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Study Tour Report

Regional Exchange on Sustainable Octopus Fisheries and Inclusive Value Chains in the Western Indian Ocean



Group Photo of Participants at Murex Octopus Processing Factory, Toliara – Madagascar

19th – 22nd May 2026 | Toliara (Tuléar), Madagascar

Report prepared by: Ms. Stephanie Achieng – Gender Policy and Strategy Expert, AU-IBAR

Citation: AU–IBAR, 2026. Study Tour Report: Regional Exchange on Sustainable Octopus Fisheries and Inclusive Value Chains in the Western Indian Ocean

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Applications for such permission should be addressed to:-

The Director,
African Union - Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR),
Kenindia Business Park,
Museum Hill, Westlands Road,
P.O. Box 30786,
00100, Nairobi, KENYA.
E-mail to: ibar.office@au-ibar.org

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1. Introduction and Background

AU-IBAR is implementing the Conserving Aquatic Biodiversity in African Blue Economy project with financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The project supports implementation of the Africa Blue Economy Strategy (ABES), endorsed by African Union Heads of State and Government in February 2020. It seeks to strengthen policy frameworks, institutional capacities, and inclusive value chains for the sustainable conservation and use of aquatic biodiversity.

A core pillar of the project is promoting gender equality and youth inclusion in aquatic biodiversity governance, and strengthening inclusive blue economy value chains. This commitment is reinforced by the Continental Gender Strategy on Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation, also endorsed by the African Union (AU) Summit in February 2024, and implemented by concrete actions to enhance women's and youth's participation and promote their benefits across aquatic sectors.

Following a regional study by Prof. Bernerd M. Fulanda of Pwani University, Kenya, octopus fisheries are among the most economically significant small-scale fisheries in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region. Octopus fisheries provide employment, food, opportunities for women's participation, export earnings for coastal communities, and the potential to strengthen sustainable livelihoods. The study identified the need to address challenges associated with inconsistent harvesting methods, post-harvest losses, post-harvest handling variations, limited value addition, poor market access, resource sustainability concerns, and the impacts of climate change on marine environments and coral reef habitats supporting octopus populations.

Also, climate change is increasingly affecting aquatic ecosystems in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region. AU-IBAR's analytical work highlights growing threats to coral reefs and associated species such as octopus, with implications for productivity, seasonality, and coastal livelihoods. These pressures are compounded by limited access to appropriate post-harvest technologies and infrastructure, as well as unsustainable practices, posing a serious threat to livelihoods.

To address these challenges, AU-IBAR previously supported a regional assessment on strengthening small-scale octopus value chains in East Africa and the South-West Indian Ocean, including field missions in Kenya, Tanzania (Zanzibar), Comoros, and Madagascar, followed by a regional validation workshop. A key outcome was the establishment of the WIO Network on Sustainable Octopus Fisheries (WION-SOF), a regional platform promoting sustainable, inclusive, and rights-based small-scale octopus fisheries. The assessment underscored the urgent need for capacity building in post-harvest handling, processing, and preservation; improved market access; value-addition opportunities, particularly for women and youth; and the promotion of sustainable practices along the value chain.

Building on the recommendations from the assessment, AU-IBAR conducted a training workshop in March 2026 in Mombasa, Kenya, bringing together women in the octopus fisheries value chain across the WIO region. The meeting expedited knowledge exchange among women entrepreneurs and fisheries stakeholders, contributing to the formation of knowledge exchange and the formation of WION-SOF as a platform to promote learning and collaboration and the promotion of sustainable and inclusive octopus fisheries. In addition, it promoted knowledge sharing on best practices in harvesting, post-harvest harvesting, issues of climate change, environmental considerations towards increased market access, conservation and sustainability of small-scale octopus fisheries in Moroni, Comoros.

In line with its mandate to promote sustainable fisheries governance, inclusive value chain development, and regional cooperation, AU-IBAR, in collaboration with WION-SOF, organized a regional exchange to facilitate peer learning and showcase best practices across the octopus value chain. The program was held in Toliara, Madagascar, from 19th to 21st May 2026. The decision to organise the program in Madagascar was guided by recommendations from consecutive consultations, including a meeting held in Comoros in March 2026, where women expressed the need for a more comprehensive study tour. Madagascar was selected for its experience in octopus harvesting, processing, marketing, community-based fisheries management, and women's participation in the sector.

The exchange aimed to promote harmonized approaches, strengthen regional collaboration, and support the scaling of successful models for sustainable and inclusive octopus fisheries. In particular, the program sought to provide practical exposure to octopus harvesting locations, fish landing sites, processing facilities, and market centers to promote peer learning, strengthen regional collaboration, improve fisheries management methods, advance the inclusion of women and youth, and report the practical experiences to be replicated across the region. Moreover, the exchange sought to better understand the role of women within the octopus value chain and highlight strategies to deliver resource sustainability.

2. Relevance of the Study Tour in Realizing the AU and AU-IBAR Objectives

The African Union endorsed the Africa Blue Economy Strategy (ABES) in February 2020 as a continental framework to promote the sustainable use of aquatic ecosystems while supporting livelihood, socioeconomic transformation, and food security. In support of this framework, AU-IBAR, with financial support from SIDA, is implementing the project "Conserving Aquatic Biodiversity in the African Blue Economy."

The project seeks to strengthen institutional capacities, governance systems, conservation measures, and inclusive value chains associated with aquatic biodiversity resources. Popular emphasis is placed on advancing gender equality and youth empowerment in aquatic biodiversity conservation and fisheries governance. This commitment is further reinforced by the Continental Gender Strategy on Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation, endorsed by the African Union in February 2024, which advocates for enhanced participation, leadership, and equitable benefit-sharing for women and youth in aquatic sectors.

The regional exchange on sustainable octopus fisheries directly contributed to these continental priorities: (i) strengthening cooperation among Member States and (ii) promoting practical solutions to improve sustainability and inclusiveness within small-scale fisheries value chains. Octopus fisheries remain among the most economically significant fisheries in the WIO region and support livelihoods, employment, food security, and export earnings for coastal communities.

