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Regional Seas Strategic Directions (2017-2020)

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I. Background

Oceans, seas and coastal environments form integral parts of our planet, providing vital ecosystem services. These ecosystems provide a wide range of benefits to humans, from fisheries to climate regulation, underpinning livelihoods of people around the world. However, severe degradation of oceans has been observed due to pollution derived from human activities. Sea-level is rising, posing great threats to coastal communities, while ocean acidification threatens biodiversity in marine and coastal ecosystems, which underpin ecosystem services.

Over the past decades, the international community has become increasingly aware of the need for improved ocean management at international, regional and national level, in order to effectively conserve the marine and coastal ecosystems. At the Rio+20 Conference, member states clearly recognised that sustainable management of oceans and seas is critical for humans. Based on the outcome document “The Future We Want” of the Rio+20 Conference, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015. The Goal 14 of the SDGs, “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” emphasizes the importance of oceans for sustainable development. In this context, the UNEP Regional Seas Programme will have an increasingly important role in assisting member states with achieving the SDG Goals relevant to oceans and seas.

The UNEP Regional Seas Programme has been UNEP’s most important regional mechanism for the conservation of the marine and coastal environment since its establishment in 1974. It is an action-oriented programme that implements region-specific activities, bringing together stakeholders including governments, scientific communities and civil societies. UNEP is mandated to coordinate eighteen (18) Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans, in which 146 countries participate. UNEP administers seven Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans (Caribbean, East Asian Seas, Eastern Africa, Mediterranean, North-West Pacific, Western Africa and Caspian Sea). In addition, it coordinates and cooperates with other eleven Regional Seas Organisations. The UNEP Regional Seas Programme strives to maintain, restore and enhance marine and coastal resources to support human well-being through sustainable development.

Since 2004, Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans have been formulating Regional Seas Strategic Directions to strengthen the Regional Seas Programme at the global level by setting a common vision. Currently the Regional Seas Strategic Directions (2013-2016) are implemented and progress has been observed especially with the work related to an ecosystem approach. On the other hand, the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans struggled to strengthen collaboration with relevant organisations such as Regional Fisheries Organisations.

In 2014, the Regional Sea Programme celebrated its 40th anniversary. Reflecting on the past achievements and lessons learnt, Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans engaged in a visioning exercise at a Workshop held in Geneva, Switzerland, 3-4 July 2014 and at the 16th Global Meeting of the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans in Athens, Greece, 29 September – 1 October 2014. The

visioning processes identified four key themes for the future work of Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans: (1) Pollution, (2) Climate Change and Ocean Acidification, (3) Extraction (living and non-living resources), and (4) Governance.

Based on the key themes identified, the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans adopted the next Regional Seas Strategic Directions (2017-2020) at the 17th Global Meeting of the Regional Seas Conventions and Actions Plans in Istanbul, Turkey, 20-22 October 2015. This document sets out the new Strategic Directions for the Regional Seas Programme in line with the SDGs, as agreed by the representatives of Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans Secretariats.

II. Regional Seas Strategic Directions (2017-2020)

The Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans aim to connect regional activities with global processes through the Strategic Directions (2017-2020), strengthening the Regional Seas Programme at the global level in response to the SDGs and 2030 Agenda. The 2017-2020 Strategic Directions will complement the previously adopted Strategic Directions (2004-2007, 2008-2012, and 2013-2016).

The two core goals of the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans across four key thematic strategies are to:

- Promote and facilitate ratification, adoption and implementation of Regional Seas Conventions, Action Plans and Protocols, working in concert with other Regional Seas Organisations.
- Strategically work in collaboration with international and regional organizations, including Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) and other relevant stakeholders.

The Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans will therefore aim to:

1. Reduce marine pollution of all kinds in line with the SDG Goal 14.1.
2. Create increased resilience of people, marine and coastal ecosystems, and their health and productivity, in line with the SDG Goal 13 and decisions made at the UNFCCC COP21.
3. Develop integrated, ecosystem-based regional ocean policies and strategies for sustainable use of marine and coastal resources, paying close attention to blue growth.
4. Enhance effectiveness of Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans as regional platforms for supporting integrated ocean policies and management.

III. Implementation of the Strategic Directions

In order to effectively carry out the Strategic Directions (2017-2020), UNEP and the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans will adopt two core goals mentioned above in the implementation of four thematic strategies.

To achieve the **Strategy 1 “Reduce marine pollution of all kinds in line with the SDG Goal 14.1”**, UNEP and the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans will:

- Enhance data, information management, monitoring and assessment at national and regional level through development of guidelines, baselines, regional indicators, and monitoring programmes as well as identification of region-specific emerging issues through research
- Raise the visibility of relevant pollution issues at all levels and facilitate science-policy interactions emphasizing socio-economic impacts and promoting relevant practices, tools, technologies and measures
- Raise issues at global level and facilitate regionalization of outcomes of the GPA IGR4 and mandated global partnerships

To achieve the **Strategy 2, “Create increased resilience of people, marine and coastal ecosystems, and their health and productivity, in line with the SDG Goal 13 and decisions made at the UNFCCC COP21”**, UNEP and the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans will:

- Support mainstreaming of climate change into regional and national policies and institutional frameworks
- Assess the impacts of climate change and the resilience of people, society and ecosystems in marine and coastal areas to propose adaptation strategies
- Create or support climate research, policy networks and inter-regional knowledge exchange towards a better understanding of climate impacts on the marine and coastal environment
- Facilitate access to instruments for climate financing at national and regional levels

To achieve the **Strategy 3 “Develop integrated, ecosystem-based regional ocean policies and strategies for sustainable use of marine and coastal resources, paying close attention to blue growth”**, UNEP and the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans will:

- Promote application of guidelines, rules and regulations for exploitation and exploration of living and non-living resources within Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans and develop such instruments, where necessary, based on the ecosystem approach

To achieve the **Strategy 4 “Enhance effectiveness of Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans as**

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