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Marine spatial planning in ocean governance: Fijian perspectives

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Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) is a globally established tool to support integrated ocean management. As Small Island Developing States (SIDS) embrace MSP, this study focuses on Fiji as it begins its MSP process alongside the implementation of newly established ocean-related policies and legislation. The study investigates whether MSP has the potential to address the challenges identified by various actors and, if so, to explore how this can be achieved. A mixed-methods case study approach was employed, combining analysis of national policy documents with semi-structured interviews involving key actors in Fiji's ocean governance. Guided by collaborative governance theory, interview data were thematically analyzed using NVivo. The results indicate that MSP could serve as a viable governance tool capable of addressing institutional silos and overcoming coordination challenges. However, prevailing interagency conflicts, power imbalances between stakeholders, and ambiguity surrounding roles and responsibilities pose significant barriers to meaningful participation, risking the reinforcement of the status quo. Our findings highlight that effective leadership, inclusive governance arrangements, financial sustainability, and social capital are mutually reinforcing enablers of collaboration within MSP. Finally, we recommend a staged, evidence-based approach to institutional reform aligned with fiscal and political realities that offers the most viable pathway to building a legitimate, resilient, and durable MSP system.

KEYWORDS

marine spatial planning, collaborative ocean governance, stakeholder engagement, policies and institutions, leadership, indigenous knowledge

1 Introduction

Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) is gaining global recognition as a strategic, place-based process for managing human activities in marine and coastal areas in ways that reduce conflicts, balance competing demands, and address interconnected ecological, economic, and social objectives (Ehler and Douvère, 2009; Ehler, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). The MSP process is designed to encourage collaborations among diverse stakeholders and allows those impacted by ocean uses to participate in various ways (Portman, 2011). Although MSP originated in the Global North, where it has largely evolved in response to specific governance capacities, legal frameworks, and economic drivers, its application in the Global South, particularly in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), remains relatively nascent

(Chalastani et al., 2021). The governance, socio-economic, and cultural realities of SIDS differ markedly from those of the Global North, raising an important question about how MSP, initially designed to cater to ocean challenges in the Global North, can be adapted to meet the distinct needs, priorities, and governance conditions of SIDS.

This study focuses on Fiji, which has recently embarked on its MSP journey as part of a broader effort to strengthen ocean governance under the National Ocean Policy 2020–2030 and the Climate Change Act 2021 (Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2021). Fiji's aspirations for MSP are tied to aligning human activities with sustainable ocean development and conservation goals. This initiative is consistent with its commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the 30x30 global target. Fiji's ocean governance is founded on a blend of modern policy instruments and deeply ingrained customary practices. For instance, Fiji has implemented Locally Managed Marine Area Networks, established Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), adopted Integrated Coastal Zone Management approaches, and maintained traditional tabu (no-take) areas and other customary conservation practices (Mangubhai et al., 2019). While these strategies remain integral to Fiji's ocean governance, effectively managing its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in collaboration with local stakeholders remains a significant challenge (OECD, 2022).

Against this backdrop, we investigate whether MSP has the potential to address the challenges identified by various ocean actors in Fiji and, if so, how it could do so. Following an overview of Fiji's ocean context and governance landscape, we outline the research methodology. In Section 3, we present the review of national policies, legislation, and plans, while Section 4 presents the results from stakeholder interviews. Section 5 discusses the study's findings through the lens of collaborative governance, exploring leadership and goal settings, governance arrangements, and social capital that could make MSP both effective and equitable in the Fijian context. The paper concludes by identifying pathways for strengthening Fiji's MSP process, ranging from institutional reforms and leadership to strategies for inclusive stakeholder engagement and sustainable financing. We also reflect on the implications for MSP design in the context of broader SIDS.

1.1 Fiji's ocean context

Fiji's EEZ is approximately 1.3 million km², making it 70 times larger than its land area. Primary sectors and initiatives in ocean management include fisheries, tourism, shipping, protected areas, maritime pollution, waste management, and cultural recreation (OECD, 2022). The responsibility for managing these sectors and initiatives is shared among government ministries, customary fishing rights holders, non-government organizations (NGOs), and the private sector (Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2020).

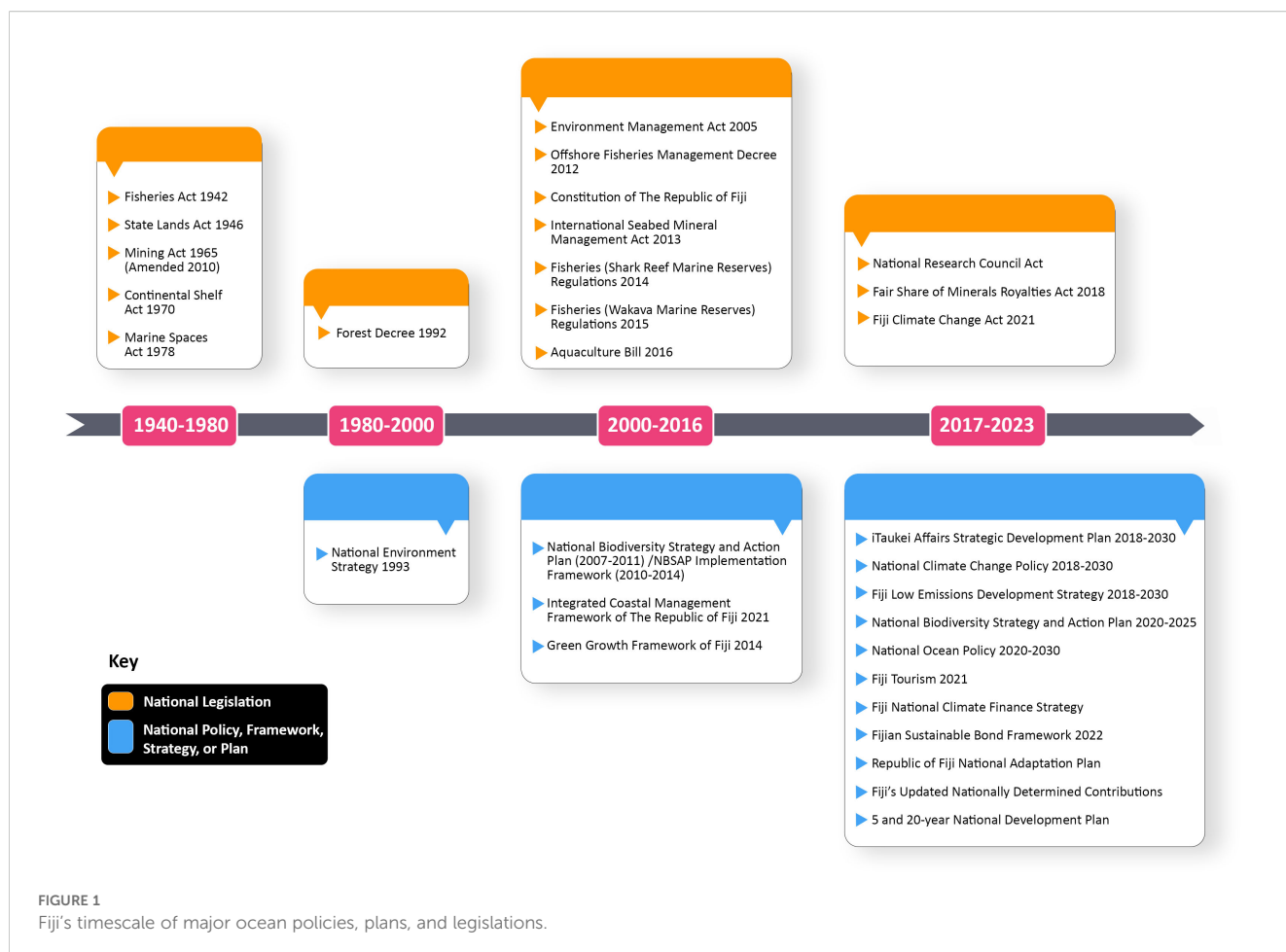
The Marine and Coastal Biodiversity Management in Pacific Island Countries (MACBIO) Project, which concluded in 2016, expedited the identification of priority areas for protecting 30% of

