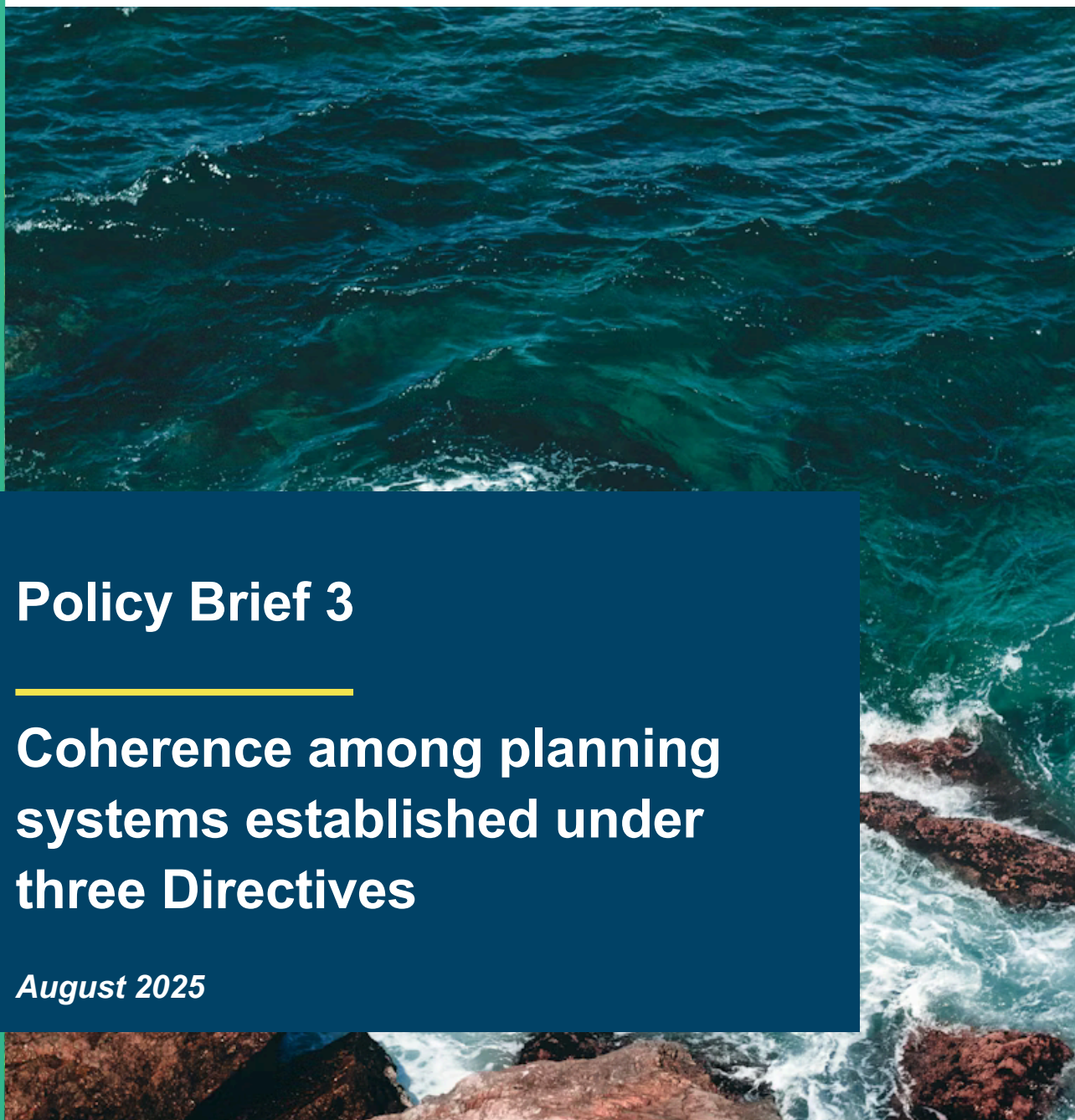# CrossGov

Coherent & Cross-compliant Ocean Governance for Delivering the EU Green Deal for European Seas

Policy Brief 3

Coherence among planning systems established under three Directives

August 2025

Coherence among planning systems established under three directives: the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), and the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD)

The European Union's WFD, MSFD, and MSPD have distinct yet interconnected objectives aimed at protecting and sustainably managing Europe's water resources, as well as its freshwater and marine environments (Box 1).

