



CAOPA STATEMENT

World Oceans Day 2026

Title: Investing in small-scale fisheries youth for a living ocean

On the occasion of World Oceans Day 2026, the African Confederation of Professional Organisations of Artisanal Fisheries (CAOPA) reaffirms that the future of oceans in Africa depends on the future of the youth in coastal communities. Reimagining our relationship with oceans also means reimagining the role of the young women and men who depend on their resources and contribute daily to their sustainable management.

Across Africa, millions of young people depend directly or indirectly on small-scale fisheries. They are fishers, women fish processor, traders, mechanics, carpenters, entrepreneurs and innovators.

Yet today, these young people face a troubling reality: declining fish stocks, increasing pressure from industrial fleets and other polluting and destructive sectors, climate change, economic insecurity, and limited opportunities.

As a result, the ocean crisis is also becoming a social, economic and generational crisis. When young people leave the sector because they see no future in it, communities lose not only livelihoods, but also knowledge, skills, local management capacities and an important part of their cultural heritage.

For CAOPA, young people are at the heart of the sector's transformation and are key drivers of solutions. For generations, small-scale fishing communities have acted as custodians of the ocean, protecting coastal ecosystems and transmitting knowledge essential to the sustainable management of marine resources. Today, many young people continue this legacy by innovating in fish processing, fisheries-related services, safety at sea and using digital technologies and community-based resource monitoring. They are not asking for handouts; they are asking for the means to act.

Investing in young people in Africa's small-scale fisheries means investing in food security, the resilience of coastal communities and the continent's capacity to adapt to climate change.



Conservation measures, including marine protected areas where appropriate, can only be effective and sustainable if young people are fully involved in their design, implementation and monitoring. Conservation initiatives imposed without meaningful participation, secure rights and viable economic opportunities risk deepening the exclusion of young coastal communities rather than strengthening their commitment to ocean stewardship.

Young people must not merely be consulted; they must be part of decision-making. Small-scale fishing organisations, co-management mechanisms, national, regional and continental platforms for non-state actors in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture, as well as international processes, must give young people a genuine say in shaping the policies that affect their future.

CAOPA calls on African governments, technical and financial partners, the FAO and international institutions to:

- guarantee small-scale fishing communities' rights of access to fisheries resources and coastal areas;
- strengthen co-management systems and the effective participation of young people in decision-making processes;
- invest in training, intergenerational knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship development;
- facilitate young people's access to appropriate financing and essential infrastructure, particularly for the conservation, processing and marketing of fisheries products;
- develop social protection systems and promote decent work throughout the fisheries value chain;
- support youth-led innovation and local initiatives that contribute to the sustainability of ecosystems and communities.

The future of Africa's oceans will be shaped by the young women and men who depend on the sea, protect it and are already driving solutions for a fairer, more sustainable and more inclusive blue future.

There can be no sustainable African ocean without a generation of young people in small-scale fisheries that is recognised, supported and fully involved in the decisions that shape its future.