Fiji's EEZ (Sykes et al., 2018). While offshore MPAs are solely within state jurisdiction, their allocation in inshore areas becomes complex due to customary tenure. iTaukei (Indigenous) communities have exclusive custodianship over inshore areas, referred to as iqoliqoli, and possess the right to harvest marine resources for subsistence or community functions as necessary. They manage their iqoliqoli through traditional and local practices. The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs advocates for and protects the interests of iTaukei communities in policymaking forums. Currently, the Blue Prosperity Fiji program, through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Fiji government, supports the implementation of specific components of the National Ocean Policy. This program supports initiatives such as MSP, the blue economy, sustainable financing, and fisheries characterization to ensure the sustainable management of 100% of Fiji's EEZ (Carreon, 2021). Some NGOs, such as Conservation International and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, have also been working in Fiji's ocean space for decades.

1.2 Fiji's ocean policy landscape

Political struggles resulting from coups, socio-economic crises, and natural disasters have characterized Fiji's recent history. Despite a series of coups, the 2014 general elections were considered democratic (Madraiwiwi, 2015). Fiji gained geopolitical standing, positioning itself as an important factor in Oceania (Mawi, 2015; Patira et al., 2014). The renewed engagement of longstanding donors and allies, including New Zealand and Australia, has led to increased partnerships and support for sustainable development efforts, particularly in the formulation of ocean-related policies (Schmaljohann and Prizzon, 2014). To understand the current state of the ocean policy landscape in Fiji, it is essential to have a working insight into how key ocean-based policies and legislation have evolved (Figure 1) to pave the pathway for current ocean management strategies, including MSP.

Marine resources, particularly the fisheries sector, have been a key focus of Fiji's ocean governance since the early 1940s. Over time, this focus has broadened to encompass various management initiatives as mandated by the Environmental Management Act and the Fisheries Management Decree. Such initiatives included the establishment of national frameworks for environmental impact assessments, pollution control, sustainable fisheries management, licensing, enforcement, and penalties for illegal fishing. Over the past two decades, Fiji's ocean policy landscape has undergone significant growth in complexity and scope, integrating climate change and blue carbon, and promoting ecosystem-based management to address social, ecological, and economic challenges. Nevertheless, many of these policies remain primarily high-level, often lacking alignment with grassroots perspectives and actions (Gounder, 2023). For instance, the dual governance system between the iqoliqoli communities and the government creates an ambiguous intersection of informal and formal legal systems concerning the management and use of inshore areas (Techera and Troniak, 2009). The lack of a formal registry to clarify



boundaries and establish benefit-sharing mechanisms between the state and customary rights holders adds to the complexity of ocean governance. While the Fisheries Act of 1942 recognizes *iqoliqoli*, limited legal regulation governs its application beyond this acknowledgment (Sloan and Chand, 2016). This raises the question of whether an MSP initiative could provide a structured, participatory framework to reconcile customary and statutory governance, clarify spatial boundaries, and embed equitable benefit-sharing into national marine management.

2 Methodology

We employed a mixed-methods case study approach, combining national legislative and policy document analysis with semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$). The study was conducted in two stages. Initially, legislative and policy documents were reviewed to assess Fiji's current ocean governance landscape, including provisions for MSP. Insights from this analysis were then used to refine the interview questions, which were subsequently explored through semi-structured interviews. While we acknowledge the value of regional frameworks in inspiring national policies, this study intentionally focuses on Fiji's national documents to maintain analytical clarity and traceability in evaluating the potential of MSP

design and implementation. This national-level focus also allowed us to identify cross-sectoral interactions, gaps, and overlaps within Fiji's policy framework, providing a clear and context-specific basis for evaluation.

In 2016, the MACBIO Project completed a review of 85 legislative and policy documents related to the development of MPA and MSP in Fiji (Muldoon et al., 2016). We departed from this analysis and identified legislative and policy documents published between 2017 and 2023. We examined documents that explicitly mentioned MSP elements and focused on legislative instruments and institutional arrangements for policy coordination and coherence, which were identified as key gaps in the MACBIO Project Report (Muldoon et al., 2016). We identified 14 national documents, including one legislative document, two policies, and several strategic plans and frameworks (Table 1).

To investigate how these documents incorporate and apply the term "Marine Spatial Planning," we conducted a qualitative content analysis of all 14 documents. Our analysis was guided by queries that examined how legislative and policy documents support MSP as an ocean management tool and whether they provide legal, institutional, and financial frameworks for the design, coordination, and implementation of MSP. We also drew on relevant insights from the MSP literature in SIDS, as reported in our previous research (Singh et al., 2025).

TABLE 1 National policies, legislation, plans, and strategic documents.

No.	Policies, legislation, plans, and strategic documents	Website Link
1.	Fiji Climate Change Act 2021	https://www.parliament.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Act-No.-43-Climate-Change.pdf
2.	National Ocean Policy 2020-2030	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Fiji_NationalOceansPolicy_2020.pdf
3.	5-year and 20-year National Development Plan	https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/LD4%205yr%20and%2020yr%20DP%20Transforming%20Fiji.pdf
4.	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2020-2025	https://www.mowe.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/National-Biodiversity-Strategy-Action-Plan.pdf
5.	Fijian Sustainable Bond Framework 2022	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Fijian-Sustainable-Bond-Framework.pdf
6.	iTaukei Affairs Strategic Development Plan 2018-2023	https://www.itaukeiaffairs.gov.fj/images/Annual_Reports/MTA_Strategic_Development_Plan_2018-2023.pdf
7.	National Climate Change Policy 2018-2030	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FIJI-NCCP-2018-2030_0.pdf
8.	Fiji Tourism 2021	https://mitt.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FT2021.pdf
9.	Fiji Low Emissions Development Strategy 2018-2050	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Fiji_Low-Emission-Development-Strategy-2018-2050.pdf
10.	Fiji National Climate Finance Strategy	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Fijis-National-Climate-Finance-Strategy.pdf
11.	Fiji's Updated Nationally Determined Contribution	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Republic-of-Fijis-Updated-NDC-2020.pdf
12.	Nationally Determined Contribution Investment Plan 2022	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022_Fiji-NDC-Investment-Plan.pdf
13.	Republic of Fiji National Adaptation Plan	https://fijiclimatchangeportal.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Fiji_National-Adaptation-Plan.pdf
14.	Ministry of Environment and Waterways Strategic Plan 2020-2024	https://www.mowe.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020_2024_Strategic-Plan_MoWE.pdf

The policy review findings were incorporated into the design of the interview questions, which were primarily informed by an analytical framework grounded in collaborative governance theories, particularly the works of Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015). According to Ansell and Gash (2008

p. 544) “Collaborative governance is a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets”. Collaborative governance is an innovation in decision-making, incorporating the role of non-state actors in both the innovation and operations of public policies and programs (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015).

