



Rethinking blue economy governance – A blue economy equity model as an approach to operationalise equity

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ABSTRACT

The blue economy was originally conceptualised as having a strong focus on social equity; however, in practice, these equity considerations have been overshadowed by neo-liberal capitalist agendas, which have become dominant in blue economy discourse. A continued expansion of ocean industry developments and activities has resulted in an inequitable share of the burdens and benefits of utilising ocean spaces and has exacerbated wealth disparities and power asymmetries. Therefore, finding mechanisms to reinstate equity as fundamental to blue economy governance and practice is increasingly important. However, there remain few practical examples that outline how to embed equity within blue economy governance and current frameworks for understanding equity are complex, often divergent and less focused on implementation. This paper outlines a new model for conceptualising equity that is clear and easily understood, captures equity's key components and dimensions, and covers key ethical concerns that arise in blue economy development. Furthermore, this model can be practically applied and embedded into governance structures. To demonstrate the model's application, the paper outlines one participatory approach to implementing the model in blue economy governance.

1. Introduction

In this paper we discuss the development of a new model of equity,

and outline a method for its application in governance. We outline how equity currently exists in the blue economy and set out our justification for contributing a new model to an already crowded and framework-

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heavy discourse. We argue that part of the difficulty in enacting equity is the existence and thus complication of multiple conceptualisations, some competing, that theorise about equity, but provide little guidance on how to work towards or achieve it. The model and accompanying example of implementation aim to capture the key elements of existing conceptualisations in an approachable and simple form to assist governments and policy makers in the development of equitable blue economy governance. The development of the Blue Economy Equity Model puts forward a novel approach to conceptualising and *doing* equitable governance. This approach is grounded in current literature surrounding governance and equity, yet creates a new path by which to navigate this complex and crowded conceptual space.

We realise that the task of operationalising equity is not easy, yet to overlook equity concerns is to overlook the ethical principles of fairness and justice. Fundamental to the approach that we outline is the role of participatory processes. And while participatory processes are key to this approach, we acknowledge that entrenched power dynamics and structures must be recognised and addressed, possibly requiring systematic and structural change if equity is to be enacted meaningfully.

1.1. Equity's sidelining in the blue economy

Humankind is reliant on the oceans in both tangible ways, such as food, income, and the stabilising role the ocean plays on the climate, and in non-tangible ways such as cultural heritage and identity (Stuchtey et al., 2020). Ocean and coastal spaces face rapid change both in relation to climate and ecosystem processes associated with the advent of the Anthropocene, and increasing industrial and economic development. The blue economy is a model for sustainable ocean development that promotes the development of ocean spaces in ways that address ecological crises and benefit 'the common good'. However, the discourses surrounding the blue economy show competing and conflicting notions of what constitutes a blue economy and what makes it sustainable (see Voyer et al., 2018 for further discussion). In addition, there is limited evidence of widespread or equitable social and environmental benefits flowing from blue economy developments. Rather, the blue economy has been critiqued as entrenching existing ocean challenges by accelerating economic and industrial development, for the benefit of powerful actors, at the expense of poor or marginalised communities who continue to bear the brunt of widescale ecological disasters and a changing climate (Stuchtey et al., 2020; Bennett et al., 2019). The root causes of inequities and economic marginalisation have not been addressed in the blue economy. For example, Louey (2022) argues that *'the blue economy of today appears to have been all but emptied of promises to equitable development; and has instead been recruited into the service of powerful economic interests with their ambitions of economic intensification, expansion, and growth. Under the guise of "sustainable development" it has become a project focused on "sustained development"'*.

A common critique of existing blue economy discourse and practice is that little has been done to address equity considerations and that groups such as Indigenous Peoples, women, low-income communities, and small-scale fishers have been further marginalised by greater industrialisation of ocean spaces. These groups have missed out on many of the benefits that come from ocean industries or are being disadvantaged by them (Engen et al., 2021; Bennett et al., 2020). Further acceleration of industrial development in the ocean has the potential to limit the access of many coastal communities to space and resources, threatening cultural identity, food security and livelihoods (Bennett et al., 2020). Colonial states, and their wide-reaching networks of small island territories, have a disproportionate network of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) (Nolan, 2015), and therefore the allocation of space and resources in the blue economy maintains colonial legacies. These legacies include systems and structures of society that prioritise Western knowledge at the expense of alternative knowledge systems, perpetuating hegemonic ideas of capitalism (Schutter et al., 2021). Furthermore, within current societal systems Indigenous knowledge (and other

non Euro-Western knowledges) are frequently not articulated or given credit despite, as Todd (2016) shows, being fundamental to much modern Western thinking. This prioritisation of Western knowledge can influence the ability of marginalised groups to participate in decision making processes. Crosman et al. (2022, p. 3) show that inequity is path dependent, and is heavily rooted in *'historic and ongoing biases and related power dynamics (including those driving and driven by patriarchy, colonialism, genocide, slavery, war, social conflict etc)'*. These historic and structural drivers perpetuate inequity and further reinforce unequal power dynamics, wealth disparity, and colonial relations.

Despite these past, current and ongoing injustices, social equity has largely been overlooked or neglected in the discussions shaping the blue economy (Crosman et al., 2022; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021; Bennett, 2022; Bennett et al., 2021, Österblom et al., 2020). Whilst visions of the blue economy were initially developed with social equity and human well-being as a focus, the emphasis has shifted away from this (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2018, Louey, 2022). For example, Louey (2022) highlighted the absence of equity discussions in a number of high-level international documents, such as the Commonwealth Secretariat's 'Blue Economy Series', to show how equity has been largely neglected in global discussions. More recently, however, international discussions surrounding ocean governance have foregrounded the importance of equity as the conceptualisation of the blue economy continues to evolve and adapt. While a number of scholars have brought attention to the current inequities that are perpetuated in existing blue economy and ocean governance, it is less common for studies to engage with the aspirations, vision and objectives of marginalised groups or how they would like to engage with ocean governance and the blue economy (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2022, Louey, 2022; Bennett, 2022; Österblom et al., 2020).

