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Introducing the Continental Strategy for the Control & Mitigating the Impact of Plastic Pollution on Aquatic Biodiversity & Environment in Africa



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Introduction

Plastic pollution poses an urgent and escalating threat to Africa's aquatic ecosystems, undermining biodiversity, human health, and economic stability. Each year, the continent generates approximately 17 million tonnes of mismanaged plastic waste (Lebreton, 2019). If unaddressed, current trends suggest that by 2050, the oceans could contain more plastic than fish by weight, with dire consequences for both nature and people. Plastics now comprise over 90% of floating ocean debris, often laced with toxic additives that threaten food safety, human health, and ecosystem integrity. From freshwater lakes to marine environments, Africa's rivers and coasts—rich in biodiversity and supporting millions of livelihoods—are increasingly contaminated. For instance, microplastics have been found in 100% of surface water samples from Lake Victoria, which sustains over 40 million people (Egessa, 2020).

This pervasive pollution causes entanglement and ingestion among aquatic species, from sea turtles to fish, and disrupts entire food chains. At the human level, the crisis jeopardises vital sectors such as fisheries, aquaculture, and tourism—leading to annual economic losses estimated at £2.3 billion ($2.9 billion) (World Bank, 2023). Plastics also degrade water quality, block sanitation infrastructure, and facilitate the spread of disease. Despite these severe impacts, much of Africa suffers from inadequate waste management and recycling infrastructure, with plastic accounting for about 13% of municipal waste in sub-Saharan Africa (UNEP, 2024). Land-based sources—including urban runoff, industrial discharge, and agricultural waste—remain the primary contributors to marine plastics, although sea-based sources such as lost fishing gear also exacerbate the problem (UNEP, 2021).

In response, this Strategy presents a multi-pillar, science-driven framework to address the crisis holistically. Rooted in principles of sustainability, circular economy, and inclusivity, the strategy envisions a continent where plastic waste is virtually eliminated from aquatic systems by 2040 through prevention, reuse, recycling, and systemic innovation (UNEP, 2024). It aims to safeguard Africa's Blue Economy, ensuring resilient ecosystems that support livelihoods, food security, and public health. Aligned with Agenda 2063 (AUC, 2014) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 6 (Clean Water), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), this strategy calls for urgent and collective action from governments, industries, civil society, and communities (UN, 2015).

Pollution through dumping of toxic wastes as well as indiscriminate discarding of single use plastics and environmental randomness also undermine the realization of Africa's Blue Economy Growth. At its core, therefore, reversing the tide of plastic pollution is not only an ecological imperative but a socioeconomic necessity to secure Africa's aquatic heritage for generations to come.

Key Messages

- Plastic pollution poses an escalating and grave threat to Africa's freshwater and marine ecosystems, impacting biodiversity, human health, food and nutrition security, income and national revenue (from important sectors such as fisheries) and livelihoods.
- The majority of plastic pollution originates from land-based sources, primarily mismanaged waste, exacerbated by inadequate collection and recycling infrastructure across the continent.
- The problem affects all aquatic life, from large marine animals suffering entanglement to organisms at every trophic level ingesting microplastics, leading to ecological damage and food safety concerns.
- A comprehensive, multi-pillar strategy is essential, focusing on prevention, improved waste management, robust policy, public awareness, research, and robust partnerships and financing.
- By 2040, Africa aims for a thriving Blue Economy free from plastic pollution, with ambitious targets to virtually eliminate plastic discharge and maximise reuse and recycling.
- Urgent and collective action from policymakers, governments, the private sector, civil society, and citizens is required to reverse the tide of plastic pollution and secure Africa's aquatic heritage.
- AU member states must adhere to national, regional and international pollution instruments, standards and practices, especially regarding chemical products and plastics.
- Eliminating plastic pollution could unlock new business and job opportunities, particularly in recycling, while inaction will result in further economic and ecological losses

Scope of the Problem

Plastic pollution poses a pervasive threat to aquatic ecosystems, impacting organisms across the food chain. Larger plastics such as bags, bottles, and fishing nets cause entanglement and strangulation of mammals, turtles, seabirds, and fish, while microplastics (less than 5mm) are ingested by a wide range of species. Global studies have detected plastics in hundreds of fish, bird, and mammal species; for instance, plastics have been found in 86% of sea turtle species and 44% of seabirds (Islam, 2025). Ingestion can obstruct digestion, leach toxic chemicals, and allow contaminants to accumulate up

the food chain, raising food safety concerns for humans as well with implications, for fish products, for fulfilment export requirements for high lucrative markets.

Both marine and freshwater systems are affected. In Africa, low rates of formal waste collection mean plastics frequently escape into rivers and lakes (UNEP, 2020). Microplastics have been found in 100% of surface samples from Lake Victoria, threatening the lake's fisheries and water quality (Egessa, 2020). In Morocco, plastics account for 10% of household waste—about 690,000 tonnes annually—a trend mirrored in other countries experiencing increased consumption (WWF, 2019). Over 800 marine and coastal species worldwide are known to suffer from plastic entanglement or ingestion (Landrigan PJ, 2023).

