

New study reveals urgent need for 'Blue Justice' in the emerging blue economy

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A new study has highlighted a critical issue within the rapidly developing Blue Economy; the need for "Blue Justice"—a new concept that originated from this study. As countries and industries increasingly turn

to the oceans for economic growth, this study warns of the risk that current policies could deepen social inequalities and exploit vulnerable communities unless justice and labor rights are prioritized.

The concept of the Blue Economy—defined by the World Bank as the "sustainable use of ocean resources for [economic growth](#), improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems"—has gained global attention.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) extends this definition to include freshwater environments. However, despite the noble intentions behind these initiatives, there is growing concern that they may inadvertently perpetuate existing patterns of exploitation.

A study by the University of Portsmouth, in collaboration with the Center for Blue Governance and the Center for Global Justice and Rights, warns that if [justice](#) is not placed at the forefront of Blue Economy policies, there is a risk of replicating the mistakes made in other sustainability efforts, such as the Green Economy. The research is [published](#) in the journal *Marine Policy*.

It emphasizes the importance of "Blue Justice," a concept that insists on fair treatment for all, ensuring that the benefits of Blue Economy activities are equitably shared and that marginalized groups, including women, [indigenous peoples](#), and migrant workers, are protected from exploitation. "Blue justice" is economic, social, political and legal, it is a unique holistic approach on the UN SDGs and Blue Economy.

Through critical examination, this new research reveals that explicit references to blue economy working conditions, incidences of labor exploitation, modern slavery, and proposed protective measures for vulnerable populations are largely absent from current strategies.

Professor Pierre Failler, Director of the Center for Blue Governance at the University of Portsmouth and UNESCO Chair in Ocean Governance, says, "While the Blue Economy holds immense potential for sustainable growth, we must ensure that it does not come at the cost of social justice.

"Our research shows that economic and [environmental sustainability](#) will only be achieved if we address the social dimensions, particularly the rights and well-being of those who depend on the oceans for their livelihoods."

Professor Leïla Choukroune, Director of the Center for Global Justice and Rights at the University of Portsmouth, says, "As we advance the Blue Economy, it is crucial to prioritize justice for labor, ensuring that the exploitation seen in past economic models is not replicated. Policymakers must embed principles of social equity at every stage to truly achieve sustainable and just development."

Key findings from the study include:

1. Human impact at the forefront: The study calls for Blue Economy strategies that prioritize the socio-economic impacts on [local communities](#), rather than focusing solely on economic growth.
2. Recognizing and preventing exploitation: It emphasizes the need to understand existing patterns of labor exploitation and prevent them from being repeated in new Blue Economy activities.
3. Supporting populations at risk of exploitation: The study encourages policies that specifically address and support the most vulnerable populations within coastal and island communities.
4. Labor education as a cornerstone: Education about labor rights should be central to sustainable Blue Economy development, ensuring that all workers are aware of their rights and

protections.

5. Closing regulatory gaps: The study identifies the need to update and amend regulations that could facilitate exploitation in the Blue Economy.
6. Interdisciplinary research: The study calls for comprehensive research that looks beyond the immediate economic and environmental impacts to consider broader social consequences.
7. A commitment to justice: Finally, the study insists that Blue Economy strategies must be grounded in a firm commitment to multidimensional justice, ensuring that all stakeholders are treated fairly.

Dr. He Yuan, Research Fellow for the UNESCO Chair in Ocean Governance, University of Portsmouth, says, "Our findings highlight a gap in current Blue Economy strategies. Too often, these strategies prioritize economic growth and environmental conservation without considering how they impact the people who work in and rely on marine and coastal environments.

"If we fail to center justice in these discussions, we risk repeating the mistakes made in other sustainability efforts. The future of our oceans depends not only on how well we protect marine environments but also on how we treat the people who live and work by the sea."

Researchers hope that by prioritizing Blue Justice principles, policymakers can create a more inclusive, fair, and just blue economy that benefits all stakeholders, particularly the populations at risk of [exploitation](#).

More information: He Yuan et al, Centring justice for labour in the new blue economy: Principles for applying emerging evidence and theoretical critiques to policy and practice, *Marine Policy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106327](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106327)

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