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EDITED BY

Maree E. Fudge,
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REVIEWED BY

Marc Jacquinet,
Universidade Aberta, Portugal
Nathan J. Bennett,
University of British Columbia, Canada

*CORRESPONDENCE

Philippa Louey
Philippa.Louey@anu.edu.au

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The blue economy's retreat from equity: A decade under global negotiation

Philippa Louey*

Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Heralded as a key agenda for sustainable ocean development, the blue economy has risen to such prominence over the last decade that it is near impossible to engage in the fields of ocean governance or development without encountering it. The exact nature of the blue economy's sustainable ocean development promise, however, remains stubbornly unresolved, with different actors advancing varying, at times conflicting, visions of what sustainable ocean development should look like, how it is to be achieved, and who it is to serve. Tracing the various constructions of blue economy promises over the last decade, this paper contends that the blue economy has progressively retreated from its early commitment to equitable benefit sharing, shifting instead to a deepening preoccupation with economic growth. For small island developing states (SIDS) and coastal least developed countries (LDCs) who took a leading role in embedding equitable benefit sharing within the blue economy during its early popularization, such retreat raises pressing questions over the agenda's continued suitability in advancing desired (and often much needed) sustainable development outcomes. This paper's attempt to grapple with such questions offers a timely contribution to discussions on the blue recovery and ocean-led development avenues in the wake of COVID-19.

KEYWORDS

blue economy, equity, small island developing states, equitable benefit sharing, sustainable ocean development

Introduction

Heralded as a key agenda for the achievement of sustainable ocean development, the blue economy has risen to such prominence over the last decade that it is near impossible to engage in the fields of ocean governance or development without encountering it. Broadly defined, the blue economy represents a vision for sustainable ocean development that promotes, and seeks to balance, economic growth, social inclusion and livelihoods, and the environmental sustainability of oceans and coastal areas (World Bank United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs, 2017, p. vi). Its promise of an environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive intensification of ocean industries has attracted widespread interest from governments, civil society, commerce, intergovernmental organizations and development agencies alike—providing a central rallying point around which these diverse agents can build coalitions in their

attempts to address the interrelated challenges of degrading ocean health, climate change and seemingly ever-growing resource demands (Schutter et al., 2021).

As noted consistently throughout the literature, however, the exact nature of the blue economy's sustainable ocean development promise remains stubbornly unresolved, with different actors advancing varying, at times conflicting, visions of what sustainable ocean development should look like, how it is to be achieved, and who it is to serve (Eikeset et al., 2018; Keen et al., 2018; Garland et al., 2019; Martínez-Vázquez et al., 2021; Ayilu et al., 2022, p. 13). Silver et al. seminal study (2015) provided the first insight into these competing interpretations of the blue economy's sustainable ocean development promise, identifying four distinct discourses at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) where the agenda was first introduced to global audiences. 3 years later, Voyer et al.'s (2018) analysis of international policy documents uncovered a similarly diverse body of blue economy discourses and sustainable ocean development interpretations, suggesting that little coherence had been achieved over the 6 years since Rio+20 and few conflicts resolved. As of today, the blue economy remains unsettled, with a growing crowd of agents drawing on, and arguably contorting, the agenda's promise of sustainable ocean development to align with their various interests.

Such acknowledgment of the blue economy's nebulous nature provides the basis for this paper's inquiry into the evolution of blue economy promises over the last decade. By tracing the various constructions of blue economy promises within mainstream global discourses, this paper contends that patterns can be observed in the agenda's 10-year career which, when read together, detail a narrative of retreating equity and a deepening preoccupation with economic growth. Critically, this paper understands the blue economy as a socially embedded agenda that can only be adequately analyzed and understood in the context of its various socio-historical settings (Garland et al., 2019; Bogadóttir, 2020; Fabinyi et al., 2021; Louey, 2022). This encourages an analysis of the broader socio-political ecosystems within which the blue economy and various promises have been articulated, ultimately situating it in the longer histories of sustainable development, modern geopolitics and neoliberalism.

This paper devotes particular attention to what the evolution of the blue economy promise means for the agenda's early advocates: Pacific Island nations. As the leading force behind the blue economy's introduction to global audiences at Rio+20, Pacific Island nations played a pivotal role in defining this agenda and crafting its foundational promises (Silver et al., 2015). As this paper will reveal, however, the blue economy has shifted considerably over the last decade—retaining some of the early promises that Pacific Island nations attached to the agenda while sidelining other central commitments. The final section of this paper will consider what implications such evolution in the blue economy promise presents for Pacific Island nations, and small island developing states (SIDS) more broadly. Ultimately, I urge caution in the Pacific's engagement

with the contemporary blue economy, suggesting that the latest iteration of the agenda may no longer serve the interests of these ocean states, their people or ecosystems. I argue that in its current form, the blue economy no longer aligns with the region's call for environmentally responsible, socially equitable ocean development. Wrested away from the control of Pacific Islands nations and SIDS more generally, the blue economy of today appears to have been all but emptied of promises to equitable development; and has instead been recruited into the service of powerful economic interests with their ambitions of economic intensification, expansion, and growth. Under the guise of "sustainable development" it has become a project focused on "sustained development".

