



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

New approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU

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
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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The blue economy plays a considerable role and has ever-increasing potential in the EU and global economy, job creation and people's welfare. The EESC believes it to be extremely important to seize these opportunities to the maximum extent, while at the same time minimising the adverse impact on the climate, biodiversity and the environment. Good water quality and healthy aquatic ecosystems are a prerequisite for a flourishing sustainable blue economy.
- 1.2 Besides environmental challenges, those active in the blue economy face challenges such as unfair global competition and rapid technological development. Many activities, especially tourism, have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Smooth and successful recovery is thus crucial for the blue economy.
- 1.3 The blue economy covers a wide range of sectors and operations, both traditional and emerging ones. The increasing diversity of blue economy activities has posed challenges in terms of their compatibility with each other, and competition for marine space and resources. The EESC emphasises the important role of maritime spatial planning both in enabling the co-existence of various activities and in preparing for climate adaptation.
- 1.4 The EESC calls on the EU to actively support the development and introduction of digital and green technologies and solutions for marine activities, with the aim of generating economic, social and environmental benefits. The EESC also points out the importance of oceanographic research, accompanied by research into the socio-economic and environmental impacts of blue economy activities.
- 1.5 The EESC urges the EU to provide a favourable and predictable innovation and investment environment, with streamlined administrative procedures and certainty in regulatory and financial conditions. The Committee welcomes the substantial EU funding available for supporting the sustainable blue economy and points out the need to make financing easily accessible for operators at national and local levels.
- 1.6 The EESC emphasises the need to consider the EU blue economy and its potential in a global context, including external and trade relations. The Committee calls on the EU to provide EU enterprises with a level playing field vis-à-vis their international competitors and to enhance global implementation of international conventions and agreements regarding economic cooperation, working conditions and the environment.
- 1.7 The EESC underlines the central role of the social partners in anticipating the changes in work, supporting the development of skills and enhancing the employability of workers in the blue economy. Moreover, social dialogue at sectoral, national and workplace levels is key in ensuring proper working conditions.
- 1.8 Due to its horizontal nature, the blue economy must be considered in a comprehensive and consistent way in policymaking. This requires seamless cooperation between policymakers at all levels: between the EU and Member States, between Member States in various regions, and

between different policy fields such as industry, fisheries, trade, transport, energy, employment and the environment.

- 1.9 The EESC highlights the need for blue economy policies to rely on sound scientific knowledge and a solid data basis and to fully take account of the needs and views of blue economy actors and stakeholders. The Committee calls for close involvement of employers, workers and other civil society parties in shaping, implementing and monitoring EU and national blue economy policies.
- 1.10 While it is relevant and necessary to consider the blue economy in a holistic and horizontal way, it is also important to look at different sectors and activities from the point of view of their specific opportunities and challenges, which makes it possible to provide a bottom-up contribution to blue economy policies.
- 1.11 Moreover, the EESC stresses the need for education and for measures to raise awareness of the significance of the blue economy in providing opportunities for healthy diets, mobility and recreation, on top of jobs and prosperity, and the importance of protecting the marine environment, for example against plastic litter.

2. General comments

- 2.1 The EESC welcomes the European Commission's Communication on a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU and endorses its objectives of supporting the transition to a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy, in line with the European Green Deal.
- 2.2 The EESC endorses and advocates an integrated approach to the blue economy with respect to the various dimensions of sustainable development and highlights that the blue economy contributes to most of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to oceans, seas and marine resources, climate action, reducing poverty and hunger, promoting health and well-being, responsible consumption and production, decent work and economic growth¹.
- 2.3 The blue economy plays a considerable role and has ever-increasing potential in enhancing the EU and global economy, quality employment and people's welfare in various locations, with specific benefits for rural and coastal areas. The EESC believes it to be extremely important that these opportunities are seized to the maximum extent.
- 2.4 At the same time, the EESC considers it crucial to minimise water and air pollution, waste generation and the harmful impact on climate and biodiversity. This is vital not only for environmental reasons but also because good environmental quality and healthy ecosystems are vital to ensure proper conditions and resources for the blue economy itself. Managing environmental aspects must therefore be seen as an integral part of any economic activity.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/oceans/>

