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West Africa is mobilising to protect the marine environment

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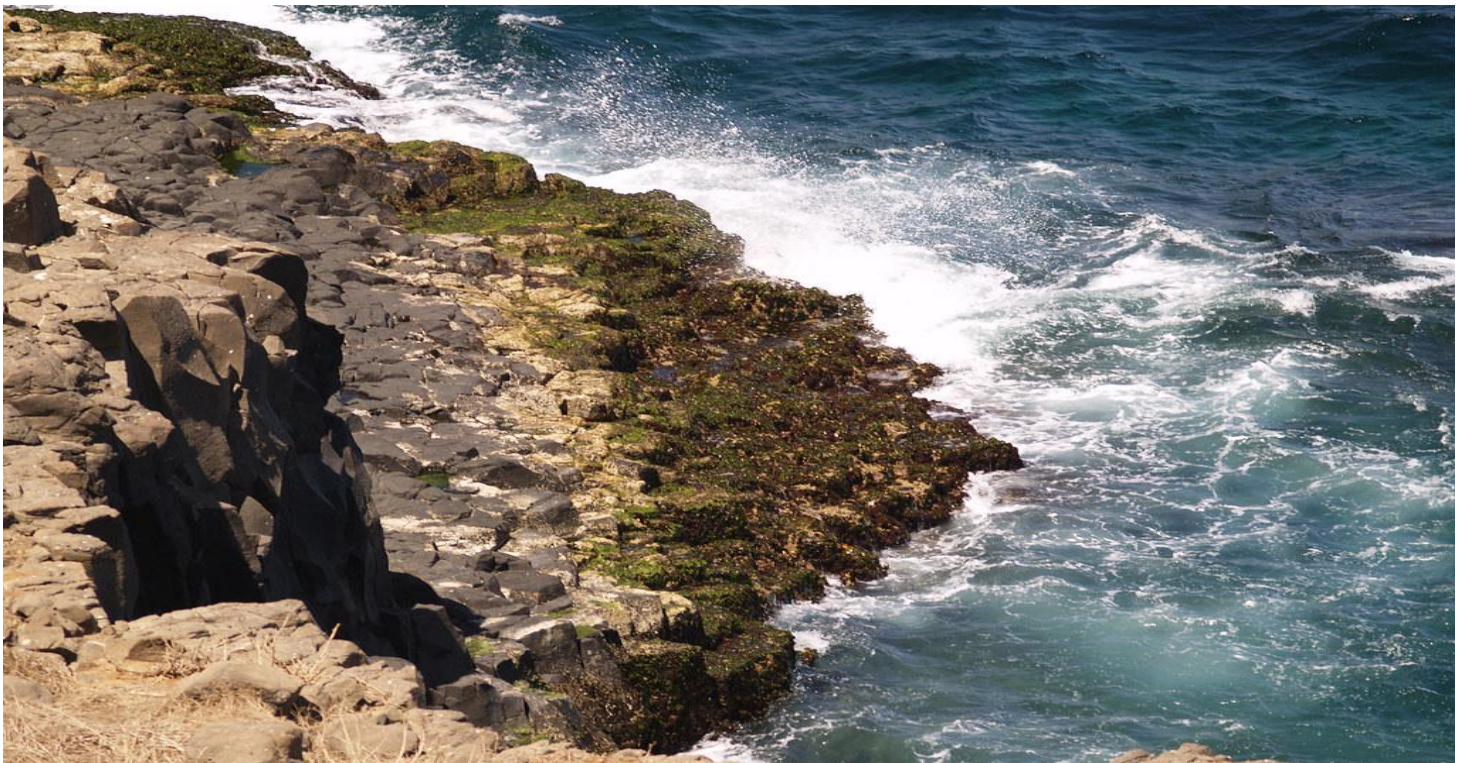
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The conference of plenipotentiaries of the Abidjan Convention for Cooperation in the Protection and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the West and Central African Region, held from 1 to 3 July, concluded with the adoption of four additional protocols to complement and strengthen the regional governance and regulatory framework. A major event in the history of the convention and an opportunity to boost regional cooperation on marine issues.

The coasts of West Africa are home to large marine ecosystems (the Canary Islands, Guinea and Benguela currents), mangroves, wetlands and several hundred species of fish. With more than a third of the region's population living along the coast, these natural assets allow several million people to live off the resources of fishing, aquaculture and tourism. However, the West African marine and coastal environment is under pressure from a multitude of threats that seriously affect its health and the populations that depend on it: coastal erosion, the impacts of climate change and ocean acidification, but also of the development of offshore activities, overfishing, land-based pollution, etc.

It is in this context that the 22 States Parties to the Abidjan Convention¹ have just adopted four protocols to enable integrated and concerted management of regional ecosystems and to address threats to their integrity: (1) the Grand Bassam Protocol, the objective of which is to combat pollution from land-based activities; (2) the Pointe-Noire Protocol, which aims to facilitate the implementation of integrated coastal zone management; (3) the Calabar Protocol, which creates a regional framework for sustainable mangrove management; (4) and the Malabo Protocol, which concerns environmental norms and standards related to offshore oil and gas activities. The Malabo Protocol, for which IDDRI is involved through the [COBIA initiative](#), was developed in response to the accelerated development of offshore oil and gas activities in the region. In addition to the States historically concerned by these activities (Nigeria, Angola, Republic of Congo), new discoveries, mainly in gas, have recently been made in countries in the region that have hitherto had little involvement in this economic sector (particularly in Senegal). The objective of this protocol is therefore to provide the States of the region with a common framework to better supervise the development of these activities and ensure their compatibility with the protection of the marine environment.

While the ratification—and subsequent entry into force—of these protocols is expected in the near future,² the main issue is their implementation. The Convention had prepared for this challenge by developing, as early as 2018, and through national consultations led by the Convention Secretariat, a methodology and roadmap to promote the integration of the protocols into national law and to identify key priority actions. But beyond the formal legal aspects, the implementation of these texts will require other challenges, first and foremost the strengthening of the capacities of national authorities. The Malabo Protocol, for example, sets out rules for strategic environmental impact assessments to accompany all oil and gas exploration and exploitation activities. While this management tool is highly relevant, the authorities, in this case the Ministries of the Environment, must have the technical capacity to analyse such studies. In many cases, in these countries, which have hitherto had little experience with offshore extractive issues, administrations are poorly prepared and do not always have the internal resources to assess the robustness of these studies and the extent of the environmental impacts of these activities (lack of analytical laboratories, insufficient means of monitoring activities at sea). For the Malabo protocol—but the same applies to the other three—civil society will also have a central role to play: scientists, non-governmental organisations, research institutes, local communities and journalists, all will have to take part in the debate on the evolution of the offshore sector and its management. To this end, it seems necessary for these actors to unite in order to establish themselves as an essential stakeholder not only with regard to national administrations but also with regard to extractive companies.

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¹ Morocco could become the 23rd State Party; discussions are ongoing with the Abidjan Convention secretariat.

² The Abidjan Convention provides that an additional protocol shall enter into force sixty days after the secretariat of the Convention has received at least six instruments of ratification.

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