

**Economic Commission for Africa****Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development**

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Item 8 (d) of the provisional agenda*

Parallel meetings for an in-depth review of progress**made, peer-to-peer learning and acceleration measures****regarding the sub-themes of the Forum: life below water****Background report on the sub-theme of life below water****I. Introduction**

1. Healthy, productive oceans are vital for food, livelihoods, economic opportunities, climate regulation, biodiversity and human rights. However, African oceans face overfishing, pollution, habitat destruction and climate change, jeopardizing their sustainability and the future of the populations that depend on them. In 2020, 104 million people lived within 100 km of African oceans. This figure is projected to surge to 143 million by 2035, thereby intensifying pressure on fragile ecosystems.¹ To address this, Africa is prioritizing the sustainable use of its oceans to achieve development goals, including Sustainable Development Goal 14 and aspiration 1, goal 6 of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union.²

2. The present report was collaboratively prepared under the leadership of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with valuable contributions from the African Union Commission, the Development Coordination Office, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It contains an assessment of the state of achievement of Goal 14 and related regional goals in Africa. In the report, achievements, good practices and lessons learned are highlighted, and transformative actions to accelerate progress are proposed. The discussion is

* ECA/RFSD/2025/1.

¹ Elham Ali, "Taking charge of Africa's oceans and blue resources," *Africa Renewal*, United Nations, 23 June 2022.

² Sustainable Development Goal 14 is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, also referred to as "life below water"; goal 6 of Agenda 2063 is blue/ocean economy for accelerated economic growth.



structured around four subtopics that encompass the 10 targets related to life below water, as outlined in the figure:

Targets of Sustainable Development Goal 14

Sustainable blue economy and blue livelihoods

- 14.7 By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism.
- 14.b Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.
- 14.4 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans.
- 14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies.

Ocean health and resilience

- 14.1 By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution.
- 14.2 By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems.
- 14.3 Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels.
- 14.5 By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas.

Global cooperation and finance

- 14.c Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law.

Scientific research and innovation

- 14.a Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology.

Source: Author’s own compilation of Goal 14 targets.

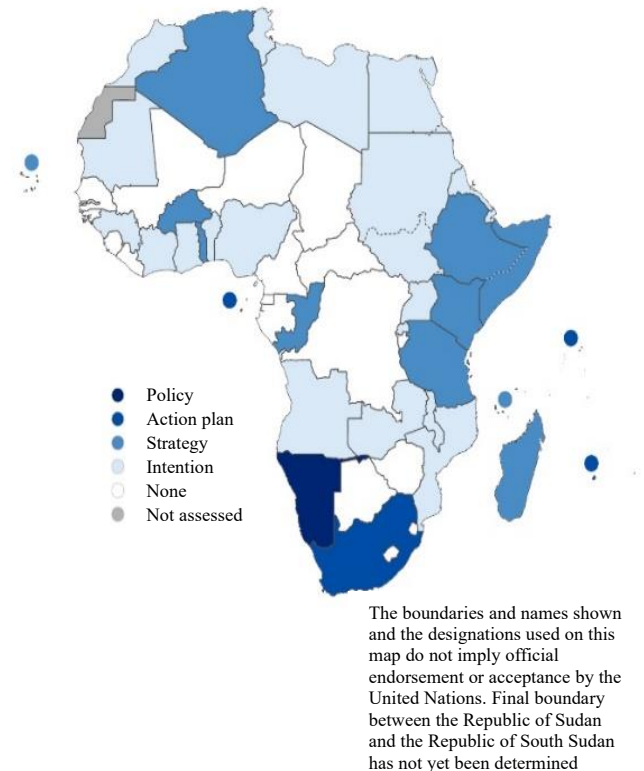
3. Goal 14 is interconnected with other Sustainable Development Goals, given the oceans’ critical roles in climate regulation, biodiversity and economic activities. Progress in the areas of climate action, waste management and sustainable resource use (Goals 11, 12, 13 and 15) supports marine health by curbing pollution and conserving and restoring ecosystems. Advancements in science, technology and international cooperation (Goals 7, 9 and 17) bolster marine research and innovation, thereby accelerating the achievement of Goal 14 targets. Efforts in mitigation and adaptation, including nature-based solutions, boost coastal conservation, reduce greenhouse gases and sustain fisheries, reinforcing the contributions of oceans to food security, livelihoods and sustainable development.

