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Achieving Equity through a Blue Economy

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Achieving Equity through a Blue Economy

The *sustainability* element of the blue economy is typically defined in terms of managing natural resources. Marine ecosystems provide the value that underpins the economy. A sustainable approach ensures that they can keep doing this indefinitely without becoming too degraded or depleted. This is certainly true but to limit this definition to natural resources alone is to overlook another key component – equity.

Equity means ensuring fairness and justice for all. It is not just one potential upside of a sustainable blue economy but rather a fundamental pillar of it.

Why is equity important?

Moral and legal responsibilities

On a basic level there is moral responsibility to embed equity into the development and outcomes of a blue economy. This stems from core principles of human rights and environmental justice. In short, it is the right thing to do.

In many cases there is also a legal responsibility for countries to ensure equity. For example, the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea ([UNCLOS](#)) treaty – created to provide appropriate [governance](#) of the planet's ocean and seas – calls for 'equitable sharing of financial and other economic benefits derived from activities.'

Equity enables sustainability

In addition to moral and legal duties, there is an argument that equity is key to achieving sustainability. [Cisneros-Montemayor et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that social equity is an enabling condition for a sustainable blue economy alongside environmental and economic conditions. Social support and buy-in from all stakeholders is key to this. Many of the ecosystems that underpin a sustainable blue economy are [socioecological systems](#), where communities live as part of the ecosystem. To preserve the value of the ecosystem, it is necessary to respect the needs of communities associated with them. Community-based management approaches are shown to be successful to long-term sustainability across numerous sectors including [blue carbon projects](#), [fisheries management](#) and [ecotourism](#). By contrast, failure to achieve [community buy-in](#) and [trust](#) of local

stakeholders can ultimately [undermine the viability](#) of projects. It is argued by [Croft et al. \(2024\)](#) that “it is only through equitable processes that desired outcomes such as sustainability can succeed”.

It is important that economic plans and strategies are shaped around equity. [Louey \(2022\)](#) highlight that many high-level international documents and discussions have neglected to consider equity in the blue economy. In particular, commitments to sharing benefits fairly have retreated from global discussions in recent years. Analysis by [Das \(2023\)](#) similarly found that social equity is often overlooked in national-level blue economy and blue growth initiatives. The paper states that *“this overlooking leads to or accelerates processes of coastal and ocean grabbing, displacement, dispossession, and exclusion which strongly impact the livelihoods of marginalized coastal communities.”* In short, this highlights a pitfall of not embedding equity into an advancing blue economy.

Intergenerational equity

The importance of equity extends beyond our own generation.

A sustainable blue economy is one built around preserving our stocks of marine natural capital. These are the natural assets and ecosystems that provide socioeconomic value. [Helm \(2015\)](#) describes out much of our natural capital is renewable and can provide value indefinitely if maintained at a healthy level. A sustainable blue economy is one that focuses on protects these assets and moves away from our dependence on finite resources. [Cisneros-Montemayor et al. \(2021\)](#) highlight six sectors of the blue economy that can be shaped around renewable marine natural capital:

- Bioprospecting
- Blue carbon
- Ecotourism
- Fisheries
- Mariculture
- Ocean energy

To achieve equity across generations, there is a need for each generation to inherit a baseline of marine natural capital that is at least as much as the previous generation inherited. This echoes recommendations to the UK Government by the [Natural Capital Committee \(2014\)](#). The argument here is that we are in a changing world where the future is unknown, and this would endow the next generation with options in how to react and adapt. Where natural capital has been degraded

across generations, there is also a need to restore natural capital to a suitable baseline that ensures it can be self-sustaining.

We should also look to the past when considering intergenerational equity. Developing an equitable blue economy needs to acknowledge that some nations, communities or sectors of society have been disadvantaged throughout the course of history. This means they are not setting off from an even starting point. As explored by [Almassi \(2020\)](#), restorative action and reparations may be necessary to address historical ecological damage and environmental or social injustice.

Sustainable development

The principle of intergenerational equity also aligns with the notion of sustainable development, [defined](#) as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

The scaling up of a sustainable blue economy addresses a number of the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#). Initially the concept aligns most closely SDG 14 (Life Below Water) which is the goal that has received the least funding. However, embedding equity into a developing global economy would also address numerous other Sustainable Development Goals by ensuring the benefits of a sustainable blue economy are shared equitably. These include SDG 1 (eradicating poverty), SDG 2, (eradicating hunger), SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 7 (clean energy).

Is the blue economy equitable?

The blue economy itself could extend to any economic activity linked to the ocean. To date, the development of the blue economy has not been equitable. Economic and industrial development has been achieved at the expense of local communities who are the most affected by climate change and environmental shocks. Historically, many coastal communities and Indigenous peoples have suffered [injustice](#) or become [marginalised](#). This is despite having a long history and culture linked to the ocean. Power and economic gains have often been taken elsewhere as local stakeholders lose access to marine space, resources and available food. Today, concentration of market power, ownership of resources and flows of finance are a cause for concern around equity.

Corporate dominance

Global sectors of the blue economy are dominated by a selection of the largest companies. Analysis by [Viridin et al. \(2021\)](#) reported that across 8 different ocean-linked industries, the 10 largest companies in each sector generated on average 45% of total revenues for each industry. The same study found that the largest 100 corporations (named the "Ocean 100") received 60% of revenues across all 8 sectors. None of these corporations are headquartered in any of the top 5 countries with the highest dependencies on ocean ecosystems. The UK has one of the highest shares of total revenues generated by those 100 companies. It is this consolidation of the power and benefits of the ocean economy that undermines its long-term sustainability.