1.2. Equity is intrinsically and practically critical to the blue economy

There are a number of reasons why equity should be properly and carefully considered and incorporated into the development of a blue economy. From a normative perspective it can be argued that we have a moral responsibility to consider equity as the right thing to do (Österblom et al., 2020). The normative rationale for equity aligns with the basic principles of fundamental human rights and environmental justice. This argument is based on the premise that equity is *'an inherently valuable governance end in itself, and/or as a means to other desired governance ends'* (Crosman et al., 2022, p.2). Secondly, there is the instrumental argument that success requires social support. In other words, it is only through equitable processes that desired outcomes such as sustainability can be achieved. Crosman et al. (2022) argue that these two arguments for social equity are mutually interdependent. Finally, there are often legal obligations to consider equity in ocean governance. Equity guides the development of law (Breakey, 2022), and the incorporation of equity in policy development aligns with legal requirements such as international treaties. For example, the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) explicitly calls for equitable sharing arrangements (UN, 1982). Countries therefore have a legal responsibility to enact equity and to safeguard basic human rights. Consequently, there are a number of practical, moral, social and legal imperatives to better address and consider equity within blue economy governance. However, there are significant challenges when it comes to embedding equity in existing governance structures, as inequitable processes are often structurally and systemically entrenched (Fehl and Freistein 2021, Anghie 2007) The complexity of conceptualising equity adds to these challenges. For example, Law et al. (2018) show that equity is frequently poorly defined and, as a result, is often applied without much critical consideration. Further, attempts to apply equity without addressing and tackling the structural and systemically entrenched processes risk further perpetuating inequitable processes and outcomes (Singh et al., 2023).

1.3. The complexities of conceptualising equity

Equity has been conceptualised and theorised in many ways, including (but not limited to) environmental justice, just transitions, critical race theory, human rights-based approaches, feminist theory, food sovereignty, Indigenous approaches, theory of access and decolonising approaches (see Croft et al., 2022). Many of these conceptualisations have similarities or synergies but some involve divergent approaches. Law et al. (2018, p.294) argue that these multiple frameworks and approaches ‘can lead to different conceptions of equity through alternative perspectives of what is good or right’, which can result in different and potentially opposing equity objectives in practice.

Equity is an inherently complex concept (Crosman et al., 2022b; Law et al., 2018), involving many different dimensions and definitions. Yet, at its core, equity refers to principles of fairness, impartiality, and achieving justice. At times, achieving fairness will require equal treatment, yet at other points strictly equal treatment may actually exacerbate or cause unfair actions or outcomes – illustrating the difference between equity and equality. For example, achieving fairness may mean prioritising the least well-off groups in society (Rawls 1971). Equity therefore ‘combines a concern for equal treatment, with an assessment of what constitutes fair treatment across both substantive outcomes and procedural concerns’ (Österblom et al., 2020, p. 4). Equity should also encompass restorative concerns such as reparations, historical debt or responsibility, and redressing harm (Okereke 2010, Schlosberg & Collins 2014). As Österblom et al.’s (2020) invocation of ‘equal treatment’ suggests, the distinction between equality and equity should not be overdrawn. Minow (2021) argues that both equity and equality attend to the differences between moral subjects and are concerned with fairness and equal respect for all.

Adding to the conceptual variety is the complexity of embedding equity in governance. The typical scales used in governance may not align with the scales at which inequities take place and need to be addressed. For example, issues of inequity are still often framed/addressed at the Nation state level. However, this may render invisible the equity issues arising outside this scale – for example, the structural marginalisation of ‘stateless’ or migratory communities in marine conservation, such as the Bajau Sea People of Southeast Asia (Pauwelussen & Swanson 2022). Emphasising the nation state as the appropriate scale may also not resonate with groups who challenge state claims to territorial control (e.g., Indigenous groups) and could serve to reinforce state authority over others (Coulthard, 2014; Nadadsy, 2017). Equity can occur both within (intra) generations and beyond (inter) generations. Thinking of equity across generations aligns the concept with sustainable development (Crosman et al., 2022), as the Brundtland Report argues that sustainable development ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs’ (UNESCO, 2021).

This inherent complexity in relation to the concept of equity, as well as its application, may go some way towards explaining why this dimension of the blue economy remains the most neglected. Ocean governance practitioners often lack both the practical tools and the tangible support to navigate the complexity of this concept and how it can be operationalised within different kinds/scales of governance systems. It is this gap that our paper seeks to fill, by providing clear information and guidance on how to navigate some of the challenges associated with conceptualising and operationalising equity.

1.4. A new model

The following section outlines the model for conceptualising equity that we developed to assist with the development of equitable blue economy governance, a model that is clear and easily understood and can be practically applied. General steps for operationalising the model include engaging with marginalised groups, reaching a shared definition of equity and current issues, identifying priority goals and objectives,

and co-developing specifications to meet them, with meaningful monitoring and evaluation to measure success. We discuss the rationale for these components, and how they build from and address equity dimensions, and ethical concerns regarding blue economy development.

This model seeks to draw together the common threads across many existing conceptualisations of equity, and in doing so, it brings to the surface the core principles and types (as discussed above). The crux of our argument is that equity needs to be fully considered and understood, rather than being an afterthought, or used as a buzzword in governance discourse. If the multiple facets of equity are not considered (which will likely involve critically analysing the structures and systems in which equity is currently embedded) transformative change will not occur, but rather the status quo will be maintained.

2. A model for conceptualising equity – blue economy equity model

This paper puts forward an equity model based on four overarching equity principles: *Achieving Fairness*, *Preventing Harm*, *Respecting Rights*, and *Supporting Flourishing*, and two types of equity: *Processes* and *Outcomes*. The Blue Economy Equity Model (hereafter, the ‘Model’) is proposed as a tool for governments and decision makers which seeks to simplify and operationalise equity, while appropriately covering its key dimensions. Too often, the requirements of equity remain ambiguous or only implied (rather than made explicit and distinct), leading to (at best) ad hoc implementation.

The Model aims to:

1. be clear and easily understood, and able to be practically applied.
2. capture and embody the key components and dimensions of equity as it is typically invoked in the scholarly and grey literature, and by major bodies (such as UN bodies).
3. be ethically justifiable—that covers key ethical concerns that arise in blue economy development.

The Model’s aims are key to moving the blue economy agenda and rhetoric in a more equitable direction.

The following section explains how the Model fits with typical invocations of equity, and aligns with key blue economy ethical concerns.

The four overarching principles upon which the Model is based are:

- *Achieving fairness*: equity requires fairness in participation in decision-making and in the distribution of costs and benefits.
- *Preventing harm*: equity requires avoiding wrongful harms, mitigating risks, and compensating when harms occur.
- *Respecting rights*: equity requires respecting existing rights and claims held by individuals and groups.
- *Supporting flourishing*: equity involves contributing to a world where all people can achieve their potential, and thereby not merely survive but *thrive*.

