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IDDRI Report on “The Mediterranean Action Plan at 50: Achievements, Challenges, and Future Directions”

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The Mediterranean Action Plan at 50: Achievements, Challenges, and Future Directions

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Disclaimer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) marks its 50th anniversary this year and the Post Rio Barcelona Convention its 30th anniversary. As one of the flagship initiatives of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under its Regional Seas Programme, the MAP has undergone significant evolution over the past five decades, with a steadily expanding legal framework and institutional architecture. Despite a complex and often volatile geopolitical context, its 22 Contracting Parties¹—comprising 21 Mediterranean States and the European Union—have managed to maintain a dynamic and adaptive framework for legal, institutional, and cooperative action. This has made the MAP a respected and recognized model for regional ocean and coastal governance.

From an environmental standpoint, considerable progress has been achieved, largely thanks to the spirit of cooperation fostered and sustained by the MAP. The reforms of 1995, which aligned the MAP framework with the principles of the Rio Conference—such as sustainable development, the precautionary principle, and the ecosystem-based approach—played a pivotal role, as did the continued engagement of Contracting Parties and the active participation of civil society.

This milestone anniversary is both a moment for celebration and an opportunity for reflection. It invites a reassessment of the lessons learned and a renewed commitment to strengthening regional cooperation in the face of mounting challenges.

As underscored by the Blue Plan, the transformations expected in the Mediterranean by 2050 will unfold in a region already under severe environmental pressure. Accelerating climate change, increasing population pressures (both permanent and seasonal), the concentration of human activities along the coastline, and intensifying demands on natural resources—all within a context frequently shaped by political tensions—pose significant threats to the sustainability of the region.

Therefore, beyond commemoration, this moment calls for anticipation and strengthened action.

Against this background, this report first reviews the particularly extensive cooperation framework that has been built over the years, making the MAP a unique structure in the landscape of regional organizations. It then highlights its main strengths and achievements, before identifying potential pathways for the future, structured around five strategic priorities:

- Enhancing efforts for implementation;
- Refining institutional mechanisms;
- Developing cooperation in emerging issues;
- Fostering the implementation of global commitments;
- Urging other decision-makers to take action.

¹ Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Slovenia, Spain, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Türkiye, and the European Union.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) celebrates its 50th and the Post Rio Barcelona convention its 30th anniversary this year. Designated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as a pioneering region within its Regional Seas Programme, the MAP has significantly evolved over the years, with an expanding legal framework and institutional structure. Despite a complex geopolitical context, its 22 Contracting Parties—21 Mediterranean States and the European Union—have managed to uphold a dynamic and evolving legal, institutional and cooperation framework over the decades, making the system a respected and recognized instrument for regional governance of the ocean and coasts. These milestone anniversaries should be celebrated appropriately and serve as an opportunity to reflect on the lessons learned and explore ways to further strengthen regional cooperation around this shared ecosystem. As highlighted by the Blue Plan,² the transformations expected to affect the Mediterranean by 2050 will unfold in an already exceptionally vulnerable environment: accelerating climate change, growing permanent and seasonal populations, concentration of human activities on the coast, and increased pressure on resources—all within a regional context often marked by conflicts. Therefore, this moment calls not only for celebration, but also for anticipating challenges and preparing for the future. This report first reviews the particularly extensive cooperation framework that has been built over the years, making the MAP a unique structure in the landscape of regional organizations (2). It then highlights its main strengths and achievements (3), before identifying potential pathways for the future (4).

2. AN ENHANCED FRAMEWORK FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

2.1. A comprehensive legal structure

Established in 1975 as part of the UNEP Regional Seas Programme which was launched one year before to coordinate activities aimed at the protection of the marine environment through a regional approach, the MAP addresses the common challenges of marine environmental degradation in the Mediterranean. Under its auspices, the Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution was adopted in 1976 and entered into force in 1978. Renamed in 1995 **Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean**, the Barcelona Convention was amended to broaden its scope to include coastal zones, aligning it with the principles adopted at the 1992 Rio Conference, including the precautionary principle, the polluter-pays principle, the ecosystem approach and sustainable development. The amended Barcelona Convention entered into force in 2004. The legal backbone of the MAP framework includes the Barcelona Convention and its **seven Protocols** addressing different aspects of marine and coastal environment and resource conservation and management. These Protocols cover areas such as pollution from ships, land-based sources and activities, hazardous waste, biodiversity protection, and the sustainable management of coastal zones (Table 1). The legal instruments under the Barcelona Convention are vital tools in promoting regional cooperation and ensuring that Mediterranean countries work together to comply with regional and international environmental standards.

