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**Regional Seas implementation and monitoring  
of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

## Regional Seas implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

### I. BACKGROUND

1. In the “The Future We Want” adopted at the Rio+20 Summit, the member States recognized “*that the development of goals could also be useful for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development. We further recognize the importance and utility of a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs),.....*” (paragraph 246), and resolved “*to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on SDGs that is open to all stakeholders with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the United Nations General Assembly. The Open Working Group was established and was supposed to submit a report to the 68th session of the UNGA containing a proposal for sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action...*” (paragraph 248).
2. Driven by this document, the Open Working Group was formulated and produced a draft document to be adopted at the Post-2015 Summit in September 2015. The outcome document entitled “*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” was adopted by the General Assembly in September 2015 (UNEP/WBRS.18/Inf xxx).
3. In the document, 17 Sustainable Goals and 169 associated goals are proposed, many of which are relevant to the work and scope of the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans. While the SDGs constitute an indivisible and universal body to be targeted in its entirety, the following goals are highlighted as those more closely relevant to the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans:
 

Goal 1, especially 1.5; Goal 2 especially 2.4; Goal 5, especially 5.a; Goal 6 especially 6.3,6.5, and 6.6; Goal 7, especially 7.2, 7.a; Goal 8 especially 8.3, 8.4 and 8.9; Goal 11, especially 11.6; Goal 12, especially 12.2 and 12.4; Goal 13, especially 13.1 and 13.2; Goal 14, especially 14.1,14.2, 14.3, 14.4, 14.5, 14.6, 14.7, 14.a, 14.b, and 14.c;and Goal 17, especially 17.16 and 17.18.
4. The same document indicates that “*Governments have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review, at the national, regional and global levels, in relation to the progress made in implementing the Goals and targets over the coming fifteen years.*” (paragraph 47). It further outlines that “*[I]ndicators are being developed to assist this work. Quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind.*” “*Data and information from existing reporting mechanisms should be used where possible.*” (paragraph 48).
5. Subsequently the list of Sustainable Development Goal indicators was adopted at the United Nations Statistic Commission (UNEP/WBRS.18/INF7). Of particularly importance to the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans are those related to SDG14.

6. The RSCAP established a Working Group on Regional Seas Indicators, which agreed on a coordinated set of Regional Seas indicators and decided to align the agreed set with the SDG14 indicators. The results of the Working Group are also submitted to the present meeting (UNEP/WBRS.18/xxx).
7. The General Assembly through resolution A/RES/70/226 decided to organize 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, in Fiji during 5-9 June 2017. It is expected that practical arrangements for the implementation of the Goal, particularly multi-stakeholder partnerships would be highlighted.
8. The second session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) made a number of resolutions which also affect the Regional Seas Programme. Among them, the most important ones are: Resolutions 2/4 (Role, functions and modalities for United Nations Environment Programme implementation of the SAMOA Pathway as a means of facilitating achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals); 2/10 (Oceans and Seas); 2/11 (Marine plastic litter and microplastics); 2/12 (Sustainable coral reefs management); and 2/18 (Relationship between the United Nations Environment Programme and the multilateral environmental agreements for which it provides the secretariat).
9. Operational Paragraph 3 of Resolution 2/10 invites “the Executive Director to provide the necessary input for 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 to be organized in June 2017, as appropriate”. Further the Assembly invites “*Member States and regional seas conventions and action plans, in cooperation, as appropriate, with other regional organizations and for a, such as regional fisheries management organizations, to work towards the implementation of, ad reporting on, the different ocean-related Sustainable Development Goals and associated targets, the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets*” (Operational paragraph 5 of the same Resolution).

