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المنتدى العربي للتنمية المستدامة
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14 LIFE BELOW WATER

SDG 14

LIFE BELOW WATER

Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

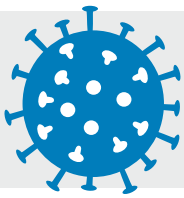
The present background note was prepared by ESCWA, FAO, UNDP, UNEP and the UNESCO Cairo Office.

The Arab region is surrounded by five oceans and seas, which provide income for millions of people across all Arab countries, and offer unique marine environments with great biodiversity. However, the marine areas surrounding the region are under threat from ocean warming, acidification, illegal fishing, and marine pollution from offshore and onshore development activities. A growing proportion of marine areas are being exploited at biologically unsustainable levels, and sustainable aquaculture remains in its infancy in most of the region, unable to fulfil the growing demand for fish in Arab countries. These trends threaten the health, food security, cultural heritage, and prosperity of people across the region today and for generations to come.

The pandemic negatively affected Arab countries' efforts to achieve SDG 14. Decreased demand for seafood products and disruptions to international trade, the movement of people and certain fishing operations affected the livelihoods of those working in fisheries and adjacent industries (with negative implications for SDGs 1, 2 and 8), while the intensive use of single-use plastics to combat the pandemic is expected to increase pollution on seabeds and beaches. Moreover, many data collection operations were derailed which, along with reduced fiscal space, threatens to negatively impact government efforts to advance the sustainability of marine environments.

Healthy oceans are not only essential for coastal communities, but also for the stability of the global climate, as damage to marine areas can affect the absorption of greenhouse gas emissions and impact weather, affecting life on land and below water. As the region looks to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic, countries have an opportunity to shift towards more informed, coherent and effective policies that protect marine areas, enhance data, and improve institutional and technical capacities to effectively monitor and sustainably manage marine resources and enforce associated regulations.

Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 14 in the Arab region



The pandemic and resulting restrictive measures and supply chain disruptions have directly impacted the livelihoods of those relying on seafood trade. The Arab region includes several countries where fisheries constitute a major industry, such as Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia and Yemen, and others where aquaculture is developing, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.[1] While the magnitude of the disruption has yet to be measured at the regional level, negative consequences on the seafood sector have resulted from several mutually reinforcing trends.

Worldwide, most markets witnessed a decline in demand for seafood products caused by a reduction in household purchasing power, and major cutbacks in consumption from the hospitality sector. The Arab region was no exception, with demand for fish falling by as much as 60 per cent in some countries during initial lockdowns.[2] At the retail level, sales were affected by the closure or reduced accessibility of markets and auctions. At the international level, reduced demand and containment measures affected supply chains and led to sharp reductions in sales, with particularly damaging consequences for products with long production cycles. Limitations on intra-urban travel impacted seafood trades even within countries, leading to price fluctuations in areas where seafood products became relatively abundant or scarce. With fishing companies often lacking the means to store their catches, these factors resulted in an excess of for-sale stocks, leading to price decreases as high as 70 per cent for some products.[3]

