



## **Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP)**

### **Regional Consultation Webinar**

#### **The Blue Way for SMEs in Asia and the Pacific**

25 November 2025 | 15h00 – 17h30 (Manila) | virtual only

### **Concept Note**

#### **I. Background**

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) represent 97–99% of all firms and employ 70% of the workforce in the Asia-Pacific region. The region's SMEs are active in all sectors of the ocean economy and are highly dependent on healthy and sustainable marine and coastal ecosystems for their viability. While individual SMEs may have smaller environmental footprints compared to large corporations, collectively they contribute a substantial portion of the region's industrial pollution, biodiversity loss and degradation, and coastal and marine resource overexploitation. At present, SMEs lack adequate direct finance and support for transitioning to blue economy enterprises, technologies, and services.

The total gap to finance Asia's sustainable blue economy transition is estimated to be \$5.5 trillion, of which at least \$2 trillion may be attributed to the needs of SMEs. But local banks are reluctant to lend to SMEs because of their typically insufficient collateral and lack of credit history. Most development and commercial banks and private funds consider investments in SMEs as high risk and high maintenance. While large public projects are well supported by governments and development finance institutions, SMEs with financing needs between \$100,000 and \$10 million do not have direct access to affordable and sustainable financing. Without comprehensive SME engagement in a blue economy transformation, a business-as-usual scenario can be expected to overshadow and limit sustainable development and blue economy transformation across the region.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) are preparing a project proposal to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to accelerate SME investments in the blue economy across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Each of these countries rely heavily on marine resources, with the blue economy estimated to contribute 23% of Malaysia's GDP<sup>1</sup>, 30% in Thailand<sup>2</sup>, and 3.6% in the Philippines<sup>3</sup>, and SMEs playing a major role in the economies of all three countries. The project aims to enhance the enabling environment for SME engagement, strengthen capacities to

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<sup>1</sup> Azam, A. H. M., KV, M. R. (2023). Malaysia's Blue Economy: Position, Initiatives, and Challenges. Available online: <https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/policy-brief/FY2023/Malaysia-Blue-Economy-Position-Initiatives-Challenges.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank. (2025). Innovative Blue Financing for Integrated Seascape Management in Thailand. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099062425035150454/pdf/P179593-3cda01ec-693e-4036-af18-268d6d49877c.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Escalona, K. P. S. (2022). Driver of blue economy in Luzon, Philippines: status, threats, and potentials for development. *Transactions NAST PHL*, 44. <https://psa.gov.ph/ocean-economy/release-id/144505>



develop investment- and impact-ready blue economy projects, and facilitate access to sustainable and catalytic financing from both public and private sectors. Furthermore, this project proposal has been positively reviewed by members of the Working Group on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems of the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA), an intergovernmental mechanism which includes Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, amongst others, as part of COBSEA's Marine and Coastal Ecosystems Framework under the overall theme of Sustainable Blue Economy.

## **II. Workshop Objectives**

To ensure inclusive and effective project design and implementation, a regional consultation workshop will be organized to engage key stakeholders in co-developing strategies and identifying opportunities for financing and SME development.

The workshop will:

- Validate project design and proposed components with national and local stakeholders.
- Identify priority sectors, project locations, and investment opportunities for SME-led blue economy initiatives.
- Strengthen stakeholder engagement, including government agencies, SMEs, financial institutions, private investors, and civil society.
- Explore financing mechanisms, including blended finance and catalytic capital, to support SME transition.
- Review successful models for engaging SMEs such as BlueInvest Europe, initial experience from the SME BlueImpact Asia pilot and regional best practices.

## **III. Participants**

Participants will be relevant agencies and organizations from Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines representing:

- National and local government
- SMEs and industry associations
- Financial institutions and intermediaries
- Private sector investors
- Regional organizations
- Civil society and community-based organizations
- Technical experts and development partners



**IV. Provisional Draft Agenda, 25 November 2025, 15h00 – 17h30 Manila time**  
As of 21 November 2025

Time	Topic / Speaker
15h00 – 15h10	<b>Moderated by:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mr. Thomas Kessler, Principal Finance Specialist (Disaster Insurance), Finance Sector Group, ADB</li> </ul> <b>Welcome Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ms. Jennifer Romero-Torres, Unit Head of Sustainable Finance Practice Group, Finance Sector Group, ADB</li> </ul>
15h10 – 15h20	<b>Overview of the Concept</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mr. Arun Abraham, ADB/GEF Senior Environment Specialist (Consultant), Climate Change, Resilience and Environment (CCRE) Cluster, ADB</li> <li>- Ms. Isabelle Vanderbeck, International Waters Task Manager, UNEP</li> <li>- Mr. Mahesh Pradhan, Coordinator, Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA)</li> </ul>
15h20 – 15h40	<b>Bankable blue economy business models across the value chain: Opportunities for SMEs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mr. Adam Brennan, Chief Sustainability and Communications Officer, Thai Union</li> <li>- Ms. Joan Fulton, Blue Finance Advisor, Finance4Blue</li> </ul>
15h40 – 16h00	<b>Financial Institutions: Mobilizing private sector financing and financial intermediaries</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ms. Karla Martinez Toral, Sustainable Blue Economy Coordinator, UNEP Finance Initiative</li> <li>- Mr. Richard Speak, Managing Director, Finance Earth</li> </ul>
16h00 – 16h20	<b>Development Partners: Building the enabling environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ms. Nancy Bermas, Integrated River Basin Management Project (IRBM) Regional Project Manager, PEMSEA</li> <li>- Ms. Purna Saxena, Regional Investment Specialist – Asia and the Pacific, UN Capital Development Fund</li> </ul>
16h20 – 17h20	<b>Q&amp;A Roundtable sessions on project concept</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>To include</b></li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participating country representatives</li><li>• Regional organizations</li><li>• SMEs</li><li>• Financial institutions</li><li>• ADB and UNEP Staff</li></ul>
17h20 – 17h30	<p><b>Closing and next steps</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Mr. Arun Abraham, ADB/GEF Senior Environment Specialist (Consultant), Climate Change, Resilience and Environment (CCRE) Cluster, ADB</li><li>- Ms. Isabelle Vanderbeck, International Waters Task Manager, UNEP</li></ul>