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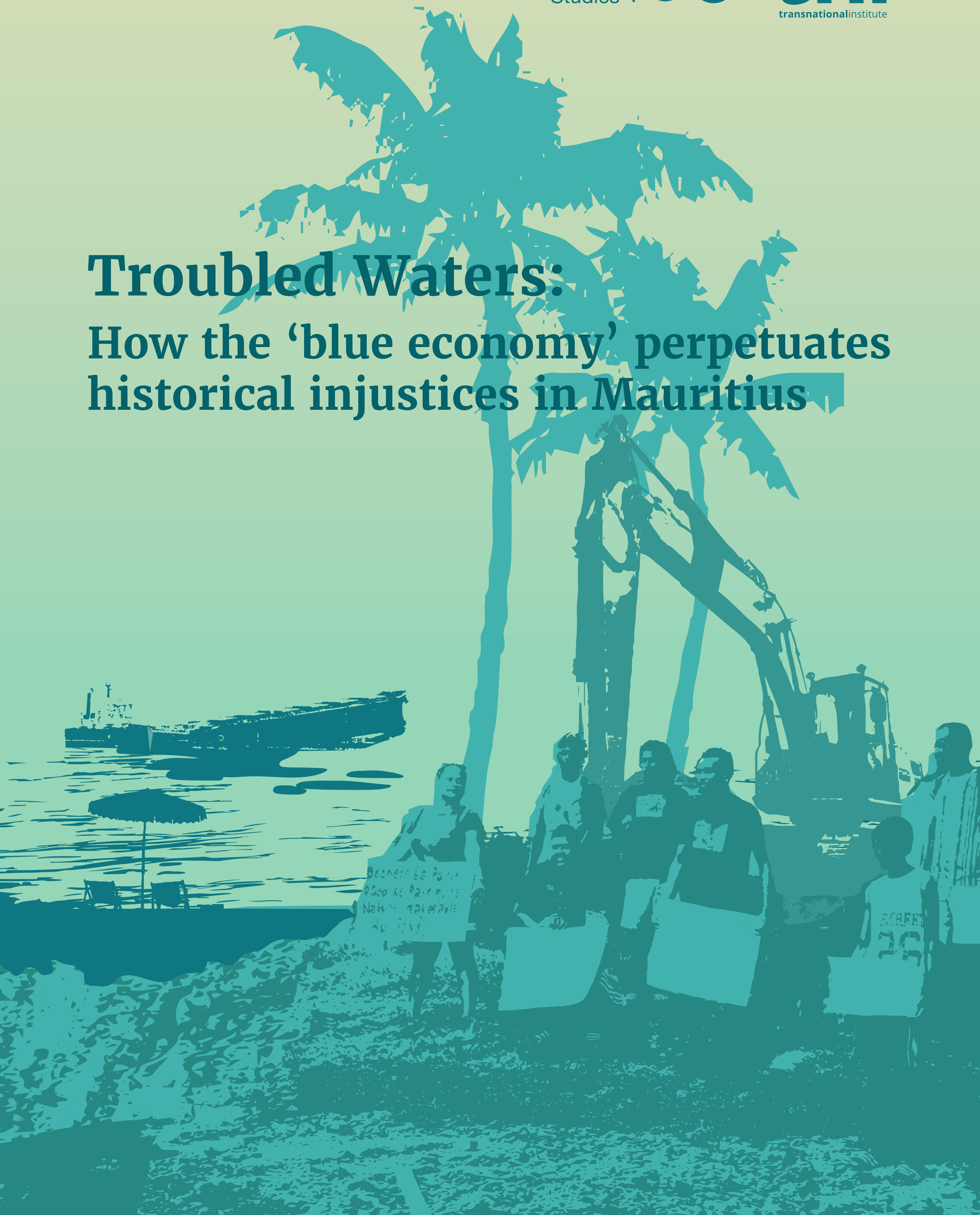
Troubled Waters:
How the ‘blue economy’ perpetuates historical injustices in Mauritius



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Introduction

Oceans have become new frontiers for economic growth, seen as an opportunity for capital investment and profits to be derived from vast untapped resources – beyond fish stocks.[1] The concept of the *blue economy* or *blue growth*,[2] which can be traced back to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, has gained in popularity in recent years and is used to place oceans more firmly on the agendas of governments, inter-governmental organisations and the private sector. At the same time, Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) – i.e. carving up the seas and coastlines into sites for particular use or exploitation – has become the preferred form of governance to continue expanding the so-called ocean economy.

This report examines the history and trajectory of the concept of the blue economy and MSP. To gain a more detailed understanding of the characteristics of the blue economy at the country level, we focus on the ocean economy of Mauritius. Located in the western Indian Ocean and surrounded by a sovereign ocean territory approximately 1,000 times bigger than its combined landmass, Mauritius is one of the countries that is leading and advancing the concept of the blue economy. The case of Mauritius exposes the gulf between the government's promises of triple benefits, and the real implications of the ocean economy for people and the environment.

The case of Mauritius is of particular interest because inter-governmental institutions portray the country as one of the 'Champions for the Blue Economy',[3] as one of only three African countries doing well in the blue economy,[4] and as a good example of 'how private sector-led growth in a stable macroeconomic and institutional environment is thriving'.[5] This glamourous international image of the Mauritian blue economy[6] not only contrasts with the realities on the ground, but also shows how some of the most influential proponents of the blue economy apply the concept to advance their own political and economic agendas while turning a blind eye to the negative impacts on both people and nature.

The research for this report started before the COVID-19 pandemic and the Wakashio oil spill,[7] and while 2020 will go down in history as the worst year since independence, Mauritius was already suffering from profound climate-related, environmental, social and economic crises. The analysis is therefore just as relevant as before the outbreak of the pandemic. As part of the research, the author travelled the country for three weeks, participated in public events on ocean issues and conducted interviews with fishers, port workers, private-sector representatives, union leaders, politicians, academics and other Mauritians actively involved in non-government organisations (NGOs). The report is intended to trigger critical debate and assist the working people[8] of Mauritius to choose the right path towards a brighter future for people and for the natural environment, in particular the ocean.

The first section of the report highlights the importance of the ocean as as territory for capital investment and accumulation, and unpacks the concept and history of the blue economy. Section 2 looks into the characteristics of the ocean economy in Mauritius and the government's plans for advancing the ocean's share in the total national economy. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), most of the country's economic activities are connected to the ocean as most imported goods (food, oil and other material needs) arrive by ship and a significant proportion of working people are directly or indirectly connected to the sea. An estimated 7% of the labour force works in the fisheries sectors, more than 9% in tourism and below 1% in Mauritius' ports. The World Bank estimates that the total ocean economy comprises around 10% of the national economy with tourism being the largest contributor (70% of the ocean economy). Port activities is the second largest ocean sector (20%) and fishing and fish processing comes third. Other sectors, such as oil, gas and aquaculture, feature prominently in the government's plans.

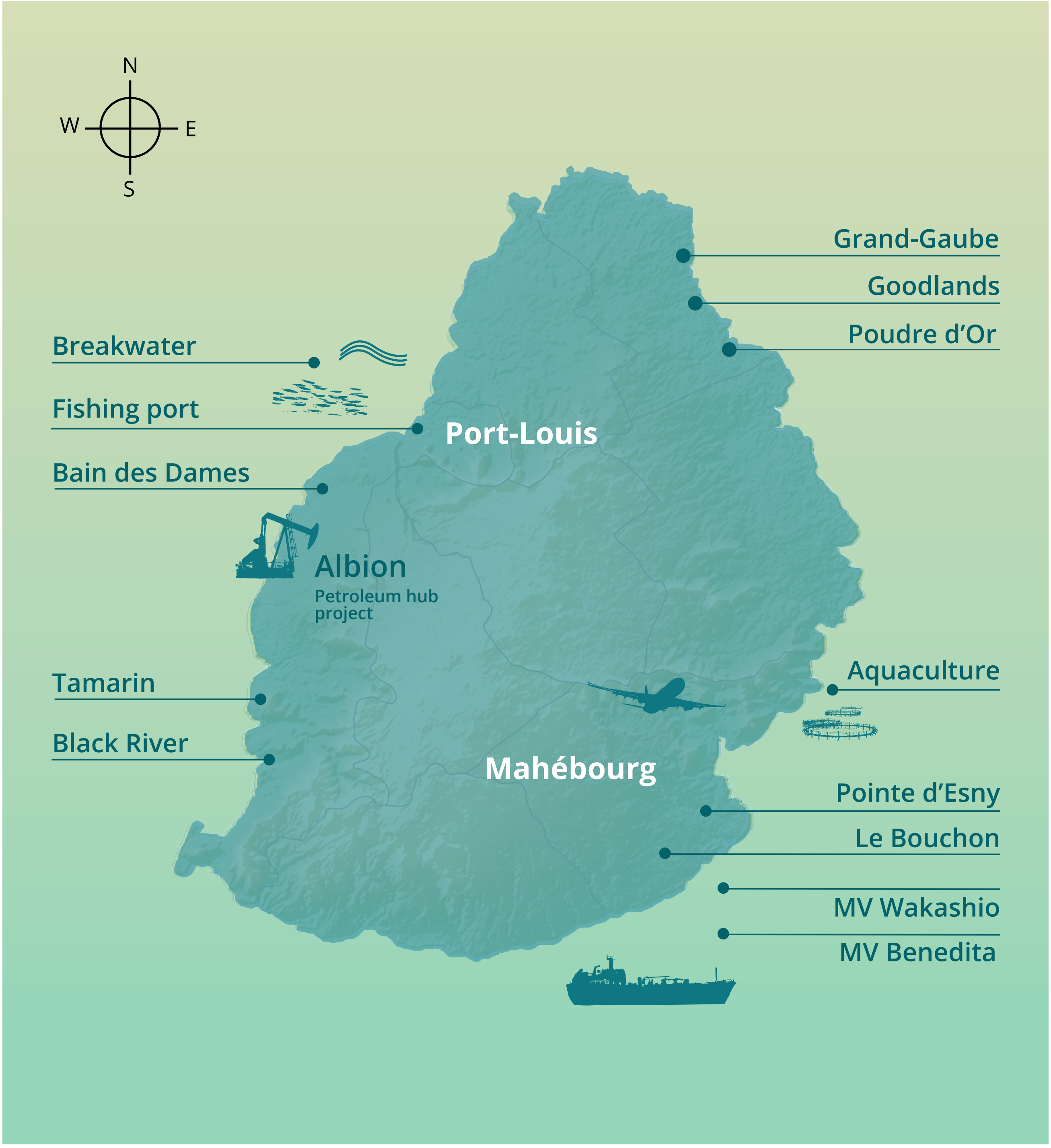
Section 3 looks at Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) and how this policy instrument has become a key driver in advancing the ocean economy. In theory, MSP allows for broad participation of all actors with a 'stake' in the ocean and can be used to balance economic growth with environmental protection and social development. However, as in the case of Mauritius, MSP is being used as a tool to privatise the ocean and allocate concessions to the most powerful actors. The section shows that although MSP has become a high political priority of the Prime Minister's Office, most Mauritians know nothing about it.

