# Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Western Indian Ocean: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Pathways

## The Blue Tourism Initiative project partners:

**IDDRI** is an independent think tank based in Paris (France) at the interface of research and decision-making that investigates sustainable development issues requiring global coordination.

**Eco-Union** is an independent Think and Do Tank based in Barcelona (Spain), whose objective is to accelerate the ecological transition of the Euro-Mediterranean region.

**CORDIO East Africa** is a nonprofit research Organisation based in Kenya focus on the sustainable use and management of coastal and marine resources in the Western Indian Ocean.

**IUCN** Centre for Mediterranean, established in Malaga (Spain), works to bridge gaps between science, policy, management and action in order to conserve nature and accelerate the transition towards sustainable development in the Mediterranean.

**CANARI** (Caribbean Natural Resources Institute) is a non-profit institute headquartered in Trinidad and Tobago, facilitating stakeholder participation in the stewardship of renewable natural resources in the Caribbean.

## Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Western Indian Ocean: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Pathways

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# About the Blue Tourism Initiative

The Blue Tourism Initiative is a global multi-stakeholder innovation program focused on the environmental management, governance, and planning of coastal and maritime tourism in three marine regions: the Mediterranean, the Western Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. The project supports the participatory development of sustainable blue tourism initiatives through policy actions and a multi-stakeholder approach to inform the scalability of sustainable blue tourism in other regions.

The objectives of the Blue Tourism Initiative are to:

1. Assess the current global and regional situation of blue tourism, focusing on challenges and opportunities, and recommend directions for sustainable blue tourism development.

2. Support and monitor the implementation of sustainable blue tourism initiatives in the Mediterranean, Western Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean.

3. Integrate sustainable blue tourism management and governance at the regional policy level, share best practices, and raise awareness among key local, national, and regional stakeholders.

The Blue Tourism Initiative is co-led by the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) and the Spanish Think and Do Tank Eco-Union and co-funded by the French Facility for Global Environmental (FFEM), and implemented by three partners responsible for the project's activities in each region: The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the Mediterranean; Coastal Oceans Research and Development in the Indian Ocean (CORDIO East Africa) in the Western Indian Ocean and the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) in the Caribbean.

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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **ABAS** | Action Based Adaptation Strategy |
| **AFDB** | African Development Bank |
| **AMCEN** | Africa Ministerial Conference on the Environment |
| **AMCOW** | Africa Ministerial Conference on Water |
| **APTA** | Association of Promotion of Tourism to Africa |
| **ASATA** | Alliance of Sustainable Tourism Certification Stakeholders in Africa |
| **ATA** | Africa Tourism Association |
| **ATTA** | Africa Travel and Tourism Association |
| **AU** | African Union |
| **AWF** | Africa Wildlife Foundation |
| **COMESA** | Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa |
| **COP** | Conference of Parties |
| **EAC** | East African Community |
| **FDI** | Foreign Direct Investment |
| **GSTC** | Global Sustainable Tourism Council |
| **GDP** | Gross Domestic Product |
| **GMP** | Gross Marine Product |
| **ICZM** | Integrated Coastal Zone Management |
| **IGAD** | Intergovernmental Authority on Development |
| **IOC** | Indian Ocean Commission |
| **IORA** | Indian Ocean Rim Association |
| **IUCN** | International Union for Conservation of Nature |
| **IWRM** | Integrated Water Resource Management |
| **KATA** | Kenya Association of Travel Agents |
| **KATO** | Kenya Association of Tour Operators |
| **MLG** | Multi level Governance |
| **MPAs** | Marine Protected Areas |
| **MSMES** | Micro Small and Medium Enterprises |
| **NEPAD** | New Partnerships for Africa Development |
| **NGOs** | Non-governmental Organizations |

| | |
|---|---|
| **OECD** | Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| **PPCP** | Public Private Community Partnership |
| **ROGS** | Regional Ocean Governance Strategy |
| **ROI** | Return on Investment |
| **SADC** | Southern African Development Community |
| **SDGs** | Sustainable Development Goals |
| **SIDS** | Small Islands Developing States |
| **SMES** | Small and Medium-sized Enterprises |
| **TDG** | Tourism Destination Governance |
| **TVET** | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNCLOS** | United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea |
| **UNCTAD** | United Nations Conference on Trade and Development |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **UNECA:** | United Nations Economic Commission for Africa |
| **UNEP** | United Nations Environment Programme |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| **UNWTO** | United Nations World Tourism Organization |
| **US** | United States |
| **WIO** | Western Indian Ocean |
| **WIOMSA** | Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association |
| **WTTC** | World Travel and Tourism Council |
| **WWF** | World Wide Fund for Nature |

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# Executive Summary

This report reviews the **state of play of blue tourism** in the **Western Indian Ocean** (WIO), including trends, challenges, and its current policy and governance landscape. It proposes **policy opportunities** and potential directions to foster a more enabling environment for the sustainability of the sector. The 10 countries that make the vast WIO includes the nations of Madagascar, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Comoros, Mozambique, Mauritius, Seychelles, Somalia and France, united by the ocean with diverse reliance on economic activities including agriculture, fisheries, tourism, heritage and mining. The role of the ocean to the WIO region and the African continent at large is significant. A report published by WWF in 2017, estimates that the **Gross Annual Marine Product** of the WIO is at least **US$ 20.8 billion** and the total ocean assets base is at US$ 333.8 billion.[1] The same report also indicates that around **60 million people in the WIO live within 100km of the shoreline** from where they draw their livelihoods. This charts the need for careful consideration of the impact of economic activities in these areas. Against this backdrop, a sustainable and inclusive blue economy could provide a more responsible approach to leverage opportunities[2] provided by the ocean for economic growth, improved livelihoods and job creation, mindful of conservation and preservation of ocean resources.

The blue economy already generates nearly US$ 300 billion in Africa and supports 49 million jobs.[3] Therefore, the sustainability, resilience and continuity of the blue economy sector is critical for a more sustainable future where economic sectors operate in sync with ocean and coastal natural resources as well as social and cultural capitals of communities living in coastal areas. As such, blue tourism, taking place in coastal and marine areas, plays an important role in driving a more sustainable blue economy. Coastal tourism accounts for 5% of global GDP and about 7% of employment.[4] Coastal and marine tourism also constitutes the largest economic sector for most Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and many other coastal states. Current projection estimates that by 2030, coastal and marine tourism will represent the largest ocean economy sector, employing approximately 8.5 million people.[5] Blue tourism has a similar relevance to the WIO. In Africa, blue tourism contributed US$ 80 billion representing 3.4% of GDP and 24 million jobs in 2018.[6] The World Bank estimates[7] by 2030, blue tourism in Africa will generate US$ 100 billion of the US$ 405 billion expected by the global blue economy, suggesting the economic potential of Africa's blue tourism to drive Africa's future economic growth, if aligned to sustainability.

1   WWF, (2017). Reviving The Western Indian Ocean Economy: Actions for a Sustainable Future.
2   UNDP, (2018). Harnessing the Blue Economy for Sustainable Development Policy Brief. Issue 6/2018.
3   IGAD, (2021). Regional Blue Economy Strategy and Implementation plan for 5 years (2021-2025).
4   World Travel & Tourism Council, (2019). Economic Impact Report.
5   World Bank, (2017). Sustainable tourism can drive the blue economy: Investing in ocean health is synonymous with generating ocean wealth.
6   World Bank, (2022). Blue Economy in Africa: A Synthesis.
7   World Bank, (2022). Operational Brief- Blue Economy in Africa.

Yet, the same report suggests that a sustainable Africa's blue economy is threatened from poorly managed fishing practices, unsustainable infrastructure development, pollution, inadequate management of natural habitats and resources, and weak governance, which intensifies in areas suffering from ecosystem fragility and social conflicts. These threats, if not managed, could affect the ability of the WIO states to shift blue tourism practices towards more sustainable models. Equally, direct threats related to blue tourism include climate change, loss of coastal ecosystems and rapid growth of tourism, potentially impacting the resilience of the sector and of the reliant communities.[8] The combination of challenges makes ocean ecosystems, communities and the blue tourism sector vulnerable to changes, limiting the sector contribution to global and regional sustainability targets and agenda. New investments in technologies for early warning, resilient buildings, capacity building for first responders, maritime workers and artisanal fishermen are increasingly needed in coastal areas. Climate change has also necessitated a rethinking of the landscape-seascape planning and forced remodelling of existing infrastructure to withstand extreme weather in coastal destinations.

Against this backdrop, a shift towards a more sustainable blue tourism in the WIO should pay attention to the following policy areas:

## Policy Pathway 1. Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Blue Tourism

Strengthening regional cooperation in the WIO would foster sustainable blue tourism through a unified approach that can address shared challenges and opportunities such as environmental protection and economic growth. Developing a Regional Master Strategy, aligned with the Regional Ocean Governance Strategy and other relevant frameworks, could guide regionally aligned sustainable blue tourism models, promote best practices, and enhance resilience through collaboration and innovation.

## Policy Pathway 2. Driving Sustainable Economic Growth through Blue Tourism

Driving sustainable economic growth in the WIO through blue tourism involves diversifying beyond beach and resort tourism. Integrated planning can promote year-round activities and leverage cultural and nature-based attractions, whilst addressing the challenges of seasonality. Moreover, scaling up local businesses with supportive policies and programs would enhance inclusivity and sustainability. By incorporating diverse tourism segments and strengthening local businesses, the region can achieve more balanced and resilient economic growth.

## Policy Pathway 3 - Advancing Social Equity Within and Through Blue Tourism

Advancing social equity in WIO blue tourism could be fostered by incentivising more inclusive value chains that support local businesses and marginalised groups, improving skills through targeted training programs, and decentralising tourism management to enhance local community benefits. These strategies can foster broader economic and social development while ensuring sustainable and equitable growth in the blue tourism sector.

## Policy Pathway 4. Promoting and Safeguarding Environmental Sustainability in Blue Tourism

To safeguard environmental sustainability through blue tourism in the WIO, multi-stakeholder and multi-level collaboration should be fostered for transparent policy-making, strengthen local marine governance through training and inclusive decision-making, and implement a regional certification program. This approach could ensure more effective management, promotes adherence to sustainability standards, and builds trust among stakeholders and travellers.

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8    UNCTAD, (2023). Review of Maritime Report.

Matemwe Beach, Zanzibar, Tanzania (© Jones/Unsplash)

# 1. Introduction

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- Coastal regions attract approximately 80% of all travel and tourism activities globally and there is a growing emphasis on sustainable tourism practices aimed at minimizing environmental impact of the sector.

- Tourism is one of the established sectors of Africa's blue economy contributing approximately US$ 39.2 billion to Africa's GDP in 2019, representing about 8.5% of the continent's total GDP.

- The Western Indian Ocean presents an increasing necessity to shift coastal and marine tourism models towards more sustainable practices and supporting governance mechanisms.

This report reviews the state of play of blue tourism in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) by drawing upon desk research and stakeholder consultations. The report's main objective is to inform possible policy solutions to pertinent challenges associated with fostering a more sustainable blue tourism economy in the WIO. Attention is also given to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and other small island destinations in the region facing their own vulnerability to climate change. A diagnosis of the blue tourism sustainability opportunities and challenges in the region develops throughout the report, along with analysis of the existing governance mechanisms. This diagnosis informs enabling and targeted policy propositions that could be considered by relevant blue tourism stakeholders in the WIO region.

Blue tourism refers to coastal and marine tourism activities[9] and is one of the most established sectors of Africa's blue economy. For example, in Kenya, among the blue economy subsectors, coastal tourism is the largest contributor to the ocean economy accounting for about 65% of the blue economy, followed by marine tourism representing around 28%.[10]

To sustain the blue tourism sector, the WIO draws from the diverse product offerings stemming from the rich coastal and marine natural and cultural resources existing in the region. For the WIO countries, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) play an important role for blue tourism due to their often high tourist visitations. Yet, their conservation value can be jeopardised by more impactful tourism development.

Thirty-eight coastal states within Africa have opportunities to benefit from blue tourism, both in terms of fostering livelihood and supporting conservation. A strong reason for this is that coastal regions attract approximately 80% of all travel and tourism activities globally,[11] positioning marine environments as crucial drivers of tourism while being highly subject to the sector's negative externalities. Despite a downturn in international travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, post pandemic data on international tourist arrivals shows that Africa has

9   Balestracci, G. and Sciacca, A., (2023). Towards Sustainable Blue Tourism: Trends, Challenges and Policy Pathways. Blue Tourism Initiatives.
10  University of Nairobi Maritime Centre (2023). As Assessment of the Status of Blue Economy Sectors in Kenya.
11  World Resources Institute, (2021). Webinar - Building a Sustainable Coastal and Marine Tourism Economy.

