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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Africa's Blue Economy Contested: Lessons for India's Ocean Governance

DOWN TO EARTH

14 April 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE



"Africa's blue economy disputes — 1,000+ documented conflicts over ocean resources — reveal the gap between aspirational 'blue economy' policy and on-the-ground enforcement. What lessons does this hold for India's own ocean governance, especially in SAGAR and Neighbourhood First contexts?"

 Source: [Original editorial](#)

Down to Earth

EDITORIAL SUMMARY

Africa's aspiration for a \$1 trillion blue economy by 2063 is increasingly contested by over 1,000 documented disputes across 34 countries — between industrial aquaculture and artisanal fishers, offshore extractors and coastal communities, seabed exploration and ecological values, commercial actors and women's traditional marine access. The governance lesson applies directly to India's Deep Ocean Mission and Blue Economy framework: institutional architecture (inclusive consultation, rights-based tenure, spatial planning, revenue-sharing) matters more than investment volume.

THE AFRICAN BLUE ECONOMY CONTEXT

Agenda 2063 — the African Union's 50-year development vision (adopted 2015) — places the "Blue Economy" at its strategic core. Potential estimates:

RESOURCE	ANNUAL VALUE (AFRICAN POTENTIAL, 2063 PROJECTIONS)
Fisheries	\$23 billion
Aquaculture	\$10 billion
Tourism (coastal & marine)	\$50 billion+
Offshore oil & gas	\$100 billion+
Shipping & ports	\$80 billion
Seabed minerals (speculative)	TBD — potentially \$500 billion by 2063
Total	\$1 trillion+ aspiration

Africa’s 38 coastal states collectively command the 3rd-largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) regionally. But as the Down To Earth piece documents, realising the potential has run into severe conflict with existing ocean economies — small-scale fishing (SSF), coastal communities, Indigenous peoples, and women’s groups.

THE FOUR FAULT LINES

1. Industrial Aquaculture vs Small-Scale Fishers

The pattern: Foreign-owned aquaculture (shrimp, salmon, tuna ranching) receives concession rights that effectively privatise what was customary-access marine space.

Case — Senegal:

- Chinese, Spanish, and Norwegian companies have secured aquaculture concessions totalling ~40% of productive near-shore waters
- Senegal’s ~600,000 artisanal fishers — whose catch volumes have halved since 2015 — report displacement from ancestral fishing grounds
- Disputes escalating to boat confrontations; several reported deaths

Case — Mauritania:

- Similar pattern with EU fleet agreements (Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement / SFPA)
- Revenue to central government; costs to local fishing communities

2. Offshore Oil & Gas

The pattern: Oil/gas concessions generate central government revenue but often with minimal coastal community consultation or benefit-sharing.

Case — Mozambique (Rovuma Basin):

- Multi-billion-dollar LNG projects (TotalEnergies, ExxonMobil)
- Displacement of ~9,000 households from coastal Cabo Delgado
- Concurrent insurgency (ISIS-linked) in Cabo Delgado exploits grievance
- ~1 million internally displaced since 2017

Case — Ghana (Jubilee Field):

- First oil production 2010
- Dispute between national revenue share and Western Region (coastal) infrastructure deficit
- Ghana's Petroleum Revenue Management Act (2011) mandates ~70% reinvestment but coastal community feedback loops remain weak

3. Seabed Mining / Deep Sea Exploration

The pattern: Deep-sea polymetallic nodule and hydrothermal vent deposits attract exploration; African coastal waters and the Mid-Atlantic Ridge region are increasingly licensed.

Key players:

- **International Seabed Authority (ISA)** — UN body regulating deep-sea mining in international waters
- Contractors: The Metals Company (Canada), DeepGreen, Lockheed Martin, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian exploration consortia

Key concerns:

- Irreversible damage to benthic ecosystems
- Displacement of migratory species (tuna, whales)
- Loss of local marine resources

African response: Guinea, Senegal, and Papua New Guinea (non-African but paradigmatic) have called for a precautionary moratorium; African Union is divided.

