

Blue Economy: The perspectives of Small Island Developing States

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ABSTRACT: Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are amongst the foremost advocates for the blue economy concept; and yet, their perspectives remain marginalised in academic literature. Furthermore, if and when acknowledged, SIDS tend to be treated as one homogeneous group, with little attempt to appreciate their diversity and idiosyncrasies. Based on a systematic literature review of blue economy and SIDS, this paper argues that knowledge production through publication by and with SIDS is lacking and unrepresentative, leading to the general invisibility of SIDS and scholars from SIDS. This situation thereby highlights an ongoing inequity between countries with and without research capacity. From an examination of national policy documents and institutional frameworks employed in SIDS to support the blue economy, this paper also showcases that SIDS are not a homogeneous group, with evident differences in their perspectives on the implementation of the blue economy. This article thus hopes to shed some light on inequity in the consideration of SIDS and the blue economy in the academic literature; it calls for more vigorous research by SIDS on their own predicament; as well as a broader recognition of the diversity of perspectives associated with SIDS.

Keywords: blue economy, inequity, knowledge production, research capacity, Seychelles, Small Island Developing States, sustainable ocean economy

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Introduction

There has been a significant growth of literature on the blue economy primarily engaged with the issues of definition, scope, and whether it advances the concept of sustainable development by balancing production and conservation (Martinez-Vazquez et al., 2021). Within this broader literature on the blue economy, the literature on the perspectives of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), as well as other small states and the blue economy, tend to mimic the views of traditional international relations that depict small states as powerless in pursuit of policy goals on the international stage and would only pursue goals that are supported by larger, powerful states (El-Anis, 2016; Gvalia et al., 2013). Significant attention is given to the perspectives of funding agencies, businesses, and international nongovernmental organizations, relegating SIDS' own perspectives to the status of exceptions (Keen et al., 2018; Martinez-Vazquez et al., 2021). Moreover, SIDS are seldom studied on their own terms, but rather examined in comparison to the perspectives of other countries or other funding agencies, businesses, and international organisations. This is curious when studying the blue economy: a concept that was advanced by SIDS themselves (Silver et al., 2015). SIDS collectively are custodians of more than 24.8 million km² of ocean (Hume et al., 2021). SIDS have argued that the blue economy is an extension of the green economy by shifting the focus from only land to embrace the ocean (Silver et al., 2015).

Despite being at the forefront of advocating for the concept and its implementation, there is no literature that comprehensively examines the points of view of SIDS about the blue economy. Instead, the considerations of SIDS viewpoints are nested in a broader blue economy

scholarship that either completely ignores the perspectives of SIDS or superficially acknowledges that SIDS may or must be different, but without any in-depth examination. Additionally, the literature portrays the perspectives of SIDS and the blue economy as common and ignores the appreciable differences within the SIDS community that would affect their perspectives of the blue economy. The literature on the blue economy and SIDS is a patchwork of articles on varying topics: some SIDS and regions receive most of the attention, with only Hassanalii (2022) providing us with insights into differences in the understanding of the blue economy amongst the Caribbean SIDS. This paper seeks to shine a light on the inequalities that exist in terms of knowledge generation on SIDS and the blue economy and highlight the necessity for papers to give due consideration to SIDS' diverse views and perspectives.

Method

To examine the academic discourse on the blue economy in SIDS, a keyword search, using Scopus and supplemented by Google Scholar, with the terms 'small island developing state' OR 'SIDS' AND 'blue economy' was undertaken. Subsequently, a keyword search with each individual 37 SIDS country name¹ AND 'blue economy' was carried out on 24 March 2023. This resulted in 81 search results. It is accepted that taking this approach of restricting the keyword search to 'blue economy' may have excluded activity-based articles that partly deal with the blue economy. It is also accepted that this search would only capture material published in the English language.

From these search results, the data was analysed to identify the number of articles per year, the keywords for each article, and the SIDS included as case study sites. Further research was undertaken to identify whether the lead author of each article is originally from a SIDS.

