



SDG 14: Life Below Water

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Introduction

The European Union has sought to address the SDGs with a combination of national and transnational initiatives and has made ‘green’ initiatives the focus of its future planning and recovery post-COVID-19 through the European Green Deal. Some critics have argued that a greater effort and incorporation of a ‘blue’ deal is needed to address SDG14 targets and wider ocean and waterway sustainability. A World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) report predicts that for the EU three of the four SDG14 targets due in 2020 will not be achieved, while the fourth will only be partly achieved (WWF, 2020a). The report finds that EU Member States will not meet aims on biodiversity conservation, healthy marine ecosystems, and sustainable and viable fisheries, targets 14.2, 14.4, and 14.6, and only partially target 14.5, conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas. The 2019 SDG index shows that EU member states are considerably behind their commitments to SDG14. Most Member States were classified as having ‘major challenges remain’ or ‘significant challenges remain’.

This policy brief outlines two areas in which the EU has had difficulty: overfishing and ocean conservation. These have been noted by the European Environment Agency (EEA) as important areas for the EU to improve in. Overfishing has decreased since 2007, but 41% of stocks remain fished above maximum sustainable yields (EEA, 2019). Additionally, ocean areas are risk from the expansion of human activities, such as bottom trawling, seabed mining, and offshore energy generation, while pollution from agriculture and damage from invasive species, tourism, and other pollutants are issues that need to be addressed (EEA, 2019)

Healthy oceans are critical to the survival of the planet. They are not only the source of income for thousands of Europeans and even more people globally, but they also aid our ability to combat climate change through processes like carbon storage.

Fishing Practices in the European Union

Strong fishing regulations are incorporated into several SDG 14 targets. Target 14.4 refers to effective regulation regarding the harvesting of fish and illegal fishing practices, while 14.6 concerns ending subsidies that contribute to overfishing. Overfishing is a significant problem in the EU and looks to be one of the most contested aspects of SDG 14, with attempts to find ‘balance’ between the conservation of marine life and the preservation of jobs and food security splitting parties and people. The management of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the future European Maritime and Fisheries Fund are two aspects that have caused significant disagreement from animal rights and environmentalist groups.

The CFP, enacted in 2013, was supposed to see high fishing quotas gradually decreased to reduce the steep decline in fish populations (Harvey, 2019) but maintain a health source of food for EU citizens (EC, 2020). By 2020, quotas were to be based on the maximum number of fish that could be caught without damaging the ability of the stocks to recover. However, quotas have been set with the same standards of the past few decades, showing little deviation from the policies that exploited fish stocks (Harvey, 2020).

It has been noted the CFP was bound to fail from the outset with significant biological, economic and legal issues present (Khalilian et al., 2010). For example, excessive quotas set by the Council and subsidies paid by the EU and the Member States have resulted in over-exploitation, leading to low stock sizes, low catches, and affected ecosystems (Khalilian et al, 2010). Khalilian et al (2010) argued that a focus on short-term political gain has overridden scientific advice. While this study was completed before the SDGs were even adopted, these issues remain unresolved.

In 2018, the EC released its annual report on the state of fish stocks and the progress made in achieving sustainable fisheries. The report shows little progress has been made. For example, 41% of stocks were excessively fished in the North-East Atlantic, while in the Mediterranean Sea the rate was 90% (Oceana, 2018). Despite a legally binding commitment to reduce overfishing by 2020, Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) has said progress thus far is insufficient (Oceana, 2018).

The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund for 2021-27 proposed a budget of €6.14 billion and focused on supporting small scale fishers, strengthening international ocean governance and climate change mitigation. The fund will support small-scale fishers with vessels below 12 metres through construction subsidies (EC, 2018). Small-scale fisheries are the largest in the fishing sector, making up 75% of the fleet (Said & Chuenpagdee, 2019). Vessel construction is a controversial aspect of the proposed budget, with some in the EC believing it will undermine fishing conservation and maximum sustainable yield targets through greater fleet sizes and competition for stock (Fortuna, 2019), while also contravening target 14.6, which calls for an end to damaging fishing subsidies.