The collaborative governance framework consists of three key variables: *Leadership and goal setting*, provides the clarity of vision, authority, and leadership capacity to define shared goals and mobilize resources; *governance arrangements*, include the formal and informal mechanisms through which decisions are developed, agreed upon, and put not practice; and *social capital* encompasses stakeholder relationships, trust, and legitimacy that underpin the collaborative process. These variables are preceded by *starting conditions* and followed by *outcomes*. Starting conditions pertain to the historical, socio-political, ecological, and legal context in which the governance process begins (e.g., existing institutions, available resources, political will, and past collaboration efforts). Outcomes reflect the tangible and intangible results achieved once the collaborative process has been implemented.

Based on our previous research, we also identified ocean literacy, research, and local and Indigenous norms and practices as critical elements to be added to the collaborative governance framework in the context of SIDS (Singh et al., 2025). The revised analytical framework (Figure 2) was then utilized to develop guiding questions for this study. The interview questions focused on ocean challenges and opportunities in Fiji, particularly regarding ocean-based initiatives and their governance. Additionally, the questions addressed leadership roles, local and Indigenous norms and practices, goals associated with MSP, governance arrangements, and the involvement of various sectors and stakeholders in planning, coordinating, and implementing MSP. We also asked about the importance of a collaborative governance framework in operationalizing the MSP model for Fiji. In the context of this study, the collaborative governance framework provides the overarching structure, including starting conditions, the interactions among various variables, and anticipated outcomes. The MSP model, on the other hand, is more action-oriented, focusing on the practical implementation of the collaborative process outlined by the governance framework.

The interviews were conducted with 15 key individuals involved in Fiji's national ocean governance processes, selected based on their respective roles. The decision to interview these participants was guided by two objectives: (i) to capture the viewpoints of actors directly involved in shaping, implementing, and overseeing ocean governance policies, and (ii) to record the practical experience of those engaged in Fiji's emerging MSP initiatives. The respondents were selected by sending letters to the heads of organizations involved in ocean governance and MSP work. They then nominated the participants best positioned to provide informed

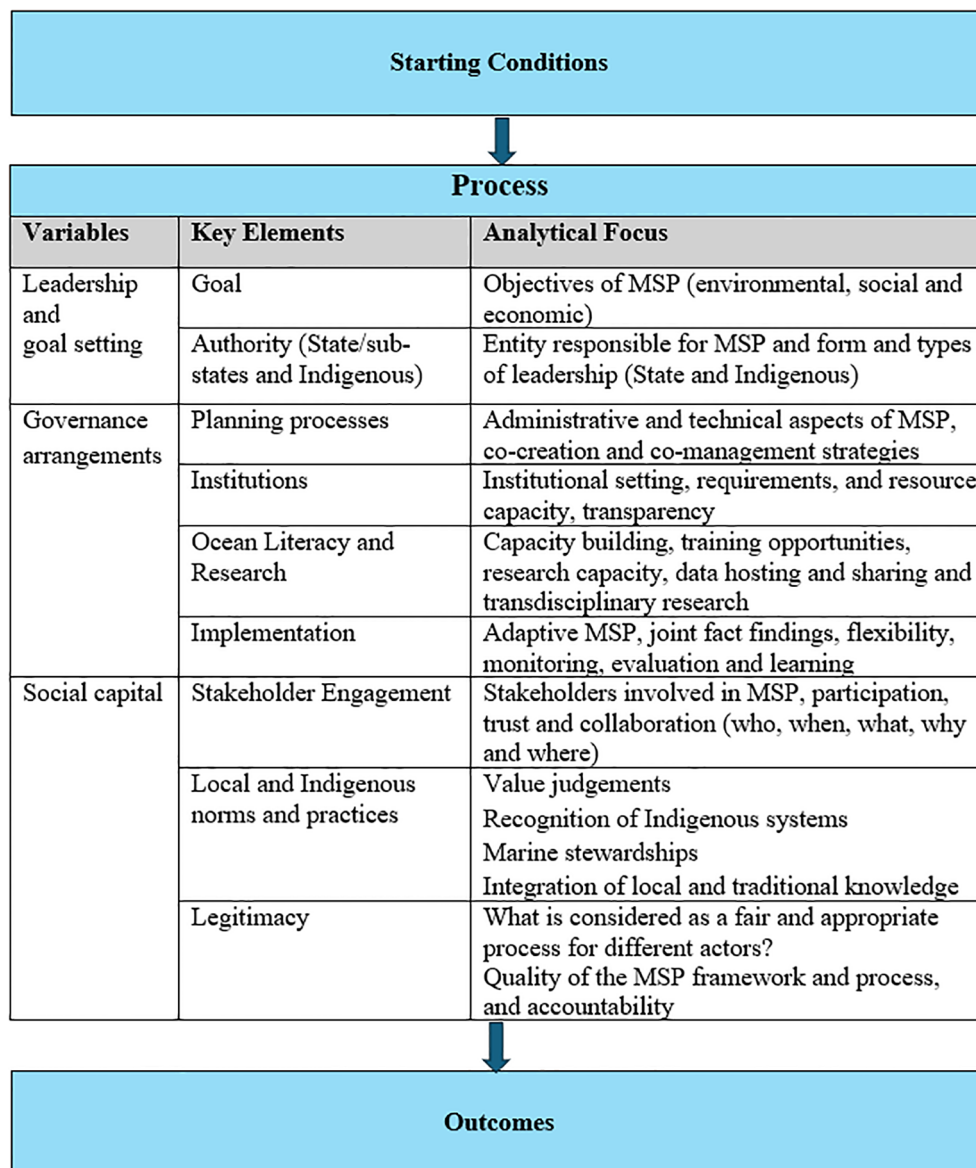


FIGURE 2
Analytical framework.

insights. This purposive sampling approach enabled the collection of in-depth, contextually rich perspectives on MSP and ocean governance in Fiji. Written consent was obtained from participants prior to the interviews, which took place between April and August 2024. Non-government organizations, the private sector, and academic institutions often collaborate with the government across various policy domains, including ocean governance (Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2020). Hence, we reached out to individuals outside the government sector in addition to state actors (Table 2).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the interview data was coded according to our analytical framework and analyzed using NVivo software. The results section presents key quotes and excerpts from the interviews.

3 Review of national policies, legislation, and plans (2017–2023)

3.1 Legislative and policy foundations

There are very few references ($n=11$) to the term “marine spatial planning” across reviewed documents, and where they occur, they appear to be incidental rather than substantive. Most existing policies and plans have a broad focus on marine conservation and sustainable management goals. Some of the foundational laws, such as the Fisheries Act, Marine Space Act, and the Surfing Decree, are currently undergoing legislative review. This process offers a critical policy window to integrate MSP principles into statutory instruments, aligning legal mandates with the country’s ocean

TABLE 2 List of participants.

Participant reference	Organization
1	Climate Change Division – Government
2	Climate Change Division – Government
3	Department of Environment – Government
4	Department of Fisheries – Government
5	National NGO
6	Regional NGO
7	Private Sector
8	Department of Navy – Government
9	National NGO
10	Department of Fisheries – Government
11	Private Sector
12	Mineral Resources Department - Government
13	Academia
14	Department of iTaukei Affairs – Government
15	Tourism Sector - Government

governance ambitions. While Fiji's Climate Change Act 2021 offers some enabling legislative support for ocean mandates, it lacks specific provisions for MSP regulation or enforcement. This underscores a significant legislative gap for MSP in Fiji.