In line with AU-IBAR's mandate, and building on the collaborative platform provided by WION-SOF, within the provision of the SIDA funded project, AU-IBAR supported stakeholders from Madagascar, Kenya, Comoros, Mozambique, and Tanzania to undertake the regional study tour that provide an opportunity for practical exposure to best practices in octopus fisheries and to systematically document best practices on community-based management arrangements, harvesting, post-harvesting, handling, and processing protocols and innovations, marketing systems such as cooperative models, and the promotion of sustainable practices along the value chain.

3. Objectives

Overall Objective

To enhance knowledge on sustainable and inclusive octopus value chains across the WIO region through regional exchange and dissemination of best practices in harvesting, handling, processing, marketing, and sustainable practices for effective conservation of Octopus stocks.

Specific Objectives

- ☐ To showcase and document best practices in sustainable octopus harvesting and fisheries management in the WIO region.
- ☐ To promote improved handling, processing, and quality assurance practices that reduce post-harvest losses and enhance market value.
- ☐ To identify and promote mechanisms for strengthening inclusive and gender-responsive octopus value chains, with particular attention to women and youth.
- ☐ To strengthen regional collaboration and knowledge sharing through AU-IBAR and WIO-NSOF platforms.

Expected Outputs

The expected outcomes of the exchange included:

- ☐ A documented report on best practices on octopus harvesting, handling, processing, and marketing.
- ☐ Practical recommendations for inclusive value chain strengthening, including co-management [involving Marine Conservation Areas (MCAs)], cooperative models, enterprise development, and market access strategies.
- ☐ Strengthened partnerships among Member States, WION-SOF members, private sector actors, and development partners.
- ☐ A post-exchange action plan to guide follow-up activities and regional collaboration.

4. Daily Activities

4.1 Day 1: Tuesday, 19th May 2026; Visits to Regional Directorate of Fisheries, and Murex and Copefrito Processing Factories

4.1.1 Visit to the Regional Directorate of Fisheries and Blue Economy, Toliara

The study tour started with a visit to the Regional Directorate of Fisheries and Blue Economy under the Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy in Toliara. Although prior communication had been sent to the Ministry, the AU-IBAR team and the representatives from the WIO region utilised the visit to directly discuss the program with the Regional Government of Madagascar, and to share its broader plans to promote inclusive and sustainable octopus fisheries in the region.

The Regional Director welcomed the delegation and expressed appreciation for AU-IBAR's and WION-SOF's efforts to promote regional knowledge exchange and collaboration. He gave emphasis to Madagascar's commitment to strengthen sustainable fisheries management.



Fig 1: Meeting with the Regional Director of Fisheries in Toliara, Madagascar

Participants learned that Madagascar annually implements a national octopus closure period from 15th December to 31st January, during which octopus harvesting is illegal; this is in order to protect octopus spawning stocks for successful stock reproduction. Fisheries officials monitor activities to ensure the regulations are enforced. Moreover, the Directorate explained that the government established a minimum catch size of 360 grams for octopus harvests. Fishers caught with undersized octopus are liable to fines and penalties. Confiscated octopuses found alive are returned to the sea, while the non-living catches are donated to special institutions such as orphanages.

The study team learned that Toliara is the main octopus-producing region in the country, accounting for up to 2000 tonnes of octopus exports annually to European markets such as Germany and France, with the dried octopus exported to Mauritius. Additionally, the Directorate highlighted the differences in octopus pricing across various production areas, noting that octopus in Toliara fetches approximately USD 2 per kilogram, and USD 1 per kilogram in the more remote areas. These price variations reflect the differences in buyer presence, access to markets, transport costs, and value chain organisation.

The Directorate noted that octopus harvesting continues to be one of the most accessible fisheries in the coastal region for communities due to the abundance of octopus in the nearshore reef systems. Though men make up the majority of the fishers, using boats, the women are similarly major actors harvesting octopus on foot in the shallow reef areas, and participating in marketing and trading. Often, the women buy octopus catches from the men and resell them, making them vital intermediary actors along the octopus value chain.

Furthermore, discussions included the country's fisheries management governance framework, including the Fisheries Act (Loi sur la Pêche 2018–2026). The delegation learned that fishers in Madagascar are not all licensed, and the authorities shared that they currently lack updated statistics on the total number of fishers. Fish traders, however, are required to acquire trading permits. In particular, women traders purchase annual trading cards that enable them to trade in special fisheries products. The cards are accessible to small-scale traders at approximately USD 5 per fish species per year, with commercial companies paying up to USD 500 to operate.

4.1.2 Visit to Murex International Octopus Processing Facility

After the visit, the team proceeded to Murex International, one of the top octopus processing and export companies in Toliara. The visit offered exposure to the octopus value chain from landing, collection, processing, packaging, storage, branding, and export preparation. Participants studied the receiving and sorting processes. They learned about Murex's selection and grading system, which classifies the octopus into Extra Quality, Grade A, Grade B, and Grade C categories. Typically, the Extra Quality octopus are delivered alive with their tentacles still moving, whereas Grade A products preserve high levels of quality and freshness. Grade B products may not meet the highest standards of market specifications, but remain suitable for export, with their freshness and color retained. Grade C products are, however, made up of undersized octopus below the minimum size of 360 grams, or octopus that show signs of deterioration and are usually rejected for export markets.

The Murex representative explained that they provide regular training to collectors on fish handling, quality assurance, and food safety. Live octopus are usually harvested using special harpoons that specifically target the tentacles to minimize damage and maintain the quality of the product. Once received at the processing factory, the octopus are cleaned, involving removal of the ink sacs, the black skin, digestive organs, and other foreign objects, before washing and preparation for processing. Participants observed how the black skin is removed during processing and used to produce animal feed; with a 10 kg bucket going for a dollar, highlighting opportunities for value addition and waste reduction.

4.1.3 Quality Assurance and Export Procedures at Murex International

The company demonstrated its packaging processes explaining the data contained on its export labels, including; processing dates, expiry dates, approval numbers, which show the date the government gave the company authorisation to operate and export seafood products; import numbers, which tally with the permit numbers issued by destination countries, acting as valid authorisation to receive the products; and lot numbers, which act as references for traceability to allow product tracking throughout the supply chain from processing to the destination markets.

