



THE WESTMED: ADVANCING MEDITERRANEAN COOPERATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BLUE ECONOMY

*WESTMED: IMPULSAR LA COOPERACIÓN MEDITERRÁNEA
PARA EL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE EN LA ECONOMÍA AZUL*

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Abstract

The Mediterranean is a unique spot in Earth in which different realities collide, particularly in its coasts. Regional cooperation in the area has been key to search for common solutions to common challenges. However, the multifunctionality of the Mediterranean shores and the different issues faced by this region – environmental, social and economic -, call for a change in the economic model in which the uniqueness of this area is recognised. The Blue Economy is the proposed alternative, which tries to respond to the current challenges while contributing to the sustainable development. However, the transition to this model cannot rely merely in diplomacy, but requires action-based initiatives, in which the stakeholders are placed in the center. The WestMED Initiative manages to provide that innovative approach. It focuses on the promotion of Blue Economy in the Western Mediterranean and tries to create a safer and more secure maritime space in the Mediterranean, a smart and resilient blue economy and a better governance of the sea. Despite all the innovative and positive aspects embedded to it, this article remarks that it can potentially fail in its ultimate goal – sustainable development – unless some changes are made in its governing structure and priorities. Nevertheless, its contribution to Blue Economy and to the development of the Mediterranean make it valuable to be analysed.

Keywords

Mediterranean, Blue Economy, regional cooperation, sustainable development, WestMED Initiative.

Resumen

El Mediterráneo es un lugar único en la Tierra en el que colisionan distintas realidades, especialmente en sus costas. La cooperación regional en la zona ha sido clave para buscar soluciones comunes a retos comunes. Sin embargo, la multifuncionalidad de las costas mediterráneas y los diferentes desafíos a los que se enfrenta esta región -medioambientales, sociales y económicos-, exigen un cambio de modelo económico en el que se reconozca la singularidad de esta zona. La Economía Azul es la alternativa propuesta, que trata de responder a los retos actuales y contribuir al desarrollo sostenible. Pero la transición hacia este modelo no puede estar basado únicamente en diplomacia, sino que requiere iniciativas basadas en la acción, en las que los interesados se sitúen en el centro. La Iniciativa WestMED aporta ese enfoque innovador. Se centra en la promoción de la Economía Azul en el Mediterráneo Occidental e intenta crear un espacio marítimo más seguro y protegido, una economía azul inteligente y resistente y una mejor gobernanza del mar. A pesar de todos los aspectos innovadores y positivos que incorpora, este artículo señala que la WestMED puede fracasar potencialmente en su objetivo último -el desarrollo sostenible- a menos que se introduzcan algunos cambios en su estructura de gobierno y en sus prioridades. No obstante, su contribución a la economía azul y al desarrollo del Mediterráneo hace que sea valioso analizarla.

Palabras clave

Mediterráneo, economía azul, cooperación regional, desarrollo sostenible, Iniciativa WestMED.

I.- Introduction

The Mediterranean is a place like no other in Earth. Despite representing only 1,5% of the planet's surface it holds several characteristics that make it valuable for humankind in all the dimensions – socio-cultural, economic and environmental-. It has been the cradle of many civilisations throughout history¹, witnessing the rise and fall of emperors, caliphs and sultans, battles and conflicts, migrations in all directions, the transfer of histories and relationships, etc. Moreover, it holds a great ecological value, and it is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. In addition, it is home to a high number of people that mostly live in its shores, and it welcomes visitors all year long.

All these characteristics that make the Mediterranean so unique also result in the multi-use of its coastal areas, in which collide diverse situations: human settlements – particularly in cities-, different economic sectors – fishing, recreational uses, tourism, renewable energies, transportation – which sometimes have opposed interests, the need to preserve the historical heritage and the urge to protect the environment.

Moreover, this phenomenon becomes harder to cope with when combined with the different number of challenges affecting the region nowadays (overfishing, loss of biodiversity, marine pollution, overpopulation, etc.) and that will potentially worsen if no action is taken, challenges exacerbated by the emergence of the environmental crisis.

These challenges are not specific to one of the countries, but they are common challenges. Many of them relate to the development of diverse anthropic activities in the coastal areas that put in risk natural ecosystems and their services. This calls for a transition to another model, named as “the Blue Economy”, that is much promoted by actors such as the European Union². Blue Economy aims for a change in the way marine activities operate, from a traditional, economically driven and conflictive one, into one that is innovative, that ensures the balance of different activities in the coastal areas and especially, which recognises the importance of oceans and seas as drivers of the economy but also for the society and the environment, beyond the monetary profit.

In the context of the Mediterranean, the challenges are common, thus they require common solutions – in particular those in Blue Economy. There are two main ideas which are essential to ensure this: connectivity and working for resilience. This can be done through the promotion of international cooperation, but not only. And even if regional cooperation in the Mediterranean has been a reality for a while (Barcelona Convention 1995), it has not been enough to make the needed change. Moreover, in the context of Blue Economy there is a call for the establishment of action-oriented initiatives which result in a real change which can be sustained overtime.

In light of this, the European Commission launches the WestMED Initiative, which focuses on the pro-

1 Sağlamer, Gülsün. (2013). “The Mediterranean Sea: Cradle of civilization”. *UN Chronicle*. No. 1, Vol. L, Water. Accesible via: <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/mediterranean-sea-cradle-civilization#:~:text=Magnificent%20civilizations%20have%20scattered%20all,the%20Ottoman%20Empire%20and%20from>

2 European Commission. (2017a). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean. COM (2017) 183 final. <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/westMed-communication.pdf>

motion of Blue Economy for sustainable development in the Western Mediterranean, including countries from the northern and southern shore, with a specific Framework of Action and a number of financing mechanisms and which successfully places the Blue Economy SMEs and those affected by it into the conversation.

Although this initiative has several things which make it innovative and relevant to be analysed, it still has some characteristics that make it problematic and ultimately diminish their contribution to their main goal: sustainable development. So, although it tries to create a resilient system, it does not manage to cover all the needed dimensions.

In this work, an overview of the Mediterranean uniqueness and legacy will be provided as well as an introduction to some of the common challenges that it currently faces. Later, the value of the WestMED Initiative to contribute to solving those challenges connected to Blue Economy will be offered, but first it will be highlighted that this initiative surges in the context of a long-term work in regional cooperation within the Mediterranean. Then, the WestMED Initiative's goals, member states, governing bodies and action points will be exposed. The European Commission involvement in the initiative will also be highlighted, as it is something that distinguishes this initiative from others, and some of its actions to implement it will be mentioned and analysed. Finally, some of the limitations of this initiative will be presented and some reflections and proposals aiming improve it and make it a real contributor to sustainable development, will be brought.

