



# Achieving SDG 14 in an equitable and just way

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## Abstract

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14—life below water—significantly elevated global awareness of the importance of the oceans. It is also a key SDG for achieving the other 16 goals and targets. However, the global community is a long way off achieving this goal and serious equity concerns have been raised in the context of SDG 14. This perspective paper provides a summary of the overall progress, or the lack thereof, in achieving SDG 14 and examines some of the obstacles which might undermine the achievement of this goal, such as weak indicators and a lack of recognition of Indigenous and traditional knowledge. This paper also provides recommendations on how countries and stakeholders could take a step closer to achieving SDG 14. Overall, reiterating the calls of global experts, it is imperative that SDG 14 is implemented in an equitable and just way, without further discriminating against developing countries and vulnerable communities.

**Keywords** Conservation · Equity · Justice · Ocean governance

## Abbreviation

IUU illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing  
EEZ Exclusive, economic zone  
BBNJ Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction  
NGOs Non-Governmental Organisations  
MPAs Marine Protected Areas

## 1 Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14—life below water—is a major milestone in the history of ocean governance. This goal summarises the major threats posed to the marine environment and emphasises the global importance of our oceans and seas. SDG 14 consists of seven targets and three sub-targets (Fig. 1), addressing issues such as marine pollution, overfishing, ocean acidification, and marine conservation. This SDG was championed by Pacific Small Island Developing States, whose livelihood, economy, and culture are

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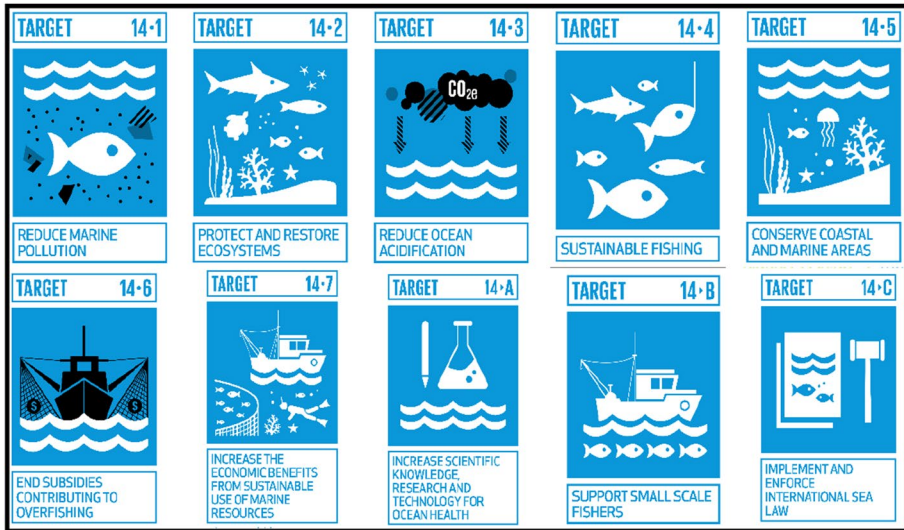


Fig. 1 SDG 14 targets and sub-targets (UN, 2023a)

closely linked with the health of the oceans (Quirk & Hanich, 2016). Since establishing the SDGs, the number of ocean-related initiatives has increased substantially, with the latest success being the Agreement for Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ). The importance of the oceans is also showcased by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030).

Yet, despite this, the health of the ocean continues to decline. For example, unsustainably fished stocks are increasing (FAO, 2022) and no country is close to achieving SDG 14 (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022; Sachs et al., 2022). Moreover, access to marine resources and benefits, conservation burdens, and costs are inequitably shared amongst the international community and ignoring these components as well as other socio-economic factors could further exacerbate existing inequities (Armstrong, 2020; Österblom et al., 2020). This perspective paper provides an update on the implementation status of SDG 14 and examines some of the challenges countries are facing in implementing its targets. Furthermore, this paper argues that equity is a fundamental part of SDG 14. Existing ocean governance frameworks often lack transparency and accountability and discriminate against vulnerable communities, hence, to achieve sustainable ocean governance, equity needs to be a core component (Bennett, 2018; Crosman et al., 2022). In the end, this paper provides key recommendations that could forge a potential path forward.

