CHAPTER NINE

RECLAIMING THE BLUE ECONOMY: SIDS, MARITIME SECURITY AND ISLAND-LED OCEAN GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

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INTRODUCTION

For Small Island Developing States (SIDS), oceans represent far more than economic opportunity—they constitute the material foundation of sovereignty, identity and survival. SIDS bear responsibility for vast ocean spaces that dwarf their terrestrial territories, with Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) often hundreds of times larger than land areas (Quirk and Hanich 2016). In the Indian Ocean, for instance, Seychelles claims an EEZ of 1.4 million square kilometres compared to a land area of just 459 square kilometres—a ratio exceeding 3000: 1 (Seychelles Trade Portal 2025). The ocean provides critical protein sources, employment through fisheries and tourism, potential revenue from seabed minerals and the littoral space through which island sovereignty is exercised and recognised in international law (Stratford et al. 2011). Yet this ocean dependency also exposes SIDS disproportionately to climate change impacts including sea-level rise, ocean acidification and extreme weather events (Nurse et al. 2014). Beyond environmental threats, SIDS face mounting maritime insecurity from illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, transnational crime, drug trafficking and piracy (Bueger 2015)—challenges compounded by limited state capacity, small populations and fragmented territories that complicate surveillance and enforcement across vast maritime domains (Okafor-Yarwood 2019). The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) emerges as a particularly strategic maritime space where competing interests, security threats and development pressures converge. This region encompasses SIDS—Comoros, Réunion

(French territory), Mauritius, Madagascar and Seychelles—alongside coastal African states including Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Somalia and South Africa (see Figure 9.1). It hosts some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, with approximately 80% of global seaborne oil trade transiting through these waters (Hafiz 2025), while supporting rich but threatened marine biodiversity and coastal communities dependent on ocean resources valued conservatively at US$333.8 billion (UNECA 2025).

The blue economy—broadly defined as the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and ocean ecosystem health—is therefore not a minor policy concern for WIO island states but an existential imperative. The WIO is, however, conceptualised differently by various stakeholders according to their strategic interests (Marggraff 2025). Indo-Pacific strategies, China's Maritime Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative) and France's assertion of resident Indo-Pacific power status through its overseas territories (Réunion and Mayotte), all extend external framings across the region (Chauhdry, Aqib and Wassan 2025; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs – France 2020; Safety4sea 2025). Okafor-Yarwood and Onuoha (2023: 948) argue that this divergence in threat prioritisation reveals fundamental tensions in ocean governance, whereby external actors often prioritise their strategic interests over the needs of local communities.

In contrast, island states—acting within the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), an intergovernmental organisation—have primarily defined the WIO according to the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA), focusing on threats directly affecting regional states' survival. These include: IUU fishing depleting food security; climate change eroding sovereignty; trafficking undermining governance; and environmental degradation threatening marine ecosystems (Mohabeer and Sullivan de Estrada 2019; Alexandre et al. 2026; RMIFC n.d.).

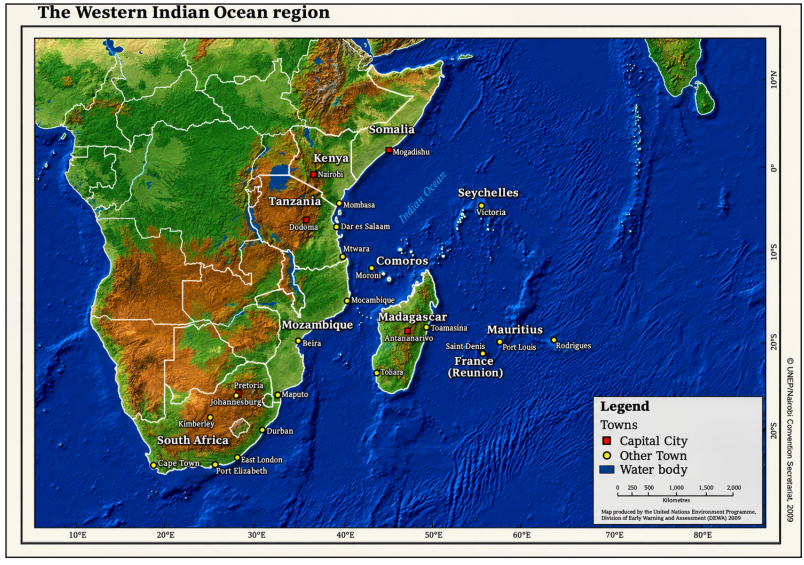

Figure 9.1: Map of the Western Indian Ocean. Source: UNEP/Nairobi Convention Secretariat (2009).