3.2 Institutional arrangements and coordination

Fiji's National Ocean Policy and the formation of its steering committee represent the country's first concerted and structured attempt to institutionalize its commitment to 100% sustainable management of the ocean (Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2020). This framework is envisioned as a central coordinating mechanism to align various stakeholders and policy efforts toward national ocean sustainability goals. Yet, there is a lack of clarity on how this framework will engage non-state actors, traditional custodians, and the private sector in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the strategic plans of various ministries largely retain a sector-specific focus, with minimal cross-sectoral integration or collaboration. These plans rarely articulate explicitly processes for inter-ministerial collaboration or the systematic sharing of information and updates pertinent to MSP. Additionally, the absence of a robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework within the National Ocean Policy constrains the government's capacity to track implementation progress, assess policy effectiveness, or adapt to ocean governance challenges. The following section draws on participant interviews to shed light on these challenges and explores their perspectives on the potential of MSP to address these interconnected issues.

4 Results and analysis

The findings draw on 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews, informed by both the analytical framework and a review of national policies, legislation, and plans. They highlight key challenges in Fiji's ocean governance and examine how MSP could serve as a governance mechanism to address them. We grouped these challenges into five broad categories and documented participants' perceptions on how MSP might help overcome each. A summary table is also provided to support the main findings (Supplementary Table 3).

4.1 Institutional fragmentation and capacity constraints

Participants identified the lack of coordination between institutions, including government and non-government, as a key issue of concern for ocean governance. All participants emphasized that institutional issues within the government arise due to a lack of clarity in goal priorities, inadequate leadership skills to facilitate cross-sectoral strategies, and insufficient resource allocation to address ocean-related matters. These participants also explained that with ocean governance mandates distributed among various government departments, Fiji lacks a cohesive national regulatory mechanism to pursue policy coherence and address ocean issues collectively. According to several participants (n=10) inadequate reporting processes on MSP-related activities exacerbate policy fragmentation.

Although intersectoral coordinating committees and legislative instruments such as the National Environmental Council and the Technical Working Groups are in place, some participants (n=7) noted that these committees either fail to convene regularly or do not follow through on commitments over time, a situation exacerbated by changes in leadership. For instance, a government participant remarked, "*The National Environmental Council, supposedly one of the most influential environmental committees, has not met for several years*" (Participant 3, April 2024). This lack of consistent engagement undermines the credibility of such high-level committees and hinders the timely advancement of environmental policy initiatives. In addition to overlapping mandates, the challenge lies in institutional inertia and insufficient effort to strengthen existing mechanisms.

Some participants (n=7) stated that the delineation of roles and responsibilities between different steering committees and advisory groups tends to be vague, resulting in miscommunication and occasional overlaps in tasks. They also highlighted that committee membership tends to be drawn from a narrow pool of individuals serving on multiple governance bodies, which potentially limits the diversity of input and innovation. These participants expressed the need for a designated government agency with legislative authority to strategically oversee all ocean-related affairs, including securing international funding, given the limited grant the government provides for area-based management tools. They explained that

the National Ocean Policy steering committee alone might lack the capacity to effectively oversee and manage the activities of other agencies, both state and non-state, or to secure adequate funding support.

In line with the analytical frameworks' emphasis on goal clarity and institutional setting, several participants (n=11) supported MSP efforts in Fiji, viewing them as a promising scientific and governance tool capable of addressing institutional silos, improving coordination, and advancing the implementation of the National Ocean Policy. MSP was seen to provide a panoramic view of the ocean that integrates conservation and development priorities while enhancing cross-sectoral coherence. These participants highlighted that MSP could serve as a deliberative platform where competing values and interests, such as economic growth, food security, and biodiversity protection, are openly negotiated. These participants envisioned MSP as a mechanism that not only aligns policy but also strengthens legitimacy by incorporating diverse stakeholders' perspectives into the decision-making process. According to a non-government participant:

MSP would demystify the whole conversation around protected areas and better inform government, policymakers, and our leaders as to what the best course of action is going forward, taking into account the grievances and standpoints of various stakeholders and the public who have immense interest in our ocean as their livelihood is dependent on it. (Participant 9, May 2024)

The remaining four participants were not as supportive of MSP, arguing that Fiji lacks the necessary resources to implement and effectively monitor MSP. Without adequate financial, technical, and human resources, as well as an overarching framework, these participants cautioned that MSP might become just an externally driven initiative that struggles to move beyond the planning stages or relies heavily on donor support, thereby limiting national ownership. These divergent views suggest that while many view MSP as an agent of change, others caution that without adequate resources and institutional strengthening, it risks reinforcing existing governance challenges.

Among those who supported MSP, there was a strong consensus that it should be led by a dedicated oceans agency. These insights highlight the perceived importance of an overarching and dedicated governance structure in reconciling cross-sectoral priorities, enabling MSP to function as a strategic tool rather than a fragmented or *ad hoc* exercise.

Several participants (n=8) emphasized that the primary goal of MSP is to balance competing priorities in marine activities through an integrative approach. They stated that placing MSP under an existing ministry without the necessary legal framework could skew priorities. For instance, the Ministry of Environment might prioritize biodiversity protection, while the Ministry of Fisheries or Mineral Resources may lean more towards utilizing natural resources. They suggested that establishing a new Ministry for

Ocean Affairs could provide impartial leadership for MSP while enhancing enforcement and compliance support.

4.2 Stakeholder engagement

Another significant challenge in ocean governance is engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process. As noted by several participants (n=9), the participatory process is rarely marketed and yields limited productivity, negatively impacting the legitimacy of policy design, constituency building, resource mobilization, and policy implementation. Many participants (n = 10) raised concerns about Fiji's stance on the ambitious 30x30 MPA commitment, questioning its feasibility and the potential impact on fishing industries and local communities that are heavily reliant on fisheries. They also raised concerns about such declarations being made without strategic consultation with local people or even NGOs that frequently engage with communities at the grassroots level. These participants also emphasized that without nurturing relational ties between relevant stakeholders, even well-intentioned policies may face resistance, reduce compliance, and fail to reflect the needs and knowledge of those most affected. According to a participant from an NGO:

Bold ocean commitments without proper consultation with local people, including small-scale fishermen, could severely impact their livelihood, especially if the government does not offer an appropriate alternative approach or livelihood pathways. (Participant 5, May 2024)

These concerns underscore a critical gap in ocean governance. While formal institutionalized participatory mechanisms are necessary, they alone cannot ensure effective collaboration. Equally important is the deliberate cultivation of reciprocal relationships, trust, and shared norms that bind stakeholders and institutions together.

Several participants (n=9) noted that Fiji's stakeholder engagement process typically includes those with the capacity, resources, and motivation to attend meetings. These participants explained that not all stakeholders who use the ocean space will have the same level of interest or ability to participate in the MSP process, often due to a lack of awareness of MSP objectives, inadequate access to information, and insufficient capacity-building opportunities. Since the stakeholder engagement process is not institutionalized, several stakeholders remain on the periphery, engaging sporadically or not participating at all.

