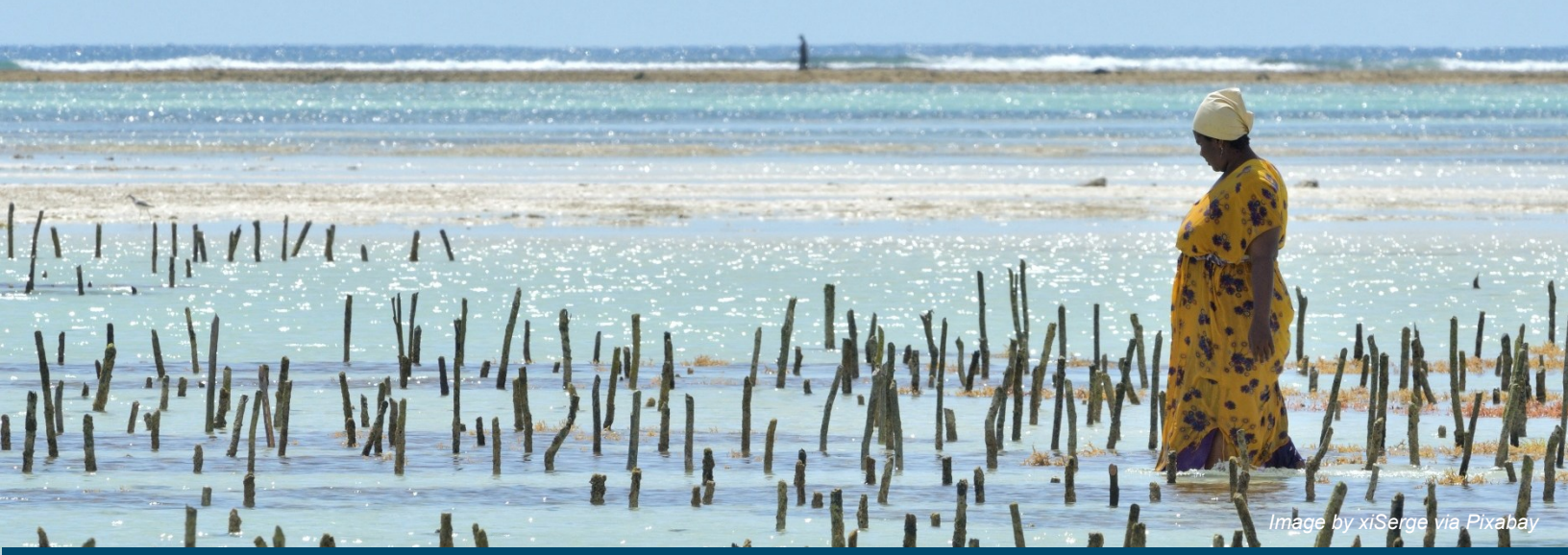

AQUATIC BLUE FOODS FOR AFRICA

A strategic policy agenda for climate-resilient food systems, nutrition, and inclusive growth

Policy Paper: June 2026

Prepared for the High-Level African Blue Food Leadership Roundtable

Mombasa, Kenya

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Who is this policy paper for?

Blue Economy, Agrifoods, Fisheries and Aquaculture, Climate, and Environment Policy-makers and Change Agents, Ministers and Senior Decision-Makers

Key message

Blue foods offer Africa a powerful yet underutilised opportunity to advance food security, improve nutrition, build climate resilience and create inclusive livelihoods.

PRIORITY POLICY ACTIONS

- Integrate Blue Foods into Climate and Food Policies
- Scale Sustainable Aquaculture
- Improve Fisheries Governance
- Reduce Post-Harvest Losses
- Promote Inclusive Blue Food Value Chains
- Strengthen Regional Trade
- Champion Africa's Sustainable Blue Food Transformation Agenda

AQUATIC BLUE FOOD COALITION

AUDA-NEPAD AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

25th ANNIVERSARY

WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

Africa stands at a strategic crossroads. The continent is host to some of the world's richest aquatic resources. As climate shocks intensify and global food systems destabilize, aquatic foods offer one of the few sectors capable of simultaneously advancing food security, nutrition, climate resilience, jobs, and economic transformation. Coordinated political action could unlock a new era of African leadership — one that places blue foods at the heart of the continent's climate, development, and food transitions and maximizes Africa's aquatic wealth benefits.

