blue economy in 2015, the LMMA Network has moved between periods of cautious observation, explicit critique and strategic adoption of this discourse over the last decade. This section attempts to trace this pattern of fluid engagement, drawing upon 70 texts as detailed in *Appendices III* and *IV*. I observe the LMMA Network to have developed two distinct storylines during this time: a 'critical' storyline that characterised the actor's early blue economy engagement and framed this ocean development construct as an externally imposed agenda that threatens coastal communities' rights and authority, and an a more 'instrumental' storyline that advocates for coastal communities as key actors and benefactors of ocean development. Rather than presenting these two storylines as neat, separate entities, I suggest that the earlier 'critical' storyline has been progressively threaded into the LMMA Network's 'instrumental' assemblage—producing a pragmatic, highly conditional blue economy relationship. Today, the LMMA Network continues to present the blue economy as a potential threat to coastal communities and small-scale fishers (SSF) due to its prioritisation of other ocean sectors that undermine community rights (both conservationist and industrial), yet remains amenable to constructive blue economy engagement should coastal communities be recognised and protected as key ocean stakeholders. This interweaving of 'critical' and 'instrumental' storylines hints at the complex power dynamics navigated by the LMMA Network in its engagement with the blue economy discourse, as I will pick up in the final section.

#### 7.3.1 Early blue economy engagements: An emerging 'critical' storyline

The LMMA Network's first public interactions with the blue economy discourse occurred over series of Facebook posts in 2015 and 2016. In these, the LMMA Network engaged with emerging global discussions on the blue economy and aligned itself with more critical perspectives. A few months prior to these posts, however, the LMMA Network engaged in conversations on a related concept of 'ocean grabbing' via its Facebook profile. Given LMMA Network's continuing critique

of the blue economy as a vehicle for ocean grabbing, I consider it important to begin our analytical exploration with these earlier ocean grabbing posts as they provide important context for the network's later blue economy thinking. These posts offer insight into the intellectual climate that the LMMA Network was operating in when it first explicitly engaged the blue economy and explanation for why the grassroots organisation has remained sceptical of this discourse.

### **‘Ocean Grabbing’: A precursor to blue economy engagement**

In two separate posts dating to 22 April 2015 and 8 May 2015, the LMMA Network shared links to a *Marine Policy* article entitled “Ocean Grabbing”<sup>733</sup> that had been co-authored by one of its founding members and advisers, Hugh Govan (Figure 24). While neither of these posts—nor the article to which they referred—explicitly evoked the blue economy discourse, Bennett et al.’s paper has become a cornerstone text for blue economy critique due to its identification of the potential injustices associated with (particularly large-scale) ocean conservation and development programs.<sup>734</sup> In the paper, Bennett, Govan and Satterfield define ocean grabbing as “actions, policies or initiatives that deprive small-scale fishers of resources, dispossess vulnerable populations of coastal lands, and/or undermine historical access to areas of the sea,”<sup>735</sup> and develop a framework to evaluate whether ocean conservation or development initiatives perform such dispossession and/or appropriation. As the blue economy has risen as a mainstream agenda through which many ocean conservation and development initiatives are promoted, political commentators and networks from the Global South have frequently returned to Bennett et al.’s article to challenge blue economy activities through a lens of social justice.<sup>736</sup>

The LMMA Network’s sharing of Bennett et al.’s article via social media reflected its interest in the ocean grabbing concept and its shared concerns about potential dispossession and/or appropriation effects associated with large-scale conservation and industrial ocean activities. Just

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<sup>733</sup> Nathan Bennett, Hugh Govan, and Terre Satterfield, ‘Ocean Grabbing’, *Marine Policy* 57, no. 61–68 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2015.03.026>.

<sup>734</sup> Barbesgaard, ‘Blue Growth: Savior or Ocean Grabbing?’; Queffelec et al., ‘Marine Spatial Planning and the Risk of Ocean Grabbing in the Tropical Atlantic’; Ayelazuno and Ovadia, ‘Ocean and Land Grabbing in Ghana’s Offshore Petroleum Industry: From the Agrarian Question to the Question of Industrialization’; Benjaminsen and Bryceson, ‘Conservation, Green/Blue Grabbing and Accumulation by Dispossession in Tanzania’; Said and MacMillan, “‘Re-Grabbing’ Marine Resources: A Blue Degrowth Agenda for the Resurgence of Small-Scale Fisheries in Malta’.

<sup>735</sup> Bennett, Govan, and Satterfield, ‘Ocean Grabbing’, 61.

<sup>736</sup> Barbesgaard, ‘Blue Growth: Savior or Ocean Grabbing?’; Brent, Barbesgaard, and Pedersen, ‘The Blue Fix: What’s Driving Blue Growth?’; Childs and Hicks, ‘Securing the Blue: Political Ecologies of the Blue Economy in Africa’; Maria Hadjimichael, ‘A Call for a Blue Degrowth: Unravelling the European Union’s Fisheries and Maritime Policies’, *Marine Policy* 94 (2018): 158–64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.05.007>; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*.

a few months later, the network would lean again on this ocean grabbing idea to frame its position on the blue economy.



*Figure 24: One of the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network two reposts of Bennett et al.'s 2016 article on 'ocean grabbing.'*

### First blue economy interactions

The first clear example of the LMMA Network's interaction with the blue economy discourse can be seen in a December 2015 Facebook post linking ocean grabbing to one of the blue economy's core focus areas: blue carbon—a term describing conservation and carbon storage initiatives pursued under the blue economy agenda (Figure 25). In this post, the LMMA Network provided a link to a World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) media release denouncing blue carbon as a 'false solution' to climate change<sup>737</sup> and in the accompanying caption, quoted the WFFP statement:

This new mechanism [blue carbon] needs to be seen as part of the larger push for false solutions through privatization, commodification and the 'green economy'" "The '50in10' and the Coastal Fisheries Initiative" as well?

Critically, the caption of this post opened with a brief, yet piercing, provocation from the LMMA Network on the nature of blue carbon: "Blue carbon = Ocean Grabbing?." This comment was

<sup>737</sup> World Forum of Fisher Peoples, 'World Fisheries Day: WFFP Denounces "False Solutions" to Climate Change', 21 November 2015, <https://worldfishers.org/2015/11/20/world-fisheries-day-wffp-denounces-false-solutions-to-climate-change/>.



unique to the LMMA Network—not drawn from the WFFP release—and thus indicative of the network’s own perspective on this increasingly popular blue economy sector. By equating blue carbon to ocean grabbing, LMMA Network drew upon its earlier references to Bennett et al.’s article to insinuate how ocean conservation (particularly carbon credit) initiatives threaten the rights and access of coastal communities to marine spaces. This post commenced the LMMA Network’s assembly of a ‘critical’ blue economy storyline that looked warily upon popular blue economy visions and sectors as possible threats to coastal communities. It highlights how concern over dispossession and/or appropriation featured in the LMMA Network’s early blue economy scepticism and—as we will see through this chapter—remains a central reason for the organisation’s vigilance over the discourse.

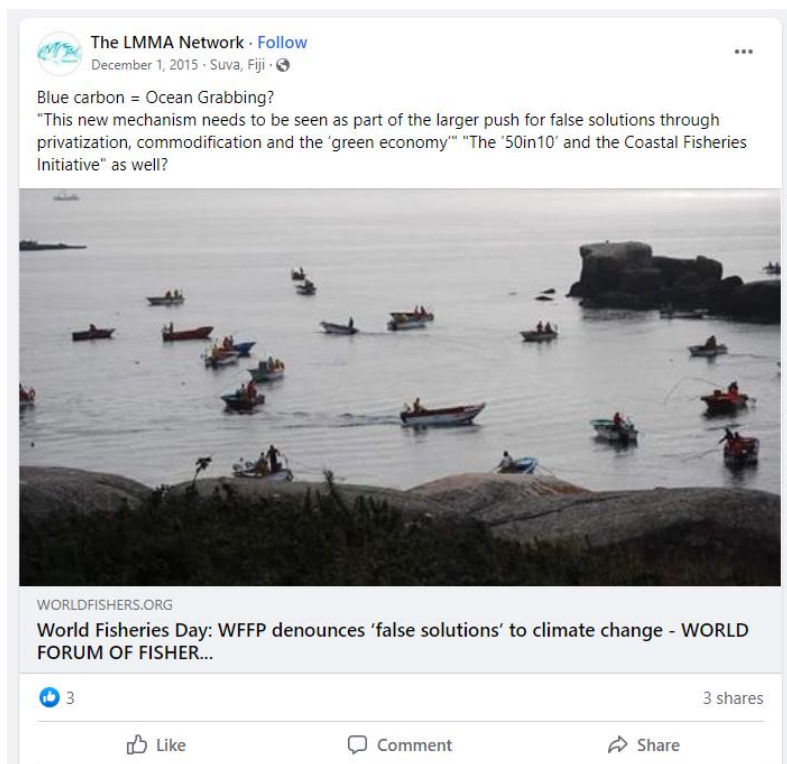


**Figure 25:** *Locally-Managed Marine Area Network reposting a World Forum of Fisher Peoples media release critiquing blue carbon.*

A few months later, in March 2016, the LMMA Network again expressed concern over the blue economy discourse. Commenting on Silver et al.’s now seminal paper, “Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance,”<sup>738</sup> the LMMA Network posted a link to the publication with the accompanying caption (Figure 26):

“Blue economy” means very different, even contradictory, things to different people. Be sure to seek their particular definition before assuming this is a “good thing.”

<sup>738</sup> Silver et al., ‘Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance’.



**Figure 26:** *Locally-Managed Marine Area Network Facebook repost of Silver et. al.'s 2015 article.*

Though not irrefutably opposed to the blue economy, the tone of this caption—as accentuated through use of scare quotes around ‘good thing’—clearly communicates caution towards the discourse. It raises questions about the virtue of the increasingly popular blue economy, namely, the assumption that it presents a desirable pathway for sustainable ocean development. Consistent with the LMMA Network’s earlier social media posts, this post furthered the network’s development of a ‘critical’ storyline that characterised the blue economy as a potential threat to coastal communities and their LMMAs.

These early years of the LMMA Network’s blue economy engagement were characterised by the emergence of a storyline that was highly cautious, if not critical, of the blue economy. A leading reason for this appears to pivot around considerations of injustice wherein the blue economy is seen to threaten the rights of coastal communities to ocean spaces and resources (ocean grabbing). Unsurprisingly, this storyline is informed by blue economy critique emerging from SSF networks and marine social sciences literatures that similarly centre justice in their analysis and advocacy.<sup>739</sup> This ‘critical’ blue economy storyline would continue to evolve over subsequent years, but not in a simple, straightforward fashion. Let us now turn to an interesting episode of blue economy silence in which the LMMA Network neither (publicly) critiqued the blue economy storylines of a major ocean development program it was participating in, nor capitulated to adopting such blue economy language in its own activities. Instead, the LMMA Network appeared to engage a strategy of blue economy avoidance.

<sup>739</sup> Silver et al.; World Forum of Fisher Peoples, ‘World Fisheries Day: WFFP Denounces “False Solutions” to Climate Change’.

### 7.3.2 The PEUMP partnership: A conspicuously absent blue economy storyline

The Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) launched in October 2017 on the sidelines of the Our Oceans Conference through an agreement signed by the European Union (EU) and Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.<sup>740</sup> The €45 million (then approximately USD53 million)<sup>741</sup> program outlined an ambitious vision to “support sustainable management and development of fisheries for food security and economic growth in the Pacific region” through direct funding assistance for regional and national level activities.<sup>742</sup> Originally designed as a five-year program, PEUMP was co-funded by the European Union (€35 million) and government of Sweden (€10 million). It covered six key result areas (KRAs), including, of particular interest to this thesis, coastal fisheries (KRA3). The majority of these KRAs were implemented through collaborative partnerships between regional CROP agencies and NGOs. In the case of KRA3, this involved an implementation partnership between the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) (lead agency) and the LMMA Network (main partner). Together, these two agencies were responsible for advancing the “sustainable management of coastal fisheries resources and ecosystems improve[ment] through better quality scientific information, legal advice, support, mentoring and empowerment at the community level.”<sup>743</sup>

KRA3 consisted of ten indicators of which the LMMA Network was directly responsible for three (3.5<sup>744</sup>, 3.6<sup>745</sup> and 3.7<sup>746</sup>). These three indicators became known as the ‘LMMA component’ and collectively represented €4.4 million in project funding to support the network’s implementation of its 100% Solution. This LMMA component consisted of three core objectives:<sup>747</sup>

- i. *Communication*: Develop a low-cost media campaign and culturally appropriate outreach tools to disseminate information on sustainable coastal management among Pacific communities.

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<sup>740</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘European Union Joins Forces with Sweden to Support Sustainable Management and Development of Fisheries in the Pacific Region’, 6 October 2017, <https://www.forumsec.org/2017/10/05/european-union-joins-forces-with-sweden-to-support-sustainable-management-and-development-of-fisheries-in-the-pacific-region/>.

<sup>741</sup> Taking conversion rate of EUR 1 = USD 1.18 as of October 2017.

<sup>742</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘European Union Joins Forces with Sweden to Support Sustainable Management and Development of Fisheries in the Pacific Region’.

<sup>743</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘PEUMP Year 2 Annual Report and Year 3 Workplan’ (Suva, Fiji, 31 August 2020), 7.

<sup>744</sup> Community-based Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management management and coordination with NGOs.

<sup>745</sup> Community-based Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management activities at sub-national and community level.

<sup>746</sup> Communication activities and production and dissemination of information and materials for communities.

<sup>747</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘PEUMP Year 3 Annual Report and Year 4 Work Plan’ (Suva, Fiji, 31 August 2021).

- ii. *Build local networks*: Provide targeted investment to support the development of local networks and champions.
- iii. *Community participation in decision-making*: Develop and strengthen national and regional mechanisms for community participation in national discussions on natural resource management.

It is clear that the LMMA Network's involvement in PEUMP afforded them access to considerable resources that could be leveraged for the implementation the 100% Solution. PEUMP's advantages, however, were moderated by the bureaucratic reality of working within a large, externally funded development program that was framed by EU understandings of sustainable ocean development—namely that of the blue economy. Here lay the rub between PEUMP's blue economy advocacy and the LMMA Network's blue economy critique.

### **PEUMP and EU blue economy understandings**

Since the European Commission's endorsement of the *Blue Growth Strategy* in 2012 (COM(2012) 494) (*Chapter One*), the EU has adopted the blue economy as leading framework for sustainable ocean development. In 2014 the Commission released a Communication on "Innovation in the blue economy" (COM(2014) 254), in 2017 it developed a *Staff Working Document* updating the *Blue Growth Strategy* (SWD(2017) 128), and since 2018 it has published a series of annual economic reports on the blue economy (*EU Blue Economy Reports*). This blue economy advocacy is reinforced by the European Parliament that passed a motion on blue growth in 2013 (2012/2297(INI)), and again recommitted their support to a sustainable blue economy in 2022 (2021/2188(INI)). Clearly, the blue economy has become central to how the European Union approaches ocean development and governance.

Looking beyond its own region, the EU has centred the blue economy discourse in its international ocean development partnerships, with PEUMP providing a clear example of this. PEUMP's core principle of 'Putting People First' expressly linked the program's commitments of inclusive and equitable ocean development to the blue economy discourse, with public materials stating that the program's "gender, social inclusion lens and human rights-based approach" sought to support a "prosperous and inclusive blue economy in the Pacific that puts people first".<sup>748</sup> Thus, while PEUMP may not have frequently evoked blue economy in public materials (the term appears only

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<sup>748</sup> Pacific European Union Partnership Programme, 'Putting People First', 2023, <https://www.peump.dev/news/putting-people-first>; Pacific European Union Partnership Programme, 'About Us', 2023, <https://peump.dev/index.php/about-us>.

occasionally in program resources such as media releases),<sup>749</sup> it is evident that this discourse informed the program's core principles. Indeed, such leveraging of development partnerships as a means of promoting the “sustainable blue economy” was recommended by the European Economic and Social Committee in 2016 (JOIN(2016)0049, Action 4) and endorsed by the European Parliament in 2018 (2017/2055(INI) [35.36]). This is to say that a blue economy discourse was not only active within PEUMP, but closely tied to the EU's blue economy storylines and strategy wherein the blue economy is broadly conceived as the ocean economy and the EU positioned as its active, global advocate.<sup>750</sup>

### **Negotiating PEUMP's blue economy discourse**

From the perspective of the LMMA Network, PEUMP's close association with the EU's blue economy storylines raised questions about how to negotiate its involvement in the project, especially given its earlier critique of the blue economy on social media. In the years of PEUMP's operation,<sup>751</sup> I observed the LMMA Network make no mention of the program's objective to support a “prosperous and inclusive blue economy in the Pacific”<sup>752</sup> and similarly, avoid linking its LMMA component to the discourse.<sup>753</sup> The two exceptions to this trend hint at a growing acknowledgement among network members of the potential for building a more pragmatic relationship with the blue economy: one that could facilitate (occasional) engagement with the discourse, while remaining committed to advocating for coastal communities as key stakeholders in any sustainable ocean development vision.

The first exception pertains to a 17 January 2018 Facebook post where the LMMA Network shared an excerpt of the European Parliament's (EP) resolution on ‘International ocean governance: an agenda for the future of our oceans in the context of the 2030 SDGs’ (2017/2055(INI) [47]). As pictured in Figure 27, the post directly quoted a passage from the resolution that called for the blue economy to be “steered towards” coastal communities and, critically, guarantee the rights of communities to information, consultation, and participation in ocean governance processes. While

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<sup>749</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Community, ‘EU Marine Programme Launches New Website’, 29 September 2020, <https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2020/09/eu-marine-programme-launches-new-website>; European Union, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), and Sweden Sverige, ‘European Union and Sweden Team up with the Pacific Region to Protect Ocean’, 6 October 2017, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/33394\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/33394_en).

<sup>750</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and Joint Research Centre, *The 2018 Annual Economic Report on EU Blue Economy* (Publications Office of the European Union, 2018), 16, <https://doi.org/10.2771/305342>.

<sup>751</sup> 2018 – 2022, with no-cost extension reflective of COVID disruptions continuing the LMMA component into 2023.

<sup>752</sup> Pacific European Union Partnership Programme, ‘About Us’.

<sup>753</sup> Consider the absence of blue economy references in the LMMA Network's section in the *PEUMP Year 2 Annual Report and Year 3 Workplan* (2020), *PEUMP Year 3 Annual Report and Year 4 Work Plan* (2021), all but one Facebook post (*Appendix IV*), the LMMA Network website (<https://lmmanetwork.org/>), and public statements (*Appendix III*)

it included no contextualising comment from the LMMA Network, this post can be read as an endorsement of the EP's position regarding coastal community prioritisation; especially considering the network's longstanding commitment to empowering coastal communities as managers of their local marine areas (e.g. Figure 26). That this statement was framed within the EU's blue economy discourse was, I suggest, of secondary concern to the LMMA Network. For the network, the more important message of this resolution was the EP's acknowledgement of coastal communities as key stakeholders in sustainable ocean management and its commitment to protect coastal community rights. Thus, while the LMMA Network's 2018 Facebook post is one of the earliest examples of its constructive engagement with the blue economy, it was not the discourse itself that the LMMA Network appeared to be endorsing but the EP's statement on community empowerment and rights. Here we see some early indications of a pragmatic, or 'instrumental' blue economy storyline being constructed by the LMMA Network; where, in order to advocate for coastal communities and their rights, LMMA Network extended a nod to the blue economy discourse of the mainstream development complex so as to secure a level of policy relevance and authority.



**Figure 27:** *Locally-Managed Marine Area Network Facebook post sharing a passage from the European Parliament resolution on 'International ocean governance: an agenda for the future of our oceans in the context of the 2030 SDGs' (2017/2055(INI) [47]), 17 January 2018.*

The second—and more tenuous—case of blue economy engagement to occur during this period of PEUMP partnership relates to the participation of a LMMA Network representative at a blue economy-themed workshop held in Noumea, February 2023. Convened by the Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in partnership with the French government initiative, Le Fonds Pacifique, the *Strengthening Regional Collaboration in the Pacific*

workshop sought to “strengthen cooperation between Pacific countries with respect the blue economy and building resilient coastal marine ecosystems through the application of cutting-edge science.”<sup>754</sup> As an independent participant of this event (having been invited by conference organisers to present on my doctoral research), I observed the representative make no mention of the blue economy during their presentation on the LMMA Network’s work, thus providing no evidence of meaningful discourse engagement. Similar to the aforementioned Facebook post, the representative’s participation at this workshop was less a signal of the LMMA Network’s blue economy endorsement as it was a reflection of the network’s view that in order to be seen as a legitimate and relevant actor in ocean governance forums, it would occasionally need to engage in spaces framed by the blue economy discourse. The representative’s notable silence on the blue economy in their presentation speaks powerfully to the LMMA Network’s overall strategy of discourse avoidance during its time as a partner to the PEUMP program.

In sum, the LMMA Network remained largely silent on the blue economy throughout its involvement in PEUMP. This discourse avoidance suggests a strategy of storyline refusal wherein the LMMA Network asserted its agency within the PEUMP partnership and resisted pressure to engage the ocean development frameworks advocated by its main development partner. While the overarching objectives, processes and structures of PEUMP were something that the LMMA Network was willing to work within, its blue economy discourse was not. Through its silence, the LMMA Network exercised its autonomy and demonstrated that just as storyline construction can be seen as an act of agency, so too can its refusal.

### 7.3.3 Collaborations with international community fishers organisations: The blue economy threat

Brought together through their advocacy of SSF and coastal community rights, the LMMA Network has long cultivated relationships with other fisheries networks across the globe, particularly those of the Global South. This has contributed to a deepening solidarity between the LMMA Network and its global counterparts, with organisations sharing one another’s resources, collaborating on position papers and collectively advocating for coastal community rights at regional and international forums. These coalition building activities have also provided for the cross-pollination of ideas within the community fisheries movement and opportunities for collective advocacy, including on the issue of the blue economy.

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<sup>754</sup> Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, ‘Strengthening Regional Collaboration in the Pacific’, 2023, <https://alumni.csiro.au/events/strengthening-regional-collaboration-in-the-pacific/>.

The LMMA Network's participation in the Call to Action campaign provides a clear example of this collaborative knowledge building and advocacy approach. Launched in 2022, the Call to Action positioned the blue economy as a threat to coastal communities' livelihoods and ocean rights, drawing on the experiences of SSF from across the Global South who had witnessed the increasing encroachment of large-scale industrial and conservationist ocean initiatives over the last decade. Rather than rejecting the blue economy outright, the campaign advocated for better recognition of coastal communities as critical ocean stakeholders and co-managers, ultimately pressing for their prioritisation within blue economy programs and agendas. This approach seemingly saw the campaign interweave 'critical' and 'instrumental' blue economy storylines in an effort to advocate for coastal community rights and self-determination on the global stage.

### **A *Call to Action* for Artisanal Fisheries**

As members of the Organisation of African Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) gathered for the 7th Meeting of OACPS Ministers in charge of Fisheries and Aquaculture (April 2022, Ghana), the LMMA Network and African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations (CAOPA) released a joint statement: *Call to Action for Artisanal Fisheries*<sup>755</sup>. The Call to Action encouraged Fisheries Ministers to increase their efforts in implementing transparent, gender sensitive and participatory fisheries management plans that would safeguard fishers' tenure rights and support co-management approaches. It also directly addressed the discourse of the blue economy, including as one of its five recommendations that OACPS members "[Protect] artisanal fisheries from *competing* blue economy sectors" (emphasis added).<sup>756</sup> This recommendation expressed a clear sense of caution towards the blue economy and provides important insight into the LMMA Network's understanding of the discourse given its close involvement in drafting and promoting the Call to Action campaign.<sup>757</sup>

While the blue economy storyline that the LMMA Network and collaborators constructed through this campaign remained critical of mainstream blue economy storylines (namely that "the likely negative impacts from more powerful sea and land-based sectors promoted in blue economy

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<sup>755</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'A Call to Action for Artisanal Fisheries'.

<sup>756</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, emphasis added.

<sup>757</sup> ICCA Consortium, 'Recap of 2022 UN Ocean Conference: The Power of Collective Action and Community Resilience in the Face of Local-to-Global Challenges', 3 September 2023, <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/2022/09/20/recap-un-ocean-conference/>; Lavenia Naivalu and Cornelia Wilss, 'We don't have time to wait for the government to help us', 2023, <https://fair-oceans.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Lavenia-Naivalu-interview-en.pdf>.



strategies jeopardise [SSF] future[s]”),<sup>758</sup> it also acknowledged the core role community fishers must play in any equitable ocean development vision. Instead of positioning coastal communities and SSF outside the blue economy, the Call to Action asserted artisanal fisheries as “the most important sector of the blue economy” and presented three actions to ensure their health and wellbeing: protection of fishing communities’ rights, transparency in blue economy strategies, and the application of the precautionary approach.<sup>759</sup>

This positioning of coastal communities as necessary actors in the blue economy marked an important shift in the LMMA Network’s discourse approach; weaving together earlier critiques of mainstream blue economy storylines with an acknowledgement that a just blue economy required the engagement of SSF and coastal communities. It opened the door for the LMMA Network to more constructively engage the blue economy discourse *on the condition* that such blue economy uphold commitments to protect fishing communities’ rights, transparency, and the precautionary approach; all while enabling the network to remain clear in its message that any ocean development vision—blue economy or otherwise—that did not uphold these commitments posed a threat to coastal communities. This interweaving of ‘critical’ and ‘instrumental’ storylines reflected a deepening nuancing of the LMMA’s Network relationship with the blue economy that was both strategically instrumental and highly conditional.

### **A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers**

The Call to Action developed for the 2022 OACPS Ministers meeting provided the basis for a similar *Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers*<sup>760</sup> presented at the June 2022 UNOC. This second Call to Action expanded the original artisanal fisheries coalition to include seven more SSF organisations from across the globe. By the time of the UNOC, SSF organisations representing Africa,<sup>761</sup> the Pacific,<sup>762</sup> South and Central America,<sup>763</sup> and Europe<sup>764</sup> had joined the campaign. Notwithstanding some minor revisions, the updated Call to Action maintained the five key recommendations of its predecessor, including the protection of SSF “from competing blue economy sectors.”<sup>765</sup> The earlier interweaving of blue economy storylines (‘critical’ and

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<sup>758</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Blue Economy: 3 Recommendations from ACP Artisanal Fisheries’, 2022.

<sup>759</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network.

<sup>760</sup> Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers’.

<sup>761</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Organisations (CAOPA), Community Action for Nature Conservation (CANCO)

<sup>762</sup> LMMA Network

<sup>763</sup> National Confederation of Artisanal Fishers of Chile (CONAPACH), Network of Responsible Fishing Marine Areas (Costa Rica) (RAMPR)

<sup>764</sup> AKTEA: Women in fisheries and aquaculture (AKTEA), Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE)

<sup>765</sup> Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘A Call to Action for Small-Scale

‘instrumental’) also continued in much of its same form, with SSF presented as a key blue economy sector yet in “competition for space and resources by other blue economy industries.”<sup>766</sup>

Since UNOC, the coalition supporting the Call to Action has continued to grow and at the time of writing, represents over sixteen SSF organisations and thirty-one civil society or NGO bodies across the globe.<sup>767</sup> The Call to Action was brought forward at the 35<sup>th</sup> session of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Committee on Fisheries held in September 2022 as an articulation of “five priority areas of action for FAO members up to 2030,”<sup>768</sup> and remains a key reference point for the LMMA Network’s view on the blue economy.

The Call to Action campaign weaves together a storyline depicting the blue economy as a fractious and predatory ocean development agenda wherein large-scale industries are prioritised and expanded at the expense of coastal communities and SSF. In the words of a campaign press release, “the growth of the blue economy is creating a “blue fear” among small-scale fishers; their livelihoods are threatened by competition and negative impacts from more powerful marine and land-based industries.”<sup>769</sup> Yet instead of positioning community fisheries outside or in opposition to the blue economy, the Call to Action campaign emphasises community fishers’ critical role as ocean stakeholders and thus their necessary participation in ocean management discussions and decisions—even if such discussions are framed by the blue economy discourse. This interweaving of ‘critical’ and ‘instrumental’ storylines reflects an evolution in the LMMA Network’s blue economy engagement characterised by strategic, yet cautious discourse engagement.

### 7.3.4 OurFish OurFuture: Engaging the ‘instrumental’ storyline

As the PEUMP partnership neared its end, the LMMA Network engaged in discussions with the United States Agency for Development (USAID) for funding assistance to continue its work on scaling LMMA. These discussions resulted in the launch of the OurFish OurFuture program at the 2022 Ocean Conference, Palau. At the time of writing, there exists few public resources on the

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<sup>766</sup> Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, 1.

<sup>767</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Organisations and Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘The Signatories’, SSF Call to Action, 2024, <https://www.ssfcalltoaction.org/signatories>; African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Organisations and Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘The Supporters’, SSF Call to Action, 2024, <https://www.ssfcalltoaction.org/supporters>.

