

# What's in a term? “Green growth” and the “blue-green economy” in the Pacific islands

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## Abstract

The term “green growth” and its sister concepts, “blue-green growth,” the “green economy,” and the “blue-green economy,” have gained considerable traction in the Pacific island region in a short space of time. Pacific island governments, regional organisations, and development agencies all use the terms, which originate outside of the Pacific. What (and who) has driven the adoption of green growth terminology within the region? How has its usage in the region mirrored international usage? This paper presents findings from research on the vernacularisation of green growth terminology in Fiji and Vanuatu. We find a contested policy space, where Pacific actors deploy competing meanings of green growth terms in ways that both reflect their worldviews and support their agendas. This diversity has helped to underpin the rapid spread of green growth terminology in the region, while differentiating it from international usage.

## KEYWORDS

blue economy, green growth, Pacific island countries, Small Island Developing States

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Fiji's Prime Minister, Josia Voreqe (or "Frank") Bainimarama, launched Fiji's first Green Growth Framework (GGF), aimed at informing national planning across a range of sectors. His preamble noted:

*The old ways of growing our economy, of developing our nation, are no longer adequate or acceptable. We need to reshape our development strategies away from the conventional growth model of exploiting particular resources for our own use in the here and now. We need to refine our existing approaches and forge a new development model - one that is more holistic, integrated, inclusive and above all sustainable ... this Green Growth Framework will be one that is truly home grown, truly Fijian. And it will benefit not only Fijians but be ready to serve as a model for our island neighbours, who look to us for leadership on this issue as they do on other things relating to their own development. (Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics (Fiji), 2014)*

Bainimarama's emphasis of the "uniquely Fijian" nature of the framework was noteworthy, as was his statement that it would serve as a model for other Pacific island countries following Fiji's lead. His statement was also significant as the term "green growth" does not emanate from Fiji, but rather, originates overseas, and has become widely used across the world owing to the strong advocacy of international organisations, especially UN agencies. But his advocacy of green growth for the Pacific was not unique. Usage of green growth terminology is now widespread in the Pacific, having been adopted in national planning frameworks, used by regional bodies, and advocated by international agencies and donors operating in the region.

This widespread usage of green growth terminology in the Pacific island region raises a number of questions. Why did the Fiji government, and later, other Pacific island governments, adopt green growth terminology? How has the concept been transposed and vernacularised in the Pacific context? To what extent have external actors influenced or motivated its adoption? How has green growth terminology in the Pacific mirrored or differed from global discourses? In other words, to what extent is the use of green growth terminology actually unique in the region?

This paper explores these questions using a mixed methodologies approach that draws on both a review of relevant global and Pacific literature, and on case study material collected during fieldwork in Vanuatu and Fiji. The global literature that we reviewed extends beyond academic material to include reports and studies by international organisations. Given there is a very limited literature focused on green growth within the Pacific, the study makes use of a great deal of grey literature in addition to influential documents that originated from within civil society.

Our case studies draw on data provided by key informants with whom we met in Vanuatu and Fiji. A semistructured interview approach was utilised. The interview structure, with key questions used across all the interviews, allowed us to crosscheck data among informants. The key informants included politicians, public servants, civil society representatives, members of the private sector, and advisers funded by development partners. A full list of interviewees is provided in Data S1.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides background to our study, with subsections on the global green growth discourse, its adoption in the Pacific, and the academic literature on the international transfer of ideas and institutions. Section 3 details our findings from fieldwork in Fiji and Vanuatu, which included discussion of green growth in both national

and regional contexts. The implications of these findings are discussed in Section 4. We provide our conclusions in Section 5.

## 2 | BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Global discourses on green growth

For such widely used terms, the history of terms such as “green growth,” “green economy,” and “blue economy” is short. These terms were barely used prior to 2008, when the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) led the Green Economy Initiative. Increased use of green growth terminology owes much to the efforts of UN agencies, particularly in Asia. In 2010, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) members adopted the Incheon Declaration on Green Growth (UNESCAP, 2010), expressing their commitment to the pursuit of green growth strategies. UNEP released a landmark report *Towards a Green Economy* in 2011, which provided some analytical rigour to underpin the term. Non-UN organisations soon followed in their use and promotion of the concept. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) became a proponent when it issued the OECD Declaration in 2009 (OECD, 2009). In 2010, the Korean Government was instrumental in the establishment of the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI): a think tank that in 2012 (at the Rio+20 Summit, discussed below) became an international treaty-based organisation dedicated to the promotion of green growth globally. The Green Growth Knowledge Platform, a grouping of organisations that included UNEP, GGGI, the World Bank, and the OECD, was also established in 2012.