- 2.5 The blue economy covers a wide range of operations that are essential to people's everyday lives, and the businesses involved range from big international companies to local SMEs. Food and energy production, mining, maritime industries, transport and tourism are the main existing marine-related sectors, while there are also emerging sectors such as the production of new kinds of blue bioeconomy products. Circular economy and water protection activities are also intrinsically linked with the blue economy.
- 2.6 As the definition of the blue economy relates to oceans, seas and coasts, it primarily concerns countries located by the sea. However, through cross-border supply chains and common markets, and a shared climate and environment, the blue economy is a matter of interest to the whole of the EU and all Member States – from the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea and the Arctic Ocean and from the Black Sea to the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea.
- 2.7 The EESC also points out that the concept of the blue economy should not be restricted to oceans and seas only, as there are corresponding economic activities based on freshwater resources, and as inland watercourses ultimately flow into seas and oceans. This highlights the importance of regional cooperation in controlling water pollution.

2.8 Challenges and opportunities

- 2.8.1 The increasing diversity of blue economy activities generates challenges in terms of their compatibility with each other and competition for marine space and resources. The EESC therefore emphasises the role of maritime spatial planning, including integrative management and assessment of cumulative impacts, and calls on Member States to seek and allocate proper spaces for various activities, with the aim of enabling them to develop and co-exist with a minimum adverse impact on other actors and on the marine environment.
- 2.8.2 While oceans and seas play a significant role as carbon sinks, marine ecosystems and coastal areas are vulnerable to climate change and its impacts, including water warming, sea-level rise, and extreme weather events. The blue economy therefore needs to be well prepared for climate adaptation, and the EESC urges the Member States to consider climate adaptation as an essential part of maritime spatial planning, preferring measures that also help sustain biodiversity. Moreover, increasing drought and freshwater scarcity call for new solutions to ensure food security.
- 2.8.3 The EESC points out that those active in the blue economy also face many other challenges such as unfair global competition and rapid technological development. On top of that, many activities have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and need to cope with its impact. This is especially true of tourism and related services. Smooth and successful recovery – in line with the green and digital transitions – is thus crucial for the blue economy.
- 2.8.4 By and large, the blue economy provides many opportunities with respect to the digital and green transitions. Grasping these opportunities will require intensive efforts in research and innovation. This is essential for both the development of traditional activities and the creation of new ones, thus also helping attract young people and diversify the spectrum of the blue economy.

- 2.8.5 The EESC calls on the EU to actively support the development and introduction of digital solutions for marine-related activities, including their use in sea-mapping and in monitoring, exploring, modelling and forecasting the state of the marine environment and resources. Innovation is also needed to improve energy and material efficiency and help decrease greenhouse gas emissions, air and water pollution, and the amount of waste. Special attention should be paid to supporting small enterprises in the green and digital transition. The EESC also urges to share good practices and to scale up social innovations created by blue economy actors and stakeholders, including with a view to strengthening the interconnectivity, resilience, transparency and fairness of value chains.
- 2.8.6 The development of a sustainable blue economy requires proper understanding of marine-related physical, chemical and biological phenomena and changes in them. The EESC points out the importance of oceanographic research, accompanied by research into the socio-economic and environmental impacts of blue economy activities, following the approach of open science and making use of citizen science projects.
- 2.8.7 In exploiting the job creation potential of the blue economy, it is essential to enhance high-quality jobs that promote people's welfare. It also requires the development of advanced training and transferable skills, mutual recognition of qualifications, cross-sectoral mobility, and adaptability to labour market changes. The EESC calls on Member States and education providers – in cooperation with the representatives of blue economy operators and social partners – to take these needs into account in the development of education and training programmes, including upskilling and reskilling, and to do so by using the European Social Fund Plus amongst other resources.
- 2.8.8 The EESC also stresses the vital role of the social partners in anticipating the changes in work, supporting the development of skills and enhancing the employability of workers in the blue economy. Moreover, social dialogue at sectoral, national and workplace levels, including collective bargaining, is essential not only for ensuring certain minimum standards but also when improving working conditions in all sectors of the blue economy.

