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Review Article

MARITIME GOVERNANCE AND THE BLUE ECONOMY: BETWEEN STRATEGIC AMBITIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION CONSTRAINTS (A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE)

Rajae Janati Idrissi*, Youssef Pheniqi

University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, Morocco

Abstract: The blue economy is emerging as a strategic paradigm for the sustainable development of ocean resources, mobilizing growing political ambitions on a global scale. However, the effective implementation of these strategies is constrained by multiple institutional, regulatory and operational constraints.

This systematic review aims to analyze the scientific literature on maritime governance and the blue economy, identifying the strategic ambitions of institutional actors and the constraints that hinder their realization.

A systematic bibliographic search was carried out following the PRISMA protocol. On 560 initial results. After deduplication and application of inclusion criteria, 126 articles were selected for the qualitative synthesis. The 30 most relevant articles were thoroughly analyzed.

The analysis reveals four major emerging themes: (1) institutional fragmentation and multi-level coordination challenges; (2) the tensions between ambitions for economic growth and imperatives of environmental sustainability; (3) gaps in technical, financial and human capacities; (4) the issues of participation and inclusion of local communities.

Despite a growing consensus on the need for integrated and holistic approaches, the governance of the blue economy still faces significant structural obstacles.

Keywords: Maritime governance, blue economy, sustainable development, ocean policies, PRISMA.

*Corresponding author: rajae.janatiidrissi@usmba.ac.ma

Rajae Janati Idrissi, ORCID: 0009-0004-2209-7402
Youssef Pheniqi, ORCID : 0009-0009-2178-9737

1. INTRODUCTION

Oceans cover more than 70% of the earth's surface and are a key pillar of the global climate system, biodiversity, and food security. In the face of accelerating degradation of marine ecosystems, the concept of a "blue economy" has emerged as a strategic paradigm aimed at reconciling economic development and environmental conservation (Pauli, 2010; Silver et al, 2015). Defined by the World Bank as "the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and employment, while maintaining the health of ocean ecosystems", the blue economy is now mobilizing major political ambitions at national, regional, and international levels (World Bank, 2017; European Commission, 2021).

Maritime governance-understood as all the processes, institutions, rules, and mechanisms through which public stakeholders, private and civil society make decisions regarding the use and management of ocean spaces and resources-is undergoing a profound transformation (Mahon et al., 2009; Jentoft & Chuenpagdee, 2009). The adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) "Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources" by the United Nations in 2015 reinforces the imperative of integrated ocean governance (United Nations 2015; Guerreiro, 2022). Many states have developed national ocean policies, blue economy strategies and maritime spatial planning (MSP) instruments (Douvere, 2008; Ehler & Douvere, 2009).

However, a significant gap persists between the stated strategic ambitions and the reality of their operational implementation. Recent academic work highlights the complexity of institutional challenges, the multiplicity of actors involved, conflicts of use between economic sectors, and tensions between growth objectives and conservation imperatives (Bennett et al., 2021; Voyer et al., 2018; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021). The literature also highlights gaps in technical, financial and human capacities, particularly in developing countries and small island states (Spalding, 2016; Keen et al., 2018).

Despite the growing abundance of publications on the blue economy and maritime governance, few studies offer a systematic and critical synthesis of this literature. This review aims to fill this gap by answering the following question: What are the strategic ambitions of blue economy and maritime governance policies, and what constraints hinder their effective implementation?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. PRISMA research protocol

This systematic review follows the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) protocol (Page et al., 2021), ensuring transparency and reproducibility. The research was conducted between January and March 2024 in the Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect databases.

2.2. Search strategy and selection criteria

The keywords used include: "blue economy", "ocean governance", "maritime governance", "marine spatial planning", "sustainable ocean development", "ocean policy", combined with Boolean operators (AND, OR). The inclusion criteria are articles in English or French, published between 2015 and 2024, peer-reviewed, on maritime governance and/or the blue economy. Exclusion criteria include: unpeer-reviewed articles, pre-2015 publications, purely technical studies with no governance dimension.

2.3. Selection process

The initial search identified 560 results. After deleting the duplicates (n=187), 373 articles were reviewed by title and summary. 247 articles were excluded for irrelevance. 126 articles were selected for the complete qualitative synthesis. Among these, 30 articles considered the most relevant were subjected to in-depth analysis and systematic thematic coding.

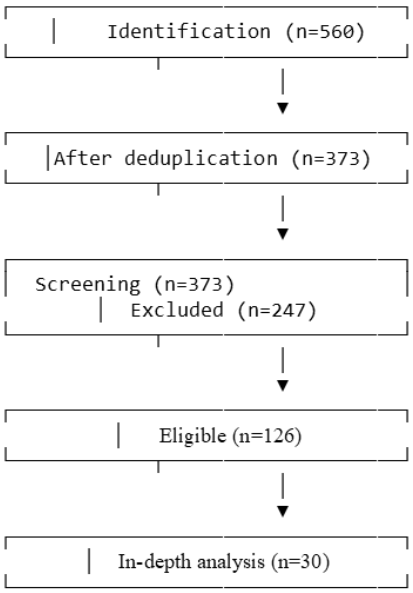

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

2.4. Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis was carried out according to the approach of Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combining inductive and deductive coding. The data was coded manually and with the NVivo software. Four major emerging themes have been identified, each subdivided into sub-themes.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the 126 selected articles reveals four major emerging themes structuring the challenges of maritime governance and the blue economy.

