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POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING THE GOVERNANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE SRFC REGION

A Roadmap for Biodiversity Conservation, Sustainable Fisheries, and Climate Resilience



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Note: This policy brief is based on the findings and recommendations of the Regional Training Workshop to Strengthen Regional Capacity for the Implementation and Governance of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in SRFC Sub-Region on Integrating Best Practices and Actions for Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation and Environmental Protection, held from 20-22 April 2026 in Dakar, Senegal. The workshop was organized by AU-IBAR in collaboration with the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) under the project "Conserving Aquatic Biodiversity in African Blue Economy". The project is implemented with financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). AU-IBAR gratefully acknowledges SIDA's continued support towards strengthening aquatic biodiversity conservation, sustainable fisheries management, and the development of Africa's Blue Economy.

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Abbreviation / Acronyms:

30×30	Global Biodiversity Framework target to conserve 30% of land and sea by 2030
ABES	African Blue Economy Strategy
ABMTs	Area-Based Management Tools
AU	African Union
AU-IBAR	African Union – InterAfrican Bureau for Animal Resources
BBNJ	Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEZs	Exclusive Economic Zones
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IUU	Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (Fishing)
MCS	Monitoring, Control and Surveillance
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MPAs	Marine Protected Areas
OECMs	Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures
RAMPAO	Regional Network of Marine Protected Areas in West Africa (Réseau Régional d'Aires Marines Protégées en Afrique de l'Ouest)
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SRFC	Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission

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Executive Summary

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are increasingly recognized as critical instruments for conserving marine biodiversity, sustaining fisheries resources, enhancing climate resilience, and supporting the development of Africa's Blue Economy. Across the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) region, Member States have made significant progress in establishing MPAs and strengthening marine conservation efforts. However, persistent challenges in governance, financing, capacity, threat of climate change and coordination continue to limit the effectiveness of many protected areas. A regional training workshop organized by AU-IBAR and SRFC brought together policymakers, technical experts, development partners, and MPA managers from SRFC Member States to review experiences, identify challenges, and propose solutions for improving MPA governance and management. The workshop highlighted the need for stronger institutional coordination, sustainable financing mechanisms, enhanced community participation, improved monitoring and surveillance systems, instituting climate-resilient MPA and stronger regional cooperation, particularly in the coordinated management of shared and transboundary marine ecosystems. This policy brief presents key findings and proposes seven strategic policy actions to strengthen MPA governance and effectiveness in support of the African Blue Economy Strategy, Agenda 2063, Sustainable Development Goal 14, Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's 30x30 target, and the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement.



Figure 1. Geographic distribution of the Member States of the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) in the Northwest African region.

Why Marine Protected Areas Matter

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are widely recognized as effective tools for conserving biodiversity and safeguarding vulnerable living resources in aquatic ecosystems (Maestro et al., 2019; AU-IBAR, 2023). MPAs provide food, employment, coastal protection, tourism opportunities, carbon sequestration, and cultural services to millions of people across West Africa. Fisheries contribute significantly to food security and national economies, supporting millions of jobs directly and indirectly. Their establishment within national Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), together with global commitments to protect ecologically and biologically significant marine areas in the high seas (Sumaila et al., 2007), has attracted growing international attention, particularly in the context of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and its 30x30 target (CBD, 2022). The SRFC region contains highly productive marine and coastal ecosystems that provide essential goods and services, supporting millions of people through fisheries, tourism, and ecosystem services, as well as cultural and socio-economic values (FAO, 2022; Maestro et al., 2019). However, these ecosystems are increasingly under pressure from multiple and interlinked threats, including:

- Overexploitation of fisheries resources;
- Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing;
- Coastal habitat degradation;
- Pollution and unsustainable development;
- Climate change impacts.

When effectively managed, MPAs contribute to:

Biodiversity Conservation

- Protection of critical habitats and endangered species;
- Recovery of ecosystem functions;
- Conservation of ecosystem services.

Sustainable Fisheries

- Protection of spawning and nursery grounds;
- Recovery of fish stocks;
- Improved fisheries productivity.

Climate Resilience

- Protection and restoration of blue carbon ecosystems, particularly mangroves and seagrass meadows;
- Enhanced ecosystem-based adaptation and resilience to climate change impacts;
- Improved coastal protection and reduced vulnerability of coastal communities to climate-related risks.

Socio-Economic Development

- Sustainable livelihoods and income-generating opportunities for coastal communities;
- Improved food and nutritional security through sustainable fisheries;
- Enhanced community participation, social inclusion, and local ownership of conservation initiatives.

Key Governance Challenges Identified

The regional workshop identified several key challenges affecting MPA effectiveness across the SRFC region that include the following:

- **Fragmented Governance Systems**

Multiple institutions often share responsibilities for MPA management, resulting in overlapping mandates and weak coordination among fisheries, environment, tourism, and local government authorities. Weak coordination often results in inefficiencies, conflicts, policy inconsistencies, and management conflicts.

- **Weak Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS)**

Surveillance systems often lack sufficient resources, infrastructure, technology, and coordination to address illegal activities and ensure compliance. Traditionally, MCS systems has been designed to focus more on mitigating IUU fishing overlooking the broader aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity.

- **Limited Technical and Operational Capacity**

Shortages of dedicated and qualified human resources for MPAs, coupled with inadequate equipment and technical expertise, continue to undermine the effective planning, implementation, and adaptive management of MPAs.

