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Initial Findings of the Evaluation of the UNEP/MAP Mid-Term Strategy (MTS) 2016-2021

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**INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNEP/MAP MEDIUM-
TERM STRATEGY 2016-2021**

Interim Report: Initial Findings

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1. Introduction

The main objective of the Independent Evaluation (IE) is to assess the relevance and success of implementation of the UNEP/MAP Medium-Term Strategy 2016-2021 (MTS). Having in mind the fact that MTS is a policy document, this evaluation necessarily falls in the category of “process” evaluations. A process evaluation, generally, focuses on the implementation process and attempts to determine how successfully a certain initiative/program (in this case the MTS) followed its implementation logic and determines whether program activities have been implemented as intended and resulted in predetermined outputs. This type of evaluation is opposed to “outcome” or “impact” evaluations, where the focus of evaluation is to establish the real change, physical or social or both, that has taken place in a certain area (ecosystem) as a result of the implementation of a project/programmatic initiative. The process evaluation focuses on inputs, activities, and outputs and how they work together. The IE will also look for signs of potential impact and sustainability of results, but that will depend on the type of information that will be made available to the European Commission (EC).

The MTS IE is a relatively long (14 months, according to the Term of Reference (ToR)) and participatory exercise. It is anchored in a series of MAP meetings, which will discuss the IE findings as well as approve respective reports before the final IE report will be submitted.

This report will present the initial findings of the IE, based on the results of the questionnaire and an initial analysis by the evaluator of the MTS itself. The discussion during the Bureau and the Steering Committee will provide valuable inputs to the evaluator to continue the evaluation process and prepare the first draft of the evaluation report.

2. The approach to the Independent evaluation

The IE will focus on the following three major aspects of the MTS development and implementation:

- The MTS strategic approach, concept and design;
- The MTS implementation, i.e. progress towards results; and
- The MTS outputs, outcomes and, eventually, impact of the measures taken as a result of the MTS implementation.

The purpose of the IE is to provide an impartial review of MTS in terms of its relevance, effectiveness, overall performance and achievements. The information, findings, lessons learned, conclusions and recommendations generated by the evaluation will be used by UNEP/MAP for the preparation of the next MTS covering the period 2022-2027. The IE will assess the extent to which planned results have been achieved since the beginning of the MTS implementation in 2016 and the likelihood of their full achievement by the end of its validity in 2021.

The IE will cover the entire scope of the MTS with all its components, and in particular by assessing the success of implementation of the strategic themes, the core and the cross-cutting ones. Particular attention will be given to the degree of implementation of the Expected Accomplishments as well as seven Objectives. Then, an evaluation of the six Strategic Outcomes and corresponding Indicative Key Outputs will be made. The results achieved will then be compared to the initial workplan as presented in the MTS Document. The IE will also analyse, to the extent possible, the funds spent during the period of its implementation set against the total amount initially allocated. It will not, however, be an audit report, but an assessment of the rate of expenditure of funds, which will provide an indication of the commitment of Contracting Parties to the implementation of MTS. Finally, the target groups to be consulted during the IE will be: representatives of the relevant authorities of the Contracting Parties,

other major national stakeholders, and the MAP Coordinating Unit and Regional Activity Centres (RACs). Their perspectives on the major issues covered by the MTS will be examined.

While the ToR envisages that the evaluator undertakes three missions (visit to CU in Athens; attend the Bureau Meeting in 2020 and MAP Focal Points Meeting in 2021), it is not certain that due to the current pandemics, any of these missions will take place. In the absence of the missions, the EC will rely heavily on other means of communication, in particular video conferencing. The EC will make every effort to contact maximum number of the stakeholders in the Mediterranean countries as well in the MAP System. As the first step in the IE process, the questionnaire was prepared and sent to a number of persons that have been involved in the development and implementation of the MTS. The purpose of the questionnaire was to get in the initial stage of the evaluation an indication of the success, problems and issues related to MTS. The results of the survey will be presented in this report.

3. The initial findings

The initial findings of the evaluation are the result of two analytical steps: the survey and the analysis of the MTS structure. These findings should not be considered as a complete analysis as the detailed analysis of the relevant documentation as well as the in-depth interviews of a representative group of stakeholders still have to be undertaken.

3.1 The survey

The questionnaire had 34 questions grouped in 5 sections, namely:

- General;
- Design of the MTS (aims at finding out how the MTS as designed in its final format that was sent for adoption);
- MTS implementation (aims at identifying how the process of MTS implementation was carried out and how the stakeholders were involved in its implementation);
- Achievement of outcomes and outputs (aims at identifying which and how specific outputs have been delivered) and
- Recommendations for the future MTS (aims at getting the views on recommendations for the future MTS).

