

SOUTH AFRICA'S OCEAN20 — WHY THE G20 NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND AFRICAN OCEANS BETTER

Ms Anum Khan

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Each year, once the G20 Leaders' Declaration is released, stakeholders across sectors begin parsing the document to understand how the summit's outcomes might shape their own priorities in the months ahead. Ocean stakeholders are no exception. Their expectations have risen significantly since the creation of the G20's dedicated ocean track — the Ocean 20 (O20). When O20 was launched during a high-level panel in Bali on 14 November 2022, it marked more than the establishment of a new engagement group. It signalled a fundamental shift in how the G20 views ocean governance: no longer as a peripheral environmental concern, but as a central pillar of global economic and sustainability debates. This shift gained further momentum in March of 2024, when Brazil's G20 Presidency formally institutionalised O20 as a permanent Engagement Group, creating a long-term mechanism to embed ocean priorities — ranging from climate adaptation and marine ecosystems to blue-economy transitions — into the heart of G20 deliberations.

It is **not** this author's case that the G20 had previously overlooked the ocean. Indeed, over the past decade, the forum had endorsed initiatives such as the G20 Action Plan on Marine Litter, the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, and the Coral Research and Development Accelerator Platform (CORDAP).¹ Yet, these efforts remained fragmented across workstreams, limiting their cumulative impact. O20 offered the coherence the G20 had long lacked: a continuous platform capable of consolidating and elevating ocean issues across presidencies. This trend was already visible during India's G20 Presidency in 2023, when the blue economy featured prominently under the aegis of the "Environment and Climate Sustainability Working Group". That year, the forum adopted the "Chennai High-Level Principles for a Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy", positioning Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) at the centre of sustainable ocean governance.² Collectively, these developments confirm that the ocean is no longer an

¹ Shailesh Nayak, "A Shared G20 Vision for the ocean Commons", *The Hindu*, 28 March 2023.

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-shared-g20-vision-for-the-ocean-commons/article66667483.ece>

² Shailesh Nayak, "A Shared G20 Vision for the ocean Commons".

afterthought in G20 deliberations; through O20, it is emerging as a strategic arena reshaping the forum's priorities.

South Africa, the only African country in the G20, chaired and hosted the forum for the first time with a clear ambition: to shape the G20's development agenda around the priorities of the Global South in general, and Africa in particular. Central to this effort was advancing an inclusive development model grounded in African needs and perspectives. In the early stages of its presidency, South Africa formally launched its Ocean20 initiative — Ocean20SA — during the 14th International Conference on Southern Hemisphere Meteorology and Oceanography (ICSHMO) at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC2).³ Its agenda emphasised inclusivity, equity, and long-term sustainability in ocean governance. To this end, Ocean20SA articulated three strategic pillars — solidarity, equality, and sustainability, with a focus on building intergenerational responsibility — and prioritised concrete action in ocean governance, climate resilience, blue economy development, and marine leadership.⁴

The oceans hold immense value for Africa, underpinning the continent's ecological balance, economic growth, food security, and cultural identity. With nearly 47,000 kilometres of coastline and 38 littoral and island States, Africa has articulated an ambitious Blue Economy goal: to generate US\$405 billion and create 57 million jobs by 2030.⁵ The Blue Economy is therefore not viewed as discretionary but as an essential pillar of Africa's development. The African Union's inclusion as a permanent G20 member in 2023 is thus seen as a critical opportunity to elevate African maritime priorities within global governance spaces, especially given how land-based development concerns have historically overshadowed ocean issues. Institutional reforms within the AU reinforced this shift. Following the 2019 restructuring, the AU Commission (AUC) embedded the Blue Economy within its formal mandate and, in 2021, established a dedicated Blue Economy Division to shape a continental strategy. These developments align closely with Agenda 2063 — particularly Goal Six, which positions the Blue Economy as a driver of accelerated, sustainable growth. Coastal and island States across Africa are similarly articulating national blue economy pathways, while Regional Economic Communities (RECs) integrate blue economy principles into their development frameworks. IGAD's five-year Blue Economy Strategy (2021–2025) and its Implementation Plan (BESIP) exemplify this continent-wide momentum.

With one of Africa's longest coastlines and a geographic position straddling both the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans, South Africa is endowed with exceptional marine biodiversity. This

Also See: Chime Youdon and Pushp Bajaj, "Towards A Holistic Blue Economy Framework: Adoption of High-Level Principles for Blue Economy by the G20", *National Maritime Foundation Website*, 02 March 2024.

