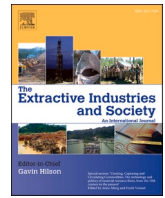


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Civil society mobilisation and the politics of deep-sea mining in the Pacific: A case study of the campaign for a moratorium

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ABSTRACT

Deep-sea mining (DSM) is emerging as a new frontier of extractivism. Drawing on critical ethnographic fieldwork in Fiji, the Cook Islands and at the International Seabed Authority, this paper follows Pacific civil society mobilisation against DSM ventures in the region. It argues that these civil society efforts are not monolithic; rather, they span a spectrum of positions grounded in differing risk perceptions, strategic pragmatism, and epistemological understandings of extractivism. Focussing on the call for a DSM moratorium, the paper situates current mobilisation efforts within the longer history of activism in the Pacific. In such light, the moratorium campaign is tied to the region's historical patterns of resources extraction shaped by colonialism, environmental injustice, and uneven development. More broadly, the analysis contributes to emerging debates on DSM and extractivism and underscores the importance of understanding civil society mobilisation as part of wider contestations over ocean governance, legitimacy, and the possibility of post-extractive futures.

1. Introduction

Although deep-sea mining (DSM) has yet to occur commercially, rising demand for metals is making it increasingly viable. Proponents argue that minerals from the deep seabed are critical for renewable energy technologies needed for the green transition away from fossil fuel reliance, such as wind turbines and electric car batteries (Hein et al., 2013), and for defence and military applications (Chapman, 2025).

To meet rising demand, DSM corporations, as well as a handful of governments, including Canada, China, the European Union, Japan, Norway, and the United States, are exploring mining the deep sea. Current interests centre on polymetallic nodules, found 3500 to 6000 m deep, rich in nickel, copper, manganese, cobalt, and rare earth minerals. Pacific Island nations sit at the heart of this frontier due to their nodule-rich waters (Bainton and Louey, 2025).

Civil society in the Pacific has been mobilising against DSM, employing a diverse array of campaigning strategies across local, national, and regional scales. Within this broader repertoire of actions, Pacific-led advocacy for a precautionary moratorium on DSM has become an influential reference point, gaining heightened visibility within regional debates and intersecting with parallel concerns

emerging globally. This call first crystallised in 2021, when Pacific regional civil society organisations launched a coordinated campaign urging the region's political leaders to endorse a moratorium on DSM. While opposition to DSM has also taken shape in other parts of the world, the Pacific campaign has since resonated beyond the region, aligning with and reinforcing international environmental, scientific, and civil society critiques of the industry. As a result, support for a moratorium has grown globally, with over 130 environmental organisations and more than 40 national governments publicly endorsing some form of pause, ban, or precautionary suspension. The campaign has also gained traction in the private sector, with several corporations—including major electric vehicle manufacturers—and financial institutions pledging not to source minerals from DSM or to finance such activities (Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, 2025).

This paper examines the Pacific campaign for a moratorium on DSM, focusing on the multi-scalar mobilisation strategies deployed by civil society to contest extractivist agendas. It analyses the campaign's diverse framings, levels of engagement, and political implications, highlighting the dynamic interplay between grassroots resistance, regional diplomacy and global advocacy. In doing so, the paper engages with emerging interdisciplinary literature focussed on DSM and seeks to

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contribute to critical debates on resource extraction, environmental justice and collective resistance movements, with a specific focus on Indigenous and coastal communities whose livelihoods and cultural identities are tied to the ocean. The analysis draws on regional media coverage, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) reports, policy papers, and official statements from 2011 to 2025, alongside fieldwork conducted in the Cook Islands (Rarotonga) and Fiji (Suva and Labasa) during 2024–25, and at the 30th Session of the International Seabed Authority in Jamaica (March 2025). Methods included participant observation of public events, governmental meetings, protests, and forums, as well as informal discussions and semi-open interviews with stakeholders ranging from NGOs and grassroots movements to faith-leaders and indigenous representatives, government bodies, and corporate entities. To encourage open and unrestrained sharing of perspectives, and given the divisive nature of the DSM debate, the identities of all interviewees have been anonymised.¹

We argue that Pacific civil society's engagement with the moratorium and ban agenda reflects a strategic response to DSM's ecological, political and epistemic challenges while drawing from longstanding traditions of mobilisation. Pacific CSOs have significantly shaped the normative lexicon of global campaign, especially stewardship, precaution, and indigenous custodianship. This was done while having to negotiate plural global movements advancing distinct, and at times even contradictory, advocacy campaigns.

The paper is organised into four sections: the first section embeds DSM in the Pacific within the critical literature on extractivism. In the second section, the paper details the development of DSM in the region, before turning to the analysis of civil society mobilisation and the call for a moratorium. In the final section, the paper discussed the complexities embedded within these mobilisation strategies and how they intersect with broader critiques of extractivism and ocean governance.