The questionnaire was prepared in the Google Form format and sent to around 220 addresses, which included all groups of stakeholders that have participated in the development and implementation of the MTS. The MAP Coordinating Unit and RACs were not included in the exercise. The deadline for the answers was 15 September 2020, and it was extended after the original cut-off date because of the summer holidays and, probably the COVID-19 situation. The total of 22 responses were received. It has to be stated that a number of emails have bounced off, which means that the original sampling group was smaller than 220. The response rate could, thus, be estimated at around 15%. This is considered to be a relatively low rate of response. However, this survey is only an indicative one and it serves the purpose of indicating the major issues related to development and implementation of MTS, while the in-depth interviews that will follow will identify the real issues. Out of 22 responses, 8 national focal points have responded.

Design of the MTS

This set of questions was focused on two major issues: the thematic design of the MTS and the design of the implementation structure of the MTS.

The respondents were quite satisfied with the **coverage of issues and definition of the priorities** in the MTS. They think that almost all the MAP priorities were emphasized and that the strategy itself is responding well to the MAP/Barcelona Convention mandate. This response was not a surprise considering that the Programme of Work of MAP and the respective priorities were almost by default transposed into the MTS. However, the respondents felt that the level of alignment of MTS to the international priorities and commitments in transboundary marine governance were somewhat less satisfactory. This is certainly an issue that will have to be analyzed in more depth during the evaluation process. The National focal Points that responded were largely satisfied with the extent the MTS is consistent with national and local policies and priorities and the needs of intended beneficiaries in their countries.

Participants were somewhat less satisfied with the **level of participation of relevant stakeholders during the MTS design phase**. This may be understandable considering the fact that this was the first strategy prepared and, consequently, hence not enough experience in developing such a complex document was present. Also, there was a relatively short time available to prepare and adopt it. They also felt that the **budget for MTS implementation** should be clearly stated. This is an issue to discuss further, i.e. whether a separate budget is needed specifically for the MTS or whether it is integrated in the MAP budget. Finally, they think that the MTS implementation structure in the strategy and at the national level was not adequately designed in the MTS itself.

MTS implementation

The majority of respondents felt that **MTS was only partially implemented**. During the next phase of evaluation, the evaluator will try to find whether this partial satisfaction is the consequence of the fact that the strategy is still being implemented (ending in 2021) or that this view is caused by other reasons, such as the MTS design flaws, for example. There were a number of problems that have probably resulted in this partial satisfaction, in particular the lack of data, lack of financing, lack of political will to implement the strategy, lack of interest among stakeholders, and delay in delivery of outputs. They also mentioned that the following:

- measures to be implemented at local level were not specifically identified neither monitored;
- new and innovative financing mechanisms (at national or local level) have not been enough developed and/or supported;
- there was also a problem of transversal work at national level between the ministry in charge of environment and the other sectorial ministries to reach an agreement and an effective implementation of measures.

The respondents were not informed of the availability of the resources for the implementation of the MTS, as only a minority had an answer (mostly not enough resources). This may be caused by the inadequate explanation in the section of the MTS where resources for its implementation were discussed.

They were generally satisfied with the level of **communication with the MAP Coordinating Unit (CU)** during the implementation of the strategy, but a significant number stated that it could be better. However, the response to question on the frequency of their communication with the CU was somewhat contradictory because the majority had communicated once a year or not at all. This aspect will have to be analyzed further taking in consideration what type of actor gave a specific answer, as

not all actors are supposed to communicate with the CU with the same frequency. Also, the quality of that communication will be analyzed.

The respondents felt, by a large majority, that **MTS outputs and outcomes have only partially been delivered as planned**. This is one of the most critical issues in the implementation of MTS and, by consequence, one that the evaluation has to dig deeply into. This will include an analysis of clear relationship between the MTS and the Programme of Work (PoW), i.e. how much is one dependent upon the other, as well as what should be the real thematic extent of the strategy compared to the one in PoW. Another question is whether the strategy has to be the repetition of the PoW, or it has to focus on the priorities and provide tools and instruments to implement those priorities.

Among the **factors critical to achieving the intended objectives, outcomes and outputs** the following were considered as the most important:

- the role played by the Coordinating Unit and MAP regional Activity Centres,
- MAP Focal Points regularly monitoring the implementation of MTS,
- the implementation structure established at national level,
- the adaptive management tools, which allowed changes in case of lagging delivery of outputs.

Majority of the respondents felt that implementation of the MTS has brought improvement of environmental indicators of the Mediterranean Region, better biodiversity protection, better environmental governance, and better coastal and marine management. The further evaluation steps will analyse more deeply these responses in order to assess their real value, i.e. make a clear distinction between benefits accrued by implementation of MTS and the PoW. Again, the respondent felt that the resources available for the implementation of MTS were not enough. However, this is also an issue that has to be looked upon by taking in consideration the entire MAP budget and whether it is sufficient for the implementation of the PoW. Consequently, almost all respondents thought that the MTS objectives have been achieved only partially. During the further evaluation steps, the evaluator will try to assess whether these objectives could be achieved during the remaining period of the MTS implementation.