This chapter advances a central claim: SIDS do not merely adopt blue economy (BE) and ocean governance frameworks developed elsewhere; they actively shape and transform them through regional governance, producing tangible outcomes that challenge both 'seablindness' and what this chapter terms 'island blindness'. Seablindness refers to the tendency to overlook the maritime domain or treat it as peripheral to land-based politics and economic life (Bueger and Edmunds 2017). At its core is the failure to recognise the ocean as a strategic domain in its own right. 'Island blindness', by contrast, refers to the marginalisation of SIDS perspectives, agency and priorities in ocean governance despite their vast ocean territories and accumulated maritime knowledge. Building on Stratford et al.'s (2011) observation that island perspectives remain 'largely absent or silent' from dominant geographical and political frameworks, the concept captures the persistent invisibility of island actors and their knowledge systems.

The two forms of blindness are related but distinct. A state may fully understand the strategic importance of the ocean yet remain island blind, treating states as objects of external strategy rather than authors of regional governance. Indeed, this distinction speaks directly to the volume's concept of ocean regions: ocean regions are not fixed geographical spaces but are actively shaped through governance. The RMSA illustrates this process. By placing the ocean at the

centre of regional policy while positioning island and coastal states as leaders in defining and securing their shared maritime space, the RMSA challenges both seablindness and island blindness.

Using the IOC as its primary case study, this chapter examines how SIDS have developed a distinct regional approach to BE. Established in 1984 by five WIO island states—Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion (France) and Seychelles—to foster regional cooperation among French-speaking islands bound by shared language, geography and development challenges, the IOC provides an important example of SIDS-led ocean governance. This chapter addresses four core questions: How is BE conceptualised in African and Indian Ocean SIDS in comparison with global frameworks? How does the IOC operationalise a SIDS-driven BE approach? What role does maritime security play in enabling sustainable ocean-based development? And what lessons does the IOC case offer for broader ocean governance, particularly regarding competing conceptualisations of ocean space and threat prioritisation? The analysis draws on IOC policy documents, regional strategies and institutional frameworks, while incorporating insights from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to highlight both the commonalities and differences in SIDS regional governance approaches.

THE BLUE ECONOMY: ORIGINS, GLOBAL FRAMINGS AND AFRICAN RECONFIGURATIONS

Origins and Global North architecture

The BE concept did not emerge in isolation. It builds on the green economy framework that gained prominence at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, extending its sustainability and market-based principles to the ocean (Picken 2025). The concept entered mainstream global policy discourse at the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, where its conceptual foundations were largely shaped by Global North institutions, including the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Nations (UN) agencies, whose definitions continue to influence international debate. Most definitions converge around the sustainable use of ocean resources to promote economic growth, livelihoods and healthy marine ecosystems (World Bank and UN DESA 2017). However, they differ in emphasis. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) prioritise food security and sustainable fisheries, while UN Environment Programme (UNEP) focuses on ecosystem-based management and environment

sustainability (UNEP and WIOMSA 2015). By contrast, the World Bank and the OECD place greater emphasis on economic growth, maritime industries, innovation and investment (OECD 2016).

These growth-oriented framings has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to distributional questions. That is, questions have been raised about who benefits from ocean resources and how coastal communities participate in blue economies constructed around them (Barbesgaard 2017). For African coastal and island states, these concerns are particularly significant, given the long history of external extraction of marine resources with limited local benefits. These ideas were further institutionalised through the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 on 'Life Below Water,' the 2017 UN Ocean Conference and other subsequent global ocean initiatives (United Nations 2017; Cisneros-Montemayor et al. 2021). However, significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in developing countries with limited technical and financial capacity (Bennett et al. 2019).

