Local Ocean, Global Currents: Climate governance and the postcolonial legacy of Seychelles' blue economy

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Introduction

In the context of environmentalism, the Republic of Seychelles has emerged as both a symbol and laboratory for the blue economy, a model that promises economic growth through sustainable use of ocean resources (Benzaken et al., 2022). As one of the world's smallest island developing states, Seychelles occupies an outsized position in global environmental governance. Its coral islands and marine ecosystems are at once vulnerable to the accelerating impacts of climate change and central to its developmental imagination (Benzaken et al., 2022). As a result, the archipelago has cultivated a global reputation as a pioneer of ocean-based sustainability, celebrated for its innovative blue bonds and debt-for-nature swaps (Benzaken et al., 2022). Yet behind this international acclaim lies a more complex story; one deeply shaped by the legacies of colonial governance and the unequal structures of global finance.

This paper examines how postcolonial histories continue to shape climate governance in Seychelles through the lens of the blue economy. It argues that while Seychelles has strategically positioned itself as a 'model' Small Island Developing State (SIDS) in global climate diplomacy, this positioning is conditioned by enduring dependencies: on development aid, on western financial institutions, and on external definitions of sustainability. The blue economy, though locally adapted, operates within a global architecture of climate governance that reproduces colonial hierarchies of expertise, legitimacy, and economic value. By interrogating these continuities, Seychelles is situated within broader debates on postcolonial governance, climate justice, and the politics of sustainability in the Global South.

The blue economy has been widely promoted as a pathway to reconcile development and conservation, particularly for small island states whose economies and ecologies are ocean-bound (Saddington, 2023). Yet, for postcolonial societies like Seychelles, governance in this domain is not merely technical or economic; it is historical and relational. The colonial past continues to shape how nature is valued, who governs it, and whose knowledge counts in environmental policymaking. Climate governance, though seemingly forward-looking, often reproduces older structures of dependency through international finance mechanisms and discursive hierarchies that privilege global expertise over local voices.

Studying Seychelles provides a unique vantage point for interrogating these dynamics. Relative to size, Seychelles wields disproportionate influence in global environmental negotiations, often representing SIDS at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and African Union forums (National Communication, 2025). Its policy innovations, from the world's first sovereign 'blue bond' to large-scale marine spatial planning, are frequently cited as success stories in sustainable development (National Communication, 2025). However, these innovations are also deeply entangled with external financing, conditionalities, and the epistemic power of global institutions (Boswell, 2022). Examining Seychelles, therefore, allows us to question whether the blue economy genuinely represents a postcolonial reimagining of sovereignty and sustainability, or whether it perpetuates familiar patterns of dependency dressed in blue rhetoric. Ultimately, there is scope to rethink climate governance in the Global South, not merely as a technical project of adaptation and mitigation, but as a deeply political process entangled with histories of empire, debt, and knowledge production. The Seychelles case underscores that achieving truly just and sustainable ocean governance requires confronting, rather than obscuring, the postcolonial currents that continue to shape our blue futures.

Historical and political context

Colonial and postcolonial governance in Seychelles

Seychelles' political and environmental landscape cannot be understood without tracing the deep imprints of colonial rule. The islands were successively colonized by France and Britain, each leaving distinct administrative and social legacies. Under French rule in the eighteenth century, the economy was organized around plantation agriculture and enslaved labour, producing an early structure of extraction and inequality that tied local livelihoods to global trade networks (Chauhan and Sharina, 2006). When Britain assumed control in 1814, colonial administration became more bureaucratic, introducing formal institutions of governance, land registration, and resource management that privileged elite and foreign ownership (Chauhan and Sharina, 2006).

This colonial inheritance produced an enduring dualism: a modern, bureaucratic state apparatus oriented towards external authority, and a local population historically marginalized from decision-making. Environmental governance during this period was primarily extractive and conservationist, aimed at maintaining resources for imperial benefit rather than local stewardship. Early forestry and fisheries regulations reflected imperial priorities, with limited consideration for indigenous ecological knowledge or community participation (Boswell, 2022).

Seychelles gained independence in 1976, but postcolonial state-building remained shaped by the inherited structures of colonial bureaucracy. The first years of independence were

marked by competing visions of nationhood and development, culminating in a coup d'état in 1977 that ushered in a socialist-oriented, single-party state. The new government sought to assert national control over resources and to reduce dependence on external actors. However, the administrative culture, legal frameworks, and patterns of elite governance established under colonial rule persisted. The postcolonial state thus inherited not only institutions but also epistemologies of governance; ways of seeing and managing nature that privileged technocratic expertise and external validation.

Moreover, the geopolitical marginality of Seychelles reinforced strategic dependency. As a small island state with limited economic diversification, it relied heavily on tourism, fisheries, and foreign assistance. These dependencies shaped its bargaining power in international forums, while also encouraging a pragmatic diplomatic posture, one that sought to leverage environmental stewardship as a source of legitimacy and funding. In this sense, the postcolonial political structure was both a constraint and a resource; inhibited by inherited hierarchies yet strategically positioned to navigate global institutions for developmental gain.