II.- Mediterranean: legacy and challenges

2.1 The uniqueness of the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean, *Mar Medi Terraneum* ("sea between lands" in Latin), spans 2.5 million square kilometres and 46,000 kilometres of coastline. It had and it plays a crucial role in the international relations and in geopolitics, and it is also highly valuable for its history and legacy, and for ecological reasons (contains a great diversity of species and ecosystems). In addition, it is home to 512 million people who live along its coasts, more than 70% of which reside in cities, and one-third of them are coastal cities³. As a result, the urban and economic growth in Mediterranean coastal regions is also very important. Thus, the Mediterranean basin represents a series of characteristics, social, ecological and economic that make it relevant and quite unique region in the planet⁴.

Social value

Some authors point out that the history of humanity cannot be understood without analysing the processes occurred around the Mediterranean⁵, that make it social valuable, or rather sociocultural valuable. Thus, its value goes beyond the present day, given that it has been the cradle of civilizations since the first settlements in Jericho in 9000 BC. It has witnessed the rise and fall of civilisations such as:

3 UNEP/MAP & Plan Bleu. (2020). *State of the Environment and Development in the Mediterranean*. Nairobi. ISBN 978-92-807-3796-7 - Job No DEP/2294/NA. <https://planbleu.org/en/soed-2020-state-of-environment-and-development-in-mediterranean/>

4 MEDCLIC. (2021). "El Mar Mediterráneo - Programa educativo sobre el Mediterráneo y su litoral". *MEDCLIC*. https://medclic.es/uploads/filer_public/e3/d6/e3d68812-ac14-4035-afc8-3e2db6980583/u1_elmarmediterraneo_medclic_cast.pdf

5 Sañlamer, Gülsün. (2013), *op. cit.*

Sumerian, Assyrian and Hittite, the Greek and Phoenician city states, the Persians, the Romans, the Byzantine Empire, the Golden Age of the Islam, the Ottoman Empire.



Figure 1. *Civilisations that have inhabited in the Mediterranean coasts.*
Source: MEDCLIC (2021).

The Mediterranean Sea is a meeting point between three continents – Asia, Africa and Europe. Its unique shape and location make it one like no other, not only it is large enough to accommodate a diverse range of peoples, but its many islands, bays and straits also serve to foster intercultural exchange. It has allowed communication around the millennia and has bred exceptional individuals who have made noteworthy historical contributions to philosophy, art, music, literature, science and technology⁶.

The civilisations that arose, together with the relations established among them, created a very specific cultural legacy. Great routes were traced through its waters that did not only serve for trading different goods but also had an impact on the transmission of knowledge, philosophies and religions that marked the legacy of the region and its people⁷. This is shown by the fact that it now has 191 of UNESCO World Heritage Sites⁸.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, it is important to highlight not only its importance in the past and the cultural legacy embedded to it, but rather to recognise its social value also today. As stated, it is home to 7% of the world's population, that reside mostly in the coastal areas. These peoples are located in similar landscape (around 70% in cities), and, as a result of the cultural legacy but also in connection with the climate conditions, they share a bunch of common values.

Environmental value

The Mediterranean Sea also holds a huge value from the environmental perspective.

On the one hand, it concentrates 10% of the world's biodiversity, being one of the regions with higher diversity of flora and fauna in the world. More than 12,000 marine species have been registered, 68% of amphibians, 63% of freshwater fish, 35% of reptiles and 28% of mammals are endemic to the Medi-

6 MEDCLIC. (2021), *op. cit.*

7 *Íbid*

8 UNEP/MAP & Plan Bleu. (2020), *op. cit.*

terranean⁹. This has been reflected in the environmental protection figures, such as marine protected areas¹⁰.

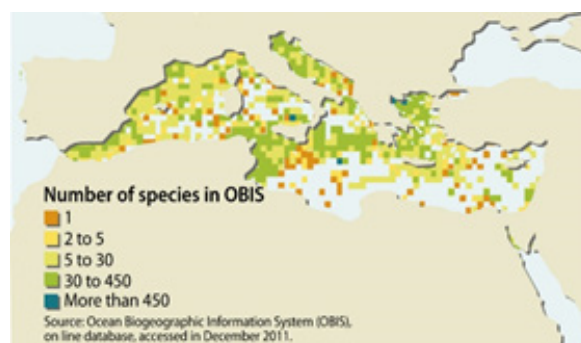


Figure 2. Mediterranean marine biodiversity.

Source: Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS) (2011) accessed by GRID-Arendal (2013).

On the other hand, it is quite a particular sea. It is one of the seas with higher salinity (38° g of salt per litre of water). This varies between the Western Mediterranean (36° g of salt per litre) and the Eastern Mediterranean (39° g of salt per litre). Moreover, it is the sea with the largest number of islands and archipelagos¹¹.

Furthermore, a moderate, humid, and windy winter, and a hot, dry, and windy summer are the hallmarks of the Mediterranean climate, and what characterises many of the landscapes of the region. Rainfall is very seldom, with the most in autumn and spring. There is a modest yearly temperature change, with hot summers and pleasant winters. Due to this climate, the Mediterranean receives insufficient water from rivers and rainfall, which leaves it unable to make up for water losses due to significant evaporation caused by sunshine and the wind. If the losses were not offset by the entry of Atlantic water through the Strait of Gibraltar, this ongoing imbalance would cause the Mare Nostrum to dry up in just over 2,000 years¹². This factor influences the environment but also directly connects with social values and identities of the peoples of the region.

However, this is directly connected to its vulnerability to climate change and the risks associated with this phenomenon and that will be better addressed in the next section.

But these social and environmental factors directly connect with economic aspects. The need of preserving the environmental value of the region, particularly of the marine life, and the predominancy of people living in coastal cities - what results in different sectors and industries colliding in a same area -, require a switch into a different model of economy. Is in this context that appears the need of the Blue Economy.

Economic value

Blue economy can be defined as a “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, im-

⁹ MEDCLIC. (2021), *op. cit.*

¹⁰ UNEP/MAP & Plan Bleu. (2020), *op. cit.*

¹¹ MEDCLIC. (2021), *op. cit.*

¹² *Íbid*

proved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health” and it encompasses a series of different activities such as: maritime transport, fisheries, waste management, renewable energy and tourism¹³. In 2018, the Chief of Natural Resources and Interlinkages Branch of UN DESA's Division for Sustainable Development Goals expressed that the concept went further, it did comprise “a range of economic sectors” but it was also shaped by “related policies that together determine whether the use of ocean resources is sustainable”. This added the notion that the real challenge of blue economy was establishing the better way to manage the many aspects of ocean sustainability¹⁴.