4. Goal 14 aligns closely with the priorities set out in national and regional development plans and initiatives, such as the 2050 Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy and the Decade of African Seas and Oceans (2015–2025), both of which promote the blue economy. Aspiration 1 of Agenda 2063 envisions a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable Africa and reinforces Goal 14 through goals to transform economies, leverage the blue economy for accelerated growth and create climate-resilient, sustainable societies. The Africa Blue Economy Strategy, adopted during the first decade of the implementation of Agenda 2063, is now a priority for implementation under the second 10-year implementation plan (2024–2033).

Box 1

Charting the blue future of Africa

The African Union has championed African marine resources as drivers of poverty reduction, job creation, food security and environmental resilience. Important initiatives include the Africa Blue Economy Strategy, in which five thematic areas are highlighted: fisheries and aquaculture; shipping, ports and security; coastal and marine tourism; sustainable energy and mineral resources; and governance. In partnership with subregional commissions and other stakeholders, the African Union Commission is mainstreaming the strategy. To date, it has supported seven regional economic communities and 30 member States in developing blue economy strategies. While countries are at varying stages of development, the Commission forecasts that the African blue economy can grow from \$296 billion in 2018 to \$576 billion by 2063, driven by population growth, integration and sustainable strategies. To achieve that potential, the Commission and UNDP launched a blue economy reference group and the annual Africa Blue Economy Week. The group helps stakeholders to plan, implement and monitor initiatives, including the Commission’s five-year blue economy programme and implementation plan.

Status of blue economy policy development in Africa

Source: Antaya March and others, “The status of blue economy development in Africa”, *Marine Policy*, vol. 165 (July 2024).

II. Progress in implementation

5. Mirroring global trends, the progress made towards achieving Goal 14 in Africa remains insufficient. Modest advancements in sustainable fisheries and marine protection are offset by rising acidification, plastic pollution and declining fish stocks.³ In the present section of the report, trends, opportunities, lessons and good practices to accelerate the achievement of Goal 14 in Africa are examined.

A. Sustainable blue economy and blue livelihoods

6. Efforts to advance a sustainable blue economy in Africa, in particular regarding fisheries and aquaculture, contribute to progress towards Goal 14. Under target 14.4, countries combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing through satellite-based vessel monitoring systems, community surveillance and cross-border cooperation, reducing such activity in previously under-monitored

³ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Goal 14: conserve and sustainably use the oceans seas and marine resources for sustainable development”, 2024, available at https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal14#progress_and_info.

hotspots.⁴ Such fishing costs Africa an estimated \$10 billion annually,⁵ with West Africa alone losing \$1.3 billion annually.⁶ In East Africa, the Indian Ocean Rim Association guidelines on combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing assist member States in achieving sustainable fisheries management. With regard to target 14.6, the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidy reforms shift financial incentives towards the promotion of sustainability, with preliminary assessments showing increased budget allocations for scientific stock assessments, data collection and training for small-scale fishers.

7. Despite a 38 per cent increase in value from 2011 to 2021, the global contribution of sustainable fisheries to gross domestic product (indicator 14.7.1) declined from 0.11 per cent to 0.09 per cent.⁷ The sub-Saharan African share, however, rose from 0.27 per cent to 0.42 per cent over the same period, and self-monitoring practices also improved. For example, investments by Kenya in small-scale aquaculture, supported by enhanced ocean science, reportedly boosted household incomes and reduced post-harvest losses. Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania reformed policies to support artisanal fishers, improving access to formal markets and credit in line with target 14.b.

8. The blue economy spans marine and inland water resources, offering a sustainable development approach that is relevant to island, coastal and landlocked African States. For years, African small island developing States have led blue economy initiatives, driven by their vulnerability and the urgency to protect traditional marine sectors while diversifying to new marine-based sources of income, employment, environmental protection and energy. Coastal and landlocked African States are also adopting blue economy strategies to achieve similar goals.