Compounding the issue of fishing practices are the implications of Brexit, which presents further risks to economic prosperity and food security. Pierre Karleskind, the new chair of the parliamentary committee on fisheries, called for a fisheries agreement with the UK, allowing EU fishers to fish British waters, and for UK seafood to be sold on the EU Single Market (Fortuna, 2020). While a trained oceanographer, Karleskind noted that science isn't always able to answer the questions of policymakers and that a balance needs to be found where jobs are created and food shortages are avoided, while maintaining biodiversity and sustainability (Fortuna, 2020).

While some progress has been made in sustainable fishing, bolstering the largest portion of the fishing sector appears counterproductive to preserving fish stocks. But as such a large employer (employing 180,000 people in the EU in 2017 (Eurostat, 2019)), without mitigation the economic impact of lower production could be significant. As such a crucial source of income, employment and food security, greater cohesion is needed to preserve this industry and the resource it exploits. Aligning the SDG targets, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries, and the CFP might be one way of enforcing the sustainability of the fishing sector and the oceans (Said & Chuenpagdee, 2019).

Ocean Protection

One further area where the EU has made some limited progress is in enshrining the protection of specific areas of ocean. The size of the area to be covered and protected is set by the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 and the Aichi Targets in the Global Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (Bley, 2018). Informed by the Aichi target, SDG 14's target 14.5 is to, by 2020, conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas, with national and international law, based on the best available scientific information.

One form that this conservation effort has taken is the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPA). MPAs are widely regarded as a cornerstone for biodiversity conservation and are largely enforced in the EU by the Natura 2000 network, creating 54% of new MPAs in 2016. However, while the EEA notes that in 2016, 10.8% of Europe's seas had been designated for protection (EEA 2018), whether implementation is effective is under question.

While the percentage of protected area rose to 12.4% in 2019, a WWF and Sky Ocean Rescue report found that 19 of 23 EU Member states were falling behind in developing management plans for their MPAs. Only 1.8% of EU marine area is covered by MPAs with management plans in place and are often sparsely located with few areas sharing borders (WWF, 2019). Providing cohesion between MPAs is important for protecting biodiversity, in that it permits marine life to move between protected areas. Greece provides one example of a nation that has many MPA areas, but without functioning management bodies the sites are largely ineffective conservation tools (Petza et al., 2019).

While progress towards target 14.5 had been made by 2016, with several seas achieving the goal, some seas still have a way to go (EEA, 2018). Additionally, there are great discrepancies in MPA locations across sea areas, with the distribution of MPAs occurring largely in coastal waters (EEA, 2018; Bley, 2018). While this area is rich with life, ecological representation is still important. So while the Aichi target and overall the SDG14 target of ocean protection may be met in some regards, its actual enforceability, cohesion, and representation are rather questionable.

A WWF report produced in consultation with the European Commission in 2020 noted the lack of progress made on SDG14 when the targets were analyzed in greater depth. While 12% of EU waters were designated as MPAs, reaching the 14.5 and Aichi target, 85% of them failed to achieve effective marine protection (WWF, 2020). While the SDGs and their associated targets and indicators have always been criticised, the EU's inability to achieve comprehensive protection for ocean areas is not necessarily the fault of the targets.

Currently, the existence of MPAs in European waters does not address key issues. A study by Dureuil et al. (2018) found that 59% of European MPAs are commercially trawled (a damaging form of fishing common in Europe), and that trawling intensity in MPA areas is 1.4 times higher than in unprotected areas. Furthermore, trawling has a high rate of bycatch--marine life not wanted commercially--and has thus further threatened some species such as sharks, rays and skates (Dureuil et al., 2018). Improper MPA management has led to an undermining of ecological preservation goals and needs urgent addressing to protect threatened species. It is clear that MPA designation is a good first step, but ensuring that MPAs are properly enforced with effective management plans informed by scientific consensus is key.

Case Study: An alternative framework in the Philippines

The SDGs have been broadly critiqued as an oxymoronic construction, promising a new incarnation of neoliberal economic growth combined with the sustainable use of resources (Adelman, 2018). While this critique is not unjustified, evidence suggests that it is possible to consume in such a way that might allow oceans to recover from decades of over-exploitation. Indigenous cultures around the world have long sustainably used the environment. Globally, Indigenous populations have developed vast knowledge bases regarding local ecology and resource management (Sandoval-Rivera, 2020).

