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The use of influential power in ocean governance

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Ensuring inclusivity, especially the meaningful participation of diverse actors, is a key component of good governance. However, existing ocean governance frameworks have not yet achieved an equitable and fair playing field and are indeed often characterized by inequitable practices. In this perspective piece, we argue that one of the reasons for this lack of inclusion are the existing power frameworks and ways in which power is exercised within fora nominally intended to foster inclusion and cooperation. By focusing on four case studies of basic ocean governance processes, we explore how influential and interactive power is exercised in intergovernmental meetings, international conferences, and regional negotiations. These case studies demonstrate how specific exercises of power that undermine procedural inclusivity influence decision-making and the setting of agendas, and exclude important voices from ocean governance fora. This perspective piece contributes to the existing literature on power by highlighting how power is exercised within fundamental aspects of ocean governance. This paper merely scratches the surface, and more actions and research are needed to uncover and, more importantly, reverse deeply-rooted and self-perpetuating power structures in ocean governance.

KEYWORDS

ocean governance, equity, developing countries, negotiations, small island developing states, intergovernmental

1 Introduction

Inclusion defines the criteria for social, economic, and ecological sustainability as emphasised by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – 'Leave no one behind' (Singh, 2020; Crosman et al., 2022a; Ota et al., 2022). This paper especially focuses on procedural inclusivity in international negotiations regarding oceans, which are intended to ensure that everyone can meaningfully participate in decisions regarding the future of oceans and resource use (Watkins, 2014; Adeyeye et al., 2019; Rudolph et al., 2020; Haas

et al., 2022). However, to begin to realize a more inclusive and, as a result, more equitable future we need to uncover existing power frameworks at multiple scales that ultimately determine if inclusion and participation can truly be meaningful (Kotzé, 2019; Crosman et al., 2022b). This especially involves questioning how such power (described here as expressions of influence in negotiations) is exercised (Allen, 2011) so that we can assign accountability. In governance, international negotiations and cooperations are an important way to establish treaties, regulations, and new initiatives, but are also important for their implementation. However, the dynamics of these negotiations and meetings are often predictable in terms of who has more influence over the process and even over other states. Interactive and influential power in international negotiations can be linked to a certain geographical location or economic status, for example, global north or developed countries (Allen, 2011). Terms such as 'developing' and 'developed' countries, which have their roots in a colonial worldview (e.g., Bordner et al., 2020), are often equated with 'powerful' and 'powerless' countries, but this is a crude understanding of power and does little to explain how power is exerted, which limits explorations in how to confront and reverse power imbalances.

The existing literature on power is extensive and we do not aim to provide a comprehensive discussion of what power is or how it is exercised in the governance of our oceans. The aim of this perspective piece is to specifically explore how interactive and influential power is expressed in basic fora of ocean governance, namely, international negotiations, meetings, and conferences. We argue that the way some countries and actors use their power to influence and interact with others in these fora perpetuates white supremacy, misogyny, racism, and colonialism. To be clear, these effects may sometimes occur unintentionally as stakeholders exercise their power because the systems in which they work are set up in ways that favour their decisions (Griffin, 2007). Lack of inclusion is perpetuated nonetheless, and an anti-inequity focus and reflection are needed to truly transform ocean governance. To contribute to this more focused approach, we illustrate four ways in which influential power is exercised in ocean governance fora. These examples are not comprehensive, but provide a glimpse into different ocean governance fora, supported by literature on (in)equitable processes in ocean governance.

2 Introduction to power

The field of power research is diverse and comprises many theories. One of the most influential conceptualisations of power is that of the 'three faces of power' outlined by Lukes (1974). The first face of power refers to decision making, and one example is the concept of 'power over' (someone or something) coined by Dahl (1957), described as "A has power over B and can get B to do something that B would not do otherwise" (Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 1974, p.11). The second face of power addresses the setting of agendas, described as the power of an actor to hinder someone else's participation in decision-making (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). The third face, built on the previous two faces, is power through control (Lukes, 1974), which Lukes described as "B not only gets A to do what they want but also B also exercises power over A by influencing, shaping or determining A's very wants" (p.23). When describing the four examples of influential and interactive exercises of power, the first two faces of power are especially relevant.

Power is often 'considered as something that is held by individuals or institutions', however, to realise it, it needs to be exercised (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018; p. 382). Everyone has some kind of power, yet how power is initially distributed and subsequently exercised can lead to the perception of 'losing' or 'gaining' power, highlighting the need to understand how people, institutions, or organisations are '(dis)empowered' (Avelino, 2017). It is also important to highlight the theory that power is always relational – that is, defined in relation to others – and is a result of the respective situation (Foucault, 1980; Nuijten, 2005). Overall, the exercise of power has the ability to shape decision-making and can be a deciding factor in whether an objective can be achieved (Griffin, 2012). However, the exercise of power is not always noticeable and can be ambiguous and indirect, for example, manipulation or hidden authorities (Allen, 2011; Hathaway, 2016). This hidden and quiet form of power is not comparable to 'soft power'. While 'soft power' reaches its goals *via* persuasion rather than outright control (Nye, 2004), quiet power has more controlling and directly manipulative characteristics (Allen, 2020). In ocean governance decisions, this can include, for example, modifying processes in ways that exclude certain actors, or even the use of explicit or implied repercussions regarding other decisions or benefits.