Section 4 briefly looks into capital accumulation[9] in the commodity trade (sea transportation) and sugar economies since early colonisation and how this laid the foundations for a small elite class of just a few families and companies that control a significant share of the national economy and hold significant political power. Section 5 explores the specific case of one company to illustrate how capital and political power have become centralised over a period of two centuries. In 1830, the Blyth Brothers formed a company which gradually expanded and has recently undergone a series of mergers and acquisitions. This centralisation process created IBL Ltd., the largest company in Mauritius in terms of employees and turnover and by far the biggest player within its fishing industry.

Fisheries is important in the ocean economy, but while large-scale fishing and aquaculture receive considerable government attention and support, small-scale fishing is less visible. Section 6 sheds light on the cultural and socio-economic importance of small-scale fishing by tracing its history and documenting its significant, yet unrecognised, contribution to the broader Mauritian economy. It underlines the political marginalisation of small-scale fishing, which is rooted in the colonial era.

It is widely recognised that fishing and marine life are in crisis. Section 7 addresses the sources of pollution and climate change which have a negative impact on all marine life and lead to diminished fish stocks regardless of the scale of fishing activities. It argues that overfishing is used to explain the deteriorating state of fish stocks while overlooking the negative impacts of climate change and other human-induced forms of environmental destruction; and that policy and management responses first and foremost aim to reduce small-scale fishing, but ignore polluting and carbon-emitting industries such as textile, agriculture and tourism.

The concluding section connects the international rise of the blue economy paradigm with the history and future plans for the ocean economy in Mauritius. It shows how the government, along with influential corporations, uses the concept of the blue economy to reshape the Mauritian ocean economy on the basis of large-scale public and private investments. Facilitated through MSP, a new private property regime for secure investments in the ocean sectors is gaining ground, but whereas MSP is intended to be inclusive and democratic the case of Mauritius also shows how such principles are watered down in geopolitical and security developments that take place behind closed doors. Influential international players are using the Mauritian case to showcase and build further support for the blue economy concept. The contradiction between the promise of prosperity under a Mauritian blue paradigm and realities on the ground points to a clear case of what has been referred to as Ocean Grabbing.[10] In this context, the working people of Mauritius continue in their struggle to realise their own alternative vision.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W
E
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Grand-Gaube
Goodlands
Poudre d'Or
Breakwater
Fishing port
Port-Louis
Bain des Dames
Albion
Petroleum hub project
Tamarin
Black River
Aquaculture
Mahébourg
Pointe d'Esny
Le Bouchon
MV Wakashio
MV Benedita

1. The ocean as a new frontier for capitalism

Massive sums of capital are tied up fixed in assets such as ships, oil-rigs, tourist resorts and port infrastructure and oceans are now attracting new and unprecedented profit-motivated investments in what are portrayed as vast untapped resources.[11]

Surrounded by a massive sovereign ocean territory approximately 1,000 times bigger than its combined landmass, Mauritius has become one of the countries at the forefront in the push to expand the ocean economy. The World Bank refers to Mauritius as one of the 'Champions for the Blue Economy';[12] the director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) highlights Mauritius as one of only three African countries doing well in the blue economy;[13] and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) praises Mauritius as a good example of 'how private sector-led growth in a stable macroeconomic and institutional environment is thriving'.[14]

Such positive assessments match the messages from Mauritian government officials and politicians who exploit international meetings and conferences to advance the Mauritian ocean economy agenda.[15] At a 2017 conference of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Chief Executive of the Ministry of Defence and Rodrigues explained that 'Marine Spatial Planning is the key to the development of a sustainable blue economy where all stakeholders can pursue their economic activities...[the] Ocean/Blue Economy is set to become a pillar of development and growth for the country in the coming years'.[16]

The rapid development of ocean industries and increasing investments in these new frontiers raise a number of questions. What is the blue economy? Where does the concept come from? And who stands to benefit from it? These questions will be addressed in the following sections and the example of Mauritius sheds sobering light on the deep gulf between the promises of sustainable development and the actual development of and impact on the ocean economy.

What is the blue economy?

The terms *blue economy* and *blue growth* are often used interchangeably and while there is no universally agreed definition of either of these terms, there is a broad consensus that it is about promoting economic growth and social development and ensuring environmental sustainability.[17] A useful approach to better understand the terms is first, to deconstruct the rhetoric used to promote blue economy as a paradigm that will have triple benefits (good for people, the planet and the economy) and then to look at specific policies and plans regarding the ocean economy.

The triple benefit

It all seemed to have started around the Rio+20 Earth Summit in 2012, when governments of Small Island Development States (SIDS) joined the World Bank, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and conservation organisations including The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund (WWF), in efforts to attract more attention to the ocean.[18] Building on the three pillars of the United Nations sustainability agenda, encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030, these agencies and organisations argued that blue growth – like green growth – would bring about *environmental protection*, *economic development* and *social development*.

In the early 1990s, when the sustainability agenda gained traction and was adopted by the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), more widely known as the 1992 Rio Earth Summit ('Agenda 21'),[19] the *social development* and *environmental protection* pillars were at the centre of discussions. Priorities of combating poverty, protecting and promoting human health and the quality of fresh water, and inclusion of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and workers' unions, stood out as key focus areas of the *social development* pillar. The focus on *environmental protection* covered issues such as protecting the atmosphere and oceans, conserving biological diversity, combating deforestation and drought, promoting sustainable agriculture, and managing toxic chemicals waste.[20] This is how 'Agenda 21' became known to most people at the time and since then, the sustainability agenda – like the Holy Grail – has made it harder for other development paths to gain traction. However, as will be discussed below, there is more behind these images.

In her 2016 book *Enterprising Nature,* Jessica Dempsey gives a historical account of how the *environmental* pillar – even before the 1992 Earth Summit – was embedded in a capitalist framing whereby it is possible to conserve nature only if there are profits to be made.[21] She explains that in the 1970s, ecologists and conservation organisations, among others, developed the concept of placing an economic value on nature, and that this was a deliberate approach in order to gain support from policy-makers. The essence of this approach is that only when nature can be given a price tag and accounted for will it be possible to develop policies and governance frameworks for its protection – and at the same time contribute to poverty reduction (*social development* pillar). In a similar critique of the sustainability agenda, Purvis and co-authors (2019) argue that a win-win model has '… emerged by recasting the same old economic growth [capitalism] in 'socially and environmentally sustainable colours' and that 'a growth-focused economic pillar is central to [the United Nations'] sustainable development narrative; here, growth is key to meeting the social and environmental goals through trickle-down effects.'[22]

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, UNEP, one of the leading agencies in the early development of the concept of the blue economy, issued a report for policy-makers stating that 'there is now a growing recognition that achieving sustainability rests almost entirely on getting the economy right'.[23] In the following years and leading up to the 2012 Rio+20 Earth Summit, UNEP co-produced a new report, *Green Economy in a Blue World*. Aiming at giving shape to the blue growth agenda, it also places *economic development* centre-stage, and repeatedly calls for investments in many of the most energy-demanding sectors (shipping, sea-bed mining, tourism and aquaculture).[24] In other words, *getting the economy right* implies economic growth in sectors that are known to contribute to the environmental and climate crisis. Since the 'birth' of the blue economy agenda, *environmental protection* and *social development* have basically been perceived as having emerged from the continuous expansion of the economy through capital investments in existing and emerging ocean sectors. The proclaimed *triple benefits* therefore rest on the dream of an ever-expanding capitalist economy.

A decade of unprecedented efforts to advance the ocean economy

Since the Rio+20 conference, a growing range of actors have become involved in the blue agenda through an increasing number of blue conferences, business projects, policy reports, corporate networks and so on. All along, Mauritius has used the international scene to advance its own interests and also, been used to showcase the ocean's proclaimed potential for economic growth.[25]

The blue economy has in particular attracted the interest of business. In 2014, *The Economist* – an international weekly that represents a liberal economic perspective[26] – hosted its first World Ocean Summit, which brought together political leaders including John Kerry, then US Secretary of State, and business leaders from huge corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell. The chief editor at the time called the summit a 'Davos of the Ocean'[27] (alluding to the venue of the annual World Economic Forum (WEF)). Other big players include various UN specialised agencies,[28] governments and intergovernmental bodies which host the annual Our Ocean conference,[29] the UN Ocean Conferences,[30] and corporate actors such as the WEF,[31] the UN Global Compact Action Platform on Sustainable Ocean Business, and the World Ocean Council (WOC).

