



GULF OF GUINEA MARITIME INSTITUTE

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AN OCEAN FOR THE YOUTH

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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ENGAGING THE YOUTH IN

Date: 22nd March, 2022

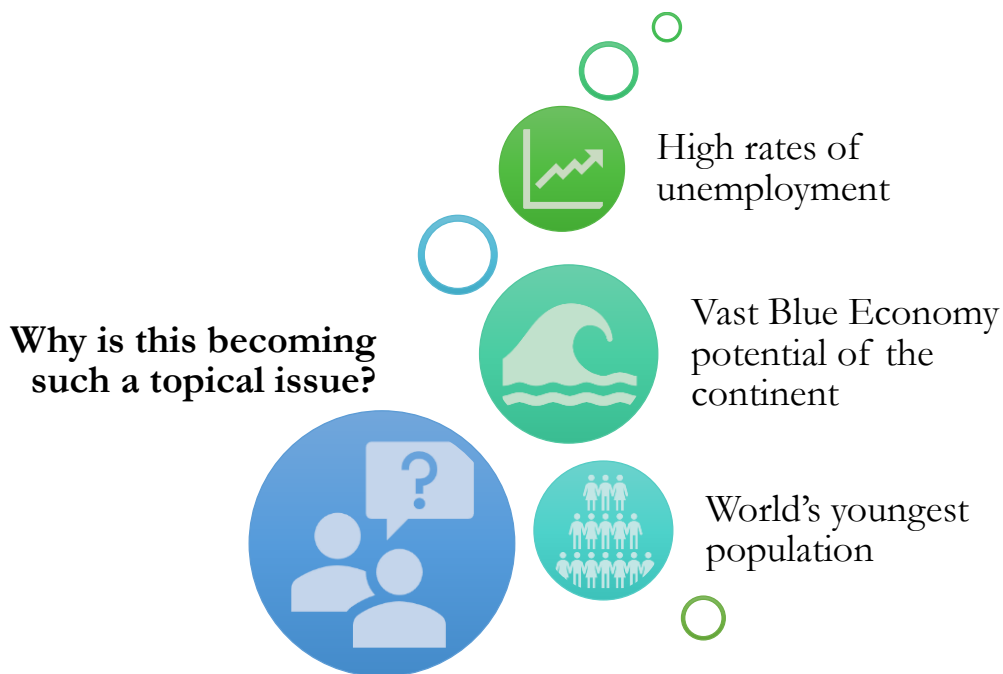




An Ocean for the Youth

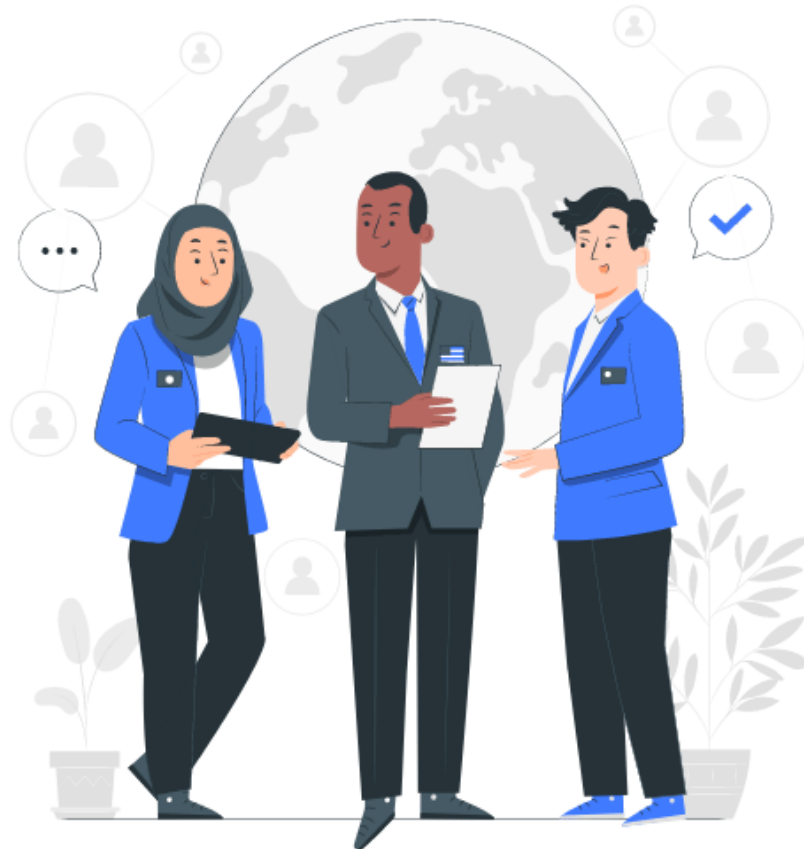
A Holistic Approach to Engaging the Youth in the Maritime Sector

