

The Atlantic Action Plan

The European Commission adopted the Atlantic Action Plan in 2013, aiming to revitalise the marine and maritime economy of France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom after the economic crisis. Funded from existing EU programmes, the plan promotes entrepreneurship and innovation through research and technology, while protecting the marine environment. Engaging national and regional actors, it also opens up possibilities of wider transatlantic cooperation.

Background

The concept of the ['blue economy'](#) – pursuing the sustainable development of oceans and coasts to drive economic growth while preserving the environment – gained force in the context of mitigating the impact of the economic crisis. The value of the blue economy for European coastal regions was estimated at about €500 billion per year and 5.4 million jobs in [2012](#), but [promising](#) up to 7 million jobs by 2020, if adequately supported. Seizing the opportunity, the EU adopted the **'Blue growth' initiative** in [2012](#) as part of the [Integrated Maritime Policy](#) framework, to foster innovation, growth and job creation in the marine and maritime sectors. However, initiatives for specific maritime areas had already been taking shape before that.

One of these was the **strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area** adopted in [2011](#), applying to the coasts, territorial and jurisdictional waters of [France](#), [Ireland](#), [Portugal](#), [Spain](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) and their overseas territories. Based on an ecosystem approach, the strategy [outlined](#) how to help communities living on the Atlantic coast while reducing Europe's carbon footprint, exploiting the seafloor's natural resources, responding to threats and emergencies and striving for socially inclusive growth. Seeking to involve not only the national, but also regional and local level authorities, private industry and think-tanks, the strategy set up an [Atlantic Forum](#) as a platform for generating exchange and debate on possible initiatives.

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Building on the strategy, consultations of the Member States and the input from stakeholders received through the Atlantic Forum, the Commission [put forward](#) the **Atlantic Action Plan** in [2013](#). Recognising that much was already being done by the Member States both individually and jointly, the plan encourages cooperation in areas offering possibilities for further collective action. In doing so, it contributes to the 'Blue growth' initiative and towards achieving the goals of the [Europe 2020](#) strategy.

The plan focuses on entrepreneurship and innovation through research and technology. Other priorities are to protect, secure and enhance the marine and coastal environment, to improve accessibility and connectivity and to create a socially inclusive and sustainable model of regional development. Concrete actions include enhancing the tourism market (by developing coastal tourism and preserving cultural heritage), improving education and training in emerging as well as traditional maritime industries (shipbuilding, fisheries and aquaculture), promoting offshore renewable energy and building cooperation in oceanic research to address climate change. To be implemented by 2020, the plan's success will depend on a mix of targeted investment, increased research capacity and higher skills.

Funding

While the plan has no specific financial instrument, potential funding sources are available from existing EU funds and programmes. Within the **European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)**, those concerned are mainly the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund ([EMFF](#)). The European Fund for Strategic Investment ([EFSI](#)) offers further financial assistance and the blue economy is [considered](#) to be well placed to benefit from it. The projects funded must be in line with the cohesion policy [priorities](#) for the 2014-2020 period, as agreed by the Member States and the Commission. The latter encouraged coordination of thematic priorities between the investments under the ESIF and sea



basin strategies, which for instance [Spain](#) achieved by adopting an integrated territorial investment ('[Blue ITI](#)'), a single instrument providing the ESI Funds contributions and the Atlantic Strategy.

In previous programming periods, the EU already provided support to the Atlantic area from the ERDF under transnational cooperation programmes ([Interreg](#)), to promote stronger coherence and regional cooperation. For instance in the [2007-2013](#) period, the **Atlantic Area Transnational Cooperation Programme** funded more than [70 projects](#) in [33 regions](#), such as the [Harvest Atlantic](#) project, focusing on competitiveness and innovation in four specific subsectors of the maritime economy. Building on this [experience](#), the Commission extended the programme for the [2014-2020](#) period (to [37 regions](#), with a total [envelope](#) of €185 million, which includes €140 million from the ERDF). The programme now focuses on promoting innovation and a resource-efficient economy, protecting the Atlantic territory against risks of natural and human origin and developing cultural and natural capital (the latter [estimated](#) to be worth €21 trillion). The initial call for projects is expected in the first half of 2016. In parallel to funds, EU financing is also available under **specific programmes**, mainly [Horizon 2020](#), the Connecting Europe Facility ([CEF](#)), [LIFE+](#) and [COSME](#). For example, the Horizon 2020 programme offers key support to innovation development and the work programmes for both [2014-2015](#) and [2016-2017](#) included a specific call for 'Blue growth'. EU funding has supported a wide range of projects, focusing for instance on [transboundary planning](#) or [interregional dynamics](#) between Europe, Africa and the Americas. In addition, Member States can use the assistance of the European Investment Bank ([EIB](#)), which already supports, for example, [projects](#) to develop tidal energy and wind farms, and they may seek private financing to complement public funding.

Stakeholders' involvement

The **Atlantic Arc Commission (AAC)**, a body of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions ([CPMR](#)) promoting cooperation among 20 Atlantic regions since 1989, [contributed](#) to the plan's preparation. It [welcomed](#) the fact that entrepreneurship and accessibility, absent from the strategy, appeared among the plan's priorities, together with sustainable regional development. It regretted, however, that the issue of accessibility was limited to cooperation between ports. The AAC contributes to the plan's implementation through several active working groups, focusing on transport, fisheries, marine research and maritime issues. For its part, the **Conference of Atlantic Arc Cities (CAAC)**, a network of more than 100 cities, focuses on the urban dimension of the Atlantic area. Analysing the issue, it has [pointed out](#) that the strategy and the programme do not completely overlap and has asked for clarification on possible joint mechanisms.

Implementation of the plan

The Commission has put in place a [mechanism](#) to engage national and regional actors and to monitor progress. The **Atlantic Strategy Group** brings together representatives of the five Atlantic Member States and EU institutions and provides guidance for implementation and monitoring. The **Atlantic Stakeholder Platform** meets annually in [workshops](#) and [conferences](#), where stakeholders can share information and secure funding. The Commission has also [set up](#) a **support team**, with a central office in Brussels and focal points in the five Member States, to disseminate information, find potential partners and advise on financial instruments. Further, the Commission opened the way towards gradual [internationalisation](#) of the Atlantic strategy by [signing](#) a joint [statement](#) with the USA and Canada in 2013, with the aim to [launch](#) an Atlantic Ocean Research Alliance, to facilitate the alignment of ocean observation efforts, the sharing of knowledge and promotion of the sustainable management of Atlantic resources.

The European Parliament's support to the Atlantic Area

While the Commission was preparing the [strategy](#), the EP in its [resolution](#) on the European Strategy for the Atlantic Region of 9 March 2011 highlighted areas requiring attention, such as interconnecting transport and energy networks, advancing marine energy, developing urban and rural areas and reinforcing territorial ties.

Shortly after, in its own-initiative [resolution](#) on the EU Cohesion Policy Strategy for the Atlantic Area of 13 September 2012, the EP insisted, among other issues, on the importance of investments to improve connections between Atlantic regions and the rest of Europe. The Parliament also had a leading role in setting up the Atlantic Forum as a mechanism to involve all stakeholders in the drafting of the action plan.

In the wider context of the blue economy, the EP in its own-initiative [resolution](#) on research and innovation for jobs and growth of 8 September 2015 urged Member States to analyse the progress achieved on their territory and called for the development of a strategy bringing together initiatives in all maritime-related sectors.