As a result, tensions between economic, environmental protection and social equity remain unresolved. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), for example, often championed by international conservation organisations, may restrict traditional fishing grounds and livelihoods without meaningful consultations (Bennett et al. 2021). Meanwhile, private sector involvement raises concerns about the commodification of ocean spaces and the exclusion of small-scale operators (Childs and Hicks 2019). The European Union's BE strategy, for instance, exemplifies a growth-oriented, technologically optimistic approach centred on maritime clusters, innovation and marine biotechnology (European Commission 2021). In the WIO, the European Union (EU) is a long-term partner supporting various programmes, reflecting its strategic interest in promoting regional stability, securing sustainable access to marine resources and strengthening trade and geopolitical ties. The table below details the EU's supporting programmes in the maritime security and sustainable fisheries sectors in the WIO. However, critics have identified three recurring limitations in dominant BE models: their technocratic bias, which favours expert-led solutions; their securitisation of maritime challenges through external strategic priorities; and their limited local ownership, with external actors often defining both problems and solutions (Silver et al. 2015; Barbesgaard 2017). These concerns are particularly relevant for SIDS, where capacity constraints and power asymmetries can reinforce external agenda-setting at the expense of island priorities.

Table 9.1: EU support in the WIO. Source: European Union External Action (EEAS) 2024; EEAS 2025; European Commission/Service for Foreign Policy Instruments 2025; EEAS 2022; IOC 2025; Ministry of Homeland Security and Civil Affairs (Seychelles) 2025.

Programme	Geographic Scope	Lead/ Implementing Body	Main Objectives	Key Focus Areas
Maritime Security Programme (MASE) (Ended in 2023)	Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA); WIO regions	IOC, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), EAC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)	Strengthen regional maritime security architecture and cooperation	Counter-piracy, antitrafficking, information sharing, regional coordination
Safe Seas Africa (SSA) (Launched in 2025)	ESA; WIO	IOC, International Maritime Organisation (IMO), The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	Consolidate and sustain maritime security architecture established under MASE	Maritime governance, legal frameworks, operational coordination
Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) (Launched in 2015)	Indo-Pacific	EU, implemented by Expertise France	Enhance maritime situational awareness and information sharing	Maritime domain awareness, IORIS platform, regional cooperation
EU Capacity Building Mission in Somalia—EUCAP) Somalia (Launched in 2012)	Somalia	EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Mission	Strengthen Somali maritime security and law enforcement institutions	Coast guard capacity, rule of law, maritime policing

Programme	Geographic Scope	Lead/ Implementing Body	Main Objectives	Key Focus Areas
Port Security and Safety of Navigation Programme (Launched in 2020)	WIO and ESA	IOC, UNODC, IMO	Improve port security, maritime safety and compliance with international standards	Port security, safety of navigation, capacity-building
ECOFISH Programme (Ended 2025)	Western Indian Ocean	EU, IOC	Promote sustainable fisheries management and governance	Fisheries monitoring, small-scale fisheries, IUU fishing
Regional Plan for Fisheries Surveillance (PRSP)/ Sustainable Western Indian Ocean Programme (SWIOP) Fisheries Project (Launched in 2025)	South-West Indian Ocean	EU, IOC member States, FAO, regional fisheries bodies	Strengthen fisheries governance and sustainability	Fisheries surveillance, stock management, livelihoods

African and continental reframings

African scholarship and institutions have responded by reframing the BE in three complementary ways. The first way is as a driver of economic transformation, promoting poverty reduction, employment and diversification beyond land-based resources (Thoya et al. 2022). This is in line with the African Union's vision of the BE as 'Africa's new frontier' (AU 2014). The second way is as a question of environmental justice, highlighting the need to balance conservation with the rights and livelihoods of coastal communities, particularly where MPAs restrict traditional fishing and risk 'ocean grabbing' (Sowman and Sunde 2018; Barbesgaard 2017). The third way is as a maritime security agenda, recognising that sustainable ocean development depends on addressing IUU fishing, piracy and trafficking (Bueger 2015; Kamal-Deen 2015).

The integrated approach is reflected in the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIM Strategy), which explicitly links maritime security to economic development (AU 2014). Subsequent frameworks, including the African Union's Africa Blue Economy Strategy (2020) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa's (UNECA) Blue Economy Policy Handbook for Africa (2016), have encouraged the development of regional and national BE strategies. As a result, organisations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have already adopted BE strategies, while the East African Community (EAC), COMESA and the Indian Ocean Rim Association are still developing theirs (March et al. 2024; IGAD 2023). Implementation, however, remains uneven. While all ten WIO states have expressed intent and seven have adopted strategies, only Seychelles has both action plans and the integration of BE priorities within national policy. The reasons behind these constraints are often due to financing gaps, capacity constraints and coordination challenges between overlapping regional initiatives.