As African youth, we have, for ourselves, a continent that really is ours to run. Africa has the highest percentage of youth in its population than any other continent, and that makes us the continent with the world's youngest population. At the same time, there's this vast Blue Economy potential that could well be the key to Africa's economic advancement. This is in such stark contrast to the fact that Africa has some of the highest unemployment rates in the world.





Now let's take a moment to shift to a global perspective of the problem. The recently concluded United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP



26) saw States come together to try to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Here's one thing that was clear: there was a heightened recognition not only of the centrality of the ocean to regulating global climate, but also of the adverse implications of climate change on the ocean and the ocean economy. Throughout the conference, this awareness had to be juxtaposed with the sovereign and competing interests of States and the element of political will – or more specifically, the lack of it.

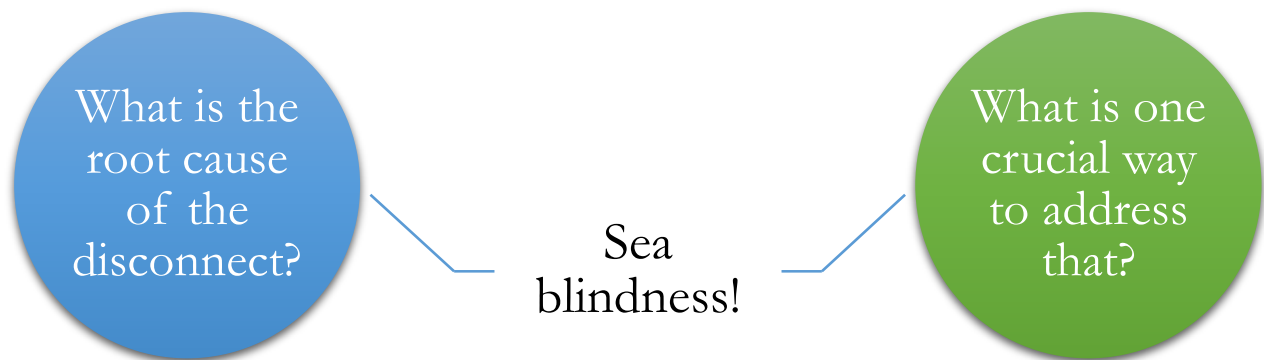
This has been the consistent challenge faced by debates centered on climate change and the need to protect the ocean. Ultimately, it has



been a vicious cycle of recognizing the problems; but not having enough political momentum to take concrete actions towards addressing them. This should be of great concern to African States because climate change and its adverse implications for marine life and the blue economy is likely to hit vulnerable African States and coastal communities hardest.

So what really is the solution to this conundrum? And we're not simply talking about positioning African States to influence outcomes at major global conventions like the COP. How can we align African State interests and political will with the ultimate goal of sustainable oceans for a vibrant Blue Economy?

We'll need to unpack this with a few more questions.



What is root cause of this disconnect between what is considered as being in the interest of African States and the need to safeguard the



ocean? It is safe to say that one of the principal root causes is sea blindness. So now, how can this persistent sea blindness be addressed?

The best way to address sea blindness is simply to end it. If you are like me, then it's safe to say that we were raised as a generation of individuals that were oblivious to the ocean...its importance and the career paths it holds. Now that we recognise this fact, we can begin to push for a reorientation of systems at the national level to raise future generations differently.



Ending sea blindness requires deliberate steps at the national level to:

- Cultivate in our young ones a love and passion for the ocean. There are really some simple ways to achieve this. For instance, elements of ocean literacy can be adapted into school curricula, even it means that they end up being integrated as co-curricular activities.



- Expose the youth to blue career opportunities. It is really important to let youth know the range of possibilities that they can successfully explore and exploit within the maritime sector.
- Groom them with the skill-sets needed to enter the maritime labour market. Of course, this definitely means taking into consideration technological advancements in the maritime sector and equipping youth with requisite technical know-how.