Which synergies, but also conflicts, appear in the operational implementation of these directives?

This question was explored through four case studies (see Box 2). Findings highlight mechanisms and practices applied by national and local authorities that contribute to policy coherence across the planning systems associated with these directives (horizontal coherence).

The analysis demonstrates that strengthening horizontal coherence would also support the achievement of the of the European Green Deal (EGD) objectives on zero pollution and marine biodiversity (see Box 3).

Box 1: The WFD, MSFD, MSFD were designed to provide a structure for integrating diverse sectoral policies in a holistic and coordinated way, rather than directly regulating specific sectors covered by other legislation (e.g., fisheries -Common Fisheries Policy, agriculture - Common Agriculture Policy).

At the national and local level, instruments such as River Basin Management Plans (RBMP), Marine Strategies (MaS), and Maritime Spatial Plans (MSP) -collectively referred to in this publication as the *planning systems*, help operationalize these directives by setting objectives and guiding national strategies, programmes of action, and monitoring programs. Complementary EU and national legislation, such as the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive, and the Nitrates Directive, also contribute by addressing specific pressures on inland and marine waters through targeted measures for pollution control, water quality, and risk management.

This policy brief offers a selection of mechanisms and practices applied by national and local authorities to advance policy coherence across the three planning systems. It also provides an overview of identified areas of policy incoherence and corresponding co-created solutions or transferable lessons from the case studies.

The Horizon Europe CrossGov project aims at enhancing knowledge on how coherence and cross-compliance of European marine-related policies affect the ability to realize the EGD objectives related to the protection of marine biodiversity, climate resilience, and zero pollution.

Policy coherence refers to how well different policies work together. When this occurs within the same level of governance, it is called *Horizontal coherence*. When it occurs across different levels of governance, it is referred to as V*ertical coherence*.

Coherence can be defined as the extent to which policies strengthen each other by promoting synergies or reducing conflicts between objectives and measures, both in design and during implementation. In policy landscapes with low coherence, the achievement of multiple objectives may be difficult, and trade-offs often need to be made.

Provided that there is a high level of coherence, policies can also positively reinforce one another by creating synergies that facilitate achieving multiple objectives. At a minimum though, a policy should not hinder progress towards achieving other policies' objectives and targets

See further at the [Handbook on Policy Coherence](#) (Platjouw et al., 2025)

Box 2: A case study approach was used to examine the practical realities of implementing multiple EU policies simultaneously, in particular, the planning systems established under the WFD, the MSFD, and the MSPD.

Two aspects were investigated: (i) The coherence among these three planning systems in governing and protecting the marine environment. (ii) Whether the planning processes associated with these directives operate in cross-compliance to support the EGD objectives on zero pollution and marine biodiversity (Box 3).

The analysis is based on four case studies located in the Finnish Archipelago, the North Adriatic Sea, the French Mediterranean Sea, and the Oslofjord.

Two analytical frameworks guided the research: the Policy Coherence Framework (Box 4) and the Science-Policy-Society Interface assessment framework (Box 5).

Detailed information can be consulted in Ramírez-Monsalve et al., (2025)

Box 3: The European Green Deal (EGD) is a comprehensive set of policy initiatives launched by the European Commission in December 2019 to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. To achieve this, the EU is focusing on reducing GHG emissions, tackling biodiversity loss, mitigating pollution, increasing the use of renewable energy, driving a shift to sustainable mobility and food systems, and promoting a circular economy.