Early environmental policies and marine governance

Environmental awareness in Seychelles began to emerge during the late colonial period, when concerns about soil erosion, forest degradation, and biodiversity loss entered administrative discourse (Seychelles National Climate Change Committee, 2009). However, these early interventions reflected imperial conservation ideologies rather than local environmental consciousness. After independence, environmental management became more explicitly nationalized, though often with strong external partnerships (Seychelles National Climate Change Committee, 2009).

The 1980s and 1990s saw the institutionalization of environmental policy through the creation of national parks, marine protected areas, and the Seychelles National Environment Commission. These initiatives were supported by global conservation organizations and bilateral donors, positioning Seychelles as a model of island environmentalism. The establishment of the Seychelles Fishing Authority and the Ministry of Environment reflected attempts to reconcile economic growth with ecological preservation (Department of the Environment, 2020). Yet, as in many postcolonial contexts, these institutions often operated within externally defined frameworks of sustainability that mirrored donor expectations more than community priorities.

Marine governance in particular became central to the national development narrative. As tourism expanded and industrial fishing intensified, the government sought to balance ecological protection with economic necessity. The discourse of ocean stewardship emerged as both an environmental and diplomatic asset, allowing Seychelles to align its domestic policy with global sustainability agendas. These early initiatives laid the groundwork for the later articulation of the blue economy as a comprehensive national

strategy, but they also revealed enduring tensions between local autonomy and international dependence.

Seychelles in the Global South and SIDS framework

Seychelles' classification as both a Small Island Developing State and a member of the Global South has profoundly influenced its political and economic orientation. SIDS share structural vulnerabilities, limited resource bases, small domestic markets, geographic isolation, and exposure to external shocks, which shape their engagement with global governance (Department of the Environment, 2020). For Seychelles, these structural conditions have been reframed as both constraints and opportunities.

On one hand, the country's dependence on tourism revenues and imported goods reinforces its exposure to global market volatility and climate risk (International Monetary Fund, 2023). On the other, its status as a SIDS enables it to access special international financing mechanisms, concessional loans, and diplomatic platforms dedicated to sustainable development (International Monetary Fund, 2023). Within global forums, Seychelles has consistently positioned itself as an advocate for oceanic stewardship and as a moral voice for climate justice. The island's smallness, rather than diminishing its agency, has been reinterpreted as a form of legitimacy, allowing it to speak from the frontline of climate vulnerability.

However, this positioning also reflects and reproduces postcolonial hierarchies within global governance. The SIDS category, while politically empowering in some respects, tends to homogenize diverse island experiences and reinforce dependency on external donor-driven solutions. Seychelles' participation in the SIDS framework and the broader blue economy discourse has thus been double-edged: it provides access to global resources and visibility, yet often on terms defined by external actors and global institutions. For example, the country's environmental policies and international partnerships have increasingly aligned with global sustainability agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, but these alignments often involve navigating complex trade-offs between sovereignty, development, and global legitimacy. Seychelles' identity as both a postcolonial and a model island state embodies this tension; it simultaneously challenges and reproduces the asymmetries of the international system that shape the governance of climate and marine resources.

As a result, the historical and political trajectory of Seychelles reveals a pattern of continuity rather than rupture. Colonial administrative structures have evolved into postcolonial governance frameworks that retain elements of hierarchy, centralization, and external accountability. Early environmental policies and marine management systems were constructed through a combination of national initiative and donor influence, embedding external expertise and financial dependency within domestic governance.

Seychelles' approach to ocean and climate governance reflects the dual imperatives of asserting sovereignty and maintaining access to international support. Its identity as a SIDS situates it within a global network of small states navigating similar tensions between autonomy and dependency. Understanding these historical continuities is essential to contextualize the emergence of the blue economy as a national strategy, not merely as a forward-looking innovation, but as a product of long-standing political, economic, and epistemic legacies that continue to shape the possibilities and limits of postcolonial environmental governance.

The blue economy as national strategy

The concept of the blue economy emerged globally in the early 2010s as a framework linking ocean-based development with sustainability (Government of the Seychelles, 2018). For Seychelles, the blue economy was not only a developmental paradigm but also a diplomatic strategy; a way to reposition a small island state within global environmental and financial systems. The government formally adopted the blue economy as a central pillar of national policy in the mid-2010s, framing it as a vehicle for sustainable growth, resilience, and international visibility (Baker et al., 2022).

The blue economy discourse in Seychelles drew on multiple influences: the country's long-standing emphasis on marine conservation, global sustainable development agendas, and the pragmatic need to diversify beyond tourism and fisheries (Baker et al., 2022). Early policy articulations positioned the blue economy as the next phase in Seychelles' development trajectory, one that could balance ecological protection with economic opportunity. In political terms, it was also a means of claiming agency within global governance frameworks historically dominated by larger states and international institutions.