Policymaking concerning the Blue Economy requires a thorough accounting of the ocean's value, even if the market does not provide these kinds of non-market evaluations – such as for the recreational advantages of coastal and oceanic habitats and the environmental services they provide¹⁵. It is important for the region for various reasons¹⁶:

- **Logistics.** The Mediterranean basin is characterised by many natural harbours. There are more than 200 ports and terminals in the Western Mediterranean. Nearly 40% of all goods (by value) pass through the Mediterranean.
- **Tourism.** The Western Mediterranean attracts the largest number of tourists. Mediterranean countries receive 30% of the world's international tourists (cite).
- **Fishing.** Represents 30% of the total value of landings at first sale in the Mediterranean and provides more than 36 000 direct jobs on fishing vessels. This sector often collides with other marine uses and other sectors' goals, such as those of tourism and of environmental protection, what explains why the Blue Economy is not only an economic model but also requires political action.
- **Biodiversity.** As stated, switching into a Blue Economy is crucial to maintain the rich biodiversity present in the Mediterranean. Today, there are 481 marine protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites. But this, alone, is not enough, the maintenance of these protected areas passes by understanding the need of encompassing the economy with the environmental protection.

An estimated USD 5.6 trillion is the value of the Mediterranean Blue Economy, which generated USD 450 billion in 2017, around 20% of the global GMP. In terms of the estimated shared wealth fund, 83% is linked to coastline production and 13% to seagrass beds. Ocean-related activities rank fifth in the Mediterranean economy when compared to regional GDPs (only behind France, Italy, Spain and Turkey) (Fosse, et al., 2023).

13 World Bank. (2017). What is the Blue Economy? *World Bank*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/06/06/blue-economy>

14 Chatterjee, Madhushree. (2019, January 15). Diving into the blue economy. *United Nations: Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA)*. other. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/sustainable/blue-economy.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20blue%20economy%20comprises%20a,of%20ocean%20resources%20is%20sustainable.>

15 Fosse, Jérémie., Monili, Helena., Lozano, Daniel., & Milo, Roberta. (2023, November). *A Sustainable Blue Economy for the Mediterranean: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Pathways. Policy Report*. Euromesco. <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Eco-union-Policy-Report-39-Blue-economy.pdf>

16 European Commission. (2017a), *op. cit.*

According to Goal 14 of the United Nations Agenda 2030, the Blue Economy is a significant contributor to job creation and growth in the area. It also plays a key role in ensuring food security and the shift to a resource-efficient, low-carbon, circular and sustainable economy. Furthermore, it is a crucial tool for achievement development according to the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (2016-2025).

2.2 Challenges faced in the Mediterranean

This reality clashes with a series of challenges that the Mediterranean region countries also share. The challenges are numerous and diverse, but they are common to the Mediterranean countries, and in relation to Blue Economy some that can be pointed are:

- **Growing coastal urbanisation.** The majority of the population lives in coastal cities. Impacting the landscape and degrading the environment (making difficult some natural processes), overstressing the resources in the area, and resulting in the development of different (colliding) economic sectors in the same area.
- **Concentration and accumulation of pressure in coastal areas.** At the same time activities as diverse as offshore industry, aquaculture and fishing, and tourism, coexist in the same environment, with the limitations and problems linked to it.
- **Overexploitation of fishing stocks.** 75 percent of the fishing stocks is subject to overfishing (FAO, 2020). In 2021, the Mediterranean (and Black) Sea showed one of the lowest scores of stocked fished at sustainable levels (84-76 percent) with a percentage of 37.5 percent, only above the Southeast Pacific¹⁷.
- **Atmospheric and marine pollution.** Emissions from transportation such as ships cause health unsafety of the population¹⁸. Also, the United Nations estimates that around 730 tonnes of plastic waste pollute the Mediterranean every day (single-use plastics represent more than 60% of this). Between 95-100% of all floating litter and more than 50% of the seabed litter are made of plastics. And the generation of municipal solid garbage has been rising throughout the region with no signs of slowing down and open dumps accounts for more than half of the waste disposed in southern countries¹⁹.
- **Biodiversity under threat.** Despite being one of the richest areas in biodiversity, much of it is under severe danger. 70 percent of wetland habitats have disappeared since 1970, there has been a decrease in marine predators of a 41 percent and only 9 percent of the marine area is officially protected. Moreover, the so characteristic *Posidonia oceanica* has experienced a 30 percent decline over a period of 50 years and its functional extinction could take place by 2100 in a no-action scenario. Thus, biodiversity loss embeds a series of factors, not only loss of fauna and flora, but also loss of ecosystem services such as protection against erosion, water purification, mitigation of floods and droughts, carbon storage, and many more²⁰.

17 FAO, 2024

18 UNEP/MAP & Plan Bleu. (2020), *op. cit.*

19 UNEP/MAP, n.d

20 UNEP/MAP & Plan Bleu. (2020), *op. cit.*

All these challenges are exacerbated by the climate change, a transversal challenge affecting all of them.

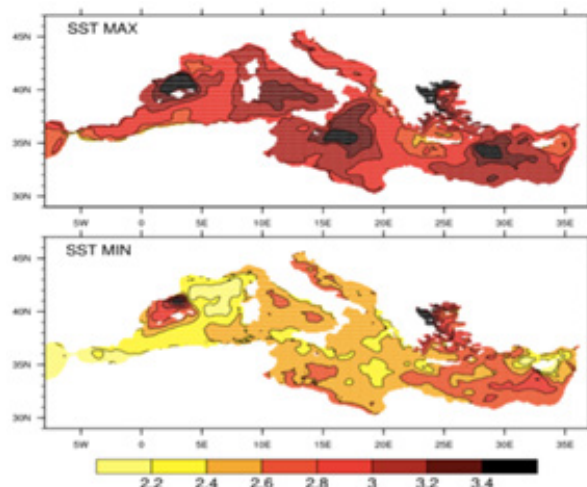


Figure 3. *Expected minimum and maximum changes in sea surface temperature for 2070-2099 period (vs. 1961-1990).*
Source: Marini, 2018.

