

Africa's Blue Economy: Harnessing Opportunities in the Technology Era and Addressing Challenges for Sustainable Development

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Africa's Blue Economy: Harnessing Opportunities in the Technology Era and Addressing Challenges for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how Africa's Blue Economy can be effectively nurtured for Sustainable Development. The paper examines the concept of Blue Economy in Africa. It argues that Africa has immense opportunities to harness the Blue Economy towards Sustainable Development. It explores some of the benefits of the Blue Economy in Africa. Despite its immense Blue Economy potential, the paper also notes that the health of oceans and marine resources in Africa is facing significant threats. The paper examines some of the challenges facing the Blue Economy in Africa. In light of these challenges, the paper examines how Africa can harness opportunities in the technology era and address challenges towards nurturing the Blue Economy for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Blue Economy refers to the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs while maintaining the health and vitality of oceans and marine resources¹. In addition, it has been argued that the concept of Blue Economy is broad and generally relates to a sustainable ocean economy – the economic activities associated with the ocean, seas and coastal regions². These activities allow resource use while preserving the health of the ocean and its ecosystems³. The Blue Economy therefore has three related but distinct meanings: the overall contribution of the oceans to

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¹ World Bank Group., 'What is the Blue Economy?' <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/06/06/blue-economy> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

² What is the blue economy?., Available at <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/explainers/what-is-the-blue-economy/> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

³ Ibid

economies; the need to foster the environmental and ecological sustainability of the oceans; and the ocean economy as a growth opportunity for both developed and developing countries⁴.

The Blue Economy has emerged as an increasingly influential global concept which seeks to ensure the development of oceans and seas and related ecosystems in a manner which also addresses concerns about ocean health in the face of increasing demands on ocean resources, marine pollution, and climate change⁵. It has been argued that a sustainable Blue Economy unlocks multiple environmental, social and economic benefits and drives Sustainable Development⁶. The Blue Economy is a major driver of local, regional and global development, creating millions of jobs in sectors such as fisheries, tourism, and shipping⁷. The Blue Economy is therefore integral in the quest towards Sustainable Development. The importance of Blue Economy in the Sustainable Development discourse is recognized under the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁸ which seeks to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for Sustainable Development⁹.

⁴ United Nations., 'Blue Economy Definitions' Available at https://www.un.org/regularprocess/sites/www.un.org.regularprocess/files/rok_part_2.pdf (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

⁵ Benzaken. D et al., 'Good governance for sustainable blue economy in small islands: Lessons learned from the Seychelles experience' Available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.1040318/full> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Sustainable Blue Economy' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-based-approaches/sustainable-blue-economy> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Blue Economy' Available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/water-governance/blue-economy.html> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

⁸ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

⁹ Ibid

Despite its role in the Sustainable Development agenda, the Blue Economy is facing mounting threat from human and environmental factors. For example, vital resources in the Blue Economy are being degraded and depleted through unsustainable practices such as marine pollution, unsustainable coastal development, deforestation and overfishing¹⁰. It has been argued that with a growing global population and increasing demand for ocean and marine resources, our connected ocean, coasts and inland waters are facing a triple-planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss¹¹. In light of these challenges, nurturing the Blue Economy is vital for Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how Africa's Blue Economy can be effectively nurtured for Sustainable Development. The paper examines the concept of Blue Economy in Africa. It argues that Africa has immense opportunities to harness the Blue Economy towards Sustainable Development. It explores some of the benefits of the Blue Economy in Africa. Despite its immense Blue Economy potential, the paper also notes that the health of oceans and marine resources in Africa is facing significant threats. The paper examines some of the challenges facing the Blue Economy in Africa. In light of these challenges, the paper examines how Africa can harness opportunities in the technology era and address challenges towards nurturing the Blue Economy for Sustainable Development.

2.0 The Blue Economy in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

Africa has an immense Blue Economy potential. It has been argued that Africa has an opportunity to unleash the potential to develop a resilient Blue Economy to fast-track the continent's development agenda¹². Africa is surrounded by some of the world's most important oceans and seas including the Atlantic and Indian oceans and the

¹⁰ Muigua. K., 'Fostering Africa's Blue Economy: Problems and Promises' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Fostering-Africas-Blue-Economy-Problems-and-Promises-.pdf> (Accessed on 27/09/2025)

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Sustainable Blue Economy' Op Cit

¹² The World Bank., 'Blue Economy for Resilient Africa Program.' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2022/11/16/blue-economy-for-resilient-africa-program> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

Mediterranean and Red seas in addition to marine biodiversity, strategic maritime trade routes, abundant aquatic resources and blue carbon assets providing immense opportunities to foster development in the continent¹³. With the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea to the North, the Atlantic Ocean to the West, and the Indian Ocean to the East, Africa boasts a vast shoreline with myriad coastal and marine ecosystems and biodiversity¹⁴. These resources and ecosystems provide the continent's coastal countries and communities with immense opportunities including food, livelihoods, and economic opportunities in key sectors such as fisheries and tourism while protecting against adverse climatic events including storm surges, flooding, coastal erosion and sea-level rise¹⁵.