This framing was strategic. By championing the blue economy, Seychelles could assert leadership among SIDS while also appealing to international donors, investors, and development agencies eager to fund ocean-based sustainability initiatives. The discourse thus operated on two levels: domestically, as a narrative of national transformation and resilience; and internationally, as a brand of environmental leadership that could attract political and financial capital.

As a result, Seychelles' blue economy agenda was codified through a series of interlinked policy documents and institutional reforms. Central among these was the Blue Economy Roadmap, developed in collaboration with international partners to provide a strategic framework for integrating marine resource management into national planning (Government of the Seychelles, 2018). The roadmap articulated a vision of the ocean as Seychelles' 'greatest asset' and emphasized economic diversification through sustainable

fisheries, marine biotechnology, renewable energy, and ecotourism (Government of the Seychelles, 2018).

This vision was embedded within broader national strategies, including Vision 2033 and the National Development Strategy 2019–2023, both of which positioned the blue economy as essential to achieving sustainable and inclusive growth. The institutional architecture supporting these strategies included the establishment of the Department of the Blue Economy within the Office of the Vice-President (Government of the Seychelles, 2018). Cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms were also introduced to align policies across fisheries, environment, energy, and finance, reflecting an ambition to mainstream the blue economy within all areas of governance (Ministry of Finance, National Planning and Trade, 2024).

Marine spatial planning became a cornerstone of this agenda. In partnership with The Nature Conservancy and other international actors, Seychelles developed one of the world's most extensive marine zoning plans, designating nearly a third of its Exclusive Economic Zone for conservation (Ministry of Finance, National Planning and Trade, 2024). This process was celebrated as an exemplar of participatory ocean planning, though in practice it was largely driven by technical experts and international consultants. The emphasis on scientific and financial expertise underscored a recurring feature of blue economy governance: the reliance on external knowledge systems and the challenges of integrating local perspectives into technocratic planning processes.

Climate policy and the financializaton of the ocean

A defining feature of Seychelles' blue economy strategy has been its linkage to innovative financial mechanisms. Facing high debt burdens and limited fiscal capacity, the government pursued creative approaches to finance conservation and climate resilience. The 2015 debt-for-nature swap, negotiated with The Nature Conservancy and a consortium of creditors, converted a portion of the country's external debt into investment for marine protection (International Monetary Fund, 2023). This was followed in 2018 by the issuance of the world's first sovereign blue bond, which mobilized funds for sustainable fisheries and ocean-based projects with the backing of the World Bank and international investors (International Monetary Fund, 2023).

These instruments positioned Seychelles at the forefront of blue finance, offering a model for other small states seeking to align environmental protection with fiscal reform. Domestically, they were hailed as symbols of innovation and leadership; internationally, they were celebrated as proof that small states could contribute meaningfully to global climate solutions. Yet, these mechanisms also deepened Seychelles' entanglement with international financial institutions and the logistics of market-based environmentalism.

The financializaton of the ocean, turning marine resources and conservation commitments into tradable financial assets, illustrates both the creativity and the constraint of Seychelles' blue economy. While such mechanisms expand fiscal space and attract investment, they can also reproduce patterns of dependency by tying national policy to the expectations of global investors and donors. The governance of the ocean thus becomes increasingly subject to financial metrics and external accountability, raising questions about sovereignty, equity, and long-term resilience.

Seychelles' adoption of the blue economy coincided with its growing prominence in global environmental diplomacy. The country has played an active role in forums such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the Commonwealth, positioning itself as both advocate and exemplar of sustainable ocean governance. This diplomatic activism has enabled Seychelles to exert influence disproportionate to its size, particularly within the SIDS and African regional blocs.

By promoting the blue economy as a moral and developmental imperative, Seychelles has cultivated a narrative of leadership rooted in vulnerability and responsibility. It presents itself as a nation on the frontline of climate change that nonetheless contributes constructively to global solutions. This narrative aligns closely with the international community's desire for success stories in sustainable development, allowing Seychelles to leverage its image for diplomatic and financial support.

At the same time, this positioning reflects complex power dynamics. Seychelles' ability to maintain international visibility depends on aligning its policies with global sustainability agendas, which are often shaped by northern institutions and epistemologies. While the country has successfully reframed its smallness as a source of legitimacy, it must also navigate the risk of becoming emblematic; celebrated as a model while constrained by the very structures of global governance that define its success.

Tensions between national aspirations and global expectations

The blue economy embodies a dual aspiration: to assert national sovereignty over marine resources while participating in global sustainability frameworks. Yet this duality produces inherent tensions. On one hand, the blue economy narrative empowers Seychelles to claim control over its oceanic territory and to craft a development model suited to its context. On the other, the practical implementation of this vision depends heavily on external funding, expertise, and validation.