## Figure 1. **International Tourist Arrivals**



**% change over 2019**

- 2021
- 2022
- 2023
- 2024
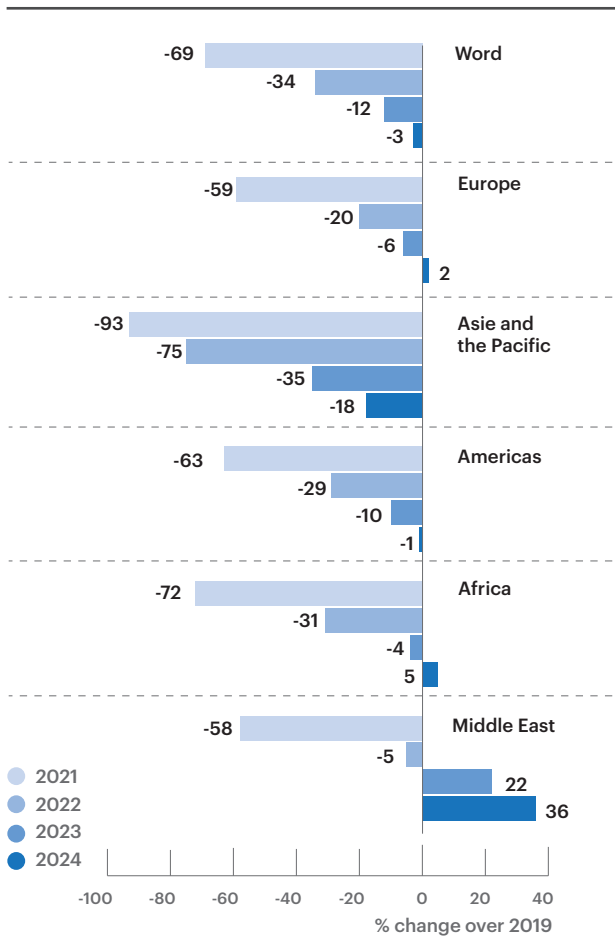
Source: UN Tourism, (2024). UN Tourism Barometer.

been picking up momentum in the tourism sector's recovery (**Figure 1**). In 2024, the continent registered a 5% positive change in arrivals over 2019, a feat yet to be achieved by few other regions. This progress is equally reflective of potential for tourism growth in the WIO, indicating the growing need for sustainable blue tourism models.

The coastal and marine tourism sector is predicted to represent the largest segment of the ocean economy by 2030, making up to 26% of the total value generated by ocean-based industries.[12] As an established sector with local populations participating in various work opportunities, tourism provides an entry point for coastal populations linkages to the blue economy. If properly designed, long standing tourism activities in coastal and ocean environments can reduce barriers for community involvement in the blue economy. Compared to other segments of the blue economy that can be demanding in terms of infrastructure development, tourism and hospitality industries allow ease of access to opportunities in the blue economy. However, unsustainable growth of blue tourism in WIO country destinations could lead to the overconsumption of natural resources, increase coastal and marine pollution, and degrade the environment, resulting in negative social, economic, and ecological impacts that outweigh its benefits.

Globally, blue economy initiatives cover a wide range of activities such as maritime transport, fishing, manufacture of ocean-based products, among others, both at sea and along coastlines. In the WIO region, where around 60 million people live within 100 kilometres of the coastline, these initiatives are vital for supporting opportunities for livelihoods and sustainable economic growth.

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) covers about 8.1% of the global ocean surface[13] (**Figure 2**). The region comprises 10 countries: Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, France, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, and Tanzania with a total ocean asset base estimated at US$ 333.8 billion[14]. A healthy marine habitat and stable abundance of marine biological diversity are important components to support human activities in the WIO region along with ensuring the functioning of marine ecosystem services, e.g. it has contributions to the hydrological cycle, is important for ocean sourced carbonate production, and has immense aesthetic, cultural and spiritual value.

## Figure 2. **The Western Indian Ocean**



Source: Authors, 2024.

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12   OECD, (2016). The Ocean Economy in 2030.

13   Obura, O., (2017). Reviving the Western Indian Ocean economy: actions for a sustainable future.
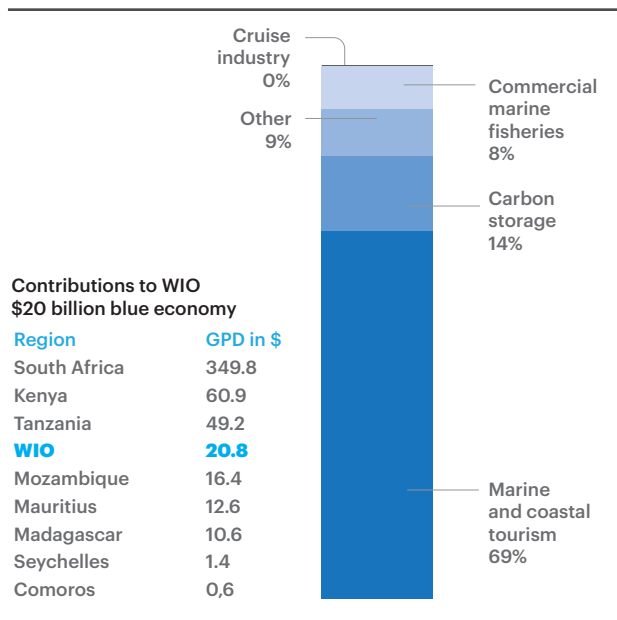
# 2. Blue Tourism in the Western Indian Ocean

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- Countries in the Western Indian Ocean are at different stages of tourism development, showing some variation and similarities in the challenges they face to sustainable blue tourism.

- In most Western Indian Ocean countries, planning approaches could further be integrated, and the objectives of sustainable tourism are generally insufficiently defined.

- As tourism is expected to grow in the region, there is an urgent necessity to structure tourism towards more sustainable models.

## 2.1. Blue Tourism Developments

Blue tourism plays a significant role in the WIO region economy. In this area bordering approximately 8,000 km of Africa's East coastline, blue tourism constitutes to approximately 69% of the ocean-based economy,[14] viewed in terms of Gross Marine Product.[15] Compared to each WIO country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), WIO Gross Marine Product is the 4th largest[16] (Figure 3).

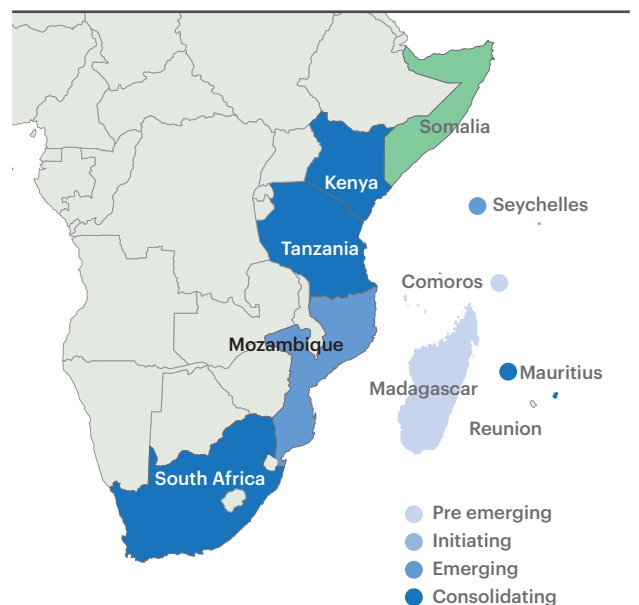### Figure 3. Ocean Gross Marine Product in WIO



Cruise industry 0%
Other 9%
Commercial marine fisheries 8%
Carbon storage 14%
Marine and coastal tourism 69%

**Contributions to WIO $20 billion blue economy**

| Region | GPD in $ |
|--------|----------|
| South Africa | 349.8 |
| Kenya | 60.9 |
| Tanzania | 49.2 |
| WIO | 20.8 |
| Mozambique | 16.4 |
| Mauritius | 12.6 |
| Madagascar | 10.6 |
| Seychelles | 1.4 |
| Comoros | 0,6 |

Source: Authors, 2024.

14 Boston Consulting Group, (2017). The economic imperative to revive our oceans.
15 *Ibid*.
16 UN Tourism, (2024). Global and regional tourism performance.

Tourism development levels in the WIO coastline varies significantly, with some countries already having matured destinations where tourism is deepening its successes (Figure 4). Few others are identifying their potential, or at different scales of picking up progress. For instance, Comoros, an emerging destination, is still developing its tourism infrastructure. Compared to other WIO destinations, it is the least visited country. Madagascar, at the initiation stage of tourism development, has significant potential for tourism investments. Kenya, a mature destination, is strategizing to rejuvenate blue tourism in view of stagnating visitor numbers to its coastal destinations.

The WIO offers various tourism products including traditional leisure destinations (i.e., Mauritius, Seychelles), diving (i.e., Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania), marine wildlife watching (i.e., whales, dolphins, marine turtles, sharks) and nature-based tourism (i.e., Tanzania, Kenya, Seychelles). In some countries, tourism is also focused on inland circuits such as safaris in Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania. Tourism in the WIO is dispersed across various islands and coastal areas, significantly boosting local economies. However, it also presents sustainability challenges that demand more responsible management practices. In these countries, the general pattern is location of tourism along the coastline. Inland tourism is concentrated in conservation areas, for example, in Kenya's Maasai Mara triangle. For Comoros, Kenya, and Madagascar, key tourism hotspots are situated along the coastline or developed in conservation areas.

Latest statistics on tourist arrivals confirm a growing tourism demand for WIO countries. South Africa leads in overall tourist numbers, whereas island nations have fewer visitor numbers, owing to their smaller sizes. The unavailability of comprehensive tourism data for Somalia presents a significant challenge for understanding the tourism sector in the region.

### Figure 4. State of Tourism Development in Western Indian Ocean countries



Somalia
Kenya
Seychelles
Tanzania
Comoros
Mozambique
Madagascar
Mauritius
Reunion
South Africa

- Pre emerging
- Initiating
- Emerging
- Consolidating

Source: UNECA, (2020). Sustainable Tourism Investment Financing in Eastern Africa.

## Figure 5. International Arrivals to the Western Indian Ocean post-COVID-19 Pandemic

Arrivals numbers in million



**Comoros** 0.1

**Reunion** 0,53

**Kenya** 1.86

**Seychelles** 0,38

**Madagascar** 0,38

**South Africa** 10,23

**Mauritius** 1,38

**Tanzania** 1,44

**Mozambique** 2,02
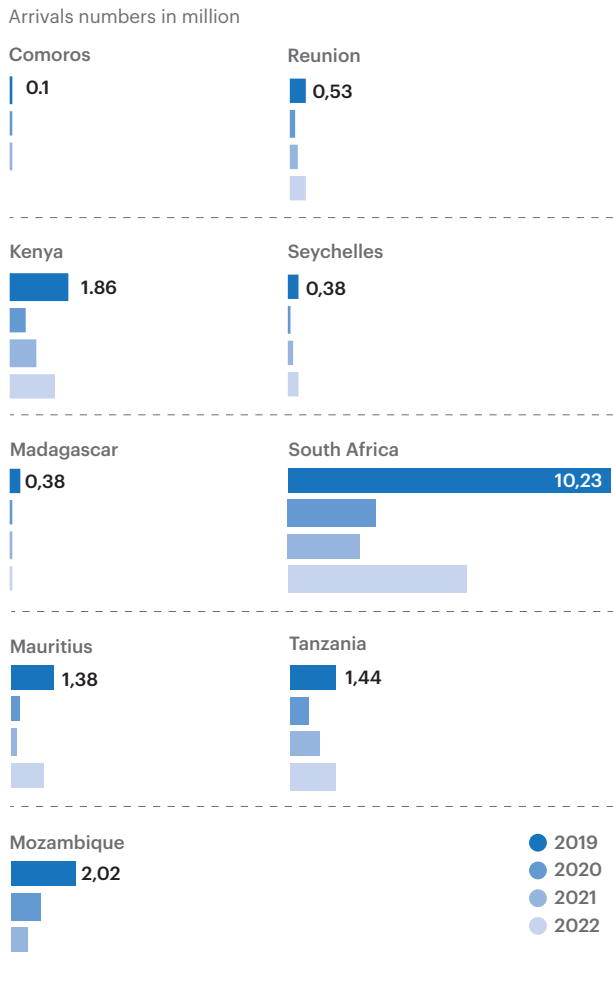
● 2019
● 2020
● 2021
● 2022

Source. UN Tourism, (2024). Global and regional tourism performance.

