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Regionalism Beyond Land Borders: Strengthening regional integration in Latin America and the Caribbean through blue economy policies

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Abstract

This article seeks to highlight the key role of the blue economy in fostering regional integration of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) based on the 2030 Agenda. By proposing a “beyond the boxes” approach, SDG 14 is not the only driver that stands out. Hence, we propose a regionalism beyond the state-centric and land borders, which will require reflecting on and rethinking theories, policies, and practices related to the foundations of regional integration, IR, and the 2030 Agenda itself. The methodology combines UN reports and data from ECLAC, WRI, FAO, UNEP-WCMC, UNESCO-MAB, WWF, UN-DESA, and NOAA.

Keywords: 2030 Agenda; blue economy; Latin America and the Caribbean; ocean; regional integration; sea.

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Introduction

Politics and policies are historically focused on land based on what we now conceive of as interstate relations. With the great navigations, some concern beyond land borders begins, but is initially limited to the subject of transportation and warfare. However, the debate on sovereignty in the coastal zone has recently broadened, including that under national sovereignty and jurisdiction (BBNJ), with significant advances in 2023.

According to the United Nations (UN), the ocean covers 75% of the Earth’s surface, represents 99% of the living spaces on the planet by volume, and contains nearly 200,000 identified species (although actual numbers may lie in millions). While ocean activities are growing in volume and diversity of sectors, the world

still lacks clear and efficient governance over resources and ocean-based industries, given the plurality of stakeholders involved.

Due to the inherent nature of the marine environment, it imposes limits on state-centric visions, often requiring regional approaches. Following this state-centered bias, theories and practices of regionalism oddly lack literature and experiences that highlight the role of the seas and the ocean. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) it is no different. Add to this is the overall regional trend of disintegration and the crisis of regionalism, which has made any dialog or regional integration policy difficult in recent years.

As an example, the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2019 (COP25), held in Santiago (Chile), and well-known as the “Blue COP,” reveals the existing engagement of some LAC countries in this blue agenda. Although there is some regional experience in this area, this article points out that LAC needs adjustments to suitably address this blue agenda.

Seeking to face the main challenges of the 21st century, the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cover marine issues and regional institutions/governance. Focusing largely on living marine resources, SDG 14 does not address the breadth of the blue economy perspective. As will be clear from the structure proposed in this article, the blue economy has yet to guide global sustainable development policies. Consequently, this agenda ends up reproducing theme-related and industry-related approaches.

In fact, discussing economic growth and sustainable development has become even more necessary and urgent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in developing countries of the Global South¹. Therefore, the post-pandemic context makes room to adopt an “outside the box” strategy for inclusive sustainable development. As an example, the ocean economy is estimated to contribute US\$ 407 billion to the Caribbean GDP, as of 2012 (InterAmerican Development Bank 2023) – according to World Bank data, this sum represents more than 17% of the Caribbean GDP, including mainland countries. Notwithstanding, in the chapter dedicated to regional integration and productive transformation for a resilient recovery Latin American Economic Outlook 2021 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2021) there is no emphasis on the specific contribution of marine, maritime, and ocean activities and sectors beyond a simple mention of the term “ocean” in the baseline scenario for renewable energies.

We seek to highlight the role of the blue economy in promoting regional integration of LAC based on the 2030 Agenda. By proposing a “beyond the boxes” approach, SDG 14 is not the only one related to such a question. This is key to ensuring the region’s development under new bases

¹ According to Dados and Connell (2012, 12), “the phrase ‘Global South’ refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including ‘Third World’ and ‘Periphery,’ that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. The use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power.” The authors argue that “the term Global South functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment. It references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained.” (p.13).

not only restricted to the land sovereignty of LAC nation-states. Thus, this article proposes a regionalism beyond land borders, which will require reflecting and rethinking concepts, policies, and practices related to the foundations of regional integration, IR, and the 2030 Agenda itself. The analysis is based on reports from the UN and ECLAC and qualitative and quantitative data retrieved, processed, and examined from different databases, such as ECLAC, WRI, FAO, UNEP-WCMC, UNESCO-MAB, WWF, UN-DESA, and NOAA.

The article is structured as follows: after this introduction, the next section gives a brief introduction to theories on regionalism and regional integration, emphasizing their focus on sectors and national-state borders. Next, we present the relevance of the 2030 Agenda for LAC and, subsequently, how the region has been addressing SDG 14. The “ocean beyond boxes” section highlights the essential role of the blue economy concept in regional policies. Despite the strategic relevance of this concept for the article, it is only brought up in this section reproducing and stressing the fact that the Latin American agenda for the seas and ocean has not yet been aligned with the principles of the blue economy. Changing the trajectory in light of the blue economy would allow LAC to revisit concepts, rethink practices, redesign policies, and remold the business mindset.

Regionalism beyond land borders

There are different approaches to the theories of regionalism and regional integration. Equally, there are various areas of knowledge that study these processes and phenomena in distinct regions and continents. Indeed, it is possible to state that there is an evolving international political economy (IPE) of regional integration, very much based on the foundations of International Relations (IR) and Economic Science. Hence, the states-centric perspective reigns, often limited to the land borders associated with the sovereignty of nation-states.

Notwithstanding, in practice, natural resources are inherently transboundary. The relevance of this debate is such that both international policy and politics are focused on the concept of the (national) border. Initially used in the military context (Foucher 1991), it is known that borders have historically been responsible for defining territories, which can be understood as the extension appropriated and used by the population, and which are a requirement for the very existence of a country (Santos and Silveira 2001). It is in reality more of a space for communication/connection than fragmentation in frontiers (Morin and Nair 1997). Today, many authors defend the need for trans-borderization when managing territory (Carneiro Filho and Rückert 2013).

However, it is difficult to sail beyond national sovereign land borders, which is why this article stresses the co-constitution between sea and land, tying the statist and static ontology and epistemology on land to the boundaryless and fluid one of the ocean. In practice, although they do address in some ways certain activities directly related to the ocean, IR, IPE, and regionalism

studies tend not to focus on these geographic spaces of power and dispute as an object of study that deserves and needs their own methods and insights.

