

III

(Preparatory acts)

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

127TH COR PLENARY SESSION, 31.1.2018-1.2.2018

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean

(2018/C 176/11)

Rapporteur: Samuel Azzopardi (MT/EPP), Councillor, Rabat Citta Victoria, Local Council, Gozo**Reference document:** Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee — Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean

COM(2017) 183 final, SWD(2017) 130 final

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the communication and the accompanying Framework for Action — Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean, adopted on 19 April 2017 by the European Commission;
2. supports the proposed measures to ensure a safe, secure and clean maritime space, better governance of the sea and sustainably managed oceans;
3. recalls and fully supports the Union for the Mediterranean Ministerial Declaration on the Blue Economy wherein participating countries were invited and encouraged to explore the added value and feasibility of appropriate maritime strategies at sub-regional level, and build on the experience of the 5+5 Dialogue. In October 2016, the foreign affairs ministers of Algeria, France, Italy, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia encouraged further work on an initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy, together with the Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat ⁽¹⁾;
4. notes that the initiative recognises the fact that, to date, cooperation between the two shores remains limited and maintains that there is room for improvement;
5. recognises that the region offers considerable economic opportunities, and is renowned for its active ports and numerous tourists due to its cultural heritage, which can be further exploited in a sustainable manner;

⁽¹⁾ UfM Ministerial Declaration on the Blue Economy.

6. recognises that the Mediterranean Sea is strategically located, geographically situated at the interface of three main continents, namely Europe, Africa and Asia. The Mediterranean Sea has always been a hub for culture and trade between its neighbouring countries and beyond;
7. recognises that the basin is notorious for its biodiversity and numerous marine protected areas;
8. recalls, inter alia, its earlier opinions on the Commission communication 'Towards an Integrated Maritime Policy' ⁽²⁾, on maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management ⁽³⁾, and on better protecting the marine environment, as well as its opinion entitled 'A new stage in the European policy on blue growth' ⁽⁴⁾;
9. is concerned about the fact that the Mediterranean region is highly affected by climate change ⁽⁵⁾;
10. recognises that the region is also associated with high youth unemployment, political instability and serious migration problems, all of which have the effect of harming the region's economic prospects;
11. while endorsing the initiative's primary focus on the west Mediterranean sea sub-basin, points out that this does not exclude in any way the possibility of extending its potential and goals to the other sub-basins of the Mediterranean;
12. notes that while there is real political will to resolve environmental, fisheries challenges and aquaculture, the region is still lacking appropriate awareness, dissemination and cross-sectoral evidence-based policymaking. Many shortcomings also remain in implementation and enforcement, in particular at the national and local levels ⁽⁶⁾;
13. stresses that the region is consistently subject to humanitarian challenges due to the influx of irregular migrants crossing from Africa and the Middle East to the southern European countries, which directly affects maritime border regions;
14. realises that maritime traffic is also a challenge in certain areas of the basin, which cannot be ignored considering the fact that the initiative, always in accordance with criteria of respect of environment and biodiversity, combating climate change, and sustainability, aims for further economic activity, which could lead to increased maritime traffic;
15. notes that the western Mediterranean region suffers from high youth unemployment rates; at the same time, many industrial sectors struggle to find workers with the required qualifications and skills;
16. welcomes the Commission's reference to a bottom-up approach, which is the approach best suited to encouraging local and regional governments to get involved in the initiative's measures;

Goal 1 — A safer and more secure maritime space

17. considers that unless safety and security measures are effectively in place and duly enforced in the region, the blue economy cannot operate sustainably and effectively. Consequently, it recommends that the regional authorities on the two shores strive to cooperate and effectively improve the existing situation;
18. is concerned that to date 'cooperation between coastguards across the two shores remains limited and the real-time response to emergency situations at sea still need to be improved' ⁽⁷⁾; and agrees with the actions intended to promote cooperation among coastguards across the two shores particularly by addressing the existing skills gaps in maritime security; considers it commendable to exchange knowledge and share data, particularly with respect to marine traffic;

⁽²⁾ Rapporteur: Michael Cohen, CdR 126/2010.

