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marine social sciences: unfolding Blue
Growth*

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Commentary 3 to the manifesto for the marine social sciences: unfolding Blue Growth

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A metaphor for transformation

A marine social science manifesto is inherently an anticipatory exercise; it looks forward to the ocean and coastal challenges that societies are facing, with which marine social scientists are responsible to engage. The concept of Blue Growth that is mentioned in the manifesto (MMSS 1.1.3) and the related Blue Economy concept are also inherently anticipatory; they deal with a desired future for oceans and coasts, which are most explicitly inscribed in national and international ocean strategies (for example, European Commission 2017; FAO 2017). Generally, Blue Growth is a catchphrase that stands for the anticipated sustainable exploitation of ocean and coastal spaces and resources to support economic growth, thereby taking into account ecosystems, biodiversity, and social issues. Obviously, this is an idealized version of growth and sustainability.

What makes metaphors like Blue Growth so popular and useful is the fact that they are open and ambiguous. They allow for different interpretations. While some emphasize economic growth, driven by novel technologies, others see Blue Growth as a response to the global challenges of poverty, food security, pollution, and climate change. Therefore, “we must critically engage with the Blue Economy” (MMSS 1.1.3) and study how its developments materialize on the ground, and how these transform needs and societies at all scales. Due to decades of experience of engaging with, and intervening in, fisheries management, marine social sciences are equipped to deal with the challenges that the current and projected industrialization of the oceans bring along (Arbo et al. 2018; Bavinck et al. 2018; Bennett et al. 2017).

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Expanding on a Blue Growth research agenda

To engage with the Blue Economy in constructive ways, three important tasks for the marine social sciences are highlighted below.

Practices of anticipation

First, to understand how the Blue Economy unfolds, we need to better understand *the processes around the construction, anticipation, and mobilization of ocean futures*. The Blue Growth visions and strategies demonstrate the key role of scenarios, foresights, and other future studies. Such studies are now undertaken in a large variety of networked settings at different scales and with different scopes, ranging from general studies focusing on entire ocean economies to strategic, sector-specific studies. The work is typically led by scientists and experts in close collaboration with policy makers, and other stakeholders are involved to varying degrees. These practices of anticipation constitute important sites of governance and politics, which set the premises and open some opportunities while closing others. As people act on the basis of their expectations, future images and narratives have a performative effect and can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Beckert 2016). Hence, it is vital to understand how such practices might prioritize certain interests and concerns over others, and how these prioritizations become real in their consequences.

Dynamics of industrial development

Second, the marine social sciences must *enhance understanding of the dynamics of industrial development* in ocean and coastal spaces, including their governance contexts. We need to better understand how *new* marine sectors expand, and what the drivers are for growth. This implies that we need to focus on the central actors

in these sectors in terms of those who exploit, manage, and regulate developments. A better understanding is needed of the resources and infrastructures that are mobilized: the finances, capital, knowledge, legislation, materials, and personnel that make an industry work. Insight into the working of socio-technical systems and dynamics of technological innovation are crucial to be able to grasp the depths of Blue Growth.

Integrated and ecosystem-based planning and management

Third, there should be *increased focus on the practices of integrated management, ecosystem-based management (EBM), and marine spatial planning (MSP) in order to understand the interactions between sectors and the socio-economic and ecological environments in which they operate* (MMSS 1.2.4). EBM and MSP are implemented at regional, national, and sub-national levels, with the objective to take into account the interactions within an ecosystem as well as the cumulative human impacts on marine environments. There is an urgent need for comparative and critical research to understand how EBM and MSP are implemented in the context of new sectoral developments, such as seabed mining, renewable energy production, or the expansion of marine tourism into vulnerable areas like the Arctic. How are these frameworks designed, and to what extent do they enable or constrain the development of new activities? The design and implementation of monitoring and surveillance systems that follow status, trends, and impacts are pertinent objects for social science scrutiny.

Toward desirable futures

To conclude, while concepts like the Blue Economy and Blue Growth are abstract slogans, they are metaphors for ongoing and projected transformations of our oceans and societies that can and should be studied in detail, to learn and provide

important lessons for sustainable governance. It is our task to study how Blue Growth unfolds on the ground, and our responsibility to engage with, and where possible intervene in these transformations, to help shaping desirable outcomes.

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