Turning development oceanwards and a call for equitable benefit sharing (2011–12)

The popularization of the blue economy as an agenda for sustainable ocean development can largely be credited to Pacific Island nations and their efforts, through the Pacific SIDS grouping, at the Rio+20 conference (Silver et al., 2015; Keen et al., 2018; Voyer et al., 2018). It is for this reason that this paper commences its exploration of the blue economy in the period 2011–2012¹. Over the course of 2011 as the global development community prepared for the upcoming Rio+20, delegates of Pacific SIDS began voicing their concerns that the terrestrial focus of Rio+20's planned "Green Economy" theme risked overlooking key development opportunities and aspirations of Pacific Island and small island developing states (SIDS) (Pacific Small Island Developing States, 2011, p. 2). As large ocean states heavily dependent on oceans and coastal environments for their social, cultural and economic health, Pacific Island nations recognized the potential of a "blue economy" for elevating the profile of ocean-based development and better "ensur[ing] that issues related to the Pacific Ocean and Islands are given prominence in the Rio +20 agenda" (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a, p. 4). By leveraging the blue economy concept to expand the focus of global development agents and agendas, Pacific Island nations sought to encourage a more inclusive development landscape

1 While the "blue economy" had been earlier referenced by Gunter Pauli and his Zero Emissions Research and Initiatives (ZERI) network, and by the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transport at its 2009 subcommittee hearing on "The Blue Economy: The role of the oceans in our nation's economic future" (S. HRG. 111-46), it was not until Pacific SIDS took charge of the concept in the lead up to Rio+20 that the agenda came to the widespread attention of global agents. Pacific Island nations were thus central in shaping early conceptualisations of the blue economy and, in particular, in crafting its foundational promises such that it aligned with the interests and aspirations of the Pacific Island states and of SIDS more broadly.

that more readily recognized, supported, and resourced ocean development opportunities (Pacific Small Island Developing States, 2011; Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a, pp. note paragraphs 17, 18; SPREP, 2011b,c). In short, the grouping sought to place ocean development on the agenda at Rio+20 and leveraged the concept of a blue economy as the vehicle through which to do this.

Throughout the 2011 preparatory period, Pacific SIDS laid the groundwork for their blue economy conceptualization through a multi-pronged and highly coordinated campaign aimed both at advocating for the agenda's inclusion at Rio+20 and socializing the concept among other actors ahead of its formal discussion at the 2012 conference. This campaign entailed the active advocacy of the blue economy concept at the second and third Rio+20 preparatory meetings (March 2011), promotion of the agenda in their Pacific SIDS submission to the draft Rio+20 outcomes document (November 2011) (Silver et al., 2015, p. 141), the convening of a Pacific Preparatory Meeting for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development to coordinate the region's position ahead of Rio+20 (July 2011), and participation at the Monaco Workshop where Pacific SIDS rallied support for the agenda among the broader SIDS coalition (November 2011). Over this period, it appears that Pacific SIDS extended two clear promises under their blue economy agenda: first, a promise of the blue economy's particular value for SIDS and coastal least developed countries (LDCs) and second, a commitment to equitable benefit sharing of marine resources, access and benefits among states.

To appreciate the strategic sophistication of Pacific SIDS' early blue economy promise, it is useful to situate this discussion within the broader context of Rio+20 campaigning and negotiation. Alongside the Pacific SIDS' blue economy campaign, the broader SIDS grouping was concurrently pushing for international recognition of SIDS as a special case (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a; Komai, 2012). As part of this effort, SIDS (including Pacific SIDS) utilized Rio+20 discussions to emphasize the unique, often structural, challenges confronting SIDS in their pursuit of sustainable development—namely, that of their narrow resource base and vulnerability to climate change impacts (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a). Attention to the distinct challenges confronting SIDS were thus already being brought to the fore during Rio+20 discussions, offering, I argue, a favorable environment into which Pacific SIDS' first blue economy promise could be introduced. By constructing the blue economy as an agenda of particular value for SIDS and coastal LDCs (given its explicit ocean orientation), Pacific SIDS capitalized on the congruence between special case recognition and the blue economy to garner support among the broader SIDS coalition for their blue economy campaign, ultimately strengthening their advocacy of the agenda at Rio+20. By the time of the Rio+20 conference in 2012, Pacific SIDS had secured support from the majority of their

SIDS counterparts (Small Island Developing States, 2011) and successfully established the concept of a blue economy as a sustainable development agenda of particular promise for SIDS and coastal LDCs (as detailed by Silver et al., 2015). As will be further explored throughout this paper, this first promise of the blue economy has come to be one of the most enduring commitments of the blue economy across its 10-year career and while many other wealthier, larger and land dependent nations have since also adopted the agenda, recognition of the blue economy's particular value to SIDS remains central to mainstream thinking (Roberts and Ali, 2016; World Bank United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs, 2017; United Nations Conference on Trade Development, 2020).

