



African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries

The African Union’s “Africa Blue Economy Strategy”

This document is a CAOPA communication on the "Strategy for a Blue Economy in Africa" published by the African Union in October 2019¹, in preparation for the Continental Stakeholders Consultative Workshop on the Strategy and its implementation, scheduled for October 15, 2020.

The Strategy for a Blue Economy in Africa presents an ambitious framework for the development of the coastal and maritime trade sectors in Africa. However, we believe that its implementation will pose fundamental threats to artisanal fisheries and the millions of people who depend on this sector for their livelihoods and food security.

The AU, which is developing this strategy, and the European Union and the Norwegian government, which are supporting it, must reconsider the approach chosen, and base it on a sustainable and equitable framework that prioritizes the human rights and livelihoods of the millions of people living and working in artisanal fishing communities in Africa. To this end, the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Artisanal Fisheries and the Reform Strategy for fisheries and aquaculture in africa should be highlighted, and the development of transparent, participatory and gender-sensitive national and regional action plans should be promoted.

The next phase of the AU Strategy for a Blue Economy in Africa is to develop a guideline for its implementation, including a budget that will require funding. This is an opportunity to thoroughly rethink the AU strategy and give artisanal fishing communities a real say.

¹This report can be accessed at: <https://www.au-ibar.org/strategy-documents>

Context

It has been well documented that this year, with the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen extreme economic and social suffering in coastal communities in Africa, many who depend on small-scale fisheries. Recent research suggests the number of rural people, including children, who will suffer hunger in Africa will double in 2020.² As many as 150 million Africans will lose their primary sources of income, and the number of people living in extreme poverty will more than double in 2020 compared to the previous year.³ Although the local African fisheries sector has also been severely impacted by the crisis, what has also been clear is that small-scale food production systems, including coastal fisheries and fish trading, are providing a vital safety net. Without coastal fisheries, the impact of the pandemic would be even worse.

Unfortunately, while the value of small-scale fisheries is more and more evident, the future of small-scale fisheries is uncertain. There are multiple threats, but perhaps the most worrying is the climate crisis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in their report last year on the effects of rising greenhouse emissions and pollution in the oceans, described the sheer scale of problems facing coastal communities who depend on fisheries, and the fact that these communities are so ill-equipped to deal with the consequences.⁴

In August 2020 another example of these vulnerabilities has been witnessed; the oil spill in Mauritius is predicted to destroy so much marine wildlife and will have a long-lasting negative impact on regional coastal fisheries.⁵ What is alarming about this event is the lack of capacity for African states to cope with these disasters. But it is also tragic that offshore oil and gas industry is being aggressively expanded all over Africa and the AU's blue economy strategy considers this a positive policy for economic development.

²Blank, J. "Economic impact of COVID-19: Protecting Africa's food systems from farm to fork", On-line article, Brookings Institute: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/06/19/economic-impact-of-covid-19-protecting-africas-food-systems-from-farm-to-fork/>

³UNCTAD, 'COVID-19: A threat to food security in Africa', on-line article, 11th August, 2020, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2450>

⁴See the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2019), 'Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a changing climate', <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/>

⁵Khadka, N. 'Why the oil spill in Mauritius is so serious', *BBC News online*, 13 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53754751>

Many people are hoping that the COVID-19 crisis will set the stage for a new beginning; that governments will commit to building a more equitable, more democratic and greener economy in its wake. However, there is an enormous risk that governments will do the opposite. They may want to kick start the economy by continuing to prioritise dirty and polluting industries on the grounds that these will generate large short-term economic gains. Across the world, we are seeing government subsidies and favorable regulations being pushed through that will benefit the same corporations that have driven the climate and ecological crisis.⁶ In Africa, this could provide enormous opportunities for corporations involved in large-scale fisheries, mining for fossil fuels and minerals and industrial fish farming. Problems of land and ocean grabbing have accelerated after previous global financial and food crises, such as the oil crisis in the 1970s, and the previous global financial crash in 2008.⁷ The same must not happen again.