² Plan Bleu (2025). MED 2050, The Mediterranean by 2050, A foresight by Plan Bleu.

TABLE 1. The Barcelona Convention's protocols

TOPIC	OBJECTIVES	
Dumping	The Protocol for the Prevention of Pollution of the Mediterranean Sea by Dumping from Ships and Aircraft (1976, into force in 1978) binds States "to take all appropriate measures to prevent, abate and eliminate to the fullest extent possible pollution of the Mediterranean Sea by dumping of wastes or other matter." The Protocol was amended in 1995 and renamed Protocol for the Prevention and Elimination of Pollution of the Mediterranean Sea by Dumping from Ships and Aircraft or Incineration at the Sea.	However, to date, it has not entered into force, essentially because it is largely considered superseded by the 1996 Protocol to the London Convention, which sets global rules governing and largely prohibiting the dumping of wastes at sea, including their incineration.
Prevention and Emergency	The Protocol Concerning Cooperation in Preventing Pollution from Ships and, in Cases of Emergency, Combating Pollution of the Mediterranean Sea was adopted in 2002 and entered into force in 2004. While the Dumping Protocol covers deliberate dumping operations from ships and aircraft, the Prevention and Emergency Protocol addresses the response to accidental spills.	This Protocol also includes provisions on contingency planning and mutual assistance at the national, bilateral or international level, effective level of response equipment, communications and training.
Land-based sources and activities (LBS)	The initial 1980 Protocol for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution from Land-Based Sources was amended in 1996 and renamed Protocol for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution from Land-Based Sources and Activities, with amendments entering into force in 2006. This Protocol addresses the largest source of marine pollution, with 80 to 90% of all sources considered coming from rivers, estuaries and the coastline.	The stated objective is "to take all appropriate measures to prevent, abate and eliminate to the fullest extent possible pollution of the Mediterranean Sea from land-based sources and activities, by the reduction and phasing out of substances that are toxic, persistent and liable to bioaccumulate", with Regional and National Action Plans containing specific measures and timetables concerning Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD5), Mercury, Marine Litter, including promoting sustainable consumption and production.
Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity Protocol (SPA/BD)	The original 1982 Protocol concerning Mediterranean Specially Protected Areas was replaced in 1995 by the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean, which entered into force in 1999. This Protocol provides a regional framework for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in the Mediterranean, including through the designation of protected areas of particular natural or cultural value, the establishment of Specially Protected Areas (SPAs) or Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs).	It also aims to protect vulnerable species of flora and fauna listed in the Protocol's Annexes which can be updated by the Meeting of Contracting Parties.
Offshore	The Protocol for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution Resulting from the Exploration and Exploitation of the Continental Shelf and the Seabed and its Subsoil was adopted in 1994 and entered into force in 2011.	It addresses all aspects of offshore oil and gas activities in the Mediterranean and includes measures to reduce pollution from offshore activities to respond to offshore pollution incidents and determine liability and compensation.
Hazardous wastes	The Protocol on the Prevention of Pollution of the Mediterranean Sea by Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal was adopted in 1996 and entered into force in 2008. It mirrors the global 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.	It aims to protect human health and the marine environment by reducing and, where possible, eliminating hazardous wastes generation, reducing their transboundary movement, and regulating movements which are permissible.
Integrated Coastal Zones Management (ICZM)	Adopted in 2008 and entered into force in 2011, the Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) in the Mediterranean provides a legal framework for the integrated management of Mediterranean coastal zones. Parties are called to strengthen regional cooperation in order to integrate coastal zone management with measures aimed at protecting the characteristics of specific coastal ecosystems, including wetlands and estuaries, marine habitats, coastal forests, woods and dunes, and to ensure the sustainable use of the coastal zone.	The objective is to ensure that the coastal and maritime economy considers and respects the vulnerable nature of coastal zones.

