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Polycentric coastal and ocean management in the Caribbean Sea Large Marine Ecosystem: harnessing community-based actions to implement regional frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have successfully forged a coalition among themselves, and make a strong case for special considerations for their development needs at global level. The unique characteristics of SIDS require environmental protection actions to be local, contextual and small scale under the coordination of regional strategic frameworks, if the overall effort is to be relevant and effective. The article examines the environmental challenges in the Caribbean islands, and discusses the regional inter-governmental approach vis-a-vis community-based local solutions. The paper considers either of these two approaches alone as inadequate, and advocates a polycentric governance approach that focuses on a nested, coordinated and linked set of local actions in the implementation of coherent regional frameworks. The paper draws its findings from community-based experiences of projects in the Caribbean islands supported by the GEF Small Grants Program (SGP) which is implemented by UNDP as a mechanism to undertake a "local action, global impact" approach to achieve sustainable development. The paper presents three examples of local actions in the Caribbean Sea LME region that should be replicated to achieve high local ownership and sustainability, and through linkages with other partners and entities, to generate scaled-up impacts. To ensure the coherence of local actions and their effectiveness in addressing regional issues, the paper advocates strengthened collaboration between programs such as that of the GEF SGP with those that develop and implement regional initiatives and frameworks.

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1. Introduction

Human induced causes of environmental degradation in coastal areas and oceans occur at multiple scales. Yet most governance mechanisms are established at a single level—whether regional, national and local—with inadequate linkages to ensure a coherent and coordinated approach to provide effective solutions for the overarching challenge of ocean governance. Such fragmented governance structure is even more serious in the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) coastal and ocean governance where international attention has drawn national capacity and efforts much towards international cooperation, regional coordination and inter-governmental processes to make policies which later lack necessary financial

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resources and technical capacity for implementation.

SIDS are often referred to as Big Ocean States that have large Exclusive Economic Zones relative to their land territories compared with non-SIDS. For this reason, ocean governance is of particular importance to SIDS. Over the past several decades, SIDS have successfully forged a coalition among the group of the countries, and make a strong case for special considerations for their development needs at global level. Three SIDS global conferences were convened respectively in 1994, 2005, and 2014 (United Nations, 1994, 2005, 2014). Consequently, three key global policy documents were adopted: the Barbados Program of Action (BPOA), the Mauritius Strategy of Implementation (MSI), and the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (Samoa Pathway). The SIDS group has been successful in raising global awareness and global political support. Global financial institutions such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) have given SIDS special priority considerations, resulting in a large amount of funding allocated to these countries. However, the implementation of the global policies needs to be strengthened. In the Barbados inter-regional preparatory meeting for the third SIDS Conference, the outcome document of the meeting pointed out “Significant gaps remain in the implementation of the BPOA and the MSI” (United Nations, 2013). We believe it is important to strengthen local efforts to fill this implementation gap, and help to strengthen overall effectiveness of the ocean governance.

The article examines the environmental challenges in the Caribbean islands, and discusses the regional inter-governmental approach vs. community-based local solutions to address these issues. The paper considers either of these two approaches alone is inadequate, and advocates a polycentric governance approach that focuses on a nested, coordinated and linked local actions to implement coherent regional frameworks. SIDS are small, and often they are made up of a number of small islands that spread across a large area of oceans and seas. The SIDS’ conditions compel environmental protection actions to be local, contextual and small scale. However, most of the actions are focusing on global or regional approaches in implementation, which is not only expensive but also has limited on-the-ground impact. Attempts to solve SIDS environmental and developmental issues only at the global and regional levels will only succeed on paper, but will bring little on-the-ground results unless they are brought down to local site level, and work island by island. Small community-based approaches are therefore strongly advocated for implementing global SIDS environment and development strategies. To highlight the results and impacts created by small-scale activities in isolated islands and communities for replication, scaling up and mainstreaming, global or regional networks should be established or strengthened among these communities working on the ground. Such “local actions, global networks” approaches are appropriate to SIDS special geographic, environmental, socio-economic and cultural conditions.

We are of view that local actions should be an integral part of ocean governance, and to strengthen implementation of global policies, concrete work will have to happen at the local level individual by individual, family by family and community by community. The paper draws community-based experiences working in the Caribbean islands with the support from the GEF Small Grants Program (SGP), implemented by UNDP, as a mechanism to implement such “local actions, global networks” approach to environment and development work in SIDS. The GEF was launched in 1991 to assist developing countries and countries with economies in transition to protect the global environment and to promote sustainable development. The GEF also serves as financial mechanism for several conventions (the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). GEF addresses global environmental issues in the areas of biodiversity, climate change, land degradation, international waters and chemicals and waste management.¹

Launched in 1992, SGP is operational in more than 130 countries, with more than 17,000 community projects around the world (UNDP, 2015). In the Caribbean, SGP has supported more than 400 ocean and coastal management projects. A global sharing and learning network is well established with the nodes of networks being national coordinators in each country. The paper presents three cases that have worked well at the community level in the Caribbean. Such cases should be replicated and implemented in the whole Caribbean Sea Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) region through linkages and connections with other partners and entities at national, regional and global level, to generate larger results and impacts. To ensure the coherence and effectiveness of local actions to address regional issues, the paper advocates SGP’s collaboration with regional initiatives and frameworks funded by GEF.

2. Environmental challenges in the Caribbean Sea LME

The Caribbean Sea large marine ecosystem (CLME) is bordered on the North and East by the West Indies archipelago, on the South by South America, and on the West by the Central American isthmus and is one of the world’s largest Large Marine Ecosystems (Duda and Sherman, 2002). The Wider Caribbean Region comprises all the 28 insular and coastal states and 10 territories bordering the Caribbean Sea LME and the Gulf of Mexico LME. The combined area of the Caribbean Sea LME and the Gulf of Mexico LME is approximately 5,326,000 km² (UNEP, 2008). Fig. 1 contains a map of the region. The small islands and low-lying states of the Caribbean share a number of socio-economic challenges, including a heavy dependence upon the natural resource base (agriculture, forestry, fishing, tourism, mining and light manufacturing), susceptibility to the vagaries of international trade, lack of economies of scale, high transportation and communications costs,

¹ The Global Environment Facility website: http://www.thegef.org/gef/project_types (accessed 01.08.13).

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