

POLITICAL WINDOW MEMO

Seizing the Policy Moments to Reclaiming Ocean Governance: Advancing Equitable Governance through the Abidjan Convention between 2025-2026

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Strategic Context

Coastal and marine ecosystems across West and Central Africa continue to face unprecedented pressures including rising sea levels, habitat degradation, unregulated offshore extraction, and pollution from land-based sources. The World Bank (2022) estimates that 56% of West Africa's coastline is subject to medium to high erosion risk, with economic losses in countries like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire exceeding 2.3% of national GDP annually. According to the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2023), low-elevation coastal zones in Africa are expected to experience compound risks from salinization, storm surges, and displacement, affecting more than 110 million people by 2050.

The Abidjan Convention, formally known as the Convention for Co-operation in the Protection and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the West and Central African Region, provides a legally binding multilateral platform to address these risks. Yet four decades after its adoption, implementation remains fragmented and under-resourced. In most countries, the Convention is absent from national coastal legislation, environmental permitting systems, or marine spatial planning. Community participation remains marginal, despite the growing international consensus that locally grounded governance is essential for effective marine protection (UNEP 2023; FAO 2022).

2025–2026 as a Political Inflection Point for Coastal Governance

The period from 2025 to 2026 presents a rare alignment of high-level regional and global political processes that can be strategically used to reposition the Abidjan Convention as the principal legal and institutional framework for West, Central, and Southern Africa's coastal and marine governance.

- i. The **UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3)**, taking place **9–13 June 2025 in Nice, France**, will generate the *Nice Ocean Action Plan*—a global registry of voluntary commitments. This offers a chance to secure visibility for Convention-aligned projects, attract blue economy investments, and register African commitments under SDG 14. The lead-up events—including the **One Ocean Science Congress and Blue Economy Forum**—create policy entry points for African governments, research institutions, and coastal CSOs.
- ii. **UNFCCC COP30 in November 2025 in Belém, Brazil** presents an unprecedented opportunity to anchor the Convention's legal protocols and ecosystem priorities—such as mangrove protection, coastal erosion, and marine protected areas—within **climate finance mechanisms**, including the **Green Climate Fund**, the **Adaptation Fund**, and the **Global Biodiversity Framework Fund**.
- iii. The **African Union's Blue Economy Strategy Midterm Review in mid-2026** will provide a political space to institutionalize Abidjan Convention instruments within **continental ocean governance**, investment strategies, and reporting under the African Peer Review Mechanism. This is also a key window to harmonize regional frameworks through ECOWAS and SADC coastal protocols.
- iv. Finally, **UNGA-80 (Sept 2025–Sept 2026)** will shape the global environmental and development discourse. African coastal states can use this moment to amplify the Convention's relevance within multilateral negotiations on ocean health, biodiversity financing, and climate-vulnerable small-scale fisheries.

This alignment of forums and reviews is more than symbolic. It provides actionable leverage to transform the Abidjan Convention from a dormant legal instrument into a living governance platform, backed by political will, investment, and community legitimacy. What is required now is not rhetorical affirmation, but deep policy integration, intergovernmental coordination, and renewed investment in implementation systems across all levels of governance.

Implementation Gaps and Governance Risks

Despite ratification by 22 coastal states, the Convention continues to face four structural barriers:

1. Policy Disconnection

Although the Abidjan Convention provides a legal framework for coastal protection, its objectives are not systematically integrated into national development plans, marine spatial policies or infrastructure investments. For instance, most countries' National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) reference coastal vulnerability but rarely link implementation to Convention protocols. This weakens policy coherence and results in fragmented or duplicated efforts across ministries and sectors.

2. Governance Fragmentation

Implementation responsibilities for the Convention are typically housed within environment ministries, while critical sectors such as fisheries, finance, infrastructure and local government remain disconnected from the process. This siloed structure limits cross-sector collaboration and impedes effective enforcement of protocols on pollution control, biodiversity protection or integrated coastal zone management. It also reduces accountability, as no single body has a mandate to oversee coordinated implementation.

3. Underrepresentation of Frontline Actors

Emerging research shows that inclusive marine governance is essential to achieving equitable conservation and climate outcomes across coastal zones (UNEP, 2023; FAO, 2022). Local actors such as women's fishworker cooperatives, artisanal fishing communities, traditional leaders and coastal youth, are largely absent from national reporting processes and regional negotiation forums. Their exclusion limits the legitimacy, responsiveness and knowledge base of the Convention's governance system.

4. Resource Insecurity

Many national focal points lack sufficient operational funding, staffing and legal autonomy to carry out their mandates effectively. There are few institutionalized channels for countries to access international climate finance or biodiversity funds through the Convention, despite eligibility under mechanisms like the GCF or GEF. This chronic underfunding compromises both implementation and long-term credibility, particularly in the eyes of development partners and regional institutions.

These constraints undermine both national resilience and the region's credibility in climate and ocean diplomacy.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

To leverage 2025 as a turning point, the following institutional and governance measures are proposed:

1. Adopt National Coastal Governance Action Plans anchored in the Abidjan Convention, ensuring formal integration into national marine spatial planning, oil and gas regulation, and disaster risk frameworks. These plans should include district-level implementation benchmarks.
2. Establish Inter-Ministerial Coastal Coordination Units under the Office of the President or Cabinet Secretariat, to ensure Convention mandates are embedded across environment, fisheries, planning, energy, and finance ministries.