The Blue Economy is therefore at the heart of Africa's development agenda. The continent's vast ocean and inland water resources hold immense promise for Sustainable Development¹⁶. Africa's blue economy is valued at approximately \$450 billion annually, presenting numerous opportunities for growth and development in several sectors¹⁷. For instance, it has been pointed out that the Blue Economy creates nearly 49 million jobs in Africa making it an indispensable resource in the continent's development agenda¹⁸. It is also crucial for food security, livelihoods, and biodiversity which are all dependent on the ocean's health¹⁹. Further, it has been observed that international trade is important to many African economies, with more than 90 percent of Africa's imports and exports

¹³ African Union., 'Shaping a Sustainable Blue Economy for Africa UN Oceans Conference Side Event.' Available at <https://au.int/en/newsevents/20220630/shaping-sustainable-blue-economy-africa-un-oceans-conference-side-event> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

¹⁴ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Available at <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/213a25f8770328e39b2ef15e7104a136-0320012022/original/Overview.pdf> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Africa's Blue Economy - it's time for Action, not Words., Available at <https://african.business/2025/06/economy/africas-blue-economy-pivotal-to-the-continent-sustainable-economic-growth-and-development> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ The World Bank., 'Blue Economy for Resilient Africa Program.' Op Cit

¹⁹ Ibid

conducted by sea²⁰. Africa's 38 coastal and island states, with their 47,000 kilometers of coastline house 85 commercial ports that serve as gateways to global markets making the Blue Economy a vital resource in international trade²¹.

A sustainable Blue Economy can therefore unleash opportunities in a number of highly productive activities which can make a powerful contribution to Africa's development agenda. These activities include trade and transport by sea, inland water ways and lakes, fisheries and aquaculture, mining and oil and gas resources, exploitation of renewable marine energy, and coastal and marine tourism²². The Blue Economy in Africa also provides environmental benefits by supporting marine biodiversity²³. Coastal/marine ecosystems including coral reefs, mangrove forests, seagrass beds, estuaries, hydrothermal vents, seamounts and soft sediments on the ocean floor are biodiversity hotspots providing habitats for thousands of species²⁴. Marine biodiversity both globally and in Africa provides a wide range of ecosystem services necessary for sustaining life on the planet including food, oxygen and climate regulation²⁵. For instance, it has been observed that deep-sea life is essential to life on Earth because of its crucial role in global carbon and biogeochemical cycles, including nutrient regeneration²⁶. Marine biodiversity provides numerous benefits and opportunities to coastal communities in Africa including

²⁰ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., 'Africa's Blue Economy: A Policy Handbook.' Available at <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/30130/AfricasBlueEconomy.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

²¹ Africa's Blue Economy – it's time for Action, not Words., Op Cit

²² United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., 'Africa's Blue Economy: Opportunities and challenges to bolster sustainable development and socioeconomic transformation' Available at https://nairobi-convention.org/clearinghouse/sites/default/files/Africa%27s%20Blue%20Economy%20Issues_Paper_UNECA.pdf (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

²³ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

²⁴ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Oceans Contain a Wealth of Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/article/biodiversityforwater-1#:~:text=Deep%2Dseabed%20habitats%20host%20between,sustainable%20fishery%20and%20mariculture%20management.> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

²⁵ United Nations., 'Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystems Underpin a Healthy Planet and Social Well-Being' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/marine-biodiversity-and-ecosystems-underpin-healthy-planet-and-social-well-being> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

²⁶ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Oceans Contain a Wealth of Biodiversity' Op Cit

poverty eradication, sustained economic growth, food security sustainable livelihoods and inclusive work²⁷.

The Blue Economy in Africa also provides opportunities towards combating climate change²⁸. For example, coastal and marine ecosystems including mangroves, saltmarshes and seagrasses are vital blue carbon sinks which can enhance the continent's response to climate change²⁹. It has been argued that blue carbon ecosystems provide a natural solution to remove carbon from the atmosphere, build resilience against the mounting impacts of climate change and preserve vital biodiverse habitats³⁰. They are effective carbon sinks and have been described as carbon removal powerhouses, storing up to 5 times more carbon per area than tropical forests and absorbing it from the atmosphere about 3 times as quickly as tropical forests³¹. In addition, these ecosystems support livelihoods through fisheries, improve water quality, and provide coastal protection against floods and storms³².

