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for the Implementation of Ocean-related
Sustainable Development Goals**

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**Secretary-General's background note
for the preparatory meeting of the United Nations Conference to Support the
implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14**

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Seventy-first session

Agenda items 19 and 74 (a) of the provisional agenda*

**Background note of the Secretary-General
for the preparatory process of the United Nations Conference to
Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14:
Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine
resources for sustainable development***Summary*

The present background note was prepared in response to paragraph 19 of resolution 70/303, which requests the Secretary-General to prepare a background note, including a proposal for themes of partnership dialogues for the conference, to be considered by the preparatory meeting to be held on 15-16 February 2017 at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The Note outlines the status and trends, the challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal 14, looking at each target and cross-cutting issues of financing and capacity building and on the basis of this, proposes seven themes for partnership dialogues for the conference.

* [A/71/150](#).

I. Introduction

The General Assembly, in resolution 70/226, decided to convene the high-level United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. The Conference will be convened at United Nations Headquarters in New York, from 5 to 9 June 2017, coinciding with World Oceans Day, observed annually on 8 June. The overarching theme of the Conference will be “Our oceans, our future: partnering for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14”.

The present Note was prepared in response to paragraph 19 of resolution 70/303, which requests the Secretary-General to prepare a background note, including a proposal for themes of partnership dialogues for the conference, to be considered by the preparatory meeting (15-16 February 2017, United Nations Headquarters in New York).

United Nations organizations (see Annex1) and relevant parts of the Secretariat contributed to this Note. The inputs from the informal preparatory process under the Advisory Group to the Co-hosts of the Conference were also taken into account.

II. Activities, challenges and opportunities for the implementation of SDG14

1. Status and trends

Oceans and seas and their resources support human well-being and livelihoods. They underpin poverty eradication, food security, employment, tourism and the protection from natural disasters. They provide humans with water and oxygen, while also being the primary regulator of the global climate and an important sink for greenhouse gases.

Marine and coastal ecosystems provide a vital basis for the livelihoods of many coastal communities, particularly in developing countries. More than 3 billion people rely on fish for animal protein, and some 300 million people find their livelihoods in marine fisheries—90 percent of those in small-scale, artisanal fisheries. The consumption of fish is increasing in all countries.

However, marine- and land-based human activities continue to be a threat to oceans and seas and marine resources. Marine pollution and litter, 80 percent of which comes from land-based sources, compromise ocean health. Invasive alien species, introduced through ballast water, aquaculture and tourism, among other means, severely impact native ecosystems. One quarter of all carbon dioxide released through human activity is absorbed by the oceans, raising the acidity of the sea water, with dire consequences for the marine ecosystems. Studies have shown that since the beginning of the industrial revolution, oceans have become 27 per cent more acidic,¹ and predictions show that, by 2050, ocean acidity could even increase by 150

¹ IPCC “Social, economic and ethical concepts and methods” and “Drivers, trends and mitigation”, Climate

percent. Some estimates predict that up to 60 percent of the current biomass in the oceans could be affected positively or negatively by CO₂ emissions and climate change, with severe implications for ecosystem services, and 90 percent of coral reefs will be threatened by 2030 if no protective measures are taken.²

Destructive fishing practices, overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing are increasing pressures on marine ecosystems, and nearly one-third of all fish stocks are now below sustainable levels—up from 10 percent in 1974.³ Harmful fisheries subsidies exacerbate the problem by encouraging fishing overcapacity.

The deterioration of coastal and marine ecosystems and habitats has more severe and immediate impacts on vulnerable groups. Small island developing States (SIDS) in particular, with their culture and economies deeply interconnected with the oceans, suffer acutely from the degradation of marine ecosystems.

The First Global Integrated Marine Assessment notes that the world's oceans are facing simultaneous pressures with such great impacts that the limits of their carrying capacity are being, or, in some cases, have been reached, and that delays in implementing solutions to the problems that have already been identified will lead to incurring greater environmental, social and economic costs.⁴ Projected global population growth to 9.6 billion people by 2050 is foreseen to aggravate the situation if no counter-measures are taken.

In the face of this situation, governments, organizations and individuals are taking action. Several international instruments have been adopted to address the many challenges facing oceans and seas, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out. UNCLOS and its implementing agreements⁵ are complemented by a comprehensive web of instruments regulating various aspects related to the use of the oceans and their resources and the marine environment, from maritime transport to exploitation of living and non-living resources and pollution from various sources.

