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Achieving Ocean Sustainability in Africa Through Inclusive Management

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Background Paper 1

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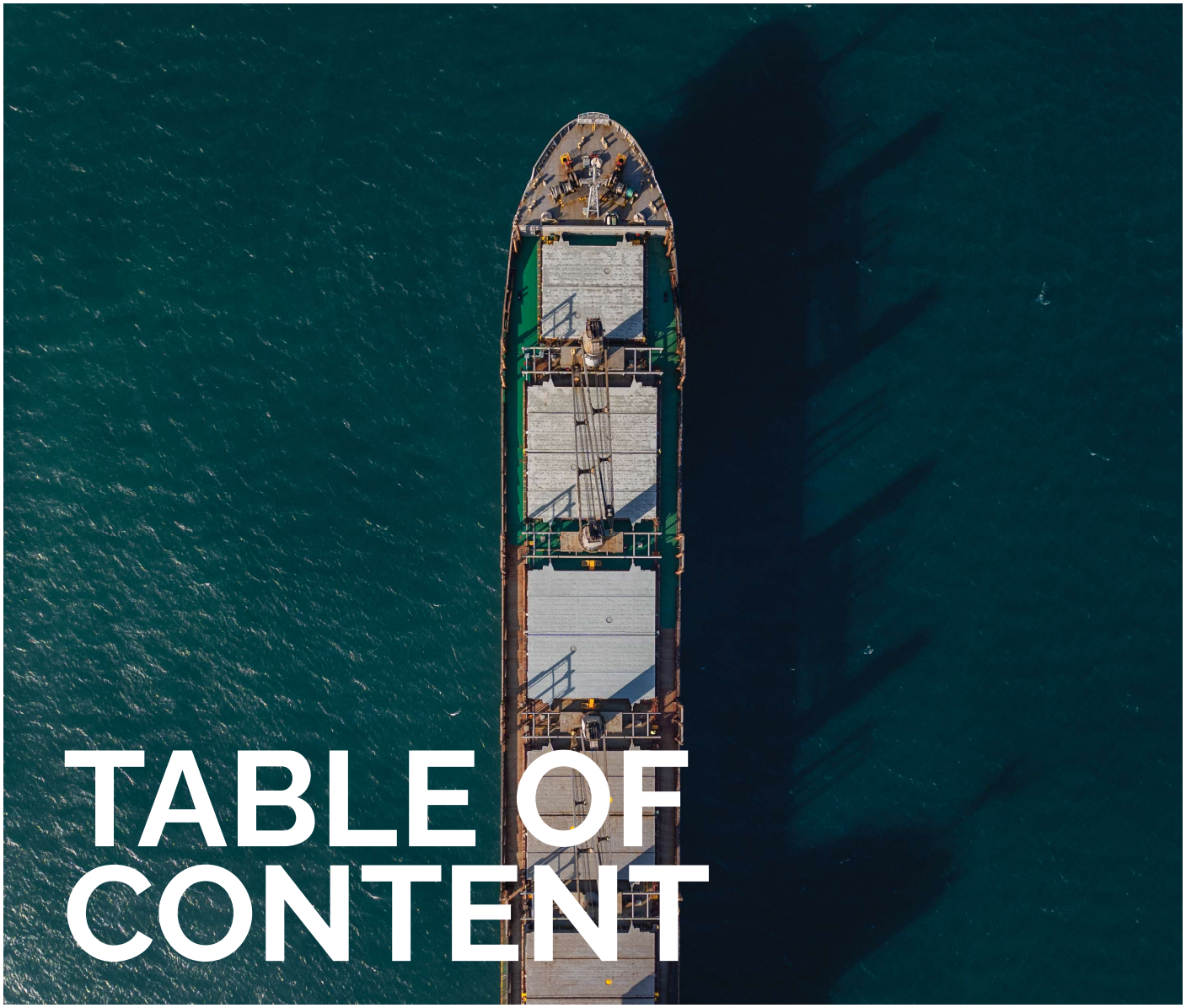