There are few exceptions, as is the case of the regions bordering the Indian and Mediterranean Oceans. In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), decades of regional literature and practices show the influence of the concept of open regionalism. It focuses on international trade associated with the transport of goods, generally commodities, despite the virtual absence of a key role associated with marine resources and maritime and oceanic activities. Moreover, there is some confusion associated with the overlapping of regional integration initiatives and processes, such as the Central America Common Market (1960), the Andean Community (1969), Caricom (1973), Mercosur (1991), and the Pacific Alliance (2011), either about the participating countries or about the agendas covered.

Nevertheless, the LAC's development has been closely related to the ocean since pre-Columbian Caribbean societies (Fitzpatrick 2015), especially from the colonization period onwards. The centrality of the seas was key to supporting the regionalization of exchanges, so much so that it was possible to build "bridges over the sea" (Gruzinski 2004) because of the development of trade in slaves, raw materials, and natural/mineral resources. More recently, the rise of trade globalization contributed to making this space one of the main hubs of international maritime traffic (Ranely Vergé Depré and Chardon 2009). Therefore, the seas and the ocean are currently at the center of the economic growth of the countries in the region, due to the offshore oil and gas industry, the fishing sector, marine tourism, and the potential seabed mining exploitation:

Latin America and the Caribbean is a region with great marine heritage. Twenty-three of the 33 LAC nations have more marine than terrestrial territory. Of these, for 18 the maritime area of its economic exclusive zone exceeds 75% of total territory. Recently, ECLAC showed that the region includes 47 of the 258 marine ecoregions around the world, more than any other region. (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2020, 7-8).

The focus of the region is on maritime cooperation and security (regional illicit drugs and piracy in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea). Some more contemporary approaches embrace environmental safety, mainly linked to accidental pollution (oil spills) or voluntary pollution (deballasting), and how climate change enhances natural risks in the region (particularly sensitive to tsunamis), such as the presence of strong regional tectonic activity and natural disasters (Santos et al. 2023).

Joint initiatives beyond security consider conservation, sustainable development, and climate change mitigation typically addressing overfishing zones, protected marine areas, and ocean acidification (United Nations Environment Programme 2018). Specifically looking at the interface with the 2030 Agenda and, of course, SDG 14, the main issues and policies that arise aim to address marine (plastics) pollution, transition to more sustainable fishing, as well as protection

and conservation of coastal and marine ecosystems (Tambutti and Gómez 2020). However, this requires the promotion of effective and broad ocean governance, currently weak or nonexistent in the region.

Some examples of existing regional initiatives include (i) the Caribbean Regional Oceanscape Project (World Bank 2023); (ii) the Marine Coastal Stressors Research Network for Latin America and the Caribbean (REMARCO) (International Atomic Energy Agency 2022); (iii) the Operative Network of Regional Cooperation of Maritime Authorities of the Americas (ROCRAM), the ROCRAM Central America (ROCRAM CA) and the Regional Activity Centre/Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Information and Training Centre of the Wider Caribbean (RAC/REMPEITC Caribe) (International Maritime Organization 2020); and (iv) the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM). These are basically issue-oriented organizations strongly focused on fisheries, shipping/port activities, and marine debris/pollution, without much of a link to a wider regional development and integration agenda.

Thus, questioning and relativizing these conceptual foundations of IR and economics to better tackle the challenges and opportunities regarding regional integration beyond land borders requires new theoretical contours, analytical designs, discursive practices, collaborative policies, and interdisciplinary contributions. Avoiding mimicking a kind of maritime nationalism (Suárez de Vivero and Rodríguez Mateos 2002) is mandatory, as it goes against the trend of regionalizing ocean governance (Adewumi 2021). In line with current views in international politics, ocean regionalization should focus on the principle of sustainable development (Vallega 2002), which would incorporate new challenges in concepts, practices, and methodologies to address regional governance and integration.

In this article, we understand regional integration as a continuous process that requires policies involving actors in different instances, public and private, for the long-term joint development of the countries involved. Therefore, it is not limited to the economic or commercial realm but includes political, identity, and, ultimately, cultural dimensions.

Considering LAC's experiences in regional integration, whether at the institutional or decision-making level, there is some resistance to supranational policies and institutions – well-known as liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009). In the context of the blue agenda, it is fully in line with the way governance through the 1982 Law of the Sea (LOS) Convention (and all previous LOS conventions) deals with the division of the oceans based on national jurisdictions.

The 2030 Agenda in LAC

The 2030 Agenda was approved in 2015, establishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and encompasses 17 interlinked goals, 169 targets, and 232 associated indicators. The UN adopted this ambitious agenda to face the great challenges of the 21st century. The set of goals, targets,

and indicators focuses on people, the planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships (known as ‘the 5Ps’) and can be understood as a more holistic approach to these threats than the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Table 1 shows that it has a broad and multi-themed perspective, including different issues and challenges of the global agenda. In addition, it presents the number of targets and indicators per SDG, revealing a significant difference between them.

Table 1. The 2030 Agenda, by SDG, number of targets, and indicators

Goal	SDG	Number of targets	Number of indicators
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	7	14
2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	8	13
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	13	27
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	10	11
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	9	14
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	8	11
7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	5	6
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	12	17
9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	8	12
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries	10	11
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	10	15
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	11	13
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	5	8
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	10	10
15	Protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	12	14
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	12	23
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development	19	25