Some participants (n=7) reported that Fiji developed a zero-draft map outlining 15 MPA blocks using decision-support tools such as Marxan. This tool aids in identifying regions of high conservation importance and other priority areas for protection. However, there are issues with implementing the 15 MPA blocks within Fiji's EEZ, including notable resistance from certain stakeholders, such as the fishing industry. Several participants (n=9) suggested that MSP could

strengthen participatory processes in Fiji by leveraging the authority and influence of traditional and prominent local leaders, empowering local communities, particularly fishing communities, and fostering active engagement from key ocean industries such as shipping, fisheries, and tourism. They emphasized that, because MSP is inherently iterative, its success would depend on sustained and adaptive engagement with these diverse stakeholders over time. These participants also stated that an MSP authority must organize nationwide outreach campaigns and ensure broad stakeholder representation from the early stages of MSP through to implementation. They also argued that an MSP authority must gain acceptance from Indigenous and local communities by clearly demonstrating a balance between socio-economic and environmental benefits. Such an argument is particularly important in Fiji, where inshore iqoliqoli areas are essential for local livelihoods. One participant highlighted the centrality of relationships in collaborative governance:

We focus on the policies, processes, but we forget the main element of a collaborative mechanism is the people because in the midst of all of this, it's the people who are doing the work, it's people who will be blocking the work or facilitating the work, and so I think some kind of investment around really building relationships with the key stakeholders is very important, particularly if you put in place a collaborative governance mechanism such as MSP. (Participant 14, July 2024)

Another noted the tension between national development ambitions and customary tenure:

Fiji's development ambitions are at loggerheads with the traditional land and ocean jurisdiction, and it is quite challenging to navigate through iqoliqoli tenure and venture into sustainable commercial activities, particularly for inshore areas. Community buy-in for MSP is extremely important to pursue conservation and socio-economic goals. (Participant 5, June 2024)

Building on these observations, many participants (n=11) emphasized that MSP offers a timely opportunity for the government to actively engage communities in shaping ocean governance and broader blue economy initiatives. These participants perceive MSP as a potential bridge between national ocean development strategies and the lived realities of coastal communities. In the Fijian context, where iqoliqoli areas form the backbone of community food security and income, MSP can secure community buy-in and legitimacy by demonstrating how conservation objectives can be integrated with, and even reinforce, socio-economic benefits. By clearly connecting ecological goals with tangible improvements in well-being, MSP, according to them, can foster a sense of shared ownership and responsibility among local stakeholders.

4.3 Surveillance, monitoring, and enforcement

Many participants (n=12) reported that Fiji faces significant maritime surveillance and security challenges. They also pointed out that inshore iqoliqoli areas comprise only about 2% of the territorial waters within Fiji's EEZ, suggesting that Fiji must prioritize offshore MPAs to achieve the 30% conservation target. However, this process is anticipated to be both complicated and costly. According to five government officials, illegal fishing activities have intensified across inshore and offshore areas. They explained that a fish warden system established for surveillance purposes in inshore areas proved ineffective because the positions were volunteer-based and lacked sufficient resources to sustain the initiative. The absence of legal recognition for management plans in iqoliqoli areas, along with challenges in surveillance, enforcement, and monitoring of vast offshore areas, continues to complicate ocean governance in Fiji. Although this issue has been identified in prior studies, the fact that it remains problematic suggests the complexity of formal and informal ocean governance in Fiji, creating challenges for the development of the marine sector.

Several participants (n = 8) noted that a nationwide MSP for Fiji could enhance monitoring and evaluation efforts, provided it is adequately institutionalized with the necessary financial and legal support. According to a government participant:

MSP must be given financial and legal backing to take up the coordination role as it includes governance of the entire ocean and not just fisheries or biodiversity. (Participant 1, April 2024)

Other participants (n = 7) noted that a dedicated MSP authority, particularly one supported by legislative backing, could significantly enhance coordination among law enforcement agencies, thereby strengthening compliance and enforcement across Fiji's waters. They also emphasized that effective MSP implementation would require both expanded at-sea monitoring capacities and streamlined land-based administrative procedures, reflecting the inherent interdependence of terrestrial and marine governance systems. These results indicate that substantial financial and legal support are essential structural preconditions within the collaborative governance framework, empowering leadership to mobilize resources, coordinate diverse stakeholders, and enforce regulations effectively across Fiji's integrated ocean and coastal jurisdictions. Several participants (n=8) suggested that a strategically resourced, nationwide MSP could serve as a foundation for transboundary collaboration, enhancing regional ocean security and reinforcing Fiji's commitments under emerging international frameworks such as the High Seas Treaty. This illustrates that robust institutional design and targeted resource allocation at the national level can produce cascading effects, facilitating compliance, strengthening collaboration, and supporting more integrated governance across the wider Pacific region.

4.4 Financial constraints

Another persistent challenge is insufficient financial resources to sustain area-based management tools. Fiji's high debt burden raises concerns for initiatives like MSP, which require consistent funding. All participants underscored that sustainable financing is a critical issue, noting that many existing ocean-based initiatives are currently dependent on donor agencies for both oversight and financial support. A participant from an NGO noted:

Once those ocean-based projects end and the community doesn't have the appetite for it, their incentive to continue the work will also fade away, and then some of those projects will just end up dying a natural death, as has happened in the past. (Participant 9, April 2024)

The increasing reliance on external funding creates vulnerabilities, as initiatives risk being driven by donor priorities rather than national or community needs, thereby weakening local ownership and long-term legitimacy. To tackle these issues, some participants (n=8) highlighted the importance of engaging the domestic private sector in ocean governance and creating fiscal space to support their involvement. They also pointed to innovative financing mechanisms, such as blue bonds and conservation trust funds, as potential pathways for addressing Fiji's ocean financing gap. Many participants (n=12) reported that a sustainable financing model for MSP is indispensable for ensuring the long-term viability of the blue economy and MSP initiatives. They pointed out that effective implementation of MSP could offer deeper insights into economic tradeoffs and help mobilize financing for marine projects at an appropriate scale and pace, thereby contributing to the development of sustainable ocean economies. These findings suggest that financial capacity is not merely a structural constraint, but rather one of the key determinants of the transformative potential of MSP.

4.5 Data limitations and research capacity

Almost all participants (n=12) voiced concerns about the collection, storage, and accessibility of ocean-related data in Fiji. While diverse datasets, including Indigenous knowledge, have been collected over the years by the government agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions, participants emphasized that current data-gathering approaches are fragmented and *ad hoc*, and poorly coordinated. Some participants (n = 7) emphasized that the local ecological knowledge held by non-Indigenous Fijians is equally valuable yet often overlooked, while others (n=5) highlighted the critical need to gather insights from women fisherfolk, whose contributions remain underrepresented in existing data systems. Several participants (n=9) also stated that data is stored in different formats across multiple institutions, which creates accessibility challenges and complicates decision-making. According to a participant:

First and foremost, there is a lack of research focusing on the ocean and its resources. Nowadays, studies are primarily driven by donor organizations or development partners rather than national priorities, often resulting in data not being shared with the local institutions. Perhaps MSP can boost interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research in ocean studies. It is about time that we bring our national academic institute to the forefront and work collectively to advance national ocean research and development. (Participant 5, June 2024)

In this regard, many participants (n=10) highlighted the need for deliberate investment in research capacity and stronger linkages between the MSP authority and academic institutions. Beyond generating new knowledge through research, this would involve developing curricula, training programs, and institutional frameworks that integrate MSP into Fiji's educational governance systems. Participants further emphasized the value of investment in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research approaches, which are essential for addressing the complexity of ocean governance. This emphasis makes clear that data governance is not simply a technical concern but also a political and epistemic challenge. Decisions about whose knowledge is recognized, how data is shared, and who holds authority over its use directly influence the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and equity of MSP processes. Fiji's lack of an institutionalized system for national data storage and access risks making it dependent on external gatekeepers to access its own information. Compounding this challenge is the absence of a dedicated national ocean research center, limited investment in marine science, and growing reliance on international expertise, all of which constrain the development of context-specific knowledge and weaken the foundation for localized action.

4.6 A new oceans ministry for MSP and the blue economy

Many participants (n=10) reported that MSP and blue economy initiatives share synergistic attributes. Given that both are relatively new for Fiji, participants proposed that they would benefit from being placed under a new ministry and led by a government leader with high authority, ideally the Prime Minister. Several participants (n=8) indicated that a dedicated agency for ocean affairs would be best suited to deploy a central clearinghouse mechanism to address institutional barriers and foster technical and scientific collaboration. These participants also emphasized that a new oceans ministry could serve as a national ocean research hub and partner with academic institutions to acquire international research funding.