2.9 Investment, financing and international framework

- 2.9.1 To realise the potential of the sustainable blue economy, the EESC urges the EU to provide a favourable and predictable innovation, investment and operation environment, including streamlined administrative procedures and certainty in regulatory and financial conditions. By setting a long-term vision and a comprehensive framework, the Commission's Communication is a valuable tool for ensuring predictability.
- 2.9.2 The EESC welcomes the substantial EU funding available for supporting the sustainable blue economy, including specific marine-related funding and general instruments such as Horizon Europe, the Structural and Investment Funds, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The EESC points out the need to make EU funding easily accessible for operators at national and local levels.

- 2.9.3 It is also important to leverage private funding for the development of the blue economy, which calls for projects that are attractive to private investors and financiers, guided by sustainable finance principles and standards. Moreover, the EESC calls for enhanced partnership projects between the public sector, enterprises and people at the grassroots level.
- 2.9.4 The EESC emphasises the need to consider the EU blue economy and its potential in a global context, as most of the blue economy activities have an international linkage via trade and supply chains or through shared marine areas. International cooperation and common rules are therefore necessary, to ensure a level playing field and to avoid conflicts with respect to marine resources. The EESC encourages the EU to enhance global implementation of international conventions and agreements in fields such as trade, transport, working conditions, climate and the environment, on top of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- 2.9.5 The EESC urges the EU to ensure that conditions for the blue economy in the EU are competitive compared to those of other international players such as China. This is necessary for the EU enterprises to be able to export sustainable blue economy products, technologies and solutions to international markets and to compete successfully with imports from outside the EU.
- 2.9.6 The EESC also draws attention to the opportunities provided by cooperation with developing countries and encourages the EU to enhance the blue economy as one element of the partnership with Africa.

2.10 Consistent and inclusive policymaking

- 2.10.1 Due to its horizontal nature, the blue economy must be considered in a comprehensive and consistent way in policymaking. This requires seamless cooperation between policymakers at all levels, both vertically and horizontally: between the EU and national decision-makers, between Member States, and between various policy fields such as industry, fisheries, trade, transport, energy, employment and the environment.
- 2.10.2 Regional cooperation between Member States and with countries outside the EU is particularly important², considering that marine areas as well as many inland watercourses are of a cross-border nature. Cooperation is also crucial to ensure the security of marine-related activities and to protect human rights and the environment against a wide variety of internal and external threats, from geopolitical risks to piracy, environmental offences and cybercrime.
- 2.10.3 The EESC highlights the need for blue economy policies and measures to rely on facts derived from sound scientific knowledge and a solid data basis. Furthermore, considering the vital role of civil society players in creating a sustainable blue economy in practice, the Committee calls for close involvement of employers' and employees' organisations as well as environmental and other concerned organisations in shaping, implementing and monitoring EU and national policies.

² EESC opinion on the *Initiative for the sustainable development of the Blue Economy in the Western Mediterranean*, [OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 82](#).

2.10.4 The EESC calls on the Commission to continue the work towards a more specific action roadmap, to be based on the feedback and contributions by various blue economy actors and stakeholders and making use of the dialogue to take place in the Blue Forum for users of the sea.

2.10.5 The EESC also stresses the need for education and measures to raise awareness of the significance of the blue economy in providing opportunities for healthy diets, mobility and recreation, on top of jobs and prosperity, and the importance of protecting the marine environment, for example against plastic litter.

3. Specific comments

3.1 While it is relevant and necessary to consider the blue economy in a holistic and horizontal way, it is also important to look at different sectors and activities from the point of view of their specific opportunities and challenges. This makes it possible to provide a bottom-up contribution and combine it with the top-down approach of the Communication.

