Small-Scale Fisheries: Too Important to Fail

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The Importance of Small-Scale Fisheries

According to some estimates,¹ small-scale fisheries constitute at least one-quarter of the world’s catches. When considering the number of people employed in fisheries, more than 90 percent of approximately 120 million people, including men and women in the South as well as in the North, involved in full-time and part-time harvest and post-harvest activities, are associated with small-scale fisheries.² Unlike large-scale fisheries, where a large portion of catches goes into reduction (e.g., for fishmeal production) and for non-consumptive uses, about 95 percent of small-scale fisheries catches are destined for human consumption. Thus, small-scale fisheries contribute significantly to global and local food security, employment both directly and indirectly related to fisheries, and to viable livelihoods. The importance of small-scale fisheries extends to culture and heritage, and in many instances, they offer a way of life to many people besides employment. Small-scale fisheries values include, among other things, community cohesion, social safety net, and resource stewardship.³ A recent trend in many places around the world is for small-scale fisheries to offer education and recreational opportunities for the general public as they visit fishing villages and enjoy the experience of being in fishing communities and eating locally caught fish. Because not all of the diverse values of small-scale fisheries are quantifiable, they are often underappreciated and easily dismissed, which could lead to eroding of communities and social safety net.

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¹ See the Sea Around Us Project website, http://seaaroundus.org.
² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (Rome: FAO, 2015).
³ D. Johnson, “The values of small-scale fisheries,” in Social Wellbeing and the Values of Small-scale Fisheries, eds., D. Johnson, T.G. Acott, N. Stacey and J. Urquhart (Switzerland: Springer, 2018).
In effect, small-scale fisheries are not just about the sector, but a system of interlinked activities and interdependent relationships, which provide diversity, stability, and flexibility for the communities in which they are embedded. The linkage goes both ways. Maintaining communities also provides an essential condition for small-scale fisheries to function and prosper. This is also important for sustaining the values and norms on which stewardship rests, and which makes it possible for communities to manage fisheries without external inputs from central governments or environmental organizations. When the moral fabric of communities dissolves, unsustainable fishing practices may occur and conflicts arise, and the collective action of communities is undermined. For communities to thrive through sustainable fisheries, trustful relationships must exist among small-scale fishers and other members of the communities whose contributions also count.

Some small-scale fishing communities follow a ‘sufficiency principle’ rather than a capitalistic logic of profit accumulation, thus expressing their awareness about the need to protect resources for the future. However, for many small-scale fisheries, having open access to fisheries resources and engaging in informal and unregulated employment provide people with a crucial safety valve. Neither of these should be seen only in negative terms, as something undesirable and that we should get rid of. In fact, they suggest that a blanket approach to control capacity in small-scale fisheries is not attuned to their characteristics and the diversified local situations. Rather than seeing fishing as an act of greed in the former case or as an illegal activity in the latter, small-scale fisheries operate according to the need for people to survive in situations where their livelihoods and food security are at stake. After all, one should keep in mind that pressure on resources is not all of their doing, but comes mostly from the uncontrolled development of industrialized fisheries around the world. If there is overfishing by numbers, closing the fisheries or reducing access may be necessary. But it should not be the first step. Many things can be done to curb overall fishing effort, such as re-distributing resources from large-scale to small-scale, which will not affect food security. Such a decision also aligns with the subsidiarity principle, which suggests that the people closest to the resources should be the one exploiting them.

Despite their impressive contribution and importance, small-scale fisheries are often in marginalized and disadvantaged situations. The conditions under which they are working are not always favorable to sustain their overall

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4 M. Bavinck and S. Jentoft, “Subsidiarity as a Guiding Principle for Small-scale Fisheries,” in World Small-Scale Fisheries: Contemporary Visions, ed., R. Chuenpagdee (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishing, 2011), 311–322.
position within the value chain. For the most part, small-scale fishing people face issues with insecure access to resources and their tenure rights are not recognized. As a consequence, they are displaced from their workplace, both on land and at sea. They are, in many cases, simply not able to ‘defend the beach’. Small-scale fisheries are also vulnerable to environmental change and other large-scale processes that affect their socio-economic conditions. They usually have little capital investment and assets that can help them in times of crisis. Moreover, they are often victims of unfair competition with industrial fisheries, in terms of supply chain and markets, and are often taken advantage of by moneylenders and traders who control prices.

