



Maritime Regionalism and 'Inclusive Development': Opportunity and Challenges before Bangladesh in Anthropocene

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Abstract

The emphasis placed by Bangladesh, as the current Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), on 'Harnessing the opportunities of the Indian Ocean sustainably for inclusive development', resonates well with the challenge of the Anthropocene, and demands attention from both scholars and practitioners in the South Asian IR community. It

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provides both the academic and policy spaces for a critical rethinking of the very idea of 'development' on the agenda of Indian Ocean maritime regionalism. And it underlines the importance of approaching the complex and compelling intersectionality of ecological (un)sustainability, natural disasters and climate change, from the standpoint of human-livelihood (in) security of millions of marginalized small-scale fishers in the Indian Ocean region. Bangladesh, as the Chair of IORA, is ideally placed to ensure greater interaction between IORA and BIMSTEC—at a sub-regional scale—and further explore the prospects of a UN Environmental Programme Regional Seas Programme for the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME).

In November 2021, Bangladesh took over as the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the one and only pan Indian Ocean organization that embodies the idea of maritime regionalism, and, farsightedly, decided to focus on the following theme as the key priority area over the next two years: *'Harnessing the opportunities of the Indian Ocean sustainably for inclusive development.'* The emphasis placed by Bangladesh on 'inclusive development' is both timely and visionary, and invites the attention of both academics and practitioners towards several challenges, risks and threats facing an increasingly interdependent yet highly unequal world of the Anthropocene. This also coincides with publication of the *Sixth Assessment Report (AR6)*¹, and a special report *Oceans and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*² published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

A great deal has been written on 'human security' both in International Relations and security studies.³ This article is based on the assumption that engagement with the question of 'small' in human security cannot – and should not— be restricted to the challenges and dilemmas of small states. This is not to belittle the importance of the subject of small states,

especially Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which has received considerable attention of IR scholars⁴ but to argue that the focus on 'small' in international relations needs to be broadened and deepened to go beyond a state-centric understanding of 'international' to include communities and their struggles for survival on the margins. Given that a relentless interrogation of power asymmetries and socio-economic hierarchies is central to the pursuit of emancipation by a more global and critical IR⁵— the importance of addressing the challenges posed by the Anthropocene to the livelihood-human security of small-scale communities—precariously placed on the margins of the mainstream—needs due acknowledgement. As rightly pointed out by some scholars⁶ irrespective of location on various continents, the Covid 19 pandemic has exposed tropical small-scale fishing communities and their livelihood security to multiple risks. These risks have arisen largely due to sharp decline in fishing, fish trading and fish prices, and coping strategies vary for men and women.

This paper argues that by adopting 'inclusive development' as the signature theme of its chairmanship of IORA over the next two years, Bangladesh has opened up the academic as well as policy spaces for the much needed critical rethinking of the concept of 'development' itself on the intersections of the Anthropocene. The challenge of the new social-geological epoch called the Anthropocene and its linkages with unsustainability, natural disaster, and climate change remains central to the realization of a sustainable future for Bangladesh; a low-lying country located at the head of the Bay of Bengal, facing special circumstances in the offshore area of Ganga/Brahmaputra delta. The Bangladesh parliament was one of the first among such institutions to bring out the *Vision 2041* and *Delta Plan 2100*. I further argue that the appeal made by Bangladesh in support of an inclusive ocean development and governance calls for a new maritime regionalism from below in the Indian Ocean region; citing the example—and there can be several other for sure—of the small-scale fishing communities in the Bay of Bengal. Given the imperative of its own location –which is also

impacted by geopolitical-geo-economic-geostrategic—developments and trends in the neighbouring South China Sea - Bangladesh is ideally placed to take multilateral cooperation at both regional and sub-regional scales to a higher level; while aiming at a more resilient Bay of Bengal. A systemic vision and systematic pursuit of inclusive development in the Indian Ocean region is likely to open new spaces for greater interaction and dialogue between the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

The paper begins with a brief engagement with the concept of Anthropocene. The key assumption is that one of the major causal explanations for the dawning of this new social-geological epoch relates to the pursuit of a model of 'development' that is dictated and driven by the obsession with reckless economic growth.⁷ The analysis then turns to a discussion of the concept of maritime regionalism, taking IORA as a leading example. Focusing on the livelihood (in)security of the small-scale fishers in the Bay of Bengal, I map out the opportunities and challenges before IORA in addressing the greater challenge of inclusive development for the 'Ocean of the Global South' through maritime regionalism. The paper concludes with some policy recommendations addressed to Bangladesh as the Chair of IORA.