2.2. A robust institutional mechanism

The MAP's institutional framework consists of several **key bodies** facilitating cooperation and decision-making:

- The Meeting of the Contracting Parties (COP) serves as the MAP's supreme decision-making body where the 22 Contracting Parties meet biennially to review and make decisions on the implementation of the Convention and its Protocols;
- The MAP Focal Points, representing the Contracting Parties, act as the official liaison between the countries and the Secretariat;
- A rotating Bureau of representatives from Contracting Parties provides guidance on the implementation of the programme of work between the biennial COP meetings;
- The Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSD) is an advisory body established in 1996 with a hybrid membership combining the Barcelona Convention's Parties and representatives of civil society organizations. The stated aim of the MCSD is to support the integration

of sustainable development into the region's socio-economic policies, integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into a Mediterranean Strategy on Sustainable Development (MSSD);

- The Compliance Committee promotes and facilitates compliance and addresses cases of non-compliance by providing advice and non-binding recommendations to Parties.
- The Secretariat is provided by UNEP through the MAP Coordinating Unit hosted by Greece. The depositary Country is Spain.

The originality of this institutional structure lies in the seven Regional Activity Centres (RACs) established over the years, each with a specific mandate to address critical issues in the Mediterranean. Together with the MED POL Programme and provided that they operate effectively, these MAP Components (Table 2) are crucial in implementing strategies and projects in various fields and in supporting Parties with thematic expertise in the implementation of protocols.

TABLE 2. The MAP's Components

RAC	Mandate	Location
Programme for the Assessment and Control of Marine Pollution in the Mediterranean (MED POL)	MED POL is an operational programme that supports Contracting Parties in the formulation and implementation of pollution control and prevention policies as well as regulatory measures. The programme also undertakes regular activities to promote capacity building and provide technical assistance on monitoring and assessment, implementation and enforcement. The technical assistance aims to support environmental monitoring and policy implementation by assessing marine and coastal environmental quality, promoting reforms for pollution control through national action plans, and facilitating the execution of these plans. It also involves monitoring pollution levels in the Mediterranean, identifying coastal pollution hot spots and sensitive areas, and managing data on environmental pressures and conditions.	Athens, Greece, as part of the UNEP/ MAP Coordinating Unit
The Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC)	REMPEC's objective is to contribute to preventing and reducing pollution from ships and combating pollution in case of emergency. In this respect, REMPEC's mission is to assist the Contracting Parties in meeting their obligations under the Barcelona Convention, the 1976 Emergency Protocol and the 2002 Prevention and Emergency Protocol, and to assist Mediterranean coastal States in ratifying, transposing, implementing and enforcing international maritime conventions related to the prevention, preparedness and response to pollution from ships.	Valletta, Malta
The Plan Bleu Regional Activity Centre (PB/RAC)	The Plan Bleu produces studies and scenarios for the future in order to raise awareness among Mediterranean stakeholders and decision-makers on environmental and socio economic trends and sustainable development in the region. Its mission includes monitoring the environment and development to support decision-making, shaping possible future scenarios for sustainable development, monitoring the implementation of the MSSD, and supporting the transition towards a green and blue economy.	Marseille, France
The Priority Actions Programme Regional Activity Centre (PAP/RAC)	PAP/RAC's mission is to support Mediterranean countries in their pathway towards sustainable coastal development. PAR/RAC provides support to Mediterranean countries in ratifying and implementing the ICZM Protocol, as well as in implementing the MSSD.	Split, Croatia
The Specially Protected Areas Regional Activity Centre (SPA/RAC)	SPA/RAC aims to assess the situation of natural heritage and support Mediterranean countries in implementing the SPA/BD Protocol.	Tunis, Tunisia
The Regional Activity Centre for Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP/RAC - MedWaves)	SCP/RAC works to build capacity and contribute to the exchange of knowledge in areas such as resource efficiency, cleaner production and pollution prevention as factors of competitiveness and economic performance for SMEs, and the reduction of hazardous chemicals by means of the best available techniques (BAT) and the best environmental practices (BEP).	Barcelona, Spain
The Regional Activity Centre for Information and Communication (INFO/RAC)	INFO/RAC was created to establish a common information management infrastructure to facilitate and support information and communication activities across the MAP.	Rome, Italy
The Regional Activity Centre for Climate Change (CC/RAC)	CC/RAC was established pursuant to a COP23 decision (2023). Its precise mandate will be decided at COP24 based on a study of progress.	Istanbul, Türkiye