2. Literature and framing: deep-sea mining and extractivism in the pacific

Extractive industries have long been framed as engines of development across the Global South promising improved infrastructures, employment opportunities and access to essential services. Contrary to such promises however, extractive activities have often resulted in profound socio-environmental harm, including ecological degradation, acid mine drainage, the overexploitation of scarce water resources, and widespread contamination of water, soil and air (Bebbington et al., 2008; Belem, 2009; Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020; Hatcher, 2014). It is worth emphasising that such environmental costs are routinely externalised onto local communities (Ali et al., 2017; Pollock, 2014). Beyond such environmental devastation, wide-ranging socio-economic impacts have also been associated with extractive industries, particularly for communities living in the vicinity of large-scale projects. These include displacement, loss of livelihoods, and human rights abuses such as violence, intimidation and the criminalisation of resistance (Feichtner, 2019; Simons and Macklin, 2014). In short, "Extractivism is risky, dirty, and prone to conflicts" (Cerioli and Warnecke-Berger, 2025).

Rooted in Latin American scholarship, the concept of extractivism critiques development models driven by large-scale resource extraction for export, often with minimal local reinvestment (Chagnon et al., 2022; Gudyas, 2013, 2021; Svampa, 2019). Today, it has evolved into a broader analytical framework encompassing "self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing" (Chagnon et al., 2022). Extractivism is thus not merely an economic model but a political and ecological regime that structures relations of power, dispossession, and environmental harm (Willow, 2018), enabled by limited regulatory

capacity and constrained state sovereignty within global supply chains (Campbell, 2013; Campbell and Hatcher, 2019).

In this paper, we build on a nascent set of critical literature expanding the concept of extractivism to the ocean and its resources. Juxtaposed with the idea of the "Blue Economy", extractive practices have expanded from land to sea, and from the water's surface to the darkest reaches of the seabed. After all, by promoting ocean-based development as a pathway to economic resilience and climate adaptation (Ardron, 2018; Mallin, 2025; Murphy and Gard, 2025), the Blue Economy is becoming a vehicle legitimising new forms of large-scale oceanic extraction (Jouffray et al., 2020; Kasanawaqa et al., 2025; Penjueli, 2015). These discourses, whether on land or sea resources, continue to obscure the socio-environmental harms attached to such practices while also reproducing colonial patterns of accumulation and domination (Bebbington et al., 2008; Campbell and Hatcher, 2019).

Tying DSM to this extractive logic, Childs (2020a, 2020b) proposes the term "blue extractivism". Ocean spaces are here reimagined to serve global capital not only by transforming into zones of economic production and control, but also by advancing the access and exploitation of deep-sea resources through the development of specialised technologies, the adoption of enabling legal regimes, and the sidelining of local communities (Childs, 2020a). Like previous resource booms, DSM is being pushed through alliances between governments and powerful foreign corporations, and legitimised by international legal frameworks and scientific discourses that claim environmental management or economic necessity (Campbell, 2013; Mallin, 2025; Simons and Macklin, 2014).

At the centre of the 'new frontier of extractivism' (Childs, 2020b; Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020) are the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). This is because while DSM exploitation is yet to officially begin, a flurry of preparatory activities has been unfolding in and around the PICs laying the groundwork for its development. Back in 2011, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) 'Solwara 1' project was expected to become the world's very first commercial DSM venture, and aimed to mine copper, gold, silver and zinc from seafloor massive sulphide deposits near hydrothermal vents in the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).² As discussed below, Solwara 1 would become the initial catalyst for civil society mobilisation against DSM and the regional call for a moratorium (Naidu and Slatter, 2023; Van Putten et al., 2023). Other countries across the region have since embraced the idea of DSM, albeit to varying degrees, including the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu.

As attempts to expand the extractive frontier to the deep-sea floor and its resources plays out in and around the Pacific, this paper follows the mobilisation and multi-scalar campaigning strategies deployed by Pacific CSOs to fight the advancement of DSM. The region's CSOs have a long history of resistance to extractive industries, whether land-based mining in Fiji and PNG, or logging in the Solomon Islands.³ Pacific CSOs have also played a pivotal role in shaping environmental and ocean governance, both within the region and on the global stage. This have included landmark victories such as the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement and the ban on driftnet fishing (Naidu and Slatter, 2023; Richards, 1994).

² In addition to polymetallic nodules, there are two other main types of DSM: polymetallic sulphides, which form around hydrothermal vents, and cobalt-rich crusts, which develop on seamount flanks and ridges.

³ The abundance of natural resources in the Pacific have historically attracted external exploitation, firmly entrenching extractivism across the region. This began with colonial extraction such as copra, sandalwood and phosphate mining (see Bambrick, 2018). This continues today through large-scale industries such as fisheries, logging, and mining (Dinnen & Walton, 2016; Havice & Campling, 2010). As in many parts of the Global South, extractivism in the Pacific is overwhelmingly geared toward exports and remains closely tied to foreign corporate interests (Campbell & Hatcher, 2019; Smart, 2017).

¹ In accordance with the University of Canterbury Human Research Ethics secured for this research.