It is also important to recognise that while billions of people have peacefully consented to give up civil rights to stop the spread of the disease, some politicians may extend these harsh restrictions for corrupt political gain. In West Africa this year, coastal communities have been outraged by the decisions of many national authorities to allocate, without transparency or consultation, fishing licenses to foreign industrial fishing trawlers, thereby undermining the fragile situation facing fishing communities and regional food security.

It is in this context that the African Union's blue economy strategy for Africa needs to be examined. However, both the process of how this document was produced and its main recommendations are worrying from the perspective of small-scale fisheries. It is not the framework that will build resilient and prosperous coastal communities for the future. Nor does it offer hope for addressing the climate crisis and the rapid loss of marine ecosystems that fishers depend on. It provides very limited recommendations on strengthening democratic governance and fighting corruption. A new vision—based on meaningful consultation with coastal communities—has to be created. In doing so the millions of people that depend on small-scale fisheries should be prioritised.

What is the African Union's Blue Economy Strategy?

⁶See, for example, Gardiner, B. 'In Pandemic Recovery Efforts, Polluting Industries Are Winning Big', On-line article, June 23, 2020, Yale Environment 360, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/in-pandemic-recovery-efforts-polluting-industries-are-winning-big>

⁷Grain (2008) 'Seized: The 2008 land grab for food and financial security', Grain Policy Brief, available at: <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/93-seized-the-2008-landgrab-for-food-and-financial-security>

The African Union's 'blue economy strategy for Africa' proposes a framework for transforming how oceans, coastal areas, lakes and rivers are used in Africa in order to conserve biodiversity, address climate change and pollution, support poverty reduction while also ensuring that all the 'blue' business sectors are harnessed to drive economic growth on the continent.

The strategy sets itself a timeframe of over 40 years, thereby linking it to the AU's overarching African Union Agenda 2063. In its introduction, the strategy is described as 'paradigm shift'; a departure from 'business-as-usual (or traditional ways of doing things)' and that this is urgently required to achieve 'socio-economic emancipation and industrialisation in Africa'. This grand narrative draws on previous statements by the AU; that the blue economy has the potential to be the new "African Renaissance".⁸

The origin of this document is the Nairobi Sustainable blue economy conference that took place in November 2018. This was a substantial global gathering—involving 20,000 people, including heads of states and senior officials from international organisations, large numbers of business leaders and civil society organisations. The conference produced commitments and ideas on transitioning to a sustainable blue economy. However, it was recognised that the proliferation of national blue economy or blue growth strategies was potentially uncoordinated. Therefore the AU, drawing on international best practice, should provide an overall guidance, or 'reference document' for all member states of the AU, as well as regional organisations and multi-lateral organisations supporting African development.

The European Union and the Government of Norway provided the funds and technical support to develop this strategy. During 2019, a group of experts travelled to 13 African countries and conducted research to draft the strategy, which was then reviewed by stakeholders in August 2019 in Nairobi.

The result of all this is a surprisingly incoherent and muddled document, from which evidence of a radical departure from business as usual is difficult to see. The document consists of five main thematic areas, each presented with a background document and large numbers of pages resembling a 'log-frame' setting out objectives, indicators and targets. The first theme, that covers fisheries and aquaculture and marine ecosystem conservation, has 3 overall goals, 15 objectives, 91 targets and

⁸Lopes, C. 'Africa's blue economy: An opportunity not to be missed', on line article 20th June 2016, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, <https://www.uneca.org/es-blog/africa's-blue-economy-opportunity-not-be-missed>.

177 indicators. How these work together, and how they work with the hundreds of targets and indicators continued in the other 4 themes of the strategy is difficult to understand.

On a closer look, there is a limited logic to all this. Indicators are mislabelled; 101 of the 177 involve holding meetings and producing more studies and reports. The indicators do not show the extent to which African states have managed to deliver on the various goals and objectives.

