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**THE BLUE PORTS AS A TOOL TO STRENGTHEN
BLUE TRANSFORMATION IN COASTAL AREAS**

INTRODUCTION

1. FAO's Strategic Framework 2022–2031 defines organisational policy, interventions, and activities focusing on more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems aiming at better production, better nutrition, better environment, and better life (the four betters), leaving no one behind, in order to support the 2030 Agenda. The four betters of the Strategic Framework reflect the interconnected economic, social, and environmental dimensions of agri-food systems. FAO also applies four cross-cutting accelerators, namely technology, innovation, data and aggregates (governance, human capital, and institutions) in its strategy with a focus on programmatic interventions, aiming to accelerate impact while minimising any trade-offs.

2. The Blue Ports initiative (BPI) is a concrete response to FAO's four betters and accelerators. It approaches marine ports as knowledge hubs to allow ports to become a source of value creation. Ports can be considered a major site where many activities directly influence people's lives, fostering synergies and serving operational strategies for local development.

3. The role ports play is also aligned with the FAO Blue Transformation Priority Programme Area (PPA)¹, particularly its focus on improved policies and programmes for integrated technological innovation, and private sector engagement. Furthermore, the BPI could be an operational tool to enhance the so called "triple bottom line" of ports, including preserving the environment, such as by reducing pollution, fostering social benefits, including encouraging decent and fair labour conditions, and promoting economic growth, for example with furthering sustained profits. In this regard, ports are considered hubs that link economic, social and environmental activities. A Blue Transformation approach can be used to achieve a measurable impact in their area of influence, particularly considering their potential for creating a virtuous cycle of development.

THE BLUE PORTS INITIATIVE

4. At its 33rd Session, the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) "recognised the synergies between the SDGs and the Blue Economy, with the need for broad cooperation on developing new economic platforms and processes (e.g. Blue Forum, Blue Ports, Blue Fashion) in a sustainable way"².

5. Furthermore, COFI 34 "requested additional information on the proposal for a voluntary Blue Ports Network for the development of coastal areas in collaboration with Members and relevant organisations"³.

6. The BPI is a pragmatic answer to maximise the role ports can play in the socio-economic development of coastal areas whilst respecting the principles of sustainability. The initiative relies on identifying good practices and then transferring these to other ports to expand their potential. The BPI will contribute to poverty alleviation and food security by fostering food quality, preserving natural resources, reinforcing value chains and gender equality and encouraging compliance with good labour practices.

7. The BPI will analyse the elements and conditions of ports' success in order to draw up guidance that can support similar development elsewhere. The transfer of knowledge and practices will rely on the coordination role the BPI can play in developing guidance, connecting ports and supporting development activities through exchange of knowledge and experiences, such as through the creation of a network, or through the provision of technical assistance or other means.

¹ Under FAO's new Strategic Framework and Medium-Term Plan, there are twenty priority programme areas seeking to catalyse transformation of food systems and secure their contribution to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

² [fao.org/3/ca5184en/ca5184en.pdf](https://www.fao.org/3/ca5184en/ca5184en.pdf)

³ [fao.org/3/cb8322en/cb8322en.pdf](https://www.fao.org/3/cb8322en/cb8322en.pdf)

8. The first steps of the initiative started in 2019 via a consultative and inclusive process at the first stakeholder's workshop for the analysis and promotion of ports in sustainable development. Subsequently, a further three workshops were held.

RELEVANCE OF THE BPI FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF COASTAL AREAS

9. Implementing the BPI will guide ports to become more sustainable, with positive spillovers within their area of influence. The BPI strategy will improve ports' operations in terms of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Some of the benefits of the BPI include:

- Stressing the role of ports as relevant drivers of sustainable local development;
- Reinforcing the strategic planning of ports by integrating inclusiveness, competitiveness, greening and efficiency of process;
- Strengthening the relationship between academia, governments, private sector and civil society in order to more effectively address the main challenges ports face;
- Strengthening the collaboration between the public and private sectors;
- Planning and implementation of investments and premises in terms of sustainability and alignment with stakeholders' interests and demands;
- Fostering innovation by attracting potential investors and entrepreneurs that provide services and products to fill gaps in competitiveness;
- Improving commercial operations in terms of volume and earnings for the value chain of the ports.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BPI

10. BPI's design and implementation processes must be tailored to specific sectorial, social and environmental considerations. Each port must follow essential guidance in order to successfully contribute to the generation of wealth in a sustainable way.

