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# Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal for the Oceans

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**T**he United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its comprehensive set of 17 interlinking Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a unique opportunity to advance ocean sustainability. The development of a robust implementation framework for the Sustainable Development Goal for the Oceans (SDG 14) is a critical step towards this overarching objective.

The degradation of the marine environment has thus far outpaced the development of the international ocean governance landscape, while the capacity of domestic measures and policies to deliver sustainable outcomes has been limited by the transboundary nature of impacts affecting marine environments. The 2030 Agenda provides the opportunity to address complex ocean sustainability challenges through regionally coordinated cooperation across sectors and with a broad spectrum of actors.

2017 could become a landmark year for efforts to put the world's oceans on a pathway towards sustainability. Complemented by numerous regional and national initiatives, the UN Ocean Conference in June and the EU-hosted Our Ocean Conference in October are important opportunities for the international community to establish a firm foundation for future action and to agree on tangible measures to reverse the cycle of declining ocean health. While there is no lack in global ambition, the global community should now agree on concrete steps to develop coherent regional and international implementation frameworks for achieving oceans sustainability. To advance these efforts, this policy brief offers three key recommendations:

**■ Message 1:  
Develop a registry of ocean  
commitments.**

The establishment of effective reporting procedures is crucial to achieving the Goal for the Oceans. A central registry of ocean commitments would provide a transparent basis for tracking the efforts of States and stakeholders to achieve the Goal for the Oceans and a repository of lessons learned.

**■ Message 2:  
Establish regional partnerships for  
sustainable oceans.**

Ocean sustainability challenges require collective action across sectors and scales. In an effort to coordinate policymaking and measures, regional ocean partnerships should be developed to support activities related to the implementation of the Goal for the Oceans.

**■ Message 3:  
Prepare a global thematic review for  
the oceans.**

States should review the implementation of SDG 14 and other ocean-related goals through an integrated thematic assessment. This review would provide the basis for future proposals and action as well as insights into interdependencies and trade-offs across the 2030 Agenda.

# A pathway to advance ocean sustainability

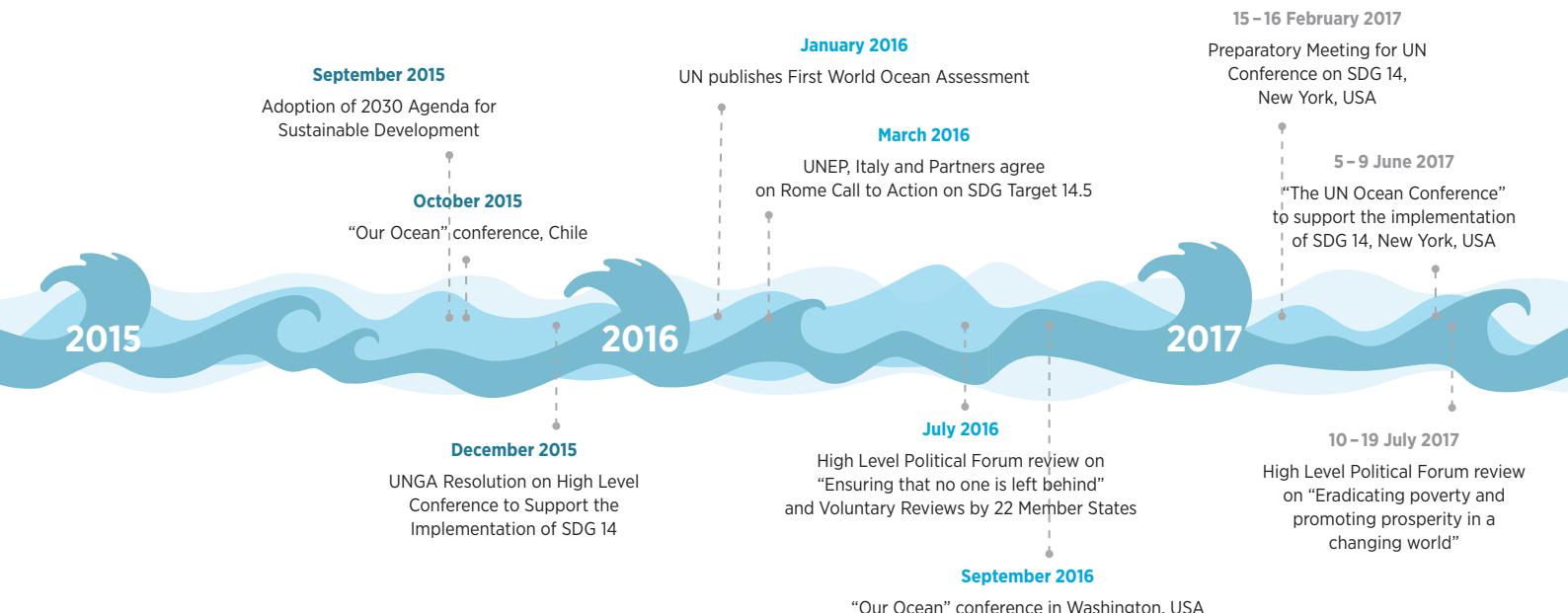
Oceans and coasts are fundamental for our survival and well-being. They are home to a rich, often fragile, and largely unexplored biodiversity. They provide essential ecosystem services, and they are the primary source of protein for one billion people worldwide. Ocean-based industries contribute roughly US\$ 1.5 trillion to the global economy, with fisheries and aquaculture operations supporting the livelihoods of roughly 12 per cent of the world's population.