However, what is striking about the document is its emphasis on the blue economy requiring private financial investments, and that the blue economy is a new frontier for economic growth. This is made clear in the introduction of the strategy, which draws attention to the need to provide a regulatory environment conducive to private investors, as well as innovative financial instruments to raise capital. With these in place, the AU predicts quite staggering rates of growth across most of the blue economy sectors. In total, the value added of the blue economy will grow from about USD290 billion (as of 2019) to well over USD400 billion in just a decade. The main engines of this growth are offshore oil and gas, deep sea mining, shipping and port building, tourism and aquaculture. The AU also describes that the value of marine ecosystem services, including the storage of carbon, will be worth USD45 billion by 2030 and USD70 billion by 2063.

All this growth is envisaged to be empowering for millions of poor people, including most importantly coastal communities. The AU recognises that to maximise the benefits of blue growth, poor people, including the most marginalised and vulnerable, have to be included in a meaningful way in government decision making. As such, the strategy advises:

“Member States should direct their poverty eradication efforts towards the integration of these communities into the BE development process. This will empower coastal and waterways communities and make them gain more access and control over the basic conditions that determine their well-being.”

However, the AU considers that growth in the fisheries sector—where millions of coastal communities have historically derived their income and economic security—will not be profound. Wild capture fisheries has already reached the upper limits of productivity, so will remain stagnant at about USD21 billion. The strategy does recommend that African states must prioritise African needs, and therefore continue to develop regional fisheries trade and prioritise domestic consumption; export of fish away from the continent should only include ‘surplus fish’, i.e. what is not needed locally. Nevertheless, the implicit message in the strategy is that the ability of blue

growth to lift millions of coastal people out of poverty will come from all the other sectors, not fisheries.

Consultation and ‘validation’

For the past few years the African Union has approved the establishment of five regional platforms for civil society consultations on the reform of fisheries and aquaculture. These regional platforms remain underfunded and they do not work nearly as well as they should. However, the principle of consultation and inclusion in decision making is critical.

The AU’s blue economy strategy also draws attention to the need for meaningful participation and empowerment of coastal communities. However, the strategy itself failed on this critical aspect. The production of the strategy may have been rushed. Of the 13 countries covered in the study, there is no evidence showing the team undertaking the research established community-based consultations. That is why hardly any fisher organisations were aware of the document until it was finalised for stakeholders approval.

When representatives from the regional platforms were informed about the process, some, including CAOPA, provided critical comments in writing and in presentations. These raised warnings about the threats of blue growth to fishing communities, the climate crisis and marine ecosystems. However, these important concerns were never reflected in the final document. The document presents a false impression that blue growth is an unproblematic idea, without political or ideological controversy.

Indeed, a representative from CAOPA was invited to Nairobi in August 2019 for a two-day meeting with another 120 African and international experts when the draft report was reviewed and concluded. This is referred to as a process of ‘validation’, although given the highly limited scope for discussion and feedback, it is not clear what this term actually means. As a result, this is a document that represents the thoughts of a small number of foreign consultants from the EU and selected African academics and bureaucrats.

This attitude towards inclusion of poor people in blue growth is not unusual. The Nairobi sustainable blue economy conference, from which this strategy derives, failed to include any representative from African fishing communities in any of the formal discussions and panel events. Fishers were represented by posters only.

The reason for the exclusion of fishers is important to reflect on. The views of those working in small-scale fisheries may not be considered serious or worthwhile, particularly on the development of non-fishery based sectors. Furthermore, it is possible that the problem lies with how ‘wealth’ is being misrepresented in blue growth strategies. The tendency is to narrowly equate wealth to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). On this measure, fishery is not very significant. In fact, by relying on economic value alone, the AU describes that by 2030 a likely scenario is that deep sea mining will be four times more valuable to African countries than fisheries. But the experts producing the AU’s strategy must know that GDP is a terrible proxy for wealth and discriminates against subsistence activities and the informal economy that are so important for food security and livelihoods.

Linkages with other AU and international agreements

The AU strategy describes that it draws together various AU strategies and initiatives, as well as international best practice. This means the document tries to synthesise various other documents and commitments into one overarching framework.