Subsequently, the institutional frameworks established in SIDS were identified. This built off the method employed by Voyer and Benzaken (2022) by examining whether SIDS had a blue economy (1) policy, strategy, or plan; and (2) ministry or department. To understand the vision and definition of blue economy by SIDS, the policies, strategy, or plans were further examined. The analysis could not rely on academic publications only, given the lack of consideration of the SIDS' perspectives on the blue economy in that literature.

Results

Generation of publications

Following advocacy on the international scene, some SIDS proceeded to implement the blue economy concept nationally. This seemingly made SIDS ideal subjects for case studies and presents a novel context for examination (Baldacchino, 2007). From the review of the 81 articles, it was found that publications on SIDS and the blue economy only started appearing in 2015, and with the highest number of publications, that is eighteen publications, produced in 2021. The topics of consideration vary: from questions of definition and implementation of the blue economy; issues of ocean governance; an examination of different sectors, such as fisheries and aquaculture; marine protection and conservation of species; deep seabed mining; and identifying lessons learnt that could inform the development of the blue economy in other regions. SIDS are situated in three oceanic regions: the Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and

¹ The 37 SIDS, also members of the United Nations, are: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, federated States of Micronesia, Mauritius, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Timor Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago and Vanuatu.

the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The most popular region used as case study site is the Pacific Ocean with 21 articles. This may be attributed to academic institutions specialising in ocean governance located in Australia, such as the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS). Despite the focus on the Pacific as a region, the most popular country of study is the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Seychelles, with 20 articles either focussing on Seychelles or including it in a comparison with another case or context. This could plausibly be attributed to the *avant-garde* pursuit of the blue economy by Seychelles with the establishment of a Blue Economy Department in 2015, a Blue Economy Roadmap in 2018, the conclusion of the first debt-for-nature swap for ocean conservation and climate adaptation in 2015, and the first sovereign blue bond in 2018 (Silver & Campbell, 2018; Schutter & Hicks, 2019).

Although SIDS had become areas of interest, the lead authors of the publications found in the literature scan were mostly not authors originally from SIDS. Of the 81 articles on SIDS and the blue economy, there are only eleven articles written by ten authors from SIDS. The SIDS scholars are: Annalee Babb (Barbados), Kenrick W. Williams (Belize), Jwala Rambarran (Trinidad and Tobago), Bonapas Francis Onguglo (Fiji), Divide Waiti (Marshalese), Raj Mohabeer (Mauritius), Kahlil Hassanali (Trinidad and Tobago), Brandon J Bethel (Bahamas), John Telesford (Grenada), and Malshini Senaratne (Seychelles). Notably, of the ten leading SIDS authors, five are from the Caribbean – the region with the least coverage – and the other five are shared by the Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions.

Further disaggregation reveals greater disparities. Of the 21 articles written about the Pacific region, only two are written by SIDS scholars (who hail from Fiji and the Marshall Islands); the other 19 articles are all led by non-SIDS scholars. Similarly, despite the great interest in the Seychelles' blue economy, only one article is led by a Seychellois national.

There is also no obvious common area of interest that SIDS scholars examine in their writings on the blue economy. The topics include the better understanding of the blue economy and the opportunities and challenges for individual countries in the pursuit of the blue economy. Another notable finding is that the leading authors on the blue economy have not written about the blue economy in the SIDS context (Martinez-Vazquez et al., 2021).

Despite a growing recognition of 'nissology', defined as "studying islands on their own terms" (Baldacchino, 2008; McCall, 1994) whereby the researcher prefers an approach to studying islands from a position of local empowerment and engagement, there is a significant body of literature that undertakes comparisons of the SIDS experience with those of continental approaches found in Europe, Asia and Africa (Chen et al., 2020; Guerreiro et al., 2021; Nagy & Nene, 2021; Thakur, 2022). On the one hand, despite the leadership by some SIDS in terms of early advocacy and early implementation, the conventional portrayal of small states continues, with articles representing SIDS as the powerless pawns in the strategy games of larger countries (Thakur, 2022) and of international non-governmental organisations and international financing institutions (Silver & Campbell, 2018). On the other hand, SIDS are hailed as trendsetters and leaders with many lessons to draw upon (Nagy & Nene, 2021; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2020). It is further advocated that the SIDS model of development is preferred to the approaches of the Global North that have proven to be unsustainable (Nagy & Nene, 2021). Indeed, the African Union has hailed Seychelles as the champion of the blue economy for Africa and the model for the rest of Africa to follow (Seychelles Nation, 2019).