9. A sustainable blue economy encompasses the five priority areas of the African Union (see box 1) as well as emerging industries, promoting integrated, equitable and circular resource use. Under target 14.7, such strategies as the Africa Blue Economy Strategy promote diversification through aquaculture, marine tourism and renewable energy. Increased research and investment in marine biotechnology and renewable energy are pivotal, and, in that regard, Sao Tome and Principe is to host the world's first floating ocean thermal energy conversion platform from 2025. Offshore wind and wave energy projects further diversify energy sources, leveraging improved oceanographic data from various sources, including collaboration between the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the International Renewable Energy Agency. Coastal tourism ventures that leverage well-maintained marine habitats can lead to increased visitor numbers and community revenues, thus reinforcing the link between conservation and economic gain.

⁴ FAO, *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020: Sustainability in Action* (Rome, 2020).

⁵ African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources, "Protecting aquatic biodiversity and the environment through improved regional MCS systems for combating illegal fishing in the FCWC region".

⁶ Alfonso Daniels and others, "Western Africa's missing fish: the impacts of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and under-reporting catches by foreign fleets" (Overseas Development Institute, London, 2016).

⁷ FAO, *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024: Blue Transformation in Action* (Rome, 2024).

Box 2

Advancing opportunities for women and young people in the African blue economy

Protecting marine resources is essential for securing livelihoods, combating poverty and ensuring a healthy environment for vulnerable populations, for current and future generations. Integrating women and young people into the blue economy creates alternative livelihoods, in particular in coastal and riparian areas, while promoting sustainable development. The African demographic dividend can drive growth in such emerging sectors as sustainable aquaculture, marine conservation and ecotourism, which have greater potential than traditional industries. Regional disparities exist, however: in the Boeny Region of Madagascar, the youth employment rate in the blue economy is 14.2 per cent, which is nine times the national rate, and in parts of Egypt and Namibia there are rates of 3 to 7 per cent, compared with near-zero national averages.^a Investments in education, capacity-building and infrastructure for small-scale fisheries could create 100,000 jobs, with 50 per cent of opportunities directed towards women and 60 per cent towards young people.^b

^a Denys Reva, David Willima and Emmaculate Asige Liaga, “Charting Africa’s blue future: youth inclusion as a catalyst for peace and development”, Africa Report, No. 46 (Institute for Security Studies, 2024).

^b UNDP, “Blue futures: integrating blue economy trade into development for African SIDS and coastal nations”, 9 July 2024.

B. Ocean health and resilience

10. African oceans are vital for livelihoods and sustenance, yet they face growing threats from ecosystem degradation. The Ocean Health Index clean water score, which measures freedom from human-made pollutants, rose globally from 69.5 in 2014 to 71.4 in 2024, yet African oceans lagged behind with an average score of 52.7 in 2024.⁸

11. Target 14.1 is aimed at reducing marine pollution, in particular eutrophication and plastic debris, which strain coastal ecosystems. Progress is limited in this regard, with chemical pollution driven by agricultural run-off and domestic wastewater. Sub-Saharan Africa collects only 36 per cent of municipal solid waste and recycles 4 per cent, far below global rates of 75 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively.⁹ Much of this waste finds its way into the ocean, where Africa accounts for almost 8 per cent of plastic pollution, despite producing only 5 per cent of global plastic.¹⁰ Positive developments include single-use plastic bans in 34 countries, such initiatives as the African Marine Waste Network and action plans under the Amended Nairobi Convention for the Protection, Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Western Indian Ocean, the Convention for Cooperation in the Protection, Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Atlantic Coast of the West, Central and Southern Africa Region, and the Strategic Framework of Action on Marine Debris in the Indian Ocean developed by the Indian Ocean Rim Association. African start-ups and non-governmental organizations are pioneering innovative

⁸ National Centre for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, “Global scenarios data for Ocean Health Index”, Ocean Health Index database. Available at <https://github.com/OHI-Science/ohi-global/releases> (accessed on 31 January 2025). ECA calculation of weighted regional average for Africa using exclusive economic zones.

⁹ UNEP, *Global Waste Management Outlook 2024: Beyond an Age of Waste – Turning Rubbish into a Resource* (Nairobi, 2024).