The Mediterranean region is a global climatic “hotspot” due to its extreme vulnerability to climate change (CC). The region is anticipated to be among the most impacted by CC, which influencing from precipitation to the hydrological cycle, according to the Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change (MedECC). At the moment its temperature is 0.4°C higher than the world average, at 1.54°C above pre-industrial levels. And temperatures are expected to rise 20% faster than those in the rest of the world. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) major effects of climate change in the region will include – although water stress and extreme climate events are already occurring ⁻²¹ :

- **Rising of sea levels.** Between 0,43 and 2,5 m by 2100, what could heavily impact those coastal populations, and result in 20 million people living below 5m of current sea level²².
- **Acidification of seawater.** Prejudicial for marine life and for food security.
- **Increase in the frequency of extreme events:** heat waves, droughts, floods, etc.
- **Changes in the frequency of water precipitation,** decrease of 30% of rainfall in spring/summer by 2080 and an increase of 10 to 20 percent of heavy rainfall extreme events outside summer²³.
- **Worst and more frequent natural disasters.**
- **Salinisation of aquifers and river deltas,** in which the population relies for living and for food security.

²¹ Fosse, Jérémie., Monili, Helena., Lozano, Daniel., & Milo, Roberta. (2023, November), *op. cit.*

²² UNEP/MAP & Plan Bleu. (2020), *op. cit.*

²³ *Íbid.*

The Blue Economy is not only a model needed to keep in place those economic, social and environmental aspects that make the Mediterranean valuable, but it is fundamental to face the new challenges presents in the region. It is important from an economic point of view, but it goes way beyond that. As stated before, it does not relate merely to economic aspects, but it also requires from different political strategies to make it happen and it is needed to achieve the Agenda 2030. This concept challenges people to understand that the sustainable management of resources demands the collaboration across borders and sectors through partnerships and networks and in a higher scale²⁴.

In light of this, it became obvious for the Mediterranean countries the need of a common strategy, and also to the European Commission who pushed for the establishment of the WestMED Initiative, which managed to bring together countries of the Western Mediterranean to work for: increasing safety and security, promoting sustainable blue growth and jobs and preserving ecosystems and biodiversity in the Western Mediterranean.

III.- Westmed initiative

3.1 Origin

The WestMED Initiative was not completely new in the context of Mediterranean political cooperation but was rather the continuation of a process of regional strategies establishment. The foundation of regional strategies is the establishment of transnational areas of cooperation, which provide forums for inter-institutional discussion on matters of shared interest between the European Union and third countries²⁵.

In order to understand the surge of this initiative, it's important to understand its context. The regionalisation framework created by the EU responds to precise policy frameworks establishing in its dealings with neighbouring countries. Several Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation programmes have been launched since the 70s, such as:

- **The Barcelona Process.** The first Euro-Mediterranean Conference was held in Barcelona in 1995, when the foreign ministers of the EU and twelve nations in the southern and eastern Mediterranean signed an agreement to initiate the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Process. It established the groundwork for a new regional alliance aiming at: (1) defining a common area of peace and stability reinforcing political and security dialogue; (2) building a zone of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership; (3) approaching peoples through a social, cultural and human partnership²⁶.
- **The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).** This policy was defined by a “territorial turn” adopted by the EU characterised for putting in value geographical proximity. The European Neighbourhood Policy framed interactions with non-EU nations at the EU's Eastern border and on the Mediterranean Sea's southern shore. It was created as a new model of political association and economic

24 Chatterjee, Madhushree. (2019, January 15), *op. cit.*

25 Coletti, Raffaella. (2022). “EU Region-building for Maritime cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea: the EUSAIR and the WestMED initiative”. In Vitali, G. & Zoppi, I.M. (eds). *CNR case histories in the Blue Planet Economy* (pp. 53-62). Quaderni IRCrES 16. Moncalieri, TO: CNR-IRCrES. <http://dx.doi.org/10.23760/2499-6661.2022.16.08>

26 Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). (2024, June 11). Frequently asked questions on the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean. *Union for the Mediterranean*. <https://ufmsecretariat.org/25faqs/>

integration. With a legal basis in Art. 8 Treaty of European Union it builds on the commitment of the EU and its neighbours to work together for promoting democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and social cohesion²⁷. On the 2015, the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented a review of the Policy that determined to focus on: stabilising the region in political, economic and security terms²⁸.

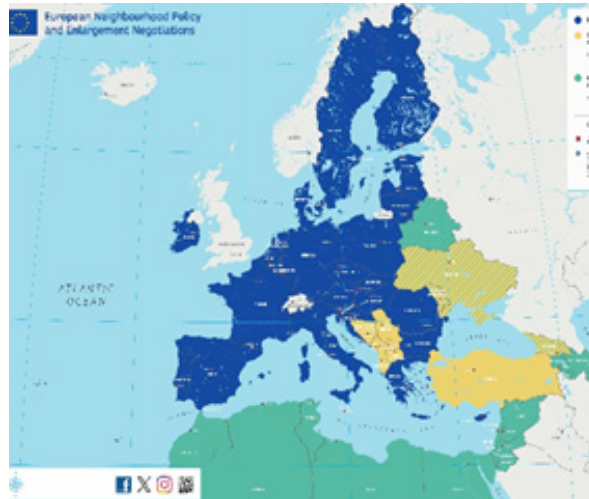


Figure 4. The ENP's States
Legend: Blue: EU MS, Yellow: candidates and potential EU MS, Green: ENP countries.
Source: European Union, 2019

- **The Union for the Mediterranean.** (UfM). It was the result of the recognition of close ties among the Mediterranean countries in the Process of Barcelona. It was launched in 2008 in order to increase the potential for regional integration and cohesion. It is the only institution bringing together the European and Southern Mediterranean countries to work together. UfM Secretariat established in 13th of July of 2008. It works following a methodology that has named the “three Ps”, and it is composed by three pillars²⁹: (1) Political Fora, (2) Dialogue Platforms, and (3) Regional Projects and initiatives.

These programmes foster cooperation and invite participation from a wide range of stakeholders by promoting collaboration across both internal and external EU boundaries. More recent initiatives concern the WestMED and the EUSAIR (EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region). These two offer an agreed set of priorities that focus efforts and resources in obtaining more relevant and long-lasting results, including those in the field of Blue Economy. They ensure specific added value, for the period 2021-2027 of EU funds, and try to coordinate and create synergies among different programmes and funds.

27 European Union External Action (EEAS). (2021, July). European Neighbourhood Policy. *EEAS*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en

28 European Commission. (2015). Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/review-european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en

29 Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). (2024, June 11), *op. cit.*

3.2 The key points of the regional initiative

Definition and origin

The WestMED initiative is a strategy adopted by the European Commission and endorsed by the Council of the EU in 2017, that works for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the Western Mediterranean. Compared to other regional cooperation strategies, it characterises by a strong involvement of the European Commission, particularly of the Directorate General for Maritime Affairs (DG MARE). The definition of the initiative was done in a top-down manner, contrary to other initiatives that tend to be countries-led approach³⁰. Relevant actors and stakeholders were involved in the drafting ensuring that the initiative responded to their interests³¹.

