

Catch this Moment

Reflections on the 'Towards an Inclusive Blue Economy' conference organized by the International Institute for Environment and Development in London in February 2019

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Behind the trendy environmental terms 'Blue Economy' and 'Blue Growth' lies a view that the Earth's oceans promise great untapped economic potential. The unutilized value of the oceans is estimated at US\$24 trillion, including sectors like energy generation, maritime transport, tourism, capture fisheries and aquaculture. Such a Blue Economy is supposed to also cater to aspects of social and ecological sustainability. However, a Blue Economy will not become inclusive nor equitable by default. This was the starting point for the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) conference in London titled 'Towards an Inclusive Blue Economy', held on February 25-26, 2019.

The conference touched upon two main topics: the internationally legally binding instrument (ILBI) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), and fiscal reforms to achieve an inclusive Blue Economy. My reflections and reporting back on insights will mainly focus on the legally binding instrument on marine biological diversity.

The purpose of the BBNJ negotiations is to develop an instrument as soon as possible. Actual negotiations started in September 2018 and will end during the first half of 2020. But how do we ensure that future high-seas governance regimes or treaties are equitable and benefit all? That is how IIED framed the discussion question. Throughout the conference there was a genuine focus on the rights of small-scale fishers and vulnerable coastal communities. Even though I would have wished for more, there

were at least two representatives from the small-scale fisheries sector invited as keynote speakers.

A brief insight into the implications of these negotiations shows they are presented as structured around four main areas:

- Marine genetic resources, including issues of access and benefit sharing;
- Area-based management tools, including marine protected areas (MPAs);
- Environmental impact assessments, and
- Capacity building and transfer of marine technology.

Areas beyond national jurisdiction are areas beyond the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of nations, also referred to as the high seas or international waters. The 1982 UNCLOS recognizes the area of the seabed and ocean floor beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, 'as well as its mineral resources, as the 'common heritage of mankind', and the benefits deriving from these are intended to be shared equitably among people. At that time, however, deep-sea mining was not in any imaginable pipeline. There is, therefore, today a big gap in governance.

Another drawback of the 1982 UNCLOS is that it only covered mineral resources; thus, all living resources, other than straddling and highly migratory fish stocks in the areas of the high seas, are excluded, implying a great risk to the ocean resources; they are up for grabs for all. Unfortunately, the current negotiations do not have the mandate to change this by including living organisms as the common heritage of mankind.

High seas governance

So why would high seas governance be of relevance to the 47 mn people

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IIED/MATT WRIGHT



High seas panel discussion during the conference on Towards an Inclusive Blue Economy, held from June 25 to 26 February 2019. Essam Yassin Mohammed, IIED; William Cheung, University of British Columbia; Ekaterina Popova, University of Southampton; Anca Leroy, Government of France

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involved in small-scale fishing and trading, out of which a vast majority live in developing countries? It is my impression, and also that of several conference participants, that many governments of developing nations, alongside civil society organizations advocating for the rights of small-scale fisheries, do not prioritize engaging in the BBNJ negotiations. Research also indicates this observation is correct. In the BBNJ negotiations there has been a small group of countries disproportionately active, while least developed countries and small island developing states are significantly under-represented. A skewed negotiation outcome is feared, not contributing to the conservation, sustainable use and benefit sharing that it was set out to do. My guess is that the reason for this inequality in the engagement in the negotiation probably mainly has to do with the existing economic inequality between nations. But I also sense a certain belief of the high seas to be too far away, something out there that does not impact us significantly. With limited resources, the reasoning of some states

might well be: why should we then involve ourselves? Most likely, they do have to deal with many urgent issues.

One very convincing argument, however, for the least developed countries and the small-scale fishers' advocates to be concerned about the

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high seas governance was provided by an ocean modeller, Ekaterina Popova, from the United Kingdom's National Oceanography Centre. She showed convincingly the close connection between the high seas and the coasts. "Ecologically," she explained, "[the high seas] are very much connected to coastal zones.

Nature of species

There are two pieces of evidence for this. One is the nature of species that often migrate through corridors between the

high seas and coastal waters. The other is ocean currents. People don't realize how fast and vigorous these are, and how tightly they connect to coastal waters." She held up a small yellow rubber duck to the audience and said that if a million ducks like that would be released into the high seas, it would take only six months until we would see them pop up on our coasts. Some areas of the high seas are also more strongly connected to coasts, and some coastlines have a stronger connection to the high seas than others. Thus, exploitation of the high seas will have noticeable impacts on the livelihoods of small-scale fishers.

There is also a strong equity aspect to these negotiations since there are only about 10 nations currently catching 71 per cent of the fish in the high seas. Another aspect of equity was a discovery that came from of a colleague of mine at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, Robert Blasiak, who found that 98 per cent of all patents originating from marine genes taken in the high seas came from 10 nations.

