
I. Sustainable Development and Coastal Fishing Communities

Small-scale fisheries play an important contribution to food security and poverty alleviation in many countries, particularly developing countries. They can be broadly described as employing labour-intensive harvesting, processing and distribution methods and techniques to fishery resources. Small-scale fisheries may operate at widely different organizational levels ranging from self-employed single operators through informal micro-enterprises to formal sector businesses, but they all provide employment opportunities and income generation to many people in coastal and rural communities, most of whom are poor.

However, for small-fisheries to contribute to sustainable development in communities in which they operate, fishing authorities need to develop innovative measures to address constraints that hinder the full potential of this important sector.

Small-scale fisheries’ constraints are often associated with governance and policy issues regarding access to, and control over, the aquatic environment and fishery resources. Lack of established rights for small-scale fishers encourages local overfishing and is a source of conflict between small-scale fisheries and industrial fishing fleets, as industrial fishing fleets often encroach in areas where small-scale fishers usually operate.

Where fishing rights are recognized for small-scale fishers, problems may arise from the exclusion of small-scale fishing communities from decision-making process that affects their livelihoods, lack of will by fishing authorities to enforce the rights of small-scale fishers against large commercial fleets, or preferential treatment given to industrial fisheries.

In addition, small-scale fishing communities are vulnerable to many external factors contributing to poverty, including economic factors such as market price fluctuations and variable access to markets, as well as climatic and natural events such as yearly seasonal fluctuations in stock abundance, poor catches, bad weather, natural disasters, and the dangers of working at sea.

All of these problems demonstrate the importance of improving policies and practices in order to reduce the vulnerability of small-scale fishers and to better defend their rights.

Thus, ensuring safety of small-scale fishing operations, resource allocation, and enforcement of the fishing rights of small-scale fishers and fair access to markets should be used to enhance the contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security and poverty alleviation.

In this regard, many developing coastal States have now taken measures to improve the national legal and policy frameworks within which small-scale fisheries operate, in order to improve the livelihoods of coastal fishing communities. Strategies to reduce vulnerability in small-scale fishing communities include: (1) officially recognizing and enforcing the rights of these communities to the fishery resources and the land they live on or use, and (2) developing fishers’ organizational capacity and introducing methods that facilitate their effective participation at local and national levels in decisions affecting the fisheries sector, their livelihoods and work conditions, in order to create a sense of ownership and accountability in the decision-making process.


In recognition of the importance of small-scale fisheries, a number of fisheries-
related international instruments have emphasized that the needs of fishing communities should be included among the environmental and economic factors that have to be taken into account by fisheries managers when devising fishery conservation and management measures in areas under national jurisdiction, or in respect of transboundary fish stocks.

With particular reference to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), article 61 of the Convention provides that the coastal State in establishing conservation and management measures in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), shall design measures to maintain fishery resources at levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield (MSY), as qualified by environmental and economic factors, including, inter alia, the economic needs of coastal fishing communities. Article 62 points out that in giving access to the surplus of allowable catch to other States in its EEZ, the coastal State shall take into account all relevant factors, including, inter alia, the significance of the fishery resources to its economy and its other national interests. It is understood that these national interests include the welfare of small-scale fisheries operating in areas under the national jurisdiction of the coastal State.

The 1995 United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA) also recognizes the interests of coastal fishing communities, artisanal and subsistence fishers in relation to the conservation and sustainable use of straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks. Article 5 of the Agreement includes the consideration of “the interests of artisanal and subsistence fishers” as being among the general principles that States must take into account in the conservation and management of straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks. Article 11 stresses also the importance for the Agreement to take into account “the needs of coastal communities which are dependent mainly on fishing for the stocks”, in determining participatory rights for new entrants of a subregional or regional fisheries management organization. In addition, Article 24 of the Agreement provides that all States to the Agreement should give full recognition to the special requirements of developing States in relation to the conservation and management of these stocks. The Agreement identifies such requirements as the need to avoid adverse impacts on, and ensure access to fisheries by, inter alia, subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fishers, women fishworkers, as well as indigenous people in developing States.

Last but not least, the United Nations General Assembly, in its annual resolution on sustainable fisheries, emphasizes that in order to achieve sustainable fisheries, States, relevant national and international organizations should provide for participation of small-scale fishery stakeholders in policy development and fisheries management strategies.¹

The foregoing demonstrates that the international community is particularly interested in improving the legal, social and economic environment within which small-scale fisheries operate, as expressed in the provisions of UNCLOS and UNFSA as well as the relevant resolution of the General Assembly.

DOALOS wishes to take this opportunity to congratulate the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) for convening this important Symposium. The Division wishes you full success in your deliberations. DOALOS is convinced that the outcome of this Symposium will contribute towards advancing the rights of fishworkers worldwide.  

¹ UNGA resolutions: A/RES/60/31, para. 5; A/RES/61/105, para. 12.