This mobilisation is not unique to the Pacific. Across the Global South, civil society organisations have played a critical role in resisting extractivist projects that threaten land, ocean, and community sovereignty. From anti-mining movements in Latin America and Africa to Indigenous-led campaigns against oil pipelines and logging in Southeast Asia, CSOs have mobilised legal challenges, transnational solidarity networks, and grassroots activism to contest the structural violence of extractivism. These movements often articulate alternative visions of development rooted in relationality, reciprocity, and ecological stewardship, challenging dominant paradigms of growth and accumulation. In this broader context, Pacific CSOs are part of a global tapestry of resistance, contributing to a counter-hegemonic politics that foregrounds justice, Indigenous epistemologies, and the defence of life against extractive frontiers.

One of the most powerful recent developments was the July 2025 International Court of Justice unanimous ruling, which affirmed that states have binding obligations to prevent environmental harm and uphold human rights, marking a historic moment for climate justice. This achievement exemplifies the transformative potential of Pacific youth and regional CSOs in shaping international law and advancing multilateral climate action (Dugal, 2025). The extensive experience of mobilisation across the Pacific provides the foundation for the current resistance to DSM, which is viewed not as a novel sector but as an extension of extractive ideologies to the deep ocean (PANG, 2021). Crucially, extractive resistance led by CSOs is not merely reactive. A rich array of literature documents how social movements have actively pre-empted, limited, reshaped, halted and even succeeded in banning extractive projects altogether (Gills et al., 2023; Hatcher, 2014; Holden, 2005; Nygren et al., 2022; Wolff, 2017).

These movements combine grassroots mobilisation, legal advocacy, and regional coalition-building to challenge extractive projects and assert Pacific agency in global environmental governance (Naidu and Slatter, 2023). They can be strategic, complex and fluid, and deeply rooted in alternative worldviews. This CSO resistance can further be about reclaiming political agency, asserting epistemic sovereignty, and redefining development on terms grounded in justice, relationality, and ecological stewardship (see Lakhani, 2017; Svampa, 2019). In many cases, CSOs do not simply oppose extractivism. In line with post-extractive scholarships, these movements create a range of alternative, often regenerative frames, to supplant extractivism, a process that borrows from environmental justice, indigenous rights, and sovereignty (Escobar, 2008; Gudynas, 2013). By articulating grounded, justice-based visions of development, these CSOs are forging counter-narrative spaces in the global struggle over land, resources, and sovereignty, and hence generating new political possibilities, often underpinned by what Escobar (2008) has termed “pluriversal alternatives” to extractivist modernity.

3. DSM in the pacific: background and timeline

The Nautilus Minerals Inc. ‘Solwara 1’ project, which was greenlighted in 2011 when the project received its exploitation mining lease, was meant to become the world’s very first DSM venture. The aim was to mine copper, gold and other minerals from Seafloor Massive Sulphides located on the seafloor of Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) Bismarck Sea. As such, Solwara 1 marked the first building block of civil society mobilisation around DSM (Doherty, 2019). However, before any extraction could proceed, the project collapsed when Nautilus Minerals, the Canadian corporation leading the project, went bankrupt in 2019. This failure left the PNG government with a loss of more than US\$120 million in public investment (Van Putten et al., 2023).

Other countries across the region have since embraced the idea of DSM, albeit to varying degrees. The Cook Islands has become one of the world’s most likely countries to start DSM exploitation, and it was the world’s very first country to adopt a mining code tailored specifically for DSM (in 2009). In 2012, the Seabed Minerals Authority (SBMA) was

created to oversee licensing, environmental assessments, and stakeholder engagement and in 2022, it issued exploration licences in its EEZ to three corporations.⁴ More recently, in February 2025, the country signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Seabed Minerals Cooperation with China, an agreement that includes strengthening collaboration on seabed mineral research (Office of the Prime Minister, 2025a). That was followed in August 2025 by another agreement, this time with the US, which also included cooperation on seabed minerals development (Office of the Prime Minister, 2025b; SBMA, 2025).

Nauru, Kiribati and Tonga, and through joint venture-the Cook Islands have sponsored entities in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ) under ISA’s exploration system. Belgium’s Global Sea Mineral Resources (GSR) holds a CCZ contract sponsored by Belgium and, via a joint venture⁵ with the Cook Islands Investment Corporation (CIIC), is also linked to a CCZ licence sponsored by the Cook Islands. GSR has recently re-focused on CCZ work while CIIC explores other options for its EEZ licence (GSR, 2025).

The Area is regulated by the International Seabed Authority (ISA), the intergovernmental organisation that operationalises the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Under the UNCLOS sponsorship system, companies can hold exploration contracts in the CCZ with sponsoring states acting as intermediaries (ISA, 2022). In the Pacific, Marawa Research and Exploration Ltd. (Kiribati), Tonga Offshore Mining Ltd. (TOML) and Nauru Ocean Resources Inc. (NORI) have each maintained commercial arrangements with The Metals Company (TMC). NORI and TOML operates as TMC subsidiaries, while Marawa is a Kiribati state-owned entity that held a commercial agreement of exclusive commercial contract partnership with TMC until it was mutually terminated effective mid- January 2025. This followed compliance issues were identified by ISA; Kiribati has since explored alternative partners, including China (Wright, 2025).