Africa faces a growing convergence of food insecurity, climate shocks, malnutrition, and economic vulnerability. At the same time, rapidly growing populations are increasing demand for affordable, nutritious, safe and sustainably produced food. Fisheries and aquaculture, which produce Africa's **aquatic or** "**blue foods"** offer one of the continent's greatest yet underutilised opportunities to strengthen food security, improve nutrition, create jobs, and build climate resilience.

Aquatic foods are among the most nutrient-rich foods available, providing high-quality protein and essential micronutrients including omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12, iron, zinc and vitamin A — nutrients often lacking in vulnerable populations

Globally, over 40% of people rely on aquatic foods for at least 20% of their animal protein intake, while approximately 600 million people depend on aquatic food systems for their livelihoods**.**[2] Small-scale fisheries are particularly important, employing approximately 90% of the global fisheries workforce.[3] At the same time, blue foods often produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions than meat from land-based animal sources.[4]

In Africa:

- Fisheries and aquaculture provide **an estimated 18% of all animal protein consumed**.[2]
- The sector supports a combine**d 15 million jobs** in harvesting and processing [2,3] and is projected to rise to **20 million jobs by 2030.[5]**
- Women make up **nearly 40% of the fisheries and post-harvest workforce[4]** and, alongside youth, are central to small-scale fisheries and aquaculture.
- Small-scale fisheries account for **over half of aquatic food production** and support almost 60 million Africans who depend on them, at least partially, for their livelihoods. [2,4]

Despite the importance of the sector and the steadily increasing blue food production levels, Africa has the **lowest apparent per capita consumption of aquatic animal foods in the world**, and remains the only region where consumption of aquatic foods is expected to fall by 2032.[2] This trend is compounded by impacts from global geopolitical dynamics and from climate change, which threaten aquatic ecosystems and livelihoods across the continent.

This moment calls for a transformative action. Policy-makers have a unique opportunity to harness the immense potential of aquatic food systems to **advance food security, economic development** and **climate resilience**. Targeted interventions, that place fisheries and aquaculture at the heart of climate policy, food systems transformation agendas, national agri-food systems and nutrition strategies**,** will enable countries to direct finance and investment to scale sustainable production, improve management and reduce post-harvest losses in the sector. In doing so, Africa could by 2050:

- **Close the animal protein supply gap** with the rest of the world;
- **Create more than 3 million new jobs,** especially for women and youth;
- **Add approximately $17 billion to the GDP;**
- **Strengthen climate resilience** while reducing pressure land-based food systems[6]

These priorities align closely with African Union development agendas outlined current policy frameworks that highlight the strategic importance of sustainable aquatic food systems for inclusive growth, food security, resilience, and economic transformation. These include the (2019) Africa Blue Economy Strategy, the (2014) Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa (PFRS), the (2025) CAADP Kampala Declaration and Strategy, and the (2023) AU Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan.

Blue foods offer Africa a powerful yet underutilised opportunity to advance food security, improve nutrition, build climate resilience and create inclusive livelihoods. This policy note outlines a strategic agenda for policymakers to unlock the full potential of aquatic foods and proposes an **African Network of Blue Foods Champions** to accelerate political advocacy, investment and coordinated action across the continent.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

- Africa's fish demand is rising rapidly
- Climate change is threatening aquatic food systems
- Fish imports are increasing
- Blue foods can improve nutrition, jobs, and resilience
- Africa has a major opportunity to lead globally on sustainable aquatic foods

Blue Foods and Africa's Food Security: Strategic Pathways for Action

The world is facing increasing food insecurity due to climate shocks, socio-political conflicts, and economic instability. In Africa, rapidly growing populations are placing increasing pressure on food systems and intensifying demand for affordable, accessible, nutritious and sustainably produced food.

Africa currently imports significant volumes of fish to meet domestic demand despite possessing vast inland and marine resources. Strategic investments in sustainable fisheries and aquaculture could reduce import dependence, strengthen regional trade under the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA), and position aquatic foods as a pillar of African agro-industrial development.

Yet food security is not only about producing more food; it also depends on whether people can access diverse and nutritious diets, use food safely and effectively, rely on stable supply over time, participate meaningfully in shaping food systems and livelihoods, and ensure that food production safeguards resources for future generations.