Mapping the Anthropocene as 'Capitalocene': Defining and Debating 'Inclusive Development'

It is important to acknowledge at the outset, as noted by a leading critical geographer Matthew Spark that "in an important ecological sense, life on earth has always been globalized.⁸ Our evolution and health as human beings have been dependent from the start on our interactions with a planetary ecosystem... Nevertheless, the anthropocentric forms of globalization have fundamentally changed these ecological interdependencies, making us the dominant global species and creating today what some scientists refer to as a new ecological-turned-geological era: the Anthropocene."⁹

The term 'Anthropocene' was coined by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000, to signify humanity's epoch-making intervention in geomorphological processes of the planet, resulting in extensive damage to the chemistry of the Earth's geosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere. The Anthropocene, in short, refers to "human-driven alterations of i) the biological fabric of the Earth; ii) the stocks and flows of major elements in the planetary machinery such as nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, and silicon; and iii) the energy balance at the Earth's surface."¹⁰

The planet earth will be inhabited by nearly 10 billion people by 2050. According to a report of the World Resource Institute titled '*Creating a Sustainable Food Future: A Menu of Solutions to feed nearly 10 Billion People by 2050*', "As the global population grows and incomes rise across the developing world, overall food demand is on course to increase by more than 50 percent by mid-century, and demand for animal-based foods by nearly 70 percent. Yet even today, hundreds of millions of people remain undernourished as local agricultural systems fail to provide enough nutritious food, and economic factors prevent equitable distribution of available food."¹¹

The notion of Anthropocene, relatively speaking, has been approached largely in terms of the consequences, and relatively speaking much less in terms of the causes, responsibility and accountability. It is often forgotten that there is complex geography and history of the Anthropocene; making it a highly contested phenomenon.¹² As pointed out by Lövbrand, E., Mobjörk, M. and Söder, "the Anthropocene is a troubling concept for troubled times."¹³ It speaks of a complex, interconnected and unstable world marked by globalized and manufactured risks that now are threatening the very life-upholding systems upon which human civilizations rest. In contrast to the hopeful and reassuring concept of sustainable development that has guided international environmental cooperation since the early 1990s, the Anthropocene is wedded into a language of fear and sorrow in view of irreparable loss of

Arctic ice sheets, mass species extinction, acidified oceans and degraded lands.”

The Anthropocene is graphically evident in the case of the global ocean. What follows here is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. As early as 1999, an international group of scientists, participating in the Indian Ocean Experiment (INDOEX) had “documented widespread pollution covering about 10 million square kilometres of the tropical Indian Ocean—roughly the same area as the continental United States.”¹⁴ It was evident that extensive pollution was adversely affecting climate processes and marine biota in the ocean below. Pollution, overfishing and habitat destruction are seriously undermining fragile coral reefs. To quote from a report of the Global Ocean Commission, “The high seas are facing a cycle of declining ecosystem health and productivity. It is our joint responsibility to act urgently and decisively to arrest the decline of this immense global commons. Failure to do so would be unforgivable betrayal of current and future generations.”¹⁵ As noted in a major study, due to waste mismanagement over several decades plastics have become one of the most serious environmental problems in the world ocean.¹⁶ Quite alarmingly, plastics account for nearly 80% of the litter in many marine environments.¹⁷

Pluralizing Anthropocene from Below: Growing Focus on the Indian Ocean: ‘The Ocean of the Global South’