Despite its close relation to this first blue economy promise, the second promise to be advanced during this early period has emerged as something far more controversial: the promise to equitable benefit sharing. Considering the long history of exploitative ocean resource extraction and use by foreign agents in Pacific Island EEZ's it comes as little surprise that equitable benefit sharing of marine resources and wealth became a key promise in the Pacific SIDS conception of the blue economy. This exploitation includes, but is far from limited to: US and French nuclear testing until as recently as 1996 (Teaiwa, 1994; Jetnil-Kijiner, 2017); systemic under-compensation for fisheries licenses by deep water fishing nations—particularly in the decades preceding the Parties of Nauru Agreement (Aqorau, 2019); occasions of environmental and social fallout resulting from the establishment of multi-million dollar, foreign owned tourism resorts (consider Freesoul Real Estate Development in Fiji), and the use of Pacific waters for military war games by former and neo-colonial powers (DeLoughrey, 2019).

As noted repeatedly throughout the Rio+20 preparatory period and conference, Pacific SIDS viewed the existing structures and practices of the ocean economy as “inadequate” (Pacific Small Island Developing States, 2011, p. 2) in equitably distributing ocean benefits (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a, p. 147; Silver et al., 2015). Their large ocean territories had provided considerable wealth to external agents for relatively little in return, yet, in the blue economy they saw an opportunity to drive change. In response, Pacific SIDS rooted their blue economy conceptualization to commitments to “specific targets to gain an increased share of the benefits from the utilization of our marine resource through direct participation and capacity building” (Pacific Small Island Developing States, 2011, p. 2), using the preparatory period to stress this demand.

At the Rio+20 conference itself, Pacific SIDS held steadfast to this benefit sharing commitment, with Silver et al. observing the grouping's repeated effort to connect the blue economy with “calls for benefit sharing agreements and other governance mechanisms by which Pacific SIDS may capture more revenue from territorial marine resources” (2015, p. 147). They rallied around the concept as a means for demanding improved access to, and distribution of, the wealth harvested from their exclusive

economic zones (EEZ) and areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ), and worked to embed equitable benefit sharing at the heart of their blue economy. As will be revealed over subsequent sections, this attempt to secure the promise of equitable benefit sharing as a priority of the blue economy was later overpowered as the agenda came to be embraced by the development mainstream. However, discussion of the blue economy's potential to transition toward a more equitable vision of ocean resource use, access and distribution did briefly persist into the post-Rio period as most prominently captured in the 2014 *Blue Economy Concept Paper* published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)—a document to which we shall now turn.

A juggling act: Final appeals to equity and the introduction of “decoupling” (2013–2015)

In the wake of Rio+20 the blue economy experienced a rapid uptake across the global development space, finding its way into state government policies², regional plans³, intergovernmental organization programmes⁴, non-governmental organization agendas⁵, and the remit of the commercial sector⁶. One of the most important publications to be released during this period was UNDESA's *Blue Economy Concept Paper* (United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs, 2014), which sought to clarify the discussions of Rio +20 and chart a path forward for the blue economy over subsequent years. While the *Concept Paper* had little success in unifying diverse blue economy visions, it marked a critical point of reference for blue economy advocates at the time and has been influential in informing subsequent blue economy visions as evident in its broad referencing by actors including the World Bank (World Bank United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs, 2017), the Commonwealth Secretariat (Roberts and Ali, 2016), and The Energy and Resources Institute (Juneja et al., 2021). It is for this reason that the document provides a valuable point of analysis for this section, exposing both a continuation of previous blue economy promises as presented by Pacific SIDS

2 Australia's *National Marine Science Plan 2015–2025: Driving the development of our blue economy* (2015); Mauritius establishes The Department of the Blue Economy (2015).

3 European Union's *Limassol Declaration* (2012); SIDS' *Abu Dhabi Declaration* (2014); the Pacific Islands Development Forum's (PIDF) *Green/Blue Pacific Economies* (2013).

4 UNDESA's *Blue Economy Concept Paper* (2014), the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) *Blue Economy: Sharing Success Stories to Inspire Change* (2015).

5 World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) *Principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy* (2015).

6 The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Blue Economy Series* (2015).

around Rio+20 and, perhaps most critically, the introduction of a new promise of “decoupling.”

Drawing heavily on the blue economy conceptualization advanced by Pacific SIDS at Rio+20, UNDESA's *Concept Paper* rearticulated both core promises made under the Pacific blue economy vision: (a) an emphasis on the agenda's particular value for SIDS and (b), a commitment to equitable benefit sharing. Moving beyond simple identification of these two promises, the *Concept Paper* actually drew the relational link between these commitments, explicitly defining the blue economy as a “sustainable development framework for developing countries addressing equity in access to, development of and the sharing of benefits from marine resources” (2014, p. 3). It thus recognized the importance of equitable benefit sharing (promise b) for the fulfillment of the blue economy's first promise to offer a development avenue of particular value for SIDS and coastal LDCs (promise a), thereby acknowledging that for a blue economy agenda to be of value for SIDS and coastal LDCs, attention to equitable benefit sharing would be paramount. Indeed, further in the paper, the “principle of equity” is described as “fundamental” to the blue economy approach and a key commitment to be upheld through the agenda's mainstreaming (2014, p. 3).