The profile of green growth terminology benefitted significantly as a result of the third United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in 2012. Green growth took centre stage at Rio+20, as one of two main themes for the conference. Rio+20 also saw references to the term “blue economy.” Pacific island countries were important advocates of the blue economy (though it originated outside of the region) at Rio+20 and were later also instrumental through the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping in the establishment of SDG14 on Oceans (Manoa, 2015). Interestingly, there was resistance among some Small Island Developing States (SIDS) located outside of the Pacific to the use of blue economy terminology at Rio+20. The previous year, for example, in the lead up to Rio+20, Caribbean SIDS argued that blue economy terminology was “not required,” cautioning against “too many colour economies” in advocacy efforts (Silver, Gray, Campbell, Fairbanks, & Gruby, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding widespread usage, consensus on a precise definition of green growth terminology has not been reached. As a result, green growth terminology is subject to different and sometimes contradictory interpretations. Silver et al. (2015) in their analysis of usage of the term “blue economy” at Rio+20 note that even within this one conference, the term was used in many ways. At Rio+20, the “blue economy” was used to refer to (a) oceans as natural capital (an argument that emphasised the unmeasured economic and social impacts of oceans); (b) oceans as good business (in which the potential and unrealised financial/economic benefits of oceans for small island states were highlighted); (c) oceans as integral to the economies of PSIDS; and (d) oceans as fundamental to the livelihoods of households reliant on small-scale

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of simplicity, this paper uses the phrase “green growth terminology” to encompass green growth and all of its sister terms, including green economy, blue economy, blue-green economy, blue growth, and blue-green growth.

fisheries. Although these interpretations were sometimes complementary, they were also in conflict at times. The implications of these narratives for the enclosure or market-based mechanisms for management of ocean resources provide a good example. Whereas green growth arguments that emphasised economic gains (such as b and c above) were likely to advocate for market-based mechanisms for management of natural resources, alternative green growth arguments that focused on unmeasured economic and social impacts (such as a above) sometimes did the opposite.

Similar debates accompany usage of the term “green economy.” Critics of the term argue that a focus on “green growth” forms part of a broader shift towards application of economic approaches to nature and that it “moves beyond ‘selling nature to save it’” and towards “selling nature to save the economy” (Corson, Brady, Zuber, Lord, & Kim, 2015; Suarez & Corson, 2013). Among these critics, there is a clear distinction between “green economy” and “sustainable development,” and a general preference for the latter—defined by the Brundtland Commission as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Silver et al. (2015) differentiate the two as follows: “a core difference between green economy and sustainable development is the former’s grounding in the logic of capitalist growth rather than in recognition of its contradictions and inequalities.” In the findings that follow, it is clear that such criticism has not been adopted in the Pacific.

Notwithstanding some global criticism of green growth terminology, debates are hampered by the absence of clear and agreed definitions. UNEP defines a green economy as “one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities” (UNEP, 2011). This definition is not dissimilar to the Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development—a similarity that is evident despite UNEP’s argument that green growth should be viewed as a tool for sustainable development.

A definition of green growth that is more distinct from sustainable development argues for environmental protection on economic grounds. There are a number of analytical arguments behind this definition. Green Keynesianism claims that “green” spending can boost employment in economies where factors of production lay idle. A Pigouvian perspective argues that market failures undervalue the economy’s use of natural capital and that correcting them (or unpriced externalities) can generate environmental and economic dividends (the latter by increasing an economy’s efficiency). A third argument is Schumpeterian: Environmental policies for green growth are said to spur innovation and create new, environmentally friendly, industries (Jacobs, 2012).

These ideas represent an understanding of green growth that emphasises the complementarities between economic and environmental objectives, an understanding that is somewhat distinct from sustainable development, which has often (not always) been used to emphasise trade-offs between economic, environmental, and social objectives. An understanding of green growth that emphasises the complementarities between economic and environmental objectives is commensurate with former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon’s description of green growth as “a new paradigm.” However, this forcefulness, backed by specific theories around how green policies are good for the economy, is missing from most green growth definitions. *The Future We Want*, the outcomes document from the most important green growth conference ever to be held (Rio+20), provides little in the way of guidance. It simply acknowledges that green growth is a tool for achieving sustainable development, noting that “There are different approaches, visions, models and tools available to each country, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities, to achieve sustainable development” (United Nations, 2012).

## 2.2 | The adoption of green growth in the Pacific

By the time green growth terminology entered the lexicon of Pacific island political life, it was already being used by aid agencies of metropolitan powers and multilateral institutions. Global conferences, particularly those attended by Pacific island leaders, proved important for the dissemination of the concept in the region itself. Of particular note was Rio+20, discussed above. In the lead up to that summit, preparatory meetings were held for island delegates to establish shared priorities for the talks, with Pacific island countries “collectively outlin(ing) a broad position on green economy policies” (UNESCAP, 2012a, p. 16). The work of international organisations in the Pacific also helped socialise the term. UNESCAP, for example, published a report on green growth in the Pacific in 2012, entitled *Green Economy in a Blue World: Pacific Perspectives* (UNESCAP, 2012b).

The Pacific adoption of green growth terminology coincided with the assertion of an increasingly independent Pacific diplomacy, particularly by Fiji.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, after failing to hold democratic elections, Fiji was suspended from the region’s premier political entity, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Keen to maintain regional ties, and even to assert leadership, the Fiji military led government hosted annual Engaging with the Pacific (EWTP) meetings of Pacific leaders from 2010 to 2012, at which island representatives considered a range of environmental issues and called for new approaches to address them. It was in this context that some island leaders suggested green growth represented a new model of development more akin to a “Pacific way” of doing things. At the 2010 EWTP meeting, for example, government, civil society, and private sector representatives endorsed a call from the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) for “a development model that moves Oceania towards inclusiveness and sufficiency” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). In 2011, the EWTP meeting endorsed the region’s preparations for the 2012 Rio+20 summit and called on Pacific island states to “take the lead in shaping the agenda of the blue/green economy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011).