## II. RREGIONAL SEAS CONVENTIONS AND ACTION PLANS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

10. The UNEP Regional Seas Programme<sup>1</sup>, launched in 1974, is one of UNEP’s most significant achievements in the past 40 years. It aims to address the accelerating degradation of the world’s oceans and coastal areas through sustainable management and use of resources and by engaging littoral countries in specific actions to protect shared marine environments. It has accomplished this by stimulating the creation of regional seas programmes for sound environmental management coordinated and implemented by countries sharing a common body of water.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “a regional seas programme” is used to denote a programme for specific regional seas, normally governed by Inter-Governmental Meetings of littoral states and, in some cases, by legally binding instruments, such as a framework convention and associated protocols. All regional seas programmes seek their programmatic activities in the Action Plans and supportive thematic action plans (such as marine litter action plans, LBS action plans, etc.). The terms “*UNEP Regional Seas Programme*” refers to the coordination programme of UNEP over UNEP-administered and non-UNEP-administered regional seas programmes. Currently, 18 regional seas programmes are participating in this coordination programme (see [www.unep.org/regionalseas](http://www.unep.org/regionalseas)).

11. Today, more than 140 countries participate in 14 Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans (Black Sea, Wider Caribbean, East Asian Seas, Eastern Africa, South Asian Seas, ROPME Sea Area, Mediterranean, North-East Pacific, Northwest Pacific, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, South-East Pacific, Pacific, Caspian and West and Central Africa) established under the auspices of UNEP. Secretariats of seven of these regional seas programmes are administered by inter-governmental organisations or regional centres while the remaining seven are administered by UNEP. These regional seas programmes received financial and technical support from UNEP in the initial phases of development of an action plan and its initial implementation. There are other regional seas conventions and action plans under general UNEP coordination, and these are Northeast Atlantic, Baltic Sea, Arctic Ocean and Southern Ocean.
12. The Regional Seas programmes function through the implementation of Action Plans. In most cases, such Action Plans are underpinned with strong legal frameworks in the form of regional Conventions and associated Protocols addressing specific problems. In the Action Plans and in some cases in the Protocols, specific objectives and goals are defined for their member states and parties to collectively achieve. In some regional seas, thematic action plans exist and were agreed, such as regional marine litter action plans, regional action plans on land-based sources of pollution, regional contingency plans for accidental oil and chemical spills, Sustainable Consumption and Production, Offshore resource extract, and regional marine biodiversity action plans. In some regional seas, Strategic Action Programmes (SAPs) were agreed upon, mainly through the GEF funded projects. These thematic action plans and SAPs also clearly define regional objectives, goals and sometimes targets.
13. Different regional Action Plans and associated legal instruments have varied scopes of action at regional and national levels depending on the perceived and assessed issues and problems related to the regional seas environment, requiring different sets of action from one region to another. Generally speaking, many of the regional seas programmes were started based on the scope of the UNEP marine environment activities as defined by the UNEP Governing Council: The overall strategy to be followed was defined by UNEP's Governing Council as<sup>2</sup>:
- *Promotion of international and regional conventions, guidelines and actions for the control of marine pollution and for the protection and management of aquatic resources;*
  - *Assessment of the state of marine pollution, of the sources and trends of this pollution, and of the impact of the pollution on human health, marine ecosystems and amenities;*
  - *Co-ordination of the efforts with regard to the environmental aspects of the protection, development and management of marine and coastal resources; and*
  - *Support for education and training efforts to make possible the full participation of developing countries in the protection, development and management of marine and coastal resources.*
14. Over the years when the regional seas programmes developed themselves by addressing regional or global emerging issues and needs, the scope of these programmes have also been modified. Many human and sector activities are

<sup>2</sup> UNEP. 1982. Achievements and Planned Development of UNEP's Regional Seas Programme and comparable programmes sponsored by other bodies. UNEP Regional Seas Reports and Studies No.1.

considered to be pressure to degrade the marine environment, and in order to address the sources and threats to the degradation of the marine environment, the regional seas programmes started addressing the human activities identified to be significant from the perspective of the protection of the marine environment. Further by introducing the ecosystem approach, the member states and regional seas programmes recognised that the maintenance of the marine ecosystem functioning is related to economic and social benefits. Different regional seas programmes took different pathways for their own evolution, resulting in different programmes and their scopes. The Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention/Mediterranean Action Plan developed a Mediterranean Sustainable Development Strategy (the current version covers 2016-2025) and its regional sustainable development has been monitored through sustainable development indicators and followed up by the Mediterranean Sustainable Development Commission. The East Africa regional seas programme introduced the blue economy concept and started working with other ocean sectoral organisations.