¹⁰ Hannah Ritchie, “Where does the plastic in our oceans come from?”, Our World in Data, 1 May 2021.

approaches to detect and transform marine plastic waste, while facilitating local recycling and greater awareness.

12. Ocean acidification, addressed under target 14.3, is worsening, as oceans absorb 25 per cent of annual anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, which is lowering seawater potential of hydrogen levels and endangering marine life and biodiversity.¹¹ While data on African ocean acidification are limited, such initiatives as the Ocean Acidification Africa Network are monitoring acidification, establishing local observation systems and studying biological responses, in particular in vulnerable coral reefs.

13. Under targets 14.2 and 14.5, countries are adopting integrated coastal zone management protocols. For example, the Contracting Parties to the Amended Nairobi Convention adopted the Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management of the Western Indian Ocean. In the Comoros, the small island developing States restoration flagship, established in connection with the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, fosters policy coherence for sustainable blue economy transitions, including conservation of blue natural capital. The Go Blue project being carried out in Kenya supports integrated land-sea planning, tackling pollution and consequences of urban human activity while promoting nature-based solutions, such as blue carbon credits, constructed wetlands and locally managed marine areas. The 2017 national integrated management plan for mangroves, associated wetlands and coastal forests of the Congo provides a road map for the conservation and sustainable management of coastal resources, mitigating the impact of human activities, such as pollution and overfishing.

14. Large marine ecosystem governance frameworks, marine protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures mitigate human impacts on marine ecosystems and enhance sustainability. Globally, 18,888 marine protected areas cover 8 per cent of ocean areas.¹² By contrast, 16 per cent of total African marine areas are currently covered under marine protected areas, up from 3 per cent in 2014,¹³ exceeding the 10 per cent target set under target 14.5. However, only six African countries surpass 5 per cent, mirroring the global tendency to establish few but large protected areas in the marine environment. Furthermore, many marine protected areas lack adequate management and enforcement to meet conservation objectives effectively.

C. Global cooperation and finance

15. By 2024, 47 out of 54 African countries had ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, highlighting the continent's commitment to ocean governance and to achieving target 14.c. African involvement in recent ocean agreements is more limited, however. Only 16 African States have accepted the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies of the World Trade Organization, of 2022, and 24 have signed the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of

¹¹ Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and UNESCO, *State of the Ocean Report 2024* (Paris, UNESCO, 2024).

¹² International Union for Conservation of Nature and World Conservation Monitoring Centre, World Database on Protected Areas. Available at www.protectedplanet.net/en/thematic-areas/wdpa?tab=WDPA (accessed in December 2024); and International Union for Conservation of Nature and World Conservation Monitoring Centre, World Database on Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures. Available at www.protectedplanet.net/en/thematic-areas/ocems?tab=OECMs (accessed in December 2024).

¹³ Diego Juffe-Bignoli and others, *Protected Planet Report 2014: Tracking Progress towards Global Targets for Protected Areas* (Cambridge, World Conservation Monitoring Centre, 2014).

Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, of 2023. Mauritius and Seychelles are among just 15 countries worldwide that have ratified the latter Agreement.

16. Goal 14 is the least financed Sustainable Development Goal, having received only 3.5 per cent of total funding at the Sustainable Development Goal midpoint.¹⁴ In 2020, it was estimated that achieving Goal 14 required an annual investment of \$174.52 billion, yet annual spending at the time was only \$25.5 billion, leaving a gap of \$149.02 billion.¹⁵ The private sector remains largely absent from ocean investments. Without adequate funding, African ocean protection efforts are at risk, despite the significant economic and climate benefits that Goal 14 could deliver.¹⁶ Regional initiatives, however, such as the Great Blue Wall, which unites 10 East African countries, offer a collaborative approach to attracting financing, boosting resilience, improving livelihoods and addressing climate challenges.

