Meaningful Partnerships in Meaningful Ocean Governance

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Introduction

I once thought of ocean governance as primarily a matter of institutions and processes. The ultimate description of ocean governance within such a perspective is through decision-making flowcharts and organizational charts. But if ocean governance is treated as a ‘functional’ matter of institutions and processes, it may be missing the key underlying ingredient. *Values*. Values tell us what kind of ocean, and what kind of ocean users, to be favoring. Values drive our individual and community choices. It is odd, then, that governance often focuses on institutions and processes, without *explicit* attention to the crucial underlying values. In reality, however, in such cases, governance still reflects *implicit* values—but not necessarily values that reflect what is truly desired. Surely, there is a strong case, then, for values being explicit, and accordingly, receiving greater attention in ocean governance.

There is a parallel with partnerships. I once thought of partnerships as largely a ‘functional’ vehicle of governance, within the context of institutions and processes. But underlying every partnership is the matter of who chooses the partners. If the choice is made by government, then that determines who has a seat at the governance table. A values-based view requires looking carefully at whether the choice of participants reflects underlying values. For example, does the partnership involve a diversity of ocean users and coastal communities, or does government choose as partners a few large companies controlling access to marine resources? These alternatives would reflect very different values.

Co-Management Partnerships

While ocean governance conventionally took place in a top-down manner, the more modern approach focuses on participatory decision-making, through co-management (‘co-operative’ or participatory management) that brings
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stakeholders into the institutions and the processes of decision-making. Co-management invariably involves a partnership of some form, with a certain set of ocean users or other stakeholders—those with ‘management rights’ and thus entitled to be engaged in participatory decision-making on ocean management, whether sectoral (e.g., fisheries) management or multi-sectoral (as in multi-stakeholder integrated management).

The rationale for such co-management partnerships is typically based on several arguments: (1) better decisions come from as full a knowledge base as possible, and incorporating the experience of those regularly using the ocean and its resources, (2) management decisions are better supported, and complied with, when those being managed have helped to design the rules and regulations, and (3) such participatory practices match the principles of good governance, which have been widely adopted internationally. These three arguments in favor of co-management partnerships have a strong logic to them, reflecting the achievement of ‘functional’ goals: better decisions, better compliance, and better governance.

I once thought that, based on those persuasive arguments, co-management was invariably a good thing, and that the corresponding partnerships must also be positive. But that view was naïve in neglecting the key matter of values. A lack of attention to values can manifest itself, notably, in a co-management system developed without considering who exactly is involved in the decision-making. For example, in Canada, some government choices on co-management partnerships in fisheries reflected preferences for a top-down approach, and are also present in the same government’s moves to shift resource access away from small-scale ocean users to fewer, bigger players. It is not clear that these actions actually reflected societal values.

Concern over the values underlying who holds the power, who gets ocean access, and who is involved in management decision-making arise with governments engaging in partnerships all along the co-management spectrum—from science and research, to policy and planning, to managing ocean use (i.e., co-management), to enforcement and compliance. Thus, values underlie

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1 A. Charles, “Rights-based Fisheries Management: The Role of Use Rights in Managing Access and Harvesting,” in *A Fishery Manager’s Guidebook*, eds., K.L. Cochrane and S.M. Garcia (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 253–282.
2 A. Charles, *Sustainable Fishery Systems* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001); J. Kearney et al., “The Role of Participatory Governance and Community-based Management in Integrated Coastal and Ocean Management in Canada,” *Coastal Management* 35, no. 1 (2007): 79–104.
3 M. Puley, “Dissecting Co-management: An Examination of Fishermen Involvement in Fisheries Management in Nova Scotia, Canada,” Thesis, Master of Environmental Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada (2017).
which partners are chosen for co-operative research projects, for management of fishing decisions, or for policy development. Partnerships can be challenging in all these situations, but increasingly so, the more they involve significant decision-making, the greater the number of stakeholders affected, and thus the more sensitive is the interaction of values and the partnerships themselves.

Science Partnerships

In the case of science, partnerships increasingly involve government scientists working with fishers, on board their fishing vessels, or with other ocean use sectors. The partnership, in such cases, may be merely the ocean users providing scientists with access to the ocean, or it may involve a true participatory approach in which stakeholders carry out data collection themselves, and perhaps even engage in analysis of the data.

Such activities have a positive aura to them, given their participatory nature, and the contrast with past top-down approaches. However, values arise in terms of which stakeholders can engage with government in research and science. For example, one factor influencing the Canadian cod fishery collapse was a disconnect between small-scale fishers and government scientists. While scientists partnered with the large-scale fishing fleet and used its data, the corresponding knowledge in the small-scale sector received much less attention. Following the cod collapse, a new partnership, the Fishermen and Scientists Research Society, sought to rectify this imbalance, by engaging small-scale fishers and scientists directly. That approach is also to be found in many other locations, now reflecting an important values-based scientific partnership model.