This is important. The number of strategies, guidelines and initiatives dealing with the oceans and maritime business sectors have proliferated to such an extent it is very hard for fishing communities, as well as the regional civil society platforms, to know how they all work together, or if they contradict each other. For example, the Africa blue economy strategy draws attention to the Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy, the Lomé Convention, the AU’s Africa Mining Vision and the AU’s Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fishers and Aquaculture in Africa.

The relationship between these other documents and the new blue economy strategy is not explained and is difficult to follow. The first of the five thematic areas of the strategy covers the exact same themes that are covered in the Reform Strategy for Fishers and Aquaculture in Africa (also produced with funding and technical support by the European Union). Small-scale fishing organisations have been engaged in extensive consultations on the implementation of this reform strategy for the past few years. But it is now unclear whether the blue economy strategy replaces this or not. If fisher organisations in Africa want to understand the AU’s thinking on fisheries and aquaculture development, then it is now unclear which document is more important.

As the blue economy strategy highlights the importance of international best practice, it should make a clear reference to the 2014 international Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries, as well as the complimentary 2012 Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure

for Land, Fisheries and Forests. These are historic documents that—in contrast to the blue growth strategies being produced over the past few years—were based on years of consultations and deliberations among fishers and fish workers.

It is now well accepted that these documents represent international best practice, and their implementation remains at the forefront of global and African advocacy by fisher communities. Almost all African states, regional and inter-governmental organisations working on fisheries have endorsed these guidelines, and they are also prominently referenced in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. But the AU's strategy overlooks this. The guidelines on small-scale fisheries are mentioned briefly in relation to one of the 101 actions under thematic heading 1. But this does not reassure that the contents of the guidelines are taken seriously. Indeed, the target relating to the implementation of these guidelines comes immediately after the target of implementing the 'wealth based approach' to fisheries reforms, which advocates policies, such as the privatisation of fishing rights, that are highlighted in the guidelines as being contrary to the interests of small-scale fishing communities.

Policy coherence and blue growth for small-scale fisheries

The failure of the AU strategy to be based on meaningful consultations and a coherent reflection on existing initiatives and reform documents, demonstrates how confusing and worrying it is for small-scale fisheries organisations. The content of the strategy also raises concerns that it is less a strategic document—which grapples with the complexity and challenges that lie ahead—as it is a wish list of activities and projects for donor financing.

However, while the presentation of the document, and the process that informed it, are important problems to draw attention to, what is most troubling about this strategy is its contradictions and policy incoherence.

The disorganised approach to compiling and presenting the strategy means it is difficult to understand its full implications. Indeed, included in the lists of proposed actions there are some positive activities for small-scale fisheries. However, these should not distract from the overall thrust of the document, which looked at as a whole is less impressive from the perspective of fisher communities. This can be illustrated in the following 5 interrelated points:

1. Blue growth and competition for scarce resources: The AU strategy presents blue growth as a process that can and must benefit everyone. Blue growth will be good for the environment, good for poor communities and good for private businesses to make substantial profits.

The trouble with this optimistic vision is that it moves attention away from the fact that the growth of blue economy sectors, including mining, tourism, aquaculture, shipping, and marine conservation, all have complex impacts on coastal development and the lives of poorer communities. In reality, capital intensive businesses and large-scale conservation efforts often displace rural communities, reduce or remove their access to and control over shared natural resources.

As maritime sectors have grown, there has always been conflict—at the local level, between sectors and also between states—and this will only increase in the future as competition for scarce resources intensifies. It is how these conflicts are handled that must be prioritised, and there is a critical role to be played by intergovernmental organisations.

However, the AU strategy depicts blue growth as a consensual process where everyone is pulling together in the same direction. With this perspective, the issue of conflict appears quite unimportant.

Unfortunately, the advice given by the AU may contribute to escalating problems. For example, the AU strategy recommends African states to increase fish farming in coastal areas, and it draws attention to Nigeria as a model to emulate. Yet in Nigeria the expansion of fish farming in coastal areas involves the construction of massive coastal farming for prawns, which displaces local fishers and can generate substantial pollution. The expansion of these intensive fish farms, which are also generally designed for export markets, is one of the leading causes of increased demand for fishmeal. Across West Africa there has been a surge in growth of fishmeal factories. These drive unsustainable fishing and divert fish away from local human consumption. Thus, growing one sector causes conflict for another.

Small-scale fisher communities are the most vulnerable group in this competitive environment. It is therefore imperative that any revision to the AU's strategy recognises the inevitable conflicts and vulnerabilities that growth produces and provides a serious discussion on how these conflicts can be addressed.

2. Rapid economic growth will destroy marine ecosystems: The AU's strategy advances a vision for the future whereby economic growth can be pursued to maximum effect while marine

biodiversity is preserved and the production of wild capture fisheries are maintained. This is a view that lies at the heart of the blue growth vision now being promoted all over the world.

However, it is now becoming clear that the ‘industrialisation’ forecast by the AU will destroy ecosystems and create an inhospitable climate for life. Coastal fisher communities are already dealing with the consequences of climate change. This includes unpredictable changes to fish populations and their migrations, which means catches of fish are highly variable and ultimately decreasing. But it also includes more regular and more intense extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, floods, heat waves and droughts, which devastate coastal fishing communities.

It can no longer be the case that strategies for blue growth can hide these contradictions. In fact, the AU’s strategy mentions the importance of lowering carbon emissions and advancing ‘clean blue’ energy on the continent, while it simultaneously opens the door to unrestrained oil and gas exploitation in Africa.

The question of how Africa and the international community can chart a path forward that combines poverty reduction and rising standards of living, without destroying the planet, is the most important and difficult discussion of our time, with policy implications that are most uncertain. However the AU strategy shies away from this fundamental issue.

3. Inclusive development. The AU strategy regularly refers to blue growth as a means to reduce poverty and achieve inclusive development. Without taking consideration of the conflicts and the reality of the climate crisis, it is hard to take this seriously. However, the AU strategy does not dwell on how inclusive growth is achieved, nor does it offer any thought to why growth in blue sectors has tended not to achieve this in the past.

Economic growth driven by the priority ‘blue’ sectors, rarely results in poverty reduction. Economies based heavily on mining, commercial farming and international tourism, which is the vision presented by the AU, often produce high levels of inequality and exclusion. That is because they allow various commercial business sectors to extract wealth from coastal areas that is then concentrated among corporations and foreign investors. The ‘traditional way of doing things’—as the AU’s document calls it—is that this wealth is exported and the revenues taken by governments are often squandered or invested elsewhere.

The strategy therefore relies on a business as usual model that imagines wealth trickles down to poor people, when it is well known that without strong policies for redistributing the wealth created, it tends to flow in the opposite direction. But the strategy provides hardly any discussion on what these policies could look like.

4. The ‘wealth based approach’ to fisheries: The AU strategy recommends that African states consider the ‘wealth based approach’ to fisheries reform, including the introduction of ‘user rights’ to end open access fisheries.

Foreign fisheries experts, including from the EU and Norway, have long been advocating this policy for African fisheries, as they have advocated for them back home. This perspective treats the fishing sector as a component of the economy that should generate surplus profits, which can then be taxed to pay for development elsewhere. It also requires individual rights to be given to fishers, that are then subject to market competition; these rights can be sold and traded, so that only the most efficient fishing businesses remain operating.

This approach is clearly designed as a drastic attempt to end overfishing and boost private profits by removing huge number of fishers out of the sector. There has been strong opposition to these policies by small-scale fishing communities, and many fisheries experts have pointed out the devastating impacts caused to coastal communities where these policies have been used.⁹

Removing large numbers of fishers is highly problematic if, as is the case in most African countries, alternative jobs and sources of livelihoods are not available. The market-based system for quota allocations also leads to economic concentration and usually the transfer of ownership of fishing activities to people and companies that have nothing to do with fishing or fishing communities. Comparative research also suggests that despite providing a smaller number of firms with long term and secure rights to fisheries, these firms do not become responsible stewards of fish populations.

What is also an objection to the wealth-based approach is the idea that the value of coastal fisheries lies in its ability to grow the rest of the economy. That is not where the value of small-scale fisheries lie and this is what makes it distinct from most of the other blue sectors.