The processed octopus is packed in 15 kilogram cartons and stored in temperatures of approximately -25°C before shipment to refrigeration containers kept at -20°C. These conditions allow the products to maintain quality standards for up to three months. The team learned that Extra Quality and Grade A products are particularly exported to European markets, while Grade B products are exported to Mauritius. For every three days, the company receives up to two tonnes of octopus from approximately 42 coastal villages south of, and 50 villages north of Toliara, with up to 3 sub-collectors in every village, demonstrating the huge network of communities dependent on the fishery.

4.1.4 Visit to Copefrito Seafood Processing Factory

The team then visited Copefrito, another large-scale seafood processing company in Madagascar. Representatives from the company reviewed their operations, explaining that Copefrito exports its seafood products to Europe, New Zealand, Seychelles, Australia and Mauritius. The delegation learned that Copefrito has been operational in the country for up to three decades, having heavily invested in quality control systems and infrastructure to meet international market requirement standards.

Copefrito's procurement systems rely on company agents who purchase seafood directly from fishers, ensuring the products are preserved immediately at temperatures below 2°C. The management explained that the company operates on an integrated system of self-sustained water, ice and electricity production to cushion against the unreliability of government infrastructure, with significant investment in both diesel and solar power generation to support processes by up to 25%.

Additionally, discussion covered the company's corporate social responsibility activities, which included efforts to provide fisher communities with fishing equipment, promote sustainable fishing, support alternative livelihoods such as seaweed farming, and their endeavour for fair market prices for their suppliers.

The delegation was informed that the factory exports approximately 1000 tonnes of seafood products annually, including 400 tonnes of octopus, 400 tonnes of crabs, 100 tonnes of squid, and 100 tonnes of fish. Products that fail to meet export specifications, or the little-known fish, are sold in the local markets to ensure minimal waste and greater economic benefits.



Fig 2: Group photo with the Manager at Coperfrito, Toliara, Madagascar

4.1.5 Processing Innovations and Quality Systems at Copefrito

The procedures for processing octopus at Copefrito highlighted the significance of quality management throughout the value chain. After collection, the octopus are taken to the dissection units where eyes, digestive organs, and foreign materials in the mouth are removed before washing and inspection. The delegation was then shown how the washed octopus are placed in a rotating drum system with ice at an appropriate ratio of 1:3, a process that takes approximately 40 minutes and is meant to improve the texture and presentation of the octopus and produce the characteristic flower-shaped appearance preferred by international export markets. Subsequently, the products are cleaned in cold water of approximately -18°C, then packed into 10-kilogram and 15-kilogram export cartons.

The company explained that they follow strict quality standards on product selection, with a preference for Grade A and Grade B octopus, whereas Grade C products are generally not accepted by export markets. In addition, the factory operates its own laboratory for regular quality and bacterial control assessments and, where possible, sends samples to licensed labs in Antananarivo for additional testing and verification of quality standards.

Finally, Coperfrito representatives shared their communal initiatives aimed at sustainable fisheries management, which include support towards livelihood diversification with the promotion of income-generating activities such as seaweed farming, to minimize over-reliance on fisheries and improve household resilience.



Fig 3: Characteristic Flower Shape after the Rotating Drum System



Fig 4: Octopus Storage Facilities at to Copefrito Seafood Processing Factory



Fig 5: Participants at Copefrito Factory



Fig 6:Visit to Copefrito Seafood Processing Factory



Fig 7: Octopus Processing Procedures at Copefrito Factory



Fig 8: Octopus Processing Procedures at Copefrito Factory

4.2 Day 2: Wednesday, 20th May 2026; Visits to Mangily and Ifaty Villages and Community-Based Marine Resources Management

4.2.1 Visit to Mangily Village and Engagement with Reef Doctor (NGO)

The second day of the study tour was aimed at visiting small-scale octopus fisheries and exploring communal experiences in marine resources management in Mangily and Ifaty villages, along the southwestern coast of Madagascar.

The delegation first visited Mangily Village, where they met representatives of the Reef Doctor, a non-governmental organisation working with local communities to support ecosystem restoration, marine conservation and sustainable livelihoods.



Fig 9: Meeting with Reef Doctor at Mangily Village



Fig 10: Discussions with Reef Doctor at Mangily Village

Dr. Emma Gibbons, a marine biologist and anthropologist with extensive experience in community-based marine resources management, hosted the group. She reviewed Reef Doctor's operations in the area, highlighting its integrated strategy to community development, food security and ecosystem conservation. She recounted how previously, local communities had been marginalised from marine resources management, and how through sustainable interventions, Reef Doctor and its partners, including NGOs, have promoted inclusive governance in the management and governance of natural resources.

The team learned about the organisation's ecosystem restoration activities, such as recovery efforts of nearly six hectares of coral reef through placement of approximately 8,000 tonnes of rock to support the restoration. Reef Doctor additionally monitors Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) as part of its initiative to evaluate fisheries productivity to inform sustainable management.



Fig 11: Group Photo with community at the Reef Doctor NGO

The discussions reiterated the need to strengthen governance, integrating fisheries management, agriculture and broader communal development goals. Special attention has been given to supporting women's associations, which play crucial roles in governance, social protection, communal development and livelihood diversification. Moreover, the organisation supports gender-based violence eradication and the promotion of inclusivity in fisheries communities.

4.2.2 Challenges in managing local fisheries and marine resources

The group acquired insight into the challenges that affect community-based fisheries management in southwestern Madagascar. The President of the Local Environment, Octopus and Fisheries Association noted that several years before, fishers harvested up to 15 kilograms of octopus per person in a single fishing trip, sharing that the numbers have since reduced. As a result, to promote stock regeneration, octopus reserves are usually closed for up to three months. The effectiveness of these community closures is, however, often undermined due to migratory fishers from other regions who harvest during these closure periods, coupled with the combined effects of climate change. He explained that the community was working to strengthen awareness of the need to re-establish the implementation of the reserves as a measure to restore octopus stocks. In addition, members of the community expressed concerns that octopus prices have remained relatively low for a long time, reducing the overall economic benefits from the fisheries despite the economic significance of octopus.

Moreover, the participants learned about Dinah (Dina), a decentralised local governance structure guided by a customary legal framework of local laws and communal agreements that govern community conduct and resource utilisation. Although the system has played a crucial role in managing communal resources, its application to the management of marine resources remains a challenge since most of its provisions relate to land-based resource management.