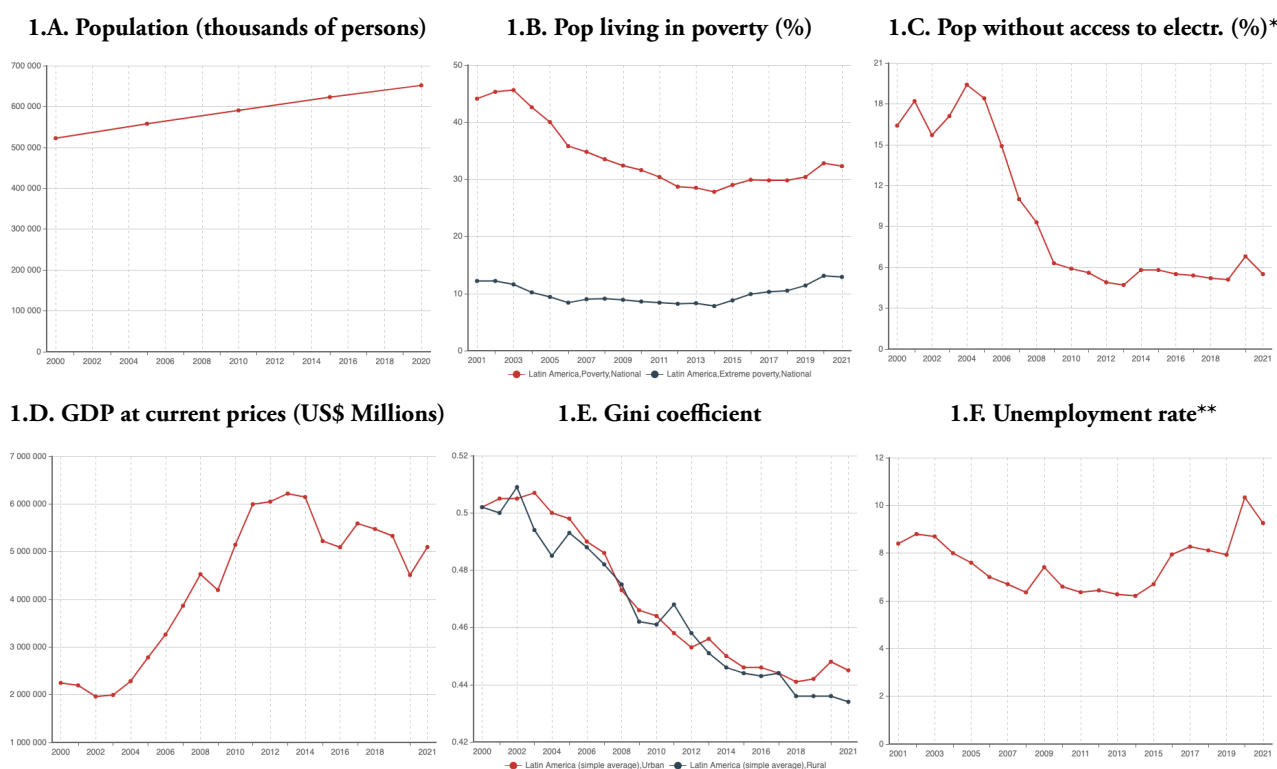
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on United Nations (2017). Note: Some goals share the same indicators; hence, the total for the 17 SDGs is 244 indicators, rather than 232.

This broad agenda deals with issues of different natures, layers, and levels of complexity. Based on data from 2022, the latest SDG progress report (2023) states that:

Early efforts after the SDGs were adopted produced some favourable trends. (...) **But it is clear now that too much of this progress was fragile and most of it was too slow.** In the past three years, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate-related disasters have exacerbated already faltering progress. (...) **It's time to sound the alarm. At the mid-way point on our way to 2030, the SDGs are in deep trouble.** A preliminary assessment of the roughly 140 targets with data show only about 12% are on track; close to half, though showing progress, are moderately or severely off track and some 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline. (United Nations 2023, 2, authors' highlight).

Developing countries from the Global South potentially benefit from the 2030 Agenda, given their major structural and historical problems related to income, inequality, gender, race, and governance, for example. However, “the lack of SDG progress is universal, but it is abundantly clear that developing countries and the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people are bearing the brunt of our collective failure.” (United Nations 2023, 3). In this sense, it is especially relevant for LAC countries, whose socioeconomic indices are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Evolution of selected LAC socio-economic indicators, 2000–2021



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on ECLAC database²; * Latin America (LATAM) simple average; ** Average annual rate.

² <https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html?lang=en>

With a population of over 600 million people, there has been a significant drop in the share of the population living in poverty and extreme poverty in the 2005-2014 decade. Driven by variables of national and international economic nature, it is effectively in 2015 – coinciding with the 2030 Agenda itself –, that LATAM faces a significant increase in the population living in poverty (above 30%) and extreme poverty (above 10%), which was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The share of the population without access to electricity also increased in 2020, reaching almost 7%, despite the relevant drop in the 2004-2013 decade (over 10 p.p.).

In regard to the region's economic data, the total annual gross domestic product (GDP) at current prices in dollars showed an important drop in 2015, reaching more than US\$ 6 trillion. Once again, 2015 shows a drop in this indicator, which is also aggravated by the pandemic. In 2020, LAC's GDP at current prices reaches levels below the 2010 total. The Gini index, which measures income inequality, falls until 2018 and begins to increase even before the adverse impacts of the pandemic. In turn, the average unemployment rate in the region starts to increase in 2015, exceeding 10% per year in 2020. It had been falling at levels close to 6% per year in the period 2008-2014.

Considering that social and economic indicators have worsened in recent years, LAC has much to benefit from the achievement of the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. Nonetheless, according to the Statistical Coordination Group for the 2030 Agenda in LAC of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC, when it comes to the level of production of SDG indicators in LAC, this is the current picture: produced (23%), not produced but can be produced with existing sources of information (18%), some information is available but needs to be improved or completed to produce the indicator (23%), no information is available to produce the indicator (19%), and there is no information (17%)³.

Considering 34 LAC countries, the Sustainable Finance Dashboard⁴ accounts for 327 initiatives, mostly in Ecuador (26, 8.0%), Colombia (24, 7.4%), Chile (19, 5.8%), Peru (18, 5.5%), and Costa Rica (17, 5.2%). The top 5 countries most engaged in this agenda account for nearly one-third (31.9%) of the total number of regional initiatives to address the 2030 Agenda.

