



The ocean as a nation: Achieving blue economic stability

Ebenezer Teigaga¹, Eliyusta Haule²

¹ Lecturer, Department of Marine Electrical/Electronic, Engineering, Regional Maritime University, Accra Ghana.

² Assistant Lecturer, Department of Science and Management, Dar es Salaam Maritime Institute, Tanzania.

Abstract

This article explores the concept of blue economic stability through the metaphor of the ocean as a sovereign nation. Building on the framework established in *The Ocean as a Nation: Reimagining the Blue Economy through Sovereignty* (Teigaga & Haule, 2025) [28], it examines how marine ecosystems, governance structures, and economic systems intersect to support or undermine the long-term resilience of ocean-based industries and communities. The discussion follows a thematic approach, organized around three pillars of stability: ecological integrity, institutional coherence, and economic diversification. It identifies key fault lines, including environmental degradation, fragmented regulation, and uneven access to resources; and proposes principles for a more stable and inclusive blue economy. Rather than offer prescriptive solutions, the article presents a conceptual narrative for understanding ocean resilience through interdependence and governance. By treating the ocean as a nation with its own citizens, infrastructure, and diplomatic presence, the article offers a novel lens through which to understand the risks and responsibilities of marine stewardship. Stability, in this view, is not a static condition but an ongoing process of regeneration, cooperation, and foresight. The ocean's future, like that of any nation, will depend on how well it governs its strengths and withstands its storms.

Keywords: Blue economy, ocean governance, blue economic stability, ocean-as-nation, marine sustainability

Introduction

The Question of Stability in the Ocean Nation

Every functioning country depends not only on the diversity of its economy or the structure of its governance, but also on its ability to remain stable. Stability underpins development, ensures security, attracts investment, and safeguards the wellbeing of citizens. If we are to extend the nation-state analogy to the ocean, then we must also ask: is the sea economically stable? And if not, what would it take to build that stability?

In this follow-up to *The Ocean as a Nation: Reimagining the Blue Economy through Sovereignty* (Teigaga & Haule, 2025) [28], we shift the focus from identity and structure to sustainability and resilience. Blue economic stability refers not merely to steady growth in ocean-based industries, but to a broader balance; ecological, institutional, and financial; that allows the ocean nation to thrive amid uncertainty and global change (OECD, 2023; UNCTAD, 2023).

Just like a country's economy can falter under inflation, debt, or social unrest, the blue economy faces pressures that test its durability. Climate change, overexploitation, pollution, regulatory gaps, and inequities in access and benefit-sharing all pose risks to the long-term stability of ocean systems and livelihoods (Sumaila *et al.*, 2021; IPCC, 2023). When fish stocks collapse or coastal communities are displaced, it is not just the environment that suffers, but the economic foundation of entire regions.

This article explores what blue economic stability looks like when the ocean is treated as a nation. It draws on the metaphor of national resilience; including fiscal health, social inclusion, institutional trust, and resource regeneration; to examine how the sea's economy can be stabilized, safeguarded, and made future-ready.

Note on Approach

This article is thematic in nature and employs a conceptual

lens rather than an empirical framework. It draws on peer-reviewed research, institutional reports, and multidisciplinary literature from 2019 to 2024 to frame and synthesize the challenges and opportunities of blue economic stability. The discussion follows a narrative synthesis approach, prioritizing coherence, and originality. The goal is to offer a structured lens for reflection and future research by integrating insights across ecological, governance, and economic domains.

What Does Blue Economic Stability Mean?

Ecology, Governance, and Resilience

Economic stability, in any country, is more than the absence of crisis. It is the presence of steady systems; productive sectors that don't overextend, institutions that can manage risk, and ecosystems that support future growth without exhausting present needs (Barbier, 2021) [3]. When the sea is treated as a sovereign state, its stability must be measured not in GDP growth alone, but in how well it can balance ecological health, industrial development, and equitable access for its citizens (World Bank, 2017).

In the case of the ocean nation, the concept of stability begins; and ultimately ends; with marine life. No other sector functions without it. Fisheries collapse when spawning cycles are disrupted. Tourism vanishes when coral reefs bleach. Maritime transport slows when rising seas damage port infrastructure. Even deep-sea mining or biotechnology depend, directly or indirectly, on the resilience of the sea's living systems (Duarte *et al.*, 2020; Halpern *et al.*, 2022) [9].

