

REPOA Brief



Sustaining Tanzania's Marine Resources: Opportunities and Challenges for Strengthening Co-Management in Coastal Communities

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Key Messages

Vital resources

Tanzania's marine resources are vital for livelihoods and economic growth but are threatened by overexploitation, climate change, and inadequate governance framework.

Implementation gaps

A significant implementation gap exists between national policies and local realities, characterised by weak enforcement, limited technical capacity, and poor infrastructure.

Empowering management structures

Empowering community-based management structures, Beach Management Units (BMUs)/ Shehia Fisheries Committees (SFCs) through capacity building, clear accountability frameworks, and dedicated funding are critical for success.

Integrated approach

An integrated approach, combining strengthened governance, ecosystem-based adaptation, and coordinated spatial planning, is essential for a sustainable Blue Economy.

Objective

- To explore the underlying opportunities and constraints for strengthening the co-management of Tanzania's marine resources in Coastal Communities.

Baseline Definitions – Blue Economy

World Bank	BE is a sustainable use of the ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem.
EU Commission	Defines BE as encompassing all economic activities related to oceans, seas and coasts.
Centre for the Blue Economy	Defines BE as the overall contribution of the oceans to economies, the need to address the environmental and ecological sustainability of the oceans, and the ocean economy as a growth opportunity for both developed and developing countries.
United Nations	Defines the BE as an economy comprising a range of economic sectors and related policies that together determine whether the use of ocean resources is sustainable.
Environmental Institutions	Consider the BE to include economic benefits that may not be marketed, such as carbon storage, coastal protection, cultural values and biodiversity.
East African Community	Considers BE as the sustainable use and conservation of aquatic resources in both marine and freshwater environments--includes oceans and seas, coastlines and banks, lakes, rivers and groundwater.

The Significance of the Marine Resources in Tanzania's Blue Economy

Marine Resources' Potential	Tanzania is endowed with extensive marine and coastal resources that play a critical role in the country's socioeconomic development, environmental sustainability, and cultural heritage.
	Stretching along a coastline of about 1,424 kilometers bordering the Western Indian Ocean, the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers approximately 223,000 square kilometers (URT, 2024).
	This marine region is most diverse and contains coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass beds, estuaries, sandy beaches, and small islands, which provide key ecosystem services, support fisheries and tourism, and sustain the livelihoods of tens of millions of coastal inhabitants.
	Coastal and marine resources significantly contribute to national revenue through fisheries, aquaculture, port operations, trade, shipping, natural gas exploration, and marine tourism, particularly in Zanzibar and along the mainland's coastal regions.
The management of marine resources in Tanzania is driven by the need to balance economic growth, poverty reduction, and environmental conservation.	

Key Productivity Challenges and Constraints facing the Coastal Fishing sub-sector

Growing challenges

These resources face increasing pressures from overfishing, destructive fishing practices, coastal erosion, pollution, population growth, unregulated tourism, climate change, and offshore oil and gas development. These pressures and challenges threaten the sustainability of marine ecosystems and the socioeconomic well-being of coastal communities that depend on them.

Recognizing these challenges, Tanzania has adopted a wide range of policies, legal frameworks, and institutional mechanisms to guide the sustainable management of its marine resources.



At the regional level, Tanzania is also an active member of initiatives such as the Southwest Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission (SWIOFC) and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), which support collaborative governance and science-based management of shared marine resources.

Methodology



The purpose of this policy brief is to explore the practical organisation and challenges of marine resource management, and recommend practical strategies for sustainable marine resource management along the Tanzania and Zanzibar coast.

It is based on a scoping study conducted in June 2025 in selected areas of Tanga, Coast, and Lindi regions on mainland Tanzania, as well as Unguja in Zanzibar. Data was collected through interviews with the fisheries technical staff at regional and LGA levels, together with ward, Shehia, village, and *mtaa* officials and elected leaders. Further perspectives were drawn from cooperatives, Beach Management Units (BMUs), Village Liaison Committees (VLCs) – in the marine park, Collaborative Fisheries Management Areas (CFMAs), and a range of fishing, farming, and aquaculture associations.