Gaps in the literature and a SIDS-centred reframing

Despite this growing body of work, important gaps remain. SIDS are still more often portrayed as vulnerable recipients of external pressures than as active shapers of ocean governance (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012). Likewise, island-led organisations such as the IOC have received limited scholarly attention despite their role in developing regional governance frameworks[56]. In particular, the security-development nexus is also under-theorised. While many studies recognise the connection, few explain how these objectives can be reconciled or whose priorities they ultimately serve. This gap is particularly evident when compared to the Pacific region. Concepts such as Epeli Hau'ofa's 'Oceania' and the PIF's 'Blue Pacific Continent' have reframed island states as ocean powers rather than small and vulnerable territories (Hau'ofa 1994; Pacific Island Forum 2022). Comparable conceptualisations for African and Indian Ocean SIDS remain limited, obscuring how island agency shapes regional governance. This chapter addresses these gaps by framing the BE through a SIDS perspective. It advances three propositions. First, the blue economy is a project of sovereignty: without the capacity to monitor and protect maritime spaces, sovereign rights remain largely nominal (Quirk and Hanich 2016). Second, maritime security is not separate from development but a precondition for sustainable ocean governance. This points towards the security-development nexus (Bueger 2015).

[56] As an exception, see Marggraff (2024).

Third, effective BE governance must be place-based, reflecting the distinct political economies and priorities of island states rather than applying universal models (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Walsh 2025).

THE INDIAN OCEAN COMMISSION AS A CASE STUDY

Established in 1982 and formalised through the Victoria Agreement in 1984, the IOC is Africa's only island-led intergovernmental organisation, representing a distinctive model of regional cooperation. Its membership—Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and France through Réunion—represents around 33 million people and 5.5 million square kilometres of EEZs (IOC 2025). Founded during a period of post-colonial state-building and Cold War competition, the IOC has evolved from a modest cooperation platform into a multi-sectoral regional organisation. The revised Victoria Agreement, which elevated the Summit of Heads of State and Government to a statutory body, marked an important step in its institutional evolution (IOC 2023b). Its growing international relevance is reflected in the admission of eight observers—including China, the EU, the International Organisation of the Francophonie, the Order of Malta, India, Japan, the UN and South Korea (IOC 2025).

The IOC operates as a coordinator and convenor rather than a supranational authority. Through its Council of Ministers, Committee of Permanent Liaison Officers and General Secretariat in Mauritius, it enables collective action while preserving member states' sovereignty (IOC 2025). Over four decades, the IOC has mobilised around €300 million in external support while deliberately diversifying its partnerships beyond its long-standing relationship with the EU. This strategy has strengthened the organisation's strategic autonomy and reinforced its ability to shape, rather than simply implement, regional priorities (IOC 2025).

Regionally, the IOC rests on the principle of subsidiarity, advancing the idea that ocean regions can have fluid boundaries that expand functional cooperation beyond fixed membership, while respecting the organisation's island-centred identity (IOC 2023a). This approach is reflected in the RMSA, whose two operational centres—the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar and the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles—connect IOC members with neighbouring coastal states and wider regional partners. The RMSA therefore extends cooperation beyond IOC membership while maintaining regional ownership of maritime security governance (Kinyua 2023; DCoC and IOC 2022).

Beyond maritime security, the IOC has developed recognised expertise in the BE, fisheries, biodiversity conservation and climate resilience, positioning itself as a regional agenda-setter rather than a passive implementing agency (IOC-Blue Economy 2021; IOC 2025). Its growing diplomatic role is equally evident internationally. After chairing the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) from 2018 to 2020, the IOC has continued as secretariat following its transition to the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA). Combined with its participation in forums such as the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE)—cochaired by the European Union Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR-Operation Atalanta) and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the UN Security Council—this has enabled the IOC to promote African island and coastal state priorities while broadening international maritime security debates beyond piracy to include fisheries, climate and wider maritime crimes (IOC-CGPCS 2020; Alexandre 2025).

Finally, clarifying the IOC's institutional role helps frame its contribution. The IOC is neither a military alliance nor an operational security actor: it has no armed forces and conducts no military operations. Nor is it simply a donor-funded project implementer. Although external funding is essential, the IOC exercises strategic and diplomatic agency by shaping regional priorities, negotiating partnerships and guiding programme design (IOC n.d.a). Unlike regional economic communities such as COMESA or the EAC, the IOC has a broader mandate encompassing maritime security, environmental protection, climate and food security and public health. Its role is to foster collective action among its member states on shared regional challenges while respecting national sovereignty (Koigi 2024).