Taking 2019 as a benchmark year, tourist arrivals for the WIO countries initially registered a negative change effect, attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions (**Figure 5**). While these countries on a post pandemic tourism recovery journey approach their benchmark figures, only Tanzania had surpassed the 2019 benchmark in their latest reporting of arrivals (**Figure 6**).

Over the years, tourism has made notable contributions to employment in the WIO countries, compared to the continent's averages (**Figure 7**). The sector averages about 10% contribution to country employment in Comoros and Kenya, Mauritius, and Reunion Island, accounting for at least 1 in every 9 jobs in these countries.[17] In Seychelles, the sector contributes 1 in every 2 jobs. As tourism remains a strong source of employment for WIO countries, the top figures for island destinations could be reflective of a strong driving force of blue tourism. Likewise, the figure shows the relevance to get tourism right in its development and management, considering its contributions to the financial well-being of local people, who can access paid work opportunities in the sector.

17    World Travel & Tourism Council, (2019). Economic Impact Report.

## Figure 6. Changes in International Arrivals since 2019 in the Western Indian Ocean

% change over 2019



**Comoros**

**Kenya** -20,97%

**Madagascar** -65,79%

**Mauritius** -27,54%

**Mozambique**

**Reunion** -5,66%

**Seychelles** -13,6%

**South Africa** -44,28%

**Tanzania** 1,39%

● 2020
● 2021
● 2022
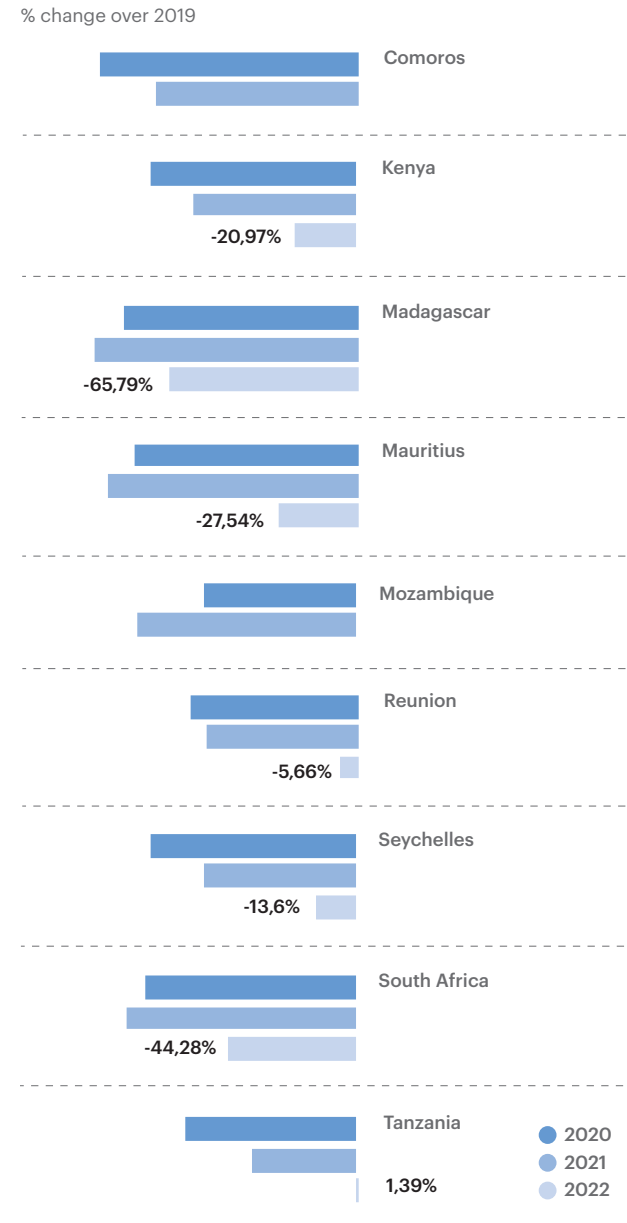
Source. UN Tourism, (2024). Global and regional tourism performance.

Tourism's contribution to GDP in the WIO has varied over time (**Figure 8**). Trends for island destination, i.e. Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar, take the lead in GDP contributions in the WIO. Once again, the lead by island destinations which thrive on blue tourism, points to the fact that ocean and coastal based tourism has great potential to contribute to local economies. 2024 estimates and 10-year forecast to 2034 show expected increase in the scale of tourism contribution to GDP, for each of these countries.[18]

18    National Bureau of Statistics, (2024). The 2023 International visitors' exit survey report.

Figure 7. **Tourism Contribution to Employment in the Western Indian Ocean**

% change over 2019



Source. WTTC, (2024). Africa Travel & Tourism Economic Impact Factsheet.

Figure 8. **Tourism Contribution to Country GDP in the Western Indian Ocean**

% change over 2019



Source. WTTC, (2024). Africa Travel & Tourism Economic Impact Factsheet.

The WIO offers diverse blue tourism products, including traditional leisure destinations like Mauritius and Seychelles; diving spots in Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania; marine wildlife watching for whales, dolphins, marine turtles, and sharks; and nature-based tourism in Tanzania, Kenya, and Seychelles. Some countries also focus on inland tourism, such as safaris in Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania. Additionally, the WIO has become a popular cruise destination. For example around 200,000 tourists visit the Seychelles

by cruise ship every year.[19] Regional governments, including those of Comoros and Kenya, are planning to expand cruise tourism, with new routes in South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Tanzania set for 2024. This expansion stresses the need for sustainable policies and regional cooperation to support sustainability across the blue tourism sector.

19 Gabbay, R. and Ghosh, R., (2017). Tourism in the Seychelles. In Tourism and economic development.

Ordinarily, beach, cruise, and diving, are key defining components, and common sequence of product development, for blue tourism activities across coastal destinations. These components are also reflected in blue tourism for WIO countries. Moreover, beach resorts, cruise facilities, and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have always been a precondition for product development in blue tourism in the WIO. All-inclusive beach resorts offered inroads for beach products in e.g. Kenya and Tanzania. Port facilities allowed for cruise tourism in Seychelles. Marine protected areas are instrumental in developing dive tourism products in both Kenya and Madagascar; along with their role in preserving marine ecosystems and biodiversity. In turn, by maintaining healthy and vibrant marine environments, MPAs help create exceptional dive experiences that attract tourists and support local economies. The timelines of these developments almost neatly map onto that of varying stages of destination development observed in tourism dependent WIO countries (Figure 4).

Beach element comprises a large share of product packages in blue tourism. The WIO beach tourism product has been a characteristic offer in destination early-stage development. Often, coastal resorts in these destinations are central in drawing visitor numbers to the region, to enjoy sun, sand, and sea, conveniently packaged as beach products. This trend is not isolated to WIO destinations, as Mediterranean beaches set the pace earlier on in this manner of blue tourism development. Comoros is at an emerging stage, primarily focused on exploring and discovery of its beach product, and banking on its luxurious beach resorts to boost the island's low visitor numbers.

In Madagascar, there are efforts to integrate local businesses into the tourism economy, enhancing both local livelihoods and tourism experience. Hospitality establishments and tour operators are encouraging local businesses, especially those run by women, to become part of the tourism economy such as by supporting craft centres/markets that showcase local artisan's work. Hotels and resorts collaborate with local craft centres, which are often cooperatives run by women. These centres produce handmade crafts and souvenirs that reflect the local culture and tradition. Tourism operators promote these craft centres as part of their guest experience. For instance, hotel guests are organized into excursions/visits to these craft centres/markets, positioned along the popular beach areas or close to tourist attractions and managed by local women cooperatives. These centres provide a venue where tourists can purchase authentic local crafts. The beach product continues to dominate in mature destinations, for example Zanzibar's tropical beaches where beach products comprise over 80% of visitor activities, dominating wildlife, cultural and other forms of tourism in the island.[20]

All-inclusive resorts in Kenya and Tanzania that promote beach tourism, today fits under the concept of more conventional blue tourism. Many other ocean front establishments, even though not all inclusive, are still riding on the beach product to appeal to their target clients. For instance, beach tourism is a defined activity for blue tourism in Comoros, Kenya, and Madagascar, countries which are in different phases of their tourism development.[21] Blue tourism has been marketed for long as sun, sand, and sea components of beach activities. This is common in other WIO countries, as visitor peak seasons coincide with winter weather in source market countries. This therefore makes warm weather a key pull factor for visitations. In Madagascar, the coastal areas are celebrated for their sun, sand, and sea attractions, which are key components of the island's appeal to tourists. These elements combine to make Madagascar's coastal regions popular destinations for tourists seeking natural beauty, relaxation, and adventure.

Ports are crucial for ocean-based industries and have significantly boosted cruise tourism in the WIO. Emerging destinations, e.g. Madagascar, focuses on the economic opportunity from incorporating cruises into their tourism offerings. They leverage enhanced cruise terminal facilities to accommodate disembarkation, benefiting from externally designed itineraries by cruise planners. WIO countries with cruise ports are regularly included in various cruise line schedules, benefiting from externally planned itineraries. Several destinations in the WIO are becoming regular stops on cruise schedules. Countries with established tourism infrastructure, for example Kenya, serve as disembarkation points for cruise ships. An already developed circuit for cruise tourism in the Indian ocean incorporates island hopping with the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Reunion included in the cruise route.

Last but not least, is the diving aspect which has more immersive visitor activities relating to underwater marine excursions. Observations of WIO countries show that this picks up at initiating and emerging stages of destination development, with establishment of MPAs. MPAs in the WIO countries, for example in Madagascar, offer rich biodiversity spots for underwater adventures. Underwater activities e.g. snorkelling, scuba diving at Nosy Tanikely, in Madagascar are popular for international visitors. Nosy Be is a tourism hot spot in Madagascar, where swimming with whale sharks has been established as an important tourism activity.[22] Diving and underwater adventures are continually being promoted, especially in MPAs in the WIO. In Kenya, snorkelling, coral garden visitations, scuba diving are core activities on this aspect. Marine excursions for island visitations, e.g. off the coast of Watamu Kenya, are popular activities too for international visitor markets, and gaining attention for domestic markets. In Zanzibar, dolphin tours offer opportunities for local livelihoods.[23] In South Africa, activities include whale watching, visits to marine protected areas, shark-cage diving.[24] Exploration of marine big five (whales, sharks, dolphins, seals, and penguins), is an example of marine excursions at Grootbos Nature Reserve, South Africa.[25] Additionally, seasonal sardine run is one of the most spectacular marine phenomena which offers extraordinary opportunities for wildlife observation, attracting thousands of tourists, divers, and marine enthusiasts.

20   National Bureau of Statistics, (2024). The 2023 International visitors' exit survey report.

21   Butler, R.W, (1980). The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: implications for management of resources.

22   Ziegler, J. A., et al., (2021). Economic value and public perception of whale shark tourism in Nosy Be, Madagascar.

23   Pike et, F., al., (2024). Dynamic livelihoods, gender and poverty in marine protected areas: Case study from Zanzibar, Tanzania.

24   Jonas, A. G., et al., (2020). The influence of cognitive dimensions on memorable experiences within a marine tourism context.

25   Dube, K., and Nhamo, G., (2021). Sustainable development goals localisation in the tourism sector: Lessons from Grootbos private nature reserve, South Africa.
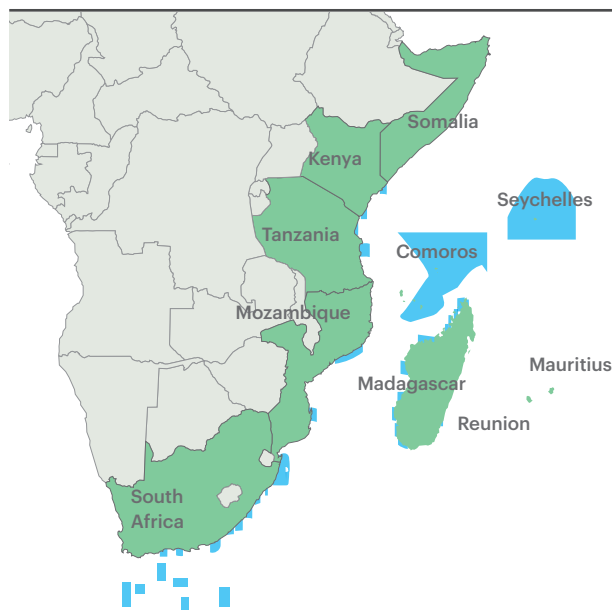
While most of the aforementioned are common activities for early to mid-stage destinations, new products are emerging in mature destinations aiming to rejuvenate their market sources and offerings. Broadly speaking, these emerging products can be categorised as ecotourism, given the touch they have for both community and marine conservation. Ecotourism, including bird watching, educational tours, and regenerative tourism, are developed. Though not predominant, this component of blue tourism has a considerable level of linkages to local community, as part of it is community driven. Community based initiatives linking ecotourism to ecosystem conservation, for example in Mwazaro and Shimoni in Kwale county, in Kenya, are examples of regenerative tourism. Women in Lamu are offering immersive experiences based on culture, e.g. henna art, cooking experiences, organising themselves so that they can be invited to functions, e.g. offer local cuisine for guests, but not in the frontline. Emerging products are keen to address the main challenge of local community exclusion, inherent in implementation of earlier forms of coastal and ocean-based tourism activities. Ecotourism promises conservation and economic benefits, which can be optimized across the WIO countries with a sustainability approach to product development and management.