3. A DRIVING FORCE IN THE PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

3.1. An expanded cooperative framework

With an action plan, a regional strategy, a framework convention, and seven protocols, the Mediterranean legal system is one of the most comprehensive among the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans. This legal framework is remarkable, having evolved in response to the global environmental context. Initially focused on pollution issues, it has expanded to address biodiversity concerns and, more recently, embrace broader sustainable development challenges through, for instance, the ICZM protocol. Moreover, this legal framework is complemented by a unique institutional landscape. In addition to the coordination unit and secretariat typically found in all regional seas conventions and action plans, the seven regional activity centres play a crucial role in ensuring the continued vitality of regional cooperation. Without these RACs, Mediterranean States would not benefit from the same level of support for regional cooperation, thematic expertise and implementation of the various protocols. The system is further strengthened by a compliance committee, which few other global or regional legal instruments currently possess.

3.2. A resilient structure

All Mediterranean stakeholders recognize that the MAP's greatest strength lies in its resilience to both internal and external shocks. Since 1975, almost no State has missed a major event: geopolitical turmoil, war, revolutions, regime change, economic crises, economic transformation after the end of the Cold War, or social unrest have not put at risk the existence of the system of cooperation for the protection of the Mediterranean Sea. While these challenges regularly slow down the implementation of commitments, delay projects, or hinder the creation of new programmes, the system remains extremely robust. This is a remarkable achievement that must be preserved at all costs.

3.3. A leading role in building a Mediterranean environmental culture

Since the 1970s, an increasing number of events, meetings and high-level gatherings on the Mediterranean have helped to forge a common environmental culture—the result of regular exchanges between States and civil society on both shores. The Mediterranean Action Plan has played a major role in this through activities carried out at all levels by its components, regular meetings of national focal points, and exchanges on key publications on the future of the Mediterranean basin, for instance. This common regional environmental culture makes it much easier to maintain a spirit of cooperation and solidarity.

3.4. An extensive network of partners

Over the course of its 50 years of experience, the MAP has established strategic partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders, creating an extensive network to coordinate policy initiatives and technical activities. Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed with major global organizations, such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm (BSS) Conventions, as well as with regional organizations like GFCM, ACCOBAMS and UfM. Partnerships have also been formed with donors, including the GEF and the World Bank, that contribute to financing its programmes. Finally, the MAP system is strengthened by the participation of civil society through a special status granted to e.g. non-governmental organizations, local authorities, scientific institutions, economic actors, allowing them to participate as observers in meetings and provide expertise and technical support to advance objectives, as well as promote policies, strategies, and programmes derived from the Barcelona Convention and its protocols.

3.5. Some success on the ground

In the Mediterranean, as in other regions, environmental progress is driven by various levers, ranging from global to local levels, making it difficult to attribute such progress to the actions of any single stakeholder. However, it is clear that the MAP has contributed to progress in several key areas, including: (i) the designation of marine protected areas; (ii) the support provided for achieving sustainable coastal development through the Coastal Area Management Programmes launched as early as 1989 and the recent coastal plans focused on adaptation to climate change; (iii) the enhancement of pollution monitoring systems; and (iv) the reduction of certain pollutants.