THE IOC IN PRACTICE: OPERATIONALISING A SIDS-DRIVEN BLUE ECONOMY

The IOC operationalises its SIDS-driven BE approach across multiple interconnected priorities: climate change, maritime security, marine environment governance and regional economic development. What distinguishes this approach is not any single programme but the deliberate integration of these domains into a coherent governance architecture that reflects island priorities rather than externally imposed frameworks. These programmes are mapped below.

The Regional Maritime Security Architecture as an institutional cornerstone

The RMSA is the IOC's most significant institutional innovation (see Figure 9.2). Established through two regional agreements on maritime information exchange and joint operations at sea and signed in 2018 by Comoros, Djibouti, France (Réunion), Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles (IOC-RMIFC 2023; Parliament of Kenya 2019), the RMSA addresses the full spectrum of maritime threats, moving beyond the narrow counter-piracy focus that has long characterised external interventions. Its mandate encompasses IUU fishing, trafficking, marine pollution, environmental crime and climate-related risks (IOC Secretary-General Marimoutou, quoted in EEAS 2021).

Initially supported through the EU-funded MASE programme and now consolidated under the SSA programme, the RMSA is built around two complementary regional centres (GovMU 2025). The RMIFC in Madagascar generates real-time maritime domain awareness by integrating satellite, vessel-tracking and partner information (Alexandre et al. 2026; Mohabeer and Micheni 2025). The RCOC in Seychelles co-ordinates national and partner assets to support joint operations at sea. This includes, for example, Operation Levante 2 held in 2024 and involving Kenya, Madagascar, the United Kingdom and EUNAVFOR-Operation Atalanta (IOC 2024; Seychelles News Agency 2024). As of January 2026, member states had committed 43 surface and air assets and conducted more than 42 joint operations at sea.

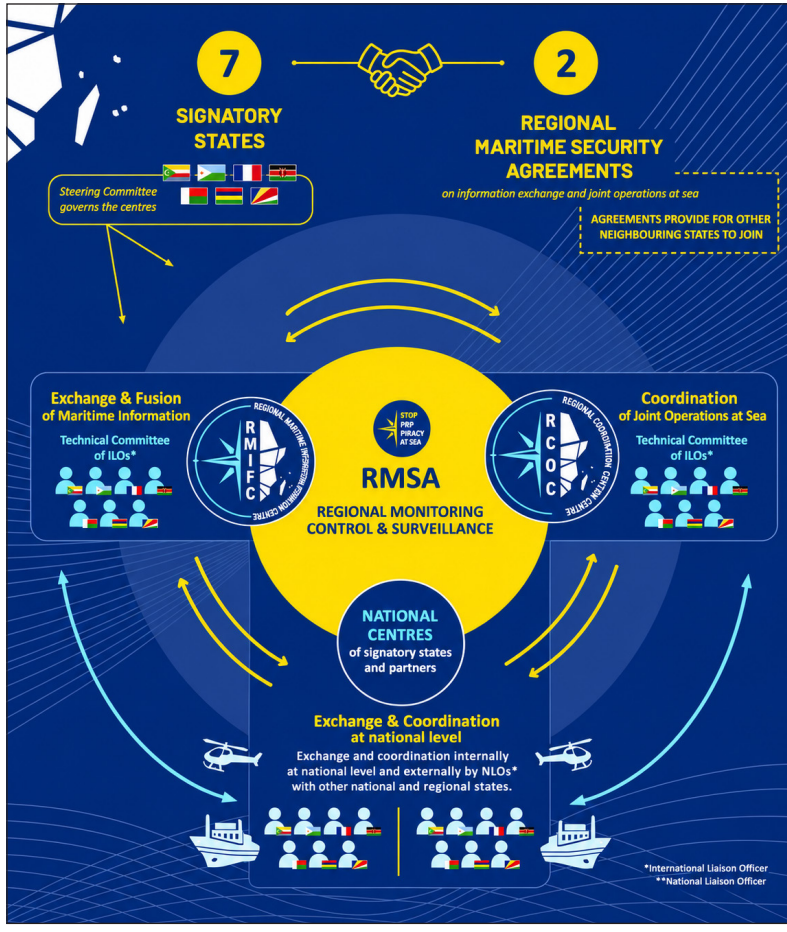

Figure 9.2: Overview of the roles of the RMIFC and RCOC within the Architecture. Source: Alexandre et al. (2026).