Addressing pollution and marine biodiversity loss represent two strategic focus areas examined within the CrossGov project. The following outlines key elements associated with each.

Zero Pollution:

➢ Ambition: Achieve a **toxic-free environment** by reducing pollution from all sources, including air, water, and soil.

➢ This ambition is operationalized primarily through the EU Action Plan: Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water, and Soil; other strategies are of support, including the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the 2030 Climate Target Plan, the EU Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, and the Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy.

➢ Among the elements that specifically relate to the **marine environment** are: reduce chemical and nutrient run-off from agriculture and industry that affect coastal and marine waters, and support the transition to a circular economy to prevent plastics and other waste from entering marine ecosystems.

Marine Biodiversity:

➢ By 2030, 30% of EU seas must be designated as protected areas, with **10% under strict protection (no extractive or industrial activities permitted)**

➢ Legally binding targets to restore **20% of degraded marine ecosystems** (e.g., seagrass meadows, oyster beds) by 2030 and all ecosystems by 2050.

➢ Biodiversity considerations must be integrated into all EU policies, including fisheries, energy (e.g., offshore wind), and climate adaptation.

More information on the CrossGov's mapping exercise of the EGD's ocean-related objectives and targets, and the results from stakeholder interviews to understand the complexities of navigating diverse policies can be consulted in, see Boteler et al., (2023) and Boteler et al., (2024)

Advancing policy coherence across the three planning systems

Findings from the case studies illustrate mechanisms and practices applied by national and local authorities that contribute to policy coherence across the three planning systems.

Among these mechanisms and practices, structured according to the coherence attributes and explanatory factors of the policy coherence assessment framework (Box 4) are:

- **Policy objectives** (coherence attribute). For example, mandatory alignment between MSFD measures and RBMP objectives; linking RBMP and MaS to address marine nutrient reduction; and integrating WFD and MSFD objectives within the MSP framework.
- **Policy Measures** (coherence attribute). For example, a unified strategic framework aligning MSFD and MSP requirements; coordinated monitoring activities across WFD, MSFD, and MSP; measures designed with consideration for environmental and economic interactions; coordination between MSP and terrestrial planning instruments; and a cross-sectoral action plan layered into existing planning instruments.
- **Governmental organizational structures** (explanatory factor). For example, the presence of coordinating agencies facilitating integration of MSFD, WFD, and MSP governance; and the availability of multidisciplinary expertise in both freshwater and marine domains among civil servants in freshwater agencies.
- **Science-policy-society interfaces** (explanatory factor). For example, environmental agencies collaborating with universities and research institutions not only as knowledge providers and policy advisors, but also as knowledge brokers and boundary organizations; and the presence of a consultative council that ensures representation across sectors and governance levels.
- Regarding **stakeholder engagement mechanisms** (explanatory factor) no positive learning experiences were identified in the case studies. Stakeholder involvement related to the WFD, MSFD, and MSP continues to occur in silos, with each policy maintaining separate engagement processes. Public consultations are conducted independently for each policy and are sometimes criticised for lacking sufficient participatory depth

More detailed information can be seen in Table 1.

Box 4: The Policy Coherence Framework allows to understand where in the policy cycle (design and/or implementation) or at which governance level (EU, national, sub-national) problems or challenges of coherence emerge.