As Dalby has argued in the context of global environmental change, “Geopolitics is a complex cultural matter, where identities are formulated, represented and repressed in contemporary political discourses. Geopolitics is also about the crucially important power to define danger, and about the ability to describe the world in ways that specify appropriate political behaviors in particular contexts to provide ‘security’ against those dangers.”¹⁸ This is an important insight for those interested in exploring the ethical and geopolitical dimensions of privileging a particular scale (from local to planetary) in

various framings of maritime security. For Dalby, the key to survival and security in the 21st century and beyond is to reimagine international relations and geopolitics.¹⁹ In his view, critical geopolitical perspectives on the Anthropocene remind us that the dominant narratives of global environmental change and excessive focus on 'big science,' run the risk of "ignoring marginal peoples, gender biases in the research, and the implicit cultural assumptions that drive international collaborations. Nonetheless, insofar as environmental contexts are part of the larger considerations of peace and sustainability in coming decades, the Earth System science perspective provides a contextualization that distances analysis from an undue focus on states and demands an engagement with the specific material contexts of vulnerability in an innovative way that makes it difficult to avoid the key issues of the politics of security"

Critical social science perspectives on the Anthropocene, thus, insist on approaching the highly differentiated, complex and compelling reality, often approached and analysed at the planetary scale, from the location of the marginalised, at the small-scale. As rightly pointed out by Smith et al., "Human-driven changes to aquatic environments threaten small-scale fisheries (SSFs). Ensuring a livable future for SSFs in the Anthropocene requires incorporating ecological knowledge of these diverse multi-species systems beyond the long-standing reliance on populations, a management paradigm adopted from industrial fisheries."²⁰ They further remind us that, "assessing the state of ecological knowledge on SSFs is timely as we enter the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science and Sustainable Development and with the upcoming International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture."²¹ They conclude on the note that, "trends in ecological research of SSFs are not well understood compared to better-studied industrial fisheries." This research finding has special resonance and relevance in the case of the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project has listed the following as one of its key functions: "Assisting

Member States in improving the quality of life and increasing the livelihood opportunities of small-scale fishers.”²²

Based on a meticulously researched assessment of the current state of climate change research at multiple scales, the IPCC special report reminds us that, “The global ocean is the interconnected body of saline water that encompasses polar to equatorial climate zones and covers 71% of the Earth surface. It includes the Arctic, Pacific, Atlantic, Indian and Southern Oceans, as well as their marginal seas. The ocean contains about 97% of the Earth’s water, supplies 99% of the Earth’s biologically habitable space, and provides roughly half of the primary production on Earth.”²³

As far as the larger Indian Ocean region is concerned, the IPCC special report sounds a note of caution: “Along with extreme El Niño events, abrupt warming in the Indian Ocean and extreme IOD events have largely altered the Asian and African monsoon, impacting the food and water security over these regions”.²⁴ The special report also underlines the critical importance of the coasts, especially in the case of low-elevation coastal zones: “Coasts are where ocean and land processes interact, and include coastal cities, deltas, estuaries, and other coastal ecosystems such as mangrove forests. Low elevation coastal zones (less than 10 m above sea level) are densely populated and particularly exposed to hazards from the ocean.” Moreover, “Due to relative sea level rise causing intrusion of saline or brackish water, combined with storm surges and natural and human-induced subsidence, residual salinity has alarmingly increased. Livelihoods depending on freshwater fish habitat, oilseed, sugarcane and jute cultivation in Bangladesh have adversely affected.”²⁵ Commenting on the wide-ranging implications of sea level rise (SLR) for equity and social vulnerability, it notes, with *high confidence*: “SLR and responses may affect communities and society in ways that are not evenly distributed, which can compound vulnerability and inequity, and undermine societal aspirations, such as achieving SDGs”.²⁶ Attention is also invited to unevenly shared “costs and benefits

of both action and inaction” with “some coastal nations, particularly small island states, being confronted with adaptation costs amounting to several percent of GDP in the 21st century...Land use planning for climate adaptation can exacerbate socio spatial inequalities at the local level” and “Private responses may also exacerbate inequalities”.²⁷