These findings raise many questions. Why are SIDS scholars not writing or publishing about the blue economy and SIDS or their own countries? Are these not obvious and pertinent subjects of interest? Are there barriers to SIDS scholars leading a team of authors to generate

publications about the blue economy and SIDS? Are there sufficient opportunities for SIDS scholars to publish in academic journals? Is this challenge systemic? Can this challenge be addressed through the introduction of more opportunities for the pursuit of tertiary education or is something else required? Why are non-SIDS scholars opting to write about SIDS and the blue economy? These concerns will be discussed further below.

Diversity in the views of SIDS

From the search results focused on SIDS and the blue economy, there is an apparent difference between the most frequent terms found in the body of current literature on SIDS and the blue economy as compared to that of the broader blue economy literature. The most frequent terms used were: ocean, development, sustainable, governance, management, growth, policy, fisheries, islands, and maritime. In contrast, in the broader literature on the blue economy, the most frequent terms used were: maritime spatial planning, China, maritime economy, ocean economy, economic development, efficiency, and coastal areas (Martinez-Vazquez et al., 2021). This difference may suggest that the broader literature, that largely excludes the SIDS experience, focuses on the blue economy’s potential to enhance economic activity and efficiency which contrasts with the fewer SIDS-focused articles that highlight the blue economy as promoting good governance, sustainability and growth. Hence, a reading of the broader literature, the blue economy is quickly criticised for failing to balance the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development, whilst the SIDS context does not escape this critique, it may be presented as a viable development pathway that attempts, although not always successful, in striking the balance amongst the three objectives.

The 37 states that fall into the category of ‘Small Island Developing States’ share many features, especially with respect to their vulnerability to external shocks from both environmental and economic factors (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997; United Nations, 1992). These states are however quite diverse: with varying populations, land areas, archipelagic fragmentation, varying sizes of Exclusive Economic Zones, with some having economies based on fossil fuel exploitation and others entirely dependent on marine sectors, such as tourism and fisheries (Hume et al., 2021). These are factors that may influence their pursuit of the blue economy in terms of its prioritisation, scope, and definition. A review of policy documents suggests that the definitions and/or vision of the blue economy differ among SIDS (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Definitions or visions that are included in the SIDS policy documents.

SIDS	Definition/Vision
	The Caribbean
Antigua and Barbuda	‘The blue economy has been defined as ‘economic activities that (1) take place in the marine environment or that (2) use sea resources as input, as well as (3) economic activities that are involved in the production of goods or the provision of services that will directly contribute to the activities that take place in the marine environment’ (Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 2021, What does blue economy mean to Antigua and Barbuda section, para. 1.3.1) The Maritime Economy Plan encompasses concepts of sustainability and equity (Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 2021)
Belize	‘The blue economy has been defined as ‘economic activities that (1) take place in the marine environment or that (2) use sea resources as input, as well as (3) economic activities that are involved in the production of goods or the provision of services that will directly contribute to the activities that take place in the marine environment’ (Belize Ministry of Blue Economy and

