

Towards a Sustainable Ocean Economy: What Role for Cities?
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Prepared Remarks

The symbiotic relationship between ocean and coasts, which incorporates two directions: (1) we have to live *with* the ocean and *from* the ocean in a sustainable relationship; and (2) a principle of the blue economy, which is a redefinition of human relationship of governance between ocean and coast.

Over the years, the role of the port city dramatically changed. Technology and the concept of door-to-door supply chains rendered the role of ports to one of a transit node, and the prime dominance of port of city authority became less relevant in terms of physical, spatial, social, and economic importance. The Blue Economy concept generated unlimited competition from new and aggressive stakeholders to a newly congested blue coast. Hence, managing sustainably the blue ocean/urban integrated space is complex and demanding.

The interconnectedness of emerging global interdependence of ocean and coast—in all their diversity and importance—opened the door to a wealth of opportunities, but it represented a major challenge in management and governance due to diverse, conflicting demands and obligations of stakeholders. Hence, as a concept, it transcends maritime or marine economy into an open ocean urban nexus of sustainability.

The Blue Economy paradigm has compounded that change from one in which the prime dominance of a port city authority becomes less relevant in terms of physical spatial, social, and economic importance due to unlimited competition from new stakeholders in a congested blue coast competing for a sustainable foothold.

The utilization of the coastal space is no longer the prime responsibility of the port state or port authority, as the Blue Economy provides for multiple opportunities and wider challenges from a variety of stakeholders, so that the traditional port is no longer the only gateway for economic and social progress.

Managing sustainable blue ocean space is complex and demanding. But an essential component of this concept is the interconnectedness of emerging global interdependence of ocean and coast—in all their diversity and importance—thus opening the door to wealth of opportunities but presenting a major challenge in management and governance due to diverse, conflicting demands and obligations of stakeholders. The benefits can only be realized through the application of integrated management principles, such as the precautionary approach, polluter pays principle, linkages to science, ecosystem approach, stewardship, compliance, and

enforcement, and, in particular, such tools as marine spatial planning (MSP), coastal zone management (ICZM), and Common Heritage (UNCLOS), among many other tools.

The transition to this Blue Economy enlarges the remit of the coastal zones biophysical, social, economic demands and acquired rights, which leads to much wider, but conflicting space allocation—whether delimited or shared exclusively. The emerging challenge implies a substantial increase of stakeholders demands and authority; overlapping spatial, economic, and social demands, which requires a change of mindset; acceptance of moral and ethical values; and settlement of dispute through peaceful persuasion.

Here, UNCTAD can and does provide a time-tested valuable technical assistance—as it has already been doing through the Annual Review of Maritime Transport and the Trade and Environment Review—to developing countries in their coastal management for sustainable fisheries, aquacultures, navigation, sustainable energy supply, recreation, supply chain trade, enhanced ocean and coastal security, robust clustering marine economic zones, maintenance of ecosystem services, conflict resolution amongst stakeholders, protection of ecologically important marine/urban ecosystems, decarbonization, marine and coastal planning, navigation corridors, and numerous other management of coastal urban interface—bringing changes to separate the influences exerted between the coastal city and the port authorities, including in social and political decision-making in an integrated urban-ocean nexus.

The Secretary General of UNCTAD wrote, “We describe a maritime transport industry as at a crossroad with many forces at play reshaping the sectors, role, and operating landscape.”

However, beyond the maritime dimension, one may consider the greatest challenge to the sustainability of the ocean-urban nexus paradigm is, in fact, the existential threat of sea level rise. Three successive UN Secretary Generals have raised with vigour the existential challenges of sea level rise, drawing attention to its impact on major port cities that are vulnerable to sea level rise and who predicted that more than 20 mega ports—centres of maritime trade at the tipping point—will go under. Just consider the unimaginable disruption of world maritime trade and supply chain. *The saying goes if that happens half of the world will die from hunger, the other will freeze to death.*

The danger is that we continue to underestimate the violence of this existential threat and its impact on the urban hinterland where humans must adapt to living with the ocean sustainably. Science tells us without doubt that sea level will rise slowly at first, then speeding up and continuing beyond the 21st century. Gradually, many coastal areas, cities, and coasts will become uninhabitable, people will lose their homes, income, and parts of their culture and way of life.

According to UN reports rising sea levels threaten millions of people in Asia alone, where such population displacement is a recipe for conflict and threat to global security. Mitigating against climate change is not sufficient, and there’s an urgent need to begin a process of adaptation and risk-minimization, for which investment in coastal management must be adequately budgeted globally and increased.

No doubt, when sea level rise reaches the tipping point, as it is forecasted by the 2060s, it will result in global economic and social costs far more tragic in historical consequences than compared with the aftermath and cost of the current economic and social crisis. Consider the enormous plight of refugees from submerged islands, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), who have no territory or nation to protect them.

The UN Secretary General António Guterres has painted a dark picture, having said, “We are a world on the edge of an abyss.”

This has led me to a supposition that science and technology as mitigating tools should become more conjectural and not solely observatory.

Furthermore, to implement precautionary adaptation and mitigation measures, there needs to be ample international financial and empowered human resources—with particular emphasis on SIDS and LDCs—and support for multilateral policies of reason to become the cornerstone of genuine multilateral cooperation in anticipation of the sea level rise tipping point.

UNCTAD has a preparatory process to develop for ports and hub cities: a vulnerability index as well for SIDS as a mitigating process in the face of this global threat. The ICP experts recognized that, combined with sea level rise, there are threats of enormous impacts on vulnerable areas, including flooding, coastal erosion, salination of aquifers, river mouths and agricultural land—leading to increased risk of food security and livelihoods, displacement of people, and the destruction of important coasts, infrastructure, ecosystems, and habitats of important flora and fauna.

However, when it comes to solutions, experts differ. Where some prefer promoting ecosystem approaches, others consider it ineffective. That leads me to the supposition that science and technology as mitigating tools should become more conjectural and not solely observatory. UNCTAD’s 60 years of leadership and expertise, particularly in maritime related trade issues, can make a major contribution, with emphasis on SIDS and LDCs, in facing this existential challenge, which highlights the importance of capacity building, innovation, global literacy, and international partnerships in the urban-ocean nexus that is sustainable.