The respondents were asked to identify the **activities that worked well** in the hitherto period of the MTS implementation. They gave plenty of responses but one could note that these responses were grouped within the same thematic area (namely, ICZM, pollution, biodiversity, SCP, etc.), and there was very little evidence of cross-sectoral groups of answers. Hence it would be difficult to assign the real significance to these answers without the further in-depth analysis. However, it is worth to mention the following positive activities: MSSD assessment studies, EcAp process, marine litter management, climate change adaptation, MSP, ICZM, SCP, adopted NAPs, national pollution and litter monitoring programs, IMAP, regional action plans for the conservation of Mediterranean endangered and threatened species, etc.

Among **activities that did not work well, or need strengthening**, the following was mentioned:

- comprehensive and coherent network of well managed MPAs, including SPAMIs, to achieve Aichi Target 11 in the Mediterranean set up and implemented;
- guidelines and other tools for non-indigenous species control and prevention;
- management of marine and coastal protected areas developed/updated and disseminated (NAPs for invasive species developed/updated.);
- Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) and Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) applied in selected areas at a pilot level linking coastal and open sea areas subject to major pressures;

- businesses, entrepreneurs and civil society need to be encouraged to use networks to disseminate SCP solutions contributing to biodiversity and ecosystems conservation;
- BCRS and Info MAP Platform (slow update and operationalization);
- ratification of Barcelona Convention and its protocols; and
- visibility of MSSD implementation and its relation with global processes.

Respondents felt that **MTS has positively influenced the stakeholders** and that they have become more engaged in its implementation, or have expressed readiness to implement it. This is definitely a positive sign but it will have to be further corroborated during the interview phase with representative stakeholders.

Recommendations for the future MTS

Overwhelmingly, the respondents thought that the **current institutional structure, led by the CU and RACs, should be kept and strengthened to support and monitor MTS implementation**. They were definite in answering that other institutions will not be needed. This response may have been expected, but it will have to be analyzed further to see whether eventual shortcomings in the MTS implementation were the result of inadequate institutional structure and available resources.

The respondents felt that the **future MTS should have clearer budgetary considerations, and have clear targets and indicators for each output and outcome**. Also, they thought greater emphasis should be placed on the **alignment of MTS with the global agenda**, that the structure of the document should be changed accordingly including the **reduction of the number of priorities**. These major recommendations also point to the shortcomings of the current MTS and these aspects of its design will be analyzed further during the evaluation process.

Among specific suggestions they thought that:

- MTS should be more targeted, because the subjects are too broad and cover all ecosystems;
- enforcement should become the top priority of the next MTS;
- there should be more emphasis on climate change vulnerability and adaptation, consider global processes and emerging issues;
- new MTS needs to include an analysis of MAP system functioning, including SWOT analysis of current institutional setup, technical and financial means that are needed to ensure new MTS to respond to ever growing challenges in Mediterranean region;
- new MTS needs to be fully driven with national needs;
- UNEP needs to explore maximal possible flexibility of administrative rules and procedure to run UNEP/MAP as its oldest Regional seas Programme in order to maximize its efficiency in delivering UNEP/MAP mandate in the period of new MTS implementation;
- new MTS has to be better aligned with the climate and Sustainable Blue Economy themes;
- Barcelona Convention does not have the capacity to take on too many priorities and should integrate those without necessarily taking the lead on these issues;
- there should be more integration among thematic subjects;
- Land-Sea Interactions priority is not as clear as the other priorities and seems to overlap with the others;
- logical framework analysis should be prepared;
- Theory of Change approach integrated based on achieving measurable impacts;
- implementation structure should be better defined;
- an assessment of the financial and human resource required for the implementation of the new MTS prepared in order to be more realistic;

- the modalities of implementation are unclear and the communication of progress (status check) in a meaningful way is lacking;
- more explicit role of NFPs and national authorities and institutions presented; core and cross cutting themes need to be designed again.

Among the current MTS elements, they would like to retain the following: Vision, The Ultimate Objective, The Strategic Themes, The Core Themes, The Cross-Cutting Themes, Strategic Objectives, Strategic Outcomes and Key Indicative Outputs. In a nutshell, it seems that they would like to retain the current MTS structure.

Among the main **challenges** to achieving a “healthy Mediterranean with marine and coastal ecosystems” that should be given particular importance in the new MTS, the respondents mentioned the following:

- higher engagement and accountability by the countries, in particular from non-EU members States;
- the decision process of the Barcelona Convention has been driven by the EU countries “block” with sporadic and uncoordinated input from the other countries;
- as the enforcement of the legal provision remain a weak point of the system, it should be reinforced in the next MTS to become the top priority;
- land-based pollution including pollution by marine litter, biodiversity conservation, resilience of coastal area from climate change and development, implementation of MSP, reducing air pollution from ships by implementing available tools should also be a priority;
- regulatory process on the decisions to be binding and its enforcement would be a key process leading towards achievement of the MTS goals;
- address increased risks and instability in the region.

