

“If Oceans Could Speak”

Season 2, Episode 9 Transcript [ENG]

Blanca Moreno-Dodson: the past, present and future of an integrated Mediterranean

[00:00:00] **Blanca:** If the sea could speak, it would not recognize whether you are from the north or from the south. We decide whether it is the sea that unites us, or a sea that separates us.

[00:00:13] **Jen:** Hello and welcome to another episode of If Oceans Could Speak, the podcast that listens to the oceans through the personal stories of those who share their life with the sea around them.

Stefan and I are going to be chatting to the people behind these unique stories in the hope that our conversations not only intrigue, but inspire you to reflect upon your own individual connection to the ocean.

[00:00:36] **Stefan:** In the second series of the podcast, we're focusing on perspectives from the Mediterranean. And today we're delighted to have with us, Dr. Blanca Moreno-Dodson, the director of the Center for Mediterranean Integration, a partnership between multi-lateral development institutions, national governments, local authorities, and civil society. Hosted by the United Nations office for project services, Blanca authored a co-authored five books throughout her career, including Enhancing Mediterranean Integration.

Originally from Zaragoza in Spain has fluent in Spanish, French, English, Portuguese. We are really delighted to have you on board today. Welcome Blanca!

[00:01:13] **Blanca:** Thank you, Jennifer. Thank you Stephan. Delighted to be with you today.

[00:01:17] **Stefan:** You're working at the Center for Mediterranean Integration, but before that you worked for several years as an economist. What has inspired you to make that switch into Mediterranean governance?

[00:01:28] **Blanca:** I am a macro economist by training and I spent my career working on developing countries and how to enhance collaboration between more advanced countries and those that are still struggling with their reforms. And this is what brought me to Marseille because I was working as a lead economist in the World Bank in Washington.

And I saw this opportunity to work as a manager of the center of Mediterranean Integration based in Marseille, where multi-lateral institutions such as the World Bank and the European Investment Bank and bilateral governments and also regional governments gathered together to find joint solutions to the common challenges that are affecting every country in the Mediterranean region north, south, east. So I thought that this was a great way to continue applying my knowledge in development economic, in an area where I was born, where I grew up, and which offers a very, very rich culture, which is in a way, the cradle of civilizations. And I thought this is a very good opportunity and that's why I came to the center four and a half years ago.

And did

[00:02:41] **Stefan:** you experience it as challenging to make this transition back from Washington, The world of economics to the Mediterranean?

[00:02:49] **Blanca:** In fact I, I continue to work as an economist because we look at the Mediterranean as the common nexus among countries, and we look at the countries that are more advanced in the EU as possibly facilitating a catalytic factor to help with development in the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

As I said, I identify with the challenges of the region because I had worked on this region before, including in my graduate work at the university. So for me, this was only a natural continuation. I believe that to solve the Mediterranean dilemmas, we need economists, but we also need the sociologists and anthropologists, biologists.

So it, it is very good to have a multidisciplinary approach and I try to add my development economics perspective. To try to find solutions in this region that is so important for the world and at the same time faces so many challenges,

conflict, climate change, waters, forced migration - it is a very, very region and at the same time, it's extremely fragile and vulnerable.

[00:03:57] **Jen:** Well, it's fascinating how your careers developed, and you mentioned some of the issues that's facing the Mediterranean Sea now, and I wondered if you personally, having worked directly with the Mediterranean, have you witnessed these changes yourself in your, in your day to day life or in your professional life?

[00:04:14] **Blanca:** Really what gives me hope and what gives me really a lot of incentives to continue doing my job, is to see that even though there is great diversity within the Mediterranean which contributes to the richness of the region at the same time, historically, we have many, many cultural and identity elements in common.

And more importantly within that, that diversity unity can emerge because it is through the dialogue among countries in the Mediterranean area that we will be able to find a common solutions, So have I seen change? I, I see some progress at the same time. We live very difficult times because many countries in this region were just recovering from the Arab Spring and we have had multiple crisis.