These tensions are evident in the competing imperatives of conservation and development. While marine spatial planning and biodiversity protection enhance Seychelles' global reputation, they can also limit economic opportunities for local communities dependent on fisheries and tourism (Etongo et al., 2025). The emphasis on attracting foreign

investment in ocean industries, such as aquaculture and renewable energy, raises concerns about resource sovereignty and environmental justice.

Furthermore, the global promotion of the blue economy often carries implicit expectations about good governance, transparency, and financial discipline, reflecting neoliberal development norms (Benzaken et al., 2022). Seychelles' efforts to align with these norms can enhance its credibility but also constrain its policy autonomy. In effect, the country's blue economy operates at the intersection of national ambition and global governance, a space defined as much by aspiration as by dependency. The blue economy thus functions as both a developmental project and a diplomatic performance. It offers a vision of self-reliance that is, paradoxically, sustained through external dependence. Understanding this paradox is key to situating Seychelles within broader debates on climate governance and postcolonial sustainability.

Postcolonial governance and discourse

Postcolonial frameworks and the politics of governance

Understanding Seychelles' blue economy through a postcolonial lens reveals that environmental governance is not simply a technical exercise but a continuation of historical power relations. The formal structures of independence did not erase the deep institutional and epistemic legacies of colonial rule; rather, these legacies continue to shape the way the state imagines development and sustainability. Postcolonial theory in this context, draws attention to how power operates through discourse, through the production of knowledge, the construction of expertise, and the narratives that legitimize certain forms of governance while silencing others (Baker et al., 2022).

In Seychelles, the blue economy is framed as an emancipatory project, a means of reclaiming sovereignty over marine resources and demonstrating leadership in global sustainability. Yet this narrative simultaneously reproduces hierarchies inherited from the colonial past. The state's reliance on external expertise, international validation, and donor-driven frameworks situates it within a postcolonial dependency complex; a condition where autonomy is performed but constrained by global systems of finance and knowledge (Saddington, 2023). Governance, in this sense, becomes both an assertion of independence and a negotiation of dependence.

Postcolonial theory helps to unpack this paradox. The rhetoric of innovation and resilience that surrounds Seychelles' blue economy echoes earlier colonial discourses of modernization and improvement, in which progress was measured by alignment with global, and often western, standards of rationality and order. Contemporary climate governance reproduces similar logics, where legitimacy is conferred through adherence to international best practice, technical quantification, and fiscal responsibility. Thus, even

as Seychelles projects itself as a leader, it is evaluated through external metrics that echo the tutelary dynamics of the colonial encounter.

Discursive construction of the blue economy

The discourse of the blue economy in Seychelles constructs both the nation and the ocean as sites of global relevance. Government documents, official speeches, and policy frameworks consistently portray the ocean as the heart of the nation's future, a space of boundless opportunity tempered by the responsibility to protect (Benzaken et al., 2022). The language of stewardship, of being both custodian and beneficiary of the ocean, serves to reconcile environmental care with economic aspiration (Benzaken et al., 2022).

This discourse operates through a series of interlocking narratives. The first is the narrative of vulnerability and leadership. Seychelles presents itself as a victim of climate change yet simultaneously as a leader in sustainability. This dual identity legitimizes its demands for international support while projecting moral authority. The second narrative is that of innovation and modernization, where the blue economy is framed as a sophisticated, science-driven model that elevates the nation beyond its postcolonial peripherality. Finally, there is the narrative of responsibility and partnership, which emphasises collaboration with international actors and the moral duty to safeguard the ocean for humanity.

Each of these narratives performs important political work. They attract investment, enhance diplomatic standing, and articulate a vision of national pride anchored in environmental virtue. Yet they also reproduce an implicit hierarchy between global and local actors. The emphasis on expertise and innovation privileges scientific and financial knowledge, often produced externally, over community-based experience and local ecological understanding. In effect, the blue economy discourse constructs an image of the modern, technocratic island state; responsible, efficient, and globally connected, but governed through frameworks not entirely of its own making.

Voices of governance: Inclusion and exclusion

The governance of the blue economy in Seychelles, while framed as participatory, remains marked by patterns of exclusion rooted in the country's colonial and postcolonial history. Policy processes are typically led by state officials, consultants, and international partners, with limited space for local communities to shape the terms of debate. Fisherfolk, coastal residents, and small-scale entrepreneurs often find themselves positioned as stakeholders to be consulted rather than as active co-authors of policy.

This exclusion is not merely procedural but epistemic. The forms of knowledge that inform national strategies such as marine science, economic modelling, financial planning, are valorized as objective and universal. By contrast, local ecological knowledge, customary practices, and community perspectives are often rendered secondary or anecdotal. This

hierarchy of knowledge reflects a broader postcolonial dynamic in which modern expertise is privileged over traditional understanding. In the context of the blue economy, it results in governance frameworks that are technically robust but socially uneven.