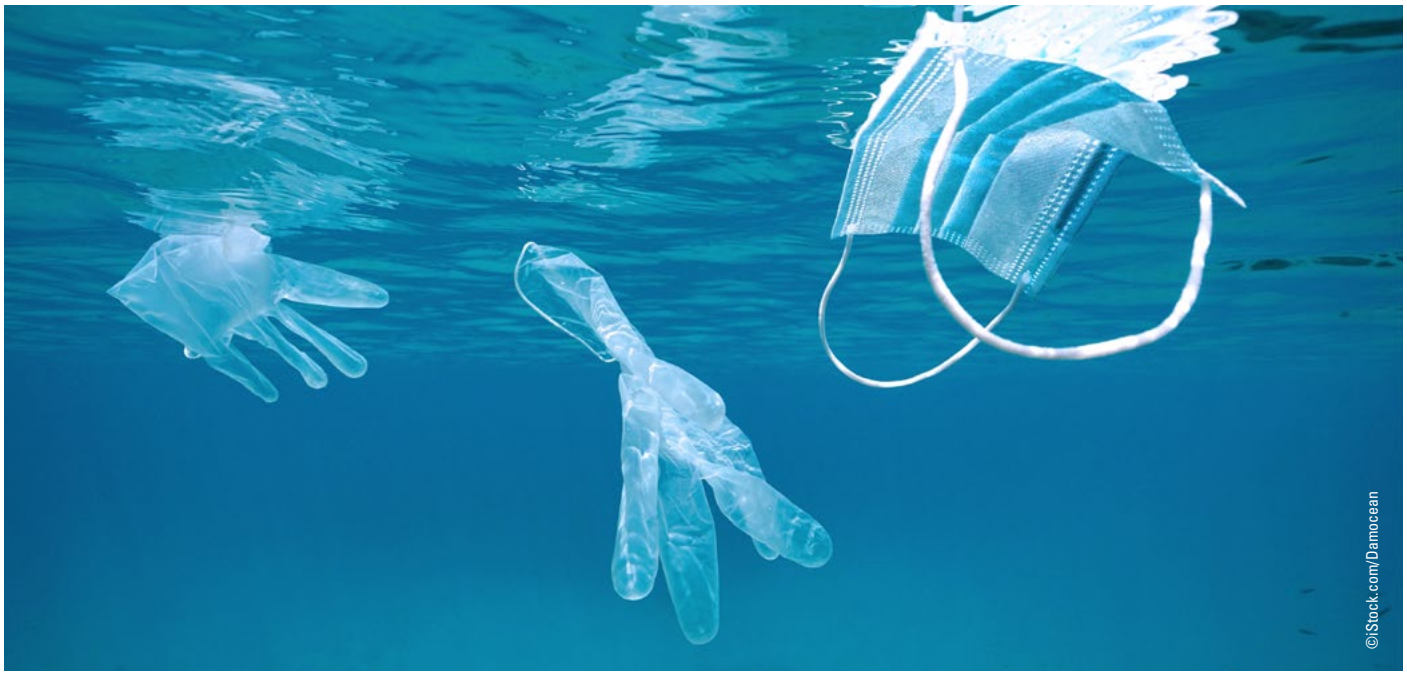
Production in both the fisheries and aquaculture sectors was disrupted by pandemic response measures. Movement restrictions extended to bans on deep-sea

1 FAO, The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on fishing activities in the Arab region, 2020.
2 FAO, The impact of COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture food systems: Possible responses, 2020.
3 Ibid.

fishing, and reductions on the numbers of fisher people permitted to access landing sites. The aquaculture sector also faced disruptions stemming from response measures, particularly for operators focused on export markets (although reduced competition sometimes led to a net positive effect for producers catering to domestic markets). In the Maghreb, for example, aquaculture production plummeted from 21,169 to 14,049 tons between 2019 and 2020, a decrease of 34 per cent.[4] These stresses led many fisheries and aquaculture operations to reduce production and the wages and working hours of many employees, highlighting the importance of social safety nets to cope with the consequences of economic shocks.[5]

The intensive utilization of single-use plastics during the pandemic has exacerbated the problem of marine plastic waste globally, including in the Arab region. The need for plastic-based protective gear accelerated waste production worldwide, with an estimated 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves disposed of every month. This phenomenon has severe implications for all regions given that marine plastic management is a highly interconnected issue, since plastic moves between oceans.[6] Models suggest that nearly all of the pandemic-associated plastic waste will end up contaminating either sea beds (28.8 per cent) or beaches (70.5 per cent),[7] with damaging effects on ecosystems and incomes derived from marine industries, such as tourism and fisheries.[8] Furthermore, microplastic contamination impacts food products and presents health risks, particularly for pregnant women who consume affected seafood.[9]

Global marine science, long challenged by underfunding compared with other fields of research and innovation, has been set back even further by the pandemic. Ocean observation operations were severely disrupted, as most research vessels were called back to their home ports and the maintenance of many mooring arrays was put on hold.[10,11] These setbacks, along with other disruptions to data collection systems, have challenged countries' abilities to record ongoing developments and formulate policy responses. Moreover, as Governments grapple with the financial implications of the crisis and prioritize other areas for recovery, there is a risk that countries will not seize the opportunity to include sustainability measures in their recovery plans to address the destructive impact of the crisis on fisheries and marine environments.