This is particularly important for Africa, where the cost of a nutritious diet remains among the highest in the world. An estimated **one in five Africans remains undernourished**, **while 307 million experience hunger,** and the proportion of people experiencing food insecurity is more than double the global average and continues to rise.[1]

Aquatic foods — including fish, shellfish, aquatic plants and a diversity of other marine and freshwater resources — can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Fish and aquatic foods provide:

- High-quality protein comparable to eggs and milk
- Essential bio-available micronutrients including **vitamin B12, vitamin A, iron, calcium, and zinc**
- Long-chain **omega-3 fatty acids critical for brain development and cardiovascular health**.

These nutrients are often difficult to obtain in sufficient quantities from land-based plant foods alone, particularly in lower-income settings where dietary diversity may be limited. This makes blue foods a critical but underutilised pathway for improving child development, supporting maternal health and reducing micronutrient deficiencies. This opportunity is especially important in Africa:

- Diets in many communities are heavily reliant on staple carbohydrates with limited micronutrient diversity, causing widespread deficiencies, especially in vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, zinc, and iron[7]
- Vitamin A deficiency is prevalent among children[8]
- Women of reproductive age face some of the highest rates of anaemia (iron deficiency) globally[1]

An estimated 200 million Africans rely on fish as an affordable source of protein and important micro-nutrients. Despite the importance of blue foods, Africa consumes far less fish per capita than any other region — just 9.4 kg per year, **less than half the global average** and is the only region in the world where per capita fish consumption is expected to fall by 2032.[2]

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Forecasting analyses indicate that fisheries and aquaculture will become increasingly important for food supply and nutrition security, particularly as demand for aquatic foods in Africa is projected to increase by approximately 30% by 2030.[9] To simply maintain today's consumption levels through 2050, Africa would need to **increase production by roughly 74%**.[2] Many countries are increasingly dependent on fish imports to meet domestic needs, exposing food systems to global price shocks and supply disruptions.

These priorities are also reflected in the Africa Blue Economy Strategy (ABES), the African Union's Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture (PFRS) and the continental agri-foods system framework, the CAADP Kampala Declaration and Strategy (2026–2035), which call for strengthened fisheries governance, sustainable aquaculture development, inclusive value chains, improved regional trade, and greater integration of aquatic food systems into broader development planning.

While many interventions can strengthen aquatic food systems, **three strategic pathways** stand out as they offer the greatest potential to rapidly increase food availability, improve affordability, strengthen resilience, and unlock inclusive economic growth:

Pathway 1: *Expansion of sustainable aquaculture production*
Pathway 2: *Improved management and productivity of capture fisheries*
Pathway 3: *Reduction of post-harvest losses and improvements in value chains.*

Blue Foods and Climate Change

Climate Impacts

Africa contributes only **around 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions**, yet climate-related disasters already cost the continent **up to US$15 billion annually**, undermining economic development and food security.

Climate change is already affecting African aquatic ecosystems. Oceans absorb significant amounts of heat and carbon dioxide. The impacts of rising greenhouse gas concentrations are warming and acidifying oceans, reducing river flows, shrinking inland water bodies and altering the ecosystems that fisheries and aquaculture depend on, reducing production across marine and freshwater systems.[10]

Projected climate impacts in selected regions of Africa include:

- More frequent and severe cyclones in the Western Indian Ocean
- Rising sea levels and coastal erosion affecting West African coastlines

- Declining river flows and shrinking inland water bodies
- Increased marine heatwaves affecting fish and aquatic plant productivity.

According to a high emissions scenario, by 2050, **fisheries catches could decrease by 7.7% worldwide** due to climate change, and in some western equatorial countries in Africa, including Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana, projected catch declines exceed 50%.[11] Specific climate change adaptation measures for the fisheries and aquaculture sector management and value chain development plans are a key priority for building climate resilience.