Furthermore, communal leaders and development partners raised broader socio-economic and environmental challenges in the region. Fisheries function in open-access conditions with many households dependent on daily fishing as a source of livelihood. Hence, restricting access to the fisheries is challenging without provision of alternative livelihood opportunities. The community representatives explained that enforcing fisheries regulations is weak as a result of inadequate logistical and financial resources; for instance, fisheries officers in Toliara have limited resources to support regular monitoring and enforcement activities in remote coastal regions.

Discussions also addressed the effects of environmental shocks and climate change on local livelihoods. Communities continue to experience heavy rainfall, prolonged water shortages from long droughts, cyclones, and a decline in agricultural productivity. The limited dependence on agriculture has additionally increased investment in marine resources. Dr. Emma advocated for communal efforts towards conservation, community empowerment, social cohesion, poverty reduction, human security, and improved governance.



Fig 12: Octopus Harvests



Fig 13: Local Octopus Handling practices

4.2.3 Visit to Ifaty Village and Communal Experiences in Octopus Fisheries Management

After the engagement in Mangily, the exchange team proceeded to Ifaty Village, where the delegation interacted with the local fishers and communal leaders involved in the fisheries management. The visit was an opportunity for the team to observe the local fishing practices and to acquire insights on octopus harvesting, handling, preservation, and marketing in small-scale fisheries.



Fig 14: Role of women in marketing in the Octopus Value Chain



Fig 15: Interaction with the local fishers

The representatives from the community cited Octopus macropus and Octopus cyanea as the major octopus species harvested in the area. They learned that the community-managed closures are periodically implemented in the village too, from one to three months, to allow for stock regeneration. The closure systems have become significant tools for fisheries management.

4.2.4 Indigenous Knowledge and Fishing Practices

The exchange team additionally observed the vital role of local ecological knowledge in octopus fisheries management. The community members showcased extensive knowledge of octopus behavior, habitat use, and seasonal movement patterns. The fishers explained that they are able to recognize octopus habitat holes and understand periods when they move into and out of reef areas. The knowledge helps them locate octopus and plan for fishing activities.



Fig 16: Discussions with community representatives



Fig 17: Discussions with community representatives

In addition, the community adapts their fishing practices to resource availability. When octopus are not readily available, the fishers switch to harvesting finfish and other marine resources. Women were also noted to be especially involved in octopus collection and fish trading activities at landing sites, purchasing and reselling octopus products.

Local knowledge is also used in preservation techniques to maintain product quality. For instance, members of the community use seaweed to preserve octopus and reduce spoilage before sale.

The delegation moreover learned that the octopus value chain follows a sequence that involves fishers, merchants, collectors, and processing companies; a structure that has established market linkages between small-scale fisheries and export-oriented seafood processors in Toliara and other coastal regions.

4.2.5 Livelihood Diversification and Community Adaptation Strategies

The engagement also included discussions with members of the community on the significance of diversifying their livelihood to reduce dependence on marine fisheries resources and strengthen household resilience. The participants learned that during octopus fisheries closures, fishing is often limited to household-level consumption, since commercial buyers do not make purchases during the closures. This results in temporary income challenges for most households. To address these constraints, the communities have employed a range of alternative livelihoods. These include seaweed farming and harvesting sea urchin eggs, which are traded in local and regional markets. These economic activities help to relieve pressure on octopus stocks during closures.

Generally, the visits to the Mangily and Ifaty villages provided the team with practical knowledge on community-based fisheries management, local governance systems, women's participation in restoration initiatives, ecosystem restoration activities, and communal adaptation strategies to sustain livelihoods during changing environmental and socio-economic conditions.



Fig 18:Women's participation in octopus collection and fish trading activities at landing sites



Fig 19:Women's participation in octopus collection and fish trading activities at landing sites.

Day 3:Thursday, 21st May 2026;Visit to Blue Ventures Madagascar and Toliara Central Market and Mahavatse Market

4.3.1 Visit to Blue Ventures Madagascar

The third day of the tour started with a visit to Blue Ventures Madagascar, a non-governmental organisation involved in supporting community-based marine conservation and fisheries management across Madagascar. The delegation was received by Mr. Paul, Head of Development at Blue Ventures Madagascar. Paul gave them an overview of the work of the organisation in enhancing resilience and livelihoods in the local coastal communities.



Fig 20:Visit to Blue Ventures Madagascar

He explained that Blue Ventures has been operating in Madagascar since 2013, focusing on community-implemented fisheries development projects with support from government bodies, civil society, and the private sector. The organisation is guided by the motto, "Thriving Communities, Thriving Oceans," to promote an understanding that healthy marine ecosystems and prosperous coastal communities are dependent on each other and have to be addressed together.

Paul additionally shared that fishing is the major source of livelihood in most areas of southwestern Madagascar, with insufficient opportunities for agricultural production. Other challenges highlighted included the use of unsustainable fishing gear, pressure from commercial fishing vessels harvesting close to the coastal areas, impacts of climate-related events, and loss of mangrove ecosystems due to charcoal production since the early 2000s.

As a result, the increasing pressure on marine resources has led to major reductions in the overall fish stocks and biodiversity, causing fishers to struggle to obtain sufficient catches. Moreover, with the depletion of fish stocks, fishers often migrate to resource-rich areas, thereby extending the pressure to previously less exploited ecosystems.

4.3.2 Community-Led Fisheries Management, Conservation and Restoration

One of Blue Ventures' achievements has been its role in promoting a communal perception shift from a preference for alternative livelihoods, education, and health care to increased concern in conservation initiatives. However, through a demonstration of sustained benefits, the communities in the area are increasingly embracing conservation as an approach to secure long-term livelihoods.

Participants learned that Blue Ventures relies on the generation and utilisation of locally owned fisheries data. The organisation works with the local communities to set up and collect digital data, which are then stored, processed, and managed in local data centres. This strategy has enabled the community to make informed decisions on resource management and to strengthen communal ownership in conservation efforts.

In addition, Blue Ventures supports community-led initiatives to strengthen local stewardship of marine resources. The organisation has, for instance, supported extensive community-managed mangrove restoration and other ecosystem rehabilitation efforts. In one shared example, at a monitoring site, fish stock increased to more than 300 fish in less than a year after the implementation of management measures. Moreover, biodiversity recovery has been observed from initial recovery efforts with the return of species such as finfish, sea cucumbers, shrimp, and lobster to their restored habitats.

