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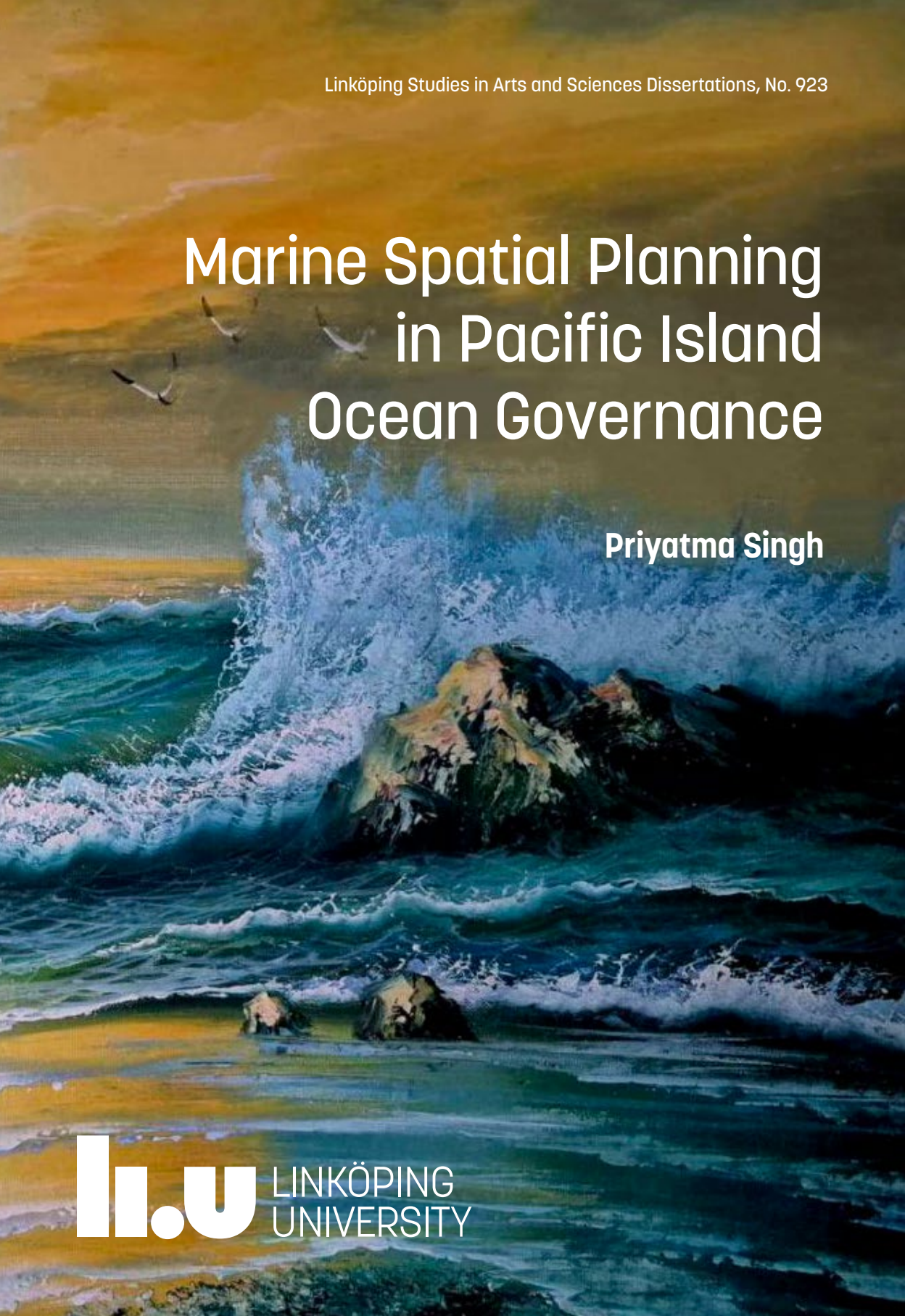
Marine Spatial Planning in Pacific Island Ocean Governance

Priyatma Singh



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Marine Spatial Planning in Pacific Island Ocean Governance

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Abstract

The sustainable governance of ocean spaces remains a pressing challenge for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where fragmented and sector-based management has long constrained the effectiveness of ocean governance. In these settings, multiple institutions often operate in isolation, pursuing competing priorities with limited coordination, resources, and accountability. These issues are particularly acute in the Pacific Islands, where vast ocean territories, customary marine tenure, and deeply rooted cultural values intersect with complex governance realities shaped by political and market-oriented forces. In response to these challenges, Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) offers an ecosystem-based, integrative framework for reconciling ecological, social, and economic objectives in marine and coastal governance. Yet, despite its growing adoption, MSP in SIDS remains a relatively new and complex endeavour, reflecting diverse institutional and cultural realities. This compilation thesis critically examines the role of MSP in advancing ocean governance in Pacific SIDS, with Fiji as the focal empirical case. It addresses a key knowledge gap regarding the contextual conditions under which MSP can function effectively as a governance instrument in resource-constrained, socially diverse settings. The four papers collectively trace this inquiry. The first paper identifies enabling and constraining conditions for MSP in SIDS through a semi-systematic literature review; the second explores how MSP could respond to Fiji's ocean governance challenges; the third investigates how Fiji's MSP process aligns with Indigenous coastal perspectives; and the fourth evaluates the extent to which MSP is fit for purpose in advancing transformative ocean governance across the Pacific.

The findings demonstrate that MSP's effectiveness in SIDS depends on robust collaborative mechanisms underpinned by facilitative leadership, clearly defined legal mandates, strong institutions, and social capital that bridges formal and informal governance systems. Yet, the Pacific context presents distinct governance challenges, including colonial legacies of centralized authority, limited stakeholder ownership, overlapping institutional responsibilities, and low public awareness of MSP that constrain the transformative potential of MSP and risk perpetuating top-down approaches. Even so, MSP in this region has the potential to become a transformative governance instrument, precisely because of the Pacific's remarkable ecological, cultural, and institutional diversity. Rather than a barrier, this diversity could serve as the foundation for a collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance architecture, in which multiple islands, customary authorities, and local institutions operate as interconnected nodes of innovation, learning, and resilience. In practical terms, this transformation requires legal recognition of customary marine tenure, resourcing local communities for meaningful participation, and empowering boundary organizations and communities of practice to bridge governance processes across scales. Together, these measures outline a pathway for MSP in the Pacific to move beyond its current technocratic and procedural emphasis, evolving into a relational, inclusive, and adaptive governance process capable of aligning ecological sustainability and economic aspirations with cultural legitimacy, equity, and social justice.

Keywords: marine spatial planning, ocean governance, Pacific Islands, transformative change, Indigenous Peoples

Sammanfattning

Hållbar förvaltning av havsområden är en angelägen utmaning för små önationer under utveckling (SIDS**)**, där fragmenterad och sektorsbaserad styrning länge har begränsat effektiviteten i havsförvaltningen. I dessa länder verkar ofta flera institutioner parallellt, med motstridiga prioriteringar och begränsad samordning, resursbas och ansvarsfördelning. Dessa utmaningar är särskilt akuta i önationer i Stilla havet, där vidsträckta havsområden, sedvanerättsliga nyttjanderätter och djupt rotade kulturella värderingar möter komplexa styrningsförhållanden präglade av politiska och marknadsmässiga krafter.

Som svar på dessa utmaningar erbjuder Marin Fysisk Planering ett ekosystembaserat och integrerat ramverk för att förena ekologiska, sociala och ekonomiska mål inom marin och kustnära förvaltning. Trots en växande användning är Marin Fysisk Planering fortfarande ett relativt nytt och komplext styrinstrument som speglar mångskiftande institutionella och kulturella förutsättningar.Denna sammanläggningsavhandling undersöker kritiskt vilken roll Marin Fysisk Planering kan spela för att främja havsförvaltning i Stillahavsområdets små önationer, med Fiji som empiriskt huvudfall.

Avhandlingen adresserar en central kunskapslucka som rör de kontextuella förhållanden under vilka Marin Fysisk Planering kan fungera effektivt som styrinstrument i resursbegränsade och socialt skiftande miljöer. Avhandlingen undersöker detta i fyra artiklar. Den första artikeln är en semistrukturerad litteraturöversikt, där förutsättningar som möjliggör och begränsar Marin Fysisk Planering i Stillahavsområdet identifieras. Den andra artikeln undersöker hur Marin Fysisk Planering kan möta Fijis utmaningar inom havsförvaltningen. Den tredje artikeln undersöker hur Fijis process för Marin Fysisk Planering överensstämmer med ursprungsbefolkningars perspektiv på kustområden. Den fjärde artikeln utvärderar i vilken utsträckning Marin Fysisk Planering lämpar sig för att främja en transformativ havsförvaltning i Stilla havsområdet.

Resultaten visar att effektiviteten för Marin Fysisk Planering i önationer i Stilla havsområdet är beroende av robusta former för samverkan, grundade i möjliggörande ledarskap, tydliga rättsliga mandat, starka institutioner och ett socialt kapital som kan överbrygga formella och informella styrningssystem. Samtidigt präglas Stilla havsområdet av särskilda styrningsutmaningar, såsom centraliserad maktutövning som ett resultat av koloniala arv, begränsat aktörsinflytande, överlappande institutionella ansvarsområden och låg allmän kännedom om Marin Fysisk Planering. Dessa faktorer hämmar dess transformativa potential och riskerar att befästa uppifrån-och-ner-perspektiv.

Trots detta har Marin Fysisk Planering potential att bli ett transformativt styrinstrument i denna region, just på grund av Stilla havsområdets anmärkningsvärda ekologiska, kulturella och institutionella mångfald. Snarare än ett hinder skulle denna mångfald kunna tjäna som grund för en samarbetsinriktad, polycentrisk och adaptiv styrningsarkitektur, där öar, sedvanerättsliga institutioner och lokala organisationer fungerar som sammankopplade noder för innovation, lärande och resiliens.

I praktiken kräver en sådan transformation att sedvanerättsligt inflytande över havsområden erkänns juridiskt, att lokala samhällen ges resurser för meningsfullt deltagande, samt att gränsöverskridande organisationer och praktikgemenskaper stärks. Tillsammans utgör dessa

åtgärder en möjlig väg för önationer i Stilla havsområdet, där Marin Fysisk Planering kan utvecklas bortom sitt nuvarande teknokratiska och procedurmässiga fokus och istället bli en mer relationell, inkluderande och adaptiv styrningsprocess, som kan förena ekologisk hållbarhet och ekonomiska ambitioner med kulturell legitimitet, jämlikhet och social rättvisa.

Nyckelord: marin fysisk planering, havsförvaltning, Stillahavsöar, transformativ förändring, ursprungsbefolkningar

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List of Papers

Paper I — Priyatma Singh, Björn-Ola Linner, and Ashneel Ajay Singh (2025). Marine Spatial Planning and Ocean Governance in Small Island Developing States. *Regional Environmental Change,* Vol. 25, 91. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-025-02412-x

Paper II — Priyatma Singh, Björn-Ola Linner, and Kushaal Raj Singh (2025). Marine Spatial Planning in Ocean Governance: Fijian Perspectives. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, *12*, 1686846. https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2025.1686846

Paper III — Priyatma Singh, Björn-Ola Linner, and Victoria Wibeck. Making Marine Spatial Planning fit for Coastal Indigenous Communities: A Fijian case study. *This article is submitted and under review*.

Paper IV — Priyatma Singh. Marine Spatial Planning in Pacific Islands - A Transformative Approach to Ocean Governance?
This article is submitted and under review.

Contribution to the papers

Paper I: Priyatma Singh was primarily responsible for conceptualization, methodology, literature review, and led the analysis and writing.

Paper II: Priyatma Singh was primarily responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data collection, and led the analysis and writing.

Paper III: Priyatma Singh was primarily responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data collection, and led the analysis and writing.

Paper IV: Priyama Singh has the sole authorship for the article.

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List of Acronyms

EBM	Ecosystem-Based Management
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FLMMA	Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LMMA	Locally Managed Marine Areas
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MSP	Marine Spatial Planning
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Chapter 1.0: Introduction

In his influential essays on reimagining the Pacific Islands, Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, a Tongan-Fijian writer and anthropologist, articulated a relational and empowering worldview that continues to shape contemporary debates on Pacific identity, sovereignty, and ocean governance.

> *There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as "islands in a far sea" and as "a sea of islands." The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power, focusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships*. (Hau'ofa, 1994 p.5).

The first perspective reduces the Pacific Islands to isolated, fragile outposts on the periphery of global power. The second, in contrast, emphasizes an interconnected and relational seascape in which land, ocean, and people are seen in the totality of their relationships. This holistic worldview not only challenges external portrayals of smallness and remoteness but also foregrounds the cultural, ecological, and economic significance of the Pacific Ocean and its island societies as a connected seascape of resilience and possibilities. Yet, even as this worldview endures, the coastal and ocean spaces of Pacific Islands are increasingly framed through an economic lens, particularly by national governments, regional strategies, and global blue economy initiatives, as new frontiers for fishing, mining, tourism, trade and shipping, energy generation, and food production (IOC-UNESCO, 2024; Murphy & Gard, 2025; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022).

This growing economic focus intersects with multiple pressures intensifying across the Pacific region, including climate change, resource extraction, and marine pollution. Global warming is one of the most critical and existential challenges confronting Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Mycoo, 2022). As Siekiera (2020) notes, impacts of global warming such as rising sea levels and changing ocean conditions directly threaten territorial integrity and, consequently, the sovereignty and statehood of low-lying nations. At the same time, Pacific Islands are attracting growing interest from an expanding range of ocean-based actors, including states, industries, and conservation-oriented organizations, each pursuing distinct agendas for the use and stewardship of marine spaces. This intensifying competition for access, control, conservation, and resource extraction increases the risk of overlapping claims, fragmented authority, and governance conflicts across the region (Papageorgiou & Kyvelou, 2018). Together, these dynamics illustrate how the Pacific Islands and their ocean territories are both a site of acute vulnerability and a contested geopolitical frontier for SIDS. For the Pacific SIDS, ocean-based industries such as tourism and fisheries remain primary sources of livelihood, foreign exchange, and employment (Ghina, 2003; Pratt, 2015), but the pursuit of these benefits is fraught with tension between ecological sustainability, cultural well-being, and economic development (Pathirana, 2025).

Pacific SIDS have often taken global leadership in ocean stewardship, pioneering marine protected areas (MPAs) and championing biodiversity conservation in international fora. Yet, the governance of ocean uses, such as fisheries, tourism, shipping, mining, and conservation, has largely remained sectoral, shaped by legislation and institutions that often operate in

isolation (Rochette et al., 2015). For instance, small-scale fishers may lose access to customary grounds because of MPAs, while licensed commercial fleets may clash with conservation zones. Tourism operators may perceive fishing near reefs as undermining the aesthetic appeal that sustains their industry. On-the-ground realities in some Pacific Islands illustrate these challenges vividly. For instance, in Tuvalu, the extraction of sand and coral for local construction is regulated under national mining and environmental laws, while shipping and port operations are managed separately by maritime authorities (Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, 2018; UNOPS, 2020). During the dry season, community fishers navigating small canoes often encounter sediment plumes from sand mining operations, which obscure coral reefs and make navigation hazardous. Meanwhile, dredgers maintaining shipping lanes generate waves that dislodge harvested sand and disrupt fishing (SPREP, 2015; Fong et al., 2019). Such conflicts illustrate how sectoral silos can pit essential livelihoods against one another, even when all activities contribute to the local economy and well-being. Such situations not only heighten tensions between user groups but also erode trust in regulatory authorities, turning the sea of islands into a sea of contestation.

The approaches and strategies that once worked for managing isolated uses of the ocean is now inadequate in a context where numerous actors and interests converge and compete for the same marine spaces (Alexander & Haward, 2019; Roberts et al., 2021; Rochette et al., 2015; Sievanen et al., 2013; Young et al., 2007). In response, governments and regional organizations have begun adopting management paradigms that aspire to be more holistic, grounded in ecosystem-based and integrated principles. The most notable example is marine spatial planning (MSP) (Ferse, 2023; Stephenson et al., 2021; Vince et al., 2017; Zacharias, 2014). What is intriguing about MSP is its growing popularity for transcending these silos by promoting an integrated, ecosystem-based approach that connects ocean, coastal, and land-based systems (Ehler & Douvere, 2010; Ehler, 2018; Merrie, 2011; Ogden, 2010). Marine spatial planning seeks to balance current and future demands on ocean ecosystems while safeguarding the continued provision of ecosystem services in ways that align with ecological integrity, economic development, and social well-being (Foley et al., 2010). Marine spatial planning offers planners and policymakers a new framework to evaluate multiple ocean uses and cumulative impacts simultaneously, marking a significant departure from siloed approaches.

In recent years, a growing number of SIDS have adopted MSP, signalling increased political commitment to integrated and inclusive forms of ocean governance. The Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan, for example, demonstrates MSP's potential to foster transformative outcomes when participatory processes actively value local knowledge, encourage shared leadership, and support continuous learning. Yet, scholars caution that without strong governance capacity, equitable representation, and sustained local ownership, MSP risks reinforcing existing power asymmetries and marginalizing those most reliant on marine resources (Flannery et al., 2020; Said & MacMillan, 2020; Tafon et al., 2019). These critiques note that the adoption of MSP alone is insufficient, rather, its design and practice must be consciously re-oriented to address socio-political barriers. To overcome such barriers, Flannery et al. (2020) call for a 'critical turn' in MSP, toward equity-oriented and socially attuned practices capable of reshaping governance systems. Gerhardinger et al. (2022) further argue that MSP can contribute to transformative governance when it mobilises inter-network strategies, surfaces and addresses power asymmetries, and builds relational capacity beyond traditional governmental silos. In the Pacific, this transformative ambition is embodied in regional policy

commitments such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which frames transformation around strengthened governance pathways, resilient ocean ecosystems, and a shift toward sustainable blue economic development (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022). In broader sustainability debates, transformative governance refers to efforts that reconfigure the structures, functions, relationships, and ways of knowing embedded in socio-technical-ecological systems, enabling new pathways and outcomes to emerge (Evans et al., 2023; IPBES, 2024; Linnér & Wibeck, 2019). Within marine contexts, transformative ocean governance emphasizes the capacities and mechanisms required to overcome entrenched governance regimes and advance more inclusive, equitable, and resilient futures (Lombard et al., 2023).

As SIDS increasingly turn to MSP, the key challenge is not whether to adopt it, but how to adapt and reimagine it for small, resource-constrained, and culturally diverse island contexts, such as those in the Pacific. This requires management and governance approaches that reflect the Pacific's own relational ocean worldview rather than relying solely on imported planning models. Framed through Hau'ofa's vision of a *'sea of islands,'* these transformative ambitions are particularly relevant, as ocean governance in the Pacific region is intertwined with customary tenure systems, unique island cultures, Indigenous knowledge, and long-standing socio-ecological relationships that risk being overlooked in technocratic planning models.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to *critically assess the role of MSP in advancing ocean governance in Pacific Island Countries*. Fiji is the focal empirical case, offering insight into how emerging MSP processes unfold in a small island context marked by customary tenure, governance complexity, and high exposure to climate and economic vulnerabilities. The aim is guided by three interrelated research questions (RQ):

1. What constitutes effective ocean governance and MSP in SIDS? (Paper I and enriched with findings from Papers II, III and IV)
2. How has MSP functioned as a governance instrument in Fiji? (Papers II and III)
3. To what extent is MSP fit for purpose in advancing transformative ocean governance in Pacific SIDS? (Paper IV)

The three research questions are addressed across the four papers in a cumulative and complementary manner. RQ1 is primarily addressed in Paper I, which synthesizes existing scholarship to conceptualize the conditions that enable effective ocean governance and MSP in SIDS. These conceptual insights are subsequently enriched through empirical evidence from Papers II, III, and IV. RQ2 is explored in Papers II and III. Paper II investigates how national-level governance actors in Fiji understand MSP's potential to address current ocean management challenges, while Paper III complements this perspective by examining how emerging MSP processes resonate with the perspectives of Indigenous Fijian coastal communities.

Fiji presents a compelling and timely case study for several reasons. As the country embarks on its MSP journey, having initiated preliminary steps toward developing a comprehensive plan for its internal and territorial waters, it provides a unique opportunity to examine the

foundational stages of MSP design, governance, and institutionalization. Studying the process at this formative stage enables the proactive identification of pathways to influence emerging policy and governance processes, rather than assessing them retrospectively. Insights from Fiji's experience, therefore, hold broader relevance for other small island nations pursuing similar MSP pathways.

Over the past decade, Fiji has developed a suite of ocean-related policies, strategic plans, and marine management frameworks to advance holistic, integrated approaches to ocean governance. As such, Fiji provides an illustrative context for examining how institutional coherence, or the lack thereof, can influence the alignment between MSP processes and existing governance arrangements. Fiji's continuous engagement in international ocean fora and its strong advocacy for sustainable and equitable ocean stewardship further enhance its significance as a case study, offering an opportunity to explore how global policy commitments and discourses are interpreted, adapted, and enacted at national and community levels. In addition to the in-depth analysis of Fiji, Paper IV contributes a regional perspective by examining emerging MSP experiences across Pacific SIDS. This comparative lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how MSP is taking shape in diverse island contexts, revealing shared opportunities, constraints, and contextual dynamics that influence its development and transformative potential. The following section highlights the research gaps and my contributions to advancing scholarship on MSP and ocean governance in SIDS.

1.2 Research Gaps

Marine spatial planning has gained significant global traction, yet critical knowledge gaps persist regarding how it is conceptualized and implemented across diverse contexts. In this section I identify several gaps: (1) *Geographical and epistemic bias,* (2) *Dominance of technocratic paradigm,* (3) *Implementation gaps,* (4) *Context-specific empirical evidence for SIDS,* (5) *Lack of insight into MSP's transformative potential,* (6) *Lack of clarity on social and governance dimensions,* (7) *Limited understanding of collaboration mechanisms,* (8) *Inadequate attention to how multi-level governance and networks shape MSP outcomes*.

Marine spatial planning scholarship remains geographically uneven and epistemically narrow. Marine spatial planning has historically been shaped by insights from the natural sciences and by the practical experience of developed nations that have advanced its implementation. Consequently, much of the global MSP literature remains dominated by perspectives and case studies from the Global North, particularly Europe. Over half of the leading authors contributing to MSP scholarship are affiliated with European institutions, and a substantial proportion of empirical work has been conducted within the European Union (Chalastani et al., 2021; Ehler, 2020; Flannery et al., 2020; Smythe & McCann, 2019). Countries such as Australia, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Portugal have made notable progress in MSP design and implementation, supported by robust institutional capacity, technical expertise, and long-standing marine research infrastructures.

Peer-reviewed empirical studies that explore the practical experiences, governance dynamics, and socio-cultural dimensions of MSP in SIDS are relatively scarce. In addition, MSP knowledge continues to be largely informed by technocratic and science-driven paradigms, which have led to a persistent lack of theoretical clarity regarding how MSP functions as a governance process (Flannery et al., 2019; St. Martin & Hall-Arber, 2008; Tafon, 2018; Trouillet, 2020).

According to Trouillet (2020);

> *Theoretical reflection on planning (roles, types) and its political dimensions, are only secondary or even marginal when they should play a more primary role and give rise to more rigorous debate, thus enabling the core MSP concepts to be properly grounded* (p. 445).

Likewise, Flannery et al. (2019) underscore the need for a more potent infusion of social science perspectives into MSP research, arguing that only through such engagement can we begin to unravel the power relations, value conflicts, and governance dynamics that shape planning outcomes. A socially grounded approach, they contend, is essential to uncovering how MSP might transcend its technocratic tendencies and realize its full democratic and transformative potential.

Moreover, there is a widening gap between the conceptual ideals of MSP and its implementation in developed countries, but even more so in SIDS. For instance, the United Kingdom took five years to enact the necessary laws to address issues associated with establishing MSP authority, acquiring stakeholder support, and securing funding (Ehler, 2020). Similarly, fragmented policies, unclear objectives, and weak institutional coordination delayed Portugal's first MSP initiative by nearly a decade (Santos et al., 2018). These experiences underscore that even in the Global North, the barriers to effective MSP are primarily political and institutional rather than technical (Ehler, 2020; Jay et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, even in contexts where MSP has achieved legal or procedural maturity, persistent challenges remain in ensuring meaningful participation, effective monitoring and evaluation, and sustained resource mobilization (Clarke & Flannery, 2019).

These socio-political realities are equally relevant, and often amplified, in SIDS, where ecological fragility, limited data, economic vulnerability, and climate change exacerbate planning challenges (Johnson et al., 2020). Although numerous toolkits and guidelines have been developed to assist practitioners, they remain largely generic and insufficiently grounded in empirical research from SIDS contexts. Despite the growing interest in MSP in SIDS, there is still no clear consensus on what constitutes an effective pathway for its development and implementation. Research highlights several persistent challenges shaped by the region's unique governance and resource constraints. Data limitations and inadequate technical capacity hinder evidence-based planning and monitoring (Fletcher et al., 2011; Mahadeo, 2022), while the absence of sustainable financing mechanisms raises concerns about long-term viability (Booth & Brooks, 2023). At the same time, questions of inclusivity, equity, and social sustainability remain insufficiently addressed, particularly in integrating marginalized and Indigenous communities into decision-making processes (Baker et al., 2023; Fa'otusia et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020).

