

UNCLASSIFIED**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** BBNJ Preparation Co-Chairs Janine Coye-Felson and Adam McCarthy

**FROM:** Zeinah Abdelsalam

**RE:** Recommendations for the Sierra Leone Delegation

**DATE:** April 24, 2026, 8:00 p.m. – 12:00 a.m.; April 25, 2026, 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

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**I. OVERVIEW**

Sierra Leone enters the first Conference of the Parties to the Agreement on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ COP-1) with a clear and urgent mandate: to establish the institutional foundations necessary to advance the protection of the Canary-Guinea Current Convergence Zone, serving over 300 million people across coastal West Africa. To advance a Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the zone, COP-1 must deliver a Scientific and Technical Body (STB) that is geographically representative, insulated from the influence of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs), and operationally functional without delay. Sierra Leone urges that COP-1 treat the Capacity Building and Marine Technology Transfer Committee (CBTMT) not as a procedural afterthought but as a prerequisite for meaningful participation, because a treaty that developing states cannot operationalize is a treaty that does not serve them. Finally, Sierra Leone supports China (Xiamen) as the seat of the BBNJ Secretariat.

**II. BACKGROUND & TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT**

PrepCom3, the final preparatory session of March and April 2026, left critical decisions unresolved, including the terms of reference for both the STB and the CBTMT, bracketed provisions in the Rules of Procedure, and the seat of the Secretariat (IISD, 2026). What was not finished there must be finished in COP-1.

For Sierra Leone, this treaty is not primarily a question of deep-sea mining rights, genetic resource patents, or geopolitical positioning – priorities that animate many delegations at this table. It is a question of survival. Coastal fisheries are the foundation of food security, and waters beyond Sierra Leone's exclusive economic zone have been largely ungoverned.

The central controversy surrounding the STB is its size. Sierra Leone firmly supports a larger model. Research on science-policy bodies consistently finds that where large, industrialized states have deep expert benches, small developing states struggle to be adequately represented on smaller bodies (Gaebel et al., 2024). Efficiency that comes at the cost of equity is mere exclusion. Equally concerning is the attempt by the five tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organizations to secure binding consultation rights within the STB framework at PrepCom3 (RFMOS Statement, 2026). These organizations have never established a single marine protected area (Carver, 2026). Embedding their authority into the STB's terms of reference would compromise the body's independence at the moment of its founding.

### **III. OPPORTUNITY & RISK**

The Canary-Guinea MPA proposal is not a Sierra Leonean ask. It is a West African one, backed by an ECOWAS coordination committee spanning seven nations. Sierra Leone's willingness to engage pragmatically rather than ideologically, combined with that regional coherence, is this delegation's greatest strategic asset. If COP-1 delivers a functional STB and a credible CBTMT, the downstream effects reach far beyond ocean policy. Fisheries security provides food security. Food security enables economic stability. Economic stability sustains governance. For West Africa, protecting the ocean is not just an environmental priority – it is a political one.

The risks are real. Sierra Leone's support for China as Secretariat host will be noted, particularly by European delegations whose preferred candidate is Belgium. Supporting China over Belgium carries perception costs that our delegation does not take lightly. The U.S., while currently absent from this treaty, articulated interpretive positions that conflict with Sierra Leone's foundational priorities – explicitly rejecting the common heritage of humankind (CHH) principle as applied to marine genetic resources and opposing mandatory benefit-sharing obligations (UNGA BBNJ, 2023). Sierra Leone cannot design institutions around the preferences of a state that has chosen not to participate, but a robust CHH-grounded framework need not permanently foreclose US re-engagement – it simply cannot be held hostage to it.

The most concrete risk is that RFMO-aligned language carried over from PrepCom3 produces an STB that looks representative but functions as a barrier to the MPA process it is supposed to enable.

### **IV. DOMESTIC IMPLICATIONS**

Sierra Leone is classified by the United Nations as a Least Developed Country. Its coastal communities depend on fisheries not as an economic preference but as a nutritional and livelihood necessity, and Sierra Leone sits at the heart of the Canary-Guinea Current Convergence Zone – the very area ECOWAS is mobilizing to protect. Sierra Leone alone loses tens of millions of dollars annually to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing by distant water fleets, among the highest rates in the region (Schneider, 2026). What enters this treaty's institutional architecture at COP-1 will either address that reality or entrench it.

Two outcomes are unacceptable to our delegation. First, an STB so small or so compromised by RFMO-adjacent appointments that the Canary-Guinea proposal faces structural obstruction before it is scientifically reviewed on its merits. Second, a CBTMT that exists as a reporting mechanism without binding funding obligations, keeping benefit-sharing merely “aspirational” (Veiga and Marcos, 2026). Without genuine capacity transfer, Sierra Leone cannot monitor or enforce its own proposed MPA. The stability of coastal communities depends on this treaty delivering substance over symbolism at its very first meeting.

### **V. INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS**

Sierra Leone supports China (Xiamen) as the seat of the BBNJ Secretariat. China's \$70 million financial pledge, its hosting of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework negotiations, and its commitment to developing state participation make it the most resourced candidate (Govt of China, 2026). Belgium and Chile each offer credible candidacies, but neither translates into the scale of financial and operational support Sierra Leone and its partners require

(Fathahudeen, 2026). We are not naive about the tensions this entails. China operates the world's largest distant water fishing fleet, with documented presence in West African waters (Carver, 2026). All international actors operate strategically, and we support China's bid precisely because institutional hosting responsibility has the potential to sharpen domestic accountability over those fleets.

Sierra Leone's natural allies at COP-1 are the ECOWAS coordination committee states, the broader African Union bloc, and the Alliance of Small Island States, which called PrepCom3 disappointing and shares our urgency around MPA momentum and equitable institutional design (IISD, 2026). Iceland, heavily fishing-dependent, is likely to resist strong MPA frameworks and align closer to RFMO interests. The High Seas Alliance and allied NGOs are broadly supportive of Sierra Leone's priorities and should be protected as observers; the weakened observer language that emerged from PrepCom3 to satisfy China is a concern we flag (Carver, 2026) even as we support China's broader bid. The tuna RFMOs, having sought binding consultation rights within the STB at PrepCom3, remain the most structurally threatening non-state actors in this process.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Sierra Leone enters COP-1 with three priorities. First, the election of an STB with 20 to 30 geographically representative members and terms of reference that preserve its independence from RFMO influence. Second, a CBTMT with binding reporting obligations and dedicated funding mechanisms, because without these features, capacity building remains aspirational rather than structural. Third, the selection of China as Secretariat host.

What most threatens COP-1 is the spillover of geopolitical disputes unrelated to ocean science – the same dynamic that stalled the Rules of Procedure at PrepCom3 (IISD, 2026). Sierra Leone urges the co-chairs to hold the process accountable to its purpose. The Canary-Guinea Current Convergence Zone is ecologically ready for protection. The ECOWAS coordination committee is institutionally ready to propose it. What remains is for COP-1 to pave the way that makes protection possible. That is the measure by which this first conference will be judged.

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