<sup>768</sup> International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, ‘Artisanal Fishers Call on Govts to Pursue Implementation of SSF Guidelines’, 2022, <https://www.icsf.net/newss/artisanal-fishers-call-on-govts-to-pursue-implementation-of-ssf-guidelines/>.

<sup>769</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Professional Organisations et al., ‘Artisanal Fisheries Call on Governments to Pursue the Dialogue on the Implementation of the Guidelines for Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries’, 1 September 2022, <https://caopa.org/en/press-release-artisanal-fisheries-call-on-governments-to-pursue-the-dialogue-on-the-implementation-of-the-guidelines-for-sustainable-small-scale-fisheries/01/09/2022/news/4700/>.

program, however the following details can be ascertained from the program *Fact Sheet* released in 2022.<sup>770</sup>

OurFish OurFuture is a five-year, USD15 million program supporting regional coastal fisheries and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) projects across the Pacific, with a specific focus on six nations: the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Alongside the LMMA Network, the program is implemented in partnership with the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Centre, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the University of the South Pacific (USP). It advances four goals:

1. Improve sustainable coastal fisheries management
2. Enhance monitoring, control and surveillance in coastal fisheries
3. Demonstrate private sector partnerships to promote sustainable supply chains
4. Strengthen resilience and meaningful engagement for marginalised actors in coastal fisheries management.

The LMMA Network's 100% Solution aligns most clearly with the first and fourth of these goals; with the first capturing the network's aim to strengthen the enabling conditions for scaling LMMA (national and regional fisheries policies and fishery department capacity), and the second facilitating the more grassroots components of the 100% Solution (local CBAM management plans and practices, and community engagement in coastal fisheries policy and planning). OurFish OurFuture thus provides another development partnership leveraged by the LMMA Network to advance its 100% Solution. This is confirmed through network Facebook posts, such as that published on 29 November 2022:

To be intentional in building partnership is key to our 100% Solution Scaling up Strategy. Paying courtesy visit to Director Resource and Development and Executive Director MCT ahead of the 4days LMMA Consultation workshop in Pohnpei for the USAIDs OUR FISH OUR FUTURE Project's priorities the next four years.

Similar to the PEUMP, OurFish OurFuture is relatively limited in its appeal to the blue economy, however on the occasions where it does engage this discourse, does so within key texts. The aforementioned OurFish OurFuture *Fact Sheet* describes the “growth of a Blue Economy in the

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<sup>770</sup> United States Agency for International Development, ‘OurFish OurFuture’, 2022, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/Fact%20Sheet\\_%20OurFish%20OurFuture\\_03-31-2022\\_0.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/Fact%20Sheet_%20OurFish%20OurFuture_03-31-2022_0.pdf).

Pacific Islands region” as one of its key objectives.<sup>771</sup> Admittedly, this objective is attached to the third program goal (private sector partnerships to promote sustainable supply chains), not the first or fourth goals that are more closely related to the LMMA Network’s work under the program. However, this blue economy vision has been ascribed more broadly to the program in numerous high-level settings, such as the 2022 Our Oceans Conference where a joint media release from program partners described “greater community, gender and youth engagement in activity design, implementation and monitoring and mobilization of and enhancements to the growth of a Blue Economy in the Pacific Islands region” as a key objective.<sup>772</sup> Indeed, this statement directly attached the blue economy to goal four of OurFish OurFuture (one of two goals under which the LMMA Network’s 100% Solution expressly aligns). Similarly, in a visit by two US government representatives to Fiji to mark the re-establishment of the USAID regional mission for the Pacific (4 October 2022), program representatives alluded to OurFish OurFuture as one of the “more than \$130 million in new investments to support climate resilience and to build sustainable blue economies in the Pacific Islands.”<sup>773</sup> Together, these examples suggest that the blue economy discourse is an active framework of the overall OurFish OurFuture program.

The blue economy framing of OurFish OurFuture is unsurprising given the US government’s official adoption of a blue economy vision in its 2022 *Pacific Partnership Strategy* where, under its ‘Support Marine Conservation, Maritime Security, and Sovereign Rights’ priority, the US commits to:

Partner with Pacific Island countries to develop sustainable, climate resilient ocean or “blue” economies, including the development of Sustainable Ocean Plans to manage 100 percent of our EEZs sustainably.<sup>774</sup>

On inspection, this commitment aligns exceptionally closely with the LMMA Network’s 100% Solution as supported through OurFish OurFuture. Thus, as with PEUMP, it appears the LMMA Network’s 100% Solution is being drawn into association with the blue economy visions of its development partner—in this case the US government via USAID—not those of the network

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<sup>771</sup> United States Agency for International Development, 2.

<sup>772</sup> Dave Lavalley, ‘URI Coastal Resources Center Lands \$15 Million to Help Countries, Communities Tackle Unsustainable Fishing Practices in Pacific Islands Region’, 8 June 2022, <https://www.uri.edu/news/2022/06/uri-coastal-resources-center-lands-15-million-to-help-countries-communities-tackle-unsustainable-fishing-practices-in-pacific-islands-region/>.

<sup>773</sup> Fiji Government, ‘United States Agency for Development (USAID) to Increase Assistance for Fiji and the Pacific’, 5 September 2022, [https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/News/UNITED-STATES-AGENCY-FOR-DEVELOPMENT-\(USAID\)-TO-IN](https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/News/UNITED-STATES-AGENCY-FOR-DEVELOPMENT-(USAID)-TO-IN;); see also Office of Press Relations, ‘USAID Announces New Programs to Protect Our Ocean’ (USAID, 14 April 2022), <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/apr-14-2022-usaid-announces-new-programs-protect-our-ocean>.

<sup>774</sup> The White House, ‘Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States’ (Washington D.C, United States, September 2022), 12, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

itself. This again raises challenges for the LMMA Network around *who's* blue economy vision it is engaging with: one crafted and tailored by its own members, or one imposed by development partners? Let alone on who's terms and/or initiative such relationship is established? I will return to these questions in *Section Three* as they remain key issues being grappled with by network stakeholders; and not only with regards to the OurFish OurFuture program.

### **Evoking the blue economy for OurFish OurFuture**

In celebration of World Oceans Day 2023, the Network hosted a public online event sharing stories of coastal fisheries management from OurFish OurFuture partners across Fiji, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands. The opening remarks provided by Alifereti Tawake, LMMA Council Chair and Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (FLMMA) representative, are of particular interest for this thesis as they illustrate how the LMMA Network's evolving blue economy storylines are shaped by its partners and partnerships. Under the title "Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) and Small Scale Fishers Essential in the Blue Economy: Fiji, Oceania and Globally,"<sup>775</sup> Tawake's remarks resonated with the LMMA Network's 'instrumental' storyline wherein the blue economy is conditionally accepted subject to prioritisation and protection of coastal communities and their rights as ocean custodians. This is clear from his statement:

In the new era and the discussions around the blue economy, we feel very strongly that locally-managed marine areas or communities' efforts to managing their marine resources, and small-scale fishers, should be first and foremost at the centre of any discussions around the blue economy.

Most of the recent conversations are focusing on private sectors and while that is important, what is even more important is the communities' involvement that depend on them, who almost their survival depends on how healthy our oceans are.<sup>776</sup>

While refraining from expressly critiquing the blue economy, the second sentence of Tawake's statement hints at the continuing caution the LMMA Network holds towards this discourse, namely its emphasis on private sectors in driving sustainable ocean development. His comments make clear that the LMMA Network's endorsement of any blue economy vision must "first and foremost" centre coastal communities. Its blue economy engagement, in other words, is conditional.

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<sup>775</sup> Tawake et al., 'Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) and Small Scale Fishers Essential in a Blue Economy: Fiji, Oceania and Globally'.

<sup>776</sup> Tawake et al.

At the time of writing, the LMMA Network's involvement in OurFish OurFuture remains in its early stages. Already, however, we are witnessing a strategy of instrumental discourse engagement wherein Network representatives constructively, yet conditionally evoke the blue economy to advocate for coastal communities' rights and priorities. This 'instrumental' blue economy storyline has progressively developed as one of the LMMA Network's key discourse constructions over the last decade and one that is particularly prominent when the network is seeking to establish or maintain relationships with external development partners (e.g. the EU or USAID). As I will explore in the following section, the strategic calculations that inform the LMMA Network's decision to engage with the blue economy in such manner are multidimensional and often complex. I thus caution against seeing such blue economy pragmatism as a concession from the LMMA Network but instead a negotiation of its core values in calculation with its material interests.

### 7.3.5 Section Summary

When looking back on the LMMA Network's near decade-long engagement with the blue economy, we observe a complex pattern of progressively interwoven storyline deployment. As the first blue economy storyline to be developed, the 'critical' storyline has remained an enduring fixture in the LMMA Network's negotiation of the discourse: casting the blue economy as a threat to coastal communities because of its prioritisation of large-scale ocean sectors and possible ocean grabbing effects. During its involvement in PEUMP, the LMMA Network remained largely silent on the blue economy: at once refraining from engaging with the EU's favourable blue economy storyline, while avoiding outright critique of the discourse to avoid souring partner relations. This period reflected a time of discourse avoidance which can be read as a calculated strategy of blue economy refusal.

The crafting of an 'instrumental' blue economy storyline was most clearly evident in the LMMA Network's collaboration with other SSF and coastal fisheries networks on the Call to Action campaign. This storyline opened the door for the LMMA Network's constructive engagement with the blue economy *if* the rights of coastal communities were protected and centred in blue economy programs. Such conditional blue economy engagement indicates the continued threading of the LMMA Network's 'critical' storyline through its discourse relationship—even if such critique does not occupy centre stage. I thus suggest that this period saw an interweaving of 'instrumental' and 'critical' blue economy storylines whereby the LMMA Network and its coalition partners expressed their highly conditional (and cautious) engagement with the discourse.

Most recently, the LMMA Network appears to be continuing its ‘instrumental’ blue economy storyline to negotiate its partnership with the USAID OurFish OurFuture program. This is not to say, however, that the ‘critical’ storyline has disappeared from view. I suggest the LMMA Network’s highly conditional blue economy engagement via the OurFish OurFuture program reflects a persistent critical impulse that remains wary of the threat such ocean development vision poses to coastal communities and their rights. This observation was reinforced by key stakeholder interviews, as I next turn in the following subsection.

## 7.4 Power: Unsettling the blue economy

Increasingly interweaving ‘critical’ and ‘instrumental’ storylines in recent years, the LMMA Network presents a dynamic case of blue economy negotiation and with it, instructive insight into the political factors that shape discourse engagement, refusal and reworking. The LMMA Network’s long-standing scepticism of the blue economy has not precluded it from engaging this discourse in the context of development partnerships or global advocacy efforts—albeit if such engagement is highly qualified (as demonstrated in the Call to Action campaign). Put simply, criticism has not led to rejection. *Why* the LMMA Network has threaded its ‘critical’ storyline alongside an ‘instrumental,’ and *what considerations* shape this approach are the key questions I attempt to grapple with in this third section.

In transitioning from an analysis of *how* the LMMA Network engages with the blue economy to now focus on questions of *why*, this section also undertakes a shift in methodology. Unpacking the motivations and considerations of the network’s engagement with the blue economy calls for insight into its members’ subjectivities and strategic calculations. The following discussion thus draws heavily on five key stakeholder interviews undertaken with LMMA Network members and partners, predominately in 2022 (Table 15). These interviews reveal a compelling story of strategic engagement where, despite feeling pressure to integrate the blue economy discourse in their development and advocacy work, LMMA Network representatives continually pushed against such imposition through selective and qualified engagements with the discourse. They refused to adopt the blue economy understandings advocated by its development partners wholesale, instead working to find ways to adapt the discourse to its own objectives and ultimately constrain its influence. This observation leads me to contend that while the blue economy appears to have achieved hegemony as an ocean development and governance discourse, it is not immune to critique and resistance—even from agents who evoke it. This stands testament to Gramsci’s

teaching that where there is power there is struggle<sup>777</sup> and unsettles analytical binaries that seek to reduce blue economy antagonism to simple opposition. As this case study demonstrates, selective, strategic engagement with the blue economy offers a potential site for resistance and reworking.

**Table 15:** List of key stakeholders interviewed for the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network case study.

| Interviewee # | Sector                                | LMMA Network Affiliation          | Identification in Thesis |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 7             | Civil Society (regional) / Consultant | Partner                           | rCS/C. 7                 |
| 39            | NGO / Civil Society (regional)        | Partner and former representative | NGO/rCS.39               |
| 27            | CROP / Civil Society (regional)       | Partner and former representative | REG/rCS.27               |
| 20            | Civil Society (regional)              | Representative                    | rCS.20                   |
| 55            | Civil Society (regional)              | Representative                    | rCS.55                   |

#### 7.4.1 Indications of hegemony

The meteoric rise of the blue economy discourse within global ocean development and governance institutions over the last decade has been hard to evade for those involved in maritime-related activities, even for those historically marginal to these spaces of power.<sup>778</sup> The SSF sector (including CBAM) has been no exception to this, with the blue economy discourse finding increasing expression in SSF-related policies, programs, research and campaigning. The FAO's *Asia and the Pacific's Blue Growth Initiative*, for example, frames its sustainable fisheries programme through the blue economy's predecessor of "blue growth."<sup>779</sup> In 2023, WWF and Finance Earth launched a USD100 million *Blue Finance Innovation for Fisheries Improvement* initiative that aims to catalyse fisheries improvement programs across industrial and SSF in pursuit of a "sustainable blue economy."<sup>780</sup> And while often concerned with issues of equity and justice confronting SSF as a result of blue economy expansion, an expanding body of academic literature is also working to position local fishers as key stakeholders in this global discourse.<sup>781</sup> The blue economy is a discourse that SSF has been increasingly drawn into—although not always of their own volition.

<sup>777</sup> See Gramsci's writings on counter-hegemony in Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*.

<sup>778</sup> Schutter et al., 'The Blue Economy as a Boundary Object for Hegemony across Scales'.

<sup>779</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 'Asia and the Pacific's Blue Growth Initiative: SDG 14 and Blue Growth Working Together toward Sustainable Fisheries', accessed 13 March 2024, <https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/perspectives/blue-growth/ar/>; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 'Blue Growth Initiative: Partnering with Countries to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals', 2017.

<sup>780</sup> World Wildlife Fund and Finance Earth, 'WWF and Finance Earth Launch Blue Finance Innovation for Fisheries Improvement', 26 April 2023, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/press-releases/wwf-and-finance-earth-launch-blue-finance-innovation-for-fisheries-improvement>.

<sup>781</sup> Ayilu, Fabinyi, and Barclay, 'Small-Scale Fisheries in the Blue Economy: Review of Scholarly Papers and Multilateral Documents'; Cohen et al., 'SSF in the Blue Economy'.



As a result, many SSF coalitions have become conversant with the blue economy, be that enthusiastically, critically or otherwise.

When speaking with LMMA Network members and partners about *why* the network engaged with the blue economy discourse, I was met with an overwhelmingly common response: that representatives felt that they ‘had to’ in order to be visible to policymakers and donors. This sense of compulsion to engage the blue economy discourse was discerningly described by one LMMA Network partner through the metaphor of a torrent:

rCS/C. 7: If you have organisations that are struggling, I can’t hold it against them on [the] failings of government systems, development sector partners – their failings to get money to the ground to those people. I can’t get mad at them because I understand that those systems have failed them.

So, they’re pulled into this torrent of if you’re not part of it, you get left out. And for me I don’t want to go down that path of the blue economy, but you’re forced to because the stream is running faster and faster.

As a “torrent” of ocean development, this statement portrays the blue economy as an exceptionally powerful discourse capable of drawing ocean stakeholders into engagement with it; even those who may be unwilling. Indeed, despite the LMMA Network partners’ personal reservations about the discourse, they lamented that engagement with the blue economy felt near unavoidable, particularly for the purposes of securing development funding. This bleak account of stakeholder agency is confronting, though was not uncommon among interviewees (rCS.20, rCS.55).

Attention to the first few sentences of the above quote also reveal the allure of the blue economy discourse in circumstances where systemic failure(s) obscures stakeholders’ ability to access development funding. In the case of the LMMA Network, the draw of the blue economy becomes stronger when this body struggles to secure adequate and/or reliable funding due to the shortcomings of government systems and development partners as it offers a fashionable discourse through which to (re)engage other donors and funding sources. LMMA Network’s engagement with the blue economy thus appears less associated with its merit as a sustainable development vision, but as a strategy to counter the structural failures of ocean governance and development systems. While the blue economy is in vogue, it presents a useful tool for appealing to and accessing ocean development funding.

Beyond considerations of funding, other LMMA Network members recounted the sense of pressure they felt to engage with the blue economy for the purposes of securing access to ocean

governance spaces. Take for example the following reflection offered in response to questions on why the network engaged the blue economy discourse at international forums:

rCS.55: You have to engage anywhere in all the spaces just so you can be recognised you know. If you don't show up to the table then the coastal fisheries importance goes down, community voices aren't heard. You need to always be there; you need to always show up. Otherwise, it gets overshadowed by other interests.

From this statement, we see how the LMMA Network engages with the blue economy as a means of accessing ocean governance spaces, which have become heavily framed in the blue economy discourse. By leveraging this discourse, the LMMA Network can better secure a 'seat at the table' in ocean governance forums from where it can then elevate the voices of coastal communities and advocate for their recognition as legitimate, important ocean stakeholders. For the LMMA Network, such visibility and voice are critical for ensuring that coastal communities are not "overshadowed" by other ocean sectors who often command greater economic and political resources (e.g. oil and gas exploitation, seabed minerals, aquaculture).<sup>782</sup> This helps explain why the LMMA Network has positioned coastal fisheries as a critical sector of the blue economy within their 'instrumental' storyline. Cautious that outright blue economy rejection may shut the door to many ocean governance and development spaces, the LMMA Network has instead identified coastal communities as key stakeholders of this discourse in an attempt to safeguard their access to such forums.

Reflecting on these observations, it appears the LMMA Network's blue economy engagement is less (if at all) motivated by endorsement of the discourse than it is a strategy for securing and safeguarding access to ocean development funding and governance spaces. Indeed, the statements above capture the sense of compulsion that LMMA Network stakeholders feel to engage the blue economy due to its popularity as a discourse for contemporary ocean governance and development. This sense of compulsion is a critical indicator of discourse hegemony, reflecting the effectiveness of the blue economy's 'disciplinary power' over ocean discussions and decisions. According to Hajer, hegemonic discourses exert a disciplinary force over knowledge and decision-making forums (structuration), which "consists in the implicit assumption that subsequent speakers will answer within the same discursive frame."<sup>783</sup> Thus, even if an agent seeks to challenge or resist the dominant discourse they are "expected to position their contribution in terms of

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<sup>782</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, 'Blue Economy: 3 Recommendations from ACP Artisanal Fisheries'.

<sup>783</sup> Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*, 57.

known categories.”<sup>784</sup> In the case of the blue economy, this means that even critical agents feel compelled to contest the discourse on its own grounds and through its own terms—the blue economy remains the frame of reference for critique. Dissent and resistance become limited to the conceptual boundaries established by the blue economy discourse, foreclosing the potential for agents to discuss ocean governance and development outside this frame. The LMMA Network’s experience with the blue economy discourse reflect this process of structuration.

Additionally, the blue economy appears to have also secured its institutionalisation in mainstream ocean development and governance bodies where the discourse sits central to the ocean-related agendas and policies of these agencies. Numerous examples have been discussed throughout this thesis, but by way of a brief recall, consider the UN and its agencies,<sup>785</sup> the World Bank,<sup>786</sup> major international NGOs such as WWF,<sup>787</sup> and philanthropy.<sup>788</sup> This institutionalisation of the blue economy, complemented by its structuration aligns with Hajer’s account of discourse hegemony and leads me to suggest that the blue economy appears to be nearing, if not have achieved, a status of hegemony in global ocean development and policy spaces.

That said, while the blue economy may have achieved discourse hegemony, I contend that this does not preclude the potential for stakeholder agency. As revealed across all five interviews,<sup>789</sup> LMMA Network representatives appeared creatively engaged in strategies of discourse containment, renegotiation and/or interruption. This brings me to the next subsection where I identify and discuss three such strategies.

#### 7.4.2 Strategies for confining blue economy engagement

Despite feeling compelled to engage the blue economy in order to access ocean governance spaces and development partnerships, LMMA Network stakeholders also identified strategies for confining and renegotiating their engagement with the discourse. These strategies enabled the LMMA Network to control how and to what extent it engaged with the blue economy, ultimately assisting it to fit the blue economy to *its* work and agenda—not the reverse. Three clear strategies

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<sup>784</sup> Hajer, 57.

<sup>785</sup> World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ‘The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries’; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, ‘Blue Growth Initiative: Partnering with Countries to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals’; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Blue Economy: New Challenges and Prospects for Recovery and Resilience’, 2020.

<sup>786</sup> World Bank, ‘PROBLUE: Supporting Integrated and Sustainable Economic Development in Healthy Oceans’.

<sup>787</sup> World Wildlife Fund, ‘Principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy’, 2015, [https://wwf.panda.org/wwf\\_news/?247477/Principles%2Dfor%2Da%2DSustainable%2DBlue%2DEconomy](https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?247477/Principles%2Dfor%2Da%2DSustainable%2DBlue%2DEconomy).

<sup>788</sup> Waitt Institute, ‘Blue Economy’, 2023.

<sup>789</sup> rCS.55, rCS.20, REG/rCS.27, NGO/rCS.39, rCS/C. 7

were identified throughout interviews: (a) box ticking, (b) incorporating the blue economy into a larger ocean development agenda, and (c) reclaiming of the blue economy as an age-old Pacific practice.

### **Box ticking**

Illustrative of their detachment from the discourse, the first strategy LMMA Network members and partners identified for confining their blue economy engagement was what can be described as ‘box ticking.’ A strategy familiar to many in program delivery spaces, this practice entailed ‘ticking the blue economy box’ on grant proposals, project reports and other such partnership documents while doing relatively little (if anything) to change existing or planned work:

rCS/C. 7: If I was writing a proposal that needed to tick the blue economy box, I would still do exactly what I wanted to do. I would just shove, fit it in it.

Here, appeals to the blue economy are little more than tokenistic, with the discourse having little influence on the everyday practices of LMMA Network members and partners nor the frameworks through which they approached CBAM. Under these circumstances the blue economy’s power appeared limited to little more than bureaucratic box ticking, with the work and social relations among network stakeholders left largely untouched.

### **Incorporating the blue economy into a larger agenda**

The second strategy for discourse confinement was the LMMA Network’s incorporation of the blue economy within its 100% Solution, with two interviewees insisting that the former only constituted *part* of the latter’s ocean development vision (rCS.20, rCS/C. 7). Here the blue economy was made a component feature of the 100% Solution and held out as a limited concept that only spoke to some elements of the LMMA Network’s CBAM scaling-up objectives. This enables the LMMA Network to maintain focus on the 100% Solution as its primary goal, with the blue economy referenced only in specific cases of complementarity. The use of this strategy is clear in the following exchange with a LMMA Network member:

*Myself: Do you see there being a difference between the SDG framing and the blue economy framing?*

rCS.20: The SDG framing is more broad. It’s more complete. More 100% Solution. The blue economy is just taking a few: SDG14 and climate change. So, it’s only two or three.

So, we start with the whole 17 [SDGs].

So, when the blue economy interest comes in, it’s sitting or building on those...

We framed it [100% Solution] around the SDG targets. If the blue economy interests overlaps, then yes, there is a match. And then that becomes the partnership that government or investors, NGOs build on.

*Myself: That's really interesting. With the 100% Solution, the SDGs may actually fit a bit more comfortably? But if there are synergies with the blue economy then we might as well use them? Might as well talk about them?*

rCS.20: Yes, but not blue economy on its own. I'm saying this because that's our default approach, we build first what the community needs. And if it overlaps with blue economy interest, then yes, then that becomes the marriage.

From this exchange we see that the blue economy was viewed as complementary to *select* aspects of the 100% Solution. It was thus considered only partially relevant and partially applicable for the LMMA Network's CBAM scaling work; insufficient on its own to capture the holistic agenda of the 100% Solution. This insistence on the limits of blue economy utility refused hegemonic impulses that attempt to absorb the 100% Solution into a broader blue economy framework. Instead, the 100% Solution is asserted as the LMMA Network's primary agenda that is, in some areas, compatible with the blue economy.

### **Reclaiming the blue economy**

The final strategy identified by LMMA Network representatives for confining the power of the blue economy was the positioning of this discourse as simply a new articulation of long-standing Pacific ethics and practices of ocean management; not something new that demanded substantive change, at least for coastal communities undertaking CBAM. This view was expressed across multiple interviews (rCS.55, rCS.20, REG/rCS.27) and seemed to reflect a reclaiming of the blue economy as something inherent to coastal communities of the region. Consider, for example, the following statement:

rCS.55: So, when people talk about a heavy push into the blue economy and investing in this new terminology of blue economy, it's not really that new for the Pacific. Because that's what people have been living – generational you know. Relying on ocean resources. Valuing them. All that sort of stuff.

In situating the blue economy as an age-old Pacific framework, LMMA Network members seemingly pushed back against storylines that cast the blue economy as a new, transformative approach to ocean engagement wherein radical change is demanded of its subscribers (e.g. the

'oceans as drivers of innovation' storyline identified in Voyer et al.).<sup>790</sup> Reclamation enabled the LMMA Network to position Pacific coastal communities as experienced practitioners of the blue economy who require little (if any) substantive shift in behaviour to accord with sustainable ocean development practices: "The community fisheries space, I would say that it doesn't need changing at all in some aspects" (REG/rCS.27). In refusing the novelty of the blue economy, the LMMA Network and its members remind global audiences of the longstanding expertise of Pacific communities as responsible ocean users and managers. In this sense, the blue economy is positioned as a continuation and recognition of customary ocean interactions—not their transformation.

These strategies of box ticking, incorporation and reclamation each resemble attempts at confining the discursive power of the blue economy as global interest in sustainable ocean development and governance grows. They enabled the LMMA Network to decentre the blue economy and instead position the 100% Solution and its local communities as its central focus. This sees LMMA Network place the blue economy in line with *its* work and *its* values—not vice versa. While this still requires the LMMA Network engage with the blue economy, it suggests that the network is working to carve out space for strategic manoeuvre within the discourse, mobilising its agency through this process. The blue economy is thereby far from totalising or absolute. It is sensitive to confinement and creative interpretation even when it appears to have achieved hegemony as a global ocean discourse.

### 7.4.3 Reasons for critique

Having described the considerations that inform LMMA Network's instrumental engagement with the blue economy discourse, including strategies mobilised to confine its hegemonic power, it is timely to now consider to the factors that underline the LMMA Network's concerns regarding this discourse. As introduced in *Section Two*, the LMMA Network has long approached the blue economy discourse with caution: constructing a 'critical' blue economy storyline well before forming its 'instrumental' counterpart. Indeed, as witnessed through the section above, the 'critical' storyline has remained threaded through the LMMA Network's relationship with the blue economy; working to qualify its more instrumental engagements of recent years. Reflecting on insights shared during key informant interviews, this subsection unpacks the question of *why* the LMMA Network has looked cautiously upon the blue economy, identifying three key (and

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<sup>790</sup> Michelle Voyer et al., 'Shades of Blue: What Do Competing Interpretations of the Blue Economy Mean for Oceans Governance?', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 20, no. 5 (2018): 595–616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2018.1473153>.

interrelated) areas of concern: (a) fear that communities are being sidelined as stakeholders of the blue economy, (b) exclusion of coastal communities with the growth and/or introduction of competing industries, and (c) suspicion that the blue economy may be a distraction from the practical work of supporting coastal fisheries. These concerns help explain why the LMMA Network constructs—and maintains—a ‘critical’ storyline that depicts the blue economy as a potential threat to coastal communities, while also exposing the relations of power that the network seek to challenge through its articulation of such storyline.

### **Sidelining of coastal communities as key ocean stakeholders**

A concern raised by all five interviewed LMMA Network stakeholders was fear that coastal communities were being sidelined, or ‘left behind’ in an ever-accelerating blue economy movement (rCS/C. 7, rCS.20, rCS.55, REG/rCS.27, NGO/rCS.39). The following comment by one LMMA Network member captures this point particularly strikingly:

rCS.55: So, in the Pacific, even though people have been living the blue economy for generations, it would be good that they aren’t left behind as it just keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger. That’s my concern.

To illustrate their point, this LMMA Network member continued, recounting an episode from the 2017 UNOC negotiations wherein they suggested that the Fiji Government revoked their support for a joint voluntary commitment to the 100% Solution in favour the globally trending 30x30 commitment:

rCS.55: So, the last UNOC [2017 UN Ocean Conference] ... the Fiji Government actually said they were gonna [sic] commit to 100% management. LMMA, they were talking with FL MMA [Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area Network], they were talking with LMMA, that was gonna [sic] be one of their commitments. Then right at the end, the last minute, they dropped that 100% and picked up the 30x30 because that was an international commitment.

... All I’m saying is that when these things happen with 30x30 or concepts like the blue economy, any sort of project to do with the blue economy, I think we can’t leave behind our communities. We have to engage them and talk to them and work out what it means to them.