Collectively, these scholars are contributing to a growing discourse at the intersection of MSP theory and practice, raising critical questions about its democratic and distributive dimensions: How does MSP's integrative nature contribute to more just and effective ocean governance? Where does decision-making power reside? And to what extent are MSP processes genuinely inclusive in practice? The concurrent rise of the blue economy further complicates these dynamics by making ocean space increasingly contested and transboundary, thereby demanding innovative, participatory, and adaptive governance

responses. Yet, while these debates are expanding, there remains a limited understanding of how MSP might catalyze deeper transformations in worldviews and practices, institutional arrangements, and power relations, particularly in SIDS.

Altogether, MSP experiences from both the Global North and SIDS cases establish that while MSP has gained widespread attention as a practical approach to ecosystem-based management, there has been limited investigation into the social and governance mechanisms necessary for it to be effective (Baker et al., 2023; Flannery et al., 2019; Flannery et al., 2016; Gilek et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Queffelec et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2018). As Gilek et al. (2021) observe, discussions of social sustainability in MSP remain limited, despite their relevance to practitioners and planners. The social dimensions of MSP include the sociocultural values it fosters and the benefits it produces, the nature of stakeholder participation, and the integration of diverse forms of knowledge and worldviews into planning and decision-making. In contrast, governance mechanisms encompass the political interests, institutional arrangements, and normative frameworks that can either enable or constrain MSP processes. Within these, the quality and depth of stakeholder interactions remain a central concern.

Ocean planning processes ideally integrate diverse forms of knowledge and value systems, yet achieving such integration remains a persistent challenge given the multiplicity of actors, asymmetries of power, and competing economic and conservation priorities that characterize MSP contexts (Dancette & Brêthes, 2019; Lester et al., 2017; Vince & Day, 2020). Several scholars emphasize the need for robust stakeholder engagement (e.g. Flannery & Cinneide, 2012; Gopnik et al., 2012; Pomeroy & Douvere, 2008; Quesada-Silva et al., 2019). A few scholars have even proposed a comprehensive framework for evaluating stakeholder participation in MSP (Pentz, 2012; Pomeroy & Douvere, 2008; Quesada-Silva et al., 2019). Recent studies have focused on participatory, bottom-up approaches that foreground local ecological knowledge and social capital as foundations for equitable MSP (Cockerell & Jones, 2021; Jacob et al., 2023). Yet, despite this progress, limited attention has been paid to the mechanisms of collaboration within MSP, particularly the governance mechanisms that facilitate social interaction, joint learning, and integrative action among diverse actors. Among the few studies that do examine these dynamics, planners are seen as central to enabling co-production of knowledge, shared vision-building, and the creation of coordinated strategies (e.g. Bonnevie et al., 2023; Ramadhan et al., 2020).

While these studies illuminate the importance of collaboration within individual planning processes, another strand of research has shifted attention to the broader governance networks that connect these processes across scales. For instance, some scholars have focused on collaborative networks at national and regional scales, exploring how these alliances facilitate coordination across jurisdictions and support the development of transboundary MSP (e.g. Baldwin & Mahon, 2014; Li & Jay, 2023; Moodie & Sielker, 2022; Smythe, 2017). Blythe et al. (2021) further argue that an explicit engagement with the political dimensions of ocean governance is necessary within academic and policy discourses to address social disparities and mitigate ocean degradation. Similarly, several authors highlight the importance of understanding institutional collaboration and coordination, noting that these dynamics shape power relations among stakeholders and can either enable or constrain interaction and learning within MSP processes (Flannery et al., 2019; Gerhardinger et al., 2019; Zuercher et al., 2022). Drawing on the Brazilian experience, Gerhardinger et al. (2019)

demonstrate that while there is substantial conceptual understanding of MSP's "steps" and governance principles (Ehler & Douvere, 2009), there remains limited empirical insight into how MSP transitions from fragmented, pilot-level initiatives to coherent, multi-level governance frameworks that are socially legitimate, politically supported, and culturally grounded. Yet, most of such analyses remain confined to the Global North or large developing countries, leaving a significant gap in understanding how collaborative networks and governance mechanisms operate within the unique sociocultural and institutional contexts of SIDS.

Despite growing global enthusiasm for MSP, it remains a contested and evolving governance approach, entangled with debates over sustainability, equity, financing, and the blue economy (Baker et al., 2023; Ehler, 2020; Flannery et al., 2018; Gurney et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Mahadeo, 2022). While countries with established governance systems and technical capacity are better equipped to navigate MSP's demands, its trajectory in SIDS, marked by ecological vulnerability, limited resources, and nascent institutional frameworks, remains highly uncertain. While limited research on the implementation of MSP in SIDS is somewhat expected, given that several of them are in the early stages of MSP development, these gaps collectively hinder the capacity of both practitioners and scholars to enhance, adapt, and refine the MSP framework to suit diverse, context-specific needs.

Accordingly, these gaps signal the need for more holistic inquiry that accounts for how social relations, cultural values, and governance systems intersect in MSP across SIDS. Interdisciplinary marine science offers valuable pathways for addressing this gap, integrating insights from conservation and biodiversity, oceanography, governance, and the social sciences to foster more holistic understandings of ocean governance (Ferse, 2023; Spalding & McKinley, 2024). With growing recognition of MSP's wider social and political complexities (McKinley et al., 2020; Partelow et al., 2023; Popova et al., 2023), the synthesis of research gaps (Table 1) highlight the need for empirical and theoretically grounded research that captures how MSP is interpreted, practiced, and adapted within the distinctive governance contexts of SIDS.

Research Gaps	**Description**
Geographical and epistemic bias	MSP scholarship and evidence remain dominated by Global North contexts, particularly Europe, limiting relevance and applicability for SIDS.
Dominance of technocratic paradigms	MSP continues to be guided mainly by natural science and spatial analysis, with insufficient attention to politics, power dynamics, and societal realities.
Implementation gap	A persistent divide exists between MSP's conceptual ambition and its practical realization, even in well-resourced contexts, highlighting political and institutional rather than technical barriers.
Context-specific empirical evidence for SIDS	Limited research examines how MSP is interpreted, developed, and enacted within the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and ecological contexts of SIDS.

Research Gaps	Description
Lack of insight into MSP's transformative potential	Whether and how MSP can reconfigure institutional arrangements, shift worldviews, and redistribute power remains poorly understood
Lack of clarity on social and governance dimensions	Insufficient attention to how sociocultural values, participation dynamics, knowledge integration, power relations, and institutional coordination shape MSP processes and outcomes
Limited understanding of collaboration mechanisms	While participation is emphasized conceptually, little is known about how collaboration, joint learning, and co-production of knowledge occur in practice.
Inadequate attention to how multi-level governance and networks shape MSP outcomes	Research rarely explores how coordination and decision-making operate across scales (local–national–regional), especially in SIDS where plural governance systems coexist.

Table 1: Synthesis of key research gaps in marine spatial planning literature

1.3 My Contribution

Building upon the research gaps identified in section 1.2, this thesis directly addresses the limited understanding of how MSP functions as a governance process, particularly within the socio-cultural, institutional, and political realities of Pacific SIDS. It responds to the need for more empirically grounded, theoretically informed studies that move beyond technocratic, science-driven perspectives to capture the social and governance dimensions of MSP. Participatory processes are premised on the assumption that policy outcomes derived from inclusive deliberation are more likely to gain stakeholder acceptance, thereby enhancing legitimacy and increasing the likelihood of effective implementation (Jarvis et al., 2015; Pentz, 2012; Reed, 2008; Ritchie & Ellis, 2010). In practice, many MSP processes remain dominated by technical experts and state institutions, leaving limited space for local, Indigenous, and community voices (Baker et al., 2023; Fa'otusia et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, the link between participatory ideals and the institutionalization of MSP remains tenuous. Despite MSP's rapid global diffusion, how it connects to and whether they hold potential to transform the governance of ocean-based activities within national systems is still unclear (Domínguez-Tejo et al., 2016; Karnad & St. Martin, 2020; Said & Trouillet, 2020; Vince & Day, 2020). Against this backdrop, this thesis contributes empirically grounded insights into whether and how governance mechanisms, stakeholder interactions, distributed authority, and knowledge co-production may support more inclusive, coordinated, and transformative forms of ocean governance.

This thesis offers context-specific empirical insights from Pacific SIDS, thereby addressing both the geographical and epistemic imbalance that characterizes the global MSP literature. Conceptually, the study employs an integrated governance framing that brings together

perspectives from collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance, alongside recent thinking on transformative change in sustainability transformations (Chapter 3). These perspectives collectively provide the analytical foundation for understanding how authority, learning, and coordination operate across governance scales and how MSP might foster more inclusive and adaptive forms of ocean governance. It also contributes a framework for understanding the enabling and constraining factors that influence collaborative capacity in emerging MSP processes. These contributions advance the development of governance approaches that reflect Pacific realities, values, and leadership practices rather than externally imposed models. In doing so, the thesis extends current debates on MSP beyond managerial or technocratic framings and explores its potential to catalyze broader systemic and value-based shifts, linking practical governance processes to the underlying social and institutional conditions that enable transformation in ocean governance across the Pacific.

Chapter 2.0: Policy Context and Background

2.1 Marine spatial planning

Marine spatial planning gained considerable traction within the European Union (EU), where it became a central instrument for implementing the Integrated Maritime Policy and the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive. In 2006, the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) convened its inaugural international workshop on MSP and has since emerged as a leading institution promoting MSP worldwide. In 2009, the publication of *Marine Spatial Planning: A Step-by-Step Approach toward Ecosystem-based Management* (Ehler & Douvere, 2009) provided the first internationally recognized methodological guide and established the conceptual foundations of MSP as an ecosystem-based and integrated management framework. A decade later, in collaboration with the European Commission, IOC-UNESCO launched the "Joint Roadmap to accelerate MSP processes worldwide" (MSProadmap), which aimed to harmonize planning practices across scales and regions (Friess & Grémaud-Colombier, 2021). To facilitate its implementation, the MSPglobal initiative was introduced, providing technical support, capacity-building, and knowledge-exchange platforms. Originally conceived as a scientific tool for biodiversity conservation (Day, 2002), MSP has evolved into a globally recognized governance framework for coordinating diverse marine uses within ecological limits (Clarke & Flannery, 2019; Merrie, 2011). Today, it is practiced in over 120 countries, with remarkably rapid uptake across Africa and the Pacific over the past decade (IOC-UNESCO, 2024).

The ocean holds profound cultural, spiritual, and subsistence significance for many Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLC). In the Pacific Islands, for example, the ocean is viewed as an extension of identity, lineage, and tradition (Veitayaki et al., 2014). For generations, Pacific Islanders have practiced some form of spatial and temporal management that resonate with MSP principles such as ecosystem-based management, spatial allocation of uses, and governance rooted in place-based knowledge and stewardship, long before the concept was formalized in Western science. Some examples of these Indigenous practices include seasonal closures associated with chiefly observances and temporally restricting fishing to protect spawning seasons (Doulman, 1993; Johannes, 1978; Veitayaki, 1997), spatial zoning of customary fishing grounds (Ruddle, 1988; Techera & Troniak, 2009) and use of traditional ecological knowledge to conserve culturally and ecologically significant species and sites (Adams, 1998; Clarke, 1990; Govan et al., 2009; Holthus, 1996). Such initiatives demonstrate long-standing traditions of ocean management that predate and continue to inform modern marine management discourse in the Pacific (Fache & Pauwels, 2020). The following section provides an overview of international ocean policy frameworks and discusses ocean governance initiatives within the broader SIDS and Pacific SIDS contexts. The final part of this section focuses on Fiji, the primary research focus of this dissertation.

2.2 International ocean policy context

As the economic and strategic value of ocean space and resources expands, a nuanced understanding of how policy frameworks and management instruments influence ocean governance is vital to achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes (Bennett, 2019; Blythe et al., 2021; Keen et al., 2018).

According to Blythe et al. (2021):

> *The surge in competing approaches for ocean governance is likely to result in diverse outcomes that may not be coherent to each other, ranging from securing the rights of small-scale fisheries to exposing small island states to international market fluctuations and the continued domination of entrenched powers in foreign investment and multilateral negotiations.* (p. 9)

The oceans exhibit high levels of complexity and interconnectivity, with approximately two-thirds falling beyond the jurisdiction of individual states. This reality underscores a shared global responsibility and the imperative for collective coordination and transboundary ocean governance to ensure effective stewardship of marine resources (Polejack, 2021; Pyć, 2016). The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the overarching legal foundation for regulating ocean space and maritime activities. It articulates the principles of a unified and cooperative approach to managing the interconnected dimensions of ocean use and protection (United Nations General Assembly, 1982). Over time, UNCLOS has been complemented by several implementing agreements, including those related to Part XI on the Area (the International Seabed), the UN Fish Stocks Agreement, and most recently, the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, commonly known as the *High Seas Treaty*. This treaty represents the newest legally binding international instrument for ocean conservation and is expected to significantly advance efforts to protect marine biodiversity in alignment with the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Deasy, 2023). These internationally agreed platforms reinforce the value of ecosystem-based management approaches and provide important cues for states to enhance coordination between national, regional, and global governance processes (Ferse, 2023). In addition to these core agreements, a wide array of specialized conventions addresses specific domains such as maritime transport, marine scientific research, fisheries management, biodiversity conservation within Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), and the protection of endangered species (Al-Abdulrazzak et al., 2017). Collectively, these instruments form a comprehensive and evolving body of international maritime law, shaping how states cooperate to balance ocean use with long-term ecological sustainability.

The year 2015 marked the beginning of a new and pivotal era in ocean science, governance, and sustainability, generating renewed optimism among ocean actors worldwide (Claudet et al., 2020). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marked the first inclusion of a standalone global objective focused specifically on the ocean, signalling an unprecedented recognition of the ocean's centrality to human well-being and planetary health. Momentum continued to build in subsequent years. At the 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP23) in 2017, under Fiji's presidency and hosted in Bonn, Germany, the ocean was formally placed at the heart of climate negotiations for the first time, an event widely referred to as the first "Blue COP." Two years later, at COP25, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate

Change (UNFCCC) launched its inaugural Ocean–Climate Dialogue, drawing on findings from the IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate (Pörtner et al., 2019). Building on these developments, subsequent COPs have expanded the ocean–climate nexus, urging Parties to embed ocean-based actions into their Nationally Determined Contributions, long-term sustainability strategies, and adaptation plans. Parallel events, such as the United Nations Ocean Conference in New York (2017) and the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP15), further consolidated the ocean's prominence within the global sustainable development agenda.

Two complementary global initiatives have since emerged as major drivers of transformation: the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy (2018–2022), which mobilized political leadership and knowledge co-production for ocean-based economic transitions; and the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), which seeks to generate the science needed for sustainable and equitable ocean management (Enevoldsen et al., 2022). Together, these initiatives symbolize a decade-long shift toward integrated, collaborative, and transformative approaches to ocean governance (Turra, 2021), reflecting a growing consensus that achieving sustainability on land is inseparable from ocean stewardship.

Indeed, numerous international institutions and policy frameworks now operate across multiple sectors of global ocean conservation and governance, extending from the global scale to regional and national contexts, including SIDS and the wider Pacific (Fig.1). These frameworks have fostered new avenues for international collaboration, promoting knowledge exchange, policy alignment, and capacity building among states and organizations. Initiatives such as ocean basin research programs have enhanced global scientific connectivity, linking major economies, including G20 and G7 countries, with select SIDS, including New Caledonia and Fiji. However, this growing interconnectivity has not always translated into practical or equitable collaboration. Deep structural disparities persist between the Global North and South, particularly disadvantaging SIDS, which often face limited financial resources, institutional capacity constraints, and underdeveloped ocean science infrastructure (Potter & Pearson, 2023). Despite these challenges, SIDS have demonstrated sustained collective agency in shaping the global ocean agenda. For instance, their persistent diplomatic efforts culminated in the inclusion of Target 14.7 under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 (Life Below Water), which seeks to conserve and sustainably use the ocean and its resources. The target explicitly recognizes the special case of SIDS and underscores the need to enhance ocean sustainability, economic resilience, and capacity development within these regions (Hillbom et al., 2023; Scobie, 2019).

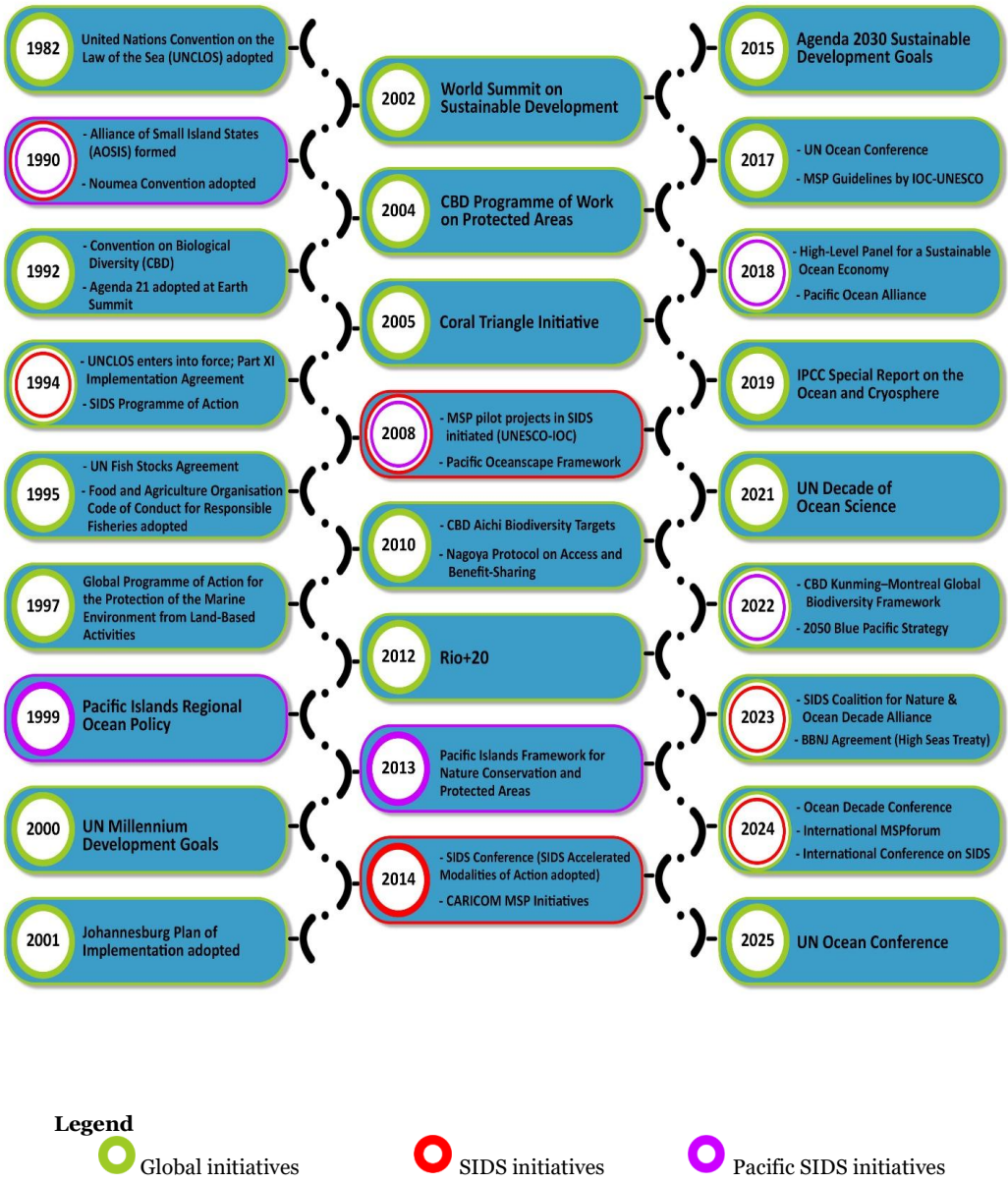


Figure 1: Chronology of key global, SIDS, and Pacific SIDS milestones in ocean governance and sustainable development (1982–2025)

2.3 Small Island Developing States - Ocean initiatives

The Small Island Developing States are geographically dispersed across three central regions: the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Atlantic–Indian Ocean–South China Sea group. Together, these regions encompass 57 states and territories, including 39 UN member states and 18 associate members and territories. Small Island Developing States are a heterogeneous group with diverse demographic, economic, and geographic characteristics. Yet, they share a distinctive position in global environmental governance due to their small economies, limited resource bases, and heightened vulnerability to external shocks (Scobie, 2019). This distinctiveness is further accentuated by the complex interactions between environmental degradation, economic dependence, and the escalating impacts of climate change (Kuruppu & Willie, 2015). Among SIDS, those in the Pacific are particularly exposed, experiencing some of the world's highest levels of economic vulnerability and disaster risk (Briguglio et al., 2014; Everest-Phillips, 2014).

The United Nations plays a pivotal role in advancing ocean governance for SIDS through a range of legal instruments, partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives that support sustainable ocean management. The establishment of the Alliance of Small Island States in 1990 marked a pivotal moment for SIDS. Within the global architecture, the Alliance of Small Island States serves as the collective diplomatic voice of SIDS, representing their shared interests in international negotiations on climate change, ocean governance, and sustainable development (Fig. 2).

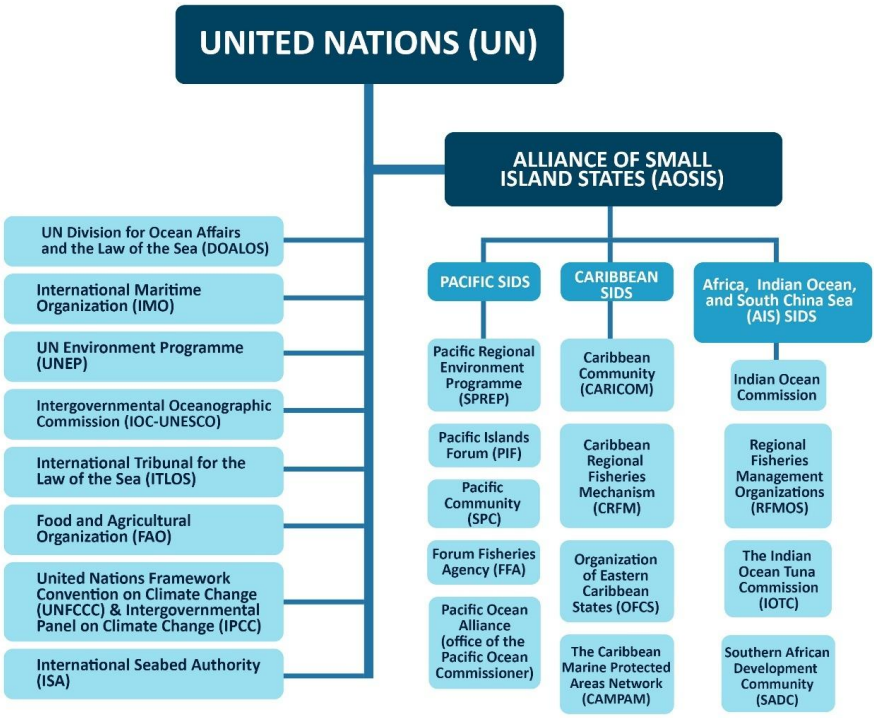


Figure 2: Key global and regional ocean governance institutions

Small Island Developing States have repeatedly reaffirmed their shared responsibility to safeguard the ocean and its resources. The 2014 SIDS Conference in Apia marked a significant milestone by launching the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway and catalyzing around 300 multi-stakeholder partnerships aimed at advancing sustainable development across SIDS (UNDESA, 2014). Approximately two-thirds of these partnerships were related to the sustainable use and management of ocean resources, reflecting the centrality of the ocean to SIDS economies, cultures, and livelihoods. The Fourth International Conference on SIDS, convened in Antigua and Barbuda in 2024, reaffirmed this commitment and prioritised several ocean-related areas, including the development of sustainable ocean economies, marine biodiversity conservation, and strengthened governance frameworks for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Bishop et al., 2024).

Over the past two decades, SIDS have adopted a range of ocean management strategies, including MPAs, sustainable fisheries management, and pollution control zones (Mangubhai et al., 2019). Complementary approaches such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management and, more recently, MSP emerged to coordinate multiple uses and activities within shared marine and coastal spaces. Both frameworks are built on ecosystem-based principles and seek to address the shortcomings of fragmented, sector-specific management. The integrated coastal zone management approach was developed earlier, with a primary focus on the interface between land and sea in coastal areas, whereas MSP is a more recent governance tool that extends these principles across the broader Exclusive Economic Zone (Douvere, 2010; Le Tissier, 2020). Given its broader scope, MSP is expected to gain momentum and will likely encompass integrated coastal zone management as one of its subsets. However, the development of MSP, whether it emerges from an existing process or is introduced as a new framework integrating various existing processes, will depend on the governance mechanisms, policies, and available resource capacity within each country (Jay et al., 2013).

The colonial histories of SIDS have rendered their economies particularly vulnerable to neoliberal ideologies and global market forces (Silver & Campbell, 2018). Consequently, contemporary ocean policy landscapes, governance mechanisms, institutional structures, and decision-making processes remain deeply intertwined with historical power relations and global trade dynamics (Blythe et al., 2021). These legacies underscore the importance of recognising and incorporating the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in ocean management, as they are both rights-holders and key stakeholders whose livelihoods, identities, and knowledge systems are intimately linked to marine resources. The ocean governance areas of interest that hold significant relevance for SIDS include sustainable fisheries, traditional fishing rights, conservation of endangered species, maritime transport, tourism, and, more recently, aquaculture (Govan, 2017). Emerging domains such as renewable marine energy, deep-sea mining, and marine bioprospecting further expand the policy frontier, while simultaneously intensifying the governance challenges associated with balancing development and conservation objectives (Chan, 2018; Saddington, 2023).

