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Cooperative audit: Are adequate mechanisms in place for the designation and effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within the Mediterranean Sea?

Acknowledging the importance of Marine Protected Areas for their countries, the Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) of Albania, Cyprus, Greece, Malta and Portugal, members of the European Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions Working Group on Environmental Auditing (EUROSAI WGEA), decided to undertake a cooperative audit with the aim of examining the mechanisms their governments have in place to ensure the proper and adequate designation, as well as effective management, of Marine Protected Areas within their jurisdiction. The SAIs of France and Slovenia, who had already conducted audit work in the area, agreed to contribute their findings to the joint report. The audit was coordinated by the SAIs of Cyprus and Malta.

This cooperative audit, which was carried out during 2018, confirmed the participating countries' understanding and commitment for the protection of the Mediterranean marine environment, as attested by the increasing number of MPAs. On the other hand, in some cases, the lack of site-specific management plans and regulation, as well as the designation of MPAs within the high-seas, remain common issues of concern.

Participating SAIs reported that the legal framework regulating MPAs seems to be sufficiently robust and mandates national authorities to ascertain the sustainability of the marine environment. However, it does not provide a common definition of what constitutes an MPA. In addition, overlapping and, in some instances, conflicting provisions were identified within the national regulatory frameworks.

National strategic frameworks, generally, reflected the political will for the protection of MPAs and outline the relevant outputs as well as outcomes expected through the designation of MPAs. However, in some of the participating countries no comprehensive sector specific strategies are in place, while all SAIs identified the potential for strengthening national strategic frameworks, so as to optimize their impact.

It was also noted that national authorities have carried out the relevant site assessments to designate MPAs, nonetheless, the scope of these assessments was not always appropriately broad, either due to resource and technical expertise limitations, or to diplomatic issues when the site assessments concerned joint jurisdictions or the high-seas.

Most participating SAIs reported that site-specific management plans are not yet in place. Moreover, other technical and logistical limitations, such as coordination issues and the non-deployment of resources, influenced the degree to which participating countries could implement specific measures to ascertain the conservation of protected species within MPAs.

SAIs reported that weaknesses related to site-specific management plans, administrative capacity weaknesses and coordination limitations between stakeholders are the key elements that hindered adequate monitoring and enforcement of measures in MPAs. Monitoring and enforcement shortcomings

do not guarantee that MPAs, and therefore the biodiversity they aim to protect, are being managed and utilised in a sustainable manner.

The SAIs commented that the maritime environment is a key economic driver with the potential for innovation and growth. Within this context, this cooperative audit recommended that national authorities step-up their efforts to ascertain the right balance between conservation of the marine environment and blue growth.

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