The IPCC *Sixth Assessment Report* refers to the Indian Ocean and its sub-regions, including the Bay of Bengal, with regard to both mitigation and adaptation. A detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper but a few references to the most compelling concerns is in order. The *AR6* notes that “The risk of irreversible loss of coral reefs, tidal marshes, seagrass meadows, plankton community and other marine and coastal ecosystems increases with global warming, especially at 2°C temperature rise or more (high confidence).²⁸ Also,

There is *high evidence, medium* agreement that increased climate variability and extreme events are already driving migration and medium evidence, medium agreement projecting longer-term climate change will increase migration flows across Asia. Despite methodological disagreement on detection and attribution of migration due to climate change, there is medium confidence that higher warming and associated changes in frequency and intensity of slow-onset events (such as drought and sea level rise) and rapid-onset events (such as cyclones and flooding) will increase involuntary displacement in the future, especially under SSP3 and SSP4 pathways. *In 2019, Bangladesh, China, India and the Philippines each recorded more than 4 million disaster-induced displacements.* In South East and East Asia, cyclones, floods, and typhoons triggered internal displacement of 9.6 million people in 2019, almost 30% of total global displacements.²⁹ (emphasis added)

A major study by *Climate and Development Knowledge Network* examines, at length, the implications of climate change for South Asia, as assessed in the IPCC special report.³⁰ Attention is given to the fact that, “Marine species are on the move as a result of

climate change. This means that in any one place, the abundance and mix of species is changing”³¹ and “changes in the ocean environment will have particular impacts on local communities that depend on fish stocks for their livelihoods and for their own food supplies.”³² It is clear that due to climate change food security and livelihood security –both being absolutely essential to human security—of millions of small-scale artisanal fishers is seriously threatened.

Bangladesh in Anthropocene: Challenges and Responses

Bangladesh has figured in various narratives of the Anthropocene. It has been mentioned in policy-oriented research on the deltas of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna, demonstrating how the bio-physical and socio-economic dynamics of the Anthropocene have jeopardized the ecosystem services of deltas, including, key roles such as protection against the facilitation of navigation, flood hazards, and biodiversity.³³ Also noteworthy is that community-based climate adaptation strategies, using indigenous knowledge and experiences, seen in case studies from Bangladesh, have also been both insightful and inspiring.³⁴

Faced with the reality of the Anthropocene, Bangladesh appears to be deeply conscious of the steadily expanding geographies of its maritime neighbourhood while preparing itself to meet the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change. As an actor with a major stake, especially in power and capability generating aspects of the Indian Ocean, Bangladesh has shown keen policy interest in maritime regionalism and sub-regionalism. Bangladesh’s *Delta Plan 2100* was approved in 2018 after five years of preparations. This remarkable plan imminently, and urgently, deserves the serious attention of both academics and policy makers in the Indian Ocean region, and beyond, for several reasons, prospectively encompassing the close involvement of, and consultation with, all major stakeholders early on in the process.³⁵

The *Delta Plan* can also be seen as an acknowledgment of the fact that the coming of the Anthropocene is also the call for a

proactive and holistic mission for both 'future of sustainability' and 'sustainability of future' affecting both human and non-human species. The *Delta Plan* is aimed at realizing the vision of a safe, climate-resilient and prosperous delta, with the following six missions: ensuring water and food security with economic growth, environmental sustainability, climate resilience, vulnerability reduction to natural hazards and minimising different challenges of the delta through robust, adaptive and integrated strategies, and equitable water governance.

