



A call for a blue degrowth: Unravelling the European Union's fisheries and maritime policies

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ABSTRACT

Terms like blue growth (as well as the blue economy) have become the new buzzword inscribing a new era where the seas are recognized as potential drivers for the European economy. It is nevertheless, through this same logic of limitless economic growth, marine resources have been unsustainably exploited despite numerous institutional attempts to tackle overfishing. The aim of this paper is to point at the contradictions inherent in the objectives of the blue economy, and question the belief that ecological, social and economic targets can be achieved under (blue) growth-centred policies. An analysis of the (failing) policies for a 'sustainable use of marine resources' will be conducted and exemplified through an analysis of the main tools the EU has promoted as solutions to the fisheries crisis (sustainable consumption, privatisation of fish, fishing in waters of third countries and marine aquaculture). Additionally, the sectors promoted by the EU's Blue Growth strategy (marine aquaculture, coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, ocean energy and seabed mining) will also be evaluated in order to question this new vision for the seas and the coast. Through the introduction of the concept blue degrowth, this article aims to open up a more critical discussion around the blue growth strategy by highlighting the inherent dangers which lie in such economic strategies.

1. Introduction

Since the publication of the European Union's Blue Growth Agenda in 2012, the term Blue Growth has been used to describe a new era, where the blue economy is an important feature of the European economy. It has been used in the aquatic development discourse in many nation states, regionally as well as internationally since the Rio +20 conference [21]. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations [33] defines Blue Growth as a cohesive approach for environmentally compatible, integrated and socioeconomically sensitive management of aquatic resources including marine, freshwater, and brackish water environments [67] and the World Bank [81] as “the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health”. For the EU, “Blue Growth is the long term strategy to support sustainable growth in the marine and maritime sectors as a whole”.¹ To make this strategy more operational and efficient, a new tool known as Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP), which is about planning when and where human activities take place at sea has been created. Its main purpose, according to the EU Directive, “is to promote sustainable development and to identify the utilisation of maritime space for different sea uses as well as to manage spatial uses and conflicts in marine space” ([32]; point 19). Through a Joint

Communication titled ‘Limits to Blue Growth’ [23], environmental NGOs have already expressed their concerns with regards to some of the priorities set in the EU's Blue Growth Communication, and called “upon Ministers and policy makers to fully enshrine Good Environmental Status by 2020 and the precautionary principle as prerequisites for the Integrated Maritime Policy and a blue growth agenda”. E-NGOs are right to raise these concerns. Previous experiences suggest that it is unrealistic to claim that there can be a sustainable natural resource exploitation within a framework of unlimited economic growth. Through an investigation of EU fishery policies, this article aspires to question the belief that ecological, social and economic targets can be achieved under a (blue) growth imaginary.

In a recent special section in Marine Policy titled ‘What is blue growth? The semantics of “Sustainable Development” of marine environments’, Eikeset et al. [21] attempt to establish a better understanding of the various definitions of blue growth. They point to the fact that for some, blue growth is about maximizing economic growth, whilst for others the focus is on sustainability. This multiplicity of understandings, is one of its biggest constraints. Burgess et al. [14] describe blue growth as “the newest of many recent calls for more holistic management of complex marine socio-ecological systems”, and “an ambitious framework for ocean management” (p. 331). Such a definition

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¹ European Commission > Maritime affairs > Integrated maritime policy > Blue growth: https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/blue_growth_en.

however is somewhat a shift away from reality. As indicated by its name, as well as how it is presented by the European Commission, Blue Growth is an economic strategy, which identifies the seas and oceans as drivers for the economy and promoted through the use of numbers (whether these are number of jobs or gross added value).² Though funding and promotion for the five priority areas promoted under the Blue Growth strategy (ocean renewable energy, aquaculture, maritime and coastal tourism, exploitation and mining of marine mineral resources and blue biotechnology) are already under way, discussion as to how environmental sustainability can be ensured is ongoing. Some researchers point out the need to study the capacity of marine ecosystems to “supply the required services” for blue growth given the indicators of Good Environmental Status and explore the required trade-offs between economic, social and environmental aspects [61], whilst others suggest rules of thumb to build a solution-oriented, realistic and practical approach for pragmatic blue growth [14].

Not much research has been done to explore the links between blue growth, sustainability and specific sectors, and what has been done has focused on fisheries. This is understandable given the long history of fishing and the resulting societal interaction with the sea and consequently its impact. Despite the long history, there are conflicting views on the blue growth potential in fisheries. Pauly [72] suggested that it is small scale fisheries which have the features that make them compatible with a sustainable blue economy, whereas Hilborn and Costello [50] point to possibilities using current harvesting technology either after the rebuilding of stocks either in cases where in some (developed) countries harvesting practises are conservative across some species.

Precisely due to this history, the dangers and the potential of the Blue Growth strategy can be explored through the fisheries sector. Since the period after WWII, when fisheries started behaving like any other sectors of the economy, the industrialization of the fishing industry and the commodification of seafood, has led to the intensification and eventually the unsustainable exploitation of marine resources [54,71]. The increase in seafood production is directly relevant with the advance of the free market which incentivized and gave rise to capital intensive and efficient practices through a push for technological advances and industrial mode fisheries [54]. It is now agreed among scientists that global exploitation limits have been reached and recovery of depleted stocks must become a cornerstone of fisheries management [82]. According to the latest FAO's report ‘The State of World's Fisheries and Aquaculture – 2016’, the share of assessed commercial fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels decreased from 90% in 1974 to 68.6% in 2013, thus, 31.4% of fish stocks were estimated as fished at a biologically unsustainable level and therefore overfished.

In the EU particularly, 60% of fish stocks for which there are available data were assessed to be outside safe biological limits and 93% of assessed fish stocks in the Mediterranean Sea were overfished in 2015 [74]. The EU is a major consumption market of seafood products in the world with almost 13 million tonnes representing EUR 54 billion during 2013–2014 [31], and much of this supply is imported (the EU was the first net importer of seafood products in 2015) [29]. In its 2016 annual report on self-sufficiency in fish consumption in the EU, the New Economic Foundation (NEF) calculated that in 2016, the EU fish dependence day was the 13th of July, indicating that almost half of fish consumed in the EU is sourced from non-EU waters (this calculation included fish production from marine aquaculture [68].

Decision-making bodies at different levels (national, regional and international) have come up with different solutions, with either legally binding and non-binding tools as a solution to the global fisheries crisis. Such solutions include input controls (restrictions placed on the intensity of fishing / fishing effort), output controls (direct limits on the amount of fish coming out of a fishery) and market-based controls (such

as ecolabels). One of the focus of the paper is an analysis of the fisheries policies and particularly the impact of efforts to ensure a limitless supply of fish resources in the EU. The fisheries sector is one of the most regulated sector in the EU, and despite the increase in the number of regulations over time this has not led to the anticipated reduction in landings nor has it helped tackle overfishing [45]. Much has been written on the reasons behind the failure of the EU's fisheries policy to protect fish stocks and the coastal communities depended upon them, such as for example the unwillingness of decision-makers to incorporate social objectives [76], as well as the contradictory and incompatibility of the objectives of the EU fisheries policy, namely conservation, sustainability and economic exploitation [58,79].

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of sustainable blue degrowth as an alternative to the growth-driven policies of the EU in general and of its maritime and fisheries policies in particular. As a starting point, it is important to highlight that sustainable (blue) degrowth is not meant to offer a single operational criterion, but a multi-faceted framework linked with a political vision that can be socially transformative [55]. Through an analysis of the EU's fisheries and maritime policies, this article will bring forward the ecological and social concerns over the implementation of the blue growth strategy. Eight elements will be analysed; three policies within the CFP (ecolabelling, Individual Transferable Quotas, and Fisheries Partnership Agreements); and all five policies within the Blue Growth Strategy. Following the introduction, a short description of the newly introduced blue degrowth concept will be presented. Section 3 will provide a policy analysis and an assessment of the EU's attempts to address the fisheries crisis whilst seeking to find ways to ‘sustainably’ satisfying people's appetite for fish. Section 4 will henceforth attempt to evaluate the EU's new vision for the seas and the coast, namely the Blue Growth strategy. Finally, through reflecting on these two, a discussion will follow before concluding.

2. The concept of blue degrowth

This paper steps away from the mainstream discussions about the ‘sustainable use of the sea and its resources’ and the ‘win-win’ scenarios of sustainably exploiting the sea, and brings forward a new standpoint; the notion of degrowth. Degrowth is defined as an equitable down-scaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term [73], whilst the term sustainable degrowth is understood as an equitable and democratic transition to a smaller economy with less production and consumption [63]. The underlying debate around the notion of degrowth revolves around the belief that economic growth is both possible and desirable and a critique on (what Georgescu-Roegen described as) the “growth mania” of mainstream economics (for a thorough analysis of this debate see [57]). Daly's (1991) steady-state economy [49], Meadows et al. [65] ‘Limits to Growth’ as well as the more recent Jackson's [52] ‘Prosperity without Growth’ have been important in the formation of the notion.

There are other alternative concepts which have been put forward as umbrella concepts. of the concept of ‘sustainable development’ as put forward in the Brundtland report for example is a prominent example. Another concept is that of a-growth, a concept which suggests that we should continue striving for effective implementation of environmental and complementary policies and be indifferent about growth [77]. Degrowth supporters nevertheless argue that a-growth is unlikely to be implemented effectively within the current socio-political context [55], and that there is a need to de-link sustainability and growth since environmental sustainability is not compatible with economic growth [2,51,63].

Degrowth is not merely an economic analysis. It has its foundations on more philosophical, cultural, anthropological and institutional critiques of the notions of growth and development such as those made by people like Cornelius Castoriadis and Ivan Illich [55]. Though there has

² The EU for example suggests that the ‘blue’ economy represents roughly 5.4 million jobs and generates a gross added value of almost €500 billion a year.

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