⁽³⁾ Rapporteur: Paul O'Donoghue, CdR 3766/2013.

⁽⁴⁾ Rapporteur: Hermann Kuhn, CdR 07256/2014, and rapporteur: Christophe Clergeau, NAT-VI/019.

⁽⁵⁾ <http://www.cmcc.it/publications/regional-assessment-of-climate-change-in-the-mediterranean-climate-impact-assessments>

⁽⁶⁾ {SWD(2017) 130 final}.

⁽⁷⁾ {SWD(2017) 130 final}.

19. concurs with the actions encouraging partners to intensify their efforts to improve their existing capacity in order to address unregulated and illegal human activities and to counter marine pollution within the sea basin, such as the smuggling of migrants and illegal fishing, as well as the development of tools in an effort to improve the response to marine pollution. It is concerned about the fact that local and regional economies might not be in a position to financially equip themselves appropriately in terms of capacity building;

20. recalls and fully supports the recent Council Conclusions⁽⁸⁾ on international ocean governance, which promote a more coherent approach among regions;

Goal 2 — A smart and resilient blue economy

21. concurs that a smart and resilient blue economy can only be attained through the adoption of a culture of constant innovation and knowledge sharing and the promotion of sustainable competitiveness and economic activities. The Mediterranean region is particularly renowned for its flourishing maritime tourism sector, which needs to be sustained through innovation and diversification strategies, paying particular attention to the coastal, inland and submarine cultural and archaeological heritage;

22. concurs with the recommendation that stakeholders from the southern shore be invited to participate in the BLUEMED initiative and **considers** the BLUEMED initiative to be an important tool that essentially promotes joint actions for research and innovation. It calls for the coordination of marine and maritime research and innovation activities and for the creation of synergies between regional, national and EU investments, avoiding duplication and reducing fragmentation;

23. supports the development of new technologies and bio-based innovative industries, particularly if such efforts are primarily focused on developing sustainable products, and encourages the development of technologies and tailor-made solutions to mitigating climate change. This is especially the case in the sector of renewable marine energies and floating wind turbines, which are so well-suited to the Mediterranean;

24. supports the establishment of national and regional maritime clusters to create the ideal platforms for the economy to thrive through the development of innovative solutions. Considers clusters to foster and promote collaboration, knowledge sharing and entrepreneurship among small, medium and micro-enterprises;

25. reiterates⁽⁹⁾ its call for the creation of a specific Knowledge and Innovation Community for the blue economy as a further measure for the development of skills and the transfer of ideas from marine research to the private sector; In this context, the Virtual Knowledge Centre⁽¹⁰⁾, which is a tool of knowledge sharing for supporting the development of the blue economy and can be defined as a 'one-stop shop/online web portal allowing for the consolidation and sharing of general, technical and sectoral information related to marine and maritime affairs in the Mediterranean', can also be of added value;

26. restates the proposal made in opinion CdR 6622/2016 to establish regional or inter-regional blue economy platforms; points out that several Mediterranean regions could be good candidates for setting up such a platform, which would provide a mechanism for identifying projects, providing support for their implementation, and mobilising local, national and European financial tools. Such platforms would be managed by the regions and their selected projects would be financed under the Juncker Plan 2.0;

27. calls for interregional, national and transnational projects that are consistent with the strategic framework of the initiative and the S3 to be eligible for financing through the pooling of regional, national and European funds within a simplified framework and to qualify for a community bonus, without the need for new calls for projects;

28. stresses that entrepreneurship in the blue economy extends beyond operations in the Mediterranean sea. It is therefore important to plan appropriate support for businesses related to the blue economy on land such as fish processing plants, shipbuilding industry, onshore wind and photovoltaic installations;

⁽⁸⁾ Council Conclusions of 3 April 2017.

⁽⁹⁾ NAT-V-44.

