

## **Implementing SDG 14: Takeaways from the Ocean Conference**

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The high-level United Nations (UN) conference to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) was held at UN Headquarters, New York from 5 to 9 June 2017. The event was specially convened to build international momentum for the implementation of SDG 14 and coincided with the World Oceans Day, celebrated every year on 08 June.

In a landmark agreement in September 2015, all 193 member countries of the United Nations adopted the document titled ‘Transforming our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, with an aim to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development by 2030. As a part of the 2030 Agenda, 17 SDGs which were universal, inclusive and indivisible were adopted. SDG 14 was dedicated to oceans and aims to ‘Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development’. SDG 14 has 10 targets dealing with marine pollution; marine ecosystems; ocean acidification; overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; marine conservation and eliminating harmful fisheries subsidies, amongst others.

Although oceans are essential to support life on earth, SDG 14 is relatively lower on priority for many developing and under developed countries which face compelling challenges such as eliminating poverty and hunger, providing education, clean water and sanitation for their citizens. The Ocean Conference was organized in order to focus on the centrality of the oceans for life on earth and to highlight the importance of SDG 14 in sustainable development. The aim of the event was to identify ways and means to support the implementation of SDG 14 amongst all member countries; to build on existing successful partnerships as well as to stimulate innovative and concrete new partnerships; involve all relevant stakeholders; share experiences gained in the

implementation of SDG 14; and to provide an input to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) which is scheduled to be held in July 2017.

The Oceans Conference attracted approximately 4,000 delegates including 16 heads of State and a large number of stakeholders. It also succeeded in building momentum towards action on SDG 14. Discussions were held on a wide variety of issues such as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), IUU fishing, Blue Economy, international legally binding agreement on marine Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), plastics and ocean pollution, climate change and its impact on oceans, small scale and artisanal fisheries etc. thereby effectively mainstreaming maritime issues at the UN in a coherent and single voice.

The Ocean Conference produced three key outcomes. The first was an intergovernmentally agreed declaration in the form of a document titled 'Our Ocean, Our Future: Call for Action'. This declaration reconfirms the commitment of UN Member States for the implementation of SDG 14 and calls on all stakeholders to strengthen cooperation and coordination among institutions at all levels. Participants also agreed to promote effective and transparent multi-stakeholder partnerships and to mobilize resources for collection and sharing of data and knowledge. While the document does not make any new commitments, it reinforces the support of various actors to cooperatively seek solutions for meeting the challenges in implementing SDG 14.

The second outcome was the large number of voluntary commitments by governments and other stakeholders for implementing SDG 14. These initiatives were pledged by various actors - individually or in partnership – and would contribute to the implementation of SDG 14. These actions include up scaling of existing successful efforts, introducing new initiatives as well as financing and capacity building efforts. Out of a total of 1328 commitments, 615 were made by the national governments, 112 by UN entities, 58 by intergovernmental organizations, 277 by NGOs, 84 by civil society organizations, and remaining by scientific communities, private sector and academic institutions on various oceans related aspects.

India registered 17 commitments including mapping of potential fishing zones for sustainable fisheries and supporting artisanal fishing; designating Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and reduction of plastic pollution. Laying emphasis on ocean observation

systems it committed to developing the Indian Tsunami Early Warning System (ITEWS) and a Regional Integrated Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems (RIMES) apart from using technology for monitoring the health of coastal seas and deploying dedicated space technologies and assets for ocean applications and its continued support to research in the Arctic Ocean. It also registered its commitment towards developing 'green ports' and coastal community development as a part of Project Sagaramala.

The third outcome was the conduct of partnership dialogues which were successful in facilitating sharing of experiences and knowledge between the participants. Seven partnership dialogues were held viz. addressing marine pollution; managing, protecting, conserving and restoring marine and coastal ecosystems; minimizing and addressing ocean acidification; making fisheries sustainable; increasing economic benefits to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and providing access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets; increasing scientific knowledge and developing research capacity and transfer of marine technology; and enhancing the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These issues were discussed in the background of the concept papers presented in the event on the subject.

While the Ocean Conference succeeded in its aim of bringing the oceans for discussions at the high table, it may however be argued that little was achieved in terms of concrete action. Apart from the formal issue of statement and expression of solidarity and support by all stakeholders, there was little progress in terms of verifiable actions. The commitments made by various actors are also voluntary in nature and are an expression of interest with no quantifiable aspect in terms of committing financial resources, time for completion of activity and have a minimal measurable aspect, if any. Without inbuilt aspects of monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) such voluntary commitments have been observed to disappear off the radar once the spotlight from the event fades away. To sum up, the event did bring a spotlight on the need for action on implementing SDG 14 and suggested a way ahead, but various cooperative arrangements and commitments need to be implemented so that the call for action materializes into actual action.

With an EEZ of more than 2.3 million square kms, India has vast interests in the maritime domain. As an emerging economy which is committed to sustainable

development for the well-being of its people, India needs to increase its presence and visibility at international events. Such an opportunity was effectively lost with no major interventions or proposed partnerships statements from the Indian contingent except a statement presented on the behalf of the Minister of State for External Affairs of India, M.J. Akbar.

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