Blue Ventures has additionally enhanced community resilience through development interventions and support to alternative livelihoods. These commitments have included entrepreneurship and financial literacy training, food security programs, establishment of cooperative societies and savings groups, support for community-based financing initiatives, and nutrition assessments to understand the overall contribution of fisheries resources to household diets and communal wellbeing.

The group learned that fisheries management has significantly expanded over the years, with the number of locally managed fisheries closures increasing from six to eleven and the total area of closures expanding from nearly 432 hectares to 1120 hectares. Fish catches have similarly increased from approximately 6.8 tonnes to 16.3 tonnes, showing the potential benefits of community-led management approaches.

Paul emphasized that the organisation encourages communities to try the management measures, study the results, and determine whether they would intend to continue adopting them. The participatory method has helped to establish local ownership and build communal trust. The communal associations are similarly supported to provide security and surveillance for management measures; whereas compliance is reinforced through the use of the Dina, the customary law used in Madagascar.

4.3.3 Women's Economic Empowerment and Community Enterprises

A major part of the discussions focused on the participation of women across the octopus value chain, highlighting efforts to promote their economic benefits from fisheries-related activities. The group learned that though women participate actively in the processing and trading of octopus, they receive low financial returns in comparison to collectors and other actors within the value chain.

Blue Ventures consequently set up women-led cooperative structures to increase their market participation and strengthen their bargaining power. This cooperative approach allows the members to manage fisheries products, promote access to markets, and equally benefit from profits.

All community members can join the cooperative with a modest registration fee determined by the members. The cooperative runs a freezing facility valued at USD 20,000, including the building and associated equipment costs; this helps the fishers and traders to preserve fish, maintain quality, and improve access to more favorable market opportunities.

Apart from fish processing and marketing, the cooperative has expanded its income-generating activities to include the production of frozen popsicles and juice. Women play a vital role in the processing activities and receive dividends from the cooperative profits after deducting operational costs.

The cooperative started with a capital of approximately USD 159 and has since grown its capital base to USD 13,000. Though the profits have remained modest, the growth has shown the capacity of community-owned enterprises to create economic opportunities within coastal communities.

4.3.4 Community Exchange Learning and Future Expansion

Blue Ventures encourages study exchanges among fishing communities to allow local leaders and fishers to learn and implement successful management practices. Participants learned that as part of Blue Ventures' efforts to enhance sustainable fisheries management, it plans to extend its activities to other coastal areas in Madagascar.

The visit demonstrated how approaches that integrate livelihood support, conservation, governance, community ownership and data systems contribute to both ecological recovery and socio-economic development within fisheries-dependent communities.

4.3.5 Visit to Toliara Central Market and Mahavatse Market

In the afternoon session, the participants visited two main octopus trading and distribution centers: the Central Market in Toliara, which mainly receives octopus from the northern regions of Madagascar, and the Mahavatse Market, where octopus from southern Madagascar is aggregated.



Fig 21: Women Trading at Central Market, Toliara



Fig 22: Toliara Market



Fig 23: Fish trading and distribution centers: the Central Market in Toliara and Maket Mahavatse



Fig 24: Fish trading and distribution centers: the Central Market in Toliara and Maket Mahavatse

Participants gained practical insights into the organisational structures of the local octopus markets and the networks between small-scale fishers, traders, collectors, processors, and final consumers. Discussions with actors established the vital role played by local markets in connecting fishing communities to national and international value chains.

4.3.6 Observations on Octopus Marketing and Value Chain Organization

Participants observed the handling, storage, transportation, and marketing of octopus products from different production zones with a focus on product quality management to preserve freshness and value before delivery or sale to processors and exporters.

Concerning octopus trading, discussions focused on pricing mechanisms, trade relationships, transport arrangements, storage facilities, and the challenges faced by market actors in maintaining product quality and meeting market requirements.

The market visits reinforced the significance of strengthening market access, value addition, quality assurance, and inclusivity throughout the octopus value chain.

4.4 Day 4: Friday, 22nd May 2026 – Women's Empowerment, Reflection Sessions and Synthesis of Regional Lessons

4.4.1 Visit to RENAFEP / AWFISHNET Madagascar

On the fourth day, the AU-IBAR delegation visited the RENAFEP Women's Association (Réseau National des Femmes de la Pêche), which acts as the Madagascar chapter of the African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET). During the visit, the participants engaged with the women leaders in fisheries, fish processing, fish trade, and community enterprise development.

The discussions highlighted the role of women within fisheries value chains entailing harvesting, processing, preservation, transportation, marketing, and small-scale enterprise development. Despite their considerable contributions, women still experience challenges relating to access to finance, market information, storage facilities, transportation, value addition technologies, and business development services, affecting their economic opportunities and access to benefits from fisheries resources. Discussions underscored the significance of strengthening women's leadership and representation within fisheries governance structures; and their access to financial services, business skills, cooperative structures, processing technologies, and market opportunities to enhance their economic returns and promote sustainable livelihoods; improve product quality, facilitate access to markets, and support community development initiatives.

4.4.3 Reflection Session with WION-SOF Representatives

The AU-IBAR team held a reflection session with representatives of WION-SOF, emphasizing the importance of regional collaboration under WION-SOF and the need for continued knowledge exchange and implementation to address common challenges facing small-scale fisheries across the WIO region.

4.4.4 Documentation of Lessons Learned and Synthesis of Findings

Focus then shifted to documenting lessons learned and synthesizing key observations to capture best practices, lessons learned, opportunities for scaling and replication, and recommendations to inform future interventions under the Conserving Aquatic Biodiversity.

5. Outcomes of the Exchange Visit

The study tour promoted knowledge exchange among participating Member States on sustainable fisheries management in the WIO region. Specifically, the following outcomes were achieved:

I. The exchange also documented the exchange of experiences on best practices in octopus harvesting, handling, processing, and marketing. In addition, practical recommendations were provided for strengthening the value chain in an inclusive manner, including co-management [involving Marine Conservation Areas (MCAs)], cooperative models, enterprise development, and market access strategies.

II. The activity contributed to the realization of AU-IBAR's objective of developing inclusive fisheries value chains by strengthening the participation and visibility of women and youth who play important roles in harvesting, processing, and marketing activities within octopus fisheries.