The UN Global Compact Action Platform on Sustainable Ocean Business[32] is an arm of the UN Global Compact, which represents the interest of many of the world's leading corporations involved in the ocean economy. The Global Compact is lobbying UN agencies, regional governance institutions and national governments. At the launch of the Ocean Business platform in New York in June 2018, the Permanent Observer of the African Union to the United Nations told an audience of business leaders, high-level state representatives and UN representatives that the 'blue economy is at the centre of the African Union Agenda 2063 – the new frontier of African renaissance. And the launch of the Sustainable Business Ocean Action Platform is an important step in the right direction – to build and strengthen global partnerships... We believe when these partnerships are fully realized, we can produce significant economic development'.[33] The Mauritian branch of the UN Global Compact is chaired by AfrAsia Bank and works in close cooperation with the government of Mauritius.[34]

The World Ocean Council (WOC) is an industry leadership alliance representing large corporations (among others) from sectors including ocean technology, shipping, tourism, oil and gas, the seafood industry, offshore wind, port infrastructure and more. It hosts the annual Sustainable Ocean Summit[35] and, according to its Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Paul Holthus, 'The [Sustainable Ocean Summit] connects all private and public actors to intensify a constructive dialogue for the *sustainable development* of the oceans through *responsible blue growth*'.[36]

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has dedicated several sessions to the ocean economy in recent years, and when COVID-19 prevented the UN from hosting its Ocean Conference in Lisbon in June 2020, the WEF seized the opportunity to convene its 'Virtual Ocean Dialogues' – or what the chairs of the many conference sessions called 'the first ever online conference bringing together governments, business, civil society and science'.[37] The aim of the conference was to produce inputs to the 2021 UN Oceans Conference, and it was co-hosted by the Friends of the Ocean Action Network, which was launched at the 2018 WEF session in order to fast-track solutions to the blue economy. Friends of the Ocean Action Network brings together an economic and political elite including government ministers, transnational corporations (TNCs), and high-level UN officials.[38]

While many other initiatives, such as the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy[39] and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) also merit scrutiny, the blue initiatives and networks outlined above serve to illustrate that big business, along with governments and multilateral institutions (in particular the World Bank and various UN agencies) have scaled up their efforts to drive unprecedented large-scale capital investments in the ocean economy, claiming that this can combine saving nature with making profits. Many of the agencies behind these conferences also praise a multi-stakeholder approach as an inclusive and participatory form of governance, but as highlighted elsewhere[40] such an approach largely overlooks the unequal power between social movements and TNCs and in reality undermines the principles of democracy, inclusion and participation.

Blue washing of the ocean economy

At its core, blue economy is about everything in the ocean or inland water bodies that is or can be turned into a commodity, whether it is in the water column, above the water surface, on or beneath the sea-bed, or on coastal land. The contemporary technological revolution (sometimes referred to as the *third industrial revolution* or the *digital revolution*) has made possible the exploration and exploitation of new resources for the generation of profit. Accumulated capital (such as from shipping, tourism or sugar plantations) and finance capital (e.g. from banks, private investment management corporations and pension funds) has made possible the scaling up of investments in existing or new ocean sectors. Coupled with free trade policies,[41] tax-exemption schemes ('tax holiday') and environmental deregulation, the planet is more open than ever for capital to flow with the currents of the ocean, from one continent to another, extract more profit and accumulate more capital in the process.

The scale of the ocean economy is the subject of debate. The figures produced by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[42] and the World Wildlife Fund (WFF) give the impression that oceans account for approximately USD 1.5–2.5 trillion a year. However, 'the definition, classification standards, and scope of the ocean economy differ from country to country'[43] and in China alone the ocean economy amounted to almost USD 1 trillion in 2017.[44] Global aquaculture was valued at USD 285 billion in 2019[45] – substantially more than the OECD indicated – and is today's fastest-growing food sector.[46] Leaving aside the uncertainty about accurate figures , it is clear that the ocean economy is sufficiently large to draw unprecedented attention from governments and the private sector.

It is therefore unsurprising that TNCs and finance institutions are increasing investment in producing ocean-related commodities, including leisure (coastal tourism and the cruise business), oil and gas (energy and plastics), minerals (coastal and deep-sea mining), bio-fuels (seaweed), deep-sea water (energy and cooling), marine biodiversity (bio-tech and medicine), wind energy (off-shore wind farms) and fish (wild capture and aquaculture). Other corporations with an interest in the ocean economy include shipping companies and owners of port infrastructure, which rely on oceans for transporting commodities; finance institutions seeking quick returns on investments; and insurance companies betting and profiteering on the risks associated with doing business in ocean industries.

This overview of how putting a price tag on nature became fundamental to the UN sustainability agenda (1970s–1992), followed by the increasing emphasis on achieving environmental sustainability and social development on the basis of economic growth (1992–2012), and unprecedented government and private-sector efforts to accelerate the blue economy through capital investments on a massive scale (2012–today), makes clear that the blue rhetoric is used to cover up the continuation of capitalist exploitation of nature and people.

2. The ocean economy in Mauritius

The ocean has been part of economic life in Mauritius since people first set foot on the island. Shipping was the backbone of the capitalist development from the beginning of colonisation until the economy was diversified after independence in 1968 and still accounts for the majority of import and exports.[47] Small-scale fishing has been there for just as long and provides livelihoods for an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 full- or part-time fishers (see Section 6). Industrial fishing began from around the 1930s and provides in the range of 7,000 to 8,000 jobs, primarily port workers and fish-factory workers but also a relatively small number of fishers (see Table 1). There has been a massive expansion of tourism, from around 50,000 tourists in the early 1970s to 1,399,000 in 2018[48] and tourism provides direct jobs for 10%[49] of the 543,000 employed Mauritians in 2018.[50] In sum, the livelihoods and income of a vast number of Mauritians depend on the ocean, which has been the case long before the new ocean economy paradigm.

In economic terms, tourism is – or was until COVID-19 brought the sector to its knees – the biggest contributor to the ocean economy. The fishing industry also contributes significantly to the national economy, with free-port activities and tuna factories dominating the sector. However, the ocean economy in Mauritius is much broader and covers at least 22 sub-sectors grouped into five broad categories. Some of the sub-sectors hold greater economic potential than others, which is also reflected in the government's priorities for the ocean economy.

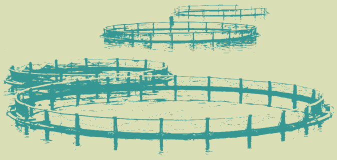
The ocean and the economy

Tourism

- Hotels and restaurants
- Boat leisure tourism
- Yacht services, marine leisure, big-game fishing
- Telemarketing services for cruise liners

Fisheries and Aquaculture

- Fish and other fishing products
- Aquaculture
- Seaweed culture
- Seafood processing



Shipping and port activities

- Ship building and repairs
- Freeport zone
- Sea transport
- Marine and port finance
- Bunkering and energy trading (oil & gas)

Energy and minerals

- Seabed exploitation of hydrocarbons
- Deep-sea mining
- Ocean renewable energy

Others and emerging sectors

- Deep water application (use of cold deep-sea water-cooling systems)
- Marine insurance
- Application of big data
- Vocational and tertiary education
- Biotechnology

Sub-categories based on the model used by the World Bank and drawing on data from the Mauritius Office of Statistics

Source: World Bank (2017) *The Ocean Economy in Mauritius: Making It Happen, Making It Last*[51]

According to the government, the ocean economy provides new opportunities for 'development and growth for the country in the coming years' which can be unlocked 'by creating a framework for consistent, transparent, sustainable and evidence-based decision-making'.[52] Such a framework is referred to as Marine Spatial Planning (MSP). In interviews conducted in September and October 2019 with people from civil society, academia and the private sector, the interviewees were either reluctant to speak about the government's concrete plans or they did not now about them.[53] The following analysis of the government's plans on the ocean economy therefore builds mainly on the government's three-year strategic plans (the 2017/18–2019/20 and the 2019/20–2021/22 plans), the Mauritius 2030 Vision, and various government statements, presentations and speeches.

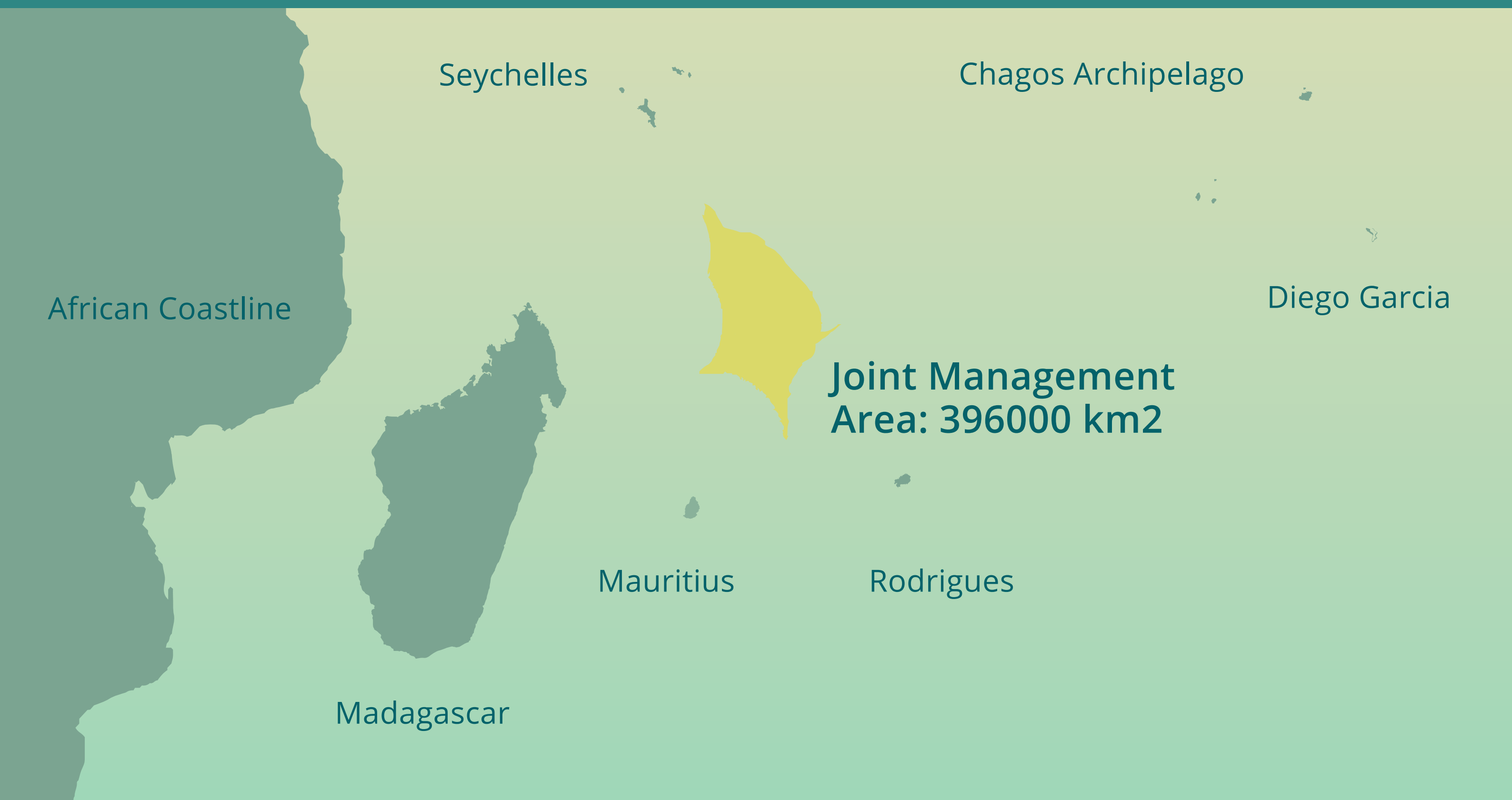
These plans and the 2030 vision seem to follow the same economic development trajectory pursued by previous post-independence governments, with the emphasis on policy reforms that further foreign direct investment (FDI) and deregulation (e.g. tax holidays and reduced environmental regulations).