The two types of equity interact with these four principles. The two types of equity are processes and outcomes, which can also be understood as ‘means’ and the ‘ends’ of achieving equity. Process-based equity is related to achieving fairness in procedures and activities—in how people are *treated*. As we discuss below, this can introduce ethical concerns about how non-human animals and ecosystems are treated, especially through consideration of traditional and Indigenous knowledge systems. Outcomes-based equity focuses on *effects*. It involves the responsibilities associated with working towards delivering equitable outcomes and, simultaneously, the responsibilities that are associated with avoiding undermining or worsening these outcomes. Fig. 1

The two types of equity each combine with the four equity principles, as follows:

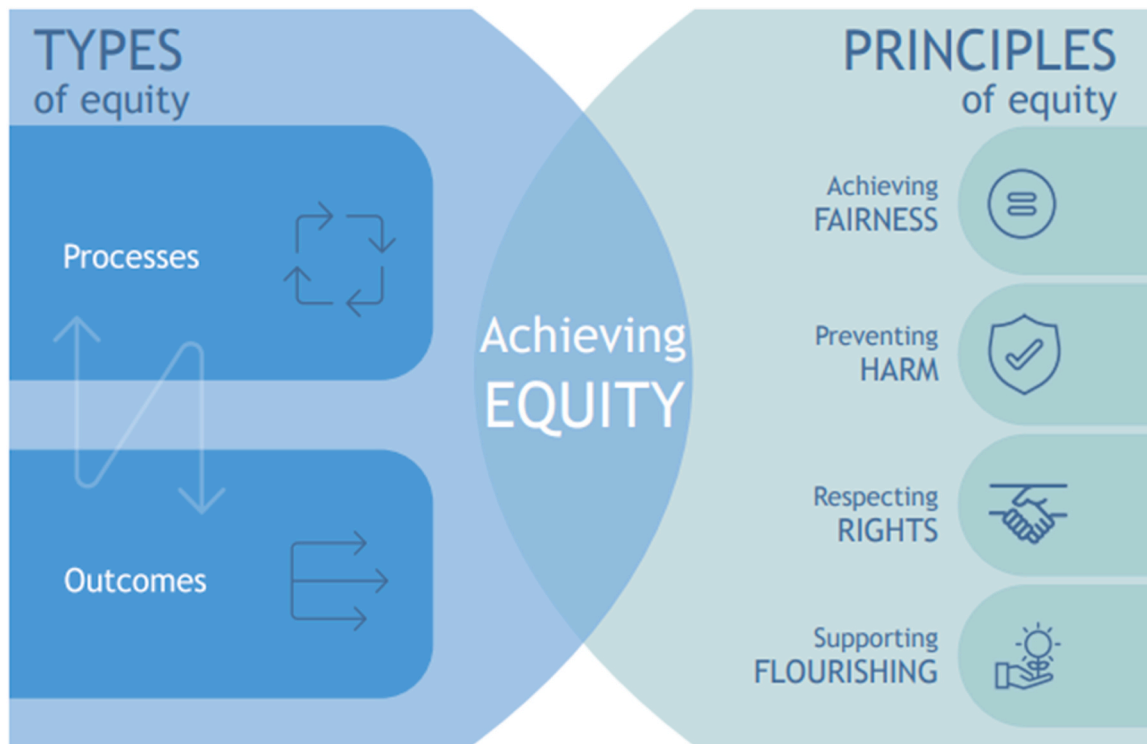


Fig. 1. The Principles and Types of Equity.

2.1. Achieving fairness

Process fairness involves ensuring that all stakeholders are kept informed, given appropriate opportunities to participate in decision-making, and can have their voices heard. It also requires that the process is authentic in the sense that necessary information is widely shared, and people are accountable for following through on undertakings. As discussed further below, process fairness requires attention to the strengths and limitations of different models and approaches to participation and engagement.

Outcomes fairness requires ensuring that costs and benefits are fairly apportioned across the relevant stakeholder groups, with marginalised groups based on gender, ethnic or other ascriptive characteristics) often requiring special attention. Benefits are not merely monetary, and can include access, employment, leadership roles, and other goods. Outcomes fairness includes a concern for intergenerational equity, requiring that current activities do not undermine the capability of future generations to meet their needs. It can also aim to redress historical harms and injustices.

2.2. Preventing harm

Harm prevention processes require gaining consent for major impacts on stakeholders' wellbeing, and especially for any exposure to serious risk (such as the possibility that pollution will impact water supplies or food safety). It also requires having fair processes for raising complaints, and ensuring compensation when harms or losses occur.

Harm prevention outcomes are secured when, so far as possible, risks are avoided or mitigated, and compensation occurs when necessary.

2.3. Respecting rights

'Rights' covers several categories. It includes *intrinsic human rights* that are owed universally to all people, as enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). It also includes *legal rights* that have been determined by international,

national and local law, including treaties. It also includes attending to other types of *claims* or *entitlements* stakeholders might have to oceans and coastlines, such as the historical traditional practices of First Nations peoples, or customary recreational common property rights.

Respecting rights presents significant challenges because rights can have ambiguous boundaries, and different rights can conflict with one another—such as conflict between a traditional cultural entitlement and a contemporary legal fishing right. Even well-established legal property rights can conflict in surprising ways (Freyfogle, 2003). In cases where rights claims aren't straightforward, it can be necessary to further specify them, or to carefully balance them against one another (Breakey, 2014; Moreso, 2012). Despite these challenges, rights carry an important moral weight, and cannot be overlooked in any consideration of equity.

Respecting rights processes requires gaining consent for impingements on existing rights.

Respecting rights outcomes requires that legal rights and customary claims, like those of traditional fishers, are protected and preserved.

2.4. Supporting flourishing

Supporting flourishing processes requires that local communities and stakeholders' notions of what counts as well-being, flourishing and thriving are understood and included in decision-making.

Supporting flourishing outcomes ensures that the material changes on the ground ultimately contribute to delivering on these community understandings of thriving and flourishing.

2.4.1. Basis of the blue economy equity model

The Model aims to align appropriately with existing understandings of 'equity'. This is important because, if the Model instructed blue economy actors to focus on areas that were independent of the term's usual connotations, then they would fail to respond to stakeholder and community demands for equity, and to align with institutional and legal requirements for equity. At the same time, the Model aims to be ethically defensible: it directs attention to key considerations required to achieve

fairness and justice for all people. This section explains these two bases.

2.4.2. Alignment with existing conceptions of equity

The Blue Economy Equity Model aims to capture the types of ethical concerns raised when equity is invoked by scholars, commentators, and practitioners, noting with Alexander et al. (2021, p.1) that often-times equity is not explicitly defined, and its content instead is implied through the identified action pathways or equity problem areas.