Last, we want to touch on the perception of being 'powerful' or 'powerless'. To support the 'empowerment' of actors, who might perceive themselves as 'powerless', it is important to understand the link between space and scale (i.e., international, regional, local) and the distribution of power across space and scale, as not considering these elements might lead to unintended consequences (Shackleton et al., 2022). These actors not only need access to resources "but also capacity and willingness to mobilize them and the belief that one can" (Avelino et al., 2022; p. 105). While the concept of 'empowerment' will not be directly discussed in the upcoming examples, it is important to be aware that the described influential exercises of power can lead to perceptions of being 'powerful' and 'powerless'.

3 Exercise of power

In this section, we present four different ways of power exercise in international ocean fora: delegation size, regional groupings and reductionism, the use of colonial languages, and narrative control. These four examples are not a comprehensive list of ways in which influential and interactive power can be exercised, but we believe that they are a good starting point to reflect on deeper and widespread marginalisation due to harmful exercise of power that occurs within ocean governance settings (Finkbeiner et al., 2017; Crosman et al., 2022b). Moreover, we are aware that, even though the focus is on influential and interactive power, some of the examples can also be linked with other ways of power exercise and structure and we acknowledge this connection in the respective sections.

3.1 Delegation size

The size of delegations is one way to exercise influential power (Martinez et al., 2019; Onderco, 2022). Bigger delegations are better at interacting with a larger number of relevant actors but might also be better prepared for the meetings and negotiations (i.e., first face of power) (e.g., Panke, 2012; Chan, 2021). For example, at the 19th meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, the Japanese delegation contained 50 people, while Pacific Island States such as the Cook Islands or Samoa, were presented by 4 and 5 people, respectively (WCPFC, 2023). Having large delegations might also be a display of power, as they might be perceived as more capable. However, it is important to acknowledge that differences in delegation size might also reflect the priority of the topic for the respective country (Schroeder et al., 2012).

While maybe not an obvious issue of power exercise, the large size of the delegations from some countries can be a barrier for smaller countries to host meetings due to the lack of appropriate infrastructure and capacity. In the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, members of the Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency proposed size limits for delegations when the meeting is hosted by one of their members, but this idea was rejected for example by the United States, Japan, or Taiwan (WCPFC, 2019). As the status quo favours these countries they are unlikely to change it, so they can continue to exercise their influential power.

3.2 Regional groupings and reductionism

As noted in the previous section, smaller delegations might be disadvantaged in exercising influential and interactive power in international ocean governance fora. To overcome this issue, countries with smaller delegations often negotiate in blocs, which allows them to pool resources and have a stronger presence and influential power (Betzold, 2010). This can be conceptualised as the first (power over), but also the second (setting agendas) face of power as these groups are more able to propose agenda items and discuss issues that are important to them. For example, the Alliance of Small Island States was influential in establishing a 'Loss and Damage Fund' at the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2022 (Wyns, 2022), and the Caribbean Community had been highly engaged in the negotiations for the newly agreed Agreement for Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdictions (Hassanali, 2022). In the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, this approach allowed the Pacific Island States that collaborate under the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency to successfully influence negotiations and discussions (i.e., first face of power) (Aqorau, 2019).

Although this approach has been successfully applied in many international negotiations, it can also lead to a reduction of diverse voices by those who perceive them to be a monolithic group. For example, in the International Seabed Authority, African countries organized themselves into a large collective group containing 47 different countries, and together they developed common positions on key discussion points for upcoming meetings. During the meetings, this group is then collectively represented by one spokesperson. However, their voice – and by extension, that of the much larger group – was repeatedly minimized. For example, at a given point the moderator sought to summarise the opinions in the room, as a segue to further discussion, a standard practice in international fora. The view of the spokesperson of the collective group was not counted as that of each of the individual countries but rather was counted as one, directly undermining the collective power of the group. The Chair of the African Group reminded the Council "that the African Group comprises the 47 Member States to the ISA, therefore the notion of majority and minority should take into account this element when I am speaking on behalf of the Group" (Algeria, 2019; p. 12). As noted in the beginning we do not necessarily believe that the moderator intentionally exercised their power over the African Group and we can only speculate on the reasons; however, as a result, the influential power of this group was undermined. Of course, this can have outsized impacts in conjunction with our points above about delegation sizes and capacity.