This includes three overlapping forms of security: ecological stability, institutional stability, and economic resilience. Ecological stability refers to the ability of marine ecosystems to absorb shocks and continue functioning (Folke *et al.*, 2021). Institutional stability involves the legal, regulatory, and governance structures that ensure long-term

oversight and compliance (Gaines, 2021). Economic resilience reflects how ocean-based industries adapt to disruptions; whether from climate change, geopolitical shifts, or technological transitions; without undermining the foundation they rely on (OECD, 2023).

Like a country that diversifies its economy or builds fiscal buffers, the ocean nation must pursue a form of balance that allows short-term productivity without long-term collapse. It must ensure that one sector's gain; say, deep-sea mining or industrial shipping; does not come at the irreversible expense of biodiversity or community livelihoods (Levin *et al.*, 2020) ^[21].

Fault Lines in the Ocean Nation: Sources of Instability Environmental Degradation

Every nation faces pressures that test its endurance; economic downturns, political unrest, natural disasters. For the ocean as a nation, the fault lines lie not only in human activity but in ecological fragility and regulatory fragmentation. These stressors do not exist in isolation; they interact, compound, and accelerate one another (Halpern *et al.*, 2019).

The first and most persistent source of instability is environmental degradation. Overfishing, pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change each weaken the ocean's life systems; its first and most important citizens (Hoegh-Guldberg *et al.*, 2023; Díaz *et al.*, 2023) ^[17]. When coral reefs bleach or oxygen levels drop in coastal waters, it's not just a biological event; it's the equivalent of a national emergency.

Governance Fragmentation

Second is the fragmentation of governance. As outlined in our earlier work (Teigaga & Haule, 2025) ^[28], the sea lacks a unified government. Its policies are divided among coastal states, regional bodies, and international conventions. This dispersed authority makes it difficult to enforce regulations consistently or respond to emerging threats quickly (Gjerde, 2021; Campbell *et al.*, 2023) ^[6].

Sectoral Overdependence

Third is economic overdependence on unstable sectors. Many coastal economies rely heavily on one or two ocean-based industries; such as fisheries, tourism, or shipping; without investing in diversification or resilience planning (UNCTAD, 2023). When climate events disrupt fish stocks or pandemics shut down cruise tourism, entire regions face economic collapse (FAO, 2022).

Inequity and Social Imbalance

Lastly, inequitable access and benefit-sharing fuels social instability. Small-scale fishers often lack the same rights and protections as industrial fleets. Island nations that contribute least to climate change suffer most from rising seas (IPCC, 2023). When large corporations profit from ocean resources while vulnerable communities are displaced or excluded, the social contract within the ocean nation begins to erode (Bennett *et al.*, 2023) ^[5].

Together, these fault lines expose a central paradox: the blue economy is expanding in value, but also growing in volatility. Without strategic action, its growth may become the very thing that accelerates its decline.

Securing the Ecological Foundation Restoration and Regeneration

No nation can achieve economic stability without securing the well-being of its primary workforce and natural capital. In the ocean nation, that foundation is marine life. These are not just environmental assets; they are the citizens, labor force, and infrastructure of the blue economy.

Stability, therefore, begins with restoration. Just as land nations invest in soil health or forest cover to protect agriculture and water systems, the ocean nation must protect its ecological engine. Marine protected areas (MPAs), when well-designed and enforced, help rebuild fish stocks and enhance biodiversity (Roberts *et al.*, 2022). Habitat restoration; of seagrass beds, oyster reefs, and mangroves; can increase resilience to storms, reduce carbon, and support livelihoods all at once (Beck *et al.*, 2022).

Regulation and Protection

But protection is not enough if degradation continues elsewhere. Stability requires regulation of harmful practices: industrial overfishing, seabed mining, unsustainable coastal development, and chemical runoff must be actively reduced or reformed (Österblom *et al.*, 2023) ^[23].