BOX 1. EXAMPLES OF RECENT KEY ACHIEVEMENTS DRIVEN BY THE MAP/ BARCELONA CONVENTION FRAMEWORK (SOURCE: MAP SECRETARIAT)

The **Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development** (MSSD) is a unique policy instrument for the region and provides a strategic policy framework aimed at securing a sustainable future for the Mediterranean region, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Developed through a broad consultation process led by the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSDD)—a consultative body of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention that serves as a platform for experience-sharing and peer learning—the strategy is currently being updated and expected to be adopted at the Barcelona Convention COP24, scheduled to take place in Egypt in December 2025.

Coastal Area Management Programmes (CAMPs) have been a cornerstone of the MAP work for over 40 years, supporting 21 projects across the Mediterranean at both local and national levels. These initiatives brought together stakeholders from all levels of government, civil society, academia, financial institutions, and the public. Key results include the development of national coastal strategies, environmental assessments to support sectoral planning (including water resources, urban planning, tourism development and alike), and investment-ready project proposals for environmental infrastructure. Participatory planning processes strengthened dialogue and trust, while training and capacity-building activities focused on youth, gender, and local communities. As a UNEP/MAP initiative led by PAP/RAC, CAMPs enabled joint action by all MAP components, offering technical expertise on legal instruments, policy implementation, and issue-specific solutions such as contingency planning, monitoring, and biodiversity conservation. This long-standing work laid the foundation for the **ICZM Protocol** adopted in 2008—the first regional legal framework for coastal management in the Mediterranean. In recent years, CAMPs have been developed to integrate climate change adaptation into coastal planning, contribute to marine spatial planning, and expand into transboundary coastal areas, reinforcing regional cooperation and integrated approaches.

Monitoring, assessment of marine and coastal environment and its interaction with sustainable development is an important mandate of the MAP system. For the first time there is coordinated Monitoring and Assessment Programme for the Mediterranean Sea and coast based on 27 common indicators and work is ongoing to support its implementation by all Contracting Parties. Networks of national laboratories to monitor and assess the marine and coastal environment has been established, their capacities built and strengthened to implement national monitoring programme in a coordinated way to deliver quality assured data through an up-to-date IMAP information system.

UNEP/MAP has also released several reports on monitoring and assessment including (i) Two Mediterranean Quality Status Reports, in 2017 and 2023; (ii) Two Environment and Development reports, in 1995, 2005; (iii) A state of Environment and Development, in 2020; (iv) Foresight reports, including the 2025 MED2050 report; (v) A 2024 report on harmful subsidies.

The MED POL is currently supporting the preparation of **National Action Plans (NAPs) 2025-2035 to fight against land-based pollution**, with the principal objective of identifying and prioritizing national programmes of measures to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES).

The Mediterranean system has significantly enhanced both **regional and national preparedness for marine pollution incidents**. The Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC) has supported 17 countries in developing operational contingency plans and facilitated 6 sub-regional agreements to ensure coordinated spill response. A 24/7 emergency response mechanism has been established, providing expert support through the Mediterranean Assistance Unit. REMPEC has also played a key role in the implementation of IMO regulations in the region, including the MARPOL Convention and the Ballast Water Management Convention. Additionally, it has trained over 5,000 government officials and volunteers through targeted capacity-building programmes.

Through the 1995 SPA/BD Protocol, the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention established a List of Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMI's List) in order to promote cooperation in the management and conservation of natural areas, as well as in the protection of threatened species and their habitats. The conservation of the natural heritage is then the basic aim that must characterize the SPAMIs. As of 2025, **39 Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs) are established across the Mediterranean region**. Adopted in 2021, the **Post-2020 Strategic Action Programme for the Conservation of Biodiversity and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources in the Mediterranean** (Post-2020 SAPBIO) aims to conserve marine and coastal biodiversity while contributing to the achievement of Good Environmental Status, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the CBD Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework within the Mediterranean context. Regarding the 30x30 target, the Contracting Parties also adopted the **Post-2020 Regional Strategy for Marine and Coastal Protected Areas and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures** (OECMs), aimed at strengthening the network of Marine and Coastal Protected Areas (MCPAs) and OECMs in the Mediterranean.

