

Researching ‘the Blue’, Researching ‘the Economy’: Reflecting on a year in Seychelles

In 2017, well before the possibility of turning it into a research project materialized, I was captured by the innovative mechanisms that the Republic of Seychelles – consistently described as a ‘Small Island Developing State’ (SIDS) – was initiating around ocean governance and ocean financing. Such efforts were almost unanimously described by relevant institutions and academics as revolving around the ‘Blue Economy’ project that Seychelles was pioneering, virtually single-handedly (Carolus, 2015; Laing, 2020; Roy, 2019; Silver & Campbell, 2018; The Nature Conservancy, 2018; UNDP, 2018; World Bank, 2018). At the time, Seychelles’ efforts were not just limited to the governance infrastructures and the related funding mechanisms that were adopted in this novel approach to ocean conservation and development. A further, arguably more important, novelty lay in the ability of a SIDS to reconfigure its own positionality vis-à-vis the space – in this case, the ocean – that it had under its jurisdictional control in order to maximize political leverage, economic diversification, and social development in, and for, its territory. Fast-forward to today and the archipelagic state in the Western Indian Ocean has established a reputation for itself globally as a reference point for these modern ocean-related policies and practices – recently reiterated, for instance, by Seychelles’ nomination as Ocean Patron as part of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development 2021-2030 (Ernesta, 2022). In what follows, I will attempt to briefly sketch out my own involvement with the Blue Economy in Seychelles. I will offer first reflections on how I came to understand it before spending time with practitioners in Seychelles; then discuss how the time spent in the country, coupled with the methodological choices I made for my project, generated somewhat surprising lines of enquiry to pursue.

In the last decade or so, an increasing body of work from across disciplinary boundaries has been engaging with what has been loosely defined ‘Blue Economy’– conceptualized as a new way of making the best use of ocean-based resources to balance economic exploitation, social development, and environmental protection. Much of this literature, again, has highlighted Seychelles’ pioneering role in this area (for instance, see Benzaken *et al.*, 2022; Christiansen, 2021; Cisneros-Montemayor *et al.*, 2022; Louey, 2022; Saddington, 2023; Schutter & Hicks, 2019; Schutter *et al.*, 2021; Sumaila *et al.*, 2021; Voyer *et al.*, 2018; Voyer *et al.*, 2022). Providing a synthesis of such work is beyond the scope of these present reflections. However, for my purpose here, I argue that an important lesson to draw from this literature is the persistent *indeterminacy* characterizing the Blue Economy. The Blue Economy might be variously construed as either a policy tool, a

political programme, a rhetorical device, a transnational branding, a financial opportunity, a government promotional strategy, a transformative approach, and more (or, in many cases, a mixture of several of the above). However, what clearly emerges is that the Blue Economy has no agreed-upon definition nor an agreed-upon operationalization. The reasons for such indeterminacy are mainly to be found in the novelty of the concept itself, and its unstructured development globally, which has resulted in a malleability around what counts as ‘blue’, as ‘economy’, as ‘development’, as ‘conservation’, as ‘social empowerment’, and so on.

Despite these complexities, the underlying assumption within much of the academic literature is that *there is* some ‘thing’ we can call the ‘Blue Economy’ happening *somewhere*, and in much of the literature a prime example of that ‘somewhere’ is Seychelles. In preparing these reflections, I have found it useful to acknowledge that my appreciation of the Blue Economy prior to engaging directly with practitioners in Seychelles had been mediated primarily through such literature and to reflect upon the limits of that approach. Most notably, following existing scholarship, I initially imagined the Blue Economy as a highly visible, self-conscious political project that would be at the forefront of ocean conservation and development debates taking place locally in the archipelagic state. In practice, as I will continue to explore here, I suggest that the fuzziness noted above is translating the Blue Economy into a sort of ‘force field’ in Seychelles politics: ‘a space in which battles are waged but also a space across which power is projected’ (Steinberg, 2001, p.17), a space that, importantly, does not pre-exist such battles and projections, but is created through them. Consequently, institutional and local practitioners are also able to intervene in the contours that the Blue Economy takes in practice; although, of course, the effectiveness of these interventions depends upon the positionalities of their relative actors.