Other researchers at the conference, associate professor William Cheung and professor Rashid Sumaila from the University of British Columbia, mentioned that if the high seas were to be totally closed off, the impact of fish stocks would be neutral, since it would increase the catches in the EEZs of countries, but it would be a great gain to developing nations, both in terms of catch and biodiversity. From a legal standpoint, however, it seems close to impossible to reach a full closure of the high seas, which is unlikely to happen, but even closing off some parts can still be of high value to enhancing equity.

One of the agenda points for the BBNJ negotiations, as mentioned, is access and benefit sharing of genetic resources. The benefits achieved from the high seas, including from living organisms, should be equally shared. Existing international law under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which has already developed an access and benefit-sharing mechanisms, is proposed to be used. There is also a need for capacity building and transfer of relevant marine technology to developing nations.

What requirements will be made for this co-operation and development assistance are still to be seen. IIED argued that there is need for a kind of clearing house mechanism, implying an independent multilateral institution that would set up "co-operation and inclusive multi-stakeholder partnership, and broker technology transfer and capacity building". The developed countries should be obliged to regulate the private sector so that any resource access implies commitments for technology transfer to developing nations.

Thus, both small-scale fisheries and the governments of least developed and small island developing states stand to gain a lot from raising their voices and engaging more strongly in the BBNJ negotiations. Since all exploitative activities in the high seas risk negatively affecting the already vulnerable coastal communities, they should be given a clear voice.

The second topic of the conference was fiscal reform. Fiscal tools include taxes, tariffs, fees, penalties, etc. It was generally agreed that there is a large untapped opportunity to use fiscal tools for enhancing sustainability and environmental stewardship. For instance, policymakers collect taxes as income to the government, rather than to guide a change in behaviour, such as more sustainable and environmentally-sound fishery management. A significant number of alternative measures could be brought in to steer development in a positive direction. For instance, a government can start fairly compensating coastal communities when, for conservation purposes, marine no-take zones are established that negatively affect their livelihoods. Such schemes must, however, be designed carefully in order to care for gender issues and adapt to the local circumstances.

Harmful subsidies

Sumaila opened the discussion with some lucid statistics. Today 86 per cent of the global subsidies to the fishing sector benefits large-scale fishing, 16 per cent goes to small-scale fishers and only four per cent benefit the processing sector that employs women.

Simultaneously, by making use of fiscal tools to enhance sustainability and equity, the harmful fisheries subsidies should be eliminated. Actually, the World Trade Organization has that as one of its tasks under the Sustainable Development Goal 14.6.

The figures provided by Sumaila was used by Editrudith Lukanga, General Secretary of the African Women Fish Processors and Traders network and Co-President of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers. She was advocating for increased subsidies to small-scale fishers and, in particular, to women in the trading and processing sectors. Women play a crucial role in the small-scale fishery sector, and their role should be increasingly recognised. About 47 per cent of those fishers and fishworkers in the small-scale fishery sector are women and in the post-harvest operations, the proportion is as high as 90 per cent. Still, policymakers “look down upon them” since their contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) is negligible. Women in the small-scale fishery sector should also have the right to influence decisions that affect them, Editrudith said.

Laying a puzzle for more sustainable governance of the oceans, one must, however, not forget the importance of succeeding in substantially—and quickly—reducing greenhouse gas emissions. William Cheung mentioned that in a business-as-usual scenario, an estimated 70 per cent reduction of catch in the high seas is projected, which will hit the least developed countries worst. They are projected to lose as much as two-thirds of the economic benefits from the oceans they get today.


IIED’s efforts to highlight these crucial ingredients of reaching an inclusive Blue Economy deserve appreciation. There was constant focus on small-scale fishers and equity, which is relevant. The increasing references to a Blue Economy seem to suggest a growing search for returns on investment from the oceans. Unless proactive safeguard measures are taken, there is a risk of increasing the pressure on the livelihoods of small-scale fishers. They are already squeezed from many directions simultaneously—

pressures from large-scale fishing fleets, industrial export-oriented aquaculture, MPAs established in the name of conservation, neglecting the involvement of the users and thus forcing small-scale fishers and fishworkers to lose their livelihoods, other types of infrastructure projects such as building harbours and tourist resorts, and the search for mineral wealth in the seas—pushing them away from their fishing grounds.

We must learn from history and not just start exploiting the ocean resources full-scale without proper safeguards—with social, environmental and benefit-sharing regulations in place. We stand to lose not only one of Earth’s most valuable ecosystems and suffer a great deal as a consequence, but also to miss out on the opportunity to make this development contribute to poverty alleviation and improve the livelihoods of those most in need.

All of us working to advocate for the rights of small-scale fishers should seize this unique opportunity to influence all possible spaces where the ocean is discussed; most important of all right now, to influence international legislation. And it is not only the BBNJ negotiations, but also the Post 2020 Biodiversity Framework under the CBD that are currently taking place—; there is still room for influencing these.

Fair oceans governance

Share your views with your governments, attend the negotiations, and raise awareness of the significant role of small-scale fisheries. Catch this moment and contribute to a sustainable and fair oceans governance that leaves no one behind. 

For more



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