Rather than transferring sovereignty to a regional institution, the RMSA enables collective sovereignty: states retain authority over their EEZs while voluntarily pooling information, expertise and operational capabilities that would be difficult to sustain individually (Quirk and Hanich 2016). Through partnerships with EUNAVFOR, the CMF, the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment (DCoC-JA), the RMSA has become a recognised pillar of regional maritime governance in the WIO region (Khan 2025; DCoC and IOC 2022; CMF 2025).

Climate change adaptation and resilience

Climate adaptation forms a second pillar of the IOC's SIDS-centred approach, reflecting island states' particular exposure to sea-level rise, extreme weather and ocean acidification (Nurse et al. 2014). Over a period of twenty years, more than 50 catastrophic events have caused US$17 billion in damage across the region, underscoring adaptation as an economic imperative (IISD SDG Knowledge Hub 2016). The ACCLIMATE project, launched in 2008, provided the region's first comprehensive assessment of climate vulnerabilities across sectors including, food security, fresh water, biodiversity and sovereignty (WeADAPT 2012; IISD SDG Knowledge Hub 2012). This work informed the IOC's Regional Adaptation Strategy (2016-2020), supporting implementation of member states' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (IOC 2023b; IISD SDG Knowledge Hub 2016). Accreditation as a Regional Direct Access Entity to the Green Climate Fund has strengthened regional ownership of climate finance (Green Climate Fund 2024). Through the Climate Resilient Islands Partnership, co-ordinated with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the Caribbean Community Climate Change centre (CCCCC), the IOC also promotes South-South cooperation on climate planning, finance and knowledge sharing (UN SDG Partnerships n.d.). This demonstrates how island regions generate solutions collectively rather than relying solely on externally designed programmes (UNFCCC n.d.).

Marine environment governance

The IOC has also developed an integrated portfolio linking environmental protection with sustainable development initiatives. These programmes span marine pollution, waste management, coastal restoration, fisheries governance and climate adaptation. The initiatives combine scientific research, regulatory reform, community-based conservation, improved fisheries monitoring and climate services to strengthen sustainable development across the WIO. Collectively, they illustrate the IOC's integrated approach to regional ocean governance. Key projects include:

Table 9.2: Key Projects in the WIO. Source: FFEM n.d.; GEF 2021; IOC n.d.; IOC 2021; IOC-Hydromet 2021; IOC-Zenodo 2023, IOC-ECOFISH 2025; OACPS n.d.; UNDP 2024, World Bank n.d.

Policy Area	Key Projects	Primary Focus	Additional Notes
Marine pollution and circular economy	*Expédition Plastique Océan Indien* **(ExPLOI)** Transformation of the Waste Sector towards a Waste-Energy Nexus **(TWENex)**	Marine pollution, circular economy, waste management	Specifically adapted to island contexts. TWENex was closed in 2025
Chemical and waste management	Implementing Sustainable Low and Non-Chemical Development in Small Island Developing States **(ISLANDS)**—Indian Ocean	Regulatory reform, private-sector engagement, regional knowledge sharing	Funded by the Global Environment Fund co-implemented with Business Mauritius
Integrated Coastal Zone Management	Resilience of Coastal Ecosystems in the Southwest of the Indian Ocean **(RECOS)**	Ecosystem restoration, community-based conservation	Operates in Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM). The RECOS builds on the Regional Coastal Management Programme (ReCoMaP)
Fisheries Governance	*Programme Régional de Surveillance des Pêches* **(PRSP)**	Monitoring, control and surveillance; institutional capacity, regional cooperation	Supported through successive EU funded programmes—ECOFISH; SMARTFISH; SWIOFISH

Policy Area	Key Projects	Primary Focus	Additional Notes
Climate adaptation	Hydromet	Hydro-meteorological services, climate information, resilience	Supported by the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD), the EU, and ClimSA

Power, agency and regional solidarity

Underlying these initiatives is the IOC's ability to convert regional solidarity into political leverage. Individually, island states have limited bargaining power with major donors and external powers. Collectively, however, they co-ordinate negotiating positions, shape regional priorities and reduce dependence on any single partner. The IOC has mobilised approximately €300 million from a diversified group of partners while maintaining strategic autonomy in programme design (IOC 2025). This strategy mirrors the PIF's collective diplomacy on climate change and fisheries (Fry 2019). By attracting multiple external partners—including competing global powers—the IOC shifts the balance of engagement: external actors increasingly compete to work with the IOC rather than the organisation having to compete for attention. At the same time, growing geopolitical interest in the WIO makes continued regional cohesion essential if island priorities are to remain at the centre of governance.