Traditional Knowledge as Strategy

Crucially, indigenous and local knowledge must also play a central role. These communities have stewarded ocean resources for generations, often using methods more adaptive and respectful than industrial approaches (Ban *et al.*, 2023) ^[2]. Recognizing this knowledge; not as folklore but as part of national intelligence; can strengthen ecological governance while honoring cultural sovereignty. In the ocean-as-nation framework, ecological health is not a constraint. It is the prerequisite for stability. No budget can be balanced, no policy implemented, no trade sustained; without the living systems that make the ocean productive in the first place.

Building Institutional Stability in the Ocean Nation Clarifying Authority and Law

In every nation, stable institutions are the scaffolding that holds the economy together. The same is true in the ocean nation; except here, institutions are fragmented, jurisdiction is scattered, and enforcement often struggles to keep pace with exploitation.

The foundation of institutional stability is legal clarity. Frameworks like UNCLOS provide a starting point, but gaps remain; especially in areas beyond national jurisdiction (Kimball, 2022; Wright *et al.*, 2023) ^[19]. Transparency tools such as vessel tracking systems, catch documentation schemes, and publicly accessible databases are vital for restoring confidence and compliance (Allen & Craig, 2022) ^[1].

Enforcement and Accountability

Effective governance must also be inclusive. Small island states, indigenous peoples, and artisanal fishers are often underrepresented in marine decision-making; yet they experience the consequences most directly (Ban *et al.*, 2023) ^[2]. Expanding participation is both an ethical responsibility and a stabilizing force.

Inclusivity and Coordination

Finally, cooperation among institutions is essential. Maritime security, climate adaptation, and sustainable trade

require coordination. The ocean nation needs the marine equivalents of fiscal ministries, federal councils, and supreme courts. Without governance, stability is only an illusion.

Economic Resilience and Diversification

A resilient economy in the ocean nation must be able to adapt, recover, and transform in response to both environmental shocks and economic shifts. This requires a deliberate balance between sustaining core livelihoods and exploring new opportunities; much like a land-based country that reduces vulnerability by broadening its economic base. The following components form the pillars of that resilience.

Reducing Overreliance on Fragile Sectors

When a country depends too heavily on one or two sectors, its entire economy can collapse under pressure. In the ocean nation, overdependence on fisheries and tourism; industries that are both climate-sensitive and ecologically constrained; places entire regions at risk when disruptions strike, whether through fish stock collapse, pandemics, or extreme weather events (UNCTAD, 2023). Reducing this fragility means maintaining these sectors while buffering them with alternatives.

New Pathways and Value Chains

Diversification does not require abandoning traditional sectors; it means expanding the economic portfolio to include complementary and forward-looking activities. Marine biotechnology, sustainable aquaculture, and ocean-based renewable energy offer promising new value chains that reduce extractive pressure and create jobs. Strengthening small-scale fisheries and coastal tourism in parallel ensures that innovation doesn't come at the expense of cultural and economic continuity (Leal *et al.*, 2022) ^[20].

Trade, Access, and Fair Returns

The ocean nation's economy is deeply tied to international trade systems. Fish, shipping services, marine genetic resources, and even ocean data flow through markets shaped by foreign policy, safety standards, and evolving regulations. For the ocean nation to remain economically stable, it must navigate these external pressures effectively; securing equitable access to global markets while ensuring that trade agreements do not disadvantage vulnerable stakeholders.

Inclusive Blue Finance

Access to capital is not evenly distributed across the ocean economy. Coastal communities, women-led marine businesses, and artisanal harvesters often face barriers to investment, insurance, and credit. Inclusive blue finance; through instruments like blue bonds, grants, and tailored microfinance; ensures that financial tools empower all stakeholders, not just large-scale enterprises. It also strengthens local value retention and ensures that marine resources fuel development where it is needed most (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

Principles for Achieving Holistic Blue Economic Stability

Stability in the ocean nation is not a fixed state; it is an evolving balance built on values, governance norms, and strategic foresight. Like any sovereign state, the sea requires more than strong institutions or profitable industries; it needs a blueprint for long-term resilience that integrates environmental protection with economic inclusion. The following principles represent foundational strategies for achieving a stable and sustainable ocean economy.