This methodological approach is based on two components:
- **Coherence attributes** (policy objectives and policy measures) assessing the level of policy coherence, and
- **Explanatory factors** (governmental organizational structures, science- policy-society interfaces, and stakeholder involvement) understanding the reasons for policy (in)coherence
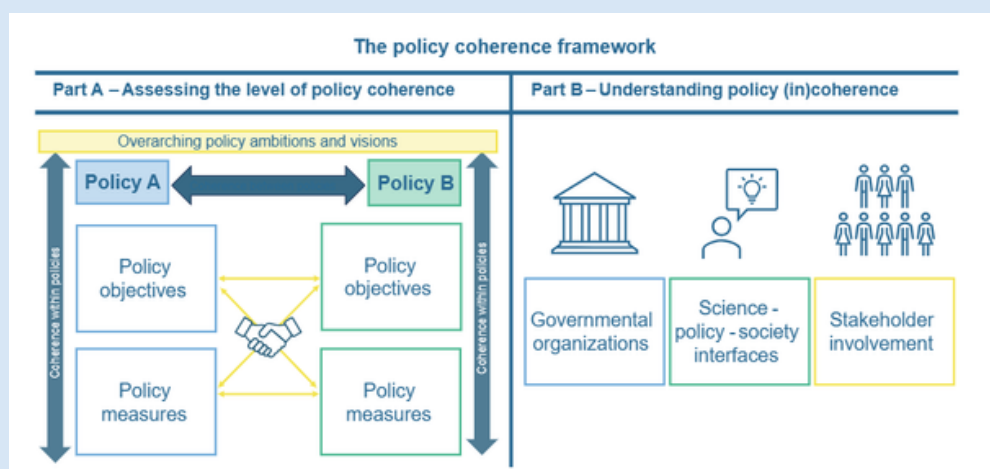

Figure 1: The CrossGov policy coherence framework

Further information on the evaluation framework can be found in the Handbook on Policy Coherence (Platjouw et al., 2025)

Table 1: A selection of aspects and mechanisms applied by national and local authorities to advance policy coherence across the three planning systems and structured according to the coherence attributes and explanatory variables of the policy coherence assessment framework.

Policy objectives: Cross-referencing each other; mutually supportive or in potential conflict			
North Adriatic	**French Med**	**Finnish Arch**	**Oslofjord**
Complementarity WFD and MSFD objectives. Alignment of WFD and MSFD Objectives: mainly regarding biodiversity, Integration of WFD and MSFD objectives within the MSP framework.	Mandatory alignment between the Façade strategic Document (MSFD+MSPD) measures and the SDAGE (RBMP) objectives.	Linking RBMP and MaS to address marine nutrient reduction.	Synergistic objectives in the RBMPs and IOMP (MSFD*).

| Policy measures: Strategic tools or mechanisms used to achieve policy objectives			
North Adriatic	**French Med**	**Finnish Arch**	**Oslofjord**
	A single strategic framework aligning the requirements of MSFD and MSP.	WFD and MSFD transposed into Finnish legislation in the same act.	
Coordination of WFD, MSFD and MSP monitoring activities.	Coordinated WFD and MSFD monitoring.	Integrated coastal and marine monitoring. Aligned coastal-marine eutrophication indicators and objectives.	
	Measures defined taking into consideration environmental and economic interactions.		The Oslofjord Plan as a positive example of institutional layering, that has increased the coherence across existing planning instruments and positively contributes to the alignment of objectives and instruments across sectors.
Coordination of the Adriatic MSP with terrestrial planning instruments.			

Governmental organizational structures:
Set the framework for policy formulation and implementation (relevant organizations, their roles, responsibilities, and coordination between them)

North Adriatic	French Med	Finnish Arch	Oslofjord
Coordinating agencies (e.g. ISPRA, ARPAs) for integrating MSFD, WFD, and MSP governance.	Consultative governance body of the French Mediterranean coast to support synergies in the operational implementation of the WFD, the MSFD, and the	ELY Centres: central role in freshwater management (RBMP) and key regional actor in marine strategy implementation (MaS).	National coordination for WFD and IOMP (MSFD*) under the responsibility of the same governmental organization.
	Multidisciplinary expertise in freshwater and marine domains among Water Agencies (RBMP) civil servants.		

Science-policy-society interfaces:
Social processes that outline how knowledge is produced, transferred, and utilized in decision-making

North Adriatic	French Med	Finnish Arch	Oslofjord
Environmental agencies (e.g. ARPA and ISPRA), together with universities and research institutions, acting not only as knowledge providers and policy advisors, but also as knowledge brokers and boundary organizations.			The Oslojord council: ensuring representation among sectors and governance levels, and increasing societal awareness (understanding that action across the entire catchment is needed to restore the fjord).