4. Women's Marine Access

Often overlooked: In traditional African (and Asian) fishing economies, women do ~50-70% of processing, selling, net-mending, salt-drying, and mangrove harvesting work. When industrial operations arrive:

- Large-scale processing plants displace small-scale women-operated drying racks
- Mangrove destruction for aquaculture ponds eliminates women's shellfish and salt harvesting areas
- Central government licensing rarely consults women's cooperatives

The piece highlights this as a gender-dimension of blue economy conflict routinely missed by official assessments.

KENYA'S COMMUNITY DIALOGUE MODEL — WHAT WORKS

The Down To Earth analysis highlights **Kenya's approach** as evidence of what inclusive governance can achieve:

The Turkana Case

Lake Turkana (northwestern Kenya) faces parallel pressures:

- Dam construction on Ethiopia's Omo River (upstream) reducing inflow
- Oil exploration by Tullow Oil in the southern basin
- Chinese fishing joint ventures
- Traditional Turkana, Samburu, and Pokot communities

Kenya's response:

- **Community-level dialogue forums** (Kerio Valley Development Authority facilitation)
- **Compulsory inclusion** of traditional community representatives in zoning committees
- **Revenue-sharing formula** (some oil revenue directed to local communities)

Outcome: The report documents that conflict rates **reduced by 40-50%** versus equivalent African regions relying on top-down zoning — not because disputes disappeared, but because escalation was managed institutionally.

Coastal Kenya (Mombasa, Lamu, Malindi)

Similar community-based approaches in marine protected area (MPA) governance have:

- Built joint-ownership models between Kenya Wildlife Service and local BMUs (Beach Management Units)
- Integrated women's cooperatives into fisheries decision-making
- Reduced illegal fishing by ~30% via community enforcement

The Institutional Ingredients

What makes Kenya's approach work:

- ① **Legal recognition** of traditional tenure
- ② **Mandatory consultation** rather than optional dialogue
- ③ **Revenue-sharing formulae** in extractive projects
- ④ **Spatial planning** with protected areas
- ⑤ **Grievance redressal** mechanisms (local Ombudsman, not just central tribunals)
- ⑥ **Women-specific seats** in coastal management committees

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S BLUE ECONOMY

India's marine economy is positioned for rapid expansion:

Current Initiatives

INITIATIVE	OUTLAY	LAUNCHED
Deep Ocean Mission	₹4,077 crore (5 years)	June 2021
Blue Economy Policy Framework (MoES)	Policy	2022
Sagarmala Programme	₹8.5 lakh crore (projects)	2015
National Fisheries Development Board	Various	2006
PM Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY)	₹20,050 crore	2020
Coastal Berth Scheme	Component of Sagarmala	2014

CRZ Notification 2019

The **Coastal Regulation Zone Notification 2019** recognises traditional fishing communities' rights:

- CRZ-III (rural undeveloped areas) — small-scale fishermen allowed construction within 200 metres of High Tide Line (HTL)
- Prohibition of industrial operations within 500 metres of HTL in ecologically sensitive areas
- Mangrove protection formalised

Implementation gaps: State-level implementation is uneven; several HCs (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Odisha) have ruled against specific coastal projects for CRZ violation.

Deep Ocean Mission Specifics

- **Crewed submersible (Samudrayaan)** — target 6,000 metre depth by 2028
- **Polymetallic nodule recovery** in Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB) — India holds ISA contract
- **Deep Ocean biology and biodiversity studies**
- **Ocean-energy and minerals research**

As deep-sea extraction scales, the African pattern of community exclusion could reproduce in:

- Coastal Tamil Nadu (fisheries, oil & gas)
- Kerala coast (fisheries, mangroves)
- Odisha coast (extractives, shipping)
- Gujarat (industrial expansion, Alang ship-breaking)