It was established in response to the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Declaration on the Blue Economy, adopted in November 2015, which invited the Member States to investigate the potential benefits and viability of suitable maritime strategies at the sub-regional level, building on the lessons learned from the 5+5 Dialogue³². Together with the UfM Secretariat, the Foreign Affairs Ministers of Algeria, France, Italy, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia worked for the establishment of this initiative aiming for the sustainable development of the activities related to the sea³³.

Moreover, the initiative builds up on all the previous policies taken by the EU concerning Euro-mediterranean cooperation listed in the previous section as well as at the European Commission's long-standing experience with sea and macro-regional strategies such as the Atlantic Strategy, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region.



Figure 6. *Members of Dialogue 5+5 and the WestMed*
Source: CeSIT OGS (2017)

30 Coletti, Rafaella. (2022), *op. cit.*

31 WestMED Initiative. (2023, August 5). WestMED initiative at a glance. *WestMED*. <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/westmed-initiative/#:~:text=The%20WestMED%20initiative%20is%20the,Mauritania%2C%20Morocco%20and%20Tunisia>

32 *Íbid.*

33 Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). (2016, October 28). Foreign affairs ministers of the 5+5 dialogue discuss pressing regional challenges and highlight the positive contribution of UFM activities to the enhancement of regional cooperation. *UfM*. <https://ufmsecretariat.org/foreign-affairs-ministers-of-the-55-dialogue-discuss-pressing-regional-challenges-and-highlight-the-positive-contribution-of-ufm-activities-to-the-enhancement-of-regional-cooperation/>

Member states

The consortium of the WestMED Initiative derives from Dialogue 5+5, so it is formed by the same members of this Western Mediterranean Forum that aimed at ensuring closer cooperation between 5 Arab Maghreb Countries and 5 EU Member States through political dialogue and to strengthen regional development. It is formed by 10 States, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Malta; and Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

Governance

The WestMED Assistance Mechanism (WM-AM) supports and monitors the implementation of the initiative. It is constituted by the Central Team and the National Hubs. It is made up of professionals in the blue economy who help stakeholders find opportunities. It also takes the lead in conversations about important marine issues and participates in regional, national and local policy discussions³⁴.

- The Central Team. It serves as the initiative's Executive Management board, it is responsible for coordinating all practical activities and providing event planning, communication resources and technical know-how to the National Hubs. In addition, it works as the connecting actor between all the political partners: DG MARE, the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA), and the National Coordinators.
- The National Hubs. They are groups of national specialists in blue economy with a broad network and a thorough understanding of financing options. They identify high-potential sectors and assist the stakeholders in the development of project ideas by providing individualised, private advice on project development, funding sources and partner matchmaking. There are 9 National Hubs established in all member states except of Libya.

The WestMED Steering Committee (WMSC) governs the initiative and it is made up of the national coordinators from the appropriate ministries of all participating nations (except from Libya), the European Commission, the Secretariat of the UfM, and observers from international organisations and financial bodies. It guarantees operational coordination, offers direction and essential support to ensure that the expected results are met. It provides high-level stewardship for the Framework for Action's Implementation and monitors its execution. It is supported by the technical working groups.

Apart from the WestMED Assistance Mechanism and the Steering Committee, a series of thematic groups have ensured the achievement of the initiatives' goals, the MSP Community of Practice is led by individual experts.

- AquaWest – Sustainable aquaculture. It focuses on the acceleration of sustainable aquaculture in the western Mediterranean. Although in recent years many advances have been made in this field, these activities remain vulnerable, particularly in the in the South-West of the Mediterranean. This group consists of different policymakers and stakeholders from the aquaculture sector and seek to: promote knowledge sharing, identify funding, facilitate policy development, create an information sharing platform and encourage stakeholder cooperation.

34 WestMED Initiative. (n.d.). Assistance-mechanism. *The WestMED Initiative*. <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/assistance-mechanism/>

- Maritime Clusters Alliance. Its main goal is to foster maritime cluster cooperation in the WestMED as it highlights clusters' importance to work as brokers between the countries. They bring together local SMEs and big companies across different marine sectors. It focuses on ensuring cluster dialogue, south-south cooperation, north-south capacity building, and it works on the creation of a platform for private investments in innovative SMEs.
- Green shipping. It focuses on promoting the importance of changing, updating, and adapting regional ships to move towards using only sustainable fuel and energy sources. But also, on the idea of turning ports into "circular hubs" for the production and consumption of sustainable energy. These objectives call for a constant monitorisation of new developments concerning green fuel, what requires financial investments. This group's priorities are to assess the new technologies and innovative models, networking maritime ports as circular hubs – energy communities, and to boost for adaptation of commercial vessels.
- Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP). It is a Community of Practice supported by DG MARE and CI-NEA. It allows and facilitates coordinated exchanges between Marine Spatial Planning experts and practitioners (i.e. planners, technical experts, researchers), from the Western Mediterranean countries. It ensures a permanent communication and dialogue between different experts on MSP for knowledge transfer, to establish shared perspectives on common topics and interests and enhance cooperation.

Moreover, the WestMED Initiative has adopted strategic partnerships aiming at creating strong and collaborative relationships. In 2021, it established an agreement with the Association of Chambers of Commerce of the MED (ASCAME), the INTERREG Euro-Med Programme 2021-2027. In 2023, it signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the World Ocean Council, this MoU provides both parties with a change to further unite the business (investment) community and the stakeholders from the maritime community. A consortium has also been constituted between the WestMED Assistance Mechanisms and the Black Sea and Atlantic Assistance Mechanisms, benefiting all the partners from the combination of their network, knowledge and experience³⁵.

Priorities, objectives and action points

This Initiative was established in 2017, however, its priorities are not static, but rather evolve with the socioeconomic context. Thus, in June 2023 Ministers and high-level representatives of the European Commission and the UfM reassessed and updated the priorities of the WestMed Framework for Action. Nowadays, the WestMED Initiative has 3 main goals and 10 priorities that are interlinked (Table 1), all focusing on marine and maritime issues. In 2018, in the meeting in Algiers, six priorities were agreed and added to the original ones, aiming at establishing a common roadmap.

³⁵ WestMED Initiative. (n.d.). *op. cit.*

Table 1. WestMED Initiative Goals and Priorities.