Blue Foods as a Climate-Smart Food System

While blue foods are at risk from climate-change, they are also part of the solution. Food systems account for approximately **30% of global greenhouse gas emissions**, making them central to climate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Blue foods offer important advantages within climate-smart food systems:

- Production of many aquatic species have **lower carbon footprints than terrestrial livestock and crop production systems**.[4]
- Some value chains, such as seaweed and bivalve (e.g. clams, oysters, and mussels) farming, have **very low or near-zero emissions**.[4]
- Well-managed fisheries are **more resilient to climate impacts** and can support biodiversity, while also protecting the carbon stored in healthy aquatic ecosystems such as mangroves and seagrasses.[13]
- Aquaculture production can be expanded sustainably to **meet per capita demand for aquatic foods** in every coastal country on Earth**,** under all but the most severe climate scenarios.[14]

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Addressing climate change in Africa's aquatic food systems therefore requires action on two fronts: protecting the sector from climate impacts through supporting adaptation; and harnessing the potential of the sector as a climate solution. Taken together, targeted investments in sustainable aquaculture and low-emission aquatic production systems such as small-scale fisheries, can simultaneously advance food security, protect the livelihoods of the communities most exposed to climate risk, and lower food system emissions.

Gender, Employment and Livelihoods for Inclusive Blue Food Systems

For many African coastal and inland communities, fisheries and aquaculture are not only sources of food but also key drivers of employment, trade, and economic activity. Aquatic foods support millions of livelihoods. In Africa, small-scale fisheries alone provide employment for 9 million people and generate $10 billion at the first point of sale.[3]

Women and youth are central to aquatic food systems, highlighting the sector's critical role in inclusive economic development. Across the world, women represent **24% of fishers and fish farmers and up to 62% of workers in fish processing.**[2] In Africa, an estimated **5.3 million women** work in the small-scale sector alone, playing a particularly central role in value chain components of fish processing, trading, and marketing.[3] Young people are equally vital, representing a significant share of the labour force and increasingly driving innovation in aquaculture.

Yet despite these essential contributions, women and youth continue to face structural barriers that limit their productivity and earning potential, including:

- Unsafe working environments and gender-based violence
- Limited access to credit, productive assets, markets, and business support
- Exclusion from decision-making processes
- Gender-transformative and youth-centred policies that expand access to finance, technology, infrastructure, and leadership can unlock significant productivity gains across fisheries and aquaculture value chains.

The impacts of climate change are increasing pressures on communities that depend most on aquatic foods for sustenance and economic stability. Small scale actors, women, and youth, who make up the backbone of the sector in Africa, face the greatest vulnerability and often have the least access to the resources, technology, and finance needed to adapt. Investing in their resilience is therefore both a social imperative and a strategic priority for the sector's long-term growth.

Empowering these groups through stronger organisations, increased access to finance, and improved infrastructure, technology, and leadership opportunities, will enhance resilience, **equity, and economic performance across fisheries and aquaculture value chains**.

Priority Policy Actions

Africa has developed strong policy commitments for fisheries and aquaculture; however, these remain insufficiently integrated into broader policy implementation processes. To unlock the potential of blue foods in Africa, governments should prioritize the following actions:

1. Integrate Blue Foods into Climate and Food Policies:
Incorporate fisheries and aquaculture into:

- Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)
- National Adaptation Plans
- National Biodiversity Strategies
- National dietary guidelines and health policies
- Public food procurement programs, such as school meals.

2. Scale Sustainable Aquaculture: Support investment in sustainable aquaculture systems to supplement capture fisheries and meet growing demands for animal protein.

3. Improve Fisheries Governance: Promote participatory governance systems for small-scale fisheries, improve monitoring, surveillance, and enforcement to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and strengthen data collection and management systems.

4. Reduce Post-Harvest Losses: Invest in cold chain infrastructure, improved processing technologies, and storage facilities, in particular for small-scale producers.

5. Promote Inclusive Blue Food Value Chains: Support women, youth, and small-scale actors across aquatic food systems.

6. Strengthen Regional Trade: Leverage the AfCFTA to expand intra-African trade in blue foods, and improve food security.

An African Network of Blue Food Champions

Sustained political leadership will be essential for blue foods to be fully recognised as a strategic continental priority for food security, climate resilience, nutrition, and economic transformation. While awareness of the importance of fisheries and aquaculture is growing globally, a stronger political platform is needed in Africa to elevate blue foods within national, regional, and global agendas and to accelerate implementation and investment.