On a global scale, the ocean receives a tiny slice of finance, with SDG 14 consistently attracting the lowest funding among all SDGs. It accounts for approximately 1% of total Official Development Assistance directed toward the 2030 Agenda, reflecting a persistent underinvestment in ocean governance and protection (Johansen & Vestvik, 2020). Given the fiscal constraints facing both the Global North and the Global South, it is unlikely that development finance alone will meet the scale of investment required to achieve regional

ocean governance objectives by 2030. While continued access to Official Development Assistance and other forms of international support remains crucial, it is equally important for SIDS to diversify and innovate financial mechanisms at regional and national levels (Benzaken et al., 2022; Johansen & Vestvik, 2020). Collectively, these conditions make SIDS an especially compelling context for examining how historical legacies, political economies, data limitations, customary marine tenure, financial constraints, and multi-actor relationships shape the evolving architecture of ocean governance.

2.4 Pacific Small Island Developing States - Ocean governance

The Pacific SIDS (Fig. 3) are widely framed, particularly in regional diplomacy and policy discourse, as guided by a constellation of ocean stewardship values, including spirituality, reciprocity, equity, security, and prosperity (Govan, 2017; Hills et al., 2022). While these values serve as influential cultural narratives, they are neither static nor uniformly interpreted across islands and communities, as power relations, historical trajectories, and socio-economic inequalities shape how they are expressed in practice (Quirk & Hanich, 2016). Spirituality offers a moral grounding and a sense of ancestral connection to the sea; reciprocity reinforces obligations of care, trust, and mutual responsibility; equity emphasizes fairness and inclusion in the use of marine resources; security relates to sovereignty and food, livelihood, and cultural continuity; and prosperity reflects collective wellbeing rather than purely economic growth. Collectively, these principles inform ongoing efforts toward collaborative and culturally attuned ocean governance in the region, while also highlighting tensions regarding whose values are legitimized in policy processes.

The ocean lies at the heart of Pacific peoples' culture, identity, and sense of place, forming an integral part of what is often referred to as the *Pacific Way* of life (Mangubhai et al., 2019; Pratt & Govan, 2010). The region also holds a distinguished legacy of leadership in global ocean and climate negotiations (Fair, 2020). This is evident in the influential role of the Pacific region during the UNCLOS negotiations, and the successful conclusion of the United States Multilateral Tuna Treaty (Quirk & Hanich, 2016). Indeed, Fiji became the first country to ratify the UNCLOS in 1982, demonstrating its longstanding commitment to and leadership in global ocean governance (Government of Fiji, 2020). Pacific SIDS have also advanced regional interests in subsequent UNCLOS implementation agreements, particularly those concerning straddling and highly migratory fish stocks, as well as biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (Powles, 2002). Most recently, in early 2025, 14 Pacific SIDS secured US$107 million from the Green Climate Fund to address the risks posed by climate-driven shifts in tuna stocks. As one of the world's largest ocean–climate adaptation projects, this initiative underscores Pacific SIDS continued commitment to protecting vital ocean resource (Pacific Community (SPC), 2025).

The Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Policy, adopted in 2002, established the foundation for developing national ocean policies across the Pacific (Veitayaki et al., 2004). Successive frameworks stemming from this regional policy have progressively emphasized the integration of ecosystem-based management and the use of MSP tools within ocean governance (Sievanen et al., 2013; Vince et al., 2017). Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, seven Member States - the Cook Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu have developed national ocean policies. These policies were designed to overcome the limitations of sectoral approaches to ocean governance by adopting a whole-of-government approach.

These policies have established centralized institutional frameworks, often through inter-ministerial committees that include selected non-government representatives, to promote policy coherence and coordination. However, Pacific SIDS vary in their approach to national ocean governance. For instance, Cook Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands opted for a legislative approach to their ocean management, while the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu pursued a policy-based approach. While a legislative approach is expected to offer a stronger legal foundation for implementing ocean-based strategies compared to policies, the effectiveness of these different approaches remains uncertain, as these are still relatively new and in the early stages of implementation. The Pacific SIDS have welcomed the introduction of national ocean policies and law, yet the extent to which they introduce novel pathways or merely reinforce existing policy agendas remains uncertain (Vince et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2006).

The Blue Pacific Ocean Report marked a significant milestone as the first comprehensive and holistic assessment of ocean governance in the Pacific region (Hills et al., 2021). Building on this momentum, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent is a recent addition to the Pacific SIDS efforts to strengthen regional collaboration and build resilient Pacific communities (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022). Similar to the Caribbean, the Pacific stands out globally for the depth of institutional integration achieved in regional ocean governance. Key institutions including, the Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner, and the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (Fig.2) have been instrumental in advancing coordination and collaboration across the region. Nevertheless, ongoing challenges persist. The Pacific's regional, sub-regional, and national ocean governance systems continue to grapple with issues of institutional overlap, mandate duplication, and inter-agency competition across the ocean sector (Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner (OPOC), 2021). Among the broader SIDS group, the Pacific SIDS remain in the early stages of MSP adoption. Research on MSP implementation in the region is still limited, leaving critical gaps in understanding how it is being conceptualized, adapted, and localized within Pacific governance systems. Yet, given the region's longstanding leadership in global ocean diplomacy and stewardship, the Pacific offers valuable insights into how equitable, resilient, and transformative forms of ocean governance might be advanced globally.

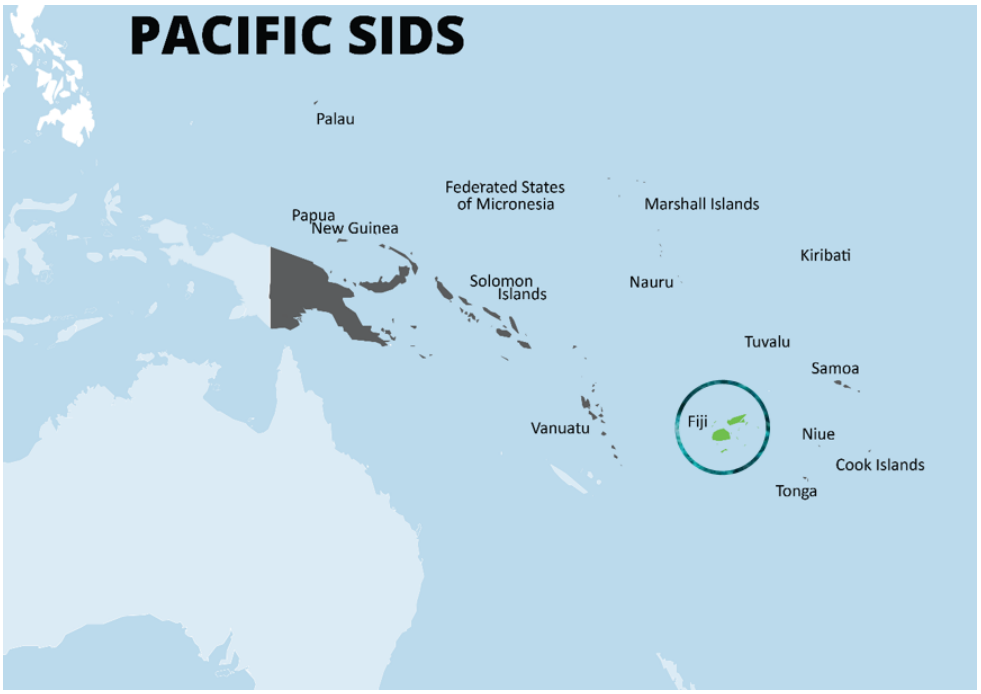


Figure 3: Pacific Small Island Developing States

Over the past decade, regional and national policy frameworks have increasingly invoked the language of transformation to reflect a growing recognition that sustainable development in SIDS demand profound systemic change. For example, the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway emphasizes transformation as the need to address the structural vulnerabilities that constrain SIDS, including narrow economic bases, limited institutional capacity, and heightened exposure to climate change and external market shocks. Tackling these challenges is viewed as essential for enabling more resilient and sustainable development pathways (United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 2014). The recently launched Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (2024–2034) further emphasizes transformative shifts in governance, finance, and ocean economies to achieve resilient prosperity (United Nations (UN), 2024). The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent articulates Pacific SIDS' long-term vision of transformational change across thematic areas of regional cooperation, including oceans (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022). It envisions transformation as strengthening governance pathways, safeguarding ocean health, and transitioning to sustainable blue economies.

In Fiji's national policy landscape, transformation is articulated as both a developmental and governance transition. The Climate Change Act 2021 positions Fiji as a contributor to the global shift toward a net zero emissions economy by 2050, signalling a decisive transformation in national planning and economic systems (Government of Fiji, 2021). The National Development Plan embeds transformation in a long-term development vision centred on building a prosperous, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable nation, with marine resources recognized as critical to securing social wellbeing and economic resilience

(Government of Fiji, 2017). Here, transformation implies strengthened institutions, enhanced coordination, and an updated governance model that elevates sustainability and equity in national priorities.

Collectively, these frameworks underscore a shared recognition among SIDS that achieving sustainable and transformative governance requires profound systemic change, anchored in inclusive and forward-looking governance approaches. This framing provides a crucial enabling narrative for emerging governance instruments such as MSP to contribute not only to improved coordination, but to transformative ocean governance grounded in the priorities and values of Pacific peoples.

2.5 A focus on Fiji

Fiji, situated centrally in the Pacific Ocean (Fig.3), occupies a pivotal position in regional development and governance initiatives. With comparatively greater institutional capacity and resources than many other Pacific SIDS, Fiji has assumed an increasingly prominent role in international policy dialogues on the climate–ocean nexus (Mawi, 2015). Building on regional commitments and international alliances, and supported by strong national leadership, Fiji launched its first National Ocean Policy (2020–2030) to strengthen coordination and integration across government ministries and agencies (Government of Fiji, 2020). The policy provides a unifying framework for ocean governance and is legally underpinned by its incorporation into the Climate Change Act 2021 (Government of Fiji, 2021), demonstrating Fiji's determination to align national ocean management with its broader climate and sustainable development agenda.

Fiji's ocean governance landscape is characterized by multiple actors, including Indigenous coastal communities, national ministries, the private sector, and local and international NGOs, positioning it as a representative microcosm of the wider SIDS. Fiji, along with other Pacific SIDS, has a longstanding history of engaging in Community-Based Natural Resource Management, primarily through the efforts of NGOs (2002). A notable initiative is the Locally Managed Marine Area Network, which originated in Fiji and subsequently expanded to other SIDS, significantly strengthening community engagement and conservation outcomes across the region (Sievanen et al., 2013). The Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area Network model later inspired a succession of similar regional initiatives, including the Micronesia Challenge, the Caribbean Challenge, and the Western Indian Ocean Coastal Challenge, exemplifying how Pacific-born governance innovations can catalyse global conservation movements (Goransson et al., 2019). At the same time, community-based management operates within complex and evolving social–ecological systems, shaped by both external pressures, such as market access and climate variability, and internal community dynamics, including traditional governance structures and power relations (Beyerl et al., 2016). A recent study in Fiji by O'Garra et al. (2023) suggests that, despite their participatory strengths, these initiatives can sometimes yield mixed or limited social and ecological outcomes when such contextual factors are not adequately addressed.

The coexistence of Indigenous customary fisheries management and state-led policy frameworks offers a valuable lens for examining the co-management of ocean spaces and the evolving participatory processes that seek to integrate Indigenous rights, local knowledge, and scientific expertise. In countries like Fiji, where MSP remains in its formative stages, it will be essential to establish collaborative networks and strengthen institutional capacity early in the

process. Such a proactive approach may help identify and tease out barriers to MSP implementation and prevent the process from being disproportionately influenced by specific interest groups (Johnson et al., 2020). New initiatives must not only align with regional and international standards but also secure the support of local stakeholders, including IPLC, who have long championed voluntary conservation initiatives such as the Locally Managed Marine Area Network (Techera & Troniak, 2009). In this regard, Fiji offers a valuable context to examine how national MSP can complement long-standing local and Indigenous marine stewardship, particularly where governance challenges extend beyond the scale of individual *iqoliqoli* (customary fishing grounds) owned and managed by Indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei*) clans.

While Fiji serves as the focal case, this research situates its analysis within the wider Pacific context to explore how MSP is being conceptualized, adapted, and interpreted across multiple scales of governance. Consequently, the analytical framework developed in this thesis builds on and extends the insights emerging from this contextual background. It draws on theories of collaborative, polycentric, adaptive, and transformative governance to examine how different actors participate in and shape governance outcomes across dynamic and interconnected scales of decision-making.

Chapter 3.0: Analytical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations that underpin this thesis and traces the evolution of my analytical approach across the four papers. The analytical framework developed here is rooted in the broader field of environmental governance, extending beyond the more specialized domain of ocean governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Gruby & Basurto, 2013; Korhonen-Kurki et al., 2025). This broader field encompasses diverse theoretical traditions concerned with how societies govern their relationships with nature, as well as how institutions, power relations, and knowledge systems interact across scales to shape collective outcomes. Such a perspective is particularly valuable in the Pacific, where governance processes are deeply entwined with cultural values, customary systems, and relational worldviews.

The analytical trajectory of this research unfolded through a gradual deepening of theoretical perspectives. I first engaged with collaborative governance theory to examine how key elements of collaborative processes, such as leadership, goal prioritization, governance arrangements, and social capital, are conceptualized in the literature on MSP in SIDS and operationalized in the Fijian context (Papers I and II). The collaborative governance framework provided a valuable analytical entry point for identifying the enabling conditions under which MSP could function as a genuinely collaborative and integrated policy instrument. This perspective emphasized the relational and institutional dynamics, such as trust-building, shared accountability, and cross-sectoral coordination, that are essential for fostering cooperation in complex governance settings such as MSP.

As my analysis progressed, it became evident that a comprehensive understanding of MSP required moving beyond the mechanics of collaboration to assess its capacity to drive systemic change. This line of analytical inquiry prompted the integration of transformative change theory in Papers III and IV, drawing on insights from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report (IPBES, 2024). Transformative change refers to deep, systemic shifts in the structures, values, and practices that underpin social-ecological systems (Bennett et al., 2024). It entails fundamental changes in how societies relate to and interact with nature, addressing the root causes of unsustainability rather than merely mitigating its symptoms (Scoones et al., 2020).

The decision to adopt the IPBES framework on transformative change was particularly relevant because it offers an integrative understanding of how governance systems, values, and practices can evolve toward sustainability through inclusive, multi-actor processes. The IPBES framework clusters numerous theoretical insights on sustainability transformations into six mutually reinforcing approaches (Section 3.5). In addition, the framework also explicitly recognizes knowledge pluralism, including Indigenous and local knowledge, as a driver of transformative processes, an aspect central to understanding MSP in Pacific Island contexts (Paper III). Thus, incorporating this perspective allowed me to broaden the study's analytical scope, exploring whether MSP could move beyond its largely technical and procedural origins (Foley et al., 2010) to catalyze transformative change toward more equitable, inclusive, and reflexive forms of ocean governance.

At the same time, the concepts of polycentric governance, and adaptive governance evolved in parallel within my analytical journey, each contributing distinct yet complementary insights

into the dynamics of ocean governance. Rather than representing discrete phases, these perspectives converged to expand the analytical reach of the study, shifting attention from procedural notions of participation to the deeper structural, cultural, and epistemic transformations necessary for sustainable and transformative ocean governance (Paper IV). By situating the discussion within this evolving theoretical trajectory, this chapter reflects the iterative and cumulative nature of the research process. It traces the movement from collaboration to transformation, capturing ongoing shifts toward inclusive, polycentric, and adaptive forms of decision-making while critically engaging with the enduring power asymmetries and sociocultural specificities that shape ocean governance in the Pacific. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide the analytical scaffolding for interpreting empirical findings, offering an integrated framework for understanding how MSP processes in Pacific SIDS may contribute to transformative ocean governance. In doing so, the chapter contextualizes global governance theories within the realities of Pacific SIDS, critically adapting them to reflect Indigenous values, cultural embeddedness, and the complex socio-ecological interdependencies that define island governance systems.

3.1 Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance theory is a framework in public policy and environmental management that explains how government, civil society, local communities, and private actors can jointly make and implement decisions on issues that traverse institutional and sectoral boundaries (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). The theory conceptualizes governance as a networked process spanning public, private, and political domains, where actors interact within formalized institutional arrangements designed to support legitimacy, transparency, and accountability (Booher, 2004; Gray et al., 2018). At its core, collaborative governance theory seeks to explain how cooperation emerges and is sustained among diverse actors with differing interests. It rests on the premise that addressing "wicked problems"[1] requires shared learning, integration of diverse knowledge systems, and cross-sectoral coordination (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Collaboration unfolds through dialogue, negotiation, and trust-building typically within deliberative and adaptive institutional structures.

Recent scholarship highlights that collaboration plays a crucial role in shifting MSP from a symbolic or procedural exercise into a more reflexive and equity-oriented process that accounts for distributional implications (Grip & Blomqvist, 2021; Lukambagire et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2020). Such a shift can transform how knowledge is produced, shared, and legitimized, and may even reshape underlying worldviews, depending on the level of uncertainty and the degree of consensus among actors. Within this evolving context, facilitative leadership, stakeholder interactions, co-production of knowledge, institutional arrangements, and information exchange are critical mechanisms shaping the design, implementation, and outcomes of MSP (Gerhardinger et al., 2022; Quesada-Silva et al., 2019; Said & Trouillet, 2020). Collaborative governance theory provides a conceptual lens to analyze these dynamics, particularly interactions among state agencies, Indigenous communities, NGOs, and private stakeholders, each with distinct values, knowledge systems, and claims to marine space.

[1] *Wicked problems* refer to complex, interconnected, and value-laden challenges that defy definitive solutions because their causes and consequences span ecological, institutional, and societal boundaries (Akamani et al., 2016).

The collaborative governance theory also illuminates how trade-offs can be negotiated, priorities aligned, and mechanisms for joint stewardship established (Ansell & Gash, 2008). A central tenet is the emphasis on the quality of participation, rather than mere representation. However, the theory also faces critical scrutiny when applied in practice. Scholars note that it may understate the influence of power asymmetries, unequal resource distribution, and weak institutional frameworks, which can constrain participation and lead to biased outcomes (Koontz & Thomas, 2006; Purdy, 2012; Singleton, 2002). The theory assumes that collaboration inherently improves governance outcomes through dialogue and trust-building. Yet empirical evidence suggests that collaboration is resource-intensive, requiring time, funding, facilitation skills, and institutional capacity that many developing or small-island states lack (Bianchi et al., 2021; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Malekpour et al., 2021).

Even carefully designed collaborative initiatives can fragment, stall, or dissolve, often because of the diversity of actors involved and the absence of effective mechanisms and adequate resources, including leadership capacity to guide the process (Bianchi et al., 2021). Sørensen and Torfing (2021) highlight that despite initial agreements and participatory processes, collaborative initiatives may struggle downstream with weak implementation, limited evaluation, diluted accountability, and loss of momentum due to unclear or poorly supported institutional roles. This is particularly relevant for MSP, as assumptions that participatory processes automatically redistribute power often overlook the complex socio-political dynamics of shared marine spaces, where competing interests and entrenched hierarchies may constrain the effectiveness of collaborative governance (Argus, 2021; Zakhour, 2020). The aspects these critiques highlight are operationalized analytically in this study (Papers I and II) through dimensions such as leadership, goal setting, governance arrangements, and social capital, providing a framework for examining the conditions under which MSP can function effectively as a collaborative instrument in the SIDS context.

I particularly focus on the collaborative governance models proposed by Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), as they translate an otherwise abstract concept into a concrete, operationalizable structure. These models are systematic in nature, highlighting the importance of initial conditions that set the stage for collaboration, the iterative cycles of dialogue and negotiation, and the direct interactions among stakeholders that shape relationships and ultimately influence governance outcomes. Ansell and Gash's (2008) model of collaborative governance comprises five key elements: starting conditions, leadership, collaborative process, institutional design, and outcomes. Similarly, Emerson and Nabachi (2015) underscore the importance of motivation, engagement, and capacity for collective action within a collaborative governance framework.

- *Starting conditions* establish the groundwork for collaboration, drawing on past stakeholder interactions that can serve as either assets or limitations in initiating the process.
- *Leadership* involves the authority and facilitative capacity to convene meetings, moderate discussions, mediate conflicts, and maintain the integrity of the collaborative process. Facilitative leadership also plays a critical role in setting priorities, aligning national and local objectives, and sustaining commitment over time.
- *Institutional design* establishes the core rules, structures, and decision-making procedures that shape collaboration, ensuring both transparency and procedural fairness.

- *Collaborative process* encompasses the interactive phase of collaboration through face-to-face dialogue, joint problem-solving, and trust-building. This process fosters ownership, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of collective goals among participants.
- *Motivation* refers to the willingness of actors to engage meaningfully in the collaborative process. Motivation contributes to the development of social capital by strengthening interpersonal trust, reciprocity, and commitment to shared outcomes.
- *Engagement* entails sustained communication, participation, and negotiation among stakeholders. Through active engagement, collaborators build consensus and enhance the quality and legitimacy of decision-making.
- *Capacity for collective action* refers to the practical ability of diverse actors to mobilize resources, share knowledge, establish institutional arrangements, and take coordinated action toward a shared goal.
- *Outcomes* represent the tangible outputs and governance mechanisms that emerge from collaboration, including policy decisions, institutional structures, and resource-sharing arrangements. These outcomes reflect actors' capacity to translate motivation and engagement into coordinated, effective, and enduring actions.

Given the overlap among the elements proposed in the collaborative governance models of Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), a more streamlined structure was required to make the framework analytically coherent and practically applicable within the context of this study. Rather than treating each element as a discrete variable, I grouped the concepts into three overarching dimensions that capture the essential institutional, procedural, and relational dynamics of collaboration. This synthesis, comprising *leadership and goal setting, governance arrangements*, and *social capital*, allowed for a more focused analysis of how collaborative processes function in practice while retaining the theoretical depth of both models. It not only provided concrete dimensions to analyze the institutional structures and processes of participation but also the factors that enable or constrain effective collaboration in practice.

Moreover, this study reconceptualizes collaborative governance by moving beyond its traditional institutional and managerial focus to highlight the relational, cultural, and epistemic foundations of collaboration in SIDS contexts. Whereas mainstream approaches typically view collaboration as a process mediated through formal institutions and policy instruments, in the SIDS, particularly in the Pacific context, collaboration also operates through customary governance systems, communal decision-making, and shared stewardship practices grounded in Indigenous worldviews. So, building on the collaborative governance models by Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), and guided by insights from MSP literature in SIDS (Paper I), the analytical framework was adapted to include additional context-specific elements (Singh et al., 2025). In particular, *ocean literacy*, *locally generated research*, and the *norms and practices* of Indigenous and local communities were incorporated as critical components, reflecting their central role in shaping participation, knowledge co-production, and legitimacy within MSP processes in SIDS. These theoretical refinements underpin the analytical framework (Fig. 4) applied in this study for analyzing how collaborative governance operates in practice, capturing both the structural and cultural dimensions necessary for effective and inclusive ocean governance in the Fijian context.

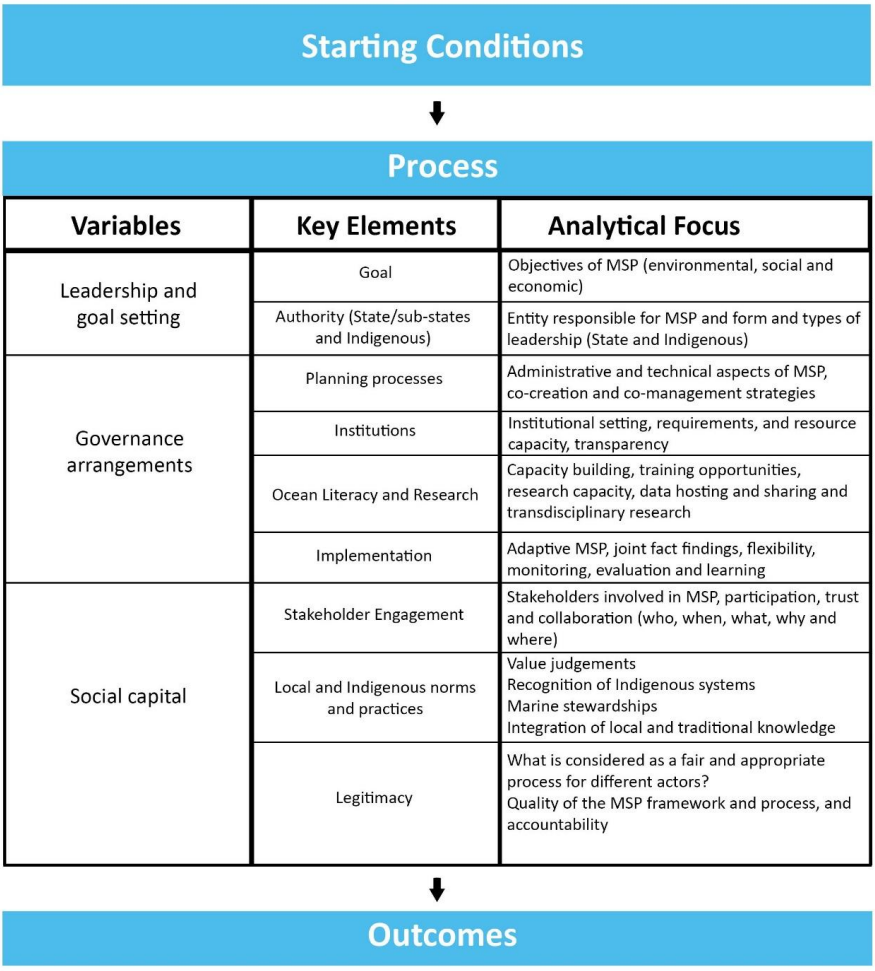


Figure 4: Collaborative governance analytical framework adopted from Singh et al. (2025 p.5)

3.1.1 Leadership and goal setting

The literature widely agrees that effective collaboration depends on facilitative leadership, well-structured institutional design, and meaningful engagement between stakeholders (Agbodzakey, 2024; Ansell et al., 2022; Bodin et al., 2017; Breaugh et al., 2023; Hofstad et al., 2022). The conditions for facilitative leadership are highly context-dependent, varying according to the specific goals, stakeholder composition, and governance challenges at hand (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Rather than prescribing a single "best way" to lead, Ansell and Gash (2008) emphasize that effective leadership requires adaptability and situational awareness. Leaders must assess the social, cultural, and institutional environment, tailor their strategies to foster trust and engagement, and be responsive to evolving dynamics within the collaborative process (Johnston et al., 2010). Silvia (2011) further notes that leadership in networked or collaborative settings is inherently more complex than in traditional hierarchies, as authority is shared, requiring leaders to rely on influence, negotiation, and coalition-

building, often within contexts of ambiguous roles and responsibilities. These complexities underscore the need for adaptive and context-sensitive leadership in MSP, where success depends not only on procedural coordination but also on the ability to build trust, balance competing priorities, mediate conflicts among diverse ocean users, and navigate power asymmetries, all while ensuring that both technical and local knowledge are integrated into decision-making.