## 2.2. Blue Tourism Market Segments

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- **Visitor source markets present a mixed scorecard for Western Indian Ocean countries, where Europe and Africa comprise the majority share of visitor numbers in different countries.**

- **Leisure travellers are the majority in these destinations, associating with the beach product which dominates blue tourism destinations.**

- **Market trends are pushing mature blue tourism destinations in the Western Indian Ocean to opening-up to diverse tourist typologies, including visitors seeking eco-tourism and community-based tourism.**

WIO countries have defined international source markets for tourists visiting. Key regions of these based on UN Tourism categories are shown in **Figure 10** (next page), detailing percent share of visitor numbers from source region between 2010 and 2021. A higher fraction of visitors to the WIO arrive via air. Improved air connectivity between WIO countries and Europe, is a contributing factor to the region's high visitations from European markets. WIO countries have varied prime visitor source markets. For South Africa and Mozambique, a larger percentage of their visitors are from Africa. Reunion has the United States as its foreign primary source market. For the rest of the countries, Europe contributed the highest share of total visitor numbers between 2010 and 2021.

Considering that the beach product is predominant in the WIO region, the majority of these visitor numbers plug on to a general typology of leisure travellers to coastal areas. This is also supported by the fact that the location of tourist hotels on the beachfront in many of these destinations, is a proxy

Figure 9. **Marine Protected Areas in the Western Indian Ocean**



Source: UNEP-WCMC, (2024). *Protected Area Profile for Africa from the World Database on Protected Areas, September 2024.*



Leisure Lodge Beach Hotel & Resort, Mombasa, Kenya (© Gudka/Unsplash)

## Figure 10. Average Percent Share of Visitor Source Markets for Each Country Between 2010 and 2021

| Source Region | Reunion | Seychelles | Tanzania | Madagascar | Mauritius | Comoros | Kenya | Mozambique | South Africa |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Africa | 10,1 | 10,4 | 10,4 | 11,6 | 22,8 | 25,1 | 25,3 | 74,3 | 74,7 |
| Americas | 87,7 | 3,3 | 3,3 | 3,7 | 1,8 | 2,2 | 12 | 5,4 | 5,1 |
| Asie & Pacific | 0 | 7,3 | 7,3 | 6,8 | 12,8 | 3,3 | 10,1 | 2,2 | 1,3 |
| Europe | 0 | 70,2 | 70,2 | 59,1 | 61,3 | 66,3 | 43,3 | 16,9 | 15,4 |
| Middle East | 0 | 9,2 | 9,2 | 0 | 1,6 | 1,9 | 0,2 | 0 | 0,1 |
| Other | 2,5 | 0 | 0 | 18,8 | 0 | 1,5 | 9,2 | 1,4 | 0,1 |

Source: UN Tourism, (2024). *Global and regional tourism performance.*

for the typology of tourists the WIO region presents. Locations of tourist class accommodation facilities in conservation areas, for example in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and South Africa, is evidence of nature-based tourists to these destinations.

Worth noting also are visitor profiles to Marine Protected Areas (MPA), as these deliver dependable economic benefits for tourism, equally underscoring the position of dive tourists or marine excursionists as a visitor typology for WIO destinations. MPAs in WIO countries are primarily developed for marine biodiversity protection. A regional distribution of MPAs is illustrated in **Figure 9**.

The establishment of MPAs over the years can be viewed as enabling parallel development of blue tourism. Indeed, designation of some of these MPAs as national parks, or marine national parks, imply their opening up for tourist visitations. Taking a general outlook on visitations to protected areas globally, tourism revenue surpasses expenditure costs on conserving protected areas.[26] Of course, sustainability thresholds for visitor numbers have to be considered, in

view of possible pressures from high visitations to marine protected areas, alongside related infrastructure development. Thus, MPAs take over regulation of tourism activities mostly comprising underwater excursions. Zoning of areas to allow differentiated under water excursions is an example from South Africa for regulating tourism in MPAs.[27]

Market trends are shaping the profile of current travellers as discussed in earlier sections. As a result, blue tourism destinations are opening up to a mix of tourist typologies, including visitors seeking eco-tourism and community-based tourism. Besides MPAs formally managed by government institutions, community managed protected areas are on the rise, for example in Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania. These would be ideal to tap on to the visitor profiles of those seeking eco-tourism or community-based tourism in marine environments. The profile of future travellers is additionally being influenced by trends in tech. Destinations for blue tourism should be aware of how to leverage mobile devices by enabling travellers connectivity and artificial intelligence.

26   Rylance, A., et al., (2017). The contribution of tourism revenue to financing protected area management in Southern Africa.

27   Rylance, A., et al., (2017). The contribution of tourism revenue to financing protected area management in Southern Africa.

# 3. Tourism Impacts in the Western Indian Ocean

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- The interplay between tourism negative impacts and challenges for sustainable blue tourism, drive consequences for different aspects of society and environment.

- A persistent challenge for the Western Indian Ocean is the gap in integrating sustainability standards within blue tourism operations across destinations, intensifying destination vulnerability to multiple crisis.

## 3.1. Socio-economic Impacts

One of the biggest downsides from blue tourism in the WIO is that dominant product development overlooks linkages for local community benefits. Exclusion of domestic players, especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) from the tourism value chain, is a challenge yet to be fully addressed in Kenya, a mature tourism destination. Weak sectoral linkages to tourism value chains in Africa are occasioned by the fact that *"African Tourism is characterized by high foreign demand, which elevates the position of global lead firms, and increases leakages of tourism spending out of local economies, (p. 1)"*.[28] International brands operating locally worsen leakage through non-local procurement practices, with most goods being imported rather than sourced locally. Economic leakages are also in tourism employment, for example in Seychelles where a high proportion of jobs in the sector are held by non-Seychellois.[29] In other WIO countries, rising inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) support diverse projects for economic development. Tanzania, among the 10 biggest recipients of FDI in Africa, received US$ 922 million in 2021. FDI policies offer incentives for investors, allowing them to repatriate profits up to certain amounts, which contributes significantly to economic leakage in the tourism industry.

For WIO destinations where current forms of mass tourism tend to over tourism, a lagged negative impact on local housing is expected. Trends from some of Europe's coastal cities like Venice or Barcelona, where over tourism has reduced the availability of affordable houses for local residents, point to this likelihood. This could be further aggravated by alternative accommodation in coastal destinations, for example home stays and Airbnb. A large-scale port infrastructure development in Lamu, Kenya, though laying the foundation for trade and tourism, faced contestation from the local community on its development. Such infrastructure-led developments are faulted for reproducing colonial legacies, disrupting local ways of life.[30] In Lamu, local protests cited reasons for port infrastructure displacing the community, with negative implications for marine heritage.

## 3.2. Environmental Impacts

Damaging effects of poor infrastructure development for tourism are already hurting fragile coastal ecosystems. In the case of Seychelles, development of tourism infrastructure bordering Curieuse Marine National Park, drove negative change to coral cover[31] due to regulatory exemption on construction on the shoreline (ibid). In coastal Kenya, flawed land policies have turned shorelines into private property for tourism development, restricting local access to beach areas. Abandoned tourist facilities along the shoreline, due to stagnation in destination development, have led to dilapidated properties on Kenya's south coast. Overdevelopment of resort infrastructure poses a significant challenge for Kenya's beach destinations. This issue is particularly severe on the south coast, where tourism development has encroached on beaches, and many facilities are financially struggling. On the north coast, facilities built too close to the beach now require sea walls for ocean protection against rising ocean waters. Despite being licensed, these developments cannot be easily reversed by authorities, partly due to policies that overlook environmental considerations.

Moreover, diving pressure cause site degradation and then result in a shift in attractiveness and decrease of number of visitors at those same sites.[32] Dive tourism in Ponta do Ouro marine reserve in Mozambique, where visitors engage mostly on drift diving[35] is an example where tourism has negative environmental impacts. Findings of higher contact with underwater bottom habitats by scuba divers in this park, suggest that tropical environments are most at risk of potential negative impacts from diving activities.[33] Relatedly, increased tourism related search efforts for sharks could have a negative impact in Nosy Be, Madagascar.[34]

In Kenya, the rapid growth of beach products in the early stage of destination development, escalated to scenarios of unplanned mass tourism. This trend is replicated in other destinations for beach tourism as well, where increased visitor numbers to fragile coastal environments have led to negative environmental impacts. Negative impacts from unplanned mass tourism have resulted in habitat destruction. In the WIO, mass tourism is particularly prominent in coastal areas of Kenya targeting sun and beaches, nature Safaris (i.e. Tsavo national park, Amboseli National Park, Hells Gate National Park), Tanzania (i.e. Serengeti national park, Zanzibar Island), South Africa (i.e. Kruger national park, Robberg nature reserve), and Mauritius (i.e. Black river gorges national park, Blue bay marine park). The challenge facing beach destinations in Kenya includes seasonal over tourism, particularly evident with overcrowded beaches in December. Cruise tourism adds to marine pollution, affecting ocean health, a critical resource for blue tourism.

28  Daly, J. and Gereffi, G., (2017). Tourism Global Value Chains and Africa.

29  Government of Seychelles, (2018). Seychelles Decent Work Country Program 2019-2023.

30  Enns, C., and Bersaglio, B., (2019). Negotiating pipeline projects and reterritorializing land through rural resistance in Northern Kenya.

31  Clifton, J., et al., (2021). Resolving conservation and development tensions in a small island state: A governance analysis of Curieuse Marine National Park, Seychelles.

32  Lucrezi, S., et al., (2021). Securing sustainable tourism in marine protected areas: Lessons from an assessment of scuba divers' underwater behaviour in non-tropical environments.

33  Lucrezi, S., et al., (2021). Securing sustainable tourism in marine protected areas: Lessons from an assessment of scuba divers' underwater behaviour in non-tropical environments.

34  Diamant, S., et al., (2021). Population structure, residency, and abundance of whale sharks in the coastal waters off Nosy Be, north western Madagascar.

Policies aimed at promoting domestic tourism further complicate efforts to implement effective travel restrictions. Without imminent control measures, this trend risks escalating into an environmental crisis, proven by oceanic waste and detrimental impacts on marine biodiversity. While the short-term effects of these impacts are observable, the long-term damage could persist for thousands of years, highlighting the enduring repercussions of over tourism during peak domestic seasons.

# 3.3. Impacts of Polycrisis on Blue Tourism

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- **Tourism development in the Western Indian Ocean region unfolds a crisis dynamic, relating social inequalities and environmental degradation to rapidly intensifying harsh consequences for local communities, or other spiralling trends.**

- **These crisis issues manifest at different intensities, some escalating, others dormant, and some more seasonal. They also comprise slow moving stresses, e.g. labour issues, or fast moving events, like the COVID-19 situation.**

- **If Western Indian Ocean destinations are to address the accelerating socio-ecological polycrisis tourism faces, they need to identify leverage points in the complex interactions that can promise better systemic outcomes on interventions, i.e. target the right constraints and most pressing challenges, or priorities consistent across the tourism stakeholder community.**

A polycrisis situation is where crisis issues intersect and overlap beyond the simplistic cause and effect relationships, with compounding effects on each other.[35] Over time, an overlapping number of serious challenges facing tourism in WIO destinations show that the region's tourism faces polycrisis. Some of these challenges are driven by tourism, or others externally driven, resulting in intersecting issues in the sector. Blue tourism has both positive and negative effects on marine socio ecological systems.[36] The challenges facing blue tourism in the WIO could have some level of independence, and their existence purely incidental, but that does not completely rule out contexts where overlaps and intersections for polycrisis are possible. Here, we identify key drivers for crisis situations that may affect blue tourism. For each, examples from the WIO region are given on resulting challenges and their intersections, as well as solutions.