The proposed **Network of African Blue Food Champions** will:

- **Elevate blue foods** as a strategic priority within African continental, regional, and national climate, and food systems processes;
- **Strengthen political leadership** and accountability for integrating fisheries and aquaculture into national development, climate, and nutrition agendas;
- **Facilitate peer exchange** and collaboration among ministers, policymakers, and champions;
- **Mobilise partnerships**, finance, and technical support for sustainable aquatic food systems;
- **Amplify African priorities** and perspectives in global platforms such as the UNFCCC COP process, the OOC11, and other relevant global dialogues;
- **Support coordinated African advocacy** on blue foods, climate adaptation, sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, and ocean-based livelihoods;
- **Promote inclusive and locally led** approaches that strengthen opportunities for women, youth, and small-scale actors across aquatic food systems.

WHY AN AFRICAN BLUE FOOD CHAMPIONS NETWORK MATTERS

- Blue foods are underrepresented in climate and food systems policy
- Africa needs stronger political coordination on aquatic foods
- High-level decision-makers can help unlock investment and implementation
- Global momentum on blue foods is growing rapidly
- Africa has an opportunity to shape the global agenda

The Network could serve as a catalytic platform to sustain momentum beyond individual conferences and initiatives, helping to connect political leadership with sector actors, technical expertise, investment opportunities, and implementation support.

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By fostering stronger alignment between fisheries and aquaculture, climate action, agri-foods systems, nutrition, finance, and blue economy agendas, the Network could help position Africa as a global leader in sustainable and inclusive aquatic food systems.

The proposed Network could also help strengthen coordination and political momentum around implementation of the Africa Blue Economy Strategy, the PFRS, and CAADP Kampala commitments related to aquatic food systems, climate resilience, and inclusive blue economy development.

By mobilising high-level political leadership and sustained collaboration, the Network of African Blue Food Champions will help ensure that fisheries and aquaculture become central pillars of Africa's strategies for food security, climate resilience, economic transformation, and sustainable blue economy development.

Call to Action: Mobilizing African Leadership on Blue Foods

Africa's aquatic food systems represent one of the continent's greatest untapped opportunities to simultaneously advance food security, nutrition, climate resilience, jobs, and inclusive economic growth. At a time of rising food insecurity, intensifying climate impacts, and growing pressure on food systems, fisheries and aquaculture can no longer remain peripheral to national development, food security, and climate agendas.

With strategic leadership, stronger governance, and targeted investment, fisheries and aquaculture can become a cornerstone of Africa's transition toward sustainable, climate-resilient, and inclusive food systems and blue economies.

The proposed African Network of Blue Food Champions offers an opportunity for ministers and senior leaders to shape a shared African agenda on sustainable aquatic food systems, strengthen collaboration across sectors and countries, and elevate African priorities within global climate, food systems, and ocean governance processes.

DECISION-MAKERS CAN HELP DRIVE THIS AGENDA BY:

- Championing the integration of fisheries and aquaculture into national climate, food systems, nutrition, and development strategies; and accelerating implementation of existing African Union commitments under Agenda 2063, the Africa Blue Economy Strategy, the PFRS, and the CAADP Kampala Declaration;
- Supporting the inclusion of blue foods in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans, and public food procurement programmes such as school feeding schemes;
- Mobilising investment and partnerships for sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, value chain development, and climate resilience;
- Strengthening inclusive aquatic food systems that create opportunities for women, and small-scale actors;
- Elevating blue foods within African continental, regional, and global policy processes;
- Joining and supporting the proposed African Network of Blue Food Champions as a platform for political leadership, peer exchange, and coordinated action.

By mobilising high-level political leadership and sustained collaboration an **AFRICAN NETWORK OF BLUE FOOD CHAMPIONS** will help mobilize the political momentum required to transform aquatic food systems and secure a healthier future for Africa's people and ecosystems. Blue foods are already embedded within AU priorities; the Network provides a platform to operationalise and accelerate implementation.

Africa has the resources, knowledge, and opportunity to become a global leader in sustainable and inclusive aquatic food systems. What is now required is coordinated political leadership, sustained investment and collective action. By championing blue foods within national, regional, and global processes, African leaders can help shape a more food-secure, climate-resilient, and prosperous future for generations to come.

Evidence of Blue Foods Policy Success in Africa

GHANA – FISHERIES GOVERNANCE REFORMS AND AQUACULTURE GROWTH

Policy reforms to increase domestic fish production while improving food security and livelihoods.

Policy actions: Ghana has implemented significant reforms to strengthen fisheries governance and expand aquaculture production, including fisheries management reforms, aquaculture investment policies, improved feed and hatchery systems, and value-chain development.