This explicit centring of equity in UNDESA's blue economy conceptualization is somewhat remarkable given the political implications of such a promise. Perhaps the framing of the publication as a concept paper (as opposed to a formal report or plan) provided the UNDESA authors with greater freedom to include equitable benefit sharing in the final document and evade pressures to water down such an expectation. Regardless, it should be noted that this *Concept Paper* contains one of the most strident assertions of the blue economy's promise to equity to yet be released by a body that does not explicitly represent the Global South. For this reason alone it provides a valuable document for blue economy observers. Yet, given the current trajectory of the blue economy, it is one that will not likely be repeated.

Seemingly in contrast to its progressive discussion of equitable benefit sharing, UNDESA's *Concept Paper* also marked the introduction of the blue economy's now notorious “decoupling” promise. Specifically, the paper stated that “at the core of the Blue Economy concept is the de-coupling of socioeconomic development from environmental degradation” (2014, p. 3). Or in other words, a promise that economic development can be pursued without compromising ecological systems and thus accelerated with minimal disturbance to the planet. While enchanting in its vision, the trouble with such promise is that it fails to confront the underlying growth imperative of contemporary ocean economies (Brent et al., 2020; Mallin and Barbesgaard, 2020). In its attempt to detach economic development from ecological impacts, the decoupling promise risks overlooking the burden that capitalist markets and contemporary societies (some more than others) place

on ecological systems (Ertör and Hadjimichael, 2019). This arguably facilitates the further expansion and intensification of resource extraction, rather than grappling with the need for transformative change to global consumption and distribution systems (Bond, 2019; Germond-Duret, 2022). Indeed, far from a novel approach to ocean development, the decoupling promise appears little more than a re-rehearsal of neoliberal sustainable development logics [most prominently captured in the *Brundtland Report* Brundtland, 1987] that, despite their three-decade career, have failed to discipline the development paradigm to the point that we today face the ever-deepening and compounding challenges of inequitable development, ocean degradation and climate change (Emberson-Bain, 1994; Longo et al., 2015; Wanner, 2015; McCormack, 2017; Bhagwan et al., 2020; *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era Pacific Network on Globalisation*, 2020; Mallin and Barbesgaard, 2020; Germond-Duret, 2022). If these earlier neoliberal logics have fallen short in their delivery of sustainable development [often in spite of considerable resourcing (Lees, 2007)], one must question why mainstream development agents continue to insist on progressing this model? As will be explored in the following section, such questions have rarely been asked in mainstream blue economy circles, with UNDESA's decoupling promise finding favor among the agenda's key advocates and rising to prominence over subsequent years.

In the evolution of the blue economy's promise to sustainable ocean development, UNDESA's *Blue Economy Concept Paper* embodies the moment of transition from a SIDS oriented blue economy to a neoliberal regime of ocean industrialization: espousing the need for equitable benefit sharing on the one hand, while introducing the idea that ocean development can be decoupled from ecological harm on the other. The following section will detail how by 2016, substantive reference to equitable benefit sharing had all but disappeared from mainstream blue economy thinking and been replaced with more conventional visions of development *via* universal economic growth. As such, I conclude this section acknowledging 2014–2015 as one of the final periods in which the Pacific Islands' original hope for an equitable and distributive sustainable ocean development agenda was visible within the mainstream blue economy discourse.

A retreat from equity (2016–19)

By the late 2010s the blue economy had become the leading global agenda for “sustainable ocean development”. Major ocean conferences were hosted with an explicit focus on the agenda⁷, and voluntary commitments on the blue economy proliferated

⁷ Pacific Islands Development Forum's “1st High Level Pacific Blue Economy Conference” (2017), the Our Ocean Conference added the ‘Sustainable Blue Economy’ as a theme (2017), the Kenyan Government

(Voyer et al., 2021). There were also expanding efforts to intertwine the blue economy concept with the UN sustainable development goal 14 (SDG14: Life below water) (Lee et al., 2020; *Sea Power Centre - Australia*, 2021). From the perspective of Pacific Island states, two key developments in the blue economy promise came to a head during this period; the first was a clear retreat from earlier commitments to equitable benefit sharing, and the second was the firm entrenchment of the idea of decoupling. These developments will be discussed in turn below, revealing how the mainstream uptake of the blue economy displaced core promises that Pacific SIDS had earlier worked to instill in the agenda during Rio+20.

