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Cooperating for Sustainable Development of the Oceans

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The United Nations Sustainable Development Summit held on 25 September 2015 formally adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets. The agreement by all 193 member countries of the UN General Assembly to approve the final document titled *‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’* is unique as it applies to all countries. These goals and targets are ambitious, indivisible and interlinked and focus on all three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental.

SDG for Oceans

“Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” has been accepted as SDG 14 and have 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.

While the objectives are unambiguous and time bound, the indicators for measuring specific targets and the mechanisms for monitoring the progress in attaining the SDGs are currently being evolved.

Challenges

Considering that oceans for long have been neglected and abused, there are many challenges facing the international community in attaining SDG 14. The first challenge is the issue of ocean governance at 'high seas'. It is a matter of concern that the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) does not spell out the responsibility of nation states or any other agency for protection of biodiversity in 'Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction'. The existing governance mechanisms and their implementation at the 'high seas' are sectoral based and are compartmentalized into fishing, shipping and sea bed mining. This leaves large gaps in ocean governance due to presence of a multitude of agencies with overlapping areas of responsibility. Although countries have agreed to progress with further negotiations on an internationally binding instrument for protection of Biological Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) under the UNCLOS, the legally binding treaty is still a couple of years away.

Secondly, there are no centralized monitoring agencies and international organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and International Maritime Organisation (IMO) rely on different countries for monitoring and implementation of laws in the EEZ and on the 'high seas'. In the absence of political will, poor infrastructure and weak institutions there is inconsistent and poor enforcement of the existing laws on conservation of the oceans. This overall lack of capability is a major challenge for enforcement of SDG 14 for a large number of countries.

Thirdly, fragmented ocean governance also leads to lack of accountability amongst national and international agencies. Conflicting interests, lack of coordination and cooperation amongst different government agencies and their counterparts in other countries also add to the list of challenges. While action to prevent pollution from industrial activities on land and overflow of untreated waste into sea is a matter of stricter environmental compliance at the local level, the issue of limiting Green House Gases (GHG) in the atmosphere calls for global action. Surmounting these challenges require a major shift in the approach and attitude of the governments.

The Need for Collective Action

Marine pollution, dwindling fish stocks, ocean acidification and other degradation are all trans-boundary issues which demand collective action. The ocean is also a public good and hence all countries are obliged to protect the oceans. It is in this spirit that all governments have reached a universal agreement and are signatories to SDG 14 as part of the global development agenda. However, it must be remembered that SDGs are non-binding and voluntary in nature and considering that countries are at various stages of development, it is important that adequate support is provided to countries by providing finance, transfer of technology, development of scientific knowhow, capacity building and sharing of best practices for action on SDG 14. A joint call for action at the global and regional level led by existing international organizations such as the IMO, or other regional groupings such as the SAARC, BIMSTEC, APEC, ASEAN, IORA etc. may give impetus to the push for collective action on SDG 14.

Civil society has an important role to play along with NGOs in implementing the SDGs. Global Oceans Commission¹, Oceans Action Network², Oceans Sanctuary Alliance³, and Global Oceans Forum⁴ are few of the agencies which are playing an active role in the restoration of oceans and the technical expertise of these organisations can be tapped for developing specific programs for implementing, monitoring and reporting on SDG 14. Think tanks such as National Maritime Foundation along with its regional chapters at Chennai and Vishakhapatnam can also play an important role in raising the awareness on SDG 14 and for promoting healthy oceans around the Indian Ocean while collaborating with other maritime think tanks in different countries.

Newer organisations such as the ‘Global Partnerships for Oceans’ (GPO), which is supported by the World Bank, can also become a lead international agency to coordinate global action for implementing SDG 14. The GPO has over 150 partners representing governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and the private sector which addresses the threats to the health, productivity and resilience of the ocean by tackling problems of overfishing, pollution, and habitat loss⁵. The global network also mobilizes finance and knowledge to implement solutions for the benefit of communities in pursuit of sustainable development of the oceans.

