

‘Life Below Water’: An agenda for sustainable development of the oceans

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The world has moved on from Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to a new era where the ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ will now drive *global development*. The world leaders finally adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015. In these goals and targets, they have set out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision - to achieve sustainable development in three dimensions – economic, social and environmental - in a balanced and integrated manner.

These ‘global goals’ build on the eight MDGs which were adopted in 2000 and were to be achieved by 2015. Although large strides and progress was made towards achieving the MDGs, these goals remained unfulfilled. Nevertheless the process of building consensus was validated and a common agenda agreed by all nations was evolved. The recently adopted goals and targets take this effort forward and are the result of over two years of intensive public consultation and engagement with civil society and other stakeholders around the world. This was made possible by a series of Open Working Group on SDGs coordinated by UN General Assembly and by the Secretary- General United Nations, who undertook a parallel discussion on the ‘Post-2015 Development Agenda’. It is universally agreed that these global goals are expected to shape policy worldwide for next 15 years till 2030 and would go much further than the MDGs, as they encompass a broader sustainability agenda.

Goal 14, represented as ‘Life Below Water’ states, “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” and is one of the

adopted goals with ten clearly identified targets. The sub-goals of this SDG are briefly enumerated below:

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 to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans.

14.3 Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels.

14.4 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible.

14.5 By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law.

14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies.

14.7 By 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism.

14.a Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular SIDS and LDCs.

14.b Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.

14.c Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in UNCLOS.

As seen from the sub-goals, the agenda of the SDG 14 for oceans is unprecedented in scope and significance, is integrated and indivisible and balances the three dimensions of sustainable development. This universal goal and targets which involve the entire world are accepted and applicable to all 193 member states of the UN, developed and developing countries alike. However, it takes into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respects national policies and priorities.

The SDG for the oceans provide unambiguous targets and is supported by a robust and universally agreed framework. While framing of goals has been completed, SDG 14 has to be backed by a set of measurable indicators, for what cannot be measured, cannot be achieved. Some work in this direction is ongoing and hopefully measurable indicators will be adopted soon. This would further entail investment in systems and procedures to implement and support regular and appropriate collection and recording of data. Secondly, implementing SDG 14 requires a strong commitment from all countries. This may not be possible due to competing goals and limited resources available with developing and LDC countries. They countries may choose to divert funds to meet basic and critical necessities such as food, water and energy which affect day to day life and are of immediate concern. The third challenge is that with 169 targets, the full implementation of the SDGs might not be possible and countries will prioritise these goals and sub-goals. Fourthly, there are issues related to weak institutions, gaps in legal framework, poor ocean governance due to lack of capability, presence of a multitude of agencies with overlapping areas of responsibility, lack of coordination and non-existent enforcement capability. Surmounting these challenges require a major shift in the approach and attitude of the governments. Finally, efficient management of the program will be the key to achieving SDG 14. This may require setting up of specialized agencies with dedicated funding at the local, regional and federal level.

Be that as it may, an agreement on global goals is no mean task. The fact that healthy oceans and marine resources have figured in the SDGs is indicative of the importance which the international scientific community and policy makers have attached to the oceans. However, identification of the goals is just the beginning and a lot remains to be done to fulfill the targets of SDG 14. This would require vision, commitment, sustained effort and constant monitoring. Finally, a sustainable future for this planet is what our children deserve and one must spare no effort in realising this dream.