Civil Society Organizations and local NGOs have sought to mediate this gap, advocating for more inclusive approaches and community empowerment. Yet their participation frequently occurs within donor-funded projects that impose their own agendas and timelines. As a result, even progressive interventions risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to address. The language of partnership and participation conceals asymmetries of power between national institutions, international donors, and local communities.

At the same time, elite and technocratic actors within Seychelles, many educated abroad and fluent in the language of global sustainability, occupy a privileged position in shaping policy discourse. Their role as translators between the local and the global gives them significant influence but also reinforces class and knowledge divides within the island society. The blue economy, therefore, becomes a field in which both global and domestic hierarchies are negotiated and reproduced.

The discursive construction of Seychelles' blue economy rests on three interconnected narratives: modernization, sustainability, and responsibility. Together, these form the moral and political foundation of the national project.

The modernization narrative situates the blue economy as the next stage in the nation's development, linking technological advancement with prosperity and progress. It invokes imagery of innovation; clean energy, biotechnology, digital monitoring, as symbols of a forward-looking state. This narrative provides a sense of collective aspiration, but it also reinforces the idea that development is synonymous with alignment to global technological norms. In this way, modernization becomes both a goal and a measure of belonging to the global order.

The sustainability narrative, meanwhile, operates as a moral justification for economic expansion. By coupling growth with conservation, it allows the state to claim both environmental virtue and developmental legitimacy (Benzaken et al., 2022). However, this coupling often masks trade-offs between ecological protection and social equity. Projects framed as sustainable such as large-scale marine reserves or eco-tourism ventures, may restrict traditional fishing areas or reconfigure community access to resources. Sustainability, therefore, functions as a flexible discourse that can legitimize both protection and exclusion of local populations.

Finally, the narrative of responsibility positions Seychelles as a custodian of the global commons. The government frequently emphasizes the nation's duty to lead by example, presenting its smallness as an advantage that enables agility and moral clarity. This

rhetoric enhances the country's diplomatic profile but also creates expectations of exemplary behaviour that may exceed its material capacities. Responsibility thus becomes a double-edged discourse: empowering in its assertion of leadership, yet burdensome in its demands for performance within global frameworks.

The interplay of these narratives reveals the persistence of postcolonial continuities within Seychelles' climate governance. The blue economy's emphasis on expertise, partnership, and innovation mirrors the colonial logic of tutelage, where development is guided by external knowledge under the guise of universal progress. Although the language has shifted from civilization to sustainability, the underlying structure of authority remains recognizably similar; legitimacy flows from alignment with international norms and institutions (Saddington, 2023).

Representation plays a crucial role in this process. Seychelles' success in global diplomacy depends on projecting an image of modern, responsible statehood that resonates with donor expectations. The nation's story is often told through policy reports, international conferences, and high-level speeches that foreground technical achievements and downplay local contestations (Saddington, 2023). These representations circulate within a global economy of recognition, where visibility and funding are intertwined. To be seen as a leader, Seychelles must conform to the aesthetic and moral expectations of global sustainability discourse, a dynamic that constrains the range of possible political imaginations. Yet within this system, there are also moments of resistance and rearticulation. Local NGOs, artists, and educators increasingly challenge the dominance of technocratic narratives by emphasizing community values, cultural heritage, and intergenerational stewardship of the ocean (Boswell, 2022). Such interventions gesture towards a more plural understanding of the blue economy, one grounded in local histories and everyday practices rather than global scripts. These emerging voices suggest that postcolonial governance, while shaped by inherited structures, remains a site of contestation where alternative futures can still be imagined.

International dependencies and climate finance

The blue economy in Seychelles is not only an ecological and developmental strategy but also a financial architecture. Its success and international acclaim have depended heavily on access to external funding, concessional loans, and innovative financial instruments designed to align market mechanisms with environmental goals (Baker, 2022). This reliance reflects a broader global trend, the financializaton of climate governance, in which the management of ecological resources is increasingly mediated through the logic of finance (Baker, 2022).

For small island states like Seychelles, where fiscal capacity and economic diversification are limited, global climate finance represents both opportunity and constraint. It provides essential resources for adaptation and conservation, yet it also embeds these nations within systems of external accountability and conditionality. The blue economy, though framed as a pathway to self-reliance, therefore operates within a paradox: it is an assertion of sovereignty that depends on the very financial and institutional structures that limit sovereignty.

This dynamic is not accidental but structural. Postcolonial states were integrated into the global financial system on terms that privilege creditor interests and market-based governance. The blue economy, by linking environmental protection to investment returns, reproduces these hierarchies under the banner of sustainability. For Seychelles, this means that climate governance is inseparable from debt management, donor relations, and international diplomacy, a convergence that shapes both policy priorities and political narratives.