The Model's two 'types' of equity follow from the many explorations of equity that distinguish between outcome and process equity (or 'substantive/distributive justice' and 'procedural' justice). (Bennett et al., 2019; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019; Österblom et al., 2020; Alexander et al., 2021; UNEP, 2021; Crosman 2022a).

In terms of the four principles, *achieving fairness* across both outcomes and processes—and within and across generations—remains equity's central concern, especially in legal and policy contexts (Maguire 2012; Bennett 2019b; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019; Österblom et al., 2020; UNEP, 2021). The inclusion of different groups in equity (especially Process Fairness) activities can deliver 'recognitional equity' (Bennett, 2022). Crosman et al. (2022a, p.3) rightly stress that equity as fairness (specifically Outcomes Fairness) can also have a restorative justice element, redressing past wrongs.

Several authors point towards equity's need to *prevent harms*, such as to safety, sanitation, or security (e.g., Bennett et al., 2019; Österblom et al., 2020, 8; UNEP, 2021). Attention to vulnerable groups, who may be harmed either by action or inaction, is a core part of equity, especially as it informs relevant areas of law (Maguire 2012).

Discussions of equity also invoke *respecting rights*, including universal human rights, but also contingent (e.g., traditional) rights of access (e.g., Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019; Bennett et al., 2019; Österblom et al., 2020, 8; UNEP, 2021). Crosman (2022a) explicitly emphasizes the importance of distinguishing entitlements like rights (which demand consent) from the moral concern owed to stakeholders (which do not require consent, but only inclusion and consideration).

Finally, equity conceptualisations can consider the ways in which a consideration of equity might *support flourishing* and capacity building—for example in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (Bennett 2019b; Österblom et al., 2020; UNEP, 2021). Supporting flourishing is a critical consideration often overlooked in conventional understandings of equity, which often tend to focus on deficit framings of marginalised communities (Burke et al., 2023). Supporting flourishing in this sense draws on a capabilities framing of equity and justice, which is concerned with '*people being able to live lives they consider worthwhile*' (Edwards et al., 2016, p. 2). Contemporary Indigenous, feminist and post-colonial scholarship challenges an exclusive focus on the deficit framing by calling for recognition of the strength, knowledge and agency of these communities (Abebe et al., 2021, Sultana 2022, Tucker and Anantharaman 2020). By incorporating the principle of *supporting flourishing* into our equity Model, we call attention to the capabilities and aspirations of coastal communities and other groups engaged in, or impacted by, Blue Economy planning and development.

Thus, the Model's four principles and two types of equity are well-grounded in existing scholarly and institutional literature.

2.4.3. Ethical justification

As well as integrating existing understandings of equity, the Model makes sense from an ethical perspective.

'Equity' refers to justice and fairness for all people. This differs from, and forms one proper part of, the broader category of *ethics*. Ethics covers ethical concerns for humans, but also explicitly considers attention to, and the intrinsic value of, non-human animals, species, ecosystems, and arguably even the land itself, including mountains, rivers, and coastlines (Singer, 1975; Leopold, 1949). This broader conceptualisation that extends ethical concerns to non-humans aligns with Indigenous ontologies that position nonhuman beings as being political actors in their own right (de la Cadena 2015), and with 'biocultural' and

'place-based' ethics that value the diverse relationships communities develop between their lived values and their habitats (Rozzi 2013). Further, an ethics of care in relation to the environment shows that there is a need to enhance moral regard for non-humans, including ecological systems, as not doing so will likely lead to environmental harms. As Whyte and Cuomo (2016, p. 235) assert, '*environmental ethics that incorporate paradigms of caring conceive of environmental harms and the exploitation of nonhuman animals as failures to extend caring to worthy others and see those failures in relation to similar failures to extend care for other people*'.

While equity differs from ethics in its specific focus on human beings, at the same time it is important that equity covers the many ethical concerns that do arise for humans. The equity model's four components and two types achieve this. Equity's two types—*outcome* and *process*—reflect the ethical concerns that arise with good and bad outcomes for human wellbeing (captured by 'consequentialist' politico-ethical theories like utilitarianism (Mill, 1861)) and that arise with right and wrong treatment (captured by 'deontological' politico-ethical theories like Locke 1690 or Rawls' (1971) contractualism).

In terms of equity's four principles, the Model's formulation deliberately parallels Beauchamp and Childress' (2009) influential 'principlism' approach to biomedical ethics. Their four principles of justice, non-maleficence, autonomy, and beneficence map broadly onto the Model's equity principles of *achieving fairness*, *preventing harm*, *respecting rights*, and *supporting flourishing*. In addition the model covers the key ethical values that arise in blue economy developments. For example, a recent distillation (Cooper et al., 2023) of the ethical values invoked in the scholarly literature on aquaculture—combined with a multi-dimensional legitimacy analysis of those values—distilled six ethical values. These six values are all covered by the equity model: environmental protection (an independent ethical concern, but one also covered by inter-generational Outcome Fairness); stakeholder participation (Process Fairness); fairness (Outcome Fairness); harm prevention (Preventing Harm and Respecting Rights); beneficence (Supporting Flourishing); and trustworthiness and accountability (Process Fairness).

While the Model draws focus onto these many ethical concerns, at the same time it aims to avoid being overly prescriptive and 'top down' determinative. Equity *always* involves fairness and justice in outcomes and processes; however, what exactly fairness and justice *mean* must be determined on a local and contextual basis. Different notions of fairness and justice may be legitimate (Rawls, 1993), and part of equity involves understanding and respecting its *context* (Alexander et al., 2021; Crosman 2022a)—the different understandings of fairness, justice, participation, and forms of knowledge that local cultures possess.

Finally, we noted above that equity focuses on treating human beings appropriately. However, it is worth noting that the *process* parts of equity (especially Process Fairness) do allow concerns with non-human animals and ecosystems to be included. Communities and stakeholders can have their voice heard in fair processes, where they can foreground their values and knowledge systems (Alexander et al., 2021). Indigenous (or non-Western) worldviews may emphasise the idea that humans are part of the greater world system, rather than separate or superior to it (Boyd, 2017), and these expanded notions of the 'social' can rightly feed into equity processes (Crosman 2022a).

Given the need for more tangible recommendations as to how to embed equity in governance, we now go on to outline one example of a high-level approach to operationalising equity, using the Blue Economy Equity Model as a foundation.