## 2 Challenges

The implementation of SDG 14 is challenging, and countries face several obstacles when working towards this goal. One issue, frequently echoed by scholars, relates to the indicators, which are often described as too broad and difficult to quantify (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022; Virto, 2018). More specifically, some indicators do not support the achievement of the respective targets. One example is the indicator for target 14.6. While target

14.6 aims to “prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing” (UN, 2023a), its indicator refers to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which is covered by SDG 14.4. This is a serious mismatch, as subsidies do not necessarily contribute to IUU fishing but to overcapacity (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2020). Overall, due to the non-specific nature of these indicators, country-specific initiatives might not be counted, thus, underestimating countries’ contributions (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022).

It is also important to acknowledge that the development of the SDGs and their targets were dominated by developed countries and influenced by their western ideas. Significantly, ideas from Indigenous organisations were not included in the final text (Cummings et al., 2017; Liu, 2023; Yap & Watene, 2019). The lack of recognition of traditional and Indigenous knowledge and the emphasis on scientific knowledge (i.e., 14.b) ignores alternative management forms, which are supporting more sustainable and equitable oceans (Cummings et al., 2017; Newell et al., 2019).

When working towards achieving SDG 14, existing inequitable mechanisms need to be considered. A common approach is the transfer of destructive practices from a developed country to a developing country (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022). For example, the sustainability and equity of the European Union’s fishing practices in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of African countries have been questioned and their negative impact on the marine ecosystem highlighted (Belhabib, et al., 2015; Okafor-Yarwood & Belhabib, 2020). Another inequitable mechanism is the way catch is attributed to the flag state irrespective of where the catch was caught (e.g., in the EEZ of a coastal state) (Davis, et al., 2022). This has severe equity implications as it undermines the coastal states’ sovereign rights and their development aspirations since fish allocations are mainly based on historical catch (Davis et al., 2022). Currently, only a few countries or stakeholders benefit from marine activities, but burdens and costs are often transferred to the most vulnerable countries and communities (Österblom et al., 2020). It is imperative that not only the benefits are shared equitably but also the costs to achieve healthy oceans (Armstrong, 2020).

SDG 14 will not only be difficult to achieve due to the inequitable sharing of conservation costs but also due to the lack of available funding. A study by Johansen and Vestvik (2020), calculated that “there is a financial gap of US\$ 149.02 billion per year” to achieve SDG 14 (p. 1). However, states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other institutions are increasing their ocean-related funding and the 2023 ‘Our Ocean’ Conference in Panama resulted in commitments worth almost \$ 20 billion (Alberts, 2023). This is positive news and an important step towards achieving SDG 14. However, SDG 14 will not be achieved without cooperation between countries and other relevant stakeholders at the national, regional, and global levels (Wright et al., 2017). The need for cooperation might, however, add more complexity to the achievement of SDG 14.

### 3 Implementation

SDG 14 has been one of the least studied and most under-implemented SDGs, with major challenges remaining in all regions and income groups (Sachs et al., 2022; Salvia et al., 2019). SDG 14 consists of seven targets and four of these targets (i.e., 14.2, 14.4, 14.5, and 14.6) were due for completion in 2020 but to date, no country has achieved all four (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022). Target 14.4 (sustainable fishing) has suffered from the slowest progress and has only been achieved by the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea,

and Tuvalu, while Target 14.6 (end harmful subsidies) registered the greatest achievements (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022). However, as noted in the previous section, target 14.6 refers to IUU fishing, covered by target 14.4. Hence, this could be interpreted as that the greatest achievement was actually made for target 14.4. The overall progress for these four SDG 14 targets was the highest in Europe and Oceania (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022). Achieving SDG 14 is further undermined as target 14.3 (reduce ocean acidification) and the three sub-targets are not associated with a due date (Quirk & Hanich, 2016).

Even though the SDGs were only initiated in 2015, the objectives of the SDG 14 targets are not new but already form part of existing initiatives (i.e. the Aichi targets which called for 10 per cent protection of marine and coastal ecosystems) and organisations such as regional fisheries management organisations and the International Maritime Organisation (Wright et al., 2017). Global conferences including ‘Our Ocean’ have also recorded a high number of international commitments for the protection of the ocean, but progress has still been disappointing (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022). Overall, SDG 14 is one of the most important SDGs and is necessary for achieving at least ten of the 17 SDGs (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2017, 2021). For example, achieving SDG 1—ending poverty—and SDG 2—ending hunger—is closely linked to the progress made towards SDG 14 (Singh et al., 2017). Thus, the lack of progress regarding SDG 14 will undermine the achievement of most other SDGs.

