

Paper Number: 69

Deep Seabed Mining, Geo-ethics and Pacific Small Island Developing States

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In 2001 the first contracts for deep seabed mining exploration were awarded by the International Seabed Authority (ISA). Since that time a number of Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have expressed interest in deep seabed mining and the extraction from the ocean of minerals and rare earth elements as a method of generating much needed revenues for their struggling economies. This is an approach consistent with the goal of a “realization of a just and equitable international economic order” outlined in the Preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) and the establishment of benefit-sharing governance architecture under Part XI of the convention.

However, while deep seabed mining represents a means of generating monies that could be used for capital investment in development projects, it is also a marine extractive process that has been critiqued by non-governmental organizations and other civil society actors because of both its potential for invidious environmental and ecological impacts, and the perceived lack of meaningful participation by communities that will be affected by seabed mining. This paper examines the dilemmas and debates for Pacific SIDS in pursuing deep seabed mining. It sets these dilemmas and debates in the context of the United Nations Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and of one Pacific SIDS (Nauru) experiences with phosphate mining.