Goal setting forms a critical companion to leadership within collaborative governance. Clear and inclusive goal definition provides direction and coherence to the collaborative process by aligning stakeholder expectations and establishing shared priorities (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). In practice, goal setting is rarely a linear exercise, rather, it is an iterative process shaped through dialogue, negotiation, and learning (Vangen & Huxham, 2011). Within MSP, goal setting involves reconciling environmental, social, and economic objectives while accommodating multiple value systems and governance traditions (Ehler & Douvere, 2009). According to Ehler (2018) establishing goals collaboratively enhances ownership and legitimacy, but it also exposes underlying tensions between short-term policy agendas and long-term sustainability visions.

In Pacific SIDS, goal setting requires input from Indigenous and local communities, who in turn look to their traditional and local leaders for guidance in articulating priorities and mediating between customary values and formal planning objectives. Recognizing and integrating these diverse leadership structures into goal-setting processes is essential for ensuring that MSP reflects both national policy aspirations and Indigenous visions of ocean stewardship. As Ansell and Gash (2008) stated, leadership and goal setting are not discrete functions but mutually constitutive dimensions of collaborative governance. Effective leaders play a facilitative role in mediating between diverse value systems and institutional logics, enabling inclusive goal formulation that reflects both national development priorities and local socio-cultural principles. Conversely, clearly articulated and collectively defined goals can provide a shared vision and direction that can sustain collaboration, reinforce legitimacy, and maintain engagement over time.

3.1.2 Governance arrangements

Governance arrangements refer to the institutional design encompassing rules, norms, and formal procedures that both enable and constrain stakeholder interactions and collaborative processes (Ansell, 2012; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). They extend beyond formal institutions to include the planning processes, organizational structures, and knowledge systems that shape how decisions are made and implemented. Within the context of MSP, governance arrangements also involve strengthening ocean literacy, research capacity, and implementation mechanisms, each of which influences how information is generated, interpreted, and shared, how coordination occurs across sectors and scales, and how collective actions are sustained over time. Ansell and Torfing (2021) argue that both leadership and institutional design can be deliberately leveraged to manage collaboration, set appropriate goals, and steer processes toward intended outcomes. Regulatory frameworks, administrative documentation, and formal guidelines serve not only as organizational scaffolds but also as communication tools that orient and integrate new stakeholders (Glicken, 2000). While stakeholder engagement has a strong relational dimension linked to social capital (Section 3.1.3), its effectiveness ultimately depends on how participation is institutionalized within

governance arrangements. As Ahn and Bessiere (2022) emphasize stakeholder engagement strategies must be embedded within governance structures to ensure continuity, transparency, and inclusivity. However, governance processes often unfold amid competing sectoral mandates and divergent stakeholder interests, creating persistent tensions that are difficult to reconcile (Brandt et al., 2018). In such contexts, participatory planning can sometimes function as a carefully managed form of governance, orchestrated by dominant actors to define roles, establish procedures, and steer outcomes in ways that align with pre-existing power structures (Healey, 2003; Purdy, 2012; Westin, 2019; Williams, 2004). As a result, participatory spaces risk becoming arenas for the legitimation of established authority and power relations rather than genuine platforms for deliberation and shared decision-making, thereby obscuring dissent and masking the ways power operates within governance processes.

Institutionalized participation is widely acknowledged as both essential and challenging within collaborative governance. At its core, it can redistribute decision-making power and surface the political tensions that shape access to resources and influence. Yet participation is often resource-intensive, requiring dedicated institutional capacity, facilitation, and coordination across sectors and levels of governance (Williams, 2004). Governance arrangements must therefore be adaptable, as institutions evolve through negotiation and culturally embedded practices rather than through linear design (Cleaver, 2017). These insights are particularly relevant to the design and implementation of MSP processes, where coordination across multiple sectors and levels of governance is essential. While formal structures and administrative capacity are indispensable for coordination, they must be complemented by relational qualities that foster trust, inclusivity, and shared purpose. In this regard, social capital functions as the connective tissue of collaborative governance, enabling institutions and leaders to mobilize support, mitigate power imbalances, and build enduring legitimacy.

3.1.3 Social capital

Social capital, anchored in local norms, practices, trust, and formal and informal networks, plays an essential role in overcoming governance barriers and enhancing the legitimacy of collaborative processes (Clark, 2008; Grafton, 2005; Malherbe et al., 2020; Putnam et al., 2004). By cultivating networks of trust, exchange, and mutual support among diverse actors, social capital provides the relational infrastructure for collaboration and stakeholder engagement (Adger, 2003). Within environmental governance, it functions as an enabling resource that can facilitate collective action, nurture shared responsibility and reinforce the perceived fairness and transparency of decision-making. At the institutional level, social capital can foster cooperation among agencies, enhance information flow, and enable joint problem-solving across sectors (Grafton, 2005; Putnam et al., 2004). When done well, it can strengthen the informal relationships and shared norms that allow institutions to coordinate beyond rigid bureaucratic mandates and sectoral silos. At the community level, where MSP is expected to exert its most tangible influence, social capital operates as a vital source of empowerment. It can enhance collective capacity, facilitate conflict resolution, and enable communities to exercise devolved authority over their natural resources (Jacob et al., 2023; Putnam et al., 2004).

Devolution of authority over natural resources has long been regarded as a cornerstone for empowerment, enabling communities to exercise agency over their lands, ocean, forests, and

river ecosystems (Armitage, 2005; Berkes, 2010; Jentoft, 2000). Ostrom's seminal work on self-governing institutions challenged the assumption that the tragedy of the commons can only be averted through externally imposed management regimes (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom et al., 2002). Instead, her research documented numerous cases of locally empowered institutional arrangements that sustained common-pool resources across generations, while fostering adaptive learning and long-term stewardship (Ostrom, 1990). These principles resonate strongly with MSP, where the durability and legitimacy of governance processes depend not only on robust institutional design but also on the strength of relational networks that connect communities and institutions, enabling collaboration and supporting devolution in practice.

Scholars distinguish between *bonding* social capital**,** which reinforces solidarity and trust within relatively homogeneous groups, and *bridging* social capital**,** which links diverse actors across social, cultural, and institutional boundaries (Baylis et al., 2018; Margerum, 2011; O'Brien et al., 2005). For instance, *bonding* capital strengthens internal cohesion and supports communal decision-making within Indigenous and local communities, fostering shared responsibility and a sense of collective purpose. *Bridging* capital, by contrast, facilitates connections between these communities and external actors including researchers, NGOs, and government agencies, enabling the exchange of knowledge and collaboration across scales. Together, these two forms of social capital enhance collective action, reduce coordination costs, and increase the overall legitimacy and effectiveness of Community-Based Natural Resource Management. Both forms are highly relevant for Pacific SIDS, where communities have long served as custodians of ocean spaces and stewards of communally managed marine resources.

The transformative potential of Community-Based Natural Resource Management approaches is well documented, from traditional reef management practices in the Pacific (Johannes, 2002; Jupiter et al., 2014) to Indigenous-led conservation initiatives in Hawai‘i, where co-management agreements have created Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas aligned with holistic “mountains-to-sea” worldviews (Winther et al., 2023). These approaches illustrate how relational trust, shared cultural values, and emotional attachments to place can motivate collective action and long-term stewardship. These characteristics strengthen the transformative potential of community-based approaches by shifting governance logics away from centralized, sectoral control toward more distributed and relational forms of authority. When stewardship is grounded in Indigenous cosmologies and local priorities, management arrangements are more likely to challenge existing power structures, enhance equity, and sustain long-term behavioural and institutional change (Winther et al., 2023). In the context of MSP in SIDS, these dynamics suggest that transformative governance is more likely to emerge when planning processes move beyond mere inclusion of communities to recentering Indigenous authority and customary tenure as foundational governance systems, rather than treating them as stakeholders to be consulted.

The principles underpinning community-based management also resonate with the concept of polycentric governance, where power and responsibility are intentionally spread among multiple, interacting governance bodies rather than concentrated centrally. Community-Based Natural Resource Management demonstrates how localized stewardship, when supported by enabling institutional linkages, can become part of a broader networked system of governance that connects communities, state agencies, and non-state actors. However, as critics note, the outcomes of such systems are often uneven, constrained by political and

institutional contexts (Aswani et al., 2017; Blaikie, 2004; Cleaver, 2017; Rohe et al., 2017). These observations highlight the ongoing challenge of identifying an "optimal mix" of governance modes and responses.

Social capital is not without its limitations. Like a renewable resource, it strengthens through active use but diminishes when neglected (Clark, 2008). Over-reliance on bonding ties can foster exclusionary "insider–outsider" dynamics, marginalizing those with weaker social connections or different cultural identities (Baycan & Öner, 2023; Strindlund et al., 2022). These risks are particularly salient in MSP, where participation processes may inadvertently privilege established elites or dominant groups while silencing less powerful actors. This underscores why social capital is often described as the most adaptable yet context-dependent element of collaborative governance (Ansell et al., 2020; Nooteboom, 2007). Social capital formally endorsed through national authorities or local NGOs, either through financial assistance or legal support, tends to be more successful (Dolšak & Ostrom, 2003). However, poorly designed external interventions that fail to appreciate existing social systems risk creating dependency, inflating expectations, or undermining customary governance.

Understanding the dynamics and limits of social capital is essential for designing participatory processes, as social networks and patterns of trust determine who participates, how knowledge circulates, and whose voices are heard (Ishihara & Pascual, 2009). Within MSP, these insights can be operationalized by evaluating whether all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups such as Indigenous Peoples and local communities, have legitimate opportunities to participate, shared goals to negotiate, and transparent mechanisms to guide decision-making. Newig et al. (2023 p.10) outline several principles for designing participatory processes that can enhance environmental governance outcomes. These include:

> *Granting real co-decision-making power to stakeholders in order to harness their knowledge and concerns; being aware that intensive communication is important but may not necessarily lead to better environmental outcomes; analysing who participates, and their stance towards the environment; taking into account the specific circumstances surrounding the decision-making process to make informed choices in designing and running a participatory environmental decision-making process.*

In this study, these ideas have several important implications. They help examine how authority is structured and exercised within MSP processes, the extent to which stakeholders are genuinely involved in decision-making, and how contextual elements, such as customary governance systems, community-based resource management, and local socio-cultural experiences, influence engagement practices and outcomes. Collectively, these dynamics underscore that effective participation is not only about inclusion but also about coordination among multiple actors and institutions operating across scales. Understanding how these diverse governance nodes interact forms the basis for the next section, which situates collaboration within broader, polycentric, and adaptive systems of ocean governance.

3.2 Collaborative-Polycentric-Adaptive Integration

Marine spatial planning operates within a complex, multi-level, and multi-actor environment where no single leader, institution, or network holds complete authority or possesses all relevant knowledge (Johnson et al., 2020). This complexity highlights the limitations of relying solely on centralized leadership or formal frameworks, even when social capital is strong. Through the analysis conducted in Papers I and II, it became increasingly evident that addressing the limitations of collaborative governance requires moving beyond single-level collaboration to examine how coordination, authority, and learning occur across interconnected governance centers. Polycentric governance theory provides a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics in decentralized yet interdependent systems composed of multiple decision-making centers that maintain a degree of autonomy while contributing to shared goals (Ostrom, 2009). By aligning collaborative governance with a polycentric and adaptive governance framework, MSP can be understood not as a standalone policy instrument but as part of an evolving web of institutions and relationships that shape ocean governance. Such an approach emphasizes the importance of coordination, nested authority, and information sharing across levels and sectors, while allowing for local adaptation and context-specific solutions. The subsequent sections elaborate on polycentric and adaptive governance, highlighting how overlapping and interlinked arrangements enhance adaptability, legitimacy, and resilience in MSP.

3.3 Polycentric Governance

The idea of polycentricity forms a cornerstone of Elinor Ostrom's theoretical contributions to governance studies. Polycentric systems consist of multiple, independent decision-making centres that are interconnected and often overlap or are nested across governance levels (Ostrom, 2009; Ostrom et al., 1961). These systems may also involve specialized forums or councils that span these boundaries (McGinnis & Ostrom, 2012; Thiel, 2017). Agency in environmental governance is shared among governments, local communities, and non-state actors, and in some cases extends to ecosystems or species when they are granted legal or cultural recognition, enabling their interests to be represented in decision-making (Haas et al., 2022; Mondré & Kuhn, 2022). A prominent example of the latter is the Whanganui River in New Zealand, whose legal recognition as a living entity reflects Māori cosmology and a co-governance arrangement between the state and local Indigenous tribes (Cribb et al., 2024). Environmental governance decisions, therefore, emerge from this dynamic interplay among diverse actors and legally recognized entities. In the Pacific SIDS context, such arrangements may offer opportunities to integrate customary marine tenure systems, local knowledge, and state-led planning into coherent, multi-level frameworks capable of sustaining transformative ocean governance.

Polycentric governance, unlike monocentric systems, allows for greater representation of diverse social actors, enhancing legitimacy and creating space for learning and adaptation as actors exercise authority according to their capacities, knowledge, and socio-cultural contexts (Berardo & Lubell, 2016; Patterson et al., 2017). Ostrom (2009) emphasized that local diversity fosters innovation by tailoring solutions to context-specific conditions. Studies in multi-level governance have linked polycentric arrangements to improved environmental outcomes (Newig & Fritsch, 2009). Pahl-Wostl and Knieper's (2014) work on polycentricity in the Global North demonstrates that hierarchical governance structures can, under certain

conditions, complement and reinforce polycentric systems. Yet, they caution that polycentricity alone does not ensure sufficient coordination among decision-making centers. For instance, empirical evidence shows that polycentric governance can also augment fragmentation and inequities (Cleaver, 2017; Galaz et al., 2012; McGinnis, 2016; Morrison et al., 2019). As noted by Huitemal et al. (2009) and Wyborn (2015), coordination efforts often incur significant transaction costs, particularly when governance systems span broad geographic areas. Moreover, not all actors have equal capacity to engage, allowing more powerful nodes to dominate decision-making (Carlisle & Gruby, 2018). As Cleaver (2017) states, institutions evolve pragmatically and often unintentionally, so rigid, "idealized" blueprints may fail to capture the adaptive realities of polycentric governance.

Proponents contend that polycentric systems enhance institutional resilience through built-in redundancy, enabling alternative centers of authority to assume functions when others fail or underperform (Andersson & Ostrom, 2008; Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Ostrom, 2009; Thiel & Moser, 2018). While polycentricity is celebrated for redundancy and adaptability, too many overlapping authorities can cause confusion, inefficiency, and conflict. Scholars debate whether polycentricity inherently fosters productive diversity or leads to dysfunctional fragmentation (McGinnis, 2016; Morrison et al., 2019). Carlisle and Gruby (2018) note that the extent of autonomy required for decision-making units to fully realize the potential benefits of polycentricity remains unclear, with limited practical guidance available in the literature.

In a polycentric governance framework, "decision-making centers are characterized by their active involvement in collaboration, competition, conflict, and conflict resolution" (Carlisle & Gruby, 2018 p. 224). These attributes closely align with the nature of MSP, which inherently depends on sustained interaction and coordination between various stakeholders. While decision-making centers may not always interact directly, they are often indirectly connected through intermediary organizations that act as brokers, helping to reduce inefficiencies and enhance coordination (Nagendra & Ostrom, 2012). In the context of SIDS, such collaboration is especially critical in MSP, both for building the collective capacity of governance actors and for transferring functions to more capable actors within the system. McGinnis and Ostrom (2012) highlight the importance of such supporting actors in polycentric systems, where effective governance often relies on those who mobilize resources, deliver services, or offer specialized expertise. These actors, also referred to as boundary spanners, often contribute to shaping policy outcomes and provide critical technical, financial, and logistical support (Fortnam et al., 2022). In the context of MSP, particularly in SIDS, NGOs can be understood as boundary organizations that mediate between different actor groups, knowledge systems, and institutional levels. From a theoretical perspective, these organizations illustrate how agency can be distributed across formal and informal actors, facilitating collaboration, knowledge integration, and coordination in complex governance settings.

These theoretical insights on polycentricity are valuable but not easily transferable to SIDS, where socio-political, institutional capacities, and ecological vulnerabilities differ markedly (Aswani et al., 2017; Carlisle & Gruby, 2018). The optimal configuration or extent of polycentricity in such settings remains uncertain. As Fortnam et al. (2022) note, power dynamics and political considerations are fundamental to understanding polycentric governance. In SIDS, governance is shaped by a complex interplay of colonial legacies, nationalist skepticism toward multilateralism, structural limitations of centralized authority, and pressures from market-oriented economies (Ghina, 2003). In such settings, a functional

polycentric MSP system must navigate tensions between market forces, centralized state authority, and local institutional needs. For analyzing MSP in SIDS, these insights are beneficial because they emphasize the distribution of authority, the capacities of local and intermediary actors, and the mechanisms through which collaboration and knowledge flow across governance nodes. They also emphasize the need to move beyond abstract models, exploring how authority can be meaningfully devolved and how Indigenous Peoples and local communities can be empowered as central actors in shaping governance outcomes (Papers III and IV). This approach allows MSP analysis to account for both the opportunities and constraints of polycentric systems in the unique socio-political and ecological contexts of SIDS.

3.4 Adaptive governance

Adaptive governance emphasizes flexibility, monitoring, learning, and iterative modifications within social-ecological systems, enabling institutions to respond dynamically to uncertainty and rapidly changing conditions (Akamani et al., 2016; Berkes et al., 2008; Chaffin et al., 2014). Adaptive governance also relies on the capacity of cross-scale networks to self-organize, mobilize resources, and drive innovation (Dietz et al., 2003), enabling institutions to respond effectively to complex challenges. In practice, it is manifested through polycentric and collaborative arrangements where governments, civil society organisations, customary institutions, and local communities co-produce knowledge and jointly shape decision-making (Akther & Evans, 2024).

Adaptive governance evolves in response to internal and external "windows of opportunity" such as political shifts, institutional reforms, ecological crises, natural disasters, and market disruptions (Folke et al., 2005; Olsson et al., 2004; Osterblom & Folke, 2013). These events can destabilize entrenched systems, creating space for experimentation with more flexible governance approaches. However, crisis-driven change often privileges short-term, reactive fixes over deeper structural transformation, underscoring the need for institutional memory, reflexivity, and sustained commitment to long-term reform. Despite its theoretical promise, operationalizing adaptive governance remains a challenge. Core principles, such as embracing complexity and uncertainty, fostering continuous learning, and enabling reflexive adjustment, are still only partially embedded within policy and planning practice (Akther & Evans, 2024). In the context of MSP, these shortcomings are amplified by persistent uncertainty, shifting priorities, and uneven power dynamics (Tafon et al., 2019; Trouillet, 2020), which undermine the very conditions adaptive governance seeks to address.

From the perspective of the IPBES transformative change framework (Bennett et al., 2024), adaptive governance can serve as both a stepping stone and an enabler of deeper systemic shifts. By fostering inclusive collaboration and learning across scales, empowering marginalized groups, integrating diverse knowledge systems, and promoting innovation, adaptive governance facilitates the reconfiguration of underlying views, institutional structures, and social practices that shape decision-making and collective action (Chaffin et al., 2016). These capacities not only strengthen the resilience of socio-ecological systems but also create the enabling conditions for sustainability transformations in ocean governance. Nevertheless, the adaptive governance framework is not without limitations. Much of the adaptive governance literature has been developed in industrialized contexts (Akther & Evans, 2024), where institutional capacity, financial resources, and governance infrastructure are relatively stronger. This raises critical questions about its applicability in small island states,

where governance systems are often resource-constrained and deeply embedded in customary and community-based institutions.

Similar to Ostrom's (2007) warning that no single institutional arrangement or management approach can be universally applied to solve complex environmental problems, Stenseke (2024 p.10) also cautions that there is "*no silver bullet"* for addressing sustainability challenges. Although their work spans nearly two decades, both scholars converge on a critical insight: governance solutions must be context-dependent, adaptive, and pluralistic, reflecting the diversity of social, cultural, and ecological conditions in which they operate. This shared perspective rejects the notion of one-size-fits-all interventions and instead advocates for policy mixes that evolve through experimentation, learning, and stakeholder engagement. Building on these insights, advancing reflexivity and transformative change in ocean governance demands innovative, context-sensitive pathways that integrate collaborative learning, place-based practices, equitable power-sharing, and culturally grounded institutions.

3.5 Governance Pathways for Transformative Ocean Governance

In the ocean realm, the rapid degradation of marine ecosystems, coupled with increasingly diverse and intensive uses, is outpacing the capacity of existing governance systems to manage human activities effectively (Blythe et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2023). Within this context, collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance offer complementary pathways that can address nonlinearity, uncertainty, and interdependence in ocean governance. These governance approaches constitute the institutional and relational scaffolding through which the IPBES six transformative change clusters can be operationalized.

The IPBES Transformative Change Assessment synthesizes 62 theories into six interrelated clusters (Table 2), providing an integrative framework for understanding how deep societal and institutional transformations occur. Indigenous and local knowledge contribute to each of these clusters in distinct yet complementary ways, shaping how transformation is conceptualized and enacted across contexts. "Each cluster predominantly focuses on one or more of the three key dimensions or entry points of transformative change: views, structures, and practices" (Bennett et al., 2024 p.8). *Views* refer to the underlying values, beliefs, worldviews, and cultural narratives that influence how people understand and relate to nature. *Structures* encompass the institutional, political, economic, and legal arrangements, such as rules, governance systems, and power relations, that shape how decisions are made and whose interests are prioritized. *Practices* involve the everyday actions, behaviors, and operational routines of individuals, communities, and organizations that directly affect nature and resource use.

Clusters	Descriptions
Systems	Focuses on reshaping relationships among components of socio-ecological systems and the interactions between people and nature. Emphasizes feedback, structures, and practices that either hinder or enable systemic change.
Structural	Refers to the underlying social, economic, political, and institutional rules, norms, power relations, and governance arrangements that shape and constrain individual and collective actions.
Inner Transformation	Seeks change through shifts in values, beliefs, and worldviews that reconnect people with one another and with nature. Links individual and collective mindsets and ethics with practices and governance.
Empowerment	Focuses on redistributing power by strengthening marginalized actors' agency to challenge unjust systems and influence decision-making. Key actions involve addressing historical inequities and advancing rights-based governance.
Knowledge Co-creation	Promotes collaborative processes that integrate scientific, Indigenous, and local knowledge through joint learning and shared action. Stresses the value of plural epistemologies and inclusive partnerships.
Science and Technology	Emphasizes the role of innovation, research, and technological solutions in enabling transformative change, provided they are socially inclusive and ethically grounded.

Table 2: Six clusters of theories and frameworks for transformative change adopted from IPBES (2024) Transformative Change Assessment, Chapter 3 (Sections 3.2.1–3.2.6).

Collaborative governance aligns closely with the IPBES clusters of *empowerment*, *knowledge co-creation*, and *inner transformation*, as it emphasizes meaningful participation of marginalized groups, particularly IPLC. It does so by strengthening cooperation among diverse stakeholders, integrating multiple knowledge systems and worldviews, and investing in long-term trust-building. In practice, this includes formal IPLC representation in MSP processes, benefit-sharing arrangements, participatory mapping and co-design of spatial plans, and sustained engagement with under-represented groups. Educational initiatives, cultural revitalization, and Pacific Indigenous concepts such as *vanua* (land, people and culture), *lotu* (spiritual stewardship), and *moana* (ocean) reinforce human-land-ocean relationships and foster shifts in values, behaviours, and stewardship ethics.