	Civil Aviation, Belize Maritime Economy Plan, 2022, p.1). The Maritime Economy Plan encompasses both sustainability and equity concepts (Ministry of Blue Economy and Civil Aviation, 2022, p.1).
The Bahamas	The maritime policy identifies 3 policy directions that include ‘(1) increase economic activity, increase revenue, and diversify the current economy; (2) create jobs; and (3) ensure that such development does not jeopardise the natural capital upon which much of the Bahamian economy depends.’ (Government of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas’ Ministry of Transport and Aviation, 2015, Policy Context section, p.7)
Grenada	Its blue growth vision involves the optimisation of the coastal and marine resources with the objective of becoming a global trendsetter and model for blue growth and sustainability. (World Bank, 2016, p.1)
Dominica	The Government of Dominica recognises the potential of the blue economy for purposes of economic diversification with a heavy focus on fisheries whilst recognising the benefit for its people in terms of jobs and wellbeing. (Government of Dominica, 2020, Blue Economy section).
St Lucia	‘Our coastal and marine resources are sustainably managed to optimise the benefits of the blue economy, ensure resilience to climate impacts, protect and restore St Lucia’s natural capital and valuable marine ecosystems, and nurture our natural and cultural heritage for the benefit of current and future generations’ (Department of Sustainable Development, Ministry of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development, 2020, Vision section).
St Vincent and the Grenadines	‘Our coastal and marine resources are sustainably managed to maximise the benefits of the blue economy, ensure resilience to climate impacts, protect and restore marine ecosystems, and nurture our natural and cultural heritage for the benefit of current and future generations.’ (Government of St Vincent and the Grenadines, 2020, Vision section).
St Kitts and Nevis	‘Our coastal and marine resources are sustainably managed to maximise the potential of the blue economy, ensure resilience and adaptation to climate impacts, protect and restore marine ecosystems, and nurture our natural and cultural heritage for the benefit of current and future generations.’ (Government of St Kitts and Nevis, 2019, Vision section)
	Atlantic – Indian – South China Sea Region
Seychelles	‘To develop a blue economy as a means of realizing the nation’s development potential through an innovative, knowledge-led approach, being mindful of the need to conserve the integrity of the Seychelles marine environment and heritage for present and future generations.’ (Government of Seychelles, 2018, Vision, goals and principles section).
	The Pacific
Samoa	‘Samoa’s ocean remains healthy and abundant through integrated management, robust coordination, and respectful use and stewardship that supports cultural, social and economic opportunities’ (Government of Samoa, 2020, Vision section).
Vanuatu	‘To conserve and sustain a healthy and wealthy ocean for the people and culture of Vanuatu today and tomorrow.’ (Government of Vanuatu, 2016, A vision for the ocean section, para. 2.1).
Solomon Islands	‘Sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health. (World Bank 2017)’ (Government of Solomon Islands, 2018, Definition section).

Fiji	The vision is for ‘a healthy ocean that sustains the livelihoods and aspirations of current and future generations of Fiji’. The mission is ‘to secure and sustainably manage all Fiji’s ocean and marine resources.’ (Fiji Ministry of Economy, 2021, National Ocean Policy section, para. 3.1 – 3.2).
Papua New Guinea	‘The blue economy entails the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs, while protecting the health of the ocean ecosystems.’ (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2020, Approaches to resolving the issues section).
Timor-Leste	‘A practical ocean-based economic model using green infrastructure and technologies, innovative financing mechanisms and proactive institutional arrangements to meet the twin goals of protecting our oceans and coasts and enhancing their potential contribution to sustainable development, including improving human well-being, and reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities ...’ (Voyer et al., 2020).

With international aspirations that the blue economy will serve as a development pathway for SIDS as evidenced in SDG 14.7, often the first step involves putting in place the institutional arrangements and policy frameworks required to support this pursuit. A review of institutional frameworks shows that there are multiple approaches employed by SIDS. Ten have opted for formal arrangements through the creation of departments in ministries. There are no similarities in the placement of these departments: Seychelles has it attached to the Department of Fisheries; Antigua and Barbuda with the Department of Social Transformation; and Barbados with the Department of Maritime Affairs (Voyer et al., 2022). There could be many reasons for the placements of the departments, including familiarity with and trust in the minister, a reasoned approach about the mutually reinforcing nature of the two departments, or addressing certain challenges. However, one of the lessons learned from the Seychelles case is the importance of its placement to enhance long-term coherence and be able to coordinate and collaborate with other government and non-government sectors (Benzaken et al., 2022). Alternatively, other SIDS have preferred a lighter governance approach by creating cross-ministerial committees to provide guidance and recommendations on the development of the blue economy (Voyer et al., 2022). In addition to the establishment of institutional arrangements, thirteen SIDS have a national policy on the blue economy or equivalent roadmap, strategy, or plan with two having draft policies that are informing subsequent policy documents, that is, St Kitts and Nevis and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Some SIDS have chosen to create a separate document, such as the Seychelles Blue Economy Roadmap (Government of Seychelles, 2018); whilst others have nested a blue economy chapter in the broader long-term development strategy, such as Dominica’s National Resilience Strategy, Dominica 2030 (Government of Dominica, 2020). This paper does not seek to go into depth in the examination of these national policies and strategies, but it is certainly an area that warrants further research.