Maritime Regionalism for the Small-Scale: Opportunities and Challenges before the IORA and Bangladesh

As stated before, the global ocean is a medium that forces us to think differently about security, sovereignty and sustainability in international relations. There are serious limits to unilateral and bilateral, approaches to ocean management and ocean governance. In other words, serious and systematic pursuit of maritime multilateralism is not a matter of choice but a sheer necessity. This has emerged as central to contemporary global geopolitics, especially in the context of Indian Ocean.³⁶

In a seminal work on Indian Ocean regionalism, Doyle suggests that different types of regions are no doubt socially-constructed, but "the regional case for the Indian Ocean is stronger, and has an essential, non-human basis."³⁷ The Indian Ocean also exists in a '*real ecospheric*' sense and it is appropriate that the Indian Ocean region is defined as "a grouping of those states which are touched by the waters of the Indian Ocean", which, from a geo-historical perspective, have been a part of the Indian Ocean world³⁸, where international order was derived out of and sustained by diversity and heterogeneity, and not by homogeneity.³⁹ Acknowledging this form of maritime regionalism is essential when addressing the challenges of environmental and human security issues in the Indian Ocean region.⁴⁰

The concept of maritime regionalism is integral to a new 'collective maritime security paradigm,' comprising several

interrelated elements. The Indian Ocean Task Force at the Australia-India Institute⁴¹ identifies five key elements of maritime regionalism as listed below⁴²:

1. It is ocean based –the ocean is central. Issues associated with the use of the ocean are critical considerations –around the edge, across, on, in and under.
2. It is a holistic security paradigm that takes into consideration the notion that security is a multidimensional concept comprising military, economic, environmental, human and political factors.
3. It is less contrived and more natural in that it is based around an ecological concept of the Indian Ocean and its various interactions.
4. It is a concept that is more people-centred that ensures that the voices of Indian Ocean peoples and communities have more of a say in their human security.
5. It is a concept that implies a much greater degree of regional cooperation to collectively solve common problems rather than a concept that is solely state-based and grounded primarily in competition.

Challenges and Opportunities before Indian Ocean Rim Association

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), established on 7 March 1997, is the most representative embodiment of the idea of maritime regionalism. The vision of IORA was first articulated by late President Nelson Mandela during his visit to India in 1995 in the following words: “The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic cooperation.”

The new Charter of the IORA (replacing the old 1997 Charter) reiterates the value of “historic bonds created through millennia among the peoples of the Indian Ocean Rim and with a sense of recovery of history” while acknowledging “economic transformations and speed of change the world over which is propelled significantly by increased intensity in regional economic cooperation.”⁴³ The Charter defines the IOR-ARC region as the territories of the Member States, and permits membership of the Association to “all sovereign States of the Indian Ocean Rim which subscribe to the principles and objectives of the Charter and are willing to undertake commitments under the Charter” and excludes “bilateral and other issues likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional co-operation.”⁴⁴ Currently the IORA has twenty-three member states⁴⁵, ten dialogue partners⁴⁶, and two observers.⁴⁷ The presence of China, Japan, Germany, UK and the USA as dialogue partners of the IORA “lends it a unique geo-strategic architecture.”⁴⁸ France, earlier a dialogue partner of the IORA, in December 2020 became the 23rd Member State reinforcing its geopolitical location as a resident member state of Indian Ocean region by virtue of its overseas Réunion Island.⁴⁹ In order to strengthen the capacity of the IORA Secretariat, based in Mauritius, France has pledged technical assistance of 900,000 euros, with a total value of one million euros over three years, as a key element of the project to “Strengthen the Capacities of IORA in Promoting the Blue Economy and Fisheries Management.”⁵⁰

The objectives of IORA are “*to promote the sustained growth and balanced development of the region and of the member states, and to create common ground for regional economic co-operation; to focus on those areas of economic cooperation which provide maximum opportunities to develop and reap mutual benefits.*” The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) architecture, “has been constructed in the spirit of tolerance, collaboration, consensus, respect, and appreciation for national and cultural commonalities and differences.”⁵¹ Moreover, “this relatively fluid architecture is enabled by a form of maritime

regionalism which is seen in few other places in the world: one which is less fixed by the borders and boundaries of predominantly land-based nation-states; one which particularly lends itself to building regional architecture based on an inclusive, open form of cooperative and collaborative regionalism.”⁵² In their view, we need to keep these “unusual and special characteristics in mind in analysing IORA or comparing it with other, more land-based, regional groupings.”⁵³