While publicly available evidence to support this claim is challenging to find, similar accounts were confirmed in informal conversations with LMMA Network members and partners. Regardless of one’s opinion about the credibility of this claim, the more important point to highlight is that LMMA Network representatives shared a similar understanding of events and were thus similarly

cautious about coastal communities being ‘left behind’ in the growing blue economy movement; particularly as enthusiasm for more large-scale, easily quantified sustainable ocean sectors caught the attention of policymakers and officials (in this case, the 30x30 initiative).

This perceived marginalisation of coastal communities contributes to the LMMA Network’s critique of the blue economy as exclusionary. Recalling the *Call to Action* campaign of 2022 of which the LMMA Network was closely involved, we observe similar arguments regarding the exclusion that coastal communities feel from high-level blue economy governance forums. The perception that coastal communities are being overlooked, compromised or refused from blue economy governance spaces thus appears to be a constant concern informing the network’s development of a ‘critical’ blue economy storyline. Resonance can be seen between this Call to Action campaign and Bennett. et al.’s ‘ocean defenders’ project,<sup>791</sup> with both identifying ‘ocean grabbing’ as a key threat to coastal communities and demanding protection of coastal communities’ rights and marine tenure.

On a related note, the exclusion of local knowledges from blue economy agendas and programs was raised by multiple LMMA Network members and partners during interviews (REG/rCS.27, rCS.20, NGO/rCS.39). These representatives criticised the blue economy for too often failing to respect and engage local knowledges on sustainable ocean management, instead privileging the advice of external consultants, donors and scientists. In contexts of CBAM and SSF where local groups have long honed their ocean management skills and knowledge, such disregard for local wisdom was regarded as particularly patronising. Pushing the critique a step further, one network member even suggested that the blue economy may serve as a “political move to undermine local knowledge” (rCS.20). Such undermining, they feared, was a dynamic “hidden behind this blue economy. We have to be very careful. And we are sensitive to those, and we will stand up and voice these issues” (rCS.20). Here we devise that some LMMA Network members interpret the blue economy’s sidelining of local knowledge as something more sinister than mere oversight. Hidden under the cover of sustainable development, these stakeholders see the blue economy as a vision of sustainable ocean development and management that ‘undermines’ local and Indigenous knowledge systems, and subsequently erodes the authority of local communities and legitimate ocean stakeholders.

Critically, however, this LMMA Network member refused to bow to such power dynamics, asserting their commitment to advocate for communities and their knowledges. They considered

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<sup>791</sup> Nathan J. Bennett et al., ‘Ocean Defenders and Human Rights’, *Frontiers in Marine Science* 9 (2023), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2022.1089049>.



this an important function of the LMMA Network, coupled with a resolution to hold the spotlight on examples of coastal community marginalisation under the blue economy and its promoted activities. This member hoped that together, these strategies would ensure the rights and interests of coastal communities would not be lost in the noise of blue economy enthusiasm. This can help explain why the ‘critical’ storyline has remained a constant fixture of LMMA Network’s blue economy engagement and often centred on championing the profile of coastal communities as experienced, expert ocean custodians. If the blue economy is to remain a popular framework for sustainable ocean development action across the region and the globe, it is the opinion of the LMMA Network that coastal communities be assured a central place in these agendas.<sup>792</sup>

### **Exclusion of coastal communities from ocean spaces and resources**

A related concern to emerge in my discussions with LMMA Network stakeholders was the deep unease many felt about potential ocean grabbing associated with the blue economy. As earlier outlined, ocean grabbing refers to processes of dispossession or appropriation wherein ocean users’ use, rights or access to ocean spaces and resources are threatened or compromised.<sup>793</sup> In effect, it is when coastal communities’ find themselves excluded, or at risk of exclusion, from the ocean spaces and resources that they rely on (and in many Pacific contexts, have customary rights to). Ocean grabbing can occur at the hands of extractive industries such as seabed minerals activity<sup>794</sup> or aquaculture,<sup>795</sup> but equally under ‘fortress’ conservation programs<sup>796</sup> such as no-take MPAs and some forms of blue bond schemes.<sup>797</sup> To ensure their success, these sectors often seek to secure unrivalled control over ocean resources and the spaces where they are located, thus necessarily looking to displace the authority of other stakeholders who may challenge their ocean claims (e.g. customary rights holders). That each of these sectors have been positioned as key

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<sup>792</sup> Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers’; African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘A Call to Action for Artisanal Fisheries’.

<sup>793</sup> Bennett, Govan, and Satterfield, ‘Ocean Grabbing’.

<sup>794</sup> Childs, ‘Performing “Blue Degrowth”’: Critiquing Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea through Creative Practice’.

<sup>795</sup> Ragnheiður Bogadóttir, ‘Blue Growth and Its Discontents in the Faroe Islands: An Island Perspective on Blue (De)Growth, Sustainability, and Environmental Justice’, *Sustainability Science* 15, no. 1 (2020): 103–15, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00763-z>.

<sup>796</sup> Bennett et al., ‘Towards a Sustainable and Equitable Blue Economy’; Cohen et al., ‘SSF in the Blue Economy’; Elizabeth M. De Santo, ‘Missing Marine Protected Area (MPA) Targets: How the Push for Quantity over Quality Undermines Sustainability and Social Justice’, *Journal of Environmental Management* 124 (2013): 137–46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2013.01.033>.

<sup>797</sup> Barbesgaard, ‘Blue Carbon: Ocean Grabbing in Disguise?’

elements of mainstream blue economy approaches<sup>798</sup> was a leading matter of concern raised by three LMMA Network stakeholders I spoke with (rCS/C. 7, REG/rCS.27, rCS.55).

The threat posed by ocean grabbing is particularly pronounced in the Pacific where many communities continue to have claim to customary marine rights and/or tenure. In these settings, the promotion of exclusionary ocean-based activities under the discourse of the blue economy (e.g. the 30x30 initiative) risks compromising not only communities' ocean access and ocean-based livelihoods, but also customary lore. Consider, for example, the following reflection offered by one LMMA Network member:

rCS.55: So how that [customary marine tenure]<sup>799</sup> engages with the blue economy; the tensions are still there.

But at the end of the day, if people are offered enough money, people will waive their rights. The thing is that they often forget these rights are waived in perpetuity. They can't get them back.

As illuminated by this stakeholder, a major concern LMMA Network representatives have of the blue economy is that it, and the activities promoted by it, may approach coastal communities to trade their customary rights in exchange for economic payment. Once waived, however, these rights cannot be reclaimed, irreversibly undercutting communities' access and authority over their coastal ecosystems. In the eyes of many network representatives, such short-term economic gain is not worth communities' sacrifice of their customary rights. Should such waiving of rights occur, there is a high risk that coastal communities will have little defence from the ocean grabbing impulses of well-resourced blue economy sectors (rCS.55).

If we reflect on the LMMA Network's blue economy engagements over the last decade, we see how ocean grabbing has been a constant concern underlying its 'critical' storyline construction. From its very early 2015 Facebook posts to the Call to Action campaign, the network has constantly warned that the activities promoted under the blue economy risk excluding coastal communities from their ocean spaces and resources. Given the staunch and founding commitment of this grassroots body to the protection of community rights and self-determination, it is unlikely

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<sup>798</sup> European Commission, 'Report on the Blue Growth Strategy: Towards More Sustainable Growth and Jobs in the Blue Economy', SWD(2017) 128 (Brussels, Belgium, 31 March 2017); World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries'.

<sup>799</sup> Under the *Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013*, 26(8)(g), iTaukei hold customary rights to access marine resources while the Fiji Government owns marine resources.

that the LMMA Network's wariness of the potential ocean grabbing effects of the blue economy will wane anytime soon.

### **Distraction**

While mentioned less frequently in interviews, the proposition that the blue economy may act as a distraction from meaningful CBAM work presents an interesting provocation for reflection. This suggestion arose during one interview with a LMMA Network partner about the relationship between the green economy and blue economy; the former of which has come to carry a terrestrial bias, yet was not originally designed to distinguish between land and ocean, while the latter (more recent) discourse is associated near exclusively with ocean-based activities:

rCS/C. 7: I'm just frustrated. We've had the green economy right, and I never when I was discussing the green economy never excluded the ocean. And I find it a bit bizarre that we had the green economy and it somehow, I worry that by creating the blue economy it's created these as separate spaces. Which always worries me when we divide disciplines and divide spaces up.

... Why do we need to pull all these spaces apart, because then it creates then all these processes in UN systems and government that everyone focuses on the talking part of these processes. And we don't actually do the – it's another mechanism for me of introducing new jargon rather than doing the work that needs to be done.

... What is the add on we can do to make sure it [the green economy] does broadly cover it, as opposed to creating a whole new sphere of work. For me it then becomes an issue of resources going into talk, talk, talk at the global level; plan, plan, plan; policy, policy, policy. And yet, the thing that's needed was actually we've done all that – it was implement, implement, implement. We don't need to reinvent things.

... It's distracting us from just getting on and doing the work.

Characterising the blue economy as a “new jargon” of global sustainable development, the exasperation of this LMMA Network partner is audible from the tone (and opening statement) of this passage. Confronting the promise of the blue economy as a transformative agenda for sustainable ocean development, this stakeholder deeply questioned the value of the discourse, suggesting that it divides ocean governance efforts, drains resources, generates superfluity, and ultimately obscures the implementation of meaningful action. In their own words, “it's distracting us from just getting on and doing the work.”

Though not as explicit in this stakeholder's provocation, scepticism over the practical value of the blue economy was a theme raised in three other interviews with LMMA Network members and

partners (rCS.20, REG/rCS.27, rCS.55). Speaking on the passing parade of paradigms that appear to cycle through the global development fora, one interviewee remarked:

REG/rCS.27: So, the priorities at the international level continues to evolve. But the question is, how sustainable will that be to the local people? And does that have any impact to the local people?

Like the network partner quoted earlier, this stakeholder expressed concern that the blue economy advances little meaningful benefit for the ocean communities whom it purports to serve. Their statement speaks to how the blue economy appears yet another global development trend that rises and fades on the tides of mainstream interest, yet often leaves local communities no better off than before. Put otherwise, the blue economy extends many promises but struggles to deliver in practice; especially for local communities who are often sidelined in large-scale multi-million dollar development projects. For them, the blue economy is little other than policy jargon that distracts from meaningful action.

This provocation of the blue economy as a tool of distraction clearly resonates with Frances Koya-Vaka‘uta’s statement quoted at the opening of this thesis. I will return to this suggestion in further detail in *Chapter Eight* but for now, conclude this subsection noting how the blue economy’s perceived distraction from meaningful CBAM action provides another explanation for why LMMA Network members and partners refuse to embrace the discourse wholesale and thus engage in the construction of a ‘critical’ blue economy storyline.

#### 7.4.4 Questioning the blue economy and its promise of transformative ocean development

On a concluding note, there are two key insights I observe from the LMMA Network’s engagement with the blue economy that speak directly to the politics of this discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development. First, it was clear across both document analysis and key stakeholder interviews that LMMA Network representatives have remained highly cautious about the possibility that the blue economy is being leveraged as a tool to expand neoliberal capitalist relations at sea (rCS/C.7, rCS.20).<sup>800</sup> Such neoliberal capitalist expansion is seen in the way that many major ocean sectors promoted under mainstream blue economy visions seek to (re)order global oceans via frameworks of spatial enclosure (e.g. MPAs), market

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<sup>800</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Blue Economy: 3 Recommendations from ACP Artisanal Fisheries’; Hugh Govan in Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, ‘Surfacing the Agendas of the Blue Economy’.

rationalisation (e.g. nature as capital), and the commodification of marine ecosystems (e.g. blue bonds)—all too often at the expense of upholding coastal communities’ rights to access and use their ocean spaces and resources.<sup>801</sup> From the standpoint of the LMMA Network, the blue economy thus appears to provide little of the transformative change it so promises, instead extending the very system of neoliberal capitalism responsible for the crises in ocean (and broader ecological) health, economic security and equitable development this discourse was conceived in response to.<sup>802</sup> Put bluntly, the LMMA Network’s ‘critical’ storyline tells not of a transformative blue economy, but a discourse in service of the status quo.

Second, the LMMA Network’s persistent expression of dissent—be that through blue economy avoidance, outright critique, or highly conditional acceptance—reaffirms suggestions of the inherent instability of power and discourse. It reveals how even when hegemony has seemingly been achieved, there always remains room for struggle. Perhaps most striking about the LMMA Network case study is the actor’s ability to express dissent even during periods of pragmatic engagement with the blue economy (i.e. the interweaving of ‘critical’ and ‘instrumental’ storylines). This observation reveals how challenges to hegemony are not limited to acts of rejection but can take the form of various strategies—namely, politicisation. It is this politicisation of the blue economy that I see in the LMMA Network’s refusal to allow mainstream blue economy visions to settle; its refusal to unquestioningly adopt the sustainable ocean development pathways and understandings outlined by the discourse; its insistence on maintaining debate around what the blue economy means and how it impacts coastal communities. Thus, while the LMMA Network may not have rejected the blue economy outright, it has remained committed to destabilising it. Through a strategy of politicisation, the LMMA Network has seemingly found an avenue for pushing back against the pressures of a hegemonic blue economy discourse at a time where its other avenues for contestation are constrained.

These insights will be carried forward into *Part III* where I grapple with the task of relating my case study findings to Gramsci’s conceptual framework of hegemony, crisis and the politics of transformation, and vice versa. LMMA Network’s experience offers invaluable perspective into how the blue economy is perceived and approached by an actor primarily committed to local communities and their self-determined development outcomes.

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<sup>801</sup> International Independent Tribunal on Blue Economy Organising Committee, ‘International Tribunal on the Impact of the Blue Economy in Indian Ocean Countries: Verdicts of the Six Tribunal Series’; Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, ‘A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers’; African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘A Call to Action for Artisanal Fisheries’.

<sup>802</sup> African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, ‘Blue Economy: 3 Recommendations from ACP Artisanal Fisheries’, 3.

## 7.5 Conclusion

LMMA Network's careful construction and progressive interweaving of 'critical' and 'instrumental' storylines indicates the strategic nature of its relationship with the blue economy. While vigilant of the threat this discourse poses to coastal communities' rights and access to ocean spaces, the LMMA Network has refrained from rejecting the blue economy outright. Instead, it has developed a pragmatic—albeit highly conditional—relationship with the discourse. This decision to constructively engage with the discourse is motivated by the LMMA Network's attempt to safeguard its access to key ocean governance spaces and partnerships where the blue economy has been accepted as the leading framework for understanding and approaching sustainable ocean development. Without access to these spaces and stakeholders, the LMMA Network and its stakeholders fear being (further) marginalised from ocean policies and programs, which are currently expanding at a rapid pace under the 21<sup>st</sup> century's ocean acceleration.<sup>803</sup> The LMMA Network's engagement with the blue economy thus appears largely driven by a sense of compulsion: 'we have to, in order to be seen.' This is consistent with the workings of discourse hegemony, suggesting that the blue economy itself has emerged as a leading discourse for mainstream ocean development.

Despite these pressures, the LMMA Network continues to exercise agency in its blue economy encounters. As I detail through this chapter, the network continues to find ways to express critical perspectives of the discourse—even when engaging somewhat constructively with it. Under a 'critical' storyline, the LMMA Network articulates its concerns over the blue economy's facilitation of large-scale industrial and conservationist ocean activities that infringe on coastal communities' ocean rights and access (ocean grabbing), thus unsettling the charismatic vision of this popular ocean development discourse. Indeed, the 'critical' storyline has remained threaded through the LMMA Network's more 'instrumental' blue economy engagements, reminding us that discourse is never absolute but always vulnerable to disruption and dissent.

By progressively threading its 'critical' storyline within a more 'instrumental' construct, the LMMA Network has been strategic in negotiating a highly strategic and conditional relationship with the blue economy. It has sought to safeguard coastal communities' access to ocean spaces and resources, all while advocating for their greater access to development and governance forums. This has by no means been an easy negotiation; yet, it has seemingly been useful for helping the LMMA Network navigate its place in an expanding and increasingly crowded ocean development

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<sup>803</sup> Jouffray et al., 'The Blue Acceleration: The Trajectory of Human Expansion into the Ocean'.

landscape. It has enabled the LMMA Network to maintain positive relationships with major development partners (the EU and USAID), strengthen relationships with other SSF and coastal fishers' networks (Call to Action campaign), and perhaps most importantly, afford it access to resources and opportunities through which it can empower and advocate for coastal communities in their marine management efforts. At a time where growing global interests in oceans for their economic, ecological and development potential presents serious challenges but also unique opportunities for coastal communities, the LMMA Network's interweaving of 'critical' and 'instrumental' blue economy storylines sees it deftly navigate a crowded space of ocean development actors and activities to serve the interests of its members.





# **PART III**

Transformation?



# CHAPTER EIGHT

## The blue economy as passive revolution

### 8.1 Engaging theory in conversation with case studies

As evident across the three case studies of *Part II*, development actors of the Pacific have developed distinct, in some cases inconsonant relationships with the blue economy discourse. This has resulted in a plurality of discourse engagements that not only stand unique from one another, but themselves evolve over time. Such observation unsettles impulses to reduce Pacific encounters with the blue economy to a singular experience; analysis that, in the words of Teresia Teaiwa, attempt to ‘paint the Pacific with just one brush.’<sup>804</sup>

Attentive to this diversity, what are we to make of efforts towards macro-level analysis of the blue economy? Is it possible—or indeed valuable—to identify common themes that speak to generalisable patterns in the blue economy’s circulation and operation; or is a case-by-case approach our only option? While I insist that careful analysis of individual discourse relationships is important for respecting the nuances and situatedness of each encounter, I also suggest there is great value in bringing multiple experiences into conversation with one another. By exploring points of convergence and friction between blue economy experiences, a dialogic approach to multi-case study analysis allows us to reflect on the broader political effects of discourse—even if these effects are felt and perceived differently among actors. Such exploration enables thinking on more conceptual questions about the blue economy’s function; reflecting on what distinct Pacific discourse encounters can teach us about the larger operation of this phenomenon.

Following the teachings of Bourdieu that “theory without empirical research is empty, empirical research without theory is blind,”<sup>805</sup> this chapter draws on case study insights of *Part II* to inform

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<sup>804</sup> Teaiwa, ‘You Can’t Paint the Pacific with Just One Brush Stroke’.

<sup>805</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Vive La Crise!: For Heterodoxy in Social Science’, *Theory and Society* 17, no. 5 (1988): 744–745, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657639>.

my conceptualisation of the blue economy's political function and, more broadly, the politics associated with discourses promising transformation. The chapter develops across three sections.

*Section One* summarises key case study insights, reflecting on points of similarity and difference that lie between the blue economy experiences of the Pacific's regional organisations, the CIG and the LMMA Network. I identify four headline findings on the functioning of discourse as a promise for transformative ocean development: (a) the blue economy does not work to advance the transformative vision of ocean development that it so promises, (b) actors consistently exercise agency in their negotiation of the discourse, (c) pressure to engage with the blue economy discourse varies depending on an actor's relationship with the social order, and (d) there remain active expressions of dissent that challenge the blue economy discourse, even among those who may appear to constructively engage with it. Considered together, these findings suggest the blue economy functions as a useful political tool for the neoliberal capitalist order to refashion itself anew and restore social authority when challenged by crisis. A political tool, in other words, that closely resembles Gramsci's concept of passive revolution (*Chapter Two*).

This observation leads to *Section Two* where I provide a conceptual illustration of how the blue economy contributes to the process of passive revolution. I identify promises of transformation—such as the blue economy—as key discursive tools that can be leveraged to reinstate the logics and social orders of established systems (hegemony), while simultaneously holding that not all promises of transformation are fated to such conservative ends. Indeed, though promises of transformation may be vulnerable to deployment for passive revolution, so too are they necessary for envisioning an alternate order. This gives rise to what I term the 'performance paradox,' which captures how discourses promising systemic change are inherently engaged in some kind of performance; be that the enactment of change (revolution) or the artifice of change (passive revolution). For actors seeking systemic change as well as those working to obscure it, the performance of transformation through discourse is an important political act.

The final section takes a step back to consider what the blue economy experiences detailed in this thesis teach us about the role of discourse in processes of passive revolution. Reflecting on my case study findings, I emphasise how discourses promising transformation facilitate hegemony's refashioning in response to changing social contexts where consent in the former order is deeply unsettled, if not ruptured. I observe how such discourses enable hegemony to adapt when its social authority is deeply challenged; acting as a vehicle through which hegemony can acknowledge the need for change, yet never to the point of envisioning a transformational social reordering. This emphasises the recursive character of passive revolution—its progression through cycles of

modification and evolution—reorienting our understanding of such phenomena from the common dialectic of ‘revolution-restoration.’

## 8.2 Case study insights and headline findings

Analysed separately, the case studies of *Part II* provide detailed accounts of how three distinct Pacific actors engage and negotiate the blue economy as a discourse promising transformative ocean development. These chapters provide an exercise in thick description<sup>806</sup> and necessary grounding for broader conceptualisation of the blue economy’s underlying political character and consistent political effects. Comparison is too coarse an analytic to account for the variability and nuance of the three case studies. A more relational undertaking is required, which leads me to approach the task through the lens of dialogue to uncover points of resonance, friction and learning.

Figure 28 summarises key insights derived from the case studies of *Part II*. I illustrate these insights through a visualisation of ocean currents to reflect the relational connection that weaves between these distinct blue economy experiences. Bringing these experiences into conversation with one another enables me to derive four key findings that speak to the political nature of discourse.

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<sup>806</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, US: Basic Books, 1973).

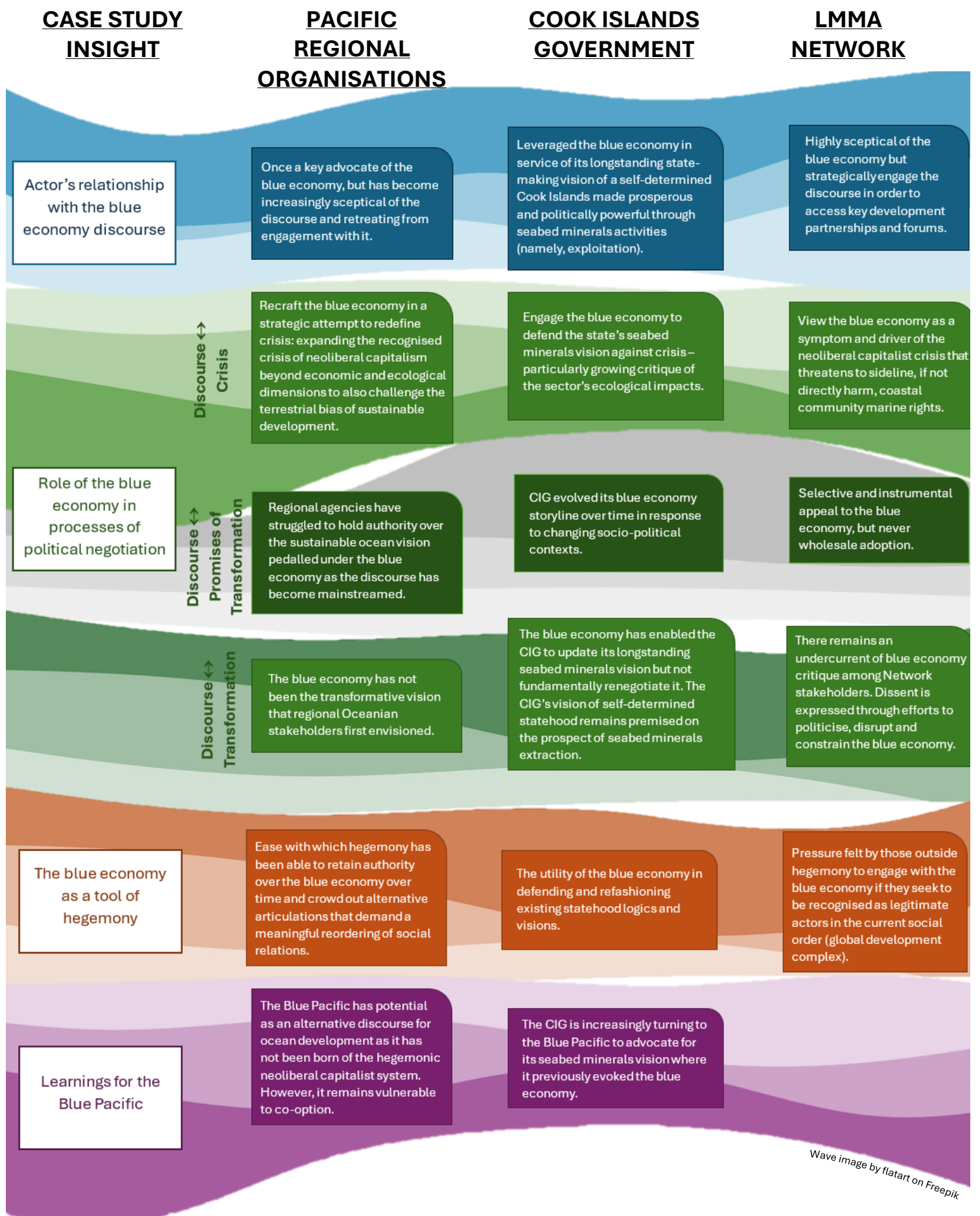


Figure 28: Headline Case Study Insights

### 8.2.1 The artifice of transformation

Irrespective of their differing perspectives and relationships with the blue economy, it became evident across all three case studies that the blue economy discourse was not driving a transformation in ocean development approaches as it so promised. It extended, in other words, little other than the *artifice* of transformation.

For the regional organisations of the Pacific, this realisation developed relatively slowly over the decade as early optimism about the discourse's potential in progressing an assertive, equitable and self-determined ocean future gave way to observations of the blue economy's use by the global development complex to extend existing development frameworks and logics in ocean-based settings (Figure 28). As mainstream sustainable development visions stagnated on land, the blue economy facilitated their revival in an ocean context (e.g. large-scale protected areas under 30x30, or emissions offsetting via blue carbon schemes). Accordingly, the blue economy continued to be designed, led and funded by the same cohort of external development actors headquartered in the Global North and consistent with philosophies of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>807</sup> As the decade progressed, Pacific regional organisations found themselves struggling to maintain authority over their vision for the blue economy as the discourse gained popularity through the development mainstream and entered the agendas of external development partners<sup>808</sup>. This reduced the utility of the blue economy for Pacific regionalism as it no longer represented a transformative, (P)SIDS-centred vision for restructuring the global development apparatus, but yet another paradigm obedient to old ways of seeing and doing 'development' *in*—not *by*—the Pacific.

Contrastingly, the CIG long recognised the blue economy as a useful tool for continuing and refashioning its seabed minerals aspirations in a contemporary geopolitical and social context. Adopting the blue economy to reframe its longstanding seabed minerals vision, the CIG leveraged the discourse to defend the sector's ecological impact and shrewdly position such activities as consistent with, if not necessary for, sustainable (ocean) development (e.g. the necessity of seabed minerals for constructing net-zero technologies) (Figure 28). Framing the seabed minerals sector as a critical element of the global sustainability transition saw the CIG work to legitimise its continued pursuit of a state-making, seabed minerals project; which ultimately aspired for the realisation of a sovereign, expansive Cook Islands made politically powerful and economically

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<sup>807</sup> Marleen Simone Schutter et al., 'Mapping Flows of Blue Economy Finance: Ambitious Narratives, Opaque Actions, and Social Equity Risks', *One Earth* 7, no. 4 (2024): 638–49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2024.02.009>.

<sup>808</sup> Philippa Louey, 'The Blue Economy's Retreat from Equity: A Decade under Global Negotiation', *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2022.999571>.

prosperous through seabed mining. Far from transformative, the blue economy was part of the CIG's decades-long journey towards (still unrealised) seabed minerals exploitation.

Finally, astute to the harms perpetuated by past (sustainable) development projects and discourses, the LMMA Network has been consistently sceptical of the blue economy. Network stakeholders have long been wary of the threat the blue economy poses for coastal communities, namely because of its promotion of ocean activities that may undermine local rights to access marine spaces and resources (such as no-take MPAs, blue carbon or seabed mining). They expressed this concern from the early days of the blue economy's mainstreaming and while the grassroots network has come to engage more instrumentally with the discourse over recent years (in the interest of securing access to lucrative development partnerships and high-profile forums), these concerns have never disappeared from view (Figure 28). This is evident in the persistence of the LMMA Network's 'critical' blue economy storyline, which continues to be interwoven alongside more 'instrumental' discourse construct. For this grassroots actor, the blue economy has and will never be a discourse to drive meaningful transformation of ocean development and governance systems. The LMMA Network has thus remained highly vigilant of the blue economy's facilitation of neoliberal capitalism's creep oceanward.

## 8.2.2 The agency of actors to negotiate discourse

In tracing the construction of blue economy storylines across the three case studies, it quickly became apparent that Pacific actors have persistently exercised agency in their encounters with this discourse. This insight stands testament the negotiability of discourse<sup>809</sup> wherein actors are positioned not merely as subjects of discursive frameworks, but active agents in their coproduction.

