CAPACITY BUILDING FOR HEALTHY SEAS: SUMMER SCHOOL ON SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN

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BLUE SKILLS AND CAREERS AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY

The need for an urgent transformation of all maritime and coastal activities in line with the objectives of the UN Sustainable Development Goals - sustainable resource use, climate change mitigation and adaptation, protection of marine and coastal ecosystems and biodiversity, improved livelihoods and social inclusion - is currently among the key areas of common interest in the Euro-Mediterranean region. This is confirmed both at the level of the Union for the Mediterranean (which adopted a Ministerial declaration on Sustainable Blue Economy on 2 February 2021) and at the level of the EU (which confirmed the important role for marine and maritime sectors for the accomplishment of the EU's internal strategy *European Green Deal,* and for its external cooperation with its Mediterranean neighbours; see Communication by the Commission *Transforming the EU's Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future* (COM(2021) 240 final) and *Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighborhood: New Agenda for the Mediterranean* (JOIN(2021) 2 final)).

The role of capacity building in that agenda is clearly acknowledged, but it is only slowly being rolled out. The documents mention the need for building up the pool of qualified people to develop the prospective sectors of the blue economy, a task

that includes the retraining and reskilling of the existing workforce, and improving the public perception of careers in the blue economy. Furthermore, the high potential of research and innovation for the sustainable development of the blue economy is recognised in the region. Yet, the implementation of that commitment is also gradual at best. Only a handful of programmes have been developed in the past years with a significant surge foreseen for the period after 2021 at both the EU and the Euro-Mediterranean level.

While widely mentioned, the notion of "blue skills" is fraught with questions over what these really entail and how to effectively build them. There has been no agreement over the content of a kind of a blue economy competence framework that would enable individuals to fill the positions across sectors that are being mapped with increasing accuracy (see UfM, 2021). Such a competence framework could outline the required knowledge, skills and attitudes as well as contribute to fostering the employability of individuals possessing them.

This note reports on an implemented training that seeks to contribute to the required "blue skills" and the deliberations over how to train individuals at the level of youth, specifically master's and PhD students. The approach taken in the described training could be a useful starting point for future trainings and educational initiatives designed in this domain, and a reference point for the adjustment of existing programmes. As such, this note aims to contribute to a more targeted and goal-oriented capacity building in the domain of the blue economy in the Mediterranean.

SUMMER SCHOOL 2021 DESIGN AND EXPERIENCE

The training described here is the Summer School on Sustainable Blue Economy, jointly organised by the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI), Slovenia and National Institute of Oceanography and Applied Geophysics (OGS), Italy in June 2021.[1] This was the third time that the two institutions have joined

1 I thank Giulia Massolino from OGS for revising this note to ensure a valid presentation of the event.

forces to organise a summer school on the blue economy, apart from each conducting its own activities in the related areas. For EMUNI, the summer school took place within the framework of its three-year project BLUES (Jean Monnet Module, co-financed by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union) and for OGS, the summer school is a result of its project BlueSkills, co-funded by the Italian Ministry for University and Research, with the support of the Central European Initiative (CEI), and labelled by the Union for the Mediterranean. Various funding opportunities, carefully combined to seek synergies and avoid duplication, have allowed the summer school to open a call for a programme that is fully free of charge for about 25-30 selected participants, covering not only the costs of a programme of about 60 hours of online and face-to-face teaching and field trips, but also the costs related to travel and accommodation.

Due to ongoing restrictions related to travel and the conduct of activities, the organisers took a decision after the selection process was concluded and just a few weeks before the planned launch of the summer school, to not host any parts of the summer school in person in Trieste and Piran respectively, but rather, to re-adjust the programme to take place fully online. This allowed for a slightly larger number of participants, amounting to 38 confirmed participants from 18 different countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The selection process paid attention to the merit of candidates and their motivation, while also ensuring a wide geographical representation.

The overall goal of the summer school is to support the creation of stable and attractive career pathways and skilled talents that will be needed to support the expansion of marine and maritime sectors. The specific objectives of the summer school were:

- to improve professional skills and competences relevant for the development of the marine and maritime sectors, and ocean governance, in support of the Sustainable Development Goals;
- to gain knowledge of challenges and opportunities in specific marine and maritime sectors;
- to foster networks and partnerships that can help to scale-up activities in support of the sustainable blue economy,

including research, entrepreneurial and communication actions; and
- to stimulate an attitude of active contribution to positive change for the conservation and sustainable use of the Mediterranean Sea.