	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3
	A safer and more secure maritime space	A smart and resilient blue economy	Better governance of the sea
Priorities	1. Coastguard functions co-operation (training, search and rescue) 2. Maritime safety and response to marine pollution rescue	3. Strategic research and innovation 4. Maritime clusters development 5. Skills development and circulation 6. Sustainable consumption and production	7. Spatial Planning and coastal management 8. Marine and maritime knowledge 9. Biodiversity and marine habitat conservation 10. Sustainable fisheries

Source: Own elaboration with data from European Commission (2017a) and b).

All these goals and priorities have an important role for the implementation of the WestMED and the achievement of the expected results. However, for the purpose of this work the focus will be set on the priorities established in connection to the Goal 2.

- **Goal 2: A smart and resilient blue economy**

In order to handle the generational shift in the labour market and increase the region's sustainability, competitiveness and resilience to change, the creation and transfer of innovation and knowledge are crucial. This goal invites partner countries to become more involved and builds on current efforts like BlueMED (Research and innovation for blue jobs and growth in the Mediterranean Area). This goal will be reached through the implementation of a number of actions in connection to the following priorities: 2.1. Strategic research and innovation, 2.2. Maritime clusters development, 2.3. Skills development and circulation and 2.4. Sustainable consumption and production³⁶.

- **Priority 2.1. Strategic research and innovation.** Partners will collaborate in the BlueMED initiative that established links between research centres and industries on both shores by fostering economies of scale and inviting partners and stakeholders of both shores to join. It has established a Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda, an Implementation Plan to achieve its goals, and other actions such as a pilot model on a Healthy Plastic-free Mediterranean, Platforms and National Pivots and the programme of BlueMED Young Communication Ambassadors. This priority includes a series of tasks that include:
 - Encourage the development of bio-based industries and services, such as those in food, medicine, cosmetics, chemicals, materials and energy.
 - Create new technologies for observing and tracking the ocean, encompassing deep-water and seafloor biological, among others.

³⁶ European Commission. (2017a), *op. cit.*

- Private enterprises and marine operators should devise novel ideas and procedures to optimise the use of platforms, infrastructure and ships for scientific, environmental safety and security purposes.
- Develop customised solutions and innovative technologies to utilise marine renewable energies and mitigate and adapt to climate change.
- Provide knowledge and technology transfer trainings.
- **Priority 2.2. Maritime clusters development.** Maritime clusters aid in the growth, innovation, and employment creation processes. They are essential in creating the necessary bulk for economic endeavours that are not now attractive to individual investors.
 - Promote the growth of medium, small and micro businesses in the blue economy using national marine clusters, incubators, and other resources.
 - Establish a proficient network of maritime clusters across the area
 - Create regional clusters on wellbeing, renewable energy and active ageing, using marine and maritime resources and technologies.
- **Priority 2.3. Skills development and circulation.** There is a need of overcoming the generational gap (and gender gap). To do this, it is fundamental to provide maritime education and training and find solutions to improve collaboration and overcome the gap between the supply and demand for marine capabilities.
 - Increase awareness of marine jobs and their appeal to young people
 - Promote the development of innovative maritime skills through different of strategic actions that match demand and supply
 - Encourage networking and exchanges and the transfer of knowledge between maritime, port and logistics institutes and academies
 - Align supply and demand for jobs in supply chains, infrastructure, and multi-modal freight transport services.
 - Coordinate current competencies and roles for managing migration concerns throughout the region and encourage circular migration.
- **Priority 2.4. Sustainable consumption and production** (maritime transport, ports, maritime and costal tourism, marine aquaculture). The Western Mediterranean is under stress from land-based and maritime activities, as well as from the increasing urbanisation of the coastline. These factors may also have an impact on the long-term viability of industries like marine aquaculture

and maritime and coastal tourism. This priority focuses on promoting the region's adoption of the Action Plan for Sustainable Consumption and Production as well as a move towards sustainable tourism, sustainable aquaculture and more environmentally friendly and smart transportation.

- Adopt sustainable models for production and consumption; promote the use of clean energy sources for saltwater desalination; and assist communities' efforts in coastal cities to become more energy-efficient and change-adapted.
- Encourage green shipping and the development of port infrastructure for alternative fuels; enhance existing port infrastructure, processes and interfaces; and expand the Trans European Network for Transport and the sea's highways and associated port links.
- Create fresh theme-based tourist products and services, such as: natural, cultural and historical tours, or options that connect inland and marine attractions (cuisine, sports, culture, etc.).
- Establish international common technical standards for sustainable marine aquaculture, diversify the sector and increase capacity.

These actions related to the priorities are established in the Communication (COM (2017) 183 final)³⁷ and are fundamental to ensure an adequate and comprehensive implementation of the initiative.

IV.- Implementing the WestMED Initiative

4.1 EU policies to promote the WestMED Initiative

The European Commission has been promoting a Sustainable Blue Economy development in the framework of the European Green Deal. In its Communication (2021) 240 final³⁸, it established as some of its goals to preserve biodiversity and invest in nature, to support climate adaptation and coastal resilience, to improve management of space at sea, among others. It publishes periodically reports on Blue Economy to monitor its implementation and improve its effects. But it has also recognised a series of ways to finance this new model, in cooperation with the European Investment Bank Group, such as the BlueInvest Fund – which supports the transformation of the value chains related to ocean activities. And it also mobilises private investments such as the EU-sponsored Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Initiative.

As it has been pointed out, this Initiative has an action-based approach, it is not limited to setting agreement of intentions, but it was created precisely to bring the will of the different member countries (in forums such as the UfM and the Dialogue 5+5) through a Framework of Action. Thus, the activity carried out by the union has a strong focus on the financing of Blue Economy initiatives and projects.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ European Commission. (2021). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU Transforming the EU's Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future. COM/2021/240 final. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2021%3A240%3AFIN>

EU funding

The approach of the European Commission (EC) is not to create new funding programmes for this initiative, but rather to optimize other programmes and to apply them for projects connected to Blue Economy. This is, the WestMED coordinates many initiatives and funds within its goals and priorities to create synergies and impact, rather than providing specific funding for project realisation. In fact, numerous initiatives in line with the objectives of the WestMED initiative have been found in the last years.

In connection with the goal 2 and its priorities, different EU funding sources – related to various topics such as environmental protection, regional development, innovation on enterprises, etc.- can be identified (Table 2). This classification helps the stakeholders and potential applicants to better understand the state of the art concerning funding resources and facilitate the work to National Hubs when advising them.

