



Feedback Report:
**Indigenous
Stewardship
Workshop**

28 July 2022

Background

The Ocean Innovation Africa July Stakeholder workshop series was held in honour of African Day of Oceans and Seas. The intention of the workshops was to facilitate action on some of the challenges and solutions raised during discussions at the annual Ocean Innovation Africa summit.

The “Indigenous Stewardship” workshop looked at key challenges and opportunities for indigenous stewardship of coastal environments and resources in Africa

This report is a summary of points raised during that discussion and as such statements do not necessarily reflect consensus from the workshop participants, nor the viewpoint of Ocean Innovation Africa.

Participants

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Introduction

The African approach to sharing a message is through storytelling. It is a way of conveying information to communities in an understandable format and a powerful way to share indigenous knowledge on global platforms. Fittingly, the discussion about Indigenous Stewardship summarised in this report was based in many instances on stories relayed by the participants about communities they have worked with and their own communities.

These stories together show that indigenous communities throughout Africa and around the world are faced with the same issues in regard to ocean governance. Namely, the need for authentic inclusion of indigenous voices and knowledge in ocean planning and management.

Visible but Invisible: Giving Legitimate Voice to Indigenous Communities

As primary users of the ocean indigenous communities should be primary beneficiaries of ocean governance initiatives. As it is, the needs and desires of communities are often disregarded in the haste to grow the ocean economy.

Communities are rarely heard at policy forums. Inclusion in governance initiatives is often limited to the role of consultants, rather than active participants, without being recognised in resulting policy. Community needs, expectations, and knowledge need to be integrated into ocean governance initiatives from the outset, rather than imposing external solutions without considering whether communities are equipped to deal with them.

Engagements and consultations need to be authentic, with representatives who are trusted and respected by the community to speak on their behalf, and who will be able to return to the community with a plan that is seen as legitimate and representative of community needs. For example, stakeholder consultation and decision-making processes must be accessible to indigenous communities. If communities cannot attend distant forums those forums should be brought to them.

Opportunities for action

- Introduce indigenous knowledge as a fundamental concept in academic studies, at pre-university and university level.
- Integration of indigenous communities should be a core metric for sustainable development projects, like gender balance
- Create a platform for sharing of issues related to indigenous knowledge and stewardship. Opportunity for different stakeholder groups and communities to ask questions, discuss with one another.
- Create a platform/repository to curate and share the stories and lessons of indigenous communities. Could approach relevant organisations (E.g. WildOceans or WWF) to host.
- Put together a document to be shared with indigenous communities around the world to contribute/opine on what they perceive as challenges for inclusive governance and marine sustainability, and desired ways forward. Prepare a document that can be provided at global level to inform organisations driving ocean governance – Ocean Innovation Africa summit, United Nations Forum on Indigenous Rights, 30x30 steering committee etc. Important that youth and gender are adequately considered.

Inclusivity and Equity

There is a difficult relationship between interests in generating revenue from the industrial sector and protecting the rights and livelihoods of coastal communities that have traditionally relied on ocean resources. The injustice to communities goes beyond the depletion of resources that often results, to the failure to uphold their rights, the lack of inclusion in decision-making, and the lack of compensation for resulting losses.

E.g. industrial fishing fleets have the ability to move to different grounds to avoid protected areas or closed seasons. Artisanal fishers do not have the same capacity and suffer disproportionate losses from restrictions.

Community Engagement

Action to protect the marine environment must make sense for the communities that rely on it. Efforts to change behaviour around marine resource use have to take into account the needs of communities when setting an end goal, be it extractive, cultural, religious, recreational etc. Once people see that they are being valued they gain trust in the process, and are more likely to see management plans as legitimate if they have taken part in designing them.

It is very important to consider what motivates behaviour, to listen to the histories and narratives of the community, and understand what the conservation challenges are in order to understand what types of interventions might be effective and others not, and what capacity building needs to take place. Failure to do so is counterproductive to the sustainability or economic growth of any country implementing ocean governance plans.

For example, introduction of international conservation measures for sea turtles resulted in the prohibition of their capture or consumption in Cabo Verde, where indigenous communities had traditionally hunted them for food and income. When restrictions were ignored by locals the government criminalised the hunting of sea turtles. Sea turtle conservation and monitoring projects were all run by foreign organisations, and no socialisation or outreach around the new regulations took place. Communities rejected the restrictions and continued to hunt, with tensions escalating to the point that the military was brought in and, at one point, even fired shots at community members. Community members protested by hunting turtles and discarding them without even taking the meat.

Eventually researchers realised that they needed to engage better with the community for conservation efforts to be successful, and finally, that conservation efforts needed to be led by local researchers. Engagement with communities has been much more successful since, taking into account community traditions and needs, and the project has been much more successful with community support now that they have been educated on the reasons for not hunting.

Legacy

Communities can become disillusioned after repeated failed interventions with little continuity between them. One thing is including community voices in decision-making, another is ensuring that resulting projects or policies can be sustained or implemented. Consideration must be given to what outcomes such projects have for communities in the long-term and what mechanisms are in place to ensure long-term sustainability or development. International communities looking at working with local communities in Africa should try to synergise their efforts to avoid discontinuity of interventions.