By this time, Fiji was also seeking to reinvigorate the PSIDS grouping at the United Nations and was investing renewed political capital in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG; see Tarte, 2011, 2013). Both of these political forums also endorsed the Pacific regional approach to the 2012 Rio+20 conference. Participants at the third EWTP meeting, held in Fiji in mid-2012, heard presentations on the “green economy” from UNESCAP and resolved to establish a new regional body—the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF)—which would “bring together leaders from key sectors in order to advance ‘green economic policies’ (Tarte, 2013, p. 2). At the inaugural PIDF conference in 2013 the theme was ‘Leadership, Innovation and Partnership for Green/Blue Pacific Economies.’”

A number of nonstate actors helped shape emergent discussions of green growth in the Pacific islands. Particularly important was the role of large conservation organisations, including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International. These organisations explicitly sought to encourage decision-makers to take greater account of conservation goals in economic planning. In mid-2011, a meeting of the Pacific Islands Roundtable for Nature Conservation developed their own submissions for Pacific states to take to the Rio+20 summit. The roundtable’s chair, and one of the region’s chief advocates for green growth, IUCN regional director Taholo Kami, argued that economic policy

<sup>2</sup>For an overview of the shift towards a more independent foreign policy by Pacific island states, and greater assertiveness in regional and global diplomacy, see Fry, Greg, and Tarte Sandra (eds.) 2015. *The New Pacific Diplomacy*. ANU Press, Canberra.

required a “greener approach” but “this shift needs to be a transformational one if change to the current development model is to be realised” (PACNEWS, 2011). At the same meeting, the secretary general of the PCC, Fei Tevi, another green growth advocate, emphasised that there were ecological limits to economic growth. His comments reflected a concern among church groups more broadly that “the neo-liberal economic ethic, which drives much of our economic thinking and policies today, is the direct opposite of our ideal value of sufficiency” (Pacific Conference of Churches, 2010, p. 2). By 2012, Tevi was heading a “Green Growth Leaders Coalition” (GGLC) project at IUCN (see further below). By 2013, both Fiji and Vanuatu were considering “green growth” strategies in national policy frameworks—discussed below.

### 2.3 | The international transfer of ideas and institutions

Clearly, the adoption of “green growth” in policy discussions in the Pacific did not occur in a referential vacuum. The concept was embraced at a particular moment in regional politics and policymaking. This green growth discourse was nevertheless imported from the international arena. Exploring how this came to be, and how global terms were translated into regional and national contexts is, therefore, relevant for a broader literature on the transfer of ideas and institutions between countries.

Institutionalists frequently refer to the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) when exploring institutional transfer between countries. Their concept of isomorphism has been used to explain similarities in modern day organisations across countries. In recent years, the term has been developed further in order to both criticise donor-led “one size fits all” approaches to capacity building and to describe why modern states may outwardly look alike despite achieving different levels of functionality. Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews (2013) argue that there is a range of incentives for governments “to engage in isomorphic mimicry—that is, adopting the camouflage of organizational forms that are deemed successful elsewhere to hide their actual dysfunction.” Krause (2013) is critical of this argument, and instead makes the case *for* replication, arguing that mimicry is an important strategy that allows countries to develop institutional capacity without needing to “reinvent the wheel.” He points to a number of examples of successful replication, such as Meiji-era Japan’s successful emulation of Britain’s postal service, France’s police force, and Prussia’s army. Modern-day examples including budget reform in Chile and Mexico, both of which drew on experiences of other countries.

There is also a literature on institutional transfer in the Pacific. Larmour (2005) outlines how institutions and the ideas that they encompass in the Pacific were generally transplanted or imposed from outside during the colonial era. He argues that this process achieved dramatically different results across countries as a result of how (and the extent to which) institutions emanating from overseas were accepted and adopted as legitimate in Pacific island countries. Crucial, according to his argument, was how new institutions interacted with pre-existing governance structures and the power relations underlying these.

Anthropologists have also explored the transfer of ideas and institutions. The term “vernacularisation” is often used among ethnographers to describe the importation, adaption, and understanding of foreign ideas in local contexts (Cheng, 2011). Particularly useful for this study is Levitt and Merry’s (2009) differentiation between three types of vernacularisation in their research on the work of human rights organisations in India. The first type of vernacularisation that they identify is minimalistic and involves building on the momentum and power of foreign ideas without using them directly. Levitt and Merry use the example of a women’s rights group (called Sahiyar), which draws on human rights vocabulary to inform



its work and “when ... address(ing) national and international audiences or funding agencies” but not when working with clients whose social and cultural background makes them unfamiliar with such concepts. This form of vernacularisation is widely practised and, simply put, could be described as “speaking to one’s audience.” Foreign ideas may motivate the work of an outside organisation in a particular context, but they are not referred to explicitly.

The second type of vernacularisation involves using global ideas to push new agendas that are appropriate in a local context. Levitt and Merry’s example from the work of human rights organisations in India is their use of both international human rights vocabulary and traditional concepts in advocacy efforts in support of the rights of homosexuals. This type of vernacularisation goes further than the first, given its explicit use of foreign ideas and concepts. However, these are only influential where appropriate in local contexts: in Levitt and Merry’s example, it is their combination with local ideas that makes these ideas potent.

