



Africa's Blue Economy: What Role for Social Sustainability?

By:

[Leïla Choukroune](#)

[Tonny Kirabira](#)

[He Yuan](#)

April 29, 2024

The Blue Gold for Africa?

Joining the new global rush for “Blue Gold” Uganda, a landlocked country, recently adopted its [national blue economy strategy](#) prepared with the support of the [Intergovernmental Authority on Development in East Africa](#) (IGAD). From [South Africa](#) to [Kenya](#) or [Cameroun](#), African countries, -as most States and [regions](#) around the world-, are encouraged to design Blue Economy frameworks, and other implementation toolkits, to grasp the economic opportunities offered by the extraordinary resources of oceans, seas, rivers, and lakes. As for Uganda, the Blue Economy concept is [now extended far beyond the Oceans to cover all fresh waters](#) as well as ground waters and associated resources. The [African Union \(AU\) developed its Blue Economy Strategy](#) from 2018 to guide sustainable development and the utilization of aquatic resources in the continent. It was endorsed, in October 2019, and is

referred to in the strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of Africa over the next 50 years, the ambitious [Africa 2063](#). Promoted as the new gold for Africa, the Blue Economy is presented by the [United Nations Economic Commission for Africa](#) as a tool for “both coastal and land-locked States” to “harness opportunities, which could yield mutual benefits, including the provision of efficient and coordinated services to each other as well as access to resources”.

Whilst the Blue Economy might provide new sources of growth for African communities, it could also only generate very few shared benefits and widen existing inequalities. As often in the developing world indeed, new concepts such as the Blue Economy are mostly exported by [international organisations](#), economically more advanced [donors and other consultants](#). These imported ideas and norms are not always suited to more complex local realities when transferred without adequate tools and time. The [African Union](#) itself is conscious of these many challenges, which are alluded to in its strategy: “most coastal and lake communities in Africa are poor, less educated, lack capacity and are impoverished, having few rights of tenure over resources of their livelihoods and often excluded from the decision-making process”. As a matter of fact, the Blue Economy might not [live up to its promises](#) if social sustainability is not integrated in the great African development plans.

Social Sustainability, the often Forgotten yet Central Element of Sustainability

Mainstream environmental and economic approaches to sustainability tend to forget its key third pillar: social sustainability. Social sustainability (and inclusion), formerly referred to by the [World Bank](#) as “social development” can be seen as an umbrella concept to achieve inclusive and resilient societies based on democratic participations, the rule of law, and rights for all, without any distinction based on gender, race, ethnicity or religion. In a context of [global extreme inequalities](#), the inclusion of social sustainability is crucial to meet poverty reduction targets and share the benefits of growth. Social sustainability can also be defined, as in the [United Nations Global Compact](#), from an accountability angle and target the “identification and management of business impacts, both positive and negative on people”. The sea, as well as other fresh waters, do not only constitute important sources of growth, but they

are also the place of major human right violations. [Ghana's fishers](#) have reported instances of modern slavery treatment on Chinese fishing vessels. The fishery industry as it remains labour intensive is also the subject of [illegal labour practices](#). [African seafarers](#), now in high demands, are not always offered decent jobs by an Industry in transition towards more protective regulations for its workers as per the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention and the [latest International Labour Organisation Regulations](#) . [African women](#) whilst more involved in the Blue Economy but remain vulnerable to grave human rights violations.

In this context and without a strong focus on social sustainability, the piecemeal sectoral approach (fisheries, tourism, shipping, transportation, etc.) and essentially environmentally focussed perspective of sustainability chosen in most Blue Economy national and regional strategies will not contribute to the sustained growth for all promised for "[Africa's renaissance](#)". Some recent initiatives are, however, encouraging. For example, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa has developed a [valuation toolkit](#) to assess the economic, environmental but also social aspects of the Blue Economy to better strategize their priorities. The latest editions of country's Blue Economy strategies, such as that of [Ethiopia 2020-23](#) adopt a more holistic approach based on "circular economy, good governance and environmental and social sustainability" and include a human rights. In doing so, African countries Blue Economy strategies and implementation toolkits will contribute to the United Nations [Common Agenda](#) and, most importantly, generate practical benefits for their populations.

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