In the Philippines, fishing is more than just a way of life; it is embedded in the culture of the island nation and this is starting to have a positive impact on SDG 14. One Indigenous population, the Tagbanua people, use traditional fishing techniques to sustainably source and manage marine produce. Over time, the Tagbanua people have reclaimed some of their ancestral waters, protecting not only their heritage but the marine environment and its resources too (Capistrano, 2010). In the context of fisheries management, property and Indigenous rights are important principles that recognise the potential for Indigenous management and knowledge to aid sustainability but also to influence wider policy and reform (Capistrano, 2010). The Tagbanua

people only fish for specific species during certain times of the year, using the tides and moon to know the opportune time to fish and to allow stocks to replenish (National Geographic Society, 2019). They also set aside certain areas such as coral reefs and use traditional methods that are more targeted. Using hook and line methods and spearfishing allows them to choose which fish to hunt (National Geographic Society, 2019). Such techniques greatly reduce by-catch and damage to marine environments when compared to ocean trawling.

By catching only what they need, the Tagbanua people ensure stocks remain stable. While the practices of one Indigenous group could not be applied to the European Union, the mindset of targeted fishing techniques, fishing certain stock and at certain times of the year, and controlling stock yields could be applied to a wider policy context. Changing the mindset from growth-driven development to something more ecologically sustainable is needed to make progress in achieving the SDGs agenda (Adelman, 2018). Indigenous resource management techniques, like those exhibited by the Tagbanua people, might be one way to change thinking and practices from being profit driven towards mutual prosperity between the environment and people.

SDG 14 and how it relates to the other goals

Achieving SDG 14 is not only important for ocean ecology and food security. There are also significant flow-on effects to the rest of the SDG campaign. Over one-third of all SDG targets are only achievable if SDG 14 is accomplished (WWF, 2019). For example, Ending Poverty (SDG 1) and Ending Hunger (SDG 2) are highly dependent on ocean sustainability with several interdependent relationships in these goals (Singh et al., 2018). Combating illegal fishing aids in combating illegal labour practices and modern slavery (SDG targets 8.7 and 16.2) and will also allow for children who have otherwise been exploited to access education (4.1 and 4.3) (Singh et al., 2018). Ensuring that fisheries are properly managed also aids in ensuring more bountiful and reliable harvests, helping to end malnutrition (SDGs 2.1 and 2.2) and preserve biological and cultural heritage (SDG 11.4).

Similarly, properly managed MPAs can also aid in preserving marine resources and have similar effects as those listed above (Singh et al., 2018). A similar study by Le Blanc, Freire and Vierros (2017), mapped the linkages between the oceans and the other SDGs. While only a working paper, Le Blanc et al. (2017) link sustainable fishing with SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8, 12, 13 and 17 with SDG 14, with ocean sustainability either affecting or being affected by these other goals. The same principle is applied to ocean protection with goals 1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 13, 15, and 16.

What Singh et al. (2018) and Le Blanc et al. (2017) highlight is the interrelationship between SDG 14 and other SDG targets. This policy brief has focused on two aspects of SDG 14, sustainable fishing expressed in targets 14.4 and 14.6, and ocean protection expressed in 14.5. The EU has made limited progress in these areas and this has serious ramifications not just for food security, biodiversity and conservation but on a broad array of other goals and targets too.

Conclusion

This policy brief has explored SDG 14 in the context of the European Union, with a focus on the Common Fisheries Policy and MPAs. Enshrined within the goal, these two areas require drastic improvements, as on current trajectories their 2020 targets will not be met. While MPA implementation in the EU has seen some improvement the reality of this achievement is doubtful. The majority of MPAs lack effective management systems and will fail to protect marine life. Fishing is another area that has improved but needs further action, perhaps outside of a profit mindset. Fishing can be done sustainably and with little harm to the environment. The Philippines example provides an alternative framework for more effective fishing policy. SDG 14 is deeply intertwined with other targets and its success will be crucial to the whole SDG agenda.

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