Discussion

SIDS scholars and academic literature

Clearly, there are very few publications written by SIDS scholars on the SIDS’ engagement with the blue economy. This raises the question: why is this the case? The inequality in research capacity between the Global North and the Global South is not a novel subject. The general disadvantage of developing countries has been examined and systemic disadvantages have been identified, including a lack of research funds, equipment, supportive academic community, and too many competing demands on the time of SIDS scholars, who

often become consultants and national experts in their field (Belcher, 2007; Salager-Meyer, 2008). Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that the continued use of English as the language for publication may act as a barrier to publications by certain SIDS scholars (Belcher, 2007; Salager-Meyer, 2008). Exacerbating the recognised disadvantages that scholars from developing countries face, are the additional special circumstances of SIDS. This includes the small populations and remote locations leading to worsened capacity constraints, more costs to travel to such locations, and accessibility to educational opportunities (such as international conferences). These research capacity constraints in SIDS have been examined specifically on the subject of marine science; but are likely to be applicable in other subject matters, including the blue economy. With small populations, islanders are often wearing many hats and, thereby, constrained by the availability of time and energy to dedicate to research and writing publications or may lack capacity altogether (Salpin et al., 2018). In addition, islanders may not be motivated by having published in scholarly journals nor driven by the “publish or perish” academic culture (Babaii, 2010). This may be the circumstances within which islanders operate in, including that academic bodies are insufficiently funded so prioritisation is placed on activities like teaching and training that generate revenue (Hind et al., 2015). Furthermore, such institutions are often staffed by non-local personnel since SIDS often suffer from the challenge of retaining experienced and smart personnel: no wonder that many of the publications generated on SIDS are penned by non-SIDS personnel (Salpin et al., 2018). Another challenge that hampers access is the decline in educational opportunities, especially in tertiary education for scholars from SIDS. Many SIDSs, with their small populations, easily graduate to the OECD classification of ‘high-income country’ and subsequently are no longer eligible for overseas development assistance, including scholarships for research and higher education. Seychelles, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, and Palau are some of the SIDS suffering from this condition; and more SIDS are likely to join this group over time. Such policy positions of funder countries are exacerbating the disparities that already exist because of the lack of infrastructure, capacity, and equipment required to advance research and knowledge production.

On the other hand, another hypothesis is that SIDS nationals prefer alternative forms of generation and transfer of knowledge to writing publications. SIDS scholars may not be investing much time in writing on the SIDS and blue economy because they do not see publications as the only effective tool for knowledge generation and transfer. The preference may be through storytelling from one generation to the next (Babb, 2015). This is further evidenced by the growing recognition of traditional knowledge in international arena, and especially advanced by the Pacific SIDS where indigeneity has best survived European colonialism (Mulalap et al., 2020). Traditional knowledge does not enjoy a universally agreed definition, but it can take many forms such as stories, beliefs, community norms, and local languages (Mulalap et al., 2020). Such forms of knowledge generation and transfer are rarely captured in the written academic literature. Is this a problem? And for whom? It raises the question as to whether SIDS scholars are investing time in writing publications and playing by the prescribed rules of another system, or should the system recognise other forms of knowledge generation to maintain its legitimacy in the eyes of local publics? (Babaii, 2010)

Who is shaping the discourse?