Before coming to Seychelles, my interest in the Blue Economy was shaped by two important bodies of scholarship. On one hand, then, my approach was facilitated by academic literature predominantly rooted in a policy-governance-management nexus, which has focused on articulating the details of governance structures, policy proposals, financial incentives and other factors that might prove most conducive to a just, equitable, and sustainable ocean economy. On the other hand, I was also drawn to another strand of literature that deals more specifically with a particular *geographical* understanding of space in relation to the Blue Economy, and the broader ramifications of that understanding for recent fascination with the oceanic portion of our planet on a global scale (for instance, see Choi, 2017; Germond-Duret, 2022; Peters, 2020; Peters & Steinberg, 2019; Steinberg & Peters, 2015; Winder & Le Heron, 2017). Among other relevant contributions, this literature first asks what kind of geographically informed modes of thinking arise with the emergence of the Blue Economy project, and how those entangle with pre-existing ones. Secondly, it asks us to take seriously the ocean as a *material* space that is both lived in and lively, a biophysical space brimming with life (and death) that never stays put but exceeds its conventional boundaries – a space that, because of such material forces, provides us

with an analytical scaffolding not just to think *about* the ocean, but also to think *with* the ocean. Therefore, using the ocean and its material qualities as a starting point for analysis allows us to revisit long-held land-based assumptions around territory, sovereignty, development, and governance, to name just a few. By way of example, a set of questions raised by the intermingling of these two scholarships is: how does the ocean-space entangle with the Blue Economy as both a local event (e.g., in Seychelles) and a global unfolding one (e.g., in the Ocean Decade)? What are its ‘geophilosophies’ (Peters, 2020)? Are there alternate ‘modes of doing ocean management’ (Peters, 2020) but also alternate ‘modes of doing finance’ from a specific oceanic perspective? And why does that perspective matter?

Jostling between these apparently incompatible discourses, when I landed in Seychelles I had to readjust the lines of enquiry and the analytical baggage I carried with me. Although a small but growing body of work has been produced in recent years about the Blue Economy in SIDS, and Seychelles in particular, a note of caution must be taken following calls by island scholars and policymakers about the imbalances and unequal distribution of power when it comes to knowledge production and circulation around these and other topics (e.g., Farbotko *et al.*, 2021; Pouponneau, 2023; Stratford *et al.*, 2023). As Angelique Pouponneau (2023) argues, SIDS scholars and institutions are still very much at the receiving end of knowledge production on the Blue Economy. This tendency perpetuates long-standing power asymmetries around research capacities while at the same time hiding the specificities of individual SIDS in favour of a false sense of homogenous needs and demands on their part. In approaching the ocean seascape in the Seychelles context, I am aware of my own positionality as a white, male, European scholar writing from an English institution, in the English language, as influencing the type of research – and the types of questions – I can discuss, the spaces I can access and under what conditions, the people I can interact with and in what ways.

How, then, was I to negotiate the research agenda outlined above while physically moving in and out of spaces where the Blue Economy was supposedly happening, and engaging with people who were part of its (un)making, in Seychelles? I had the opportunity to spend a total of twelve months in the country conducting research through a mixed-methodology approach based on interviews and ethnography (participant observation and event ethnography) that allowed me to plunge deeply into a variety of different settings and with a broad range of actors. Crucially for my purpose here, I could engage with these events unfolding both in time and on practitioners’ own terms (e.g., stakeholders’ consultation meetings that are not researcher-driven). In interpreting experiences gained from this embedded practice, I should note that I am writing the present reflections a few months after leaving the country and I am only sketching out some insights and new avenues for research generated by such a methodological approach. However, early in my experience in Seychelles it became increasingly clear that this research, or projects like it, has a limited capacity to provide a ‘once-and-for-all’ definition of the Blue Economy in Seychelles (if such a thing exists; and I will address this further below), or even to conclusively devise a

‘how-to’ policy plan of the Blue Economy *in or for* Seychelles – although inroads into such topics might be garnered. Instead, within this more reflexive approach to the topic, the refined aim of my research tries to understand the spatiality of the Blue Economy as a development project using the space itself, the ocean, as the starting point of analysis, and with a special focus on the ‘modes of doing ocean management’ (Peters, 2020) and ‘modes of doing finance’ that are generated in such a way.

Nevertheless, to explore this research agenda, and remembering the policy-infused literature mentioned above, as I started conducting research in Seychelles I still believed that opening with the ‘Blue Economy’ – whatever meaning my participants might give to it – would be a decent icebreaker to ease the conversation. Yet, little did I know that its mention tended to put people off. Accordingly, soon into my fieldwork I realized that the Blue Economy would not provide the most productive terrain for engagement. Instead, I quickly learned that a more relatable framing for many of my participants was ‘ocean management’, of which the Blue Economy was a relatively minor aspect, if it was considered at all. This was one of the first analytical readjustments that I had to go through – and one of which I am still trying to grasp the full implications. Regardless of the position of my various interlocutors and their relations with the Blue Economy project (e.g., from politicians to artisanal fisherfolks, from civil society to non-governmental organizations), the Blue Economy invariably evoked mixed feelings of uncertainty, caution, confusion, acceptance, dismissiveness, political branding, missed opportunity, or outright rejection, with only at times hints of excitement and political responsibility. A related surprise was with participants being more comfortable in describing the Blue Economy *by exclusion* – that is, they found it harder to explain what the Blue Economy is compared to what *is not*: definitions that I received across the board are that the Blue Economy is not (just) fisheries, it is not (just) conservation.