Based on the Annual report on regional progress and challenges regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in LAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2017), it is necessary (i) to correct the recessionary bias resulting from persistent trade imbalances; (ii) to reduce the high levels of instability and uncertainty created by financial globalization; (iii) to broaden the welfare state and protect the labor market; (iv) to revive the development agenda; (v) to steer production and consumption patterns towards sustainable growth paths; and (vi) to re-establish international cooperation and multilateralism with a new and revitalized role for LATAM regional integration. However, it highlights that “regional cooperation was fragmented and weak in the 2000s, particularly in South America.” (Economic Commission for Latin America and

³ <https://sdgstatsurvey.cepal.org/>

⁴ <https://sdgfinance.undp.org/dashboard>

the Caribbean 2017, 37). In fact, this diagnosis made it difficult to make progress on traditional regional integration agendas that already existed, hindering alternatives to the *modus operandi* beyond land borders.

Figure 2 presents the coordination mechanisms of LAC countries at the national level to address the challenges presented by the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 2. Coordination mechanisms for implementing and monitoring the 2030 Agenda in LAC, Jan 2023



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2023).

As shown (...), 14 countries have established ad hoc coordination mechanisms to follow up on implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The remaining 19 countries, primarily in the Caribbean, have made an existing public institution responsible for monitoring, reporting either to the office of the president, a ministry or another public office. (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2023, 45).

Created in May 2016, the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development is a regional mechanism for the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, their SDGs, targets, and means of implementation (MoI). It encompasses subsidiary bodies of ECLAC, Forum of Ministers of the Environment of LAC, specialized agencies (such as ILO, FAO, and UNESCO), funds and programs of the UN (such as WB, IMF, OCHA, UNAIDS, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNEP, and WTO), development banks (such as CBD, IDB, and CAF)⁵. It is also worth mentioning that the contribution of the Community of Practice on Voluntary National Reviews for Latin American and Caribbean countries has become a prominent regional platform for peer-to-peer learning. Such a community was established by ECLAC in December 2019 and represents an effective regional institution to address LAC's joint challenges.

Despite these advances in LAC:

participation by multiple stakeholders in implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda remains a challenge. (...). Only in some countries is participation by non-State actors a formal part of institutional arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.” (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2023, 45).

As outlined in the theoretical debate of this article, although there is an agency in the regional perspective, the political approach of the 2030 Agenda in LAC ends up being strongly state-centric in terms of actors and national policies. This becomes a limitation, either to the broad perspective of the agenda or to the very contribution to the maritime and oceanic debate as will be presented in the next sections. As an example, the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development has met only once a year since 2015 between the months of April and May, except in 2020, emphasizing the relatively low regional collective engagement.

Thus, LAC's existing structures follow a top-down model whereas addressing the ocean agenda requires a bottom-up governance approach. Given that contradiction, the following section will analyze what institutions, policies, and norms exist in the region, specifically addressing the targets and indicators of SDG 14. After analyzing the region's economic and social data, LAC should take advantage of the opportune moment to revisit and rethink sustainable development strategies in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context to reformulate its policies, including those more closely related to the blue agenda.

SDG 14 in LAC

Table 2 presents the different goals of SDG 14. Besides, it details the state-of-the-art for each of the targets based on the latest SDG progress report, published by the UN in 2023 (based on 2022 data).

⁵ <https://agenda2030lac.org/en/forum-countries-latin-america-and-caribbean-sustainable-development-and-regional-follow-2030-agenda>

Table 2. Current status of SDG 14 based on SDG progress report

Target	Issue area	SDG progress report (2023)
14.1	By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution	The global trend of elevated coastal eutrophication continued in 2022 above the 2000-2004 baseline conditions, though different in magnitude from recent years. The highest rates are in the Arabian Sea.
14.2	By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans	-
14.3	Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels	Ocean acidification is increasing and will continue to do so if CO ₂ emissions do not stop rising, threatening marine ecosystems and the services they provide. Today, the ocean's average pH is 8.1. This means that the ocean today is about 30% more acidic than in pre-industrial times.
14.4	By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics	Fishery resources continue to be threatened by overfishing, pollution, poor management and other factors, including illegal fishing. More than a third (35.4%) of global stocks were overfished in 2019, an increase of 1.2% since 2017. Despite ongoing deterioration, the rate of decline has decelerated in recent years. However, the trend continues to deteriorate from the 2020 target to restore fish stocks to biologically sustainable levels.
14.5	By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information	-
14.6	By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation*	By the end of 2022, the Agreement on Port State Measures, targeting illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, reached 74 Parties, (including the EU) or effectively 100 states. In the 2018-2022 period, there has been some progress at the global level in implementing instruments to combat IUU fishing. The new WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, adopted in June 2022, marks a major step forward towards ocean sustainability.
14.7	By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing states and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism	-

Continue

Continuation

14.a	Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing states and least developed countries	Even though the ocean covers more than 70% of the surface of our planet and contributes to 2.5% of the world gross value added, on average, between 2013 to 2021, only 1.1% of national research budgets were allocated for ocean science.
14.b	Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets	Globally, the degree of application of frameworks that recognize and protect access rights for small-scale fisheries in 2022 was at the highest level based on available data, reaching a maximum score of 5 out of 5. However, this score conceals a reduced number of countries that contributed to the reporting.
14.c	Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of “The future we want”	-

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on UN (2017; 2023); * Considering ongoing World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations, the Doha Development Agenda, and the Hong Kong ministerial mandate.

Not all targets have sufficient information for an update in this latest report. As stated in target 14.a, “between 2013 to 2021, only 1.1% of national research budgets were allocated for ocean science.” (United Nations 2023, 21). Besides, SDG 14 focuses only on living marine resources and stresses the biological and environmental perspective of life in marine spaces. Therefore, either because of budget constraints or the narrow understanding of the 2030 Agenda itself when it comes to the marine/ocean role, there is a major limitation on the role of the blue economy in achieving sustainable development.

“Despite their contribution to the economy and recognition in SDG 14, there is limited awareness on the state of the oceans and seas.” (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2019a, 160). Considered alone, “SDG 14 has received the least amount of funding compared to other SDGs and ocean science makes up just a small part of this funding” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2022, 10). This reality is no different in LAC. According to ECLAC (2019b), the coastline of LAC extends over 70,000 km and is where many of the region’s largest human settlements are located. Besides, the sea accounts for 60% or more of the sovereign territory of 22 countries in the region. Despite this, the Caribbean Sea is second only to the Mediterranean Sea in terms of plastic pollution, for example.