The third type of vernacularisation involves the greatest level of modification of global ideas, with a view to ensuring that they can be implemented in ways that are useful in a local context. The example provided here by Levitt and Merry involves the differentiated use of “human rights” terminology in rural and urban contexts in India, with international concepts (and terminology) adapted in each case so as to safeguard and enhance their relevance. In this case, global ideas are appropriated by the local context, though in ways that differentiate them from their global usage. Thus, global ideas become localised, and in doing so, new understandings and ideas are formed.

All of these types of vernacularisation involve the importation of foreign concepts or ideas. What differs is their local application and the extent to which they are changed in that application. Levitt and Merry’s schema is used later to help analyse the way in which global discourses on “green growth” have been applied in the Pacific.

### 3 | FINDINGS

Our study of green growth in the Pacific draws on both a review of relevant global and Pacific literature and on case studies drawing on material collected during fieldwork in Vanuatu and Fiji. It was clear from the case studies that regional and subregional discourses have influenced or intersected with national policymaking activities. We therefore present our findings below under regional and national subheadings.

#### 3.1 | Pacific regional

As is the case globally, the use of green growth terminology in the regional policy space is characterised by a multiplicity of definitions, which themselves draw on pre-existing (including global) discourses. These in turn are linked to competition between regional organisations, a competition that now extends into the “green growth” space.

Terminology has formed part of that competition. The PIDF’s embrace of green growth as its *raison d’être*, and its “unique selling point” in a crowded regional landscape, has already been noted (Dornan, 2014). Early adoption of green growth terminology occurred in the midst of fraught Pacific politics about the regional diplomatic architecture. “Green growth” was advocated by those challenging the political settlement at the PIF, as a more uniquely “Pacific” vision than “regional economic integration,” which had been a key priority for the Forum for many years.

It could be argued that Fiji, in establishing the PIDF, has walked a tightrope between arguing that the new organisation is an addition to the regional architecture (filling a previous gap) and at the same time using it as one of several tools to de-legitimise that existing architecture. Green growth terminology has been central to such efforts. Former Fiji Foreign Minister Kaliopate Tavola suggested that the PIDF “stands unchallenged as the sole purveyor of green growth technical advice” to Pacific island countries (Tavola, 2015, p. 35). He was highly critical of the PIF in the same piece, arguing that it needed reforming if it were to better represent the interests of PSIDS without being “compromised” by “the geopolitical interests of Australia and New Zealand” (Tavola, 2015, p. 27). However, he did not go so far as to argue that the PIDF might replace the PIF. Indeed, he argued in the same book that the PIDF was not a direct challenge to the PIF and that the PIDF might one day become a new Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific agency.

In contrast to the PIDF, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS) has, until recently, been reluctant to adopt green growth terminology, instead favouring terms such as “resilient development” and “low carbon pathways” when discussing climate change and disaster management. These terms are aligned with the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, of which a number of regional organisations, but not the PIDF, have carriage. More recently, the PIFS has changed tack, in a context of continued usage of green growth terminology both in the region and internationally. In 2017, at the 48th meeting of PIF leaders, members endorsed *The Blue Pacific: Our Sea of Islands—Our Security through Sustainable Development, Management and Conservation* (PIFS, 2017), a statement of regional identity intended to sit at the heart of regionalism going forward. Though the PIF has been late in adopting green growth terminology, it is clear from subsequent speeches and statements made by Dame Meg Taylor, the Secretary-General of the PIF, that the Blue Pacific is being used as a rallying point for Pacific island countries, much like nuclear testing was a driver for enhancing regionalism some decades ago. None of these statements have been directed towards the PIDF. However, neither have they identified that organisation as (to take the words of former Fiji Foreign Minister Kaliopate Tavola) “the sole purveyor of green growth technical advice.”

As noted earlier, the PIDF and the PIF have not been the only regional actors that have utilised or advocated for green growth. Among the regionally focused groupings advocating for green growth, the Green Growth Leaders Coalition has been particularly significant. As its name suggests, the GGLC brings together leaders from across the region for discussions about development and the environment (Pacific Leadership Program, 2017). There is a historical connection between the GGLC and the PIDF, with the Suva-based members of the GGLC, including Fei Tevi (PCC), Taholo Kami (IUCN), and Iosefa Maiava (UNESCAP), being key actors during the establishment of the PIDF. The GGLC was itself created as a result of the efforts of the IUCN Pacific office, which sought to “create a strong and effective coalition of Pacific island leaders in key development sectors who can drive the introduction and implementation of green growth and sustainability principles in policy and decision making in their countries” (IUCN, 2012).

At the subregional level, there was previous work done in relation to green growth by the Melanesian Spearhead Group. In March 2012, Melanesian leaders heard a presentation from Iosefa Maiava, head of the UNESCAP Pacific Operations Centre, on the “green economy” and subsequently tasked the MSG Secretariat to develop a “MSG Green Growth Roadmap and implementation framework” (MSG Secretariat, 2012). However, there does not appear to have been any sustained momentum within the MSG for this area of work, with some noting that the organisation has “dropped the ball” when it comes to green growth. Tensions between leaders of countries that comprise the MSG, as well as Fiji’s focus on other international fora,



no doubt have also played a role—a development that again emphasises the fraught regional political environment in which green growth terminology has been used.

