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The blue economy as a boundary object for hegemony across scales

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ABSTRACT

The blue economy has become an influential concept in international and national marine governance discourse. Various contested interpretations exist, and different actors choose to emphasise different aspects of the triple goal of environmental, economic, and social improvements. However, despite disagreement over its interpretations, the blue economy finds support in many different arenas. This paper explores the position of dominance that the blue economy has reached, and examines how supporters of the concept maintain and employ power to keep it relevant. The paper applies a mixed-methods approach: 29 semi-structured interviews with people in roles of formal decision-making across the fisheries sector, economic development and tourism sector, conservation and environment sector, and specific blue economy-institutions are supplemented by observations from the wider landscape during 4 months of fieldwork in Seychelles. Findings show that in international discourse, the blue economy obtains and maintains its influence through persuasion and through the construction of a 'common sense' and productive way forward, capable of achieving triple wins. Within this narrative, oceans are undergoing a reconfiguration as economic frontiers, and the blue economy places economic growth from oceans centrally within contemporary environmental governance. Maintaining the blue economy as a powerful concept on the ground is done through social power relations: the blue economy functions as a boundary object, contributing to depoliticisation of discussions about a shared vision. Depoliticisation allows Seychelles to continue using the concept despite simmering dissent among policy makers, practitioners, and resource users. Dominance of the blue economy on the international stage means that associating with it brings Seychelles visibility and influence. The usefulness of the concept in eliding tensions makes it difficult for counter-hegemony to arise, although alternatives are emerging elsewhere, such as blue justice. However, fundamental change is needed to re-politicise environmental decision-making and explicitly discuss values and images attached to the blue economy.

1. Introduction

The *blue economy* is an emerging concept that has been heralded as a new approach to ocean governance, and refers to a broad set of policies aiming to support ocean-based economic activities that provide simultaneous improvements for economic, social, and environmental outcomes [1]. Even as the idea of the blue economy has gained popularity, it is not very well understood and is contested in (inter)national arenas [1,2]. The versatility of the concept means that some advocates are using it to describe oceans as economic frontiers, whereas others emphasise the ocean's unique biodiversity that needs to be protected e.g. [3–5]. This has led to many different interpretations and definitions of the

concept, from a variety of different actors. The blue economy has such ambiguity that it can be difficult to specify its influence on policy and practice.

Business and economic-growth focused interpretations of the blue economy – often propagated by economically powerful states and industry – emphasise innovation, entrepreneurship, and close collaboration with the private sector, paralleling approaches common in its terrestrial counterpart, the green economy [1,2]. It also holds the same optimistic belief in growing the economy and protecting the environment simultaneously, which has been argued to obscure trade-offs in favour of supposed win-win outcomes [6,7]. As such, blue and green economy share a foundation in ecological modernisation thinking,

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whereby economic growth and environmental protection can go hand-in-hand through incorporation of environmental issues into markets [8–10]. By proposing that win-win outcomes are achievable through “modernising modernity” [10] and reliance on technology and innovation, ecological modernisation has been argued to further promote a profit and growth paradigm, obstructing the fundamental change required to achieve actual sustainability [7,11,12]. Indeed, blue economy discourse asserts that “since a large proportion of marine resources is believed to have remained untapped or unexplored [...] future growth will be contingent on the efficient utilisation of those rich ocean resources” [13]. Specific untapped or unexplored ocean resources that have received recent attention are oil and gas and deep sea minerals [14].

It remains unclear how a concept that has received considerable critique and struggles with seemingly paradoxical aims, still remains dominant in contemporary seascapes. How do proponents of the concept maintain and employ power to keep the blue economy relevant, and how does the reconfiguration of oceans as economic frontiers contribute to this power? Drawing on insights from neo-Gramscian theory, combined with a focus on local power relations, we explore how the blue economy gains influence, and what the power of the increasingly hegemonic blue modernisation narrative enables or constrains. We first examine how the blue economy as a concept serves to maintain hegemony, and then focus on how social interactions in national governance settings contribute to maintaining a consensual power dynamic.

1.1. Conceptual framework

Both at the global stage and in national governance settings, the blue economy has the status of a *boundary object*. Boundary objects are concepts that can be applied in a structured way in specific situations, but are also versatile enough to appeal to many different actors as an idea [15]. They frequently occur in environmental governance, taking the shape of e.g. resilience, natural capital, ecosystem services or green infrastructure [16–19]. These kinds of concepts, which have a strong degree of plasticity in their meaning, take on the role of bridging boundaries – that is, they facilitate cooperation between different social worlds [16,20].