2.4.4. An approach to operationalising equity

In order to explore how equity could be operationalised within blue economy governance, this research was informed by practical considerations of how this approach might be applied to an established blue economy governance framework; the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Transition Framework for a Sustainable Blue Economy. A more complete exploration of how the Model intersects with this

Framework can be found through [Reference redacted for review purposes]. For the purposes of this paper, we explore the main ‘lessons learnt’ through the process of aligning the Model with this Framework. This process was explored through a series of workshops with experts, and ongoing smaller workshops with the project team. The lessons learnt have broader practical implications for ocean governance practitioners beyond the application of this particular governance framework.

The high-level approach that we detail below is meant to be neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Instead, it is meant to act as an implementation guide for those engaging in blue economy governance. In this sense, the approach we outline can be seen as a starting point and a mechanism to foster discussion and further thought in relation to the implementation of equitable processes and the quest for equitable outcomes. The contextually specific approach we put forward (Fig. 2) is explained at length below, and involves:

1. engaging with marginalised groups,
2. reaching a shared understanding and definition of equity,
3. understanding the current status of equity,
4. identifying priority areas that then form the basis of overarching goals and objectives, and
5. developing specifications in order to meet objectives and goals, with meaningful monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure success.

We further argue that, in order to ensure that both the processes and outcomes align with the Blue Economy Equity Model it is imperative to design processes that are participatory and inclusive. The guidance we put forward is just the beginning. Our suggestions leave room for contextual nuance, and a facilitation technique for governments to begin difficult yet necessary processes. Working out how goals, objectives and actions align to policy frameworks, how policy is implemented, and how implementation is monitored, evaluated, and adapted will all need to be carefully constructed. Furthermore, in acknowledging that inclusion and participation do not guarantee equity, we argue that the underlying conditions for participation should be examined to ensure that there is room for plural knowledge, and that existing power relations are brought into question.

The model outlined in Fig. 2 is designed to be stepwise. And whilst appearing linear in nature, the process is effectively circular, as monitoring and evaluation should be happening throughout, meaning that each step is re-examined to account for changing expectations in relation to equitable governance in any context. The Model outlined in this approach is designed to be used by governments and policy makers and should be adapted to suit each context. In an implementation example, different stakeholders and representatives would go through the process (outlined in the Model) with policy makers in appropriate settings (see discussion on participatory processes) to highlight their understanding of equity, and to identify goals, objectives and actions in relation to a particular development/activity occurring in their area. Within this process the aspirations of the individuals and the community more broadly regarding the future management of the local area would be foregrounded, along with areas of concern, areas of opportunity and notions of what might constitute the burdens and the benefits for the community.

2.5. Participatory processes and the consideration of inclusivity and diversity

Participatory governance (or participatory processes) refers to the active engagement of civil society, stakeholders, the private sector, and members of the public in decision making processes. It incorporates involvement and collaboration, in which participants are given varying degrees of power to impact the decision (Jager et al., 2020). Diversity and inclusion extend to these processes by drawing attention to the need to ensure that approaches to participation are ethical and equitable. We

understand *diversity* to be the inclusion of a wide range of voices (particularly those that may have previously been silenced or marginalised) and *inclusivity* to include creating a safe space for these diverse voices to be meaningfully heard (and recognising that this space may not be in a traditional government or institutional setting).

Participatory processes are often considered one of the main ways to improve equity (Bennett et al., 2021), but it is critical that participation not be seen as a proxy for equity. Efforts to enhance diversity within participatory processes, and ocean governance more broadly, can be undermined by structural inequities inherent in bureaucratic western societies which hinder the transformative change needed for genuine co-production (Maas et al., 2022). Furthermore, Louey (2022) argues that the concept of inclusivity within political blue economy discourse has ‘distracted’ attention away from the notion of equitable benefit sharing – a concept that requires more transformational and structural change. Louey (2022) further argues that the blue economy cannot simply focus on inclusion without equity – instead governance needs to be ‘coupled with attention to global political and economic structures and their role in upholding inequitable systems’, otherwise ‘these inclusivity efforts risk being merely band-aid solutions’.

Deciding what is fair, just, or equitable is inherently contestable, with elements that are dynamic, contextual, pluralistic, and subjective (Crosman et al., 2022b), therefore deciding what is appropriate when making decisions in relation to equity is also highly subjective. If decision making in blue economy governance is not inclusive and meaningful it runs the risk of making assumptions about what communities, rightsholders, stakeholders, or marginalised groups consider to be equitable. We therefore argue that participatory processes and inclusive governance should be deeply embedded within the Blue Economy Equity Model.

While participation can allow for an understanding of current inequities and can ensure that people have a voice in the decisions that impact them, entrenched power dynamics can undermine the influence of such participatory processes if they fall into the trap of being a box ticking exercise. As Hügel and Davies (2020, p.12) show ‘participatory processes in particular places are rarely apolitical, and they are inevitably mediated by uneven patterns of power between those involved’. These processes risk lacking any real meaning if they do not pay attention to *who is participating, in what and for whose benefit* (Singh et al., 2023).

Furthermore, it is important to note that power dynamics occur *within* marginalised communities – it can’t be assumed that everyone in a local village or community has equal power. The power may relate to economic power, education, or capacity – and these power relations within marginalised communities may ensure that the voices of the *most* marginalised continually go unheard. This relates to the concept of a ‘community of equals’, which forces a delineation of who is included and who is not when making comparisons (Crosman et al., 2022). A naive assumption based on the community of equals premise may lead to failure in the planned activity as it does not consider the perhaps complex and nuanced relations within that community (Crosman et al., 2022).

The equity Model can assist in ensuring critical examination of whether participatory processes themselves are enhancing or undermining equity. *Achieving fairness* requires consideration of whether participatory processes appropriately recognise existing dynamics of power and prioritisation, and the implementation of strategies to ensure that traditionally silenced voices do not continue to be dismissed. For example, many existing consultation and decision-making procedures are deeply embedded in colonial structures that are founded on western knowledge systems. This can then lead to processes that attempt to bring all stakeholders into a framework based on western knowledge, where marginalised groups are not (historically) given an equal voice (Croft et al., 2022).