Table 2. EU Funding sources in connection with the specific priority

	Goal 2: A smart and resilient blue economy	Potential funding programmes
Priorities	<p>3. Strategic research and innovation</p> <p>4. Maritime clusters development</p> <p>5. Skills development and circulation</p> <p>6. Sustainable consumption and production</p>	<p>Horizon Europe</p> <p>European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFF)</p> <p>European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)</p> <p>European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) – it finished in 2020.</p> <p>LIFE Programme</p> <p>EMFF, ENI, ERDF</p> <p>Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs (COSME)</p> <p>European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI)</p> <p>European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD)</p> <p>EMFF, ENI</p> <p>European Social Fund (ESF)</p> <p>ERASMUS +</p> <p>Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)</p> <p>EMFF,</p> <p>ENI,</p> <p>COSME,</p> <p>LIFE,</p> <p>CEF,</p> <p>ERDF,</p> <p>Horizon Europe,</p> <p>European Investment Project Portal</p> <p>EFSI</p> <p>EFSD</p>

Source: Own elaboration with data from European Commission (2017a).

Moreover, although all of these financial programmes are relevant and mobilised to the implementation of the WestMED Initiative, two other important programmes need to be cited as the really much connect with the goals of the Initiative:

- The **Blue Mediterranean Partnership** launched by UfM and financial institutions (EBRD and EIB) with the support of the European Commission. This partnership intends to collect more funds from sovereign donors for project preparation and blended finance through a multi-donor fund run by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Actors such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), and the European Commission have committed 6.5 million, 2 million and 1 million, respectively, to this partnership. Also, the European Commission will mobilise its existing financial resources through the Neighbourhood Investment Platform and the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) to co-finance blue economy projects. In the coming months, the European Investment Bank (EIB), Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), EBRD and AFD will work as financial implementing institutions. The first beneficiaries of this partnership will be Egypt, Jordan and Morocco which will identify blue economy projects in their countries. This agreement of cooperation was signed at COP28 by the EIB, EBRD, UfM, EC, AFD, CDP, KfW, donors and beneficiary countries³⁹.
- **Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership**. It is coordinated by Italy and co-coordinated by Norway and co-funded by the European Union. It funded by Horizon Europe Programme, which goal is to plan, direct, and assist the fair and inclusive transition to a blue economy which is resilient, regenerative and sustainable. The proposals must come from at least two distinct European Sea basins, including the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean⁴⁰.
- **Interreg Europe**. It focuses on regional development, but it is crucial to the WestMED initiative's structure. In fact, sea basin initiatives and macro-regional strategies are specifically included in the previously stated EU Regulation 2021/1059 for European Territorial Cooperation 2021–2027 as essential sources for defining the objectives and priorities of each programme. In this context, it is necessary to highlight the Next MED programme for achieving some of the priorities of the WestMED Initiative, this focuses on creating: (1) a smarter Mediterranean, (2) a greener Mediterranean, (3) a more social Mediterranean, (4) and a better cooperation governance for the Mediterranean.

Moreover, a platform bringing together Blue Economy Stakeholders has been established and among other functions, it provides a list for those interested in Blue Economy in the Western Mediterranean of fundings and donors that they should be aware of in order to implement their projects and initiatives⁴¹.

39 WestMED Initiative. (2023, December 5). Blue Mediterranean partnership steps up support for Sustainable Blue Economy. *WestMED*. <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/blue-mediterranean-partnership-steps-up-support-for-sustainable-blue-economy/>

40 Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership. (2023). The Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership's Second Joint Transnational Call: Blue partnership. *Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership* <https://bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunity/sustainable-blue-economy-partnerships-second-joint-transnational-call>

41 Mediterranean Blue Economy Stakeholder Platform (MedBlue Economy Platform). (n.d.). Funding blue economy. *Mediterranean Blue Economy Stakeholder Platform*. <https://medblueeconomyplatform.org/funding-blue-economy/>

EU diplomacy

Nevertheless, diplomacy is still fundamental to ensure the long-term sustainability of those partnerships for economic funding and those financing programmes. The WestMED Initiative itself originates from a series of diplomatic actions and structures created to enhance cooperation and collaboration between the Mediterranean partners. Diplomacy and the establishment of dialogue and joint strategies are the only way to make face to the multiple challenges threatening the Mediterranean Sea.

In order to ensure the implementation and success of the WestMed Initiative, continuous and intensified cooperation efforts are needed. This means to not only strengthen the partnership between the European Commission and the UfM but do it alongside with key territorial actors: regional and local governments, the civil society, and the cooperation with important actors in the Mediterranean in order to establish the projects identified under this initiative. Synergies with other Sea Basin Strategies (such as the Atlantic Strategic and the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea) are also crucial, what highlights the value of the consortium established between the three entities. Furthermore, the framework of the Barcelona Convention should not be forgotten as it is essential for the protection of the marine environment and the coastal regions, and the Initiative needs to align with the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD).

Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the concept of diplomacy is a dynamic one, and that it has changed importantly over the years, now it does not merely refer to security and economic development, but contemporary diplomacy embodies a wide number of actors, different thematic and addresses different challenges. When referring to diplomacy within the European Union, it does not limit to governments and European institutions, but it includes new actors such as businesses, the civil society, research and knowledge centers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), etc. Theme-based diplomacy start to gain importance, in the context of this article it could be said that the political actions to promote and implement the WestMED Initiative, and the WestMED Initiative itself, could be consider examples of Ocean Diplomacy.

In this understanding of the word “diplomacy”, other actions take also relevance. For instance, the funding programmes and the transnational projects presented in this area are a means of diplomacy. This funding often links to innovation and research or what has been identified as science diplomacy or knowledge diplomacy. This term refers to HEIs but not only, in the broad definition of the term, it is about the variety of interactions between science and diplomacy, and it concerns those actions taken to collaboratively tackle global challenges and promote a unified vision and approach to build bridges between science, technology, innovation with national, regional and global interests.

4.2 Limits and proposals to ensure its contribution to sustainable development

It was stated at the beginning of this article that many of the pressing challenges that the Mediterranean region is currently facing are connected to the ecological dimension, particularly intensified by the irruption of climate change. Nevertheless, when analysing the goals, priorities, action plans, and particularly the governance of this WestMED initiative, the ecological dimension is not that evident.

This is, the Initiative builds up on the idea of contributing to sustainable development for the Blue Economy that aims to ensure, as previously stated, a “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health”⁴². And this idea builds up on the

42 World Bank (2017), *op. cit.*

late reports assessing the many problems related to environmental and particularly marine degradation. But in practice, it seems that the model proposed for this “sustainable development” focuses more on the economic aspect than on the ecological and social, what brings about a series of problems.