Evidence of impact: Research shows that small-scale aquaculture and cage farming expanded rapidly in Ghana. In addition, feed mill investments improved production reliability and efficiency and aquaculture development increased income opportunities and local food supply.

Food system benefits: Research indicates aquaculture in Ghana contributes to a number of positive impacts ranging from poverty reduction and improved access to animal protein to rural employment and increased domestic food availability. These outcomes demonstrate how sector investment can strengthen food systems and rural economies simultaneously.

EAST AFRICA – AQUACULTURE EXPANSION IN KENYA, UGANDA, TANZANIA AND RWANDA

Aquaculture in East Africa has expanded significantly over the past decade.

Policy actions: Countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda have invested in aquaculture research centres, fish feed industries, hatcheries and improved production technologies, cage aquaculture systems. These policies supported the rapid expansion of fish farming systems.

Evidence of impact: Academic reviews show aquaculture production is increasing steadily, demand for fish products is driving rural economic growth, aquaculture supports food security and employment.

Food system benefits: This regional aquaculture expansion demonstrates how policy support for fish farming can strengthen national food systems.

MALAWI AND GHANA – BLUE FOODS IN SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES

The integration of blue foods into school feeding programmes.

Policy actions: Home-grown school feeding programmes in Malawi and Ghana are incorporating locally sourced fish products, fish powder or dried fish in school meals, and procurement from small-scale fishers and aquaculture farmers. These initiatives aim to improve nutrition while strengthening local food systems.

Evidence of impact: Studies show that including aquatic foods in school meals increases dietary diversity among children, improves intake of essential micronutrients and strengthens local value chains and livelihoods. Research in Malawi found that integrating fish products into school meals was **nutritionally effective, affordable, and accepted by children**.

Broader development benefits: School feeding programmes that include aquatic products such as fish and fish products can significantly improve child nutrition, increase school attendance and attention, support small-scale fish producers and serve to stimulate local rural economies.

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Appendix A: Examples of Blue Food Related Commitments at OOC

The following table presents **selected Blue Food-related commitments** from governments at Our Ocean Conference (2014–2024). Selected commitments from African Governments are highlighted in blue.

Organization	Year	Theme	Commitment
Government of Ghana	2023	Sustainable Fisheries	Commits to 100% transparency on fishing vessel authorisations and subsidies, joining global fisheries transparency initiatives. Addresses overfishing threatening food security and employment for millions of Ghanaians.
The Government of Namibia	2019	Sustainable Fisheries	Commits to increasing national per capita fish consumption to the global average of 20.4 kg by 2020, an increase of 32%. This will diversify protein supply, reduce pressure on land production, and lower deforestation and associated greenhouse gas emissions in the country.
Governments of Namibia, Angola & South Africa	2019	Sustainable Fisheries	Trilateral commitment under the Benguela Current Convention to fund maritime research activities covering one of the world's most productive fishing ecosystems.
Government of Seychelles	2016	Sustainable Fisheries	Commits $15M to support sustainable management of its small scale fishery through the issuance of a “blue bond” for rebuilding fish stocks, introducing harvest control measures, eco labelling, and encouraging a shift to post harvest and value adding activities.
Government of Malta	2024	Sustainable Fisheries	Invests in fisheries and aquaculture research and governance reform under Malta's Multiannual National Plan for the Development of Sustainable Aquaculture (MNPSA) 2022–2030, streamlining aquaculture regulation through legislative reform, improved site selection, and enhanced permitting and concession procedures.
Government of the United Kingdom	2022	Sustainable Fisheries	Commits £100 million through the UK Seafood Fund to modernise coastal infrastructure, advance science and innovation, develop workforce skills, and support the long-term environmental and economic sustainability of the UK seafood industry and its coastal communities.
Government of the United States of America	2022	Sustainable Fisheries	Commits to the development of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (AOAs) in US federal waters, combining scientific analysis and public engagement to identify optimal sites for environmentally safe, climate-smart marine aquaculture production, strengthening domestic food supply and the blue economy.
Government of Indonesia	2018	Sustainable Blue Economy	Commits USD 3 million over three years to develop zero-waste seafood processing industries across six Indonesian islands, promoting inclusion of small and medium enterprises to reduce processing waste, create employment, and improve livelihoods in coastal fishing communities.