Research Partnerships

Knowledge-focused partnerships with ocean-use stakeholders also arise outside government, notably with academic researchers. This shifts away from the conventional role of the academic (collect data, analyze, publish results,

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4 A.C. Finlayson, Fishing for Truth: A Sociological Analysis of Northern Cod Stock Assessments from 1977–1990 (St. John’s: Institute of Social and Economic Research Books, 1994).
5 A. Charles, “The Atlantic Canadian Groundfishery: Roots of a Collapse,” Dalhousie Law Journal 18 (1995): 65–83.
6 Finlayson, supra note 4, 176.
typically in a professional journal) with stakeholders not engaged directly in the process (apart from being a source for the academic’s data). That approach, which led to literally thousands of journal articles, has been much criticized by communities and ocean user groups, who are frequently asked by researchers for access to their territory, resources, and vessels, but who often never see the research results.

The old model also misses the insights and knowledge that come through participatory research, which brings together full-time researchers with ocean users, to jointly address key knowledge needs.⁷ A fully participatory approach requires involvement in the multiple steps of the research process: with ocean users not only ‘helping’ with data collection, but also being involved in designing the research in the first place, and then in analyzing and interpreting the results. An ongoing challenge here is that the goals of the research can be quite diverse. While some in the partnership may aim for a professional journal article, the goal for others may be quite different—often more focused on meeting tangible social and economic needs (e.g., better knowledge of where a resource is located, or its sustainability, or better means to ensure local livelihoods and cultural aims).

**NGO Partnerships**

Around the world, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often play a major role in environmental, social and/or economic aspects, whether locally, nationally, regionally, or globally. It seems that the more global the NGO, the greater tends to be the focus on just one of the three pillars of sustainable development—environmental, social, or economic. Thus, for example, some global ocean-focused NGOs focus solely on environmental aspects, particularly neglecting social considerations (contrary to wide acceptance that these are integral to sustainable development). On the other hand, locally-oriented NGOs often seem to better understand the crucial linkages of social, economic, and environmental concerns. This tendency seems to be true in both developing and more developed countries.

NGOs may partner with governments and multilateral global institutions (e.g., the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO) or more locally, with ocean user groups and coastal communities. In all these cases, and as with other partnerships, values are key to NGO partnerships.

⁷ M. Wiber et al., “Enhancing Community Empowerment Through Participatory Fisheries Research,” *Marine Policy* 33 (2009): 172–179.
In particular, each NGO brings its own values, notably reflected in its choices of how and where to spend its funds, and the priorities it is advocating. No NGO is merely a neutral funding body. Thus the crucial question facing a coastal community or an ocean user group, or indeed a government or a UN agency, is whether its own values and priorities are compatible with those of the NGO. That will not always be the case.

National and International Partnerships

At a larger scale, partnerships can be important both within a nation and at the international level. As with all other partnerships, these types are rooted in values, whether explicit or implicit. Two examples will be used here to illustrate this.

Following the passing of Canada’s Oceans Act, the government recognized a need to draw on expertise across the country in ocean and coastal management, as well as in social sciences connected with ocean use and sustainability. The government funded a new academic-based cross-country entity, the Ocean Management Research Network (OMRN), to bring together all those with an interest in research and knowledge on ocean use and management. This included not only academics, but also government staff, Indigenous organizations, industry bodies, coastal community organizations, NGOs, and many others. The OMRN operated throughout the decade 2000–2010, with its membership growing to over 800 participants. As a national-level partnership to support ocean governance, the OMRN generated many knowledge syntheses and considerable networking and multi-sectoral interaction. The values underlying this initiative, though quite basic—a shared sense of the importance of oceans to that country—led to high levels of contributed energy and time, maximizing outcomes achieved from fairly modest funding.

An international example of a successful partnership arose from a growing recognition of the importance of small-scale fisheries globally, and a corresponding recognition of a lack of a formal international instrument to support those fisheries. Global fishery associations—notably the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers, and the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers—collaborated with a wide range of civil society organizations to move an international governance

8 Oceans Act, S.C. 1996, c. 31.
9 A. Charles et al., “Canada’s Coasts and Oceans: Identifying the Issues,” Discussion Paper (Ottawa: Ocean Management Research Network, 2005).
agenda forward. The partnership was supported by the FAO and by many national governments. There was a very impressive display of consensus on core people-centered values within the process, rooted in human rights perspectives. Ultimately, in 2014, nations formally agreed to the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication.\(^{10}\) The momentum of the partnership has continued since then, in implementing the values, goals, and approaches in the Guidelines.

### Conclusion

Meaningful partnerships are inspiring. They can also be very effective in achieving key goals. But being inspiring is more important, because an inspiring partnership leads to a kind of enduring, fundamental effectiveness that transcends the ‘functional’ effectiveness we tend to focus on first. The reason is rooted in values. An inspiring partnership generates energy, momentum, good will—which brings along other people and other organizations, with shared values. So fundamentally, partnerships should be meaningful, inspiring, and rooted in values. The effectiveness follows as a result, leading in turn to meaningful ocean governance.

\(^{10}\) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* (Rome: FAO, 2015).