PSIDS' reformulation of the blue economy in the early 2010s illuminated how discourses promising transformation can be reworked and pushed towards more progressive ambitions by actors marginalised in the hegemonic order. More than merely adopting the blue economy first crafted by the US Government and EU, PSIDS reconceptualised the discourse's vision for ocean development and, critically, its promise of change. Through its crafting of a 'green economy in a blue world' storyline, Pacific stakeholders broadened the blue economy to look beyond economic and ecological crises inherent in the neoliberal capitalist order, also bringing to attention the growing crisis in mainstream sustainable development: namely, its entrenched terrestrial bias,

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<sup>809</sup> Wendt, 'Towards a New Oceania'; Hannah Fair, 'Their Sea of Islands? Pacific Climate Warriors, Oceanic Identities, and World Enlargement', *The Contemporary Pacific* 32, no. 2 (2020), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0033>.



oversight of ocean development opportunities and consequent sidelining of the interests of ocean-based communities of the Global South. PSIDS' reworking of the discourse retooled the blue economy as a discourse of particular utility for the Global South and exposed the inherent injustices and biases of the established global development project. Such re-envisioning left an indelible mark on the blue economy discourse, modifying its conceptualisation not only among the Pacific but in the global mainstream. This remains evident in the blue economy's frequent characterisation as an ocean development vision particularly geared towards the interests of ocean-reliant developing communities<sup>810</sup> (even if such characterisation is misleading).

Observation of the CIG's deft construction and evolution of its blue economy storylines likewise points to the agency of actors to shape discourse. From 'green economy in a blue world' to 'net-zero leader,' the government strategically recrafted its blue economy storylines over the decade to support its state-making vision of a seabed minerals future. The 'green economy in a blue world' aligned with the PSIDS blue economy campaign of Rio+20, while the 'net-zero leader' storyline enabled the CIG to expressly promote Cook Islands sovereignty over seabed minerals activities in addition to emphasising the contribution this sector could have in provisioning the metals required for the global transition to low carbon technologies. We thus saw the CIG increasingly tailor its blue economy storylines in service of its longstanding state-making vision of a seabed minerals future. As with the Pacific's regional organisations, the CIG was no passive adopter of the blue economy but an active and strategic discourse agent.

Though seemingly compelled to engage the blue economy in its advocacy work at regional and international forums, the LMMA Network also found ways to exercise agency in its blue economy encounters. This was most clear in the highly conditional and constrained ways the LMMA Network engaged the blue economy discourse; never adopting the discourse wholesale but crafting strategically instrumental, if not expressly critical, storylines. I will return to this observation in learning (d) (*Chapter 8.2.4*) as it dovetails neatly with discussion around the possibility of discourse dissent. For now, however, I highlight how the LMMA Network's highly conditional engagement with the blue economy and its increasing interweaving of critical and instrumental blue economy storylines reflect the network's exercise of agency. Thus, even in cases where blue economy engagement appears coerced—or at least compelled—there remains possibility for negotiation.

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<sup>810</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'Rising Up for SIDS: UNDP SIDS Offer' (New York: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021); World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-Term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Islands Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries'; Julian Roberts and Ahmed Ali, 'The Blue Economy and Small States', Commonwealth Blue Economy Series, No. 1 (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016).

Put in dialogue with one another, these insights attest to the negotiability of discourse. Far from a fixed, impenetrable structure, the blue economy has been continually coproduced by social agents. This exercise of agency was firmly facilitated by processes of storyline construction, which enabled Pacific actors to refine, constrain, adapt, and/or evolve the blue economy in response to their distinct interests.

### 8.2.3 Pressure to engage the blue economy

Throughout *Part II*, it became evident that different case study actors felt varying levels of pressure to engage with the blue economy discourse. Stakeholders of Pacific regional organisations and the LMMA Network frequently reported feeling compelled to evoke the blue economy to gain access to mainstream ocean forums and be seen as legitimate ocean development actors (*Chapter 5.5.1*, *Chapter 7.4.1*). This contrasted the experiences of CIG representatives who made no mention of such pressure to adopt the blue economy (*Chapter 6.5.2*) and limited their engagement of the discourse to a handful of international capacity strengthening (Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth) and domestic policy forums. Indeed, the CIG appeared to exercise considerable discretion over whether it engaged the blue economy discourse to frame its seabed minerals pursuits (or not)—selectively, and somewhat restrictively, engaging the construct when it found doing so strategically advantageous, while turning to other discursive assemblages (such as the Blue Pacific or appeals to Moana Nui o Kiva) when these were seen to offer greater political utility (*Chapter 6.5.1*).

These observations suggest that those seeking a transformation of society's relationships with the ocean feel the greatest pressure to engage the blue economy (LMMA Network and Pacific regional organisations), while those content with continuing—even innovating—the status quo experienced this pressure less acutely and can embrace the discourse at their choosing (CIG). On the surface, this finding is unsurprising. After all, wouldn't actors seeking systemic change most likely be those served by promises of transformation and thus their greatest champions? Where it does become intriguing, however, is when actors seeking systemic change continue to face pressure to engage such discourses *even when* they perceive these to be little other than the artifice of transformation (as in the case of the LMMA Network and a growing body of regional stakeholders). This raises a puzzle of why ocean development stakeholders experience different levels of pressure to engage the blue economy and its promise of transformation, and what such variation suggests about the politics of discourse?

Hajer's notion of discourse hegemony provides a useful concept from which to begin untangling this puzzle around the varying pressure experienced by stakeholders to engage the blue economy. As detailed in *Chapter Four*, discourse hegemony refers to the triumph of certain discourses over

others for authority in society; that is, when certain discourses become the dominant scaffold by which actors understand and interact with their world and thus highly influential constructs in determining what is knowable and possible in a given social order. Discourses are most powerful when they become naturalised as the commonsense logic of a society and thereby indisputable, or even invisible as the ‘given way of things.’ This is achieved through the twin processes of discourse structuration and discourse institutionalisation (*Chapter 4.2.1*), which together work to embed a discourse in the structural foundations of society: such as the language used in everyday communication or the policies and legislations that govern daily affairs.

As a result of discourse hegemony, actors often experience pressure to engage dominant discourses to be seen as legitimate and intelligible actors of society. This can help explain why the LMMA Network and many regional stakeholders feel compelled to evoke the blue economy to frame their ocean development activities even when otherwise sceptical of it: in short, it is seen as a necessary strategy to safeguard their relevance in the mainstream development community. Securing such social legitimacy is particularly important for these actors given the new, alternate vision of ocean development that each seek to promote: a Pacific-led and Pacific-centred paradigm in the case of regional organisations, while a coastal community-led and coastal community-centred approach for the LMMA Network. Here, engaging discourses that are widely accepted in the mainstream development community can help actors position themselves as intelligible and acceptable social actors, from which they can promote more ambitious and more progressive demands for systemic transformation.

Why CIG representatives feel less pressure to engage the blue economy may be reflective of their position as actors aligned to the established social order. Having already attained a degree of social authority due to their support of the existing hegemonic order (neoliberal capitalism and state-led order), CIG representatives face less challenges to their legibility and perceived legitimacy in the mainstream development community. Appeals to the blue economy are a useful, though not necessary, way to engage with such communities, affording the CIG with greater discretion over whether they engage such discourse or not. Indeed, the disciplining effect of the blue economy as a hegemonic discourse (i.e. the pressure it places on actors to speak in its terms of reference) is experienced *less* forcibly by the CIG precisely because it poses minimal challenge to the established order and its logics of ocean engagement. The CIG’s conformity with neoliberal capitalist logics and visions of ocean relations demands minimal (if any) corrective intervention from the hegemonic form, which in turn, places less pressure on the CIG to speak according to prescribed discourses (blue economy). The LMMA Network and regional stakeholders, on the other hand, are not extended this freedom, with the disciplinary force of hegemony working to compel these

counter-hegemonic actors to engage the blue economy and articulate their ocean development visions within its frame of reference.

Such asymmetry in how discourse hegemony is experienced across the social order (i.e. how actors closer aligned with the hegemonic form feel less pressure to engage dominant discourses while those advocating for counter-hegemonic movements face most pressure to adopt such discourses for social legitimacy) is a key observation of the three case studies. I return to this finding in the next section where I build upon it to conceptualise the ‘performance paradox’ of discourses promising transformation.

#### 8.2.4 Persistence of dissent

While the three case studies paint a rather a glum picture of the transformative potential of the blue economy, one cannot overlook the persistence of dissent in Pacific relationships to the discourse. *Chapter Three* detailed how civil society organisations of the region provide the clearest expression of resistance; often through explicit critique of the blue economy.<sup>811</sup> However, as my research finds, dissent is also evident among actors who have cultivated a working relationship with the discourse.

The blue economy’s uptake among Pacific regional organisations, for example, has noticeably slowed since the turn of the 2020s as the PIF’s Blue Pacific narrative has risen as an attractive alternative. Unlike the blue economy, the Blue Pacific is an inherently Pacific construct that has, to date, been more challenging for external actors to coopt and/or engage in contexts outside the region (though not immune).<sup>812</sup> This has enabled regional bodies to maintain a tighter grasp on the Blue Pacific as the discourse has grown in profile. The region’s turn to this newer and more expansive Blue Pacific discourse, coupled with efforts to wean the blue economy from the Blue Pacific (see *Chapter Five*) signals regional stakeholders’ desire to step back from the blue economy and its ocean development vision. As dissatisfaction with the transformative potential of the blue economy has grown among regional stakeholders, their turn to the Blue Pacific can be read as an act of discursive agency and resistance.

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<sup>811</sup> Pacific Network on Globalisation and Ozeanien Dialog, *Rough Seas: Looming Dangers of the Blue Economy*; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*; Bhagwan, ‘Tides Are Changing: Opening Speech at the International Conference “The Future of the Oceans and Seas”’.

<sup>812</sup> Wallis, Koro, and O’Dwyer, ‘The “Blue Pacific” Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?’; Fry, Kabutaulaka, and Wesley-Smith, ‘“Partners in the Blue Pacific” Initiative Rides Roughshod over Established Regional Processes’.

Perhaps the most fascinating enactment of blue economy dissent among the three studied cases was that of the LMMA Network. Throughout the LMMA Network's encounters with the discourse there has been a noticeable undercurrent, if not explicit criticism of the blue economy. While *Chapter Seven* detailed the LMMA Network's eventual construction of an 'instrumental' blue economy storyline, it was also clear this construct never replaced its 'critical' counterpart. The LMMA Network's more constructive engagements with the blue economy (motivated by attempts to secure access to key development partnerships and forums) have frequently been interrupted, undercut and/or moderated by its own critical instincts informed by observations of the past harms wrought by development discourses promising transformative change (e.g. CBMRM of the 1990s), with the network carefully interweaving its 'critical' storyline alongside a more 'instrumental' construct. As such, we observe the LMMA Network negotiate a highly conditional engagement with the blue economy which refuses wholesale endorsement. Strategies of politicisation are an important feature of the LMMA Network's blue economy dissent. By constantly highlighting the trade-offs, compromises and need for negotiation in blue economy agendas (namely with respect to the rights of coastal communities), the network reminds ocean development actors of the politics of this discourse. Such acts challenge attempts to cast the blue economy as a harmonious and broadly supported ocean development vision. It reminds the ocean community that there are difficult debates to be had around blue economy priorities, implementation and funding; the blue economy is not an apolitical construct. How such politicisation provides a powerful strategy for discourse dissent is a matter I attend to in the following section.

Finally, though the CIG has had a friendlier relationship with the blue economy than its case study counterparts, its recent turn to the Blue Pacific raises important questions about the temporality of discourse. Discussions with CIG representatives revealed an awareness of the limitations of the blue economy, particularly with regards to its legitimacy among domestic audiences where the discourse holds little socio-cultural meaning. Though the discourse had been a useful political tool for refashioning the CIG's longstanding seabed minerals dream over the 2010s, there appears to be a rising sense that the blue economy has reached its proverbial shelf-life. Greater political utility now appears to lay in the discourse of the Blue Pacific. The CIG's move away from the blue economy—while not exactly an expression of dissent—is a clear indication of the discourse's limits. Read in dialogue with the blue economy experiences of Pacific regional organisations and the LMMA Network, this insight highlights how discourses are not only susceptible to dissent but also vulnerable to disposal. There is nothing absolute nor fixed about discourse and this is a key insight that I will carry forward through this chapter.

The four key findings examined in this section emerge from case study insights. They are rooted in the blue economy experiences of Pacific regional organisations, the CIG and the LMMA Network, and while I refrain from generalising these case studies as emblematic of all blue economy encounters—indeed their distinctiveness renders such proposition folly—the constructive dialogue they produce when considered together sheds light on broader patterns of discourse politics.

### 8.3 A striking resemblance: The blue economy and passive revolution

Contrary to its promise of transformative ocean development, the blue economy encountered in this thesis appears to function not as a tool for socio-political change, but that for refashioning the status quo. Rather than pressing for a meaningful alternative to existing ocean development and governance approaches, the discourse has remained obedient to neoliberal capitalism's interest in “freeing up the market”<sup>813</sup> as underpinned by logics of market ascendancy, commodification and enclosure<sup>814</sup>—even when these logics have been revealed as the underlying drivers of structural crises (economic and environmental) that necessitated the blue economy's very emergence in the late 2000s. Indeed, the blue economy does more than merely repeat these precepts. It works to restore public faith in them and, subsequently, the established order to which they belong: neoliberal capitalism. It is to this effect that the blue economy resembles a process of passive revolution conceptualised by Gramsci (*Chapter Two*).

#### 8.3.1 Discourse as a tool of passive revolution

Interrogating the ways in which hegemony responds to crisis, scholars have developed a rich account for how discourses promising transformation can (perversely) work to reproduce the status quo. This has been seen with regards to hegemonic systems of colonialism,<sup>815</sup>

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<sup>813</sup> Claudia Baldwin et al., ‘Hybrid Neoliberalism: Implications for Sustainable Development’, *Society & Natural Resources* 32, no. 5 (2019): 566–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1556758>.

<sup>814</sup> Bargh, ‘Re-Colonisation and Indigenous Resistance: Neoliberalism in the Pacific’; McCormack, *Private Oceans: The Enclosure and Marketisation of the Seas*.

<sup>815</sup> Kyle Whyte, ‘Against Crisis Epistemology’, in *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020); Sophie Bond, Graddon Diprose, and Andrew McGregor, ‘2Precious2Mine: Post-Politics, Colonial Imaginary, or Hopeful Political Moment?’, *Antipode* 47, no. 5 (2015): 1161–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12157>.

neoliberalism,<sup>816</sup> capitalism,<sup>817</sup> and the State<sup>818</sup> (acknowledging the close relationship that often sits between these systems). Such accounts highlight how promises of transformation enable hegemonic orders to appear as enthusiastic, appropriate, and in some cases even ‘natural’ responders to crisis, despite many of these crises occurring *because* of systemic failures in the given order (e.g. capitalism’s insatiable resource demands leading to an overexploitation and exhaustion of earth’s ecosystems). By presenting hegemonic orders as willing agents of change, promises of transformation perform an important strategic function in the process of passive revolution: the restoration of public consent in a hegemony’s social authority.

In service of this larger function of restoring public consent, how specifically do discourses contribute to processes of hegemonic renewal? Firstly, as we see in this thesis’ interrogation of the blue economy, discourse provides a key vehicle for the construction and articulation of promises of transformation: it is the medium via which promises of transformation are crafted and first presented to the social body. For hegemonic forms, discourse offers a valuable tool for responding to crisis as it is through discourse that hegemony can carefully craft promises of transformation which commit to (certain) acts of change, while leaving unscrutinised the core logics and social order of the status quo. Consider, for example, the mainstream blue economy storylines of a ‘healthy, (therefore) prosperous ocean.’<sup>819</sup> Clinging to neoliberal capitalism’s faith in the free market, this storyline articulates a promise of transformative ocean development that reinforces ambitions of continued economic growth and the wisdom of the market’s invisible hand. It promises to ‘transform’ ocean development in a manner where economic growth is compatible with ecological health (a novel proposal if this were realised given capital’s historic exploitation and destruction of ocean ecosystems and communities), but in doing so, only reaffirms the

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<sup>816</sup> Doreen Massey, Stuart Hall, and Michael Rustin, *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto: The Kilburn Manifesto* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2015); Bernice Maxton-Lee, ‘Narratives of Sustainability: A Lesson from Indonesia’, *Soundings* 70 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3898/SOUN.70.03.2018>; James McCarthy and Scott Prudham, ‘Neoliberal Nature and the Nature of Neoliberalism’, *Geoforum* 35, no. 3 (2004): 275–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2003.07.003>; Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*.

<sup>817</sup> Wanner, ‘The New “Passive Revolution” of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the “Sustainable Development” of Neoliberal Capitalism’; Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Physic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*; Ståle Holgersen, *Against the Crisis: Economy and Ecology in a Burning World* (London, New York: Verso, 2024).

<sup>818</sup> Colin Hay, ‘Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1, no. 3 (1 October 1999): 317–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.00018>.

<sup>819</sup> National Marine Science Committee, ‘National Marine Science Plan 2015–2025: The Midway Point’ (National Marine Science Committee (NMSC), 2021), <https://www.marinescience.net.au/midway/>; Sustainable Seas National Science Challenge, ‘Bringing It All Together for a Healthy Ocean and Prosperous Blue Economy’, Sustainable Seas, 2024, <https://www.sustainableseaschallenge.co.nz/tools-and-resources/bringing-it-all-together/>; Council of the European Union, ‘Council Conclusions on a Sustainable Blue Economy’, *European Council*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/26/council-conclusions-on-a-sustainable-blue-economy/>.

economism of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, while proclaiming an ambitious vision for ocean development, such storyline remains obedient to hegemonic logics. This demonstrates the first role discourse plays in processes of passive revolution: the construction and articulation of hegemonically-defined, politically benign promises of transformation.

The second core function served by discourse in processes of passive revolution is the circulation of such hegemonically defined promises of transformation. As the medium through which hegemony's commitments to change can be promulgated among the social body, discourse simultaneously works to popularise hegemony's promise of transformation, as well as the values, assumptions and beliefs that are embedded within them. It is this continual circulation of promises of transformation (beyond their initial construction and articulation) that renders discourse important for passive revolution. Thus—somewhat deceptively—discourse enables hegemony to reinstate and perpetuate established ways of understanding the world and potential futures under the promise of (purported) transformation.

These two related, yet seemingly distinct discourse functions reflect what historian and political theorist, Peter Thomas, has described as passive revolution's *defensive form*, followed by *cautious attack*.<sup>820</sup> According to Thomas, passive revolution passes through two interrelated phases wherein hegemony first responds to a crisis of authority (defensive move), then works to reassemble itself for continued reign in an updated social context (cautious attack). Reflecting on my case study findings, I suggest the blue economy's articulation of a market-led sustainable oceans transformation constitutes neoliberal capitalism's defensive move: an attempt to frame neoliberal capitalist logics and actors as adept responders to deepening crises in ocean health, and development, and therefore appropriate (if not necessary) for society's pursuit of 'new' ocean development futures. Discourse's continued circulation of such promise then provides for cautious attack. As described earlier, hegemony's utilisation of discourse to circulate its promise of transformation enables the continued propagation of its core tenets. Therefore, while hegemony's underlying beliefs and visions of social order may be framed in new ways by a discourse promising transformation (than they were prior to crisis), they remain present and central. Indeed, such reassembly of established logics in discourses promising transformation may even strengthen the hegemonic form as it provides an opportunity for the status quo to adapt and pivot in response to shifting social demands (as I further explore in the next section). Here passive revolution does more than simply defend hegemony against crisis, but exploit crisis to refashion the established

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<sup>820</sup> Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).



order *anew* and place it on a stronger footing for its continued authority in an evolving social context.

Figure 29 captures this understanding of discourse's role in the process of passive revolution. I illustrate the specific role discourses promising transformation play in processes of passive revolution, emphasising the key role such constructs play in reassembly society's consent in the hegemony's social authority (orange box). This function is critical during times of crisis where hegemony experiences a crisis of authority and the once stable weave of its prescribed social order starts to unfurl (*Chapter 2.3*). The articulation of promises of transformation represent the leveraging of discourse for passive revolution's defensive form, with the circulation of these promises (complete with their underlying logics) constituting passive revolution's cautious attack through which hegemony is able to reassemble anew. Figure 29 provides the initial building block for my conceptualisation of discourse as a tool available for passive revolution. However, as I problematise next, it is not inevitable that discourses promising transformation are leveraged only for conservative political ends.

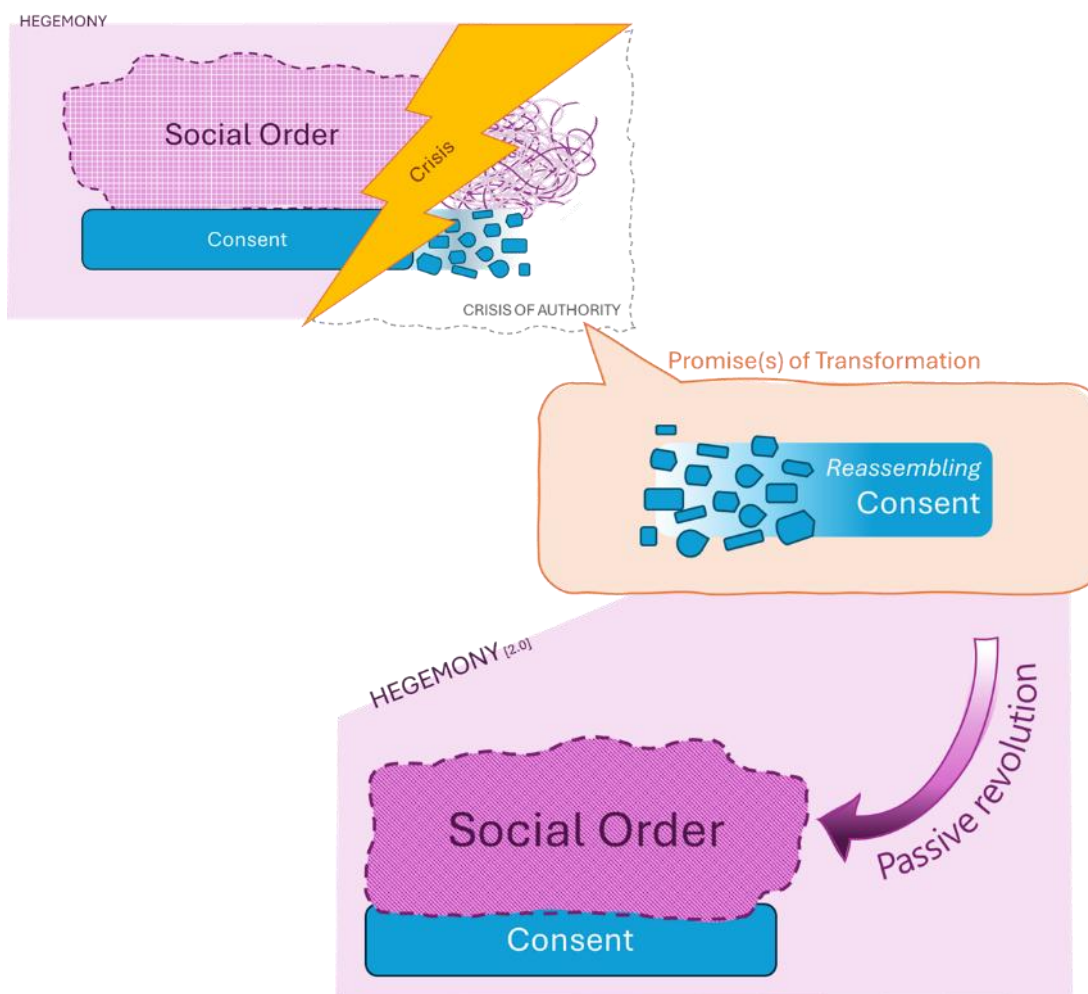


**Figure 29:** *The role of discourse in the process of passive revolution.*

### 8.3.2 The promise of transformation: A moment of negotiation and the ‘performance paradox’

Witnessed through the ages, the rupturing of established orders (crisis) typically gives rise to periods of heightened political activity as actors across the social order look to possible ways for (re)constructing society.<sup>821</sup> It is in these moments that discourses promising transformation come to be conceived and first uttered, often from a variety of standpoints and in support of a range of socio-political visions.<sup>822</sup> As my research into the blue economy suggests, promises of transformation can provide powerful tools for *reassembling* the established order. However, in reflecting on the role discourse plays in processes of political change, I find it equally important to recognise the revolutionary function that discourses promising transformation can perform. That is, promises of transformation are also critical for counter-hegemonic movements to imagine a world otherwise.

Deployed in service of counter-hegemonic ambitions, discourse can give voice to different ways of relating within and assembling the social order.<sup>823</sup> They make it possible to conceive of alternate social systems—transformation in a true political sense. Though Pacific experiences of the blue economy detailed through this thesis suggest this discourse has *not* ultimately supported such alternate order making, the Blue Pacific construct appears (at present) more faithful in its promise to imagine and drive a different way of structuring social relations<sup>824</sup> (in its case, regional and international state relations). The Blue Pacific’s commitment to an interconnected, self-determined, situated and collaborative model of Pacific regionalism<sup>825</sup> extends a vision that does meaningfully depart from old orthodoxies wherein the region was too often defined by external actors and engaged as an object in their geopolitical games. It is a discourse that capitalises on promises of transformation to advance political change, but unlike the blue economy’s push towards political conservatism, the Blue Pacific leverages such promise to imagine global relations differently. Remembering that discourses promising transformation are also critical for such

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<sup>821</sup> Vincent Bevins, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2023); Colin Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the ‘Winter of Discontent’’, *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1996): 253–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038596030002004>; Jessica L. Blythe et al., ‘The Politics of Ocean Governance Transformations’, *Frontiers in Marine Science* 8 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2021.634718>.

<sup>822</sup> Silver et al., ‘Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance’.

<sup>823</sup> Hau’ofa, ‘Our Sea of Islands’; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, ‘Re-Presenting Melanesia: Ignoble Savages and Melanesian Alter-Natives’, *The Contemporary Pacific* 27, no. 1 (2015): 110–45.

<sup>824</sup> Kabutaulaka, ‘Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order’; Jane Samson, ‘Blue Continent to Blue Pacific’, in *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean: Volume 2: The Pacific Ocean since 1800*, ed. Anne Perez Hattori and Jane Samson, vol. 2, *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 132–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108226875.008>.

<sup>825</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*; Taylor, ‘Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined’.

counter-hegemonic efforts is important and though not the example foregrounded in this thesis, nevertheless possible.

I have attempted to capture this political potentiality of promises of transformation in Figure 30, which layers atop the earlier diagram (Figure 29). In drawing two diverging paths which discourses promising transformation can follow—one of alterneity (green) and the other of hegemonic reconstruction (pink)—I pay homage to those discourses that do genuinely seek a shift from the status quo. While discourses (and the promises of transformation they respectively construct, articulate and circulate) can provide potent tools for passive revolution (pink), I emphasise that this outcome is not inevitable (green). Discourses promising transformation provide valuable sites for creating and imagining alternate worlds and I insist that this thesis not be read as a denial of such.