3.1. Theme 1: Institutional fragmentation and multi-level coordination challenges

3.1.1. Multiplicity of actors and overlapping competences

Maritime governance involves a multiplicity of actors at local, national, regional and international levels, generating overlapping competences and conflicts of jurisdiction (Grip, 2017; Vince & Haward, 2017). Sectoral regulatory frameworks (fisheries, maritime transport, tourism, offshore energy) often fall under separate authorities, hindering coordination (Flannery et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016).

3.1.2. Vertical and horizontal coordination challenges

Vertical coordination between levels of governance (international, national, local) and horizontal coordination between sectors remain problematic (Soma et al., 2015; Qiu & Jones, 2013). Existing coordination mechanisms are often informal, ad hoc and insufficiently institutionalized (Frazão Santos et al., 2020).

3.1.3. Weakness of integrated legal frameworks

Despite the existence of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), national legal frameworks remain fragmented (Rayfuse, 2019; Tanaka, 2015). Maritime spatial planning (MSP) is presented as an integration tool, but its adoption remains uneven and its implementation often limited (Ehler, 2021; Collie et al., 2021).

Table 1 : Challenges of institutional coordination

Governance level	**Main challenges identified**	**References**
International	Fragmentation of conventions, absence of supranational authority	(Rochette et al.,2015) (Grip,2017) (Rayfuse,2019),
Regional	Disparities in capacities, cross-border conflicts	(Vierros et al.,2016) (Hassanali,2018) (Österblom et al. 2015)
National	Sectoral overlap, lack of inter-ministerial coordination	(Flannery et al.,2018) (Jones et al.,2016) (Barbesgaard,2018)
Local	Exclusion of communities, low participation	(Bennett & Dearden,2014) (Cinner et al.,2016) (Sowman & Sunde, 2018)

3.2. Theme 2: Tensions between economic growth and environmental sustainability

3.2.1. Conceptual ambiguity of the blue economy

The concept of the blue economy suffers from a fundamental ambiguity: some actors privilege economic growth ("blue growth"), while others insist on environmental sustainability (Eikeset et al., 2018; Winder & Le Heron, 2017). This tension translates into divergent priorities in national policies (Choi, 2017).

3.2.2. Prioritization of economic growth

Many blue economy strategies prioritize economic growth and job creation objectives over conservation (Cohen et al., 2016; Foley & Havice, 2016). Extractive sectors (industrial fishing, deep-sea mining, offshore hydrocarbons) often benefit from disproportionate political and financial support (Childs & Hicks, 2019; Okafor-Yarwood, 2019).

3.2.3. Inadequacy of environmental safeguards

Environmental impact assessments (EIA) are frequently insufficient, carried out late or bypassed (Jay et al., 2016; Stelzenmüller et al., 2018). Marine protected areas (MPAs) cover less than 10% of the oceans, and their effectiveness is often compromised by a lack of monitoring and enforcement capacity (Gill et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018).

Table 2. Tensions between growth and sustainability

Dimension	**Growth orientation**	**Sustainability orientation**	**References**
Priority objectives	GDP, jobs, investment	Conservation, ecosystem resilience	(Eikeset et al.,2018); (Winder & Le Heron,2017); (Choi,2017).
Preferred Sectors	Industrial fishing, offshore energy, tourism	MPA, ecological restoration, artisanal fishing	(Cohen et al., 2016); (Foley & Havice, 2016); (Childs&Hicks,2019); (Okafor-Yarwood,2019)
Regulatory instruments	Economic incentives, PPPs	EIA, zoning, strict quotas	(Jay et al.,2016) ; (Stelzenmüller et al.,2018) ; (Österblom et al.,2017)
Stakeholder participation	Dominant economic actors	Local communities, environmental NGOs	(Jentoft et al.,2012); (Pomeroy et al.,2016) (Song et al.,2013)

3.3. Theme 3: Gaps in technical, financial and human capacities

3.3.1. Gaps in scientific data and knowledge

Effective maritime governance requires robust oceanographic, biological and socio-economic data. Yet, many regions, particularly in developing countries, suffer from significant gaps in data collection, management and sharing (Visbeck, 2018; Halpern et al., 2019).

3.3.2. Financial constraints

Funding for maritime governance and the blue economy remains largely insufficient (Sumaila et al. , 2019; Virdin et al., 2021). Developing countries and small island developing states (SIDS) struggle to mobilize the resources needed to implement their strategies (Govan et al., 2009; Blasiak et al., 2020).