The COP22 of the Barcelona Convention held in Antalya in 2021 adopted a comprehensive **Set of Regional Measures to support the Development of Green and Circular Businesses and to Strengthen the Demand for more**

Sustainable Products, promoting sustainable consumption and production (SCP) patterns across the Mediterranean region and aligning with the objectives of the MSSD and the Regional Action Plan on SCP. SCP/RAC is supporting the implementation of the Set of Regional Measures and has actively worked on key priority areas such as Policy Development by encouraging the incorporation of green and circular economy principles into national policies and regulatory frameworks to create an enabling environment for sustainable businesses. In addition to support for private sector development, SCP/RAC has worked with civil society, businesses and citizens to foster sustainable consumption models and market development, including the demand for sustainable products through public procurement policies, consumer awareness campaigns, and labelling schemes that highlight eco-friendly products and certifications for plastic-free zone for restaurants and cafes.

The Switchers Support Programme for Green and Circular Businesses has actively supported the switch to sustainable consumption and production models and has empowered thousands of entrepreneurs, SMEs, and policymakers in developing sustainable, green and circular business models, reducing waste, and promoting eco-design and resource efficiency across the region. The Switchers Support Programme (SSP) is the flagship programme led by SCP/RAC aimed at fostering enabling ecosystems for sustainable entrepreneurs and enterprises pursuing socially responsible circular economy business models. The Programme works closely with entrepreneurs and businesses, Business Support Organisations (BSOs), trainers and mentors, financial stakeholders and policymakers to this end. The Programme has provided key methodologies, tools and services (Switchers ToolBox) for the development and strengthening of sustainable enterprises; networking opportunities

(Switchers Community & Switchers Products Platform); access to markets and financial services (Switchers Fund); and has supported policies that enable fair circular economy business models. In general terms, the Switchers Support Programme has supported up to 3,500 Green Entrepreneurs across Mediterranean countries to develop their sustainable business model by applying eco-innovation and life cycle thinking, including eco-design practices (51% are women), while more than 200 green and circular start-ups have been incubated and accessed funding to launch their sustainable products and companies (55% are women). Moreover, up to 120 BSOs have been supported and networked via the Switchers Support National Partnerships.

The MedProgramme is a multisectoral and multidisciplinary initiative funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) over a six-year period (2020–2026). It is being implemented across 10 Mediterranean countries: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Montenegro, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey. The MedProgramme is grounded in the principle of partnership—political, financial, technical, and operational: (i) Political, as it supports and strengthens the legal and institutional framework of the Barcelona Convention and its protocols, helping to translate regional commitments into concrete actions; (ii) Financial, by bringing together a diverse group of donors and implementing partners, united under a shared vision of sustainable development in the Mediterranean; (iii) Technical, recognizing that only through the synergy of cross-sectoral and institutional expertise can the region effectively address its complex environmental challenges; and (iv) Operational, with the leadership and ongoing support of the UNEP/MAP Coordinating Unit playing a crucial role in ensuring coherence, integration, and coordination across the Programme's numerous actors and activities.

4. POSSIBLE PATHWAYS FOR STRENGTHENING REGIONAL ACTION

4.1. Enhancing efforts for implementation

Since the late 1990s, environmental cooperation has entered a new era. Until then, both globally and regionally, the primary challenge was to fill legal gaps by adopting new instruments. This is how the Mediterranean legal framework was strengthened in the 1990s, through amendments to existing protocols and the adoption of new texts. Today, the focus has shifted from filling legal gaps to implementing the existing instruments, a task that is undoubtedly much more challenging. In the Mediterranean, as in many regions, **the implementation of regional agreements is far from systematic and comprehensive**. Many

reasons, often cumulative, can explain this situation, including the lack of political will, political instability in some States, financial shortfalls, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Much progress is therefore to be made in this area. There is however no silver bullet: implementation challenges stem from a complex mix of technical and political considerations. The MAP, particularly through the RACs, is already making significant efforts to support countries in this regard. However, additional approaches could be explored to strengthen the implementation of the Convention and its protocols.