- **Weak Implementation of Legal Frameworks**

While legal provisions for MPAs exist in many countries, implementation and enforcement remain inconsistent. Regional harmonization is also limited, particularly for shared ecosystems.

- **Limited Stakeholder Participation**

Community participation remains uneven, and women and youth are often underrepresented in governance structures; resulting very often in non-compliance of regulations pertaining to effective MPA governance.

- **Unsustainable Financing**

Many MPAs continue to depend heavily on external donor funding, with limited national budget allocations and few innovative financing mechanisms. Long-term financing mechanisms such as trust funds, conservation levies, biodiversity credits, blue bonds, and payment for ecosystem services remain underdeveloped.

- **Climate Change and Marine Pollution**

Marine and coastal ecosystems are facing increasing pressures from climate change, pollution, and emerging maritime development activities. Climate-related impacts, including habitat degradation, shifts in species distributions, and increased vulnerability of coastal communities, are compounded by rising levels of marine pollution, particularly plastics, which threaten marine biodiversity, ecosystem health, and the sustainability of fisheries. Furthermore, the expansion of offshore oil and gas exploration and other blue economy activities in parts of the region poses additional environmental and governance challenges that require effective planning, monitoring, and risk management.

- **Weak Regional Cooperation**

Many marine ecosystems and fisheries resources are transboundary, requiring stronger regional collaboration and harmonized management approaches.

Strategic Policy Priorities

Priority 1: Strengthen Governance and Institutional Coordination

Policy Actions

- Clarify institutional responsibilities for MPA management;
- Establish inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms;
- Strengthen co-management frameworks;
- Strengthen the integration of MPAs into fisheries management and marine resource planning frameworks;
- Promote integrated marine spatial planning approaches.

Priority 2: Establish Sustainable Financing Mechanisms

Policy Actions

- Develop comprehensive business plans for all Marine Protected Areas, incorporating diversified and sustainable financing strategies;
- Establish conservation trust funds and endowment mechanisms;
- Promote biodiversity finance and blue economy investment opportunities;
- Encourage public-private partnerships and ecosystem service financing.

Priority 3: Strengthen Capacity and Knowledge Systems

Policy Actions

- Invest in training and professional development for MPA managers;
- Establish formal mechanisms for experience sharing, peer learning, and study visits among Marine Protected Areas at national and regional levels;
- Improve access to scientific data to support evidence-based decision-making;
- Promote integration of traditional and local knowledge into decision-making.

Priority 4: Promote Inclusive and Participatory Governance

Policy Actions

- Strengthen community participation in MPA identification, implementation and governance, including promotion of enhanced community participation in co-managed Marine Protected Areas as effective mechanisms for local stewardship and biodiversity conservation;
- Strengthen the role of women and youth in decision-making in MPA governance;
- Support alternative livelihoods linked to conservation and sustainable resource use;
- Promote stakeholder dialogue and conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Priority 5: Strengthen Regional Cooperation and Transboundary Management

Policy Actions

- Promote the establishment and strengthening of transboundary Marine Protected Area initiatives within the SRFC region;
- Harmonize regional policies, standards, and management approaches for Marine Protected Areas to ensure coherence and effectiveness;
- Strengthen collaboration and coordination among regional and continental institutions such as (AU-IBAR), Regional Economic Communities (ECOWAS), specialized regional institutions and networks (SRFC, RAMPAO, the Abidjan Convention and Member States to enhance coordinated MPA governance);
- Promote regional cooperation in implementing Area-Based Management Tools (ABMTs) and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs);
- Develop and operationalize regional platforms for information sharing, data management, and monitoring of Marine Protected Areas.

Key Message: It is important to note that shared ecosystems such as migratory corridors, wetlands, and fish spawning grounds require coordinated regional management. SRFC should therefore champion the development of transboundary MPAs and joint management frameworks.

Priority 6: Align MPA Governance with Global and Regional Biodiversity Frameworks

Policy Actions

- Align national and regional MPA strategies with the objectives of the BBNJ Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework;
- Support achievement of the global 30×30 target through effective and equitable MPA management;
- Strengthen reporting, monitoring, and evaluation systems to meet international commitments.

Priority 7: Enhance Pollution Control and Climate-Resilient MPA Management

Policy Actions

- Integrate climate change adaptation and resilience measures into MPA management plans;
- Strengthen monitoring and mitigation of marine pollution, including plastics, nutrient runoff, and industrial contaminants;
- Protect and restore blue carbon ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrasses, and salt marshes;
- Develop climate risk assessments and vulnerability mapping for MPAs;
- Promote nature-based solutions to enhance coastal protection and ecosystem resilience;
- Strengthen early warning systems and disaster preparedness measures for climate-related impacts on marine ecosystems.

Call to Action

The future sustainability of marine ecosystems in the SRFC region depends largely on the effectiveness of Marine Protected Areas, among other complementary management tools. While significant progress has been made in establishing MPAs, strengthening governance systems, ensuring sustainable financing, enhancing stakeholder participation, and deepening regional cooperation remain urgent priorities for their long-term effectiveness. Governments, regional organizations, development partners, civil society organizations, and coastal communities must work collectively to implement the actions outlined in this policy brief. Investing in effective MPA governance is not only a conservation imperative but also a strategic investment in food security, sustainable livelihoods, climate resilience, and the long-term development of Africa's Blue Economy. Urgent and coordinated action is required to ensure that MPAs fully deliver on their ecological, social, and economic objectives. The Regional Training Workshop should serve as the foundation for continued regional dialogue, peer learning, and coordinated action among SRFC Member States and their partners."

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