Sustainably managing Europe's water resources

Protecting freshwater and marine environment
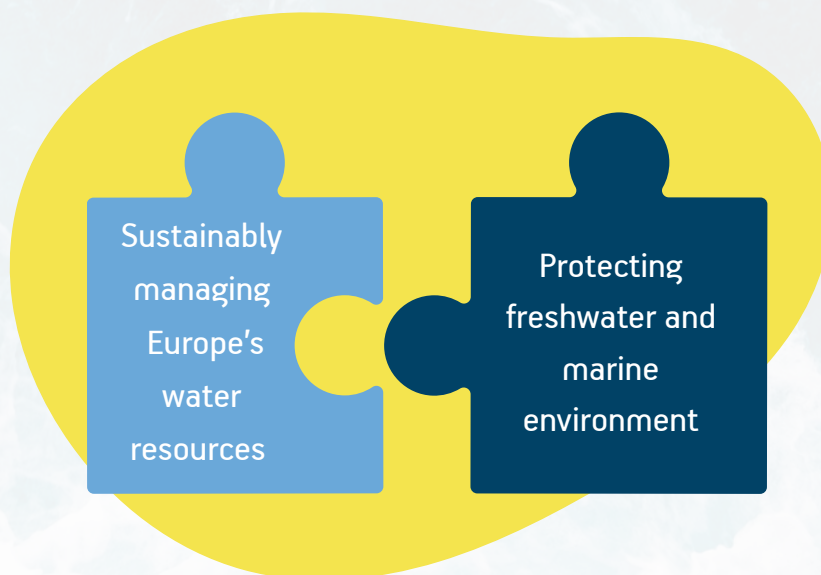
Box 5: The Science-Policy-Society Interface Assessment Framework

Science-policy-society interfaces (SPSI) are social processes which encompass relations between several actors in the policy process and which allow for exchanges, co-evolution, and joint construction of knowledge with the aim of enriching decision-making.

The framework allows identifying gaps and opportunities to strengthen the connection between different types of knowledge, policymaking, and societal needs through its six building blocks (Figure 3).

The SPSI framework is seen as the further elaboration of one of the explanatory variables of the Policy Coherence Framework; something that can help explain the lack of coherence. Both frameworks (the SPSI and the Coherence framework) have been aligned: in the Coherence framework, the guiding questions for the SPSI explanatory variable are the main questions of each building blocks in the SPSI framework.

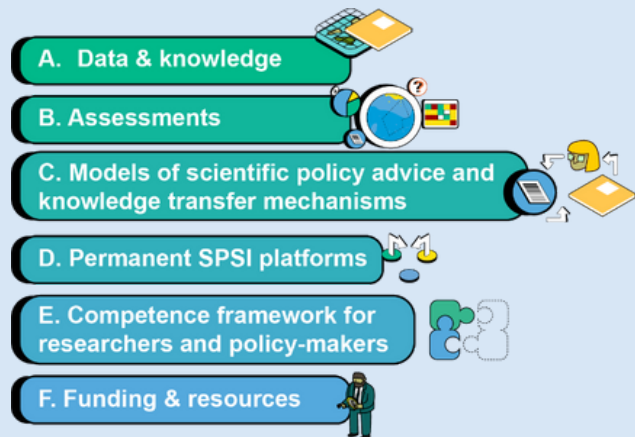For further information on the evaluation framework please consult the Blueprint for SPS (Capurso et al., 2025)

Figure *3*: Building Blocks of CrossGov's SPSI assessment framework

Potential ways to improve coherence

Findings from our case studies highlight areas in need of improvement. For each of these areas, we present either suggestions that emerged during co-creation processes, and/or opportunities for lesson extraction, particularly where operational solutions already exist within one of the case studies. These insights may also resonate with other EU contexts seeking to strengthen integrated marine and water governance in support of EGD goals