Among **specific implementation tools**, respondents overwhelmingly supported development of the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan to become a constitutive element of the strategy. The strategy should be made more adaptable and responsive to unforeseen emerging issues and priorities. The respective adaptive mechanisms should be, among other:

- establish the contact/focal point of UNEP/MAP when a contracting party or stakeholder identifies an emergency and wants to share it with the UNEP/MAP community;
- MTS should cover a longer period of time till 2030 to allow long-term processes to contribute to achieving SDGs under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- a mid-term assessment, in 2026, could allow adaptation/flexibility, while the new MTS should not be as detailed as the previous version, with higher objectives/building block, leaving details to the level of the biannual Programme of Work, which could also be adapted to address new emerging challenges;
- allow more proactive role of the Bureau of Contracting Parties and specially Coordinating Unit;
- contingency planning allowing revision of the Action Plan; emergency funds to be allocated to new and urgent challenges and the possibility that they enter as part of "an emergency action plan" within the Strategy to be implemented, monitored and evaluated.

3.2. Other findings

In addition to the above comments and suggestions collected via the survey of stakeholders, the evaluator has several comments that could be considered as initial findings at this stage of the evaluation. It should be noted that these findings are by no means exhaustive and that more in-depth analysis and evaluation will certainly bring new findings. The evaluator would also like to point the fact that the evaluation will not question the validity of the thematic subjects mentioned in the MTS as it is in the mandate of the Contracting Parties and other stakeholders to decide what goes into the MTS. However, the evaluation is mostly concerned with the structure of the document, its eventual missing elements as well as implementation modalities.

As a general comment, the **MTS looks like a very complex document**, which is sometimes difficult to follow and the user/reader may lose track of its main objectives. The MTS has the total of 42 outcomes and 84 key outputs. One can only imagine what a complex task would be to develop an appropriate tracking system to monitor all the indicators for all the outcomes and outputs. The impression is that during the development of MTS, a “Christmas tree” approach was taken, intended to accommodate all actors. The strategy cannot be “all the things to all the people”, which means that clear priorities have to be established. In the document there is only 20 odd mentions of priority/priorities, albeit not in a systematic but in a very haphazard manner. Therefore, a clear list of priorities should be established early on during the strategy development process.

In the view of the evaluator, the **elaboration of the principal strategy components is unbalanced**. While the main headings in the introductory strategy context are mentioned, the international context dwells on only two initiatives: MSSD and SDG. This is something to be expanded and the strategy should be more firmly anchored within the dominant international context and take in consideration many more of those initiatives and show how the strategy intends to respond to them. The elaboration of the thematic subjects is quite extensive, which may be justifiable, but the important elements are elaborated in a superficial manner. This is particularly important for the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan as well as the Implementation Plan. It should have been much better elaborated. The timeline for the implementation of the strategy is missing, as well as the action plan for the implementation of the strategy, which would clearly state when, who, how and where strategic elements will be implemented. The standard strategy development approach requires that the document contains the strategy itself and an action plan for its implementation. The latter is missing in this document. It is true, though, that the implementation of the 6-year strategy is divided in 2-year biennial programmes, but the implementation modalities should be better developed and present in the respective action plan.

It is true that the funding aspect of the MTS is quite specific, as it is clearly stated that it is embedded in the implementation of the MAP PoW. However, **there are a few calls on the need to attract additional financing for the implementation of the proposed programme**. That should be one of the critical elements of the strategy, because it should not be only the transposition of the MAP PoW into the 2-year implementation blocks but the strategy should contain actions how the challenges, funding included, should be met and what actions need to be taken to achieve these objectives. In this context, there is a mention of the private sector and the need to attract these resources. The intention is valid, as this is something that all the current strategies are calling upon. However, the strategy that covers a relatively short period of time (6 years is really a minimal time-span for any strategy) should be much more specific in proposing concrete actions to attract additional financial resources, public or private.

4. The next steps

The next steps in the evaluation process will be the following:

- In-depth interviews with a selected representative group of stakeholders to further analyse issues that have come up in the survey;
- Assess the extent of achievement of targets (at the level of strategic outcome) based on the analysis of the implementation of the biannual PoWs;
- Assess financial implementation of the MTS;
- Prepare the first draft evaluation report, including financial implementation and inputs from initial online consultation.

Upon completion of the first draft, the comments will be collected and the second (final) draft of the evaluation report will be prepared to be presented at the MAP Focal Points Meeting.