Overall, the lessons will inform the ongoing efforts by AU-IBAR, WION-SOF, Member States, and other stakeholders to enhance livelihoods, improve conservation, expand market opportunities, and promote inclusivity within octopus fisheries value chains across the WIO region.

6. Lessons and Best Practices

The exchange tour has generated critical lessons to inform subsequent interventions to promote sustainable and inclusive octopus fisheries value chains within the WIO region. Particularly, the following best practices have resulted from the exchange:

Lessons Learned

a) Community-led fisheries management enhances sustainability and compliance. Community-based closures, locally managed reserves, co-management arrangements, and ecosystem restoration initiatives strengthen stewardship, improve compliance with regulations, and contribute to fisheries stock recovery and conservation outcomes.

b) Integrating traditional and formal governance systems improves fisheries management. The combination of national regulations with local governance mechanisms, such as the Dina community law framework, enhances legitimacy, accountability, and collective responsibility in resource management.

c) Data-driven and participatory approaches support effective decision-making. Digital fisheries data collection, community-owned information systems, ecosystem monitoring, and participatory decision-making processes improve evidence-based management and adaptive responses to emerging challenges.

d) Value addition and market-oriented investments increase economic returns. Investments in cold chain infrastructure, quality grading, traceability systems, processing facilities, and organized market systems improve product quality, reduce post-harvest losses, and enhance market access and export opportunities.

e) Livelihood diversification strengthens resilience in fishing communities. Alternative income-generating activities, including seaweed farming, savings groups, and cooperative enterprises, reduce dependence on fisheries resources and provide income security during periods of low catches or fisheries closures.

f) Climate change and socio-economic challenges require integrated responses. Addressing resource scarcity, fish migration, weak enforcement, limited livelihood opportunities, and inequitable participation in value chains is critical for sustaining small-scale fisheries and community livelihoods.

Best Practices

a) Implementation of sustainable fisheries management measures, including minimum catch size regulations, seasonal octopus closure periods, community-managed reserves, and catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) monitoring systems.

b) Promotion of co-management frameworks that combine government oversight, community participation, and indigenous knowledge to strengthen fisheries governance and resource conservation.

c) Support for community-based conservation and ecosystem restoration, particularly mangrove and coral reef restoration initiatives linked to fisheries productivity and climate resilience.

d) Adoption of community-owned digital data collection and management systems to support monitoring, transparency, and evidence-based fisheries management.

e) Investment in post-harvest infrastructure and quality assurance systems, including cold storage, transport facilities, processing equipment, grading standards, and traceability mechanisms.

f) Strengthening inclusive value chains through targeted support for women and youth in harvesting, processing, marketing, entrepreneurship, and skills development.
g) Promotion of cooperative business models to improve bargaining power, access to finance, market linkages, and income-generation opportunities for fishers and traders.
h) Encouragement of livelihood diversification strategies, such as seaweed farming, savings groups, and other alternative enterprises, to build household resilience and reduce pressure on fisheries resources.
i) Facilitation of regional learning and collaboration platforms to promote peer-to-peer exchange, replication of successful approaches, policy harmonization, and investment in sustainable and inclusive octopus fisheries value chains across the Western Indian Ocean region.

The lessons and best practices guide stakeholders and Member States on sustainable and inclusive octopus fisheries value chains while strengthening conservation outcomes and improving livelihoods across the WIO region.

7. Key Recommendations and Follow-up Actions

The following recommendations and actions were identified to enhance inclusive and sustainable octopus fisheries value chains in the WIO region and support knowledge translation;

a. Develop and implement a regional octopus fisheries management framework that promotes sustainable harvesting, value addition, market development, livelihood improvement, and harmonized fisheries governance across the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region.
b. Strengthen knowledge sharing, capacity building, and regional collaboration through documentation of lessons and best practices, exchange visits, technical workshops, learning platforms, and dissemination of knowledge products to support policy development and informed decision-making.
c. Invest in value chain development and fisheries infrastructure, including cold storage, ice production, transport systems, processing facilities, quality assurance, traceability systems, and market infrastructure to reduce post-harvest losses and enhance product competitiveness.
d. Promote inclusive economic empowerment and cooperative business models by supporting women and youth through entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, access to finance and markets, value addition, and strengthened producer cooperatives to improve incomes and resilience.
e. Adopt integrated fisheries management approaches that combine community-led co-management, conservation and ecosystem restoration, data and information systems, research and innovation, and multi-stakeholder partnerships to ensure the long-term sustainability of octopus stocks and coastal livelihoods.

Implementing these next steps will strengthen conservation, improve livelihoods, enhance market access; promote greater inclusivity within the octopus fisheries value chains; and support the objectives of AU-IBAR, WION-SOF, Member States and other fisheries stakeholders across the WIO region.

8. Role played by AU-IBAR

AU-IBAR played a central coordination and technical role in the planning, implementation, and facilitation of the regional exchange, in collaboration with WION-SOF and local partners in Madagascar.

It coordinated the participation of Member States and stakeholders, ensuring representation of small-scale fisheries organisations, women and youth groups, fisheries institutions, researchers, processors, members of WION-SOF, as well as community organisations.

Through the exchange, AU-IBAR also strengthened the implementation of the Conserving Aquatic Biodiversity in African Blue Economy Project while advancing commitment under the Continental Gender Strategy on Aquatic Biodiversity.

It further guided the documentation of lessons learned and supported the synthesis of technical findings for the development of regions and future action plans.

Key persons for follow-up with:

1. Dr. Mohamed Seisay - Fisheries Management and Blue Economy Expert
2. Ms. Stephanie Achieng - Gender Policy and Strategy Expert, Environmental Management
3. Ms. Anne Kisemba - Administrative Assistant

Annexes:

1. Concept Note
2. Agenda
3. List of Participants

Annexes

Annex 1: Concept Note

CONCEPT NOTE

Study Tour for Regional Exchange on Lessons and Best Practices for Sustainable fisheries, Harvesting, Handling, Processing, Marketing of Octopus and Conservation towards Strengthening Inclusive Value Chains in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) Region

19th -21st May 2026

Toliara (Tuléar), Madagascar

1. Introduction and Background

AU-IBAR is implementing the Conserving Aquatic Biodiversity in African Blue Economy project with financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The project supports implementation of the Africa Blue Economy Strategy (ABES), endorsed by African Union Heads of State and Government in February 2020, and seeks to strengthen policy frameworks, institutional capacities, and inclusive value chains for the sustainable conservation and use of aquatic biodiversity.