Human interventions in marine ecosystems over the last decades have put oceans and coasts on unsustainable trajectories. Despite efforts to address this, ocean health continues to decline, with recent research showing that no part of the global ocean is without human influence. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the management of human activities affecting the oceans is pursued through a fragmented institutional system, making it difficult to ensure that marine resources are used sustainably. Policy targets and com-

mitments undertaken in international agreements, such as the adoption of sustainable harvest practices aligned with maximum sustainable yields for fisheries or the designation of ten per cent of coastal and marine areas as protected areas, are a long way from being reached.

## A sustainability goal for the oceans

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations has acknowledged the full urgency of the situation, ranking the health of the world's oceans among the most pressing development challenges. The stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal on the oceans and coasts (SDG 14) calls on the international community to: "Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development." This goal provides opportunities to facilitate concrete actions for ocean sustainability and to foster greater integration among the different sectors of ocean governance.



A central challenge to achieving this emanates from the transboundary nature of both marine resources and threats to ocean sustainability. In short, neither fish stocks nor marine pollution are bound by national borders. Addressing these challenges requires collective and coordinated actions by States, including at the regional level to develop innovative approaches to ocean governance and solutions to shared problems.

### Rethinking sustainable development

The 2030 Agenda is the world's first global agreement to provide a comprehensive agenda for action to support transformations towards social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets will guide the activities of diverse actors over the next 14 years. Crucially, the 2030 Agenda recognises the need for