On 22 August 2015, the then Prime Minister, Mr Anerood Jugnauth presented the Mauritius Vision 2030 and 'the second economic miracle'. His speech set out the basis for the future ocean economy with reference to fisheries, shipping and port development, a petroleum hub and tourism. He also announced the launch of the National Ocean Council (NOC) to spearhead the development of the ocean economy and highlighted the importance of FDI from Dubai, China and Singapore to develop the ocean economy.[54] Vision 2030 is broad in scope but offers few details on the future plans for the ocean economy but, as Jugnauth indicated, the plans would be given shape by the National Ocean Council. In May 2017, the NOC presented the Government Vision 2030 Strategy for Ocean Economy which sets out seven objectives, focused on the exploration and exploitation of resources, significant public seed funding along with private investment, and policy reforms designed to enhance such investments.[55]

The Vision 2030 Strategy for Ocean Economy makes no reference to tourism and small-scale fisheries,[56] and the fishers interviewed said they have not been involved in developing the strategy or had any input at the NOC. However, the broader Vision 2030 (not to be confused with the Strategy for Ocean Economy) and the NOC have made more detailed planning for the ocean economy which includes tourism and, albeit to an insignificant extent, small-scale fishing.

According to the government's three-year strategic plans (2017–2020 and 2019–2022), the blue economy will build on foreign financing, new legislative frameworks on offshore extractive industries (oil exploration and exploitation), development of an MSP, enhancing maritime security, combating overfishing, among other

Joint Management Area



In 2018, the Seychelles and Mauritius signed an agreement with Spectrum Geo to conduct seismic surveys over the Joint Management Area. The survey is expected to providing unique insight into the oil and gas reserves.

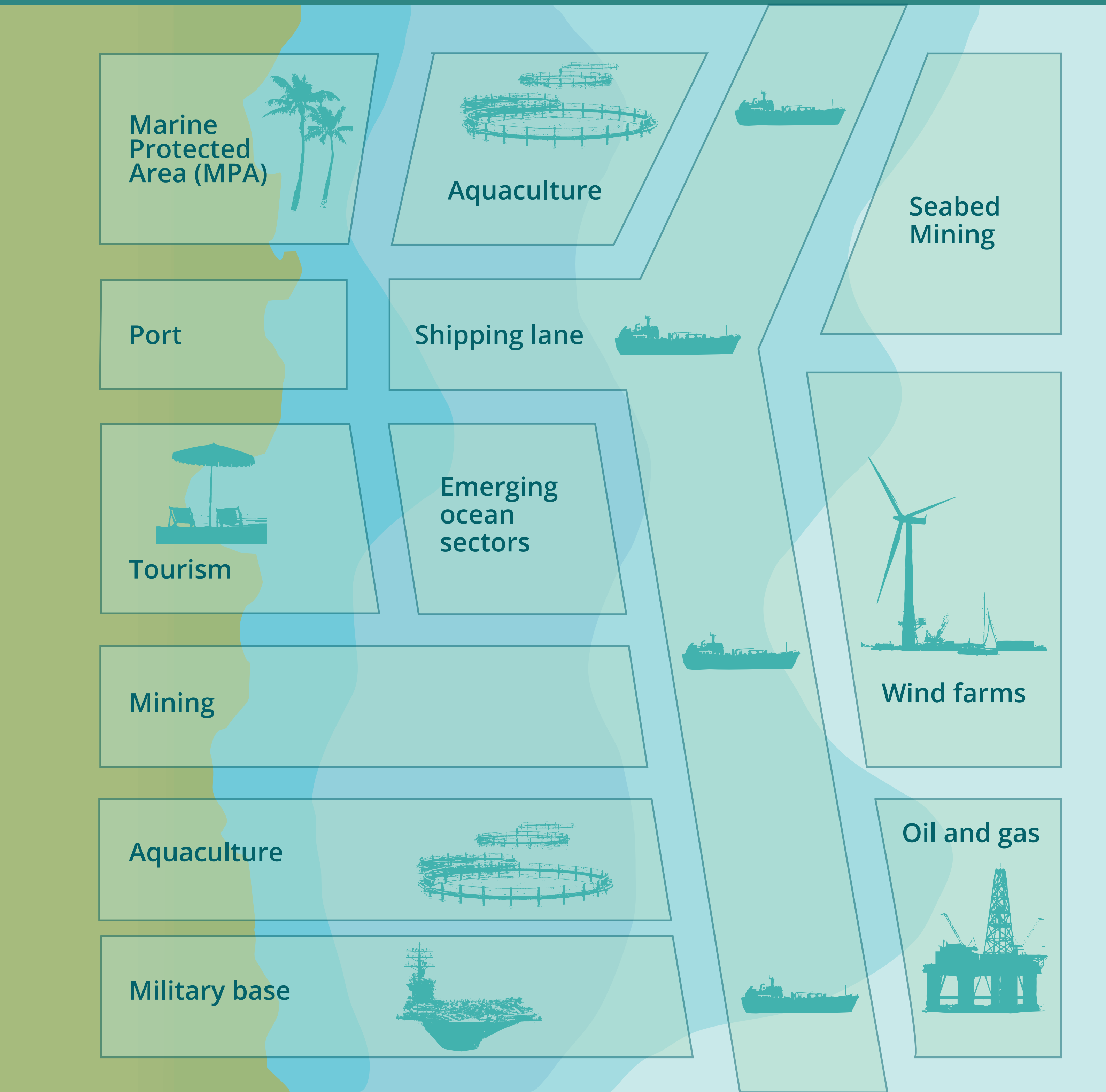
priorities.[57] Comparing the budgetary plans with the strategic plans for the ocean economy reveals a clear orientation towards particular sectors. Oil and gas developments will be promoted through investments in port infrastructure and exploration in the Mauritius and Seychelles Joint Management Area (the shared exclusive economic zone between the two countries) started in 2018.[58] The tourist sector will benefit from investment in a new terminal for cruise ships, sewerage and electricity infrastructure and massive investments in airport expansion. Industrial fisheries are projected to benefit from investment in port infrastructure and in particular from the construction of the breakwater at Fort William & Caudan and a new fishing port, which is part of the Island Terminal Reclamation project prospected to cover an 100 hectares of reclaimed land. Promotion of aquaculture is another key government priority, but whereas the latter project will be funded through public–private partnerships (PPPs) (approximately 70% state funding and 30% from private investors), aquaculture development will rely mainly on private investment.[59] Under the heading of 'Embracing a brighter future together as a nation', the government's strategic plan is silent on the existence and importance of the small-scale fisheries sector and its contribution to local economies and to healthy food and nutrition for the population.[60]

The government plans also align with the recommendations of the World Bank, spelt out in a government-commissioned report,[61] and reflect the framing of the ocean as a major new economic frontier. In terms of scale and investments, these plans are unprecedented in the history of Mauritius and can only be realised through massive capital injections. The sectors and projects in the pipeline rely mainly on high levels of technology and education, and while there may be many jobs created in the construction phase of infrastructure projects (airstrips, ports etc), there will be little long-term employment. According to the World Bank's vague projections, some 1,500 jobs could be created in the aquaculture sector through investments of USD 290 million over a 10-year period, and a total of 35,000 jobs could be created in the same timespan through massive investments in the broader ocean economy. However, the experience of the South African government's ocean economy project, Operation Phakisa, show that promises are not always in line with realities. According to the South African Minister of Environmental Affairs, the aquaculture projects had led to the creation of 521 jobs by mid-2017 – 18 months before the promised 15,000 new jobs in that sector alone.[62]

In his speech at the launch of the Vision 2030, Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth acknowledged that the expansion of the ocean economy is leading to increased competition for ocean space, and in 2017 at the opening of a regional conference on MSP and in his capacity as Minister of Defence and Rodrigues at the time, he stressed that '[i]n the case of Mauritius, MSP has become even more pressing as the country is facing multiple demands for allocation of ocean space'.[63] In his words, MSP is 'an excellent strategy to advance the development of oceanic resources and combat climate change issues… The main purpose of the [MSP] plan is to elaborate and embark into a strategy for the development of our oceanic industry in accordance with national policies'.[64]

The government's vision and plans give a picture of what the ocean economy in Mauritius will look like from its perspective. Basically, economic growth will be pursued through large-scale investment in oil exploration and exploitation, port infrastructure, tourism (airport expansion) and aquaculture. Investment will be made possible through reforms of public policies (including MSP) that open up for more FDI and allow for corporations to acquire private ownership of natural resources and coastal and ocean territory. Rather than combating climate change, as suggested by the previous Minister of Defence and Rodrigues, if the plans are realised they are likely to lead to significantly increased CO_2 emissions.

Marine Spatial Planning



"We hear about a lot of plans [tourism development, oil projects, port construction] but we do not hear the details... political leaders are attending meetings with investors, but that is very much under the table and we don't know what is happening"

"MSP has become even more pressing as the country is facing multiple demands for allocation of ocean space for emerging marine activities, such as... oil, gas and mineral exploration, aquaculture, amongst others" - Anerood Jugnauth, Minister of Defence and Rodrigues, November 2017.