<https://maritimeindia.org/towards-a-holistic-blue-economy-framework-adoption-of-high-level-principles-for-blue-economy-by-the-g20/>

³ NRF–SAEON, *Ocean20-SA Launch Report*, Cape Town: South African Environmental Observation Network, June 2025, <https://egagasini.saeon.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Ocean20-SA-Launch-Report.docx.pdf>

⁴ NRF–SAEON, *Ocean20-SA Launch Report*

⁵ African Union, "Africa's Blue Economy: The Next Frontier for Economic Resilience," *AU Press Release*, 23 September 2025, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20250923/africas-blue-economy-next-frontier-economic-resilience>

positioning not only enriches its natural heritage but also enhances its ability to shape global discussions on marine and maritime issues. Building on this advantage, South Africa — through the National Research Foundation’s South African Environmental Observation Network (NRF–SAEON) Egagasini Node — led the Ocean20 Engagement Group. The Ocean20SA theme, “*Uniting for Inclusive and Sustainable Development: Advancing Cooperative Innovation and Partnerships for Action*,” encapsulated this vision.⁶ Distinctively, the initiative adopted the Quadruple Helix model, bringing together academia, industry, government, and civil society to collaboratively address complex ocean challenges. Guided by this approach, NRF–SAEON developed a series of measurable Ocean Actions emerging from events, workshops, and high-level engagements aligned with priorities set under the Brazil-led Ocean Dialogues. To translate these priorities into action, the initiative mobilised wide-ranging cross-sectoral support to foster collaboration, mobilise financial resources, and embed long-term ocean-focused initiatives within society. Although the ocean possesses robust self-regulatory capacity, this resilience holds only when human pressures remain within ecological thresholds. Today, however, the oceans face an emerging “*polycrisis*” in which multiple anthropogenic stressors — geopolitical tensions, unsustainable extraction, carbon-intensive energy production, pollution, habitat degradation, and species translocations — intersect and amplify one another.⁷ These cumulative pressures contribute to biodiversity loss, intensify climate-related risks such as acidification and sea-level rise, increase disaster vulnerability, and weaken marine ecosystem resilience. Recognising the urgency of these challenges, Ocean20SA formulated a set of targeted Ocean Actions to deliver practical, measurable, and inclusive solutions. These spanned Blue Finance, adaptive and evidence-based ocean governance, ocean literacy, blue food security, ecosystem restoration, species translocation dynamics, and renewable energy transitions.

As an outcome of these deliberations, the South Africa Communiqués issued key recommendations, including: the full implementation of SDG 14, the BBNJ Agreement, and the Kunming-Montreal Framework; expansion of sustainable blue foods; scaling of ocean-based renewable energy; reduction of shipping emissions in line with the IMO GHG Strategy; promotion of inclusive innovation; de-risking of finance through public–private–philanthropic partnerships; urgent action to protect tropical coral reefs; and expanded ocean literacy.⁸ A central early achievement of Ocean20SA was its broadening of stakeholder engagement, enabling dialogue across sectors on marine and maritime issues. However, as maritime challenges cascade across systems, this dialogue must similarly evolve into coordinated action and implementation. Yet despite this momentum, discussions have not fully shifted toward a holistic approach to prioritising Africa’s ocean potential. As oceans become the new frontier of economic growth, Africa must ground its ambitions in a comprehensive stocktake of what its oceans yield, what they must continue to yield, and what must be safeguarded. Only through such an integrated assessment can the continent clearly define the benefits it seeks to secure from its maritime domain.