Consolidation of power

The consolidation of power is replicated across many aspects of the blue economy. A study by [Blasiak et al. \(2018\)](#) revealed that 47% of all marine gene patents were held by one single corporation. This is a significant concentration of marine genetic resources which in principle is a [common heritage of mankind](#). In the fishing sector, just 25 countries are responsible for over [80% of all fishing activity](#) around the world, with [rich countries](#) being the most dominant. A 2018 [Unearthed](#) report revealed that in the UK, 29% of the fishing quota was owned or controlled by just 5 families found on the Sunday Times Rich List. The same investigation found that just 25 businesses control two thirds of the UK's fishing quota.

According to the [Ocean Panel](#), too much consolidation across the blue economy can undermine sustainability goals by restricting fair access to ocean resources. The current situation offers a stark contrast to what an equitable and sustainable blue economy would look like.

Blue finance

Evidence also suggests that "blue" finance does not necessarily flow equitably into the economy. Mapping of blue-economy-labelled finance by [Schutter et al. \(2024\)](#) found that out of 654 data points, 35% of flows showed red flags concerning social equity. The most common issue was enclosure, where projects increase private company control over public resources. Second to this was entrenchment. This is where projects risk exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities or disempowerment of marginalised groups. In other cases, finance flowed towards projects that aim to conserve coastal areas but in fact limit community access to those spaces.

Embedding equity into the blue economy

The sustainable blue economy offers a new way of doing things. The UK is in a particularly fortunate position – it has a large ocean territory with an enormous availability of natural resources. When shaping the blue economy, it is important that we use these natural resources in a way that is equitable as well as environmentally responsible and economically beneficial. These three pillars are not mutually exclusive – they depend on each other.

Guiding principles

A paper by [Croft et al. \(2024\)](#) proposed four key principles for equity in a blue economy:

1. *Achieving fairness*. This means keeping all stakeholders informed, listened to and involved in decisions. The benefits or costs need to be divided fairly and not concentrated amongst a few.
2. *Preventing harm*. Understanding and managing impacts on stakeholders is crucial to protecting their wellbeing. The result should be that risks are avoided or minimised and affected stakeholders are fairly compensated for any damage.
3. *Respecting rights*. This refers to both fundamental human rights and legal rights according to national or international law. Consent is needed to impinge on any existing rights and legal protection is needed to safeguard rights indefinitely.
4. *Supporting flourishing*. The notions of respective stakeholders for what flourishing means needs to be understood and factored into decisions. Actions taken need to materialise these notions.

Implementing such a model is not without challenges. Ensuring that all stakeholders are heard and involved takes consideration. There may also be variations of equity within stakeholder groups themselves. The process requires time and effort and there is a risk that it could be reduced to a box-ticking exercise.

Nevertheless, it is important for this to be prioritised. Embedding these processes into the design of a blue economy can help to get buy-in across all stakeholders and ensure that they are aligned with what a sustainable blue economy can deliver. It is these stakeholders who are ultimately responsible for delivering the outputs of the sustainable blue economy, so it is important that they are the key architects and beneficiaries of it too.

Tools to achieve equity

There are tools available to achieve effective stakeholder engagement for managing natural resources. [Cumming et al. \(2021\)](#) explain the value of the Community Voice Method (CVM) as an effective means of accounting for social contexts and increasing trustworthiness amongst local stakeholders through a place-based understanding that incorporates local views and knowledge.

A big benefit of the Community Voice Method is its accessibility. In some cases, stakeholders may not feel willing or able to partake in common methods of community engagement or formal meetings. The Community Voice Method is designed to meet people in a manner they are comfortable with. This could be one-to-one interviews or attending a workshop within their community.

Marine planning can be a useful tool to transform ocean economies to achieve both equity and sustainability. [Cisneros-Montemayor et al. \(2021\)](#) explain that appropriate planning can avoid conflicts and find mutual benefits between sectors operating in a similar space. For example, blue carbon projects could deliver climate mitigation but also support coastal fishing communities and ecotourism. Ecotourism offers a unique source of local economic growth and can be aligned with conservation action and infrastructure developments. Bioprospecting could also create economic incentives for conservation, given that globally marine biodiversity is twice as much as terrestrial biodiversity.

Acknowledging the power imbalance when a community and corporation are competing for space and resources is also important to equitable planning.

Financial transparency

Finally, when it comes to equitable flows of blue finance, transparency is an important missing piece of the jigsaw. This was a notable conclusion of the [Schutter et al. \(2024\)](#) review of blue-economy-labelled finance. It is difficult to track blue economy investments and understand where, how or on what the money is being spent. Without understanding the impacts of these flows, it is difficult to acknowledge where good work is being done. At worst, it presents a risk that some blue finance could support or exacerbate inequity in the blue economy.

Conclusion

Discourse around the blue economy has been critiqued for its failure to include equity considerations, particularly for marginalised and underrepresented communities. These groups, such as indigenous communities and coastal stakeholders have lost out due to [development across ocean industries](#). As a blue economy develops, it can limit their access to marine spaces, leading to loss of culture and local identities.

The state of the blue economy currently reflects an absence of equitable development, with ownership of marine space, legal rights and profits being consolidated into a small number of corporates, countries or individuals. Where equity is absent in the blue economy, it tends to veer away from sustainability.

However, a sustainable blue economy offers a chance to do things differently. Using principles and existing methods that involve all stakeholders, it is possible that the structure and outcomes of the sustainable blue economy can be distributed more evenly. At the same time, this pillar of equity will ensure that the blue economy remains sustainable. This means that appropriate stakeholders are empowered as stewards of the marine environment and that domination of the ocean space does not lead to exploitation of resources. The result is that the sustainable blue economy can be built around renewable marine natural capital that can sustain a thriving blue economy for current and future generations.

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