On the list of ‘Priorities and Focus Areas’ of the IORA are the following: “maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk management; tourism and cultural exchanges; academic, science and technology cooperation; blue economy; and women’s economic empowerment. Whereas the current flagship projects include: the Indian Ocean Dialogue; the Somalia and Yemen Development Programme (SYDP); the IORA Sustainable Development Programme (ISDP); the IORA Nelson Mandela be the Legacy Programme; and the IORA-Women Economic Empowerment Programme.”⁵⁴ Despite the diversity in terms of issues and foci in the above mentioned, the issue of ‘inclusivity’ remains a cross-cutting challenge. The concepts of space-place and scale also remain at the heart of the quest for ‘inclusive’ development *in* and *for* the Indian Ocean region, to which I turn next.

Indian Ocean Maritime Regionalism: Ethical and Geopolitical Implications of ‘Scale’

Ontologically speaking, the Indian Ocean space-place is composed of, as well as constituted by, a complex interplay between the material–power and capability generating— aspects and their discursive-representational dimensions. There are several framings of a maritime domain and correspondingly several uses or abuses of it. In short, for the purposes of this paper, we need to pluralize our understanding of Indian Ocean space and scale before addressing the challenge of “Harnessing the opportunities of the Indian Ocean

sustainably for inclusive development.” As far the question of scale is concerned, Finnish geographer Anssi Passi points out with remarkable insights: “scales are not fixed separate levels of the social world but, like regions/places, are structured and institutionalized in complex ways in de/reterritorializing practices and discourses that may be partly concrete, powerful and bounded, but also partly unbounded, vague or invisible. Scales are also historically contingent; they are produced, exist and may be destroyed or transformed in social and political practices and struggles. The institutionalization/deinstitutionalisation of region, place and scale are in fact inseparable elements in the perpetual process of regional transformation.”⁵⁵

Critical geographer Philip Steinberg reminds us in his path-breaking work on ‘social construction of the ocean’ that discursively speaking we are dealing with not a singular but several understandings and framings of the Indian Ocean space-place, depending on *who gets what where, when and how* from that space.⁵⁶ Steinberg narrates an incident during 1990s, whereby a number of containers carrying Nike sneakers, worth approximately \$2.5 million, fell off a Seattle bound ship due to heavy storm, and after a long journey reappeared on the beaches of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. He shows how the West Coast residents, much to their delight, discovered that the shoes were still wearable after being subjected to a thorough warm water treatment. The obstacle caused by Nike’s decision to ship the shoes untied, resulting in mismatch in models, colors, and sizes, was innovatively addressed by the ‘beachcombers’ by holding ‘swap meets’ over a long period of time. So much so, “one particularly enterprising beachcomber, Oregon artist Steve McLeod, reported earning \$568 by collecting, matching, cleaning, and selling washed-up Nikes. Meanwhile, two Seattle-based oceanographers, took advantage of the spill, calibrating shoe recovery data and the release site to existing ocean current models to gain new insights into the variability of ocean currents.”⁵⁷ According to Steinberg, the story of ‘floating Nikes’ graphically illustrates

how the 'world ocean' has been differently imagined, constructed, approached, managed "under modernity", and "how multiple constructions of the ocean serve to maintain the concentrations and movements of wealth that characterize modern capitalism."⁵⁸ It is both intriguing and illuminating to speculate how "... each actor might favour certain ocean policies (which in turn would imply further perceptions and constructions of the ocean) so as to strengthen their specific interests."⁵⁹ Correspondingly,

If each actor were to pursue its strategy, the result would be a set of social institutions, attitudes, and norms that would reproduce the construction of the ocean as unclaimable transport surface, claimable resource space, a set of discrete places and events, *and* a field for military adventure. The balance between these often contradictory constructions would shift from time to time, as the power of the actors varied and as the need for certain ocean uses waxed and waned, but the overall competition among the various actors would serve to reproduce the ocean as a uniquely constructed space with a complex regime designed to serve a multiplicity of functions.⁶⁰