- A&N Islands (already tensions — Great Nicobar Project)

THE FOUR-LAYER GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE FOR INDIA

Layer 1: Rights-Based Marine Tenure

- Strengthen CRZ 2019 implementation
- Digitise traditional fishing tenure records
- Extend to inland fisheries (Schedule V and VI tribal areas with aquatic resources)
- Recognise **Gram Sabha consent** under Forest Rights Act 2006 principles for marine-adjacent communities

Layer 2: Mandatory Inclusive Consultation

- Small-scale fishers and women's cooperatives on planning committees
- Revise EIA Notification 2006 to include coastal-specific consultation standards
- Strengthen NGT Coastal Bench jurisdiction

Layer 3: Spatial Planning

- National Marine Spatial Plan — currently draft stage
- Exclusion zones for ecologically sensitive areas (coral reefs, mangroves, estuaries)
- Social-sensitivity zones where traditional communities retain customary rights

Layer 4: Transparent Licensing & Revenue-Sharing

- Mandatory disclosure of offshore contracts (oil & gas, aquaculture, seabed minerals)
- Revenue-sharing formulae with coastal districts (analogous to DMF — District Mineral Foundation — for mining)
- Grievance redressal with time-bound adjudication

GLOBAL CONTEXT — THE REGULATORY PATCHWORK

BODY	ROLE
UNCLOS (1982)	Framework for ocean governance; EEZ rights; ISA creation
International Seabed Authority (ISA)	Deep-sea mining regulation in international waters
Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)	Marine biodiversity; EBSAs (Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas)
BBNJ Treaty (2023)	“Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction” — protection of high seas biodiversity
Regional Fisheries Management Organisations	Stock management in regional waters
Blue Economy Finance Principles (2018)	Voluntary standards for ocean-related finance

The regulatory patchwork has weaknesses:

- Non-binding voluntary principles
- Limited enforcement mechanisms
- National discretion dominates implementation
- Small-scale fishers and Indigenous voices routinely excluded from international negotiations

THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The difference between Africa’s conflict-riddled blue economy trajectory and a potentially smoother Indian path depends on decisions taken **before** major extraction begins at scale. India’s Deep Ocean Mission is still in exploration phase; mineral recovery at commercial scale is 5-10 years away. This window allows:

- Institutional architecture to be built proactively
- Community rights to be clarified pre-emptively
- Revenue-sharing formulae to be established before they become politically contested
- Environmental safeguards to be embedded in licensing design

Once a Deep Ocean Mission extraction site begins commercial operation with a Mauritanian or Mozambican model of governance gaps, retrofitting inclusive governance becomes exponentially harder. The choice is now.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — IR	Africa-India cooperation; AU Agenda 2063; IORA; UNCLOS; International Seabed Authority; BBNJ Treaty 2023
GS2 — Governance	CRZ 2019; Deep Ocean Mission; EIA consultation standards; marine spatial planning
GS3 — Economy	Blue economy; Sagarmala; PMMSY; Deep Ocean Mission; revenue-sharing formulae (DMF analogy)
GS3 — Environment	Marine biodiversity; mangroves; coral reefs; seabed mining ecology; BBNJ Treaty
GS3 — Security	Maritime security; IORA; SAGAR; Neighbourhood First
Mains Keywords	Blue economy disputes, African Agenda 2063, ISA, Deep Ocean Mission, Samudrayaan, CRZ 2019, PMMSY, Sagarmala, BBNJ Treaty, Kenya community dialogue model, FPIC, polymetallic nodules

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Africa's 1,000+ documented ocean resource disputes — across 34 countries, involving aquaculture, extractives, energy, and small-scale fishers — reveal that 'blue economy' rhetoric cannot substitute for institutional architecture: fair governance, inclusive decision-making, and consistent enforcement matter more than technology or investment volume.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Disputes cluster around four fault lines: industrial aquaculture displacing artisanal fishers; offshore oil/gas rigs affecting coastal livelihoods; seabed mining exploration; and women's traditional marine access being squeezed out by new commercial entrants.
- Kenya's Lake Turkana and coastal case studies show that community dialogue forums — mandated inclusion of small-scale fishers in zoning decisions — reduce conflict by ~40-50% versus top-down zoning alone.
- The UN's Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles (2018) have been adopted by 60+ financial institutions — but adoption rarely penetrates to on-the-ground project

selection; 'green-washing' and 'blue-washing' remain common.