To exemplify, the 2015 debt-for-nature swap marked a turning point in Seychelles' environmental finance. Through an agreement brokered with international partners, a portion of the country's sovereign debt was purchased and restructured in exchange for commitments to marine conservation (International Montray Fund, 2023). The resulting arrangement established the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT), which channels funds into ocean management, climate adaptation, and community-based projects (United Nations, 2023).

This initiative was widely hailed as a global model for linking debt relief with environmental stewardship. It demonstrated that even highly indebted small states could innovate within global finance, transforming vulnerability into leverage. Yet it also illustrated the complexities of dependency in postcolonial governance. While the debt swap reduced fiscal pressure and financed important conservation outcomes, it effectively embedded Seychelles' marine policy within donor-driven frameworks. The conditionalities of the arrangement, including reporting requirements, conservation targets, and oversight mechanisms, reflected external priorities as much as national ones.

The creation of SeyCCAT institutionalized this duality. On one hand, it represented a step towards domestic ownership of climate finance, providing a local platform for managing funds and coordinating projects. On the other hand, its governance structure included significant international representation, ensuring continued external influence over national decision-making. The result was a hybrid model of sovereignty: formally autonomous yet substantively shaped by transnational partnerships and fiduciary oversight.

From a postcolonial perspective, the debt swap illustrates how the promise of sustainable finance can reproduce dependency through the language of collaboration. The initiative's success was measured not only by ecological outcomes but also by its alignment with global norms of financial responsibility echoing the moral economies of the postcolonial debt regime.

Building on the visibility generated by the debt swap, Seychelles launched the world's first sovereign blue bond in 2018 (Benzaken et al., 2024). The bond aimed to raise capital for sustainable fisheries and ocean-based industries, backed by guarantees from the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility (Benzaken et al., 2024). This innovation positioned Seychelles at the forefront of the emerging blue finance movement, which seeks to attract private investment into marine conservation (Baker, 2022).

The blue bond exemplifies how climate governance has become entangled with global capital markets. By translating environmental stewardship into an investment opportunity, it reframes sustainability as a financial asset. In doing so, it invites participation from investors and development banks while subjecting local priorities to the imperatives of risk assessment and return on investment. For Seychelles, the bond provided much-needed funding and enhanced international prestige, but it also deepened its integration into financial networks governed from outside its borders.

The logic underpinning the blue bond, that market mechanisms can deliver ecological and social benefits, rests on assumptions about efficiency and accountability derived from neoliberal governance. It privileges quantifiable outcomes and measurable impact, often at the expense of more qualitative or community-based forms of environmental value. This shift reflects a broader postcolonial condition in which development is increasingly defined through compliance with global financial norms rather than local aspirations.

While the blue bond has funded important initiatives in sustainable fisheries and capacity building, its success depends on continued investor confidence and alignment with global sustainability metrics. The state's role becomes that of an intermediary: translating local realities into data legible to international finance. This process risks displacing the very communities whose livelihoods the blue economy is meant to sustain, as their experiences and needs are reinterpreted through the abstractions of financial governance.

Beyond innovative instruments, Seychelles remains embedded in a dense network of aid relationships and development partnerships. Multilateral institutions, bilateral donors, and international NGOs continue to play central roles in funding and implementing environmental projects (Baker, 2022). These partnerships have been instrumental in strengthening institutional capacity and advancing conservation goals, yet they also reinforce asymmetries of power.

The conditionalities attached to aid, whether explicit or implicit, shape national policy priorities. Donor-funded programmes often emphasize measurable outcomes aligned with global agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals or Paris Agreement commitments (United Nations, 2023). This can marginalize local priorities that are harder to quantify, such as cultural heritage, traditional livelihoods, or social equity. Moreover, the administrative burden of meeting donor reporting requirements consumes significant bureaucratic capacity, leaving limited space for autonomous policy experimentation.

These dependencies are not unique to Seychelles; they are characteristic of the wider SIDS experience. Small island states occupy an ambivalent position in global governance, simultaneously visible and vulnerable, celebrated as frontline nations yet constrained by the architectures of aid and finance. Their moral authority as climate advocates often masks structural dependencies that limit their agency. In Seychelles, this dynamic is particularly evident in the blue economy, where international support has been both enabling and circumscribing.

Aid dependency also operates through discourse. The portrayal of Seychelles as a success story in sustainable finance reinforces global narratives of responsible governance and innovation, which are politically useful for donors and international institutions (United Nations, 2023). However, these narratives can obscure the complexities of local implementation, where projects must navigate social tensions, uneven benefits, and the persistent challenge of ensuring that global solutions address national realities.

As a result, the interdependence between Seychelles and the international financial system raises profound questions about the meaning of sovereignty in the context of climate governance. Sovereignty, in the traditional sense of independent authority, is complicated by the reliance on external funding, expertise, and policy frameworks. Yet in a world of globalized finance and environmental interconnection, absolute autonomy is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. The challenge lies in negotiating forms of conditional sovereignty that enable small states to exercise agency within constraint.