### 3.2 | Fiji

The translation of the term green growth into a national context in Fiji occurred in the context of multilateral efforts to protect the world's environment, including Rio+20, which was attended by (then interim) Prime Minister Bainimarama. Subsequently, during preparatory meetings for the 2014 UN multilateral conference for SIDS, representatives from 14 Pacific island states endorsed “green growth” as a tool to support sustainable development and suggested there was a need “to move from political commitment to tangible results” (Nadi Outcomes Document, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Although these multilateral discussions were ongoing, there was a lively debate in Fiji regarding the nation's future, in the lead up to national elections in 2014 (the first since 2006 when the military took power in a *coup*). In June 2014, the government launched “*A Green Growth Framework for Fiji: Restoring the balance in development that is sustainable for our future*” (GGF) at a national summit in Suva. The concept of green growth used in the GGF was explicitly derived from multilateral meetings at the UN (see Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, 2014, p. 13). However, the GGF was *at the same time* presented as part of a “home-grown” nation-building agenda, complementing previous national planning documents.<sup>4</sup>

Fiji's GGF clearly draws from the green growth model promoted by UN agencies in the Pacific and shares an overarching emphasis on low carbon development and resource efficiency.<sup>5</sup> The framework sets out a very long list of proposals, covering numerous sectors. It also refers to budgetary measures (e.g., duty exemptions and direct subsidies) intended to promote positive environmental outcomes (Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, 2014, p. 25). In 2015, for example, Fiji introduced an environmental levy, applied to the tourism sector, in order to raise funds for conservation efforts. The levy was increased to 10% and applied to an expanded range of prescribed goods and services in 2017 (Fiji Parliament, 2017).

There is little doubt that the adoption of green growth terminology in Fiji was also linked with opportunities to access climate finance. “Low carbon development” is a key part of the GGF. In part to act as an “example to the world,” Fiji has made ambitious commitments in global fora to move to 100% renewable energy by 2030 (though the share of electricity generation from renewable energy in Fiji has been steadily declining, despite this commitment). A significant proportion of climate finance allocated to Fiji has gone towards mitigation projects—particularly renewable energy. GGGI has provided technical support and finance for such investments.

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<sup>3</sup>In the lead up to preparatory meetings in Nadi, the Fiji government held consultations in Suva, Lautoka, and Labasa to assess progress that was being made to implement strategies for SIDS mandated by global UN meetings, namely, the “Barbados Plan of Action” (1994) and the “Mauritius Strategy for Further Implementation” (2004). A report arising from those consultations suggested Fiji's post-2015 priorities would be “built around ‘green growth’ strategies to enhance management of resources for current and future generations” (Fiji Government, 2013, p. 38).

<sup>4</sup>Including, for example, the *People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress* (2008) and the *Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development* (2009).

<sup>5</sup>Guiding principles from the Framework include reducing carbon footprints at all levels; improving “resource productivity (including by doing more with less)”; and providing “incentives for investment which support the efficient use of natural resources” (Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, 2014, p. 17).

Although ideas associated with green growth have influenced policy discussions in Fiji, their impact to date domestically is debated. Environmental policy in Fiji has been at the forefront in some areas. In October 2017, Fiji became the first developing country to issue sovereign green bonds—an initiative that has been oversubscribed (Reserve Bank of Fiji 2017). At the same time, environmental groups are critical of some activities promoted by government, particularly mining projects and industrial-scale fishing.

Arguably, the greatest impact of Fiji's adoption of green growth terminology has been international in scope, with Fiji adopting an assertive environmental diplomacy (Fry & Tarte, 2015). During 2017, Fiji took on significant international roles in this space, including cohosting the inaugural UN Conference on Oceans and presidency of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).<sup>6</sup> Fiji has thus sought to reposition itself as a “large ocean state”: a country with a unique Pacific message to share about stewardship of the world's oceans and ecosystems (Stewart, 2016). Domestic policy has supported these international objectives. It is somewhat telling that Fiji launched a new 20-year National Development Plan *in Germany* at the COP23 summit, a plan that identifies “green growth” as a guiding principle for implementation and that includes a number of recommendations from the GGF (Ministry of Economy, 2017).

### 3.3 | Vanuatu

The leading policy document that refers to green growth terminology<sup>7</sup> in Vanuatu is the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) (Government of Vanuatu, 2016). This plan, which covers the period 2016 to 2030, addresses many more things than just green growth. However, the fact that green growth terminology is used in a foundational policy document of this type is significant, in itself.

The term “blue-green growth” appears in two key parts of the NSDP. It is referred to under the heading “A pristine natural environment on land and at sea serving our food, cultural, economic and ecological needs”<sup>8</sup> in the following terms:

*With environmental degradation a common global challenge, Vanuatu has the potential to be a world leader in blue-green growth and sustainable development*

“Blue-Green Economic Growth” subsequently appears as the second goal in the “Environment” pillar,<sup>9</sup> as follows:

*An economy which fosters sustainable growth and development through low impact industries and modern technologies to ensure the well-being of future generations.*

Under this sit six policy objectives, although only the first of these makes specific use of green growth terminology (it refers to “Increase(d) access to knowledge, expertise and technology to enact our blue-green growth strategies.”).