## Climate change threats

Climate induced challenges present various dimensions of socio-ecological polycrisis clear in the tourism sector. Climate change as a polycrisis in tourism, relates to labour crisis due to health and migration issues, insecurity fuelled by resource conflict, economic crisis affecting financial well-being of people, or even intensifying inequalities of destination communities. Community displacement following climate disasters could affect cultural heritage across tourism destinations. Decreased tourist visits, and climate induced damage to tourism infrastructure, results to income losses, affecting financial well-being of people. Besides, climate related illnesses, to both tourists and locals, is a reality facing destinations. Illnesses put a strain on the workforce supporting tourism. Given the high involvement of women in tourism in these destinations and gendered nature of climate vulnerabilities, climate threats to tourism escalate to be risks for women in tourism. Climate threats are a risk for tourism in Madagascar, the 3rd country most prone to disasters worldwide due to the impacts of climate change. Extreme events at the ocean may affect cruise traffic to the country during the December to March high season. In the SIDs category, Comoros is shown to be most impacted by the climate crisis.

Restoration of vegetated coastal ecosystems, like mangrove areas, can be a priority action supported for climate mitigation, as carbon sinks. Also restoration fits as adaptation, as these can provide coastal protection from storms. In view of rising sea levels, climate proof infrastructure is recommended, to minimize damages resulting from extreme weather events. Sea walls, raised buildings, are some common examples adopted by hospitality facilities in coastal areas.

## Health related threats

Rapidly escalating challenges, e.g. COVID-19 pandemic, can be a strong driver to polycrisis situation. The spike in challenges during and immediate post COVID-19 induced tourism crisis, was a stark pointer to multiple intersecting challenges facing the WIO tourism industry. COVID-19 induced crisis in tourism, was central to other rapidly escalating challenges in tourism destinations, e.g. health challenges, labour shortages, etc., devastating tourism livelihoods. Decreased consumer confidence in safety of travel, affected visitor numbers to WIO countries just like other regions globally. Additionally, many countries in the global south, dependent on visitor source markets from the global north, were categorized as high risk or not fit for travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Comoros faced a severe cholera outbreak in 2024 and Madagascar is exposed to recurrent plague.

Over reliance on tourism, dealt Seychelles a huge blow during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reduced visitor numbers to the island destination, had implications for reduced foreign exchange inflows, affecting governments ability to loans in major foreign currencies. Other WIO countries were also affected, with consequences in reduced tourism earnings, job losses and increased unemployment in tourism dependent coastal communities. Destination responses focused on gaining visitor numbers back as a recovery strategy. This entailed adherence to new protocols for safe travel embraced by destination wide networks. Hospitality facilities took up new hygiene measures following COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure employee and guest safety. The downside to this was increased operational costs for businesses to comply with safety standards.

35  Helleiner, (2024). Economic Globalization's Polycrises. International Studies Quarterly.

36  Lukman et al., (2022). Tourism impacts on small island ecosystems: public perceptions from Karimunjawa, Indonesia.

## Political turbulences/shocks

Insecurity challenges experienced in WIO countries, have direct implications on reduced visitor numbers. Intra state conflicts, political violence, and terror attacks, are some insecurity issues that have marred Kenya, Madagascar, and Comoros in previous years, resulting in travel advisories issued by key visitor source countries to their citizens. There have been recurrent coups, e.g. in the Comoros, disputed elections escalating to political crisis e.g. in Kenya and Madagascar, and terror threats e.g. in Kenya and Tanzania. These events can result in social instability, general disruptions of economic activities linking to tourism, and implications for negative reputation on destination image.

Solutions include on-going efforts for conflict management in affected areas. Tourism actors should minimize travel related plans or promotions in periods where events likely to trigger unrest are common. During times of political uncertainty, prompt communication for information about unfolding situations is helpful for travel related decisions.

## Financial/economic shocks

Debt-laden economies in the WIO region, stare at tougher times ahead if measures are not taken to address ensuing crisis like rising costs of living affecting populations. With US$ 21 billion out of Africa each year in debt payments,[37] there is a possibility of debt to accelerate climate crisis, as borrowers lack financial capacities to respond to climate effects. Kenya now prioritizes debt payment, which is hurting tourism MSMEs, e.g. through new taxations imposed. Debt crisis with the world bank, resulting to more taxes introduced by the government to raise money, affects people's ability to do business, and puts pressure on small businesses that can no longer sustain and are shutting down. Economic uncertainties in Comoros, can be attributed to debts accrued to fund.

## Labour exploitation

Severe forms of labour exploitation exist within blue tourism, to some extent due to its characteristic seasonal nature. Seasonality pushes the workforce on margins of sub employment, an issue evident in tourism related jobs held by coastal communities. Lower wages, gender pay gaps, and limited opportunities for career growth, are a reality of labour exploitation by those in tourism and hospitality jobs, especially in seasonal tourism destinations. Legal consequences, social unrest, and reputation damage, are looming for destinations yet to address concern of labour exploitation. Efforts to increase employee representation in trade associations, which can negotiate for better terms and conditions for those working in tourism. Targeted training programs to equip local communities with skills for management roles in tourism and conservation can also be helpful to promote career growth for those in tourism work.

## Social inequality

Social inequality is a common factor that worsens the severity of experiences in every other crisis issue in tourism destinations. High levels of poverty in tourism rich areas, have indirect implications for environmental degradation, education

deficits, and over dependence on aid. It is important that tourism development pays attention to indicators for various dimensions of equity in its performance evaluation.

## 3.4. Best Practices for Sustainable Tourism

Despite tourism development challenges facing these WIO regions, they can continually draw valuable lessons from successes observed elsewhere or in different types of tourism. For instance, in Kenya's inland wildlife tourism, lessons abound in workforce skill enhancement, encouraging shared value between tourism and local communities, and empowering communities through ownership of safari assets and co management of conservation areas. Also, lessons abound in the recognition of domestic small businesses as having valuable contributions to tourism development. Informal tourism activities in Kenya are being formalized e.g. through practitioner's associations, integrating them into the supply chain and adapting legislative frameworks to better support their contributions. This shift includes recognizing local operators' associations on par with established bodies like Kenya Association of Travel Agents (KATA) and Kenya Association of Tour Operators (KATO), ensuring their voices are heard in national tourism dialogues. Tour Operators of Madagascar is a practitioner's association in the island destination, as a unifying voice for tour operators promoting beach and biodiversity products. The Comoros Tourism Association is business focused and draws nationwide membership in the island state.

A comparable example can be seen in Gambia, where early 2000 World Bank funding facilitated community integration into the blue economy and coastal tourism. Here, local initiatives thrive with government-built visitor offices facilitating non-hotel tours and prohibiting hotels from running excursions independently. Instead, guests engage local transportation and services, fostering community-led initiatives like cooperative vehicle ownership for safer tourist transport and women-operated fruit stalls. These cases illustrate how tourism development can evolve through adaptive learning from diverse successes, bridging challenges with innovative solutions tailored to local contexts.



Mombasa, Kenya (© H. Gudka/Unsplash)

37   UNECA, (2016). Africa's Blue Economy: A policy handbook.

# 4. Blue Tourism Governance in the Western Indian Ocean

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- Integrating blue tourism governance into existing MPA frameworks in the Western Indian Ocean region could address the current lack of a comprehensive regional framework for blue tourism offering a promising approach to managing tourism sustainably.

- Functionally integrated incentives from blue tourism (e.g., eco-tourism revenues, payment for ecosystem services) are core for effectiveness of MPA governance that includes tourism-related considerations, whether the governance approach is decentralised to local institutions with state oversight, or state governed, or fully governed by local communities.

- Incorporating incentives into MPAs and blue tourism governance can be an effective strategy for encouraging various actors to support blue tourism goals within marine governance frameworks, which can drive sustainable practices and promote effective management of marine resources.

- An integrated approach to blue tourism governance, working with different levels of governance, across multiple actors, and involving relevant institutions, is desired for the Western Indian Ocean region.

## 4.1. Regional Blue Tourism Governance

At the regional level, the recently adopted Regional Ocean Governance Strategy (ROGS)[38] developed under the Nairobi Convention[39] is attuned to concerns for the blue economy for the region, through aims to address a wide range of regional challenges, including marine pollution, climate change, disaster, response, among others. Anchored on aims for regional cooperation for marine science, capacity building, and public awareness of ocean issues, implementing the framework can result to effectiveness on marine resource use with benefits for blue tourism in WIO countries. The ROGS is a recent development approved and endorsed by the contracting parties at Conference of Parties (COP) 11 of the Nairobi Convention in August 2024, soon moving to its implementation taking a collaborative approach with interested stakeholders in the marine and tourism environment. Other key instruments elaborated by the Nairobi Convention Contracting Parties and relevant to blue tourism include the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Protocols (ICZM), and Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) activities.

The ROGS states that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) requires countries to cooperate on ocean governance both with other countries and with global and regional institutions. These obligations range from suppression of piracy to prevention of pollution and conservation of biodiversity. WIO countries are party to numerous other international conventions and treaties, under which the countries incur international legal obligations to cooperate on ocean-related matters, including on shipping, climate change, science and human rights. In addition, WIO countries have also made numerous international ocean-related commitments which are not legally binding. These include: commitments related to the SDGs, with respect to the UN Decade for Ocean Science and through commitments to various action plans and codes of conduct, and the approval of the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS)[40] a the 4th United Nations Small Island Developing States Conference in Antigua which represents a significant step forward in supporting small island nations in their efforts to adapt to climate change and build resilience in various sectors including coastal management and tourism.

Yet, looking at strategies, regulations, frameworks and commitments, it is important to think through whether they have the range to address issues peculiar to blue tourism at WIO bloc level. While these countries share the WIO geographic region, their decisions for instance on tourism investments or international visitors to attract, could lead to competing interests in terms of resource use or regional collaborations. It would be straight forward to address such details in an umbrella framework for tourism governance at regional scale, which the WIO region lacks.

Essentially, governance driven by regional block tourism policies can reshape conduct of stakeholders in blue tourism regional networks. Two examples of regional bloc tourism strategies in the WIO are the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) sustainable tourism master plan which was applicable to Kenya and Somalia as member states; the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) protocol which establishes tourism as a priority sector for Southern Africa, with focus on Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, South Africa and Tanzania.

## 4.2. Destination Blue Tourism Governance

At the destination level several stakeholders are actively involved in blue tourism and should all potentially support the sustainability of the sector. These include government authorities, destination management organisations, marine and coastal authorities, tourism operators and local communities.

Tourism Destination Governance (TDG) applications focuses on organizing behaviour across local stakeholder networks, while factoring in linkages with other spatial scales upwards,[41] therefore, fostering relevant multi-level communication and collaborative channels that are crucial for integrated policy

38   The Regional Ocean Governance Strategy (ROGS) was developed in response to decisions by the Nairobi Convention COP and AMCEN through a participatory process led by a regional Task Force. It aims to guide sustainable ocean management, blue economy growth, and climate change action in the Western Indian Ocean, aligning with African policies and regional initiatives.

39   The Nairobi Convention, part of UNEP's Regional Seas Programme, focuses on tackling the growing degradation of the world's oceans and coastal areas through sustainable management and use of marine and coastal resources. It brings together countries of the Western Indian Ocean region to collaborate in protecting their shared marine environment.

40   United Nations (2024). The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) – a Renewed Declaration for Resilient Prosperity.

41   Mach, L. and Ponting, J. (2018). Governmentality and surf tourism destination governance. Journal of Sustainable Tourism.

Table 1. **Tourism Governance with Incentives at Local Level**

| Actor networks | Local Communities | Economic incentives | Tour operators, investor community | Legal incentives | Government agencies | Incentives for participation | NGOs and civil society |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Institutions | Local government | | Practitioner associations | | Government and interstate collaborations | | NGOs |
| Select interest | Fair distribution of benefits among local communities and minimizing negative social impacts. | | Generating income and employment through tourism while promoting local prosperity. | | Enforcing local and international regulations to sustainably manage tourism activities. | | Protecting coastal ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resources. |

Actor collaboration to balance economic development, environmental conservation, and community welfare.

Source: Author, 2024.

making. Below are the main destination governance actors and their roles in sustainable blue tourism:

- In blue tourism contexts, **local government authorities** enforce policies and regulations including, but not limited to, zoning, issuing permits, and ensuring compliance with environmental and social standards. They also coordinate with other stakeholders to implement and monitor sustainable tourism initiatives, provide infrastructure for waste management and environmental protection, and develop long-term strategies that align with sustainability goals.
- **Destination Management Organizations** (DMOs), play an important role in marketing to sustainable blue tourism markets and implement sustainability strategies, and coordinating with local businesses and communities to ensure that tourism activities adhere to sustainable practices. DMOs also work to enhance the visitor experience while minimising negative impacts on the environment and local culture.
- **Marine and coastal authorities** are particularly relevant for blue tourism as they regulate marine tourism activities and enforce environmental protection laws. They are crucial in ensuring that marine ecosystems are preserved and that tourism activities do not exceed ecological thresholds. They also engage in monitoring and research to assess the health of marine environments and adjust policies accordingly to address emerging issues.
- **Blue tourism operators** such as hotels and tour organisers, are on the front lines of implementing sustainable practices. They can adopt eco-friendly practices, such as minimising waste, conserving energy, and reducing pollution. Operators can also offer tours and activities that highlight and protect local ecosystems and cultural heritage, and collaborate with local communities to ensure that tourism benefits are equitably distributed.
- Last but not least, **local communities** in blue tourism destinations are both beneficiaries and stewards of tourism. They contribute to the cultural and environmental attractiveness of a destination and should be actively involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes. Communities can also participate in monitoring environmental impacts and advocating for practices that align with their values and needs.

