Addressing Justice Concerns in Coastal Resilience Strategies: a Literature Review

MICHELA MARCATELLI
JUNIOR PROGRAMME SPECIALIST - DCC-CR

How do we make sure that building coastal resilience does not represent a regressive step? In other words, that the idea of persistence inherent in the definition of resilience (see, for example, Villasante et al. 2023: 14) does not help reproduce an unequal status quo, while, on the other hand, the transformations it aims to bring about are truly progressive?

A useful, if not necessary, way to address such concerns is to (finally) include power dynamics in our discussion of coastal resilience. More to the point, to intersect the debate on resilience with that on justice – socio-environmental justice, that is. Hence the question, what would 'coastal justice' entail and, most crucially, for whom?

To begin answering this complex question, we carried out a systematic literature review on Web of Science Primary and Scopus databases that yielded 135 academic articles, almost all of which were published during the last decade – a clear indication of a burgeoning interest in this topic.[1] As the search was limited to articles written in English, a relative majority were based on case studies from North America – a good reminder that richer countries are not necessarily more just. In what follows, however, we remain true to our intention, as a Centre, to adopt a Global South focus and briefly outline the major issues that define coastal justice from the perspective of people located in several places in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

The nexus justice-injustice

Let us start by stressing that talking about justice is imperative because many coastal communities around the world– but especially in the Global South – are

[1] We first searched both databases for "coastal justice" and "coastal environmental justice", then added the operator AND (i.e. coastal AND justice), within article title, abstract, or keywords. This yielded 272 results which were checked for duplicates and errors, bringing the final number of articles down to 135.

subject to various forms of *injustice*. Blythe and colleagues (2023: 3) provide the most recent and comprehensive definition of 'blue injustice' as 'the inequitable exposure of oppressed or marginalized people to coastal and marine harms, as well as their cultural and political exclusion from marine decision-making'. This definition encompasses all three dimensions of justice as typically understood today, namely distribution, participation, and recognition.[2] It also immediately points out that referring to coastal communities as such makes little sense, since these are far from being homogeneous groups. Instead, coastal injustices are usually experienced by people who live and work on the coast and who are already rendered marginal by other global, yet context-specific, processes. For instance, the emerging scholarship on coastal justice shows how coastal and marine hazards (often hard to distinguish) produce socially differentiated effects as a result of class and gender dynamics – surprisingly, given the origins of the environmental justice movement in racial discrimination in relation to exposure to toxic waste in 1980s United States, race is mentioned only rarely, although indigenous groups are receiving more attention.

It is not all about unequal hazard exposure though. As ocean resources become more valuable within the context of increasing investments in the so-called blue economy, conflicts over resource access and use are on the rise. More often than not, these conflicts see rural people whose livelihoods and traditions depend on marine and coastal resources being dispossessed of the latter, while, at times, being adversely incorporated into global value chains. Interestingly, the term 'blue justice' was coined by Moenieba Isaacs as 'social justice for SSFs [small-scale fisheries]', aimed at 'creating an enabling environment for small-scale fisheries to engage meaningfully, and to challenge their exclusion and marginalisation which is brought about [...] by the Blue Economy' (Isaacs 2019). Over the years, the definition of blue justice has moved beyond a focus on small-scale fishers alone, to include other marginalized groups. Therefore, going back to Blythe and colleagues (2023: 3), they now understand it as 'the recognition, meaningful involvement, and fair treatment of all coastal people with respect to how ocean and coastal resources are accessed, used, managed and enjoyed. Drawing upon the environmental justice movement, this definition recognizes the inherent right of all people and communities to a healthy, productive, and sustainable marine environment'.

Coastal injustices in the Global South

If coastal justice is fundamentally about the absence, or better the resolution, of injustices, how can we fully grasp the scope of the latter? Bennett and colleagues (2023) adopt a broader definition of 'environmental hazards in the ocean' to categorize environmental injustices among coastal populations under five headings: 1) pollution and toxic waste; 2) plastics and marine debris; 3) climate change; 4) ecosystem, biodiversity and ecosystem service degradation; and 5) fisheries declines. While Blythe and colleagues (2023) suggest an alternative categorization based on three types of blue injustices: 1) hazardous waste and toxic pollution; 2) non-renewable and renewable resource extraction; and 3) appropriation, displacement, and ocean grabbing.

[2] That is, distribution of environmental goods/harms, participation in environmental decision-making, and recognition of different identities/groups and their own perceptions of and claims on the environment.

Our own literature review, however, prompts us to offer a synthesis of the above categories that emphasizes two issues that are particularly relevant from the perspective of Global South coasts today: 1) climate change; and 2) resource extraction. Let us look at each of them in some detail, by drawing on some concrete examples.