3. Launch a Regional Blue Justice Financing Facility, coordinated through the Abidjan Convention Secretariat and ECOWAS, to fund ecosystem restoration, community monitoring, and climate-resilient livelihoods. Contributions could be blended from national budgets, donor finance, and multilateral climate funds.
4. Institutionalize Community Co-Governance Protocols, requiring that all Convention-related marine projects undergo social impact assessments co-led by local councils, women's groups, and fisherfolk associations. This would align with international best practices under the FAO's Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines (2022).
5. Mandate Open Data Platforms and Performance Dashboards, where Convention member states publicly report progress on targets including marine pollution reduction, coastal land rights, and ocean biodiversity protection.

Diplomatic Implications

Reinvesting in the Abidjan Convention's implementation would advance multiple international obligations, including:

Target 11 of the Global Biodiversity Framework (30% coastal protection by 2030)

Reinvigorating the Abidjan Convention would directly support the implementation of Target 11, which calls for the conservation of 30% of marine and coastal areas by 2030. Most West and Central African states currently fall below this threshold, with marine protected areas averaging just 14% coverage regionally (UNEP-WCMC, 2023). Strengthening regional coordination through the Convention can help countries expand protection zones, harmonize biodiversity protocols, and report collectively to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Target 7 of the Sendai Framework on ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction

The Convention's provisions on mangrove restoration, coastal land-use planning, and pollution control align with the Sendai Framework's call to reduce disaster losses through nature-based solutions. As coastal communities face growing risks from sea level rise, flooding, and storm surges, ecosystem-based strategies, embedded in Abidjan Convention protocols—offer cost-effective resilience-building tools (IPCC, 2023). Operationalizing these measures would strengthen national disaster preparedness while advancing regional commitments under the African Union's Programme of Action for DRR.

SDG 14.2 and 14.c on marine ecosystem resilience and international law for oceans

SDG 14.2 urges countries to sustainably manage and restore marine ecosystems, while 14.c emphasizes adherence to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Abidjan Convention is one of the few regional legal instruments that complements these global frameworks with enforceable protocols on land-based pollution, biodiversity protection, and marine spatial governance. Accelerating its implementation would enhance state compliance and reporting under both Agenda 2030 and UNCLOS obligations.

Article 7 of the Paris Agreement on participatory, equitable adaptation

Article 7 requires adaptation actions to be participatory, inclusive of vulnerable groups, and informed by traditional knowledge systems. The Abidjan Convention's ecosystem-based and community-focused frameworks provide a regional vehicle to meet this obligation, particularly in integrating coastal adaptation into Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Strengthening implementation would also unlock access to climate finance for community-led coastal resilience projects through funds like the GCF and Adaptation Fund.

Diplomatic Leverage in 2026

Investing in the Convention ahead of major political moments, such as the African Union Summit on Environmental Sustainability (February 2026) and upcoming ECOWAS dialogues on ocean economy integration, positions Ghana and its coastal peers as credible leaders in marine diplomacy. It enhances their ability to shape continental frameworks on blue economy, maritime security, and coastal adaptation. Strategic engagement at this time will also increase regional visibility at international forums such as the UN Ocean Conference follow-ups and COP31.

Conclusion

The Abidjan Convention was never intended to be a symbolic agreement. It remains a binding continental tool for protecting marine ecosystems, promoting equitable resource governance, and safeguarding the livelihoods of Africa's coastal populations. Its effectiveness now depends on reinvigorated political will, clear institutional mandates, and financing that matches the scale of environmental and socio-economic threats.

West and Central Africa's coastlines are cultural and economic lifelines under growing strain from climate change, resource exploitation, and maritime insecurity. The Convention can bridge local realities with global commitments by advancing ecosystem-based management, transboundary cooperation, and genuine community participation, shifting the region from crisis response to proactive governance. The choice is between letting coastlines become symbols of irreversible loss or transforming them into spaces of renewal, resilience, and shared responsibility. With coordinated action, targeted investment, and accountable implementation, the Abidjan Convention can stand as a continental platform for just, future-facing ocean governance.

Let the coastlines of West and Central Africa not be remembered as lost territories, but as frontline sites of renewal, governance, and global solidarity.

Disclaimer

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About FIDEP Foundation

FIDEP Foundation is a Ghana-based NGO that focuses on environmental justice, sustainable development, and human rights. We work to empower local communities and to support evidence-based decision making from the grassroots to national and regional levels. Our trans-regional partnership approach helps us work on large projects that focus on climate change, resource management, and environmental protection. These connections, also allows us to share knowledge and implement solutions that address Africa's environmental challenges. Through these partnerships, we also introduce international best practices into our projects. Our ability to organize community groups, facilitate structured dialogues between farmers, traditional authorities, and other stakeholders, and drive innovative solutions through consultative research approaches makes us an active partner in conflict prevention in climate-affected areas in Ghana and West Africa. Our projects are transformative, focusing on climate change, resource management, and sustainability. FIDEP has proven success in bringing together diverse stakeholders to create impactful, scalable solutions. FIDEP Foundation operates a dynamic and flat organizational structure that enhances efficiency and responsiveness in our partnership approach. FIDEP is led by a Board that prioritizes gender equality and social inclusion. Our leadership team integrates Core Functional Divisions that foster close cooperation with researchers, farmers, affected communities, stakeholders, and exploitation agencies. Our collaborative approach ensures the effective dissemination of research findings and the development of impactful, sustainable solutions to environmental challenges while maintaining scientific rigor and community relevance.

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