Building on previous research in Seychelles that defined the Blue Economy as a ‘boundary object’ that does the performative work of reconfiguring ocean-space as a new economic frontier, and that generates partial consensus through stifling political tensions (Schutter *et al.*, 2021), I would posit that the Blue Economy locally is somewhat shifting its analytical purchase today. Indeed, it seems to me that Seychelles has entered a ‘post-Blue Economy’ moment where the Blue Economy does somewhat more and somewhat less than that of a ‘boundary object’. Thinking through some scalar politics here, on a global stage abstracting the ocean for its economic and environmental potentials politically legitimates claims of Seychellois actors to be a ‘Big Ocean State’ (and not a SIDS) (see also Gruby & Campbell, 2013). Conversely, such a move does not translate into an overarching, ‘hegemonic’, ‘boundary object’ on the ground (so to speak). Instead, my participants viewed it, at best, as a sectoral and niche articulation of what the ocean-space could signify; at worse, as a flat-out political re-branding of old ocean-based exploitative logics and practices. In that sense, the ‘simmering dissatisfaction’ that Schutter and colleagues (2021) found around the hegemony of the Blue Economy concept in the country, to me has been

partly addressed by reducing what counts as, and is meant by, Blue Economy and partly by actively voicing dissatisfaction with its actualization. Indeed, now that the Blue Economy is moving towards the implementation phase – that is, management plans are being drafted *and* implemented, mostly notably the Marine Spatial Plan that is arguably the key outcome of the Blue Economy project – its effects are suddenly being felt as ‘more real’, resulting in intense and *open (contra Schutter et al., 2021)* confrontations that I had the opportunity to witness at a variety of stakeholders’ consultations. Whether those discussions, then, turn into actual policy changes is beyond the scope of the present reflections, but for my purpose here it is worth noticing that they are happening in a variety of contexts, with a variety of stakeholders, and on a number of separate issues.

Why does such a seemingly subtle shift matter? Attending to the specificities of how actors and practitioners in Seychelles articulate their conceptualizations of the ‘Blue Economy’ on their own terms, in their own spaces (not only interview settings but also, for instance, in offices and consultative rooms), and through a relatively prolonged period of time, has forced me to rethink certain assumptions that I carried with me beforehand. As the brief snapshot recounted above illustrates, the ‘arts of noticing’ (Tsing *et al.*, 2017) practised during my time in Seychelles have allowed me to push back against a tendency in policy-imbued academic literature to reify the Blue Economy as some ‘thing’ happening somewhere – favouring instead a more diluted and fluid understanding amenable to the political and biophysical temporalities of the actors, humans and non-humans, involved. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the Blue Economy as a policy programme *does not* hold political purchase overall; indeed, I have here only briefly zoomed in on practitioners in Seychelles. Arguably, on a global stage the cohesiveness and leverage of such ‘Blue’ branding depicts a dramatically different picture. Instead, I am calling attention to the potentialities of a methodological tradition rooted in the attention to everyday ‘insistent, if humble, details’ (Tsing, 2015) to dive into the multiple currents co-constituting the ocean-space, and its ability to complexify policy discourses that too often conjure up realities that they merely assert to be describing. Especially when it comes to a ‘project’ as novel as that of the Blue Economy, such complexification might offer us alternate ‘modes of doing’ governance (and finance) at sea, and with it.

As I write the present reflections only a few months after leaving Seychelles and begin to move into the final stages of my research project, I suspect other (un)surprising reflections may be lying along the way. Nevertheless, with the present notes I posited the extent to which one of the key tenets of my research, the Blue Economy, has been deeply affected by my time in Seychelles – to the point of questioning its analytical usefulness as a research prompt and the consequences of that. Crucially, such questioning stemmed from specific methodological choices rooted both in methods *per se* (i.e., ethnography) and scholarly interests (i.e., critical ocean studies). As the Blue Economy becomes more and more established as both a policy programme and an academic topic in its own right, then,

scholars will likely need to experiment with a variety of methodological possibilities to delve into the multiple visions that are now sprawling around it.

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