Statement on behalf of the AU-PG on the occasion of the launch of

_The Decade of Africa’s Seas and Oceans_

Saturday July 25th

Your Excellency, Mrs. Fatima Haram Acyl,
Deputy Chairperson of the Africa Union Commission;
Distinguished representatives of AU member states and other diplomatic missions;

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. Let me first of all thank you for this invitation to make a statement on behalf of the AU-Partner Group, which is co-chaired by the representatives of Japan and Sweden.

It is a great honor – and also a pleasure – to be here today, on the occasion of the launch of the Decade of African Seas and Oceans, as one of many activities related to the new African Integrated Maritime Strategy for the period up to year 2050.

Our most sincere congratulations to the African Union, the special task force and other actors involved for having achieved this comprehensive framework for the protection and sustainable use of the African Maritime Domain for the purpose of promoting inclusive human development.
2. Without the seas and the oceans, we humans would probably not exist. The oceans have played a key role for the creation of the kind of climate on Earth which has enabled us to evolve and develop. The oceans also constitute a crucial mechanism for regulating and maintaining the hydrological cycle. The oceans hold 97% of the total water on the planet and they are the source of 86% of global evaporation. Hence, they are the rain – without which our agriculture and our cities would not exist.

The oceans are also the waterways of the globe, connecting the different continents and islands of our planet. Without the oceans, our contact with other regions, our knowledge about other continents and our interconnectedness would have been much more cumbersome. And shipping still constitutes, by far, our most important mode of transport for commodities in the world, maintaining us connected and facilitating growth and development linked to international trade.

Apart from these awesome qualities, the oceans also represent an enormous wealth in terms of different kinds of resources; resources which we recently have learned must be governed and managed in a sustainable and responsible way. In fact there is only one global ocean, which connects us all and gives us life. It is in that global ocean where Africa now is setting out to systematically develop efforts for harnessing a Blue Economy, to the benefit of its people.

3. Africa’s Marine Domain is truly impressive in terms both of its beauty and its richness. Africa’s Marine Domain represents enormous wealth in terms of renewable living resources for food security, nutrients and raw material for medicine. The fisheries sector provides livelihoods, employment and income – not least for millions of people living in coastal communities. Winds, waves and tidal currents represent huge potential sources of renewable energy. The coasts and the seas are attractive environments for tourism and Africa’s trade is transported by sea. The ocean floor has vast resources of oil and gas, as well as minerals. Finally, the coastline is a habitat for a wide range of human settlements and provides cultural identity.
While the coastal and marine environment still represents a vast and untapped potential for economic growth and poverty reduction, it should also be admitted that this potential is under threat. One major challenge in this context is pollution from gas and oil exploitation, from maritime transport and from coastal mining and other land-based activities. For fisheries, one of the main issues is resource governance, where deficiencies easily lead to overfishing, which hit small-scale fisheries and women the hardest. Finally, climate change and its consequences for the ocean add new problems to already existing challenges.

4. For all these reasons, we applaud and welcome the comprehensive framework constituted by the AIM, Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy, which sets out to address the threats and to promote a more systematic and sustainable use of the maritime resources, embarking upon the road towards a Blue Economy.

The concept of Blue Economy has attracted considerable interest during the last few years but there is still no common definition of what it entails. Some interpret it as a parallel to the concept of Green Economy – with a focus on environmentally sustainable and inclusive development, while others have understood the term as referring to business as usual – but in the oceans.

In this context, we welcome your new marine strategy where the Blue economy is defined as an approach which “improves the well-being of African citizen while significantly reducing marine environmental risks as well as ecological and biodiversity deficiencies”.

In order to make this vision come true, we are tasked by our commitment to Nature and to our fellow citizen to think twice on what tools to apply in order to get the analysis and the incentive structure right. While, for example, oil exploitation and fish production easily can be attributed values in monetary terms, there are also intangible values more difficult to monetize – such as the ones stemming from marine ecosystem services.
Moreover, we also need to ensure the social sustainability and the inclusiveness of the Blue Economy. Hence, it will be crucial to balance different interests in the use of the ocean, recognising that these interests have different weights and voices. We need to ensure that weaker sectors, such as small-scale fisheries, are given fair opportunities and a voice in the allocation of space and access rights. If these aspects are not taken properly into account, the production is not likely to be durable and may even inflict great harm, both environmentally and socially.

5. This also happens in the developed world, in the countries represented by the AU Partner Group. Hopefully, our dearly-bought lessons can serve as an incentive for prevention and make other countries and continents avoid the worst bumps in the road. One such example – seemingly trivial but in reality with far-reaching and serious consequences – is the over-fishing of the cod.

When I grew up in the northern part of Europe some decades ago, cod was not only tasty but supply was also plentiful and its price was attractive. Many different cod-based dishes were standard among tens of millions of families in Canada, the United States and the Nordic countries, to name a few.

True, fishermen and scientists knew that catches were going down – but this was compensated for by new techniques and new ships. Soon, however, the cod was almost gone and in 1992 the Canadian Federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans astutely declared a moratorium in the Great Banks of Newfoundland, where cod fishery for the past 500 years had shaped the lives and communities of Canada’s eastern coast. Over 35,000 fishers and plant workers from 400 coastal communities became unemployed.

During that same point in time a very similar development took place also in the Baltic Sea, close to the Nordic countries and other EU member states. Cod fishing soon became tightly regulated; the delicious cod dishes disappeared from the weekly menu and an enormous amount of jobs were lost. Not until recently, some 15 years later, have we seen the first signs of recovery in the fish stock in these parts of the Atlantic.
In order to avoid this kind of damage – which sometimes may be self-reinforcing and difficult to detain and reverse – improved governance mechanisms are urgently needed, in Africa as well as elsewhere. Important supporting tools for sustainable and equitable governance system are marine spatial planning, integrated coastal zone management and eco-system based management for fisheries. Tools which are already mentioned and given a role in your new strategy for the African Marine Domain.

6. Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy is a very timely document also in relation to the forthcoming decision later this year on the Sustainable Development Goals for the period 2016 and onwards. In the current proposal, Goal No. 14 is about conserving and using the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, and includes the reduction of marine pollution, increasing the resilience of ecosystems and restoring fish stocks. Your Strategy and its Plan of Action for Operationalization, will be an important tool for reaching this new international Sustainable Development Goal. The seas are many, but there is only one global ocean.

7. Let me finally, on behalf of the AU Partner Group, once more congratulate you for the timely publication and encouraging contents of the African Maritime Strategy. Within the Partner Group we are looking forward to discuss with you how our resources – in terms of institutions, know-how, funding and some dearly-bought lessons – may best be utilized to support the implementation of your strategy for a Blue economy which can generate sustainable and equitable economic growth, improving the well-being of African citizen and reducing marine environmental risks.

THANK YOU
MERCI
OBRIGADO