From the review of publications, it is evident that the discourse on the blue economy in SIDS is being shaped by the person that Baldacchino (2008) describes as ‘the other’. Of the 81 articles, 70 are led by non-SIDS scholars. This paper is not considering whether the articles written by non-SIDS scholars on SIDS are valuable or otherwise; but it is worth raising concerns here about the theory of knowledge, or epistemology. Research and science are often

assumed to be neutral and conducted by an objective researcher in understanding the socioeconomic and sociocultural world, but this has been criticised. Beneath scientific enquiry lies a belief and values system of the broader dominant worldview that subsequently informs the questions asked and the methodology used (Weisman, 2017). Stand-point epistemology, which originated in Marxist theory, posits that an individual's lived experience, economic status, and culture influence how the individual understands the socio-economic and socio-cultural world (Weisman, 2017). Postcolonial theory supports the questioning of knowledge generated by those who held power during the colonial period. Beyond having the 'outsider' interpret the experience of islanders based on their own value system, the tone is often interpreted as imperialist in approach, with islanders not being consulted and instead being told what to do by outsiders (Newitt, 1992). In most cases, such important critical discussions that present the experiences of island states are often devoid of the perspective of the islanders themselves (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2020; Perumal, 2018).

Similarly, there is growing interest in the issues of parachute science, where scientists or consultants engage in science in foreign countries during brief trips (if at all), without the participation of local communities, leading to value-laden approaches and findings (Singeo & Ferguson, 2022; Stefanoudis et al., 2021; Vos & Schwartz, 2022). From the above review, the focus has been on the lead author to reveal the numbers in terms of the leadership of SIDS; but there are other papers that have included SIDS practitioners and scholars as co-authors. However, the challenge with simply recognising the inclusion of a SIDS scholar is that there is no guarantee that the inclusion was meaningful and genuine, or rather a tokenistic attempt to overcome critics of parachute science and build legitimacy.

The alternative viewpoint is that it is possible that what is written by non-SIDS scholars is not shaping the discourse on the blue economy in practice if these publications are not informing policy decisions. Turning to practice, despite large EEZs, less than 50% of SIDS have national policy documents that deal with the blue economy; and a smaller fraction of these have put in place a national-level institutional arrangement to pursue the blue economy. This is already evidence that SIDS should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Within the group of 15 national policy documents, most SIDS use the word "sustainability" or 'sustainable'. However, there are apparent differences in terms of what activities are included in their scope of the blue economy. Hassanali (2020) argues that, even within the Caribbean, the small island states in the same geographic location do not share the same understanding or motives in the pursuit of the blue economy, pointing to the differences between Trinidad and Tobago – which has a fossil fuel-based economy – and Belize, which does not see the exploitation of oil as part of the blue economy (Hassanali, 2020). On the other hand, Timor Leste's transition to the blue economy involves moving away from the exploitation of fossil fuels (Voyer et al., 2020). Another divergent point is the activity of deep seabed mining where SIDS do not agree whether this is an activity that can fall within the blue economy (Waiti & Lorrenij, 2018). However, the implementation of the blue economy has not received significant attention, and this paper does not seek to dive into the differences in implementation. But, as more countries advance the implementation of the blue economy, this may be a subject for future research (Hicks & Schutter, 2019).

There are also differences in the way SIDS view their pursuit of the blue economy. For example, Vanuatu's National Ocean Policy highlights that the health and wealth generated from the ocean will benefit its people and culture (Government of Vanuatu, 2016) or Dominica's M&E framework showcasing that the blue economy is to mostly support only economic indicators (Government of Dominica, 2020). There is sufficient evidence here to

make a case that the perspectives of SIDS cannot be generalised, and consideration of the blue economy cannot simply treat SIDS as a homogenous group.

However, even in practice, there is possible influence from the ‘other.’ It is interesting to find that the majority of the policy documents generated were done so with funding from external partners, such as the Commonwealth Secretariat, the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility, the InterAmerican Development Bank, the United Kingdom’s UKAID Direct funding agency, and the non-governmental organisations such as Conservation International. These funding bodies often provide the funding, but the work is undertaken by consultants, who are often not from SIDS. This is not inherently problematic and is common practice in SIDS who are reliant on external funding for the development of certain documents. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting because some definitions of the blue economy are directly adopted from that of the funding agency, or that the definition is replicated in each country because they form part of the same project. This is not necessarily unhelpful, as it may lead to regional integrated ocean management if all small island states in the area have a common understanding of the development of the blue economy. The influence of external funders is sometimes neutralised by significant consultation with the local community and local stakeholders. As has been highlighted, for long-term sustainability of initiatives in SIDS, national ownership and local involvement, as well as long-term funding, are essential (Hind et al., 2015). Future research could investigate the substance of national policies and explore their national implementations: this would prove useful to understand the diversity as to how the blue economy is implemented by a seemingly similar group of countries.