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Abstract

African marine ecosystems face unprecedented pressures from overexploitation, climate change, and inadequate governance structures. These ecosystems now stand at a critical juncture where the top-down exclusion of human activity, otherwise the legacy of 'fortress conservation,' threatens the very biological integrity it sought to preserve. Whilst conservation efforts have traditionally relied on top-down, exclusionary models rooted in Western scientific paradigms, evidence increasingly demonstrates that inclusive approaches that integrate local knowledge, gender perspectives, and community participation yield more sustainable and equitable outcomes. This background paper argues for a shift towards inclusive management by integrating Local Ecological Knowledge (LEK), establishing co-management frameworks, and upholding human rights. It also proposes a strategic roadmap for inclusive management that aligns conservation with social justice, international maritime law, and emerging opportunities in Blue Carbon. This transformation will enable African states to foster a resilient Blue Economy. This study draws on examples such as the Bazaruto Archipelago in Mozambique and the Regional Network of Marine Protected Areas in West Africa (RAMPAO).



bazaruto-archipelago-Mozambique

Keywords: sustainable, blue carbon, marine resources, Africa

Introduction

Africa's coastline stretches over 30,000 kilometres, hosting some of the planet's most productive biodiversity. However, the governance of these waters often mirrors colonial-era structures that disenfranchise the 12 million people involved in artisanal fisheries. Its marine fisheries contribute substantially to food security, livelihoods, and economic development, with an estimated 12.3 million people employed directly in the sector. Approximately 50 per cent of the estimated population engaged in post-harvest activities, including processing, preservation, and marketing, are predominantly women, yet decision-making structures consistently marginalise these crucial stakeholders.

Colonial governance models imposed centralised, scientific management systems that dismissed indigenous knowledge as primitive or irrelevant. Post-independence administrations often inherited these structures wholesale, perpetuating what might be termed 'epistemic violence', explained as the systematic devaluation of local ways of knowing. Contemporary marine conservation initiatives, whilst well-intentioned, frequently replicate this pattern through expert-driven assessments, imported management frameworks, and consultation processes conducted in colonial languages that exclude many fishers. [2]The designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) has often led to 'green grabbing,' displacing or criminalising coastal communities for traditional practices.

While women constitute half the fisheries workforce and dominate critical value-chain segments, they remain virtually invisible in formal governance structures. [3] The average representation of women in parliaments in Africa is about 27 per cent.[4] Women make up to 80 per cent of the seafood marketing workforce in West Africa but hold less than 15 per cent of fisheries management committee seats, with their community-level decision-making largely limited by patriarchal norms[5]. In the fisheries sector, this exclusion is unjust and economically irrational because women's perspectives on seasonal variations, market dynamics, and household food security are essential to effective policy design.

Conservation measures implemented without community input risk resistance, low compliance, and ultimately failure. Ghana's 2019 closed fishing season, introduced to allow stock recovery, generated significant hardship amongst fisherfolk with no alternative livelihood support. This resulted in economic distress and resistance towards the conservation policy.

[2] Béné, C., Hersoug, B., & Allison, E.H. (2010). Not by Rent Alone: Analysing the Pro-Poor Functions of Small-Scale Fisheries in Developing Countries. *Development Policy Review*, 28(3), 325-358.
[3] Harper, S., Zeller, D., Hauzer, M., Pauly, D., & Sumaila, U.R. (2013). Women and Fisheries: Contribution to Food Security and Local Economies. *Marine Policy*, 39, 56-63.
[4] Pippie Hugues, & Esther Folashade Abiodun. (2025). Women in Political Leadership: Progress and Barriers in West and East Africa. In IRASS Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (Vol. 2, Number 5, pp. 26–28). Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15397602
[5] Environmental Justice Foundation (2023). Leaving No One Behind: A community-based analysis of gender inclusion and economic vulnerability in Liberia's small-scale fisheries.

The Dasgupta Review (2021) emphasises that economies are not external to nature but deeply embedded within it.[6] In Africa, coastal populations serve as the primary defenders against climate-induced sea-level rise, and exclusionary policies become a systemic risk to national security.

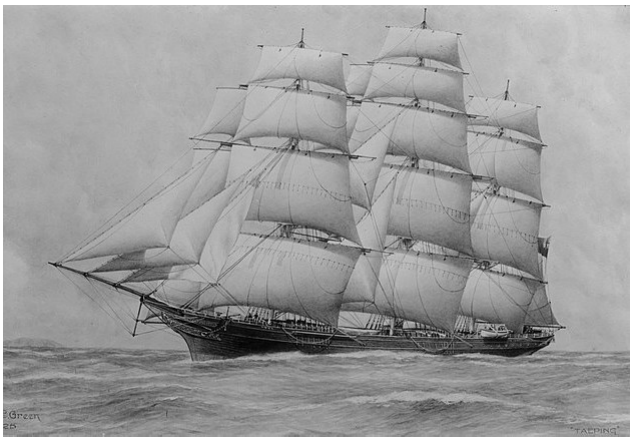
Nelson Mandela warned that ....