The structural disadvantages imposed by dominant constructs needs to be recognised, raising larger questions about ‘*participating in what*’ and ‘*for whose benefit*?’ (Cornwall, 2008). For example, when focusing on the

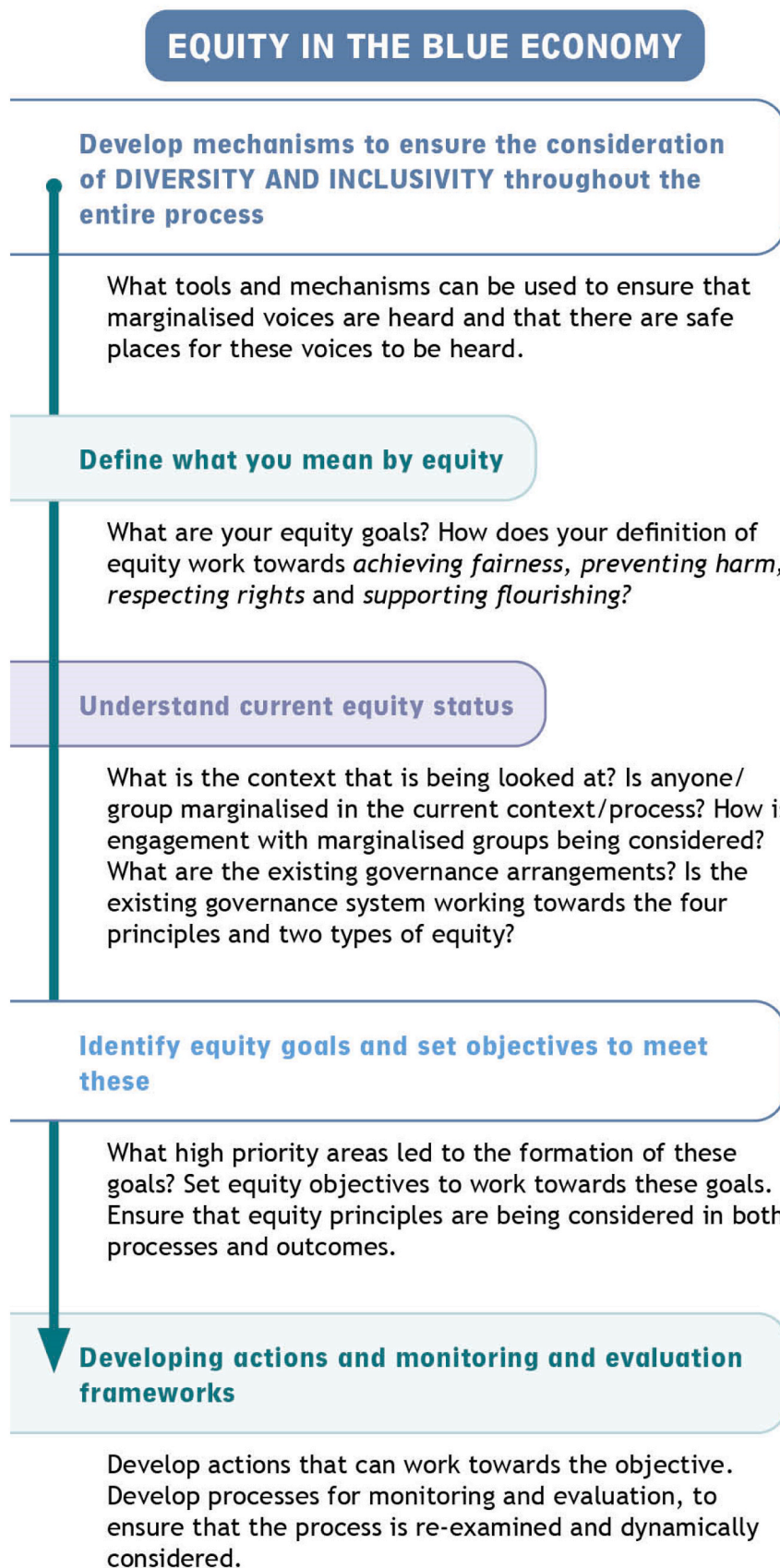


Fig. 2. Stepwise approach to operationalising equity in blue economy governance.

role of economic structures, the continued domination of capitalism must be acknowledged. To think of inclusivity and diversity in the processes and outcomes of the blue economy, we recognise the capitalist framing of ‘economy’, which does not allow for the inclusivity of pluralism in relation to ‘economies’. Rethinking the concept of the blue economy may allow the concept to become inclusive of a diversity of economies – rather than a continuation of capitalism, in which the ‘*the 1 per cent benefit while the 99 per cent suffer*’ (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020, p.1). Diverse and plural economies may promote well-being over profit, and present an ethical path forward.

Similarly, *preventing harm* in participatory processes draws attention to the possible unintended consequences of ineffective or disingenuous participation. Increasing access of marginalised groups to decision making processes does not automatically equate to equitable processes and outcomes. Frequently, participatory processes and the co-production of knowledge reinforce existing uneven power relations, which can result in failed processes that may not lead to positive social outcomes (Turnhout et al., 2020, Chambers et al., 2022). When discussing co-production as a pathway to transformation, Chambers et al. (2022), for example, suggest that it is critical to be ‘*elevating marginalised agendas*’, whilst also ‘*questioning dominant agendas*’, to overcome the tensions and power imbalances that arise in these processes. Participatory processes also need to consider the burden of participation on those who take part, including ‘consultation fatigue’ and the mental and physical health implications of participation on spokespeople (Young et al., 2020).

Considering participatory processes through the lens of *respecting rights* draws attention to the question of *who* should be involved in participation (Cornwall, 2008). To be effective, participatory processes should strive for meaningful consultation, collaboration and co-decision-making processes that recognise inclusivity and diversity throughout. At the beginning of governance processes it is imperative to undertake exercises to identify stakeholders, rightsholders, or relevant, interested and involved parties (Newton and Elliott, 2016). A plan of engagement should also consider how these parties have previously been involved, what needs to be addressed based on previous involvement, and what needs to be considered in relation to capacity – for example there may be language barriers, or some members of the group may not have access to the internet. Other considerations may include: who has authority to speak on behalf of a community; how power imbalances within as well as between stakeholders groups can be managed; whether particular rightsholders should be prioritised in participatory exercises; and how the needs of non-humans (such as ecosystems) are being considered.

Finally, *Supporting Flourishing* within participatory processes requires being open to working within alternative models of engagement which may sit outside conventional consultation approaches. For example, Parsons et al. (2016) explain alternative approaches to co-designing with Indigenous communities. Their work highlighted the ‘*importance of recognising ontological and epistemological differences to comprehend how people think differently about, and understand issues and concepts*’ (Parsons et al., 2016, p. 100–101). This diversity of knowledge means that it is important to foster a multitude of approaches to collaboration, and support opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange, and being open to the fact that these might be quite different from conventional co-design or collaboration workshops (many of which may be based on colonial foundations of governance and science) (Parsons et al., 2016). Instead, alternative models of engagement might emphasise the importance of relationship building. Inherently, these processes must allow people to have a say over the decisions that impact their lives, including how they are consulted, and their own understandings of what it means to thrive (Nussbaum, 1997).