Box 3

Innovative financing for the African blue economy

Some African countries have adopted innovative ocean-linked financing instruments, including the 2015 debt-for-nature swap carried out by Seychelles and the blue bonds that country issued in 2018. In 2023, Cabo Verde and Sao Tome and Principe announced debt-for-nature swaps with Portugal to fund marine conservation and climate initiatives. That year, Gabon secured a deal worth \$500 million with The Nature Conservancy, reducing its debt interest rate and extending its repayment period, while committing \$125 million to expand marine reserves and strengthen fishing regulations to protect endangered humpback dolphins. Other coastal States and landlocked States are exploring innovative blue financing through such initiatives as the Blue Fund for the Congo Basin, led by the Congo, to transition regional economies from forest reliance to sustainable river and water resource use. Moreover, the Indian Ocean Rim Association Blue Carbon Hub builds capacity in blue carbon finance mechanisms and carbon credits, emphasizing ecosystem protection and restoration. Kenya is advancing blue carbon credit schemes through integrated coastal ecosystem management. International initiatives, such as BlueInvest Africa, connect entrepreneurs with investors and policymakers, thereby fostering partnerships and knowledge exchange. Leveraging such opportunities can boost funding, skill development and sustainable practices in the sector.

D. Scientific research and innovation

17. Ocean science is expanding, with an increasing number of publications on marine plastic pollution and the ocean-climate nexus being published.¹⁷ Such efforts as the First Global Integrated Marine Assessment and such initiatives as the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, the Ocean Biodiversity Information System and the FAO fisheries databases all provide crucial data. Increased adoption of the ECA blue economy valuation toolkit has helped several countries to build quantitative estimates of the economic, social and

¹⁴ David Willima, “Lack of funding could sink Africa’s ocean protection efforts”, Institute for Security Studies Today, 16 November 2023.

¹⁵ Despina Johansen and Rolf Vestvik, “The cost of saving our ocean – estimating the funding gap of sustainable development goal 14”, Marine Policy, vol. 112 (February 2020).

¹⁶ Willima, “Lack of funding could sink Africa’s ocean protection efforts”.

¹⁷ Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and UNESCO, *Global Ocean Science Report: Charting Capacity for Ocean Sustainability* (Paris, UNESCO, 2020).

ecological contribution of the blue economy, thus supporting informed policy development.

18. Scientific knowledge on many ocean areas remains limited, and its application in management and policymaking is uneven. Technical capacity, such as vessels, observation platforms and laboratories, for ocean sciences is unequally distributed, with Europe leading in the number of ocean science researchers per capita, while most African countries face resource and human capacity constraints.

Box 4

United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030)

The Ocean Decade, proclaimed by the General Assembly in 2017 and coordinated by UNESCO and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, operates under the vision, “The science we need for the ocean we want”. It has become the most extensive ocean science movement ever undertaken, with over 50 global programmes, 400 national and regional projects and close to \$1 billion in mobilized resources, supported by more than 4,500 institutions and 70,000 individuals.

In Africa, the Ocean Decade is leveraging the best examples of collaborative science to implement the regional framework – the Ocean Decade Africa Roadmap. Seaward Africa, a flagship initiative carried out under the Roadmap, is focused on translating scientific knowledge into actionable solutions for blue economy development, including capacity-building, policy alignment and inclusive governance. It helps to promote equitable access to marine resources and innovation in such sectors as fisheries, renewable energy and marine biotechnology, fostering resilience in coastal communities and advancing the achievement of Goal 14. This programme exemplifies the way in which Africa can leverage the framework of the Decade to drive regional progress.

III. Challenges, constraints and emerging issues

19. The main gaps, constraints and emerging issues impeding progress towards the achievement of Goal 14 are identified in the present section of the report. In summary, the challenges facing the conservation and sustainable use of African oceans, seas and marine resources include weak governance, limited enforcement, financial constraints and gaps in scientific capacity and data.

A. Sustainable blue economy and blue livelihoods

20. The African blue economy faces critical challenges, including climate change, overfishing, pollution, unsustainable coastal development, ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, ineffective policy and regulatory frameworks, limited management and enforcement capability, financial constraints, data and capacity gaps and restricted market access. Rapid population growth and failure to respect the customary tenure rights of small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples exacerbate these issues.¹⁸ Weak governance and fragmented institutional mandates also hinder effective coordination and enforcement of blue economy strategies.¹⁹

21. Women’s significant contributions to the African fish value chain – through fish processing, small-scale fisheries, aquaculture and market distribution – are

¹⁸ For more information on the rights of small-scale fishers and Indigenous Populations, see the report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri, on fisheries and the right to food in the context of climate change (A/HRC/55/49).

