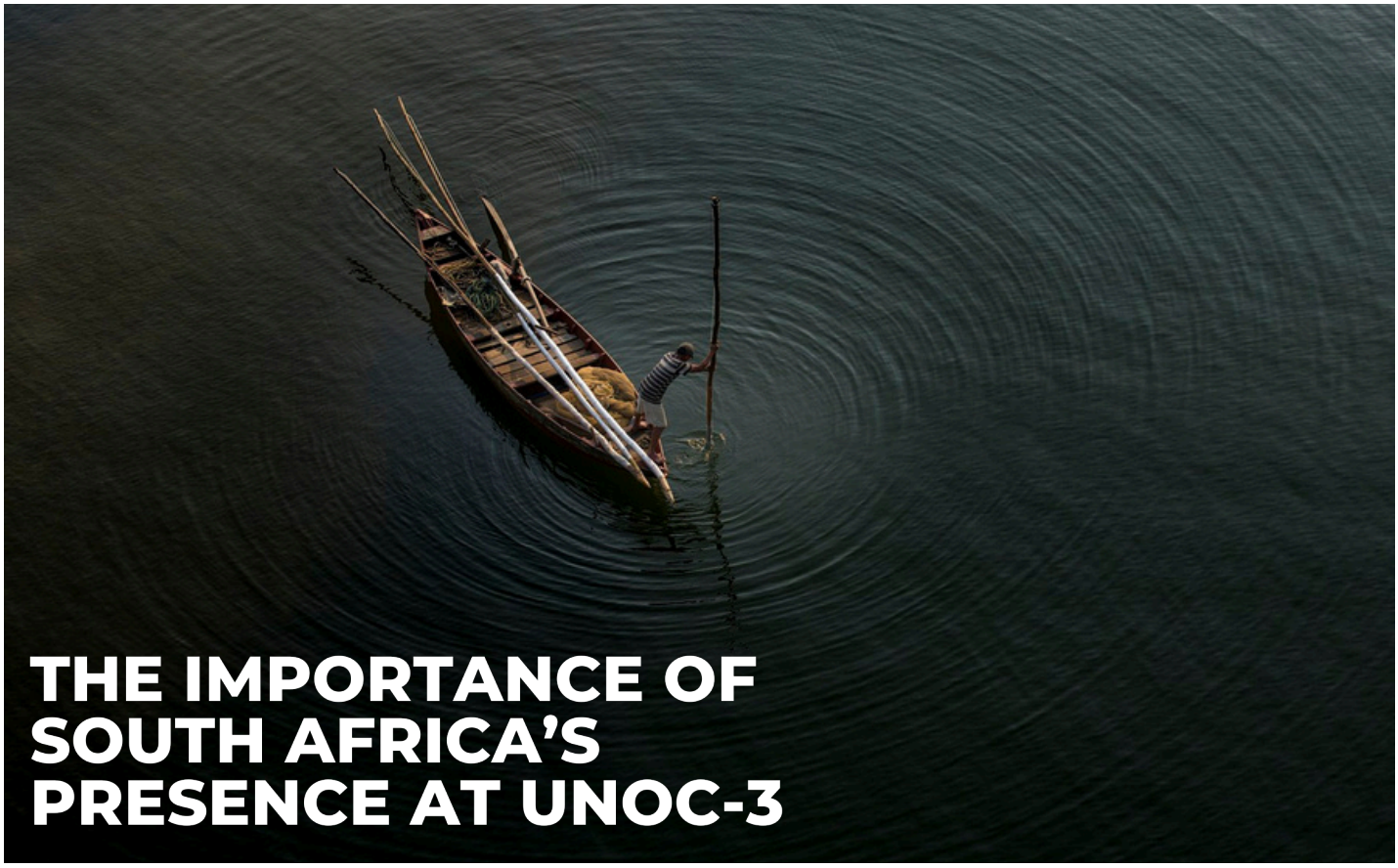

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S PRESENCE AT UNOC-3

When the second United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) was held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2022, South Africa's participation was modest. According to the official attendance documentation provided by the United Nations, South Africa was only represented by Mr Thembile Joyini, who was the Principal State Law Adviser (International Law) of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) at the time. This is in stark contrast to other African countries such as Seychelles, which had over 17 government representatives and Nigeria, which had 20 representatives.

Such a small presence is striking considering that South Africa occupies a unique position, bordered by three oceans, namely the Atlantic, Southern and Indian Oceans. Along with this, South Africa is the only African country that has a presence in the Antarctic due to its status as one of the original signatories of the Antarctic Treaty and its ownership of the Prince Edward Islands in the Southern Ocean. South Africa furthermore boasts one of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in Africa and manages an ocean space that is larger than its land territory. South Africa has a land area of 1,221,037 square kilometres, while its EEZ covers over 1,535,538 square kilometres.