Once a core promise of earlier blue economy conceptualisations, the commitment to equitable benefit sharing suffered a swift retreat from global discussions during the late 2010s. While blue economy advocates continued to recognize the unique value that sustainable ocean development presented for SIDS and coastal LDCs, observations suggest that this more progressive promise to distributional justice was stripped out of the agenda in, what I suggest, was an attempt to render the blue economy more palatable to larger, wealthier agents. The Commonwealth Secretariat's “Blue Economy Series” provides perhaps the starkest illustration of this retreat from equity, with *The Blue Economy and Small States* report (2016) making no mention of equitable benefit sharing despite its explicit focus on the agenda's application for SIDS and small states more broadly. Instead, the report celebrates the blue economy as “a promising avenue for economic diversification and growth” (2016, p. 5). Or, reading between the lines, an agenda wherein SIDS and small coastal states (alongside the expanding gamut of ocean actors) can grow their wealth through expanded ocean industries while posing little, if any, disruption to the established ocean economy, its powerful agents and asymmetrical resource distribution. Such approach to economic growth sidelines earlier demands of SIDS and coastal LDCs that called for a greater *share* of the wealth derived from their ocean resources—ultimately upholding a structure in which larger, wealthier agents remain unchallenged in their concentration of ocean profits. For a report designed explicitly to explore the potential of the blue economy for SIDS and small coastal states, the absence of promises of benefit sharing presents a serious watering down of the agenda's earlier ambitions.

Here it is important to mention that while calls for equitable benefit sharing were struggling for air during this period, the late 2010s did witness a rise in attention to issues of inclusivity in the blue economy discourse. This new focus on inclusion stemmed predominately from the efforts of small scale fisher organizations [e.g., ICCA Consortium, Too Big to Ignore (TBTI)], maritime workers and consortiums (e.g., Project MATES) and Global South

in collaboration with the UNDP hosted the “Sustainable Blue Economy Conference” (2018).

coalitions [e.g., Development Alternative for a New Era (DAWN), Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG)] who argued that livelihoods, decent employment, market access and marine tenure rights were the foundation of sustainable ocean development. Attentive to the issue of inclusivity, blue economy advocates incorporated these commitments into their discussions and program designs (see for example The World Wildlife Fund's Blue Economy Principles (2015), Europe's "Blue Generation Project", or the IIED's "Inclusive blue economy" programme).

The rise of such commitments to inclusivity, however, risk shifting attention from more transformative understandings of equitable benefit sharing. First, it is without doubt that social inclusion must be central to any framework of sustainable ocean development as without it, the agenda is left balancing precariously upon its economic and environmental pillars alone. Yet, it also appears that the rise of inclusivity has, intentionally or not, distracted from earlier equitable benefit sharing demands that more radically call for the structural transformation of global systems. As such, the blue economy finds itself caught in a trap of facilitating inclusion into inequitable systems, rather than addressing root structural disparities. Further to this, by focusing on inclusion without equity, the blue economy loads the burden of responsibility upon actors at the national level (governments, NGOs, civil society) who are expected to lead inclusivity initiatives and monitor their progress. Again, the placing of responsibility on national actors is not a negative outcome given the critical role that these actors occupy in distributing the benefits of marine development among communities. However, if not coupled with attention to global political and economic structures and their role in upholding inequitable systems these inclusivity efforts risk being merely band-aid solutions. Attention to inclusion within blue economy discourses, though important, should thus not be seen as a substitute for promises to equitable benefit sharing as first proposed by Pacific SIDS at Rio+20. After all, it is the transformative nature of the latter that first rendered the blue economy a valuable discourse for Pacific Island nations and SIDS who looked beyond inclusion to demand a redistribution of ocean wealth and access.

Turning to the promise of decoupling, the release of the World Bank and UNDESA report, *The Potential of the Blue Economy: Increasing Long-term Benefits of the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources for Small Island Developing States and Coastal Least Developed Countries* (2017), marks an key milestone in the blue economy's evolution. Like the previously discussed Commonwealth Secretariat report, this publication explicitly recognized the value that the blue economy presented to the SIDS and coastal LDCs, and in light of this, suggested a series of broad steps for these nations "to follow to make the blue economy an important vehicle to sustain economic diversification and job creation" (2017, p. ix). While the report's

definition⁸ of the blue economy has emerged as perhaps the most visible legacy of this publication, I contend that its reaffirmation of the "decoupling" promise earlier introduced in the 2014 UNDESA *Concept Paper* has also powerfully shaped contemporary interpretations of the blue economy agenda.

Echoing statements earlier outlined in the 2014 *Concept Paper*, the World Bank and UNDESA report states that the blue economy "at its core it refers to the decoupling of socioeconomic development through oceans-related sectors and activities from environmental and ecological degradation" (2017, p. vi). As noted earlier, this equation advances the idea that continued economic growth remains permissible under sustainable development, with little (if any) reflection on the need for radical change in global consumption and distribution trends. Capitalism's growth imperative thus goes unchallenged, opening the way for capital's oceanward expansion to proceed unimpeded and unopposed.