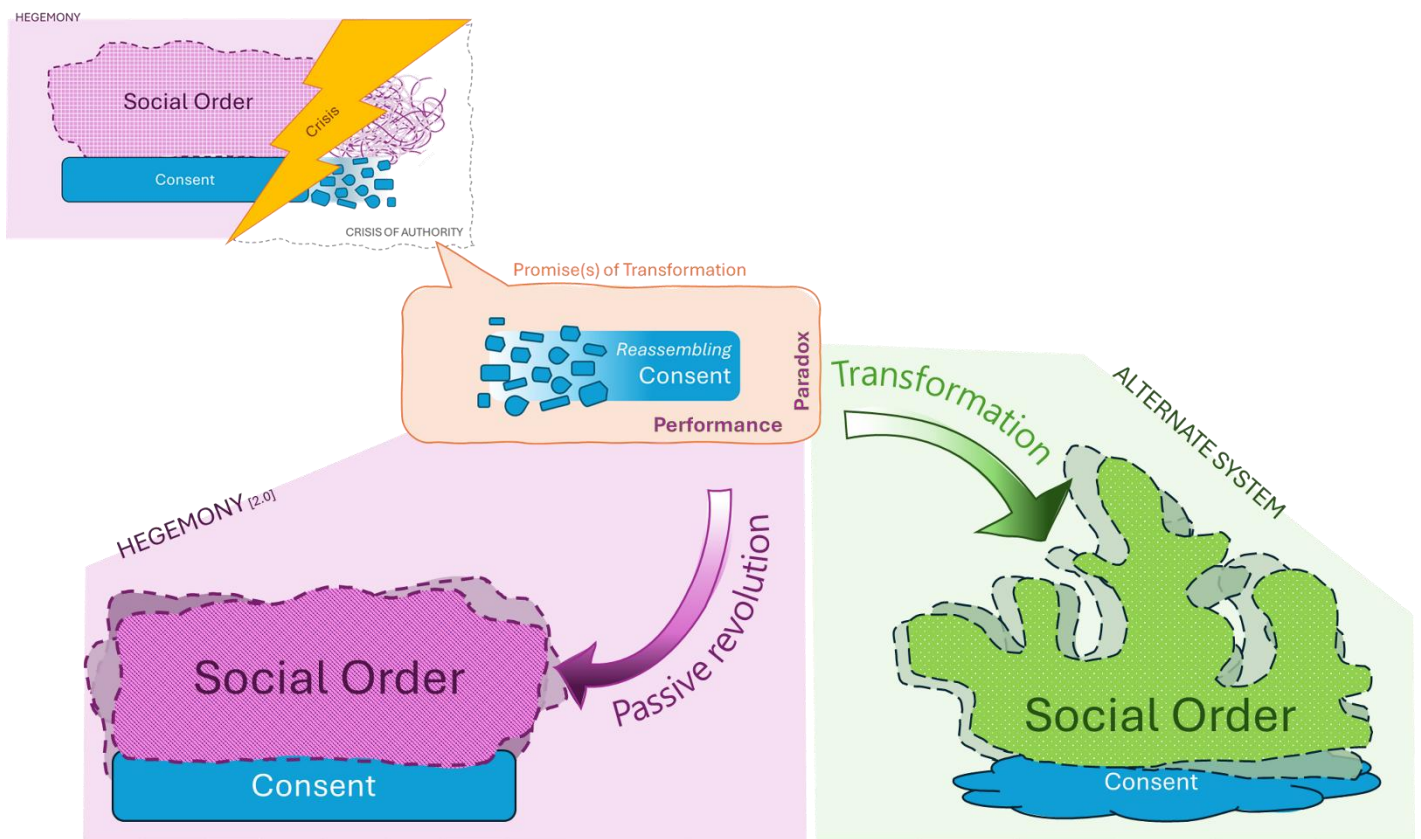


**Figure 30:** The performance paradox of discourses promising transformation: change as artifice (passive revolution), or change as enactment (resistance)

Though it may be tempting to see promises of transformation as either inherently revolutionary or reconstitutive of the established order, a key observation from my blue economy research was the internal contestability of discourse. I found that discourses promising transformation are themselves sites for political negotiation; a space of struggle between actors envisioning new social orderings and those seeking to refashion the status quo. The experience of Pacific regional organisations is particularly illustrative of this point.

As detailed in *Chapter Five*, PSIDS adopted the blue economy ahead of Rio+20. In doing so, the regional grouping carefully crafted the discourse into a ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline, therein reassembling the blue economy such that it provided a distinctly different vision of sustainable ocean development than that first proposed by the US government and EU; the former framing the blue economy as an agenda of particular value for ocean-based communities of the Global South with a commitment to the equitable distribution of ocean benefits, while the latter conceiving the discourse as a tool for (the US’ and EU’s) economic recovery and expanding ocean industrialisation. During this brief period from 2011 to 2012, it was conceivable that actors of the Global South could emerge as the leading authorities of the blue economy and utilise the discourse to advance a systemic restructuring of the global development agenda and financing system. Had this been the case, the blue economy may have meaningfully unsettled neoliberal capitalism and supported a reordering of ocean relations. However, as time progressed, the discourse was seemingly drawn into the slipstream of hegemonic logics as established global development actors rushed to embrace blue economy.<sup>826</sup> Under the leadership of these global bodies, the discourse became a tool for perpetuating extractive, asymmetrical ocean relations; not transforming them.

From this example we see how discourses promising transformation can themselves be sites of negotiation at once animated by forces pressing for change as well as those defending against it. It reveals how actors of all political persuasions lean upon discourse—particularly promises of transformation—to *perform* change in response to crisis. This brings me to a key conceptual insight of this thesis: the performance paradox.

### **‘Performance Paradox’**

In response to a destabilisation of the political order, my research suggests that promises of transformation are necessary for those seeking to obscure political change just as they are for those working in pursuit of it. In both cases, a core function of discourses promising transformation is the *performance* of change; a public recognition of the failures of the existing system and a commitment (cosmetic though it may be) to do something differently to avoid such shortfalls in

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<sup>826</sup> Louey, ‘The BE’s Retreat from Equity’; UK Aid and SNC-Lavalin, ‘Pacific Blue Economy Financial Flows’.

the future.<sup>827</sup> Such performance gives the impression that an actor is actively responding to crisis, thus mitigating accusations they are neglectful, or worse, complicit in the structural failures that fuelled crisis in the first place. Here, promises of transformation are critical for *all* actors seeking to shape the future order as it is through such discourses that they can work to (re)build social consent for their political vision and authority. Where actors differ in their performance of change, however, is the end goal of their discourse deployment. This is where we come to see the distinction between performance as *enactment* and performance as *artifice*. Herein lies the performance paradox (Figure 30, or Figure 31 with specific reference to the blue economy).

As mentioned above, discourses promising change are often essential for groups seeking an alternate social order as it is through these proposed futures that actors can imagine the possibility of a system that is not yet born (or long passed) and mobilise support for its realisation (Figure 30, green). For these actors, periods of crisis provide fertile ground for cultivating support for an alternate system, with promises of transformation enabling such visions to be perceived as possible. From this perspective, promises of transformation perform change in the sense of advocating for its *enactment*, or at least envisioning. We see this through strategies of prefigurative politics,<sup>828</sup> imagined futures,<sup>829</sup> speculative fiction,<sup>830</sup> critical fabulations,<sup>831</sup> and the demands of the manifesto,<sup>832</sup> each of which leverage the performance of alternate orders as a core strategy for manifesting a society otherwise.

Running in the other direction are impulses of hegemonic refashioning which similarly articulate promises of transformation, however, with little intention of fundamental social reordering (Figure 30, pink). Like revolutionary groups, actors of the established order require promises of transformation to perform change in response to crisis to build consent among the social body. Yet, rather than cultivating consent in a new order, these actors leverage discourses promising transformation to restore consent in the old; carefully crafting their promises of change to remain consistent with established logics, structures and social relations. Here, performance takes on the meaning of *artifice*. Discourses promising transformation in this second sense are no less politically

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<sup>827</sup> Massimo Modonesi, *The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 94.

<sup>828</sup> Sofa Saio Gradin and Paul Raekstad, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2019).

<sup>829</sup> Jeroen Oomen, Jesse Hoffman, and Maarten A. Hajer, 'Techniques of Futuring: On How Imagined Futures Become Socially Performative', *European Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 2 (2022): 252–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020988826>.

<sup>830</sup> Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood* (New York: Aspect/Warner Books, 2000); Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

<sup>831</sup> Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; Saidiya Hartman, 'The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 465–90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942093>.

<sup>832</sup> Breanne Fahs, *Burn It Down!: Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution*, 1st ed. (London: New Left Books Ltd, 2020).

valuable to the hegemonic order than they are for those seeking change. Indeed, discourses promising transformation are critical for strategies of passive revolution, as we saw through *Part II*. They can be exploited by hegemony to project an appearance of change while insidiously working to appease, then displace<sup>833</sup> genuinely meaningful attempts toward it.

My reflection on the blue economy experiences of three Pacific case studies highlights how exploitation of the performance paradox has facilitated the blue economy's broad uptake in the region and with it, the intensification of neoliberal capitalism at sea (Figure 31). By leveraging the blue economy's promise of transformative ocean development to *appear* committed to a new way of organising ocean relations, structures of neoliberal capitalism work to reassemble the consent of Pacific communities in the legitimacy and suitability of its foundational institutions, logics and actors—positioning these as necessary components of the pursuit of sustainable ocean development. The promise of transformation extended under the blue economy thus enables neoliberal capitalism to ostensibly meet the demands of (some) Pacific communities pushing for a reimagination of ocean relations towards more a sustainable, equitable future (e.g. LMMA Network and regional stakeholders), and in doing so, minimise and displace these inherently counter-hegemonic demands such that they appear addressed under the hegemony's proposed path forward (the blue economy). Such displacement of counter-hegemonic impulses works to clear the social space of possible competitors, thereby pacifying dissent. It is through this adept performance of change that established orders can weaponise the promise of transformation—constructed and circulated through discourse—as tools for passive revolution.

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<sup>833</sup> Alex Callinicos, 'The Limits of Passive Revolution', *Capital & Class* 34, no. 3 (2010): 491–507, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816810378265>; Modonesi, *The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action*.

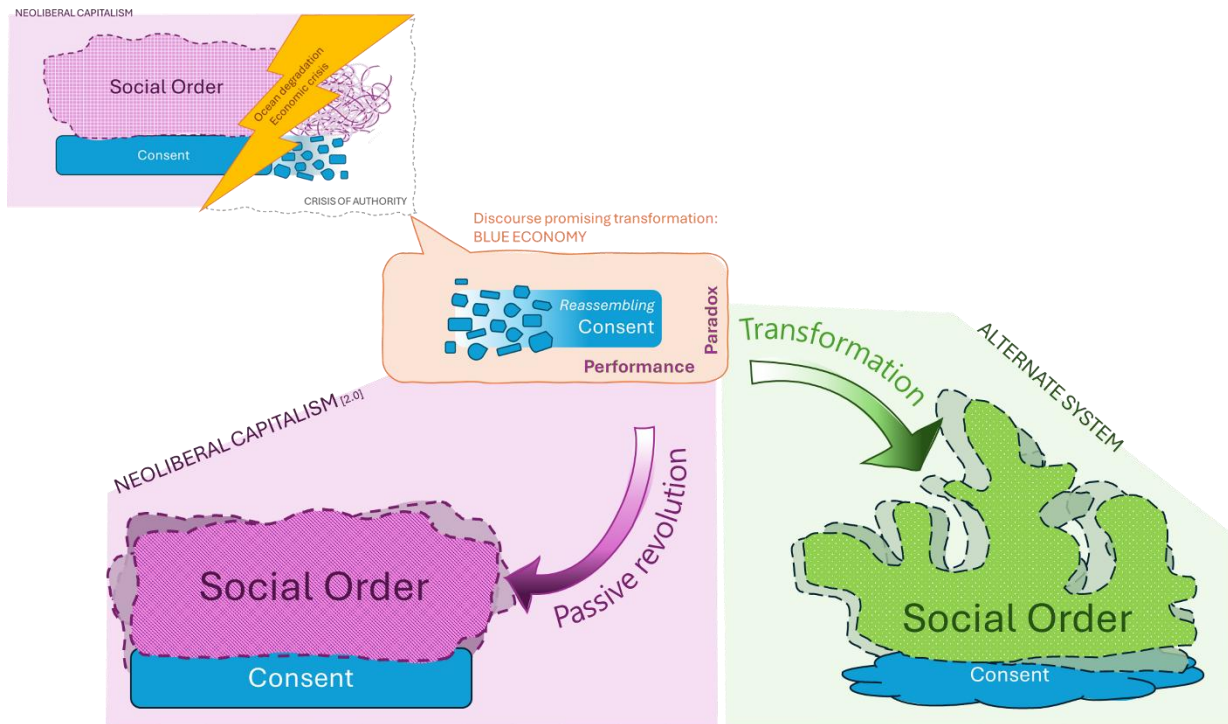


**Figure 31:** The performance paradox of discourses promising transformation, illustrated with reference to the blue economy (as a discourse promising transformation) and neoliberal capitalism (as the hegemonic form).

### 8.3.3 Dynamics of (de)politicisation

Having established that discourses promising transformation can be leveraged for both conservative (passive revolution) or revolutionary ends, how are we to determine the political orientation of these versatile phenomena? Are there observable dynamics that can be used to identify when a discourse promising transformation is working towards meaningful change or, perversely, hegemonic restructuring? I suggest that attention to dynamics of (de)politicisation can usefully indicate when promises of transformation are genuinely seeking alternate social orders and when they are not. Here I turn to a growing body of literature from the last three decades that similarly grapples with questions over how hegemony works to stabilise itself and what is required to make space for political change: (de)politicisation.

Emerging from the discipline of political science, the concept of (de)politicisation provides an analytical framework accounting for the strategic shifting of ideas and issues into and away from realms of public debate. (De)politicisation explores how certain issues are made available for public discussion (e.g. in the media or policymaking) or conversely, hidden from view; with a keen interest

in the political effects associated with this curation of public discussion.<sup>834</sup> It is assumed that strategies working to raise the profile of issues by pushing them into spheres of public debate constitute acts of *politicisation*. While the removal of select issues or ideas from the realm of debate—be that through naturalising or deifying certain logics—represents attempts of *depoliticisation*. Critically, scholars of (de)politicisation acknowledge politicisation and depoliticisation exist in constant dialogue with one another and forever in a state of flux.<sup>835</sup> They emphasise how politicisation and depoliticisation are inherently contested, partial *processes* that require constant enactment; not outcomes that can be absolutely achieved.<sup>836</sup>

Fraser<sup>837</sup> and Ferguson<sup>838</sup> have provided seminal studies on the political function of depoliticisation (or anti-politics as conceptualised by Ferguson), revealing it as a process where hegemonic actors seek to enclave or render invisible certain matters from public dialogue and scrutiny. The primary goal of depoliticisation is to suppress dissent by depicting existing conditions and systems as the ‘natural order of things’ or, to similar effect, phenomena that can only be effectively managed by established institutional groups and arrangements (e.g. international development experts).<sup>839</sup> By removing certain matters from public debate, it is hoped that the potential for critique and challenge is quashed, thus enabling the established order to operate relatively unchallenged. To this effect, depoliticisation represents an attempt to stifle the rethinking of social relations.

Politicisation presses in an opposite direction. Where depoliticisation works to render invisible the structural features of hegemony, politicisation is tasked with exposing and questioning what is taken for granted, obligatory or essential.<sup>840</sup> It aims to move issues into a space of debate, energising the social relations active within a given order.

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<sup>834</sup> Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood, eds., *Tracing the Political*, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89frc>.

<sup>835</sup> Jim Buller et al., *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2018).

<sup>836</sup> Katalin Ámon, ‘Revanchism and Anti-Revanchism in Hungary: The Dynamics of (De)Politicisation and the Criminalisation of Homelessness’, in *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-Politics*, ed. Jim Buller et al. (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019), 209–36, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64236-9\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64236-9_9).

<sup>837</sup> Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

<sup>838</sup> Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: ‘Development,’ Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*.

<sup>839</sup> Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*.

<sup>840</sup> Ámon, ‘Revanchism and Anti-Revanchism in Hungary: The Dynamics of (De)Politicisation and the Criminalisation of Homelessness’.



Modonesi,<sup>841</sup> Tuğal,<sup>842</sup> and McNelly<sup>843</sup> offer valuable analysis to link this framework of (de)politicisation to the process of passive revolution. Describing passive revolution as a process with ‘demobilising’ tendencies,<sup>844</sup> these scholars highlight how “part of passive revolution’s pacifying tendencies derives from closing these spaces of radical potential, either by absorbing them into the spaces of the state or by producing new spaces and scales of social antagonism.”<sup>845</sup> They observe how processes of passive revolution often involve strategies of depoliticisation; namely, the restriction (if not elimination) of spaces available for dissent or, when this is not possible, the redirection of public attention to other issues so as to divert scrutiny from the hegemonic form towards other objects of debate. Their analysis suggests that passive revolution can be characterised by an overwhelming tendency towards depoliticisation whereby the established way of things is re-naturalised and reinstated following a period of rupture (crisis).

Indeed, the case studies of *Part II* provide evidence in support of passive revolution’s association with dynamics of depoliticisation. Across each context, the blue economy’s utility as a tool of passive revolution hinged on its capacity to discipline the boundaries of public debate regarding what could be conceived as sustainable ocean development and what issues were sidelined or prohibited from discussions. The CIG found value in the blue economy discourse because it perpetuated logics of resource extraction, enclosure and continued economic growth as pillars of sustainable ocean development. Rather than questioning these underlying neoliberal capitalist logics, the blue economy enabled the CIG to direct attention instead to technical issues of revenue distribution, governance and capacity building. It thus served as a useful discursive tool for safeguarding the CIG’s state-making seabed minerals visions, leveraging a promise of sustainable ocean development to do so.

Likewise, though from a starkly different perspective, Pacific regional organisations and the LMMA Network grew sceptical of the blue economy because of its depoliticisation of the ocean development agenda. Rather than questioning the global development complex’s privileging of external ‘expertise’ over Indigenous knowledges (*Chapter 5.5.3* & *Chapter 7.4.3*), its perpetuation of asymmetrical economic structures (*Chapter 5.5.3*) and oversight of customary and coastal community marine rights (*Chapter 7.4.3*), the blue economy held these assumptions as given and closed down opportunities for questioning them. Consider, for example, the LMMA Network’s

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<sup>841</sup> Massimo Modonesi, *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy Constructing the Political Subject* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

<sup>842</sup> Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>843</sup> Angus McNelly, *Now We Are in Power: The Politics of Passive Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Bolivia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023).

<sup>844</sup> Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism*, 239.

<sup>845</sup> McNelly, *Now We Are in Power: The Politics of Passive Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Bolivia*, 193.

charge that global blue economy discussion frequently sideline issues of customary tenure and SSF rights (*Chapter 7.3 & 7.4.3*). This avoidance of debate on structural matters drew the ire of LMMA Network stakeholders, as well as many regional representatives, who (ultimately) criticised the blue economy for failing to address the root issues leading to inequitable and perverse ocean development outcomes. These actors recognised how the blue economy depoliticised issues that may challenge the structural pillars of neoliberal capitalism, and for this reason, they grew disenchanted with the discourse's promise to transform global ocean relations. Their experiences highlight the blue economy's tendency to depoliticise core neoliberal capitalist precepts, removing these from public debate and carrying them forward with reduced scrutiny.

What then, are we to make of passive revolution's relationship to dynamics of politicisation? Is politicisation absent from the outworking of this hegemonic process, or may it play a more insidious role?

### **Passive revolution's necessary (but brief) act of politicisation**

Considering (de)politicisation in conversation with *Subsection 8.3.2's* outline of the performance paradox raises interesting insight into the functioning of discourse as a tool of passive revolution (Figure 32). When working in service of hegemonic refashioning, discourses promising transformation necessarily perform change in an effort to cast the hegemonic order as active in responding to its own systemic failures. Such performance is a highly political act as it brings to the surface features and failures of the established order. Indeed, the initial articulation of promises of transformation can be seen as a moment of acute politicisation (Figure 32): a moment where a social group intentionally works to be *seen* committing to visions of change. This holds for promises of transformation deployed both for passive revolution as well as the meaningful imagining of worlds otherwise.

The trick for actors seeking to engage a strategy of passive revolution, however, is to swiftly transition from this moment of politicisation to that of depoliticisation (Figure 32, pink chevrons); only allowing public debate of the established order's misgivings for a brief moment before quickly repositioning core logics and institutions of the hegemonic order as necessary components/champions of the promised transformation. While hegemony's initial promise of transformation first appears committed to change, its subsequent circulation works to return and re-naturalise core hegemonic logics and institutions (given the discourse's initial crafting to ensure core hegemonic tenets remain uninterrogated and often necessary for the path out of crisis). Depoliticisation thus remains the main objective of passive revolution; yet, given the need to

concede some commitments to change (to perform change), a goal that can only be pursued after first entertaining a brief period of politicisation (Figure 32).

From the perspective of counter-hegemony, case studies of this thesis demonstrate how resistance to hegemonic forms and their refashioning often takes the form of politicisation (Figure 32, green chevrons). This was evident through explicit strategies of resistance, such as the LMMA Network's early critique of the blue economy on social media or the PIF's weaning of the blue economy from its Blue Pacific vision as a way of retreating from the former. It was also apparent in more covert forms of resistance deployed by actors whom on the surface appeared to engage constructively with the blue economy, yet continued to constrain, challenge and destabilise the discourse from within (e.g. the LMMA Network's interweaving of its critical blue economy storyline alongside its instrumental construct). Across each of these expressions of dissent, actors exposed and contested the assumptions that sat at the heart of the blue economy; be that its enclosure and industrialisation of oceans, or its steering by actors of the Global North. Their politicisation of such logics enabled Pacific stakeholders to push against neoliberal capitalism's efforts to naturalise its given system for engaging with the ocean and keep alive visions for relating otherwise. As a result, the blue economy discourse was denied an opportunity to settle.

I will return to this use of politicisation as a strategy for resisting discourses of passive revolution in the *Conclusion*. For now, I note that while politicisation is an inherent quality to all promises of transformation (revolutionary and conservative), its continued enactment provides a strategy for resistance. By refusing the slide into depoliticisation, actors advocating for alternate orders can hold the spotlight on the structural failures inherent to the hegemonic order and feed doubt in the adequacy of the status quo. It is in this way that *persistent* politicisation presents a lethal threat to hegemonic refashioning.

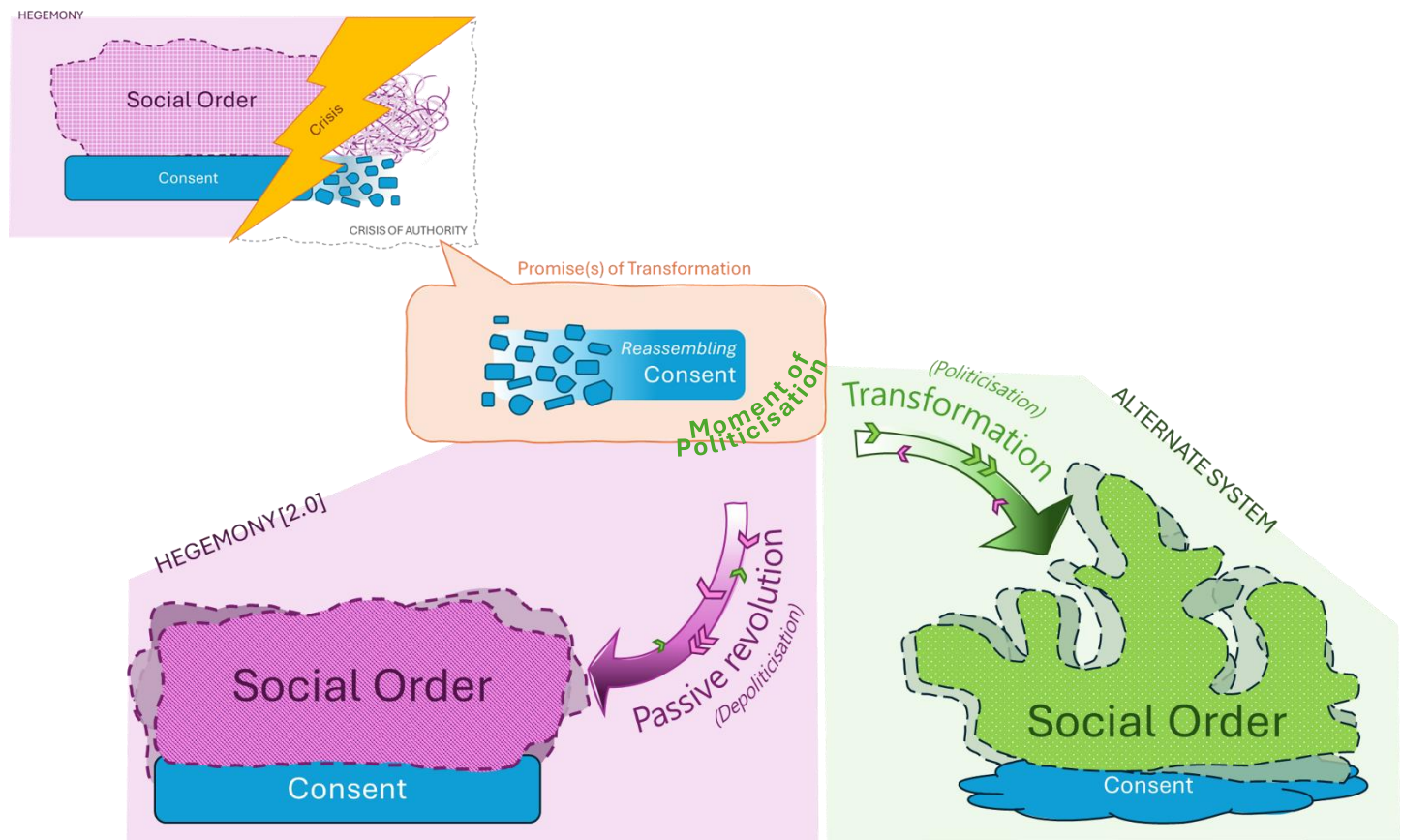


**Figure 32:** Dynamics of (de)politicisation and the process of passive revolution.  
Pink chevrons represent acts of depoliticisation. Green chevrons represent acts of politicisation.

## 8.4 The recursivity of passive revolution

This thesis has cast a spotlight on the utility of discourse in processes of passive revolution. Across theoretical and empirical discussion, I have detailed how discourse can facilitate hegemony's refashioning upon its destabilisation during crisis; taking particular note of the ways promises of transformation can be leveraged by hegemonic forms to reproduce established logics and social relations despite promising to imagine a world otherwise. In the broader field of Gramscian scholarship, such processes of passive revolution are typically conceived through the framework of *revolution-restoration*, or *revolution/restoration*.<sup>846</sup> This conceptual coupling underpins many key

<sup>846</sup> McNelly, *Now We Are in Power: The Politics of Passive Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Bolivia*.

analyses of passive revolution over the decades.<sup>847</sup> While I recognise revolution-restoration as a useful heuristic accounting for how processes of passive revolution leverage performances of transformation to pacify voices of dissent and clear the way for hegemonic refashioning, my reflection on the blue economy experiences of the Pacific suggests such dialectic be reframed for reasons of accuracy. Rather than a closed-loop cycle where hegemony ‘restores’ itself to its former form, my research indicates that a key characteristic of passive revolution is its refashioning of hegemonic forms anew. I find utility in the idea of ‘recursion’ to capture this iterative and adaptive process, proposing *revolution-recursion* as a more appropriate description for processes of political reassembling underway in passive revolution.

A concept generally associated with fields of mathematics and computer science, the idea of recursion offers a helpful lens through which to characterise the iterative and adaptive quality of processes of passive revolution. It describes a process for solving problems or defining concepts by invoking earlier iterations of the process itself, such as the Fibonacci sequence or Sierpiński triangle (Figure 33). Scholars of critical history have also found value in the idea of recursion to capture when a socio-political order partially folds back on itself, reassembling many of its core structures yet never returning quite the same.<sup>848</sup> Consonant with mathematical definitions, these critical historians define recursion as a process where existing systems call on earlier manifestations of themselves to scaffold a new form and through this refolding, reveal new surfaces and planes of social order and authority.<sup>849</sup> As incisively put by Ann Laura Stoler, “recursion is precisely not to imagine that social and political processes ever play out in a repetitive and mimetic fashion... Rather, they are processes of partial reinscriptions, modified displacements, and amplified recuperations.”<sup>850</sup> Understood in this sense, recursion accounts for how the refashioning of a social order necessarily brings with it elements of change. This pushes against the idea that existing systems simply replicate themselves in a closed cycle of restoration and is the understanding of recursion I engage in this thesis.

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<sup>847</sup> Adam Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Wanner, ‘The New “Passive Revolution” of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the “Sustainable Development” of Neoliberal Capitalism’; Colin Beck et al., *On Revolutions: Unruly Politics in the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); McNelly, *Now We Are in Power: The Politics of Passive Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Bolivia*.

<sup>848</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997); Michel Foucault, *A History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373612>.

<sup>849</sup> Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*.

<sup>850</sup> Stoler, 27.

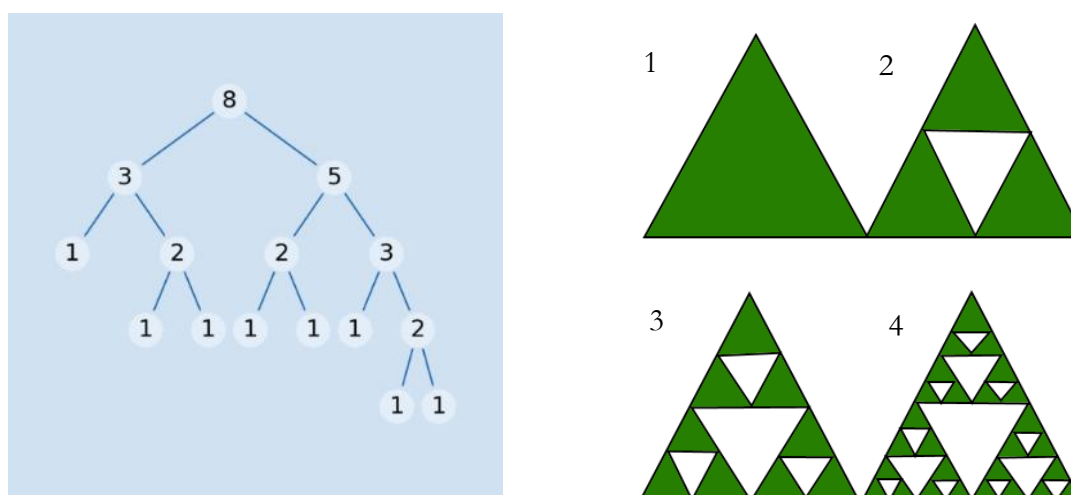


**Figure 33:** Examples of recursive algorithms: the Fibonacci sequence (left) and Sierpiński triangle (right).

As we saw in the blue economy experiences of *Part II*, discourses promising transformation enable hegemonic systems to adapt and refashion themselves anew in response to a crisis of authority. Across each case study, the blue economy facilitated neoliberal capitalism's metamorphosis by crafting new narratives (storylines) for a transformative ocean future that retained (while often reframed) its core logics, institutions and fundamental social order. We saw this in the CIG's construction of the 'net-zero leader' storyline to position the extractive sector of seabed minerals mining as a necessary activity for provisioning growing global energy and resource demands (*Chapter 6.3*). Or similarly, in the blue economy scepticism of LMMA Network and (increasingly) regional Pacific stakeholders who grew disillusioned with the discourse *because* of its seeming reinforcement of neoliberal capitalism's asymmetrical global relations (*Chapter Seven & Chapter Five*)—particularly between development partners of the Global North and coastal communities of the Global South.

