

# Webinar

## Towards a sustainable ocean economy: What role for cities?

20 June 2024

Held over Zoom with remote participation. Documents available at:

<https://unctad.org/meeting/webinar-towards-sustainable-ocean-economy-what-role-cities>

### Meeting summary

#### Discussion

United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and Global Cities Hub noted they co-organized this virtual event on cities' role in the ocean economy with two aims. First, they sought to strengthen two-way information exchange between speakers, UNCTAD and other organizations, and local and regional governments. Second, they aimed to explore how UNCTAD can help coastal cities and the global community achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Speakers repeatedly emphasized the scale and urgency of the topic. The global population now lives predominantly in cities, and by 2050 urbanization rates could reach 70 per cent. Of the urban space that will exist in 2050, however, 60 per cent has yet to be built. Rapid development and urbanization can bring advantages and opportunities, such as connectivity, port activities, fisheries, and tourism, with global trade in ocean-based goods and services estimated to be \$1.8 trillion in 2022 (UNCTAD Stats, 2024).

However, it can also bring challenges, including unique vulnerabilities to climate change, large demands on infrastructure and services, and significant plastics, greenhouse gas, and chemical pollution. These challenges and opportunities are particularly pronounced for cities in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which both depend on the ocean for livelihood and are existentially threatened by climate disasters and sea level rise. Major port cities like Shanghai, China, Panama City, Panama, and Alexandria, Egypt—which are now central to the functioning of the global economy—also face substantial threats from climate change. In fact, estimates suggest \$18.3 trillion dollars may be needed for global coastal protection by 2100 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). As such, the global community has a significant interest in understanding how to urbanize in a sustainable and resilient way.

In exploring the role of local and regional governments in the ocean economy, speakers highlighted several areas where cities have significant roles and the need for a multisectoral, multistakeholder approach. Waste management and pollution control emerged as areas of focus. In these sectors, cities often have exclusive or even primary jurisdiction, and thus may even be more important than national governments in implementation of specific SDGs. According to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), 47 per cent of municipal plastic waste is poorly disposed of and likely to enter the ocean. Water, water treatment, and sanitation were also identified as areas of significant urban responsibility, and speakers discussed the possible role of desalination in urban ocean economy strategies. While desalination has been critical in helping many Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cities, like Barcelona, Spain, deal with the impacts of droughts, it can cost five

times more than other sources and currently serves more as a last resort. Additionally, speakers emphasized the importance of local and regional governments in promoting and regulating tourism and recreation, managing coastal zones, and building local infrastructure.

Speakers also presented several examples of cities and organisations positively handling opportunities and challenges facing the urban ocean economy. For instance, one speaker highlighted the role of USAID's Clean Cities Blue Ocean Program in helping coastal cities to transition to better waste management and the work of Caribbean Blue Economy Financing Project in offering sustainable financing. Another focused on diverse experiences from Yangzhou, China, in addressing plastic pollution and promoting recycling; Mombasa, Kenya, in implementing urban, port, and coastal waste management efforts; and Copenhagen, Denmark, in cleaning up and transforming its port into a recreation and tourism hub. A third speaker highlighted the role of subnational governments by focusing on Catalonia's Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP). The IMP aims to focus promote a sustainable blue economy, healthy ecosystems, citizenship that values the sea, and innovative governance.

Finally, speakers emphasized UNCTAD's important role in helping national, regional, and local governments. They highlighted UNCTAD's efforts to create dialogue, expand data collection, and identify lessons and best practices. They also considered the possibility of greater efforts to localize and track SDGs, particularly related to the urban-ocean nexus.