3. Marine Spatial Planning

The essence of a Marine Spatial Plan (MSP) is to parcel up coastal and ocean territory, which can then be handed over to private or state-owned corporations for different purposes. The process leading to a MSP – from when a government decides to develop such a plan until it is in its final form and endorsed – should be 'inclusive' and 'participatory' in order to ensure that all 'stakeholders' have a say in the process.[65] This principle of participation was echoed when Mr. Anerood Jugnauth, Minister of Defence and Rodrigues, said that 'MSP should include clear objectives, stakeholder participation and define the geographic boundaries' at his opening of a MSP meeting in 2018;[66] and by Mr. Arshad Rawat, Department of Continental Shelf, Maritime Zones Administration and Exploration under the Ministry of Defence and Rodrigues, when he made a presentation on the same topic at the 2017 Indian Ocean Rim Association conference on MSP[67] and again at a regional meeting in Tanzania in March 2019.[68]

Based on internet-based research and 18 interviews conducted with people whose professions or livelihoods are closely connected to the ocean, it seems that either the government is not disclosing details on MSP processes or there is no plan worth publishing. This is well illustrated by an interviewee from a university in Mauritius who explained the situation, 'imagine if we don't know. We are the university and we don't know! Imagine the layman… do they know what's happening?'. A leader of Syndicat des Pêcheurs, the biggest small-scale fisher organisation in Mauritius representing some 400 full-time fishers, was the only fisher interviewed who was aware of the MSP process but had no details. According to him, a ministerial committee comprised of three of four ministries was set up to develop zoning of the ocean, but the department responsible for fisheries was not included and their organisation never received any invitation to participate.

The apparent contradiction between the principle of inclusive participation in MSP processes and the exclusion of certain stakeholders seems to be glossed over by both the political elite in Mauritius and the many external consultants providing expert advice on MSP, including the World Bank, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC-UNESCO), The Nature Conservancy and others.[69] Instead, these organisations and agencies are focused on increased competition for ocean space and therefore the urgent need to develop a form of private property regime for the ocean against which large-scale investment can be secured.

Mauritius already has at least 25 Acts or other legal instruments that are relevant for the regulation of ocean space, but these lack a clear *spatial plan (*sometimes referred to as *clear tenure* or *access rights)* for the expansion of the ocean economy and have no adequate mechanisms to resolve conflicts between sectors and investors.[70] In 2007, the government tabled an aquatic bill which resembled a *spatial plan* for coastal waters and beaches that would have made it possible for government to grant concessions of beaches and coastal waters to private investors. According to one interviewee, this draft bill was abandoned because the general public wanted to keep the coastline and coastal waters as public space, and a recent mobilisation – under the banner of Aret Kokin Nu Laplaz[71] – shows that this struggle is far from over. However, with MSP moving ahead a much larger area of the coastline and ocean space can potentially be sold to private investors. In the words of the interviewee 'it [MSP] resembles the laws of the past which allowed for the colonial ruler to privatise Crown land'.[72] Another interviewee argued that the government uses international conferences, with specific reference to the WEF, in order to attract foreign capital.

The exclusion of certain groups from MSP and decision-making processes on the ocean economy remains a larger controversy that is rooted in contemporary power imbalances and the long history of capitalist development that has resulted in the centralisation of economic wealth and political power. The interest of the political elite and capitalist class is, however, not necessarily shared by Mauritian working people, including fishers and port workers.

Small-scale fishers, including women and young people involved in the entire value chain, have never had sufficient political power to be involved in decision-making processes and remain compromised by the lack of mobilisation and organisation (see Section 6). In contrast to the proponents of MSP and actors driving the ocean economy paradigm, Syndicat des Pêcheurs perceives aquaculture, tourism, foreign fishing and port developments as part of a bigger problem and seeks to protect the environment by rejecting destructive practices such as pollution and infrastructure projects and promoting the traditional practices and rights of small-scale fishers.

Port workers, on the other hand, play a key role in ensuring economic growth in most ocean sectors (commodity trade, bunkering, the fishing industry, aquaculture, port infrastructure etc.) and belong the strongest unionised workforce in Mauritius. Yet, according to the port workers (off-loading and loading of fish in the Freeport[73]) and a union leader who were interviewed in November 2019, they are not involved in MSP processes or in any other planning on the ocean economy. The port workers explained that the main struggle for them and their unions is to improve working conditions and fight for decent salaries. Apart from harsh working conditions, they stressed that climate change is their biggest concern. As the frequency and intensity of tropical storms increase, work on the docks is increasingly dangerous, and the port authorities often have to close the harbours, resulting in port workers losing part of their income.

The issue of participation is further complicated by the location of the MSP process within the Ministry of Defence and Rodrigues. This ministry has more authority than other ministries and addresses sensitive issues of national security and geopolitical interests. The disputed control over the Chagos Archipelago, the vast natural resources surrounding the group of islands, and in particular Diego Garcia – which is where (see map on p. 12) the strategically important UK–US military base is located – remains a highly controversial topic connected to the ocean economy. In May 2019, the UN General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution that the British government should cede this archipelago to Mauritius, but when Joe Biden became President-elect the Mauritian Prime Minster renewed his offer of a long-term lease of Diego Garcia for its continued use as a US military base.[74] Yet, with the political tensions between the US and China and the increased militarisation of the Indian Ocean with the establishment of the Chinese military base in Djibouti,[75] it seems likely the British government will hold on to what it perceives as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) in order for the UK–US military to maintain their military position in the region.

Meanwhile, China has shown interest in the fisheries resources in the territorial waters of the Archipelago[76] and is currently one of the biggest investors in Mauritius.[77] India is surrounded by Chinese development projects in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka which forms part of the Belt and Road Initiative and there have been heightened political tensions between China and India. India, with its long historical and close ties with Mauritius, follows the developments closely, but also engages with the US on military security issues in the region.[78] The unfolding of militarisation and geopolitics, with Mauritius caught in the middle, is for obvious reasons highly sensitive and complicates decisions about investment and trade deals. Rather than paving the way for the public to gain access to information, such delicate issues might instead seal the already closed doors of the ministry and prohibit any meaningful participation in the MSP process.

4. Trade, sugar and slaves: the roots of capital accumulation under colonialism

Oceans have been key to the expansion of capitalism for centuries. As a geographically isolated small island state, piracy, trade, slavery and sugar exports made up the backbone of pre- and early capitalist development in Mauritius. When the Dutch established their presence on the island in 1638, it was largely because the Dutch East India Company needed a refreshment station along its long trading routes between Europe and East Asia.[79] In 1710 the Dutch abandoned Mauritius and the French soon saw new opportunities for profiteering. For the French Indian Company, Mauritius made up an ideal location to protect and advance the French interests in India, from where the French fleets could also attack British interests. The Company enjoyed French monopoly on trade with Asia until 1769, after which Port Louis was declared a free port (1789) and trade was opened up for all French nationals. The free trade policy unleashed a new wave of investment in vessels and trade[80] and, coupled with French attacks on British ships, paved the way for the formation of a class of wealthy local merchants in Port Louis.[81] During the French colonial period, sugar production was never the cornerstone of the economy, but the merchants accumulated capital that would subsequently contribute to the reshaping of social, economic and cultural life in Mauritius.

In 1810, the British navy conquered the island and put an end to French colonial rule. In the aftermath, the French free trade policy was substituted with laws prohibiting non-British traders from using Mauritius as a base to connect Asia and Europe. British traders also continued to make use of trading routes established before the conquest of Mauritius and the colony quickly lost its trading significance. While most of the capital accumulated by the traders left Mauritius along with the ships, the French merchants or colonialists who remained in Mauritius retained a significant amount. This capital had to be invested in new economies and it soon became clear that sugar was the best option for capital accumulation.

Soon after the British colonised Mauritius, sugar producers gained preferential access to the markets of the British Empire – first by reducing tariffs and in 1825 through integration in the West Indian Sugar Protocol. In the many decades to follow and against the backdrop of slavery (until 1835) and indentured labour (after 1835), a capitalist class of plantation owners and shipping and marketing companies steadily accumulated capital and increased its political and economic power. However, the sugar industry fluctuated throughout the approximately 150 years it dominated the economy.

A combination of factors resulted in cyclical crises, each of which contributed to the centralisation in the sugar industry with fewer and bigger companies controlling production, processing and exporting. Investment of capital in sugar plantations in many of parts of the world led to overproduction and a fall in prices on the world market (especially from the mid-nineteenth century onwards). Initially under British rule, plantation owners relied on wealthy merchants to obtain capital (loans) for investment in land, machinery and labour and when prices began to fall it became increasingly difficult to pay off their debts. During the latter nineteenth century many family-owned farms and factories merged into sugar estates, which controlled both the land and the factories. In order to mobilise capital for investment in new technology, the sugar estates sold off parcels of land to a new class of small planters, but retained ownership of the factories and most of the land.[82] In 1863 there were 303 factories and 50 years later, mergers reduced the number to 66.[83] Although British private capital (before the fall in sugar prices) and finance capital in the early twentieth century found its way into the sugar industry, it was never enough to make the sector profitable and lift plantation and factory owners out of indebtedness. In 1951, there was a new attempt to rescue the sugar economy of Mauritius with the signing of the Commonwealth Sugar

Agreement – which was later integrated in the Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The agreement guaranteed exports of a significant volume of sugar at a fixed price and because of this agreement, sugar remained the single most important export product for the following 30 years. From the early days of British rule until some 15 years after independence, sugar made up 85 to 90% of export income[84] and was throughout this period the backbone of Mauritian economic and social life.

While the sugar economy bloomed in short periods of time, the many economic crises during and after British rule also points to dependence of the owners of plantations and sugar mills on cheap labour. In 1810, the number of recorded enslaved people on the island was 63,281 and over the next century some 452,000 workers and their families arrived under indentured immigration.[85] The inhumane exploitation of workers, on the basis of which plantation and mill owners accumulated profits (or reduced deficits during the economic downturns), is described in detail in the Report of the Truth and Justice Commission released in 2011.[86]

The indentured labour system came to an end in 1925, but the plantation and mill owners continued to generate profit on the backs of cheap labour. Until1937, sugar producers were locked into a system of fixed prices controlled by mill owners,[87] and while trade unions managed to ensure better incomes for plantation and mill workers in the 1950s,[88] global market forces coupled with technological development and a large force of unskilled surplus labour sustained a system of economic exploitation that still continues.