<sup>6</sup>The Oceans Conference was cohosted with Sweden and held in New York. The government of Fiji worked with the German government to chair the 23rd Conference of Parties COP23 in Bonn.

<sup>7</sup>We were informed by those involved in leading the development of the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) that during the 3-year process, the term “green growth” was replaced with “blue-green growth” but the terms are largely used interchangeably.

<sup>8</sup>This forms part of the “National Vision” section of the NSDP.

<sup>9</sup>There are three pillars to the NSDP; the other two are “Society” and “Economy.”

The meaning of “blue-green growth” in the Vanuatu context was examined with reference to two questions: how did green growth terminology come to be included in the NSDP and why was it incorporated into the “Environment” pillar (rather than the “Economy” pillar).

The answer to the first question appears to lie in the process by which the NSDP was created. Further to two reviews of the previous National Development Plan (in 2010 and 2012),<sup>10</sup> a core group, with high level leadership, started to explore what should take its place. This led to a National Sustainable Development Symposium held at Mele village in 2013.<sup>11</sup> The IUCN was asked to provide technical support for the process of developing a new national plan. It was via this input that the concept of the three pillars (Society, Economy, and Environment) was introduced. A former co-chair of the core group that led the early development of the NSDP was a member of the GGLC, which may have influenced the inclusion of green growth terminology in the final document. However, the GGLC discourse around green growth differs quite markedly from the technology-focused concepts that influence the work of the Department of Energy (DoE), which is where green growth is seen to sit bureaucratically within Vanuatu.

In relation to the second question, the technical working group that developed the content of the “Environment” pillar within the NSDP drew on policy documents that reference green growth terminology. These include the Climate Change Policy (Government of Vanuatu/Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2015) and the Vanuatu National Environment Policy and Implementation Plan (Government of Vanuatu/South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme, 2017). The “Environment” technical working group used the National Environment Policy and Implementation Plan goals to inform the policy objectives of the “Environment” pillar of the NSDP, which is why “blue-green growth” appears in this pillar rather than under “Economy.”

Other contributors to the NSDP process advised us that this placement of green growth terminology aligns the national plan with pre-existing environmental commitments and obligations. There is a perception that donors and regional organisations that support this sector influenced the insertion of green growth terminology into the “Environment” pillar by the technical working group. Of particular significance is GGGI, which has very strong links with the DoE, within the Ministry of Climate Change and Adaptation.<sup>12</sup> Members of the DoE were part of the “Environment” technical working group, and it appears that they sought to ensure that the NSDP objectives were aligned with the Updated National Energy Roadmap in which the term green growth appears. It was evident in our discussions that green growth terminology was largely considered something that sits with the DoE, with a particular focus on increased uptake of renewable energy products.<sup>13</sup>

A defining feature of the process of developing the NSDP was the extensive community consultations undertaken by the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination, the government department that led the writing of the plan and that has carriage of the monitoring and evaluation of its implementation.<sup>14</sup> Consultations were held in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas in each of Vanuatu’s six provinces. The information we received

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<sup>10</sup>Priority and Actions Agenda (Government of Vanuatu, 2006).

<sup>11</sup>Often referred to as “the Mele summit.”

<sup>12</sup>GGGI support for the DoE extends to funding in-line positions.

<sup>13</sup>This was illustrated during the national validation summit for the NSDP. When the facilitators of the summit were asked from the floor what the meaning of blue-green growth was, they referred that question to the Director of the DoE. His explanation focused on low impact development, use of new technologies, and renewable energy.

<sup>14</sup>This is a department of the Prime Minister’s Office.

about the use of green growth terminology in these community discussions revealed a mixed response, with environmental terms not easily translated into Bislama (the *lingua franca* for Vanuatu). We were informed that in rural areas, where 75% of the population resides and where cash-based economic opportunities are limited, environmental concerns did not form a significant part of what participants wanted to discuss. People in these areas were more concerned about livelihood issues, such as generating a cash income to pay for school fees, fuel, and other items they cannot provide for themselves. Environmental issues and concerns were more topical in urban areas, possibly as a result of observable resource depletion (e.g., fisheries).

### 3.4 | Summary

The dissemination of green growth terminology in the Pacific islands has been shaped by regional, and national, debates about appropriate development policy. In discussions that were held primarily in Suva, the term was promoted by a coalition of regional actors, including those working for conservation non-governmental organisations, regional church organisations, and even multilateral UN agencies. Amidst concern that orthodox prescriptions for development focused too narrowly on free markets and economic growth, green growth was proposed as an “alternative” model; one that was more in tune with a “Pacific” balancing of the economy with social and ecological stewardship. In 2013, the Fiji government, suspended at the time from the PIF, adopted green growth as the guiding mantra for the Fiji-backed PIDF. Although the PIDF did not displace the PIF as the region’s pre-eminent multilateral body, it is notable that subsequent reform at the Forum emphasised a common Pacific identity and prioritised policy aimed at promoting sustainable development and conservation (particularly the “Blue Pacific” framework endorsed by Forum leaders in 2017).