4 FAO, Impact de la crise covid-19 sur les secteurs de la pêche et de l'aquaculture dans quatre pays du Maghreb, 2021.
5 FAO, The impact of COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture food systems, Possible responses, 2020.
6 World Bank Blogs, MENA joins forces to stop marine plastic pollution, 2021.
7 Peng and others, Plastic waste release caused by COVID-19 and its fate in the global ocean, 2021.
8 World Bank Blogs, MENA joins forces to stop marine plastic pollution, 2021.
9 OECD, Women and SDG14 – Life under water: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, 2021.
10 United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2021.
11 International Science Council, COVID-19's impact on the ocean observing system and our ability to forecast weather and predict climate change, 2020.

Measures taken by Arab Governments

1. **In response to the economic consequences of the crisis, Arab countries extended relief measures to support those whose livelihoods were impacted, including fisher people.** In many cases, measures such as cash and in-kind transfers were introduced or extended to a wide range of informal sector workers, who have traditionally faced difficulties in accessing social protection benefits. Such measures allowed many informal workers employed in the seafood supply chain to access support. Several Arab Governments extended fiscal support, such as tax relief, to targeted sectors of the economy, sometimes including fisheries. In Mauritania, for example, the Government temporarily waived taxes and royalties resulting from activities in the traditional fishing sector.[12] Throughout the region, firms also benefited from exceptional access to concessionary finance, the suspension of loan payments, the postponement of tax due dates, and monthly allowances to benefit formal employees.[13]

2. **Innovations in the region have assisted seafood producers in reaching customers by means of digital applications and platforms.** Examples of such interventions include the launch of the *Behar* platform in Oman, which allows remote fish auctions to take place amidst social distancing measures, and the adoption of direct-to-consumer Internet sales and home delivery by firms in the region, notably in the United Arab Emirates.[14]

3. **Despite the COVID-19 crisis, Arab countries worked to develop and implement strategies to address marine litter, advance the protection of coastal regions, and protect marine resources.** Morocco, for example, continued the rollout of its National Integrated Coastal Management Plan, including a Regional Costal Scheme in the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region following integrated coastal zone management principles. The Plan seeks to promote sustainable development by integrating strategies for a variety of sectors and land uses, including natural resource management, ports, tourism, urban planning, and fishing.[15] In Saudi Arabia, Juzur Farasan became the country's first UNESCO-recognized biosphere reserve in 2021, connecting the site to a cooperative network for promoting conservation, sustainable economic development, and research in protected zones.[16] In the United Arab Emirates, the introduction of regulations to protect overexploited species led to a year-on-year decrease of 43 per cent in fisheries production in 2020 compared with 2019. This also led to a marked improvement in the biological state of fish stocks around the country, with the Sustainable Exploitation Index moving from a low of 5.7 per cent in 2018 to 57.1 per cent in 2020.[17]

12 For an overview of response measures implemented by Arab governments, visit the ESCWA COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker.
13 FAO, The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on fishing activities in the Arab region, 2020.
14 FAO, How is the COVID-19 outbreak impacting the fisheries and aquaculture food systems, and what can FAO do? 2020.
15 World Bank, Preserving Morocco's coastline, 2021.
16 UNESCO, Juzur Farasan – Saudi Arabia, A landmark for hidden marine and terrestrial gems in the red sea, 2021.
17 Abu Dhabi Environment Agency, Fisheries and Aquaculture Bulletin, 2020.

Most at risk of being left behind

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the degradation of coastal ecosystems posed significant threats to vulnerable people who depend on marine resources for their livelihoods and nutrition. Pollution, overfishing, climate change, and the absence of effective regulations to mitigate these threats negatively affect the wellbeing of millions of people in the region, who often face additional obstacles and inequalities that leave them at an elevated risk of being left behind.

The crisis has devastated many workers in the seafood and tourism industries operating in the informal sector, who generally lack social insurance coverage and are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks. As the region plans for its post-pandemic recovery, evidence-based policies can advance SDG 14 achievement and address these vulnerabilities by responding to the needs of the following groups.

Small-scale fisheries are vital to the food security, health, nutrition, income and livelihoods of coastal communities throughout the region, particularly in Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, the State of Palestine and Yemen. However, unsustainable fishing practices, illegal fishing, dwindling fish stocks, pollution and climate change threaten the viability of small-scale fisheries.