11. Preliminary conclusions of a participatory approach based on workshops and the exchange of good practices indicated successful elements to be considered for developing Blue ports:

- Having a status assessment and scope identification, analysing strengths as well as constraints and other challenges facing the ports;
- Adopting a full-dimensional approach (inter and intra-sectorial, cross-cutting, and multi-stakeholder), considering the complete context of a fishing port where multiple stakeholders are involved;
- Being result-oriented, with strategic planning delivering outputs based on the assessment, with the ultimate aim to improve the efficiency of ports;
- Making a measurable impact, particularly taking into consideration that sustainability will be best achieved only when the level of economic, social and environmental impact is assessed;
- Defining specific objectives at the initial stages so that the challenges of ports and their hinterland to improve their competitiveness and ensure sustainability can be appropriately addressed;
- Adopting a long-term vision approach;
- Being tailor-made, considering that each strategy (goals and targets) must respond to the reality of each port;
- Aiming at promoting commitment and ownership so that stakeholders must understand the relevance of the process and the positive impacts on their activities from social, economic, and environmental perspectives;
- Being participatory, even if the initial process was initiated or coordinated by one of the entities, it should become increasingly decentralised;
- Strengthening public and private collaboration;

- Enhancing transparency and facilitating communication so that achievements, constraints, and any other relevant information related to the strategy must be communicated in a timely manner to all stakeholders;
- Developing a governance system addressing continuous monitoring and proactivity in designing and implementing specific projects and actions;
- Considering efficiency and resources available, particularly as the design and implementation process can only happen if necessary technical and financial resources are available;
- Keeping a dynamic and flexible process, continuously adjusted as performance and impact are monitored.

THE BPI PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

12. The participatory process started with the discussion during organized workshops on the design of a guidance document for ports to adopt a Blue Economy approach.

13. The first workshop on “Global Stock-Taking and Best Practices” was held in Vigo (Spain) in June 2019 with representatives from 16 ports in Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America. The workshop brought together experts with various port-related interests and expertise to collaborate on implementing Blue Transformation in ports. It laid the groundwork for establishing a network of Blue ports, with specific consideration for the context, challenges and opportunities of different ports. It was agreed that the approach promotes a process of sustainable growth.

14. In November 2019, a case study workshop entitled “Blue Growth Impact. Perception from Stakeholders” was organised in Vigo (Spain) to study the impact of the approaches carried out by the Port of Vigo. Particular attention was paid to progress in areas covered by the Blue Growth Plan of the Port of Vigo, which was selected as a relevant good practice. The Port of Vigo has pioneered the implementation of a multi-stakeholder approach as a strategy to strengthen the impact of the port’s operations within its area of influence, including reporting on collaborative projects and actions aimed to reinforce the social, economic and environmental dimensions of its operations. The stakeholders involved in implementing the Blue Growth Plan of the Port of Vigo participated in the workshop, sharing their experiences, perceptions and vision, which supported the identification of the main implementation challenges and facilitated understanding of the potential implications for the sustainable development of coastal areas.

15. In October 2020, the “Second Blue Ports Workshop: Towards Sustainability” was organised virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to reinforce the exchange of good practices among ports, focusing on the social dimension and its benefits. The workshop increased awareness and built knowledge about the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of the impact ports have in their area of influence, including the benefit of establishing a BPI and the development of objectives, structures, and an action plan.

16. The “Third Workshop Blue Ports Initiative, Stepping Forward”, organised online in June 2021, focused on reinforcing existing knowledge of the capacity of Blue ports to promote sustainable development in their area of influence. The main outputs were the design of the BPI, the analysis of a preliminary “Guidance document to become a Blue port” and the exchange of experience drawn from challenges faced, with a particular focus on market access and traceability. This workshop was very successful in terms of conclusions reached and the variety of participants: more than 20 countries were represented, as well as eight regional and multilateral organisations (African Development Bank, European Commission (DG MARE), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC-UNESCO), the World Bank, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private companies related to the fishing sector, ports and traceability.