The use or misuse of the concept of sustainable for naming practices which do not respond evenly to all the 3 dimensions related to sustainability – ecological, social and economic - is what leads to misconceptions and misinterpretations.

The goal that connects the most to the ecological dimension would be the goal 2, but when analysing the priorities, and specifically the actions to be taken, the link is not really emphasised. It does mention some topics that can be linked to the environmental dimension, but it is almost consequential or at least the focus is not on protecting the environment. For example, it works on developing solutions and technologies to use marine renewable energies, but here the benefits are not merely on the environment but also connect with economic benefits and having a higher degree of independence.

In general, all the priorities focus very much on creating a marine economic ecosystem which is innovative and promotes the exchange of good practices. A set of actions to ensure the growth of enterprises, networking, eliminate the generational gap and bring more young people to the sector. In short, the tasks proposed can help to advance in the research of the area as it works on developing new tools for observing and tracking the ocean – and consequently in conservation – but, in practice, it does not make statements and it does not take compromises in the area of environment that can be detrimental to the operational of the economic marine industry.

This can also be acknowledged when analysing the governance structure, particularly the thematic groups: the AquaWest, the Marine Clusters Alliance, the Green shipping and the Maritime Spatial Planning. All these bodies are relevant as technical bodies, but they fail to meet the requirements for a green transition. The members of these groups are stakeholders, actors with interest (probably economic) in the area, that will of course provide their expertise but will also lobby to bring up conclusions that are favourable for them. These groups are not sustainable as they do not consider other aspect that is named by some as the fourth pillar of the SD: governance. To tackle SD, a pluralistic approach needs to be taken, one that can deal with many players and levels. This governance, however, cannot be one that replicates a “traditional” hierarchical government institution, but it becomes more suitable to shift towards shared governance as a collective responsibility. For these groups to be sustainable, there should be a representation of people that could look for the interests of the ecological and social dimension: environmentalists, academics, civil society, local communities, etc.

This is not to say that this initiative is detrimental to the environment or that it does not contribute to sustainable development. This is rather to highlight that it now misses to introduce the environment in the centre of the discussion, and that this needs to be changed if the will is to really contribute to sustainable development in Blue Economy. Additionally, these 3 pillars/dimensions cannot be understood as completely equals, but also in connection with the planetary boundaries⁴³, understand that without a healthy environment, the other 2 dimensions cannot be achieved (Figure 7).

43 Planetary boundaries were defined by Rockström and 28 other leading scientists in 2009, marking the limit lines for maintaining a safe operating space for humanity with respect to the Earth system associated with the planet’s biophysical processes. These are: (1) climate change, (2) biosphere integrity, (3) soil change, (4) biochemical fluxes, (5) stratospheric ozone depletion, (6) freshwater use, (7) ocean acidification, (8) atmospheric aerosol loading, (9) incorporation of new entities (Rockström, Steffen, Noone, K. et al. A, 2009).

Thus, the WestMED cannot contribute to do *business as usual*. It needs to be careful that it does not promote a system which brings some important actions concerning mediterranean cooperation, knowledge transfer and skill acquisition but that focuses mainly on the economic benefit and completely diminishes the other two dimensions. This is not to say that the economic and social dimension are not important, the three of them are interlinked and their balance is essential to ensure a just transition, but without a “safe space” to live in⁴⁴, communities cannot develop nor in the social aspect either in the economic one.

Figure 7. The SDGs “Wedding Cake”



Source: Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016

It is about recognising the multifunctionality of the ocean, that does bring about a series of prominent blue economy sectors which create value, jobs and strong growth prospect. But that goes beyond human needs and activities, and sustain marine biodiversity, and many other ecosystem services. This realisation needs to be incorporated into the Initiative in order to achieve a Sustainable Blue Economy, and different key actions must be introduced to ensure this – recognised by the European Commission (2021) itself -:

- Introduce the most up-to-date understanding of the structure, functions, services, benefits and values of marine ecosystems into the strategy for Blue Economy.
- Assess marine ecosystem biocapacity and blue natural capital.
- Apply the best practices for sustainable resource exploitation and ocean governance.
- Adoption of an ecosystem-based approach in spatial planning.
- Introduce the Nature Based Solutions to respond to socioeconomic and environmental challenges.

V.- Conclusions

In definitive, and as stated at the beginning of this work, the hardest part of Blue Economy is not to make a statement or a communication or to promote its use. The idea that it evokes will often be su-

⁴⁴ Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K. et al. A. (2009). Safe operating space for humanity. Nature. 461, 472–475. <https://doi.org/10.1038/461472a>

ported by everyone, the real challenge is implementing it in a way that is beneficial to all parties involved. As highlighted by Chatterjee⁴⁵ (2019), the real issue is to establish the most appropriate manner to manage the many aspects related to ocean sustainability and to harmonise the different sectors and ecosystems (humans and natural) that directly connect to it and strongly depend on it.

In the end it is about ensuring connectivity and resilience. Two concepts which also very much interlink. For it to be resilient, this harmonisation needs to be done in a way that ensures sustainability in all dimensions, because a focus on economy will not solve the problems highlighted nor those coming in the future. But also, the most effective way to ensure the resilience of a system is by establishing networks. Networks are a pattern found in nature; they ensure resilience since the failure of one of the agents does not directly cause the failure of the whole system. So, in order to have resilience, it is essential to bring up connectivity, which refers to regional cooperation actions, bringing different countries with common problems together to come up with solutions, but also refers to connectivity between different local actors, with different interest, which ensure that all dimensions are taken into account and respected. It passes through acknowledging the importance of cooperation between divers agents: institutional, but also SMEs, civil society, universities, research centres, local communities, etc.

In summary, the WestMED has the capacity to significantly advance the development and application of the Blue Economy, thereby promoting the long-term viability of the Mediterranean coastal ecosystem. It does so because it goes one step further than other previous initiatives: it does not only establish dialogue between the different (Western) Mediterranean countries, but it focuses on the implementation of projects and initiatives that practically advance Blue Economy in the region. And it does so, by involving the stakeholders from the very beginning (even drafting the initiative), but the focus should go beyond the economic sectors affected, it should also ensure the protection of the environment, the mitigation of the effects of the climate change, the adaptation to the potential impacts of the climate crisis, and do this by involving also other actors interested and not only those with an economic interest. Ensuring this, as stated by the Chief of Natural Resources and Interlinkages Branch of UN DESA, is the real challenge.

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45 Chatterjee (2019), *op. cit.*

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