Many women in the region are employed in fishery-adjacent industries, including seafood processing and trade, often in the informal sector. Informal workers were particularly likely to lose employment during the crisis, and women in particular were often forced to withdraw from the workforce to assume greater childcare responsibilities, thus increasing the impact of COVID-19 on women in the fisheries sector who lost employment at a greater rate than men.[18]

Similarly, refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants are also frequently employed in the food sector, and faced heightened risk of job loss as COVID-19 disrupted trade flows with major consumer markets.[19]

Least developed countries have limited institutional capacity to protect their territorial waters from illegal fishing activities, with adverse consequences including risks of piracy, the collapse of local fish stocks, reduced livelihoods of those in the fishing industry, and reductions in available food resources.

Coastal communities are especially vulnerable if Governments within the Arab region and worldwide do not improve the management of shared natural environments. Pollution, ocean acidification, and climate change threaten to devastate coastal communities in the Arab region. Rising temperatures, for example, risk driving one third of marine species in the Arabian Gulf to extinction,[20] which could have a devastating impact on the livelihoods of those working in fisheries and fishery-adjacent industries. Moreover, several Arab countries are vulnerable to sea level rises, which pose increased flood risks, threaten saline intrusion and seepage, and risk the erasure of coastal communities as a result of shoreline retreat.[21]

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18 FAO and ESCWA, Arab Food Security, Vulnerabilities and Pathways, 2020.
19 Ibid.
20 ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.
21 UNEP, Marine resources in the Arab region, 2015.

Policy recommendations for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving SDG 14 by 2030

The Arab region must accelerate efforts towards achieving SDG 14 by adopting new policies and improving collection efforts. The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 identified a series of recommendations to accelerate the achievement of SDG 14 in the region [22] which, along with the following recommendations, can guide Arab countries' recovery efforts as they build back better from COVID-19. As Arab countries work towards implementing the 2030 Agenda, they have an opportunity to prioritize investments in marine environments and coastal communities, advance the achievement of SDG 14 in the region, and ensure that ocean resources continue to benefit people today and in future generations.

Build the capacity of Arab countries to collect data and report on all SDG 14 targets, improve the **production of knowledge**, and strengthen the **science-policy interface** to support the sustainable management of oceans, seas, and marine resources.

Integrate marine protection and conservation into national development plans and urban development strategies in coastal regions, including by intensifying efforts to assess the impact of pollution on coastal communities, and by promoting sustainable tourism in coastal areas to generate decent work.

Implement and improve marine fisheries management arrangements for all oceans and seas around the Arab region, including by enhancing regional collaboration to combat illegal fishing and ensuring greater engagement with integrated fisheries management frameworks. While many of the long-term effects of the crisis have yet to manifest, it is essential that fisheries management bodies are empowered to operate effectively and in combination with effective government policies that ensure fisheries recover in a sustainable manner that maximizes benefits. **Fisheries management is the best conservation**.[23]

Increase marine area protection, scale up the restoration of degraded coastal and marine ecosystems, and reduce key pressures on the marine environment by increasing efforts to monitor protected zones, mitigating and managing the environmental impact of urban, industrial and agricultural development through improved waste management strategies, and adopting integrated approaches to the management of coastal zones.

Support sustainable aquaculture in desert and arid countries as a means to enhance food security in the region and provide decent work and livelihoods to people in coastal communities.

22 For a comprehensive analysis of these recommendations, see ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

23 FAO, The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture, 2020.

Key facts on SDG 14

	Arab region	World
Beach litter (count per km^2)	**4,412** (2018)	**1,347** (2018)
Chlorophyll-a anomaly, remote sensing (percentage)	**2.7** (2020) **-10 per cent since 2018**	**2.3** (2019) **-6 per cent since 2018**
Chlorophyll-a deviations, remote sensing (percentage)	**1.8** (2019) **-1 per cent since 2000**	**2.9** (2019) **+0.28 per cent since 2000**
Fish species, threatened	**672** (2018)	**8,233** (2017)
Marine protected areas (percentage of territorial waters)	**2** (2018) **+3 per cent since 2016**	**11** (2018) **+1 per cent since 2000**

Proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels[24]

Mediterranean	Indian Ocean, Western	Atlantic, Eastern Central	World
38 (2017)	**68** (2017)	**57** (2017)	**66** (2017)

Source: ESCWA, Arab SDG Monitor, unless otherwise noted.

24 FAO, Indicator 14.4.1 – Proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels.

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