Though such discourses promising transformation reproduce core logics and systems of relations fundamental to the established order, they also concede the need for *some* changes in the status quo. Indeed, this is key strategic manoeuvre for appeasing then pacifying dissent.<sup>851</sup> If we again return to the case studies; the CIG, now accountable to the performance of seabed mining's ecological and social sustainability under the blue economy, has expanded its environmental impact assessment and community consultation practices over the last decade.<sup>852</sup> Similarly, in response to

<sup>851</sup> Modonesi, *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy Constructing the Political Subject*; Modonesi, *The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action*.

<sup>852</sup> See Teremoana Matepi's forthcoming doctoral thesis: *Unleashing values praxis: The policy paradox of seabed mining, spiritual capital, culture, and decision path dependency*

the advocacy of small-scale fisheries networks (including the LMMA Network), the mainstream ocean development complex has reoriented its blue economy agenda to better address coastal community concerns and not simply the expansionist ambitions of industry or conservation.<sup>853</sup> I do not imply here that such changes are radical departures from the established system's pursuit or promotion of neoliberal capitalist objectives. If anything, they are largely window dressing. But this is precisely the point: fundamental social structures and logics remain in place, masked from view by cosmetic modifications to the hegemonic form.

By emphasising passive revolution as a recursive (not restorative) process, we can better reflect how promises of transformation necessarily facilitate *some* modification of the hegemonic form. Gramsci's own work on passive revolution noted the importance of these "molecular changes" for transforming the physiognomy of hegemony while upholding its core structures: "One may apply to the concept of passive revolution... the interpretative criterion of molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes."<sup>854</sup> Here we see how Gramsci was closely attuned to the function of passive revolution as a process of hegemonic adaptation, or "conservation/innovation" as he elsewhere described it.<sup>855</sup> Unfortunately, the popular characterisation of passive revolution as revolution-restoration has obscured these more complex understandings of hegemony's reassembling and simplified it to the imitative process of restoration. I contend that recognition of hegemony's strategic adaptations is key for understanding the durability of these systems and should be a key focus of political inquiry.<sup>856</sup> It is towards this goal that revolution-*recursion* may be a more accurate characterisation of processes of passive revolution than offered under the revolution/restoration dialectic.

I have attempted to illustrate this reframing of passive revolution in Figure 34. Informed by my study of the blue economy discourse, I emphasise how hegemonic systems rarely (if ever) return the same but, through strategies of passive revolution, are able to adapt and refashion anew. Unlike the cyclical form denoted by passive revolution's characterisation as revolution-restoration, this illustration captures the partial reinscriptions, modified displacements, slidings, turn-about and gaps in hegemony's reassembling.<sup>857</sup> It highlights how hegemony is necessarily displaced through

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<sup>853</sup> World Bank, 'Gender, Marginalized People and Marine Spatial Planning', Marine Spatial Planning for a Resilient and Inclusive Blue Economy Toolkit, 2021; European Parliament, 'A Sustainable Blue Economy in the EU: The Role of Fisheries and Aquaculture', 2021/2188(INI) § (2022).

<sup>854</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 109.

<sup>855</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volume 3* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 252–54, Q8§25, Q8§27.

<sup>856</sup> Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, 345.

<sup>857</sup> Stoler, 27; Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*.

processes of passive revolution, never folding back to its exact prior form but always modified, to some degree, as it responds to crisis.

Puzzling together the insights developed across this chapter, Figure 34 depicts the role played by discourses promising transformation in the larger, longer story of hegemonic recursion. It captures how change is both a necessary and resultant feature of passive revolution; with the performance of transformation (via discourse) enabling hegemonic forms to return consent in their social authority, while recognising that hegemony's prior form will never restore itself exactly the same but always adapted in response to the changed socio-political environment. This is to say that change—superficial as it may be—is central for the means and ends of passive revolution. It is precisely this aptitude for cosmetic change that underlies hegemony's ability to displace and pacify more radical demands for transformation, ultimately enabling its adaptability and durability. To those of us scrutinising, or indeed challenging, systems of power, we dismiss the political importance of these changes at our peril.

I also seek to capture the tenacity of dissent in Figure 34 by including an inscription of counter-hegemonic forces (green). As discussed in the former section, the process of passive revolution is fuelled by depoliticisation wherein actors of the hegemonic order work to re-naturalise certain logics and social structures after their exposure in periods of crisis. Acts of politicisation, however, provide key strategies for disrupting, even breaking, from this conservative impulse by holding the spotlight on foundational hegemonic structures and interrogating their virtue. Figure 34 attempts to incorporate this play of (de)politicisation, acknowledging that hegemonic refashioning is never assured. Though on first glance Figure 34 may be dominated by the image of hegemony's recursive reincarnation (passive revolution, pink), closer inspection brings forward possibilities for departure and movement towards a new order (green). Hegemony's refashioning in the wake of crisis is neither a circular nor inevitable process and this is what I seek to emphasise in reframing passive revolution as revolution-recursion.



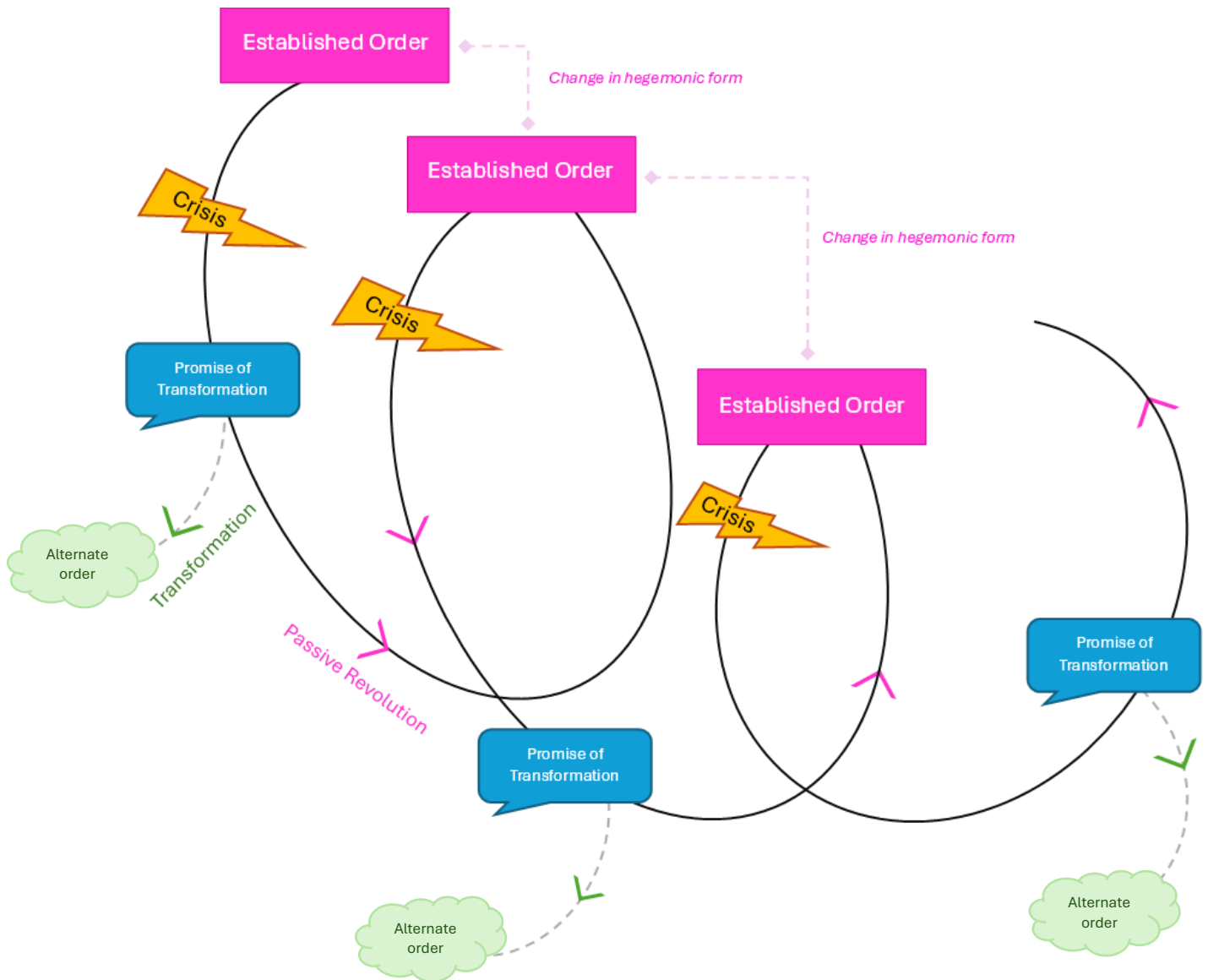


**Figure 34:** *Passive revolution and the recursion of hegemony.*

## 8.5 Conclusion

While each holding unique relationships with the blue economy, the three case studies examined through this thesis shed light on broader dynamics regarding the function and politics of discourse in processes of socio-political change. A key finding of *Section One* was the close resemblance between the political functioning of the blue economy and Gramsci's concept of passive revolution; both of which work to defend and reassemble the established order of relations in the wake of systemic rupture (crisis). This insight points to the utility of discourse for passive revolution, with promises of transformation providing potent and insidious tools for political conservatism.

Building on these empirical insights, the next two sections moved to deepen and refine our conceptual understanding of passive revolution. This resulted in three areas of theoretical contribution. First, the exposition of the performance paradox. The performance paradox captures how, when faced with crisis, actors across the social body are necessarily pressed to imagine a new future and regularly do so via discourses promising transformation. These discourses provide for the performance of social change, yet not always with a transformational goal in mind. The performance paradox highlights how performances of transformation are just as politically vital for the hegemonic order as they are for counter-hegemonic groups, with the former mobilising these promises to re-establish social consent in its continued authority while the latter looking to imagine a world otherwise. Here we strike at the dual meanings of performance: performance as *artifice* and performance as *enactment*. Discourses utilised in the process of passive revolution represent performance as artifice.

The second theoretical contribution was my illustration of (de)politicisation dynamics in processes of passive revolution. Drawing on (de)politicisation literature, I identified how processes of passive revolution hinge on hegemony's ability to depoliticise its vision so as to enable easy reassembly. This can occur through the delegation of crisis response to institutional technocrats, thus limiting meaningful civil engagement, or the strict disciplining of public forums such that only certain issues are permitted for discussion as other—more structural—matters remain untouched. Where depoliticisation aims to limit the grounds for hegemony's possible challenge, politicisation works to provoke public debate and cast light on the systemic failures of the status quo. Discourses promising radically alternate visions for transformation are a clear embodiment of politicisation, yet so too are the more discreet acts of reworking, appropriating, confining and unsettling discourses working towards conservative refashioning. To this end, holding the political is a key strategy for resisting passive revolution<sup>858</sup>.

My final theoretical contribution was the reframing of passive revolution as a recursive process. As argued through *Section Three*, re-orienting our understanding of passive revolution from that of revolution-restoration to revolution-*recursion* better reflects how hegemonic systems reestablish consent in their social order by adapting to changing socio-political circumstances. This recognises change as a critical feature of passive revolution; particularly cosmetic change which obscures scrutiny of foundational hegemonic logics and structures. The revolution-recursion dialectic can help to explain why hegemonic orders remain so durable across time and context and provides a valuable update to Gramsci's understanding of passive revolution. Reformulating passive

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<sup>858</sup> Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, 157.

revolution in this manner may present a novel theoretical contribution to academic scholarship, yet it reflects an observation long noted among the changemakers and activists of the Pacific who piercingly expose how the adaptability of hegemonic systems (namely (neo)colonialism and capitalism) enable their perpetuation across time and space.<sup>859</sup>

As a discourse leveraged for passive revolution, the blue economy illuminates patterns and characteristics of hegemonic refashioning more broadly. Taking the blue economy experiences of three Pacific case studies as my guide, I suggest there is great opportunity in rethinking passive revolution as a recursive process. Reframing passive revolution through the dialectic of revolution-*recursion* calls to attention the slight but indispensable adaptations that allow for hegemony's remaking and its return of social authority in the wake of challenge.

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<sup>859</sup> Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982*; Rokotuivuna et al., *Fiji, a Developing Australian Colony*; Emberson-Bain, *Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth?: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women*; Penjueli, 'Pacific Futures: For the Good of All (Mankind)'.



# CHAPTER NINE

## Conclusion

### 9.1 The glittering eye of ‘Transformation’

Half an hour later, with the sun a throbbing pain in the empty sky, they were on the outskirts of Apia, among houses, shacks, and fale huddled together like a defeated army or swarm of large sea-crabs which had crawled out of the sea to die on dry land to the sound of mechanical marvels and the stench of swamp rising from the deep ditches beside the road.

And Tauilopepe knew he was there in the glittering eye of ‘Progress,’ and he forgot the heat, the sun.

- Albert Wendt, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*<sup>860</sup>

Almost fifty years since the release of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, Albert Wendt’s description of the global development project as a seductive, glittering promise continues to ring true. Like Tauilopepe’s forgetting of the stench, rot and overcrowding of a swiftly urbanising Apia, this thesis has shown how the transformative promise of the blue economy masks the reproduction, extension and evolution of neoliberal capitalist relations with the ocean. Indeed, this thesis suggests that the blue economy discourse may do more than simply distract from the reassembly of the established order, but itself provide a key political tool in this process.

At its heart, this thesis tells the story of how the blue economy has been leveraged in service of neoliberal capitalism to make oceans legible to international markets, and ocean management amenable to the interests and authority of the Global North. Of perhaps even greater concern, it has demonstrated how the blue economy has been deployed as a strategy for placating calls to relate with oceans differently; noting, however, acts of resistance and agency that challenge such pacification. Contrary to its promise to transform ocean development, I have detailed how the

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<sup>860</sup> Albert Wendt, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1979), 46.

blue economy has become an accomplice in the process of hegemonic refashioning through its deployment as a strategy of passive revolution. It is a discourse that speaks in one way and acts in another, with the experiences of Pacific ocean development actors attesting—in varying ways—to the blue economy’s politically conservative character. In response to the puzzle that first led me to this doctoral project<sup>861</sup>: the blue economy is not working in support of new ocean development approaches. Instead, it is facilitating the continuation and adaptation of the established order.

This chapter concludes my thesis and offers some final remarks on the scholarly significance and policy implications of this research. *Section One* offers a recap of headline findings in direct response to the research questions that guided this project. *Section Two* then considers the significance of this thesis for the academy, looking to the contributions it offers to both the political scholarship and blue economy studies. *Section Three* rounds off this project with a reflection on the implications this study has for policymakers and practitioners of ocean development, particularly those of the Pacific. I offer this thesis as a starting point for further studies into the politics of the blue economy discourse in the Pacific, acknowledging the wise insights of those before me<sup>862</sup> and the pressing need for careful, considered analysis to come.

## 9.2 Key findings

Grappling with the puzzle of whether the blue economy is as transformational as it so promises, this thesis closely examined the circulation and negotiation of this widely-cited ocean development discourse among actors of the Pacific. Through in-depth case study analysis, I explored how and why three Pacific actors (Pacific regional organisations, the Cook Islands Government, and LMMA Network) engage with the blue economy discourse through their partnerships, policy and rhetoric, including strategies they employ to negotiate such interactions in pursuit of their own interests. This analysis provided insight into the complex, often strategic relationship that many Pacific actors have with the discourse; suggesting the blue economy constitutes more than simply a buzzword, but a potent political construct that materially effects how ocean development is conceived, envisioned and enacted. Determining what these effects are and what they suggest

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<sup>861</sup>Research Puzzle: Does the blue economy work to support a transformative vision of ocean development, and if not, what is it doing?

<sup>862</sup>Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka`uta and Ligaiula Pita, ‘We Need Pacific Voices on Oceans Science Decade: Dr Vaka`uta’, *Pacific Community*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2019/07/we-need-pacific-voices-on-oceans-science-decade-dr-vakauta>; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, ‘Surfacing the Agendas of the Blue Economy’; Allen et al., *The Rush for Oceania: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Ocean Governance and Stewardship*; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and Pacific Network on Globalisation, *DAWN Informs on Blue Economy*.

about the politics of discourses more broadly has been the leading motivation of this doctoral project.

### 9.2.1 Pacific blue economy relationships

In response to my first research question (What do Pacific experiences of the blue economy suggest about the political function of this discourse and its promise of transformative ocean development?), my central finding is that the blue economy works to reproduce, reinstate and reassemble neoliberal capitalist relations with the ocean and ocean-based communities through vocal, yet politically ingenuine, promises of transformation. While approaching the blue economy from varying standpoints and in pursuit of differing goals, the experiences of all three Pacific case studies suggest the blue economy functions not in support of transformative ocean development, but rather to maintain the authority of the established hegemonic order. Each reveal how through its charismatic promise of sustainable ocean development, the blue economy works to restore social consent in the institutions and logics of neoliberal capitalism: conceding some demands for change so as to be seen responsive to evolving societal demands—particularly in the wake of crisis where the economic, social and ecological injustices inherent in neoliberal capitalism are laid bare—while obscuring, displacing and ultimately pacifying visions for meaningfully transforming the social order. In effect, the blue economy and its promise to transform ocean-based relations weaponises society’s desire for change to perverse effect: restoring, rather than renegotiating, neoliberal capitalism under the guise of transformation.

#### **Pacific regional organisations**

From the perspective of Pacific regional bodies, many stakeholders have arrived at this conclusion on the blue economy’s political conservatism after careful observation of the discourse over the last decade. Though once optimistic about the blue economy’s potential to drive a new agenda of self-determined, equitable ocean development, many regional stakeholders today look sceptically upon the discourse for the external influence and logics seeming active in its construction and circulation. I detail this souring relationship through *Chapter Five*, tracing the region’s blue economy encounters from the PSIDS grouping to the PIDF, and ultimately to the PIF. First embracing the blue economy in 2011, regional stakeholders organised through the PSIDS grouping crafted a ‘green economy in a blue world’ storyline in preparation for Rio+20. In doing so, they reworked earlier discourse constructs originating from the US and EU to introduce a new commitment to the blue economy promise: updating the global development project to better recognise and serve ocean-based communities of the Global South. This demand for a transformed global order that centred and elevated the interests of ocean-based communities was bold, but has seemingly been

sidelined as the blue economy entered the mainstream and powerful external actors have come to control the discourse.

The PIDF's adoption of the blue economy shifted the discourse from a tool of international diplomacy to one of regional politics. By incorporating the 'blue/green economy' as a core organisational pillar, the PIDF worked to differentiate itself from the PIF—which at the time, had suspended Fiji's membership due to the 2006 coup and was, relatedly, struggling with internal tensions over the influence of Australia and New Zealand on regional policymaking. Though the PIDF's position as a politically influential, alternate regional body was relatively short lived as relations improved within the PIF, the blue economy usefully provided this regional body with a unique selling point to distinguish itself from the established regional architecture during its early years of activity. This experience highlighted the potential the blue economy once held for progressing an alternate vision of regional order—and one that was firmly Pacific led.

Only really coming to engage the blue economy in 2017, the PIF first incorporated this ocean-centric discourse within its broader Blue Pacific vision via a 'Blue Pacific Economy' storyline. The PIF's relationship with the blue economy has subsequently been murky, fluctuating between constructive engagement and seeming retreat. My research suggests that some PIF stakeholders are actively working to separate and wean the blue economy from the Blue Pacific vision, citing concerns over the external influence seemingly associated with blue economy programs, financing and logics—particularly from actors of the Global North. This evolving situation alerts us to the need for scrutiny over issues of co-option, appropriation and discourse leadership. With the emergence of lucrative, donor driven projects such as the Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity partnership, it appears that the PIF may be struggling to maintain authority over the blue economy, raising questions about whose agenda this purportedly transformative discourse serves?

### **The Cook Islands Government**

*Chapter Six* examined the CIG's mobilisation of the blue economy discourse to safeguard and reposition its longstanding seabed minerals dream in an age of ocean environmentalism and accelerating critical minerals demand. Tracing the CIG's history as an active agent and advocate of seabed minerals activity, I highlighted how ambitions for seabed mining are deeply embedded in the Cook Islands state-making project: from Sir Albert Henry's representation of the newly self-governing state at UNCLOS negotiations in the 1970s, through to the CIG's current endeavours to commence seabed mining in its domestic waters as a means to secure economic independence and strengthen its international political profile. Recent interest in seabed minerals mining as both a source for critical minerals and a potential threat to ocean health has prompted the CIG to



reframe its activities in this sector, with the blue economy offering a powerful discourse for doing just that.

First engaging with the discourse as part of the PSIDS' Rio+20 campaign via the 'green economy in a blue world' storyline, the CIG has since crafted its own unique blue economy storyline: 'net-zero leader.' This construct works at once to defend seabed minerals activity as consistent with global sustainability commitments, while casting the Cook Islands as a leading, sovereign and necessary stakeholder of this emerging ocean industry. I suggest this storyline is consistent with the CIG's positioning of seabed minerals as a core pillar of its state-making dream, with the blue economy but a recent tool for refashioning this vision anew. More recently, however, the CIG appears to be stepping back from the blue economy as the primary framing for its seabed minerals aspirations in international forums, turning instead to the Blue Pacific. The Blue Pacific's strong articulation of self-determined development and its resonance with Indigenous Cook Islands' values of ocean kinship are leading reasons for this shift. This emerging dynamic again provokes questions about the relationship between the blue economy and Blue Pacific discourses, which I will return to shortly. Ultimately, I find that the CIG has strategically deployed the blue economy in service of its longstanding seabed minerals aspirations; not in pursuit of a particularly new, transformative vision for ocean development.

### **The LMMA Network**

The evolution of the LMMA Network's cautious yet highly strategic relationship with the blue economy provided the focus for *Chapter Seven*. Though long critical of the blue economy for its perceived extension of neoliberal capitalist logics, industries and institutions to coastal areas and communities, the LMMA Network has developed a cautious, yet constructive relationship with the discourse for the purpose of accessing international oceans forums and major development partnerships. I detail how it has crafted two distinct blue economy storylines to negotiate this discourse: a 'critical' blue economy storyline on the one hand, and an 'instrumental' one on the other. The LMMA's Network's progressive interweaving of these two contrary storylines provides an interesting point of analysis, revealing how its more constructive engagements with the blue economy in recent years have always been conditional and tempered by its vigilance over issues of ocean grabbing (as expressed under the critical storyline). This is to say that the LMMA Network's 'critical' storyline has never been far from its blue economy engagements, reminding us that discourse is never absolute but always vulnerable to disruption and dissent.

Conversations with key LMMA Network stakeholders revealed the considerable pressure many felt to engage the blue economy discourse in order to be seen as legitimate ocean development

and governance actors—particularly in international settings. This pointed to the blue economy's attainment of discourse hegemony, or the triumph of one discourse over others for social authority. Despite this, network stakeholders detailed their persistent and creative strategies for constraining and reworking their interactions with the blue economy. These acts speak to the strategic nature of the LMMA Network's blue economy relationship and its agency to rework, unsettle and limit the discourse as a way of resisting its discursive hegemony.

### 9.2.2 The role of promises of transformation in political change

To my second key research question (What insights do Pacific blue economy experiences provide about the role promises of transformation in facilitating (or otherwise) political change?), I observed that discourses promising transformation can play a perverse, yet critical, role in defending against political change and returning established orders to a position of social authority. Indeed, I saw how promises of transformation not only distract from political change but can be the very tools through which society's demands for change are coopted in service of refashioning the established order and safeguarding its social authority in an evolving context. I arrived at this conclusion under the guidance of Gramsci and his thinking on hegemony, crisis and passive revolution (*Chapter Two*). This enabled me to situate my empirical observations in a broader conversation about the politics of social change from which I distilled three headline findings.

#### **The performance paradox of discourses promising transformation**

First, I identified how discourses promising transformation are essential for *all* actors seeking to shape the future social order when confronted by moments of crisis. Following from Gramsci,<sup>863</sup> crises embody periods of political dynamism where the systemic flaws of the old system are exposed and faith in its social authority is ruptured. These periods prompt widespread demand for change, with the former order no longer considered satisfactory and consent in its leadership unsettled. For actors seeking an alternate system of relations, these periods of crisis provide opportunity to imagine, advocate and enact social transformation. Discourses promising transformation offer such groups a key site to construct alternate social worlds and guide their actions towards it. They constitute, in short, a vehicle for manifesting a society otherwise.

Paradoxically, discourses promising transformation are just as important for actors of the hegemonic form when challenged by moments of crisis. With the rupture of crisis, the systemic flaws of the established order are exposed to society, pressing hegemonic forms to concede the need to for change so as to maintain public consent in its leadership (*Chapter Two*). Here hegemonic

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<sup>863</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*.

actors can likewise leverage discourses promising transformation to imagine a future out of crisis. Under this second scenario, however, discourses promising transformation are not designed to bring about a fundamental reordering of social relations—transformation in a true political sense—but to restore public consent in the legitimacy and logics of the hegemonic form. Discourses are carefully crafted to ensure commitments of change remain largely cosmetic, with hegemony's foundational logics and system of relations deliberately shielded from scrutiny. This sees discourses promising transformation leveraged for perverse political objectives: the reinvention of the status quo. Such tension between discourses genuinely promising transformation and those more deceptively exploiting it is what I termed the 'performance paradox.'

### **The struggle over (de)politicisation**

Second, I identified dynamics of (de)politicisation active within discourses promising transformation. I observed how *all* promises of transformation constitute an inherently political act upon their first utterance, with speakers—regardless of their political persuasion—utilising such discourse to acknowledge systemic flaws and voice their commitments to change. This (performed) reckoning with the failures of the status quo is necessary for enlisting public faith in the speaker's vision for the future social order and, most critically, their authority to lead society down this path. Politicisation cannot be avoided.

The trick for discourses deployed for passive revolution is to swiftly transition from this moment of politicisation to that of depoliticisation; only allowing public debate of the established order's misgivings for a brief moment before quickly repositioning core hegemonic logics and institutions as necessary components of the promised transformation. This can occur through the delegation of crisis response to institutional technocrats thus limiting meaningful civil engagement, or the strict disciplining of public forums such that only certain issues are permitted for discussion as other, more structural matters, remain untouched. Depoliticisation enables hegemony to re-naturalise its fundamental structures, all while it performs commitments to transformation via discourse.

Pushing in the other direction, promises of transformation which meaningfully seek the construction of new social orders can be characterised by their steadfast commitment to acts of politicisation. These counter-hegemonic discourses work to hold focus on the systemic flaws of the old order and ensure they are not again naturalised and hidden from public scrutiny. Alongside a new vision for society, these discourses express discontent in the status quo and thus the pressing need for systemic change.

An important, though more subtle observation from my blue economy research was the use of politicisation as a strategy for resisting discourses of passive revolution. Sometimes, these acts of politicisation were explicit—such as overt critique of the blue economy as a tool of neoliberal capitalism. However, so too could they take more covert forms of discourse constraint and conditionality; for instance, when the LMMA Network insisted that it *only* accepted a blue agenda that centred coastal communities and respected their ocean rights. Here, actors who may feel compelled to engage a discourse (due to discourse hegemony) can still exercise dissent by unsettling and exposing the core logics of such discourse, working to keep them alive in public debate. This enables actors to remain resistant to the reassembly of hegemonic systems while reworking hegemonic discourses through their strategic engagement with them. Though these strategies may not be enough to overturn a discourse utilised for passive revolution, it does disrupt and hinder the construct's attempt to slide towards depoliticisation. It seeks to hold open space for political debate on the structural assumptions, core logics and visions of a given order in the hope that these will strengthen demands for change. It is this tension between attempts of politicisation and depoliticisation that we see in the contestation over the blue economy discourse and what vision of ocean development it purports to support.

### **Reframing passive revolution as a process of ‘revolution-recursion’**

Finally, my study into the role discourse plays in processes of passive revolution revealed the distinctly *recursive* nature of hegemonic refashioning. I found that rather than restoring hegemony to its prior form, discourses promising transformation enable hegemonic systems to reassemble themselves in a kind of recursive evolution. Informed by my study of the blue economy, I emphasise how strategies of passive revolution rarely (if ever) return hegemony the same, but utilise discourses promising transformation to adapt to evolving social contexts. Indeed, by promising transformation and strategically conceding certain acts of change, such discourses facilitate some modification to the hegemonic form. These discourses thus enable hegemony to partially reinscribe and modify itself in response to crisis, resembling a process of passive revolution closer akin to recursion than restoration. This third finding on the recursive nature of passive revolution is significant in reframing how passive revolution is understood in the political literature, as I describe in the following section.