To summarise, profits and capital accumulation in the trade and sugar sectors from Dutch rule to independence has not only led to an extreme centralisation of capital, but has also enabled the rich elite to invest heavily in other sectors.

From sugar to a diversified and ocean economy

The recurrent crisis in the sugar industry, increasing unemployment and unrest, and a general slowdown of the Mauritian economy made economic reform a priority at the time of independence. The new government took its cue from, among others, the British economist James Meade – who, in his 1961 report *The Economic and Social Structure of Mauritius* recommended economic diversification[89] – and Edouard Lim Fat, who became a key architect of the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) Act of 1970.[90] The new EPZs opened up for FDI and by 1980 some 21,000 workers, 80% of them women, were employed in 101 EPZ companies, mainly textile factories.[91] At that time, the manufacturing sector was still second to the sugar industry in terms of employment and export earnings, but preferential access to foreign markets resulted in continuous growth of the textile sector – until the Multi-Fibre Arrangement for textiles expired in 2004 – whereas the share of the sugar industry continued to decline.[92] Loss of preferential access to the European markets in the mid-2000 and price cuts (a 36% drop from 2006 to 2009) reduced the role of sugar in terms of jobs and export earnings to a historical low and placed the industry further down the list of key sectors for the Mauritian economy.

Towards 1990, the diversification strategy bore new fruit. The number of tourists started to increase as did FDI in that sector. New resorts were constructed and many Mauritians found employment in the related service sectors, including hotels and resorts, public services, construction work, fisheries and transport. The number of tourists increased substantially following independence, passing 900,000 just before the 2008 global financial crisis[93] and plateauing at around 1.3 million in 2017–2019.[94] Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was the largest sector both in terms of economic contribution and employment.[95]

The economic policy reforms pursued by the governments in the late 1970s and 1980s, coupled with the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) (1979–1986), on which International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank loans were conditioned, led to privatisation of state-owned enterprises, tax reductions, and increased FDI and turned Mauritius into a tax haven. The activities of so-called 'global business companies' which benefit from Mauritius' status as a tax haven have also increased significantly since 2000. While the flow of funds to and from off-shore accounts are close to impossible to track, the global companies registered in Mauritius purchase services from Mauritian businesses (e.g. accounting and advertising) and invest in assets in the country, such as real estate.

As a small island state it can be argued that most of the economic activities in Mauritius are connected to the ocean. Most imported goods (food, oil and other material needs) are shipped in, and a significant proportion of working people are directly or indirectly connected to the sea. An estimated 7% of the labour force works in the fisheries sectors, more than 9% in tourism and less than 1% in the ports. The World Bank estimates that the total

Share in the total national economy and number of jobs in sub-sectors

Sector	Share of the economy (GDP) of Mauritius [a]	Number of jobs [h]
Ocean economy [b] – Port workers	10.45% 0.3%	+/- 100,000 [i] +/- 1,800
Agriculture [c]	6%	41,000 (12.100 in sugar plantations) [j]
Fisheries (fishing and processing) [d]	1.4%	Between 27,000 and 47,000 [k]
Tourism [e]	8.1%	55, 000 [l]
Manufacture [f]	12.5% (8%)	77,800 [m]
Tax haven (global business companies)	5.8%	n/a
Education, health, arts, administration, real estate, finance and insurance, information and communication, construction, wholesale, mining, water supply, electricity and other services combined [g]	70%	Total workforce in 2018: 597,000 (including above numbers)

[a] Based on National Accounts 2006–2019, Statistics Mauritius. All information excludes the contributions of the transportation, education, health, arts and entertainment, information and communication and 'other sectors' to the sectors referred to in Table 2 unless otherwise stated. [b] The share of the ocean economy draws Cervigni, R. and Scandizzo, P.L. (2017) *The Ocean Economy in Mauritius: Making It Happen, Making It Last*. Washington, DC: World Bank. [c]Agriculture (excluding fisheries) and manufacturing (sugar and other food products excluding an estimated 0.5% for fish products). [d]The contribution of the 20,000–40,000 small-scale fishers and fish vendors is not accounted for. [e] Includes tourism's share of accommodation, transport, recreation and manufacture. [f] The figures in parentheses excludes food products (accounted for under agriculture and fisheries). [g] These sectors combined contribute to the remainder of the gross value added (measure of contribution to the GDP). [h] Based on labour statistics 2018, Statistics Mauritius. [i] Fisheries, tourism and water and air transport workers. [j] A small number of fish-workers is included as agricultural workers in the official statistics. [k] Including over 7,000 workers in the Seafood Hub and between 20,000 and 40,000 people involved in the small-scale fisheries value chain. See Section 4 for further details. [l] 9.6% of total employment. Ministry of Tourism: Annual report on the performance for the financial year 2018/2019. [m] Excluding food manufacture (fish processing and other jobs).

ocean economy comprises around 10% of the national economy with tourism being the largest contributor (70% of the ocean economy). Port activities is the second largest ocean sector (20%) and fishing and fish processing comes third (see Table).

As discussed above, emerging and new ocean sectors are expected to grow in the near future and according to government plans the ocean economy will play a more central role in Mauritian social and economic life. The economic data available from Statistics Mauritius, on which the World Bank's analysis relies, renders women as well as the majority of small-scale fishers invisible.[96] According to Statistics Mauritius, women make up 40% of the total labour force. Official data on fisheries only captures the economic activities contributing to the gross domestic product (GDP), and so do not take into account the vast contribution of part- and full-time small-scale fishers who largely operate in the informal, cash economy.

At independence, the economy was dominated by a few wealthy families who would hugely benefit from its diversification into textile, tourism and other activities. While economic diversification has made it possible for new investors to become part of the elite, six families continue to control many of the top companies and in particular hotels and sugar plantations.[97] Apart from textiles, sugar and tourism, their economic activities span from chickens to the Cyber City and chemicals to commercial banks, and they make a profit on almost everything that passes through Port Louis. In other words, capitalist development in Mauritius has paved the way for its extreme centralisation with a handful of actors controlling substantial parts of the economy. These actors also invest in and control commercial aquaculture and industrial fisheries – central to the country's ocean economy – and as we will see in Section 5, one company epitomises the trend.

5. Two centuries of capital accumulation: From Blyth Brothers and Co. to IBL ltd.

With the incorporation of Mauritius into the British Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century, sugar exports and the introduction of indentured labour from India became a lucrative business. In 1830, James Blyth arrived and soon founded Blyth Brothers and Co., which quickly seized the opportunities in exporting sugar and importing labourers from India. With its family and business contacts in London, Blyth Brothers and Co. was able to diversify its economic activities, and soon the company was profiteering as a consulate for international banks in Port Louis and by buying and selling land and plantations in Mauritius.[98] Over the next century, Blyth Brothers and Co. entrenched its economic and political power by occupying influential positions in the Mauritian Chamber of Commerce (founded in 1854) and through its close contacts with British governors and Members of Parliament in the UK.[99] While its main economic activities remained centred on banking, marketing and shipping until independence, Blyth Brothers and Co. also operated as a management agent for foreign corporations and was instrumental in assisting Shell to become the first international oil company to operate in Mauritius in 1905.[100] In the following decades, Blyth Brothers and Co. continued to consolidate its position as a leading company in Mauritius.

In 1972, the company merged with Ireland Fraser and Co., forming Ireland Blyth Ltd., which became the biggest player in the fishery sector with its ownership of Princess Tuna[101] (tuna canning), Froid des Mascareignes (cold storage),[102] Mer des Mascareignes (dry frozen-fish products),[103] and Marine Biotechnology Products (fishmeal business). With another merger in 2016, Ireland Blyth Ltd. and GML Investissement Ltée amalgamated into the corporate giant, IBL Ltd.[104]

According to CEO Arnaud Lagesse, IBL Ltd. is Mauritius' largest company in terms of turnover (Rs 37 billion in its 2017/2018 financial year)[105] and number of employees[106] (over 26,000 in 2019)[107] and with its shares in fishery-sector companies, IBL leads in both fisheries and aquaculture.[108] Senior IBL staff and board members (including subsidiaries) serve on influential private associations and public governance structures, including the Economic Development Board of Mauritius,[109] which the government set up in 2017 to boost trade and foreign investment; the Mauritius Ports Authority set up under the Ports Act 1998 to regulate and control the port sectors;[110] The Mauritius Export Association (MEXA) set up to promote the interests of export companies, including IBL.[111] MEXA is represented on the National Ocean Council, which is tasked with developing a new National Ocean Bill.[112]

The case of IBL's ancestor companies illustrates how capital has become centralised over almost 200 years, and accumulated capital by exploiting workers (including enslaved people, indentured labour and free labour). It also shows how capital accumulated from commercial trade and sugar exports has been invested in other sectors including fisheries, and how the company seeks to advance its business interests through representation on the Economic Development Board of Mauritius and other private and public associations and councils.

The interest of the corporate sector, including IBL, in fisheries is largely concentrated in export-oriented production, in particular tuna. Emerging sectors such as fishmeal and oil production as well as aquaculture are attracting new investment from Mauritius and abroad. These capital-intensive sectors might dominate in terms of export earnings and their contribution to the GDP, but in relation to livelihoods, healthy and nutritious food and the informal economy, small-scale fisheries play much more important role.

6. Small-scale fishing at the social margins

A 1973 book about young fishers from Grand Gaube – a village in Mauritius founded by freed slaves – claims that 'the island is already so over-populated and so depleted of resources that it is fast approaching breakdown'.[113] Since then, most of the literature on Mauritian small-scale fisheries paints a similar picture of too many fishers chasing too few fish,[114] and yet, approximately 20,000–40,000 full- and part-time small-scale fishers continue to thrive and earn their livelihood from fishing. Many young people, women and men are also involved in associated activities, such as repairing fishing gear and processing and selling fish, and although these workers remain invisible in the statistics it can be assumed their numbers are significant and might well exceed those who go out to sea.[115] In interviews conducted in 2019, fishers from Goodlands and Tamarin also raised the problem of too few fish, although they did not link this problem to the number of fishers, but argued the real problem in Mauritius is the environmental destruction caused by tourism development, agricultural production (eutrophication and pesticides from plantations), industrial pollution (from textile factories) and –unsurprisingly – they emphasised climate change as an immediate threat. As one of the fishers argued 'when corals die [as a result of climate change], fish don't survive'.