We recognise that the development of good and meaningful participatory processes is likely to be cumbersome, expensive and demanding in terms of time and expertise, and is essentially very challenging to achieve comprehensively (Cornwall, 2008, Hügel and Davies, 2020). It

is critical to engage with marginalised local communities to understand how the operations might impact them, and the possibility that the operations could improve their situation in ways that matter to them. However, it is also important to ensure that perfect does not become the enemy of good. In other words, whilst striving for perfection throughout the development and execution of participatory processes is worthwhile, it will not always be feasible or possible, meaning that hard decisions will have to be made to achieve the best possible processes and outcomes with the resources that are available. Cornwall (2008, p. 276) terms this ‘*optimum participation*’, which is about ‘*getting the balance between depth and inclusion right for the purpose at hand*’.

Establishing a strategy to support participatory processes involving diverse actors throughout the planning process is the first step in developing an equitable Blue Economy. Here the equity framework is both a guide and a mechanism for enacting these processes. The next step is to work towards a shared vision of equity. What this looks like and how it is reached will likely differ from place to place, as deciding what fairness and justice mean must be determined on a local and contextual scale.

2.6. Define what is meant by equity

Identifying a common understanding of equity is a critical first step that will assist in the development of methods, approaches, and equity plans that are context-specific and relevant, and will help to ensure that multiple parties can work towards the same principles. As discussed above, defining what is meant by equity should be a participatory and iterative process. Collaboratively working towards a shared understanding of equity (along with the expectations of equity) will ensure that approaches do not produce similar yet divergent understandings. Carefully considering each type of equity (the Model’s four principles and two types) can help to ensure that critical equity issues are not overlooked, which would then require them to be retrofitted at a later point. As Chambers et al. (2022, p. 2) assert, ‘*aims should emerge from the process rather than being pre-determined*’. Working towards a shared understanding of equity based on the principles may involve a discussion about what *achieving fairness* looks like in a particular context, or what a specific cultural group might understand *supporting flourishing* to mean, or how certain groups might want to be consulted on their understanding of *equitable processes*. Reaching consensus may not always be possible, however, as Van Den Hove (2006) show, negotiation is often present in participatory processes (see Van den Hove 2006 and Scolobig et al., 2016, for further information on compromise and negation in participatory governance).

2.7. Understanding the current status of equity in practice

We suggest implementing an approach to better understand the current governance context for equity which involves taking stock of what is currently happening in any given context on the ground. Forming an understanding of the status of equity is highly contextually specific. Almost all cultures and societies develop norms, systems, institutions, and structures where *some* of these work in antisocial and inequitable ways, and *others* work in prosocial and equitable directions. In such cases, systemic change may be highly undesirable, from an ethical point of view, and a better process might be one that aims to conserve and extend the system parts that are working well, and remove, stifle, or mitigate the parts that are not.

Furthermore, assessing equity in any context will require an investigation of the drivers of inequity. As Crosman et al. (2022a) assert: ‘*The manifestations, impacts and correctives for existing ocean inequities can only be understood “in situ”: the lived experience of equity is mediated by the histories, cultures and economic and governance systems and structures that attach to geopolitical context*’. It also requires attending closely to systems, practices and governance arrangements that are working—such as locally-led sustainable management of coastal resources and fishers (e.

g., Ostrom, 1990). To understand the current situation when it comes to equity in the blue economy, we put forward a series of questions (Table 1) that, when meaningfully investigated and considered, will help to form a thorough understanding of the current state of play. Examples are provided of questions designed to help answer what is meant by “equity”, and to better understand the current status of equity. This approach follows the work of Crosman et al. (2022a). We further suggest that a wide range of stakeholders and rightsholders take part in the process of both creating and answering questions. Through answering these questions, priority areas can be identified which enable the setting of equity goals. The examples of answers to each question are far from exhaustive, rather they are meant to be illustrative of the kinds of responses that may be generated when this activity is completed. We stress that the questions and answers in this table are included as examples only. Both questions and answers should be crafted using inclusive and participatory processes (as discussed above). Another example to draw on are the questions provided by Crosman et al. (2022a).

2.8. Identify priorities, goals, and objectives

The identification of high priority areas and subsequent equity goals should be developed in response to collaborative discussions and the answers to questions in Table 1, in accordance with the participatory approach identified in Step 1. In this sense it can be understood that equity goals are co-designed (for discussion on how to identify priority areas see Kwatra et al., 2021; Kytta, et al. 2023)

Realistically operationalising equity involves identifying priorities. Whilst ideally all equity issues could be addressed in governance, this may not be the case on the ground. For this reason, we identify three critical components or priorities that should be the absolute minimum required for any socially equitable blue economy initiative. First, blue economy activities must prevent harm to critical domains like human safety, health, security, and subsistence (this is the most high-stakes application of the Principle of Preventing Harm). Second, blue economy activities must improve fairness for – and never further marginalise – the word off (this is the highest priority application of the Principle of Achieving Fairness.) Thirdly, blue economy decision makers must never assume that they know the priority areas. In other words, at a bare minimum, blue economy decisions should not be made without (at least some level) of consultation with stakeholders and rightsholders and this should be done early in the process (this is the most urgent application of Fair Processes).

The identification of these priorities will enable the setting of equity goals. The establishment of broad goals will then allow for the development of appropriate objectives, and subsequently actions, that should align to the four overarching principles of equity.

2.9. Developing objectives, actions, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks

This first part of this process is to develop objectives that work towards achieving equity goals and the four overarching equity principles. In this step it is important to recognise that equity goals are a vision for equity, while equity objectives outline how this vision can be achieved. Equity objectives should be well articulated, attainable and accountable. Following the development of objectives, we suggest designing specific actions that set out to achieve the stated objective. Considering how equity objectives interact with different aspects of the governance system is one way to examine how equity actions are aligned with existing policies, structures, and systems. For example, this could involve considering specific actions aimed at achieving the objective in the areas of policy development, decision making processes, data collection and science, monitoring and evaluation, capacity building, knowledge and innovation, finance, and stakeholder engagement.

We suggest that each step of the process is re-examined and dynamically reconsidered to account for the fluctuating expectations

Table 1

An applied example on how to ‘Understand the Context’ in which the equity model is being implemented.