## **9.3 Significance for the academy**

As a study that closely engages political theory to grapple with the effect and negotiation of the blue economy in the Pacific, this thesis provides significant contribution to the academy—

particularly in the fields of critical blue economy and political studies. These contributions can be distilled into five key points:

### 9.3.1 Account of Pacific blue economy experiences

This thesis' close and careful analysis of *Pacific* blue economy experiences sets this research apart from much of the existing blue economy scholarship where attention to the world's largest ocean region remains scant. This thesis offers one of few dedicated studies of the blue economy's discourse construction, circulation and negotiation in the context of the Pacific; and perhaps the first to do so to such detail. Seminal studies by Silver et al.<sup>864</sup> and Voyer et al.<sup>865</sup> usefully identified the livelihoods, equity and developmental orientation of early Pacific blue economy understandings developed by regional stakeholders around Rio+20 to the mid-2010s. In these studies, however, the region featured as but one component of broader global analysis.

With specific attention to the Pacific, Keen et al. developed a five-component 'Blue Economy Framework' from regional Pacific ocean policies and examined its interpretation in the distinct national context of the Solomon Islands.<sup>866</sup> Though valuable for its Pacific focus, this work derives its blue economy framing from broader sustainable ocean policies (such as the *Framework for Pacific Oceanscape* (2010)), not those which explicitly cite the discourse. This paper thus more usefully points to evolving understandings of sustainable ocean development in the region, less precisely evolving and contested blue economy articulations.

Finally, critical blue economy studies have been undertaken of the Pacific by Penjueli and Wolfenden<sup>867</sup> (militarisation and industrialisation), Santos Perez<sup>868</sup> (colonisation and militarisation), and Childs<sup>869</sup> (blue growth). These contributions provide key touchpoints for this thesis' interrogation of power and politics associated with the blue economy as it circulates in the Pacific, which I build upon and further develop through the framework of passive revolution. Yet beyond this handful of works, there remains little academic literature on the discursive construction, negotiation and effect of the blue economy in the Pacific. This is an oversight this thesis seeks to address.

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<sup>864</sup> Silver et al., 'Blue Economy and Competing Discourses in International Oceans Governance'.

<sup>865</sup> Voyer et al., 'Shades of Blue: What Do Competing Interpretations of the Blue Economy Mean for Oceans Governance?'

<sup>866</sup> Keen, Schwarz, and Wini-Simeon, 'Towards Defining the Blue Economy: Practical Lessons from Pacific Ocean Governance'.

<sup>867</sup> Wolfenden and Penjueli, 'Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?'

<sup>868</sup> Santos Perez, 'Blue-Washing the Colonization and Militarization of Our Ocean'.

<sup>869</sup> Childs, 'Performing "Blue Degrowth": Critiquing Seabed Mining in Papua New Guinea through Creative Practice'.

### 9.3.2 Critical analysis of the blue economy discourse

Secondly, this thesis significantly enriches our understanding of the blue economy as a phenomenon of *discourse*, interrogating this ocean development vision at the fundamental level of its principles, logics and promise. As I detailed in *Chapter Three*, recent years have seen a growing number of studies<sup>870</sup> conducted into the blue economy, with the vast majority of these examining associated policies, activities and implementation. While these studies are valuable for tracing how this ocean development vision translates into discrete, measurable outcomes, they tend to leave untouched the core assumptions that underlie how the blue economy frames ocean development and makes (im)possible certain ways of pursuing it.

Discourse analysis allows me to grapple with these more fundamental questions about how the blue economy encourages certain understandings of how we should order society and our relationships with the ocean. By engaging Hajer's argumentative discourse analysis<sup>871</sup> to trace discrete blue economy storylines, this thesis provides a highly situated, granular analysis of discourse engagements across three case studies. This enables me to uncover the many ways that Pacific actors assemble and negotiate the blue economy over time and with respect to different audiences. On a basic level, this confirms the diversity of blue economy understandings and encounters across the region, with differing ocean development stakeholders constructing and advocating different ocean development visions. Yet it also reminds us of the dynamic, multifaceted and often contested character of individual discourse engagements. This was evident in the evolving and/or colliding blue economy storylines that animated an individual actors' blue economy appeals (e.g. the CIG's emerging 'net-zero leader' storyline, or the LMMA Network's strategic manoeuvring between 'critical' and 'instrumental' storylines). Any assumptions of a consistent, coherent or homogenous blue economy vision in the Pacific were quickly shattered to reveal a complex discursive landscape under constant negotiation.

By adopting an explicitly discursive approach to blue economy analysis, I hope to strengthen the still relatively small body of literature dedicated to unpacking this phenomenon's founding logics

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<sup>870</sup> Michelle Voyer et al., 'The Role of Voluntary Commitments in Realizing the Promise of the Blue Economy', *Global Environmental Change* 71 (2021): 102372, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102372>; Michelle Voyer et al., 'Assessing Policy Coherence and Coordination in the Sustainable Development of a Blue Economy. A Case Study from Timor Leste', *Ocean and Coastal Management* 192 (2020); Bennett et al., 'Towards a Sustainable and Equitable Blue Economy'; Andrés M. Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 'Social Equity and Benefits as the Nexus of a Transformative Blue Economy: A Sectoral Review of Implications', *Marine Policy* 109 (2019): 103702, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.103702>.

<sup>871</sup> Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Environmental Modernisation and the Policy Process*.

and ocean development visions.<sup>872</sup> This work is necessary if we are to understand how the blue economy guides ocean development and the purported transformation it promises to deliver.

### 9.3.3 Correcting narratives around the blue economy's origins

Thirdly, my clear tracing of the (contemporary)<sup>873</sup> blue economy to the US government and EU at the end of the 2000s corrects a somewhat common fallacy evident within blue economy scholarship that the discourse originated from SIDS and PSIDS at Rio+20.<sup>874</sup> As I outline in *Chapter One*, such narrative of the blue economy's invention by the Global South is not only false, but misleading. It romanticises the blue economy as a vision pioneered by the Global South for self-determined and equitable development and obscures the neoliberal capitalist interests that first prompted and defined this discourse (US Government and European Commission). Correcting this origins narrative is important for interrogating the transformative promise espoused by the blue economy, asking not only whose vision of ocean transformation this discourse has worked to serve but whose vision it was originally constructed for.

My research suggests that just as the blue economy was first developed in support of the Global North's economic recovery and ocean expansion, so has it continued in service of neoliberal capitalism—despite its seductive promise to privilege the development interests of SIDS.<sup>875</sup> Acknowledging these submerged histories is essential for holding the blue economy and its proponents accountable for the political effects of its transformative promise.

### 9.3.4 Clarifying the role of discourse in passive revolution

Looking beyond the immediate blue economy discourse, the fourth major scholarly contribution of this thesis is the strengthened understanding it offers into the role discourse plays in processes

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<sup>872</sup> Mallin and Barbesgaard, 'Awash with Contradiction: Capital, Ocean Space and the Logics of the Blue Economy Paradigm'; Steinberg and Kristoffersen, 'Building a Blue Economy in the Arctic Ocean: Sustaining the Sea or Sustaining the State?'; Choi, 'The Blue Economy as Governmentality and the Making of New Spatial Rationalities'; Christian Bueger and Felix Mallin, 'Blue Paradigms: Understanding the Intellectual Revolution in Global Ocean Politics', *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 1719–39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad124>; Leah M. Fusco et al., 'Blueing Business as Usual in the Ocean: Blue Economies, Oil, and Climate Justice', *Political Geography* 98 (2022): 102670, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102670>; Germond-Duret, 'Framing the Blue Economy: Placelessness, Development and Sustainability'.

<sup>873</sup> Noting Gunter Pauli and the Zero Emissions Research and Initiatives (ZERI) Network introduced the term 'blue economy' in 2004, yet that this concept sat more closely aligned with visions of a circular economy than that of ocean development. See Louey, 'The Pacific Blue Economy: An Instrument of Political Maneuver'.

<sup>874</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'Blue Economy Concept Paper'; Roberts and Ali, 'The Blue Economy and Small States'; Kahlil Hassanali, 'CARICOM and the Blue Economy – Multiple Understandings and Their Implications for Global Engagement', *Marine Policy* 120 (2020): 104137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104137>.

<sup>875</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'Blue Economy Concept Paper'; Dogley and Roberts, 'Action Brief: An Ocean of Opportunities - How the Blue Economy Can Transform Sustainable Development in Small Islands Developing States'; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 'Social Equity and Benefits as the Nexus of a Transformative Blue Economy: A Sectoral Review of Implications'.

of passive revolution. Since Gramsci's conceptualisation of passive revolution at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars have had some appreciation for the function promises of transformation (or 'demagogic promises') serve in hegemonic refashioning.<sup>876</sup> This focus, however, has tended to be marginal as issues pertaining to elite capture, globalisation, or policymaking and governance have attracted the interest of political scholars.<sup>877</sup>

This thesis reinforces the essential role that discourse serves in such process of political conservatism; acting as the mechanism through which transformative promises are constructed, circulated, (de)politicised and even challenged. I argue that discourses promising transformation provide powerful tools in the process of passive revolution by weaponizing society's desire for an alternate order to perverse political effect. They enable hegemonic forms to commit to change, perform change and in doing so, restore social consent in their authority. However, as this research has illustrated, these changes are selective and cosmetic, with core hegemonic logics and systems of relations refashioned anew via these very discourses.

Equally important, this thesis also found that even when leveraged in service of passive revolution, discourses promising transformation can be challenged and unsettled by actors seeking genuine political change. This was evident in the LMMA Network's continual articulation and weaving of their critical blue economy storyline over the last decade (*Chapter 7*); as was it apparent in the efforts of some PIF stakeholders to distinguish and isolate the Blue Pacific as a discrete (and preferable) discourse distinct from the blue economy (*Chapter 5*). This is to highlight that while discourses promising transformation can play a key role in processes of passive revolution, they are not impervious to resistance. Discourse is a potent but not indomitable tool for political conservatism, and indeed just as critical for projects working to imagine society otherwise—a dynamic I capture under my proposal of the 'performance paradox' (*Chapter 8.3.2*).

### 9.3.5 (Re)framing passive revolution as 'revolution-recursion'

The final takeaway from this thesis for those of the academy is its (re)emphasis of the recursive nature of passive revolution. Detailed above, I find passive revolution to be an adaptive political process that facilitates hegemony's modification to changing social contexts and demands. In this

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<sup>876</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 210.

<sup>877</sup> Babic, 'Let's Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order'; Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*; Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism*; Alfonso Gonzales, 'Resisting "Passive Revolution": The Migrant Rights Movement in Washington, D.C., and New York City', in *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2013), 121–51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199973392.003.0006>; Fiona Nash, 'Participation and Passive Revolution: The Reproduction of Neoliberal Water Governance Mechanisms in Durban, South Africa', *Antipode* 45, no. 1 (2013): 101–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.00994.x>.



way, it is closer akin to dynamics of recursion than that of restoration (as frequently implied under the common revolution-restoration dialectic). I argued in *Chapter Eight* that this process of adaptation is an essential function of passive revolution as it is the basis upon which hegemony returns widespread consent in its social order. Reframing passive revolution as ‘revolution-recursion’ more accurately accounts for this strategic *adaption* of the hegemonic form through such process. Indeed, it re-emphasises Gramsci’s own understanding of the adaptive nature of passive revolution, wherein he variously described it as a process of ‘conservation/innovation’<sup>878</sup> or ‘progressive modification.’<sup>879</sup> Reorienting the scholarship’s characterisation of passive revolution from that of revolution-restoration to revolution-*recursion* has the potential to encourage greater focus on the molecular changes undertaken by hegemony in response to crisis and thus strengthen our understanding of hegemony’s durability across time and place.

## 9.4 Implications for policymakers and practitioners

Seductive in its promise to transform global ocean relations towards a sustainable, just future, the blue economy has garnered much enthusiasm among ocean development and policymaking forums over the last decade. The discourse is materially shaping how ocean development and governance is being conducted, funded and framed—with real world implications for communities, including those of the Pacific. This doctoral research thus has implications beyond the academy, calling to attention issues of power and politics that require careful consideration from ocean policymakers and practitioners as they negotiate the blue economy and debate its value for advancing sustainable ocean development outcomes. I outline three headline implications of import for ocean policymakers and practitioners to conclude this thesis.

### 9.4.1 Be vigilant of the blue economy’s promise of transformative ocean development

Perhaps the most pressing implication to emerge from this thesis is a warning to remain vigilant to the blue economy’s (supposedly) transformative promise of sustainable ocean development. Across all three case studies, this research found that the blue economy discourse acts not to drive—even encourage—genuinely alternate ways of engaging with and across oceans. Instead, it works to partially appease, pacify, then displace these demands to clear way for the refashioning of neoliberal capitalism anew. Where the CIG found utility in this political conservatism to rework its longstanding seabed minerals aspirations in a contemporary context of growing ecological

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<sup>878</sup> 252–54, Q8§25, Q8§27 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Volume 3.

<sup>879</sup> Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 109.

consciousness, Pacific regional organisations and the LMMA Network came to look sceptically upon the discourse for its failure to deliver or support alternate ocean visions that press for a fundamental reworking of mainstream development approaches and visions. More than simply a tool to distract from neoliberal capitalism's intensification within ocean spaces and communities, the blue economy facilitates this very process under the false promise of transformation.

For policymakers, this finding suggests the need for a careful re-evaluation in how the blue economy is framed and positioned as a vision for ocean development. Statements celebrating the blue economy as a transformative opportunity for sustainable, equitable and re-imagined ocean use (often with emphasis on the benefits possible for ocean-reliant communities of the Global South)<sup>880</sup> mislead audiences as to the deeply neoliberal capitalist character of this discourse. Furthermore, these statements contribute to the blue economy's performance (artifice) of such transformation, thus facilitating its deployment in the process of passive revolution. This research encourages policymakers to seriously consider tempering promises of the blue economy's transformative potential, particularly among communities who are not served by the neoliberal capitalist system and are instead working to realise (or at least) imagine a different way of supporting their livelihoods and wellbeing through oceans. Resisting the blue economy's deployment as tool for passive revolution will require continual confrontation and politicisation of its promise to transform ocean development; asking *what* activities of change such discourse works to support, and more importantly, according to *whose* vision?

#### 9.4.2 A cautionary tale of discourse weaponisation: Lessons for the Blue Pacific

Of particular relevance for policymakers of the Pacific, this thesis found indications of a growing region-wide shift away from the blue economy in favour of the Blue Pacific. This suggests the blue economy's time as a leading discourse for ocean development in the region may be coming to an end. Having failed to deliver the transformative ocean development outcomes it envisioned in the early 2010s, the blue economy is seemingly being questioned by regional actors as they explore other frameworks for imagining and advocating for just, sustainable and equitable ocean futures. Here, we are seeing growing appeal to the Blue Pacific vision, with observant external actors recognising this shift and following suit in their ocean development partnerships and programs (*Chapter Five*).

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<sup>880</sup> Dogley and Roberts, 'Action Brief: An Ocean of Opportunities - How the Blue Economy Can Transform Sustainable Development in Small Islands Developing

I reiterate that the Blue Pacific championed by the PIF encompasses more than ocean development. It is a vision of assertive, collective regionalism centred on a shared Blue Pacific identity, which fosters commitment to ecosystem stewardship, community wellbeing, self-determined development and peace.<sup>881</sup> Sustainable ocean development is but one part of broader Blue Pacific construct. However, by nesting ocean development within this expansive construct, Pacific actors can approach ocean development as part of a holistic and integrated Blue Pacific vision (thereby resisting the siloing of ocean issues), while stridently emphasising their commitment to self-determination. The Blue Pacific's clear construction as a regional vision *by* the Pacific, *of* the Pacific and *for* the Pacific distinguishes it from the blue economy which was developed by the Global North and has since been widely pedalled by its high profile institutions (IGOs, philanthropy, BiNGOs) and interests (e.g. blue carbon, seabed minerals activity).

Some Pacific stakeholders see the Blue Pacific's clear Pacific focus as a safeguard against the co-option of their ocean development visions and activities by the mainstream neoliberal capitalist order. By being so explicitly oriented towards Pacific development objectives, the Blue Pacific offers a framework for foregrounding regional interests and demanding change to the established global development complex. In effect, it is far harder for Pacific demands for a more equitable ocean development system to be submerged in the Blue Pacific compared to the blue economy (which since Rio+20 has become gradually quieter in its campaigning for a systemic transformation of the global ocean order to better serve SIDS).<sup>882</sup> However, it was also seen in *Part II* how the Blue Pacific is similarly drawing the interest of actors aligned with the hegemonic order who seek to capitalise on the symbolic allure and transformative promise of this discourse to refashion longstanding neoliberal capitalist relations with the ocean (e.g. CIG, philanthropy). Could the Blue Pacific be vulnerable to deployment as a tool of passive revolution and critically, how can this be avoided? This question demands careful and open discussion among Pacific policymakers and practitioners.

#### 9.4.3 Hold the political: Pressing for change by refusing depoliticisation

Offering the blue economy as a cautionary tale for how promises of transformation can be leveraged to weaponise society's demand for systemic change against it, I conclude this thesis with a teaching from Gramsci to 'hold the political'.<sup>883</sup> A lesson developed through Gramsci's own political praxis and struggle, 'holding the political' encourages us to be alert to the way discourses

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<sup>881</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

<sup>882</sup> Louey, 'The BE's Retreat from Equity'.

<sup>883</sup> Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, 157.

promising transformation craft visions of change, particularly the extent to which they meaningfully press for a reimagining of the social order. Where discourses genuinely seeking transformation will constantly politicise issues related to the structure and logics of the established order, those mobilised for passive revolution will conversely work to silence such discussions and redirect attention cosmetic tinkering that ultimately leave the foundations of the status quo untouched (*Chapter 8.3.3*).

In the case of the Blue Pacific, this call to hold the political reminds policymakers to remain steadfast to the Blue Pacific's demands for self-determined regionalism and highly wary of initiatives that may work to undermine this. Particular vigilance should be shown towards Blue Pacific articulations that attempt to water-down, deprioritise or appropriate the vision's demands for assertive Pacific-conceived and Pacific-led futures.<sup>884</sup> Such acts would indicate impulses of depoliticisation and the possible slide of the Blue Pacific towards passive revolution.

As it stands, the Blue Pacific provides the necessarily strident vision for transformative ocean development sought by so many Pacific communities and stakeholders who have been harmed by the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>885</sup> Defending its transformative political capacity will require stakeholders to stay committed to questioning and confronting the established development orthodoxies. It is only by envisioning the world otherwise that discourses promising transformation can truly work in service of political change and advance acts towards it.

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<sup>884</sup> Taylor, 'Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined'.

<sup>885</sup> Bhagwan et al., *From the Deep: Pasifiki Voices for a New Story*; Santa Ana et al., *Empire and Environment: Ecological Ruin in the Transpacific*; de Jong, 'Kotahi Te Moana, Only One Ocean: Pacific Environmentalism, 1970–1995'; McCormack, *Private Oceans: The Enclosure and Marketisation of the Seas*; Santos Perez, 'Blue-Washing the Colonization and Militarization of Our Ocean'; Wolfenden and Penjueli, 'Blue Economy: Industrialization and Militarization of Oceans?'; Anais Maurer, *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).





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- Zhao, Qianshuo, Huimin Huang, and Mark John Costello. 'Systematic Planning Shows More than Half of the Most Species-Rich Ocean Region Is Needed to Include All Species in Representative Protected Areas'. *Global Ecology and Conservation* 53 (2024): e03036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2024.e03036>.
- Ziai, Aram. *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals*. London: Routledge, 2015.







# Appendix I: Referenced blue economy sources | Pacific regional organisations

|       | Year | Title                                                                                                                                    | Author                                                          | Institution                                                       | Text Type         |
|-------|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| PSIDS | 2012 | Fiji And PSIDS Push For Special Case Recognition In Rio+20 Declaration.                                                                  | Makereta Komai                                                  | PACNEWS                                                           | Newspaper Article |
|       | 2012 | Pacific At Rio+20: Q And A.                                                                                                              | Makereta Komai                                                  | Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) | Newspaper Article |
|       | 2012 | Summary of Pacific Preparations for Rio+20: The Evolving 'Special Case' of Small Island Developing States [E/ESCAP/68/1]                 | Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries             | Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)   | Meeting Report    |
|       | 2012 | Green Economy in a Blue World: Pacific Perspectives.                                                                                     | Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) |                                                                   | Report            |
|       | 2011 | Summary Report, 21–22 July 2011: UNCSD Pacific Subregional Preparatory Joint Ministerial Meeting Report                                  | Melanie Ashton, Cherelle Jackson                                | Earth Negotiations Bulletin                                       | Meeting Report    |
|       | 2011 | Summary Report, 7–8 March 2011: UNCSD 2nd Session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom II).                                             | Jennifer Covert, Faye Leone, Tanya Rosen, and Lynn Wagner       | Earth Negotiations Bulletin                                       | Meeting Report    |
|       | 2011 | Report of the Asian and Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development                | Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) |                                                                   | Meeting Report    |
|       | 2011 | Monaco Message                                                                                                                           | Government of the Principality of Monaco                        |                                                                   | Communique        |
|       | 2011 | The Regional Preparatory Committee Meetings for Rio+20: An Analysis of the Outcomes                                                      | International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)      | Earth Negotiations Bulletin                                       | Meeting Report    |
|       | 2011 | Summary of the 26th Session of the UN Environment Programme Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum: 21-24 February 2011. | Kate Neville, Dorothy Wanjia Nyingi, Delia                      | Earth Negotiations Bulletin                                       | Meeting Report    |

## Appendix I

|      |             |                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                   |                                   |                   |
|------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
|      |             |                                                                                                                                                 | Paul, Tanya Rosen, and Andrey Vavilov                             |                                   |                   |
|      | 2011        | Statement by H.E Mr. Robert G. Aisi Permanent Representative of Papua New Guinea to the UN on Behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States. | Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS)                    |                                   | Speech            |
|      | 2011        | Final Record of Discussions and Decisions.                                                                                                      | Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) |                                   | Meeting Report    |
| PIDF | 2019        | Providing an Enabling Environment for Green/Blue Pacific Economies.                                                                             | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                 |                                   | Media Release     |
|      | 2017        | 1st High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference: Report of Proceedings.                                                                          | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                 |                                   | Meeting Report    |
|      | 2016        | Blue Economy and Pacific SIDS Form the Core of PIDF's Mandate                                                                                   | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                 |                                   | Media Release     |
|      | 2016        | Green Growth for Blue Economies the Future of the Pacific Islands                                                                               | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                 |                                   | Media Release     |
|      | 2015        | Charter of the Pacific Islands Development Forum                                                                                                | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                 |                                   | Policy            |
|      | 2013        | Outcomes Document                                                                                                                               | Pacific Islands Development Forum                                 |                                   | Meeting Report    |
| PIF  | Forthcoming | Pacific Roadmap for Economic Development (formerly the Blue Pacific Economic Strategy)                                                          | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                 |                                   | Policy            |
|      | 2023        | High-Level Leaders Meeting to Unlock Blue Pacific Prosperity                                                                                    | Government of The Kingdom of Tonga                                |                                   | Media Release     |
|      | 2023        | Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity Business Case                                                                                                 | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                 |                                   | Media Release     |
|      | 2023        | SG Puna Keynote Address to 8th Pacific Tuna Forum in PNG                                                                                        | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                 |                                   | Speech            |
|      | 2023        | Statement by Henry Puna, Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General on the Adoption of the BBNJ Agreement                                          | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                 |                                   | Speech            |
|      | 2023        | Whipps 'Blue Prosperity Plan' Adopted by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders.                                                                         | Leilani Reklai                                                    | Island Times Palau                | Newspaper Article |
|      | 2023        | Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity                                                                                                               | The Pacific Community (SPC)                                       |                                   | Media Release     |
|      | 2023        | Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity at COP28                                                                                                      | Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) |                                   | Video             |
|      | 2022        | Statement by HE Samuelu Laloniu Tuvalu Permanent Representative to the United Nations on Behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum                    | Samuelu Laloniu                                                   | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat | Speech            |

|                 |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                       |                                   |                             |
|-----------------|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                 | 2022 | 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                                                                     |                                   | Policy                      |
|                 | 2021 | Blue Pacific Ocean Report 2021: A Report by the Pacific Ocean Commissioner to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders                                                                                                                                                   | Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner                                                                              | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat | Report                      |
|                 | 2020 | Blue Pacific Ocean Report 2020: A Report by the Pacific Ocean Commissioner to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders                                                                                                                                                   | Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner                                                                              | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat | Report                      |
|                 | 2017 | Opening Address by Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi of Samoa to Open the 48th Pacific Islands Forum 2017                                                                                                                                               | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                                                                     |                                   | Speech                      |
|                 | 2017 | Remarks by Hon. Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa at the High-Level Pacific Regional Side Event by PIFS on Our Values and Identity as Stewards of the World's Largest Oceanic Continent, The Blue Pacific. | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                                                                     |                                   | Speech                      |
|                 | 2017 | The Blue Pacific at the United Nations Ocean Conference                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                                                                     |                                   | Media Release               |
|                 | 2014 | 52nd PIFS Forum Communique                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                                                                     |                                   | Communique                  |
|                 | 2011 | Joint Statement of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders and the Secretary-General of the United Nations.                                                                                                                                                                 | Pacific Islands Forum and Ban Ki-Moon                                                                                 | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat | Media Release               |
| Waitt Institute | 2023 | 52 <sup>nd</sup> Pacific Island Leaders Meeting Forum Communique                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat                                                                                     |                                   | Communique                  |
|                 | 2023 | High-Level Leaders' Meeting to Unlock Blue Pacific Prosperity                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Prime Minister Hon. Hu'akavameiliku (Tonga), President Surangel S. Whipps Jr (Palau), Andrew Steer (Bezos Earth Fund) |                                   | Photo                       |
|                 | 2023 | Blue Economy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Waitt Institute                                                                                                       |                                   | Website                     |
|                 | 2023 | Memorandum of Understanding in Partnership with the Waitt Institute                                                                                                                                                                                               | Government of Vanuatu, Waitt Institute                                                                                |                                   | Memorandum of Understanding |
|                 | 2021 | Memorandum of Understanding in Partnership with the Waitt Institute                                                                                                                                                                                               | Government of Fiji, Waitt Institute                                                                                   |                                   | Memorandum of Understanding |
|                 | 2019 | Memorandum of Understanding in Partnership with the Waitt Institute and Blue Prosperity Coalition                                                                                                                                                                 | Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, Waitt Institute, Blue Prosperity Coalition                          |                                   | Memorandum of Understanding |
|                 | 2019 | Blue Prosperity Coalition Commits \$150 Million to Help Protect 30% of the Ocean by 2030                                                                                                                                                                          | Blue Prosperity Coalition                                                                                             |                                   | Media Release               |
|                 | 2017 | Ted Waitt Speaks at Ocean 2017                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Ted Waitt                                                                                                             | Waitt Foundation                  | Speech                      |



## Appendix II: Referenced blue economy sources | Cook Islands Government

| Year | Title                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Author                               | Institution             | Text Type     |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| 2024 | Opening Remarks by Honourable Prime Minister Mark Brown: Leveraging knowledge, innovation and empowerment in deep-sea research in support of the stewardship of the Area for the benefit of humankind. | Mark Brown                           | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2024 | 9th Our Oceans Conference 2024 High-Level Segment with Heads of States; Address by Honourable Prime Minister Mark Brown                                                                                | Mark Brown                           | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2023 | 78th UNGA High-Level Side Event: Launch of a Global Call to Action for Accelerating Sustainable Development through Deep-Sea Research, Technology Development and Innovations                          | Mark Brown                           | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2023 | General Statement Delivered at the 28th Session of the International Seabed Authority                                                                                                                  | Mark Brown                           | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2023 | SBMA Release: Cook Islands Participates in International Seabed Meetings                                                                                                                               | Seabed Minerals Authority            | Cook Islands Government | Media Release |
| 2023 | SBMA Release: Pacific Leaders Agree to Greater Regional Dialogue and Cooperation on Deep Sea Minerals                                                                                                  | Seabed Minerals Authority            | Cook Islands Government | Media Release |
| 2023 | Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth                                                                                                                                                                     | International Seabed Authority (ISA) |                         | Media Release |
| 2022 | Address by Honourable Mark Brown, Prime Minister & Minister for Seabed Minerals at the Exploration Licence Granting Ceremony 2022                                                                      | Mark Brown                           | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2022 | Statement by Prime Minister Hon. Mark Brown                                                                                                                                                            | Mark Brown                           | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2022 | Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the SBMA at Ensuring the stewardship of seabed mineral resources and the protection of the marine environment of the Area for the benefit of humankind         | Alex Herman                          | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |
| 2022 | Address by Alex Herman, Commissioner of the Seabed Minerals Authority at the Fostering International and Regional Cooperation in Support of the Sustainable Development of the Blue Economy of         | Alex Herman                          | Cook Islands Government | Speech        |