Regarding SDG 14, the LAC region is quite relevant given the nature of some countries. Table 3 presents this detailing by sub-region and nature – least developed countries (LDC) and small island developing states (SIDS) – since the treatment of some of these categories is particular and differentiated in certain targets (specifically targets 14.6 and 14.7). Because of the focus of the analysis, the list only includes LAC coastal countries.

Table 3. List of SIDS and LDC in LAC

Group	Subregion	Countries
SIDS	Caribbean	Anguilla; Antigua and Barbuda; Aruba; Bahamas; Barbados; Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba; British Virgin Islands; Cuba; Curaçao; Dominica; Dominican Republic; Haiti; Jamaica; Montserrat; Puerto Rico; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Sint Maarten (Dutch part); Trinidad and Tobago; United States Virgin Islands; Belize
	Central America	Belize
	South America	Guyana, Suriname
LDC	Caribbean	Haiti

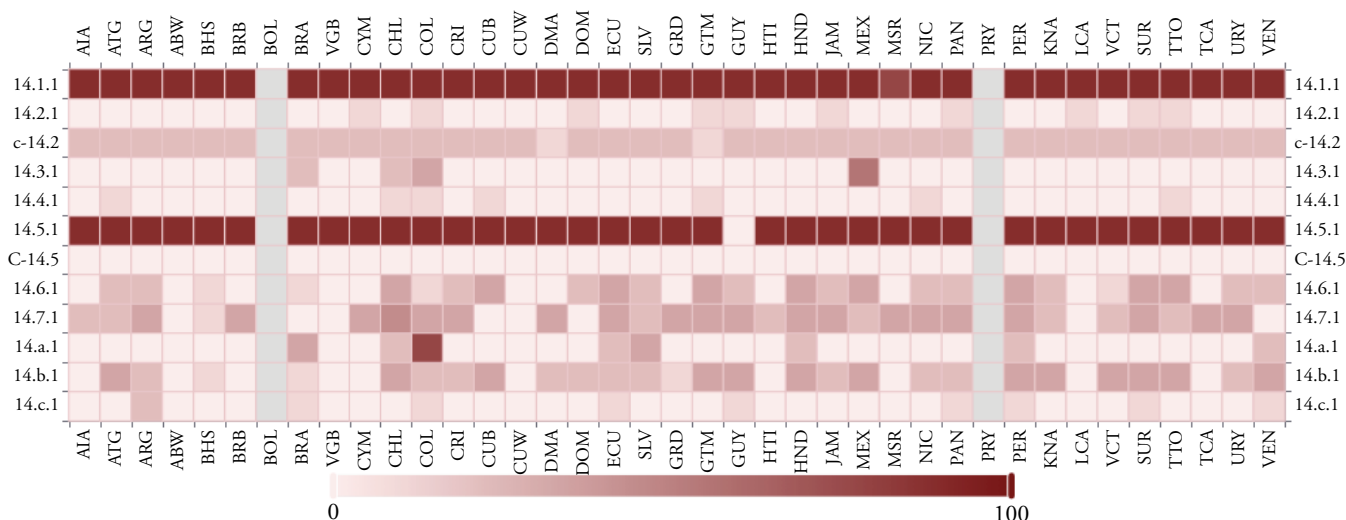
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on UNstats⁶.

The number of coastal countries, either for the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, in addition to SIDS and LDCs, motivated that “the region has greatly increased the extent of protected areas, surpassing the target of protecting 10% of marine and coastal areas set in Aichi Biodiversity Target 11.” (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2019, 161)⁷. Once again, a regional perspective associated with the ocean seems key and a necessary alternative to state-centric approaches. Nevertheless, Figure 3 shows that there is a relative delay in the elaboration of indicators regarding SDG 14, apart from indicators regarding targets 14.1 and 14.5.

⁶ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/regional-groups/>

⁷ “However, the global average for the coverage of marine protected areas in exclusive economic zones is above 15%.” (ECLAC 2019, 161).

Figure 3. Availability of comparable data of SDG 14 indicators for the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda (%)



Source: ECLAC statistical knowledge management hub⁸; AIA = Anguilla; ATG = Antigua and Barbuda; ARG = Argentina; ABW = Aruba; BHS = Bahamas; BRB = Barbados; BOL = Bolivia; BRA = Brazil; VGB = British Virgin Island; CYM = Cayman Island; CHL = Chile; COL = Colombia; CRI = Costa Rica; CUB = Cuba; CUW = Curaçao; DMA = Dominica; DOM = Dominican Republic; ECU = Ecuador; SLV = El Salvador; GRD = Grenada; GTM = Guatemala; GUY = Guyana; HTI = Haiti; HND = Honduras; JAM = Jamaica; MEX = Mexico; MSR = Monserrat; NIC = Nicaragua; PAN = Panama; PRY = Paraguay; PER = Peru; KNA = Saint Kitts and Nevis; LCA = Saint Lucia; VCT = Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; SUR = Suriname; TTO = Trinidad and Tobago; TCA = Turks and Caicos Islands; URY = Uruguay; VEN = Venezuela.

The first annual report on regional progress and challenges regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in LAC highlights that unfavorable economic conditions hampered the progress of the agenda in the region, which was further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2017). The second annual report does not feature anything specific to the ocean again. “Sea” and “oceans” appear only for the Caribbean region, without much importance. Besides, when it comes to the inclusion of the global targets in the countries’ lists of national priorities, the analysis of the national framework revealed that SDG 14 “has the lowest average coverage, as only 43% of its targets are included by the countries studied. Except for conservation of coastal and marine areas (target 14.5), the targets are all underrepresented in the metrics prioritized by the countries.” (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2018, 139). The last quadrennial report stresses that:

Regional bodies also have a greater capacity to work in a coordinated manner, organized around regional mechanisms to monitor and review implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. This allows them to link the national and global levels, while considering the specific characteristics and priorities of each region. (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2019a, 88).