¹⁹ FAO, *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024*.

often overlooked and undervalued, and the challenges that they face include cultural restrictions, limited control over labour and earnings, lower pay, undervalued labour and family responsibilities that limit opportunities. Women also have minimal influence in fisheries governance at the community and household levels. Supportive policies, capacity-building, training and improved access to technology are essential to empowering women, enhancing their productivity and increasing their incomes.

B. Ocean health and resilience

22. Achievement of the ocean health and resilience targets under Goal 14 in Africa is hindered by multiple barriers. In a joint report, the African Development Bank, the African Union, ECA and UNDP²⁰ have highlighted growing risks to African marine ecosystems from pollutants and debris. Marine pollution (target 14.1) remains critical, owing to inadequate waste management systems. Barriers include the costliness of adequate waste management systems, political unwillingness and deprioritization, weak governance, limited enforcement, insufficient local markets for waste recycling and low public awareness of the risks of unmanaged waste.²¹ Limited data and monitoring further hinder the effective assessment and mitigation of pollution.

23. Overfishing, habitat degradation and weak enforcement of environmental regulations pose major obstacles to the sustainable management of African ecosystems (target 14.2), and those challenges are compounded by the impacts of climate change. Ubiquitous and sustained ocean acidification poses another threat. Mitigating acidification (target 14.3) requires a drastic decrease in global carbon dioxide emissions – which poses a challenge to independent regional or national progress towards this target. Furthermore, there is very limited regional research or understanding of the ecological and socioeconomic impacts of acidification.²²

24. Progress on expanding the coverage of marine protected areas in Africa (target 14.5) is uneven across countries. Despite the rise in designated protected areas, many exist in name only, as inadequate resources, monitoring and enforcement re-emerge as significant impediments to their effectiveness. Even effectively managed marine protected areas may be undermined by their proximity to areas of heavy coastal development or warming waters.²³ Marine protected areas that fail to involve Indigenous Peoples and local communities and that deprive those already in marginalized situations of their tenure rights have been reported to lead to restricted access to marine resources, exacerbating food insecurity and livelihood loss.²⁴

²⁰ African Development Bank and others, *Africa Sustainable Development Report 2022: Building Back Better from the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) While Advancing the Full Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2022).

²¹ UNEP, *Africa Waste Management Outlook* (Nairobi, 2018).

²² Roshan Ramessur and others, “Ocean acidification in Africa”, *Ocean Acidification Africa Network newsletter* (2021).

²³ Mary Kate McCoy, “New study a ‘wake-up call’ for marine protections,” *Conservation International*, 25 April 2024.

²⁴ Merle Sowman and Jackie Sunde, “Social impacts of marine protected areas in South Africa on coastal fishing communities,” *Ocean and Coastal Management*, vol. 157 (May 2018).

C. Global cooperation and finance

25. Limited bargaining power in global negotiations prevents African countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries, from effectively voicing their concerns in international forums. Moreover, many African countries lack a full awareness of the benefits of international agreements, often citing concerns about sovereignty, economic development and potential financial burdens stemming from treaty implementation. The Afripac project by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Global Resource Information Database-Arendal is aimed at addressing these challenges by strengthening the negotiation skills of West African national representatives, in particular in the context of the proposed United Nations treaty on global plastics, ensuring that these countries can effectively engage in global treaty negotiations. Efforts are under way to build capacity in relation to the ratification and implementation of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, with capacity gap assessments and training sessions on regional conventions being conducted through the Regional Seas Programme in 2025.

26. A deterioration in access to finance for African countries, notably owing to the increased cost of debt servicing, which nearly doubled for African countries between 2020 and 2024,²⁵ restricts the resources available for sustainable ocean-based investment. Fulfilling the vision of Agenda 2063 to empower African countries to manage and sustainably develop their blue economy and to provide urgently needed ocean-based climate adaptation requires the allocation of specific resources through multilateral development banks. This may include the provision of guarantees and other forms of credit enhancement that can help to de-risk investment in ocean space.