Due to the foregoing opportunities, it has been argued that a sustainable Blue Economy is at the heart of Africa's development and competitiveness³³. This is recognised under African Union's *Agenda 2063*³⁴ which seeks to exploit the vast potential of Africa's

²⁷ United Nations., 'Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystems Underpin a Healthy Planet and Social Well-Being' Op Cit

²⁸ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

²⁹ World Bank Group., 'What You Need to Know About Blue Carbon' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/11/21/what-you-need-to-know-about-blue-carbon> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

³⁰ Wood. K., Ashford. O., 'How Blue Carbon Can Tackle the Climate, Biodiversity and Development Crises' Available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/what-is-blue-carbon-benefits-for-people-planet> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

³¹ Ibid

³² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Why protecting & restoring blue carbon ecosystems matters' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/what-we-do/protecting-restoring-blue-carbon-ecosystems/why-protecting> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

³³ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

³⁴ Africa Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want.' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

blue/ocean economy for Sustainable Development. Agenda 2063 acknowledges the potential of the Blue Economy to trigger Sustainable Development in Africa through marine resources, fishing, tourism, energy, port operations, mining and marine transport³⁵. It calls for the sustainable utilization and management of the Blue Economy in Africa in order to realize its potential³⁶.

Further, the *Africa Blue Economy Strategy*³⁷ aims to foster an inclusive and sustainable Blue Economy that significantly contributes to Africa's transformation and growth. The Strategy seeks to guide the development of an inclusive and sustainable Blue Economy that becomes a significant contributor to continental transformation and growth, through advancing knowledge on marine and aquatic biotechnology, environmental sustainability, the growth of an Africa-wide shipping industry, the development of sea, river and lake transport, the management of fishing activities on these aquatic spaces, and the exploitation and beneficiation of deep sea mineral and other resources³⁸. The Africa Blue Economy Strategy therefore seeks to harness opportunities and address challenges towards nurturing the Blue Economy in Africa for Sustainable Development.

Despite having an immense Blue Economy potential, Africa faces several challenges that undermine the role of the ocean economy in the continent's development agenda. For example, unsustainable infrastructure development, pollution, and the inadequate management of natural habitats and resources are key challenges threatening the productivity of the Blue Economy in Africa³⁹. In addition, it has been pointed out that oceans and aquatic inland ecosystems in Africa face multiple stresses from resource overexploitation, poor governance, rapid coastal population growth, habitat

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Africa Union., 'Africa Blue Economy Strategy.' Available at https://www.auiabar.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/sd_20200313_africa_blue_economy_strategy_en.pdf (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

degradation, and pollution⁴⁰. In particular, marine pollution is a major challenge in Africa with the continent estimated to be the second biggest ocean plastic polluter⁴¹. This undermines economic activities such as fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, and shipping while also harming marine life⁴². In addition unsustainable practices including overfishing, deforestation of mangroves, unsustainable coastal development and habitat degradation are impacting coastal/marine ecosystems leading the loss and decline of marine biodiversity with severe consequences for people and planet⁴³. Climate change is also impacting the Blue Economy in Africa. For example, climate change-related events such as sea-level rise, land subsidence, storm surge, and coastal flooding are exacerbating the vulnerability of the Blue Economy in Africa⁴⁴. Further, according to the Africa Blue Economy Strategy, harmful and illegal practices including maritime terrorism, sea piracy, human trafficking, illicit trade in crude oil and arms, and drug trafficking are serious challenges to Africa's Blue Economy since these incidences pose a real threat not only to the safety of vessels and their crew but also to the economies of affected countries⁴⁵.

In light of the foregoing challenges, it is imperative to nurture a sustainable Blue Economy for Africa's development.

3.0 Nurturing the Blue Economy in Africa for Sustainable Development

The Blue Economy is at the core of Sustainable Development efforts in Africa. A sustainable Blue Economy provides immense opportunities for economic development by supporting key sectors including fisheries, tourism, maritime trade and transport, blue energy and ocean mining⁴⁶. The Blue Economy is also at the heart of biodiversity conservation, climate action due to the vital role of blue carbon ecosystems in confronting

⁴⁰ Africa's Blue Economy – it's time for Action, not Words., Op Cit

⁴¹ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Childs. J & Hicks. C., 'Securing the Blue: Political Ecologies of the Blue Economy in Africa.' *Journal of Political Ecology*, 2019

⁴⁵ Africa Union., 'Africa Blue Economy Strategy.' Op Cit

⁴⁶ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

climate change, and coastal protection against adverse climatic and weather events including sea-level rise, flooding and storm surges⁴⁷. Despite its important contribution to Sustainable Development, the Blue Economy in Africa is facing mounting threats including marine pollution, illegal and unsustainable fishing, coastal erosion, degradation and destruction of marine/coastal ecosystems, harmful and illegal activities and adverse climatic events⁴⁸.