⁸ <https://agenda2030lac.org/estadisticas/availability-comparable-data-indicators-follow-up-2030-agenda.html?group=3&lang=en>

As seen in the previous section, regional bodies in LAC to address the 2030 Agenda are organized under the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development. Despite this, what exists in the region in terms of institutions and norms reflects the intergovernmental and top-down approach, creating little room for the effective participation of non-state actors. Besides, there is little chance for optimization of the region's scarce resources considering regional policies that can deal with LAC's marine resources, maritime industries, and ocean challenges in a coordinated and integrated manner. Although the focus of this article lies on and forwards the regional rather than the borders-based approach, tackling the agenda of social inclusion and participation is essential in the context of the 2030 Agenda. It is imperative that in changing the direction of this agenda in the LAC region, this sensitivity is duly considered.

In fact, individual national approaches unveil a large policy delay in achieving the goals of SDG 14, which is well-known as the one relevant to the ocean agenda. This is the focus of the discussion in the next section.

Ocean beyond boxes

Ocean affairs in the 2030 Agenda should not be limited to SDG 14, marine living resources, or national and state-centric approaches. Indeed,

among the efforts being made to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are territorial development policies that aim to bridge the divides among and within the countries of the region. Positive indicators at the national level are not sufficient (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2023, 43).

In this report, there are once again some limitations regarding the marine and ocean agenda. When it comes to "territorialization", the focus is only on the subnational approach, without any deeper analysis of LAC's regional arrangements in terms of cooperation or regional integration. Moreover, "ocean" appears only twice (in the annexed table on indicators of the 2030 Agenda), "marine" appears fourteen times, with broad mentions of natural resources, ecosystem, pollution, conservation, and the remainder of the text mentions the goals and indicators in the table above. The same goes for the term "coastal", which appears only eleven times in a very detailed 215-page document focused on LAC recommendations.

Using SDG Geoportal data⁹, Figure 4 presents some characteristics and challenges regarding the ocean in LAC, including reefs at risk, corals threatened by marine pollution, corals threatened by overfishing, mangroves, marine ecoregions, and reported incidents. Data were retrieved from different databases, such as ECLAC, WRI, FAO, UNEP-WCMC, UNESCO-MAB, WWF, and NOAA.

⁹ <https://statistics.cepal.org/geo/geo-cepalstat/?lang=en&context=sdg-gateway>

Figure 4. Selected characteristics and challenges related to the ocean in LAC

4.A. Reefs at risk



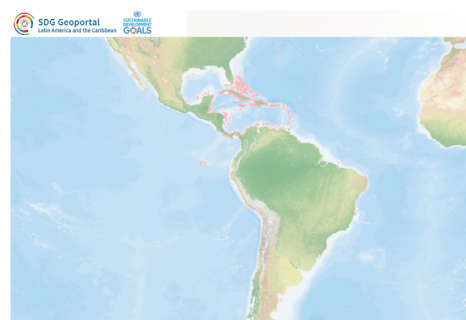
Source: ECLAC, 2011.

4.B. Corals threatened by marine pollution



Source: WRI, 2011.

4.C. Corals threatened by overfishing



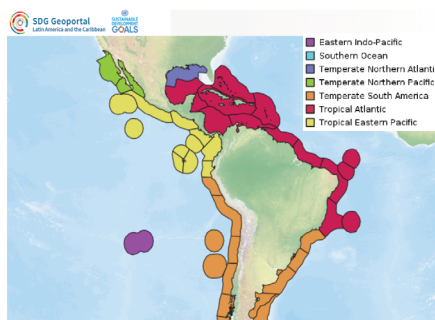
Source: GEOSUR.

4.D. Mangroves



Source: ITTO, ISME, FAO, UNEP-WCMC, UNESCO-MAB, UNU-INWEH, TNC, 2010.

4.E. Marine ecoregions



Source: WWF.

4.F. Reported incidents



Source: NOAA, 1957-2021.

Clearly, none of the six variables presented is limited to national borders, either on land or at sea. This once again suggests a regional approach not necessarily limited to national borders, which certainly benefits from collective mechanisms, supranational institutions, international cooperation, and regional integration. Therefore, the lack of integration, either of LAC countries or of the different SDGs in tackling ocean issues is key to achieving the targets proposed by the 2030 Agenda.

In practice, there are different interconnections and trade-offs between the 17 goals (Breuer et al. 2019). We should always consider different levels of hierarchies, bringing together interconnections between domestic/international coordination and land/maritime activities. This is precisely the case of the ocean in the 2030 Agenda. International Council for Science (2017) highlights that SDG 14 is among those that interact the most with others, having strong relationships with SDGs 1, 2, 8, 11, 12, and 13. Hence, dealing with the ocean in the context of the 2030 Agenda requires a change of perspective, mainly because it is a cross-cutting issue. It is not reasonable to be limited to the boxes presented in the visual identity of the 2030 Agenda. This is exactly what usually happens with the sea and ocean, whose analysis and policies end up being limited only to SDG 14. A broader, cross-cutting, integrative, equitable, inclusive, and sustainable perspective is urgently needed.

According to United Nations Sustainable Development Group (2018), SDG 14 is only related to SDGs 1, 2, 8, and 15, given its focus on safeguarding the oceans. As in many other analyses, this reveals the lack of a blue economy-oriented vision, which is ratified in the inexistence of mentions

of seas and ocean in the report. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the many analyses presented in this report focused on various other issues, such as environment, climate change, disaster risk management, citizen security, and social inclusion. No mention is made of the close interrelation of these issues, much less the perception that they all make up the blue economy concept.

The Blue Economy is a developing world initiative pioneered by SIDS but relevant to all coastal states and countries with an interest in waters beyond national jurisdiction. (...) The Blue Economy breaks the mould of the business as usual “brown” development model where the oceans have been perceived as a means of free resource extraction and waste dumping (...) The Blue Economy will incorporate ocean values and services into economic modelling and decision-making processes. (United Nations 2012, 3).

Today, specialized literature understands that it encompasses ocean-based industries, ocean ecosystem services, and often ocean governance. Consequently, the blue economy is not only a political arena of and for economists. Directly related to sustainability, it also addresses environmental, climate, social, technological, regulatory, and political realms.