TMC frequently presents itself as the front-runner in public filings and investor communications; however, this positioning is contested in critical analyses highlighting financial, regulatory, and operational uncertainties, including Q3–2025 net losses and risks associated with its U. S licensing strategy (The Metals Company, 2025). Nauru, through its subsidiary NORI, has taken a more assertive stance. On July 2021 Nauru triggered the “two-year rule” under the UNCLOS, pressuring the ISA to finalise the mining code for “the Area” by July 2023 (Cody and Feldman, 2024). This move placed significant pressure on the ISA to finalise regulations governing commercial DSM in international waters. Although the deadline passed without a completed code, the ISA remains under scrutiny, particularly as NORI has submitted a plan of work for exploitation (ABC, 2025a).

At the regional level, institutions such as the Pacific Community (SPC) have been pivotal in assisting PICs in developing legal frameworks to regulate seabed mineral extraction (Deep Sea Mining Campaign et al., 2019; Lily, 2016) and ultimately, in spreading the idea of DSM across the region (Deep Sea Mining Campaign et al., 2019). The joint SPC-European Union €4.4 million ‘Deep Sea Minerals Project’ (2011–2016), aimed to assist 15 PICs in improving the governance and management of their deep sea minerals (Pacific Community, n.d.).⁶ Over the years, the project provided technical support to several PICs in drafting DSM laws and decrees, some of which having since been formalised (the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu) (Bainton and Louey, 2025).

While PNG’s Solwara 1’s collapse (2019) became a catalyst for

⁴ CIIC Seabed Resources (now Cobalt Seabed Resources), Moana Minerals, and Cook Islands Investment Corporation (CIIC).

⁵ The 15-year exploration contract was signed in 2016 with each partner holding equal 50% share in the venture (GSR, 2025).

⁶ The Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

regional opposition, there is little evidence that it slowed DSM promotion across the Pacific. Analyses underscore the continued role of TMC and the public advocacy of former ISA Secretary General Michael Lodge is sustaining momentum in the region, alongside state and corporate strategies that unfolded irrespective of Solwara 1's failure (Deep Sea Mining Campaign et al., 2019). Countries like the Cook Islands have positioned themselves as regulatory pioneers, engaging in partnerships with major powers like China and the US alongside scientific expeditions and environmental commitments. Meanwhile, Tonga and Nauru continue to sponsor corporate exploration in international waters through the ISA, despite mounting global scrutiny and civil society concerns. Kiribati's withdrawal from TMC and its pivot toward China reflect shifting alliances and resource realities. Regionally, institutions like the SPC have played a key role in shaping DSM governance frameworks, yet tensions remain between national ambitions, environmental stewardship, and community resistance. This SPC-EU nexus should be acknowledged as central to the diffusion of DSM governance frameworks in the Pacific (Kasanawaqa et al., 2023). The Pacific stands at a critical juncture, whether to embrace DSM or to heed calls for precaution and justice in ocean governance.

4. Pacific mobilisation and the call for a moratorium

Projected to become the world's first site of commercial DSM, Solwara 1 galvanised PNG civil society mobilisation in the 2010s. The movement was led by a diverse coalition of local organisations, including Alliance of Solwara Warriors (a coalition of over 20 communities in the Bismarck and Solomon Seas) and the PNG Council of Churches, which collectively mobilised a wide spectrum of societal actors, including faith leaders, community elders, environmental activists and scholars (Childs, 2023).

While little academic research has been carried out around the early mobilisation efforts and public perception of DSM in PNG the multifaceted and diverse mobilisation efforts focussed on a range of issues, including those resonating with PNG's legacy of extractivism and its socio-environmental impacts on communities (Filer and Gabriel, 2018; Mudd et al., 2020; Roche and Bice, 2013). For instance, in a letter to the PNG Government calling for the cancellation Nautilus exploration licences, mining leases, and environment permit, a coalition of PNG CSOs argued:

Our communities already face many unsustainable developments impacting our lands, oceans, lives and livelihoods. This includes mining, logging, and oil palm operations. The risks and uncertainties of experimental seabed mining are too great to allow this industry to ever proceed in Papua New Guinea (Friends of the Earth, 2019).

A range of concerns were raised over the potential ecological risks attached to the world's first DSM venture, including threats to marine biodiversity and endangered habitats, as well as concerns over the lack of research, consultation, legislation, regulation, assessment, and monitoring around the DSM project. More specifically, Filer and Gabriel (2018, p.396) identify three types of argument raised against the Nautilus project in PNG: (i) a scientific stream of arguments around the precautionary principle, pointing to the insufficient existing knowledge over DSM; (ii) a religious stream which built on Christian ethics and stewardship values; and (iii) a rights-based stream emphasising Free, Prior and Informed Consent as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As detailed in this paper, these themes will continue to resonate in anti-DSM campaigns across the Pacific.