3.2 Transport and ports

3.2.1 Maritime transport is crucial for freight logistics and passenger transport both within and outside the EU. The EESC calls on the EU to enhance conditions to further international competitiveness, digitalisation and the greening of shipping and to work on eliminating practices that lead to unfair competition, such as improper practices in the context of sailing under a foreign flag. In addition to individual technology developments, system-level digital solutions help improve the economic and environmental performance of transport, e.g. through better matching of supply and demand. The benefits of short-sea shipping should also be fully utilised in reducing the environmental impacts of transport. Moreover, the EESC draws attention to the opportunities provided by new global transport routes such as the Northeast Passage in the Arctic region.

3.2.2 The EESC emphasises the key role of ports as blue economy hubs, including in the green and digital transitions. While the traditional role of ports as enablers of maritime transport and fish landing sites remains, the role of ports is expanding to include new activities such as facilitating renewable energy and circular economy. This requires investment in infrastructure and a new kind of management overall. New roles may also make smaller ports more important for the region in question.

3.3 Fisheries, aquaculture and new bioproducts

3.3.1 The EESC highlights the important role of fishing, aquaculture and related industries in ensuring low-carbon and healthy diets for Europeans. Considering the high quantity of fish and seafood being imported into the EU, there is a clear motive to reduce the EU's dependence on food imports and provide competitive conditions for European fishing, aquaculture and related industries to respond to food security and sovereignty. Considering the old age of the EU fishing fleet, funding under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund should be

allocated to modernise the fleets and thus improve their environmental performance, working conditions and attractiveness. The EESC acknowledges and encourages continued efforts by fisheries to keep fish stocks at sustainable levels and protect marine ecosystems. The EESC also encourages the sharing of concrete practices such as the contribution of trawlers to collecting plastic litter.

- 3.3.2 Regarding aquaculture, the EESC refers to another opinion, the focus of which is the new strategic guidelines for EU aquaculture³. The EESC also endorses the development of new bioproducts such as pharmaceuticals, food and food additives, animal feeds, cosmetics, and new materials based on algae and other marine organisms. These bioproducts complement the spectrum of the blue bioeconomy, addressed by the EESC in its previous opinion⁴, which covered freshwaters as well.

3.4 **Tourism and related services**

- 3.4.1 Maritime and coastal tourism, with several related activities such as transport, hotel and restaurant services, is vital for many regions of the EU. Regarding measures to address the problems caused by the pandemic, the EESC refers to its opinion on tourism and transport⁵. After recovery from the pandemic, tourism should regain its important role in contributing to local economies and quality employment, often based on SMEs, in a way that ensures its overall sustainability. The EESC points out that sustainable tourism is an essential way of providing people not only with recreation but also with knowledge and experience of the diversity of EU cultures and environments.

3.5 **Shipbuilding and maritime technology**

- 3.5.1 Shipbuilding is a traditional maritime industry serving freight and passenger transport, but many new elements and approaches are currently being introduced in line with the digital and green transitions. For example, advanced automation of vessels contributes to improving the energy efficiency and safety of transport, and the development and adoption of clean propulsion techniques and renewable fuels are key in minimising atmospheric emissions. Repair, maintenance and shipbreaking technology and practices that enhance the circular economy are also essential in this development. The EESC therefore calls on the EU to provide favourable conditions for the development of and investment in marine technology, including equipment and software, and labour.

3.6 **Energy**

- 3.6.1 While traditionally focussed on exploitation of fossil fuels, marine-related energy operations are now geared towards renewable energies, mainly wind and ocean energy. Introduction of renewable energies is key in making progress towards climate neutrality, and marine-related

³ EESC opinion NAT/816: [Strategic Guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture](#) (See page XX in the OJ).

⁴ EESC opinion on the *Blue bioeconomy*, [OJ C 47, 11.2.2020, p. 58](#).

⁵ EESC opinion on Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond, [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 219](#).

renewable energy can contribute significantly to the future energy mix and reduction of carbon emissions. At the same time, solutions need to be found to address competing interests between various uses of marine areas. The Committee has expressed its views on offshore renewable energy in the recent opinion on the offshore renewable energy strategy⁶.

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The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

⁶ EESC opinion on Offshore Renewable Energy Strategy., [OJ C 286, 16.7.2021, p. 152](#).