- India's 'Deep Ocean Mission' (2021, ₹4,077 crore) and Blue Economy Policy Framework (MoES, 2022) are gathering investment but have not yet tested against large-scale social disputes — the test will come as deep-sea mineral exploration advances in the CCZ-Indian Ocean region.

COUNTER

Blue economy development is a legitimate national priority — the ocean is the last major resource frontier, and countries that hesitate risk ceding sovereignty to Chinese and European extractors already moving aggressively. Over-emphasising conflict risk can paralyse legitimate development.

WAY FORWARD

Four-layer governance: (1) Rights-based marine tenure for traditional fishing communities (CRZ Notification 2019 implementation in India; OCEAN Protocol for African states); (2) Mandatory inclusive consultation — small-scale fishers and women's groups in planning committees; (3) Spatial planning with exclusion zones for ecologically/socially sensitive areas; (4) Transparent licensing regimes with revenue-sharing formulae for coastal communities.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

Africa's blue economy aspirations are increasingly undermined by over 1,000 documented disputes over ocean resources. Analyse the governance gaps revealed, and discuss what policy architecture India must build to ensure its own blue economy (SAGAR, Deep Ocean Mission) avoids similar conflicts. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Africa's ocean resources — a potential \$1 trillion blue economy by 2063 (Agenda 2063) — are now the site of 1,000+ documented disputes across 34 countries, as industrial aquaculture, offshore energy, seabed mining, and small-scale fishing community interests collide. The Down To Earth analysis offers a template of failure India must learn from as its own Deep Ocean Mission scales.

BODY

Africa's disputes cluster around four fault lines. **Industrial aquaculture** in Senegal, Mauritania, and South Africa has displaced traditional fishing grounds, with foreign-owned (often Chinese, Spanish, Norwegian) operations receiving concessions that extinguish customary access rights. **Offshore oil and gas** — Mozambique's Rovuma Basin, Ghana's Jubilee Field, Senegal-Mauritania's SNE deposits — create tension between national revenue and coastal community displacement, often without consultation under FPIC (Free, Prior, Informed Consent). **Seabed mining exploration** in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and Indian Ocean off East Africa raises ecological questions no sovereign has resolved. **Women's marine access** — traditionally central to processing, sorting, and mangrove harvesting — is being squeezed by industrial male-dominated commercial entrants. Kenya's Lake Turkana case study — where community dialogue forums were mandated in zoning decisions — showed conflict reduction of 40-50% versus top-down zoning, suggesting the institutional architecture (not the technology or investment) is the variable. **Lessons for India**: The Deep Ocean Mission (₹4,077 crore, 2021), Blue Economy Policy Framework (MoES 2022), and Neighbourhood First maritime initiatives (SAGAR, MAHASAGAR) are gathering momentum. The CRZ Notification 2019 recognises coastal community rights but implementation is uneven; pre-emptive institutional investment in inclusive consultation, spatial planning, and revenue-sharing formulae is required before deep-sea extraction begins at scale.

CONCLUSION

India's ocean governance must build four architectural layers now, before conflict materialises: rights-based marine tenure for traditional communities, mandatory inclusive consultation at planning stages, spatially-zoned exclusion areas for ecologically or socially sensitive waters, and transparent licensing with coastal revenue-sharing. The Deep Ocean Mission's long-term success depends not on polymetallic nodule recovery technology but on whether institutional governance can prevent the African pattern of displaced communities and paralysed development.

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