At the national level, green growth assumed a different hue to that of regional discussions. In Fiji, the government set out a GGF in the lead up to the country’s first election in nearly a decade, as it borrowed the term to articulate a “uniquely Fijian” vision for national development. The Fiji government also sought to reposition itself on the global stage as a leader in multilateral environmental diplomacy. In Vanuatu, green growth terminology was adopted during protracted discussions regarding an NSDP. Some of the same actors promoting green growth terminology in Suva were also involved in planning discussions in Port Vila, but the term was adopted in a decidedly Vanuatu syntax. Local political leaders drew on long-running national debates about appropriate development, as they sought to articulate a “people’s plan” that valued economic growth as well as the country’s environment and wealth of traditional cultures.<sup>15</sup>

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Our study shows that actors in the Pacific understand and deploy green growth terminology in different ways. Consistent with its usage by international technical agencies such as GGGI, there are Pacific actors that use the term to focus on new technologies. This is most evident among actors such as the DoE in Vanuatu that are involved in working towards achieving

<sup>15</sup>Ralph Regenvanu, then Minister for Lands and leader of the largest political party in Vanuatu parliament, argued green growth in a Vanuatu context referred to the sustainable development of Vanuatu’s “traditional economy.”

the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions agreed to by their government under the Paris climate accord—involving ambitious investments in renewable energy capacity.

Other Pacific actors have a different understanding of green growth. Many leaders and policymakers valued green growth terminology primarily as a means of reinvigorating the region's commitment to sustainable development. One regional leader noted “in the Pacific, green growth is sustainable development. It is not about technology.” Another leader in Vanuatu was of the view that the term added little to sustainable development and viewed its inclusion in the NSDP as “a means of accessing international funds, including climate finance opportunities” (though it should be noted that this leader was supportive of sustainable development).

Related to comparisons with sustainable development was usage of green growth terminology to advocate for alternative development models: models deemed more appropriate to the region than those used in “the West.” Here, the emphasis was often on strengthening the “traditional economy”—a concept especially strong in Vanuatu where support for “the *Kastom* economy” has a long history. Underlying advocacy for the traditional economy was an emphasis on indigenous cultural norms and obligations seen as important for stewardship of the environment. This emphasis on indigenous culture was especially prominent among members of the GGLC. One GGLC member noted that usage of the green growth terminology was often contradictory, with “multilaterals looking to ‘green’ energy policies to allow for continued and increased consumption,” in contrast to “Pacific” uses of the term that were primarily focused on “rebalancing the three pillars of sustainability: the social, the environmental, and the economic.” A focus on social customs and obligations formed part of this narrative. Another member emphasised that usage of “green growth” by the GGLC “is different to usage internationally. The values raised, relating to the environment, to social issues, are different.”

A related green growth narrative concerned resource sovereignty and self-determination (Aqorau, 2006). Policymakers pointed to resource management and to fisheries management as areas where the Pacific could improve business models in order to “ensure that the Pacific is not just a spectator in its own development.” The Parties to the Nauru Agreement, which has seen fees paid by distant water fishing nations to Pacific island governments more than triple, was cited as an example of development consistent with green growth, given its economic and environmental benefits (the latter result from limits on fishing effort that are imposed as part of the scheme). But self-determination was not limited to economic initiatives. Several regional leaders also asserted that decolonisation movements in the region, especially the plight of West Papua, should be considered within the ambit of green growth, as a social issue of regional importance.

These narratives were present across our case studies, though there were differences between views in Fiji and Vanuatu. What was also clear from discussions was that there was no one understanding of green growth in the Pacific. Organisations and individuals used different (and sometimes contradictory) understandings of green growth in ways consistent with their worldview, often as a means to support their own agendas. So too did governments, as illustrated by Fiji's adoption and deployment of green growth as part of its broader foreign policy strategy. Nonetheless, there were common themes that arose in our discussions that differentiated the use of “green growth” in the Pacific from its usage internationally. The first involved an emphasis on self-determination and resource sovereignty: concepts that are foreign to international discussions of green growth. The second involved an emphasis on the broader context of cultural obligations and indigenous concepts of ecological stewardship—a theme often associated with sustainable development (and its social objectives), but not one often drawn on to

describe green growth.<sup>16</sup> Such understandings of green growth are directly in conflict with global usage and criticism of the term. As noted earlier, critics have lamented what they perceive to be as the term's market emphasis. In the Pacific, not only has no such criticism taken place but the term has been used (such as in the case of sustainable development) as an "alternative development model" to the neoliberal focus on economic growth.

Green growth terminology is likely to continue to be used as a part of development policy discussions in the Pacific because of the persistence of the political conditions in which the term has been adopted. Key multilateral actors, including but not limited to the PIF, the PIDF, UNESCAP, and GGGI will continue to influence regional and national discussions about green (and blue) development. So too will international conservation organisations, such as IUCN, which has contributed to green growth discussions and provided technical support for government planning. Internationally, also, discussions around green growth will likely persist as powerful development actors (both multilateral and bilateral) emphasise low carbon development in a post-Paris context. Although Pacific island countries are not themselves key drivers of climate change, they have set ambitious targets to move towards low-carbon economies. Climate-related challenges and responses will therefore likely shape development policymaking in the coming decades.