Understand the Context		
Example Question/s	Example Answer/s	Equity Principles
What are the social and cultural values held by the coastal communities in this context?	<i>Cultural and spiritual connection to coastal land and sea for Indigenous communities. Aesthetic value of coastal places for local community. Recreational values.</i>	Supporting Flourishing
Which groups have dependencies on marine and coastal resources for their livelihoods?	<i>Indigenous Peoples. Small-scale fishers. Local coastal communities. Tourism operators.</i>	Achieving Fairness, Preventing Harm
What are the existing rights and how are they considered? For example, what are the access rights for marine and coastal communities?	<i>Traditional access rights for cultural fishing practices for Indigenous Communities. Established fishing quota, licences, or leases.</i>	Respecting Rights
What communities have strong existing processes for inclusion?	<i>Those with access to information and technology (i. e., internet access). Those with the capacity to speak and write in English. Those with resources like wealth, education, and access to finance and legal</i>	Achieving Fairness
What communities have weak existing processes for inclusion?	<i>Remote communities. Those whose voice is not well represented in government decision making (i.e. Indigenous communities, youth, women). Those with limited access to technology and information).</i>	Achieving Fairness
Are there any groups that are currently exposed to potential harms?	<i>Indigenous Peoples. Small-scale fishers. Women. Low-income earners. Coastal communities at risk of environmental degradation or unsustainable development. Regional and remote populations with poor employment, development, and infrastructure. Vulnerable populations.</i>	Preventing Harm
Who is flourishing and in what ways?	<i>Small-scale fishers in local fishing cooperative as they all have access to the fair distribution of benefits from this activity and have subsequent needs filled.</i>	Supporting Flourishing Achieving Fairness
In what ways could opportunities to flourishing be available to everyone.	<i>Participatory design in relation to ‘flourishing’ and opportunities ‘to flourish’. Embedded in education system</i>	Supporting Flourishing Achieving Fairness
What barriers are there to flourishing?	<i>Systemic discrimination Ineffective processes of inclusion</i>	Supporting Flourishing Achieving Fairness
What mechanisms could be used to support flourishing?	<i>Ingrained power dynamics Increase representation in decision making. Address gender pay gap in blue economy jobs. Address systemic discrimination. Access to grants for grants for capacity building activities such as scholarships to study. Ability to practise cultural traditions in coastal and marine spaces.</i>	Supporting Flourishing Achieving Fairness Respecting Rights Preventing Harm
Are there any groups (human and non-human) that have previously been harmed?	<i>Indigenous communities that have lost traditional access rights. Extractive industrial practices that have led to vulnerability for local communities as a result of</i>	Preventing Harm

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Understand the Context		
Example Question/s	Example Answer/s	Equity Principles
	<p><i>environmental pressures.</i></p> <p><i>Marginalised groups who have not had access to inclusive processes (lack of political representation)</i></p>	

that are held for equity in governance. Monitoring success should also involve revisiting equity goals regularly to ensure they are still relevant. Evaluating progress can be done through employing the use of indicators (while this is outside of the scope in this paper it is explored in more depth in an accompanying paper (*Reference redacted for review purposes*)).

When evaluating progress on embedding equity in blue economy development, we suggest not just focusing on quantitative metrics. Rather, qualitative methods should be employed together with methods that account for diverse ways of knowing/understanding and alternative knowledge. For example, the work by Yates et al. (2022) foregrounds the importance of a divergence from Eurocentric governance frameworks to wellbeing-led governance. Yates et al. (2022, p. 3) argue that 'global governance approaches based on privileging gross domestic product (GDP) and export-orientated growth through global international divisions of labour are simply insufficient in fostering wellbeing for the vast majority of ecological systems and human societies'. Transformative wellbeing framework signal a departure from traditional quantitative indicators such as GDP, which fall short of providing nuanced information of wellbeing.

3. Conclusion

Equity is inherently complex, as it is multifaceted. Embedding it within systemically inequitable and path-dependant governance structures and systems is equally complex. In other words, 'doing' equity is fundamentally challenging, and structured guidance is required to embed it within, or to challenge, current blue economy governance. However, despite the difficulties of practically enacting equity, it is of increasing importance given that inequity and inequality continue to be exacerbated. Currently, the blue economy has shifted away from a focus on equity (Louey, 2022) and instead encapsulates neo-liberal and capitalist ideologies that see increases in wealth disparity, asymmetrical power relations and an inequitable share of the burdens and benefits of ocean activities. Moving away from legacies of colonialism, embracing alternative value and knowledge systems, and recognising that the current structures in society are not inherent (for example a capitalist, neo-liberal economy is not the only viable economic model), would all help to firmly embed equity within the processes and practices that shape the blue economy. To move away from these systemic drivers of inequities will not be an easy task. Yet embedding equity in governance is important to achieve; Crosman et al. (2022, p. 1) show that '*uncoordinated, poorly specified, unaccountable governance allows the powerful to entrench and maintain their dominance*'. Recognising the flaws and power dynamics that may be present in the existing societal systems and structures may be necessary to enact trajectories of change.

We recognise that operationalising equity has been further complicated by the varied ways in which equity has been conceptualised and theorised. To assist policy makers in navigating such complexities, we have developed the Blue Economy Equity Model that draws on concepts at the core of equity – fairness, impartiality and achieving justice. Key ethical concerns for blue economy development, and key components of equity as discussed in current literature, are distilled into both processes and outcomes along four overarching principles (*achieving fairness, preventing harm, respecting rights and supporting flourishing*). The Model is proposed as a tool for governments and decision makers and therefore

seeks to simplify and operationalise equity, while appropriately covering its key dimensions. The planned future trajectory for this application of equity is to pilot it within blue economy governance. This will undoubtedly raise further considerations that have initially been overlooked in the development of this approach, including issues of scale in governance. Being open and flexible to the need for adaptation, particularly on a context specific basis, will be crucial. The Model that we have outlined in this paper provides a simple and easily accessible approach for practitioners, to assist them in navigating the complexity of operationalising equity for the collective benefit.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Alejandro Garcia Lozano: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Andrés Cisneros-Montemayor:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Angelique Pouponneau:** Writing – original draft. **Annet Pauwelussen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Brooke Campbell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Catherine Moyle:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Dominique Benzaken:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Freya Croft:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Gerald Singh:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Hekia Bodwitch:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Hugh Breakey:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ibrahim Issifu:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Kate Barclay:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Leah Fusco:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Makrita Solitei:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Marleen Schutter:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Michelle Voyer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Yoshitaka Ota:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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Data Availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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