⁶ NRF–SAEON, *Ocean20-SA Launch Report*

⁷ NRF–SAEON, *Ocean20-SA Launch Report*

⁸ NRF–SAEON, *Ocean20-SA Launch Report*

Africa stands at the heart of global ocean action but experiences impacts that are distinctly regional in nature. South Africa was therefore duty-bound to bring these perspectives to international fora. This is also about shaping accountability mechanisms in ways that genuinely benefit African countries and other poorer nations — an emphasis subtly advanced in Johannesburg. Ocean20SA placed climate impacts at the centre of its debate, and South Africa urged member countries to scale up investments in climate-disaster resilience. As President Ramaphosa noted in Johannesburg: *‘Disaster knows no borders. But their toll is heaviest on those without the means to recover and to rebuild.’*⁹ Disasters also transcend the maritime domain. The Cape of Good Hope, for instance, is a weather-determined chokepoint that poses significant risks to vessels navigating around it. About 13% of the population of eastern Africa lives along the coast, with major cities and ports such as Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Maputo, Beira, and Nacala featuring extensive low-lying, flat coastal zones. Moreover, much of this eastern coastline lies along the trajectory of tropical cyclones originating in the southwest Indian Ocean basin, where landfalls typically occur between November and April.¹⁰ For example, Tropical Cyclone Hidayah — equivalent to a Category 1 hurricane — was the first of its kind to develop along the eastern coast, causing severe flooding that claimed hundreds of lives in Kenya and Tanzania.¹¹ According to a World Bank estimate, by 2050, 86 million Africans will be forcibly internally displaced due to climate change.¹² The continent is already on the move. In South Africa itself, rising temperatures and growing water scarcity are pushing rural communities into urban centres such as Cape Town, further straining limited resources. Therefore, if we are to pursue African solutions to African problems, it is incumbent on South Africa to foreground the continent's unique challenges.

Yet even as these challenges grow, Africa continues to shape its own responses. Along the Kenyan coast, the Mikoko-Pamoja Project tells a powerful story of community-led resilience. In Gazi Bay, the local community is restoring mangrove forests and, in a global first, funding their efforts through the sale of carbon credits. It is celebrated as a ‘triple win’ for climate, community, and biodiversity.¹³ Across the continent, numerous other climate-resilience projects are underway, including the UNDP-GEF Project, the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem initiative (spanning Namibia, South Africa, and Angola), Kenya’s “Go Blue” Project, and the Great Blue Wall initiative, which aims to establish a connected network of marine protected areas in the western Indian Ocean.¹⁴ Complementing these conservation efforts, African seas also hold immense potential to support the green energy transition, as several

⁹ Global News, “G20 Summit Concludes with Ambitious 122 Point Declaration After Two Day Meeting”, *Afro Insight News*. <https://afroinsightnews.com/g20-summit/>.

¹⁰ Bernardino J Nhantumbo et al, “Sea Level Rise and Climate Change – Impacts on African Coastal System and Cities” in *Sea Level Rise and Ocean Health in the Context of Climate Change*, eds Yuanzhi Zhang and Qiuming Cheng, (IntechOpen, Upcoming), <https://www.intechopen.com/online-first/88259>.

¹¹ Martina Igini, “Kenya, Tanzania Hit by First-ever Cyclone following Weeks of Heavy Rain, Deadly Floods”, *Earth Org*, 06 May 2024. <https://earth.org/kenya-tanzania-hit-by-first-ever-cyclone-following-weeks-of-heavy-rain-deadly-floods/>.

¹² Africa Climate Insights, “The Unseen Toll of Climate Migration in Africa”, 25 March 2025, <https://africaclimateinsights.org/the-unseen-toll-of-climate-migration-in-africa/>.

¹³ Mikoko Pamoja Project: About Us: Who We Are, <https://mikokopamoja.org/about-us/>.

¹⁴ “Project Objectives: BCLME III”, Benguela Current Convention, <https://www.benguelacc.org/bclme-iii-project-2/>.

coastal States are well-positioned to harness ocean currents for electricity generation. These currents carry substantial kinetic energy that can be converted into power using underwater or floating turbines, operating much like offshore wind farms but driven by the steady movement of the ocean. A study analysing 30 years of water-velocity data has identified high-energy zones off Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania, with power densities ranging from 500 to 2,500 watts per square metre across vast stretches of coastline.¹⁵ Such findings position East Africa as one of the world's most promising regions for developing non-conventional energy resources—particularly those derived from mechanical energy.

Within the G20, the Energy Transition Working Group (ETWG) has become a key platform for shaping global energy transition priorities — ranging from diversifying energy sources to securing critical mineral supply chains and managing price volatility. Yet, even as Africa advances some of the most ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions, the broader G20 dialogue often overlooks the continent's structural constraints. This tension was evident in Johannesburg, where the rhetoric of a “*just energy transition*” featured prominently, but the deeper limitations of existing financing models remained largely unaddressed. The “*Just Energy Transition Partnerships*” (JETPs), promoted as flagship mechanisms, underscore this gap between ambition and reality. While they signify progress, their loan-heavy design reveals a persistent asymmetry in how transition costs are borne. For countries already facing acute fiscal pressures, such financing risks undermine the very principle of justice. South Africa's experience is telling: of the initial US\$8.5 billion pledged, only 4% was offered as grants, while more than 60% came as commercial loans.¹⁶ Rather than easing the shift to clean energy, this structure risks deepening debt vulnerabilities and weakening the equity that a just transition demands.