Given its broad and wide scope, Figure 5 presents all SDGs directly and/or indirectly related to the sea/ocean based on economic sectors related to the blue economy. Rows represent the SDGs and columns represent its targets. Besides, columns with X show which targets are directly or indirectly related to the blue economy.

Figure 5. The blue economy in the 2030 Agenda

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	a	b	c	d
1	X	X			X															X	X		
2	X																						
3			X																				
4			X	X	X		X														X		
5					X																X		
6	X		X	X	X																X	X	
7																							
8	X		X	X					X												X		
9	X		X	X																	X		
10		X			X																		
11				X	X	X																X	X
12		X	X	X																		X	
13	X	X	X	X	X		X															X	X
14	X	X	X	X	X																X	X	X
15	X							X													X		
16							X	X													X	X	
17			X			X	X		X							X	X	X					

Source: Santos (2023).

The number of targets for each SDG varies widely, but each SDG is somehow related to the blue economy. The ocean has then a much broader and transversal spectrum in the 2030 Agenda than SDG 14 itself. Besides, given this proposed methodological paradigm, all the SDGs have an impact on marine space, maritime activities, and ocean services. This argument is in line with the view of the UN, which claims that “issues related to oceans and seas are addressed in the 10 targets under SDG 14, as well as many other related SDGs, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”¹⁰

After this great move to place the ocean at the forefront of the global sustainable development agenda, the first World Ocean Assessment (WOA), released in 2015, reinforced the urgency of controlling activities in the ocean with sustainability. In 2017, the first UN Ocean Conference, held in New York (USA), allowed the global community to rethink the health of the ocean and seas hoping for concrete solutions. The Governments of Fiji and Sweden co-hosted responsibilities of this high-level UN Conference. In contrast to the cross-cutting nature of the ocean in the 2030 Agenda, the focus of the conference was not only excessive but exclusive to SDG 14. However, the most important outcome of the event was the launch of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, known as the (UN) Ocean Decade. To be implemented between 2021 and 2030, it seeks to fulfill the commitments of the 2030 Agenda with a focus on SDG 14 – and other correlates.

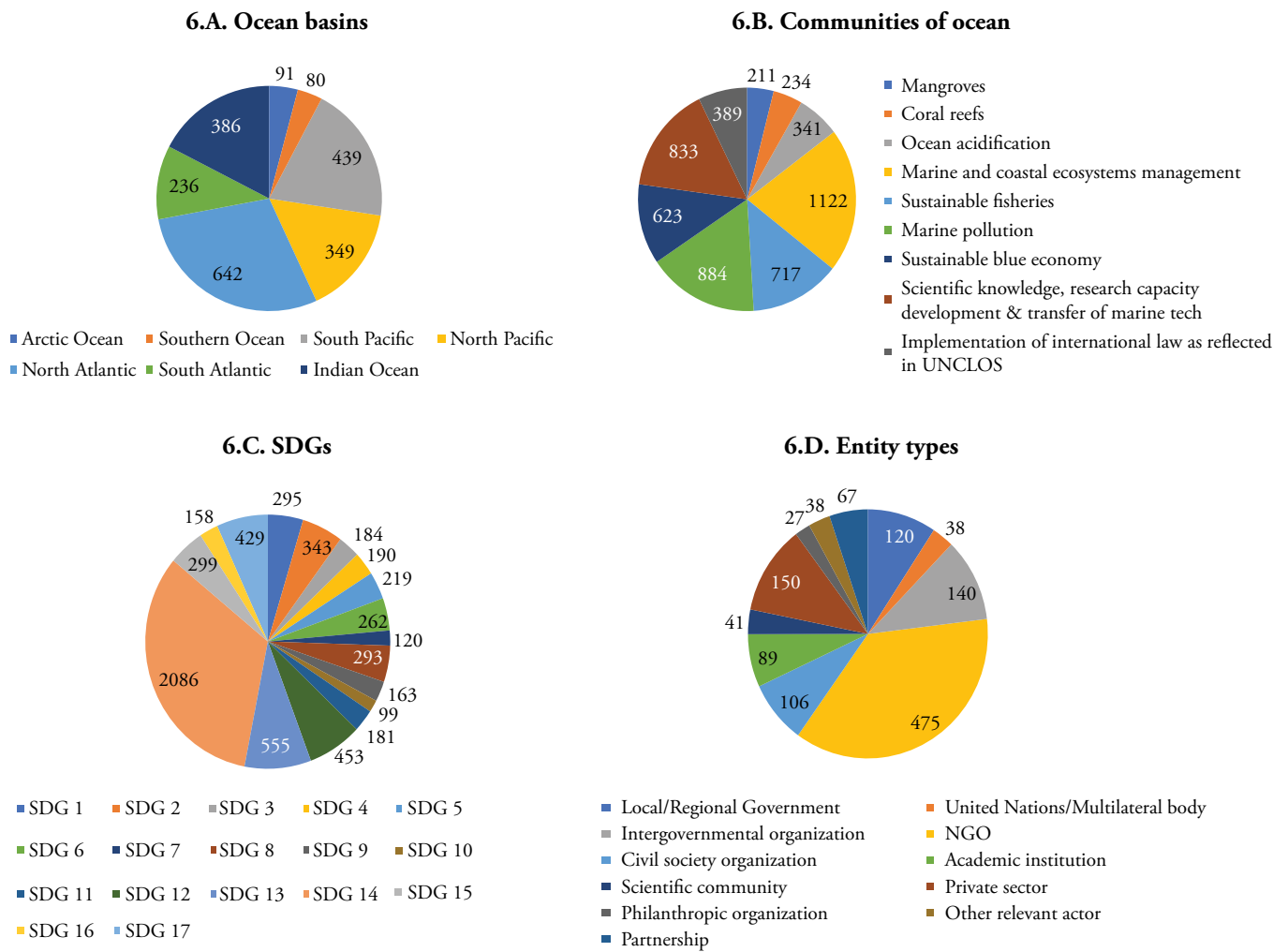
The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is responsible for the design and preparation of the (UN Ocean) Decade Implementation Plan. Unlike what had been done so far, the discourse and publications of the decade insist on using the term “ocean” in the singular, highlighting its unique nature, which requires the unification of (regional and global) collective actions in favor of this common good. This makes clear once again the need for real regional approaches in addressing this agenda. Undoubtedly, it would be no different in LAC, which is why regional integration plays a key role in this process.