Table 1 illustrates how blue tourism governance at the sub-national level can be operationalized to balance economic development, environmental conservation, and community welfare by incorporating various incentives into the governance framework. These common incentives include:

- **Economic incentives,** to work out revenue sharing across stakeholder groups, for example between local community and investor community as stakeholder groups of interest to community based tourism.
- **Legal incentives,** for governance to address sustainability issues on conservation, or enforce compliance of sustainability practices among tourism businesses, e.g. through issuance of permits and licences for tourism. Cross linkages on this incentive are evident between the tourism business community and government.
- **Participation incentives,** for collaboration on environmental conservation, policy advocacy, and community inclusion in decision processes. Cross linkages on this incentive are seen between government agencies and NGOs or civil society organizations.

Against this backdrop, community driven tourism governance presents a scenario where the agenda for tourism develops through private sector engagement, particularly trade associations articulating stakeholder and community issues in these sectors. Taking the example of Kenya, inland based trade associations come out stronger in all matters for governance applicable to tourism, dominating coastal based associations. Marine organizations appear to be the strongest non-state actors supporting tourism in coastal areas. They combine tourism as part of resource management approaches, rather than tourism organizations getting involved, and this trend could be a limitation of tourism stakeholder's political agency in blue tourism governance through MPAs. Taking this into account, an important consideration for governance approaches would be how they enhance greater stakeholder participation.

Table 2. **MPA Governance Based on Incentives Relating to Tourism**

| MPA governance approach | Governance incentives relevant to blue tourism |
| --- | --- |
| Market based | Driven by economic incentives, e.g. for the case of blue tourism, the need to promote profitable and sustainable tourism, or to invest in MPA income. |
| Top down (state steer) | Backed by legal incentives, to enforce relevant laws and regulations that may be applicable to blue tourism. Allows for capacity for enforcement and regulations on protection of marine resources, where blue tourism stakeholders are active users. |
| Bottom up (people steer) | Driven by the need for inclusive participation in MPA management and decision making. Enables collaboration among the range of stakeholders in the marine environment, including those working in tourism, for collective governance goals. It is however vulnerable to external challenges, for example where community actors lack resources to implement effective governance. |
| Polycentrism | Acknowledges diverse actors in governances, and diverse centres of governance, working on shared governance goals, with oversight involvement of the state. Blue tourism interests are covered where common resource use is factored as an incentive for governance. |
| Coevoluntionary governance* | Functionally integrated combinations of diverse incentives, representing different governance approaches that interactively evolve and synergistically function to promote the health of both ecological and social systems, through impact reduction and ecosystem services flow enhancement.* Blue tourism interests are covered where incentives tailored for the sector are introduced in governance frameworks. |

Source: Authors (2024). *Mach, L. and Ponting, J. (2018). Governmentality and surf tourism destination governance. Journal of Sustainable Tourism.

## 4.3. Blue Tourism Governance in Marine Protected Areas

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are key locations for blue tourism because they offer unique natural and cultural resources to attract tourism activities. Therefore, it is important to understand how the governance of MPAs connect with and integrate blue tourism. Three important elements of marine management that can be basis for blue tourism governance in the WIO are: i) coastal habitat restoration owing to the characteristic nature of WIO blue tourism to be nature based and thus dependent of healthy marine habitats; ii) coastal community resilience owing to a growing dependency on tourism livelihoods for income support; and iii) marine protected areas, as these are already established for biodiversity protection alongside supporting tourism development in WIO destinations. These elements are addressed in various policies and strategies to balance economic growth with the preservation of fragile marine ecosystems for sustainable tourism. Marine management with a focus on blue tourism, will include diverse actors, having shared as well as priority interests, across several institutions and different scalar dimensions.

As blue tourism is a relatively new concept in WIO marine governance, its governance in the region can be integrated within existing MPA governance structures, or draw approaches from such, because they already have a solid foundation. This is also due to poor applications of tourism governance in Africa, leaving room to ride on governance arrangements outside the sector.[42] Current approaches for governance of MPAs in marine areas are structured in a way that allows cross linkages of diverse sectors e.g. artisanal fisheries, shipping, biodiversity conservation, and even tourism. Against the backdrop of cross linkages, MPAs build their governance frameworks on the basis of incentives relevant across diverse issues of interest to different stakeholders.[43] Integrating diverse incentives which support each other is vital to strengthening MPA governance frameworks for effectiveness (ibid). Incentives relevant for tourism in different MPA governance approaches are shown on **Table 2**.

MPA governance can only integrate tourism to a certain degree,[44] considering that the scope of blue tourism activities in countries extends beyond the confines of MPAs. Besides, the fact that MPA regulations imposed on a non-deliberative manner could be perceived as restrictive to tourism activities, could spark some disinterest for tourism. There are options for blue tourism to follow existing governance structures for the sector operating across multiple scales.

The suitability of blue tourism to fit within approaches to MPA governance encounters an existing dilemma on whether institutions should be built from the top down hierarchical governance, or from bottom up, for example in the polycentric approach, nested on higher level institutions but way out of their interference. This dilemma has been core to politics of exclusion in tourism development. A coevoluntionary approach to MPA governance addresses such a dilemma, as it allows institutions to co-evolve through interactions of top down and bottom up influences.[45] **Figure 11**, is an illustration of MPA coevoluntionary governance, across different levels of governance and different sectors, with highlights on integration of WIO blue tourism. Multi-Level Governance (MLG)

42    Siakwah et al., (2019). Tourism Governance and Attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa.
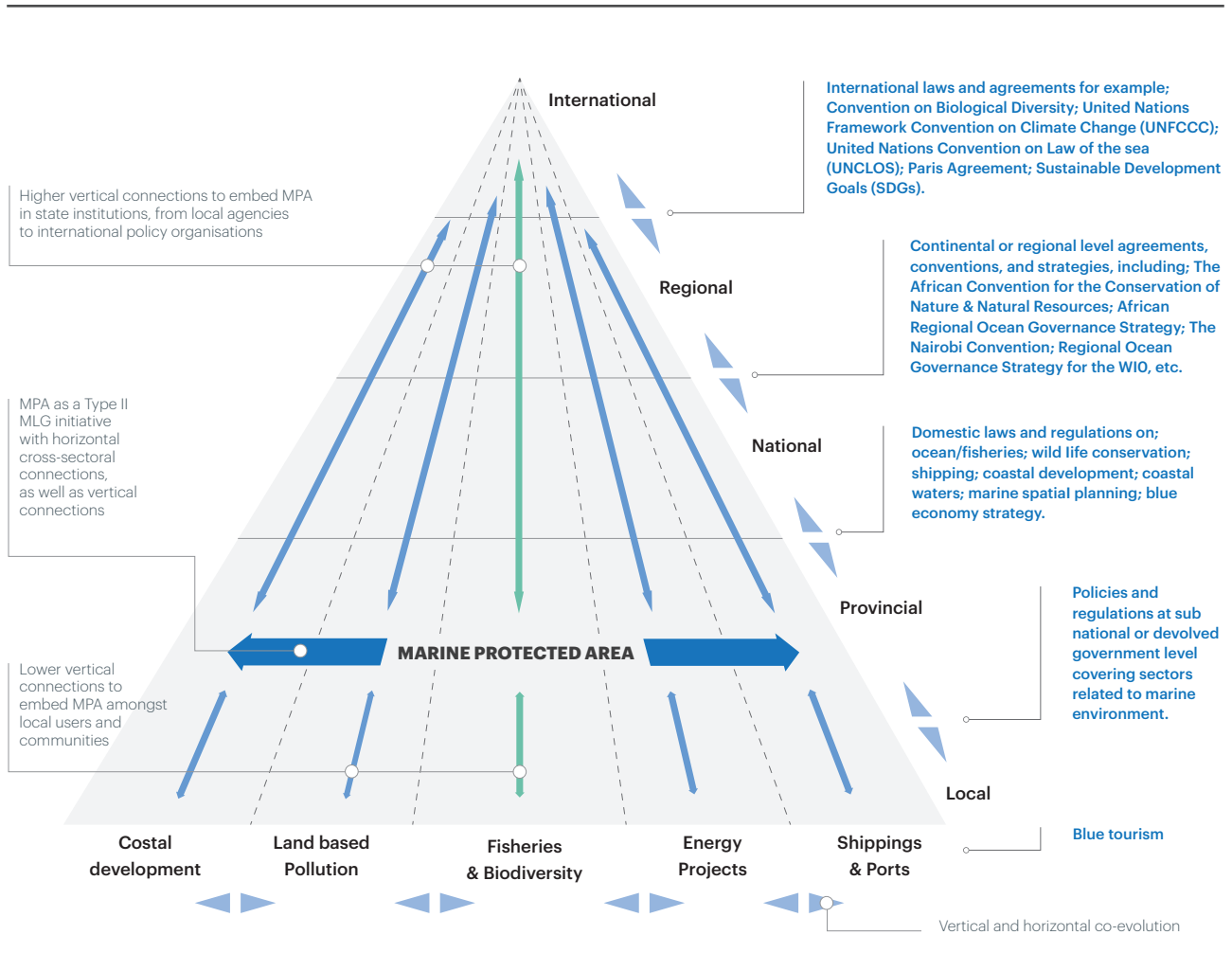
43    Jones et al., (2024). Incentive diversity is key to the more effective and equitable governance of marine protected areas.

44    Atmodjo et al., (2020). Governing Dynamics in Marine Conservation Tourism in Raja Ampat, Indonesia.

45    Mach, L. and Ponting, J. (2018). Governmentality and surf tourism destination governance. Journal of Sustainable Tourism.

## Figure 11. Blue Tourism In Coevolutionary Governance Framework for MPAs



Higher vertical connections to embed MPA in state institutions, from local agencies to international policy organisations

International

International laws and agreements for example; Convention on Biological Diversity; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); United Nations Convention on Law of the sea (UNCLOS); Paris Agreement; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Regional

Continental or regional level agreements, conventions, and strategies, including; The African Convention for the Conservation of Nature & Natural Resources; African Regional Ocean Governance Strategy; The Nairobi Convention; Regional Ocean Governance Strategy for the WIO, etc.

MPA as a Type II MLG initiative with horizontal cross-sectoral connections, as well as vertical connections

National

Domestic laws and regulations on; ocean/fisheries; wild life conservation; shipping; coastal development; coastal waters; marine spatial planning; blue economy strategy.

Provincial

Policies and regulations at sub national or devolved government level covering sectors related to marine environment.

MARINE PROTECTED AREA

Lower vertical connections to embed MPA amongst local users and communities

Local

Blue tourism

Costal development | Land based Pollution | Fisheries & Biodiversity | Energy Projects | Shippings & Ports

Vertical and horizontal co-evolution

Source: Adapted from Jones et al., 2024, (p. 7). Incentive diversity is key to the more effective and equitable governance of marine protected areas.

in this framework enables partnerships for implementation of initiatives towards defined goals. The included categorisation of laws, strategies, and agreements is not exhaustive, but serves to capture those with shared applications across WIO countries.

As a marine resource user, blue tourism would fit at the lower horizontal connections, having cross linkages for example with fisheries and biodiversity, coastal development, energy projects, etc. From this level, vertical connections upwards narrow to core issues for MPAs, raising the possibility to overlook other blue tourism forms that do not have MPAs as a component of their product development.

Drawing from an international level, the SDGs offer a common ground to orient governance to concerns for both MPAs and blue tourism. For WIO blue tourism applicable SDG targets include e.g. Target 5 of SDG 14 on conservation of marine areas; Target 8.9 to implement policies for promotion of sustainable tourism development; SDG Target 12b aiming for implementation of monitoring tools for sustainable development impacts for tourism that creates jobs; and Target 14.7 with goals to use tourism as a tool to increase economic

benefits of Small Island developing states and least developed countries. A major limitation here is the persistent challenges for integrating the SDGs within tourism in Africa.[46]



Tanzania (© L. Stawinska/Unsplash)

46    United Nations (2024). The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) – a Renewed Declaration for Resilient Prosperity.

# 5. SIDS and Small Island Destinations

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- Small Islands Developing States and other small island destinations with healthy marine environments have been successful in nurturing blue tourism.

- Small Islands Developing States are at high risk of mass tourism and need deliberate policies to manage tourism development and avoid overtourism.

- Challenges facing blue tourism in Small Islands Developing States are social empowerment, governance, financing, innovation, resource management, infrastructure, climate change, adaptation to change and territory management.

Small Islands Developing States (SIDS), which are territories and countries located in the tropics and low latitude sub-tropics, have large coastal and marine areas, with many of them depending on tourism. Indeed, tourism has played an important role in the growth of many SIDS for several decades, underpinning a large proportion of the countries' GDP, creating formal and informal employment, and contributing foreign exchange earnings. In 2019, international visitor expenditure accounted for 20% of nominal GDP in at least 15 SIDS.[47] Among these, several stand out as disproportionately dependent on the tourism sector, namely: Seychelles, Maldives, Saint Lucia, and Antigua and Barbuda. International expenditure in these countries range between 45% and 62% of their respective nominal GDP in 2019.[48] Moreover, many SIDS have large informal sectors which are often not properly accounted for in calculation of GDP for lack of data.

In recent years, the rising market demand for authentic, pristine experiences, new adventure sports and conscious travel has created opportunities for SIDS to embrace tourism as a tool for inclusive and sustainable development. However, studies indicate that the benefits of tourism do not flow equitably to citizens and MSMEs. Further, SIDS are affected by mass tourism that results to damage to the environment and loss of biodiversity, but these opportunity costs of tourism are not accounted for in the valuation of tourism leading to disconnect between rising visitor numbers and wellbeing of people and the environment.

Behind the growing visitor numbers to SIDS are missed opportunities to achieve greater development outcomes for the communities due to lack of linkages with local MSMES and individuals to monetise local talent and community assets. Tourism's contribution to SIDS economies may also be dampened by economic leakages driven by remittances by migrant workers, spending on imported goods, foods and other supplies for tourism. Addressing this digital financial gap and other leakages is critical for inclusive, sustainable development of blue tourism in SIDS. Other challenges facing blue tourism in SIDS are social empowerment, governance, financing, innovation, resource management, infrastructure, climate change, adaptation to change and territory

management.

Tools available for SIDS in management of coastal and marine resources, with relevance for blue tourism development include:

- Marine Protected Areas
- Marine Spatial Plans
- Integrated Coastal Management
- Community Managed Marine Conservation Areas

It has emerged that co-management is the desired governance model for marine and coastal resources which SIDS depend on. Co-management has had successes in bringing together diverse actor groups in the marine environment, including government, community and NGOs. Majority of examples from SIDS relate to co-management in the fisheries sector, for example in St. Lucia. Equally, Public Private Community Partnerships (PPCP) are key in building capacity for local linkages across the tourism value chain. This has been achieved through technical and financial assistance to the SIDS.

Overall, achieving sustainable development in SIDS requires a holistic approach that enhances local participation, promotes environmental sustainability, and ensures that tourism development supports broader social and economic objectives. Destinations should have comprehensive tourism plans that include policy reforms to improve land-use planning, safety, control over-development, water resources management, and natural asset management. Both top-down guidelines and bottom-up actions must converge to optimise value for citizens in the short and long term. Governance arrangements applied to tourism must be dynamic due to changing actors.



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47   WTTC, (2024). Travel & Tourism Economic Impact.
48   Ibid.

# 6. Challenges for Sustainable Blue Tourism

Several challenges hinder development of sustainable blue tourism in the WIO. Understanding these challenges to strengthen the link between coastal tourism and marine conservation is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote sustainable blue tourism practices. The challenges point to a persistent issue for the region; gaps in integrating sustainability standards within blue tourism across some destinations. Such gaps would potentially intensify destination vulnerabilities to crisis.

## 6.1. Socioeconomic Disparities

Tourism often brings substantial economic benefits to coastal regions, but these benefits are not always distributed equitably, leading to economic disparities within coastal communities in the WIO. For example, in Mauritius, the tourism industry is concentrated in areas like Grand Baie and Flic en Flac, which are known for their high-end resorts and luxury tourism. While these areas experience significant economic benefits from tourism, less developed regions such as the interior of Mauritius or rural coastal areas see minimal benefits.

In Kenya, the coastal city of Mombasa and the nearby island of Lamu are popular tourist destinations, attracting international visitors with their beaches and historical sites. However, the local population in these areas may not always benefit equally from tourism employment opportunities. Tourism-related jobs may be concentrated in hotels, restaurants, and tour operations, which can be inaccessible to local communities due to skill mismatches or lack of education. Consequently, while some residents find employment in the tourism sector, others remain unemployed or work in low-paying, informal jobs. This disparity can exacerbate economic inequalities between those who benefit from tourism and those who do not.

In Seychelles, tourism contributes significantly to the national economy, but the distribution of tourism revenue can be uneven. Large international hotel chains and tour operators often dominate the sector, and a significant portion of the revenue generated from tourism leaves the country in the form of profits repatriated to foreign owners. Local businesses, such as small guesthouses and local tour guides, may receive a smaller share of the tourism revenue. This can create a disparity where local entrepreneurs and communities benefit less from tourism compared to large, often foreign-owned enterprises.

In Madagascar, coastal tourism is vital for regions like Nosy Be, where local fishing communities often attempt to engage in tourism by offering small-scale accommodation and tours. However, these small-scale operators frequently struggle to compete with larger, well-established resorts and tour operators. Small operators may be marginalized, receiving limited support or recognition in the tourism sector. They often lack access to the same marketing resources, networks, and investment opportunities as larger businesses, which can limit their ability to benefit from tourism growth. Consequently,

economic benefits may be disproportionately enjoyed by larger, more resourceful entities.

## 6.2. Infrastructural Development

Tourism infrastructure development can have significant impacts on coastal environments, leading to habitat loss and increased pollution if not developed and then managed sustainably. These impacts often disproportionately affect different segments of coastal communities in the WIO. For example, in Malindi, Kenya, coastal tourism development has led to the construction of resorts, hotels, and recreational facilities along the beachfront and near sensitive marine ecosystems. The development often encroaches upon critical habitats such as mangroves and coral reefs, which are crucial for marine biodiversity and coastal protection. The destruction of mangroves, for instance, reduces the natural protection against storm surges and coastal erosion[49].

In Madagascar, Nosy Be, a popular tourist destination, has experienced rapid tourism development with the construction of luxury resorts and marinas. This development leads to the reclamation of coastal land and destruction of critical habitats like coral reefs and seagrass beds.[50] Small-scale fishers and local businesses suffer from reduced fish populations and degraded marine environments, while tourism developers and large resorts benefit from the increased revenue and improved property values.

In Zanzibar, the expansion of tourism infrastructure, including resorts and large-scale waste treatment facilities, often leads to increased pollution.[51] Wastewater and sewage from resorts can flow untreated into the ocean, causing nutrient pollution and harming marine life.[52] Additionally, solid waste from tourism activities can end up on beaches and in the ocean.[53]

## 6.3. Overcrowding

Over tourism can significantly impact coastal communities in the WIO, leading to environmental degradation. In Mombasa, Kenya, a popular coastal destination – commonly known as Pirates beach, attracts large numbers of tourists annually. Overcrowding, particularly during peak seasons, places intense pressure on coastal and marine environments. The excessive number of tourists can cause physical damage to sensitive habitats such as coral reefs and mangroves. Coral reefs, in particular, are vulnerable to damage from snorkeling, diving, and trampling by tourists. Coral bleaching, physical breakage, and reduced biodiversity are common

49  Asari et al., (2021). Mangrove as a natural barrier to environmental risks and coastal protection.

50  Ntombela, C. and Celliers, L. (2015). Urbanisation, coastal development and vulnerability, and catchments. United Nations Environment Programme/ Nairobi Convention Secretariat.

51  Khamis et al., (2017). Geographical characterization of the Zanzibar coastal zone and its management perspectives.

52  Shechambo, D. (2019). Social economic and cultural impacts of coastal tourism to local communities in Zanzibar, Tanzania

53  Asari et al., (2021). Mangrove as a natural barrier to environmental risks and coastal protection.

© Mauritius (© G. Baudusseau/Unsplash)

consequences. These damages can disrupt marine ecosystems, leading to declines in fish populations and affecting the health of coastal environments.

Zanzibar experiences high tourist volumes, especially in areas like Stone Town and Nungwi Beach. The influx of tourists can exceed the carrying capacity of these areas. Overcrowding can lead to increased waste production and pollution, including litter and untreated sewage entering the ocean[54]. Additionally, the physical footprint of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels and resorts, can encroach on fragile coastal ecosystems.[55] Increased pollution contributes to water quality issues, harming marine life and reducing the aesthetic and ecological value of the coastal area.[56]

Mauritius is a key tourist destination with beaches, lagoons, and coral reefs. High tourist numbers result in significant pollution from various sources.[57] Wastewater from hotels and resorts, if not properly treated, can enter marine environments, carrying pollutants such as nutrients, chemicals, and pathogens. Plastic waste from tourism activities can also accumulate on beaches and in the ocean,[58] posing a threat to marine animals, which may ingest or become entangled in debris, leading to mortality and habitat degradation.

Nosy Be, in Madagascar, is known for its tourism appeal, drawing significant numbers of visitors to its coastal and marine attractions. The strain on local infrastructure becomes evident with such high tourist volumes. The demand for fresh water, energy, and waste management services increases with tourism. If local infrastructure is not equipped to handle this demand, it can lead to resource shortages and inadequate waste disposal. Resource strain can lead to over-extraction of water from local sources, affecting both the environment and local communities.

## 6.4. Marine Plastic Pollution

Pollution from plastics can have severe consequences for both tourism and marine life within coastal communities in the WIO. Mauritius is renowned for its pristine beaches and vibrant marine life, including coral reefs and diverse fish species. However, plastic pollution poses a significant threat.[59] Plastics such as bags, bottles, and micro plastics can entangle marine animals, leading to injury or death. Sea turtles, for example, often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, leading to ingestion and potentially fatal blockages in their digestive systems. The ingestion of plastics by marine life can lead to malnutrition and internal injuries, ultimately reducing population numbers and affecting the overall health of marine ecosystems.[60]

Zanzibar is a popular tourist destination known for its beautiful beaches and clear waters. However, plastic pollution has become a significant issue.[61] Plastic waste, such as bottles and bags, often accumulates on beaches, detracting from their natural beauty and cleanliness. This accumulation can make beaches less attractive to tourists, leading to reduced visitor numbers. A decrease in tourist numbers can lead to lower revenue for local businesses that depend on tourism.

The Comoros islands, with their scenic beaches and marine environments, are facing challenges from plastic pollution[62]. Plastic debris often washes ashore, affecting the cleanliness and appeal of tourist sites. Plastic pollution can negatively impact the visual appeal of beaches and coastal areas, which are critical for attracting tourists, affecting recreational activities such as swimming and snorkeling. The decline in tourist satisfaction due to polluted beaches can lead to a decrease in tourism revenue and negatively affect the local economy.

54    Maione, C., (2021). Quantifying plastics waste accumulations on coastal tourism sites in Zanzibar, Tanzania.

55    Mustelin et al., (2010). Understanding current and future vulnerability in coastal settings: community perceptions and preferences for adaptation in Zanzibar.

56    Mohammed, S. M. (2002). Pollution management in Zanzibar: the need for a new approach.

57    Ramkissoon, H., & Durbarry, R. (2009). The environmental impacts of tourism at the Casela Nature and Leisure Park, Mauritius.

58    Mattan-Moorgawa, S., et al., (2021). A first assessment of marine meso-litter and microplastics on beaches: Where does Mauritius stand?.

59    Ramkissoon, H., & Durbarry, R. (2009). , Mauritius.The environmental impacts of tourism at the Casela Nature and Leisure Park

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61    Mohammed, S. M. (2002). Pollution management in Zanzibar: the need for a new approach.

62    Indian Ocean Commission, (2023). Western Indian Ocean: Prevention, reduction and control of Marine Plastic Pollution in AIODIS. APPENDIX 1. Country Working Papers.

# 7. Policy Pathways for Sustainable Blue Tourism

The relations between tourism and oceanic environments are established. This report notes that the state of development of blue tourism varies from state to state in the WIO, and the sector faces several challenges already identified in this report. Yet, policy opportunities exist to chart a sustainable path for blue tourism in the WIO. Leveraging these opportunities can re-engineer tourism in the WIO states through good policies that underpin destination development, by touching on all nodes in the value chain and establishing a resilient tourism system. These opportunities focus on enhancing conservation efforts, engaging local communities, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. Charting a way forward for tourism requires a mix of pathways that will address economic growth, social equity and environmental sustainability in and through blue tourism. These pathways will concretise in policy and strategic actions to be undertaken at regional, country or destination level.