D. Scientific research and innovation

27. Ocean science research and innovation in Africa suffer from limited funding, owing to competing government priorities. Increasing scientific knowledge, research capacity and infrastructure requires adequate, long-term investment, but investment is often ad hoc and short-term, thus hindering progress. Africa faces inadequate human, technical and institutional capacity to adopt ocean science research, technology and innovation, and high costs restrict access to technological advancements. Trained experts are driven to work in other regions, owing to the lack of employment opportunities on the continent, and compensation disparities further exacerbate poor retention. Many countries lack the resources required to manage ocean data, impeding open access and data-sharing.

28. Challenges persist in the collation, storage, analysis and effective use of data. Insufficient institutional coordination and failure to ensure that data are findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable lead to fragmented and incompatible data formats, thus limiting the value of the data for effective decision-making. Critical thematic and geographical gaps remain in ocean science and knowledge, and existing knowledge is often not available in a format that is optimal for the integration of science, policy and society. Gaps remain in the understanding of the technical, ecological and social feasibility and the potential impacts of new technologies, such as marine carbon dioxide removal. In addition, the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National

²⁵ *Unpacking Africa's Debt: Towards a Lasting and Durable Solution* (United Nations publication, 2024).

Jurisdiction underscores the need for deeper insight into biodiversity, ecosystems and their vulnerability to climate change and into emerging economic activities.

IV. Recommendations to achieve Goal 14 and its targets

29. The following transformative actions, partnerships and ambitions are needed to accelerate progress towards Goal 14 in Africa.

A. Sustainable blue economy and blue livelihoods

30. Promoting a sustainable blue economy and blue livelihoods in Africa requires an enabling environment for transformation and innovation. This comprises strong leadership, policy coherence, effective coordination and robust institutional infrastructure, including a dedicated blue economy unit to work across sectors and ministries. Important instruments include cohesive blue economy laws and policies, such integrated approaches as marine spatial planning and integrated coastal zone management, sustainable financing, and data collection and analysis. Strategies must align with other governance structures, and all blue economy actions must respect, protect and fulfil human rights, including the customary tenure rights of small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples.

31. African Governments must adopt policies to integrate women and young people into blue economy sectors. The policies should include youth-focused and gender-focused employment programmes, vocational training in marine industries, entrepreneurship support and educational initiatives that equip women and young people with the necessary skills to participate in sustainable blue economy activities. Governments must also scale up youth-led initiatives that drive economic growth and restore marine ecosystems.

B. Ocean health and resilience

32. Growing African cities, in particular those near rivers and coasts, must urgently improve waste management systems to address the anticipated surge in waste generation in Africa. Local governments can foster partnerships with non-governmental organizations and the private sector to develop local recycling markets and promote circularity. Public awareness campaigns on the risks of ocean pollution, paired with incentives for adopting better practices, should be complemented by stronger governance and enforcement of waste disposal laws, in particular for municipal and agricultural waste. Regional agencies should develop or promote data systems to monitor pollution and inform targeted solutions. Policy guidelines and such funds as the Clean Oceans Initiative can support projects to curb ocean pollution.

33. Regional agencies and development partners should scale up cooperation and funding to enhance the development and effective management of marine protected areas, other effective area-based conservation measures and large marine ecosystems. Governments must go beyond merely designating protected areas by integrating them into national development plans and budgets. Adopting inclusive governance frameworks that respect, protect and fulfil human rights is essential to empowering and engaging Indigenous Peoples and local communities that are most directly affected by changes in the marine ecosystem. Large marine ecosystems need more support from riparian States to ensure the sustainable conservation of coastal and marine resources.

C. Cooperation and finance

34. African States are vital to advancing international ocean frameworks and can lead in developing, signing and ratifying treaties. Targeted support should be provided to enhance their negotiating skills and raise their awareness of global initiatives. Facilitating dialogue among members of ECA can address concerns, promote collaboration and strengthen collective action on the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, the proposed United Nations treaty on plastics and the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, while also fostering a shared position among African States at the upcoming third United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14.