Over the years, CSOs in PNG developed local and national campaigns of education, advocacy, and outreach which contributed significantly to local and national understanding of DSM issues (Friends of the Earth, 2019). Several multi-front activities were deployed ranging from petitioning, lobbying, policy advocacy, public education and outreach initiatives, legal empowerment such as the use of the national court system, as well as calls for consumer boycotts. For instance, in 2014, the

Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG reported that 1.2 million of its members supported a halt to DSM (PNG Mine Watch, 2014). Another example is the legal action initiated against the PNG government in 2017 which was based on claims that the Environmental Impact Assessment conducted for the Solwara project lacked sufficient independence. The PNG transparency case remains active, with civil society continuing to seek access to public-interest documents on Solwara 1 in the absence of freedom of information legislation. Online platforms such as PNG Mine Watch, alongside social media channels including Twitter and Facebook, have played a critical role in amplifying opposition within and beyond PNG (Levitt, 2010), and some national politicians and public servants also began to voice their opposition to the project (Filer and Gabriel, 2018, p.396). Several regional and international CSOs and coalitions also worked in partnership to support and amplify the voice of local CSOs, including Deep Sea Mining Campaign (DSMC), a science-based, investor-focused, and solidarity-driven initiative founded in 2011 that worked with Pacific communities and partners to halt DSM (Deep Sea Mining Campaign, 2011).

Beyond PNG, civil society opposition to DSM also grew across PICs during the mid-2010s. In Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tonga and Tuvalu also saw the rise of CSOs. The latter began engaging in policy dialogues, raising concerns about environmental risk and the marginalisation of Indigenous and customary rights (Naidu and Slatter, 2023). Between 2017 and 2020, CSOs' engagement in legislative processes deepened in the Cook Islands. CSOs submitted formal recommendations on the draft Seabed Minerals Bill, calling for enhanced environmental safeguards, recognition of customary marine tenure, and alignment with the national Marae Moana Marine Spatial Plan (2017). This reflected a growing emphasis on integrated governance and the intersection of environmental and Indigenous rights (Kung, 2019; Magallanes, 2019). Criticism intensified over diaspora-oriented consultation events in Australia and New Zealand in late 2024, which CSOs characterised as promotional rather than participatory. CSOs Te Ipukarea Society and Korero o te Orau raised concerns over the unauthorised use of their logos during the presentations, suggesting that the government was misleading audiences about the extent of domestic support for DSM (SBMA, 2024; Talaia, 2024).

Pacific regional organisations⁷ are actively engaged in advocacy around DSM and employ a diverse array of campaigning strategies. These encompass petitioning, lobbying, policy advocacy, public education and outreach initiatives, legal empowerment, and calls for consumer boycotts. These efforts have combined grassroots mobilisation and a localised resistance into a more coordinated regional and international campaign against DSM (Kasanawaqa et al., 2023; Naidu and Slatter, 2023; Penjueli, 2015). The movement remains multi-scalar and plural, encompassing a diverse coalition of actors, including indigenous knowledge holders, community leaders, faith-based groups, humans rights and environmental NGOs.

The call for a DSM moratorium was first galvanised when PNG Prime Minister James Marape, announced in 2019, a 10-year moratorium on DSM, from 2020 to 2030 (Ocean Mining Intel, 2019). The same year, Fiji's Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama also called for a moratorium citing ecological risks and the need for stronger scientific understanding and urged other PICs to do the same (Doherty, 2019). CSO mobilisation around a moratorium for DSM culminated in March 2021, when the Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG), the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO), the World Wide Fund for Nature Pacific (WWF),

⁷ The CSO landscape in the Pacific region is a two-tier structure; one consisting of national CSOs at the country level, and the other consisting of Pacific Regional CSOs composed of regional CSOs whose members are national umbrella organizations. These include for instance Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO), and Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG). For a discussion on the CSO landscape in the PICs, see UNDP (2015).

and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) issued a joint statement calling on all Pacific leaders “to join the growing ranks of governments, scientific authorities, CSOs, global leaders and indigenous groups the world over opposing the rush to mine the ocean floor” (PANG, 2021).

The internationalisation of the campaign for a moratorium was amplified in 2021 when Nauru triggered the two-year rule, pressuring the ISA to finalise the mining code for the Area. The Pacific Parliamentarian’s Alliance on DSM (PPADSM) was launched during the 7th Our Ocean Conference in Palau in April 2022 (Abel, 2022).⁸ In July 2022, President of the Republic of Palau supported a moratorium, launching the Alliance of Countries Calling for a DSM at the United Nations (UN) Ocean Conference in Lisbon, which would later be supported by Samoa and the Federal States of Micronesia. In August 2023, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which includes representatives from Fiji, the Front De Liberation Nationale Kanak Socialiste, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, also called for a moratorium across the region.

The initiative has since been supported by the Pacific Parliamentarians Alliance on Deep Sea Mining (Kumar, 2023). In September of that year, Palau’s president reiterated at the General Assembly, its call for a global moratorium on DSM (United Nations, 2023). At the June 2025 UN Ocean Conference, both Solomon Islands and Marshall Islands signed into the DSM moratorium. French Polynesia has taken a particularly firm stance, with President Moetai Brotherson declaring that DSM would only be permitted “over [his] dead body,” and instituting a temporary ban within its national waters (cited in Tuuhia, 2025). French President Emmanuel Macron denounced DSM as “madness,” declaring that “the oceans are not for sale,” while UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that “the deep sea cannot become the Wild West” (cited in Alberts, 2025).