It includes **strengthening civil society's ability to defend the Mediterranean acquis**. Experience demonstrates that effective environmental law implementation relies not only on strong enforcement and compliance mechanisms, but also on the ability of civil society to drive change—both nationally and locally. An independent, well-informed civil society can be a powerful force, encouraging national and local authorities to take action. The MAP and its Parties could therefore support the expansion of existing programmes and/or establish new ones.

It is also imperative to **strengthen the capacity of national administrations** to adopt and implement ambitious coastal and marine policies that align with international and regional agreements. In this regard, the needs are numerous, including data collection, monitoring of environmental indicators, access to international funding, and enforcement mechanisms.

4.2. Refining institutional mechanisms

At the institutional level, adjustments could be made to further strengthen the authority and effectiveness of the cooperation system led by the MAP. This is the case, for instance, with regard to the **Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSD) and its Mediterranean Sustainable Development Strategy (MSDS)**. It is widely recognized that the Commission provides a unique space for dialogue, giving the opportunity to all Mediterranean actors to engage in-depth on common challenges. The quality of the Mediterranean Strategy is also universally acknowledged for its foresight, its capacity to address challenges, and its ability to link environmental, social, and economic aspects. However, both the MCSD and its strategy suffer from several limitations. Firstly, the MSDS is still not well known among Mediterranean stakeholders. It lacks the profile and visibility that could make it an effective tool for regional activities. Secondly, the strategy includes numerous developments and recommendations that go beyond the mandate of the environmental ministries, which are its primary recipients. To be effectively integrated into national policies and thus implemented, other sectoral ministries (economy, social affairs, health, tourism) should be much more involved and committed. The MSDS should serve as a roadmap for all public actors and intergovernmental organizations in the region, not just those involved in environmental issues. It would also likely be useful to involve donors from the strategy development phase in order to facilitate their contribution to its implementation. More broadly, despite decades of existence, the MAP needs to **enhance its visibility and political appeal**. Developing a dedicated strategic communication plan to increase its public profile and capture the attention of the media, civil society and high-level decision-makers would contribute significantly to this goal. Finally, adjustments to the RACs, especially in their relationships with host countries, and to the Compliance Committee's rules of procedure, could enhance both efficiency and impact.

4.3. Developing cooperation in emerging issues

In addition to implementing existing tools, it is crucial for the MAP to enhance regional cooperation on emerging and increasingly urgent issues. This unquestionably requires **strengthening actions related to climate change adaptation**. The Mediterranean is warming 20% faster than the global average, with temperatures already 1.54°C higher than pre-industrial levels. Projections indicate a 2-4°C rise by the end of the century, making it a climate hotspot. Climate change is transforming

marine ecosystems, with native species declining and invasive ones proliferating. The region also faces significant risks, including heatwaves, diseases, the multiplication of extreme weather events, rising sea levels, threatening both public health and economic sectors. The MAP has a critical role in supporting climate adaptation policies, and establishing a specialized RAC could offer valuable contributions, provided it is given a clear mandate with real added value within the Mediterranean context. **Coastal and maritime tourism** is another area that could be further explored by the MAP and its Contracting Parties. The Mediterranean, as the world's leading tourist destination, accounts for 30% of global tourism and generates over US\$420 billion annually, contributing 4.8% to regional GDP. However, tourism also drives coastal development, erosion, habitat destruction, and social challenges such as overcrowding and precarious employment, or the proliferation of unsustainable cruise ships affecting the environmental, social, economic and cultural fabric in the region. The sector's heavy reliance on tourism makes economies vulnerable to disruptions, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic or specific events causing a sudden disaffection of certain countries or cities. While the MAP is committed to sustainable tourism, including through the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development, efforts should be bolstered with a dedicated strategy or action plan in the absence of a specific protocol.

For these and potentially other issues, **new forms of cooperation will likely be required**. For various reasons, countries appear reluctant to develop new protocols—which some Mediterranean stakeholders find regrettable, while others see as justified. Regardless, progress must continue through alternative approaches such as action plans, including potentially involving sub-national authorities more extensively. These authorities are uniquely positioned at the heart of adaptation and tourism challenges and can serve as key drivers in implementing sustainable strategies and measures. State-level involvement alone is no longer sufficient. This should be seen as an opportunity to expand the MAP's engagement with local authorities, leveraging their proximity to the issues to foster more effective and lasting solutions.