Additionally, South Africa is considered a biodiversity hotspot, with the third-highest levels of marine endemism globally. This has made the waters of South Africa appealing for marine biodiscovery and has attracted global attention because of the presence of unique compounds. South Africa's coastal and marine diversity is estimated to have the ability to contribute approximately R177 billion to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of South Africa and create over one million jobs by the year 2033. However, South Africa's participation in global ocean diplomacy has not yet reflected recognition of its potential as a maritime power, which is also evident by the absence of a coherent maritime strategy.

South Africa's active participation at UNOC-3, to be held in Nice, France, from June 9 to 13, may provide an opportunity to change this narrative and, importantly, to pursue its vision and assert its global leadership for the G20, which it will host later in the year.

The overlap: UNOC-3 and the G20 Presidency

The theme for South Africa's G20 Presidency is *"Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability"*, which links to the theme of UNOC-3: *"Accelerating action and mobilising all actors to conserve and sustainably use the ocean"*. In particular, some of the key topics to be discussed during UNOC-3 include:

(i) the sustainable management of marine, coastal and deep-sea ecosystems;
(ii) expanding ocean science, marine technology and education;
(iii) mobilising financial resources to achieve SDG14;
(iv) preventing and reducing marine pollution stemming from land-based sources;
(v) promoting sustainable fisheries and advancing blue economies to address poverty eradication and increase food security.

These topics speak directly to the values of solidarity, equality and sustainability, which South Africa is pursuing through its G20 Presidency. In this sense, the overlap of undergirding values presents South Africa with the opportunity to use UNOC-3 as a springboard to garner further momentum for the upcoming G20 summit.

To achieve this, South Africa must first recognise that the themes discussed at UNOC-3 are not merely abstract concepts but are crucial for the nation itself. Furthermore, as President of the G20, South Africa has an opportunity to highlight themes of equality and advocate for the interests of the Global South. Specifically, at UNOC-3, South Africa can emphasise that oceans represent a significant site of global inequality. Finally, it is essential for South Africa to appreciate the importance of UNOC-3 in shaping its narrative at the G20.

The relevance of UNOC-3 to South Africa

The thematic panels at UNOC-3 are deeply relevant to South Africa. Indeed, they are not abstract global issues but lived realities in South Africa. One such example is the thematic area of pollution that stems from land-based sources. Every year, between 90,000 to 250,000 tonnes of rubbish enter the oceans surrounding South Africa, with 80 per cent of marine litter stemming from land sources. The coastline of Durban, in particular, has consistently had major problems in complying with sewage pollution standards, dating back to 2006. Specifically, in 2022, eThekwini was served a written warning to implement urgent measures to decrease the discharge of inadequately treated sewage entering the sea at Blue Lagoon from the Umgeni River. Notably, South African President Ramaphosa signed the Marine Pollution (Prevention of Pollution from Ships) Amendment Bill in early 2025, which specifically aims to better protect the oceans from pollution stemming from ships. However, more needs to be done, especially in terms of addressing land-based sources of pollution.

A further theme of relevance to South Africa is the theme of advancing blue economies with the goal of poverty eradication and increasing food security. South Africa certainly has a stake in such a discussion. In particular, there is an urgent need to discuss the much-promoted Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) concept, often advocated for at the international level, and how they need to be attuned to local experiences. In the Eastern Cape, for example, local subsistence fishermen are finding themselves banned from fishing in certain areas due to the establishment of MPAs, which deprives them of providing food and making an income.

In the meantime, illegal vessels continue to fish in these areas, which South African enforcement agencies are unable to patrol due to limited manpower. One study explains that there is a widespread perception that conservation efforts, such as MPAs, are a colonial practice, where local fishers, who have historically been able to sustainably coexist with nature, are now perceived as trespassing and fishing illegally and therefore labelled as poachers. Importantly, conservation cannot be detached from community realities, otherwise, this risks reproducing colonial patterns. This presents a pressing need for South Africa to push for community-centered and equity-driven ocean governance frameworks.

Finally, as a developing country, the topic of finance mobilisation is always high on the priority list of South Africa. One of the panels at UNOC-3 is aimed at mobilising finance for ocean actions in support of SDG 14. This may serve as an opportune moment to highlight how the high debt service levels of African countries potentially hinder them from investing in ocean governance. According to a report from the Institute for Economic Justice, 57 per cent of Africa's population lives in countries where more funds are spent on servicing external debt than on addressing education or healthcare. This disproportionate figure hampers progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 85 per cent of SDGs being off track, stagnating, or regressing.