Often, and not only in Mauritius, it is small-scale fishers are who are most affected when fish stocks are declining and governments respond by imposing various restrictions. Top-down policy measures – with little, if any, participation of small-scale fisher people – tend to ignore the history, culture and socio-economic fabric of small-scale fishing communities,[116] while allowing bigger corporate players (tourism, agriculture, fishing industry, financiers etc.) to expand their economic activities. Small-scale fishing in Mauritius – and elsewhere – has not become fully integrated, or captured, in the capitalist mode of production but largely operates as an informal and localised economy. As such, the sector does not contribute directly to the GDP, which is one of the main reasons why small-scale fishers remain politically marginalised. The monetary measure of market value in GDP not only fails to account for the localised economy but also fails to capture the historical, cultural, livelihood and nutritional values of small-scale fishing. In order to fully understand and appreciate small-scale fishing in Mauritius today, we need to understand how fishing evolved as a livelihood.

The Dutch were the first Europeans to settle in Mauritius in 1638. From the latter part of the seventeenth century, they introduced the sugar cane and brought in enslaved people from Madagascar, India and Southeast Asia.[117] The population remained relatively small, and it is uncertain how much fishing was practised. With the arrival of the French settlers in 1721 (the French colonial period lasted from 1715 to 1810), Port Louis became a commercial centre based on international trade. The number of ships and enslaved people grew significantly during the course of the eighteenth century and French merchants invested some of the capital they had accumulated in sugar-cane production towards the end of the century. During almost 160 years under British colonial rule (1810–1968), the scale of sugar production and capital accumulation based on the exploitation enslaved people and indentured labour expanded massively. Sugar cane was the main source of capital accumulation until the early twentieth century, a period in which the British colonial power shaped a society characterised by racism and exploitation.[118] While this part of colonial history is well documented, it is less known that fishing was crucial for the development of the economy.[119]

The food the masters provided the people they had enslaved was unhealthy and based mainly on carbohydrates. The main source of protein and micronutrients came from fish (and livestock) people caught in their own time. Some sugar estates also used slaves for fishing and many workers brought to the island as free workers during French colonialism took up fishing as a livelihood – which was transmitted from one generation to the next.[120] With the abolition of slavery in 1835, an increasing number of freed slaves settled in the coastal regions, particularly around Black River.[121] This early era of British colonialism seems to have been a turning point for the development of fisheries in Mauritius; according to Eric Charles Paul (1987) fishing was the 'main occupation of the former slaves and was until recently dominated by people of African and Malagasy descent'.[122] While the consumption of fish in the diet of enslaved people and indentured labourers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is poorly documented in official records,[123] it is clear that their health could not have been maintained without protein and micronutrients from fish and shellfish. In other words, a significant proportion of the diet for the working population was provided by enslaved and free workers at no cost to the plantation owners. By reducing the cost of food for the working people, the capitalist class generated more profit and accumulated more capital in the form of land, machinery, labour and money.[124]

From this brief history, it is clear that fishers and their families have been among the poorest of the Mauritian people. This is also documented in the rare literature on the topic[125] and is described in sobering words by Paul (1987): 'As a group their plight has always remained in the backwaters of political and economic development. They are the personification of the landless peasant caught in the whirlwind of modern changes but not benefiting from its dislocations and rewards'.[126] Interviews conducted with fishers revealed that the small-scale sector is poorly organised at the national level, and the leader of Syndicat des Pêcheurs explained that 'divide and rule' government policies have split fishers into at least two fractions: those willing to accept government compensation under the Bad Weather Allowance scheme and those who perceive this as a means to suppress their political rights. According to the government, the Bad Weather Allowance is a form of social assistance for fishers prevented from fishing because poor weather conditions,[127] whereas the Syndicat des Pêcheurs argues the compensation scheme is encouraging fishers to stay on shore, find alternative livelihoods and stop fighting for their rights as small-scale fishers. The interviews also confirm Hollerup's (2000) conclusion that small-scale fishers are 'not only poorly organized but also lack administrative capabilities that are required to undertake certain management functions and there are no legal foundations for their involvement'.[128] Yet, in terms of their numbers small-scale fishers make up a significant part of the working population in Mauritius.

The scale of the small-scale fishing sector

The *official* number of active small-scale fishers in Mauritius have been in the range of around 2,000 and 3,000 for over a century, but it appears from reports and other literature that the number is likely to be higher. In 1974, it was estimated that some 68,000 fishers were active on a part- or full-time basis;[129] in 2003 the government reported 25,500 'amateur' fishers;[130] in 2012, an Indian Ocean Commission study arrived at a number of 2,303 *registered* fishers and an increasing number of non-registered fishers;[131] and in 2017, the World Bank reported 20,000 *part-time* fishers.[132] While these figures give some indication of scale, they overlook some important aspects of fishing in Mauritius.

According to the leader of Syndicat des Pêcheurs, many of the *registered* fishers have given up full-time fishing because of reduced catches and renew their permits principally in order to benefit from a government compensation system. The majority of the approximately 2,200 registered fishers used to be members of Syndicat des Pêcheurs but because of the declining fishing activity coupled with the Bad Weather Allowance scheme, many have left the union. With reference to one of the oldest fishing areas in Mauritius, the same leader explained 'in Black River you see a lot of problems, when developers start land reclamation [destructive to marine life] they [fishers] will ask for compensation. But what happens if we ask them not to go down that route? We become their enemy. They are not considering the bigger picture'.

Other fishers who were interviewed explained that a large number of *non-registered* fishers go to sea on a part-time basis, mainly at weekends. In Tamarin, for example, there are some 100 part-time fishers and 21 full-time fishers. Presenting small-scale fishing in terms of numbers may offer some overall indication of the scale of the sector but it also reveals some blind-spots. As explained above, not all registered fishers are engaged on a full-time basis and the number of non-registered fishers varies hugely depending on the source. Furthermore, the contribution of women in particular but also of men and young people in the pre-harvest (e.g. repairs, supplies) and post-harvest activities (e.g. cleaning and marketing) is not included in the statistics, and the importance of small-scale fishing in terms of its contribution to nutritious and affordable food is largely overlooked.

Acknowledging the limitations of the available quantitative information, this report confirms the importance of small-scale fishing for livelihoods and food security for a large number of people directly involved in the entire fisheries value chain. Based on combining data from the literature and numbers provided by fishers, anything between 20,000 and 40,000 women, men and youth rely on small-scale fishing.

7. Fisheries in the midst of crisis

While many in numbers, the political marginalisation of small-scale fishers allows for the government and corporations to push for policy reforms that serves their own interests and agendas. Fishers are easily blamed for dwindling fish stocks (often portrayed as overfishing), which is well illustrated in a recent World Bank report requested by the Mauritian government: *The Ocean Economy in Mauritius* maintains that declining fish stocks in lagoon waters is caused by the activities of too many fishers, but offers no evidence to back up its claim.

Against the so-called 'fisheries crisis', the World Bank recommends policy reforms that it acknowledges '… are likely to reduce the traditional economic opportunities of coastal fishing communities' and lead to reduction in '… employment in small-scale coastal fisheries'.[133] One of the Bank's recommendations is the introduction of 'clear tenure' rights or individual transferable quotas (ITQs) – which resembles a form of privatisation.[134] Such fisheries reform is not new, and according to Liam Campling and Elizabeth Havice (2014) 'the World Bank has identified 'weak' fisheries management and the lack of private property rights as key causes of the fisheries crisis'.[135]

Bound by the same market logic that resulted in centralisation of capital in Mauritius (addressed in Section 6), the privatisation of fisheries will centralise fishing rights in the hands of a few and at the expense of most small-scale fishers who will be pushed out in the process.[136] This is why fisher movements across the world have taken a strong stand against such privatisation schemes,[137] and pushed for solutions based on the principles of human rights and customary or collective tenure rights as well as the implementation of the UN International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines).[138]

Clearly, all fishing activities have an impact on the natural environment, but without assessing other human-generated causes, researchers and policy-makers are often too quick to conclude that reduced catches are caused by overfishing. In response, they propose new fishing restrictions such as no-take Marine Protected Areas, seasonal closures, and privatisation of fisheries. The fishers who were interviewed shed a more nuanced light on the different plausible causes resulting in dwindling fish stocks – and their explanations are backed by science.

The environmental and climate crisis

While fishers from Goodlands, Tamarin beach and Port Louis beach did mention overfishing when they were interviewed – in particular the excessive fishing by foreign vessels operating under licence agreements with the government of Mauritius – they placed more emphasis on the development that has reshaped the coast and environment in recent years. In their words, tourism development with all the coastal construction work and leisure activities in the lagoons are '…destroying marine life as if an airport has been built on the lagoon' and they ask 'how can fish come in the lagoon to sleep, to lay eggs, to reproduce?' with such massive disturbance of the natural environment.[139] A recent environmental survey confirms the impact of tourism development. According to Ranjeet Bhagooli and Deepeeka Kaullysing (2019) '[c]oastal erosion has been accelerated by disturbances such as sand extraction from coastal dunes, flattening for construction purposes, and building on the fore dune… [and] approximately 200 jetties and groynes have been built without proper control, destabilizing the beach and intensifying erosion… Extensive siltation and death of corals occur [and] coral cover has been declining at several sites around Mauritius'.[140]

The negative impact of coastal erosion was also emphasised by an interviewee from a Mauritian conservation organisation who explained that 'erosion from the hills and mountains [with reference to extensive land use] is so high and especially after big rains. Now, with the impact of climate change we have more flash floods and sometimes the lagoon is brown from sedimentation'.[141] Siltation of coral reefs as a result of increased sedimentation is not the only negative impact of erosion and run-off from rivers and streams. The island's geological formation facilitates the movement of contaminants, pollutants, and pathogenic bacteria down towards the sea. In their chapter 'Seas of Mauritius', Bhagooli and Kaullysing argue that the high levels of nitrate and phosphate discharged into lagoon waters 'are most probably contributing to eutrophication in lagoons [and] effluents from industry and agriculture have been degrading fresh and coastal water quality'. They also mention that the manufacturing industry 'contributes substantial run-off to fresh and coastal waters including dyestuff, heavy metals, and other chemical compounds'.[142] This latter point was emphasised by the fishers from Goodlands who explained that 'every time there are heavy rains, we pick up dead fish, octopus, everything that you can find in the sea is dead at the bottom… [and] all the corals are continuing to die… from Poudre d'Or up until Grand Gaube'.