The PICs immediate neighbours, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, have taken divergent positions. While Australia has remained noticeably quiet on the issue, with the exception of the Northern Territory and New South Wales having enacted a moratorium in their waters, Aotearoa New Zealand has, in October 2022, implemented a conditional moratorium in international waters but did not ban it in its own waters. During the July 2025 ISA meeting in Kingston, Australia’s failure to adopt a formal pro-moratorium position received significant criticisms by CSOs (e.g., Greenpeace Australia Pacific) (ABC, 2025b). However, the country’s focus on terrestrial critical minerals is unlikely to proceed with the exploitation of its own water, allowing for sufficient research and stronger regulation.

Following a change in government in 2023, through the Fast Track Approval Act 2024, Aotearoa New Zealand has been pushing for seabed mining activities in its own waters, while not in the deep seabed region, this has signalled a distinct positional shift under the current administration (McCabe, 2023). However, opposition parties Te Pāti Māori and the Green Party, including environmental groups and iwi (Māori tribes) have both called for an outright ban on DSM (Sage, 2023). As of October 2025, over 40 countries have taken a position in support of a DSM Ban, Precautional Pause or Moratorium, as detailed in Table 1.

In addition to over 130 environmental organisations publicly supporting the moratorium, the campaign has gained traction in the private sector, with, as of October 2025, 64 companies and financial institutions pledging not to source minerals from DSM or to finance such activities (Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, 2025). The latter, which include multinational corporations such as Apple, BMW, Google, Samsung and Volvo, have made the commitment citing reputational and ecological risks. The call for a moratorium states:

The lack of knowledge and the numerous risks to ocean health,

⁸ As of October 2025, the alliance is supported by parliamentarians from Aotearoa New Zealand, Autonomous Bougainville Government, Fiji, Guam, Maohi Niu (French Polynesia), New Caledonia, Palau, Peru, PNG, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

Table 1
Countries in support of a DSM Ban, Precautional Pause or Moratoriumⁱ.

1	2
Precautionary Pause	Austria, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Finland, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Ireland, Denmark, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Panama, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.
Moratorium	Antigua & Barbuda, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, (European Union Parliament), Federal States of Micronesia, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Palau, Peru, Romania, Samoa, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom
Ban	France

Source: Authors compilation.

ⁱ As of October 2025.

fisheries, sustainable development and to important climate functions, point clearly to the need for precaution. Instead of adding additional stressors, it is imperative that we work toward ocean protection and restoration, to ensure a healthy ocean that can continue to provide social, economic, environmental and cultural benefits for humanity into the future [...]. Central arguments include that the environmental, social and economic risks of deep seabed mining need to be comprehensively investigated. Consequences for ecosystem functioning, and impacts upon people, societies and industries depending upon a healthy ocean shall be understood (WWF, 2021).

The regional mobilisation has amplified precautionary norms-through Pacific parliamentarian alliances and regional groupings-while international NGO coalitions advanced parallel moratorium initiatives. More than three dozen states and over a hundred NGOs now publicly back a ban, moratorium, or precautionary pause, joined by major companies citing ecological and reputational risks. In this plural movement, Pacific actors have consistently foregrounded Indigenous stewardship and justice, even as many Pacific CSOs explicitly advocate a ban, and some question the DSCC’s global moratorium frame as insufficiently aligned with Pacific priorities (Bajaj et al., 2025).

5. Divergent framings: ban, moratorium, and precautionary pause

Resistance to DSM is not monolithic. Resistance to DSM spans abolitionist (ban), moratorium, and precautionary pause positions. The DSCC and many European-based organisations have prioritised a moratorium and pause, while numerous Pacific CSOs and coalitions (e.g., the Pacific Blue Line Collective) call for a total ban grounded in stewardship and Indigenous rights. These distinctions reflect both strategic pragmatism and epistemic differences within a transnational movement that remains collaborative yet plural.

5.1. To pause or to ban: strategic pragmatism

Moratoria are a pre-emptive tool to halt potentially harmful activities; they can be indefinite or subject to review, and they may reflect a firm political or legal stance. In international environmental law, moratoria are typically enacted through legislative or executive action to suspend rulemaking or extractive activities to address concerns such as environmental damage or social impacts (Singh et al., 2025; Watts, 2012; Wilde et al., 2023; Willaert, 2022). Notable global precedents include the International Whaling Commission’s commercial whaling moratorium and the Madrid Protocol’s 50-year ban on mining in Antarctica, both of which established powerful legal norms in ecologically sensitive and legally ambiguous zones (Hanifah and Hashim, 2012; Herrera and Hoagland, 2006).

While deep-sea mining has yet to commence, Portugal made history in 31 March 2025 by adopting Law No. 36/2025, which establishes a legally binding moratorium on deep-sea mineral prospecting,

exploration, and extraction in its national maritime zones until 2050 (Bruxo, 2025). By embedding this position in primary legislation, the moratorium is legally entrenched, ensuring that any reversal would require formal parliamentary action rather than executive discretion.