Steinberg stresses the need for acknowledging the multiple imaginations and constructions of the Indian Ocean space and ensuring that diverse interests and perspectives are duly factored into any pursuit of 'inclusive development'. In a similar vein, Rudolf et al. have argued that the Anthropocene perspective on the 'Blue Planet' calls for re-imagining the world ocean as global commons. The need of the hour, therefore, is "a new system of global governance" that "responds to these pressures and recognizes the ocean as global commons." They further argue that

Traditional nation-state and market-oriented governance mechanisms are not sufficient. Instead, we could build on a long tradition of polycentric governance arrangements for managing the commons that human civilizations developed long before the modern era of nation-states and markets. What is

needed is a new mode of polycentric governance of the ocean-as-commons. This, however, cannot be imposed from above. It needs to build on the transition dynamics already underway at the niche and regime levels. It also must recognize the inherent complexity of the social-ecological ocean system, and facilitate nimble, rapid transformation through shared information and joint knowledge development.⁶¹

Quest for 'Inclusive Development 'in the Indian Ocean Region: The Case of Small-Scale Fisheries

Whereas the narrative of the world ocean as global commons has its own value and appeal, what appears to be missing in several top-down narratives on the Anthropocene is the acknowledgement of the small-scale. As pointed out by Erika Techera⁶², "In the Indian Ocean region fish and other marine living resources are vital for food security, local livelihoods, national economies, and future development opportunities. Of particular importance is the small-scale fishing sector, which supplies food and employment for many local people and coastal communities. To ensure the longevity of artisanal and subsistence fisheries, and healthy oceans and marine living resources, improved legal governance is critical." Taking the case of the social wellbeing and the values of small-scale fisheries, a subject of critical importance in the Indian Ocean region as well⁶³, a major study concludes:

Small-scale fisheries are neglected around the world. They are often overlooked by policy-makers, and they are overlooked in public political consciousness. And yet people around the world tend to value and cherish the small-scale, artisanal fishing communities around their coasts. Even when these communities are being driven out of their coastal locations by tourism or residential development, the picturesque backdrop of the traditional fishing community, with the colourful boats, the nets hanging on beaches and quays and the hustle, bustle and excitement of the fish trading when a catch is brought in, remains an attractive feature. The new beach

hotels will include photogenic images of local fishing communities as part of their publicity material, tourists love to wander along jetties or beaches looking at boats and gear, and tourists along with more wealthy locals will flock to eat the freshest fish and seafood in local restaurants. There is something about these communities that inspires us.⁶⁴

As noted earlier fisheries management is a priority area of the IORA. It is significant to note that the issue of small-scale has finally emerged on the list of IORA activities. In August 2021, a virtual webinar was organized by IORA and French Development Agency on 'Small Scale Rural Aquaculture', as part of the French Development Agency (AFD)-funded project on technical assistance for the Implementation of the IORA Action Plan on Fisheries, Aquaculture and the Marine Environment. A specific goal of this project was promoting sustainable aquaculture development. The project's concept note acknowledged that:

The Member States of IORA together represented 26.2 million tonnes of aquaculture production in 2018. The development of aquaculture in the IORA region multiplied almost 6-fold over the past two decades to represent almost USD 39 billion to IORA Member States' economies in 2018 (FAO). Much of this comes from small-scale aquaculture. This webinar will present the results of a review of aquaculture, governance and the development of small-scale aquaculture in the IORA region, including the organization of production, species, technologies, and social and economic aspects. Some interesting experiences and specificities from the IORA region will be provided as a source of support or approach to aquaculture development.⁶⁵

Bangladesh, as it is imperative to note, is strategically located in the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BBBLME) and is well-endowed with the rich policy experience of the BDP, so is ideally placed to apply its vision of 'inclusive development' to small-scale artisanal fisheries in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Bangladesh has assumed the chairmanship of the IORA in truly extraordinary times of the Anthropocene and its manifestation on the intersections of unsustainability, natural disasters, climate change and the ongoing pandemic. The policy focus placed by Bangladesh geared towards inclusive development—should not be seen as merely rhetorical. It is a serious call for a meaningful transformation, which demands both critical reflection and early policy action and implementation to ensure that inclusive development remains at the very core of steadily proliferating narratives of blue economy.