> **"if we fail to act, Africa's unique biodiversity will be lost to our world, and her children, forever"**



Harnessing UNCLOS for Community Equity

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea[7] (UNCLOS) is frequently invoked in maritime boundary disputes, yet it contains untapped potential to anchor the rights of coastal communities. Under Article 61(2), the Convention requires coastal States to ensure that living resources are not endangered by overexploitation and to take measures based on the best available scientific evidence. By expanding the definition of science to include LEK, policymakers can legally integrate community wisdom into national strategies. Furthermore, Article 61(3) explicitly requires States to consider the economic needs of coastal fishing communities when determining allowable catches, thereby providing a direct legal mandate to prioritise artisanal fishers over industrial fleets. The obligation for Marine



Technology Transfer under Part XIV (Articles 266–269) could likewise be harnessed to empower local communities with decentralised tools such as low-cost monitoring systems, to fulfil international obligations whilst enhancing local agency.

[6] Dasgupta, P. (2021). *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review.* HM Treasury.
[7] United Nations. (1982). *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.* UN General Assembly

The Shift from Consultation to Co-Creation

Indigenous and local communities across Africa possess sophisticated ecological knowledge accumulated over generations. Ghanaian fishing communities, for instance, observe taboo days which are traditional rest periods that align well with spawning cycles identified through research on fish behaviour. In April 2026, the Government of Ghana declared the Greater Cape Three Points Marine Protected Area, the country's first formally designated MPA, covering approximately 703.86 square kilometres of coastal waters in the Western Region.[8] The area encompasses ecologically significant habitats, including fish spawning and nursery grounds, rocky reef systems, wetlands and mangrove ecosystems, and directly affects 21 coastal communities whose livelihoods are closely tied to fisheries and other marine resources. Its significance lies not merely in its designation, but in the management model it is expected to adopt: a zoned approach combining no-take core areas with multiple-use zones, alongside community co-management arrangements involving local authorities, fisherfolk and other coastal stakeholders.

If implemented effectively, the MPA could provide an important test of whether conservation can move beyond exclusionary protection towards a more inclusive model that supports ecological recovery while safeguarding the rights, livelihoods and knowledge of coastal communities.[9] Its success will depend, however, on the timely finalisation of zoning arrangements, adequate financing, credible enforcement, and the meaningful participation of women, fish processors and other actors whose contributions to the fisheries value chain are often overlooked in formal governance structures.

In the Bijagós Archipelago of Guinea-Bissau, customary marine tenure systems have regulated fishing access for centuries, maintaining reef health through spatial and temporal closures long before the concept of marine protected areas entered Western scientific discourse. Madagascar's octopus fishery demonstrates the integration of traditional knowledge, in which community-managed temporary closures, informed by local understanding of octopus reproduction, increased catches by an average of 60 per cent whilst enabling stock recovery. Communities designed and enforced these closures, ensuring legitimacy and compliance. The Velondriake, for example, is a locally managed marine area on Madagascar's southwest coast covering over 1,000 square kilometres, and operates under traditional Malagasy laws - '*dina* '-alongside scientific monitoring, exemplifying productive knowledge pluralism. [10]

[8] Ghana News Agency (2026) 'Ghana Declares First Ever Marine Protected Area', *Ghana News Agency*, 15 April. Available at: https://gna.org.gh/2026/04/ghana-declares-first-ever-marine-protected-area/