Climate change is affecting this region, 20% more than the rest of the world. And then more recently we had the covid from which countries are recovering at a different speeds and now, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that is affecting the price of some basic goods for Mediterranean countries, the price of oil, and creating overall instability in the area.

So again, even though I have seen changes and I see a great potential for change, There is a lot to do not only to improve the political dialogue among the countries in this region, but also to together work to, to fight these crises and to recover from this multiple crices.

[00:05:44] **Jen:** Yeah thanks for sharing that. It sounds like you have a really unique insight into how environmental change can affect also and social problems and political problems, and how these all sort of merge together into this Mediterranean environment. So that's, that's really fascinating.

[00:05:59] **Stefan:** The Center for Mediterranean integration has this vision, to turn the Mediterranean Basin into an area for dialogue for exchange and co-operation. And there's a lot that reminds me of the Arctic and Co-operation in the Arctic, which, and the Arctic was the main topic for our first season of the podcast. Can you explain a little bit more what is meant with that from Mediterranean perspective?

[00:06:25] **Blanca:** Yes. We work on, on fostering Mediterranean integration at different levels, and it is not just about trade.

I think that when the center was created, we, we thought about well, my predecessors had fascinating approaches to Mediterranean integration. And in many ways trade was a very important part, improving the, the flows of trade between the two sides of the Mediterranean that continues to be important for obvious reasons.

Not only the geographical, but also the many affinities, and also the possibility to identify opportunities in some sectors and operating a very large scale market. Very, very strategic market, which is a Euro Mediterranean market. But in addition to, For me, integration has to happen at other levels. For example, human capital, we cannot continue having gaps in the quality of education, in the access to the labor market.

Not everyone is equipped with the same skills to really solve the problems of the 21st century. So improving the curriculum in different universities and given the youth which by the way is growing faster in the, in the south than in the north, given this youth the opportunity to acquire the skills they need to serve the labor market, and also to be able to have mobility and mobility, not only physical, but also mobility of knowledge.

That would be the best way to transform the region. So this is one of the areas that we work on. In addition to that, to the human capital component, I think also that everything that's related to the environment, whether it is water scarcity, or territorial resilience, or the energy transition is also key for the future of this region because the, the solutions must be found urgently.

For example, smart solutions to water scarcity. Both on, on the supply side with new non-traditional sources of water and on the demand side, making the

demand much more the users of the water much more efficient. That is urgent. It's not a, a wish or an aspiration. It's something we have to start doing right away.

And keeping track of that environment, protecting that environment so it's not farther degraded. And making sure that the rural areas that are really essential for the development of the region, where there are ecosystems that preserved biodiversity, that allow the rural population to have a livelihood and contribute to put security in the region.

All these issues require coordination. Again, it's not up to a country, only, whether it's the country in the north or in the south, to solve some of these issues. So we work in paralleling all these dimensions for us. All these are different dimensions of Mediterranean integration. It's not only economic, it's social, it's environmental, it's working together towards more growth and stability.

And I am sorry to also have to mention the resilience to conflict because unfortunately this region still suffers from conflict, conflict from Syria, conflict in Libia, in Palestine. And this affect the stability of the, of the region. And this send signals to investors - when they are going to invest in the south of the Mediterranean it is very important to have confidence. And some of these conflicts affect the stability in the region. So tremendous challenges at the same time, tremendous opportunities.

[00:09:47] **Stefan:** You just mentioned a term that I would like to ask you to explain for our listeners. You mentioned the non-traditional sources of water. What is meant with that?

[00:09:57] **Blanca:** Well, one of them is the desalinisation of sea water and this, we know that it's quite energy consuming.

So the important thing is to do it with renewable energy and to do it in a way that is sufficient and that it's affordable. So in the medium term we are gonna need to do that because the traditional water resources are not going to be sufficient, especially as the countries continue progressing and climate change triggers more droughts and waters scarcity. So this is already happening. There are a lot of investments and the transfer of technology and know how from those

that are doing on a regular basis and those that are just starting must happen. We already have some areas that are under water stress, several areas within the region, and this can destabilize the country and the region. So this is really an emergency.