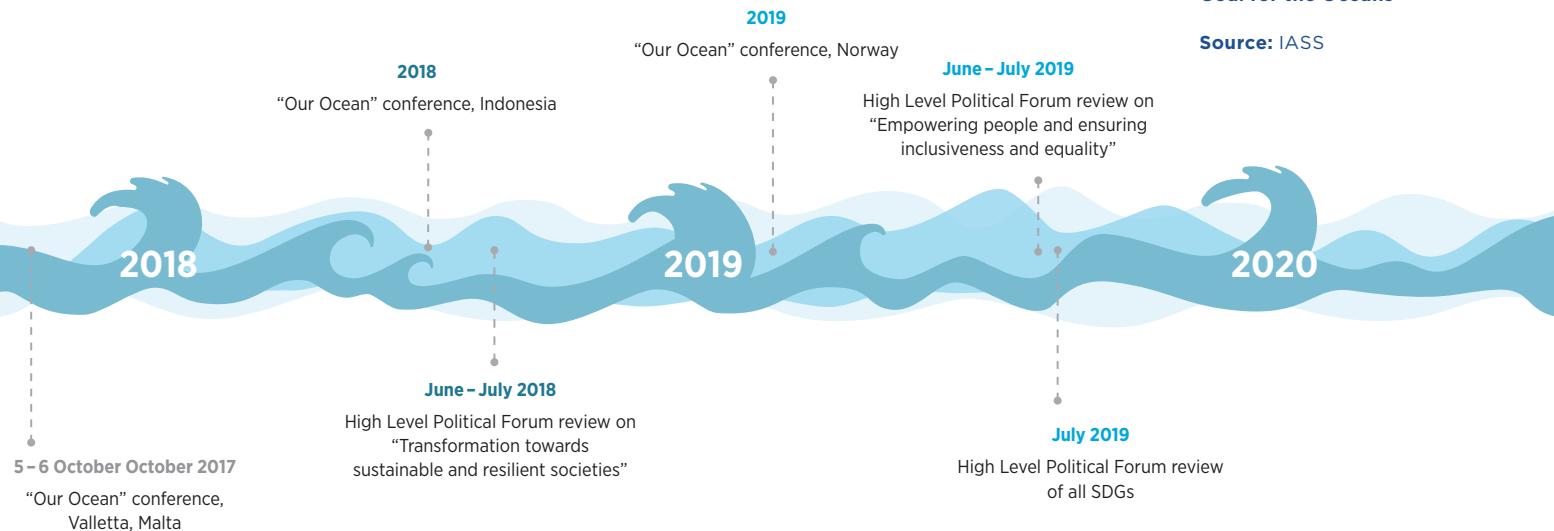
cross-cutting, cooperative, and transboundary action to address development challenges. It encourages policymakers to engage with sustainability through a nexus approach that emphasises interdependencies and integrates governance, management, and action across sectors and scales.

The follow-up and review process for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is the best available opportunity to advance innovative models of ocean governance and build partnerships to address sustainability challenges. This collective process should support the generation of new knowledge and solutions, foster capacity-building and the exchange of good practice, and celebrate the achievements of first-movers as a stimulus for further action to reverse the decline in the health of oceans and marine resources for people, planet and prosperity.

The **United Nations Ocean Conference** in New York (5–9 June 2017), where States and stakeholders will issue a "Call for Action" for ocean sustainability, and the subsequent review of efforts to implement SDG 14 by the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) are important moments within the broader process. Together with other high level international meetings, such as the EU-hosted "Our Ocean" conference in Malta (October 2017) and national and regional initiatives, they set out a pathway for the implementation of SDG 14. The global community should use this political momentum to translate their commitments into national, regional, and global action.

**Figure 1: A pathway to implementing the Sustainable Development Goal for the Oceans**

**Source:** IASS



# Develop a registry of ocean commitments

A registry of commitments on action for ocean sustainability would provide an important frame of reference for intergovernmental and domestic efforts to achieve the Goal for the Oceans. Documenting intended actions, the registry would facilitate the development of solutions and the coordination of action in the water and on the ground. Much like the Registry of National Determined Contributions (NDCs) established under the Paris Climate Agreement, the registry would provide a transparent basis for the systematic assessment of actions to implement SDG 14 and inform efforts to ensure the efficacy of activities. Activity reports submitted to the registry would provide a repository of lessons learned and innovative solutions, potentially leading to further cooperation or the development of new partnerships for sustainable development.

Reflecting the integrated and ecosystem-based approaches favoured by the 2030 Agenda, we recommend that States and other stakeholders communicate and maintain successive oceans commitments across three main categories:

#### **a) Domestic action**

The establishment of marine protected areas or measures to reduce marine pollution from land-based sources, for example.

#### **b) Reduction of impacts abroad**

Policies to restrict imports to sustainable sources and efforts to reduce marine pollution from international shipping, for example.

#### **c) International cooperation**

Regional and global partnerships, development cooperation, technology transfers, and financial assistance, for example.

Ideally, within the registry, commitments should be grouped according to marine regions. This would not only facilitate assessments at the scale of ecosystems but also enhance cooperation through regional approaches. For instance, an assessment of commitments that identifies deficits with respect to a particular target in a region could highlight the need for further initiatives to be conducted under the umbrella of regional organisations.