Some participants (n=6) asserted that MSP is an enabler of the blue economy and that a new ministry for ocean affairs could be strategically positioned to monitor and evaluate the iterative MSP process while governing emerging blue economy sectors, such as deep-sea mining and offshore renewable energy. One-third of participants were less enthusiastic about establishing a new

ministry for ocean affairs, arguing that it would only add more layers of bureaucratic complexity and impose additional constraints on ministries already grappling with reporting issues and limited resources. These participants suggested improving integration across ministries, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and strengthening existing steering committees to include dedicated representatives from NGOs, the private sector, and the public sector. They proposed elevating the roles of these stakeholders from observers to active, full-time members. They further suggested that the Ministry for Climate Change and Environment could continue to lead MSP efforts but should establish a community of practice to address technical and human resource deficits. Generally, the interviews imply that political will, strong leadership, consistent stakeholder engagement, and institutional collaboration are essential prerequisites for ensuring a just and transparent MSP process.

5 Discussion

In this section, we interpret the findings in relation to the three key elements of our collaborative governance framework (Figure 2): leadership and goal setting, governance arrangements, and social capital. These elements play a critical role in mobilizing the collaborative process and shaping the effectiveness, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability of MSP in Fiji. To capture the full scope of the findings, we highlight two cross-cutting themes that warrant special attention: financial sustainability, as a critical enabler of continuity and legitimacy of MSP, and the search for an institutional home for MSP in Fiji, which addresses issues of authority and coordination while pointing toward pragmatic pathways for reform.

5.1 Leadership and goal setting

Our analysis indicates that, despite Fiji's efforts to align high-level policies and achieve policy coherence, many pieces are still missing from its woven approach, with detailed integration mostly absent from many sectoral plans. This has created a disconnect between Fiji's high-level policy commitments, decision-making processes, and grassroots actions, echoing Johnson et al. (2020 p. 14) observation in Barbuda of a "top-down" MSP process with weak stakeholder engagement. This situation reflects a breakdown in facilitative leadership and deliberative process elements that are essential for linking national decisions to local realities. As Fiji commits to a 100% sustainable ocean management goal, effective leadership and prioritizing appropriate goals will be integral to achieving policy coherence and mobilizing and sustaining a collaborative MSP process. Drawing on lessons from collaborative governance, MSP authority will need to act more as a convenor and facilitator of the MSP process than an instructor. As outlined in section 4.2 of the results, effective leadership is crucial in MSP to cater to the needs of all ocean users, not just those with powerful agendas.

The effectiveness of a collaborative network is derived from the interplay of the network's governance elements, the characteristics of key stakeholders, and their positions within the network (Ansell et al., 2020; Booher, 2004). Such a network requires transformational leadership at each node to ensure meaningful participation and transparency throughout the process. Transformative leaders do not wield their power to enact change; instead, they use their vision and goals to inspire behaviors that drive change (Montuori and Donnelly, 2017). In the context of Fiji's MSP, leadership cannot be disentangled from broader historical legacies that continue to shape political authority. Colonial governance introduced highly centralized administrative systems that prioritized sectoral control. However, post-independence political instability and a series of coups eroded institutional trust, reinforcing reliance on elite-driven decision-making. These historical legacies complicate efforts to foster distributed and transformative leadership by creating "path dependencies" that favor hierarchical authority structures over more inclusive, collaborative forms of leadership. We argue that leadership in MSP will be critical in challenging this concentration of power by shifting from directive, top-down styles toward convening, facilitative, and distributed approaches. These approaches not only create participatory spaces but also ensure that these spaces carry decision-making weight, with clearly defined goals and mechanisms for accountability.

In Fiji and across Pacific SIDS, customary decision-making structures remain central in defining how coastal marine resources are accessed, utilized, and managed. These dynamics carry particular significance for MSP as customary systems function not only as governance mechanisms but also as repositories of social capital, anchored in trust, reciprocity, and shared norms. When appropriately mobilized, these qualities can substantially bolster the legitimacy and acceptance of MSP. However, customary authority is not static, it is continually reshaped by migration, generational shifts, commercialization, and broader socio-political change (Veitayaki et al., 2011). Consequently, MSP planners in Fiji face the substantial challenge of revitalizing customary governance while institutionalizing spaces for genuine co-creation that extend participation to non-Indigenous community members, women, youth, and people with disabilities. This requires resisting the romanticization of customary systems and instead adopting a pragmatic approach that leverages their strengths while acknowledging internal inequities.

We therefore urge ocean leaders and champions in Fiji to deliberately weave together statutory and customary systems, ensuring that provincial-level decision-making platforms are adequately resourced while also embedding safeguards that protect the representation of marginalized groups. According to Zuercher et al. (2022), MSP process has the potential to provide a platform for Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLC) to exercise their rights and achieve substantial representation. Our findings also affirm that the MSP process can provide formal avenues for recruiting and incentivizing IPLC to facilitate collective action. Yet, the results also highlight persistent coordination challenges within Fiji's broader ocean governance

system, which could hinder such collective action. These challenges have direct implications for MSP design and implementation.

5.2 Governance arrangements

Fiji's ocean policy landscape has set the stage for integrated ocean governance, but several policies and plans are still dispersed across legislative frameworks and regulatory institutions. This fragmentation repeatedly poses challenges to shifting away from business-as-usual and siloed approaches. From a collaborative governance perspective, these challenges point to weaknesses in the starting conditions for collaboration and the persistence of high transaction costs for coordination. The implementation of Fiji's National Ocean Policy and the Climate Change Act 2021 will necessitate adjustments in organizational design and operational protocols, as well as changes to actor networks and stakeholder engagement. As presented in section 4.1 of the results, the static composition of steering groups and task force committees raises concerns about diversity, inclusivity, and equity, principles that are fundamental to achieving broad and legitimate stakeholder representation. Without deliberate efforts to renew membership and strengthen stakeholder capacity, the collaborative process risks becoming insular and unresponsive to evolving contexts, thereby undermining both the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of MSP.

Bureaucratic inertia, identified in collaborative governance theory as a structural barrier to shared decision-making (Elston et al., 2023), remains a significant challenge in Fiji. Reconciling the differing priorities of NGOs, the private sector, resource owners, state agencies, and Indigenous Peoples and local communities requires recognition that each actor's values and mandates are legitimate. While significant challenges remain, according to several participants, MSP has the capacity to foster stronger inter-agency coordination and accelerate progress toward implementing the National Ocean Policy. The results indicate that participants view MSP as a tool that could provide a comprehensive "whole-of-ocean" perspective, creating space for more integrated and equitable consideration of both conservation priorities and development needs. However, we conclude that without legislation that grants one agency clear jurisdiction over the management of the entire ocean space, including both living and non-living resources, institutions with conflicting priorities will continue to impinge on each other's goals as well as those of MSP.

Furthermore, in the absence of an effective conflict resolution mechanism, these tensions will hinder efforts to manage limited financial resources, pursue multiple goals, and leverage existing management frameworks. Some pressing questions to consider when designing an MSP framework include: *What is the defined ocean law that is acceptable to all? Who is the political champion for the ocean? What are the most effective management strategies to address various tensions?* One of our key observations is that Fiji lacks a national policy dedicated to the explicit development of MSP or MPAs. Previous reports (Muldoon et al., 2016; Techera and Troniak, 2009) identified this as a significant gap and recommended

creating a policy to fulfill Fiji's commitments to both. However, nearly a decade later, this gap remains unaddressed. As Fiji embarks on its MSP journey, creating an enabling governance environment anchored in legislation and equipped with the legal authority to oversee and coordinate ocean use will be essential to move beyond the status quo.