South Africa could promote and advocate for innovative financing models such as the debt for nature swap pioneered by Seychelles in 2017. Under this arrangement, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) acquired a portion of Seychelles' debt at a discounted price. The government of Seychelles now repays loans to the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT) – a dedicated fund established by the TNC – while it conserves its ocean through MPAs. This model not only supports ocean conservation but also extends Seychelles' debt repayment period from 8 to 20 years, easing the fiscal burden. Such initiatives, pioneered by countries in the Global South, and in this instance, in Africa, can serve as a model for financial relief while simultaneously addressing ocean conservation.

The oceans as sites of global inequality

Since one of the key themes for this year's G20 is equality, it is pertinent to point out that, globally, oceans remain a site of inequality. Perhaps one of the most visible examples of this is in relation to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. The African continent is the most affected by IUU fishing, losing approximately $11.2 billion in revenue annually.

This is particularly alarming since African countries are among the states most dependent on fish resources. According to one study, Western Indian Ocean coastal communities are particularly dependent on the coastal environment for goods, services, livelihoods and income, with the only other areas displaying such highly dense ocean-dependent coastal communities being the Bay of Bengal and the West coast of Africa. The IUU Fishing Risk Index reveals concerning statistics about African states in relation to IUU fishing. Out of the top 50 most vulnerable countries to IUU fishing, 13 are from Africa. Additionally, 17 of the top 50 countries where IUU fishing is most prevalent are also African nations. Furthermore, 12 of the top 50 countries with the weakest responses to combat IUU fishing are situated in Africa.

Meanwhile, foreign industrial fleets from China and the European Union (EU) have been known to exploit African waters. Amongst those, the Chinese distant water fleet, which is subsidised by the Chinese government, has been known to engage in illegal fishing, particularly off the coast of Africa, where 78.5 per cent of the Chinese government's approved fisheries projects are conducted. Reports have also found that despite a European Commission ban on importing fishery products from Cameroon, almost €10 million worth of such products made their way into EU countries by 2023.

African countries lack technological parity, that is, they lack the same technological capacity to monitor and exploit their marine resources. Consider, for example, that while Madagascar has an EEZ of approximately 1,225,259 square kilometres, which is larger than China's, which stands at 877,019 square kilometres, the former has only four patrol vessels in contrast to China's 150, according to the Global Fire Power index. Meanwhile, Türkiye has an EEZ of only 261,654 square kilometres yet boasts 41 patrol vessels.

A further example of how oceans are a site of global inequality is the impact of climate change. While industrialised countries have historically contributed the most towards greenhouse gas emissions, it is low-lying coastal and island nations, such as Seychelles, Mauritius and Comoros, amongst others, who are facing the most immediate and severe consequences. Rising sea levels, ocean acidification and intense storms do not only jeopardise the livelihoods of those reliant on the ocean but also threaten the very existence of such states.

Why UNOC-3 matters for South Africa's G20 narrative: advancing its G20 vision from land to sea

South Africa has articulated that there are four central priorities that it aims to pursue during its G20 presidency. These include: (i) Disaster Resilience and Climate-Induced Natural Disasters, (ii) Debt Sustainability and the Cost of Capital, (iii) Finance for a Just Energy Transition, and (iv) Critical Minerals for Inclusive Growth. These stated priorities are deeply connected to ocean governance, and therefore, UNOC-3 offers South Africa a strategic platform to advance its G20 priorities from land to sea.

South Africa has made a clear commitment to strengthening disaster resilience and response, in particular by calling for financial institutions to scale up post-disaster reconstruction in the aftermath of climate-induced events. This is a pertinent focus area for the African continent, considering the vulnerability of African states to natural disasters. Over the past several years, tropical cyclones and floods have had devastating impacts on states such as Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi and Comoros, with Madagascar experiencing four cyclones since the beginning of 2024. Indeed, the cyclones have caused increased flooding across Southern-Eastern Africa, with more than 2,800 people displaced due to the floods in Antananarivo in February 2025, while in Malawi, more than 180,000 people had been affected by flooding. Apart from the immediate impact of disasters on civilians, there are also longer-term infrastructural and ecological impacts. In South Africa, the flooding (particularly of April 2022 in KwaZulu-Natal) has been said to have impacted various sewage and water systems, resulting in millions of litres of untreated sewage spilling into the Durban beaches, rivers, harbours and ocean. Such incidents underscore a crucial point, namely that natural disasters are not confined to having a terrestrial impact, but the impacts spill over into the ocean, leading to serious ocean pollution.

