

## ***THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: IN PURSUIT OF BLUE ECONOMY***

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The Indian Ocean has immense potential in providing sustainable livelihood and economic development to its littoral countries. Exploring marine resources for economic development while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities has now come to be known as Blue Economy. There are many initiatives that have been taken up so far, since the evolution of the concept in 2012. As a further step in the series, the first Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) ministerial-level Conference on Blue Economy was held in Mauritius on 2-3 September 2015. Since the concept of Blue Economy provides a model of development that is ocean-based instead of solely land-based, and is better suited to the challenges and opportunities of the Indian Ocean rim countries. The key objective of the Conference was to understand and develop the concept of Blue Economy to help Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) countries to create new job opportunities and new livelihoods for the sustainable development of their huge populations. During this Conference, four priority issues were dealt with: fisheries and agriculture; renewable ocean energy; sea port and shipping and seabed exploration for hydrocarbons and minerals. Other priority issues relating to the Blue Economy such as tourism, marine bio-technology, research development, ocean knowledge, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)/Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are likely to be discussed in subsequent conferences.

Twenty Indian Ocean rim countries participated in the Conference. They agreed on cooperation on the issues adopted in the conference. Since many countries in the region are among the poorest in the world—including island nations with their intrinsic characteristics and vulnerability levels—they have formulated and strengthened their national plans and strategies to encourage the Blue Economy at the regional and national levels. This initiative can significantly assist them in eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable development processes, and improving the livelihoods of populations by enhancing resiliency and capability to deal with their specific and unique vulnerability. Nevertheless, during the last few years, the global food, energy and financial crises have slowed-down the rate of development in the region. Due to this global crisis, progress in terms of achieving the Millennium Development Goals is now threatened by slow and negative economic development resulting from decreased opportunities for trade, low resource base and insufficient aid from donor states.

It is recognized that the greatest threats to the development of the ocean economy in the region are poverty and the degradation of resources either from human activities (such as unsustainable exploitation or oil spills) or from natural causes (such as climate change). These challenges and restraints have hampered sustainable development practices in IOR countries. Therefore, the concept of a Blue Economy seems very significant in the case of Indian Ocean island states and other coastal countries. Some of island states like Seychelles and Mauritius have already taken several initiatives regarding the Blue Economy.

Recognising the importance of an ocean-based economy for island and coastal countries, the first IORA Conference has encouraged member states to enhance cooperation and coordination in various Blue Economy sectors like fisheries and aquaculture, renewable ocean energy, seaports and shipping, offshore hydrocarbons and seabed minerals. The Conference concluded with adoption of the IORA declaration with an emphasis on sustainable use of marine resources in accordance with international laws, including the Convention of Biological Diversity and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); cooperation and coordination while collecting data on the ocean environment; and the sustainable development of the ocean economy.

As India is one of the major countries in the Indian Ocean region, having a long coast line of more than 8000 kilometres and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of over 2 million square kilometers, smaller ocean states reckon that India can assist them by sharing knowledge and resources in the areas of sea ports, shipping, fisheries, and aqua culture. It could also help in creating a proper data base on ocean resources and analysing big data.

Though, such conferences are very significant for regional coordination island and coastal countries of the Indian Ocean must search for more integrated and cooperative actions in the future which will enhance sustainable development. IOR countries suffer from poverty and poor infrastructure; they also lack skilled human resource and opportunities for employment. Consequently, they face difficulties in adopting a Blue Economy. In this context, the international conference on Blue Economy 2016 proposed by the Indian Prime Minister during India-Pacific Island Forum meeting in August 2015; the Second International Blue Economy Summit scheduled to be held in UAE in 2016, and the Second IORA Conference on the Blue Economy scheduled to be held in Indonesia in 2017 may be seen as an invigouration of regional efforts to promote the concept and practices of the Blue Economy. Such efforts would, however, need to be supplemented by the call by the region's island and low-lying coastal countries for more strict and fair global action on climate change and its impacts such as sea level rise and increased frequency of natural disasters.

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