

Briefing on the preparations for the Oceans Conference

**Statement of Mr. Miguel de Serpa Soares,
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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my capacity as Special Adviser on oceans and legal matters to the Co-Presidents of the Ocean Conference, it is my pleasure to make some introductory remarks in relation to the background note of the Secretary-General, prepared jointly by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and my Office on the basis of information received from organizations throughout the UN system. It is important to note that the background note, which was prepared pursuant to paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 70/303 on the modalities of the Conference, does not seek to be comprehensive in its treatment of the various issues, and should therefore be read in conjunction with other important reports and publications of the United Nations system, including previous reports of the Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea and on sustainable fisheries.

The note aims to inform the work of the preparatory meeting by highlighting the current status and trends in relation to the oceans; describing activities, challenges and opportunities for the implementation of Goal 14 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and providing information on existing partnerships and suggesting areas for new ones. As requested in resolution 70/303, the note sets out a proposal for themes of the partnership dialogues to be held at the Conference.

Rather than trying to summarize the content of the note, I would like to take this opportunity to draw out from this document some important aspects relating to the work before us regarding the implementation of Goal 14 and in preparation for the Conference to be held in June. The Director of the Sustainable Development Division of the Department for Social and Economic Affairs, Mr. Zhuwang Zhu, will present in further details the content of the Secretary-General background note.

At the outset I would like to recall the important contribution of the oceans and seas to sustainable development, which is increasingly recognized by Member States, including through their efforts to develop ocean-based economies. In the note, the important role of the oceans and their resources in support of human well-being and livelihoods is highlighted, including through the invaluable ecosystems services they provide, particularly with respect to the regulation of the earth's climate. However, what is also becoming increasingly clear is the vulnerability of the oceans, and their susceptibility to the detrimental impacts of human activities, both on land and at sea.

In this regard, the First Global Integrated Marine Assessment, completed in 2015, provides a stark picture of the current state of our oceans. Anthropogenic pressures on marine ecosystems, such as marine pollution, overexploitation of marine living resources, ocean acidification, coastal degradation and climate change are challenging the resilience of the oceans and their resources, as well as their continued ability to provide important ecosystems goods and services to humankind. The General Assembly has noted with concern the findings of the Assessment that the world's ocean is facing major pressures simultaneously with such great impacts that the limits of its carrying capacity are being, or, in some cases, have been reached, and that delays in implementing solutions to the problems that have already been identified as threatening to degrade

the world's oceans will lead, unnecessarily, to incurring greater environmental, social and economic costs.

These challenges are not new. Each year, they are at the very centre of the General Assembly's annual consideration of the item on oceans and the law of the sea and sustainable fisheries. They are also part of discussions held in more specialized fora around the world and reflected in the commitments agreed upon within the context of the outcomes of major Conferences on sustainable development, such as chapter 17 of Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, "The future we want", the SAMOA Pathway and most recently in Agenda 2030. I would also note that a sturdy international legal framework, centred around the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and related instruments, has been developed over the course of several decades and continues to be strengthened through the development of additional instruments. In that regard, I would recall that the General Assembly and the international community have recognized the contribution of UNCLOS to the sustainable development of the oceans and seas and reaffirmed that it sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out and is of strategic importance as the basis for national, regional and global action and cooperation in the marine sector.

Nevertheless, despite the considerable progress that has been made in the development of this legal and policy framework, the deterioration of the state of our oceans has continued, and some might say accelerated. The unavoidable conclusion is that the international community has thus far failed to meet some of its commitments, and there remain important challenges in the implementation of existing applicable instruments, including UNCLOS.

It is in this context that Goal 14 of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development provides a roadmap for action through its ten targets.

If we are to maximize our benefits from the oceans over the long-term and achieve sustainable development, our challenge will be to move from words to action. The “Ocean Conference” is set to play an important role in this regard. The Secretary-General’s background note highlights some of the opportunities and challenges for achieving each of the targets, and draws attention particularly to the need for capacity-building and enhanced financing as means of implementation. It also draws attention to the important role which can be played by partnerships, including multi-stakeholder partnerships.

In order to enhance the implementation of agreed commitments, including those contained in international legal instruments, three fundamental aspects can be highlighted:

- 1) awareness-raising and increasing scientific knowledge,
- 2) enhancing financing and developing capacity and
- 3) strengthening implementation and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Raising awareness of the state of the marine environment and of the existing commitments, as well as measures that can be taken to improve the state of the oceans, is an important step towards improving implementation. Increasing our knowledge of the oceans is one key action in that regard. As highlighted in the background note, although the oceans represent 70 per cent of the world’s surface, scientific knowledge regarding marine ecosystems, biodiversity, species and processes remains limited. In this regard, marine scientific research, as well as the exchange of information and data, can help build our knowledge of the oceans and seas and inform policy-making. Improving the science-policy interface to ensure that scientific knowledge can be

translated into effective policy-making for coherent management of the oceans is crucial.

The need for increased financing and enhanced capacity-building is also underscored in the background note. Developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed States, face considerable hurdles in the management of maritime spaces due to the lack of resources and capacity. Ocean-related initiatives in many cases suffer from a lack of sufficient or sustainable funding, including for capacity-building. In this regard, the background note highlights the need for innovative approaches and that the effective use of partnerships could help overcome some of these obstacles. It is also expected that the Ocean Conference can provide an opportunity for States and other stakeholders to make voluntary commitments in this regard.

Improving governance at the global, regional, national and local levels through improved implementation and enhanced cooperation and coordination also remains a challenge for the international community. This is despite the comprehensive international legal framework related to the oceans which includes a number of competent international organizations. It is well-recognized that the problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be considered as a whole through an integrated, interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach. In accordance with the Convention, and as reaffirmed by the General Assembly, there is a need to improve cooperation and coordination at the national, regional and global levels, to support and supplement the efforts of States in promoting the integrated management and sustainable development of the oceans and seas.

In this regard, the partnership dialogues constitute a vital component of the Oceans Conference, as they can serve to spur innovative thinking and actions to protect and preserve our oceans for

future generations and for sustainable development. Voluntary commitments and partnerships, including those to be announced in the context of the partnership dialogues, will be essential towards addressing the challenges in the achievement of Goal 14. The members of UN-Oceans have been actively engaged in preparations for the dialogues, including through thematic Informal Preparatory Working Groups under the Advisory Group to the Co-hosts of the Conference. In this regard, I would like to draw your attention to the seven themes proposed by the Secretary-General for the partnership dialogues, which will be considered at the preparatory meeting on 15 and 16 February 2017.

Going forward, it will also be important to bear in mind that the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda are integrated and indivisible, and that our work must also be seen in its broader context. The background note underscores that given the inter-relationship between the various targets under Goal 14, results or lack thereof under one target will necessarily impact efforts to achieve other targets. Similarly achieving Goal 14 will depend on progress under other Goals of the 2030 Agenda relating for example, to food security and combatting climate change and its impacts.

Our oceans are our future. Let it also be our children's future, as well as their children's future. The Ocean Conference is our opportunity to act now before the damage to the oceans and seas becomes irreversible.

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I would like to wish you success in your preparations for this important Conference.