17. In addition to the four workshops, a continuous development process to strengthen potential ties was carried out with UN agencies such as IOC-UNESCO, the World Bank, ILO and IMO, including meetings and consultations. As a result, a specific collaboration with IOC-UNESCO took place in October and November 2021, focusing on the exchange of good practices to implement a training programme on “Engaging Blue Ports in Marine Spatial Planning (MSP)” and to design a “Guidance document to reinforce the role of fishing ports in MSP”, which is expected to be published in April 2022.

THE BPI IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

18. A strategy document has been prepared to identify specific outputs and activities that will enhance the capacity of ports to create value and, consequently, improve people’s livelihoods. It was designed in collaboration with ports participating in BPI activities, and shared and discussed with international organisations and international port organisations.

19. The strategy is divided into five outputs which can be summarised as:

- **Output 1. Setting up the BPI platform**

Awareness-raising through information dissemination in publications⁴ and websites⁵ associated with advocacy actions, including specific workshops involving national port authorities and fisheries administrations. The baseline and a guidance document for becoming a Blue port have been drafted.

- **Output 2. A capacity-building programme on Blue Ports management is developed and implemented**

The capacity building programme will strengthen the managerial (strategic) and operational (technical) capacities of ports and their stakeholders.

Several actions have already been implemented to this end, including the elaboration of a good practice document and repository through a participatory process: three regional virtual workshops, “Engaging Blue Ports in Marine Spatial Planning”, in Africa, Latin America and Asia, in collaboration with IOC-UNESCO, and three workshops on the exchange of good practices related to social, economic, and environmental dimensions of ports. A training programme based on one global and three regional training courses (Latin America, Africa and Asia) will be implemented in 2022. Spain expressed their intention in supporting this training programme. At the time of writing, the administrative procedure for accepting the funds offered by Spain is in progress.

- **Output 3. Innovative tools for knowledge management are designed, developed and implemented**

The collection and accessibility of data are crucial for a successful strategic planning and implementation process in sustainable development. Better access to ports’ economic, social and environmental data will result in better management and impact.

In order to generate this data, it was proposed to create a data observatory to collect, analyse and provide updates on port activities, statistics, resources, challenges, and mapping ports and landing site locations.

- **Output 4. Strategies and actions under Blue Transformation are designed and implemented by ports**

Creating a technical assistance programme to support BPI members to implement the Blue Growth approach is currently ongoing, and potential donors have already been approached.

⁴ FAO – IOC UNESCO joint publication about the importance of MSP (Marine Spatial Planning) in fishing ports.

⁵ [fao.org/in-action/globefish/news-events/details-news/en/c/1392282/](https://www.fao.org/in-action/globefish/news-events/details-news/en/c/1392282/) and AIVP [The Blue Ports initiative to encourage positive city–port relationships](#).

- **Output 5. Real impact of ports on their area of influence is measured so local development strategies may be adjusted**

The impact should be measured in terms of benefits for coastal communities, and specific key performance indicators (KPIs) have to be identified and implemented according to the baseline currently being drafted.

CONCLUSION

20. The BPI aims to contribute to socio-economic growth based on the principles of sustainable development, and its implementation strategy is the result of a participatory and inclusive process that began in 2019. Since then, several workshops and meetings have helped identify and design best practices to make ports more sustainable, setting the foundation for a collaborative platform among ports to strengthen fish value chains and generate value to the ports' area of influence.

21. The BPI will provide ports with tools to enhance their capacity, strengthen existing connections and form new ones, focusing on exchanging good practices, commercial cooperation and strategic planning aligned with global demands and trends. Furthermore, the existence of capacity building programmes and knowledge management tools will impact positively on better management of ports in social, economic and environmental terms.

22. Finally, the BPI's strategy is fully aligned with the 2030 Agenda. Its implementation provides an opportunity to include the 2030 Agenda in the ports' strategic planning within the framework of cooperation and partnerships, including the catalyst role played by FAO and other international organisations to maximise resources, capitalise on experience, and broaden influence of the BPI.