The blue economy, with an interest in economic, social, and environmental issues simultaneously, benefits from being a broad concept, finding supporters in different arenas e.g. [6,16,23,24]. However, as a concept, the blue economy – like many classical boundary objects – navigates a thin line between being versatile and inhibiting explicit discussions about incompatible interpretations [23]. Whilst boundary objects “allow different groups to work together without consensus” [20], for the blue economy this also means that its status as a boundary object allows it to appear apolitical. It seems apolitical because, through its very plasticity, it can stifle debate around the difficult choices and trade-offs that can be made between the three different dimensions of the blue economy. Yet, this vagueness that obscures choices does not automatically mean that the concept as a representation is not useful [20], or that it is not making things happen. Boundary objects can become a source of power when they serve to create a ‘common sense’ in which conflicting interests are resolved rhetorically [24].

We adopt the Gramscian concepts of *passive revolution* and *hegemony*, because they offer a useful approach to studying how challenges to dominant economic systems are neutralised and absorbed [7]. Hegemony refers to the non-coercive power of the ruling class to secure their position through ideology as common sense [25], and has recently received attention in political ecology to explore the role of ideology in shaping environmental governance and practices [26]. It is no coincidence that conceptualisations of human-nature relationships play an important role in maintaining the hegemony of capitalism: indeed, it has been argued that the ability to achieve hegemony relies on the proposed approaches to environmental governance [27]. In green and blue economy approaches, the argument of win-win situations has worked to

neutralise arguments about limits to growth, muddying trade-offs between economic and environmental sustainability. As such, capitalist hegemony is maintained, allowing for continued and even accelerated exploitation of what is now called *natural capital* [7]. Key to the concept of passive revolution is the influence of international support forged by powerful states, which places less powerful states on the receiving end of developments and ideas from other countries [24]. These less powerful states subsequently incorporate aspects from the hegemonic model, which facilitates the expansion of its ideology [28]. What constitutes ‘the state’ is increasingly expanded to include international civil society, in which a transnational system of production and financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF play an important role in global hegemony [24,28].

The blue economy can be seen as a new iteration of the passive revolution facilitated by the green economy, in which the hegemony of capitalism is further embedded into oceans. Oceans, more than terrestrial ecosystems, are often conceptualised as placeless, regarded from land as ‘out there’ [29]. This has led to images of oceans as dangerous and chaotic areas of wilderness, frontiers to conquer, or as places to traverse [30]. A view of oceans as separate from land, and humans, is instrumental in blue modernisation: maintaining modernity’s separation of humans and nature, reconfiguring ocean spaces into new and contested territories that are simultaneously new economic frontiers and areas of enclosure [30,31]. In doing so, the emergence of the blue economy has been observed to facilitate continued capital accumulation [32] by offering technology and innovation as a way out of frictions and conflicting interests caused by the territorialisation process of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) [33].

However, at the national level, more is needed than a hegemonic ideology in order to steer conduct, which is why combining neo-Gramscian thinking with a focus on power in social interactions can be useful [34]. The blue economy internationally has attracted attention, and the governments of countries like Seychelles have aligned themselves closely with the idea. However, in order to open up the process of negotiating power relations, it is necessary to acknowledge that power in environmental governance is not just about state coercion, and rather about “who gets what, when, and how” [35]. In order to explore this power through social agency, a closer look is needed at the specific context and social relations within national environmental governance [34]. Power can therefore be approached as something that is productive: rather than being something that can be accumulated, it is making things happen and can be traced as such [35].

2. Material and methods

2.1. Study site

Seychelles has been a pioneer in promoting the blue economy in national and international contexts, most prominently through former president James Michel, who continued the agenda-setting work of Seychelles’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2011 [36]. The emergence of the concept was accompanied by the formation of a Blue Economy Department [37], with jobs and events and a communication strategy that is currently being drafted. In addition, the blue economy and its focus on innovation and entrepreneurship has inspired new ways of finance. The first oceanic debt-for-nature swap took place in Seychelles [38,39] and has resulted in the creation of the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT), whose goal is to “competitively grant at least US\$ 750,000 per annum [or 0.044% of 2018 GDP [40]] to support the stewardship of Seychelles’ ocean resources, island life and blue economy” [41]. Within this context, human use of ecosystem services informs the Marine Spatial Plan (MSP), which involves stakeholder consultations to identify and map potential benefits from the different zones in the Seychelles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). These served as layers in the spatial planning process that resulted in the designation of different marine zones (highly protected,

medium protected and sustainable use, and multiple use zones) [42].