Injustices in climate actions

When we talk about climate change at the coastal level – in relation to justice, that is –, we need to critically analyse adaptation and mitigation strategies that are implemented at different scales. For instance, if we consider the case of coastal cities, a common concern among places as different as Mumbai (India), Port Louis (Mauritius), and Porto Alegre (Brazil) (Chacowry, McEwen and Lynch 2018, Parthasarathy 2018, Pereira Santos et al. 2022) is whether poorer residents, often living in 'informal' settlements, are equally protected from hazards exacerbated by climate change, such as sea level rise, coastal storms, and floods – something that refers both to the spatial distribution of adaptation infrastructure and to how these people participate in disaster governance. In the case of Porto Alegre, for example, Pereira Santos and colleagues (2022) document a 'poverty-vulnerability trap', whereby residents resign themselves to living with hazards, hence normalize the latter and the losses they suffer, as the very idea of relocation (away from jobs and services) is perceived as a far greater risk in the long term.

Furthermore, adaptation and mitigation objectives influence coastal land use. From the restoration of mangrove forests in West and East Africa (Cormier-Salem 2017, Omukuti 2020) to that of peatlands in Indonesia (Merten et al. 2021), for the purposes of carbon sequestration and coastal protection, what matters here is whether local people whose livelihoods and identities depend on such complex socio-ecological systems are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes on land-use change, including whether their 'informal' institutions and knowledge are recognized and valued, and to what extent their lives may get disrupted as a result. Unfortunately, despite decades of efforts to integrate conservation and development goals, it appears that a conservationist approach that severely curtails resource use by local communities, and which is largely sponsored by foreign donors within the context of transnational climate policies, is re-emerging in relation to coastal land use. Yet, the conversion of coastal rice farms into aquaculture farms in Bangladesh (to adapt to soil salinity and land erosion), also promoted by international donors, is similarly described by Paprocki and Huq (2018) as an example of 'maladaptation' which has caused job losses and displacement among agricultural workers, while benefitting absentee landowners and processing factory owners.

Injustices in resource extraction

The relationship between the extraction of ocean resources and justice, on the other hand, is centred – as already noted – around conflicts among competing coastal zone uses. Zoning, and the use rights deriving from it, is not a technical exercise, but a political process imbued with (unequal) power relations. Small-scale fishers from countries as far apart as Brazil, Ghana, and India (Chhotray 2016, Gasalla and Gandini 2016, Ayilu et al. 2023) are clearly losing to more powerful sectors such as ocean conservation (typically, but not always, non-

extractive), industrial fishing (often foreign-owned), and tourism – with serious repercussions on their livelihoods, food security, and social institutions. The literature points both to a total exclusion of small-scale fishers from marine decision-making and to the 'illusion of inclusion' (Few, Brown and Tompkins 2007 in Omukuti 2020), whereby although being technically involved, these people are not able to exert any influence.

Besides small-scale fishers, another group which is being further marginalized globally is that of coastal harvesters. For instance, the conservationist approach mentioned above is harming those local communities that rely on mangroves for wood and shellfish (Cormier-Salem 2017, Omukuti 2020). While Satizábal and colleagues (2022) describe the precarious working conditions of coastal dwellers in the Philippines who have traditionally harvested edible nests, precisely because the financial value of the latter has increased within the framework of an expanding blue economy.

Moreover, moving beyond the extraction of ocean resources, coastal dwellers across the Global South are also exposed to the land and marine pollution caused by extractive-based industries that benefit from lax environmental regulations. This is the case of Chile, for example, where mining, power-generation, and fish processing (to produce fishmeal) pose a serious threat to the health of several coastal communities as well as to their fishing-based livelihoods, prompting Anbleyth-Evans and colleagues (2022) to refer to such places as 'coastal sacrificial zones.'[3]

Conclusion

Based on the review above, we suggest to understand coastal justice in the Global South as having to do with how coastal people, but especially the most vulnerable and marginalized among them, are treated in relation to climate change and (ocean) resource extraction. More specifically, it is about making sure that their perspectives and concerns – which are already clearly articulated in a number of resistance movements, as Blythe and colleagues (2023) timely remind us – are truly heard and that their material conditions do not worsen as more powerful actors appropriate all the benefits.

While we think it is crucial to incorporate justice concerns in our own work on coastal resilience – to compensate for the lack of attention to power that still characterizes this concept –, we also find it relevant, if not necessary, to make explicit the connection between socio-environmental justice and the Ocean Decade's mission to bring about 'transformative ocean science solutions'. In other words, we feel compelled to qualify 'transformative' as a synonym for more 'just' and to call for greater accountability mechanisms to guarantee that Decade Actions do not end up contributing to structural dynamics of socio-environmental marginalization and exclusion.

[3] A well-known concept in environmental justice literature, sacrifice zones refer to areas of structural environmental degradation, so severe that the lives of local populations are rendered 'disposable' (see Lerner 2010).

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