15. UNEP by issuing the document, “*Ecosystem Approach to Regional Seas*”<sup>3</sup> where setting and agreeing on ecosystem based objectives/targets as well as the monitoring of their achievements have been promoted. Annex II indicates the compiled information on the strategic documents each regional seas programme use to define its goals, objectives and targets.

### III. ENGAGEMENT OF THE REGIONAL SEAS CONVENTIONS AND ACTION PLANS IN SDGS

16. The Agenda 2030 clearly defines the follow-up and review of the SDGs. Some of the principles for SDGs included and relevant to the Regional Seas Programme are (paragraph 74):

*“(a) They will be voluntary and country-led, will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities. As national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national-level processes will be the foundation for reviews at the regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.”*

*“(b) They will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development.”*

*“(f) They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid Duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.”*

*“(h) They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes, particularly in African countries, least developed countries, small island developing States, landlocked developing countries and middle-income countries.”*

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<sup>3</sup> UNEP (DEPI) RS.15/WP.2.RS

17. The Agenda 2030 also defines the follow-up and review at the national, regional and global levels.
18. In order to achieve SDGs and implement the recommended regional-level follow-up and review, the Regional Seas Conventions and Action plans are encouraged to work in three areas: (i) aligning the regional objectives/goals/targets with the relevant SDGs and accelerating the implementation of strategic documents through national and regional action; (ii) setting up a regionally coordinated mechanism to assist the Member States in developing national reports in a coordinated manner, targeting the shared regional seas; (iii) regional partnerships under the global multi-stakeholder partnerships; and (iv) assist the Member States in applying the coordinated set of Regional Seas indicators, which are aligned with the SDG indicators.
  - (i) Aligning the regional objectives with SDGs
    19. The regional seas programmes and/or their Member States have developed various strategic documents, ranging from the Regional Seas Conventions and associated Protocols, regional strategies for sustainable development (such as the revised one for the Mediterranean, adopted in 2016), Action Plans, Strategic Action Programmes (SAPs) and National Action Programmes (in support of the SAPs). Some of these strategic instruments were developed and agreed upon outside the regional seas programmes, but the same member states of the regional seas programmes committed themselves to achieve the strategic objectives and goals included in these policy instruments. These documents engage and in many cases oblige the member States in achieving the objectives and goals clearly defined in them.
    20. In the implementation of these documents and its monitoring, each regional seas programme has its own institutional framework. It is proposed that each regional seas programme list up all relevant regional objectives, goals and targets in relation to the relevant SDGs and their associated targets (Annex I of this document). It is further proposed that the regional seas programme review them from the perspective of how achieving these regional objectives, goals and targets would contribute to the SDGs and associated targets.
    21. If and when the Member States of the specific regional seas programme so decide based on the review above, the programme may revise the existing objectives, goals and targets to be aligned with the global targets.
    22. With such an exercise as proposed above, the member States of the regional seas programme can clearly recognise that achieving the regional objectives, targets and goals would lead to the implementation of the SDGs. Targeting specific regional seas ecosystems they share, they can move towards a regionally coordinated SDGs implementation and mutual assistance among them. Effective external support would be expected for such a regional seas initiative.
    23. Based on the review of the regional strategic objectives or targets, it is proposed that each regional seas programme move toward development of a SDG implementation outlook, which should outline the approach, strategy and partnership with and by which the specific SDG target will be implemented through the regional mechanisms and cooperation. The outlook also indicates the baseline situation and possible projections for the region's SDG implementation under various scenarios. For some SDG targets,

regional seas programmes may be advised to achieve them through a global programme or globally coordinated action/partnership. The example of marine litter may fall into this category as there is a developed multi-stakeholder partnership, which is the Global Partnership on Marine Litter.