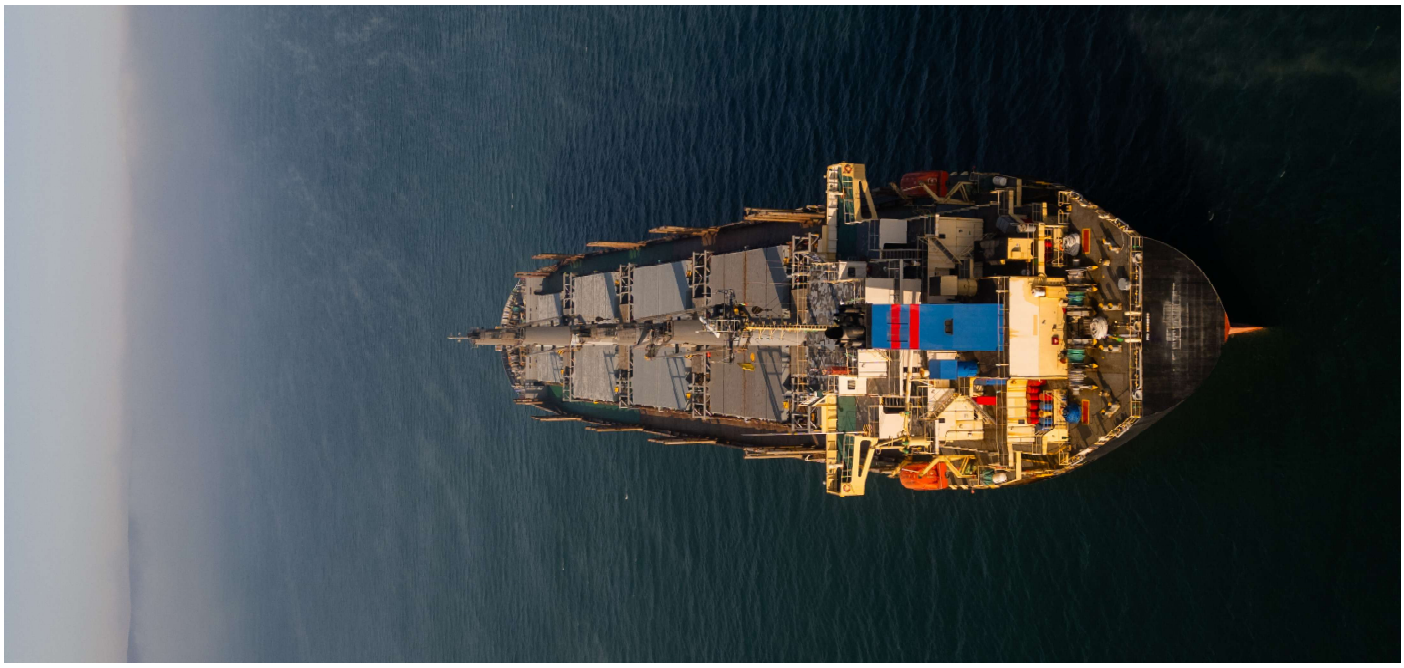
[9] Joint Nature Conservation Committee (2026) *Delivering Technical Assistance on Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Ghana*. Available at: https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ghana/

[10] Augustave, L. C. (2018). Governing for Viability: The Case of Velondriake Locally Managed Marine Area in Madagascar. In *Transdisciplinarity for Small-Scale Fisheries Governance: Analysis and Practice* (pp. 163-177). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Knowledge pluralism, the recognition that indigenous wisdom is as vital as Western oceanography, underpins inclusive conservation. Moving beyond 'box-ticking' consultations, inclusive approaches mandate a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)[11] which align with the principles of the Aarhus Convention that ensure public participation and access to justice. When local fishers are treated as stewards rather than suspects, the cost of enforcement drops, often the largest hurdle in marine conservation, and the quality of ecological data rises as community-led monitoring strengthens.[12]

Co-management frameworks, in which government agencies share decision-making authority with community organisations, have shown considerable promise across African contexts. Senegal's Local Artisanal Fisheries Councils (Conseils Locaux de Pêche Artisanale, or CLPA) provide statutory platforms for fishers to participate in quota-setting, gear restrictions, and enforcement. These councils bring together government officials, fisher representatives, women processors, and traditional leaders, creating space for negotiation across different knowledge systems and interests.[13]

Tanzania's Beach Management Units (BMUs), established under the 2003 Fisheries Act, devolve certain management functions to the community level, including licensing local fishers and enforcing gear restrictions. Although implementation has been uneven, with some BMUs hampered by inadequate resources and unclear jurisdictional boundaries, successful units demonstrate the potential for local stewardship. Consequently, well-functioning BMUs achieve higher compliance with mesh-size regulations than areas under purely state enforcement.[14]



[11] United Nations (2019). United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Guidance https://unsdg.un.org/resources/united-nations-sustainable-development-cooperation-framework-guidance
[12] Jentoft, S., & Chuenpagdee, R. (2009). Fisheries and Coastal Governance as a Wicked Problem. *Marine Policy*, 33(4), 553-560.
[13] Centre for Maritime Law and Security Africa, (2024). Fisheries Governance And Inclusive Decision-Making: The Case of Local Artisanal Fisheries Councils in Senegal.
[14] Etiegni, C. A., Irvine, K., & Kooy, M. (2020). Participatory governance in Lake Victoria (Kenya) fisheries: whose voices are heard?. *Maritime Studies, 19*(4), 489-507.



