

Revitalising inclusive blue economies: Strategies for employment and entrepreneurship in disadvantaged coastal and outermost regions



[See the full study](#)

Europe's coastal and outermost regions are strategically important for the EU economy, environment and territorial cohesion. However, some face persistent disadvantages linked to remoteness and insularity, demographic decline, limited economic diversification and growing climate pressures. At the same time, innovative blue economy sectors, including marine renewable energy, marine biotechnology and digital maritime services, offer opportunities for new businesses and quality employment.

The study examines what prevents disadvantaged and transitioning coastal and outermost regions from fully benefiting from these opportunities and how Cohesion Policy can better support inclusive blue economy development, particularly in the 2028-2034 programming period.

What are the main challenges?

Four interconnected structural challenges shape these territories' capacity to develop blue economy activities:

- **Climate and environmental pressures:** flooding, coastal erosion, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss and increasing pressure on natural resources.
- **Socio-economic pressures:** seasonal economies, ageing and population decline, housing constraints and unequal access to services.
- **Remoteness and insularity:** higher transport and logistics costs and more limited access to markets, services and employment.
- **Security and geopolitical pressures:** increasing vulnerability associated with interconnected maritime, energy and digital infrastructure.

These pressures vary significantly between territories. Coastality or insularity does not automatically imply disadvantage; smaller islands, fisheries-dependent territories and outermost regions are more likely to face several constraints simultaneously.

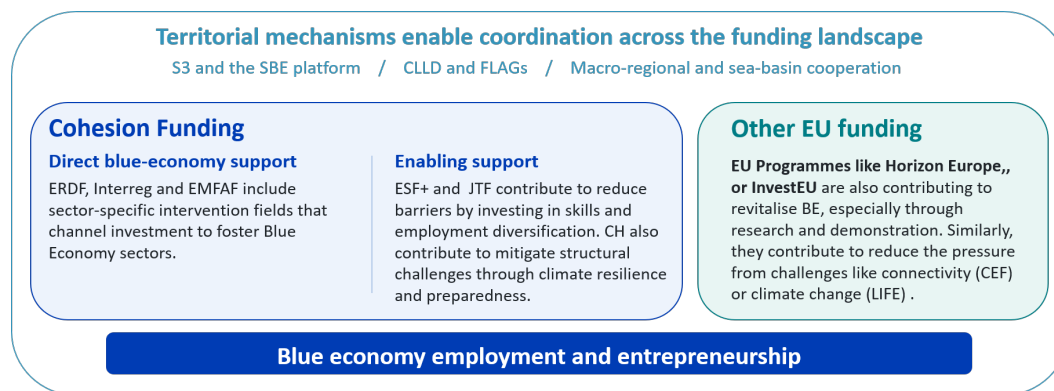
What are the key barriers to employment and entrepreneurship?

Structural disadvantages are compounded by recurring barriers in emerging blue sectors:

- **Skills shortages and mismatches,** reinforced by ageing workforces and difficulties attracting and retaining workers.
- **Weak innovation ecosystems,** with limited access to specialised infrastructure, research institutions, business networks and investors.
- **Difficulties accessing finance and scaling up,** especially when moving from research to commercial deployment.
- **Persistent gender inequalities:** women account for only around 29% of the blue economy workforce and remain underrepresented in technical, operational and leadership roles.



How does Cohesion Policy contribute?



The study examines how Cohesion Policy funds support employment and entrepreneurship in blue economy sectors. The ERDF, Interreg and the EMFAF provide direct support to specific activities, including ports, but only a limited number of intervention fields explicitly target these sectors. Determining the extent to which this support reaches disadvantaged and transitioning coastal regions remains challenging. To date, the main mechanisms enabling coordination across funding sources are Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), community-led local development (CLLD) initiatives and sea basin cooperation frameworks.

Policy Recommendations

1. Future Cohesion Policy Programmes should help the development of place-based support pathways for entrepreneurship in emerging blue sectors.
2. Make the European Ocean Pact a central strategic reference for the 2028-2034 Cohesion Policy in disadvantaged coastal, island and outermost regions.
3. Establish blue skills and ocean literacy as integrated priorities of the 2028-2034 Cohesion Policy.
4. Use the 2028-2034 Cohesion Policy as a territorial delivery framework for the forthcoming Blue Generational Renewal Strategy.
5. Mainstream gender-responsive pathways across blue skills, entrepreneurship and innovation support.
6. Gather evidence and knowledge on gender-specific barriers.
7. Strengthening the innovation ecosystems that underpin economic diversification and adaptation.
8. Reinforce Smart Specialisation (S3) as a driver of long-term blue economy transformation.
9. Support spaces for multi-level governance and coordination on blue economy innovation, including maritime regional cooperation.
10. Scaling and deploying solutions that have already demonstrated their effectiveness during the 2021–2027 programming period.
11. Strengthen the territorial evidence base, monitoring and accountability framework for blue economy development.
12. Provide tailored, place-based support to disadvantaged and outermost coastal regions.
13. Cohesion Policy should empower coastal communities to play a more active role in shaping local blue economy transitions.

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