



Ocean's People Conference - Oslo

An Ocean full of blue myths – Concept note

This is a concept note on side events planned parallel to the 2019 Our Ocean conference, Oslo 22-24 October 2019

This concept note briefly mentions the agenda and political implications of Our Ocean; the purpose of planning side events for people from civil society; the rationale for also participating inside Our Oceans; the agenda and strategy of the side events; potential partners from Norway and abroad and how to involve these in the planning as well as implementation of the events; practical implications; funding; and media strategy.

The concept note is based on conversations between Handelskampanjen, Norway (www.handelskampanjen.no) and TNI, the Netherlands (www.tni.org).

Our Ocean 2019: <https://ourocean2019.no/>

The first Our Ocean conference was initiated by the US State Department in 2014 under John Kerry, the Secretary of State at the time. The intention was to ‘...create a global movement to protect the ocean...’ by bringing together ‘government leaders from around the world... scientists, environmentalists, and business leaders’¹. Five conferences down the line, it is reasonable to argue this has not changed. Our Ocean remains an elite club with little – if any – opportunity for movements, youth, local fisher folks, labour unions and non-unionised labour to influence the agenda and the outcomes. Just as with the World Economic Forum, Our Ocean is not anchored in or accountable to any multilateral or nation state governmental structure.

Yet, what happens at Our Ocean conferences does have political impact. State delegates build consciousness and develop political priorities through participation in the conferences, which impacts on policy both at home (nation state) and internationally (UN system, regional governance institutions and development banks). The strong emphasis on bringing together government and business (minimum-stakeholderism) allows for corporations to continue to influence legislation (at all levels). By involving the eco-centrist international environmental NGOs, Our Ocean also contributes to entrenching the notion that the climate and environmental crisis can be addressed by conserving a proportion of the ocean (Marine Protected Areas). However, the conference fails to address the deep problems caused by the financial powerful oceans sectors including oil & gas, shipping, large-scale industrial fishing and aquaculture, militarization and tourism. Furthermore, the conference fails to take into account the role and needs of local fishing communities and the youth engaged in maintaining and develop the sustainable use of the seas

Thematically, Our Ocean in Oslo will focus on:

- Marine Protected Areas (MPA): leaning towards eco-centric fundamentalism with disregard to people’s intrinsic relations with nature.

¹<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/227305.htm>

- Climate change: focus on carbon offsetting schemes, technological fixes and ‘greening’ the ocean but not addressing the threats caused by the most dominant oceans sectors (see above paragraph).
- Fisheries: emphasis on environmental sustainability but not focusing on social development.
- Marine pollution: focus on reducing contamination (toxic substances) and littering (emphasis on plastic) through litter prevention and recycling but not addressing the problem of producing toxic commodities in the first place.
- Sustainable Blue Economy: emphasis on *the huge untapped potential for economic growth*² through capital investments in established and new ocean sectors (e.g. aquaculture, renewable energy, tourism and biotechnology) but not addressing environmental sustainability and social development.
- Maritime security: emphasis on trafficking, piracy, smuggling and armed conflicts but not the threats caused by increased militarization (e.g. China vs. USA in the West Pacific): geopolitical instability, competition for minerals and oil & gas, increasing carbon dioxide emissions.

To summarise, the problems with Our Ocean, seen from a civil society perspective, are:

- Lack of accountability and legitimacy.
- An exclusive club for the political and economic elite effectively excluding of civil society.
- Avoid to address the politically difficult conversations on the catastrophic environmental and social impacts caused by the biggest ocean sectors (oil & gas, shipping, tourism)
- It fails to address the problems of capital (over)accumulation in the ocean sectors.

Purpose of the side events

Deepen and broaden the current ocean trajectories

The ocean is increasingly perceived by governments and corporations as a ‘new frontier’ for economic growth. For decades, transnational corporations have sunk billions into infrastructure (fixed capital) in the dominating oceans sectors (shipping, oil & gas, tourism) and they continue to direct over-accumulated capital into new infrastructure. This expansion results in reshaping the ownership and access to territories (coastal lands and ocean space) with more and more being captured by those with excess capital. New ocean sectors are emerging (e.g. biotechnology and deep-sea mining) and, again, we see transnational corporations investing massively to exploit new sites and resources for profit. While capital is still being invested in wild-capture fisheries (e.g. privately-owned fishing quotas), statistics indicate that the level of fish exploitation has reached or exceeded what nature can provide for. Instead, capital is increasingly invested in aquaculture.