Seychelles' political economy has recently undergone considerable neoliberal restructuring as a democratic state, emerged from a previously socialist country with a largely closed economy [43]. These changes have been particularly pronounced in the Seychelles approach to marine governance, which has been reoriented to enthusiastically engage with the blue economy [1,44]. Marine environmental governance has seen an increased reliance on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for practical implementation and monitoring, especially after a structural adjustment intervention by the International Monetary Fund in 2008, which necessitated cuts in government spending [45].

2.2. Interview approach

The lead author conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 29 people in roles of formal decision-making across the fisheries sector, economic development and tourism sector, the conservation and environment sector, and specific blue economy institutions (Table 1). Sampling followed a snowballing approach to connect to as many actors as possible involved in policy and practice around the blue economy in Seychelles. The interviews took place in the context of a larger project, during which the lead author spent a total of 4 months in Seychelles, and which included 130 household interviews and 50 resource user interviews. Therefore, data collection followed a mixed methods approach, consisting of observations and impressions from the field in addition to the 29 interviews.

Most interviews took place in the respondents' places of work, offering an opportunity to obtain more contextual information. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a small country like Seychelles, ministries, departments and NGOs are run by small groups of people. It was common for government departments to only consist of 3–5 people, and respondents expressed difficulties finding enough human resources to run their affairs, further complicated by a constant flux of personnel changes. The small scale of governance also made it possible to easily access actors at relatively high levels of organisations, such as principal secretaries and directors. In addition to shortages in personnel, organisations face financial constraints. Reduced government budgets after the austerity measures in 2008 mean that (international) environmental NGOs have come to play a large role in environmental governance, through their own agenda-setting work, and by representing interests of their funding sources. One example of such involvement is the role that The Nature Conservancy played in the development of the debt-for-nature swap. This prominent role of predominantly environmental NGOs seems logical when considering their financial clout vis-à-vis that of Seychelles' government, as well as their access to (academic) knowledge through international networks. Their role is also reflected in the sectoral distribution of our interviews: fewer NGOs in the economic development and tourism sector, combined with limited government capacity, made it more challenging to find respondents. This distribution could mean that more critical voices are reflected in our respondent pool, and that supportive voices from the economic development sector are underrepresented.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and together with observational notes from meetings, presentations and discussions coded into emergent themes. These were themes that linked both to power of the blue economy as a representation of hegemonic ideology, and its

translation into on-the-ground interactions that determine implementation outcomes (i.e., the negotiation of power in social interactions). Emergent themes were analysed to explore how actors viewed the blue economy concept in an international context, and how they perceived Seychelles to play a role in international discourse. We further zoomed in on the process by which Seychelles aligned with the concept, and considered how this alignment was influenced by the power of international hegemony but also facilitated Seychelles to carve out a role for itself as a pioneer, gaining attention in the process. In addition, the data were analysed for themes that gave insight into local processes of decision making. We were mostly interested in tracing social interactions, therefore we focused on data that spoke about respondents' relationships with others, and their interaction in fora such as the MSP process.

The lead author's positionality inevitably influenced data collection and analysis. As a researcher from a high-income country in the global north, it was possible to navigate between different spaces of power, gaining access to actors on different sides of the emerging debates. During the interviews, it became evident that many of the actors were engaging in unique conversations, and shared more with the researcher than they would have with their peers. This dynamic created a mutual opportunity: as a researcher, the lead author was able to collect data, and the respondents were able to promote their views. The timing of the interviews (in 2017–2019) had a positive impact on this access, as blue economy policy-making was still in the early stages of articulating its aims and meanings. Although political tensions were present, they were less pressing than they later became, when elections were approaching, and implementation of the blue economy began to be more evident.

3. Results and discussion

It is clear that the blue economy concept is maintained as influential by persuasion rather than coercive force, through the use of the concept as a way to rationalise governance and achieve economic, environmental and social goals at once [31,32]. Here, we respond to calls for attention to the social relations that play a role in changing people's subjectivities and relationships with the oceans and that maintain the blue economy concept on the ground [32]. We found that, despite literature describing a sense that there are critical voices as Seychelles is shaping the blue economy [44], there is a lack of public dissent on the ground. Common themes that emerged from interviews and observations were: the pervasive role of an international concept that supports the visibility and influence of Seychelles; the function of the boundary object status in obscuring trade-offs and facilitating depoliticisation and communication; and related to that, consensus on the phrase (the term blue economy is used widely) but not on its content, which shows a simmering discontent that is expressed only privately. As a result, the concept, having achieved hegemonic status on the international stage through its persuasive and all-encompassing character (the promise of triple wins), persists as influential in decision-making at the national stage.