Polycentric governance approach aligns most closely with the IPBES *structural* cluster, which focuses on how authority and accountability are organized across governance systems. It seeks broad institutional involvement and devolved authority to improve coordination across sectors and levels of governance. In MSP, this involves nested arrangements that connect customary institutions to provincial, national, and regional structures; clarified mandates across agencies; and legitimate decision-making and grievance mechanisms that uphold procedural justice. Adaptive governance closely aligns with the IPBES transformative change clusters of *science and technology*, and *systems*, supporting decision-making in dynamic and uncertain socio-ecological conditions. It emphasizes innovation, monitoring, feedback-based learning, and recognition of interconnectedness between ocean ecosystems and human

systems. Within MSP, adaptive governance can be operationalized through decision-support tools (e.g., SeaSketch, MARXAN), ecological monitoring and remote sensing, scenario planning, and iterative review cycles that incorporate scientific and community knowledge as conditions change.

Together, these governance approaches comprise an integrated analytical framework (Fig. 5) that demonstrates how transformative change can be pursued through MSP in Pacific SIDS. The framework was developed iteratively, with theoretical constructs and empirical insights informing one another to ensure both contextual relevance and analytical rigor.

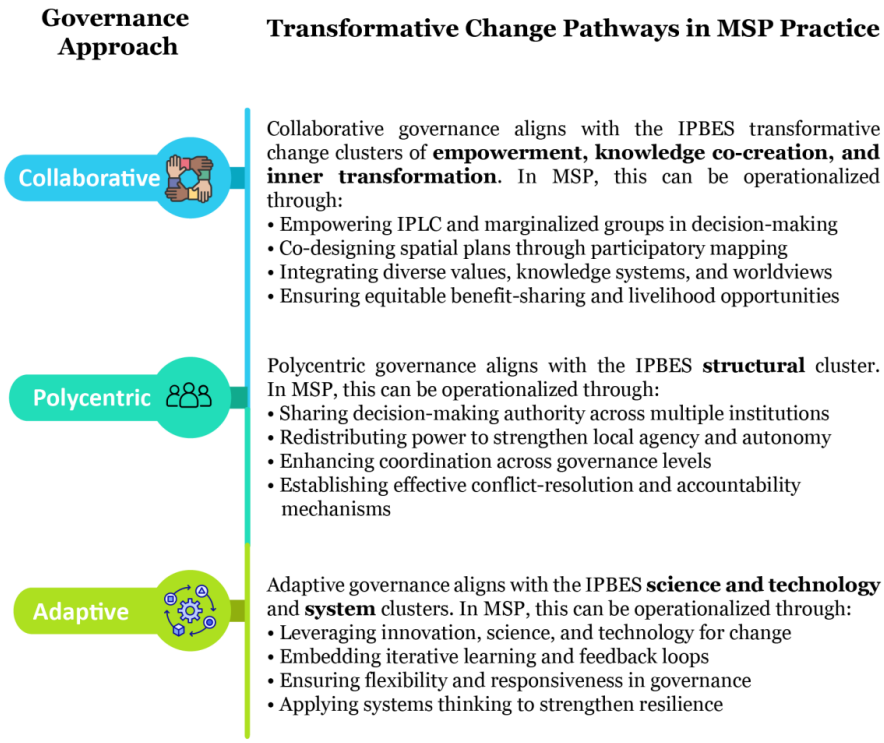


Figure 5: Integrated governance analytical framework (Adapted from Paper IV)

Although each IPBES cluster is aligned with a particular governance approach for analytical clarity, the six clusters are intrinsically interlinked and function synergistically across all governance forms. This integration highlights multiple pathways for change, reflecting the IPBES view that no single cluster can achieve transformation alone. Governance of such transformations can take diverse forms. Linnér and Wibeck (2020) emphasize that transformative change is not about discarding existing structures, but rather about creating new pathways that strategically interact with the systems, practices, and institutions already in place. In this way, transformation becomes both feasible and legitimate, anchoring change in familiar social fabrics while opening space for fundamentally new directions (Linnér & Wibeck, 2020; Nerland et al., 2025). Some scholars advocate for radical sustainability

transformations that challenge and disrupt preexisting systems (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2024; Schellnhuber et al., 2010), whereas others emphasize gradual, adaptive, and emergent pathways that evolve in response to changing contexts (Berman & Fox, 2023; Patterson et al., 2017). A third perspective recognizes the potential of hybrid strategies, where multiple governance trajectories unfold concurrently to tackle complex sustainability challenges (Göpel, 2016; Termeer et al., 2024). Taken together, these perspectives underscore that pathways to transformative ocean governance emerge through layered and interconnected approaches, drawing on collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance to navigate complexity, integrate diverse knowledge systems, and foster systemic change.

3.6 Bridging Governance Perspectives and Methodological Choices

The integrated governance framing guided the selection and application of methodological strategies for this dissertation. In Paper I, I focused on the collaborative governance models of Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) to systematically examine how the core elements of collaborative processes are conceptualized within MSP literature across SIDS. Insights from this review informed a refined analytical framework, which was subsequently applied in Papers II and III to investigate how collaborative dynamics unfold in the Fijian MSP context. While Paper II focused on the collaborative process, Paper III broadened the analytical scope by incorporating the IPBES framework on transformative change, with particular attention to empowerment and co-creation clusters. To investigate these dynamics, I adopted largely qualitative, multi-method approach that combined document analysis of national policy texts with semi-structured interviews involving government and NGO actors, as well as surveys, and focus group discussions with Indigenous coastal communities in Fiji. This design allowed for the incorporation of insights from across governance scales, highlighting both the opportunities that support collaborative processes and the barriers that continue to constrain transformative change.

Recognizing the multi-scalar complexity of MSP in the Pacific Islands, this study integrates collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance perspectives to examine MSP not only as a policy instrument but as a key component of a transformative governance framework (Paper IV). From this vantage point, MSP is viewed as more than ocean zoning, it becomes a process through which equity, resilience, and sustainability may be pursued. Participant observation at regional workshops captures the real-time dynamics of the MSP process in the region, while interviews with regional actors provide nuanced insights into its design, implementation, effectiveness, and governance objectives. By integrating governance-informed analytical perspectives with diverse methodological strategies, the study develops a grounded and contextually rich understanding of the role of MSP in advancing ocean governance. These methodologies are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 4.0: Methodology

4.1 Overview of the Research Design

In this thesis, a qualitative-driven mixed methods research design was adopted to critically assess the role of MSP in advancing ocean governance in Pacific SIDS. Ocean governance in the Pacific is inherently complex and multi-scalar, influenced by diverse sociocultural and economic contexts and the escalating impacts of climate change (Vince et al., 2017). To reflect this complexity, the research design was constructed to capture a plurality of perspectives and lived experiences using diverse methodological techniques. The empirical foundation of this thesis draws on data gathered between 2022 and 2025 through literature review, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, policy document analysis, and participant observation. This methodological triangulation enhanced both the credibility and contextual depth of the findings by enabling cross-validation of insights across multiple actor groups and governance levels. The methodological strategy was iterative and reflexive, with insights from one phase informing subsequent analyses across the four interrelated papers. Table 3 presents a summary of the four papers, including their research focus, materials, analytical approach, and theoretical lens.

Papers	Research Question	Empirical Material	Analytical Approach	Theoretical Lens
Paper I	What constitutes effective ocean governance and marine spatial planning in SIDS?	40 academic articles and 15 grey literature sources on MSP in SIDS (Data collected: 2022-2023)	Qualitative content analysis through a semi-systematic literature review process	Collaborative governance framework emphasizing leadership and goal setting, governance arrangements, and social capital
Paper II	Does MSP have the potential to address the ocean governance challenges identified by various actors and, if so, to explore how this can be achieved?	Fiji's national ocean-related legislative and policy documents, and 15 semi-structured interviews with key individuals engaged in Fiji's national ocean governance processes (Data collected: 2024)	Qualitative content analysis of policy documents and thematic analysis of interview transcripts using a hybrid deductive–inductive coding approach	Revised collaborative governance framework integrating insights on ocean literacy, locally generated research, and Indigenous norms and practices

Papers	Research Question	Empirical Material	Analytical Approach	Theoretical Lens
Paper III	How does the MSP process in Fiji align with the perspectives of Indigenous coastal communities?	120 individual surveys across nine *iTaukei* coastal villages and six focus group discussions involving 66 community members (Data collected: 2024)	Mixed-method analysis combining descriptive statistics (SPSS) and inferential tests (Chi-square and log-linear analyses) with thematic coding of qualitative narratives to capture community perceptions, agency, and participation.	IPBES Transformative Change framework, with focus on empowerment and knowledge co-creation mechanisms as pathways for transformative change
Paper IV	To what extent is MSP fit for purpose in advancing transformative ocean governance in Pacific SIDS?	Participant observation during a regional MSP workshop and 15 semi-structured interviews with regional actors from Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Palau (Data collected: 2025)	Thematic analysis of field notes and interview transcripts using a deductive–inductive approach	Integrated governance framework combining collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance with the six IPBES transformative change clusters

Table 3: Overview of the four papers, outlining their research focus, empirical materials, analytical approaches, and theoretical lenses.

4.2 Discussion of Methods

4.2.1 Semi-systematic literature review

For Paper I, I employed qualitative content analysis to explore MSP in SIDS. Following Snyder's (2019) semi-systematic literature review approach, which balances rigor with flexibility, this study traced key themes, theoretical developments, and temporal trends across the interdisciplinary MSP literature. This approach enabled me to identify recurring concepts, thematic patterns, and conceptual relationships while maintaining interpretive flexibility (Cardno, 2018; Roudgarmi, 2011). This flexibility was essential given the interdisciplinary and emergent nature of MSP, in which the literature is fragmented across environmental science, policy, and governance studies. In practice, this meant I could focus on how different studies conceptualize collaboration and its processes within MSP, while accommodating the heterogeneity and uneven development of scholarship in this emerging area.

Drawing on collaborative governance models proposed by Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), an analytical framework was developed to guide the review process. As described in section 3.1, this framework focused on three dimensions: *leadership* and *goal setting, governance arrangements*, and *social capital*. Operationalizing collaborative process through these dimensions allowed me to move beyond abstract theoretical discussion and trace how collaboration is understood and practiced within the MSP literature in SIDS. The analysis followed a primarily deductive approach, applying the predefined categories to the literature to examine how collaborative processes manifest in MSP activities (Fife & Gossner, 2024). In qualitative research, deductive analysis typically entails applying and testing theoretical concepts against empirical data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). This structured, top-down approach begins with predefined categories, often derived from an analytical framework, and examines how well the data align with these theoretical constructs. It ensures analytical consistency and facilitates systematic comparison across cases.

Coding was carried out in NVivo by organizing relevant excerpts from each article into the predetermined analytical categories. During coding, I noticed that while many studies focused on formal institutional arrangements, stakeholder engagement, and resource issues, few engaged deeply with the role of local research, customary authorities, Indigenous stewardship systems, and informal community networks, elements that are often central to ocean governance in Pacific Island contexts. By applying the analytical framework and a semi-systematic review design, such silences and omissions became analytically visible. Recognizing that many SIDS are still in the early stages of MSP implementation, I supplemented the peer-reviewed literature with grey sources. This additional layer of analysis provided practical insights into on-the-ground MSP developments and complemented the academic findings by capturing recent and region-specific initiatives that had not yet been covered in the peer-reviewed literature.

4.2.2 Policy document analysis

Policy analysis offers a systematic approach to examining not only policy content but also the context of its formulation and implementation, making it a valuable interpretive tool in qualitative research (Cardno, 2018). In this study, policy document analysis was central to the Fiji case study, serving as the analytical foundation for understanding the institutional, legislative, and policy environment within which MSP is evolving. The reviewed corpus comprised Fiji's national policies, legislative frameworks, and strategic planning documents that collectively shape ocean governance and resource management in the country. These overarching frameworks cascade down to influence sectoral and ministerial strategies, translating national priorities into operational practices across different governance levels. In qualitative inquiry, however, policy texts are not analyzed merely for their linguistic patterns or frequency of key terms. Rather, they are treated as political and institutional artefacts that both reflect and reproduce broader governance discourses (Cardno, 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Hence, the analysis sought to uncover not just what is stated in the policies about MSP but also what is implied or omitted.

To maintain analytical focus, the policy review was guided by insights from the MSP literature review (Paper I) and aligned with the research focus of Paper II. The following questions, adapted from Paper II, guided the policy analysis process.

1. How is MSP framed or understood within Fiji's legislative and policy documents, and what roles or purposes is it expected to serve in national ocean governance?
2. Do the legislative and policy documents establish institutional and financial mechanisms for designing and implementing MSP?
3. Do the documents specify policy coordination or institutional arrangements to enhance coherence across sectors and levels of governance?
4. Which relevant issues and themes emphasized in the SIDS-focussed MSP literature remain absent or underdeveloped in these documents?

The analysis sought to understand both the structure of the policy framework and whether implementation capabilities match policy ambitions. To conduct the analysis, I employed a traditional note-taking strategy that enabled deep, reflective engagement with the texts. Key observations and interpretive insights were annotated in the margins of each document, recording not only explicit policy statements but also underlying assumptions and notable omissions. These notes were then systematically organized using an Excel spreadsheet to identify cross-cutting patterns, recurring goals, and divergences across policy instruments. Through sustained engagement with the documents, the analysis captured how MSP is represented, elevated, or excluded within the broader trajectory of ocean governance in Fiji.

As a Pacific researcher analyzing policies within my own regional and cultural milieu, this process was also inherently reflexive. It required a conscious awareness of how my insider perspective, grounded in familiarity with Fijian governance structures, customary systems, and sociocultural values, influenced interpretation. Rather than treating my positionality as a limitation, I viewed it as an analytical strength. My familiarity with Fijian governance processes and cultural contexts enabled me to recognize subtle nuances, overlooked perspectives, and culturally embedded meanings that might escape the notice of externally driven policy analyses. For instance, how national policies often reference concepts such as community stewardship symbolically, without fully reflecting their deeper social and spiritual significance in local governance and decision-making. The insights from the policy analysis helped shape the questions for the semi-structured interviews that followed. Themes and gaps identified in the policy documents were translated into guiding prompts, ensuring that the interviews explored how policy commitments were being interpreted, enacted, or contested by key governance actors involved in Fiji's MSP process.

4.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews formed the backbone of my empirical material, providing rich, contextual insights into the perceptions, practices, and institutional dynamics that shape MSP in Fiji and across the Pacific region. Interviews are a well-established method in qualitative research for accessing in-depth information about complex social and institutional phenomena that are not easily captured through surveys or document reviews (Schmidt, 2004). In Paper II, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with national-level stakeholders involved in Fiji's ocean governance, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and industry. In Paper IV, I conducted an additional 15 interviews with regional ocean governance actors, MSP practitioners, and technical advisors from across the Pacific Islands. This two-tiered interview design captured both national and regional perspectives.

The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed conversations to evolve organically, enabling participants to elaborate on emerging issues and raise new areas of relevance. This flexibility in the research design allowed me to adapt to ongoing conversations during interviews and pursue new leads as they emerged. Additionally, in Pacific research contexts, building trust, fostering dialogue, and establishing relational connections are not incidental but foundational. Accordingly, in each interview, I allocated time at the start to acknowledge participants' context and priorities, allowed the conversation to evolve beyond predetermined questions, and accepted that participant insights may diverge from my original list of topics, all of which reflects the *talanoa* ethos described by Feetham et al. (2023). The *talanoa* method is an Indigenous Pacific research approach grounded in open, respectful, and empathetic dialogue (Gremillion et al., 2021). Originating in many Pacific cultures (including Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa), *talanoa* literally means to talk or converse openly and from the heart (Vaioleti, 2016).

While fully participatory *talanoa* sessions embody the Pacific ethic of storytelling and shared understanding, they often require extended engagement and informal settings, which can be challenging to achieve with policymakers and technical staff constrained by formal roles and time commitments. The semi-structured interview, therefore, represented a pragmatic middle ground, aligning with Pacific relational norms while maintaining the focus and time efficiency necessary for research conducted within formal governance settings. Table 4 summarizes the objectives, design, and key characteristics of both interview phases.

Category	**Fiji**	**Pacific Islands (Regional)**
Objective	To evaluate the potential of MSP to address identified ocean governance challenges and to explore the mechanisms and strategies through which MSP can enhance governance outcomes (Paper II)	To assess the suitability of MSP in promoting transformative ocean governance across Pacific Island Countries (Paper IV)
Number of Participants	15	15
Participant Composition	Government (n=9), National/Regional NGOs (n=3), Private Sector (n=2), Academia (n=1)	Experts from regional organizations (n=7), MSP practitioners (n=4), and Researchers engaged in Pacific MSP processes (n=4)
Countries Represented	Fiji	Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Palau
Participant Selection Criteria	Direct involvement in National Ocean Policy implementation and MSP processes; Engagement in policymaking, technical expertise, capacity building, or research relevant to ocean governance	Direct involvement in regional ocean policy and management; Active engagement in MSP implementation or research across Pacific Island Countries
Interview Dates	April – August 2024	March – April 2025

Category	Fiji	Pacific Islands (Regional)
Interview Guide Design	Informed by: Policy document analysis; analytical framework	Informed by: Participant observations at regional MSP workshop; analytical framework
Interview Format	Semi-structured (~1 hour), conducted in English; all interviews were face-to-face and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.	Semi-structured (~1 hour); conducted in English; all interviews were face-to-face except for six that were conducted online due to logistical constraints; all were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
Reflections	Government representation was dominant, potentially skewing perspectives toward institutional viewpoints. Interviews highlighted the challenge of capturing nuanced Indigenous perspectives within a policy-driven environment. Focus group discussions with *iTaukei* coastal communities provided bottom-up perspectives from direct ocean users.	Regional interviews provided valuable comparative insights but were occasionally constrained by participant availability and uneven national engagement. Notably, regional actors provided limited information on Tuvalu and Kiribati, reflecting both the early stage of MSP development in these countries and broader challenges in maintaining consistent regional engagement with microstates that face capacity, connectivity, and resource limitations. Follow-up: A second regional MSP workshop (5–9 May 2025) provided an opportunity for member-checking and collective reflection on preliminary findings. While the discussions did not yield substantial new information on Tuvalu and Kiribati, where MSP processes remain nascent or undocumented, the workshop nevertheless facilitated a deeper regional reflection on coordination challenges, shared priorities, and the varying stages of MSP development across Pacific Island countries.

Table 4: Overview of semi-structured interviews in Fiji and the Pacific Islands

Each interview was recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The resulting transcripts were organized and coded within NVivo, guided by the study's analytical framework. The data were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. In contrast to the deductive approach discussed in section 4.2.1, inductive analysis is a bottom-up process in which codes and themes emerge organically from the data itself (Bingham, 2023). Rather than testing theory, it seeks to build understanding directly from participants' experiences, observations, and narratives.

During the early stages of data analysis, I began by coding attributes, classifying interview data by actor categories, organizational affiliations, and interview contexts. Although this information was not included in formal reporting, it served as a useful reference point for interpreting patterns in stakeholder perspectives. Using the analytical framework, I initially

adopted a deductive coding approach, aligning transcript excerpts with pre-established categories. However, as I became more deeply immersed in the transcripts, new and unanticipated insights began to surface, for instance, erosion of customary structures, intra-community power dynamics, and declining trust in marine management strategies. To capture such nuances, I expanded the coding process to include inductive codes, allowing the data to reveal patterns and meanings beyond the original framework. The combined deductive–inductive strategy proved valuable across both the case contexts (Fiji and the Pacific Islands). The deductive component ensured that the analysis remained anchored in theory, providing coherence and comparability with previous stages of the research, while the inductive dimension enabled interpretive flexibility and responsiveness to context.

4.2.4 Survey

While Paper II focuses on MSP in Fiji through the perspectives of key ocean governance actors, Paper III explores the extent to which Fiji's emerging MSP process aligns with the priorities, values, and lived realities of the *iTaukei*, whose customary marine tenure underpins local ocean governance. Fiji's coastal communities are inseparable from the ocean, both materially and spiritually. Nearly half of Fiji's population lives within 5km of coral reef (Mangubhai et al., 2019). The country's 411 *iqoliqoli* are not merely resource spaces but expressions of collective identity, kinship, and stewardship. These *iqoliqoli* systems exemplify a relational worldview that binds people, place, and ocean through reciprocal obligations. Within these communities, gendered divisions of labor play a pivotal role. Fijian women are deeply engaged in nearshore fisheries, gleaning, and small-scale trade, while men often focus on offshore and commercial fishing (Thomas et al., 2020; Vunisea, 2016).

In paper III, I have explored the voices of both *iTaukei* men and women, acknowledging their distinct yet interconnected roles in sustaining ocean-based livelihoods and ensuring that MSP processes reflect the lived realities of the communities most closely tied to the sea. To examine these perspectives in depth, I conducted a structured survey with 120 coastal respondents across nine villages**,** followed by focus group discussions during a workshop. I drew on Gideon (2012) for a comprehensive guide to survey design and sampling in social science research. Yet, Gideon's paper offers limited insights into the relational, cultural, and contextual dynamics of surveys. Accordingly, I adopted its technical guidance (e.g., question phrasing, sampling frames) while adapting its recommendations to respect local context, relational trust, and cultural nuances. The survey served as both a culturally appropriate entry point into the communities and a means of establishing a quantitative foundation for subsequent qualitative inquiry.

In many *iTaukei* communities, established social hierarchies and communal norms can discourage open expression, particularly in collective settings. Thus, individual surveys provided a neutral, private space for participants to express their views without the influence of chiefly authority, gender norms, or social expectations. This design proved crucial for eliciting candid perspectives, particularly from groups whose voices are often marginalized, including women, youth, and everyday fishers who are not in leadership positions. The survey aimed to generate a baseline understanding of community awareness of MSP, levels of participation in marine management processes, and perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and representation in decision-making. It also sought to identify perceived risks and opportunities associated with MSP. The structured nature of the survey enabled comparability across sites**,** revealing both shared and divergent attitudes among villages. Administering the same set of

questions allowed patterns to emerge regarding trust, perceived inclusivity, and engagement with state-led ocean initiatives, insights that later informed the focus group protocols.

Fieldwork was conducted between July and September 2024. In accordance with *iTaukei* research protocols, formal consultations were initially held with village chiefs and elders, whose endorsement was crucial for community entry and participation. Each village nominated a gatekeeper, a respected intermediary who facilitated introductions, explained the purpose of the study in the local dialect, and ensured that cultural etiquette was observed throughout the research process (Clark, 2010). Before administering the survey, I verbally explained the research objectives and emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary. Each survey session lasted approximately one hour. My direct involvement in administering the survey allowed me to clarify ambiguous questions, maintain contextual sensitivity, and establish rapport with participants. The presence of local facilitators who are fluent in both English and the vernacular further enhanced linguistic accessibility and participant comfort, particularly among the elderly. Beyond serving as a data collection instrument, the survey functioned as an important trust-building exercise that fostered mutual understanding and prepared the ground for more reflective, dialogic engagement during the subsequent focus group discussions.

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS, employing both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques (Chi-square and log-linear analyses) to investigate the associations between demographic characteristics and perceptions of MSP processes. This analysis provided an empirical overview of local awareness, participation levels, and trust in government-led ocean initiatives and institutions. While the statistical findings revealed broad patterns of perception and engagement, they offered limited insight into the underlying cultural logics, motivations, and relational dynamics that shape these attitudes. Therefore, the subsequent focus group discussions were designed to contextualize and interpret these quantitative results, grounding them in the lived realities and shared experiences of *iTaukei* coastal communities. The mixed-method approach yielded a more holistic and culturally grounded understanding of local ocean priorities, perceptions of MSP, and the community-based governance practices that continue to underpin marine stewardship in Fiji.

4.2.5 Focus group discussion during workshop

Focus group discussions were conducted during a participatory workshop held in early October 2024 at a centrally located venue to ensure ease of access for all participants. From each of the nine participating villages, three men and three women were randomly selected to attend the workshop. Prior to the workshop, I personally visited each selected participant to explain the event's purpose, structure, and planned activities, and to obtain informed consent. This face-to-face approach not only aligned with *iTaukei* cultural protocols but also fostered trust, rapport, and a sense of shared ownership over the workshop process, ensuring that participants felt informed, respected, and comfortable contributing to the discussions. In total, 66 participants (34 men and 32 women) took part, including both the initially invited individuals and several additional community members who had completed the survey and expressed interest in contributing to the workshop. The inclusion of these additional participants reflected the communal nature of decision-making within *iTaukei* communities and the strong local interest in ocean issues.

Beyond serving as a data-collection activity, the workshop was intentionally designed as a dialogic, culturally grounded space that encouraged participants to share their relationships with the ocean and to reflect on Fiji's emerging MSP process collectively. Workshops are widely recognized in qualitative research as effective platforms for facilitating structured yet open-ended dialogue around shared issues of concern (Pomeroy & Douvere, 2008). They promote collective sense-making and create opportunities for participants to exchange, question, and co-develop ideas in a supportive environment (O. Nyumba et al., 2018; Wibeck et al., 2007). While individual interviews were well-suited to eliciting detailed governance-oriented perspectives from key national actors, the focus group discussions provided a participatory forum for engaging community participants in a dialogue.