With the summer school eventually unfolding in the online mode only, the selection of objectives was not affected, but their scope certainly was. The personal experience of places and people would have carried a more positive impact, particularly on the third and fourth objectives, i.e. on the intensity of friendships and professional partnerships, the desire to use them, and on the participants' relation to the sea. There is certainly a limitation to fostering interpersonal skills and emotional experiences in the online environment. A significant weakness of the switch to online mode was also the inability to carry out the specially tailored field trips, which have in the past editions of the training proven to be an important source not only of local-specific knowledge, but also of the application of context-dependent knowledge to new situations.

To address the first and second objectives, the course consisted of a combination of asynchronous and synchronous online learning. The introductory session in the asynchronous mode examined the discourse over "blue economy" in policy literature, the objectives of the legal framework relating to the seas and oceans, and also the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Contrary to the popular discourse on "blue economy", many students were for the first time familiarised with the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas, which aimed to establish a legal order that would "facilitate international communication, and will promote the peaceful uses of the seas and oceans, the equitable and efficient utilization of their resources, the conservation of their living resources, and the study, protection and preservation of the marine environment." These ultimate goals of applying effort at sea and in the oceans, and the principles of "a just and equitable international economic order which takes into account the interests and needs of mankind as a whole and, in particular, the special interests and needs of developing

countries, whether coastal or land-locked" are all too often forgotten in the fervor to develop blue economy opportunities.

The core of the course consisted of synchronous, non-recorded sessions held over five days, each of which was dedicated to one of the five thematic areas: marine spatial planning, climate change, the seabed, fisheries and plastic pollution. These themes were selected not to indicate priorities, but merely to organise the course around some focus points, and to ensure a number of cross-references among topics and approaches. For the large part, the lecturers were academics and researchers, who introduced their knowledge from their scientific fields and experience from applicative projects. Inevitably, many relevant themes were left out. It seemed important to be transparent about the selected themes with the participants. Interestingly, several themes were picked up by participants in the time dedicated to mentoring. For instance, the concept of multiuse at seas was not discussed in the lecture on marine spatial planning, but was presented through a case study developed by the students themselves.

As the notion of blue economy cuts across ecological, sociocultural and economic systems and requirements, interdisciplinarity is believed to be a key defining principle in the teaching of this field. However, true interdisciplinarity is very rarely accomplished among individual lecturers. Instead, the aim of the summer school was to involve in the programme a variety of lecturers, from different backgrounds. In practice, this meant paying particular attention to balancing the predominant profiles of physical and life scientists with those of social scientists and humanities, which tend to be less visible in the perceptions of science underlying the blue economy. By way of example, the discussion on fisheries combined not only ecological modelling, but also the results of fieldwork studying fishing communities in the Northern Adriatic (Istria region) over time. Another valuable method for accomplishing interdisciplinarity in the teaching of blue economy is to encourage academic staff to listen to other lectures outside their field and reflect on them together with participants. Finally, the role of moderation is significant and involves foremost, explaining the intended purpose of the

lecture in the overall programme and stimulating discussion not only after the lecture, but also across the programme.

The interactive lectures held in the mornings were succeeded by a mentoring session, in which students met in smaller groups and developed, under the guidance of the faculty, an output of their choice, related to a research proposal, an entrepreneurial idea or an educational activity. The groups additionally aligned their work independently before presenting a final project on the last day of the summer school. Teamwork resulted in short group presentations, which primarily reflected an awareness of diversity (of challenges) across the Mediterranean, creativity of participants and an understanding of profound interconnections between ecosystems and human activities, including links and conflicts among various human interests at sea. Understandably, the students' output was less proficient at resolving the conflicts and presenting the implementation details. These are inherent in real-life situations and trouble the advancement of a sustainable blue economy.

MANDATE FOR THE FUTURE

As the seas, which are a fundamental source of ecosystem services, are undergoing intense developmental transformation, capacity building for their sustainable development has become an exigency. This need has been recognised very clearly at the global level, particularly through the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), and also in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It is time for countries, higher education institutions, vocational education and training (VET) providers, networks of VET providers, international institutions and many other actors to deliver on that need. This note has provided an experience from one concrete training to generate ideas on how it can be done.

Capacity building will include various target groups, from students to the existing labour force, and will have to be particularly inclusive of women. Regardless of the beneficiaries however, it needs to be transnational and interdisciplinary, in line with the nature of the challenges at sea. The educational and reskilling efforts need to cover an awareness of the technology potential at

the global level as well as an awareness of the socio-ecological specificities of the local environments and populations.

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