The IOC experience supports this chapter's central argument that maritime security is not a separate policy domain but a prerequisite for sustainable ocean development. Through the RMSA, maritime domain awareness has significantly improved the region's ability to detect and respond to IUU fishing, trafficking, pollution and other maritime threats (Ralaiarivony 2025). The two regional centres, working with the Nairobi Convention Secretariat and international partners, have strengthened regional preparedness and interoperability through co-ordinated pollution response exercises, including the Maritime Security and Pollution Response Exercise held in 2023 (MASEPOLREX23) and in 2025 (MASEPOLREX25). These exercises have also reduced institutional duplication by improving coordination across regional actors (IOC-MASEPOLREX25 2025; Témoignages 2023; Nairobi Convention 2025). These outcomes are now internationally recognised. For example, the United States Navy has formally integrated the RCOC into the planning of their annual regional exercises through CUTLASS Express, thereby publicly acknowledging its central role in coordinating regional responses and enhancing interoperability (Gontier 2025; PMAESA 2025; Levardi 2024). The development implications are

equally significant. UNECA estimates that maritime security issues cost the WIO more than US$1.14 billion annually—around 5.7% of the region's gross marine product (UNECA 2025). Between 2020 and 2025, the IOC managed approximately €130 million across fourteen projects linking maritime security with sustainable development (IOC 2023b).

Regional cooperation has also created the conditions for innovation. The UNECA Blue Economy Valuation Toolkit (BEVTK) highlights the importance of ocean-based sectors in SIDS: in Seychelles the BE underpins key revenue-generating sectors, while in Zanzibar it contributes over a quarter of GDP (UNECA SRO-EA 2021; Maskaeva et al. 2024). For smaller economies such as Comoros, regional security arrangements provide access to surveillance data, technical expertise and operational coordination that would otherwise be beyond national capacity. Seychelles' pioneering US$15 million sovereign Blue Bond for marine conservation and fisheries management illustrates how security-enabled governance can support financial innovation (World Bank 2025). While nationally issued, it benefited from IOC-facilitated technical cooperation and knowledge sharing, creating a model that other island and coastal states can adapt (Virdin et al. 2021).

WHAT LESSONS DOES THE IOC CASE OFFER FOR BROADER OCEAN GOVERNANCE?

The IOC case generates valuable lessons, illustrating how SIDS can exercise epistemic authority over the ocean futures and contribute to reshaping global ocean governance frameworks. In bridging the gap between vulnerability and agency, the IOC demonstrates how regional institutions enable collective sovereignty, facilitate knowledge production and create platforms for negotiating with powerful external partners on more equitable terms. When the IOC and UNECA jointly released the 2025 report quantifying maritime security costs according to SIDS-defined priorities—documenting that IUU fishing, climate impacts and environmental degradation impose greater economic costs than piracy—it challenged external threat prioritisation and provided evidence for reallocating resources toward island concerns (UNECA 2025). In the same vein, the coproduction and launch of the policy brief on the RMSA with the University of Oxford exemplifies how sustained research-practice collaboration can strengthen the regional knowledge base (Alexandre et al. 2026). This SIDS-led knowledge production establishes regional ownership of the problem definition, a critical precondition for ownership of the solution.

For the IOC, flexibility as an adaptation tool has proven effective in fostering regional cooperation. The IOC illustrates that ocean regions need not be defined by fixed boundaries but can instead remain fluid, shaped by functional cooperation needs. While formal IOC membership is limited to five island states, the RMSA extends its operational reach across East African coastal states and Red Sea littorals, engaging non-member states without requiring formal expansion and coordinating with continental institutions while preserving an island-specific identity (Kinyua 2023). This flexibility allows the region to be reconfigured in response to evolving challenges rather than constrained by rigid institutional frameworks. As such, it reflects a form of adaptive governance suited to complex transboundary maritime contexts, requiring cooperation across multiple scales and actor types (Mahon and Fanning 2019).

As argued at the outset, this case illustrates that ocean regions are not simply given—they are shaped by those who define them. The WIO is often viewed through external lenses: as part of the Indo-Pacific, a corridor on the Maritime Silk Road, or an area of French strategic influence. In these narratives, island states often appear as strategic locations rather than political actors. Through the RMSA and its vision of *Indianocéanie,* the IOC offers an alternative regional narrative—one shaped by island priorities, regional ownership and shared security. In doing so, it challenges island blindness by placing island states at the centre of regional governance.