Regenerative Capacity

True economic stability requires more than sustaining the present; it demands rebuilding the past. Regeneration means actively restoring degraded habitats, replenishing depleted fish stocks, and allowing damaged ecosystems to recover. This capacity is the marine equivalent of rebuilding infrastructure after a conflict or economic collapse; a way of ensuring that the core foundations of productivity remain intact and viable (Duarte *et al.*, 2020) ^[9].

Coherence Across Scales

Policies that conflict across levels of governance create instability. For example, local fishers may follow seasonal limits, only to see industrial fleets operating under more lenient national rules. Effective ocean governance must align local, national, and international efforts; creating legal and policy coherence that avoids loopholes, enforces standards consistently, and fosters cooperation rather than competition (Österblom *et al.*, 2023) ^[23].

Inclusivity

Stability is undermined when key voices are excluded. In the ocean nation, that includes coastal communities, small island states, indigenous groups, and even marine life whose survival underpins the entire system. An inclusive approach ensures that those most vulnerable to ecological or economic shocks are not only protected, but empowered to participate in shaping solutions (Ban *et al.*, 2023) ^[2].

Transparency and Accountability

Rules mean little without trust and enforcement. Transparent data systems, public monitoring tools, and independent verification all strengthen the ocean nation's ability to hold stakeholders accountable; from distant-water fleets to mining corporations. This principle is a safeguard against corruption, regulatory capture, and the slow erosion of public legitimacy (Allen & Craig, 2022) ^[1].

Adaptive Foresight

In a world of rapid environmental and technological change, stable economies must anticipate, not just react. Adaptive foresight means building flexibility into policies, investing in research and innovation, and preparing for future risks before they become crises. For the ocean nation, this might involve climate-proofing ports, developing ocean-based early warning systems, or shifting subsidies toward regenerative industries (IPCC, 2023).

While this article focuses on thematic principles, many align with existing international agreements and initiatives:

Principle	Corresponding Frameworks/Examples
Regenerative Capacity	SDG 14.2, BBNJ Agreement (Habitat Restoration Articles)

Coherence Across Scales	UN Ocean Decade Pillars; UNCLOS regional implementation
Inclusivity	Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (FAO)
Transparency and Accountability	Port State Measures Agreement; Global Fishing Watch
Adaptive Foresight	IPCC Working Group II reports; National Blue Economy Strategies

The Nation Beneath the Waves

The ocean nation has no flag, no anthem, and no single government. Yet it feeds, employs, shelters, and stabilizes more people than most sovereign states. Its citizens span from plankton to port workers; and its rights must extend to non-human life forms whose roles are essential, though silent.

To speak of blue economic stability is not to impose human bureaucracy on the sea. It is to recognize that the ocean already functions with the complexity and interdependence of a country; and that, like any country, it needs deliberate stewardship to remain whole. Unlike frameworks that describe the ocean as a global commons, a frontier of extraction, or a threatened ecological zone, the ocean-as-nation metaphor highlights structured interdependence, positioning the sea not merely as a shared resource, but as a geopolitical and institutional actor. While this analogy has limitations, the sea has no centralized authority or singular identity; it provides a grounded narrative for organizing the conversation around rights, responsibilities, and resilience.

If we continue to see the ocean as a frontier, it will continue to collapse under the weight of that ambition. But if we govern it like a nation; with rules, responsibilities, cooperation, and care; it might yet endure as one.

Conclusion

To imagine the ocean as a nation is not simply to draw a metaphor; it is to assert that this vast, life-giving system deserves the same coherence, attention, and investment we give to terrestrial economies. In this vision, stability becomes the sea’s form of sovereignty: the right not just to exist, but to endure.

Blue economic stability is not achieved through growth alone. It rests on the strength of marine ecosystems, the integrity of governance, the resilience of coastal livelihoods, and the fairness of benefit-sharing. It requires policies that do not merely regulate extraction, but regenerate life. It calls for cooperation that transcends maritime boundaries, and institutions that include the most affected in every decision that shapes their future.

No country achieves stability by accident. It is built; through planning, trust, protection, and renewal. The same must be true of the ocean. If we are to rely on it for food, transport, energy, and climate balance, we must also ensure that it can rely on us; not just as users, but as citizens.

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