The semi-formal workshop setting encouraged participants to speak openly, drawing on their lived experiences, traditional knowledge, and collective values. By embedding *Talanoa* principles throughout the discussions, the process became one of reciprocity and shared learning. Rather than positioning participants as mere data providers, the workshop evolved into a dialogic space of mutual reflection where knowledge was shared rather than extracted. At the same time, I remained mindful of the inherent challenges associated with conducting FGDs. Group settings can, at times, amplify existing hierarchies, where more outspoken or authoritative individuals dominate the conversation. To mitigate this, intentional efforts were made to ensure that quieter participants were gently invited into the discussion and that no single voice overshadowed others. This required sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal cues, as well as an understanding of cultural protocols governing speech and respect. Skilled facilitation was therefore essential, not only to maintain thematic focus and manage group interactions, but also to avoid inadvertently leading participants and to promote balanced participation throughout the dialogue (O. Nyumba et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2011).

The workshop began with a plenary session, during which participants introduced themselves, before breaking into six smaller focus groups. The atmosphere was open and collegial, and it was encouraging to see participants engage comfortably in mixed-gender discussions, even as many chose to stay within their village groups. This choice reflected a cultural preference for familiarity and shared understanding, illustrating how trust and kinship networks shape collective participation in community-based marine discussions. Each focus group was facilitated by a bilingual moderator, fluent in both English and *iTaukei*, who was carefully selected for their prior experience in participatory research and focus group facilitation. To ensure consistency and preparedness, facilitators were provided with guiding questions, ethical protocols, and background materials two weeks before the workshop.

The FGDs were structured around two main thematic sessions.

- *Session 1:* Participants reflected on the significance of the ocean in their everyday lives, their experiences with marine resource management, and their involvement (or lack thereof) in public consultations or decision-making forums. This session also examined their levels of awareness of the MSP process, perceptions of fairness and transparency, and the barriers that inhibit meaningful participation.

- *Session 2:* The discussion shifted toward envisioning the future of MSP in Fiji. Participants were invited to describe what an inclusive, culturally grounded MSP process should look like, identify factors that foster or constrain collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and articulate how communities could actively contribute to ocean planning efforts.

Each FGD lasted approximately two hours. Facilitators took detailed field notes throughout the workshop, supplemented by audio and video recordings (with participants' consent) to capture both verbal exchanges and non-verbal cues that conveyed meaning in the discussions. The video footage was particularly valuable during the analysis phase, as it provided contextual cues, such as tone, gestures, and collective expressions, that enriched the interpretive depth of the thematic analysis. At the conclusion of each session, groups voluntarily presented summaries of their key discussion points to the larger plenary. These presentations not only validated the accuracy of shared ideas but also stimulated further dialogue across groups, fostering an atmosphere of collective reflection and reciprocal learning. The process ultimately transformed the workshop into a co-creative forum where community perspectives on MSP were articulated, debated, and reimagined collaboratively.

All audio recordings from the FGDs were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for systematic coding and analysis. I employed an inductive thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006 pp.87-93) six-stage framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Identifying preliminary themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final analysis

The coding process was iterative, reflective, and adaptive, allowing themes to evolve through continuous engagement with the data. To enhance analytical rigor and trustworthiness, I engaged in peer verification with facilitators and my thesis supervisors. They reviewed the coding framework, thematic summaries, and illustrative excerpts to assess coherence, resonance, and validity. This collaborative review process helped refine category boundaries and confirm the credibility of interpretations. The resulting themes provided rich insights into how *iTaukei* communities perceive and engage with the MSP process. Participation was shown to be deeply shaped by the interplay between customary authority and state-led governance, resource capacities, and by enduring Indigenous values, kinship ties, and collective ethics of stewardship that define community relationships with the ocean.

4.2.6 Participant observation during workshop

Paper IV, the final paper in this thesis, extends the analysis beyond the national case study of Fiji to a broader regional scale, with the specific aim of assessing to what extent MSP is fit for purpose in advancing transformative ocean governance in Pacific Island Countries. To address this question, I employed a participatory research design grounded in participant observation and semi-structured individual interviews. This approach enabled direct engagement with regional practitioners, policymakers, and technical advisors involved in ocean governance initiatives, providing an opportunity to observe how MSP principles are interpreted, debated, and adapted within diverse institutional and cultural settings across the Pacific.

Participant observation was undertaken during a regional workshop organized by the Pacific Community through its Educational Quality and Assessment Programme, held in Suva, Fiji, from 17 to 21 February 2025. The workshop aimed to co-design a regional MSP qualification framework tailored to Pacific contexts, offering a unique platform for collective reflection on the knowledge, skills, and institutional capacities required to make MSP meaningful and

effective across Pacific SIDS. The event convened a diverse group of academics, ocean practitioners, and policy specialists from across the region, including representatives from Fiji, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Palau. Twelve participants attended in person, and five joined virtually. Beyond its formal objectives, the workshop provided a valuable opportunity to observe regional dynamics of collaboration, dialogue, and knowledge co-production, illuminating how MSP is being localized within the broader vision of Pacific-led ocean governance.

My primary objective as a participant observer was to gain first-hand, contextually grounded insights into how regional actors conceptualize the role and purpose of MSP in the Pacific. This involved observing how participants positioned MSP within broader regional ocean governance priorities, articulated its perceived benefits, and debated the institutional, political, and cultural challenges surrounding its implementation. Adopting an *observer-as-participant* stance, I actively engaged in group sessions and informal exchanges while maintaining a principal focus on observation and documentation. Participants were fully informed of my researcher role, and informed consent was obtained from both workshop organizers and individual participants. My contributions during discussions were limited to providing clarification or offering contextual observations when invited, ensuring that my presence did not influence the substance or tone of the deliberations. Throughout the workshop, I maintained detailed field notes organized around three thematic areas aligned with the study's overarching aim:

- Perceptions of MSP's relevance and suitability in the Pacific context
- Enabling and constraining conditions for MSP adoption and implementation
- Opportunities for MSP to catalyze transformative change in governance structures, practices, and mindsets

These themes provided a consistent analytical lens for capturing both formal deliberations and informal exchanges during group work and plenary discussions. I also participated in a follow-up week-long workshop with the same cohort of participants in May 2025. This second engagement provided an invaluable opportunity for member checking, allowing participants to revisit, validate, and expand upon the preliminary findings. Their reflections helped confirm interpretations, clarify ambiguities, and highlight areas that needed additional nuance.

To deepen and triangulate the findings, semi-structured interviews (Section 4.2.3) were subsequently conducted with regional ocean experts. These interviews offered opportunities for individual reflection and critical analysis, enriching and validating the insights generated from the workshop discussions. Field notes from the workshop were analyzed alongside interview transcripts, enabling a holistic interpretation of regional perspectives. This integrated analysis revealed how collective dialogues and individual reflections converged to shape nuanced understandings of MSP's perceived relevance, practical challenges, and potential to reshape governance thinking and practice across Pacific SIDS.

4.3 Researcher reflexivity

The researcher's role in a qualitative study is often seen as both an asset and a limitation. Close engagement with participants enables a deep understanding of their experiences, meanings, and perspectives within their social and cultural contexts. However, this proximity also introduces the risk of subjectivity, as personal values, assumptions, and prior experiences may

inadvertently shape data collection and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Reflexivity, therefore, becomes a core principle of qualitative research, entailing a continual process of critically examining how the researcher's identity, positionality, and interactions influence the research process and outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Patnaik, 2013).

My shared Pacific cultural grounding helped build rapport and trust with participants, creating a space for open, genuine, and meaningful dialogue. At the same time, I remained mindful of the need to critically examine how my own perspectives and affiliations might influence the framing of questions, interpretation of narratives, and representation of participants' voices. I engaged in continuous reflexive practice throughout all stages of the study. I found that maintaining a reflexive logbook proved particularly valuable for documenting evolving thoughts, assumptions, and emotional responses during fieldwork. Regularly revisiting these notes enabled me to identify potential biases and reconsider initial assumptions. I also sought feedback from peers and supervisors to challenge my interpretations and ensure analytical rigor. The use of diverse data collection methods, including document analysis, interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, further enabled triangulation and cross-validation of findings. Collaboration with bilingual facilitators during focus group sessions provided additional interpretive depth and served as a form of peer debriefing, ensuring that emergent insights were grounded in participants' intended meanings. Moreover, a follow-up validation workshop with regional actors corroborated key findings from earlier observations and interviews, reinforcing both the trustworthiness and relational integrity of the research process.

4.4 Reflection on the workshop experience

Facilitating the community workshop and later participating in the regional MSP workshop as an observer were among the most meaningful and transformative experiences of my research journey. Both engagements extended far beyond data collection. They became acts of reciprocity, reflection, and shared learning, where knowledge flowed in multiple directions and across scales. During the FGDs, many participants expressed deep appreciation for being part of a process that valued their lived experiences and recognized traditional knowledge as a legitimate and essential contribution to marine governance. What began as a structured research activity gradually evolved into a vibrant collective dialogue, one in which community members not only reflected on their values related to the ocean and views on MSP but also articulated their own visions of equitable, inclusive, and culturally grounded ocean governance from an *iTaukei* worldview. These exchanges revealed the depth of local wisdom and the community's aspirations for stewardship that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary change.

At the regional MSP workshop, my role as a participant observer provided a unique vantage point from which to observe how Pacific planners, policymakers, and practitioners collectively interpreted the purpose and potential of MSP. The discussions revealed a complex interplay of shared aspirations and underlying tensions between high-level policy discourses and grounded governance realities, between technocratic planning models and Indigenous worldviews, and between the ambitions of national frameworks and the limited skills and resources available to implement them. Observing these dynamics not only deepened the empirical richness of this study but also prompted sustained reflexivity about my own role as a researcher navigating between insider and outsider positions. It underscored the importance of humility, dialogue, and critical awareness in interpreting the multiple meanings that MSP

holds across different epistemic and cultural standpoints. Engaging as both facilitator and observer allowed me to witness knowledge co-production in its most authentic form, where dialogue and shared purpose became the foundation for understanding. This experience reinforced my conviction that meaningful transformation in ocean governance begins with listening, humility, and genuine collaboration, grounded in relationships of trust and care.

4.5 Data triangulation and validation

In this study, data triangulation was used not only to ensure validity and reduce potential biases but also as a strategy for complementarity, elaboration, and the iterative development of insights (Bryman, 2006). Complementarity was achieved by using diverse methods to examine different facets of MSP. For example, interviews with national and regional policymakers revealed institutional priorities and the rationales shaping emerging MSP frameworks, while surveys and focus groups captured the relational values, lived experiences, and everyday governance practices of Indigenous coastal communities. Elaboration occurred when one dataset helped deepen or nuance findings from another. For example, survey results showing low levels of MSP awareness among *iTaukei* communities gained depth when focus group discussions revealed how traditional hierarchies, varying leadership capacities, inadequate resources, and unequal access to information shape who receives knowledge about new governance initiatives and who is invited to participate in workshops and community outreach programs. In this way, triangulation enabled the study to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a more contextualized explanation of how governance processes are understood, contested, and negotiated across scales.

Development was also a central feature of the research design. Emerging insights from earlier stages of data collection informed subsequent data collection and analysis. For instance, insights from the policy analysis were translated into targeted interview questions. This recursive movement between evidence and inquiry enabled the interviews to evolve in response to key gaps and tensions identified in the policy landscape. Validation also extended beyond methods to include member checking and iterative feedback during follow-up workshops (Paper IV), providing participants with opportunities to review, clarify, and refine their interpretations. This process not only enhanced the factual reliability of the findings but also fostered deeper mutual trust and accountability between the researcher and participants. By weaving together these complementary strands, this integrative methodological approach reflected the multi-layered and multi-actor nature of ocean governance, capturing the complexity and interconnectedness that characterize MSP processes across the Pacific region.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Upholding ethical standards not only ensures methodological integrity but also sustains the trust, legitimacy, and credibility of both the researcher and the institutions associated with the study. Ethical approval for this study was sought from the Swedish Ethics Review Authority, ensuring alignment with Swedish research ethics standards. Additionally, local cultural protocols were viewed as ethical imperatives rather than administrative formalities. Approval was obtained from the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs, Fiji, and all research engagements followed customary consent processes, beginning with consultations with community leaders and elders before approaching individual participants. Indigenous protocols such as *vakaturaga*

*(*respect) and *veiwekani (*reciprocity) guided interactions throughout the fieldwork (Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009; Rhodes, 2005; Vaioleti, 2016).

All participants received comprehensive written and verbal information outlining the study's purpose, scope, and objectives, as well as the nature of their involvement and their rights as participants. They were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, including their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty or explanation. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, survey, and focus group discussion. Confidentiality was integral to the research design and rigorously maintained throughout all stages of data collection, analysis, and dissemination. While participants were categorized according to relevant demographic attributes, institutional affiliations, and community roles to contextualize their perspectives, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, field notes, and reports. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the workshop sessions were both audio- and video-recorded with explicit prior consent. These recordings were used exclusively for analytical purposes. Hard copies of data are securely stored in a locked cabinet at the University of Fiji, while all digital files are maintained in password-protected and encrypted folders, ensuring compliance with data protection standards and long-term confidentiality.

Ethical responsibility extends beyond data collection to the dissemination and application of findings. Upholding integrity in research communication was paramount, ensuring that interpretations remained fair, accurate, and culturally respectful. Guided by the Pacific principle of reciprocity, findings and published outputs will be shared with participating communities, relevant government agencies, and regional organizations. This process not only honors participants' contributions but also reinforces the commitment to returning knowledge to those who helped produce it, fostering mutual learning and supporting ongoing capacity building in marine governance across Fiji and the wider Pacific region.

Chapter 5.0: Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the study's key findings in relation to the thesis's overarching aim: *to critically assess the role of MSP in advancing ocean governance in Pacific Island Countries*. Advancing ocean governance refers to the evolution of governance systems toward more integrated, equitable, and transformative approaches to managing marine resources. This entails not only strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing transparency, and promoting cross-sectoral coordination, but also reconfiguring how authority is distributed, how knowledge is valued, and whose voices influence decision-making.

In pursuit of this aim, the chapter engages with three research questions that underpin the analysis:

5.1. What constitutes effective ocean governance and marine spatial planning in SIDS? (Paper I enriched with findings from Papers II, III, and IV)

5.2. How has MSP functioned as a governance instrument in Fiji? (Papers II and III)

5.3. To what extent is marine spatial planning fit for purpose in advancing transformative ocean governance in Pacific Island Countries? (Paper IV)

5.1 Ocean governance and marine spatial planning in SIDS

The first research question was addressed through a semi-systematic review of academic articles on MSP in SIDS (Paper I). Building on this review, I triangulate the findings with empirical insights from the Fiji case (Paper II–III) and the Pacific regional study (Paper IV) to present an integrated account of how MSP is conceptualized, enabled, and constrained in practice.

An analytical framework grounded in collaborative governance theory guided the interpretation of findings, conceptualizing MSP as a deliberative and collaborative process embedded within the broader context of ocean governance. The literature highlights the critical roles of leadership and goal setting, governance arrangements, and social capital in mobilizing the human, financial, and technical capacities that support integrated ocean planning in SIDS. Furthermore, in identifying what constitutes an effective governance framework to sustain a collaborative MSP process, scholars highlight several interrelated elements that collectively underpin collaboration in SIDS contexts (Fig.6).

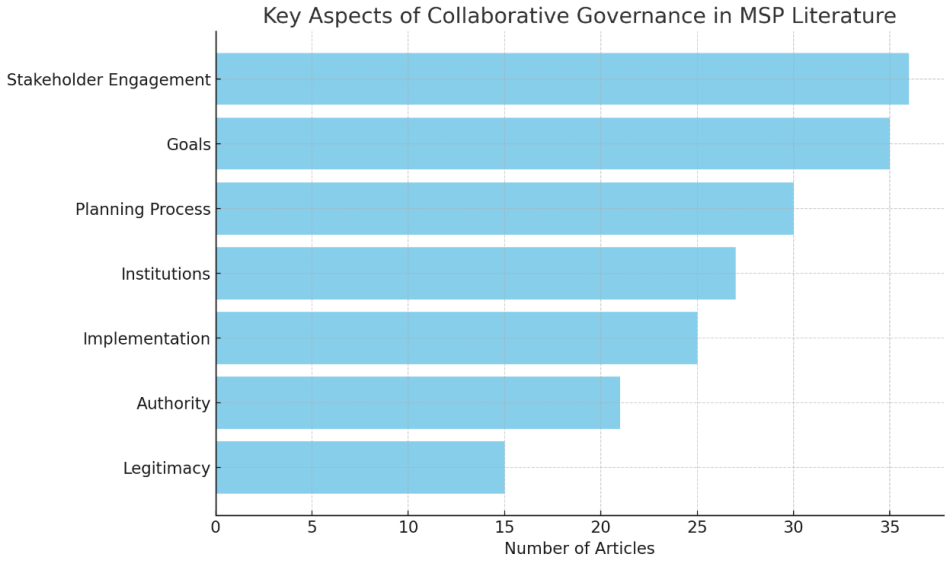


Figure 6: Key elements of the collaborative governance framework identified in MSP literature from SIDS adapted from Singh et al. (2025 p.10)

An interesting outcome of the review is the mismatch between the rhetorical framing of MSP as a participatory and integrative tool and the empirical reality of its implementation in SIDS, where legitimacy, capacity, and knowledge equity remain persistent gaps. Findings from the review indicate that *stakeholder engagement* (n = 36) has been discussed extensively, whereas the legitimacy aspects of MSP have received comparatively limited attention (n = 15). This gap is particularly significant, considering that the legitimacy of MSP is closely tied to the early and meaningful engagement of relevant stakeholders and the effectiveness of the consensus-building process (Pomeroy & Douvere, 2008; Zaucha & Kreiner, 2021). The results indicate that, although stakeholder engagement is the focus of several MSP studies, it remains embroiled in controversies surrounding tokenistic participation, limited awareness, and inadequate resource capacity to support inclusive decision-making in SIDS. Moreover, weak institutional capacity and the unequal valuation of knowledge systems further constrain the equity and effectiveness of the MSP process. These constraints have led to insufficient attention to the legitimacy aspects of MSP. Another interesting finding relates to the categories of *goals* and *authority*. Goal setting is frequently discussed in the literature (n=35), with numerous studies emphasizing that effective MSP in SIDS requires goals that are clearly defined, localized, aligned with national priorities, and inclusive of socio-cultural dimensions, particularly the perspectives of marginalized groups. Although aspects of authority received relatively limited emphasis (n = 21), they were addressed indirectly through broader discussions on governance arrangements, which comprised the categories of planning process (n = 30), institutions (n = 27), and implementation (n = 25).

5.1.1 Alignments and divergences between literature and empirical evidence

Table 5 synthesizes several collaborative governance dimensions identified in the literature and reinforced by findings from Fiji and Pacific study. These dimensions are widely recognized as essential enabling conditions, as they encompass the institutional, social, and relational qualities necessary for effective collaboration in MSP across SIDS contexts.

Governance Dimensions	What constitutes effective MSP and ocean governance in SIDS-focused MSP literature (Paper I)	What Fiji and the Pacific evidence show (Papers II, III, and IV)	Implications for context-appropriate MSP design in SIDS
Political Will and Leadership	High-level commitment and facilitative leadership sustain momentum, align sectoral priorities, and drive integrated ocean governance.	MSP is politically endorsed, but leadership remains centralized and inconsistent, often dependent on external timelines; momentum fluctuates with political cycles, and local/customary leaders remain insufficiently empowered to drive implementation.	Leadership must be distributed across governance levels; supported by long-term incentives and anchored in both state and customary authorities to ensure continuity and accountability.
Institutional Capacity	A dedicated lead agency, stable legislation, and clearly defined mandates enable coordination, enforcement, and integrated ocean planning across sectors and scales.	High-level steering committees are in place to guide MSP activities, yet institutional authority remains fragmented, with overlapping mandates and incomplete legislation; national institutions struggle to retain expertise due to their reliance on external sources.	MSP requires a statutory mandate, dedicated legislation, an empowered coordinating body, and permanent technical capacity to move from project cycles to sustained governance practice.
Stakeholder Engagement	Structured, inclusive, and transparent engagement builds shared ownership, supports conflict resolution, and strengthens the legitimacy of decisions by leveraging diverse interests and capacities.	Participation is uneven and largely transactional, often limited to invited or well-resourced actors; IPLC involvement remains peripheral and lacks influence on decision outputs, contributing to mistrust.	Engagement must be a resourced governance obligation, with mechanisms to ensure equitable representation, sustained involvement, and feedback loops to build legitimacy.
Customary Governance	Co-governance with Indigenous tenure systems enhances legitimacy, supports	Customary governance remains essential and is experiencing revitalization across	MSP must legally recognize and embed Indigenous authority through co-decision

Governance Dimensions	What constitutes effective MSP and ocean governance in SIDS-focused MSP literature (Paper I)	What Fiji and the Pacific evidence show (Papers II, III, and IV)	Implications for context-appropriate MSP design in SIDS
	compliance, and aligns spatial management with local stewardship values and lived practices.	many Pacific SIDS, yet it is still undervalued in formal decision-making; Internal power dynamics also limit equitable representation of women, youth, and other marginalized groups.	structures and protect rights using tools such as FPIC and grievance pathways.
Financial Sustainability	Stable financing aligned with national priorities supports monitoring, enforcement, data systems, and sustained engagement, with blue finance offering opportunities to accelerate sustainable development.	MSP funding in the Pacific remains largely external, with limited national budget allocation and no established financial framework to sustain implementation, monitoring, or engagement beyond project cycles	Domestic budgeting, sustainable engagement with the private sector, and equitable finance governance are essential to operationalize and sustain MSP.
Ocean Literacy, Knowledge Integration, and Research	Knowledge co-production, open data access, and strong local research capacity underpin adaptive decision-making and effective monitoring.	Decision-making is primarily driven by scientific data and political priorities, while Indigenous and local knowledge is often only recognized when filtered through scientific frames. Community awareness of MSP remains low, and academia is still underutilized in national processes.	Strengthen knowledge pluralism by redistributing epistemic authority, investing in community literacy, and positioning universities and relevant MSP stakeholders, including IPLC, as core MSP partners in a community of practice.
Ethics, Cultural Norms, and Values	Respect for cultural relationships to the ocean and fair benefit distribution promote stewardship and justice, while ethical frameworks uphold fairness and accountability in MSP.	Cultural values are widely acknowledged but rarely embedded in governance criteria, and procedural and recognitional justice remain weak, particularly for non-chiefly groups, women, and youth.	Cultural protocols and equitable benefit-sharing must be institutionalized to uphold fairness and sustain social legitimacy.

Table 5: Alignments and divergences across collaborative governance dimensions

The literature review and empirical evidence collectively show that MSP in SIDS is emerging at the intersection of global ocean commitments, national policy developments, and Indigenous governance traditions grounded in cultural, spiritual, and relational connections to the ocean. Across Pacific SIDS, there is normative support for MSP, reflected in high-level policy endorsement, revitalized customary stewardship, and an enduring ethic of collective

responsibility for the ocean. However, the practical realization of the governance dimensions remains highly uneven. Persistent challenges identified in the literature include weak institutional capacity, fragmented authority across ministries, under-resourced stakeholder participation, limited research, and insufficient integration of Indigenous and local knowledge. Findings from Fiji and the wider Pacific region both confirm and amplify these governance challenges, underscoring that MSP in SIDS is not a neutral or purely technical exercise but a deeply political and relational process that relies on building capacity, trust, and legitimacy.

This study not only reaffirms the governance dimensions highlighted in the literature but also extends the conceptual understanding of collaborative governance by identifying the conditions critical for effective, contextually grounded MSP in Pacific SIDS. These conditions extend beyond generic participation to include the institutionalization of Indigenous co-decision-making authority, the strengthening of boundary organizations, the recognition of internal community inequities shaped by gender, age, and chiefly hierarchies, and the cultivation of relational trust in contexts marked by historical grievances and institutional mistrust. The findings also draw attention to epistemic justice concerns, as Indigenous and local knowledge is often subordinated to scientific expertise, and to the risk that MSP could unintentionally weaken customary marine tenure if legal and procedural safeguards are not embedded. Finally, political turnover and reliance on external financing introduce temporal and sovereignty-related vulnerabilities that remain underexplored in broader MSP discourse. Together, these insights suggest that advancing MSP in Pacific SIDS will depend on strengthening context-specific governance capacities that respect Indigenous rights and authority, address local equity concerns, and build the relational foundations needed to support more enduring and legitimate ocean governance outcomes.

5.2 Ocean governance and marine spatial planning: Fijian perspectives

The discourse on MSP in Fiji, along with the evolution of ocean-based policies and legislation, offers deeper insights into how MSP is emerging as a governance approach. This section focuses on the perspectives of both key ocean governance actors and Indigenous coastal communities to address the research question, “How has MSP functioned as a governance instrument in Fiji?". For clarity, the key ocean governance participants (Paper II) will be referred to as “governance actors”, while members of *iTaukei* coastal communities (Paper III) will be referred to as “community participants”.

5.2.1 Ocean governance in Fiji

The analysis of interviews with governance actors, as well as surveys and FGDs with community participants, revealed that Fiji’s ocean governance is characterized by a complex and dynamic interplay among statutory frameworks, customary institutions, and multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and Indigenous coastal communities. Consistent with the broader literature on MSP in SIDS, Fiji’s MSP processes reveal that robust leadership and institutional capacity are essential for navigating the complex interplay of formal and informal governance actors. Overlapping mandates, entrenched sectoral silos, and limited institutional capacity constrain the practical design and implementation of MSP, underscoring the literature’s emphasis on co-leadership arrangements, adaptive learning, and investment in human capital. Similarly, customary governance remains central to coastal

stewardship, particularly within *iTaukei* communities, but historical hierarchies and uneven consultation limit the meaningful integration of Indigenous knowledge and local priorities into formal decision-making, mirroring the challenges identified in the SIDS literature.