Furthermore, not only does such a "decoupling" vision attempt an act of historical anomaly —proffering a counter to strongly evidenced trends over the last decade that have repeatedly shown the devastating impact that capitalism's intensification has had on social and ecological systems—but it stunningly celebrates the economy's separation from the environment as a positive achievement. Decades of scholarship and activism across a range of disciplines have challenged this assumption of ecological separatism (consider Carolyn Merchant, Donna Haraway, Teresia Teiawa, Upolu Lumā Vaai, Karl Polanyi and the degrowth movement to name a few), and numerous cultures across the world have refuted such vision for millennia. These voices have emphasized the mutual embeddedness of ecological and social systems (including economic systems) and insisted on their inalienability. The World Bank and UNDESA's reaffirmation of the decoupling promise thus serves the interests of a very specific subset of the global community (namely those who profit from the dominance of neoliberal market economics) and works to further legitimize the notion that economic development can be achieved without negative environmental consequences or a significant reduction in resource use and consumption. Today the idea of "decoupling" has developed into a core promise of the blue economy that features heavily throughout the mainstream literature (Koehring, 2020; European Commission, 2022).

Upon arrival at the 2020s, it appears that the blue economy had shifted significantly from its initial conception: losing its progressive commitment to equitable benefit sharing and hardening its orientation toward industrial interests through its promise to the notion of decoupling. These trends appear to have continued into the current decade, however, as discussed below,

⁸ "The "blue economy" concept seeks to promote economic growth, social inclusion and preservation or improvement of livelihoods while at the same time ensuring environmental sustainability." (2017, p. 1).

the global shock of the COVID-19 pandemic has revived an old promise of the blue economy agenda: economic recovery.

A COVID-19 recovery pathway (2020 – present)

On 31 December 2019, at the turn of the new decade, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) China Office picked up a media statement from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission outlining cases of "viral pneumonia" in the city. 1 month later, on 30 January 2020, the WHO declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as a public health emergency of international concern and within months the virus had spread across the globe. In addition to the devastating public health impact of COVID-19, the economic fallout that arose from the pandemic and associated response measures was immense and pushed many national economies to the point of crisis. Pacific Island nations and SIDS were hit particularly hard by these economic impacts as tourism, a critical sector in many of these nations, ground to a halt and the commercial fisheries sector in many cases contracted. According to the OECD, the GDP of SIDS dropped by 6.9% in 2020 compared to a 4.8% decline in other developing countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development, 2021, p. 2). The impacts of COVID-19 were thus felt acutely through island nations, if not from a health perspective then almost certainly economically.

As the world started looking toward a path out of COVID-19, discussion emerged around the idea of a "blue recovery". Simply termed to convey the use of sustainable ocean development activities (i.e., the blue economy) in support of economic recovery efforts, the concept of the blue recovery has swept through ocean development circles. The blue recovery forms a central component of UNCTAD's forward work program (2020), the OECD's COVID-19 Policy Response (2021), the World Bank's PROBLUE program (2020), and even the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy—an organization once cautious in its engagement with the blue economy (Stuchtey et al., 2020, p. 27; Österblom et al., 2020)—has adopted the blue recovery into its agenda (Northrop et al., 2020). This is not to mention the numerous regional and national bodies that have incorporated blue recovery measures into their COVID-19 recovery plans, among which include the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2021), Japan (Satoyama Initiative), the European Commission (2021), the United States' National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (2021), and the Cortal Triangle Initiative (2021), whose members include Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, and Timor Leste. In response to COVID-19, the blue economy has evidently been saddled with an additional promise to lead economic recovery, especially in SIDS where ocean resources are vast. However, as the following discussion

will reveal, this promise is not particularly new, but rather a resurrection of one of the blue economy's initial promises.

Aspirations of economic recovery have a deep history in the evolution of the blue economy, dating back further than Rio+20 to the agenda's very early conceptualization at the 2009 U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transport's hearing: "The Blue Economy: The role of the oceans in our nation's economic future" (S. HRG. 111-46). Responding to the fallout of the 2008 global financial crisis, the U.S. Senate Committee presented the blue economy as "one of the main tools for rebuilding the U.S. economy" (US Senate Committee on Commerce Science Transportation, 2009, p. 1), viewing it as an agenda under which the U.S. could harness "great untapped wealth in our oceans" and create "new jobs and new business opportunities" (2009, p. 1). The hearing placed considerable emphasis on technological innovation as a central pillar for economic recovery, with speakers and senators expressing their interest in the exploration of emerging blue economy sectors, namely offshore renewable energy, marine biopharmaceuticals and marine spatial planning. In a similar fashion, the European Union developed its Blue Growth strategy (the predecessor of their present Blue Economy initiative) in the wake of the European Debt Crisis with the hope that the agenda would "[offer] new and innovative ways to help steer the EU out of its current economic crisis" (European Commission, 2012, p. 3). Emerging sectors again formed a key component of the EU's Blue Growth strategy, with the organization identifying five priority sectors—ocean energy, aquaculture, coastal tourism, marine biotechnology and seabed mining—based on their apparent "high potential for sustainable jobs and growth" (European Commission, 2012). As both the U.S. and Europe transitioned out of economic crisis, their interest in the blue economy as an expressly "recovery" oriented agenda unsurprisingly dampened and the EU, in particular, redirected their conceptualization of the blue economy as a central component of its ongoing regional maritime strategy. The return of the blue economy's recovery promise, captured in the term "blue recovery", can thus be seen as a revitalisation of an old promise, albeit with an expanded global remit. What implications the blue recovery promise poses for Pacific Island nations will be considered in the following section as part of a broader discussion about the impact that the blue economy's evolution presents for SIDS development ambitions and opportunities.