Exploit the role of MSP in the integration of environmental objectives into spatial decision-making for marine areas

Situation:	The MSP, although mentioning support for the Good Environmental Status (GES) objectives, does not elaborate on specific measures or collaborative mechanisms with MaS for achieving GES in the marine environment. (Finnish Archipelago case study).
Potential for lesson extraction:	The guidelines for establishing common principles for MSP in Italy states that, in the **process of defining strategic objectives for MSP, coherence with the environmental objectives set out by the MSFD must be ensured**. Among the strategic objectives of the MSP framework related to environmental protection, Objective OS_N|03 explicitly mandates the integration of spatially relevant measures from the MSFD's Programmes of Measures into maritime planning measures (North Adriatic case study).

Strengthen the explicit links from the RBMP to MSP

Situation:	The RBMP plans do not explicitly consider or aim at contributing to the MSP objectives or measures. MSP objectives (such as the planning of areas suitable for aquaculture activities, for the protection of coastal ecosystems, and for the support to blue economy sectors) could be compromised if they are not supported by a robust WFD basin plan (North Adriatic case study).
Suggestion:	Improved alignment of objectives and measures between the RBMP and the MSP would help ensure that land-based actions under RBMP would positively impact the marine environment and the maritime uses planned under MSP.
Suggestion:	Integrate land-based nutrient load data into spatial allocation within the MSP processes. While the MSP may acknowledge the importance of nutrient reduction for marine environmental objectives, the direct integration of land-based nutrient load data into site selection or spatial allocation decisions is generally lacking.

Strengthen local technical competence and implementation capacity

Situation:	Local authorities frequently face implementation challenges due to resource constraints, particularly limited human capacity within supporting institutions. Although these institutions provide support services, there are not enough human resources to respond to all requests. As a result, local authorities sometimes abandon efforts to develop a more integrated management plan that could cover all requirements, instead prioritizing solutions that are more feasible within their limited resources and guidance.
Suggestion:	Strengthening collaboration with local authorities, building local capacity through targeted training and knowledge-sharing, optimizing internal workflows, streamlining administrative procedures for project approval and funding, and forming public-private partnerships to supplement the workforce, are some of the actions that can address insufficient staffing levels.
Suggestion:	A continuous system of funding is needed to ensure stable human resources and to fund research and capacity building. Ad hoc projects and initiatives are not enough to offer capacity-building activities and trainings to improve the competence framework of national and local authorities, but also more long-term institutional funds.

Strengthen the science-policy interactions between terrestrial, coastal and marine water governance

Situation:	Even when responsibilities for the WFD and MSFD are housed within the same ministry, intra-organizational collaboration often remains weak, with a sharp divide between the two planning processes and limited integration of marine expertise into water governance, and vice versa.
Potential for lesson extraction:	Each water agency (in charge of RBMP) has a service or an expert dedicated to marine coastal areas (2-3 person). One point underlined by many experts in France is that the Water Agency from the Mediterranean coast has achieved positive impacts and projects on the Mediterranean Sea, partly because it has created a marine service and it has integrated deeply qualified marine environment experts into its teams, providing strategic advice and active involvement. Besides, the involvement of Water Agency supports the land-to-sea continuum (French Mediterranean case).
Potential for lesson extraction:	A French-water **coastal committee** has been created for coastal municipalities to support the specific implementation of freshwater measures impacting the marine environment (French Mediterranean case).