3.1. The blue economy as negotiation for power

The emergence of the blue economy as a powerful narrative cannot be seen in isolation from interstate politics, achieving its power through persuasion and consent rather than coercion, leading to hegemony of ideas [24,25]. Consent is achieved through absorbing challenges to the dominant socio-economic order by providing an attractive and internationally supported alternative narrative. The adoption of the blue economy as a new conceptualisation of the ocean as a (sustainable) development space was thus expressed in Seychelles: "The blue economy [...] embraces the vista of untapped potential that is available through enhanced exploration and sustainable exploitation of our oceanic spaces" [46]. As such, the blue economy offers a way to align oneself with the hegemonic core, incorporating a blue modernisation

Table 1
Number and distribution of interviews across sectors.

Sector	Number of interviewees
Fisheries	7
Economic Development & Tourism	5
Conservation & Environment	8
Blue Economy	9
Total	29

narrative that supports the maintenance and expansion of global economic growth [26]. In international arenas, Seychelles and other countries aligned with the blue economy concept speak with a voice of enthusiastic support for “transforming oceanic spaces into development spaces” [47]. The blue economy has become an important project to be associated with, providing legitimacy and relevance at the international stage and opportunities for ‘innovative finance’.

The concept has become further established as hegemonic by the promise of triple wins and its presentation as a logical and rational approach. Respondents commonly mentioned that interest in the sustainability of the oceans seemed to be *de rigueur* at the moment and that it seemed logical to jump on the bandwagon: a government representative in the environment sector said that “[...] right now there is a lot of interest in ocean matters, it seems like the resources are going towards those things.”³ Thus, consensus is created, which has been argued before to serve hegemony when people “come to accept the hegemonic project as their own even though in critical terms the project serves to reproduce the dominance of the ruling elite.” [34]. Power thus does not rely on coercion but on consent, and the ‘common sense’ created by international blue economy discourse relies heavily on presenting the blue economy as a rational and modern way of environmental governance. As such, the term carries agency, as local actors feel compelled to use it and perpetuate the discourse: “Even my [strategic document] talks about the blue economy, but if somebody comes and does a review and asks me ‘what have you done with the blue economy?’, I would have to scratch my head and say I’ll get back to you. And then I have to go and see what we have done and try and get a link with the blue economy, stretch it to the limit.”⁴ This seemingly pragmatic adoption of the concept leads to the tacit consent that is a key component of Gramsci’s passive revolution: the stimulus to incorporate this new approach to ocean governance comes from growing international support which has the power to “transmit their ideological currents” into national governance settings, where they work to prevent radical change [24]. The power of global capitalism is further solidified by the ‘opening up’ of national economies and interventions such as structural adjustment programmes [48], both of which have taken place in Seychelles.

3.2. The importance of the blue economy at an international stage

Not only is the blue economy presented as common sense, but it is perceived as actively serving Seychelles’ geopolitical interests. Through its weight on the international stage, countries that embrace the blue economy concept find themselves at the centre of a new wave of ocean governance. For Seychelles, the concept has meant increased international attention, an opportunity to present itself as a pioneer on a global stage, and in doing so gain influence and draw in finance [44]. The blue economy has put Seychelles on the agenda, as evidenced by mentions from the World Bank, and the Commonwealth e.g. [49,50], as well as by recurring themes during interviews. Interviewees mentioned that “Government will say that the MSP, SeyCCAT and the debt swap are all part of the larger blue economy agenda, but what the blue economy is mostly doing is raising the profile of Seychelles.”⁵ One senior IGO representative said that “Everyone is talking about it; it is good PR”,⁶ indicating both the sheer volume of blue economy ideas being promoted and the sense that the concept is useful – it carries outwork (delivering good public relations) for those that use it. In addition, the blue economy appeals because of the promise of a new source of income: “It shows that it can bring in money.”⁷ Bringing in money is important in Seychelles, because despite the country’s graduation from a developing state into a

high-income country, Seychelles is still vulnerable to external environmental and economic shocks [51].