The case of Portugal is unique, as most countries that have supported a moratorium have done so without enacting national legislations. In this context, the distinction between a legally binding moratorium and a discursive endorsement becomes crucial. While both approaches suspend activities, a non-binding endorsement can be more easily reversed or circumvented. The politics of the language around the call for a ban, moratorium or a precautionary pause appears to reflect overlapping, and at times contradictory, objectives amongst the plural actors engaging in the DSM space.

As a regional CSO representative in Suva observes, the call for a moratorium instead of a ban does not necessarily represent the position of all CSOs in the PICs, many of which preferring to campaign for an outright ban as the latter would force governments to take legally binding steps against DSM, rather than the “wait and see attitude many governments are adopting under the cover of a moratorium” (Interview, Suva, May 2024). In the specific context of the Government of Fiji, who endorsed the moratorium, another civil society respondent warns that while “the Government is weak and easily corrupted; when promised with money, they will get it; Fiji has millions of debts, and they have become crazy about money [...]. When you are poor, you are desperate with the money.” (Interview, Suva, June 2024). In short, as another CSO representative puts it, a moratorium governmental endorsement can be: “to buy time” (*Ibid*), or as a regional Pacific CSO leader concludes:

The challenge that we have is that we don’t have any policy that grounds a moratorium or a ban position at all. So, I think that’s why we’re quite concerned about the [governments] position to [...] just stand on the sides and see what happens. (Interview, Suva, June 2024)

There are precedents to suggest that such concerns are well-founded. For instance, while PNG Prime Minister Marape has been a pioneering voice of the moratorium, the country has re-engaged with DSM in mid-2024, resuming exploratory activities near the original Solwara 1 site. Media and NGO reporting in 2024–2025 documented bulk sampling near the Solwara site despite national-level moratorium rhetoric, underscoring the policy-practice gap (PNG Today, 2025). Fiji presents a similar case. Despite endorsing a moratorium, it has issued DSM exploration licences.⁹

Discussions with Pacific CSO respondents suggest a clear awareness in the degrees to which the campaign against DSM is plural and its language, fluid. This appears to be a practical choice on the part of the regions’ CSOs, which have a long history of adaptive pluralism and indeed, strategic pragmatism. While power dynamics between local CSOs and international NGOs, governments and corporations have long been underlined in the literature on civil society (Naidu and Slatter, 2023; Penjueli, 2015), this is particularly acute in the Pacific as CSOs are overwhelmingly dependent of international funding (Interview, Suva, May 2024; also see UNDP, 2015), and therefore, are needing to cultivate a broad spectrum of campaigning alliances. A CSO representative at an ISA meeting observes that:

[We] need to move as Pacific people beyond politics, beyond positions and actually have a heart-to-heart conversation [...]; it’s really sad to see that Pacific communities and leaders who are here [at ISA meeting], are fragmented because of positions on whether to have a moratorium, a ban, or just a precautionary pause. (Interview, ISA, July 2025)

⁹ In the case of Fiji in particular, fieldwork respondents repeatedly pointed out that there are tensions between what a moratorium entails in practice and whether it applies to deep sea scientific expeditions. The latter often overlap with DSM exploration and hence the former could serve as proxies for future commercial extraction.

However, as detailed by a CSO leader, there are some frustrations on the part of local CSOs to see that at times, governments and even international NGOs, take the lead on anti-DSM campaigning strategies without a substantial engagement with local Pacific civil society (Interview, Suva, May 2024) or, as a respondent bluntly observe: “we [Pacific civil society] don’t want a [DSM] moratorium; we want a ban!” Afterall, in the absence of binding legal frameworks, moratorium endorsements may function as an a-political discursive strategy on the part of governments or corporation. In such light, the moratorium is at times articulated through technical and legal narratives that foreground scientific uncertainty over a substantive engagement with the broader politics of DSM, including its ties to extractivism.

These tensions are further apparent in the plural waves of DSM ‘consultations’ that have taken place over the course of the past decade in the region. For instance, the SPC-EU *Deep Sea Minerals Project* convened national stakeholders consultations, bringing together policymakers, scientists, legal experts, and civil society actors (Lily et al., 2012), while the government of the Cook Islands has organised diaspora consultation tours in New Zealand and Australia on DSM policy (SBMA, 2024). However, as international NGOs, media and CSO respondents noted, these consultation processes have privileged technical expertise and policy implementation over foundational ethical and political questions (PANG, 2021). Maureen Penjueli (2015: 74), the former coordinator of the CSO Pacific Network on Globalisation observes that “the question of ‘how’ should only be discussed after the question of ‘if’ has first been debated”, further deploring that: “Consultation is only sought on policies for seabed mining rather than questioning whether it should be allowed.” This echoes the views of several respondents who argued that there exists a procedural and technical narrowing of the discussions formally taking place around DSM in the region which may foreclose genuine debate, often leaving claims to popular support for DSM unchallenged (also see Naidu and Slatter, 2023). A Pacific regional CSO respondent reflects that in the context of the SPC project, the campaign for a moratorium was “successful in the sense that we’re able to slow down a lot of our countries [going ahead with DSM] overnight” (Interview, Suva, June 2024).