A core pillar of the project is the promotion of gender equality and youth inclusion in aquatic biodiversity governance and strengthening inclusive value chains. This commitment is reinforced by the Continental Gender Strategy on Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation, also endorsed by the AU Summit in February 2024, which advocated for concrete actions to enhance women's and youth's participation and benefits across aquatic sectors.

Octopus fisheries are among the most economically significant small-scale fisheries in the WIO region, providing livelihoods, employment, food security, and export earnings for coastal communities. The sector plays a central role in the participation of women and youth across harvesting, processing, and marketing segments of the value chain. However, the sector faces persistent challenges, including resource sustainability concerns, inconsistent harvesting practices, post-harvest losses, limited value addition, weak market linkages, and unequal benefit distribution among small-scale actors. Variations in handling standards and market access across countries further constrain competitiveness and regional trade.

Also, climate change is increasingly affecting aquatic ecosystems in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region. AU-IBAR's analytical work highlights growing threats to coral reefs and associated species such as octopus, with implications for productivity, seasonality, and coastal livelihoods. These pressures are compounded by limited access to appropriate post-harvest technologies and infrastructure as well as unsustainable practices, posing a serious threat to livelihoods.

To address these challenges, AU-IBAR previously supported a regional assessment on strengthening small-scale octopus value chains in East Africa and the South-West Indian Ocean, including field missions in Kenya, Tanzania (Zanzibar), Comoros, and Madagascar, followed by a regional validation workshop. A key outcome was the establishment of the WIO Network on Sustainable Octopus Fisheries (WION- SOF), a regional platform promoting sustainable, inclusive, and rights-based small-scale octopus fisheries. The assessment underscored the urgent need for capacity building in post-harvest handling, processing, and preservation, alongside improved market access, value addition opportunities, particularly for women and youth, and promotion of sustainable practices along the value chain.

In line with its mandate to promote sustainable fisheries governance, inclusive value chain development, and regional cooperation, AU-IBAR, in collaboration with WIO-SOF, proposed a regional exchange to facilitate peer learning and showcase best practices across the octopus value chain. The exchange will promote harmonized approaches, strengthen regional collaboration, and support the scaling of successful models for sustainable and inclusive octopus fisheries.

2. Justification

Octopus fisheries are a cornerstone of livelihoods, employment, food security, and export earnings for coastal communities across the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region. They are predominantly small-scale and offer significant opportunities for women's and youth participation, particularly in post-harvest handling, processing, and marketing. Despite their socio-economic importance, octopus fisheries in the region face persistent challenges, including increasing pressure on resources, uneven application of sustainable harvesting practices, high post-harvest losses, limited value addition, weak market linkages, and inequitable distribution of benefits along the value chain.

There is considerable variation across WIO countries in the governance, management, handling, processing, and marketing of octopus products. While several countries and communities have developed effective practices—such as community-based management arrangements, seasonal closures, improved handling protocols, small-scale processing innovations, and cooperative marketing models—these experiences are often not systematically documented or shared across the region. As a result, opportunities for replication and scaling of proven approaches remain underutilized.

In line with AU-IBAR's mandate to promote sustainable utilization of aquatic resources and inclusive fisheries value chains, and building on the collaborative platform provided by the WIO Network on Sustainable Octopus Fisheries (WION-SOF), this regional exchange will facilitate structured peer learning and knowledge sharing among Member States and stakeholders. The exchange will strengthen regional cooperation, promote harmonization of best practices, and support the development of inclusive, competitive, and environmentally sustainable octopus value chains that contribute to livelihoods, food security, and economic development in the WIO region.

3. Objectives

Overall Objective

To enhance knowledge on sustainable and inclusive octopus value chains across the WIO region through regional exchange and dissemination of best practices in harvesting, handling, processing, marketing, and sustainable practices for effective conservation of Octopus stocks.

Specific Objectives

- ☐ To showcase and document best practices in sustainable octopus harvesting and fisheries management in the WIO region.
- ☐ To promote improved handling, processing, and quality assurance practices that reduce post-harvest losses and enhance market value.
- ☐ To identify and promote mechanisms for strengthening inclusive and gender-responsive octopus value chains, with particular attention to women and youth.
- ☐ To strengthen regional collaboration and knowledge sharing through AU-IBAR and WIO-NSOF platforms.

4. Expected Outputs

- ☐ A documented report on best practices on octopus harvesting, handling, processing, and marketing.
- ☐ Practical recommendations for inclusive value chain strengthening, including co-management (involving MCAs), cooperative models, enterprise development, and market access strategies.
- ☐ Strengthened partnerships among Member States, WIO-SOF members, private sector actors, and development partners.
- ☐ A post-exchange action plan to guide follow-up activities and regional collaboration.

5. Key Activities

The proposed exchange will be implemented through a combination of technical, experiential, and participatory activities designed to maximize learning and practical application. Field visits will be organized to selected octopus handling facilities, processing plants, and marketing hubs or outlets. The visits to the factories will be complemented by visits to harvesting sites and landing areas, to allow participants to observe practical applications of sustainable and innovative approaches. Stakeholder dialogues will provide space for exchange between public institutions, fishing communities, cooperatives, private sector actors, and researchers, enabling identification of practical mechanisms to strengthen coordination and partnerships along the value chain.

The exchange will also include documentation and synthesis of lessons learned, best practices, and policy-relevant recommendations. These outputs will inform the development of a regional action plan and knowledge products to be disseminated through AU-IBAR and WIO-SOF platforms, supporting follow-up actions and continued collaboration beyond the event.

6. Target Beneficiaries and expectations

The primary beneficiaries of the exchange will be small-scale octopus fishers, processors, and traders across the WIO region, with particular emphasis on women and youth who play a central role in harvesting, post-harvest activities, and marketing. National fisheries authorities and extension services will benefit from practical exposure to lessons and best practices, enhanced technical knowledge and capacity, and regional perspectives on value chain development, policy development, and small-scale octopus fisheries management. Participants will include representatives of small-scale fisheries organizations, women and youth groups, processors, extension officers, researchers, and relevant national institutions, as well as members of WIO-SOF.

