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Ocean protection and conservation in the context of climate change and disaster risk reduction

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Expert paper: Ocean protection and conservation in the context of climate change and disaster risk reduction

Nature-based solutions to address climate change have been identified as one of the avenues countries should pursue to bridge the carbon gap and limit warming to 1.5C. This is not a substitute for the reduction and elimination of burning fossil fuels but is intended to be complementary. NBS can be both terrestrial and marine. This expert paper will focus on ocean protection and conservation in the context of climate change and disaster risk reduction. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s 2019 report identified that the ocean would be both affected by the impacts of climate change but also, provide a solution to address many of its impacts. The IPCC recognized that it has both mitigation and adaptation value.

The ocean provides ecosystem services to people that are often underestimated. One such service is address climate change. This can be through ecosystem-based mitigation and ecosystem-based adaptation.

Ecosystem-based mitigation: Mitigation is crucial. As countries curb their use of greenhouse gases, it is expected that in the long run this will reduce the rate of warming and as such the need to adapt and the pace at reaching the limits of adaptation will be reduced. The IPCC provides for methodologies to undertake carbon inventories and in 2013 the methodology to include 'blue carbon' in national inventories were produced through the IPCC's wetlands supplement. They included methodologies for mangroves, salt marshes and seagrasses. Hence, the focus of ecosystem-based mitigation is the protection and management of these critical ecosystems.

Ecosystem based adaptation: The protection of the ocean and the abovementioned critical ecosystems has adaptation values for local coastal communities as well as further afield. The protection and conservation of the ocean can be specifically through marine protected areas or through locally managed areas. Either way, the benefits are well-documented as undertaking such actions removes stressors on the ecosystems it protects and increases the resilience of the ecosystems. Further, the 'spillover effects of MPAs means that fishers and local communities' benefit from more resources in terms of fisheries. It also, provides for alternative livelihoods that are less affected by slight changes in the marine ecosystems such as tourism.

Disaster risk reduction: With slow onset events and extreme weather events are continually looming and menacing countries. These are examples of events that are caused by the ocean. However, marine ecosystems such as seagrasses, coral reefs, mangroves all provide first line defences from increasing wave action from storm surges and sea level rise. We have seen innovative financing mechanisms emerge to use such ecosystems to protect the coast and infrastructure.

Whilst these are all within the control of national governments to take action to protect and conserve ocean areas, there is a growing awareness of the importance of how the ocean beyond national jurisdictions can also, be used for MPAs which would provide similar ecosystem services.

Community-led action

Nature-based solutions also, require the engagement of people, in particular women and girls, who are impacted the worse. In pursuit of the protection and conservation of the ocean it is important to acknowledge the impact of such measures on the community. Such efforts should not be seen to exclude coastal communities but to work with coastal communities to achieve a dual objective of addressing environmental degradation and creating new opportunities for decent work and improved livelihoods.

Often such efforts require financing. Whilst there may be climate financing bodies such as the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, and the Global Environment Facility, it is questionable as to whether these financing bodies are even accessible to grassroots community led action, including those by women. The challenge of accessibility is significant and stems from the design of such funds and the requirements to access such funds.

Case Study: The Seychelles

In 2016, the Government of Seychelles (GoS) in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Seychelles' Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT) closed a groundbreaking deal. This included a US$ 21.6 M debt-restructure conditioned on the protection of 30% of the Seychelles' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and channeling US$ 8.6 M to ocean conservation and climate adaptation projects over a 20-year period. The proceeds of the debt-swap would be administered by SeyCCAT, a locally managed administrator, to ensure that all the conditions of the debt-swap are met.

5 years later, the Government of Seychelles has successfully legally designated more than 30% of its EEZ as marine protection areas (15% no-take zone; 15% sustainable use zone). This is a nature-based solution that provides for both adaptation and mitigation. As part of the marine spatial planning process to identify the areas that should be protected, included a need to have representation of at least 30% of mangroves and seagrasses. Hence, it has co-benefits.

In 2020, the GoS in collaboration with numerous partners including SeyCCAT and Pew Trusts embarked on an ambitious project to integrate blue carbon into the Seychelles' nationally determined contributions (NDcs). In June of 2021, GoS committed to protect 50% of its mangroves and seagrasses by 2025 and a 100% of its mangroves and seagrasses by 2030, should external funding be available. This commitment supports both adaptation and mitigation. On one hand, it supports adaptation through the ecosystem services provided by these ecosystems for marine biodiversity and fisheries and on the other, mitigation because of the ability of these ecosystems to sequester and absorb carbon from the atmosphere.

In both initiatives, whilst the final decision-making power sits with the Cabinet of the GoS – a male majority body, the drivers and on-groundwork has been driven by women. Women have been championing the marine spatial planning process (Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Project Manager)), innovative financing (CEO of SeyCCAT), blue carbon (coastal wetlands and climate change project manager)

Gender-responsive financing:

Further, SeyCCAT has successfully disbursed US$ 1.8 M towards projects supporting ocean conservation and climate adaptation projects. Of the portfolio of 45 projects, with more than 50% of projects being led by women or have women as the main beneficiaries. However, it should not be assumed that because over half of the portfolio of projects are led by women this directly translates to more funds are being channeled to women. This would be incorrect as trends show a tendency for women to apply to small grants and therefore, less money is actually being channeled to women-led organisations. This may be because of a multitude of issues including lack of confidence, capacity constraints, etc but they do subsequently apply to large grants.

Examples of women-led initiatives:

Women in Action Seychelles Organisation: A women-led organization that is teaching women how to turn seaweed into fertilizer and providing them with key financial literacy training to be able to sell their products thereafter.

Eco-sol Consulting: A company led by a woman undertook a Blue Economy entrepreneurship ecosystem assessment has found that women are less likely to go into business in the Blue Economy seeing it as a male-dominated field and that entrepreneurial lifestyle did not easily align with their domestic responsibilities around child-care.

Building capacity: Training and capacity development is part and parcel of all projects funded and grantees are encouraged to ensure they are reaching out to all genders. SeyCCAT's own efforts to build capacity of potential applicants included 75% of women in attendance. The most significant contributions of the Blue Grants Fund have been supporting a PhD student directly with her research study, and a Masters and Bachelors degree student with their research either through a grant directly or data collected through one a SeyCCAT-funded project. This has paved their journeys to becoming marine scientists, environmental economists and blue entrepreneurs.

Whilst the Trust is seemingly supporting gender responsive financing, it still requires the development of a gender policy and strategy to guide its work. This is work in progress. So far, the progress includes targeting women as part of communications in Requests for Proposals, collecting gender disaggregated data, sensitizing the Blue Grants Committee and other decision-making bodies on gender and providing role models of how women, including young women are leading change in their communities through the financing available.