

CONCEPT NOTE

Regional Blue Carbon Workshop in the Western Indian Ocean:

Strengthening Measures for the Protection, Restoration, and Sustainable Management of Blue Carbon Ecosystems in the Western Indian Ocean in Line with Global and Regional Policy Commitments

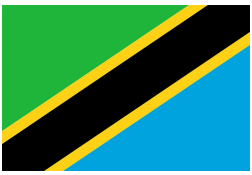
Zanzibar, Tanzania,

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1.0 Background

The Western Indian Ocean region contains diverse coastal and marine ecosystems that support local and national economies. The critical coastal and marine ecosystems also provide valuable ecosystem services, including sequestration of carbon. They also provide a habitat for marine biodiversity and are considered one of the world's most valuable ecosystems. These ecosystems have also greatly benefited coastal communities, particularly as sources of livelihood, food, and energy. Despite the benefits associated with coastal and marine ecosystems, the anthropogenic stresses on these ecosystems, particularly from land-based sources and activities, are increasing and causing damage to the integrity of these ecological systems. The increasing threats arising from land-based sources and activities mean that the ecosystems in the region will continue to be degraded to the point where they will cease to provide essential goods and services, with severe consequences at local, regional, and global levels.

As growing demand and technological advances allow the exploitation of even more - and new - marine resources, oceans are recognized as a new frontier for economic development. The rush of public and private sectors to harness this potential exacerbates the risks to marine ecosystems, economies, and people who depend upon them. For instance, a report by WWF, prepared in collaboration with business consultancy the Boston Consulting Group, estimates that the economic value of coastal and oceanic environments is conservatively US\$2.5 trillion per year before the outbreak of COVID-19, more than 65% larger than the ocean-based industry economic value estimated by OECD in 2010. The WWF report further states that the overall value of the ocean as an asset is ten times \$2.5 trillion, or \$25 trillion, equivalent to the world's eighth-largest economy (World Ocean Outlook, 2023).



The blue economy is also expected to grow faster than the general global economy. However, under business as usual, this is expected to result to catastrophic economic and environmental outlook with significant impact on people and planet due to the following reasons: increasing demand for marine resources; overfishing; climate change and ocean acidification; pollution; technological advances in exploration of ocean resources; inadequate stewardship and law enforcement; and habitat loss. These reasons have clear nexus with the current development in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region that is affecting several coastal and marine ecosystems, profoundly impacting the prospects for sustainable development in countries of the region. Major environmental problems and the drivers behind them that the project will address include:

- Habitat degradation and biodiversity loss
- Marine Pollution and Marine Litter
- Overfishing and Unsustainable Fisheries
- Climate Change Impacts
- Deforestation
- Urbanisation and Infrastructure Development

It is in this context that in the last few years, there is renewed international attention to the plight of the coastal and marine ecosystems with view to promote sustainable management and conservation in line with SDG 14.

2.0 Drivers of Environmental Change in the WIO Region

The underlying drivers of environmental change and pressures on the coastal and marine environment in the Western Indian Ocean region are the following:

- **Population Growth:** The region has experienced substantial population increase in recent decades, increasing pressure on natural resources and habitats. The growing population demands more food, water, energy, and land, resulting in deforestation, land degradation, and habitat destruction. The expanding human footprint exacerbates the strain on ecosystems and contributes to biodiversity loss.
- **Unsustainable Resource Exploitation:** Fishing, timber extraction, and mining are among the key industries in the region, providing livelihoods for many communities. However, overfishing, illegal logging and unregulated mining threaten marine and terrestrial ecosystems. The depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, and habitat destruction disrupt the environment's delicate balance and compromise its resilience.
- **Inadequate Governance:** Inadequate governance and insufficient capacity to implement regulatory frameworks are crucial in driving environmental change in the Western Indian Ocean region. Limited enforcement of environmental laws and inadequate capacity for monitoring and enforcement contribute to illegal activities



such as overfishing, illegal logging, and pollution. The lack of effective governance hinders conservation efforts and sustainable resource management, perpetuating environmental degradation.

- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Socioeconomic factors, including poverty, lack of alternative livelihoods, and limited access to education and healthcare, contribute to environmental change in the Western Indian Ocean region. Poverty often drives local communities to engage in unsustainable practices, such as destructive fishing methods or illegal logging, to survive. The absence of viable economic alternatives and social services exacerbates the pressure on natural resources, leading to environmental degradation.

Recognizing and addressing these drivers and pressures is crucial for effective environmental conservation and sustainable development in the region. Strengthening governance frameworks, implementing sustainable resource management practices, promoting alternative livelihoods, and addressing social inequalities are essential to mitigating environmental change in the WIO region. By tackling these underlying drivers collectively, stakeholders can work towards a more sustainable future that preserves the region's unique biodiversity and safeguards the livelihoods of its communities.

However, if nothing is done, the impacts of climate change, coupled with high population growth rates in coastal areas of the region and increasing national pressures for post-COVID-19 economic recovery and growth, will lead to increased unsustainable use of marine and coastal resources. If left unchecked, this will be accompanied by increased pollution and waste entering the ocean, leading to increased biodiversity, habitat, and ecosystem degradation. This, in turn, will lead to reduced ocean capacity to regenerate species and maintain the food web balance, produce oxygen, and sequester and capture carbon. It will also lead to reduced resource viability in terms of harvestable biomass volumes and access to fishing grounds amidst rougher seas and unpredictable and ongoing changes in resource distribution. Coastal areas are projected to become more populous around Africa, including the WIO region, implying higher demand for decent lives, incomes, improved livelihood security, and to pursue business opportunities.

The current critical demand for jobs, incomes, and food security in the region, if not addressed with viable, sustainable, and scalable Blue Economy solutions, will result in higher incidences of illegal use of ocean resources, overharvesting, and the implementation of poorly coordinated and designed income-generating interventions. Climate variability and change hold major uncertainties for the WIO region that could negatively impact people and living marine resources. Addressing climate change requires innovative climate-resilient, and sustainability-driven approaches for



economic growth, based on adequate competencies for successful implementation. Inadequate governance of coastal and marine resources in the region will affect the capacity of marine and coastal ecosystems to continue being the basis for sustainable economic growth. Therefore, improving coastal and marine governance will improve chances for a successful transition to a sustainable ocean economy, i.e., the Blue Economy in the WIO region.

3.0 Opportunities for the Conservation of Blue Carbon Ecosystems

Blue Carbon Ecosystems (BCEs) can sequester 5-10 times more carbon per unit area than their terrestrial counterparts. For example, mangroves can store more than 1,000 tonnes of carbon per hectare in their biomass and underlying soils, making them good candidates for climate change adaptation and mitigation. African governments are interested in realizing these potential carbon benefits; however, a better understanding is required to develop appropriate policies to attract sustainable development financing for conserving and restoring vital coastal wetlands.

Carbon markets and trading mechanisms could mitigate climate change by incentivizing emission reductions and promoting sustainable development. The rapidly growing interest in carbon markets for offset credits also offers the potential for the (co-) financing of small, equitable, and self-sustaining conservation projects in developing countries. Article 6.2 of the Paris Agreement (PA) allows countries to trade emission reductions and removals with one another through bilateral or multilateral agreements. These traded carbon credits are called Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes (ITMOs). Carbon markets may offer African countries the additional socio-economic incentives required to prioritize, protect, sustainably manage, and restore their coastal ecosystems, especially when benefits are equitably shared with key stakeholders, including local communities.

Participation of African countries in carbon markets has been limited due to various challenges, including a lack of capacity and awareness owing to the complexity inherent in the approaches and methodologies for carbon quantification, valuation, pricing, and verification. Consequently, they are yet to be fully integrated into policy discussions within the national economies and much less so in financial mechanisms for climate mitigation. Although scientific evidence exists to support the carbon sequestration benefits of marine and coastal ecosystems, the substance and certainty surrounding Blue Carbon (BC) benefits remain to be established in the developing carbon trading community.