The time is just right for Bangladesh to revive and rejuvenate the idea of a regional seas programme for the Bay of Bengal. As Chair of the IORA, Bangladesh is ideally placed to initiate such a discussion against the backdrop of FAO supported Large Marine Ecosystem Project and its several notable contributions. One issue area demanding greater policy attention is the small-scale sector and the ontological security of millions. This would provide further fillip to the idea of maritime regionalism and ensure greater interaction and dialogues between IORA and BIMSTEC.

As the preceding discussion suggests, whereas disaster management is very much on the priority list of IORA, climate change remains conspicuous by its absence. Well equipped with the enriching experience of its widely acclaimed *Delta Plan*, Bangladesh may choose to initiate a regional conversation among IORA member states and dialogue partners on regional and sub-regional approaches to climate adaptation, with special attention to the perspectives and priorities of small-scale stakeholders in diverse sectors, including millions of small-scale fishers in the Bay of Bengal. This author has proposed elsewhere that, maritime regionalism' for the IOR should address the anticipated adverse trans-border consequences of climate change (e.g., floods, droughts and human displacements)⁶⁶ and the Indian Ocean Academic Group could

be assigned the task of designing a research agenda on regional and sub-regional cooperation on climate change adaptation governance.

The theme that Bangladesh has chosen for maritime regionalism –*inclusive development*—can also be interpreted as a clarion call for radically redefining the very meaning of ‘development’ and thus liberating the concept from the dangerous illusion that there are no limits to economic growth, fueled by, what some have so appropriately termed as ‘carboniferous capitalism’⁶⁷ and forcibly sustained through relentless commodification of nature and reckless exploitation of ‘natural resources. No less transformative and potentially emancipatory for millions of poor and the marginalized is the insistence on ensuring ‘inclusiveness’ in various pursuits of development.

The pursuit of inclusive development, through the medium of people-centric maritime regionalism, faces a number of challenges. Growing major power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific strategic theatre and growing contestations around the geoeconomics and geopolitics of connectivity could distort the national priorities and derail regional cooperation on climate change and disaster management. The wide-ranging implications of these global and regional trends for the Indian Ocean states, especially middle and small powers, have been duly noted.⁶⁸ What is at stake is the livelihood security of those engaged in small and medium scale enterprises in the Indian Ocean region, including millions of fishers in the large marine ecosystem of the Bay of Bengal. Doyle and Rumley are so right in reminding us that:

Although a valid and often inspiring project, not all Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, or, in this instance, Indo-Pacific futures can be adequately provided at the level of grand oceanic dreaming which, to a large extent, mimics the politics of predominantly land-based nation-states, and reprojects these largely Westphalian holograms of geopolitics onto the more

'watery' canvas of the Global South. The dominant narrative of the Global North, with its determined connectivity between geo-economics and geosecurities, too often provides a one-size-fits-all, neo-liberal/neo-mercantilist economic model for regional development. *Diverse and contested narratives of community, sustainability, and security must be given voice (and listened to) across the pan-region and sub-regions—without this, and with the continued rapid insurgence and deployment of the homogenizing narratives of neo-liberal economics and securitization, Indo-Pacific futures may be found to be no more than a desperate race to the bottom of the sea for the majority, with wealth only accruing to large corporations with head offices in other oceanic spheres (emphasis given).*⁶⁹

As the University of Dhaka celebrates its birth centenary, its Department of International Relations, which is the oldest South Asian IR school is at the forefront of critical, gender-sensitive reflection and research on Anthropocene insecurities and its various dislocations and displacements.⁷⁰ There are good reasons to believe that it will continue to engage critically with the important task of reimagining the 'discipline' of IR in Anthropocene, including a new and inclusive maritime regionalism for the Indian Ocean.

Notes

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