The follow-up and review processes for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda will seek to provide accountability to citizens through reference to a framework of indicators and targets for sustainable development. While the 2030 Agenda commits States to “engage in a systematic follow-up and review,” comprehensive and coherent procedures for reporting and reviewing commitments and concrete actions were not established during negotiations. Instead, governments report on their activities through country-led and -driven National Voluntary Reviews to the UN High Level Political Forum. These reviews have so far varied substantially in terms of their content, form, and structure, and do not provide a systematic record of commitments for specific SDGs, making it difficult to ascertain whether the global community is on track.

The “list of voluntary commitments” to be adopted at the United Nations Ocean Conference in June 2017 should be taken as the starting point for the development of a comprehensive reporting mechanism and registry. The registry should be hosted by an appropriate UN body such as the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea (UN DOALOS) or the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). It should be maintained and updated regularly in close cooperation with competent global and regional organisations, ensuring transparent access to data and information.

# Establish regional partnerships for sustainable oceans

Over the last four decades regional organisations and mechanisms have proved to be effective in fostering marine conservation and sustainable ocean management. They are a cornerstone of marine ecosystem-based management, the best-known practice to facilitate long-term sustainability, and have frequently succeeded in securing greater commitments by States and stakeholders than global instruments. Their inclusive nature facilitates cooperation among national and local stakeholders, fosters peer-to-peer learning, and invites the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes, allowing for the ecological, economic, political, and cultural characteristics of marine regions to inform policy and practice.

## **A broad spectrum of stakeholders**

Partnerships established in support of the 2030 Agenda should be designed to address specific contexts and should bring together States, regional and global organisations and mechanisms, and a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations, research centres, and private sector actors, and donors. Concrete measures that could be implemented through partnerships include institutional capacity-building and the development of guidelines and regionally coordinated indicators and reporting processes for ocean sustainability. These should be underpinned by regional and ecosystem-specific

targets, priorities and strategies to address cross-cutting challenges such as land-based pollution. In many cases, the necessary instruments are readily available. The format of individual partnerships should be aligned with the needs and opportunities specific to regions. The options available include regular high level regional conferences, overarching regional dialogues, and annual meetings of regional and sectoral ocean management organisations.

## **A harmonised implementation of measures**

In addition to the above, regional partnerships would provide mechanisms through which countries and competent organisations could cooperate towards the harmonised implementation of measures to address sustainability challenges, in particular where these are subject to different legal regimes or call for cross-cutting action. Ocean acidification and over-fishing both fall within the latter category, for example. Moreover, they are well placed to respond to the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda and to establish linkages between activities around the Goal for the Oceans and other commitments on food security (SDG 2), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), employment and growth (SDG 8), and climate action (SDG 13), for example.

# Prepare a global thematic review for the oceans

A global thematic review of the oceans should be prepared with a view to maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of States' actions, and to assess trends and progress, and if needed, to adapt implementation. The review should take into account the central and cross-cutting role of SDG 14 and its links across the Sustainable Development Goals (see Figure 2). The 2030 Agenda suggests that overarching "thematic reviews" be conducted to ensure that trade-offs and synergies are taken into account. Such a holistic review for the ocean would assess the state of the marine environment and coupled economic and social systems, identify priority issues and impacts, evaluate current policies, and weigh options to achieve the Goal for the Oceans. By offering insights into interlinkages with other SDGs and shedding light on global and regional trends, the review would also provide an evidential basis for the development of cross-cutting policy measures and propose action with a view to addressing drivers of ocean decline and advancing efforts to achieve other SDGs.

## **Recognising interdependencies in ocean sustainability**

The nature and strength of the interactions between the various goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda are dynamic and context-specific, ranging from synergistic to antagonistic interdependencies. For example, commitments to sustain economic growth in least-developed countries or to promote job creation and foster the growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SDG 8), and measures to protect and restore marine and coastal ecosystems (SDG 14) might counteract each other when developed in isolation. Likewise, benefits from synergies that arise from the inextricable link between sustainable fisheries and the sustainable and efficient use of natural resources (SDG 12) could well go unexploited if they are not properly identified within the follow-up and review process.