4.4. Fostering the implementation of global commitments

In addition to the tailored actions developed by regional seas, which consider the specificities of their regional ecosystems, the regional level also serves as a key lever for implementing commitments made at the global level. The Mediterranean system, for instance, adapted to the outcomes of the 1992 Rio Conference by revising the Barcelona Convention and developing new protocols. This bridging work between global and regional levels is an undeniable added value of regional seas, which must be continued and deepened. In this regard, three key instruments should be given particular attention by regional seas in general and the MAP in particular. First, the **Global Framework for Biodiversity/Kunming-Montreal Agreement**, adopted in 2023 by the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on

Biological Diversity, which serves as the international roadmap to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Several targets of this agreement fall within the MAP's mandate, particularly the flagship target on implementing the 30x30 objective. Therefore, targeted actions, tailored to Mediterranean countries and environment, must continue to support Mediterranean countries in its implementation. Adopted in 2023, the **international agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction** (the "High Seas Treaty") is another significant international instrument that aims to sustainably manage the previously neglected half of our planet. This treaty establishes processes for protecting the marine environment, resolves a longstanding dispute regarding the principle of the common heritage of humankind, and strengthens capacity building and technology transfer, enabling all States to participate in the management of this vast global commons. Pockets of high seas remain in the Mediterranean and the MAP should therefore act on at least two fronts: supporting countries in their ratification process and anticipating the challenges related to its implementation in the Mediterranean, particularly with regard to area-based management tools and marine protected areas. Finally, negotiations for a **global treaty on plastics** must also be closely monitored. Every day, approximately 730 tons of plastic are dumped into the Mediterranean Sea. Measures to combat this pollution have already been taken, including through the 2013 Regional Plan on Marine Litter and the 2022-2027 Medium-Term Strategy. If the global treaty is finally adopted, the MAP could continue these efforts by supporting countries in its implementation, tailored to the specificities of the region.

4.5. Urging other decision-makers to take action

The future of the Mediterranean requires the deployment of multiple actions, some of which fall outside the direct mandate of the MAP. These include the **elimination of harmful subsidies, the sustainable management of aquaculture activities, the decarbonization of the maritime sector, or action to address ship strikes and the impact of underwater noise pollution on vulnerable species**. These four major challenges are complementary to those that the MAP can address and are essential for placing the Mediterranean on a sustainable development path. MAP meetings, particularly the COPs, should serve as key opportunities to issue calls to relevant organizations—and above all, to their Contracting Parties—to accelerate decision-making and the implementation of solutions in these four critical areas. In the same spirit, but at the national level this time, representatives of environment ministries attending the COPs should more actively engage their colleagues from other sectors to effectively contribute to the implementation of the adopted decisions.

5. CONCLUSION: CLOSER, FURTHER, FASTER

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) and 30th anniversary of the post-Rio Barcelona Convention, and it is no overstatement to say that significant progress has been made since its establishment, despite the geopolitical upheavals and various crises that have affected the region over the past decades. From an environmental standpoint, numerous advances have been achieved, largely thanks to the spirit of cooperation fostered and sustained by the MAP. Since 1975, the cooperation system has not only endured but also evolved, expanded, and strengthened to the extent that it is now regarded as one of the most effective regional seas frameworks. Compared to the global UN approach, the developments initiated within the MAP have made it possible to go closer—by adopting rules tailored to the Mediterranean context; further—by at times exceeding international standards; and faster—as, despite a complex geopolitical environment, negotiations among Mediterranean countries tend to be more manageable than within the broader UN framework.

In a shifting diplomatic, economic, social, and environmental context, many challenges remain to ensure the effective and lasting protection of the marine environment in the Mediterranean, to strengthen the resilience of coastal ecosystems, and to guarantee the fair and coordinated management of shared resources. The MAP and its Contracting Parties must continue to address these challenges by upholding the spirit of collaboration and solidarity that has guided them for decades and by further strengthening their actions, both technically and politically.