Another pressing issue concerns Africa's place within global clean-technology value chains. Despite holding over 30% of the world's known reserves of critical minerals — such as nickel, lithium, and cobalt — the continent remains largely absent from the high-value segments of processing and manufacturing. These estimates account only for land-based deposits, as oceanic mineral reserves have yet to be comprehensively mapped. Nevertheless, Africa continues to export the bulk of its critical minerals in raw or minimally processed form, allowing value addition to take place elsewhere along the supply chain. In response, the African Union has adopted the African Green Minerals Strategy, aimed at promoting responsible resource development, increasing local processing, and strengthening value-addition capacities. These priorities closely align with the African Mining Vision of 2009, which outlines a pathway for mineral-led industrialisation across the continent.¹⁷

Food security was also a prominent concern on the G20 agenda. Ocean20SA explicitly prioritised blue foods, recognising their critical role in the nutrition and wellbeing of coastal

¹⁵ James H Van Zwieten Jr. *et al*, “Ocean Currents can Generate Electricity – and our Study shows Africa's Seas Have Some of the Strongest”, *The Conversation*, 05 June 2025. <https://theconversation.com/ocean-currents-can-generate-electricity-and-our-study-shows-africas-seas-have-some-of-the-strongest-253754>.

¹⁶ S Selvaraju, A Indah Pratiwi, L Sabogal, and V Ahlgren, *Just Energy Transition Partnership Grants and Country Platforms: Lessons from Indonesia and South Africa* (London: Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2025).

¹⁷ Ana Garcia *et al*, eds, “G20 in Brazil and South Africa Priorities, Agendas and Voices of the Global South” (Auckland: UJ Press, 2025)

communities. Globally, an estimated 600 million people depend — at least in part — on the aquatic food sector for their livelihoods, with nearly 500 million engaged in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. In Africa, where fisheries form the nutritional and economic backbone of many coastal regions, this dependence is even more pronounced. However, this sector is threatened by illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which accounts for \$246.3 million in annual losses from depleted stocks, undeclared revenues and habitat degradation.¹⁸ Despite this, the food-security discourse at Johannesburg remained predominantly land-focused, with only limited recognition of the ocean's role in sustaining diets, supporting informal economies, and enabling climate-resilient food systems. At the heart of the issue is the reality that much of Africa's domestic fishing sector is artisanal in nature and therefore unable to scale or compete with international industrial trawlers operating with far superior technology and extraction capacity. Africa's ocean-spaces are not merely ecological assets; they constitute living food systems that underpin household stability, informal economic activity, and cultural continuity. Integrating blue foods more prominently into G20 deliberations is, therefore, not a supplementary consideration but an essential one — aligning global food-security commitments with Africa's lived realities.

To do true justice to the vast oceanic face of the continent, global forums must deepen their understanding of Africa's maritime realities and the structural constraints that shape them. South Africa's stewardship of Ocean20SA has underscored both the immense opportunities embedded in African ocean spaces and the risks of overlooking them. If energy security is to remain a global priority, then the security of energy itself must be given equal weight — particularly as offshore energy potential across the African Maritime Domain (AMD) is considerable. Mozambique's offshore petroleum reserves in the Rovuma Basin have advanced to the cusp of extraction; Somalia has issued multiple exploration and production licences; and Kenya is increasingly described as a "*frontier exploration country*." Yet, much of this promise remains stalled by persistent insecurity: the Rovuma Basin continues to face the threat of ASWJ insurgency, while northeastern Kenya and the Lamu basin grapple with recurrent Al-Shabaab attacks.¹⁹

For the G20, recognising the full spectrum of Africa's ocean priorities — from climate resilience and marine livelihoods to energy transitions and equitable value chains — is not merely a gesture of inclusion but a prerequisite for shaping sustainable, credible, and forward-looking global policy. Only by engaging with Africa's oceans in a holistic and sustained manner can future deliberations within O20 advance a genuinely global ocean agenda — one that is just, responsive, and equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

¹⁸ Anne Nzouankeu, "Illegal Fishing, Other Maritime Threats Cost Western Indian Ocean \$1b a Year: Report", *Mongabay*, 12 December 2025, <https://news.mongabay.com/short-article/2025/12/illegal-fishing-other-maritime-threats-cost-western-indian-ocean-1b-a-year-report/>.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, "Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado", *Africa Report*, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado>.

About the Author

Ms Anum Khan is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation. Her research is centred upon the multiple maritime facets of the eastern African littoral, about which she is deeply passionate. She may be contacted at amgs2.nmf@gmail.com