⁽¹⁰⁾ <http://www.med-vkc.eu/2016/>

29. emphasises the gaps that exist in education and skills that need to be addressed without further delay. Economic development and education go hand in hand and thus the partners need to take into consideration both of these socio-economic aspects to ensure the success of this initiative. Enhancing awareness of maritime professions is of crucial importance for attracting citizens to explore opportunities in the maritime and marine domain, thus mitigating the imbalance between job supply and demand that characterises the sector and helping to reduce the rate of unemployment. There is a particular paradox in the Mediterranean area that, while youth unemployment rates are among the highest in Europe, maritime companies in both emerging and traditional sectors are unable to find skilled staff;

30. agrees with the models that support the development and use of clean energy sources, including innovation in ocean energy and the sustainable use of energy for seawater desalination, following practices to minimise its impact on the seabed; endorses the proposals to promote energy efficiency and adaptation to climate change in coastal cities, green shipping and port infrastructure for alternative fuels, and the development of new tourist products and services, and to develop common technical standards for sustainable marine aquaculture across countries ⁽¹¹⁾. It should be pointed out that even though these actions are essentially positive in their aims and goals, consideration should be given to struggling or small economies;

Goal 3 — Better governance of the sea

31. recognises that coastal and maritime areas have long been highly competitive and multifaceted, resulting in challenges for space allocation and scarce resources. The environmental concerns dominating our present day as a result of increasing pressures on natural resources raise the need for increased knowledge. Undoubtedly, an integrated approach to promoting the use of shared resources will lead to the development of new opportunities;

32. encourages development models based on cutting energy emissions, consumption and costs and increasing flexibility and reliability. Developing energy from biogenic, organic and waste residues will be crucial in this;

33. recognises and fully supports the importance of effective Maritime Spatial Planning regarding human activities in seas leading to coordinated efforts and mitigating possible conflicts of activities;

34. stresses and supports **the actions** highlighting the importance of marine scientific data and knowledge as one of the pillars for a resilient and innovative economy, whilst recognising the importance of updating the existing data in relation to environmental phenomena and climate change and making them available to the international scientific community and public administrations;

35. fully concurs with **the actions** set out to protect the marine environment and habitat against all kinds of pollution whilst proactively identifying zones for preservation such as the marine protected areas. Awareness campaigns are undoubtedly a move in the right direction;

36. supports regional coordination and cooperation through the implementation of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean mid-term strategy (2017-2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries. This will also ensure that the common fisheries policy is implemented more consistently at sub-basin level ⁽¹²⁾;

37. fully agrees with **the action** promoting the development of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture and the dissemination of best practices in order to enhance the fishing and aquaculture industry whilst ensuring proper regional data collection and scientific evaluations, in full respect of international legislation;

⁽¹¹⁾ {SWD(2017) 130 final}.

⁽¹²⁾ {SWD(2017) 130 final}.

Governance and implementation

38. supports the establishment of the WestMED task force jointly with the Union for the Mediterranean which will include national focal points and the European Commission and will ensure the participation of regional and local authorities;

39. acknowledges the availability of various funding sources mainly through EU funding programmes that support various initiatives, depending on the nature of the project submitted, its scope and priorities;

Final recommendations

40. encourages the exchange of best practices, capacity building and cross-border cooperation between LRAs from all sides of the Mediterranean;

41. recommends to all parties to foster the exchange of knowledge and policy expertise in the LRAs, facilitating multi-level of governance in the management of resources and in relation to shared challenges in the WestMED area;

42. recommends promoting economically sustainable projects on a local and regional level and facilitating access to capital;

43. underlines the need to promote education and retraining projects and measures directed at lowering youth unemployment in cooperation with local and regional authorities, promoting labour mobility between sectors of the blue economy. Notes in this regard the role that local and regional authorities play in forecasting skills needs and matching them with labour market needs. The Member States should be aware of this role and provide LRAs with the right resources to facilitate the transition of young people from education into employment.

Brussels, 31 January 2018.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*

Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ
