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WORKING TOWARDS A PLASTIC-FREE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

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ENGAGING FISHERMEN, EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES, AND BUILDING A CIRCULAR BLUE ECONOMY

On the shores of the Mediterranean, one of the planet's most vibrant seas is suffocating under the weight of plastic. Every year, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of waste – bags, bottles, fishing nets – flow from land to water, threatening biodiversity, food security, and human health. In the first session of the Med Dialogues 2025 Edition, Ahmed Yassin, Egypt Country Manager of Enaleia, shared how a movement that began in Greece with

a single fisherman has evolved into a regional model for change.

Founded in Greece, Enaleia is pioneering collaboration between fishing communities and environmental innovators to clean the sea, recycle marine waste, and integrate local livelihoods into the circular economy. In Egypt, Ahmed – also co-founder of Banlastic Egypt, one of the country's first campaigns against single-use plastics – has led efforts to turn fishermen from “problem creators into problem solvers.” His story is one of perseverance, trust, and belief that a clean Mediterranean begins at the community level.



SMALL-SCALE FISHERS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

128,000 FISHERS

Small-scale and artisanal fisheries employ about **128,000 people** in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, representing **57% of total onboard employment**.

Source: FAO / GFCM (2021)

82% OF VESSELS

Small-scale boats account for **82% of all fishing vessels** in the region but only **15% of total catches**, reflecting low-margin, community-based livelihoods.

Source: European Parliament / FAO (2024)

44% AFFECTED BY MARINE LITTER

Surveys show that **44–49% of fishers** report frequent reductions in catches due to marine litter, while **30%** report gear losses or damage.

Source: FAO / GFCM (2021)

€18 MILLION/YEAR OF LOSSES

Estimated annual losses from marine litter to Mediterranean small-scale fisheries amount to **€18 million**, with total EU losses up to **€62 million per year**.

Sources: European Parliament / MDPI (2024)

FROM THE DOCKS OF GREECE TO THE PORTS OF EGYPT

When Greek fisherman Lefteris Arapakis founded Enaleia after the 2008 financial crisis, his goal was

simple: to help struggling fishermen earn a living while protecting the sea that sustained them. *“He understood their language,”* Ahmed recalls. *“Because he was a fisherman himself.”*

The idea was practical: fishermen would collect plastic waste along with their catch, selling it to recycling partners instead of discarding it. *“We want to turn fishermen from problem creators to problem solvers,”* says Ahmed.

The success of the project in Greece inspired expansion across the Mediterranean. Egypt, however, posed a formidable challenge. *“Most people said we shouldn’t even try. Egypt was seen as too complex, too unpredictable,”* Ahmed admits. But he saw an opportunity. Egypt’s coastline stretches over 3,000 kilometres along the Mediterranean and Red Seas; its fishing communities, if engaged, could become a decisive force in regional marine recovery.

When Ahmed and his team launched Enaleia Egypt, scepticism was everywhere. *“The first fisherman I spoke to thought I was crazy,”* he laughs. *“He told me: ‘Engineer Ahmed, you will lose money. Why would anyone pay for trash?’”* But seven months later, that same fisherman was leading others out to sea to fish for plastic.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY ANCHORED IN ALEXANDRIA

Ahmed’s commitment to the ocean began long before Enaleia. Growing up in Alexandria, he remembers walking along the Corniche with his father and watching plastic debris float by. *“He said, ‘This is not the Alexandria I know,’”* Ahmed recalls. That moment, in 2013, planted the seed of activism.

Trained as an engineer, Ahmed’s early work focused on renewable energy projects. But his passion soon shifted toward the environment and community mobilisation. *“I was volunteering in civil society, working with refugees and on education,”* he says. *“So when I found a way to combine the civil society background with my passion for environment, it all made sense.”*

In 2018 he co-founded Banlastic Egypt, an initiative to ban single-use plastics through campaigns and education. By 2020, as COVID-19 exposed both environmental fragility and social inequality, Ahmed de-

ecided to dedicate himself fully to the blue economy. “We need to make climate a job,” he insists. “It’s not a luxury or a nice thing to do. It’s survival.”

FISHING FOR PLASTIC, BUILDING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Enaleia’s model is striking in its simplicity and effectiveness. Fishermen collect marine waste, including ghost nets (abandoned fishing gear that continues to trap marine life) and deliver it to Enaleia for recycling. “In Egypt, we are the first organisation to recycle fishing nets,” Ahmed proudly notes.



PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



229,000 TONNES PER YEAR

An estimated **229,000 tonnes of plastic waste** enter the Mediterranean Sea each year, mainly from **33 coastal countries**. The largest contributors – **Turkey, Spain, Egypt, and Italy** – account for over **50%** of total inputs.

Source: IUCN (2020)



95–100% OF FLOATING LITTER

Plastic makes up 95–100% of all floating litter and more than 50% of seabed waste in the Mediterranean.

Source: UNEP (2021)



7 MILLION TONNES ACCUMULATED

The total stock of plastic accumulated in Mediterranean waters, beaches, and sediments is estimated at around 7 Mt – one of the highest regional densities in the world.

Source: Biogeosciences (2025)



1.25 MILLION FRAGMENTS/KM²

Microplastic concentrations in the Mediterranean reach 1.25 million particles per km², nearly four times higher than those of the Pacific ‘plastic island.’

Sources: WWF / Biogeosciences (2024)

These nets, once considered worthless waste, are transformed into durable tiles, polypropylene pellets, and even furniture. “*They are stronger and more resistant than many other plastics,*” Ahmed explains. “*They can be turned into cars, bags, even airplane parts.*”

The recycling process also benefits local industries. “*Factories didn’t believe us at first,*” Ahmed says. “*But after two weeks of experiments, they realised these nets were a powerful and cheap resource.*” What began as a pilot has become a thriving circular economy chain linking fishermen, recyclers, and manufacturers. “*We’re proving that what was once trash can become treasure,*” Ahmed says. “*And at the same time, we’re creating jobs for people who used to throw this waste into the sea.*”

EDUCATION AND TRUST AT THE HEART OF CHANGE

If there is one lesson Ahmed repeats throughout his work, it is the importance of trust. Fishermen are often wary of NGOs and government policies. “*They feel blamed, not supported,*” he explains. Enaleia’s approach begins with listening.

Training sessions are delivered by port coordinators – trusted leaders within fishing communities – who then teach their peers. “*When you tell a fisherman that plastic is destroying fish stocks, you’re talking about his food, his job, his family,*” Ahmed says. “*That’s how we connect.*”

This peer-to-peer education model has proven essential. It empowers local voices, ensures cultural relevance, and bridges the gap between traditional knowledge and modern sustainability practices. “*The fishermen teach us too,*” Ahmed adds. “*They know the sea better than anyone. They tell us where fish have disappeared and where plastic piles up. Without them, we would be lost.*”

In one memorable case, a fisherman guided Ahmed’s team to a remote spot offshore. “*We pulled so much waste it took four men to lift it,*” Ahmed recalls. “*That moment showed how powerful trust can be when communities and activists work side by side.*”

YOUTH, FAITH, AND THE FUTURE OF CLIMATE WORK

For Ahmed, engaging younger generations is crucial. “*The young fishermen are curious and open-minded,*” he says, recalling one 18-year-old who used ChatGPT to research marine plastic pollution. He told me, ‘I love this job, but why don’t we do it for free?’ I told him, climate should be a job now “*It’s not just volunteering, it’s our duty.*”

Faith, too, plays a motivating role. “*In the Qur’an, it says we must not corrupt the land or the sea,*” Ahmed explains. “*That verse resonates deeply with the fishermen.*” By framing environmental work as both moral and economic, Ahmed is nurturing what he calls social sustainability: communities that can afford to protect their environment.