Key findings

Organisation & Structure of Marine Resources Management—The management of marine resources in the studied area is characterised by a multi-layered governance structure that combines national, regional, and local-level institutions involving communities, as indicated in the table below.

Ministerial level	The Government, through the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries (Mainland) and the Ministry of Blue Economy and Fisheries (Zanzibar), sets policies, laws, and regulations, provides oversight, and coordinates interventions to ensure sustainable management of marine resources. On the mainland, the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries aligns sectoral policies with national development plans and international commitments. In Zanzibar, the Ministry of Blue Economy and Fisheries oversees resource management through the Department of Fisheries Development and Marine Products, which promotes sustainable use and economic opportunities, and the Marine Conservation Unit, which ensures protection through monitoring, control, and surveillance.
Zonal Fisheries Offices / Regional Secretariat	The centralized strategy cascades down through regional and district administrations, where fisheries offices and councils implement policies, provide technical support, and enforce compliance. At the regional level, the Regional Fisheries Office provides oversight and coordination, working closely with District Councils and partner NGOs such as WWF, SEASENSE, and Blue Ventures to strengthen co-management initiatives. This multi-tiered system integrates government institutions, NGOs, and communities to promote sustainable marine resource governance. Provide technical support and coordinate fisheries activities at the regional level.
District Fisheries Offices	Local Government Authorities (LGAs) and community-based organisations act as the frontline managers of coastal and marine resources. Responsible for enforcing regulations (licensing, surveillance), providing extension services and monitoring fishing activities.
Ward levels	Ward Fisheries Officers / Extension Officers are responsible for direct support to fishers, training on sustainability practices and conflict resolution.

CFMA / CMGs	Collaborative Fisheries Management Area (CFMA) / Collaborative Management Groups (CMGs)---A combination of BMUs forms a CFMA, which may bring together several villages/mitaa (ward), or Shehia. The CFMAs/CMGs allow for more coordinated and integrated management of marine resources across adjacent communities.
BMUs, VLC and SFCs	Beach Management Units (BMUs), Village Liaison Committee (VLC), Shehia Fisheries Committees (SFCs) (Community Level) are composed of local fishers, traders, and processors. These are responsible for co-managing and conserving resources with the government, monitoring illegal practices, including illegal fishing and reporting. At the community level, the organisation and structure of marine resources management in Tanzania's mainland are coordinated through Beach Management Units (BMUs) and the Shehia Fisheries Committees (SFCs or DICO) in Zanzibar, which act as the frontline institutions for co-management of fisheries and marine ecosystems. BMUs / SFCs or DICO are responsible for implementing fisheries by-laws, monitoring fishing practices, collecting data, and sensitizing fishers on sustainable use of resources, while also linking local communities with district and national authorities; and for Zanzibar the SFCs manage access to fishing grounds, enforce conservation rules, and collaborate with the Ministry of Blue Economy and Fisheries to strengthen community participation in resource governance.
Others	Fisher folk & Aquaculture Groups & Cooperatives are responsible for fishing and seaweed farming activities, link to market and government services, participate in planning and decision-making.

The findings show that Community participation is a cornerstone of Tanzania's marine resource management. The government has promoted co-management approaches through BMUs, VLCs, CFMAs, CMGs and locally managed marine areas (LMMAs). These mechanisms empower coastal communities to take part in decision-making, monitoring, and enforcement, thereby enhancing stewardship and compliance with sustainable practices.