Emerging Frontiers through Blue Carbon and the High Seas Treaty

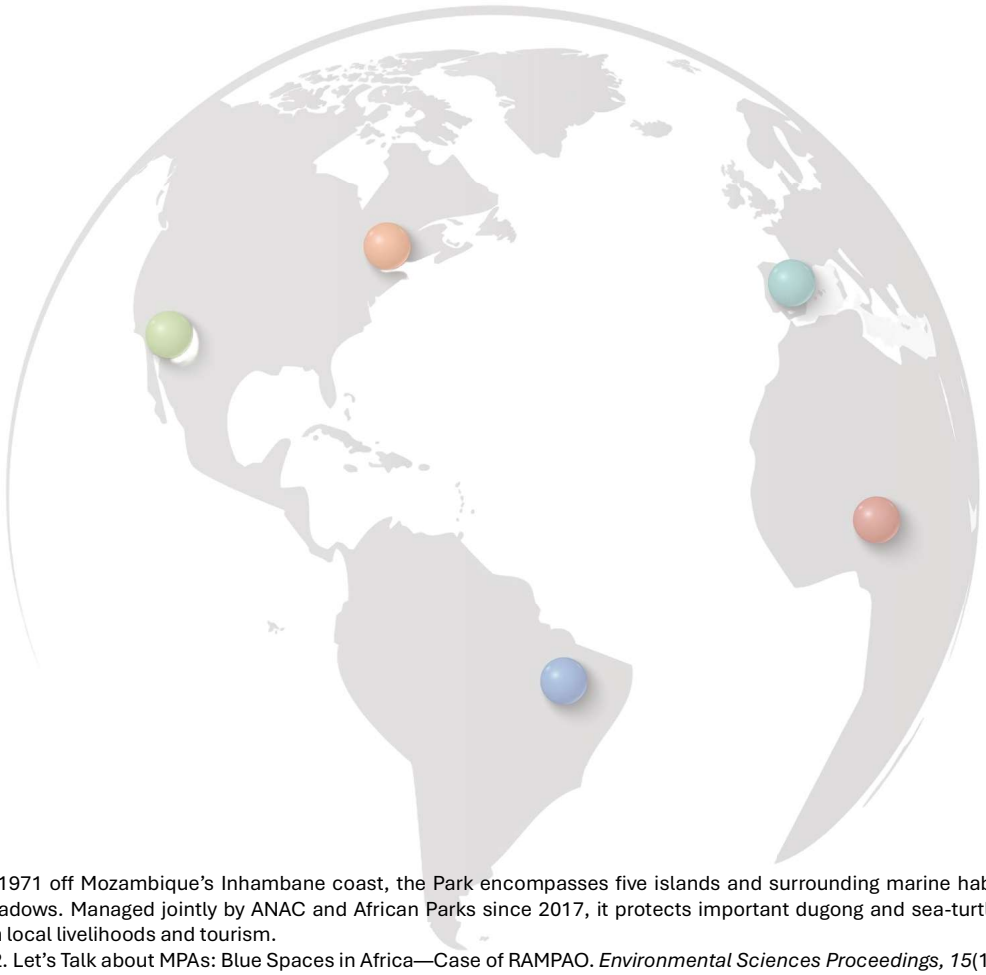
The financial architecture of conservation is being transformed by the rise of blue carbon, a comparatively more efficient carbon-sequestration alternative to terrestrial forests that simultaneously provides essential storm protection, biodiversity nurseries, and food security for coastal communities.[15] For African states, mangroves, seagrasses, and salt marshes represent significant carbon sinks. However, for these credits to be ethical and effective, the legal frameworks must ensure that revenue flows directly to the coastal stewards. By nesting blue carbon projects within Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), states can achieve multifaceted benefits for climate, biodiversity, and poverty alleviation. Furthermore, the recent adoption of the BBNJ Agreement (High Seas Treaty) signals a global shift toward viewing the ocean as the common heritage of humankind. Whilst the treaty focuses on areas beyond national jurisdiction, its principles of equitable benefit-sharing and the recognition of traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) set a new global standard that African nations should mirror within their own territorial waters.