## Policy Pathway 1 - Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Blue Tourism

### Enhancing Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Blue Tourism Development

Strengthening regional cooperation is essential for promoting sustainable blue tourism across the WIO and its SIDS. By fostering collaboration among governments, private sector stakeholders, and local communities, countries in the region can address common challenges such as environmental protection, sustainable resource management, and inclusive economic growth.

A unified regional approach can help create a resilient and thriving blue tourism sector, guided by shared sustainability goals and enhanced by the collective expertise and resources of all stakeholders. The recently developed Regional Ocean Governance Strategy (ROGS) provides a starting point for this cohesive and collective effort. Through collaborative governance, countries can co-create innovative solutions that promote sustainable blue tourism development, safeguard marine ecosystems, and deliver long-term benefits to coastal communities.

### Developing a Regional Master Strategy for Blue Tourism

To coordinate efforts, the WIO states could collaborate on developing a Regional Master Strategy for Blue Tourism. This strategy would serve as a comprehensive framework designed to guide sustainable blue tourism development across the region, while adhering to the core principles of the ROGS and other relevant frameworks. The proposed strategy would align national tourism and other relevant policies with regional objectives, ensuring cohesin and long-term sustainability.

The master strategy would incorporate global best practices in sustainable tourism, promoting innovative approaches that minimise environmental impacts while maximising socio-economic benefits for coastal communities. Additionally, the strategy would encourage enhanced regional cooperation, enabling WIO countries to address shared challenges such as climate resilience, marine biodiversity protection, and equitable resource use. Through this collective effort, the strategy would ensure that the region's blue tourism sector remains resilient, adaptive, and aligned with the SDGs.

## Policy Pathway 2 - Driving Sustainable Economic Growth through Blue Tourism

### Diversification of Blue Tourism Sector

While there are many opportunities for sustainable blue tourism, diversity is lacking in WIO with policy focus being given to beach, sand and sea, mainly on beach hotel/ resort development and cruise tourism. There is a lack of integrated planning to promote all segments of blue tourism. One example of fostering integrated planning can be found in Kenya, through the Go Blue Project[63], the first ever Blueprint on Tourism and Cultural heritage in the Coastal Counties of Kenya[64] launched in 2023 aimed to support sustained and inclusive growth.

The lack of frameworks for diversifying blue tourism is limiting the welfare of host communities. Diversification will not only expand opportunities for local populations but will also address seasonality, lifting related pressures and creating opportunities for all-year-round tourism activities. For example, diversifying tourism offerings in Kenya, Madagascar, and Comoros involves leveraging cultural heritage, nature-based attractions and community-based tourism. Nosy Be and Île Sainte-Marie offer snorkeling and whale-watching experiences. Whale-watching is particularly notable during migration seasons, but marine activities draw tourists year-round. Similarly, Diani beach along Kenya's coastline offers snorkeling and diving in Kisite Mpunguti Marine National Park.

Additionally, Lamu cultural festival in Lamu Island celebrates Swahili culture with music, dance, and traditional crafts attracting tourists beyond the peak holiday season, benefiting local artisans and cultural practitioners year-round. The same is witnessed in the Famadihana (Turning of the Bones) festival in Madagascar, which is a unique cultural event that attracts tourists interested in traditional practices.

### Scaling Up Local Business Opportunities

Tourism in the WIO is characterized by many small businesses with potential but lack capacity to scale up sustainably. The potential of sustainable growth for these businesses is limited by several factors, not just financing. Programs for scaling up MSMEs can be catalytic in transforming blue tourism to more inclusive models. The case of the World Bank project in Gambia, mentioned herein, is an example of what can be achieved when scaling is combined with value chain integration. Policies that support scaling must address indigenous skills recognition, affirmative action for integration of MSMEs and mentorship and weighted incentives.

63   GO Blue Project.
64   Asari et al., (2021). Mangrove as a natural barrier to environmental risks and coastal protection.

## Policy Pathways. Suggested Actions

### Diversification of Blue Tourism Sector

▌ Mapping of sustainable blue tourism opportunities in the WIO to create an up-to-date inventory.

▌ At country level, support and redirect new investments towards the identified sustainable blue tourism opportunities to spread benefits and build resilience in coastal destinations.

▌ Support acceleration programs for segments of blue tourism with opportunities in the WIO region that are poorly developed or not effectively integrated in the value chain.

### Scaling Up Local Business Opportunities

▌ At destination level, support business incubation to mentor small businesses for sustainable scaling.

▌ At destination level, promote the creation of multi-stakeholder innovation clusters to foster knowledge sharing and scalability.



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## Policy Pathway 3 - Advancing Social Equity Within and Through Blue Tourism

### Strengthening Inclusive Blue Tourism Value Chain

Building inclusive and resilient blue tourism in the WIO region relies on locally competitive and inclusive value chains that support both existing businesses and travellers while creating opportunities for local communities. The tourism value chain encompasses services provided before, during, and after travel, all of which shape the tourist experience. Building an inclusive ecosystem involves collaboration across these multiple sectors, including destination management organisations. In addition to ensuring efficient operations, value chains should be inclusive, offering equitable access to opportunities for SMEs, women, and marginalised groups within local communities. This inclusivity allows a wider distribution of the benefits of blue tourism, fostering greater social and economic development.

Policies informed by up-to-date value chain analysis are most likely to effectively address issues of destination competitiveness and sustainability. Regularly assessing value chain performance, and the effectiveness of these policy actions, and adapting policies accordingly can help ensure that the tourism sector remains inclusive, and aligned with environmental and social sustainability objectives.

### Support Human Capital Development for Inclusive Blue Tourism

Lack of formal skills among local populations has two effects on sustainable blue tourism in the WIO. First, the wages paid to workers in the sector are low because the labour is categorised as unskilled or domestic. Secondly, lack of skills and poor wages has an impact on quality of services in the value chain making some of these destinations low value mass tourism destinations, ultimately leading to social and environmental pressures.

An effective policy intervention for addressing human capital development in the WIO is through institutions that offer special curriculum to catalyse skills development and recognition. The UNESCO project on Innovative Learning Practice, is working with established institutions in tourism to support Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVETS) to develop alternative curriculum for recognition of tourism skills for workers already in the sector. The Masai Mara Tourism College is another example of how TVETs can be used to catalyse skills development for local populations. These programmes can increasingly foster social inclusion, resilience and sustainability of the sector.

### Support Mechanisms to Foster Local Community Benefits

Decentralisation of blue tourism management and revenues is a key pillar of sustainable tourism and foster social inclusion. This enables destinations to plan for the needs of the local population, effectively and quickly respond to threats as well enhance participation in sector governance. Blue tourism can bring benefits to local communities in several ways including job creation, social services and infrastructure development. However, when destinations develop without structured interventions to promote local benefits, communities struggle to keep up with tourism growth. A mix of strategies can be used to share benefits with local communities.

**Policy Pathways. Suggested Actions**

**Strengthening Inclusive Blue Tourism Value Chain**

❚ Conduct and support value chain analysis of blue tourism in the WIO to identify key nodes that can inform policy making and planning.

❚ Support mechanisms for assessing inclusivity and sustainability performance of regional, national and destination-level value chains, as well as related policies.

**Support Human Capital Development for Inclusive Blue Tourism**

❚ At national level, accelerate Alternative Learning Practices to promote and recognise sustainable blue tourism through Continuous Professional Development and give graded recognition.

❚ At destination level, incentivise stakeholder collaboration to offer short-term technical courses to local existing and aspiring entrepreneurs.

**Support Mechanisms to Foster Local Community Benefits**

❚ At national level, support policy analysis to better meet community needs and enhance the effectiveness of revenue retention strategies.

❚ Introduce value chain controls in destinations that include strengthening local ownership, integrating local procurement, fostering community-based initiatives, and promoting fair trade practices to promote sustainable development.

**Support Mechanisms to Foster Local Community Benefits**

❚ At destination level, develop an action agenda for community benefit sharing by engaging local communities to identify local needs and expectations regarding benefit sharing.

❚ At destination, incentivise entrepreneurship development programs through business incubators and accelerators with mentorship and resources, provide tailored training and workshops.

❚ Introduce actions that remove barriers for MSMEs in the value chain including, but not limited to, simplifying regulations, support access to market and certification programmes.

❚ Incentivise co-management and/or co-ownership of tourism by exploring new models to ensure fair and equitable participation.

# Policy Pathway 4 - Promoting and Safeguarding Environmental Sustainability in Blue Tourism

## Support Collaboration and Multi Stakeholder Engagement in Policy Making

Creating effective mechanisms for stakeholder consultation is crucial for promoting and safeguarding environmental sustainability in blue tourism. Policies developed through collaborative processes foster transparency, build trust, and enhance a sense of ownership among all parties involved. Collaborative policymaking for blue tourism would ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to policies that address the needs of all stakeholders and facilitate the co-creation of innovative solutions. Proactive collaboration allows for the consolidation or clarification of roles and responsibilities, maximising impact and efficiency. For instance, the Kenya Coast Tourism Association serves as a prime example of how stakeholder collaboration can effectively represent the industry and drive collective action in a specific region. Such collaborative frameworks enable stakeholders to develop and implement effective strategies, share resources, and create synergies that support environmental protection and sustainable development.

## Strengthening Local Marine and Coastal Governance Institutions

The rapid growth of tourism in the WIO has created challenges in managing marine and coastal environments sustainably. To address this, it is crucial to develop new policies and regulations where gaps exist, while strengthening existing frameworks to align with global best practices. This would involve enhancing the capacity of governance institutions through targeted training, ensuring that they can effectively oversee tourism activities and implement sustainable practices.

Efforts should focus on inclusive decision-making, involving local communities, tourism operators, and stakeholders in the policymaking process. Capacity-building initiatives should be prioritised to equip governance bodies with the skills needed for effective management, monitoring, and enforcement of regulations. Additionally, integrating international best practices and fostering knowledge exchange will help align local governance with global sustainability standards. Regular evaluation and updating of policies will ensure that governance frameworks remain responsive to emerging challenges in the blue tourism sector. By strengthening local governance institutions, the WIO region can better manage the growing tourism sector, ensuring the protection of coastal and marine environments while fostering sustainable development that benefits local communities.

## Incentivise Access to Certification and Standards

WIO countries should work toward the adoption of comprehensive tourism sustainability standards that align with global best practices. A regional tourism certification program would provide a framework for evaluating and recognizing tourism operations that adhere to high sustainability criteria, which would also foster greater transparency and trust among travellers.

By establishing a standardised regional certification system, WIO states can ensure consistency in sustainable blue tourism practices across borders, encouraging responsible business operations and strengthening the reputation of the region as a leader in blue tourism sustainability. Collaboration with relevant international organisations, or local certifying bodies, would provide the necessary expertise and credibility to create a robust certification program. Such a program would not only provide a competitive advantage for certified operators but also encourage businesses to adopt practices that contribute to environmental conservation, social equity, and economic sustainability.

In addition to environmental protection, the certification program should incorporate social accountability, ensuring that tourism businesses support fair labour practices, community engagement, and cultural preservation. Regular monitoring and assessment of certified operations would guarantee ongoing compliance and improvement, helping to build a sustainable tourism model that meets both traveller expectations and local development goals.

## Policy Pathways. Suggested Actions

### Support Collaboration/Multi Stakeholder Engagement in Policy Making

❚ At national level, conduct stakeholder mapping to identify all relevant actors in blue tourism, assess their roles and interests, and pinpoint any gaps or underrepresentation to ensure a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to tourism development.

❚ Strengthen blue tourism trade organisations and stakeholder groups by building their capacity to engage in policy making, encouraging the formation of new groups where needed, and fostering continuous collaboration through platforms for dialogue and co-creation.

### Strengthening Local Marine and Coastal Governance Institutions

❚ Supporting institutionalisation and capacity of local governance groups to design, implement and monitor impacts of conservation projects related to blue tourism.

❚ Document and integrate indigenous knowledge systems into governance frameworks to include locals in marine and coastal management, promoting citizen science.

❚ Support the development of local knowledge exchange hubs to facilitate the sharing of expertise and best practices.

### Incentivise Access to Certification and Standards

❚ Develop certification programs for blue tourism to promote sustainable practices and industry standards.

❚ Align regional service rating systems to facilitate cross-state comparisons within the WIO.

❚ Collaborate with sustainable tourism certification agencies to provide training and establish standards tailored to the WIO.

Trou aux Biches Beachcomber Golf Resort & Spa, Mauritius (© X. Coiffic/Unsplash)

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