

Concept Note

Ocean at Risk – How can we Save our Ocean in the Context of Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Goals?

Tuesday, 2nd April 2019, UN City, Copenhagen

8:00 – 9:00, Auditorium I

Background

Recognizing the environmental, economic and social benefits of the ocean and the erosion of those services through anthropogenic pressures, SDG 14 “Life below water” aims at the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources. In order to mobilize action in support of the implementation of SDG 14, Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives gathered at the UN Ocean Conference in 2017. More than 1.500 voluntary commitments on ocean action to achieve the targets of SDG 14 have been made to date by governments, UN system bodies, NGOs and other stakeholders. The progress regarding SDG 14 was moreover reviewed in depth at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017, where countries emphasized the importance of the ocean for sustainable development and human well-being.

The ocean and climate change are inextricably linked. In its preamble, the Paris Agreement notes the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity. Countries emphasize that while the ocean plays an important role in mitigating climate change by serving as heat and carbon sink, the impacts from climate change which include temperature rise, ocean acidification and sea-level rise endanger marine biodiversity and coastal livelihoods. The IPCC’s 2018 Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty warn against the risk of irreversible loss of many marine and coastal ecosystems with increasing global warming. Coral reefs, for instance, are projected to decline by a further 70–90% at 1.5°C of warming and will face losses over 99% at 2°C. Fisheries and aquaculture are the sectors most at risk from the forecasted ocean warming, which may lead to decreases in global annual catch. Failure to act on climate change will thus have serious implications for the ocean as well as humans. Countries recognize these linkages and stress that ocean action needs to be accompanied by efforts to implement the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda.

Addressing the issues in an integrated manner is however perceived as a huge challenge. Countries often point to national strategies and action plans that seek to advance marine protection with due

regard to climate change impacts and resilience building. This includes a high degree of interagency cooperation and coordination among departments which countries have reported to struggle with according to the HLPF Synthesis Report (2017).¹ Over 20 % of the voluntary commitments made by governments, UN system bodies, NGOs and other stakeholders included references to climate action. Resilience building of coastal communities and marine ecosystems to the impacts of climate change is one of the issues most often addressed in national policies aiming to link ocean and climate action. This typically involves the restoration, management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems such as mangroves, coral reefs and seagrass beds. Addressing ocean acidification, which is caused by increased CO₂ levels in the atmosphere, requires further scientific research and continuous monitoring to close gaps in knowledge. Countries also stress the importance of the implementation of the Paris Agreement to tackle ocean acidification through CO₂ reductions.

Small island development States (SIDS) share economic, social and environmental characteristics that constrain their sustainable development efforts and make them particularly vulnerable to global climate change, climate variability and sea-level rise. Developing national frameworks that tackle ocean protection with regard to the impacts of climate change as well as strengthening coastal protection against natural hazards and sea-level rise are among the policies most often reported by SIDS. International assistance to address those challenges is being assured for example in the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway (SAMOA Pathway). However, given their size and their comparatively low contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS emphasize that they are highly dependent on global efforts to restrict CO₂ and pledge for enhanced climate action.

Energy is - apart from agriculture - the sector contributing most significantly to climate change. A transition to renewable energy is therefore a crucial prerequisite for mitigating the impacts of climate change on the ocean. According to the World Resources Institute, to date only 25 % of the world's electricity comes from renewable sources, displaying a huge potential for CO₂ reductions.² Marine renewable energies such as offshore wind farms, wave and tidal power offer a sustainable, non-polluting alternative to fossil fuels. Apart from contributing to climate change mitigation objectives it has the potential to provide a significant energy resource base for island countries and countries situated along the coastlines, thereby advancing action regarding SDG 7, affordable and clean energy. However, the potential impacts of activities generating marine renewable energies on other activities in the ocean and marine ecosystems make careful planning necessary, e.g., through marine spatial planning and strategic environmental assessments.

The individual stressors on the ocean including not only climate change and ocean acidification but also marine pollution, such as eutrophication, and overfishing interact, hence need to be managed in an integrated approach to achieve ocean health and resilience. Turning the 2030

¹ See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf

² See https://www.wri.org/blog/2019/01/climate-action-barometer-12-charts-explain-where-we-are-today-and-where-we-need-be-2020?utm_campaign=WRIclimate&utm_source=Climate_Digest-2019-03-19&utm_medium=email&utm_content=title

Agenda into practice is key for addressing the causes and impacts of climate change, while climate action is a prerequisite to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The circular economy is a whole system approach aimed at decoupling economic activities from the consumption of finite resources. This includes using biodegradable materials where possible and reintroducing technical products into the cycle through recovery, repair and remanufacture or – when this is not possible – recycling. Thereby the circular economy can not only contribute to address marine (plastic) pollution but also climate change. The extraction, processing and manufacturing of goods is responsible for a large part of greenhouse gases. However, the Circularity Gap Report (2019) finds that the global economy is only 9% circular, displaying huge potentials for improvement.³ By keeping products and materials in use, regenerating natural systems and promoting renewable energy, waste and pollution is designed out of the system and economic, natural and social capital is built. A circular economy thus provides the potential for aligning climate action and contributing to ocean protection as well as advancing the 2030 Agenda.

Objective

This side event at the Global Conference on Strengthening Synergies between the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Maximizing Co-Benefits by Linking Implementation across SDGs and Climate Action considers how to accelerate integrated action aimed to achieve SDGs and implement the Paris Agreement at all levels. In particular, it seeks to raise awareness and improve the understanding of the linkages between climate change and the ocean and aims to illustrate how those synergies can be effectively addressed. Participants will present specific examples of complementary approaches for conserving and sustainably using the ocean and its resources in the light of the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda. The key messages emerging out of this side event will inform the in-depth review of SDG 13 at the HLPF in 2019 and follow-up activities to the 2017 UN Ocean Conference, including the Communities of Ocean Action.

Participants

Opening remarks will be given by Ambassador Peter Thomson, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean. The panel will consist of country experts and representatives of think tanks. Confirmed speakers include Ms. Maja Johannessen, Research Analyst at Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Ms. Miriama Betham-Malielegaoi, Deputy Permanent Representative/ Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Samoa to the United Nations and Mr. Masanori Kobayashi, Senior Research Fellow at Ocean Policy Research Institute, Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

³ See https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ad6e59_ba1e4d16c64f44fa94fbd8708eae8e34.pdf