Africa faces acute risks as its rivers, lakes, and coastal waters are critical to food security, employment, and regional economies. Lake Victoria alone sustains hundreds of thousands of fishers and traders, yet pollution is driving severe declines in fish stocks, threatening livelihoods and local economies. Plastic waste compounds these challenges by clogging waterways, worsening flood risks, and spreading disease, thereby weakening water and sanitation infrastructure. The socio-economic consequences are far-reaching: polluted beaches deter tourism, fisheries yields diminish, and clean-up costs continue to rise. Additionally, Africa's proximity to seven highly productive Large Marine Ecosystems (Agulhas, Benguela, Guinea, Canary, Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Somali Current LMEs) presents both an opportunity and a challenge. These ecosystems are rich in biodiversity and natural resources, yet face mounting pressures from overfishing, pollution, toxic waste dumping, mining, gas exploration, and unsustainable coastal development. Such practices are undermining ecological resilience and threatening the long-term viability of marine and freshwater biodiversity. Urgent and coordinated conservation strategies are essential to safeguard these ecosystems, ensure the sustainable use of aquatic resources, and preserve ecological balance for future generations (UNEP, 2023).

In brief, concerns raised by stakeholders, and supported by robust evidence from UN agencies, NGOs, and academic studies confirm that plastic pollution is a rapidly escalating problem in African waters, incurring substantial costs to both nature and society.

Strategic Vision and Goals (2040 Targets)

The Continental Strategy aims for a transformative turnaround by 2040. Its overarching vision is a thriving African Blue Economy, entirely free from plastic pollution, where waste generation is minimised, and circular economy systems for recycling and reuse are fully operational. In tangible terms, the strategy establishes ambitious 2040 targets, meticulously aligned with global objectives. These include the virtual elimination of plastic discharge into aquatic ecosystems and the maximisation of plastic reuse and recycling. The ultimate goal is to ensure that plastics which cannot be avoided are effectively captured and reintegrated into the economy, rather than polluting the environment. This aligns seamlessly with global commitments, as UNEP projects that through unified action, we can "virtually eliminate plastic pollution by 2040," leading to a sharp reduction in social and environmental costs (UNEP, 2023).

These targets are designed to support Africa's broader development aspirations. They contribute directly to Agenda 2063's vision of a "prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development," specifically addressing Aspiration 1's goals concerning resource management and well-being. Furthermore, they reinforce Aspiration 6, which envisions a flourishing Blue Economy with healthy blue ecosystems that are linked to environmental management and biodiversity protection with zero pollution of African coasts regarding chemicals and plastics, and Aspiration 7, focused on environmental sustainability (AUC, 2014). By 2040, the strategy envisions healthy, resilient aquatic ecosystems across Africa, serving as a robust foundation for sustainable growth and enhanced community well-being. The African Union blueprint, the Policy framework and Reform Strategy for fisheries and aquaculture in Africa (PFRS), underscored conservation and Sustainable Resources Use. Plastic pollution poses a direct threat to the objectives of the PFRS which champions sustainable and ecosystem-based management of aquatic resources. The widespread presence of plastics in African waters degrades aquatic habitats, disrupts breeding grounds, and contaminates fish stocks, undermining the viability of both inland and marine fisheries. These impacts compromise food security, public health, and economic stability—core concerns of the PFRS. Moreover, the pollution of shared marine zones, including Africa's seven Large Marine Ecosystems, intensifies transboundary environmental pressures that the PFRS seeks to mitigate through coordinated governance and sustainable exploitation. Tackling plastic pollution is therefore integral to realising the PFRS's vision of resilient aquatic ecosystems, prosperous coastal economies, and inclusive, sustainable blue growth (AUC, 2014).

Pillars of the Strategy

The Strategy is built upon seven integrated pillars, each designed to address a critical aspect of the plastic pollution problem:

Pollution Prevention and Reduction: Focuses on minimising plastic waste generation by phasing out unnecessary single-use plastics, promoting reusable or biodegradable alternatives, and encouraging eco-friendly packaging design. This includes coordinated policies like plastic bag bans or levies and fostering public–private partnerships, exemplified by initiatives such as the Clean Seas campaign.

Waste Management and Circular Economy: Aims to improve plastic collection and recycling through investment in waste infrastructure—collection systems, sorting centres, and advanced recycling facilities. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes incentivise manufacturers to manage product life cycles. Formalising waste pickers' roles and developing markets for recycled plastics support job creation and reduce environmental leakage.

Policy, Regulation and Enforcement: Calls for robust legal frameworks and standards to control plastic production, use, and disposal, building on existing instruments such as the Bamako Convention. Harmonised regulations, effective enforcement, and regional cooperation are vital to prevent illegal plastic use and cross-border dumping. Capacity building for officials ensures compliance and strengthens governance.

