



The Commonwealth

Report of the Secretary-General on Oceans and the Law of the Sea

Submission by the Commonwealth Secretariat | January 2022

About this Submission

This Submission is prepared by the Commonwealth Secretariat in response to the invitation by the United Nations for contributions to the Report of the Secretary-General on Oceans and the Law of the Sea.

Background

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 54 independent and equal countries. It is home to 2.4 billion people and includes both advanced economies and developing countries. Our members work together to boost trade and create prosperity, protect the environment, promote democracy and good governance, amplify the voice of small states, and celebrate diversity.

- 47 Commonwealth countries have a marine coastline and contain about one-third (35.5%) of all marine waters in national jurisdiction;
- 32 of our members are small States;
- 25 of our members are small island developing States, ('SIDS'), sometimes referred to as 'Large Ocean States.'
- the Commonwealth Secretariat provides technical assistance support to member countries in the development of policies, laws, design of fiscal regimes and strengthening of national institutions as they seek to implement the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Commonwealth Blue Charter Ocean Observation Action Group

The Commonwealth Blue Charter is an agreement by Commonwealth countries to actively cooperate in addressing the myriad of ocean-related issues and commitments that they face. Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Groups are member-driven, led by Commonwealth Blue Charter 'Champion' countries. These groups have embarked on a shared mission to cooperate to solve ocean-related problems and meet commitments for sustainable ocean development. Canada has stepped forward to lead the Ocean Observations Action Group. The Action Group with external Commonwealth Blue Charter partners assists the delivery of an integrated ocean observations monitoring, training and knowledge exchange program.

The Action Group has recognised the uneven global representation of observational technologies, which has led to gaps in observations, especially surrounding Small Island Developing States and coastal states that are most vulnerable to ocean changes. The Action Group aims to address this gap by providing existing affordable and ease-of-use observational technology, such as 'Global Ocean Acidification – Observing Network (GOA-ON) in a box', 'Argo' and 'Biogeochemical Argo' floats, and focusing on developing draw-down technologies to create low-cost, low maintenance technology for areas with limited resources and difficulty to access.

The Action Group additionally recognises that existing ocean observational data are not fully utilised due to siloed platforms, as well as lack of training and tools to fully find and utilise existing ocean observational datasets. To promote accessibility of ocean observational data, knowledge and best practices, the Action Group initially focused on facilitating the use of Argo Floats. The Action Group has held virtual meetings on Argo floats, which reached participants from 18 countries, and will release a publicly available open-source analysis package, which provides tools for downloading and analysing collections of oceanographic Argo float datasets. Finally, the Action Group is looking to partner on the development of a portable set of tools to measure eutrophication and related indicators—'Eutrophication in a Box.'

By supporting our member countries to attend knowledge mobilisation and training sessions, the Action Group can advance the utilisation of existing ocean observations into national and global decision-making.

Challenges

The Action Group has worked to advance greater inclusivity in ocean science, with an initial focus on gender. In December 2020, the Action Group released an [issue paper](#) on gender equality in ocean sciences, which included actions and recommendations.

Several other challenges within ocean observations have been identified:

- accessibility of ocean observation data, particularly those data with potential commercial value (e.g. seismic data);
- capacity restraints related to transforming big datasets into manageable information and knowledge;
- communication of the value of ocean observations to non-scientists and decision-makers; and
- cost and maintenance of ocean observation equipment, especially over long time series.

Some ocean observation data are not easily accessible or findable. Additionally, data perceived to be sensitive or of commercial value are not shared between countries, institutions or programmes. The Action Group is working to bring awareness to existing data resources and is encouraging the sharing of data and information.

Next steps

As part of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), the Ocean Observation Action Group will improve ocean observations on multiple scales and advance SDG14 through information and knowledge sharing. The Action Group plans to increase the innovation, development and deployment of ocean observational technologies, by developing and sharing modular/portable fit-for-purpose observation platforms and investigating draw-down technologies that allow for simpler, cheaper and easier to use ocean observations, such as eutrophication monitoring kits.

Furthermore, the Action Group aims to improve accessibility of ocean observational data, knowledge and best practices among Commonwealth countries through the development and training of opensource tools for accessing, analysing and visualising existing data, including orphaned data. The sharing of technologies, expertise and analytical capacity will further improve accessibility of ocean observational data.

Additionally, the Action Group plans to engage political co-operation to better integrate ocean observational data, information and knowledge into decisions, products and services within the Commonwealth, by interacting with other Action Groups to identify cross-cutting issues and opportunities to collaborate.

Finally, the Action Group wishes to further examine gender, youth and indigenous issues within the context of ocean science, by promoting gender equity in ocean sciences, by advancing the recommendations from the gender equity issue paper, and by exploring opportunities to promote the inclusion of indigenous peoples, youth and early-career scientists in ocean sciences.

The pursuit of these ongoing activities against the backdrop of the disparate effects of COVID-19 across the Commonwealth and beyond, affords them greater urgency and relevance. Striving to remain on course for attainment of the SDGs will require awareness of these interfaces and sustained cooperation and partnerships at every level. The Commonwealth Secretariat welcomes the efforts of the United Nations on this topic and looks forward to further collaboration.