35. Governments and the private sector should harness synergies between the blue economy and the African Continental Free Trade Area. Reducing barriers to intraregional trade and investment can boost regional value chains, for example in fisheries, unlocking the potential of the African blue economy. The secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area and development partners must enhance awareness of market access platforms and opportunities for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in the blue economy, in particular women-led and youth-led enterprises, to leverage the Free Trade Area protocols effectively.

36. To support the sustainable development of the African blue economy and enhance ocean-based climate adaptation, multilateral development banks should significantly increase their financial support for African countries through targeted resources, including credit enhancements, guarantees and capacity-building initiatives. This would enable countries to gain access to affordable financing for ocean projects, such as blue bonds and debt-for-climate swaps, and to scale up sustainable ocean-related solutions that are critical for climate resilience. Given the risks linked to certain financing instruments, however, it is essential to ensure that they do not place excessive burdens on debtor countries.

37. Creditor countries should expand commitments to beneficial debt swaps, and multilateral development banks should facilitate affordable market access through credit enhancements for targeted blue bonds. Ocean-based climate financing through the Green Climate Fund should be increased, with a focus on building African capacity to develop viable ocean-based adaptation initiatives.

38. Partners advancing the African blue economy must enhance coordination and avoid duplication by supporting knowledge-sharing platforms, such as the African blue economy reference group.

D. Scientific research and innovation

39. A detailed analysis of the current landscape and financing models for ocean science infrastructure is required in order to identify investment gaps and returns, with a view to attracting private sector investment. Establishing a coalition of partners, including intergovernmental, non-governmental, public and private institutions, can catalyse investments in ocean science. Governments ought to promote national funding for ocean research and the development of capacity to address national priorities, given the long-term benefits those actions would offer. Innovative resource mobilization and partnerships are important for sustained ocean science funding.

40. African Governments and regional bodies need to prioritize the establishment of state-of-the-art regional research facilities to promote the development of end-user-targeted ocean science research. In addition, research and academic institutions need to have robust strategies in place that can be supported by regional and international organizations and that are focused on nurturing young and emerging scientists through effective mentorship programmes.

V. Key messages

41. Protecting life below water in African oceans is critical for economic growth, livelihoods, food security, climate regulation and human rights. Progress towards Goal 14 is achieved through sustainable blue economy efforts, with notable policies and collaborative strategies promoting sustainable fisheries, marine and coastal protection, nature-based solutions and economic diversification.

42. Pollution, overfishing, habitat destruction, acidification and the impacts of climate change, however, continue to undermine African ocean health and resilience. Insufficient and inequitable management has limited the effectiveness of some efforts, while successful initiatives have not been sufficiently mainstreamed, leaving Africa off track for achieving Goal 14 by 2030. These challenges are amplified by deep, cross-cutting gaps in data, infrastructure, research capacity and funding for ocean-linked initiatives.

43. Collaborative regional and international efforts, equitable governance and increased financial and technical resources are essential to accelerating progress in Africa towards achieving Goal 14. Prioritizing young people and women in sustainable and equitable blue economy initiatives to boost employment and entrepreneurship can strengthen the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of those initiatives. Strong leadership, coordination and robust institutional infrastructure are vital to fostering an enabling environment for inclusive development of the African blue economy.

44. African States urgently need to improve waste management systems, strengthen marine protected areas, other effective area-based conservation measures and large marine ecosystem management, and enhance global cooperation through the adoption of ocean frameworks, focusing on the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction and the proposed United Nations treaty on plastics. At the local level, involving directly affected communities and Indigenous Peoples in marine spatial planning and management is fundamental for success.

45. Investment in ocean science infrastructure, collection of disaggregated data on vulnerable groups, and capacity development are crucial. African Governments should prioritize national funding, foster partnerships and nurture young scientists to address gaps in research and promote ocean science innovation.

46. Development and financing partners should increase financial and technical support for ocean-based initiatives, using innovative financing instruments that do not place an undue burden on recipients. In addition, partners need to improve their cooperation to avoid duplication of efforts and to maximize the effective use of the scarce financial and technical resources available for African oceans.