24. The implementation of the strategic documents is to be reviewed by the existing regional seas institutional mechanisms, such as Conference of the Parties, Intergovernmental Meetings, etc. The implementation will be guided by the SDG implementation outlook. By incorporating SDGs into the strategic documents of the regional seas, the existing regional seas institutional frameworks should be able to review the implementation of the SDGs relevant to their scope and mandates.
25. Many of the SDGs may be considered to be outside the scope and mandate of the regional seas programmes. Among them regional seas programmes may decide to achieve and monitor some of them by establishing partnership with relevant regional and/or international organisations. For example, in regard to the fishery related SDGs, regional seas programmes may work with regional fisheries bodies to jointly assist the member States in their implementation and monitoring.
26. Once the SDGs are closely aligned with the regional seas strategic documents, necessary actions at national and regional levels should be defined within the strategic document frameworks. Some of regional seas strategic documents are accompanied by national programmes in support of achieving the regional strategic targets. Clear definition or revision of regional goals/objectives/targets within the regional seas strategic documents should lead to development of a set of national measures or national programmes in support of achieving the Ocean related regional strategic targets/objectives/goals. These national programmes may be expressed in new national marine programmes or revised national programmes of action. Further such national programmes should be incorporated into national responses, possibly in the form of national development plans or national sustainable development plans, as advocated by the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (paragraph 78).
27. Under the Partnership for Regional Ocean Governance (PROG), which UNEP has been leading together with Institute of Advanced Sustainability Studies and Institut du Développement Durable et des Relations Internationales, a project is being implemented to support interested regional seas programmes in implementing the relevant SDGs, particularly those evaluated to be of priority by their members and assisting their members States in achieving these goals. Two other projects are under preparation: (i) one with EC funding for regional ocean governance for SDG implementation; and (ii) the other with Italian funding for SDG 14.5 on marine protected areas (under the 10x20 initiative).

(ii) Regionally coordinated mechanisms for national reporting

28. The Agenda also defines the three levels of follow-up and review: national, regional and global. The national level of follow-up and review is defined as:

*“78. We encourage all Member States to develop as soon as practicable ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda. These can support the transition to the Sustainable Development Goals and build on existing planning*

*instruments, such as national development and sustainable development strategies, as appropriate.*

*79. We also encourage Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels which are country-led and country-driven. Such reviews should draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities. National parliaments as well as other institutions can also support these processes.”*

29. The regional level follow-up and review is defined as:

*“80. Follow-up and review at the regional and subregional levels can, as appropriate, provide useful opportunities for peer learning, including through voluntary reviews, sharing of best practices and discussion on shared targets. We welcome in this respect the cooperation of regional and subregional commissions and organizations. Inclusive regional processes will draw on national-level reviews and contribute to follow-up and review at the global level, including at the high-level political forum on sustainable development.*

*81. Recognizing the importance of building on existing follow-up and review mechanisms at the regional level and allowing adequate policy space, we encourage all Member States to identify the most suitable regional forum in which to engage. United Nations regional commissions are encouraged to continue supporting Member States in this regard.”*

30. At the global level, the high-level political forum will have a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level, working coherently with the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and other relevant organs and forums, in accordance with existing mandates. It will facilitate sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, and provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for follow-up.

31. The Secretary-General of the United Nations submitted his report to the General Assembly at its seventieth session, “Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level<sup>4</sup>. In this report, the high-level political forum voluntary national reviews are discussed, but details, such as frequencies and number of reviews are not provided. However, each country could consider

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