In this context, Tanzania continues to pursue integrated coastal and marine management (ICM) strategies, blue economy initiatives, and partnerships with regional and international actors. These efforts aim not only to conserve ecosystems but also to unlock the potential of marine resources for inclusive and sustainable economic transformation. Despite these initiatives and the management framework in place, this sub-sector faces some challenges as outlined below:

Challenges Facing the Management of Marine Resources	
Illegal fishing practices	Illegal fishing methods, such as the use of explosives or undersized nets, continue to threaten fish stocks and marine biodiversity. These practices often spark disputes among fishers, BMUs, and enforcement agencies, weakening trust and compliance with regulations.
Insufficient budget	Limited financial resources (including cars and fuel) prevent government officials from conducting effective field monitoring and supervision of BMUs. As a result, oversight is often reduced to phone calls, which undermines accountability and the enforcement of sustainable fishing practices.
Smuggling of fish harvests	Some fishers engage in smuggling by bypassing official landing sites to avoid taxes and regulatory charges. This causes revenue loss for the government but also disrupts data collection on fish harvests.
Limited technical capacity	Some BMU and cooperative leaders have insufficient knowledge of writing reports and implementing their roles, as well as limited use of digital technologies. They lack the necessary skills to prepare accurate reports and manage records effectively. Their limited ability to adopt and use digital tools further constrains efficient communication and data management.
Lack of accountability measures	In all legal documents, it is not stated what actions the municipal or district councils or other organs should take over the mistakes made by the BMUs. Legal and policy frameworks provide little clarity on how higher-level authorities should address errors or negligence by BMUs. This gap reduces accountability and leaves room for inefficiency and poor governance in marine resource management.
Political interference	Enforcement efforts are sometimes undermined by political influence, where leaders intervene to protect offenders. Such interference weakens the rule of law and discourages compliance with fisheries regulations.
Lack of information on biomass	There is limited scientific data on the status of fish stocks and other marine biomass, making it difficult to plan for sustainable harvesting. Without this information, management decisions risk being based on assumptions rather than evidence.
Water use conflicts	Seaweed attracts fish, as some fish varieties feed on the weeds and others use it as a hiding place. This causes some fishers to conduct activities using boats on the seaweed farms, resulting in damage. Conflicts often arise between seaweed farmers and fishers, as fishing activities damage seaweed farms that serve as both habitats and food sources for marine species.
One interviewee stated: "Up to now, we do not have a formal Marine Spatial Plan (MSP) in place, and the discussions are still at the stage of considering marine zoning as a potential approach to guide sustainable use, conservation, and equitable allocation of marine resources. The plan will also resolve the water usage conflict."	

Conclusion and recommendations

Marine resource management in Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar relies on a multi-layered governance system that combines national frameworks with strong community participation through BMUs and SFCs. This co-management approach, supported by NGOs and marine protected areas, has facilitated the

advancement of conservation and sustainable use. However, illegal fishing, limited enforcement capacity, weak accountability, smuggling, political interference, poor biomass data, and resource conflicts continue to undermine progress. Tackling these challenges is essential to safeguard ecosystems and coastal livelihoods, requiring strengthened enforcement, improved capacity, reforms to enhance accountability, better data collection, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

Key recommended actions to address the above challenges	
Strengthen enforcement	The central government and local councils should allocate more resources for fuel, patrol boats, and vehicles to enable fisheries officers and BMUs to conduct regular on-site monitoring and surveillance.
Build BMU capacity	The Ministry responsible for Fisheries, in collaboration with NGOs, should deliver training programmes in record keeping, report writing, digital literacy and provide digital tools to BMU and cooperative leaders to improve reporting, record management, communication, and overall management capacity and accountability.
Ensure accountability	Parliament and relevant ministries should revise fisheries laws to clearly assign oversight roles to councils and higher-level authorities, with penalties for negligence. Clear accountability frameworks that define the roles and responsibilities of BMUs and district councils should be developed and disseminated to enhance transparency and governance.
Improve biomass data	Research institutions and universities, supported by the government, should conduct regular stock assessments and share findings with policymakers and BMUs for evidence-based planning.
Resolve resource conflicts	Develop MSP to formally zone areas for fishing, seaweed farming, conservation, and other uses, reducing conflicts and ensuring sustainable management of marine resources. Local councils, BMUs, and SFCs should establish community mediation committees to resolve disputes between fishers and seaweed farmers through dialogue and agreed zoning.

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