## **Based on regional ocean assessments**

The global thematic review should apply a nested approach and should be based on regional ocean assessments of the kind already prepared through some regional seas conventions and economic organisations, as well as other available reports on the state of the marine environment and its resources and their use, such as the FAO State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture report. It should take into account critical interdependencies and facilitate their regular evaluation to enable the adaptation of implementation measures as circumstances require. Thematic reports should be pioneered as collective learning processes to provide guidance for associated SDG follow-up and review processes with respect to critical and cross-cutting areas of concern.

## **A knowledge platform for sustainable development**

The United Nations "Regular Process for Global Reporting and Assessment of the State of the Marine Environment Including Socioeconomic Aspects" could serve as a knowledge platform for the follow-up and review of efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for the Oceans. This could be further developed to focus on the broader objectives of SDG 14, considering not only its targets but also those goals and targets in the 2030 Agenda which directly impact on its achievement. In future, the World Ocean Assessments conducted through the Regular Process could thus become a cornerstone of a global thematic review of the oceans and coasts in support of the 2030 Agenda.

## Ocean health is central to global sustainable development



### Goal 14 targets address:

14.1 Marine Pollution | 14.2 Healthy Oceans | 14.3 Ocean Acidification  
 14.4 Sustainable Fisheries | 14.5 Marine Protected Areas | 14.6 Fisheries Subsidies  
 14.7 Economic benefits for Small Island Developing States & Least Developed Countries | 14.a Knowledge & Technology | 14.b Small Scale Fisheries  
 14.c Law Development & Implementation

The Goal for the Oceans occupies a central role within the 2030 Agenda. Its targets link to Sustainable Development Goals across the full extent of the Agenda. These interdependencies offer opportunities for the development of synergies and require actors to balance trade-offs carefully.

Figure 2: Interlinkages between SDG 14 and other SDGs | Source: IASS

# Towards a framework for the Goal for the Oceans

Achieving the 2030 Agenda's vision of global ocean sustainability requires far-reaching changes in ocean governance and the use of marine resources. Numerous factors contribute to the poor state of the marine environment, including overfishing, onshore and offshore pollution, climate change, and the increasing demand for diverse marine resources. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a comprehensive legal framework to guide action towards the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, it is becoming increasingly clear that current governance frameworks must be revamped if we are to achieve ocean sustainability. With many of the drivers of ocean degradation beyond the purview of marine management institutions, achieving the 2030 Agenda will require not only greater integration within governance but also in relation to other sustainability policies and frameworks. This aspect touches on matters as diverse as employment, food security, sustainable consumption and production, and climate action.

## **Commitments to accelerate processes towards oceans sustainability**

The universal character of the 2030 Agenda requires actions by all States. They should now come forward with national commitments to accelerate processes towards oceans sustainability. A global registry of ocean commitments would provide a mechanism to identify collective trends and necessary action to

achieve the targets of the Goal for the Oceans. The development of regional partnerships in particular could provide the level of coordination and cooperation necessary for the efficient delivery of the 2030 Agenda for the oceans. A global thematic review for the oceans and coasts would highlight the central role of the oceans for global sustainable development and provide a platform to address key linkages with SDGs that impact directly on oceans sustainability. Requiring the cooperation of many actors from multiple sectors and the integration of different types of knowledge and expertise across the national, regional and global scales, the global thematic review could become a driver of greater coordination and integration in oceans governance.

## **First-mover States should lead the way**

The follow-up and review process for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda offers a unique opportunity to address key ocean sustainability challenges and to facilitate a transformation towards integrated oceans governance. First-mover States should lead the way by translating the 2030 Agenda into nationally-owned and regionally harmonised visions and objectives, building new partnerships, and developing integrated approaches to governance. The United Nations Ocean Conference in New York in June 2017 should be used to build the follow-up and review framework necessary to advance these efforts and ensure their success over the longer term. ■

## About the authors

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## Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) e.V.

Funded by the ministries of research of the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Brandenburg, the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) aims to identify and promote development pathways for a global transformation towards a sustainable society. The IASS employs a transdisciplinary approach that encourages dialogue to understand sustainability issues and generate potential solutions in cooperation with partners from the sciences, politics, the economy, and civil society. A strong network of national and international partners supports the work of the institute. Its central research topics include the energy transition, emerging technologies, climate change, air quality, systemic risks, governance and participation, and cultures of transformation.

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