Enaleia is now exploring models to support fishermen during Egypt’s two-month no-fishing season, when incomes drop to zero. “*We’re trying to make marine plastic collection a consistent source of livelihood,*” Ahmed says. “*Because plastic never ends.*”

LOCAL REALITIES, GLOBAL IMPACT

Plastic pollution is a global problem, but Ahmed insists that solutions must be local. “*Spain is different from Egypt, Egypt is different from Greece,*” he says. “*You need to gather local solutions together to make a holistic one.*”

This conviction shapes his critique of global plastic negotiations. Speaking about the recent derailment of the UN Global Plastics Treaty in Geneva, Ahmed was frank: “*They’re not putting the right people at the table. You can’t design treaties without the fishermen, the NGOs, the practitioners who see the problem every day.*”

He calls for an approach that values experience as much as expertise. “*Negotiators have academic knowledge, but not field knowledge,*” he insists. “*Civil society must be at the heart of the process.*”

TOURISM, POLICY, AND THE POWER OF LAW

Egypt's Mediterranean beaches, especially Alexandria, attract millions of domestic tourists each summer, tourism, however, is also a major source of pollution. *"People come and infest the beaches with plastic,"* Ahmed says bluntly.

To tackle the problem, Enaleia collaborates with local NGOs and government officials to enforce Egypt's Law No. 202 (2020), which restricts single-use plastics in coastal cities and strengthens recycling infrastructure. *"We're trying to return to our old habits,"* he explains. *"Thirty years ago, people went to the beach with reusable bottles and plates. We need to bring that back."*

Ahmed believes laws are only as strong as the collaboration behind them. *"The government, civil society, and communities must work together at the same pace,"* he says. *"When they act in silos, everyone loses trust."*

ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Unlike many environmental initiatives, Enaleia has succeeded in bringing private companies on board, from fashion brands like Ecoalf to insurance firms supporting clean-up operations in Spain. *"Private actors want to tick their boxes: environmental, social, innovative,"* Ahmed notes. *"We give them all three."*

The organisation also uses blockchain technology to track the entire plastic journey, from collection to recycling, ensuring transparency and accountability. *"It builds trust for everyone,"* Ahmed explains. *"For donors, for companies, and for the fishermen themselves."*

This system has helped turn Enaleia's products – recycled tiles, kayaks, and clothing – into educational tools that raise awareness and drive market demand. *"When someone buys a t-shirt made from fishing nets, they become part of the story,"* says Ahmed. *"They learn, and they spread the message."*



EXPANDING ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

From its Greek origins, Enaleia now operates in Egypt, Spain, Italy, and Croatia, and plans to extend its work to the Red Sea and the Nile. Ahmed sees Egypt's scale and diversity as both challenge and opportunity. "We have thousands of kilometres of coastline and communities that earn less than a dollar a day," he explains. "If we can offer them climate jobs, we protect both people and the ocean."

He also hopes to engage women fishers, who remain largely excluded from marine work. "They are part of the solution," he insists. "They just need access and opportunity."

HOPE AS AN ACT OF ACTIVISM

For all his technical expertise, Ahmed's message is deeply human. "Everyone must be an activist," he says. "Not in name, but in action." Whether it's a fisherman pulling a net of waste from the sea or a student telling their parents not to use plastic bags, each small act adds up.

Enaleia's viral TikTok video, showing plastic being transformed into a usable product, has reached over four million viewers, proving that storytelling is as vital as action. "It gives hope. People need to see that change is possible." "We cannot wait for politicians or experts to fix everything," he concludes. "Everyone has a circle of influence. Start there. The sea connects us all."

TOWARD A PLASTIC-FREE MEDITERRANEAN

The Mediterranean is a shared sea, its problems, and their solutions, cross borders. Through Enaleia, Ahmed Yassin and his partners are weaving a network of cooperation from across the Mediterranean, from ports to classrooms, from waste to sustainability in its broadest sense.

Their vision is bold yet attainable: a Mediterranean where fishermen thrive, the sea breathes again, and circular economy becomes the norm rather than the exception. As Ahmed puts it, "We are fishing for the future, not just for fish."