At the same time, the global Law of the seas -convention which states at least some procedures for sovereignty and bilateral- regional procedures of management cooperation, may be undermined. This may happen as a result of Our Ocean conferences, Ocean Summit and the ongoing work in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on fisheries subsidies. All these three make policy makers meet big capital interests and thus create a situation where this increasing private infrastructure investments are accepted as legitimate – a *Terra nullius* (nobody’s ownership). Future regulations and commonalisation through legal frameworks under e.g. the Law of the Seas, may be hampered.

²Proponents of blue growth / economy increasingly refer to the ‘huge untapped potential’. The European Union, African Union, Our Ocean conferences, several states and others repeatedly install the notion of this huge potential but without further explanation.

To understand the flaws and myths presented by Our Ocean, we need to deepen and broaden those trajectories. See the section on *potential partners* and *media* for more information on target groups.

Build alliances and international solidarity

Peoples' struggles for the right to the sea for food, livelihoods and culture are mainly driven by fisher movements and organisations. While others have been involved in ocean related struggles, these have had a different character with focus on environmental protection (e.g. protests against offshore drilling or coastal mining and dumps, and campaigns on the protection of marine mammals) or migration and slave labour. Meanwhile, the ocean has been a vast and almost invisible space in most 'land based' struggles (urban and rural).

Looking deeper into the ocean-land nexus, it becomes clear that the multiple crisis (economic, social, climate, environmental) connects peoples' struggles. New gas pipelines cuts across water and land; coal is transported by rail and ship; hydro-power dams affects all people living from the river as well as estuary ecosystems upon which fishing communities depend; tourism leads to increased competition for coastal territories and affects people living off both the sea and land; and regardless of oil is drilled from the deep oceans or on land, the effect of burning fuels is the same.

It is a purpose of the side events planned, to visualize these connections as a means to build stronger alliances and solidarity.

Expose and propose

The events will expose the problems mentioned in the above section. Equally important, the events will aim at building synergy and hope around the various solutions advanced by movements and organisations from across the world. Some, including peasants and fisher movements, have for many years articulated *food sovereignty* as a solution to the crisis. Others have been involved in the struggle for a *just transition* – a solution that was first framed and articulated by US-based organisations but is gaining traction in other regions of the world today. These two concepts resemble just two of the many approaches that are being proposed as alternatives today.

The events coupled with a media strategy will serve to reach both those who participate in the events and a much broader audience in Norway as well as internationally.

Rationale for participating inside Our Ocean

As already pointed out, Our Ocean resembles an elite club who pursue their own agendas with little, if any, space for movements and organisations with social and communal political orientations to participate. In this light, we do not have high hopes of changing the political orientation and outcomes of Our Ocean. Yet, an inside-strategy is part of the broader strategy for a couple of reasons.

Our Ocean provides an opportunity for us to get a better understanding of the political agendas of the elite players. Tracking and deepening our understanding of the 'minimum-stakeholder' approach of the conference - with the main 'stakeholders' being corporations, international environmental NGOs, philanthropic foundations and governments – is important in order to refine our own political strategies. First-hand evidence of political positions and announcements of key players (individuals or institutions) allow us to identify and expose the myths and false solutions often advanced at such conferences. Combined, the knowledge we gain from participating in Our Ocean provides a basis for producing new information – e.g. publications and videos - that can be used to advance a social and democratic commons agenda.

Inside participation also allows for movements – and especially from the global south – to articulate their critique, demands, and solutions. While this is unlikely to change the discourse and outcomes of the conference, it may be picked up by certain actors (including journalists) and it constitutes one element or episode in the broader struggle for change. A transformation towards a social democracy (food sovereignty, just transition or other solutions for transformative change) requires for movements to plant seeds in every small and large political space on a continuous and long-term basis. Our Ocean is one such space.

Agenda and strategy of the side-events (outside strategy)

Our Ocean is a two-day conference. The side-events will start two days before in order to prepare for Our Ocean. Some of the goals with the preparatory meetings include:

- reaching out to media.
- developing short statements that the inside-representatives can use at Our Ocean, with emphasis on critical analysis and proposing solutions.
- deepen the participants understanding on the different problems and solutions as mentioned in the above sections.
- strengthen the cooperation between organizations working on issues relevant for the conference.

The last two days of the side-events will be used to:

- further discuss problems and solutions
- follow the discussions taking place at Our Ocean. ‘Our’ inside participants will provide evening briefings for all side-event participants.
- Develop a final statement.

The side-events will be participatory with some plenary sessions and more work in smaller groups.

A planning committee will be formed end of May. This committee will be open to new participants leading up to the events.