By embracing the blue economy concept early and enthusiastically, Seychelles has also positioned itself as a site of blue economy lobbying for external actors. The country has been a location for pioneering and showcasing innovative finance promoted by the World Bank through their Blue Bonds [52]. Within the blue bonds context, Seychelles offers impact investment opportunities to investors and an opportunity for the World Bank to publicise their development philosophy. Other actors lobbying for a blue economy agenda in Seychelles are (international) environmental NGOs. Embracing the concept of natural capital, the blue economy offers new opportunities for NGOs to engage with the private sector. This is evident from the use of the Seychelles case as a ‘proof of concept’ for marine debt-for-nature swaps [39]. In addition to agenda-setting and financial opportunities, engaging with the blue economy can also offer international actors an opportunity to expand the legitimacy of various ocean-based sectors [53]. Particularly the tuna industry – an important economic pillar in Seychelles but also one that struggles with the paradoxical aims of sustainability and economic growth [54] – can benefit from the capacity of the blue economy concept to absorb these challenges and lend a ‘sustainable’ image to the industry. Considering the role that fleets from the European Union play in Western Indian Ocean fisheries, it seems fitting that the EU’s blue growth innovation strategy tends to favour the growth potential of industrial fisheries over sustenance of small-scale fisheries [55].

The power of persuasion and the benefits that the blue economy offers in terms of influence and income has meant geopolitical competition between states. Other countries were mentioned as competitors in the blue economy context, for instance Kenya: “Seychelles is the blue economy champion of Africa, yet Kenya is now pulling the lead in a position paper for the African Union. Kenya is now able to hijack the conversation.”⁸ The importance of maintaining the status of pioneer and champion of the concept was also mentioned: “Maybe it’s part of the whole competitive thing, that we have to keep this blue economy, because it keeps you relevant, it keeps your activities in view of everybody else and then they still engage with you.”⁹ The blue economy has come to play an important role in Seychelles’ ‘Creole diplomacy’ and is seen as instrumental for successful foreign policy [36]. As a result, actors that are enrolled in the now hegemonic project are actively working to maintain it, as the ties to this internationally successful project have become instrumental in maintaining (perceived) geopolitical influence.

3.3. Maintaining consensus on the ground

In 2015, the blue economy became institutionalised in Seychelles as a department under the Ministry of Finance, Trade and the Blue Economy, aiming to coordinate all ocean-related activities of other departments and ministries [37]. This aim articulates the potential of the blue economy as a boundary object, allowing different departments to coalesce. The blue economy’s status as a boundary object enables widespread adoption and acceptance, despite (or perhaps due to) the absence of a clear definition of the term. The most common theme encountered in interviews was the lack of clarity on what the blue economy actually is. One senior Intergovernmental Organisation (IGO) interviewee stated that “it is not very clear what they mean. It is an amorphous concept”.¹⁰ A local resident expressed this by stating “I don’t think anybody knows fully what it means”.¹¹ This ambiguity in the concept works to muddy contradictions inherent to capitalist expansion,

³ Government representative. Interview 13.06.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

⁴ IGO representative. Interview 08.06.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

⁵ IGO representative. Interview 01.08.2017, Victoria, Seychelles.

⁶ IGO representative. Interview 01.08.2017, Victoria, Seychelles.

⁷ IGO representative. Interview 01.08.2017, Victoria, Seychelles.

⁸ Non-governmental organisation (NGO) representative. Interview 20.11.2019, Victoria, Seychelles.

⁹ Government representative. Interview, 13.06.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

¹⁰ Intergovernmental Organisation (IGO) representative. Interview 01.08.2017, Victoria, Seychelles.

¹¹ Local resident. Interview, 03.06.2018, Beau Vallon, Seychelles.

thus raising support for the idea that continued and accelerated exploitation of oceans is indeed possible (and necessary) at the same time as more environmental protection. The lack of clarity has also meant that the promise of ‘triple wins’ and ‘more money for everyone’ could be maintained, hiding trade-offs and suggesting that the blue economy has something for everyone, “enough to ensure conformity of behaviour in most people most of the time” [28].

Furthermore, a senior blue economy official mentioned that embedding the Blue Economy Department within the Ministry of Finance at that time served as a “carrot”: the promise of financial benefits from the blue economy would lure in the various other departments.¹² The blue economy’s status as a boundary object has an impact on the ground in two ways. First, consensus is maintained through employing the blue economy to depoliticise discussions, a strategy that finds fertile ground where there are historical tensions and a lack of trust. Second, although dissent is indeed present in Seychelles, the blue economy has been positioned as an object within multiple stakeholder consultations in planning and implementation. This positioning has further depoliticised the debate and trade-offs, thereby manufacturing consent. Maintaining consensus is important, because it allows for the continued use of the concept which has not only become powerful in a hegemonic sense itself, but also offers power to Seychelles in terms of visibility and relevance. The process of negotiation at the national level provides an avenue for exploring how power relations are employed to maintain the delicate balance between support and opposition for the blue economy [35].