Seychelles has demonstrated considerable skill in this negotiation. Leaders have strategically framed dependency as partnership, vulnerability as leadership, and smallness as a source of legitimacy (IUCN, 2024). Through this diplomatic balancing act, the country has secured resources and visibility while maintaining a narrative of agency. However, this resilience is contingent on the continued willingness of global institutions to engage on favourable terms. The risk remains that shifts in donor priorities, market conditions, or geopolitical alignments could undermine the fragile equilibrium that sustains Seychelles' blue economy.

Resilience, therefore, must be understood not only as ecological adaptability but as political and financial dexterity, the capacity to navigate asymmetrical systems while

preserving a measure of autonomy. For Seychelles, achieving true resilience may require reimagining the blue economy beyond its financial dimensions, emphasizing social equity, cultural values, and community participation as equally vital components of sustainability.

Seychelles' experience is emblematic of broader patterns among SIDS and postcolonial states engaged in climate governance. From the Caribbean to the Pacific, small island nations have adopted the blue economy as a development framework that promises empowerment but often reproduces dependence on global finance and expertise. The parallels with countries such as Mauritius, Barbados, and Fiji reveal a shared dilemma; the pursuit of sustainable development within structures that privilege financial rationality over social justice (IUCN, 2024).

In this context, Seychelles' innovations can be seen as both exemplary and cautionary. They demonstrate the potential of small states to exercise agency within global systems, yet they also expose the limits of that agency when mediated through debt, aid, and investment. Comparative analysis underscores that the blue economy is not a neutral model but a contested field of power, where postcolonial states must constantly negotiate their position between autonomy and dependency, resilience and vulnerability.

Critical reflections: Climate justice in the Seychelles context

Seychelles' blue economy has been celebrated as a model for small island innovation, yet its experience underscores a deeper question at the heart of global climate governance: who benefits, and who bears the costs? Climate justice provides a framework for interrogating these uneven dynamics, emphasizing the moral and political dimensions of environmental change. It challenges the notion that sustainability is purely technical, revealing it instead as a site of contestation over power, knowledge, and access.

For Seychelles, climate justice involves negotiating both global and domestic inequalities. On the global stage, the nation advocates for the recognition of historical responsibility, the principle that those most responsible for emissions should bear the greatest burden of mitigation and support (Saddington, 2023). Yet in practice, climate finance mechanisms and governance structures often perpetuate the very asymmetries they claim to redress. Access to funding depends on compliance with donor requirements, alignment with market-based models, and demonstration of good governance (Baker, 2022). This reproduces a colonial logic in which the Global South remains accountable to external arbiters of legitimacy.

Domestically, the pursuit of the blue economy has generated its own forms of inequality. While large-scale conservation and investment projects have brought global prestige, their benefits have not always been equitably distributed. Fisherfolk, artisanal workers, and low-

income communities sometimes experience these initiatives as exclusions, losing access to resources or decision-making power (Saddington, 2023). Climate justice, in this sense, demands more than resilience; it requires redistribution of both material benefits and epistemic authority. It insists that sustainability be redefined through participation, equity, and historical awareness.

Furthermore, the risk of reproducing colonial hierarchies in climate governance lies not only in financial dependency but also in epistemic dependency, the reliance on external knowledge systems and validation. Seychelles' environmental strategies, though nationally owned in form, are often shaped by the conceptual vocabularies and evaluative frameworks of global institutions. Terms such as resilience, innovation, and natural capital reflect a particular worldview that translates complex social and ecological realities into quantifiable metrics (Baker et al., 2023).

This process mirrors colonial modes of knowledge production, where local landscapes and practices were mapped, categorized, and managed according to external logics of order and value. In the blue economy, these dynamics manifest through scientific modelling, financial valuation, and technocratic planning. The result is a subtle form of epistemic colonization; global expertise defines what counts as knowledge, while local experience becomes supplementary or anecdotal.

A just and decolonial approach to the blue economy should begin with the centring of community knowledge and participation. Local communities possess intimate understandings of marine ecosystems, seasonal cycles, and sustainable practices developed over generations. Yet such knowledge often remains peripheral to formal decision-making. Bringing it to the centre requires more than consultation; it demands structural change in how policy is produced and whose voices define its direction.

This shift entails building participatory governance frameworks that grant communities genuine decision-making power in resource management. Co-management arrangements, local advisory councils, and community-led monitoring can provide mechanisms for integrating local perspectives into national policy. Beyond procedural inclusion, it also involves recognizing the legitimacy of non-scientific knowledge such as oral histories, cultural values, and spiritual relationships with the ocean, as vital components of sustainability.

