Untapping the potential of research and innovation in the blue economy to create jobs and growth

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The Committee on Industry, Research and Energy adopted an own-initiative report by João FERREIRA (GUE/NGL, PT) on untapping the potential of research and innovation in the blue economy to create jobs and growth.

To recall, the concept of the blue economy covers a **wide range of economic sectors linked to the seas and oceans**, spanning traditional or established and emerging sectors including fisheries, aquaculture, (seagoing) shipping and inland waterway transport, ports and logistics, tourism, pleasure sailing and cruising, shipbuilding and ship repairing, maritime works and protection of the coastline, prospecting for, exploitation of, offshore mineral resources, exploitation of offshore wind and marine energy, and biotechnology

Members took note of the Commission communication entitled 'Innovation in the Blue Economy: realising the potential of our seas and oceans for jobs and growth' and pointed out that the communication is of limited scope and does not cover all sectors making up the blue economy. They called on the Commission to adopt an **integrated and more comprehensive approach encompassing the challenges of innovation and job creation** over the whole varied range of interacting sectors.

The report:

- maintained that the blue economy should be **defined in specific and embracing terms** covering all sectoral and inter-sectoral activities connected with oceans, seas, coastal ecosystems, the connected hinterland and coastal areas, including forms of direct and indirect support;
- drew attention to the cross-cutting importance of innovation for all these activities, be they **traditional or emerging**;
- advocated the need for **strategic planning** of activities in the blue economy, direct methods of funding, targeting of priorities and an action plan in order to boost this sector by 2020.

Members urged the Member States to carry out an **analysis and quantification** of the extent of their existent blue economy activities and called for the development of a **strategy** which should bring together initiatives on all maritime-related sectors.

Protecting the ecosystems: the blue economy should therefore consider protecting, restoring and maintaining seas' and oceans' ecosystems, biodiversity, resilience and productivity. They stressed the **important role of new technology in counteracting the degradation of marine ecosystems** and stated that the precautionary principle and the ecosystem approach should be at the core of the blue economy.

Improving knowledge of the seas and oceans: Members stressed that the sustainable development of the blue economy requires greater investment in knowledge and research. Rejecting the cuts in the budget for the Horizon 2020 research framework programme proposed by the Commission, Members took the view that, in order to improve understanding of the marine environment and its economic potential, the EU and the Member States must provide **substantial funding under arrangements making for continuity and predictability over the long term**, while not jeopardising the financing of already existing and running programmes.

Data collection: Members urged the Commission to encourage the compilation of **periodic, up-to-date scientific data** on the state of marine populations both within and outside of EU waters in collaboration with other international organisations. They urged that **clear-cut objectives and time frames** be laid down with a view to making data transparent, more accessible and fully interoperable and harmonised. They also called for information about seas and oceans to be supplied to the public, with a view to fostering innovation.

Traditional sectors: the report drew attention to the negative development and clear deterioration of some of the more traditional sectors of the blue economy (such as fisheries and shipbuilding and repair), especially in areas where they functioned as authentic anchor activities. It stressed the importance of sea and maritime research and of **stronger cooperation on these sectors** among researchers, among Member States and among regions in order to overcome the existing gap between Member States and the geographical concentration in some areas and to boost the competitiveness of coastal areas and the creation of quality and sustainable local jobs.

Overcome the skills gap: convinced that the shortage of qualified professionals in various fields of study and activity – including researchers, engineers, technicians and workers – is be a huge hurdle that could prevent the blue economy from fully realising its potential, Members urged Member States and regional authorities to **invest in an ambitious social dimension** of blue growth and maritime literacy in order to promote training and access for young people to maritime professions. The Commission was called upon to promote the rights of workers and guarantee safe working conditions in all sectors within the blue economy, whether already established or newly emerging.

Appropriate financial framework: the report called for an appropriate financial framework to be established in order to stimulate innovation, the sustainable development of the blue economy and job creation, **combining, coordinating and facilitating the access to the financial instruments available** – structural and investment funding (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund), the research framework programme, the possible creation of a future knowledge and innovation community (KIC) focused on the blue economy, the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI).

Members emphasised that the **onshore industries which support the offshore blue economy** are the vital link to ensuring marine innovation and called on the Commission to provide for greater support for these onshore industries. They considered that **coastal and island communities** should be fully involved at every stage in the development of the blue economy.

Sector-based approaches: the report advocated, *inter alia*:

- more active support for **modernisation and sustainable development of the fisheries sector** and processing of fishery products, aiming at the creation of higher value added, laying emphasis on small-scale fisheries and seeking to make fishing gear more selective, reduce energy consumption;
- the need for **cultural and natural attractions** to be identified and promoted stressing the role of 'no-go' zones to help pristine areas survive;
- supporting the sustainable development of European **aquaculture** which requires stronger support for scientific research and technological development related to the breeding of new species;
- the integration of environmental and wider sustainability criteria into **production standards and labelling**, to reward responsible producers;
- the need to take immediate action with regard to maritime transport in terms of efficiency improvements and speeding up the **decarbonisation** of the sector;
- re-examining the policy towards the **European shipbuilding** industry and strongly endorses special aid intended for the restart and modernisation of shipbuilding in Europe.