In light of the foregoing, it is imperative to harness opportunities and address challenges towards nurturing the Blue Economy for Sustainable Development in Africa. In particular, it has been argued that promoting good governance in the Blue Economy sector and establishing regional and sub-regional cooperation in the Blue Economy can enable Africa to harness opportunities and address challenges facing this vital sector⁴⁹. Through good governance, it is possible to ensure a sustainable Blue Economy by curbing harmful practices including overfishing, unsustainable coastal development, habitat degradation, marine biodiversity loss and marine pollution⁵⁰.

By embracing good governance practices that take into account all levels of government, all stakeholders including the private sector and coastal communities, and all Blue Economy sectors including fisheries and aquaculture, tourism, renewable energy, marine biotechnology, transport, ports, logistics, wastewater and solid waste management, it is possible to harness opportunities and curb challenges facing the Blue Economy through sustainable fisheries, sustainable wastewater and solid waste management, sound marine biodiversity conservation, and sustainable extraction of resources including blue

⁴⁷ United Nations., 'Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystems Underpin a Healthy Planet and Social Well-Being' Op Cit

⁴⁸ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

⁴⁹ Roy. A., 'Blue Economy in the Indian Ocean: Governance Perspectives for Sustainable Development in the Region.' Available at https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ORF_Occasional_Paper_181_Blue_Economy.pdf (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

⁵⁰ Ibid

energy, minerals, oil and gas⁵¹. Further, global, regional and sub-regional cooperation is key towards tackling harmful and illegal practices in the Blue Economy including, piracy, human trafficking, maritime terrorism, illicit trade and drug trafficking⁵².

It is also imperative to utilise technology towards harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges facing the Blue Economy in Africa. Technology can strengthen governance of the Blue Economy in Africa through integrated maritime surveillance which can inform better decision making, digital mapping of maritime and coastal space and natural assets which can form the basis for cross-sector analysis and planning in order to prevent conflicts and avoid externalities, sustainable extraction of resources including fish, minerals, oil and gas, and effective monitoring and conservation of marine biodiversity⁵³. It has been argued that modern data and information technologies are key towards nurturing the Blue Economy in Africa through evidence-based knowledge and information and growing the marine knowledge base required for sound governance of the Blue Economy⁵⁴. Utilising science and technology is therefore key towards effective governance of coastal and marine resources and ecosystems⁵⁵. It is thus necessary to harness opportunities in the technology era by increasing scientific knowledge, developing research capacity and transfer of marine technology towards ensuring a sustainable Blue Economy in Africa⁵⁶.

⁵¹ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

⁵² Roy. A., 'Blue Economy in the Indian Ocean: Governance Perspectives for Sustainable Development in the Region.' Op Cit

⁵³ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., 'The Nairobi Statement of Intent on Advancing the Global Sustainable Blue Economy.' Available at <https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploadeddocuments/SROs/EA/HIGH-LEVEL-SUSTAINABLE-BLUE-ECONOMY-CONFERENCE-2018/nairobistatement-of-intent-advancing-global-sustainable-blue-economy.pdf> (Accessed on 28/09/2025)

⁵⁴ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

⁵⁵ Africa Union., 'Africa Blue Economy Strategy.' Op Cit

⁵⁶ Ibid

4.0 Conclusion

Africa has an immense Blue Economy potential. It is therefore necessary to harness opportunities in key sectors including tourism, fisheries and aquaculture, maritime trade and transport, blue energy, minerals, oil and gas extraction, marine biodiversity conservation, and climate action through blue carbon sinks towards nurturing the Blue Economy for Sustainable Development in Africa⁵⁷. It is also vital to address challenges including overfishing, unsustainable coastal development, habitat degradation, marine biodiversity loss and marine pollution towards nurturing the Blue Economy in Africa for Sustainable Development⁵⁸. It is also important for Africa to utilise science, technology and innovation towards harnessing opportunities and tackling the challenges facing its Blue Economy sector⁵⁹. Nurturing the Blue Economy in Africa is therefore a practical ideal that can be actualised in the technology era for Sustainable Development.

⁵⁷ World Bank Group., 'Blue Economy in Africa: a Synthesis' Op Cit

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Africa Union., 'Africa Blue Economy Strategy.' Op Cit

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