Specifically, the recent recognition of the value of BCEs has encouraged interest in quantifying coastal ecosystems and further exploring options for establishing and trading blue carbon credits. However, inadequate knowledge of the intricacies of



carbon trading schemes, primarily blue carbon, has hindered African Governments' realistic and practical engagement. Building capacity is essential for stakeholders in the region to understand, assess, and unlock the potential of carbon/blue carbon to catalyze climate-positive, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth. Sustainable coastal and marine development triggered by carbon markets can improve jobs, food security, health, and climate resilience while contributing to global efforts to combat climate change. Building capacity on, among other things, economic and regulatory aspects of carbon markets and trade for the WIO region will be necessary to leverage climate finance opportunities through enhanced integrity, transparency, and equity.

Beyond carbon trading, other sustainable and financing opportunities for the conservation and sustainable management of BCEs as major contributors to the Blue Economy in the region must be explored. Regulatory regimes for these financing mechanisms must be developed at the regional and national level to ensure equity, social justice, transparency, and a predictable operational environment.

4.0 Rationale

The Contracting Parties, through Decision CP.9/1.3. of the Work Programme for 2018–2022, asked the Secretariat to work with partners and develop one regional integrated program to fully implement the two existing Strategic Action Programmes (SAPs). The 10-year program, themed ***Implementation of the Western Indian Ocean Strategic Action Programme in Support of a Sustainable Regional Blue Economy***, was adopted during the 11th COP of the Convention.

The 2025-2028 Programme of Work developed out of the Integrated Programme was adopted at the 11th COP and includes the global political processes, with the obligations to be met by member countries of the Nairobi Convention. Such political processes include the continued implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs), especially SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development. Other important processes include the implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change; the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF); the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ Treaty); negotiations towards a legally binding instrument on combating plastic pollution, including in the marine environment; the UN Decade of Ocean Science, the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration; and UNEA6 resolution 15 on strengthening ocean efforts to tackle climate change, marine biodiversity loss and pollution.

The sustainable management of BCEs is central in this transformation, and, if an integrated approach is adopted, it will help contribute delivery towards many of these global policy processes, which have now been cascaded and adopted as regional



priorities. Building on these global policies and informed by the 2023 WIO Science to Policy platform (SPP), various COP 11 Decisions proposed actions to bolster the conservation of BCEs. These include but are not limited to:

- Decision CP11/3: Contributing to the Agreement's entry into force under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction.
- Decision CP 11/5: Implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
- Decision CP 11/6 Regional Ocean Governance Strategy for the Western Indian Ocean Region
- Decision CP 11/10: Mainstreaming climate change concerns in marine biodiversity
- Protection
- Decision CP11/11: Conservation, Restoration, and Management of Critical Habitats and Species
- Decision CP 11/12: Improving environmental quality through Source-to-Sea approaches
- Decision CP 11/13: Strengthening Marine Spatial Planning

It is against this background and a heightened ambition to reach a transformative turning point for many interconnected challenges that an opportunity exists to shape the work of the Nairobi Convention and focus the attention of Governments on significantly scaling up ocean biodiversity protection, efforts to address climate change and pollution and degradation, with a focus on building sustainable blue growth in the WIO. The Convention has therefore organized a meeting in Zanzibar between the 22nd and 24th of October 2024.

5.0 Objectives

The overall objective of the meeting is to discuss progress made in the conservation and management of BCEs in the region and ensure alignment with global/policy commitments. The specific objectives include:

- i. Review the status of conservation and management BCEs in the region;
- ii. Discuss modalities of aligning the conservation and management of BCEs in the region to global/regional priorities;
- iii. To enhance policymakers' and practitioners' understanding of the concept of blue carbon and its significance in climate change mitigation, adaptation, and sustainable development;



- iv. Discuss opportunities for strengthening partnerships in the conservation and management of BCEs; and
- v. Explore and recommend sustainable financing mechanisms for the conservation and management of BCEs.

6.0 Expected Outcomes

- i. An understanding of the status of BCEs in the region;
- ii. Alignment of BCE conservation and management to global/policy priorities;
- iii. An understanding of the significance of BCEs in climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- iv. Proposal on a regional Biodiversity Framework for the region;
- v. Proposal on a regional vision and framework on ratification and implementation of the BBNJ Treaty for the region considering the connectivity of waters within national jurisdiction and the high seas; and
- vi. Proposed framework for sustainable financing for the conservation and management of Blue Carbon Ecosystems in the region.