From Collective to Multi-Level Action

Although the SDGs are global, their implementation has to be undertaken at the regional, national and sub-national level. At the regional level, cross-boundary cooperation is vital as seas and oceans transcend political boundaries. The Regional Seas Programme (RSP) is a good example of what can be achieved at a regional level. The programme under the guidance of the UNEP aims to reverse the degradation of the world’s oceans and coastal areas through the sustainable management and use of the marine and coastal environment⁶. The programme engages neighbouring countries in a comprehensive manner by undertaking specific actions to protect the marine environment through a regional convention and associated protocols. These are backed by a strong legal framework and are coordinated and implemented by member countries at the regional level. There are currently 13 such RSPs that are administered in different parts of the world including the South Asian Seas Action Plan (SASAP). The overarching program focuses on coastal management, oil-spill contingency planning, human resource development and the environmental effects of land-based activities on oceans. Although there is no regional convention, the SASAP draws from the existing global environmental and maritime conventions and contributes to regional action for maritime conservation.

At the national level, countries need to draw out their action plans for achieving the sub-targets and need to assign responsibilities to relevant agencies for achieving results in a time bound manner. The actions under the RSP and the legal framework for its implementation may serve as an example for the governments which can adapt the program to suit the respective domestic institutions and existing national laws.

At the sub-national level, the detailed plans need to be drawn and implemented by respective states or agencies which can be undertaken under the program. These actions have to be coordinated centrally at the national level by a dedicated organization. Financing for undertaking the projects, technical knowhow and scientific expertise needs to be provided centrally to these agencies and clear accountability needs to be established before commencement of the program. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), domestic financing through national action plan on climate change and development of other innovative ways to tap into international public and private financing mechanisms is also required to ensure a steady supply of funds for undertaking the activities under the program.

Success Stories

Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) is a good example of coordinating efforts for coastal and marine management and has been successfully implemented in the Mediterranean, Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Apart from conserving the oceans, it addresses the 'stressors' on oceans and targets human activity in coastal areas. The plan includes safeguarding marine protected areas, implementing development activities that takes land-sea interactions into account, conduct of Environmental Impact Assessments (EAI) for coastal projects, measures for pollution control based on a monitoring and assessment programme which are supported

by legislation, public education and the involvement of coastal communities. These cross-sectoral linkages at the national as well as at the local level are an important reason for the success of the program.

The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF & CC), Government of India has initiated the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Project in three states of West Bengal, Orissa and Gujarat. The World Bank assisted project which was approved in 2010, has a budget outlay of Rs.1155.63 crores (US\$262 million) and includes a National Coastal Management Programme. Under the project, a National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM) has been established in the Anna University, Chennai and it will be linked to eleven collaborating regional centers in each of the coastal States/Union territories. Further, the Society of Integrated Coastal Management (SICOM) has been set up for the implementation of the project. At the national level, the MoEF & CC is the lead agency and the Departments of Forests and Environment (DoFE) are partners at the state level. National Project Management Units (NPMUs) and State Project Management Units (SPMUs) have also been set up as registered societies to manage the project and to achieve the Project Development Objectives (PDOs). These entities coordinate project activities on a full-time basis and directly execute some of the relevant project's sub components. In addition, Steering Committees (SCs) at the national and the state levels have been set up for inter-sectoral coordination.⁷

Conclusion

Any effort for conservation and sustainable use of the oceans demands universal action. Similar to the vexing issue of climate change, global governance of oceans is challenging and requires that all parties agree to a common framework for implementation and monitoring. International cooperation is inbuilt in the SDGs framework, given that the goals are universal and have been arrived at by a rigorous intergovernmental process. These also promise long

term benefits to all countries. The objectives having been defined and its implementation agreed to in a time bound manner, the focus must now shift to the processes for the implementation and monitoring to achieve the targets. Although there are many success stories which could serve as models for the implementation of SDG 14 for oceans, shared responsibility, global commitments, collective and multi-level actions which are built on broad, multi-stakeholder participation and accountability are essential for achieving the SDG for oceans.

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