Implementation needs funding, which can stifle projects that are started with good intentions. Funding requires political will and commitment to the project, which in turn requires demonstration that communities will be able to generate money. For example, tourism is not a viable option in Niger Delta with the current security risk.

Funding constraints could be addressed by making use of indigenous knowledge and practices, for example, reinstating traditional fisheries management practices, enforced by the community themselves.

Beneficiation and Alternative Livelihoods

It is often indigenous communities that are displaced in efforts to mediate the environmental damage caused by large-scale offenders. It is imperative for this reason that livelihood opportunities for coastal communities are diversified, but also to mitigate the negative effects of climate change and environmental degradation on traditional livelihoods.

Alternative livelihood creation requires long term relationship building with communities. Strong, resilient alternatives are needed, that do not just provide employment but generate wealth in the form of income, infrastructure, ecosystem services etc., for communities to see benefit to alternatives. For example, the focus is often on ecotourism which can fluctuate according to circumstances like covid. There is a need for resilient alternatives.

It is important to think about how to give communities market access, and what capacity development is required, for example, infrastructure, financing, or business acumen, to support this.

Marine Protected Areas, Closed Seasons and Prohibited Species

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have a legacy of being places of exclusion and displacement. Many coastal community members see them as inaccessible. There is a lot of work to be done and trust to be built to be able to separate the concepts of conservation and oppression in many African countries. This requires a combination of educating communities on the value of protected areas, and adapting conservation models to ensure that communities still have access to resources in the area.

A lot of restrictive conservation measures are designed and promoted by the global north. It is futile implementing measures based on external pressure when there is no will or capacity to enforce them. For example, 30x30 is being adopted enthusiastically by many countries without considering how it might make coastal communities more vulnerable than they already are. Balancing conservation and context requires a case by case/country by country approach rather than blanket solutions. For example, in some South African communities, community members are policed by enforcement officers while offshore skiboats and trawlers fish unchecked within the MPA.

Opportunities for action

- Strategic MPA design can reduce the amount of area needed to protect a particular threshold of biodiversity.
- Alternative management strategies, like the TURF model from Chile where community leaders allocate fishing rights and seasons, might be more feasible solutions.
- The western conservation model could be adapted to better fit the African context, e.g. by linking environmental protected areas to areas of cultural significance. E.g. Cape of Good Hope World Heritage Sites.

Revisiting Traditional Management Approaches

The Western approach to natural resource management tends to overlook the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge. Integration of indigenous knowledge would provide a much broader knowledge base from which to build management plans, often with more effect than top-down regulation.

Often communities are seen as an obstacle in management plans when in fact they are the most familiar with the resource and how it changes over time and in response to external pressures. They are often well aware of how the resource needs to be used in order to conserve it for future generations, and have for generations acted as ocean stewards.

Traditional management systems need to be revisited and potentially reinstated where appropriate. In many instances they provide feasible management and livelihood solutions where government does not have the capacity to implement or enforce conventional systems. For example, many communities in Africa implement their own fisheries restrictions, often determined by traditional leaders, based on local knowledge. Practices like open and closed seasons, gear restrictions, limit on number of fishermen, etc have been successfully employed by many communities to protect the resources on which they depend.

Link Between Deprivation and Maritime Security

Maritime security responses in Africa often emphasise militarisation, without taking into account how deprivation and vulnerability in coastal communities might drive community members to use their knowledge of the sea to negative ends. Maritime security needs to incorporate provision of social goods along with military enforcement to effectively address risks.

For example, in the Niger Delta continued degradation of the marine environment by multinationals, particularly oil and gas companies, and restricted ocean access for communities without benefit to them from resource extraction was not adequately dealt with by government, leading to communities eventually responding violently.

Link Between Deprivation and Maritime Security (cont.)

Even where damages to environment and livelihoods have been acknowledged, companies skirt accountability by selling off assets. Part of the issue until now has been that accountability was an issue between states and so could only be heard as government against government in the international court of justice. If the Human Rights Commission grants the right to environment this will allow for accountability at individual level and remuneration for affected communities.

Another example comes from Lake Chiuta, a small, rural lake in Malawi. Historically there was very little government intervention in fisheries management, and fishermen traditionally made use of gill nets and traps. A large influx of migrant fishermen who made use of more destructive techniques, such as seine nets, began to have detrimental effects on fish stocks, and locals appealed to the government to intervene. When government failed to do so local fishermen ended up violently evicting the migrant fishermen, and subsequently introduced their own comprehensive suite of regulations to manage the fishery which they successfully enforced without government intervention, though they later received official recognition and support.

Takeaway

Policy decisions need to include all types of knowledge and voices in an authentic way that has an impact on decisions taken. There is an enormous resource of indigenous knowledge that is not accessed. We need much more broad-based, consensus-driven, community-driven knowledge to be informing ocean policy at a global level.

While there is still a long way to go, there are numerous examples now of indigenous communities using their voice to hold government accountable and where indigenous knowledge has been integrated in governance processes. These examples need to be shared to understand what steps were taken to create a successful framework so that the process can be replicated, not just in Africa but from communities around the globe.

Opportunities for action

- Create a project and raise funding to assess successful international projects and how to turn them into flexible, locally adaptable solutions that can be applied for different communities.

Thank you to our fantastic workshop participants for getting this discussion going!