For a developing island nation like Fiji, ocean governance extends beyond mere cartography of the ocean space. It involves regulating land-based activities and pollution control, strengthening customary laws, providing district-level support for policy compliance, and allocating technical and financial resources to effectively manage ocean space. With maritime transport emissions projected to rise in Oceania due to an increase in seaborne trade (Xu et al., 2025), there is a pressing need for regional collaboration, robust regulatory frameworks, and technological innovation to mitigate environmental impacts. MSP offers a strategic platform to address these challenges, providing a comprehensive framework to manage all ocean spaces while harmonizing ecological, economic, and social priorities across sectors (Ehler and Douvère, 2009).

Fiji's experience with MPAs provides a solid foundation for ocean management, yet implementing MSP would require extending governance to currently unprotected areas and fostering coordinated, multi-sectoral commitment to climate resilience. MSP can diversify conservation efforts across a broader range of habitats and ecosystems, moving beyond a narrow focus on coral reefs or other climate-vulnerable hotspots that may not endure the next 30 to 50 years. Marine spatial planning and ocean zoning strategies capitalize on the strengths of the MPA tool while alleviating its shortcomings, creating a more adaptive and comprehensive approach to ocean stewardship (Agardy et al., 2011).

In Fiji, several NGOs are engaged in MSP initiatives at the local level, creating promising "collaborative sub-systems" that could be scaled up nationally. These locally grounded efforts not only build community capacity and trust but also generate practical knowledge that can inform national planning. To sustain and amplify their impact, we argue that the Fiji government must prioritize transitioning these NGO-led projects into official government programs, ensuring ongoing institutional support for long-term viability. In a collaborative governance framework, institutionalizing such partnerships is essential to maintain environmental management momentum beyond short-term project cycles (Ulibarri et al., 2023). These partnerships would also enable the government to better leverage the technical expertise and resources provided by NGOs and other partners. Thus, the combined contributions of both the state and non-state institutions are equally important for achieving shared ocean governance goals.

5.3 Social capital

The ocean, in essence, is a network of actants, which, on their own, do not assert any authority but become associated with power and politics by virtue of their relationships with one another and

with the ocean. We argue that the ocean space is a construction of culturally, socially, historically, and scientifically situated discourses. Thus, value judgments are critical factors to consider when designing MSP for Fiji. Analyzing local ocean narratives and stories is crucial to ensure that MSP aligns with the needs of the most vulnerable populations, rather than prioritizing the interests of a select few. This study confirms that MSP has the potential to accommodate diverse ocean users while generating social capital, a foundational asset for collaborative processes. Nevertheless, social capital in collaborative governance is not automatically inclusive. As this study finds, not all Fijians will share the same level of interest in the marine environment and thus may be more or less active and have varying entitlements to participate in the MSP process. A collaborative framework for MSP must therefore move beyond simply “inviting” stakeholders to the table, to actively enabling participation by valuing and integrating the knowledge, experience, and values of a wide range of actors.

In line with collaborative governance principles of mutual respect, joint learning, and shared decision-making, MSP in Fiji must embrace innovative ways of incorporating traditional and local knowledge practices into spatial plans. While Fiji’s customary systems have contributed to conservation goals for decades, recent evidence suggests that certain community-based initiatives have fallen short of delivering tangible social-economic and ecological benefits (O’Garra et al., 2023). A collaborative approach here would emphasize co-designing strategies with communities, ensuring that management plans are not only culturally resonant but also produce measurable outcomes for local well-being. To this end, MSP can serve as a timely intervention to enhance coastal economies and ways of life, aiding communities in optimizing their resources for both economic and ecological purposes. It offers a conducive platform for sharing lessons and best practices and cultivating innovative solutions to improve the well-being of Fijians and the health of the ocean, which is crucial to their livelihood. Von Heland et al. (2014) highlights that the media has the capacity to construct alternative imaginaries of the future, normalize emergent forms of social and environmental behaviors, and stimulate innovation by influencing the public agenda and focusing attention on priority issues.

Although Indigenous and local knowledge in Fiji is extensive and deeply rooted in cultural practices, it tends to be somewhat obscure and insufficiently documented within formal governance processes. The interviews indicated that consultations with Indigenous iqoliqoli representatives are mainly limited to men and chiefly leaders, thereby marginalizing other ocean users, including youth, women, and non-chiefly community members who also hold valuable ecological knowledge and depend on marine resources for their livelihood. The collaborative governance framework cautions against such exclusivity, as it risks reinforcing power asymmetries and eroding trust. To tackle this issue, the MSP governance framework must adopt a culturally sensitive, gender responsive, and socially equitable consultation framework that actively broadens participation beyond traditional power holders.

In Fiji, the power struggle between the fishing industry and the government adds to the ongoing challenge to protect 30% of the

ocean. In this conflict, small-scale fisherfolk (including Fijian women who dominate the subsistence fishing sector) and local people emerge as silent stakeholders, many of whom are unaware of high-level policies and their implications. Given that MSP is inherently political, shaped by competing interests and discursive struggles (Flannery et al., 2019; Tafon, 2018), a collaborative governance lens demands deliberate processes to manage conflicts, foster transparency, and counterbalance the influence of elite actors, including donor agencies. Based on our analysis, we caution the government to be wary of the agenda associated with international donor agencies and invest in a local community of practice to tackle ocean governance issues.

Governance scholarship highlights that the sustainability of collaborative processes depends on well-designed incentives, clearly defined roles, and institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue (Zambrano-Gutiérrez et al., 2023). Deciphering conflicts of interest, improving communication, and promoting equal economic opportunities are essential steps in creating entry points for stakeholder engagement in the MSP process (Le Heron et al., 2020). In Fiji, this means moving beyond *ad hoc* consultation toward a more systematic and structured framework for dialogue and knowledge exchange, which is essential for building trust and legitimacy. Ocean literacy, research, and data collection are integral components of an MSP model. However, this study highlights that the national capacity for ocean research is weak, with most research activities happening in an *ad hoc* manner. Linnér et al. (2025) observe that many countries face challenges in institutionalizing biodiversity data systems. As fragmented and donor-driven research efforts often fail to align with national priorities, digitalization must be accompanied by investments in infrastructure, training, and inclusive data governance to ensure that data supports both ecological and social goals.

Funding calls for proposals typically include predefined thematic areas that may not necessarily align with local needs. A collaborative governance approach, by contrast, emphasizes the co-production of research agendas developed jointly by government agencies, communities, academia, and NGOs. Such an approach ensures that knowledge generation is not only scientifically robust but also aligned with ecological sustainability and the aspirations of local communities. Linnér et al. (2025) advocate for such collaborations as a means to reduce dependency on external actors and anchor biodiversity data production within local contexts, ensuring that national priorities guide both policy and practice.

A practical pathway for advancing this vision lies in formally embedding strategic partnerships with local NGOs and academic institutions into the governance architecture. As revealed in the interviews, several NGOs play a vital role in Fiji’s ocean governance landscape, acting as strong allies to the government, facilitating grassroots engagement, and empowering local communities. Their impact is evident through their hands-on involvement in community-based initiatives that promote marine stewardship. We contend that when paired with the research capacity of academic institutions, these partnerships can generate long-term ecological and social data, support evidence-based decision-making, and build a skilled national cadre for adaptive ocean governance.

