

# THE IORA BLUE ECONOMY CORE GROUP INITIATIVE

## KEEPING THE FUTURE IN MIND

BY PROF. NARNIA BOHLER-MULLER



The Blue Economy Core Group, initiated and led by South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), under the Republic of South Africa, has hosted three workshops with special funding from the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat, as well as generous contributions made by Australia, China, UAE and Oman.

The aim of the core group is to share experiences and best practices related to the Blue Economy in the Indian Ocean Region and to: Coordinate the activities of the IORA Blue Economy Core Group, which would in future lead to the establishment of a more permanent Blue Economy Working Group within IORA;

- Provide support for networking to promote priority areas related to the Blue Economy including fisheries and aquaculture; safety and security; shipping and ports; and environmental effects of the exploitation of marine resources. Renewable energy and climate change are also high on the agenda;
- Facilitate an active community of research-based institutions, universities, public and private sectors, as well as NGOs and CSOs interested in the Blue Economy;
- Build capacity by empowering a younger generation of experts, researchers, academics and scholars to take ownership of this research environment and to aid in shaping its direction;
- Increase funding accessibility and regional cooperation for Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) development, including building stronger links with Dialogue Partners for both expertise and donor support;
- Analyse the capacities, needs, technology transfer, strengths and weaknesses of Member States in terms of the Blue Economy; and
- Promote interstate trust and cooperation for mutual benefit.

The Indian Ocean is the world's third largest ocean. It carries half of the world's container ships, one-third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of the world's oil shipments. The region is woven together by trade routes that has a long history, and commands control of major sea-lanes. Broadly, the Blue Economy is envisaged as the integration of the Ocean Economy with the principles of social inclusion, environmental sustainability and innovative, dynamic business models. The Blue Economy is explicitly referred to in paragraph 12 of the Perth Declaration (2014): "We strongly encourage private sector involvement in IORA activities to enhance regional trade and investment, and commit to developing business-friendly initiatives to address issues related to energy security, food security, tourism and infrastructure. We also recognise the opportunities offered by the ocean ('blue') economy".

As the full economic potential of the Indian Ocean and its rim has not been fully realised, it is vital to focus on unpacking the meaning and value of the Blue Economy in ensuring sustainable growth in the region through the cooperation of the Member States and Dialogue Partners of IORA.

The first Blue Economy Core Group (BECG) workshop was hosted in Durban, Republic of South Africa, in May 2015 with a focus on "Promoting Fisheries and Aquaculture and Maritime Safety and security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region". The workshop was attended by 16 Member States, two Dialogue Partners and two external representatives.

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The keynote speaker was Republic of South Africa's Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, the Honourable Nomaindiya Mfeketo. She shared a wish that the BECG workshops would be utilised, among other things, to frame the strategic importance of IORA in our respective regions. She recommended that focus areas should include:

- (i) Research, Development and Innovation;
- (ii) Engagement with Dialogue Partners;
- (iii) Maritime Security; and
- (iv) Civil Society Participation in IORA need to find collective sustainable ways to improve the life of all the peoples in the Indian Ocean Rim Region was also stressed in view of ensuring a better world for future generations.

The second BECG workshop took place in Qingdao China in July 2016 with a focus on "Maritime Connectivity and Financing for Development in the Indian Ocean Region".

The workshop was attended by 13 Member States and two Dialogue Partners (with China as host). A key outcome of the workshop was to encourage the strengthening of South-South cooperation through inclusive growth and economic development through IORA and government to government cooperation. A highlight of the workshop was a trip to "Blue Silicon Valley of Qingdao" and "Qingdao National laboratory for Marine Science and Technology", the leading Research Centre for Marine Science in China.



The third workshop was held in April 2017 in Mauritius with the focus on: “Environmental Sustainability and the Blue Economy in the Indian Ocean Region”, with emphasis on environmental disaster risk management and early warning systems, and how climate change contributes to the environmental vulnerability of Small Island States (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean.

The second day of the workshop focused on the consolidation of the three BECG workshop outcomes; the identification of main trends; and recommendations for further action and research.

The BECG workshops focused on the priority areas of IORA and on developing discourses around the “Blue Economy” in the Indian Ocean region in order to feed into the annual Ministerial Meetings on the Blue Economy.

It was decided at the 1st workshop that there are many activities that could fall within the ambit of the Blue Economy, and thus specific sectors should be identified to focus on different priorities. These priority (or focus) areas were identified and consolidated in the Second Workshop as:

- i. Aquaculture and fisheries related to food security;
- ii. Maritime safety and security;
- iii. Maritime connectivity, infrastructure and development.

Deliberations on the focus areas of the Third Workshop led to the adoption of an environmental agenda. During the deliberations in the first two workshops, a number of recommendations and needs were identified that related to the region as a whole and would be applicable to all priority areas. These include:

- The Core Group should look at existing cooperation models to develop a blueprint to improve cooperation in the Blue Economy space for IORA e.g. OECD and Asia. Work can be done in collaboration with the Chair of Indian Ocean Studies at the University of Mauritius.
- There is a need to identify the skills required to grow the Blue Economy and improve the sharing of skills and technologies across countries and the region.

There should be a mechanism in place whereby less advanced countries can request help with the development of legislation, policy, plans and capacity from more advanced Member States and Dialogue Partners. It was recommended that requests for assistance should be made through the Secretariat.

- There should be better coordination of activities between countries to avoid overcapacity in sectors e.g. a number of countries are working on port development roadmaps which could benefit from increased cooperation to enhance results.

- There should be an inventory of projects and activities that have been - and are being - conducted in the IORA region, which can be shared with Member States. This will help prevent duplication of work and also identify gaps in knowledge and sector development.
- New sources of funding should be explored for both capacity/skills and infrastructure development e.g. Maritime Silk Road, New Development Bank (BRICS). IORA should consider establishing its own development fund, to which Dialogue Partners would contribute. This would be separate from the existing Special Fund for collaborative research projects. Focus should be on developing research in the broad area of the Blue Economy that aligns with IORA priorities.

Furthermore, it is important that the research in IORA should link up with the SDGs and, in particular, Goal 14 which relates to conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources.

This UN Goal was agreed upon as the world’s oceans drive global systems that make the Earth habitable for humans: “Our rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines, much of our food, and even the oxygen in the air we breathe, are all ultimately provided and regulated by the sea. Throughout history, oceans and seas have been vital conduits for trade and transportation. Careful management of this essential global resource is a key feature of a sustainable future.” (SDG Goal 14)

Republic of South Africa, as the incoming Chair would like to see this initiative expanded and for a permanent Blue Economy Working Group to be established as part of IORA. This will assist in driving the research and policy agenda in the region, and has been recognised as a key priority for Member States. Ideally, emphasis should also be placed on the role of women in the Blue Economy.

The 20th Anniversary celebrations of IORA should enable us to look back and, hopefully, to realise that whatever we do from this moment, will determine the future of humanity, dependent on the oceans for sustenance and a healthy environment conducive to well-being.

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