Additionally, sustainable financing is a critical bottleneck in Fiji, underscoring the literature's caution about donor-dependent mechanisms and innovative instruments such as blue bonds. Governance actors recognized the potential of such instruments but stressed that their effectiveness depends on institutional strength, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and alignment with customary governance systems, echoing lessons from the Seychelles experience (Hunt & Hilborn, 2025). In terms of social capital and stakeholder engagement, the Fiji case illustrates persistent gaps in awareness, access, and influence among Indigenous people and local communities. Several governance actors increasingly view MSP as a promising tool for aligning national marine development objectives with the needs and practices of coastal populations. However, surveys and FGDs with *iTaukei* coastal communities revealed a significant awareness gap. Many community participants were unfamiliar with MSP and struggled to understand how it could improve their economic opportunities or contribute to community well-being. This underscores a persistent disconnect between policy-level aspirations for inclusivity and the realities of grassroots empowerment. Despite Fiji's long history of community-based natural resource management, current governance frameworks fall short in systematically integrating Indigenous knowledge, values, and priorities into decision-making. The absence of structured approaches to incorporate diverse worldviews and value-based judgments undermines MSP's potential to serve as a transformative governance instrument capable of aligning ecological, social, and economic objectives.

The results are presented in two complementary parts, reflecting the perspectives of governance actors on the one hand and community participants on the other. Together, they provide a multi-scalar view of Fiji's evolving MSP landscape. Table 6 presents insights from interviews with ocean governance actors, highlighting how institutional fragmentation, capacity constraints, monitoring and compliance, stakeholder engagement, funding constraints, and data gaps collectively shape Fiji's marine governance landscape.

Theme	Key Insights	Illustrative Quotes
Institutional fragmentation and capacity constraints	• There's political support for MSP, but institutional coordination is weak, with overlapping mandates, unclear roles, and limited cross-sectoral integration. • Leadership and resource gaps hinder effective ocean governance and MSP implementation. • Existing committees are inconsistent in meetings and follow-ups, reducing policy coherence and credibility. • National policies such as the National Ocean Policy (2020–2030) and the Climate Change Act (2021) articulate high-level	*"Fiji government departments typically confine their roles and mandates within the boundaries of their legislative parameters .....despite decades of negotiations and discussions to advance an integrated approach to ocean management, the government is still failing to address siloed situations...I am wondering if MSP will be able to tackle this hurdles."* (Participant 13, April 2024)

Theme	Key Insights	Illustrative Quotes
	objectives for ocean and climate management, but they provide limited operational guidance for the implementation of MSP. • MSP is viewed as a tool to integrate conservation and development priorities and facilitate deliberation among stakeholders. • Without sufficient financial, technical, and human resources, MSP risks being donor-dependent and externally driven. • A dedicated Ministry or agency for Ocean Affairs could provide impartial leadership, strengthen enforcement, and balance competing sectoral priorities	*"Marine spatial planning has started, but we at the ministry are not able to engage with relevant stakeholders, because we simply don't have the staff nor the time for it"* (Participant 2, April 2024)
Monitoring & Compliance	• Fiji faces major surveillance and security challenges, especially in offshore waters. • Illegal fishing persists; existing fish warden systems are under-resourced and ineffective. • Lack of legal recognition and weak enforcement complicate governance. • MSP could enhance monitoring, compliance, and coordination if supported by legislation and adequate resources. • Dedicated MSP authority can strengthen law enforcement, integrate land-sea governance, and enable transboundary collaboration.	*" Fiji iqoliqoli areas are a critical component of the iTaukei way of life, and the iTaukei know how to care for it, but it covers only about 2% of Fiji's EEZ, so who is going to be responsible for the management of the rest of 98% of EEZ?"* (Participant 14, April 2024) *" Marine spatial planning is about managing the entire ocean space and resources, so in that way it is more inclusive than MPAs. ....I feel like we can use MSP as a tool to ramp up monitoring efforts in the ocean"* (Participant 8, May 2024)
Stakeholder Engagement	• Stakeholder engagement is limited and often tokenistic, undermining legitimacy and policy implementation. • National commitments (e.g., 30x30 MPAs) risk resistance without meaningful consultation with industries, communities and NGOs. • Participation favors well-resourced stakeholders; marginalized groups often remain excluded. • Engagement with IPLC is ad hoc • MSP can strengthen engagement by leveraging traditional leaders,	*"Fiji government made a very bold commitment to protect 30% of the ocean, it is good, but how feasible is it? We have a small economy, and fisheries is one of the largest economic sectors here, so then where are our fishers supposed to fish? Such commitments should not be made without consulting those whose livelihoods are solely dependent on fishing activities."* (Participant 5, May 2024) *"What are the alternative options for those whose fisheries livelihood will be affected...Fiji is still struggling with aquaculture activities...so what*

Theme	Key Insights	Illustrative Quotes
	empowering communities, and involving key ocean industries. • Success requires iterative, sustained engagement, early outreach, and clear demonstration of socio-economic and environmental benefits. • Building trust and collaborative relationships is essential for effective governance and shared ownership	*other options are available…have we thought this through yet'* (Participant 6, April 2024)
Sustainable Finance	• Insufficient funding is a major barrier to sustaining MSP and area-based management tools. • Heavy reliance on donor support limits local ownership and risks discontinuity of initiatives. • Engaging the domestic private sector and using innovative mechanisms (e.g., blue bonds, trust funds) can address funding gaps. • Sustainable financing is critical for MSP's long-term viability and transformative potential in the blue economy.	*"A lot of initiatives are donor-funded because of our constrained public finance, even MSP is being supported by NGOs, so Fiji must create a financial mechanism for MSP to ensure that it is sustained beyond donor support."* (Participant 1, April 2024) *"Maybe MSP can help us find a way to strengthen our institutional framework and secure the much-needed finance to sustain ocean-based activities"* (Participant 9, 2024)
Data limitations and research capacity	• Ocean data collection, storage, and accessibility are fragmented and poorly coordinated. • Indigenous knowledge, local ecological knowledge, and women's contributions are underrepresented. • Data is stored in multiple formats, limiting accessibility and informed decision-making. • Investment in research capacity, academic linkages, and interdisciplinary approaches is needed. • Lack of a dedicated national ocean research center and reliance on external expertise constrain localized knowledge and action.	*"Research, data collection, storage, and access have been an ad hoc process in Fiji….even after so many years, we have not been able to resolve data issues as organizations are still reluctant to share and publish data"*(Participant 6, June 2024)

Table 6: Key insights from Fiji's ocean governance actors

Table 7, in turn, draws from community surveys and focus group discussions conducted across nine coastal villages, capturing how *iTaukei* coastal communities perceive, experience, and engage with emerging MSP processes. Their voices reveal how ocean governance intersects with everyday livelihoods, customary tenure, trust, and knowledge systems, reflecting five interrelated themes.

Categories	Key Insights	Illustrative Quotes
Ocean Priorities	• The ocean is central to coastal communities' livelihoods, food security, income, cultural identity, and sense of belonging. • Communities recognize and depend on both the ecological and socio-economic benefits provided by the ocean. • The ocean holds deep spiritual significance, shaping cultural practices and governance. • Indigenous Fijians have a traditional responsibility to protect their totemic species, guided by cultural and spiritual practices.	*"We value our vanua, which isn't just about caring for the land and sea but also our people, culture, and spirits that guide us both on land and sea"* (Focus Group 3) *"Ocean is our source of income….anything to do with the ocean must be discussed with us..We have long been protecting it, but we now feel like we are losing our connection because its controlled by the government"* (Focus Group 1)
Awareness and Participation	• Awareness of MSP varied, with many participants familiar with marine management efforts but uncertain about the specific purpose and processes of MSP • Support for MSP tended to increase when communities understood the potential benefits for livelihoods, resource access, and local economies. • Engagement in marine management was more common through NGO-led initiatives than government-led processes, • Geographic differences were evident: communities in Sigatoka expressed stronger support for MSP due to positive conservation experiences, whereas participants in Ba and Rakiraki were more cautious or skeptical, influenced by limited information and negative past interactions with government-led development projects.	*"We are seeing the benefits of MPAs, and if MSP can secure livelihoods and bring economic benefits to coastal communities, we would be happy to support it."* (Focus Group 5) *"We have participated in some NGO-led conservation activities, but have never heard of the word MSP before, we don't know about it"* (Focus Group 4)
Trust and Governance Challenges	• Erosion of customary governance authority, coupled with weak communication and transparency between leaders and community members, has reduced trust in decision-making and undermined community	*"Project don't give much benefits. It actually benefits implementing organisations more than communities.*

Categories	Key Insights	Illustrative Quotes
	confidence in new governance initiatives such as MSP • Governance of *iqoliqoli* resources continues to be controlled by men and chiefly lineages, restricting the participation of women and youth • Technical/scientific knowledge is prioritized over Indigenous knowledge • Participants expressed a strong interest in having a clear and transparent governance framework for MSP that formally recognizes the role of IPLC in decision-making. • Many believed MSP should be backed by dedicated legislation for the protection of local rights and interests. • Support for proposed protection targets varied, reflecting the importance communities place on sustaining livelihood access, fair benefit sharing, and long-term food security alongside conservation goals.	*Sometimes even communities are on the losing end because we don't understand the objectives of the project and how it is suppose to benefit us"* (Focus Group 3) <br*" First of all, we don't understand much about MSP, and second of all, there should be some form of policy and governance that ensures that our voices are heard when such tools are being implemented…without guidance, anyone can do anything."* (Focus Group 4)
Integration of Indigenous and Local Knowledge	• Participants strongly supported integrating local ecological and traditional knowledge into MSP design. • Communities emphasized that MSP should differ from past projects by ensuring structured IPLC involvement in monitoring and evaluation. • Communities are eager to combine customary practices with modern tools (e.g., monitoring technology, data collection, sustainable gear).	*"We are not saying that our knowledge is superior than other forms of knowledge, but what we are saying is that we use the ocean and coast almost on a daily basis – someone is always out there in the sea, so at least our ideas and knowledge should be combined with science because we can tell you things that you may not know"* (Focus Group 6)
Gendered Contributions and Roles	• Men are more involved in offshore surveillance, youth mentorship, technical work, and by-law development. • Women contributed through reef gleaning, seaweed farming, mangrove rehabilitation, leadership, and documentation. • Both genders agreed on the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge in MSP.	*"We women are more actively involved in coastal areas than men, we are also good at recording information, we are much better than men, because they are lazy…so women should be motivated and even with little empowerment and support, they will do wonders"* (Focus Group 3)

Table 7: Key insights from Indigenous coastal communities

Viewed together, the insights from Tables 6 and 7 reveal a complex but complementary picture of Fiji's evolving marine governance landscape. At the institutional level, actors recognize MSP as a potentially integrative mechanism for overcoming long-standing coordination gaps,

fragmented mandates, and resource limitations. However, its practical realization is constrained by weak institutional capacity, donor dependence, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and the absence of sustained leadership. At the community level, MSP remains a largely unfamiliar concept, but its underlying principles, participation, stewardship, and knowledge integration, resonate strongly with Indigenous governance traditions and local priorities. Both governance levels express frustration over the lack of coherence and inclusivity in decision-making, underscoring the need for transparent communication, shared ownership, and stronger institutional-community linkages.

5.2.2 Discussion and reflections on marine spatial planning in Fiji

The synergies between collaborative governance and the MSP framework provide a systems-oriented perspective on the complex relationships among government officials, non-governmental actors, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, as well as how these interactions influence policy development and the management of ocean space and resources. Policy developments in Fiji increasingly reflect a shift toward ecosystem-based and cross-sectoral ocean governance, with MSP positioned as one of the key mechanisms to operationalize recent policy commitments. However, despite its prominence in discourse, MSP is only briefly mentioned in Fiji's two flagship policy instruments, the National Ocean Policy and the Climate Change Act, and currently lacks a formal legislative basis. In practice, MSP has been initiated through existing frameworks and overseen by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change through the National Ocean Policy steering committee. However, its development remains fragmented and largely project-based, embedded within a predominantly top-down governance architecture. Comparable to Brazil, where studies such as Gerhardinger et al. (2019) reveal MSP as a patchwork of subnational initiatives rather than a coherent national process, Fiji's experience similarly reflects the early and uneven stages of institutionalization.

Key collaborative dimensions such as leadership and goal setting, governance arrangements, and the cultivation of social capital remain underutilized in MSP design and implementation. Leadership, in particular, cannot be disentangled from Fiji's historical and political legacies. The legacy of colonialism left Fiji with a rigidly centralized and sector-driven governance system, while post-independence political unrest and coups diminished confidence in state institutions and maintained a pattern of decision-making dominated by a small elite. These legacies have created path dependencies that privilege hierarchical authority structures, complicating efforts to cultivate distributed, transformative leadership.

Fiji's limited fiscal space, exacerbated by global disruptions like COVID-19 and frequent climate hazards, poses an additional barrier to effective collaboration. Financial sustainability, therefore, should be viewed as both an issue of equitable resource distribution and of the political incentives, institutional coherence, and social trust that enable cooperation. Sustained financing plays a decisive role in determining whose priorities are pursued, whose voices are amplified, and whose participation is enabled within MSP processes. At the same time, reliance on short-term or donor-dependent financing, quite common in Fiji, risks fragmenting MSP initiatives, undermining trust, and reproducing patterns of dependency rather than fostering long-term autonomy. Thus, financial sustainability is a critical determinant of whether MSP evolves into a transformative governance instrument that promotes inclusivity and enables co-creation or remains locked in bureaucratic routines with limited local ownership.

For *iTaukei* community members, access to decision-making forums remains limited, and even when included, their social acceptance within those spaces is uneven. For instance, consultations tend to engage only a narrow segment of the community, primarily male representatives, thereby excluding broader voices and perspectives. Many focus group participants, including some village chiefs, were unfamiliar with MSP and uncertain about its implications for livelihoods, customary tenure, or cultural relationships with the ocean. This knowledge gap contributes to ambivalence toward MSP, reflecting broader concerns about how it may affect ways of life and livelihood security. Fiji's Indigenous and local knowledge, though extensive and deeply tied to cultural and spiritual traditions, frequently struggles to gain traction within institutional decision-making structures. In the context of MSP, questions of justice extend beyond outcomes to the processes by which decisions are made. For *iTaukei* communities, procedural justice is undermined when access to decision-making forums is limited and when opportunities for participation lack transparency or genuine influence. Within the IPBES framework, strengthening procedural and recognitional justice aligns with key levers of transformative change, such as the recognition of diverse values, inclusive decision-making, and capacity-building.

At the same time, the role of bonding and bridging social capital, highlighted in theory as essential for trust, reciprocity, and knowledge sharing (Baylis et al., 2018; Margerum, 2011; O'Brien et al., 2005), is mirrored in the *iTaukei* context. *iTaukei* communities possess rich traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and relational worldviews, and they have demonstrated a willingness to collaborate with both state and non-state actors. These strengths are essential for effectively operationalizing MSP, particularly in inshore areas where customary governance remains strong. However, these capacities are not automatically mobilized and require deliberate recognition, support, and integration within formal governance processes. Their potential is mediated by local power dynamics, where, as previously discussed, decision-making often rests with chiefs, elders, or dominant families. Overlooking intra-community inequalities risks reproducing exclusion under the guise of Indigenous participation. This study concludes that Indigenous knowledge is a living, adaptive system, sustained by the multiplicity of voices within communities and enriched through interactions with science and technology. For MSP to be both transformative and legitimate, it must move beyond symbolic inclusion and embrace Indigenous knowledge as an active, adaptive form of governance capable of guiding decision-making alongside formal institutions.

5.2.3 From participation to transformation: the role of Indigenous coastal communities in Fiji's MSP

Governance and institutional actors play a central role as key stakeholders and facilitators in the MSP process. However, while MSP inherently involves a diverse range of actors, this study deliberately focused on Indigenous coastal communities to foreground their perspectives, experiences, and contributions to ocean governance. In Fiji and the wider Pacific, these communities are primary users and custodians of inshore marine spaces, relying on them for subsistence, livelihoods, and culturally embedded practices. Their centrality in MSP makes them critical actors, however, focusing on these communities does not exclude other stakeholders. Rather, Indigenous coastal communities serve as entry points for inclusive co-creation, ensuring that planning processes are grounded in local knowledge, culturally resonant governance, and equitable participation.

In Fiji's MSP context, empowerment and co-creation with Indigenous coastal communities serve as both catalysts and conduits for transformative change, shaping values, fostering trust, and enabling mutual learning. Grounded in the IPBES framework on transformative change, Indigenous and local knowledge provides alternative epistemologies that foreground responsibility, reciprocity, and the interconnectedness between people and nature (Bennett et al., 2024). This study concludes that MSP and *iTaukei* coastal communities are currently in an emerging and asymmetrical relationship, but one with the potential to become reciprocal if governance arrangements meaningfully redistribute authority and embed Indigenous stewardship values. Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems, and customary governance can guide co-creation platforms, participatory research, and inclusive decision-making. Conversely, MSP can strengthen local leadership, empower marginalized groups, expand access to technology and resources, and build capacities for engagement with broader governance systems. Rather than demonstrating transformation already in effect, the results reveal the enabling foundations and directional potential for a more equitable and culturally grounded MSP. Realizing this potential, however, will depend on whether future MSP processes meaningfully embed Indigenous authority, ensure sustained resourcing, and institutionalize inclusive governance mechanisms that translate principles of participation and equity into practice. Thus, focusing on empowerment and co-creation is not merely a normative objective, but rather a gateway through which other IPBES transformative clusters, such as structure, systems, science and technology, and inner transformation, are activated. Practical mechanisms such as the institutionalization of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, grievance redress channels, and culturally sensitive participatory procedures are not only ethical imperatives but also practical enablers of sustainable, transformative, and socially legitimate governance outcomes.

5.2.4 Institutional pathways for marine spatial planning in Fiji

The National Ocean Policy's intent and institutional design reflect a distinctly transformative orientation. By promoting cross-sectoral coordination, integrated decision-making, and intergenerational equity, the policy seeks to shift ocean management away from fragmented, sectoral practices toward a more holistic and inclusive governance system. This orientation is further reinforced by the Climate Change Act (2021), which mandates mainstreaming climate and ocean considerations across all sectors of national planning. Together, these instruments signify a gradual but meaningful shift in Fiji's ocean governance paradigm, one that emphasizes systems thinking, institutional learning, and participatory approaches as the foundations for resilient and equitable ocean governance.

Although MSP is not yet fully articulated in these policy instruments, this study finds that MSP holds considerable promise as an integrated, potentially transformative approach to ocean governance in Fiji. Yet, a central dilemma lies in how its principles can be practically unpacked and operationalized within the country's complex governance landscape. While mainstreaming of MSP into existing governance frameworks may appear pragmatic, in practice, Fiji faces entrenched structural and institutional limitations that hinder coordination, collaboration, and socio-technological innovation. These findings resonate with the barriers to transformative change identified in the IPBES framework. For instance, at the structural level, outdated legal frameworks and fragmented mandates impede coherent, cross-sectoral governance. At the systems level, weak participatory mechanisms and uneven representation limit opportunities for knowledge co-creation and shared decision-making,

perpetuating power asymmetries. The absence of sustained spaces for learning and reflexivity further constrains the potential for inner transformations, such as shifts in values, mindsets, and trust that are essential for building and maintaining collaboration. Finally, insufficient investment in data infrastructure, monitoring, and knowledge-sharing systems weakens the science and technology mechanisms needed to generate, integrate, and apply knowledge for innovation and adaptive governance. Collectively, these deficiencies suggest that if MSP remains dispersed across multiple agencies, it risks defaulting to routine bureaucratic mandates, becoming siloed and exclusionary, and resisting adaptive or cross-sectoral planning.

This study finds that a graduated approach is needed to strengthen MSP governance in Fiji, progressing from pragmatic reforms achievable within current constraints to more substantial restructuring if required. The first step is to reinforce existing structures by formalizing and resourcing the National Ocean Policy steering committee, providing it with a statutory mandate, decision-making authority, and dedicated human resources and technical support to improve coordination. If coordination and capacity gaps persist, an independent legislated MSP Authority could then be established to define clear lines of accountability for planning and data governance, while embedding customary institutions and accessible grievance pathways into decision-making. Although some governance actors have proposed a Ministry of Ocean Affairs to unify ocean functions across government, such restructuring carries significant fiscal, legal, and political implications and is unlikely to be feasible under current budgetary conditions. Pacific experience, such as Tonga's "Oceans 7", shows that meaningful integration can be achieved more rapidly and cost-effectively by strengthening coordination within existing arrangements. Nonetheless, ministry-level consolidation could be considered as a long-term option, contingent on feasibility assessment, sustainable financing, and safeguards such as an independent Ocean Fund and statutory recognition of MSP functions.

Regardless of the institutional pathway adopted, the MSP governance framework should ultimately aim to cultivate a Community of Practice as a foundation for mobilizing the collaborative process. A Community of Practice provides a social infrastructure through which trust, learning, and collective problem-solving can evolve organically. There is no universally prescribed model for its establishment, allowing the lead agency responsible for MSP to design a context-specific and adaptive structure grounded in bottom-up principles. The initial network could comprise Indigenous Peoples and local communities, local government representatives, and the leading MSP agency. Once this foundational network is established, deliberate efforts should be made to expand cross-boundary linkages with a broader range of actors, such as the private sector, technical institutions, and research organizations. Within this framework, collaboration extends beyond a strategic choice, it becomes a transformative relational process, rooted in mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, that strengthens social capital and enhances the adaptive capacity of ocean governance.

5.3 Marine spatial planning as a governance instrument for transformative change in the Pacific Islands

Fiji represents a strategically valuable case study for understanding MSP in Pacific Island Countries. Its diverse socio-ecological contexts, from densely populated coasts to remote outer islands, provide a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities facing MSP across the Pacific. At the same time, a Pacific-wide perspective is essential for understanding how MSP is unfolding across the region and for assessing the extent to which it advances transformative ocean governance. This section draws on insights from the Pacific Islands regional MSP workshop and interviews with regional ocean actors to address the final research question: *To what extent is marine spatial planning fit for purpose in advancing transformative ocean governance in Pacific Island Countries?* (Paper IV). For simplicity, workshop participants and interviewees are collectively referred to as participants throughout this section.

5.3.1 Conceptualization and application of marine spatial planning in the Pacific Islands

> *The Pacific is becoming reconnected to our land, to our sea, to our resources….It is important for us all to work together so that when we paddle, we can paddle in the same direction towards a shared ocean vision.* (Sokimi, 2025)

This public statement by Arthur Sokimi, the Pacific Regional Director leading MSP initiatives across several Pacific Island countries, encapsulates the collective spirit driving MSP efforts in the region, a vision rooted in unity, collaboration, and the reconnection of Pacific peoples with their ocean as a shared heritage. Reflecting this sentiment, nearly all participants described MSP in the Pacific as an initiative grounded in aspirations for integrated, equitable, and sustainable ocean governance. They viewed MSP conceptually as a holistic and inclusive process aimed at fostering inter-ministerial collaboration, promoting social justice and gender equity, integrating scientific and Indigenous knowledge, and establishing robust legal and institutional frameworks supported by sustainable financing.

However, participants highlighted a significant gap between this vision and its practical application. Consistent with the Fiji case, implementation remains hampered by limited institutional capacity, fragmented coordination mechanisms, weak legal and financial underpinnings, and highly centralized, state-led governance. While NGOs often serve as intermediaries to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice, many participants, including some from local and regional NGOs, highlighted that their efforts are hindered by rigid governance structures. These participants also expressed concerns regarding the lack of sustained academic involvement in MSP initiatives. Institutional and legal gaps persist across the Pacific, with Samoa identified as the only Pacific SIDS possessing formal MSP legislation, though its development and implementation are still at an early stage. Furthermore, participants underscored that overreliance on donor funding undermines local ownership and long-term sustainability of MSP.

According to several participants, Indigenous coastal communities across the Pacific maintain deep-rooted connections to their inshore and coastal areas, grounded in customary tenure systems, ecological stewardship, and cultural identity. Yet, these long-standing relationships

have been gradually undermined by colonial and post-colonial governance regimes, which have created centralized authority and eroded community-based management systems. The resulting disempowerment has curtailed the decision-making authority of coastal communities, a legacy that continues to shape governance processes today. This marginalization has been further compounded by entrenched patriarchal norms, which often exclude women, youth, and non-chiefly individuals from meaningful participation and leadership roles in marine governance. However, participants reported that MSP initiatives in the Pacific are beginning to shift this dynamic. Emerging MSP processes across the Pacific are providing new avenues for IPLC to reclaim agency in ocean governance by reasserting their ecological knowledge, customary practices, and stewardship values. These initiatives (Table 8), though still evolving, reflect a growing recognition of the legitimacy and value of Indigenous governance systems within national and regional ocean management frameworks. While structural and cultural barriers persist, participants emphasized that these developments represent an incremental yet significant shift toward more participatory, inclusive, and culturally grounded approaches to ocean governance in the Pacific.