This narrowing of political spaces around DSM discussions in the PICs is not merely procedural but epistemic. Spatial, technical and linguistic barriers to engagement reflect deeper structural inequities in how legitimacy and authority are constructed in DSM governance. A respondent observes that while several platforms for civil society participation on DSM have been established foregrounding Pacific approaches—such as Talanoa—these “will not work if the power dynamics [between participants] are uneven. Indigenous methodologies can work but run the risk of being ‘tokenised’ and losing their *mana* in spaces where profit is the objective” (Interview, Suva, September 2025).

As several civil society representatives emphasised during fieldwork periods, Pacific voices on DSM must not only be included in regional and international forums but actively amplified by international CSOs and Pacific governments alike (Interviews, Suva, May 2024 and September 2025). As a civil society respondent argues, this is not merely a matter of representation, it is a matter of justice, sovereignty, and epistemic legitimacy (*Ibid*).

5.2. Pacific philosophies, environmental justice and post-extractive futures

Segments of Pacific civil society, including Indigenous and faith leaders, have consistently called not only for a halt to DSM, but for a reimagining of ocean governance rooted in justice, custodianship, and epistemic plurality. This call must be understood within the broader critique of extractivism as articulated in the beginning of this paper. DSM is not an isolated venture; it is part of a longer history of colonial and capitalist resource extraction that has treated Pacific lands and oceans as sites of exploitation rather than spaces of relationality and life. Extractivism operates not only through material dispossession but

through epistemic violence, silencing Indigenous worldviews and governance systems in favour of technocratic and profit-driven logics (Chagnon et al., 2022; Willow, 2018).

At the heart of resistance to “blue extractivism” lies an epistemological battle, woven through the competing narratives of bans versus moratoria. State and corporate actors frequently present DSM as necessary for the technological transition to renewable energy, deploying terms like mineral “harvesting” and “collecting” to soften its extractive nature. These discourses are frequently aligned to regional development frameworks and the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals, while being legitimised through appeals of “strategic autonomy” and Pacific sovereign control over seabed resources (Kasanawaqa et al., 2025; Murphy and Gard, 2025). Yet these framings obscure the deeper tensions between technocratic rationales and Pacific worldviews. While marketed as a “green” solution to terrestrial resource depletion, DSM extends the extractivist logics into fragile and poorly understood deep-sea ecosystems (Koschinsky et al., 2018) and represents a continuation of colonial patterns of accumulation and spatial domination, rebranded under the guise of sustainability. A faith leader interviewed for this research concludes: “When you take something [from the ocean], you take part of the web. If you take one part of the earth, you create a gap down there” (Suva, September 2025).

Pacific civil society is not only resisting DSM; it is also articulating rich alternative possibilities. These post-extractive futures envision the ocean not as a resource frontier, but as a sacred space of connection, sustenance, and peace. They call for governance grounded in reciprocity, intergenerational responsibility, and Indigenous knowledge systems that have long sustained Pacific communities. This requires relational, value-based processes that considers indigenous governance structures, cultural protocols and spiritual ties to the ocean. It means supporting Pacific-led research, amplifying Indigenous epistemologies, and co-creating governance frameworks that reflect the region’s diverse values and aspirations. It also means recognising that the Pacific Ocean is not a frontier to be mined, but a relational space to be protected, nurtured, and reimagined.

6. Conclusion

Like other forms of extractivism, DSM is underpinned by entrenched power structures-governance regimes, financial interests, and geopolitical alignments. These dynamics manifest in tensions among states, corporations, regional institutions, and global bodies like the ISA, as well as within transnational civil society movements. Pacific resistance operates within and against these frameworks, often in spaces dominated by techno-scientific and state-corporate authority.

The campaign for a DSM moratorium reflects Pacific civil society’s strategic navigation of DSM’s complex challenges-environmental, political, and epistemic. It highlights the region’s capacity to forge multi-scalar coalitions and exert normative influence, building on a long tradition of mobilisation. The resistance is non-monolithic and multi-scalar, rooted in efforts to reclaim political agency, assert Indigenous epistemologies, and challenge the extractivist logic that has long shaped the region’s engagement with global capitalism.

This resistance challenges dominant narratives on multiple fronts. First, it unsettles the framing of DSM as a green solution to global resource demands, exposing its role in reproducing environmental injustice and developmental dependency. Second, it foregrounds alternative ways of relating to the ocean-grounded in custodianship, intergenerational responsibility, and spiritual connection. These epistemologies offer powerful counter-visions of ocean equity and governance. Third, it is politically generative: civil society actors have catalysed national moratoria, reshaped regional discourse, and influenced global debates, asserting moral leadership despite structural imbalances.

Ultimately, the DSM debate is not just about the seafloor; it is about whose knowledge counts, whose voices are heard, and whose visions

shape the future of ocean governance. Pacific civil society is not merely reactive; it is a creative and political force, redefining the terms on which ocean futures are imagined and realised. These dynamics reflect broader patterns of global environmental injustice, where Pacific nations are expected to bear the costs of extraction in the name of global economic or green transitions.

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