The workshop will bring together participants from across the WIO region, including Representatives of Stakeholders in small-scale octopus fisheries - Member States:

1. Madagascar,
2. Kenya,
3. Comoros,
4. Mozambique,
5. Tanzania
6. Ground Facilitator working in small-scale fisheries communities
7. AU-IBAR
8. AU-IBAR
9. AU-IBAR

7. Areas for Visit:

I. Processing Factories (2).
II. Market and distribution centre for octopus.
III. Co-managed Octopus fish landing sites (with MCAs).

Contact persons:

Dr Mohamed Seisay *Fisheries Management and Blue Economy Expert* *AU-IBAR, Kenindia Business Park* *Museum Hill, Westland's Road* *P.O. Box 30786-00100* *Tel: +254 203 674 000* *+254 740 820 261* *Email:mohamed.seisy@au-ibar.org*	**Ms. Stephanie Achieng** *Gender Policy and Strategy Expert, Environmental Management* *AU-IBAR, Kenindia Business Park* *Museum Hill, Westland's Road* *P.O. Box 30786-00100* *Email: stephanie.achieng@au-ibar.org*	**Ms. Anne Kisemba** *Administrative Assistant* *AU-IBAR, Kenindia Business Park* *Museum Hill, Westland's Road* *P.O. Box 30786-00100* *anne.kisemba@au-ibar.org*

Annex 2: Agenda

PLANNING THE PROGRAM WIO STUDY TOUR TOLIARA ***Dates : 17th - 23th May 2026***						
N°	**JOURS**	**DATES**	**HOURS**	**DESTINATION**	**ACTIVITY**	**OBSERVATION**
	ARRIVAL					
1	*Sunday*	*17/05/26*	*17:15*	*Airport*	*Seek to airport*	*04 persons*
2	*Monday*	*18/05/26*	*06:15*	*Airport*	*Seek to airport*	*03 persons*
			19:00	*Airport*	*Seek to airport*	*01 persons*
	Tuesday	*19/05/26*	*08:00*	*Direction peche*	*Courtesy visit from fishing management*	*11 persons*
				Toliara	*Regional Management Department of Fisheries and Blue Economy*	
3			*11:00*	*Murex Factory*	*Factory visit*	*11 persons*
			14:30	*Copefrito Factory*	*Factory visit*	*11 persons*
4	*Wensday*	*20/05/26*	*08:00*	*Mangily Village*	*Meeting with Reef doctor*	*12 persons*
			12:30	*Lunch à mangily*	*Lunch to hotel "la Bella Dona*	*12 persons*
			15:30	*Ifaty village*	*Meeting with fishermans à ifaty*	*12 persons*
			17:30	*Toliara*	*Return to Toliara*	*12 persons*
6	*Thirsday*	*21/05/26*	*08:00*		*Visit to Blues Ventures ONG*	*11 persons*
			10:30	*Toliara Market*	*Visit to the center market Toliara (Octopus from North)*	
			12:30		*Lunch*	
			15:00		*Visit to RENAFep Women's Association*	
			17:30	*Market Mahavatse*	*Visit to Mahavatse Market (Octopus of the South)*	*11 persons*
	DEPARTURE					
					AU-IBAR visit to RENAFEP Women's Association AWFISHNET in Madagascar	
7	*Friday*	*22/05/26*	*16:40*	*Airport*	*Return to Tana*	*01 persons*
8	*Saturday*	*23/05/26*	*11:50*	*Airport*	*Return to Tana*	*04 persons*
			17:50	*Airport*	*Return to Tana*	*03 persons*
						Dany

Annex 3: List of Participants

MADAGASCAR

1. MS. MATOKISOANIRINA ANGELIANE
Fondatrice et Présidente de l'association A M A (Femmes travaillant en mer)
Association des Femmes Pêcheurs
Toliara , Madagascar
nirinaangeliane@gmail.com
+261347339269

2. MR. RAJAONARISON SOLONDRAINY DANY
Vice president WION - SOF
Organisation de la Société civile
Toliara- Madagascar.
danytoliara@gmail.com
+261343532574 (whatsapp) , +261320232574

KENYA

3. MS. MARYAM JUMA MBUI
Fisheries Officer
Kenya Fisheries Service
P.O Box 90423-MSA-80100
Lamu, Kenya
mbuimaryam@gmai.com
+254719458921

ZANZIBAR – TANZANIA

4. MS. NURU SAID SALUM
Regional Coordinator
Mwambao Coastal Community Network
Maungani
Zanzibar Tanzania
nuru.salum@mwambao.or.tz
+255 777 625 840

MOZAMBIQUE

5. MS. FRANCISCA MONTEIRO DA COSTA NOBRE
Member, Awfishnet
Maputo, Mozambique
Fnobre2001@gmail.com
+258 84909174

COMORES

6. RAMLATA HASSANI AHAMADA
Secrétaire générale adjointe
Association des femmes vendeuses et transformtrices des produits halieutiques.
Iconi - Mutuel
Moroni,Comores
ramlatahsn@gmail.com
+269 339 00 00 / +269 439 00 11 ramlatahsn@gmail.com

AU-IBAR

7. MRS. HELLEN GUEBAMA
Coordinator, Animal Production Unit, AU-IBAR
P.O Box 30786 – 00100
Tel: 254203674000
Email : hellen.guebama@au-ibar.org

8. MS. STEPHANIE ACHIENG
Gender Policy and Strategy Expert,
AU-IBAR
P.O Box 30786 – 00100
Tel : 254203674000
Email : stephanie.achieng@au-ibar.org

9. NADIOPE ERIC
Legal and Institutional Officer
AU-IBAR
P.O Box 30786 – 00100
Tel : 254203674000
Email: eric.nadiope@au-ibar.org

10. ANNE KISEMBA
Administrative Assistant
AU-IBAR
P.O Box 30786 – 00100
Tel : 254203674000
Email: anne.kisemba@au-ibar.org



African Union
Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR)
Kenindia Business Park
Museum Hill, Westlands Road
P.O. Box 30786
00100, Nairobi, KENYA
Telephone: +254 (20) 3674 000 / 201
Fax: +254 (20) 3674 341 / 342
Website: www.au.ibar.org
Email address: ibar.office@au-ibar.org