Several integrated, interdisciplinary and intersectoral tools have been developed to help manage activities in the oceans and seas in a more sustainable manner, including ecosystem approaches and area-based management tools, such as marine spatial planning and marine

Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change, (2014) Ch. 3 and Ch. 5

² UNDESA, 2014, How oceans- and seas-related measures contribute to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: Local and regional experiences.

³ FAO (2016) The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2016. Contributing to food security and nutrition for all. Rome.

⁴ Summary of the First Global Integrated Marine Assessment, A/70/112; A/71/L.26, para. 289.

⁵ Agreement relating to the implementation of Part XI of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 (Part XI Agreement); Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks (United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement or UNFSA).

protected areas (MPAs). The number and size of MPAs worldwide has increased dramatically over the last 20 years, with 14,688 MPAs currently covering almost 15 million square km, or 4.12% of the oceans. The number of States taking steps to implement marine spatial planning has also increased.

Sustainable ocean-based economies, which build on fisheries, tourism, aquaculture, marine renewable energies, marine biotechnology and other activities, are increasingly being looked at as a path to sustainable development, including in SIDS.

2. Challenges and opportunities for the implementation of SDG 14

Both challenges and opportunities exist in the implementation of SDG 14. The targets under SDG 14 exhibit close interrelationships and interlinkages with one another and also within each target. A good performance on any of them would accelerate progress on the others. For example, the means of implementation identified under targets 14.a and 14.c will be critical to the achievement of all other areas of SDG 14. Of particular importance in this regard is the effective implementation of the legal framework established by UNCLOS and its implementing agreements. Conversely, failure to achieve some of the targets would negatively impact many others – sustainable management of marine and coastal ecosystems under target 14.2 is a case in point. In addition, achieving some of the targets under SDG 14 will depend on a broad array of actions under other SDGs, including in relation to food security, economic growth, industrialization and infrastructure, and sustainable consumption and production. These interactions should be kept in mind when discussing implementation of SDG 14.

The following sections considers the ten targets of SDG 14, as well as the means of implementation dimensions of financing and capacity-building.

a) Target 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

Marine pollution originates from a number of land-based and marine sources, including riverine discharges, agricultural and industrial run-off, urban outfalls, municipal or industrial wastewater, atmospheric deposition, illegal or indiscriminate dumping, accidents (e.g. oil spills), fishing operations, maritime transport and off-shore activities (e.g. seabed mining). More than 80% of marine pollution is derived from land-based sources. The introduction of invasive species, including through the exchange of ship ballast water, also remains a major concern.

Over the past 40 years, global rules and standards have been developed to regulate most of the ship-related sources of pollution. Steps are now being taken to further strengthen the uniform enforcement of these rules and standards around the globe. Good progress has been made in reducing pollution from ships originating from catastrophic events (shipwrecks,

collisions and groundings) and chronic impacts from regular operational discharges.⁶ Progress has also been made in improving response capabilities, though much remains to be done.⁷ As regards pollution in relation to garbage, the major obstacle to the implementation of the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships has been the lack of, or insufficient, reception facilities in many ports.⁸ Steps have also been taken to reduce or, where possible, eliminate many of the impacts of heavy metals and hazardous substances, with positive trends in some parts of the world, even though problems persist in some local areas. New technologies and processes have also been widely developed that can potentially address these problems, but there are gaps in the capacities to apply these newer processes as they are very costly.⁹

Population density in coastal zones is much higher than in non-coastal areas and the urbanization will accelerate this trend combined with the predicted world population increase. Biodiversity-rich areas have a disproportionately high representation of ports and coastal infrastructure, intensive coastal land uses, fishing activities and aquaculture.¹⁰ This trend has already had significant environmental impacts on oceans and seas, particularly as a result of the lack of environmentally sound waste management in coastal cities.¹¹ Wastewater, nutrient load pollution and solid waste discharges, including in the form of litter, plastics and micro-plastics, are a major threat. New wastewater treatment technologies and waste management processes may have the ability to minimize problems, but there can be gaps in the capacity to apply these newer processes, often because of the costs involved in particular in developing countries.

