

a previous article on Prof Attri was published in the HSRC Review Volume 13 Number 2 April – June 2015

Interview with Prof Vishva Attri, chair of Indian Ocean Studies at the University of Mauritius

The HSRC hosted *Prof Vishva Attri* from 12-15 June 2017 with a view to create more awareness of the blue economy and to finalise the Blue Economy Handbook of the Indian Ocean Region co-edited by *Prof Narnia Bohler-Muller*, to be published by AISA Press. This is an interview with *Professor Attri* who spoke to *Dr Michael Cosser* from the Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery programme.

Rather than focusing on short-term gain, governments should be seeking to secure the futures of their countries and peoples by ensuring that the oceans are farmed responsibly, and that what is taken out is replenished.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), composed of the 21 states that abut the Indian Ocean, owes its genesis to a sentiment expressed by the late Nelson Mandela during a visit to India in 1995: “The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic co-operation and other peaceful endeavours. Recent changes in the international system demand that the countries of the Indian Ocean become a single platform” (IORA, 2017a). This statement led to the formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative in March 1995 and the subsequent establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (now known simply as IORA) two years later.

The IORA Secretariat, hosted by the Government of Mauritius in Cyber City Ebène, and currently headed by Secretary-General Ambassador K V Bhagirath, is responsible for the management, coordination, and monitoring of policy decisions adopted by the Council of

Ministers of Member States as well as for servicing IORA meetings, promoting the Association, collating and disseminating information, maintaining an archive, depository and registry for IORA documentation and research material, and mobilising resources (IORA, 2017b).

A Chair in Indian Ocean Studies has been established at the University of Mauritius to provide research support to the Secretariat. The incumbent is Prof Vishva Attri, who was a guest of Prof Narnia Bohler-Muller, Executive Director of DGSD and leader of the South African Chapter of the IORA Academic Group. As Chair, Prof Attri is responsible for promoting research in the six priority areas of IORA: maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; disaster and risk management; fisheries management; academic, science and technology; and tourism and cultural exchange. “Women and economic empowerment” and the “Blue Economy” (BE) have since been added as cross-cutting areas.

The BE has been recognised as “the top priority for generating employment, food security, poverty alleviation, and ensuring sustainability in business and economic models in the Indian Ocean ... [which is] the world’s preeminent seaway for trade and commerce ... [and a region] endowed with a wealth of natural resources ... largely untapped” (IORA, 2017c). Beyond this official description, Prof Attri characterises the BE as a major paradigm shift in terms of the way in which humanity is responding to the potential of the oceans – and of course in IORA’s case of the Indian Ocean – to provide employment, boost trade, investment and tourism, as well as a source of food and agro-processing. However, he cautions that that all ocean-related activity must be conducted in a sustainable way. Rather than focusing on short-term gain, governments should be seeking to secure the futures of their countries and peoples by ensuring that the oceans are farmed responsibly, and that what is taken out is replenished. Promoting



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awareness about the impact of maritime pollution on fish stocks, for example, and about which fish can be sustainably harvested is just one of the initiatives with which IORA is concerned.

Goal 14 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources” (UN, 2017) – provides an undergirding framework for IORA. However, Prof Attri says the real test lies in the extent to which ocean-state governments are prepared to assume responsibility for, and invest in meeting the targets that contribute to meeting the following goals: reducing marine pollution; sustainably managing and protecting marine and coastal ecosystems; minimising the impacts of ocean acidification; regulating harvesting and ending overfishing; conserving (by 2020) at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas; regulating fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing; increasing the economic benefits from the sustainable use of marine resources to small Island developing States and least developed countries;

increasing scientific knowledge, developing research capacity, and transferring marine technology; providing small-scale artisanal fishers access to marine resources and markets; and implementing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

While Goal 14 and its 10 targets are of global significance, the particular focus of IORA is naturally on the Indian Ocean Rim. Prof Attri acknowledges the important role played by South Africa in providing a platform from which some of the key IORA initiatives could be launched. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) and the HSRC hosted three Blue Economy lectures in South Africa in 2015: the first, at the HSRC offices in Durban on 6 May, on renewable energy; the second, at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in Port Elizabeth on 7 May, on the contribution of IORA to member states; and the third, at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) in Johannesburg on 8 May, on IORA more broadly, which was attended by officials from the South African Navy, and by

heads of missions from Canada and New Zealand. The broader purpose of all three lectures was advocacy.

As CIOS, Prof Attri has been involved in two major projects over the past three years. The first is a study of bilateral trade and investment among IORA member states. A collaborative project with the IORA Secretariat begun in 2015. The project, which will feature in a six-chapter book, focuses on trade in relation to economic growth and economic conditions in member states. The second, launched also in 2015 in the wake of an HSRC lecture on the BE organised by Prof Bohler-Muller, is a handbook on the BE, which Prof Attri describes as “the first modest attempt by any organisation to present the Blue Economy in a systematic way.” The first draft of the 21-chapter book written by authors from seven IORA Member States and one Dialogue Partner, a highly ambitious project, is being finalised at the time of writing. The book, to be published by AISA Press, will appear in October 2017.