Conclusion

Inequity persists when it is ‘the other’ who continues to tell the story of development of the ocean that is also under the custodianship of SIDS, especially by ‘large ocean states’. This article suggests that a story started by islanders is being told by the ‘other’, with very few scholars from SIDS shaping the narrative of the blue economy in SIDS. It highlights that those with the time, privilege to write and who are having their publications accepted are influencing how SIDS are perceived; more importantly, the question of what are the implications of relying on the thoughts and perceptions of the ‘other’ is raised. For example, how influential are these writings on the readers who may be the funders and partners that SIDS require to advance their blue economy? Should SIDS scholars invest more of their time to change the tide and offer a different narrative that provides perhaps a more accurate, representative, nuanced and valid perspective of the different SIDS; or should islanders focus on what they deem more impactful?

This paper raises more questions than it seeks to answer. However, its audience is the academic community and possible external sponsors and partners who are reliant on the generation of knowledge through publications. This paper cautions against allowing academic publications to be the only criterion of valued knowledge for informed decision-making. It also indicates that caution must be taken by those who choose or have the opportunity to tell the story of others. There is growing literature on how to steer away from parachute science, and this is equally applicable to other research subjects. These issues will grow in relevance, especially with the growing literature on decolonising knowledge and academia.

Evidence of inequity persists: from a review of the national policies, strategies and action plans, it is evident that there are external influences in the vision of the blue economy that are visible in the verbatim replication of definitions of the blue economy in/by neighbouring countries or by multilateral funding agencies. So far, there is little effort to understand the stories of SIDS and their development of the blue economy, from definition to implementation; and therefore, one often relies on inferences. Furthermore, the review of national documents

reveals that there is no ‘one size fits all’ view of the blue economy in SIDS, with varying views and varying emphasis: ultimately, that will lead to varying implementation. Hence, literature on the blue economy should recognise that, when portraying the views of SIDS, the latter should not be treated as a homogeneous group; and more effort should be placed in understanding the appreciable differences. It is evident that more research is required on SIDS, and importantly, with more opportunities for SIDS scholars to undertake these research efforts and lead knowledge generation.

In any case, despite the emphasis on academic literature, its relevance in shaping discourse should not be overstated, especially if SIDS government officials or scholars are placing their efforts elsewhere. There are upcoming opportunities where people from SIDS will be shaping their development plans, including the ocean agenda, at least for the next ten years. A pivotal moment in this decade will be at the upcoming fourth UN SIDS Conference in 2024. This conference will result in an outcome document that will set out the goals and action plans of SIDS that will guide their development for the next decade. Admittedly, the culmination of such documents is not devoid of external influences; but, as an outcome document led and generated by SIDS setting out their self-determined priorities, it is likely to merit more weight.

The remit of this paper is to highlight the challenges before us. It is recognised that SIDS are often constrained by their resource availability and personnel capacity and non-SIDS scholars contribute to closing knowledge gaps. This paper does not argue that non-SIDS scholars should not undertake research on SIDS. The opportunities to do so sit in the Global North and contributions or attempts to closing the knowledge gap are arguably the lesser evil than not addressing the knowledge gap at all. This article highlights that there is a need for non-SIDS scholars who write about SIDS’ blue economies to reflect on the applicability of the conversation on parachute science and their positionality. In addition, there is scope for more SIDS-specific research to better understand how to address the challenges highlighted and to give each SIDS its due consideration. Such research will be useful to inform funders and external partners who are seeking to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships) and to support SIDS and Least Developed Countries in meeting SDG 14.7 with the development of their sustainable ocean economies.

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