[00:10:49] **Stefan:** And is this also the kind of knowledge exchange and skills building that you are working

on?

[00:10:56] **Blanca:** Yes. Well, we are working, as I was saying, on, on how to invest more in human capital, both by improving the curricula internationalizing them, making sure that there is mobility for the student that they can use not only their, the, they can use their certificate in other countries, but that they have the opportunity to have exchanges with other universities. And also that the content is adapted to today's needs in the labor market. For example, digitalization knowledge of of the digital solutions even including climate change components in the curriculum.

A curriculum that helps develop soft skills, also dialogue. This is not only about having a university degree, there is also professional and technical training that can become a solution to find a job in some cases. And is making sure that no one feels excluded because the, the population keeps growing at higher rates in some of southern Mediterranean countries, and you can think of the youth as the future. Because they will be the ones being educated and getting jobs and opening companies. Or if they don't have that chance, then you can see them as a burden and that could create exclusion and instability in the region. So the future of the region depends on the investments that we make on, on human capital, especially for the youth to access the labor market, not just in their country or their village or the region. But in other parts of the Mediterranean.

[00:12:27] **Jen:** Thanks. I really like that term, human capital. I, I never heard it before. It's so really, it really captures exactly what you can achieve by putting in this cooperation and education and providing equality and opportunities.

This is something I really like. So going back to, you mentioned that the, the Mediterranean is changing rapidly and that sometimes comes in different places with the opportunity for sustainable development to happen in a, in a negative

way. So maybe over exploitation of resources and activities. And I was wondering if that is an issue in the Mediterranean. Is it possible that sometimes it can become an unsustainable use? And, and do you see a role for the center of Mediterranean integration and preventing that from happen?

[00:13:13] **Blanca:** That is an excellent question. I believe that if you compare the data of GDP growth in the Southern Mediterranean countries, particularly the whole Middle East and North Africa area, you will see that those rates of growth are comparatively lower than other parts of the world. You can even see countries like Anisha. The last 10 years, growth has been decreasing and unemployment has been increasing. So in terms of GDP growth, the region is underperforming. And this is partly because they are not using all their assets. And among those assets, we talked about the youth and the human capital assets, but there is, they're also the natural assets.

And some countries in the region, by the way, export oil, but others are dependent on import of oil, but they have a lot of renewable energies and that is something that they could be exporting among themselves and also exporting to the EU. And I believe that particularly now with the what's happening in Ukraine, I think that countries have realized that being too dependent on one or two countries is not healthy. We realized that with the Covid. We realized that depending on imports from China, excessively was was not the best idea. It was very risky. And with the Ukraine Russia conflict, we realized the same regarding oil.

So I think that in countries in the South must, in their accounting of growth, They must take into account also the use of natural resources. And this is something that in economics is not always done within the GDP. Growth is all GDP per capita growth is what we need to measure, but we also need to measure whether or not we are growing or depleting natural resources, which is much more complicated to quantify, but it's possible.

I don't know if you have heard of the notion of the wealth of countries. That calculates growth or wealth in this case as the sum of GDP plus other variables. And among those variables are the natural capital variables. We, at the CMI, we promote such an approach, particularly because the countries in the Southern Mediterranean are very rich in, in renewable energies and in natural resources.

And this, again, if well protected and well used to trade with other countries could become also an element of transformation for the region. I mean, solar energy, eolic (wind) energy, et cetera.

[00:15:38] **Jen:** Yeah. And picking up on those types of energies, what sort of attitude do the countries have towards building infrastructure for those energy systems? Are they enthusiastic or...?

[00:15:49] **Blanca:** It's a very, very good question. I believe that they are open to those investments. However, the Interconnectors, for example, between the, the north and the south Mediterranean, they are relatively expensive investments. So they need to have support from the multi lateral institutions, such as the World Bank or the European Investment Bank.

But there is also the need for transfer of know-how and technologies, which may be more advanced in the EU. Towards those countries so that they can also contribute and they're not just receptors of investments, that they can participate in co-investment so that the local population can also benefit from it.