3.3.3. Lack of qualified human resources

The implementation of blue economy policies requires specialized skills in spatial planning, integrated coastal zone management, environmental assessment and international negotiation. These skills are often lacking, particularly in the public administrations of southern countries (Allison et al., 2012; Nakamura et al., 2018).

Table 3. Capacity gaps by region

Region	**Key gaps**	**References**
Sub-Saharan Africa	Data, funding, technical expertise	(Visbeck,2018); (Govan et al.,2009); (Allison et al.,2012)
Small Island States (SIDS)	Financing, human resources, climate vulnerability	(Keen et al.,2018); (Spalding,2016); (Blasiak et al.,2020)
Southeast Asia	Regional coordination, enforcement of regulations	(Halpern et al.,2019), (Nakamura et al.,2018) ; (Asadi et al., 2023)
Latin America and Caribbean	Funding, community participation, data	(Virdin et al.,2021) ; (Costa et al.,2024); (Nommela et al.,2022)

3.4. Theme 4: Issues of stakeholder participation and inclusion

3.4.1. Exclusion of local communities

Marine governance decision-making processes frequently exclude coastal communities and artisanal fishers, whose livelihoods depend directly on ocean resources (March et al., 2023; Casanova, 2021).

3.4.2. Power asymmetries and capture by elites

Participatory processes, where they exist, are often dominated by powerful economic actors (large fishing companies, oil companies, tourism developers) and political elites (Winton et al., 2024; Oceans and seas...,2022). Public consultation mechanisms are frequently formal and symbolic, without real influence on decisions (Shih et al., 2023).

3.4.3. Challenges of inclusive governance

Implementing truly inclusive governance requires robust institutional mechanisms that ensure effective representation of marginalized stakeholders, access to information, and influence over decisions (Saha et al., 2018; Bennett et al., 2019). These conditions are rarely met (Voyer et al., 2020).

Table 4: Barriers to inclusive participation

Obstacle Type	Description	References
Institutional	Lack of formal mechanisms for participation	(March et al.,2023) (Saha et al.,2018) (Voyer et al.,2020)
Socio-economic	Power asymmetries, capture by the elites	(Winton et al.,2024) (Oceans and seas..,2022) (Shih et al.,2023)
Cultural and linguistic	Exclusion of local communities, language barriers	(Casanova,2021) (Bennett et al.,2019) (Rudolph et al.,2020)
Geographic	Remoteness, limited access to decision-making processes	(Queffelec et al.,2021) (Campbell et al.,2016) (Rudolph et al.2020)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Summary of the main findings

This systematic review highlights a central paradox: while the blue economy and maritime governance are the subject of growing strategic ambitions at national and international levels, their effective implementation faces major structural obstacles. The four emerging themes identified—institutional fragmentation, tensions between growth and sustainability, capacity gaps, and participation challenges—are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

Institutional fragmentation impedes the coordination needed for integrated ocean management. Tensions between economic and environmental objectives reflect policy choices that often favor short-term growth. Capacity gaps constrain the ability of states, especially the most vulnerable ones, to implement ambitious policies. Finally, the exclusion of local stakeholders undermines policy legitimacy and effectiveness.

4.2. Implications for research and practice

The results of this review call for a renewal of maritime governance approaches. First, there is a need to strengthen multi-level and cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms, including through the institutionalization of platforms for dialogue and integrated planning. Second, blue economy strategies must explicitly incorporate binding environmental sustainability targets with robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Third, a massive effort to build technical, financial and human capacities is essential, particularly in developing countries. Finally, the effective participation of local communities must be guaranteed by formal and binding institutional mechanisms.

4.3. Limitations of the study

This review has several limitations. First, the research focused on publications in English and French, potentially excluding relevant work in other languages. Secondly, thematic analysis, although systematic, involves a degree of subjectivity in the identification and interpretation of themes. Thirdly, academic literature mainly reflects the perspectives of researchers and may underrepresent the views of practitioners and local communities.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic review of the literature on maritime governance and the blue economy reveals a significant gap between the stated strategic ambitions and the implementation constraints. Despite a growing consensus on the need for integrated and sustainable approaches, ocean governance still faces major structural obstacles: institutional fragmentation, tensions between growth and sustainability, capacity gaps, and participation challenges.

The transition to a truly sustainable blue economy requires deep transformations of institutional frameworks, financing mechanisms, technical and human capacities, and decision-making processes. It also requires a conceptual and normative clarification of the blue economy, explicitly prioritizing environmental sustainability and social equity.

Future research should deepen the analysis of multi-level coordination mechanisms, innovative financing instruments, and inclusive participation modalities. Comparative studies across regions and countries would help to identify good practices and success factors. Finally, special attention must be given to the knowledge and practices of local communities, too often marginalized in governance processes.

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