⁹Béné, Christophe & Hersoug, Bjørn & Allison, Edward. (2010). Not by Rent Alone: Analysing the Pro-Poor Functions of Small-Scale Fisheries in Developing Countries. *Development Policy Review*. 28. 325-358.

But these are well known arguments, which should be acknowledged in the strategy. It is alarming that the AU allows this controversial advice to be presented without question.

5. The governance challenge: In presenting the blue economy the AU recognises ‘governance challenges’. These are not described very clearly or in sufficient detail. The key part of the text devoted to this reads:

“Notwithstanding the progress made to date on many fronts, significant institutional and governance challenges remain, constraining the ability of Member States to effectively formulate and implement policies relating to growth of the relatively new blue economy concept in Africa alongside with policies in favour of environmental protection and the health improvement of ecosystems. An effective Policy and regulatory framework is needed to secure investments in sea exploration as well as a sound Policy for innovation, transfer of technology and adaptation to encourage inventors. This should be in place for strengthening of the institutional capacities of key national and regional agencies and organizations for the effective implementation of blue economy related functions. It would also entail capacity enhancement and incentivization of those entities and structures that are related to the key sectoral aspects of the blue economy, among others.”

From the perspective of small-scale fisheries this summary of the governance challenges to achieving an equitable and sustainable blue economy overlooks critical aspects.

One of these relates to empowering marginalised fishing communities, including women, in decision making processes. Existing experiences of small-scale fisheries communities in being able to influence decisions surrounding maritime sectors is highly frustrating. If consulted, this tends to be on a limited range of issues, and rarely on National planning or the negotiation of investment agreements in other sectors that affect fisheries. The problem is exacerbated by the very low levels of transparency that not only exist in the fisheries sector, but across all other blue economy sectors. The AU Strategy does include targets and actions to ensure participation by fisher communities, but there is no reflection on why previous policy statements for the empowerment of marginalised people have failed.

A second critical issue relates to high levels of corruption and corporate abuses in the blue economy. The opportunities and incentives for these abuses are likely to expand with growth in the blue economy and with the increase in private financial investments that it requires.

One of the primary problems with corruption is the ability of more powerful actors to gain preferential access to resources, and to avoid environmental and labour regulations. There are many examples to cite, from the enormous fraud involving foreign banks and the tuna fisheries sector in Mozambique, to bribery and conflicts of interests in the allocation of fishing quotas in Namibia last year. Corruption has also become a common theme in understanding why fisheries access agreements are so unfavourable for African coastal communities.

The African Union has demonstrated its understanding on the seriousness of corruption and it has taken steps to draw attention to this, including several high level events on anti-corruption organised in 2018.¹⁰ But trust in African governments to address corruption remains very low across the continent, as measured by Afrobarometer, for example.¹¹ In this context, a blue growth strategy must include an anti-corruption component, which is clearly prioritised for achieving responsible governance. It is disappointing to note that the AU strategy fails to mention the links between blue growth and human rights treaties and anti-corruption initiatives, including the African Union Convention on Anti-corruption and the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 Pandemic and economic crisis offer the chance for a radical re-think of ‘business as usual’. The industrialisation of the blue economy, based on the expansion of commercial sectors such as offshore oil and gas, intensive aquaculture and global tourism, is bound to have negative impacts for small-scale fisheries. The AU and supporting organisations, including the EU and the government of Norway, must reconsider its blue economy strategy based on a sustainable and equitable agenda that puts the human rights and livelihoods of millions of people living and working in coastal communities at the forefront. This requires giving prominence to the Voluntary Guidelines on Small-Scale Fisheries and the Reform Strategy for fisheries and aquaculture in Africa through the elaboration of transparent, participative, gender sensitive national and regional action plans.

¹⁰See for example, African Union Advisory Board on Anti-Corruption (2019) ‘Report on the implementation of the African Anti-Corruption Year’, <http://www.auinticorruption.org/resources/view/report-on-the-implementation-of-the-african-anti-corruption-year>

¹¹See, <http://afrobarometer.org>