Theme	Country / Example	Key Insights
Community stewardship	Vanuatu – Laone Village Council manages the Laone-Lamalana MPA	Strong community leadership and stewardship led to improved marine biodiversity.
Legal recognition of rights	Tonga – The Government granted coastal communities rights to manage certain marine zones	Shared authority between traditional and national systems; legal recognition is expected to strengthen engagement and collective management.
Knowledge co-production	Solomon Islands – Communities contributed traditional knowledge to MSP	Local knowledge filled scientific gaps, enabling MSP progress despite the limited data available
Inclusive governance	Solomon Islands & Samoa – Early consultations with NGOs, private sector, and local/provincial councils and communities	Early stakeholder involvement demonstrated an inclusive and participatory approach to governance
Responsive management	Samoa – Communities identified conflicts such as sand mining and coastal development	Authorities acted on community recommendations, leading to more adaptive management
Customary governance frameworks	Fiji – Lau Seascape project incorporates customary governance	The integration of traditional knowledge and cultural values with science has enhanced the legitimacy of management efforts
Women's empowerment and livelihood diversification	Palau – NGO-supported women fishers transitioned to clam farming Fiji – Women-led pearl farm demonstrates how community-based aquaculture empowers women and advances sustainable ocean management	Women adopted sustainable practices, reduced pressure on wild fisheries, and secured new income streams.

Table 8: Illustrative examples of community-driven and inclusive MSP practices across Pacific Island countries (Adapted from Paper IV)

Moreover, participants identified several barriers and enablers of MSP in the Pacific, which I have categorized using the analytical framework (Paper IV). These are presented in Table 9, which compares three governance approaches (collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive) and highlights the main challenges and enabling conditions identified across the Pacific Islands. While collaborative governance is hindered by limited and often tokenistic stakeholder engagement, power imbalances, and weak coordination, it is strengthened by NGO facilitation, shared leadership platforms, and the integration of Indigenous and local knowledge. Polycentric governance faces institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and limited legal backing but shows promise through the emergence of inter-ministerial committees, the integration of customary governance, and regional cooperation. Adaptive governance remains constrained by data gaps, donor dependency, and weakened customary systems, however, community-led initiatives, local knowledge use, and digital and technological advancements are enabling more responsive, learning-oriented, and transformative approaches to ocean governance.

Governance Approach	**Key Barriers**	**Key Enablers**
Collaborative Governance	• Stakeholder engagement remains limited and often tokenistic, with ad hoc consultations and low participation from IPLC • Power asymmetries persist between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities, undermining equitable participation. • Absence of structured and transparent engagement mechanisms leads to stakeholder fatigue and uneven representation. • Limited negotiation and conflict-resolution skills within government agencies hinder collaborative problem-solving. • Overreliance on donor-driven participation initiatives limits continuity and ownership. • Weak communication and coordination across sectors create mistrust and fragmented decision-making. •Insufficient awareness and understanding of MSP concepts among policymakers	• High-level government support for MSP initaitves. •National MSP processes (e.g., Tonga's Oceans 7, Solomon Islands' Oceans 12) demonstrate potential for shared leadership and cross-sector dialogue • NGO facilitation strengthens links between government and local communities, fostering trust and technical support. • Recognition of IPLC as co-creators of knowledge promotes legitimacy and inclusiveness. • Women-led and community-based initiatives (e.g., Palau clam farming, Fiji, women-led pearl farming) showcase participatory innovation and empowerment. • Regional and international partnerships bring resources, training, and platforms for dialogue across scales

Governance Approach	Key Barriers	Key Enablers
Polycentric Governance	• Institutional fragmentation and overlapping mandates between ministries and sectors constrain coordination. • Weak horizontal and vertical integration across governance scales • Weak regulatory and enforcement frameworks remain the "Achilles' heel" of MSP implementation. • Authority is concentrated at the center, with limited or absent mechanisms for distributed decision-making. • Inconsistent leadership, irregular committee meetings, and inadequate policy evaluations reduce coherence. • Absence or delay of legal instruments (e.g., Fiji's unenacted Climate Change Act) limits accountability. • Cross-border and inter-island jurisdictional issues remain poorly coordinated, challenging regional coherence	• Inter-ministerial and steering committees provide emerging coordination mechanisms and policy alignment. • Customary and community-based systems offer culturally grounded governance nodes that can be integrated into MSP. • Cross-sector partnerships between NGOs, government, and local actors enhance collective problem-solving. • Strengthening universities and training institutes could build sustained national MSP capacity • Regional collaboration and learning exchanges help harmonize national efforts and promote shared governance principles. • Legal reforms underway in Samoa (MSP Law) and Tonga (Oceans Bill) provide momentum for institutionalization.
Adaptive Governance	• Limited engagement of academic and research institutions weakens evidence-based planning. • Limited monitoring, data gaps, and fragmented information systems hinder learning and responsiveness. •Shortage of skilled MSP professionals and high staff turnover undermine institutional learning and continuity • Heavy reliance on external funding risks discontinuity once donor projects end.	• Community-led adaptive management (e.g., Vanuatu Laone-Lamalana MPA) demonstrates learning-by-doing approaches. • Integration of local and Indigenous ecological knowledge enhances monitoring and adaptive responses (e.g., Fiji's Lau Seascape). • Innovative financing (blue bonds, trust funds) could sustain MSP beyond donor cycles. • Incorporation of climate change projections and scenario planning supports anticipatory governance.

Governance Approach	Key Barriers	Key Enablers
	• Erosion of customary governance systems due to modernization, market pressures, and climate change reduces adaptive capacity.	• Explicit emphasis on empowerment, co-learning, and reflexive practices aligns with IPBES transformative change pathways

Table 9: Barriers and enablers of marine spatial planning in the Pacific Islands (Adapted from Paper IV)

5.3.2 Dislodging path dependencies: governance pathways for transformative change in the Pacific marine spatial planning

Drawing on collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance concepts, the application of MSP in Pacific SIDS reflects a complex interplay of governance modalities and engages dynamic human–nature–economy relationships. At the same time, it represents a critical window of opportunity where incremental improvements must give way to systemic transformation. The 2050 Strategy situates the Pacific region on a trajectory of transformational governance (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022). In the IPBES framework, transformative change entails a fundamental reorganization of institutions, power relations, and value systems to achieve sustainability, equity, and resilience (IPBES, 2024). In the Pacific context, this requires dislodging entrenched regime lock-ins, including legal, bureaucratic, financial, and cognitive constraints that maintain the status quo. As shown in Table 9, the barriers reflect entrenched path dependencies that limit change at strategic leverage points, overcoming them is vital to enable meaningful action.

Collaborative governance alone cannot resolve the power dynamics between influential MSP stakeholders and marginalized groups (Flannery et al., 2018), including IPLC. The results of this study emphasize that authority must be more equitably shared among key MSP actors. Polycentric governance offers a promising pathway by dispersing authority across multiple, overlapping centers (Carlisle & Gruby, 2018; Ostrom, 2009), encompassing national agencies, local municipalities, Indigenous governance bodies, and private-sector institutions. Such a structure is better positioned to support and scale successful local innovations (Table 8), gradually challenging rigid legal, bureaucratic, and cognitive norms that perpetuate the status quo. Several Pacific SIDS have experimented with hybrid governance arrangements that integrate state, provincial, local, and customary authorities. Yet the erosion of customary structures, combined with the predominance of centralized state authority, has rendered these arrangements fragile. This raises a pivotal question: Can MSP, under current conditions, realistically catalyze transformative change? The answer, as participants suggested, is both affirmative and conditional, reflecting both the potential and the limitations of the current governance landscape. MSP's transformative potential lies not in its design alone but in how the wider governance system enables or constrains its operation. I contend that when embedded in supportive contexts that promote collaboration, reflexivity, and cross-scale learning, MSP can act as an enabling conduit, translating transformative intent into practice. However, within systems marked by entrenched power asymmetries, fragmented mandates, and institutional inertia, MSP risks becoming a casualty of untransformed governance, limited to technocratic or symbolic outcomes.

From a systems perspective, transformative change is non-linear, emerging through iterative interactions, feedback loops, and co-evolution among institutions, stakeholders, and

ecosystems (Bennett et al., 2024). This study shows that empowerment, co-creation, and procedural justice are not only ethical imperatives but also practical mechanisms to generate trust, shared understanding, and resilience. This study also finds that MSP can catalyze transformation when it nurtures inclusive participation by focusing on historically marginalized groups, promotes adaptive learning, and actively integrates Indigenous and local knowledge with scientific and technological approaches. To be effective, these efforts must also ensure ecological integrity and deliver social and economic benefits that matter locally (Ban et al., 2019). Without establishing effective governance mechanisms to operationalize such a holistic approach, MSP risks remaining siloed, technocratic, and disconnected from the complex realities of the Pacific's coastal and marine systems. However, realizing such a transformation remains a formidable challenge. Despite the conceptual promise offered by collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance, current MSP practice across the Pacific largely reflects reformist tendencies rather than transformative change.

5.3.3 From incremental reforms to transformative pathways: rethinking MSP governance in the Pacific

The findings of this study suggest that current MSP initiatives in the Pacific are predominantly donor-driven and technocratic, emphasizing coordination and spatial zoning rather than deeper structural transformation. The process tends to layer new mechanisms onto existing governance arrangements without redistributing authority, strengthening NGOs and academic involvement, and altering entrenched decision-making hierarchies. As a result, IPLC often remain peripheral participants, while national agencies shoulder coordination burdens within limited legal and financial capacities. The underutilization of NGOs and academia limits opportunities for evidence-based planning, capacity building, and sustained innovation, further constraining the transformative potential of MSP.

I argue that to move beyond this reformist trajectory, MSP in the Pacific requires innovation that is both radical and pragmatic. While, in theory, disruptive change, decentralization, and the dismantling of epistemic hierarchies have been given considerable importance (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2024; Schellnhuber et al., 2010), achieving them in practice is fraught with difficulty in Pacific governance contexts characterized by tight-knit sociopolitical networks, limited institutional capacity, donor dependency, and enduring colonial legacies. Abrupt disruption in such settings risks institutional instability or the erosion of the legitimacy of customary systems. What is therefore needed is an incremental yet transformative reform in ocean governance (Göpel, 2016), one that leverages collaborative MSP processes to enable polycentric, adaptive, and experimental arrangements. These institutional structures can interact and evolve across multiple scales, supporting iterative learning and coordinated decision-making. Examples from the Pacific include Fiji's Lau Seascape project, Tonga's community-led fisheries management, and Vanuatu's Laone-Lamalana MPA, all of which show how local innovations can be integrated into broader governance systems to promote iterative learning and cross-scale coordination. Yet, while such mechanisms represent important steps toward decolonial and context-appropriate governance, they are insufficient on their own to catalyze the scale of transformation required.

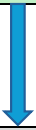
Some decisions require state-level coordination, while others are best managed through local and customary authorities (Govan et al., 2024; Kere & Torii, 2025). The private sector can also provide efficiency and innovation through market-based mechanisms (Benzaken et al., 2024). On the other hand, this study confirms that boundary organizations led by universities and

local NGOs are crucial in integrating scientific, Indigenous, and local knowledge systems. To ensure accountability and equity, the MSP governance framework must be reinforced by transparent performance indicators, ocean equity assessments, and accessible grievance mechanisms. Such deliberate adjustments serve as leverage points that cumulatively shift the governance system toward inclusivity and resilience. To operationalize these incremental changes, I argue that it will be crucial for the Pacific to invest in a legitimate, well-resourced, coordinating oceans agency comprising both state and non-state actors, with political and legal backing, to navigate the multiple decision-making centers. Without such an agency, coordination burdens will continue to fall disproportionately on under-resourced state actors, as is currently the case across the region. Incremental changes can cumulatively drive radical transformations in ocean governance.

In the MSP governance framework proposed for Pacific SIDS (Fig. 7), the starting conditions shape the level of political will, resource availability, and incentives for collaboration, and determine whether the emerging configuration enables or constrains legitimate and adaptive outcomes. The institutional arrangement is characterized by polycentricity, comprising multiple semi-autonomous decision-making centers (shown in green). These include the highest level of national authority, the oceans agency (MSP Authority), private sector regulatory bodies, and local government and Indigenous institutions. Operating at different scales, these centers remain interconnected through continuous coordination, knowledge exchange, and feedback processes. Non-decision-making units (shown in blue) are equally critical to system functioning. Coastal communities, fishers, and other local user groups contribute place-based ecological knowledge that strengthens adaptive learning and social legitimacy. NGOs and academic institutions act as boundary organizations that mediate across knowledge systems and facilitate capacity-building and stakeholder engagement. International and regional institutions reinforce coherence by linking national processes to broader governance commitments and enabling access to technical and financial resources.

This collaborative and polycentric configuration is expected to enhance flexibility, legitimacy, and adaptive capacity in MSP across Pacific SIDS by ensuring decisions draw on evidence-based science, culturally grounded Indigenous and local knowledge, and responsible private-sector participation. The governance framework must be supported by adequate and sustainable financing, while being coherently coordinated by a dedicated MSP agency with the mandate to align actions across sectors and levels of governance. This arrangement lays the foundations for more resilient governance outcomes and, in line with the IPBES transformative change framework, has the potential to catalyze systemic shifts by reconfiguring institutional roles and relationships, realigning values and norms toward equity and sustainability, and fostering the co-creation across governance scales.

Starting Conditions



Component	Description / Role	Key Functions / Relationships	Expected Outcomes	Pacific SIDS context (Polycentric governance interpretation)
Highest Level of National Authority	National ministries or government bodies responsible for ocean governance.	Translate regional commitments into national policies; ensure political endorsement and integration into national development agendas.	Political legitimacy and strategic direction for MSP.	Acts as one of the key decision-making centers within the polycentric system, responsible for setting national priorities, resource allocation, and legal frameworks for MSP.
Oceans Agency (MSP Authority)	Central coordinating body for MSP at the national level comprising state and non-state actors	Oversees planning, coordination, and monitoring across sectors and scales.	Effective coordination and implementation of MSP activities.	Serves as a central MSP decision-making hub in the polycentric network, ensuring coherence, adaptive management, and alignment between national objectives and stakeholder interests.
Private Sector Regulatory Framework	Industry actors and regulators (e.g., fisheries, tourism, extractives).	Engage through consultation and compliance mechanisms; align economic activities with sustainability goals.	Responsible investment and sustainable resource use.	Functions as a key decision-making center influencing how resources are utilized and managed; contributes to balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability.
Local Government and Indigenous Institutions	Local governments, Provincial councils and community-based and traditional governance bodies.	Integrate Indigenous knowledge and customary marine tenure into MSP decision-making.	Culturally grounded and socially legitimate management outcomes.	Constitute vital subnational decision-making centers that ground MSP in customary governance (e.g., *iqoliqoli* management in Fiji), ensuring legitimacy and place-based decision-making.
International and Regional Institutions	International organizations and the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific.	Provide policy alignment, funding, and technical support within an institutional framework.	Regional coherence in MSP implementation; alignment with global ocean governance goals.	Provide overarching institutional guidance that connects national MSP initiatives to regional and global commitments but are not the primary decision-making centers.

Component	Description / Role	Key Functions / Relationships	Expected Outcomes	Pacific SIDS context (Polycentric governance interpretation)
NGOs and Academic Institutions (Boundary Organizations)	National research bodies, advocacy groups, and civil society organizations.	Facilitate stakeholder participation, conduct scientific assessments, build capacity, and promote co-creation of knowledge.	Evidence-based and inclusive policy design.	Act as boundary organizations linking the various decision-making centers. They mediate between science, policy, and local knowledge systems, fostering communication, learning, and collaboration across governance scales.
Local User Groups	Coastal communities, fishers, and resource users.	Provide local ecological knowledge and feedback to national and regional authorities.	Locally relevant and community-driven MSP practices.	Offers experiential and traditional ecological knowledge that informs adaptive learning and strengthens bottom-up governance in the polycentric system.
Stakeholder Engagement and Capacity Building	Continuous participatory process across all levels.	Facilitates communication, trust-building, and shared learning among stakeholders.	Empowered actors and sustainable collaborative governance.	Builds trust and inclusivity across governance scales; enhances the effectiveness of boundary organizations in linking actors and sustaining collaboration.

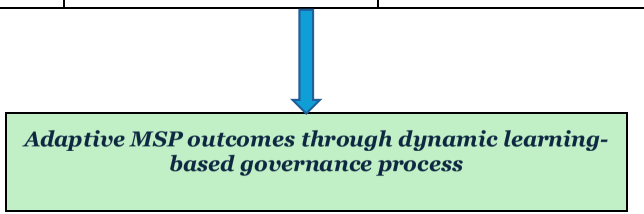


Figure 7: Polycentric governance framework for marine spatial planning in Pacific SIDS

Chapter 6.0: Conclusions

This dissertation set out to critically assess the role of MSP in advancing ocean governance in Pacific SIDS, with Fiji serving as the focal empirical case. Across four interlinked papers, the study investigated what constitutes effective ocean governance and MSP in SIDS (Paper I, enriched by Papers II,III,IV)), how MSP has functioned as a governance instrument in Fiji (Papers II and III), and to what extent it is fit for purpose in fostering transformative ocean governance across the Pacific (Paper IV). Collectively, the findings reveal that while MSP provides a valuable entry point for integrating ecological, social, and economic objectives, its transformative potential in Pacific SIDS remains largely unrealized due to persistent structural, institutional, and epistemic constraints. Yet, these same challenges also underscore a unique opportunity for the Pacific to reimagine MSP not merely as a technocratic planning tool, but as a relational and reflexive governance process capable of bridging worldviews, mobilizing community agency, and catalyzing systemic change.

Drawing on insights from the review of MSP literature, this study reaffirms that MSP cannot be reduced to a purely spatial exercise. Effective MSP in SIDS must instead be understood as a governance process deeply embedded within socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts, where legitimacy, participation, and trust are as vital as spatial data, ecological objectives, and economic aspirations. The literature further highlights that facilitative leadership, coherent institutional support, and sustained investment in human and social capital are indispensable for cultivating trust, equity, and meaningful stakeholder engagement, all of which are key foundations of effective and inclusive ocean governance. Collaborative governance frameworks offer a valuable scaffold for structuring relationships among these dimensions, yet their application in SIDS must extend beyond administrative coordination to actively embrace Indigenous norms, customary institutions, local knowledge systems, and culturally grounded forms of ocean literacy and research. Such an expansion acknowledges that governance legitimacy in island contexts is derived not solely from formal mandates or policy coherence, but from the moral and relational authority rooted in local institutions and everyday practices of stewardship.

The Fijian case illustrates both the promise and pitfalls of operationalizing MSP in practice. While Fiji has articulated progressive ocean governance commitments through the National Ocean Policy and the Climate Change Act, MSP remains an emergent, predominantly state-led process with limited legislative grounding. Institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and inadequate financing constrain coordination and inclusivity. At the community level, *iTaukei* perspectives revealed persistent awareness gaps and uneven access to decision-making forums. Despite long-standing traditions of customary marine tenure, Indigenous knowledge and governance systems are weakly integrated into formal policy processes.

Yet, the findings also demonstrate that *iTaukei* communities possess rich reservoirs of social capital, traditional and local knowledge, and relational worldviews that can serve as powerful anchors for a more inclusive and transformative approach to ocean governance. These community-based assets, rooted in collective responsibility, reciprocity, and place-based understanding, represent the very foundations upon which MSP can evolve into a genuinely collaborative and transformative governance instrument. However, the study also cautions against romanticizing Indigenous knowledge or portraying it as a uniform or inherently harmonious system. These findings reveal that Indigenous knowledge is dynamic, reflecting

context-specific histories, social hierarchies, and evolving interactions with modern governance structures and markets. Idealizing it risks oversimplifying its complexity and obscuring the internal contestations, power asymmetries, and adaptive capacities that shape how such knowledge is practiced and transmitted. In light of this, empowerment and co-creation with *iTaukei* communities should not be seen as unidirectional processes of "including" Indigenous perspectives into MSP, but as reciprocal engagements that require MSP institutions themselves to learn, adapt, and transform. Indigenous knowledge can inform and enrich spatial planning processes, yet it also depends on MSP frameworks to create equitable spaces where such knowledge is respected, protected, and resourced. This reciprocity highlights that transformative governance is not achieved by simply inserting Indigenous perspectives into pre-existing structures, but by facilitating iterative exchanges that reconfigure the distribution of knowledge, authority, and responsibility.

In Fiji, fostering these mutual learning relationships between diverse MSP stakeholders and Indigenous knowledge holders represents both an ethical imperative and a practical pathway toward building legitimacy, resilience, and social equity in ocean governance. Operationalizing MSP in this context requires a phased and context-sensitive approach that balances ambition with feasibility. Incremental reforms, such as strengthening existing steering committees, embedding statutory authority, legalizing customary marine tenure, and enabling community-led monitoring, can cumulatively shift governance norms, redistribute authority, and enhance local capacity. At the same time, innovative financing mechanisms and sustained institutional investment are crucial for maintaining participation, inclusivity, and locally owned outcomes in the long term. Collectively, these measures point to a pragmatic yet transformative route for advancing MSP in Fiji, one that grounds ocean governance in both institutional strength and Indigenous relational ethics.

At the regional scale, the analysis of Pacific MSP initiatives reveals that while MSP is widely embraced as an integrated instrument for ocean governance, its implementation remains constrained by persistent resource and capacity deficits, donor dependency, centralized decision-making, and weak institutional and legal foundations. Nonetheless, several Pacific SIDS are revitalizing the customary stewardship of inshore areas, which blend customary and state authority, along with NGO facilitation. These localized innovations reflect nascent forms of collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance. This study underscores the critical role of boundary spanners and academic institutions in upscaling local MSP efforts and accelerating national-level MSP by creating a Community of Practice. These initiatives and efforts represent incremental but meaningful steps toward rebalancing power, enhancing legitimacy, and fostering social and ecological learning.

Drawing on the IPBES framework on transformative change, this study concludes that the current application of MSP in Pacific SIDS largely reflects reformist tendencies. While collaborative, polycentric, and adaptive governance frameworks provide conceptual pathways for transformative change, actual MSP practice remains top-down, technocratic, and episodic, with IPLC participation constrained by structural inequalities, procedural gaps, and resource limitations. To move beyond reformism, MSP in the Pacific requires a pragmatic pathway toward transformation, one that acknowledges contextual limitations while mobilizing the latent potential of existing institutions and community systems. By engaging historically marginalized groups, integrating diverse knowledge systems, and involving the full spectrum of stakeholders, MSP can begin to reshape how oceans are governed across the Pacific.

Without such deliberate shifts, however, it risks remaining a technocratic exercise disconnected from the lived realities of island societies.

Finally, MSP in the Pacific holds distinctive potential to become a uniquely transformative governance instrument precisely because of the region's extraordinary ecological, cultural, and institutional diversity. Rather than an obstacle, this diversity forms the foundation for a collaborative, polycentric, adaptive governance system in which multiple islands, customary authorities, and local institutions function as interlinked sites of innovation and learning. The richness of Indigenous worldviews and community-based practices enables MSP to evolve as a process of radical incrementalism (Göpel, 2016), a form of transformation driven by small, context-sensitive reforms that cumulatively reshape governance structures, values, and relationships. The Pacific's mosaic of customary marine tenure, strong social networks, and deep cultural connections to the ocean provides fertile ground for co-created, pluralistic approaches that integrate Indigenous, local, and scientific ways of knowing. In this way, MSP becomes less about replicating external models and more about nurturing a relational, community-driven process rooted in Pacific epistemologies of stewardship, reciprocity, and collective well-being. Such an approach aligns worldviews, practices, and structures toward equitable, resilient, and culturally grounded ocean governance (Bennett et al., 2024).

Ultimately, the Pacific invites the world to rethink transformation as a "voyage of collective becoming", an ongoing navigation across diverse ways of knowing, being, and governing the ocean. Just as Pacific seafarers read the winds, stars, and currents to chart their course, transformative MSP requires navigating uncertainty through dialogue, humility, and shared purpose. In this sense, MSP in the Pacific is more than a policy tool, it is an evolving social journey that redefines what ocean governance can mean in a climate-uncertain world, rooted in reciprocity, carried by community, and guided by the enduring ethos that "we paddle together toward a shared horizon."

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Appendix

57 SIDS and territories, including 39 UN member states and 18 associate members and territories

No.	UN member states	No.	UN associate members and territories
1	Antigua and Barbuda	1	American Samoa
2	Bahamas	2	Anguilla
3	Barbados	3	Aruba
4	Belize	4	Bermuda
5	Cabo Verde	5	British Virgin Islands
6	Comoros	6	Cayman Islands
7	Cook Islands	7	Commonwealth of Northern Marianas
8	Cuba	8	Curaçao
9	Dominica	9	French Polynesia
10	Dominican Republic	10	Guadeloupe
11	Fiji	11	Guam
12	Grenada	12	Martinique
13	Guinea-Bissau	13	Montserrat
14	Guyana	14	New Caledonia
15	Haiti	15	Puerto Rico
16	Jamaica	16	Sint Maarten
17	Kiribati	17	Turks and Caicos Islands
18	Maldives	18	U.S. Virgin Islands
19	Marshall Islands		
20	Federated States of Micronesia		
21	Mauritius		
22	Nauru		
23	Niue		
24	Palau		
25	Papua New Guinea		
26	Samoa		
27	São Tomé and Príncipe		
28	Singapore		
29	St. Kitts and Nevis		
30	St. Lucia		
31	St. Vincent and the Grenadines		
32	Seychelles		
33	Solomon Islands		
34	Suriname		
35	Timor-Leste		
36	Tonga		
37	Trinidad and Tobago		
38	Tuvalu		
39	Vanuatu		

(Adopted from https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids)

Papers

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https://doi.org/10.3384/9789181183184

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