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Africa's maritime security community can use data to set the record straight

Background

African countries are coming together to improve maritime security around the continent, though one would never know if from reading the news. Commentators identify the Gulf of Guinea as the world's [most dangerous](#) body of water and Somalia's reputation for piracy persists, although it has been [extremely uncommon](#) off the coast of East Africa since its peak around 2010. Images of [desperate migrants](#) define maritime security off northern Africa, while southern port cities like Durban and Cape Town are now known as [major shipping hubs](#) in global black markets for drugs, wildlife products, and other contraband. These threats are real, but this narrative also obscures the gains being made by Africa's maritime enforcement authorities.

Discussion

Africa's progress should be publicized and this is not only about earning good press. When land-focused government agencies, politicians, the international community, and the politically active public fail to appreciate progress being made against security threats offshore, this can reinforce unfair perceptions of government ineffectiveness, reduce incentives for further investment in good maritime governance, and deny the maritime community valuable opportunities to learn lessons and draw best practices from successful enforcement efforts. Communicating incremental progress toward good maritime governance and maritime security could generate more political will for investing in Africa's maritime domain, both by African governments and the broader international community. Changing perceptions could also encourage private investment in offshore and coastal industries, which would boost the [African Blue Economy](#). This, in turn, would accelerate the progress being made against problems like illicit trade and piracy and armed robbery, which are largely driven by coastal poverty.

So what specific steps can the African maritime security community take to draw more attention to its victories and attract more political and financial support for its efforts? The African maritime security community can push back against the power of negative news by adopting strategies from other international campaigns. Specifically, they can clearly measure goals, regularly report on the progress measured, and then use data to maintain a more productive public narrative and counter the negative perceptions caused by newsworthy setbacks. This could generate more public and political support for maritime security investments, which could also be monitored and allocated depending on performance against these targets.

Good maritime governance is strikingly similar to other international development campaigns. Take, for example, the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) initiative finalized by the United Nations in 2015. This set of 17 goals for 2030 includes many objectives that are, in many ways, far more complicated and ambitious than good maritime governance around the African continent. [SDG1](#) aims for no less than “*an end to poverty in all its forms everywhere.*” Lofty goals welcome [cynicism and skepticism](#), especially when a [decades-long trend](#) of declining poverty rates across the world is much [less likely to gain media attention](#) than a local famine or displacement causing a natural disaster. The SDG framework has a [very intentional strategy](#) for keeping the public focused on progress.

The United Nations countered critique by establishing [clear and measurable targets](#) for each goal, creating incremental benchmarks based on these targets, and publicizing general trends. These data provide valuable context that can balance negative news. SDG1, for example, has explicit targets set for government spending on social welfare and percentages of the population subsisting on a very specific income. More recently, we have seen specific indicator-linked statistics attract more attention than the broader goals they aim to promote. For example, [SDG14](#) calls on states to “*conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.*” This rhetoric has been echoed in numerous international conferences, but the most concrete steps taken toward the goal have aimed squarely at [target 14.5](#), which requires states to formally establish marine protected areas covering no less than 10% of their marine areas. A growing [civil society community](#) has arisen around measuring this specific goal. The most recent annual Our Ocean Conference made recognition of new protected areas a major priority and, not coincidentally, raised more than [\\$63 billion](#) in financial commitments toward ocean protection. This turns the attention to applying data-driven reporting to African maritime security.

Vast maritime spaces, limited patrol assets, and absent satellite and remote-sensing technology over large parts of the ocean make data collection at sea extremely difficult. However, the maritime community has already seen how rigorous and regular reporting can bolster efforts to improve maritime governance. International counter-piracy efforts demonstrate how the same principles of measurement and transparent reporting can accelerate maritime security initiatives. Piracy, like all crimes at sea, can evade accurate reporting. Some seafarers are discouraged from reporting suspicious incidents. Attacks against small vessels are much less likely to be reported than those against the large vessels engaged in transoceanic global trade. This has not stopped several international and non-governmental organizations from doing the tedious work of creating thorough piracy [databases](#) that can be used to analyze trends, gain media attention, and catalyze multilateral counter-piracy partnerships. Piracy remains a challenge in a few regions, but the information provided by piracy trend analyses has undoubtedly contributed to declines in piracy in former hotspots like the Western Indian Ocean and parts of Southeast Asia.

As a next step, the maritime community should strive to replicate success by establishing data-informed benchmarks for other threats to maritime security. One new product, the [Stable Seas Maritime Security Index](#), provides a useful template for amalgamating metrics for these unobserved illicit activities. With the assistance of regional partners like the SIGLA Institute at Stellenbosch University, Stable Seas uses dozens of data sources and surveys of international civilian and military officials to create yearly data for 70 countries, including every coastal country in Africa, across nine maritime security issues: piracy and armed robbery at sea, illicit trades, maritime mixed migration, maritime enforcement capacity, rule of law, international cooperation, fisheries, blue economy, and coastal welfare. These issues mirror the goals stated in the [Lomé Charter](#) and Africa’s regional maritime security strategies. Like the targets and indicators of the SDGs, these metrics offer an objective way of assessing long-term incremental progress toward mitigating grand, but surmountable challenges.

There are, of course, valid concerns about measurements such as “[governing to indicators](#),” [overlooking complexity](#), and [biasing policy](#) toward outcomes that are easier to measure. These critiques have been applied fairly by MDG

and SDG critics who worry that policy-makers are concerned more about metrics than missions. Creating marine protected areas is important, but it does not encompass all that must be done to reach SDG14. The African maritime security community can learn from these processes and improve upon them by identifying its own benchmarks through an inclusive process that welcomes military leaders, civil society, the private sector, and the scientific community. Measurable targets must not be imposed on the maritime sector. Rather, the best way to avoid setting bad targets is to prioritize inclusive discussions around what measurable goals must be accomplished by whom and before when. This will generate better buy-in from the broader maritime security community and increase the chances that statistical targets are aligned with the underlying goals.

Concluding remarks

Though African countries face persistent maritime security challenges, they also have strong multilateral institutions that were created for the purpose of coordinating effective responses. These agreements, which include the [Yaoundé Code of Conduct](#) (West and Central Africa/Gulf of Guinea) and the [Djibouti Code of Conduct](#) (Western Indian Ocean) are broad and ambitious, but no more so than other international development initiatives. Lessons from these other initiatives suggest these regional maritime security strategies could more effectively control the narrative and communicate their victories by adopting a rigorous and regular way for measuring progress against the problems they were created to address. Only by providing public-facing metrics for these goals can these institutions counter the occasional bad news fueled by headline-generating setbacks. As importantly, regular data will show governments and international donors the efficacy of greater investment in maritime enforcement, offer maritime authorities a novel way of understanding which strategies are working and how unsuccessful strategies might be revised to provide strong maritime governance more efficiently.

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