[00:16:28] **Jen:** Yeah. That's, yeah, it's just great to hear how, how things all connect across countries. And I'm thinking even more broadly outside of the Mediterranean. Does, is there a wider context to development and integration beyond the Mediterranean countries. Is there a sort of global benefit that we can have if these things work out in a positive way?

[00:16:50] **Blanca:** I believe that at the moment, Especially at the moment because of the Africa free Continental trade agreement that was signed in 2019, that remains still to be implemented with some delay due to Covid offers a great opportunity for the Mediterranean to position itself as a hub between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, so the stability and the growth of this region can have spillovers all across Africa, and also it can benefit tremendously the European Union. But the first winners of this transformation will be Mediterranean countries themselves. Also, I believe that if, if we are able to preserve the stability in this region, it could become an example for the rest of the world because it is like this region faces all challenges - climate change, forced migration, conflict. So if we manage to preserve the stability of the region, this could be, again, an example for the rest of the world.

And there are good practices. For example, the region has tremendous examples of hosting refugees especially those that escape the Syria crisis. And they have found the communities that have integrated them despite the difficulties in Lebanon, in Jordan, in Turkey. So there is also a lot of good examples, even though it becomes very challenging because the hosting countries themselves have their own issues of vulnerability, which you can find a lot of good good examples.

And this contributes to the stability of the region because otherwise, if this refugees cannot find a, a community where they can feel, included, this could be very, very distorting for the rest of the region. So yes, the stability of the Mediterranean affects the stability of Europe and the stability of the world, and they can be many positive spillovers with Sub-saharan Africa. You can think of countries like Morocco and Algeria that sometimes they become transit countries, but they can also be a hub, a digital hub, a financial hub, a migration hub for people coming from sub-Saharan Africa.

[00:18:52] **Jen:** Thanks for that.

So, yeah, I, I was wondering to maybe take a more personal reflection on your, your thoughts on, on the Mediterranean, because I guess you work in constant knowledge of so many different threats facing a place that you, you grew up in and that you love and you work in. What is it that gives you hope for the future of the mediterranean?

[00:19:13] **Blanca:** Sometimes it's difficult to, to visualize the transformation, and it's not uncommon that people lose hope. However, for me, I go back to the histories of this region and how many civilizations, coexisted, sometimes integrated, sometimes fought with each other for sure.

But at the end when you see the result in terms of the art, the architecture the literature even mathematics and culinary arts. You cannot help by seeing that as the mixture of all different civilizations. So even though this region has gone through a lot of episodes of war and conflict and disagreements and continues to experience these issues and the political dialogue, especially south South, it's is very, very difficult.

What gives me hope is to think that this conflicts happened also in the past, and at the end, in some cases, peace led to development and in some other development led to peace. So I wanna believe internally optimistic that this will be the case, that even countries that may appear to be in conflict may see that it's in their interest to negotiate and to work together.

And that's what keeps me hope. But at the same time, I'm realistic and I, I see that there are some serious bottlenecks to the dialogue in the region, especially South, South. And that's why I believe that the European Union is a very stable block and a very good example of regional integration can have a catalytic effect for the development of the Southern shore and can help as an example.

And also they can be bilateral agreements that can be concluded between countries in the south, in the European Union that could be perhaps scaled up or replicated. So there are many elements that give me hope, but I think the most important is to look back at what happened some ago and to see that despite all those conflicts, the result has been, for the most part, very rich.

Again, it's unity emerging from diversity.

[00:21:12] **Stefan:** Those challenges that you've mentioned, Peace, sustainable development or these goals, of course, things that really require all hands of deck require people to come together and to cooperate. What message would you share with somebody who's concerned about the Mediterranean region and who wants to do something actively in order to support the region to help protect the Mediterranean Sea as well?

[00:21:39] **Blanca:** I think that one message is that we need to act on different fronts. It's not just hope that the governments will take care of it, and they will talk to each other, which in some cases they, they don't do, We cannot expect that the multilaterals will solve all problems either. I think it has to be a partnership.