The experience of the PIF demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of SIDS-led ocean governance. Like the IOC's vision of *Indianocéanie*, the PIF has redefined regional identity through the concept of the 'Blue Pacific Continent' and successfully championed SDG 14 as a standalone ocean goal (Pacific Islands Forum 2022; Quirk and Hanich 2016). The WIO, however, is shaped by a more contested strategic landscape. Competing visions promoted through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), France's Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Maritime Silk Road largely reflect external priorities, often with limited SIDS influence (Chauhdry, Aqib and Wassan 2025). In this context, the RMSA remains the only comprehensive regional framework designed and led by African island and coastal states, making it essential for preserving regional agency.

The entry into force of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement in January 2026 marks a significant achievement for SIDS in global ocean governance. SIDS played a central role in securing provisions for biodiversity protection, equitable benefit-sharing of marine genetic resources and capacity-building, while advancing the interests of 'adjacent states' affected

by high seas activities (Raguain, Eck and Pouponneau 2025). Early ratification by Mauritius, Seychelles, Palau and the Maldives reflects the treaty's importance for SIDS (Newsroom Panama 2025; Commonwealth Secretariat 2026). For regional institutions like the IOC, the BBNJ creates new opportunities to co-ordinate positions, strengthen technical cooperation and support equitable governance of adjacent high seas areas, highlighting the value of SIDS coordination across regional, inter-regional and global levels (Etuk Johnson 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

African and Indian Ocean SIDS are actively reshaping the BE through regional governance, with the IOC serving as the primary vehicle for island-led agenda setting. Rather than adopting externally designed frameworks, islands and coastal states have used regional cooperation to define institutions and strategies grounded in their own priorities—producing measurable outcomes that challenge both seablindness and island blindness in ocean governance. Through the RMSA, the IOC has positioned maritime security not as an end in itself but as an enabler of sustainable ocean governance. The IOC contributes to strengthening fisheries management through programmes and mechanisms such as Southwest Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth (SWIOFISH) and the Regional Fisheries Monitoring Plan (PRSP). It advances marine conservation and climate resilience through coastal and ocean management initiatives, and promotes pollution reduction and circular economy strategies. Furthermore, its approach also redefines regional threat priorities by placing IUU fishing, environmental degradation, climate impacts and sovereignty alongside traditional security concerns, while building flexible partnership that connect island states, African states and external actors. The BBNJ Agreement further empowers islands to participate in high seas management, securing marine conservation, equitable benefit-sharing and capacity-building in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

These achievements speak directly to the volume's central proposition that ocean regions are not fixed geographical spaces but are continually shaped through governance, institutions and political agency. While external actors continue to frame the WIO through various strategic narratives, the RMSA, supported by the IOC, represents a region defined from within—through the priorities, institutions and cooperation of the states that inhabit it. Comparison with the PIF highlights a shared ambition to position islands as custodians of vast maritime spaces, while also illustrating the more complex geopolitical environment in which the WIO operates. In this context, the RMSA remains the

only comprehensive maritime governance framework conceived and led by the region's island and coastal states, making its continued consolidation essential to foster regional agency. What these collective achievements also reveal, however, is that regional innovation and national implementation do not necessarily progress at the same pace. While the WIO has established one of the developing world's most advanced regional maritime security architectures, national implementation of BE strategies remains uneven. Bridging this gap represents the next frontier of SIDS-led ocean governance and will require stronger national institutions, greater policy coherence and sustained political commitment (March et al. 2024).

Several implications follow. SIDS should continue strengthening regional ownership of the BE governance agenda while embedding regional commitments more systematically into national policies and institutions and treating maritime security as a development infrastructure rather than a separate domain. African continental organisations should further integrate island perspectives into maritime governance and BE strategies, respect subsidiarity and ensure coastal and island priorities receive equal recognition. International partners should move beyond fragmented project-based support toward long-term institutional partnerships that reinforce leadership and respect locally defined priorities. The experience of the IOC demonstrates that when island and coastal states collectively shape the governance of their shared maritime space, they do more than strengthen maritime security—they shape the governance of the ocean region itself. In doing so, they offer a compelling and replicable model of ocean regionalism that challenges both seablindness and island blindness while demonstrating how regional governance can advance security, sustainable development and political agency simultaneously.

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