

A Pacific resistance to Blue colonization

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Over the past few years, the concepts of “Blue Economy,” “Ocean Economy,” and “Blue Growth” have emerged from government leaders and the financial and corporate business sector as a supposed sustainable development model for future generations. Here, the ocean is a central focus in providing for the needs of today and tomorrow (jobs, food security, livelihoods, mineral and resources, etc).

Yet social movements around the world have raised serious concerns that this emphasis on “blue growth” can actually be understood as a form of “blue colonization”. Pacific state leaders are courted with economic gains that are a fraction of the value of the ocean resources that will be extracted. Commercial and exploration licenses for significant experimental mining of deep-sea minerals are being issued without the consent of the people. The rights of the people to make decisions about their territories are being taken away.

*In this month’s “Voices from the South,” **Joey Tau (Papua New Guinea) of the Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG)** writes on the dangers of the “blue economy” and deep-sea mining, the work that is being done to stop such projects in the Pacific region, and the need to listen to the early warning observations from those living in the region related to ocean ecosystems.*



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There is a race to divide and exploit the ocean’s resources. Global powers including developed countries and transnational corporations backed up by multilateral



financial institutions, together with Pacific Island nations are all competing to obtain maritime resources.

Framed as “sustainable blue economy” and “blue growth” to justify economic interests, this race for exploitation aims to obtain minerals for “green technology” and renewable energy for the economies in the global North and emerging powerful economies in the South, such as China. Corporations are now arguing that technological advances in recent years has now made exploitation of ocean minerals imminent.

The Blue Economy concept has been sold to the Pacific as sustainable for the future of the region and environmentally green, thus Pacific leaders are courted with promised economic gains that are a fraction of the value of the ocean resources that will be extracted. Already some Pacific Island governments, without the consent of their peoples, have issued commercial as well as numerous exploration licenses to significant parts of their territories for experimental mining of deep-sea minerals. These explorations pose serious threats to the ocean and coastal communities in the Pacific.

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Seabed mining is perceived as an imminent venture in the Pacific. Countries such as Nauru, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Tonga, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Vanuatu, Fiji and the Solomon Islands are seen as some of the pioneers. Despite the experimental nature of the industry, exploration has already begun within the territorial waters of these countries. Without proper legal guidance and lack of consultation, PNG issued in 2012 the world’s first commercial license to Canadian company Nautilus Minerals Inc., which was set to commence exploitation in 2019.

However, due to ongoing community resistance and a lack of investor interest which was seen to be in its infant experimental stages, the Nautilus Mineral’s Solwara 1 project in the Bismarck waters of PNG was forced to close operations after being delisted from the Toronto Stock Exchange mid 2019.

Regionally, the elaboration of a model legislation for Pacific Island countries sponsored by the European Commission signaled the readiness of the Pacific. An independent review undertaken by Blue Ocean Law (BOL) and PANG of the model legislation found that it focused more on ensuring a clear licensing regime and conditions favoured industry rather than to ensure the rights of the Pacific peoples and their environments were safeguarded.

Moreover, the industry continues to argue that nothing lives deep in the ocean, deep sea mining has less risks (or less pollution risks), with predictions of high economic gains. The experimental nature of DSM projects ignores the fact that we don’t know the full impacts that mining will have on the deep seabed and the waters there, nor how coastal territories and communities will be impacted. In addition, several studies have found that the economic value of minerals is highly speculative in nature.

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There is increasing scientific evidence that deep-sea mining poses a grave threat to the vital balance of different planet's functions. Most studies also found that there will be little to zero recovery of biodiversity after depleting the mineral reserve. More disturbing is that given the industrial scale of operations (both in terms of size, intensity and duration), the results would be devastating and its effects would cover large areas of the ocean floor.

In the Pacific, coastal communities in New Ireland and East New Britain in PNG are already experiencing the negative impacts from the exploratory mining and drilling occurring 30-50 kilometers from their communities. Villagers have reported an increase in frequency of dead fish washed up on shore, including a number of deep-sea creatures hot to the touch, as well as excessively dusty and murky waters.

The irony cannot be ignored that in in this era of climate change, the Pacific People, who have contributed the least to the causes of climate change and are acknowledged to be already bearing a disproportionate burden in terms of the effects, are also now facing another attack of equivalent if not greater significance.

In 2011, a collective including feminists, community groups, regional non-governmental organisations and a church-based organization, organized research and analysis to better understand implications for Pacific peoples and the ocean of economic exploitation of deep-sea minerals.

In 2012, the collective mobilized over 8,000 signatures to caution Pacific Island Forum Leaders over deep sea mining, while in 2014 the Lutheran church issued a signed petition to the PNG Government over growing concerns about the impacts of DSM, representing over one million of its members.

In Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Council of Churches and the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta persuaded the

government to review the 147 licenses that were issued without the prior knowledge of previous governments or parliament, let alone the custodians of the ocean.

Globally, activists from PNG and Fiji made an appeal respectively in Brazil at the Rio + 20 Summit in 2012 and in Europe in 2014 to garner support for a ban on seabed mining. It took three years of lobbying and advocacy efforts with European partners, until 2017, before the European Parliament supported a moratorium resolution on deep-sea mining. Palau has placed a ban on commercial activities including fisheries and mining.

In addition, the Fiji Government has recently announced a 10year moratorium on deep sea mining activities at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting. The call for a 10year moratorium was supported by the governments of PNG and Vanuatu. The announcements follow suit of countries, such as New Zealand, who are rejecting applications for DSM within their territorial waters, whilst the governments of Northern Territory of Australia and Chile also have a ban in place against seabed mining.

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Link: <https://www.karibu.no/newsletter/2020/02/a-pacific-resistance-to-blue-colonization/>