Oceans play a critical role in disaster resilience. Coastal vegetation, including mangroves, is essential for providing protection against storm surges and cyclones. Additionally, coral reefs serve to diminish wave energy during coastal storms, thus enhancing the resilience of shorelines. A pivotal aspect of addressing post-disaster reconstruction can begin with mitigation and adaptation, such as advocating for nature-based solutions. The value of investing and promoting nature-based solutions is increasingly evident. After the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the country made a strategic decision not to raise sea walls, but instead expand the coastal forest national park. This was estimated to save Japan more than 2.5 billion JPY. Such a model offers valuable insight: Post-disaster recovery does not need to begin after disaster but rather can begin with pre-emptive investment in ecosystem protection and climate adaptation.

In terms of pursuing increased finance for a Just Energy Transition, South Africa can use UNOC-3 to expand this transition to include the marine sphere, making it not just a 'just' energy transition but a 'blue-just' energy transition. The upcoming UNOC-3 can serve as a platform to highlight this agenda by exploring possible ocean-based solutions, such as offshore renewable energy and blue carbon ecosystems, which can be integral to a just energy transition. According to the Centre for Green Economy, renewable energy as it relates to the ocean remains relatively underexplored. In particular, countries like Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Kenya have a high potential for ocean thermal energy conversion, where clean energy is created by utilising the difference between warm and cold sea water.

Finally, South Africa has articulated that a key focus of the G20 will be on ensuring that the countries and local communities endowed with critical resources are the primary beneficiaries of their extraction and use. Traditionally, the focus of resource extraction has typically been on terrestrial resources. However, there is growing international attention on the potential of seabed mining to access critical minerals essential for the green energy transition.

Within the broader theme of equality, several key issues warrant South Africa's careful consideration. Firstly, many African states are currently some of the largest producers of minerals, such as cobalt, nickel, manganese and copper; the same minerals that may be mined from the seabed. Should this materialise, then the global shift in extraction could challenge the strategic and economic importance of land-based mining in Africa. States like South Africa, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo may stand to lose out if they do not capitalise on the additional value that they could gain from deep-sea mining.

This is especially concerning given that at present, no African state holds a contract from the International Seabed Authority (ISA) for seabed mining. At the same time, Africa is encircled by various license claims in both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Should these mining endeavours proceed without equitable involvement and safeguards, then African states risk not only becoming excluded from exploration opportunities but also face significant environmental harm. Island and coastal states such as Seychelles, Comoros, Tanzania, and Mozambique are particularly vulnerable. These countries could suffer the loss of vital coral reef systems that not only serve as barriers against waves and flooding but also support livelihoods through fishing and tourism.

Secondly, African states continue to face technological and financial barriers to participating meaningfully in deep-sea exploration. In the absence of sufficient domestic capacity, African states may be forced to act as mere sponsors for foreign companies, mirroring arrangements such as that between Naura and The Metals Company. In this instance, sponsorship does not refer to Nauru providing financial support, but rather assumes legal and regulatory responsibility for The Metals Company so that it can explore and exploit the seabed through the ISA. Such partnerships may offer limited short-term benefits, such as states receiving royalties from the projects, but they do not promote local capacity building. Others have warned that the relationships between states like Nauru – small island developing states – and the private companies may be characterised by a power imbalance. For example, in 2019, at the ISA meeting, the boss of The Metals Company spoke for Nauru, prompting concern over the ability of small states to act independently. Without a strategic approach, African countries risk remaining raw material suppliers in a value chain dominated by external actors. To increase Africa's involve-

ment, some have suggested that African countries should band together through regional organisations, pool resources and apply for exploration contracts.

At the core of the global debate on seabed mining lies a fundamental tension: proponents argue that deep-sea extraction offers access to critical minerals with potentially lower environmental and social costs than traditional land-based mining, making it crucial for the green economy.

However, critics caution that the deep-sea remains poorly understood and the risks, which include the destruction of carbon sinks and disruption of marine food webs, are too high. South Africa has the opportunity, as the hosts of the G20, to approach and advocate for the matter from a position that places equality and sustainability at the centre. Importantly, South Africa and Africa should engage, in some way or another, to avoid being left behind while the seabed is carved up by external actors.

Against this background, South Africa's engagement at UNOC-3 should not merely be symbolic but should be seen as a strategic imperative. Its active participation would demonstrate its commitment to the Ocean 20 (020) agenda, which was initiated under Brazil's G20 presidency in 2024 and will be carried forward under South Africa's leadership in 2025. UNOC-3 offers a timely platform for South Africa to elevate and increase awareness of its G20 priorities, particularly those relating to ocean sustainability, as it prepares to host the G20 Summit in November 2025.

This piece was compiled by Daniela Marggraff and edited by Maxi Schoeman. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

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