## Appendix II

|      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                             |                              |                      |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
|      | LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS United Nations Ocean Conference Side Event                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                             |                              |                      |
| 2021 | Blue Economy - Duurzame Oplossingen Voor Wereldwijde Uitdagingen                                                                                                                                                                                                              | DEME                                                                                                        | Global Sea Mineral Resources | Video                |
| 2021 | Opening Remarks at the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth Deep Seabed Environmental Management & Monitoring Workshop                                                                                                                                                          | Mark Brown                                                                                                  | Cook Islands Government      | Speech               |
| 2021 | <i>Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui: National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+ (2021–2121)</i>                                                                                                                                                                              | Central Policy and Planning Office, Office of the Prime Minister                                            | Cook Islands Government      | Policy               |
| 2021 | <i>Te Akapapa'anga Uki - One Generation • 25 Years</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Central Policy and Planning Office, Office of the Prime Minister                                            | Cook Islands Government      | Policy               |
| 2021 | <i>Te Kaveinga Iti – 5 Year Scorecard</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Central Policy and Planning Office, Office of the Prime Minister                                            | Cook Islands Government      | Policy               |
| 2021 | Cook Islands Investment Corporation and Its Interest in Seabed Minerals                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Cook Islands Investment Corporation                                                                         | Cook Islands Government      | Media Release        |
| 2021 | ISA Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth #OceanAction16538                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | International Seabed Authority (ISA), and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) |                              | Video                |
| 2019 | Browne attends seabed minerals workshop                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Seabed Mineral Authority                                                                                    | Cook Islands Government      | Media Release        |
| 2019 | Draft <i>Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Sector Strategy</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Cook Islands Government                                                                                     |                              | Policy               |
| 2018 | Seabed Minerals Draft Bill Released                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Seabed Minerals Authority                                                                                   | Cook Islands Government      | Media Release        |
| 2017 | Cook Islands Investment Corporation and Ocean Minerals LLC Joint Media Release                                                                                                                                                                                                | Cook Islands Investment Corporation                                                                         | Cook Islands Government      | Media Release        |
| 2017 | Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth: #OceanAction40974                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | International Seabed Authority (ISA), and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) |                              | Voluntary Commitment |
| 2017 | Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth: Advancing SDG 14 and the Quest for a Blue Economy through the Promotion of Socio Economic Benefits for Developing Countries, Including SIDS, and Increasing Scientific Knowledge and Research Capacity: Perspectives on Deep-Sea Minerals | International Seabed Authority (ISA), and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) |                              | Media Release        |



|      |                                                                                                         |                                                                   |                             |                      |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| 2014 | Cook Islands Marine Park: Legal Analysis Workshop                                                       | Cook Islands Government                                           |                             | Meeting Report       |
| 2012 | Pacific Island Countries Appeal Exclusion from Rio+20                                                   | Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) |                             | Media Release        |
| 2012 | Marae Moana - Cook Islands Marine Park: #OceanAction40829                                               | Cook Islands Government                                           |                             | Voluntary Commitment |
| 2011 | Summary Report, 21–22 July 2011: UNCSD Pacific Subregional Preparatory Joint Ministerial Meeting Report | Melanie Ashton, Cherelle Jackson                                  | Earth Negotiations Bulletin | Meeting Report       |
| 2011 | Summary Report, 7–8 March 2011: UNCSD 2nd Session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom II)             | Jennifer Covert, Faye Leone, Tanya Rosen, and Lynn Wagner         | Earth Negotiations Bulletin | Meeting Report       |
| 2011 | Greening Our Blue World: Report on the Cook Islands National Assessment on Greening the Economy         | Christina Newport                                                 | Cook Islands Government     | Report               |



## Appendix III: Referenced blue economy sources | Locally-Managed Marine Area Network

| Year | Title                                                                                                                                        | Author                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Institution    | Text Type                                                                                                        |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2023 | About Us                                                                                                                                     | Pacific European Union Partnership Programme                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | European Union | Website<br><a href="https://peump.dev/about-us">https://peump.dev/about-us</a>                                   |
| 2023 | Putting People First                                                                                                                         | Pacific European Union Partnership Programme                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | European Union | Website<br><a href="https://peump.dev/news/putting-people-first">https://peump.dev/news/putting-people-first</a> |
| 2023 | Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) and Small Scale Fishers Essential in a Blue Economy: Fiji, Oceania and Globally                          | The LMMA Network                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                | Speech                                                                                                           |
| 2023 | Community-based fisheries management                                                                                                         | Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                | Speech                                                                                                           |
| 2022 | A Call to Action for Artisanal Fisheries                                                                                                     | African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                | Policy                                                                                                           |
| 2022 | Blue Economy: 3 Recommendations from ACP Artisanal Fisheries                                                                                 | African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations and Locally-Managed Marine Area Network                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                | Policy                                                                                                           |
| 2022 | Artisanal Fisheries Call on Governments to Pursue the Dialogue on the Implementation of the Guidelines for Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries | African Confederation of Artisanal Professional Organisations, Locally Managed Marine Area Network, Network of Marine Areas of Responsible Fisheries and Marine Territories of Life, Low Impact Fishers of Europe Platform, Sindicato de trabajadores del Mar SITRAMAR, Bocas del Toro territorio Comarcal Gnobe Bugle Comarcal, Ostra Comichin, and LARECOTURH |                | Media Release                                                                                                    |
| 2022 | A Call to Action for Small-Scale Fishers                                                                                                     | Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                | Policy                                                                                                           |
| 2022 | United States Agency for Development (USAID) to Increase Assistance for Fiji and the Pacific                                                 | Fiji Government                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                | Media Release                                                                                                    |
| 2022 | Artisanal Fishers Call on Govts to Pursue Implementation of SSF Guidelines                                                                   | International Collective in Support of Fishworkers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                | Media Release                                                                                                    |

## Appendix III

|      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                        |                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2022 | URI Coastal Resources Center Lands \$15 Million to Help Countries, Communities Tackle Unsustainable Fishing Practices in Pacific Islands Region                                                                                                                                                                        | Dave Lavallee                                                                                          | Coastal Resources Center, University of Rhode Island | Media Release                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2022 | USAID Announces New Programs to Protect Our Ocean                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Office of Press Relations                                                                              | USAID                                                | Media Release                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2022 | Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | The White House                                                                                        | US Government                                        | Policy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2022 | OurFish OurFuture Fact Sheet                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | USAID                                                                                                  |                                                      | Fact Sheet                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 2022 | To be intentional in building partnership is key to our 100% Solution Scaling up Strategy. Paying courtesy visit to Director Resource and Development and Executive Director MCT ahead of the 4days LMMA Consultation workshop in Pohnpei for the USAIDs OUR FISH OUR FUTURE Project's priorities the next four years. | The LMMA Network (29 November 2022)                                                                    |                                                      | Facebook Post<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02UtDN1JiZ8fn2QhmiYRk6JiAgaKKGzifTY2EEu9mYJz7WyhsaaSX6jg5XJe6R2fGl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02UtDN1JiZ8fn2QhmiYRk6JiAgaKKGzifTY2EEu9mYJz7WyhsaaSX6jg5XJe6R2fGl</a> |
| 2021 | PEUMP Year 3 Annual Report and Year 4 Work Plan                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | The Pacific Community (SPC)                                                                            |                                                      | Report                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2020 | PEUMP Year 2 Annual Report and Year 3 Workplan                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | The Pacific Community (SPC)                                                                            |                                                      | Report                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2018 | The 2018 Annual Economic Report on EU Blue Economy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | European Commission, Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and Joint Research Centre |                                                      | Report                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2018 | "47. [European Parliament] Calls for the Blue Economy to be steered towards rebuilding the resilience of coastal communities..."                                                                                                                                                                                       | The LMMA Network (17 January 2018)                                                                     |                                                      | Facebook Post<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1763100267093404">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1763100267093404</a>                                                                                                               |
| 2017 | Report on the Blue Growth Strategy: Towards More Sustainable Growth and Jobs in the Blue Economy. SWD(2017) 128                                                                                                                                                                                                        | European Commission                                                                                    |                                                      | Report                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2016 | "'Blue economy' means very different, even contradictory, things to different people."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | The LMMA Network (8 March 2016)                                                                        |                                                      | Facebook Post<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1000743786662393">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1000743786662393</a>                                                                                                               |
| 2015 | World Fisheries Day: WFFP Denounces “False Solutions” to Climate Change                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | World Forum of Fisher Peoples                                                                          |                                                      | Media Release                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

|      |                                 |                                    |                                                                                                                                                      |
|------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2015 | "New article: Ocean Grabbing"   | The LMMA Network (22 April 2015)   | Facebook Post<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/831034153633358">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/831034153633358</a> |
| 2015 | "Blue carbon = ocean grabbing?" | The LMMA Network (1 December 2015) | Facebook Post<br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/942932449110194">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/942932449110194</a> |



## Appendix IV: Analysed media sources | Locally-Managed Marine Area Network

| Year | Date      | Source                  | Blue economy storyline | Title / Theme                                                                                         | Link                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2024 | 02-Feb-24 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental           | Theme: Celebrating World Wetlands Day                                                                 | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0Qyu8fdyNp7iuQ8qjP8XEysDFYHCFML2zfcq3F6TuQiv9pFfXWQa4SNr8KDzYX7QWDI">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0Qyu8fdyNp7iuQ8qjP8XEysDFYHCFML2zfcq3F6TuQiv9pFfXWQa4SNr8KDzYX7QWDI</a> |
| 2023 | 08-Jun-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental           | Theme: Celebrating World Oceans Day                                                                   | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02zKGG8v9dT2RgoNgJ2M6oj3faLvdhNANQfX2KUFJzEfQT6piTK7ud3VN78tzzGnRVl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02zKGG8v9dT2RgoNgJ2M6oj3faLvdhNANQfX2KUFJzEfQT6piTK7ud3VN78tzzGnRVl</a> |
|      | 02-Jun-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental           | Theme: Celebrating World Oceans Day                                                                   | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0vrldLFAbcKn6u4AzWCMmqGHaDPURmZpoLn53ZB9ndAxEepe2ZobEqSM3pMEDjFcWRl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0vrldLFAbcKn6u4AzWCMmqGHaDPURmZpoLn53ZB9ndAxEepe2ZobEqSM3pMEDjFcWRl</a> |
|      | 29-Apr-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                        | Theme: USAID & Conservation Society of Pohnpei workshop                                               | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0MZ5GzZcEMn5QbpFGBoAZXVmRwXhmWjJi2u8o4THrZgiHxzc5D1WYts8zQoLhXVo1ul">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0MZ5GzZcEMn5QbpFGBoAZXVmRwXhmWjJi2u8o4THrZgiHxzc5D1WYts8zQoLhXVo1ul</a> |
|      | 14-Mar-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                        | Theme: Small-grant opportunity to scale-up Community-Based Fisheries Management in the Pacific        | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid033RVH2dU2E5eTp4x8PVifVudSUqmtwJMe2Z8kEjxFMgz4xrQRc1MR7BiqM2vNSeYdl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid033RVH2dU2E5eTp4x8PVifVudSUqmtwJMe2Z8kEjxFMgz4xrQRc1MR7BiqM2vNSeYdl</a> |
|      | 14-Mar-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                        | Theme: PEUMP Sustainable Fisheries                                                                    | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid024aervVXabsHdgfXDdDrdovFKzQzE5BUhJe3YZ235tchkRHZTvfKzmEptoozTJwoxl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid024aervVXabsHdgfXDdDrdovFKzQzE5BUhJe3YZ235tchkRHZTvfKzmEptoozTJwoxl</a> |
|      | 05-Mar-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                        | Theme: Fiji PM Rabuka recognise LMMA at 2023 Our Ocean Conference                                     | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02Eiy6f2ePtcWaTfPDCATfQwBDzFqQu3MWBHXSaVo3hrWq82FvhaThRe65zqsZscBol">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02Eiy6f2ePtcWaTfPDCATfQwBDzFqQu3MWBHXSaVo3hrWq82FvhaThRe65zqsZscBol</a> |
|      | 02-Mar-23 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                        | Theme: Pohnpei LMMA Network receive The Pacific Islands Managed and Protected Area Conservation Award | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0kaVhvnWNTquaLCBoLEn6k8u1JPYjsUKrx4L2jACykAXw9Gwj1CEdvwRsuZvQHCEql">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0kaVhvnWNTquaLCBoLEn6k8u1JPYjsUKrx4L2jACykAXw9Gwj1CEdvwRsuZvQHCEql</a>   |
| 2022 | 29-Nov-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                        | Theme: LMMA Consultation workshop in Pohnpei for USAID OurFish OurFuture                              | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02UtDN1JiZ8fn2QhmiYRk6JiAgaKKKGzifTY2EEu9mYJz7WYhsaaSX6jg5XJc6R2fGl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02UtDN1JiZ8fn2QhmiYRk6JiAgaKKKGzifTY2EEu9mYJz7WYhsaaSX6jg5XJc6R2fGl</a> |

## Appendix IV

|  |           |                         |                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--|-----------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | 6-Sep-22  | Facebook - LMMA Network | (Instrumental / Critical in <i>Call to Action</i> )                                                               | Theme: Call to act for small fishers and communities                                                    | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid021KaLAq8ai4AioAkjV8YL9ZPV6ZhgSPg8nwbAUXYSapFTj2GgEMkme8ctpj3fAMNKL">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid021KaLAq8ai4AioAkjV8YL9ZPV6ZhgSPg8nwbAUXYSapFTj2GgEMkme8ctpj3fAMNKL</a>                       |
|  | 06-Sep-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network | (Instrumental / Critical in <i>Call to Action</i> )                                                               | Theme: <i>Call to Action</i> raised at FAO Committee on Fisheries 2022                                  | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid09yqLbMhMZ1beM6yz1zgvprDZuovvPa8ozN2rvHYSudg1GXNaFx4ZjxxL8qkDVTf3l">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid09yqLbMhMZ1beM6yz1zgvprDZuovvPa8ozN2rvHYSudg1GXNaFx4ZjxxL8qkDVTf3l</a>                         |
|  | 06-Jul-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                                                   | Theme: Final remarks of the small-scale fisher reps at UN Ocean Conference                              | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0ZfnbdyYhaUQnz a3UK4dccBTv2zyhjRgqFcWZCHifkswJLCZXmAVuf2x7XbAWDNl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0ZfnbdyYhaUQnz a3UK4dccBTv2zyhjRgqFcWZCHifkswJLCZXmAVuf2x7XbAWDNl</a>                           |
|  | 01-Jul-22 | Mongabay                |                                                                                                                   | Title: U.N. Ocean Conference ends with promises. Is a sea change coming?                                | <a href="https://news.mongabay.com/2022/07/u-n-ocean-conference-ends-with-promises-is-a-sea-change-coming/">https://news.mongabay.com/2022/07/u-n-ocean-conference-ends-with-promises-is-a-sea-change-coming/</a>                                                           |
|  | 01-Jul-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                                                   | Theme: Repost Guardian article " <i>Talk with us, not for us</i> "                                      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02RVAAXkrRS6WLiRU92NeAqnvXtwJz71QQjVNR7yzk5D9gJLz4PQWx8kMvhKSuFMkl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02RVAAXkrRS6WLiRU92NeAqnvXtwJz71QQjVNR7yzk5D9gJLz4PQWx8kMvhKSuFMkl</a>                         |
|  | 01-Jul-22 | The Guardian            | (Instrumental / Critical in <i>Call to Action</i> )                                                               | Title: 'Talk with us, not for us': fishing communities accuse UN of ignoring their voices               | <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/01/talk-with-us-not-for-us-un-urged-to-do-more-to-protect-fishing-communities">https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/01/talk-with-us-not-for-us-un-urged-to-do-more-to-protect-fishing-communities</a> |
|  | 01-Jul-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                                                   | Theme: Repost Guardian article " <i>Talk with us, not for us</i> "                                      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0jKpJfG1qECXU5DypDvjV1irXfx1JeKHASKPBAtPLrL6CkgBZJkwpcPRQ3Z5agovl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0jKpJfG1qECXU5DypDvjV1irXfx1JeKHASKPBAtPLrL6CkgBZJkwpcPRQ3Z5agovl</a>                           |
|  | 01-Jul-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                                                   | Theme: LMMA Network at the UN Ocean Conference, Day 2                                                   | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02NMKk8X86gin2K8dicEdWf6YJdBNnGUKXBsbkH7MiGJ5HQ8G7e8C9yBLN5YxTSiaWl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02NMKk8X86gin2K8dicEdWf6YJdBNnGUKXBsbkH7MiGJ5HQ8G7e8C9yBLN5YxTSiaWl</a>                       |
|  | 30-Jun-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                                                   | Theme: LMMA Network contributing to the discussions on small-scale fisheries at the UN Ocean Conference | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0gvFDSF7TrmgKPhjMwT7oqhxxUpmzjCFYhuZ88jivGsoVgUrWTS9KsLM2Hrpzv5JAcl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0gvFDSF7TrmgKPhjMwT7oqhxxUpmzjCFYhuZ88jivGsoVgUrWTS9KsLM2Hrpzv5JAcl</a>                       |
|  | 28-Jun-22 | The Loop                | (Instrumental / Critical in <i>Call to Action</i> )                                                               | Title: Small-scale fishers launch global call                                                           | <a href="https://www.looppng.com/global-news/small-scale-fishers-launch-global-call-113768">https://www.looppng.com/global-news/small-scale-fishers-launch-global-call-113768</a>                                                                                           |
|  | 17-May-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network | (repost Tamatoa Bambridge article on Blue Climate Summit. Outside conference title, no evocation of blue economy) | Theme: Growing partnership for Locally-led Solutions: Rahui Center, LMMA Network and One Reef           | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0C6uKidE2bz5PCwFo79WwZXTh4bfrvZMWZUbLGn6T34w3t3eQks9sqaQ1mcNM3oCBl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0C6uKidE2bz5PCwFo79WwZXTh4bfrvZMWZUbLGn6T34w3t3eQks9sqaQ1mcNM3oCBl</a>                         |



|      |           |                         |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      | 09-May-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                  | Theme: Study confirms community involvement and equitable governance contribute to more effective multiuse protected areas            | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0WT6x3deSL95gyANHLSDWER1Hw3Mxu1xZAhTVSUjY3o4Cn3REjCkPTeUHZE2ypEXl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0WT6x3deSL95gyANHLSDWER1Hw3Mxu1xZAhTVSUjY3o4Cn3REjCkPTeUHZE2ypEXl</a>                        |
|      | 20-Apr-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical (repost Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements blog) | Theme: How to destroy the oceans responsibly                                                                                          | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/7316558601747515">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/7316558601747515</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 16-Apr-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                  | Theme: Launch of OurFish OurFuture                                                                                                    | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/7297379336998775">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/7297379336998775</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 06-Apr-22 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental / Critical                                          | Theme: Call to Action at OACPS Minister's meeting                                                                                     | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0zoe7zAH17cFchzKi2BQw7AXTW98J1SL5ExQb2nrtpAMXYDteM6D9ukfDJyrKWEil">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0zoe7zAH17cFchzKi2BQw7AXTW98J1SL5ExQb2nrtpAMXYDteM6D9ukfDJyrKWEil</a>                        |
| 2021 | 20-Nov-21 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical (repost ICCA Consortium)                                | Theme: World Fishers Day                                                                                                              | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/6464730986930285">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/6464730986930285</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 30-Sep-21 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental                                                     | Theme: Madagascar fishers highlight connection between offshore fisheries and to small-scale fisheries                                | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/6192506364152750">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/6192506364152750</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 20-Jul-21 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical (repost Masifundise Development Fund)                   | Theme: Comment on South Africa's <i>Ocean Economy Master Plan</i>                                                                     | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/5809750439095013">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/5809750439095013</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 19-May-21 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental (repost Asian Development Bank)                     | Theme: Asian Development Bank's "Collaboration for Resilient & Green Recovery: Realising the Potential of a Sustainable Blue Economy" | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0sabpjHif82yyfnZpnTXqDaHMNoyP3QJmXfY8ZwdJHkUHptzg5PLRPzaD6A4Njy6l">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid0sabpjHif82yyfnZpnTXqDaHMNoyP3QJmXfY8ZwdJHkUHptzg5PLRPzaD6A4Njy6l</a>                        |
|      | 08-Jan-21 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical                                                         | Theme: 30x30 reads like a new model of colonialism                                                                                    | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4877528812317185">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4877528812317185</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 05-Jan-21 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical                                                         | Theme: 30x30 not support community efforts to manage oceans                                                                           | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4865275920209141">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4865275920209141</a>                                                                                                                                    |
|      | 05-Dec-20 | Website: 4FJ Facebook   |                                                                  | Title: 4FJ Fish Smart Start National Talanoa With on FBC Radio Waves                                                                  | <a href="https://4fjmovement.org/news-events/radio-program-launch">https://4fjmovement.org/news-events/radio-program-launch</a><br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4695940757142659">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4695940757142659</a> |

## Appendix IV

|      |           |                         |                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      | 27-Nov-20 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                          | Theme: The controversy of the 30x30 campaign                                                                                                  | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4702521193151282">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4702521193151282</a>                                                                                                                 |
|      | 25-Nov-20 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                          | Theme: Launch Fish SMART Campaign                                                                                                             | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4740844992652235">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4740844992652235</a>                                                                                                                 |
|      | 23-Nov-20 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                          | Theme: 4FJ campaign relaunched as the 4FJ Fish Smart campaign                                                                                 | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4695938780476190">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4695938780476190</a>                                                                                                                 |
|      | 06-Nov-20 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental / Critical (repost High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy report) | Theme: Study affirms human relationship with ocean                                                                                            | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02fq28cTA9aFvbbbdK938732RWBj2meoHqv6CxHD5wS7DeG4N7UA1H64eGb9WBGHkl">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02fq28cTA9aFvbbbdK938732RWBj2meoHqv6CxHD5wS7DeG4N7UA1H64eGb9WBGHkl</a>   |
|      | 25-Aug-20 | Facebook - LMMA Network |                                                                                          | Theme: Needs of small-scale fishers coming into conflict with industrial and for-profit conservation sectors                                  | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4151055781631162">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/4151055781631162</a>                                                                                                                 |
| 2019 | 09-Dec-19 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental                                                                             | Theme: Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), Pacific Blue Foundation (PBF) & Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area Network (FLMMA) partnership | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/3269688459767903">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/3269688459767903</a>                                                                                                                 |
|      | 21-Mar-19 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical                                                                                 | Theme: Dr Cresantia Frances Koya- Vaka'uta remarks at 'Surfacing the blue economy' panel                                                      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/2539972409406182">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/2539972409406182</a>                                                                                                                 |
|      | 25-Feb-19 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical                                                                                 | Theme: Inequity of REDD+ highlight lessons for blue carbon                                                                                    | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02hoFfbCyJot4SqQYSYUQrX4ykrY8tZa6QSexhbeHjXLhq8NSJJmdUYcwEANUu7rCal">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02hoFfbCyJot4SqQYSYUQrX4ykrY8tZa6QSexhbeHjXLhq8NSJJmdUYcwEANUu7rCal</a> |
|      | 31-Jan-19 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical (repost Masifundise Development Fund)                                           | Theme: TooBigToIgnore African workshop on transdisciplinary approaches to small-scale fisheries                                               | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/2431868310216593">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/2431868310216593</a>                                                                                                                 |
| 2018 | 05-Jun-18 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical                                                                                 | Theme: Raise equity questions around blue economy                                                                                             | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1955978991138863">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1955978991138863</a>                                                                                                                 |

|      |           |                         |                                               |                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      | 17-Jan-18 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Instrumental                                  | Theme: Repost European Parliament call for blue economy to be steered towards rebuilding the resilience of coastal communities | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1763100267093404">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1763100267093404</a>                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2017 | October   | Website: SPC            |                                               | Title: EU Marine Programme Launches New Website                                                                                | <a href="https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2020/09/eu-marine-programme-launches-new-website">https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2020/09/eu-marine-programme-launches-new-website</a>                                                                                                               |
|      |           | Website: EEAS           |                                               | Title: European Union and Sweden team up with the Pacific region to protect ocean                                              | <a href="https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/fiji_it/33394/%20European%20Union%20and%20Sweden%20team%20up%20with%20the%20Pacific%20region%20to%20protect%20ocean">https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/fiji_it/33394/%20European%20Union%20and%20Sweden%20team%20up%20with%20the%20Pacific%20region%20to%20protect%20ocean</a> |
|      |           | Website: PEUMP          |                                               | Title: Signature of a historic Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP)                                               | <a href="https://peump.dev/news/signature-historic-pacific-european-union-marine-partnership-peump">https://peump.dev/news/signature-historic-pacific-european-union-marine-partnership-peump</a>                                                                                                                           |
|      | 09-Sep-17 | Facebook - LMMA Network | (repost Eos article on blue carbon)           | Theme: Coastal wetlands effectively sequester blue carbon                                                                      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02hHDmKURHWTMTWRDAtkdgn7SW6nJ8npV6vH5hDFLjQhybw5X1niLo5N55h91Bq2l">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/pfbid02hHDmKURHWTMTWRDAtkdgn7SW6nJ8npV6vH5hDFLjQhybw5X1niLo5N55h91Bq2l</a>                                                                           |
| 2016 | 08-Mar-16 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Critical                                      | Theme: Question blue economy definitions, evoking Silver et al. (2015)                                                         | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1000743786662393">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/1000743786662393</a>                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2015 | 01-Dec-15 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Precursor: ocean grabbing                     | Theme: Blue carbon = Ocean Grabbing?                                                                                           | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/942932449110194">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/942932449110194</a>                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|      | 08-May-15 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Precursor: ocean grabbing                     | Theme: Bennett, Govan & Satterfield (2015) <i>Ocean Grabbing</i>                                                               | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/838855352851238">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/838855352851238</a>                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|      | 22-Apr-15 | Facebook - LMMA Network | Precursor: ocean grabbing                     | Theme: Bennett, Govan & Satterfield (2015) <i>Ocean Grabbing</i>                                                               | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/831034153633358">https://www.facebook.com/lmmanetwork/posts/831034153633358</a>                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 2013 | 01-Dec-13 | Facebook - LMMA Network | (Instrumental - repost Marjo Vierros seminar) | Theme: Role of communities in blue carbon                                                                                      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=570353856368057&amp;set=a.460537464016364">https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=570353856368057&amp;set=a.460537464016364</a>                                                                                                                                                 |



## Appendix V: List of key stakeholder interviews

| Randomised Interviewee Number | Relevant case study            |                                     |                         | Informal conversation ahead of interview | Sector                                            | Identification in Thesis |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
|                               | Pacific Regional Organisations | Locally-Managed Marine Area Network | Cook Islands Government |                                          |                                                   |                          |
| 83                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations                            | REG.83                   |
| 16                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.16                   |
| 71                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations                            | REG.71                   |
| 60                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.60                   |
| 11                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations                            | REG.11                   |
| 45                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations                            | REG.45                   |
| 5                             | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations / Fiji Government          | REG/FJ-GOV.5             |
| 40                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.40                   |
| 88                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Civil Society (regional)                          | rCS.88                   |
| 63                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | NGO                                               | NGO.63                   |
| 9                             | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations                            | REG.9                    |
| 35                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | NGO                                               | NGO.35                   |
| 82                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | NGO                                               | NGO.82                   |
| 17                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | NGO / Philanthropy                                | NGO/PHL.17               |
| 38                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Philanthropy                                      | PHL.38                   |
| 49                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Philanthropy                                      | PHL.49                   |
| 57                            | X                              |                                     |                         | X                                        | Philanthropy                                      | PHL.57                   |
| 31                            | X                              |                                     |                         |                                          | Fiji Government                                   | FJ-GOV.31                |
| 7                             | X                              | X                                   |                         |                                          | Civil Society (regional) / Consultant             | rCS/C. 7                 |
| 39                            | X                              | X                                   |                         | X                                        | NGO / Civil Society (regional)                    | NGO/rCS.39               |
| 27                            | X                              | X                                   |                         | X                                        | Regional organisations / Civil Society (regional) | REG/rCS.27               |

Appendix V

|    |  |   |   |   |                              |          |
|----|--|---|---|---|------------------------------|----------|
| 20 |  | X |   | X | Civil Society (regional)     | rCS.20   |
| 55 |  | X |   | X | Civil Society (regional)     | rCS.55   |
| 74 |  |   | X |   | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.74   |
| 91 |  |   | X | X | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.91   |
| 52 |  |   | X | X | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.52 |
| 94 |  |   | X |   | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.94   |
| 26 |  |   | X |   | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.26   |
| 41 |  |   | X |   | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.41   |
| 12 |  |   | X | X | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.12 |
| 66 |  |   | X | X | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.66 |
| 78 |  |   | X |   | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.78   |
| 23 |  |   | X |   | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.23 |
| 96 |  |   | X |   | Cook Islands Government      | CIG.96   |
| 4  |  |   | X |   | Civil Society (Cook Islands) | CI-CS.4  |