Awareness, Education and Behaviour Change: Seeks to raise public understanding and mobilise communities via multilingual outreach, school curricula, media campaigns, and engagement with civil society groups. Grassroots initiatives, such as community clean-ups and NGO recycling drives, promote responsible plastic use and disposal, shifting social norms towards sustainability.

Research, Monitoring and Innovation: Supports ongoing data collection and scientific research to track pollution, identify hotspots, and assess impacts on ecosystems. Encourages innovation in recycling technologies, biodegradable materials, and waste-to-energy solutions, linking research with policy to ensure evidence-based interventions.

Partnerships and Finance: Emphasises multi-stakeholder collaboration among AU bodies, governments, private sector, donors, NGOs, and academia. Promotes sustainable financing

mechanisms like green bonds and blue economy funds to support infrastructure and programmes, leveraging donor and continental resources such as the African Development Fund.

Gender and Social Inclusion: Recognises the disproportionate impact of plastic pollution on women, youth, and marginalised groups, especially in fisheries and informal waste sectors. Embeds gender-responsive and inclusive approaches across education, policy, and financing to ensure equitable participation and strengthen resilience, essential for achieving a sustainable, plastic-free Blue Economy by 2040

These pillars are designed to work synergistically; for instance, improved waste management systems enable stricter bans to be enforced more effectively, while public awareness programmes can significantly boost recycling rates. The strategy underscores that no single action will suffice; a comprehensive suite of measures implemented across all these pillars is indispensable to achieve the ambitious 2040 goals.

Guiding Principles

The strategy is underpinned by the following guiding principles.
Sustainability is central, ensuring interventions support the long-term resilience of aquatic ecosystems.

Inclusivity will guarantee participation from communities, civil society, and industry. Coordination and coherence will align actions with continental and global frameworks to maximise impact. Broad stakeholder engagement—including governments, the private sector, academia, and local communities—will strengthen ownership.

An evidence-based approach will inform all interventions, drawing on science, data, and best practices. Emphasis on the circular economy will promote reduction, reuse, recycling, and innovation to minimise plastic waste and dependency on virgin plastics.

Gender and social inclusion will ensure the needs of women, youth, and vulnerable groups are addressed. Climate alignment will integrate mitigation and adaptation into all plastic pollution measures, while good governance and accountability will uphold transparency, monitoring, and continuous improvement.

Implementation Mechanism for this Strategy

Effective coordination across institutions is essential for the successful implementation of this strategy. The African Union Commission (AUC), through its Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment (ARBE), will provide overarching oversight. The Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR), housed within ARBE, will lead on fisheries and aquatic biodiversity and oversee the rollout of the strategy.

A continental task force or steering committee under AU-IBAR will be established, comprising member states' environment and fisheries departments, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and specialised agencies such as the African Ministerial Conference on Environment (AMCEN). These bodies will align national policies with the continental strategy and facilitate the exchange of best practices. At the national level, governments will designate focal points—typically within Ministries of Environment, Water, or Fisheries—to oversee implementation and reporting, supported by subnational authorities responsible for waste management.

Formal collaboration with international partners will underpin implementation, with UNEP approaches supporting waste assessments and UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) commitments, UNDP facilitating awareness campaigns, and multilateral banks providing financial support. RECs, such as ECOWAS and the East African Community, will be key in harmonising cross-border regulations and coordinating transboundary clean-up actions.

The Africa Blue Economy Strategy offers an integrated framework for embedding plastic pollution control within broader ocean governance, while flagship initiatives like the Great Blue Wall—aimed at restoring 100 million hectares of coastal ecosystems—will include dedicated plastic mitigation efforts. Institutional mechanisms such as working groups and annual conferences will be established to monitor progress, ensure accountability, and enable adaptive management. AU-IBAR will drive policy coordination, while member states and stakeholders execute actions across national and regional levels.

Call to Action

Protecting Africa's waters from plastic pollution requires urgent, collective action from all sectors of society. Policymakers must lead by translating this strategy into national legislation, allocating dedicated budgets, and embedding plastic targets within blue economy plans, while prioritising waste infrastructure and enforcement.

Donors and the private sector play a critical role in investing in recycling industries and driving innovation in sustainable packaging, with the transition to a circular plastics economy offering potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs. Civil society and educators are essential for raising public awareness, shaping behaviour, and holding authorities accountable.

The cost of inaction—degraded fisheries, polluted coastlines, mounting health risks, and escalating clean-up costs—is too high to ignore. Conversely, coordinated action, as UNEP underscores, could virtually eliminate plastic pollution by 2040, yielding significant environmental and economic benefits. Africa now stands at a pivotal moment: by embracing this strategy and mobilising all stakeholders—governments, communities, businesses, and individuals—it can restore clean waterways, secure abundant fisheries, and build a resilient Blue Economy for generations to come.

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