Indeed, after the 2030 Agenda and within the Ocean Decade, grows the notion that the ocean’s role in promoting sustainable development is much broader than SDG 14 itself – including the very need for regional mechanisms to promote it. The present diagnosis is that the *modus operandi* has been failing to offer inclusive, sustainable, collective, and regional-oriented solutions.

Recently, the UN Ocean Conference, held in Lisbon, Portugal (2022), counted more than 6,000 participants. Figure 6 shows ocean commitments.

¹⁰ <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/oceans-and-seas?page=1%2C0>

Figure 6. Ocean commitments in the context of the UN Ocean Conference, 2023



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the UN-DESA database; data retrieved on 29 May 2023.

Despite the diversity of themes addressed, as in the case of the Nairobi Conference (2018), there is a concentration of actions from different viewpoints. Spatially, the commitments are focused on the North Atlantic (over 20%), South Pacific, and Indian Ocean; in terms of communities/themes, marine and coastal ecosystem management (again, over 20%), marine pollution, scientific knowledge, and sustainable fisheries stand out; regarding the SDGs, as expected there is a large concentration on SDG 14 (over 30%), followed by SDGs 13, 12, 5 and 17; in terms of entity types, NGOs (almost 40%), private sector, and intergovernmental organizations play key roles.

Specifically for LAC, the Development Bank for Latin America (CAF) informed that it will invest US\$ 1.25 billion in the next years to preserve and boost marine and coastal ecosystems. Funding will be directed to promoting the blue economy, focused on

the restoration of marine and coastal environments, blue carbon, marine renewable energy, sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, integrated coastal management,

nature-based solutions, payment for ecosystem services, ecotourism and improved management of marine protected areas¹¹.

The regional-oriented approach is clear here.

Harnessing the opportunities associated with the blue economy in the context of post-pandemic recovery in the region

will require a transition from a traditional ocean economy towards a coordinated blue economy, including the adoption of effective governance and sustainability principles, (...) as well as a **more regional coordinated approach to the management of resources** (Phang et al. 2023, 1, authors' highlight).

More than ever, proposing a dialogue between areas that traditionally do not interact, such as regionalism, sustainable development, and blue economy in the context of the 2030 Agenda in LAC tenses the science-based logic (from oceanography and geology, basically) of framing regions based only on basins and technical criteria.

Therefore, it is important to bring into the analysis the essential contribution of political, historical, identity, and regional drives since they effectively contribute most to the joint and collective decision-making process. In line with the 2030 Agenda and not limited to SDG 14, blue economy policies help academia, civil society, NGOs, policymakers, and other stakeholders to think outside the box. Hence, they will be able to propose broader policies, contemplate different sectors not limited to fisheries and marine biodiversity, and identify relevant key actors for the promotion of regional governance driven by regional integration that is not limited to land borders, nor to onshore industries.

Conclusions

As outlined in the recent IPCC report on ocean and climate change, the impacts on ocean ecosystems are primarily driven by regional trends (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022). Thus, it is necessary to understand that any ocean-related discussion will be narrow and not enough if limited to a national-boundaries approach.

Since the nature of ocean resources, events, and phenomena is distinct from that of resources on land, it is mandatory to consider different perspectives, alternative policies, and unique approaches beyond land borders to address the challenges presented in the maritime environment considering the 2030 Agenda. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions, nor successful policies on land or in other regions that can be replicated in others. We then propose the existence of effective regional

¹¹ <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/economy-and-business/caf-will-allocate-125-billion-protect-latin-american-and-caribbean-oceans/20220628101207157097.html>

policies that address the particularities of the LAC. Furthermore, given the differences between LAC and Caribbean countries, it is recommended that blue policies be specific to both regions. It would enable the optimization of natural, financial, and human resources, as well as different technical and scientific capacities to reach the goals within the defined deadlines.

Resource-based regional integration need not and should not be limited to onshore resources. Instead, it should consider that the wealth of offshore, marine, and seabed resources can contribute to regional development that is effectively inclusive, sustainable, fair, and participatory. This is exactly what the blue economy proposes: revisiting concepts, rethinking practices, redesigning policies, and remolding the business mindset. Under new bases and based on innovative arrangements, different regions (and LAC in particular) can guarantee much sought-after sustainable development based on arrangements not limited to boxes, sectors, or national borders.

Following Isbell and García (2015, 1), “new ‘ocean basin regionalisms’ offer Latin America alternative options (...) and could become a new guiding frame for Latin American regionalism.” Therefore, connecting the Atlantic-Pacific main issues and challenges can be a new vector of regional integration, since the subcontinent has the fortune of standing between two relevant oceans. Indeed, the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2019 (COP25), held in Santiago (Chile), and well-known as the “Blue COP”, already reveals the existing engagement of some LAC countries in this blue agenda.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced recent changes in short-term priorities, given the urgent and asymmetric impacts on the most vulnerable populations, particularly in the Global South. However, it is possible to identify the great potential for economic growth and job creation associated with blue economy policies. In this context, the 4Cs are important, since we need to *communicate* with different segments of society, *coordinate* actions and efforts, *collaborate* with other countries in the region, and *cooperate* in terms of policies and strategies to promote real regional integration. Sharing the feeling that the ocean that surrounds us is common to all citizens is fully in line with the foundations of any regional integration process and with the universal proposal of the 2030 Agenda itself.

It is then key to think beyond the market-led regional integration paradigm, supporting deeper integration beyond open regionalism in LAC. For such, it is important to consider the role of civil society and rethink public-private partnerships in LAC to achieve the SDGs. Although there are already some institutional coordination mechanisms, an effective regional vision is missing to address the 2030 Agenda in general. The blue agenda is no exception to the rule and looks promising for the revival of an agenda of growth, development, prosperity, and protagonism for the region.

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