5.4 Financial sustainability

The financial sustainability of MSP, as highlighted across interviews, emerged as one of the critical and cross-cutting concerns. Sustained funding underpins the effectiveness of leadership, governance arrangements, and social capital, and therefore warrants recognition as a distinct dimension of MSP design and evaluation. Fiji's high debt burden, exacerbated by global shocks such as COVID-19 and recurrent climate-related disasters, has significantly constrained fiscal space for new initiatives (Singh, 2024). From a collaborative governance perspective, the financial sustainability of MSP is not merely a technical issue of securing budgets but also a relational and political challenge. The way in which funding is sourced, allocated, and managed directly shapes priorities, feasibility, scope, and legitimacy of MSP from the outset (Ciravegna et al., 2024). Over-reliance on short-term, project-based donor funding can erode trust, perpetuate power asymmetries, and weaken accountability if local actors perceive MSP as externally imposed.

We contend that financial sustainability must extend beyond core operational expenses to include the often "hidden" but indispensable costs of inclusive participation. As several participants highlighted, empowering customary governance systems and broadening participation to women, youth, and marginalized groups requires consistent investment in capacity-building, facilitation, and community engagement. Without predictable and dedicated financing for such equity-oriented elements, inclusion may remain a rhetorical rather than an embedded practice. Failure to address these financial dimensions could stall implementation, limit stakeholder buy-in, and reduce MSP to a symbolic rather than transformative exercise.

We therefore argue that MSP planners in Fiji face a dual financial task: (1) mobilizing innovative and diversified funding sources to reduce donor dependency, and (2) ensuring that financial arrangements are designed to sustain the collaborative and inclusive ethos of MSP. Thus, the MSP authority process must champion financing strategies that extend beyond donor cycles and political terms, integrating instruments such as blue bonds, regional trust funds, sovereign wealth allocations, or earmarked national budgets into the governance architecture. A reliable, long-term financing model is therefore central to enabling Fiji not only to implement MSP effectively but also to sustain meaningful stakeholder engagement, ensure equity in participation, and build an inclusive and resilient ocean governance system capable of withstanding future social, economic, and environmental pressures.

5.5 Toward an institutional home for MSP in Fiji

Participants frequently emphasized the need for a dedicated institutional anchor to coordinate the growing demands of MSP. For some, this took the form of a Ministry of Ocean Affairs, envisioned as a platform for cross-sectoral dialogue among

government, NGOs, the private sector, and customary governance systems. While compelling, such a proposal requires careful scrutiny. Establishing a new ministry would carry significant fiscal, legal, and political costs and may not be feasible in the short term, given Fiji's constrained financial situation. Further research is needed to assess these risks and evaluate alternatives. However, comparative experience from the Pacific provides valuable lessons. For instance, Tonga's *Oceans 7* technical committee institutionalized cross-sectoral coordination without creating a new ministry, demonstrating how inter-ministerial mechanisms can deliver rapid, low-cost gains (SPREP, 2021).

We therefore propose evaluating institutional pathways for MSP in Fiji through a transparent feasibility framework (assessing fiscal, legal, institutional, political, and social dimensions). The potential pathways are presented here in order of priority, from most to least preferred.

- Reinforcing existing structures - Stabilize the National Ocean Policy Steering Committee by granting decision-making authority to both state and non-state members, backed by a statutory mandate, a dedicated and resourceful secretariat, and an earmarked budget. This committee should be co-chaired by the highest-level authority at the Ministries of Fisheries, Environment and Climate Change, Tourism, Local Government, and iTaukei Affairs. This is a low-cost, politically feasible option that can serve as a transitional platform for MSP coordination.
- Create a statutory MSP authority - If coordination challenges persist, legislate an independent MSP authority with defined powers for planning, data governance, and oversight. This could reduce turf battles by specifying functions and limits. This enabling legislation should also embed grievance redress mechanisms and obligations to engage customary governance.
- Consider ministry-level consolidation only if warranted - considering Fiji's existing financial constraints, a Ministry of Ocean Affairs should be considered only after: (i) a robust cost-benefit and political-feasibility assessment, (ii) evidence that existing mechanisms cannot deliver integrated and adaptive outcomes, and (iii) secured, sustainable financing to cover recurrent costs. If pursued, the ministry should incorporate transitional institutional safeguards, including a statutory MSP authority nested within it, an independent Ocean Fund, and robust stakeholder engagement protocols.

We conclude that institutional reform in Fiji must proceed in stages, aligning ambition with fiscal and political realities. Innovative financing mechanisms, such as conservation trust funds or blue bonds, have the potential to sustain MSP while mitigating risks from under-resourced institutions. This evidence-based, staged approach could strengthen social legitimacy and financial sustainability, reducing the likelihood of fragile institutional reforms.

6 Conclusions

This study found that Fiji's ocean policy landscape has progressively evolved toward an integrated, ecosystem-based approach to ocean governance. Marine spatial planning fits this role. However, realizing the ambition of fully sustainable ocean management will require more than technical mapping and zoning exercises. It will demand institutional innovation, financial ingenuity, and deep societal engagement. We find that the success of MSP in Fiji will be highly contingent on building a collaborative governance framework that extends leadership beyond political oversight, convenes actors across levels, and nurtures social capital through trust, reciprocity, and inclusivity. However, unless deliberately safeguarded, MSP risks becoming constrained by top-down decision-making, weak institutional clarity, and unbalanced stakeholder participation. To avoid this trajectory, MSP must prioritize facilitative and distributed leadership, embed robust conflict resolution mechanisms, and ensure that women, youth, and marginalized groups are not only consulted but granted meaningful influence in decision-making. It will be equally crucial for planners to weave statutory and customary governance systems together to create an MSP process that is both legitimate and durable.

Financial sustainability emerged as a cross-cutting challenge. Fiji's constrained fiscal space, high debt burden, and reliance on short-term donor funding threaten to undermine inclusive participation and long-term continuity of MSP. Innovative financing mechanisms, such as blue bonds, conservation trust funds, or earmarked budgets, must therefore be institutionalized to ensure predictable, diversified, and equitable funding. We also suggest that institutional reforms should proceed incrementally, guided by a staged and evidence-based approach that first consolidates existing mechanisms, explores statutory authorities as necessary, and considers a dedicated oceans ministry only once fiscal and political conditions permit. This gradual strategy will help safeguard against fragile reforms and align ambition with available resources.

A critical pathway toward the effective implementation of MSP lies in elevating the role of NGOs and academic institutions as central actors in the MSP process. Formally institutionalizing the contributions of NGOs within formal MSP structures would not only enhance legitimacy and inclusivity but also ensure that locally grounded knowledge directly informs decision-making at the national level. Likewise, academic institutions must be positioned at the heart of MSP, mandated to co-produce research agendas with stakeholders, generate long-term ecological and socio-economic data, and strengthen national capacity for adaptive and science-based ocean governance. We conclude that embedding these partnerships into the governance architecture of MSP can consolidate fragmented and *ad hoc* initiatives into a sustained, evidence-based process that bridges policy and practice.

We anticipate that these findings will encourage policymakers, regional bodies, and development partners to approach MSP in SIDS not as a purely technical zoning exercise, but as a deeply

political and relational process that must balance ecological imperatives with cultural values and livelihood needs. Future research should explore how public-private partnerships can be designed to align with community priorities and how Indigenous and local governance systems can be embedded within formal MSP structures in ways that respect and enhance their authority.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

PS: Data curation, Validation, Methodology, Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. B-OL: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Validation. KR: Validation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

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