3.4. Historical tensions and distrust interact with contemporary governance

Boundary objects are useful in climates where trust and communication are difficult, precisely because they require no consensus for groups to continue to be able to work together [20]. This is especially useful in places like Seychelles, which in the past featured a strong and very present state [43]. During the interviews, despite a focus on the blue economy, some respondents spent time explaining the history of internal politics in Seychelles, as an important part of understanding domestic interactions with the blue economy concept. Historically, Seychelles has struggled to separate politics and the state; although the one-party system has been abolished, the shadow of the ruling party’s power still hangs over public life and political allegiances were still believed to influence citizens’ opportunities in life [56]. Although the opposition gained control over the National Assembly in 2016, and in 2020 even secured the first opposition victory in presidential elections [57], these are recent developments, and the blue economy in Seychelles remains tied to president Michel and his formerly dominant party.

Several interviewees linked the political context to a culture of distrust responsible for suspicion and a lack of communication, and suggested that this has caused a refusal or inability to explicitly discuss trade-offs and choices in the blue economy. Respondents spoke about a fear of offending others, which inhibits explicit discussions, and suggested that this might be a leftover from the one-party state and coup d’état. Indeed, one interviewee explained holding back in discussions in order not to escalate disagreements, and said: “sometimes you’re scared of being negative, you want to respect other people’s views”,¹³ and another described the delicate balance as follows: “[...] for example with the MSP, we have to be very careful, we don’t want to be in someone’s way, we don’t want to be too tainted you know.”¹⁴ The result is that not many people are publicly critical of the blue economy. Rather, there is a simmering dissatisfaction with the currently hegemonic status of the concept.

3.5. Manufacturing consent through depoliticisation

In Seychelles, the MSP process and the consultation process for the blue economy roadmap have served to depoliticise environmental governance through a focus on the technical process of planning. There were mentions of “meetings for the sake of meetings”,¹⁵ during which no explicit discussions on choices within the blue economy took place. Interviewees spoke of a lack of meaningful engagement in stakeholder consultations, reflecting what Flannery et al. [58] call “choreographed participation”. For example, one interviewee said: “There are so many processes [...] that are just there to validate some fait accompli. They say they will do stakeholder consultation, and they just want you to fill out an attendance sheet [...]. I’ve attended most of the meetings and when I look at the report, it says they had concluded the stakeholders’ consultation successfully. [But] I cannot remember one meeting that ended with a handshake.”¹⁶ Although the sentiments expressed by stakeholders indicate disagreement with the process as well as the content of blue economy-inspired governance, respondents did not see their dissent reflected in real changes. Indeed, time constraints often meant that there was no space to express concern: interviewees lamented for instance the fact that the Blue Economy Roadmap consultation took place “at the end of a full day [...] it was a Friday, from 4 to 6 pm.”¹⁷ Again, discussion on a vision for the blue economy and trade-offs was stifled by its status as a boundary object, offering the illusion of collaboration whilst actually depoliticising the debate. As a result, consensus takes the shape of the manufactured consent of stakeholder consultations [58], in which the hegemonic ideology of the blue economy takes precedence over explicit discussion of trade-offs.

Playing into historical tensions and interpersonal relationships, the blue economy in Seychelles ‘performs’ to provide a sense that there is no politics, thereby enacting the depoliticisation discussed above. Although the blue economy as a boundary object has facilitated the navigation of tensions, “[t]he problem of rhetorics, however, is that a strategic choice [of a boundary object] is always a constitutive choice also.” [16]. By reproducing hegemonic notions of human-nature relations, the blue economy brings these notions into existence as a ‘new’ reality [59,60]. As a performative concept, the blue economy is making things happen – namely, the unloading of the ‘new’ blue economy onto an existing ocean-based economy. As a boundary object, the blue economy *does* something: it offers a new and seemingly depoliticised space where there is no need to discuss trade-offs, but instead triple wins can be achieved. Although processes of depoliticisation and triple win fantasies ensure conformity and buy-in, they also mask the performative effect of the blue economy in reproducing and entrenching hegemonic framings of reality [60]. Moreover, the worldviews and images thus promoted translate into conceptions of reality that influence governance, thereby shaping reality itself [61].