In Seychelles, some initiatives already move in this direction. Community-based marine protected areas, youth-led conservation programmes, and educational outreach have begun to democratize environmental governance (Saddington, 2023). However, these efforts often depend on donor funding and remain fragmented (Baker, 2022). Embedding participation into the institutional fabric of the blue economy would help ensure that local

empowerment is not contingent on external projects but becomes a defining principle of national governance.

Centring community knowledge also redefines resilience: not as a technical capacity to absorb shocks, but as a social process rooted in mutual care, cultural continuity, and collective agency. This perspective aligns with indigenous and decolonial understandings of environmental stewardship, which see the ocean not as a resource to be managed, but as a living space of relation and responsibility.

Therefore, moving towards more inclusive and reflexive climate governance requires a reorientation of both discourse and practice. Inclusion means more than participation in policy processes; it entails redistributing authority and revaluing different forms of knowledge. Reflexivity, meanwhile, involves recognizing the positionality of the state within global power structures and acknowledging how historical legacies shape current governance choices.

In practical terms, this could involve three key shifts. First, enhancing transparency and accountability in international partnerships, ensuring that donor priorities do not override local needs, and that financial instruments like the blue bond serve community as well as national objectives. Second, fostering cross-sector dialogue that brings together policymakers, scientists, civil society, and local communities in co-designing environmental initiatives. Third, developing education and research programmes that cultivate critical awareness of postcolonial histories and promote homegrown expertise.

At a discursive level, reflexivity also means resisting the pressure to constantly perform success. The international celebration of Seychelles as a model blue economy can obscure the tensions, compromises, and inequalities that underlie its governance. By embracing critical reflection rather than defensive optimism, the state can open space for a more honest and transformative dialogue, one that confronts the structural constraints of smallness and dependency without reducing them to narratives of failure.

Such reflexivity does not weaken global leadership; it strengthens it. A truly just climate governance model from Seychelles would exemplify not only innovation and efficiency but humility and inclusivity, recognizing that sustainability is as much about justice as it is about growth.

Conclusion

Seychelles' blue economy stands at the intersection of ambition and constraint, a site where postcolonial histories, global finance, and environmental politics converge. The country's embrace of the blue economy is not only a response to the material realities of

climate vulnerability but also a discursive and political project that seeks to reconcile sovereignty with interdependence. It exemplifies how Small Island Developing States navigate the complex terrain of global governance, asserting agency in spaces structured by inequality, and crafting innovation within the limits of dependency.

Across the preceding sections, a consistent thread has emerged: the blue economy, while framed as a pathway to sustainable self-reliance, remains deeply entangled with the postcolonial legacies of governance and knowledge. The institutional forms that shape environmental policy in Seychelles reflect not only pragmatic adaptation but also the enduring influence of colonial administrative rationalities. The state's authority continues to be mediated through external validation, whether from donors, investors, or multilateral institutions. In this sense, the blue economy operates as both a symbol of independence and a reminder of constraint.

Postcolonial theory helps to make visible the continuities that underlie this paradox. The discourse of modernization and sustainability that animates Seychelles' environmental strategies echoes earlier colonial narratives of progress and improvement. Development, in this context, remains tethered to the moral economies of global governance, where legitimacy is conferred through conformity to external norms. Yet, as the analysis of governance discourse revealed, these dynamics are not static. They are continually negotiated through acts of translation, resistance, and reinvention. Seychelles' policymakers, civil servants, and civil society actors demonstrate significant agency in appropriating global concepts and reworking them to serve national and moral aspirations.

From a normative perspective, these tensions highlight the need for a climate justice framework that transcends technocratic and financial metrics. Climate justice insists that sustainability cannot be divorced from questions of equity, voice, and historical responsibility. In the Seychelles context, this means acknowledging that environmental governance is not merely about protecting ecosystems but about redistributing power, between global and local actors, between experts and communities, and between past and future generations. The challenge is to design governance systems that are not only efficient but reflexive; not only globally legible but locally grounded.

A more inclusive and reflexive blue economy would begin with the recognition of community knowledge and cultural values as integral to sustainability. It would involve institutional reforms that ensure genuine participation in policy design and implementation, moving beyond token consultation towards co-governance. It would also require greater transparency in the operation of international financial mechanisms, so that accountability flows both upwards to donors and downwards to citizens. Most importantly, it would cultivate a political culture of reflexivity, a willingness to confront the historical and structural dimensions of dependency without reducing them to fatalism.

Ultimately, the challenge for Seychelles, and for postcolonial climate governance more broadly, is to transform the blue economy from a framework of managed dependency into a genuinely emancipatory project. Doing so requires reimagining the ocean not merely as capital, but as a space of relation, history, and shared stewardship. Only by grounding climate policy in justice, participation, and reflexivity can the promise of the blue economy be fulfilled, not as a new frontier of global finance, but as a living testament to the sovereignty, creativity, and dignity of small island states in a changing world.

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