None of this is intended to imply that Pacific engagement with green growth will be driven externally. As is evident from our case studies, Pacific island actors interpret or vernacularise international messages concerning green growth in ways that are consistent with their world-views and agendas. Indeed, underlying the widespread use of green growth terminology in the region is this lack of a unified or clear definition. Lack of precision serves a purpose, insofar as organisations and individuals can use green growth terms to support their own agendas, even where these contradict each other. The fact that this is the case serves to show that the term has not simply been adopted blindly from the international arena. Pacific islanders—and for that matter, donors operating in the region—use the term with purpose and agency.

Linking this to the literature on the international transfer of ideas and institutions, our findings are inconsistent with isomorphic mimicry, or the idea that green growth terminology is used solely due to external pressure and is without substance. Even in the case of Pacific actors whose definition of green growth most closely matches that of international actors—who emphasise technological aspects of green growth (renewable energy)—the term is used with a public good objective in mind. This does not fit well with Pritchett et al. (2013) examples of civil servants mimicking foreign "best practice" as a means of securing their narrow self-interest.

The identification of different green growth narratives within the Pacific, narratives that borrow from but differ to international conceptualisations of the term, is consistent with Larmour (2005). His argument that foreign ideas and institutions are never transferred unchanged, but are rather used and interpreted locally on the basis of existing understandings, institutional arrangements, and power relations, can help explain the diversity of green growth narratives in the region. This paper has identified this process and pointed out examples of where this has occurred.

Particularly useful for our analysis is the literature on vernacularisation, or the transfer of foreign concepts and ideas into local contexts. Applying Levitt and Merry's (2009) schema, outlined in Section 2.3, we would argue that use of green growth terminology in the Pacific has gone further than just building on the momentum of a foreign idea (in this case,

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<sup>16</sup>The ongoing work of the Vanuatu National Statistics Office in developing alternative indicators of well-being provides an example. These indicators, according to officials from the Vanuatu National Statistics Office, will capture non-monetary aspects of well-being, including the health of traditional languages, cultures, and customs.



environmental protection). Its most common usage in the region has involved translating global terms so that they are appropriate in a local context. Examples of this include the focus on oceans, on natural capital, and on other issues that are pertinent in the region, while setting aside less relevant terms such as technological change. Even in the case of renewable energy advocates, there has been no suggestion that Pacific island economies should invent or develop such technology, which is a common argument in regions such as Asia. In other words, green growth terminology, even when used in ways most similar to usage in international discussions, has not mirrored that usage exactly.

Does usage of green growth terminology in the Pacific match the third and most ambitious type of vernacularisation identified by Levitt and Merry (2009)? Has it involved significant modification of an international concept so as to ensure that it can be implemented in useful ways in the Pacific? This, in our view, remains to be determined. Although the Pacific, and Fiji in particular, has been influential in driving the international discussions concerning the blue economy, the impact domestically remains to be seen. In some areas, there appears to have been positive developments when viewed from an environmental protection standpoint, such as in the establishment of marine protected areas. In others, such as the continued subsidisation of fisheries, progress has not been so clear. The same is true in relation to green growth more broadly. Fiji, for instance, has implemented reforms to its duties designed to encourage the purchase of environmentally friendly products. At the same time, its record in relation to mining lies in stark contrast to its international green growth advocacy. Thus, although the adoption of green growth terminology goes beyond building momentum and has been vernacularised so as to be appropriate in the region, the extent of its impact remains to be seen.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Use of green growth terminology is widespread in the Pacific. Governments across the region have incorporated references to the green growth in National Development Plans and have advocated for improved environmental stewardship in international fora. International and regional non-governmental organisations have increasingly deployed the term in their advocacy work. Green growth terminology now also informs the work of regional organisations, with a new regional agency having been established to promote the concept, and with the blue economy at the heart of the most recent key statement of regional identity.

This paper explored the introduction and dissemination of green growth terminology in the Pacific, drawing on a mixed methodologies approach that involved the review of relevant global and Pacific literature and the collection of case study material (including interviews with leaders and policymakers) during fieldwork in Vanuatu and Fiji. It explored how, and the extent to which, external actors have influenced or motivated the adoption of green growth terminology in the region. It also discussed how green growth terminology in the Pacific mirrors or differs from global discourses.

It is clear from our research that there is no one “Pacific” understanding of green (or blue) growth. Pacific actors use green growth terminology differently, in ways that are consistent with their worldviews and supportive of their agendas. Some Pacific actors advance a definition of green growth that is technological in its focus, consistent with the way in which the term is often used in Asia. Others take a very different view, using the term to advocate for an “alternative development model” that supports the “traditional economy.” We argue in this paper that such diversity underscores the widespread use of green growth terminology in the region. It is

this lack of precision that allows organisations and individuals to use green growth terms to support their own agendas. In doing so, Pacific actors demonstrate agency in their strategic use and references to green (and blue) growth.

The introduction and dissemination of green growth terminology in the region echoes the introduction of other foreign ideas and institutions in the Pacific. As Larmour (2005) notes, foreign ideas and institutions are never transferred unchanged but are used and interpreted locally. Drawing on ethnographic literature concerning the vernacularisation of foreign ideas and concepts (especially Levitt & Merry, 2009), we argue that usage of green growth terminology in the Pacific goes beyond using a foreign idea to build momentum and has in fact involved the translation of global terms so that they are appropriate in a local context. Though green growth has helped strengthen an ambitious environmental advocacy in the international arena by Fiji, the full extent of its local impact remains to be determined.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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