3.3 The use of the English language

As language plays an important role in delivering ideologies and discourse it is an important tool for exercising power. English is seen as the new lingua franca[1] in scientific communication and many of the international fora related to ocean governance. However, while the use of English as a common language increases our connectedness and might even "depoliticise policymaking" (Ringe, 2022), it also has the potential to undermine countries and individuals whose native language is not English. For example, Falzon (2021) noted that English-speaking delegations are more effective. It could be argued that if an actor is more fluent in English, they might have greater success in influencing others. During meetings and conferences, for example at the Conferences of the Parties on climate change, English-speaking countries occasionally correct the drafting suggestions from non-English-speaking countries in a way that changes the meaning of such suggestions. This tactic undermines non-English-speaking countries' decision-making power and strengthens English-speaking countries' power over others (i.e., first face of power). Native English speakers may also be in a better position to bring their points across and hence explicitly or implicitly ensure their views are considered.

The issue of using English as the main language, also reveals structural, institutional biases and entrenchments of power. We argue that this could be linked to Lukes' third face of power – power through thought control. Lukes (1974) argues that preventing actors from forwarding ideas and voicing their interests is one of the most influential ways of power. Countries, institutions, or organisations can use their power to make it more difficult for stakeholders from non-English-speaking countries, for example, by excluding the

1 "any language that is used by speakers of different languages as a common medium of communication" Oxford English Dictionary

voices of researchers from these countries by rejecting their work due to their English (Ramirez-Castañeda, 2020). Studies on 'linguistic racism' also found that people who speak English with an accent might find themselves marginalized and perceived as less intelligent (Lindemann, 2005; Ro, 2021). However, this is also linked to racial stereotypes and English spoken with a Western European accent does not face the same judgement as English spoken by Asians, Africans, or people from the Middle East (Lindemann, 2005; Ro, 2021). Of course, very similar dynamics can be at play with other colonial languages (such as French or Spanish), or even local dialects.

3.4 Steering the narrative

The last example directly relates to the second face of power – excluding actors from setting agendas (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). This form of exercising influential power is not always obvious and often conducted in a hidden way *via* existing institutions and also conferences (Allen, 2011). There is an increasing number of ocean-related conferences and meetings, with many of them providing a platform to broadcast sustainability commitments or raise awareness of sustainability issues (Neumann and Unger, 2019). However, the outcome narratives for subsequent actions are often decided beforehand, often by a small elite group, often including Big International Non-Governmental Organisations (BINGOs), industry partners, and government officials and scientists from countries from the global north (Holmes, 2010; Blanc, 2022). In this case, stakeholders not only use their power to exclude others from these meetings but also use their power to transform existing frameworks in a way that works for them. These conference narratives often do not include or centre around diversity but on more lucrative topics such as economic growth, privatisation of ocean areas, or the enabling of new technological innovations as the ultimate goal of ocean and biodiversity conservation (Voyer et al., 2018).

4 Discussion and conclusion

The inclusive participation and contributions of multiple states towards international negotiations (procedural equity) are necessary for governance systems addressing sustainable development (Kotzé, 2019; Rudolph et al., 2020). Working towards more inclusive ocean governance first requires an understanding of current power dynamics in diplomatic negotiations (Petersson and Stoett, 2022). As power dynamics are the interplay of different types of power exercises, it is important to further unpack this issue (Avelino & Rotmans, 2011). This perspective paper explores the use of the influential and interactive exercise of power in ocean governance fora *via* four examples based on personal observations of the authors. Attention regarding the ocean and ocean-related activities has been rapidly increasing and there is more recognition of the importance of inclusive processes as a prerequisite for truly equitable outcomes (see e.g., Crosman et al., 2022b; Petersson and Stoett, 2022). The literature on power is extensive and our case contributes to uncovering power dynamics specifically in ocean governance.

Following the "faces of power" framework, three out of the four examples we discuss mainly associate with the first and the second face of power – power in decision-making (i.e., power over) (Dahl, 1957) and setting agendas (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). The example of using English as a *lingua franca* partially links to the third face of power – preventing ideas from emerging (Lukes, 1974). These presented examples do occur in existing structures that often favour certain actors (Griffin, 2007). For example, the use of English in conferences or meetings, but also for communicating information, excludes actors that are less fluent in the dominant language and 'dialects' of Western science and policy (Ramirez-Castañeda, 2020). Furthermore, the way meetings are conducted often favours states which are represented by larger delegations, as they have greater influential power and can for example conduct more informal meetings during negotiations (Panke, 2012). However, even though existing structures favour certain actors or groups, they also constrain these actors, as they are also bound by and can be held accountable to the respective rules (Nuijten, 2005), providing space for empowerment (Gwynn, 2019).

The presented examples not only occur in a predetermined set of structures, rules, and guidelines, but also in the context of climate change, biodiversity, trade, security, and fishing, which influence these negotiations, meetings, and conferences. For example, some countries depend on overseas aid or trade agreements with other countries. To achieve their economic aspirations, aid-providing countries might use their power to influence negotiations in multilateral fora (Sinan et al., 2021). Overall, these four examples demonstrated the different ways how influential and interactive power is exercised in ocean governance fora. Many more forms of power exercise can be experienced in ocean governance, and more work is needed to make power exercises and the resulting consequences visible, to develop strategies to empower actors, and to link the exercise of power to concepts such as colonialism, racism, misogyny, capitalism, or classism in ocean governance.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the conception and design of this paper. BH wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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