The implications of an evolving blue economy promise

As this paper has demonstrated, the blue economy has been involved in a process of considerable evolution over the last decade. Tracing the making and remaking of the agenda's promises offers a useful insight into this evolution. Nevertheless,

consideration into what these changes actually mean for the original blue economy advocates and their initial vision for the agenda should not be overlooked. This final section reflects on how the blue economy's retreat from equity, continued recognition of the agenda's unique value for SIDS and coastal LDCs, adoption of the "decoupling" vision, and re-orientation to economic recovery may impact Pacific Island communities and their ambitions for sustainable ocean development. It offers but a starting point for such discussions and it is hoped that further conversation on the blue economy's material impact may be furthered by and within the region.

One of the most disheartening trends in the blue economy's evolution has been its near absolute retreat from substantive commitments to equitable benefit distribution. Though a central promise of the Pacific SIDS' blue economy conception of 2011/2012, this commitment appears to have been watered down over the last decade to the point where its redistributive essence has effectively been usurped by the less transformative aspiration of inclusion. Under this new focus on inclusion, Pacific Island nations and SIDS more broadly are invited to participate in activities of ocean development and wealth generation yet, concerningly, are deterred from more forthright ambitions for the restructuring and/or dismantling of existing ocean economy structures that concentrate wealth in the hands of a few to the exclusion (and arguably at the expense of) the many. Existing ocean economy structures are thus broadened, not transformed; and historical power relations maintained, not confronted. I suggest that this falls short of Pacific SIDS' ambition for the blue economy to encourage a "more equitable sharing of the benefits" derived from ocean-based economies (*Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a, p. 4*) and therefore the blue economy in its current form should be approached with caution by these large ocean nations.

Indeed, the blue economy's enduring struggle to adequately acknowledge and address issues of equity within ocean development and governance has been increasingly highlighted by academic and civil society observers over recent years (*Bennett et al., 2019; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2019; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era Pacific Network on Globalisation, 2020; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2020; Pacific Network on Globalisation Ozeanien Dialog, 2020; Farmery et al., 2021; Pedersen, 2021; Voyer et al., 2021; Ayilu et al., 2022*). Similar to this paper, these observers have suggested that issues of equity and justice continue to be overlooked in mainstream blue economy approaches, resulting in the detrimental outcomes and the further exclusion of communities distant to power. This disenfranchisement (at times dispossession) under current blue economy agendas has been documented among small scale and capture fishers (*Cohen et al., 2019; Bogadóttir, 2020; Farmery et al., 2021*), coastal dwelling populations (*Satizábal et al., 2020; Pedersen, 2021*), communities of the global south (*Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era Pacific Network on Globalisation,*

2020; Fache et al., 2021), and indigenous knowledge holders (*Helmreich, 2007*). The High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy has led some important discussion among global leaders about the need to prioritize equity within blue economy agendas (*Österblom et al., 2020; Stuchtey et al., 2020*) and have recognized "ocean equity" as one of its key areas of transformation in its Ocean Action Agenda. However, given the extent of inequity currently entrenched and perpetuated in the ocean economy (*Österblom et al., 2020*), further advocacy on the global stage is urgently needed. At a time where the blue economy appears to be increasingly retreating from its promise to equity, I suggest that Pacific Island nations can play a crucial role in calling for a systemic restructuring of the ocean economy while recognizing their own role in ensuring inclusive development outcomes and opportunities for their communities.

On a more positive note, continued recognition of the blue economy as a particularly valuable avenue for sustainable development among SIDS and coastal LDCs reflects an important turn in global understanding regarding the role that oceans play for the health and wellbeing of developing oceanic nations. From the position of Pacific Island nations, the blue economy's focus on sustainable ocean development enables them to direct greater attention toward the development activities and opportunities that revolve around their oceans, and subsequently, provide them with greater leverage to secure international partnerships, resourcing and support. Nevertheless, Pacific Island communities, SIDS and coastal LDCs must work carefully to control the pace, objectives and agents of this "blue acceleration" (*Jouffray et al., 2021*) to guard against the threat of ocean grabbing (*Bennett et al., 2015*). After all, a blue economy that encourages a surge in externally led and/or externally driven ocean development activities risks undermining the principle of self-determination that many developing ocean states have fought so hard to advance.