The recent report of the United Nation's International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) paints a sobering picture: the oceans have absorbed 91% of the global warming (from 2006 to 2018) and functions as a CO_2 sink at a similar scale as the terrestrial ecosystems; the sea level will continue to rise; coastal floods and marine heatwaves will become more frequent; coastal erosion will become more pronounced; and the oceans will become more acidic (with all the negative impact on marine life). All of these scenarios are projected by the IPCC with high confidence.[143]

In its special ocean report of 2019, the IPCC states that '[c]arbon emissions from human activities are causing ocean warming, acidification and oxygen loss with some evidence of changes in nutrient cycling and primary production. The warming ocean is affecting marine organisms at multiple trophic levels, ***impacting fisheries*** with implications for food production and human communities' [emphasis added].[144] In the same report, the IPPC also states that '[p]rojected decreases in global marine animal biomass and fish catch potential could elevate the risk of impacts on income, livelihood and food security of the dependent human communities' and that 'decreases in potential fish catches in ***tropical areas*** (high confidence)… will further increase the risk of impacts on food security…' [emphasis added]. In essence, the IPCC reports indicate that climate change stands out as the biggest threat to small island states, their peoples and marine life.

Lastly, oil pollution from shipping accidents is a serious threat to the environment. One such accident took place when the bulk carrier MV Benita ran aground on 7 June 2016 on the outer reef of Ilot Brocus, Le Bouchon.[145] This ship carried 150 tons of oil and while beaches were opened for tourism within one year, fishing remained impracticable 18 months after the accident.[146] The leader from Syndicat des Pêscheurs also expressed deep concern over the Albion Petroleum Hub project (bunkering and oil refinery) and the risk of oil spills. Less than a year after the interview, the Japanese vessel MV Wakashio crashed into one of its most fragile coral reefs off Pointe d'Esny. On 6 August 2020, the vessel began leaking 1,000 tonnes of a new type of highly toxic oil in what is considered the worst-ever environmental disaster in Mauritius.[147] While early clean-up actions initiated by Rezistans ek Alternatives and CARES mitigated the devastating impact,[148] the coastal and marine environment is severely damaged. According to local people in Mahebourg, it has also resulted in food insecurity as people can no longer eat seafood.[149]

These accounts of the environmental and climate crisis show that fish stocks are under threat regardless of any fishing that takes place. Without scientific proof that dwindling fish stocks in the lagoon is caused by too many fishers catching too many fish, the over-reliance on such claims is not only misleading but also diverts attention away from the apparent severe climate and environmental problems caused by tourism, factories and sugar-cane production.

8. Conclusion

Tourism is the largest sector of the ocean economy in Mauritius in terms of its economic contribution and employment. Shipping and port activities have been the backbone of social life and the economy for almost four centuries and remain a key sector in the ocean economy, along with industrial fishing. Combined, these sectors make up the vast majority of the Mauritian ocean economy and are dominated by a relatively small group of corporations. The case of IBL Ltd., the biggest company in Mauritius in terms of turnover and number of employees, illustrates how centralised the economy has become. It owns or has majority shares in the vast majority of the industrial fishing and aquaculture companies, as well as many other types of business, and it influences ocean governance and political processes more generally through its representation on numerous advisory bodies including the Economic Development Board and the National Ocean Council. IBL Ltd. and other corporations involved in ocean sectors, through the activities of their ancestral companies, have accumulated capital for almost 200 years on the basis of exploiting natural and human resources (slavery, indentured labour and free labour over different time periods), which is how they now dominate the ocean economy and influence ocean governance.

In addition to these well-established sectors, the government of Mauritius has made plans for advancing off-shore oil and gas exploration and exploitation,[150]bunkering (storing and supplying of fuel for ships), port infrastructure developments, biotechnology and other emerging ocean sectors. According to government plans, investments in existing and emerging ocean sectors will be made possible through public and private finance and facilitated through MSP.

In addition to its area for the transportation of goods and the rich resources it contains, the Mauritian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is the focus of geopolitical security interests. The disputed control over the Chagos Archipelago and in particular Diego Garcia, which is the home of a strategically important UK–US military base, remains highly controversial. China is currently one of Mauritius' biggest investors, whereas India has strong historical economic ties to the country. The ongoing geopolitical development and militarisation in the broader Indian Ocean region – with Mauritius being caught in the tensions between India, China and the USA – makes ocean governance even more secretive and opaque.

The analysis of the Mauritian ocean economy reveals that the country's political and economic elites both wield disproportionate political power and also prioritise sectors that will inevitably contribute to further environmental degradation and increased carbon emissions. The research findings show that Mauritius' ocean economy and the government's plan to expand the contribution of the ocean sector to the overall national economy are far from the triple win promised by the blue economy agenda. The prospects for economic growth in capital-intensive sectors (infrastructure projects such as port construction and the Petroleum Hub) and high-tech sectors (e.g. biotechnology and aquaculture) depend on massive investments, but this development path is unlikely to contribute to environmental sustainability and social development.

In this context, it is misleading to portray Mauritius on the international stage as a champion for the blue economy as the World Bank has done,[151] as has the UNECA director when he expressed the view that Mauritius is one of only three African countries doing well in the blue economy.[152] Using Mauritius to showcase the potential of the blue economy illustrates how some proponents of this blue paradigm develop and use fictional narratives to advance their political and economic agendas. Similarly, Mauritian government officials and politicians exploit international events such as the World Economic Forum to showcase the Mauritian ocean economy,[153] or as one interviewee suggested, to attract foreign investment.

The main policy tool to advance the ocean economy is Marine Spatial Planning. In essence, MSP carves up ocean space into sections which the government then sells or leases to various ocean sectors as it sees fit. In the words of the Prime Minister, 'MSP has become even more pressing as the country is facing multiple demands for allocation of ocean space for emerging marine activities, such as... oil, gas and mineral exploration, aquaculture, amongst others'.[154] The proponents of MSP argue it is the best way to ensure 'inclusive' and 'participatory' processes in deciding on who should have what rights to ocean resources and territories. In theory, this is achieved through multi-stakeholder processes whereby all actors with a stake in resources or territories have an equal say. In the case of Mauritius, the process of developing the MSP is located in the Ministry of Defence and Rodrigues, which is also responsible for the nation's geopolitical and security interests and therefore discloses very little information. While the government treats powerful corporations as stakeholders to participate in the MSP process, the working people are effectively excluded from influencing decisions.

Historically, small-scale fishing in Mauritius has been a source of healthy food and livelihoods and an important part of cultural life. At the same time, it played a crucial role in subsidising the capitalist economy by providing cheap food for the growing population of workers – whether enslaved people, indentured labourers or free workers. Whereas small-scale fishers continue to provide affordable food in Mauritius, a considerable share of the catches end up on the plates of tourists rather than of Mauritian workers. Although small-scale fishing provides jobs and livelihoods for some 20,000–40,000 people, the sector has limited political power and it is not recognised in any meaningful way in the government's plans for the future ocean economy. The biggest small-scale fishers' organisation, Syndicat des Pêcheurs, has lost many of its members due to the government's 'divide and rule' policies and its organisational and political capacity is limited. However, in the light of the significant number of women and men involved in the entire small-scale fisheries value chain, the sector holds great potential to form a strong and united mass-based movement.

Port workers, on the other hand, are some of the strongest unionised labourers in Mauritius and play a key role in ensuring economic growth in most ocean sectors (commodity trade, bunkering, the fishing industry, aquaculture, port infrastructure etc.). Yet, according to the port workers (in the Freeport) and one union leader, they have neither participated in shaping the government's ocean plans nor in MSP processes. The port workers explained that the highest priorities for them and their unions are to improve working conditions, obtain better salaries and combat climate change.

As this report has shown, the Mauritian blue economy and the MSP process do little, if anything, to mitigate climate change and are fundamentally out of sync with the call for urgent action and unprecedented social transformation as the IPPC has emphasised.[155] Rather than an inclusive and participatory MSP process, small-scale fishers and port-workers (in the Freeport of Port Louis) among others are excluded from any meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Effectively, the blue economy and the MSP process in Mauritius amount to what has been referred to as Ocean Grabbing.[156]

As expressed by the leader of Syndicat des Pêcheurs '[the] main battle here, is to fight against destructive use of our environment, to fight against illegal fishing and [fishing] permits that are given to foreign fleets, and to protect our fisher comrades so that they can make a living. Then, our struggle in Mauritius is to push government and make them roll back projects that are harmful... Our struggle is for future generations'. Some of these words were echoed by both a union leader and the port workers who also spoke out against illegal foreign fishing and the secretive deals signed by the government with other countries and fleets. Furthermore, both fishers and port workers share a deep concern about the heightened climate crisis. While not explicitly discussed with the interviewees from these sectors, their shared concerns and aspirations provide a basis for organisation and mobilisation of broader coalitions of working people to advance the struggle for a just transition.

Endnotes

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8 The term 'working people' refers to the broad range of people working in a different sectors – irrespective of whether they are fully employed, semi-employed or unemployed – who make up the combined mass of people whose labour is exploited. The term draws on the work of the leading Tanzanian scholar and pan-Africanist, Issa Shivji, who in turn was inspired by the political activist Walter Rodney.

9 Capital – in the form of money, machinery or other means for production, or labour purchased for the production of commodities – continues to generate new surplus value (or profit). When some of the profits are reinvested in new cycles of production of commodities, surplus value creates new capital. In Chapter 24: The Transformation of Surplus-Value into Capital (Capital Vol. 1), Marx explains that "[t]he employment of surplus-value as capital, or its reconversion into capital, is called *accumulation of capital* [emphasis added]".

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