Public, private in it is very, very important to include the civil society. In some cases, a very young entrepreneurs that have great startup ideas that we can help incubate and grow. I think that working as a multi partner association for example, we also need the academics, the researchers that have great results that they have spent years working on.

But how to translate those results into policy action and how to have the beneficiaries, the youth and the civil society involved to make sure that those recommendations are on the right track. It's very important that we work as a multi-partner association with all the stakeholders, governments, private sector, civil society, NGOs, and of course the, the multilaterals that is the way it's gonna work.

I don't think that any of these actors by themselves can solve the problems.

[00:22:49] **Stefan:** Thanks. We've already learned a lot about the importance of co-operation, and that's something we've seen earlier conversations in the podcast too, that the sea is often something that unites people, that brings people together rather than to separate it.

One question that we often ask our guests here on, If Oceans Could Speak, is what's the one thing people should know about the mediterranean?

[00:23:13] **Blanca:** Yes. In fact I think in my answers I have not talked about the sea itself. I have talked about collaboration, but I have not talked about the sea. And if the, if the sea could speak, I believe that the, the speech would be a speech of unity and the sense that it would not recognize whether you are from the north or from the south.

It would focus on all the, all the richness that you can find in the sea. And it's not just the fish and all the beautiful beings that that you find in at the bottom of the sea, but also it is the boats that transport goods between the two shores. It is the people, unfortunately, some of them that are risking their lives.

So we decide whether it is the sea that unites us or at sea that separates us, and I want to believe that we can turn it into the sea that unites us. If together we are able to preserve the health of the ocean or the Mediterranean sea, the coast, we are able to decarbonize transport and make sure that all the transport does not deteriorate the quality of of the waters, making sure that the shores are all clean, that we actually think of the sea as bringing life to, to our countries, bringing the oxygen we need.

All the energy that comes from, from the sea, but that requires care. And this cannot be done by one country at a time. We need agreements on recycling. We

need agreements on responsible fishing. You know, we need to stop all the polluting practices that are taking place. And, and again, you need regulations and it is difficult to enforce regional regulations, but at least you can harmonize the national regulations.

It's gonna be very difficult to issue a regional regulation. But at least you can have a regional framework under which the national regulations and even the subnational regulations are all aligned. And I think that's the way to go because otherwise the dream of regional integration is not gonna happen. But you can make it happen with little wins like that.

To try to harmonize. Sometimes even the word collaboration is too strong, but at least try to align on those policies and, and have to have a minimum standard. I think that the objectives of national commitments to decarbonization that every country has made often, you know, tried to go in the direction of the EU policies will be key. They will be key to, to help all these countries decarbonize and also it will be key to protect the environment and to protect the health the sea.

[00:25:47] **Stefan:** Thank you so much. I think that was a really good summary. Also a realistic but optimistic outlook at the sea and realizing, of course, yes, there are serious terms as you mentioned, people risking their lives often losing their lives at Sea, Mediterranean, and at the same time, there's so much history and it's great to hear from you that there's also so much optimism for the future of the region. So thanks for sharing that personal view on your sea, on the Mediterranean.

[00:26:15] **Blanca:** Thanks to you for the excellent questions. It was wonderful talking to you.

[00:26:19] **Jen:** Yeah, it's been really great and I think you've given a really great overview of how things are interconnected and the power that we can have from, from cooperation and integration. So thank you so much for speaking with us today and we wish you the best of luck and all of your work going forward.

This podcast was brought to you by members of the EU4Ocean Coalition and was made by the If Oceans Could Speak, production team led by Anna Saito, co-organized by Penny Clarke and Arne Riedel, and presented and edited by



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Stephan Kirshner, Vera Noon, Agnes Nora, Anna Maria Marino, Pierre Strosser, Francisco Lopez Castejon, and me Jen Freer.

Thank you for listening, and with that, we've reached the end over Mediterranean journey and what a season it's been. I want to say a huge thank you to all of our hosts and guests that have joined us this season, and to all of our listeners who have tuned in. Until next time, there's nothing left to say except if the oceans had a voice, what would it say to you?