3.6. Finding counter-hegemony

Blue modernisation reconfigures oceans as new economic frontiers and places of enclosure simultaneously [31,62]. The combination of the important role of the blue economy in giving Seychelles a platform internationally, the appeal of win-win situations and the use of the boundary object to facilitate depoliticisation means there is no coercion but rather a consensual agreement that comes about through the use of the term. However, this does not mean that the concept is not contested. Narratives of oceans as placeless frontiers are difficult to sustain at the implementation phase of the blue economy, where resource users are actually closely connected to and familiar with oceans. In addition, although trade-offs may be avoided at the discursive (inter)national

¹² Government representative. Interview, 02.08.2017. Victoria, Seychelles.

¹³ Government representative. Interview, 17.04.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

¹⁴ Government representative. Interview, 08.06.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

¹⁵ IGO representative. Interview 08.06.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

¹⁶ NGO representative. Interview, 30.04.2018, Victoria, Seychelles.

¹⁷ IGO representative. Interview, 08.06.2018. Victoria, Seychelles.

policy levels, on-the-ground implementation will have to make much clearer the impact on resource users and others. A boundary object cannot itself be implemented, and local political models are more difficult to adopt than hegemonic ideology, leading to the contradictions and contestations at the local level [28]. In this light, it is not surprising to find dissatisfaction with the ideas and processes of the blue economy in Seychelles.

Indeed, from earlier research a sense emerged that Seychelles was shaping the blue economy, and resisting aspects of the international discourse [44]. However, the international influence of the blue economy and the dominant economic paradigm it represents, combined with social power relations, tend to shut down discussion and participation. This combination of structural and social power relations has led to an impasse in terms of where the blue economy *should* go: a lack of a shared vision. The question is: where might alternative visions, or counter-hegemony, come from? In Gramscian terms, structural changes in world-order, and therefore challenges of hegemony, are always rooted in social relations in national societies and political orders [24]. This means that establishing counter-hegemony against the blue economy can only happen through the alliance of those that are disadvantaged by it [28].

Civil society has been identified as an important place where resistance and counter-hegemony can be formulated and advocated [63]. But the tendency to expand the state to include international civil society at the cost of local civil society [28], reduces opportunities for critical engagement (and potential for counter-hegemony) in the blue economy. In Seychelles specifically, civil society associations were long prohibited [56], and an interviewee mentioned that still, “civil society is not strong enough; they do not realise their potential.”¹⁸ The potential for critical civil society engagement is further reduced by the post-political manner in which MSP is often implemented and presented as impartial and rational [64]. In Seychelles, the consultations that do take place suffer from “pressure to get it implemented”,¹⁹ which reflects academic critique on consultation as depoliticisation. Consequently, consultation can actually serve to produce apparent consensus that keeps dissent at bay when it only allows for disagreement on specific technology and management choices, not challenging the expansion of a capitalist socio-economic order [65,66]. As a result, as far as civil society is present in Seychelles (mostly in the shape of foreign-led environmental NGOs), they tend to be embedded in the hegemony of dominant groups.

The lack of strong voices coming from local civil society feeds into a lack of meaningful engagement of the blue economy with resource users. This lack of engagement means that the problematic configuration of oceans as placeless frontiers where economy and environment can coexist, cannot be effectively challenged by resource users. Meanwhile, Seychelles speaks with one voice on the blue economy in international settings, obscuring tensions between diverse interests locally. During the interviews, respondents spoke about “policy incongruencies in the country, where you have a national company actively licensing, and encouraging, exploration of oil and gas, and a trust fund that has been established to look at [climate change] adaptation and conservation.”²⁰ These policy incongruencies indicate the contradictions that come to the fore at the national level, such as extractive non-renewable industries and seabed mining co-existing with conservation and sustainable livelihoods.

The emergence of counter-hegemony in Seychelles is therefore constrained by a perceived need to align with hegemonic ideology, and the not yet realised potential of local civil society. However, if hegemony spreads from within national societies, counter-hegemony can also develop elsewhere and challenge world-order [28]. Indeed, counter-hegemonic currents are rising outside Seychelles, most notably

in South Africa, where the negative consequences of blue economy-inspired growth have been argued to be felt acutely by small scale fishers, who are trapped between uneven economic development and competing conservation interests [67]. In this context, the movement for ‘blue justice’ has emerged [68,69], which points at contradictions in the blue economy concept that often result in marginalisation of small-scale fisheries. Blue justice advocates for the recognition of small-scale fishers’ rights to access and participate equitably in the blue economy [67]. Other arenas of resistance revolves around the role of fisher peoples in safeguarding food sovereignty [70] and blue degrowth [71]. There have been calls for the blue economy to return to its original aims as put forward by small island states – placing social equity at the centre of any blue economy-related plans [72–75]. Engaging with counter-currents around the blue economy could also serve as an avenue to bring the blue economy back to these original aims.