## 4 Conclusion

With SDG 14, the global community acknowledged and emphasized the importance of the oceans. To achieve most of the other SDGs, achievement of SDG 14 is required. However, SDG 14 is the most under-implemented goal and four of its seven targets have already expired, with no country having achieved all four of them. The implementation of SDG 14 is hindered by weak indicators that fail to address the targets’ objectives and to take into account non-western knowledge forms. As none of the SDG 14 targets is new in nature, but taken from existing initiatives, the recommendations proposed below highlight the importance of achieving the objective of these existing initiatives as this will, in turn, support the achievement of SDG 14. While these recommendations might not be new and innovative nor comprehensive, they highlight important considerations that have been repeatedly noted by the global research community.

The first recommendation targets existing treaties, initiatives, and instruments, which form the base of SDG 14, and which could also form successful platforms for achieving SDG 14 (Wright et al., 2017). Ratifying the new BBNJ agreement, which covers several targets of SDG 14 (e.g., 14.2, 14.4, 14.5 or 14.7), would be an important step towards SDG 14. This agreement aims to protect biodiversity at the high seas and deals with issues such as area-based management tools, including marine protected areas or genetic marine resources. Another important agreement would be the World Trade Organisation’s Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (i.e., 14.6), prohibiting harmful fisheries subsidies, or the Convention on Biological Diversity’s Global Biodiversity Frameworks, which calls, for example, for at least 30 per cent protection of ocean ecosystems. It is important that these new agreements are not only ratified but that they are also equitably implemented and enforced at a national level (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022). Furthermore, countries need to better incorporate SDG 14 into existing regimes they are members of, such as regional fisheries management organizations or the International Seabed Authority, and enhance cooperation

and coordination across these different organizations (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022; Haas et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2017).

Second, the SDG 14 indicators need to be streamlined and more inclusive. It is not only important that the indicators match the respective target, but also that they follow a SMART approach—specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bounded (Cormier & Elliot, 2017). Furthermore, traditional and Indigenous knowledge and initiatives need to be included in the indicators. Having indicators that also recognise different cultures and knowledge might increase the acceptance of the goal and, hence, the achievement of SDG14 (Ray, 2023). The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators needs to take these considerations into account and revise the indicators accordingly. Changes can then be submitted to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-sixth session in 2025 (UN, 2023b). Additionally, these global indicators are complemented by national and regional indicators, thus states have the opportunity to develop indicators that capture country-specific initiatives (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022).

Third, it is important that the costs and conservation burdens for SDG 14 are shared equitably among all countries and stakeholders and are not disproportionately carried by developing states or vulnerable communities. When implementing specific SDG 14 targets it is important that all communities and stakeholders are consulted and that their knowledge and experience are taken into account (Baker et al., 2023). On a regional and national level, regional management organisations and countries should conduct an assessment beforehand to ensure that this measure does not disproportionately burden coastal developing states and vulnerable communities. The ‘polluter pays’ principle would be one approach that could support the equitable distribution of conservation burdens and, for example, would require states that are responsible for the current status of global fish stocks to bear most of the conservation burden (Armstrong, 2019).

Finally, it is important to increase the funding for SDG 14 and several commitments have been made at the 2023 ‘Our Ocean’ Conference in Panama (Alberts, 2023). These financial contributions need to be based on a long-term strategy and also need to establish capacity-enhancing programmes for achieving SDG 14 (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2022; Armstrong, 2020; Liu, 2023; Wright et al., 2017). Collecting data, monitoring MPAs, and implementing ecosystem-based management approaches require capacity and funding, which are often lacking in developing countries. Without addressing this capacity gap and providing secure long-term funding, it will be difficult to achieve SDG 14.

To date, little progress has been made on achieving SDG 14 and these recommendations would be a start towards achieving and implementing SDG 14 in an equitable and just way that incorporates the voices of everyone and shares not only the benefits but also the costs equitably.

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**Data availability** Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** I confirm that I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

**Ethical approval** The author does not have any conflicts of interests and this research did not involve any human participants or animals.

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