Progressively develop an integrated land-sea stakeholder engagement process

Situation:	Stakeholder involvement related to the WFD, MSFD, and MSP has largely occurred in silos, with each policy operating its own engagement processes. Public consultations are managed separately for each policy and are sometimes criticised for not being sufficiently participatory. In addition, decisions are often made at a national scale with few considerations of local specificities and obligations, which can create frustration and incoherence with local stakes (e.g. Lack of clear understanding of mandates, insufficient capacity to implement top-down approaches, lag in policy implementation to align local level practices with national level priorities).
Suggestion:	**Coordinate consultation processes across different policies in a phased manner** to establish an integrated stakeholder engagement framework. This will help support more holistic sea management i.e. land-sea interaction, and "source to sea" approach (see example ideas below).
Suggestion:	**Structured feedback channels, institutionalized mechanisms that systematically collect, process, and incorporate local input**. For example, a regional maritime council with a formal process for reporting back to stakeholders on how their input shaped the final plan, digital platforms for submitting local concerns, and a reduction of administrative burden of policy and reporting for local stakeholders. These mechanisms would allow for continuous input, review, and adjustment of plans based on stakeholder feedback and new information. In addition, managers and people involved in the marine environments at the local level have emphasized the importance of strong political support, sufficient time, and **open dialogue with civil society** and businesses to ensure that the measures are accepted.
Suggestion:	**Stakeholder engagement can be deepened by involving more key NGOs**. These organizations are often engaged in the MSFD and MSPD program of measure, bringing strong scientific expertise and maintaining good relationships with local populations. The role of key NGOs has been highlighted as essential in bridging the gap between state services which are often met with public skepticism, and local economic actors. NGOs also play a crucial role in raising awareness on the importance of environmental regulations.
Potential for lesson extraction:	Establishment of **stable multi-actor platforms** and **structured consultation mechanisms** across policies and across actors. This is something that the "*Report: operational proposal for the start of the implementation and monitoring phase of the plans*" (2024) supports as one on the actions to prioritise, by envisaging hearings held by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport on topics relevant to MSP, involving public administrations, associations and sector operators, research institutions and universities, and civil society organizations (North Adriatic case study).

Situation:	Despite the existence of high-level coordination mechanisms where synergies between MSFD, WFD, and MSP are enabled, there is the need for further strengthening the cross-policy integration at all governance levels.
Suggestion:	**Strengthening the role of one existing local agency** to act as a central coordinating body, addressing the overlapping responsibilities and coordination challenges between institutions. This could be complemented by measures such as harmonizing reporting requirements and establishing a unified environmental monitoring platform to improve data integration. In addition, clarifying the distribution of funding responsibilities among competent authorities would enable a single point of contact to address sectoral policy issues, such as environmentally harmful subsidies.
Potential for lesson extraction:	Creation of technical working groups: e.g. one on land-sea interactions (bringing together representatives of the processes under MSP – WFD – Floods Directive – Port development – Spatial and landscape planning); another one on MSP – MSFD – Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (Protected Areas and Restoration) – Fisheries Policies (North Adriatic case study).
Potential for lesson extraction:	To support synergies in the operational implementation of the WFD, the MSFD, and the MSPD, as well as to address broader Mediterranean maritime issues, France has established the Maritime Façade Council CMF. This consultative body brings together over 50 different actors including state representatives, state services at sea and inland, freshwater representatives, university experts, work union representatives, and NGOs. The CMF meets twice a year to discuss and provide recommendations on strategic orientations for the Mediterranean Sea, while more targeted work is undertaken by specialized technical committees focusing on topics such as MPAs, marine renewable energy, and maritime employment (French Mediterranean case study).
Potential for lesson extraction:	Oslofjord plan, a positive example of institutional layering, that has increased the coherence across existing planning instruments and positively contributes to the alignment of objectives and instruments across sectors. The plan uniquely integrates policy objectives and instruments across multiple sectors, including land use, agriculture, sewage, fisheries, spatial management, invasive species control, heritage, and climate initiatives.

Concluding remarks

These findings are timely, as the European Ocean Pact will, among other goals, provide a strategic framework to harmonize and integrate various ocean-related policies and activities. The path towards effectively governing European seas requires coherent policy actions that account for cross-compliant interactions across sectors, interests, and governance levels.

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