

**April 2nd , 15:00-18:00 , Room VII**

Dear Distinguished delegates, I wish to highlight three critical areas during this round table on SDG 14, "Life Below Water": the role of local communities and NGOs, the need for inclusive financial support, and the importance of youth participation in shaping our shared future.

To start with, **Local communities and NGOs** play a pivotal role in marine conservation, leveraging traditional knowledge and grassroots initiatives to address challenges often overlooked by larger institutions. A notable example is the Ligurian **Sea Marine Protected Areas** (MPAs) in Italy, where local stakeholders, including fishers and NGOs, collaboratively manage biodiversity while supporting sustainable fishing practices. However, such efforts require consistent financial support to remain effective. Initiatives like the **EU's Blue Parks Community** demonstrate the importance of targeted investments by providing financial mechanisms to enhance marine conservation across European sea basins while promoting sustainability and climate resilience. **Youth advocacy further underscores** the need for increased funding and their formal inclusion in partnerships with NGOs and local actors to integrate innovative ideas into ecosystem management. Without adequate resources, even the most promising community-led projects risk stagnation, highlighting the critical need for sustained support to empower local actors and safeguard marine ecosystems.

Having said that, **Inclusion** is essential for addressing systemic barriers that prevent marginalized groups from accessing funding or participating in decision-making processes. **Coastal communities in regions like Indonesia have demonstrated the potential of blue infrastructure projects, which integrate nature-based solutions with sustainable design, to enhance climate resilience and create economic opportunities.** However, true inclusion requires more than token representation; it demands active involvement of these communities at every stage, from policy formulation to implementation, ensuring their voices shape outcomes that directly affect them. Integrating such efforts into broader blue economy frameworks that prioritize regenerative approaches and equitable economic opportunities is crucial. **Youth advocates** emphasize the need for equitable access to funding mechanisms like the **EU's Blue Parks Community initiative**, alongside dedicated financial resources for youth-led projects and capacity-building programs aligned with sustainability and climate resilience. Transparency in funding allocation is also vital to ensure marginalized groups, including youth, are prioritized, fostering innovation and equity in marine conservation efforts.

We must emphasise that **Youth Participation** is a critical component in achieving SDG 14, yet young people are often excluded from environmental decision-making under the misconception that they lack expertise. This narrative overlooks their deep understanding of community challenges and solutions. Initiatives like **Eurocean's Youth network**, which empowers young Europeans to advocate for ocean protection at events such as the **One Ocean Summit**, and the **Youth Ocean Advocate program at the New York Aquarium**, which trains young leaders in conservation policy, demonstrate the transformative impact of youth-driven education, advocacy, and innovation. Globally scaling such efforts is essential to provide youth with platforms for equal representation, mentorship opportunities, and access to resources that enable them to act on their ideas. **Youth demand** recognition of

their expertise and lived experiences in shaping policies and call for funding mechanisms that support youth-led initiatives while integrating them into blue economy frameworks as active agents of change. Empowering young leaders ensures their voices are valued in creating sustainable ocean conservation strategies.

To ensure meaningful progress on SDG 14 and to secure a sustainable future, we must prioritize financial investment in community-led solutions, amplify marginalized voices through inclusive policies, and empower youth as agents of change within a resilient blue economy framework. The oceans are not just a resource; they are a lifeline for billions worldwide.

Thank you.

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Distinguished delegates, I wish to highlight three critical areas during this round table on SDG 14, "Life Below Water": the role of local communities and NGOs, the need for inclusive financial support, and the importance of youth participation in shaping our shared future.

To start with, **Local communities and NGOs** play a pivotal role in marine conservation, leveraging traditional knowledge and grassroots initiatives to address challenges often overlooked by larger institutions. At times, we see such actions happening. However, those efforts require consistent financial support to remain effective. Initiatives of young people demonstrate the importance of targeted investments by providing financial mechanisms to enhance water ecosystems protection, while promoting sustainability and climate resilience. **Youth advocacy further underscores** the need for increased funding and their formal inclusion in partnerships with NGOs and local actors to integrate innovative ideas into ecosystem management. Without adequate resources, even the most promising community-led projects risk stagnation, highlighting the critical need for sustained support to empower local actors and safeguard marine ecosystems. Coastal communities' income is very much connected to fishing, leisure, marine industry, and they may rely heavily on the external influences, rather than the feeling of connection with the environment they live in. We must ensure that living alongside and together with nature is affordable for all, and that local health of communities and other beings is not sacrificed for financial gains, e.g. by unsustainable fishing, polluting waters and the exploitation of coasts.

Having said that, **Inclusion** is essential for addressing systemic barriers that prevent marginalized groups from accessing funding or participating in decision-making processes. However, true inclusion requires more than a token representation; it demands active involvement of these communities at every stage, from policy formulation to implementation, ensuring their voices shape outcomes that directly affect them. Integrating such efforts **into broader blue economy frameworks** that prioritize regenerative approaches and **equitable economic opportunities is crucial**.

Young people are often excluded from environmental decision-making under the misconception that they lack expertise. This narrative overlooks their deep understanding of community challenges and solutions. Supporting their efforts, for be it financial, educational, or material resources, is essential to provide youth with platforms for equal representation, mentorship opportunities, and access to resources that enable children and youth to act on their ideas. **Youth demand** recognition of their expertise and lived experiences in shaping policies and call for funding mechanisms that support youth-led initiatives while integrating them **into blue economy frameworks** as active agents of change. Empowering young leaders ensures their voices are valued in creating sustainable ocean conservation strategies.

To ensure meaningful progress on SDG 14 and to secure a sustainable future, we must prioritize financial investment in community-led and across-the-borders empowering solutions, amplify marginalized voices through inclusive policies, and empower youth as agents of change within a resilient cross-sectional **blue economy framework**. The waters

are not just a resource; they are a lifeline for billions worldwide. And they should be, together with youth voices, actively heard across different sectors.

Thank you.