The broad embrace of the blue economy's decoupling promise presents another area of caution for Pacific Island communities, particularly with regard to its incompatibility with deeply held cultural values of socio-ecological embeddedness, respect and relations. As long noted in Pacific development debates, modern development programmes have repeatedly failed to recognize Pacific peoples' deep and reciprocal relationships with their ecosystems (*Emberson-Bain, 1994; Vaai, 2019*). Such programmes have instead sought to impose western assumptions of human/nature dualisms upon the Pacific, often enacting such vision through their project design. For many commentators in the region, this western understanding of human-ecosystem relations (or lack thereof) fits poorly within Pacific contexts, and for some even threatens to jeopardize and harm communities' relationship with their environment (*Emberson-Bain, 1994, p. i; Vaai and Casimira, 2017*). The blue economy's decoupling promise represents but the latest iteration of this western human/nature dualism, again denying the

tangled web of interactions, processes and impacts that humans share with their ecosystems. I suggest that the decoupling promise thus requires close scrutiny from Pacific communities (as well as SIDS and many coastal LDC communities) as to its compatibility with their cultural values, practices, and ontologies.

Finally, to the question of what implications the blue recovery promise poses for Pacific Island nations, three key questions appear to be of central importance for future deliberations. Firstly, the undoubted reorientation of the blue economy toward economic objectives under the blue recovery raises concern that social and environmental considerations will become sidelined as agents pursue, first and foremost, economic growth. For Pacific Island nations in particular, this undermines their original vision of the blue economy which stressed the need for environmentally responsible ocean activities, particularly in response to climate change ([Pacific Small Island Developing States, 2011](#), p. 2; [Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2011a](#), p. 4), and the socio-cultural importance that the ocean has long had for Pacific Islands' peoples and communities ([Silver et al., 2015](#)). Thus, there is a risk that the blue recovery will weaken the promise of *sustainable* ocean development as promoted by Pacific Island agents.

The second question raised by the blue economy's returning recovery focus concerns the issue of *which sectors* will be promoted under such reorientation. As earlier noted, Pacific Island nations have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, in large part (at least from an economic perspective) due to their heavy reliance on tourism and fisheries for economic revenue and employment. Unsurprisingly, discussions of economic diversification have thus become commonplace over the last 2 years as Pacific Island leaders look not only toward immediate economic recovery but also to safeguarding future prospects ([Global Access Partners \(GAP\), 2021](#)). Emerging sectors have drawn particular attention from Pacific Island leaders as potential avenues for diversification, including blue bonds (e.g., Fiji's sovereign Blue Bond initiative), technological innovation (Kenilorea in [Global Access Partners \(GAP\), 2021](#), p. 16; [The Economist, 2020](#)), and perhaps most noteworthy: seabed mining (Cook Islands, Nauru, Tonga). The integrity of these emerging sectors as blue economy candidates, however, should be carefully considered to ensure that they meet the environmental and social objectives of the Pacific's blue economy vision. In short, economic diversification that ignores the social and environmental ramifications of newly adopted sectors not only fails to meet the sustainability baseline of the blue economy but risks undermining, and perhaps further endangering, the very promise of sustainable ocean development all together.

Thirdly, the question of *who* will lead the blue recoveries of Pacific Island nations will be a critical point of discussion over the coming years. Such a question builds on a rich history of debate that has been ongoing through the region around

issues of development dependency, self-determination and self-sufficiency ([Tupouniua et al., 1975](#)). With the economic fallout of COVID-19 constraining the budgets of many Pacific Island governments, it is likely that many blue recovery activities will be undertaken by or with the support of foreign partners. To avoid the risk of overbearing or misaligned foreign involvement in ocean development projects, it will be critical for Pacific Island representatives (both political, cultural and community) to be integrally involved in blue recovery initiatives and planning—if not leading the programmes themselves. Placing Pacific Island peoples at both the center *and* head of the blue recovery will better ensure that these activities align with the ambitions, needs and interests of the region.

Conclusion

An agenda that has gained extraordinary popularity over the last decade, the blue economy has and continues to embody the aspirations and interests of its advocates in the promises that it makes about sustainable ocean development. This paper has brought to light some of the key shifts in the blue economy's promise from 2011 to present, with a particular interest in the commitments that impact Pacific Island nations. Analysis reveals a dynamic landscape of change and negotiation wherein certain promises have gained dominance and longevity (decoupling, and recognition of the blue economy's value to SIDS), others have faded into the distance due, seemingly, to their confrontation of entrenched power structures (i.e., equitable benefit sharing), and some have returned in response to somewhat cyclical contextual circumstances (i.e., economic recovery).

From the perspective of Pacific Island nations, the blue economy has, I argue, failed to retain its early promise of promoting equitable benefit sharing of ocean resources. Its uptake among the global mainstream has instead seen its agenda bend in service of interests who wish to expand ocean profits without the responsibility of sharing them. As the blue recovery accelerates in coming years, it will be critical for observers to monitor where sustainable ocean development funding and support is directed and critically, if SIDS, who rely so heavily on their ocean resources, are equitably serviced in this allocation. If this latest iteration of the blue economy fails to equitably support the recovery and development needs of SIDS then it will not only undermine current efforts to drive an equitable, inclusive and sustainable economic recovery, but also further weaken and perhaps even extinguish the value this agenda presents for SIDS.

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

PL: conceptualization, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing.

Conflict of interest

The author declares 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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