Towards Sustainable Seas: A National Blue Economy Policy Framework for Sri Lanka: Inter-Ministerial Governance, Marine Spatial Planning, and Fiscally Realistic Implementation

S.M.D. Athukorala*, A.J.M. Gunasekara
Marine Environment Protection Authority, Sri Lanka
*dinishiya@mepa.gov.lk

Sri Lanka's maritime jurisdiction of approximately 517,000 km² presents substantial potential for ocean-based economic development across traditional sectors including fisheries, ports, shipping, and tourism as well as emerging industries such as marine biotechnology, offshore renewable energy, blue carbon, and ocean innovation. Despite this potential, Sri Lanka lacks a coordinated National Blue Economy Policy. Previous national coordination efforts, including the "Coastal 2000" strategy, failed to achieve effective vertical integration between national institutions and local implementation mechanisms. Recent maritime disasters have further exposed persistent regulatory fragmentation and the absence of a long-term national vision for sustainable ocean governance. Consequently, marine ecosystem services remain inadequately valued within economic planning, while emerging ocean industries continue to operate with limited statutory oversight. This study employs a multi-source documentary analysis comprising a systematic review of national legislation, comparative assessment of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) policy frameworks, and insights derived from expert consultations involving senior maritime policymakers and ocean industry stakeholders. The analysis identifies fragmented institutional mandates, weak inter-agency coordination, limited economic valuation of marine resources and governance gaps in emerging ocean sectors as key barriers to sustainable Blue Economy development in Sri Lanka. In response, the study proposes a statutory National Blue Economy Secretariat, hosted within the national marine environmental authority and incorporating representation from finance, foreign affairs, environment, and related sectorial ministries to strengthen policy coherence, facilitate sustainable investment, and support economic diversification. The proposed framework positions Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) as the central governance mechanism for balancing competing ocean uses while safeguarding ecologically sensitive marine areas. Furthermore, the study suggests a phased implementation pathway and proposes an AMSA-style, industry-funded maritime regulatory mechanism with a dedicated fund as a fiscally realistic alternative to sovereign blue bonds under current national fiscal constraints. By integrating statutory authority and explicit governance provisions for emerging ocean industries, the proposed framework addresses key limitations of earlier coordination initiatives. The framework supports Sri Lanka's climate resilience objectives, regional commitments, and alignment with SDG 14, while offering a potentially replicable governance model for resource constrained SIDS.

Keywords: *Blue economy, Inter-Ministerial coordination, Marine spatial planning, Ocean governance, SIDS, Sri Lanka*