By using relational power on the ground, displaying resistance and forming associations, local resource users can engage with “alternative institutions and intellectual resources [...] while resisting the pressures and temptations to relapse into the pursuit of incremental gains” [28]. Within this context, international expansion of Too Big to Ignore’s push for blue justice and fisher peoples’ mobilisation of food sovereignty in fighting ‘blue grabs’ is helpful [67,70]. However, because power in social relations and power in structures of hegemony are interlinked [34], resistance at the local level would need to accompany international movements, to re-politicise decision making at home. Moreover, despite increasing resistance against neoliberal hegemony more broadly, there are many examples of the expanding influence of neoliberal approaches [76]. The blue economy might be the newest iteration that further entrenches neoliberalism into small-scale food production.

4. Conclusions

The blue economy has widely gained influence at the international stage, and ties in with the hegemonic regimes of contemporary global environmental governance. It has become influential through persuasion and consent, and the boundary object status is useful to facilitate communication but also to offer something to everyone. The triple bottom line promise creates an appealing sense of progressive change, benefiting the economic, environmental, and social dimension simultaneously. Interest in the blue economy is further fuelled by framings of the ocean as underdeveloped and underexplored [31,62], and in need of rational management. The blue modernisation narrative thus absorbs issues associated with the ocean economy (e.g. coral bleaching, pollution, industrial overfishing). It avoids “challeng[ing] the factors causing our ecological ills” [77], constituting a passive revolution of continued and even accelerated exploitation through closing off pathways to alternative trajectories [66].

The emerging conceptualisations and proposed ways of governing oceans also determine who is considered to be connected to the ocean, and consequently, which stakeholders have a voice in blue economy debates. The lack of a culture of local civil society engagement and the ambiguity in the concept means that local engagement in Seychelles has proven difficult. Instead, voices from the international civil society have managed to gain positions of influence, strengthened by the increased reliance on NGOs in marine environmental governance following economic restructuring and cuts in government budgets.

In Seychelles, the blue economy offers a way of finding common ground in an environment that is characterised by political tensions, as well as environmental and financial pressures. However, blue modernisation also means a choice for a profit and growth paradigm, and an obstacle to alternative approaches for environmental governance. The current approach in marine spatial planning in Seychelles’ blue economy tends to avoid political discussions that would enrich democracy. This can mean that activities such as small-scale fisheries are overlooked or even discarded as something that people need to be ‘developed out of’, thereby marginalising these activities instead of recognising their

¹⁸ NGO representative. Interview, 12.08.2017. Beau Vallon, Seychelles.

¹⁹ Government representative. Interview, 01.08.2017. Victoria, Seychelles.

²⁰ Government representative. Interview, 30.04.2018. Victoria, Seychelles.

valuable contributions for food security and employment [69]. In Seychelles, there is an intellectual weariness when it comes to discussing the blue economy with resource users. The concept enables current power relations to prevail and even to be entrenched: the participation of 'stakeholders' is choreographed, and the beneficiaries of innovative financing and public-private partnerships are not marginalised groups but the powerful elite.

However, this does not mean that resistance is absent: competing interpretations and critique on the concept have been found in Seychelles before [44]. Nevertheless, from an outside perspective the critique appears to be expressed only in private. For counter-hegemony to truly emerge, resistance needs to find its way into public dissent. Open discussion about a shared vision for the blue economy requires the recognition of small-scale fishers' and other resource users' rights that is proposed in the blue justice movement [67,68]. There is a need to unpack the term blue economy, to discuss what a shared vision would look like, and to re-politicise environmental decision-making. Rather than aiming to achieve consensus through rational dialogue, space should be allowed for disagreement that might emerge from participation and consultation [78,79]. The multiple and increasing pressures on and demands from marine ecosystems demand political and explicit discussion of the values and images attached to the blue economy.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marleen Schutter: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Christina Hicks:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing. **Jacob Phelps:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing. **Claire Waterton:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing.

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