While UNCLOS provides a general legal framework to address marine pollution from land-based sources, the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities (GPA) is currently the only global mechanism entirely dedicated to address this issue. Under the GPA framework, some 98 countries have prepared National Plans of Action and/or relevant national plans/strategies to address land-based pollution. However, the lack of sewage systems and wastewater treatment plants, in particular for large urban settlements, is still a major threat to the ocean.

Policies to reduce marine pollution may limit the vulnerability of marine ecosystems. For example, enhancing waste management in coastal urban areas should be a priority, as should be the minimization of pollution of freshwaters which convey pollutants to the marine environment. Sustainable consumption and production is highly relevant to incorporation of circular economy principles and practices that touch on higher resource use efficiency, recycling and minimization of harmful discharges to the environment.

⁶ United Nations, 2016, First Global Integrated Marine Assessment, Chapter 17;

⁷ United Nations, 2016, First Global Integrated Marine Assessment.

⁸ A/71/74.

⁹ United Nations, 2016, First Global Integrated Marine Assessment.

¹⁰ A/69/71.

¹¹ A/70/112.

b) Target 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

Managing ecosystems sustainably involves balancing sustainable use and biodiversity and habitat conservation on the basis of the best available scientific information, data, knowledge and best practices. Yet, often there seems to be no clear process for addressing the different knowledge gaps and ensuring that sound advice is available for management, in relation to critical fishery resources, habitats and critical natural processes.

The lack of strong and coordinated frameworks to develop and implement integrated coastal zone and ocean management and planning as well as ecosystem approaches was highlighted in contributions to this Note. Also stressed was the need for effective national legislation, civil society participation, strengthening of administrative and technical frameworks and capabilities, and institutional arrangements that enhance and ensure monitoring, control and surveillance, and enforcement of legislation. Sharing knowledge and practices more systematically can help address coordination problems and needs to involve both public and private stakeholders.

The importance of ecosystems and ecosystem approaches, as well as the need for enhancing their resilience, as the basis for sustainable management of the marine environment and resources has long been recognized.¹² The development and implementation of area-based management tools should, to the extent possible, be combined with other appropriate conservation and management measures, taking into account the need to avoid negative impacts in other areas.¹³

Sustainable management of coastal ecosystems requires sustained inclusion and participation of coastal communities. Legislative and policy frameworks should foster community organization and allow for their full participation in the management of marine resources as stewards, as their engagement helps achieve better biodiversity outcomes.

c) Target 14.3: Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels

An emerging body of research suggests that many of the effects of ocean acidification on marine organisms and ecosystems will be variable and complex, impacting developmental and adult phases differently across species depending on genetics, pre-adaptive mechanisms, and synergistic environmental factors. Ocean acidification is also expected to have significant

¹² See for example General Assembly resolution 70/235.

¹³ See A/CONF.210/2016/5.

socioeconomic impacts, particularly on communities and economic sectors dependent on the oceans and their resources.¹⁴

Major adverse impacts to ecosystems from ocean acidification will be compounded by impacts from climate change which include ocean warming and a reduction in the solubility of CO₂, shifting currents and deoxygenation. Warming oceans are also changing the behaviour of fish stocks, generally pushing them toward the poles and to deeper water, and also are changing the metabolic rates, range and productivity of some species. Sea level rise endangers natural habitats and poses major threat to coastal settlements worldwide. The impacts of all these threats are already apparent and expected to increase.¹⁵

The long-term control of ocean acidification depends on the reduction of emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In this regard, effective implementation of the Paris Agreement will be instrumental.

Currently no global international instrument is specifically dedicated to addressing ocean acidification or its impacts on the oceans. Nevertheless, a number of existing international instruments, at the global and regional levels, may contain relevant provisions.¹⁶

The protection and sustainable management of oceans and seas will be critical to build resilience of ocean ecosystems to the effects of ocean acidification and climate change and to support their role as carbon sinks and thus meet adaptation and mitigation goals. For example, protecting coastal habitats such as barrier islands, coral reefs, mangroves and wetlands reduces human vulnerability in the face of climate change and provides the natural infrastructure (e.g. storm protection) on which people rely.

Significant opportunities also exist through enhanced collaboration among States, regional fisheries management organizations and arrangements (RFMO/As), regional seas conventions and action plans, scientific organizations, academia and civil society in conducting research to achieve an understanding of the impacts of, and risks associated with, ocean acidification and climate change.

d) Target 14.4: By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and

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