Cultivate a love and passion for the ocean



Expose the youth to blue career opportunities



Groom younger ones to acquire skill-sets needed to enter the maritime labour market



Look beyond mainstream biases

- How can existing career paths lead back to the ocean?

I think though that what is crucial in all of this is the need to look beyond mainstream biases. Often, we think of only two sides of the spectrum when it comes to maritime career paths – we may think of seafarers on one side of the spectrum and ocean scientists like marine biologists on the other. But we need to break away from this limited focus to see how existing career paths can lead back to the ocean. Public relations specialists and communicators, journalists, economists, psychologists, accountants...each of these professions have unique roles they can play towards ensuring a vibrant and sustainable Blue Economy. As an



example, when we shift the maritime security narrative to the well-being of seafarers, we become increasingly aware of the role of psychologists, for instance, in studying the impact of piratical threats to the mental health and wellbeing of seafarers.

Here's the central message: individuals in various professions who develop a passion for the ocean later on can always find a way of contributing meaningfully to the Blue Economy without having to shelve away their existing skills in order to acquire a completely different set of skills, even if their main field of work is not within typical Blue Economy sectors. The Blue Economy encompasses so many more professions than we give it credit for. If my passion is to become a journalist or an economist – a politician, maybe – I can still find a way to merge this beautifully with the advancement of the Blue Economy and build my skill-set around that, developing a unique niche in my field of work. The possibilities are endless.

Of course, industry practitioners also need a shift in perspective to truly appreciate the wealth of youth they have at their disposal. They need to understand the cross-linkages between the maritime sector and other disciplines to absorb beyond the limited range of youth that have acquired “conventional” maritime skill sets. Organisations dedicated to safeguarding the ocean must equally begin to think outside the box and recognise the truly interdisciplinary nature of viable efforts aimed at safeguarding the ocean space. As a matter of fact, the fluidity and interconnectedness of the 5 separate oceans is the perfect metaphor for these cross-linkages between disciplines in addressing ocean problems.

Now that we've looked at pathways to ending sea blindness, let's take a step back. We get that Africa has a rather youthful population...but what's so special about the youth? Why are they so essential to driving change and building a thriving blue economy for Africa?



Well, it's great that I'm driving towards a major point here with a question because here's something interesting: history has really pointed to the fact that the most remarkable breakthroughs are driven by asking the right questions.

Think about Isaac Newton, who asked himself: "What causes objects to stop when they are already in motion?". Or, think of Einstein who asked himself: "If the speed of light is constant and it travels through space and time, what does that mean for space and time?". In either case, the breakthroughs from asking these questions laid the foundation for several global advancements today.

According to renowned neurologist, Susan Greenfield, creativity starts with questioning dogma. Enough said then....and on to the next question. Take a moment to think back. At what point in our lives are we best at asking questions?

When we are young! So, it really isn't just mundane rhetoric to say that youth are more likely to generate useful dialogue by asking the right questions. Now this doesn't discredit the wealth of experience and insights that older generations can bring to the maritime sector. It only highlights the fact that youth have a more unique role to play in driving innovative solutions to the ocean's challenges. This is definitely a grey area that African youth need to exploit.

Now, let's get back to what I mentioned earlier about why it's so important to end sea blindness. Let's imagine a future COP (or any crucial conference centered on ocean governance and maritime security) where African States have taken concrete steps to build a love and passion for



the ocean in that generation, to encourage individuals to explore ocean careers, and so on and so forth. What's going to happen?



We'll likely have a team of delegates attending the conference who truly understand how crucial the ocean is to the well-being of their citizens...delegates who are able to press for outcomes that would ultimately favour the development of a thriving and sustainable Blue Economy.

We really have nothing to lose.

Let's conclude on this note. Climate change and its impact on the ocean and the ocean economy is certainly an issue that needs to be addressed urgently, as are all other ocean governance and maritime security concerns such as piracy and IUU; but they are also issues that are likely to remain on the global agenda for decades to come.



Grooming a large number of African youth to love the ocean and pursue careers centered around safeguarding it may not have noticeable effects now. It does imply, however, that generations to come will be more sensitised about the ocean, the threats it faces and how to effectively address them. It also means that these generations will be more willing to take collective action towards addressing oceanic threats. Let's not forget the other side of the coin. African States will emerge with more vibrant Blue Economies championed by its youthful population because we would have exposed them to the economic potential of Africa's maritime sectors.