

Why Capacity Building Matters: Supporting Pacific SIDS in understanding Deep-Seabed Governance



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As international discussions on deep-seabed mineral activities continue to evolve, one principle remains fundamental: developing countries must be able to participate effectively in decisions concerning the global commons.

For Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS), this issue is particularly significant. The Pacific Ocean is central to the region's identity, culture, livelihoods, and future development aspirations. It is therefore essential that Pacific countries are equipped with the knowledge, institutions, and technical capacity required to engage meaningfully in discussions surrounding activities in the Area, the seabed and ocean floor beyond national jurisdiction governed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

UNCLOS established the mineral resources of the Area as the common heritage of humankind. This principle carries with it an important expectation: all States, including developing countries and SIDS, should have a meaningful opportunity to participate in the governance of these resources and in decisions affecting their future.

Yet effective participation cannot be assumed. It requires capacity.

The Origins of the Abyssal Initiative

Recognizing this challenge, the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) launched the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth as a voluntary commitment during the first United Nations Ocean Conference in 2017.

The Initiative was founded on a simple but important objective: to strengthen the ability of Pacific SIDS to participate effectively in matters relating to activities in the Area.

Supported by the UN Development Account (DA) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the Initiative delivered regional workshops, technical dialogues, legal and policy advisory support, peer-learning exchanges, institutional assessments and specialized training programmes across the Pacific region.

Throughout its implementation, one lesson became increasingly clear: capacity-building is not merely a technical exercise. It is also institutional, strategic and political. Countries require not only technical expertise but also the confidence and governance structures necessary to make informed sovereign decisions that reflect national priorities, environmental responsibilities and the interests of future generations.

From Capacity Building to Practical Tools

One of the most important outcomes of the Abyssal Initiative has been the development of two practical knowledge products designed specifically for Pacific Island countries.

The first is the **Toolkit on the Roles and Responsibilities of States Sponsoring Activities in the Area**.

The Toolkit provides practical guidance for governments seeking to understand and implement their obligations under UNCLOS and the ISA regulatory framework. It explains the responsibilities associated with sponsorship, including due diligence, regulatory oversight, environmental protection, compliance assurance and governance arrangements.

Importantly, the Toolkit translates complex legal concepts into practical guidance for policymakers, regulators and legal advisers.

The second product is the **Guidelines for Negotiations and Contractual Dealings with Sponsored Entities**.

These Guidelines respond to a challenge faced by many developing countries: negotiating arrangements with prospective contractors often involves highly technical legal, financial, environmental and commercial issues. Such negotiations can create significant asymmetries in expertise and bargaining power.

The Guidelines seek to address this gap by providing practical advice on due diligence, negotiation preparation, contract management, transparency, accountability, stakeholder engagement and risk management.

Together, these products aim to strengthen national preparedness and institutional confidence.

Effective Participation as a Prerequisite for Good Governance

As discussions on the future regulatory framework for deep-seabed activities continue internationally, the importance of informed participation cannot be overstated. Countries must be able to assess opportunities and risks, articulate national interests and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.

This is particularly relevant for SIDS, many of which operate with limited administrative, legal and technical resources but possess a profound stake in the future governance of the ocean. Capacity-building therefore remains essential, not only for ensuring compliance with international obligations, but also for advancing equitable participation in global ocean governance.

The objective is not to predetermine national positions on deep-seabed activities. Rather, it is to ensure that countries have the information, expertise and institutional preparedness necessary to make informed decisions consistent with their own development priorities and environmental responsibilities.

Supporting the Next Phase of Capacity-Building

I am particularly encouraged by the leadership of the Secretary-General of the International Seabed Authority, Ms. Leticia Carvalho, in advancing a new chapter of this work through the Deep Seabed Sustainable Blue Growth Initiative.

Building on the strong foundations established by the Abyssal Initiative for Blue Growth, the new initiative reflects a continued commitment to ensuring that Pacific Small Island Developing States are equipped with the knowledge, institutional capacity, technical expertise and strategic partnerships necessary to participate effectively in the governance of activities in the Area.

What is especially significant about this new initiative is its recognition that capacity-building must evolve beyond awareness-raising towards long-term institutional preparedness. Through initiatives focused on regulatory capacity, environmental management, data governance, scientific cooperation, training opportunities and inclusive participation, the International Seabed Authority is helping to ensure that Pacific countries can engage in global decision-making processes from positions of confidence and informed sovereignty.

I strongly support the Secretary-General's vision of a Pacific-led approach to deep-seabed governance, one that is grounded in partnership, science, transparency and respect for the unique perspectives and aspirations of the Blue Pacific Continent.

The continuation and expansion of this work is particularly timely. As international discussions on the future governance of deep-seabed mineral resources continue to evolve, the need for informed participation by developing countries has never been greater. The Deep Seabed Sustainable Blue Growth Initiative provides an important platform through which Pacific SIDS can strengthen national capacities, share experiences, develop regional cooperation and contribute more effectively to international decision-making processes concerning the common heritage of humankind.

A Pacific Contribution to Global Ocean Governance

Pacific countries have long demonstrated principled leadership in international ocean affairs. Their perspectives are grounded in stewardship, sustainability and a deep understanding of the relationship between people and the ocean. As the international community continues to navigate the opportunities, responsibilities and uncertainties associated with activities in the Area, Pacific leadership will remain indispensable.

The future governance of the deep seabed must be informed by science, guided by precaution, grounded in equity and shaped through inclusive participation. Strengthening the capacity of Pacific SIDS to engage in these discussions is therefore not simply a regional priority. It is an investment in better global ocean governance and in ensuring that the common heritage of humankind is managed in a manner that is informed, equitable and sustainable for present and future generations.

Ultimately, effective participation is not merely a procedural aspiration. It is a prerequisite for legitimacy, equity and good governance. Ensuring that Pacific SIDS possess the capacity, confidence and institutional readiness to participate fully in the governance of the Area is therefore essential to realizing both the promise of UNCLOS and the broader objective of sustainable development for all.

As the Abyssal Initiative transitions into a new phase through the Deep Seabed Sustainable Blue Growth Initiative, there is an opportunity to build on a strong foundation of partnership, trust and capacity-building. By continuing to invest in Pacific leadership, institutional preparedness and informed decision-making, the international community can help ensure that the governance of the common heritage of humankind remains inclusive, equitable and responsive to the needs and aspirations of present and future generations.

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