[15] The Blue Carbon Initiative. (n.d.) . About blue carbon. Retrieved from https://www.thebluecarboninitiative.org/about-blue-carbon on February 9, 2026

Lessons from African and Global Precedents

Globally, the UK Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009) provides a legislative template for integrated planning, yet it also serves as a cautionary tale. The legal disputes surrounding the Chagos Archipelago highlight that even robust frameworks fail when they neglect the rights of displaced or indigenous peoples. The Bazaruto Archipelago National Park[16] in Mozambique exemplifies successful transformation. By transitioning to a collaborative management model that employs residents as rangers, the park has secured the last viable dugong population in East Africa whilst revitalising the local economy.

Similarly, the Regional Network of Marine Protected Areas in West Africa (RAMPAO)[17] demonstrates the efficacy of transboundary inclusivity, linking community-led sites across Mauritania and Senegal to ensure that nature is treated as a central economic asset rather than a peripheral concern.



[16] Established in 1971 off Mozambique's Inhambane coast, the Park encompasses five islands and surrounding marine habitats, including coral reefs and seagrass meadows. Managed jointly by ANAC and African Parks since 2017, it protects important dugong and sea-turtle habitats while balancing conservation with local livelihoods and tourism.

[17] Selkani, I., 2022. Let's Talk about MPAs: Blue Spaces in Africa—Case of RAMPAO. *Environmental Sciences Proceedings, 15*(1), p.32.

Strategic Recommendations for Implementation

To achieve a truly inclusive policy for ocean sustainability, governments must prioritise the following strategic actions:

1. Institutionalise Knowledge Pluralism: African fisheries governance must move beyond the separation between scientific and traditional knowledge. Both knowledge systems have strengths and limitations, and effective management requires their integration. Governments should establish formal mechanisms to document and incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into stock assessments, spatial planning, and regulatory design. This might include participatory research methodologies and protocols that protect intellectual property rights whilst enabling knowledge sharing.

2. Legislate for Co-Management: There is a need to create legal pathways for LMMAs to receive formal state recognition, aligning national law with UNCLOS Article 61. Such legislation should be paired with the establishment of GEDSI (Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion) protocols to ensure that women, whose contributions are often publicly submerged, are involved in decision-making.

3. Establish Blue Carbon Equity: The financial architecture of conservation requires restructuring through national frameworks to mandate that a minimum percentage of carbon credit revenue be reinvested in community-led restoration. The financing gap needs to be bridged by shifting from volatile short-term grants to Blue Bonds and sustainable financing mechanisms that channel funds directly to community-led restoration projects.

4. Invest in Marine Cultural Heritage: The recognition that coastal landscapes and traditional maritime histories are essential to a community's identity could drive sustainable heritage tourism that respects both the past and the biological future of our oceans.

5. Operationalise the BBNJ Principles Locally: The High Seas Treaty's standards for the inclusion of traditional knowledge need to be adopted for all Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and relevant activities.

Conclusion

Inclusive approaches are not panaceas and risk elite capture, in which local elites exert their power to potentially dominate processes and resources. The sustainability of African ocean resources requires transparent management and the representation of diverse leaders, including all relevant stakeholders. While participatory methods take time, establishing inclusive frameworks can yield outcomes that help avert failures of top-down management. Exclusionary conservation has pragmatic and ethical limitations, and, given the importance of marine resources to livelihoods and cultural values, effective governance that incorporates community partnerships is recommended. In essence, inclusive approaches empower the ocean's primary dependents to assume their role as stewards.

> **"Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents; it was loaned to you by your children - A Kenyan proverb"**

About the Authors

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Josephine Laryea Asare is an ocean governance & marine fisheries specialist with over a decade of experience in fisheries management, policy implementation, stakeholder engagement and research. She has extensive experience working with diverse stakeholder groups across various projects on small-scale fisheries in Ghana and industrial trawl fisheries in Scotland. Josephine is presently a PhD student at the University of St Andrews. She continues to build on the leadership experience she gained as Senior Fisheries Manager with the Fisheries Commission of Ghana, where she led initiatives that translated regional catch and vessel data into national policy.

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About the Forum

Since 2022, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), and SIGLA at Stellenbosch University have collaborated under the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund's Maritime Security Programme to organise annual fora on maritime security, primarily focusing on the Gulf of Guinea.

The fora provide a platform to examine maritime security challenges, assess existing vulnerabilities, and discuss initiatives and responses to insecurity in the region. In 2025, the forum was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa, with discussions expanded to cover developments in the Red Sea and their implications for littoral countries in Southern and Western Africa.

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