From the governance perspective, small-scale fisheries are not only ignored in policy-making, but also have to bear the consequences of erroneous rules and regulations that discriminate against them in a way that makes their demise a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, if small-scale fisheries are considered by policy-makers to be a lost cause to begin with, e.g., they are a weight on society rather than an untapped possibility, the policies are likely to keep them in a situation for which they cannot thrive. An example of this can be found in the way subsidies are allocated within fisheries, which shows that as much as 84 percent of total fisheries subsidies (about US$35 billion in 2009) goes to large-scale fisheries. Further, of this amount, the majority is considered ‘harmful’ subsidies, while for small-scale fisheries a larger portion of subsidies is considered beneficial. One could imagine what situation small-scale fisheries would be in today if the ratio had been reversed. For this reason, the recently adopted Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) emphasize the need for states to implement re-distributive equity policies, taking into account the marginalized conditions of small-scale fishing communities.

The fact that small-scale fisheries around the world are struggling to maintain their existence is largely an issue of poor defense mechanisms, including lack of power, voice, representation, and lack of organization, which add to their vulnerability and marginality. The lack of engagement in policy-making processes where their working conditions are determined is a governance issue that can be corrected through political will and entrepreneurship. Thus, their position should be understood by a thorough analysis of how small-scale fisheries work in order to keep the possibility open that the observed governability problem resides in the governing system, and not in the social or

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5 A. Schuhbauer et al., “How Subsidies Affect Economic Viability of Small-scale Fisheries,” Marine Policy (2017): doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.05.013.
6 FAO, supra note 2 above.
natural systems where they operate. In other words, rather than assuming that the problems of small-scale fisheries are either ecological or social, we argue that the problems of small-scale fisheries are located in the governing system and their interactions.

**How Not to Fail**

Small-scale fisheries have been ignored for reasons that are not always clear. It is true that their large number and their social complexity create challenges and difficulties for governance. Because small-scale fishing people are largely owner-operators who enjoy their independence and freedom, they are not aligned with the government’s idea about efficiency. Thus, the general lack of interest and recognition of the sector may even be considered a deliberate act. For instance, acknowledging the values and importance of small-scale fisheries would imply policy measures that may lead to change in the distribution of resources and power, which would negatively affect large-scale fisheries and other influential sectors. The introduction of policies that do not bring out these values, but instead undermine small-scale fisheries capacity, serves to confirm the predisposition against them.

Small-scale fisheries are not only too big to ignore, but are also too important to fail. Recognizing their values and importance is therefore the first step in the process of making it possible for them to realize their contributions and become prosperous. That is partly an issue of knowledge and information. We simply need to know more about their characteristics, situations, and potentials, at local, national, regional, and global scales.

Here, the academic community has an important role to play. Small-scale fisheries research needs to be broad and holistic, and extend beyond a single discipline. It needs to build on and include the experience-based knowledge that small-scale fishing people possess, in a way that makes the research of small-scale fisheries transdisciplinary. It would also involve comparative research that sorts out how small-scale fisheries are different from place to place, and determines how these differences affect viability and sustainability.\(^7\)

These needs are being increasingly addressed globally, including through the *Too Big To Ignore Global Partnership for Small-Scale Fisheries* (TBTI).\(^8\)

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7. G. Bateson and M.C. Bateson *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
8. See *Too Big To Ignore*, Global Partnership for Small-Scale Fisheries Research website, http://www.toobigtoignore.net.
Such initiatives also speak to the need for researchers, practitioners, fishers’ organizations, environmental groups, and government agencies at various levels to work collaboratively in enhancing the profile of small-scale fisheries. This can start with identifying the main reasons why small-scale fisheries around the world underperform. Further, since good governance requires better data and a solid knowledge base, developing an information system specifically for small-scale fisheries is important, as is in-depth research to improve the overall understanding of small-scale fisheries, addressing the key questions mentioned above.

Further, small-scale fisheries need to be better organized and empowered so that they can play an effective and proactive role in their own governance. Improvement in governance requires attention to what Kooiman calls the three governing orders, i.e., day-to-day decision-making (first order), institutional design and arrangement (second order), and an articulation of values, images, and principles that inform behaviors and decisions (meta order). Opportunities for improvement must also be sought in any governing mode, be it hierarchical, co- and self-governance. In fact, recent research reveals a general tendency of governance reform and transformation in the direction of more participatory and cooperative forms of governance in small-scale fisheries. This is a positive movement relative to the ssf Guidelines, which suggest that what they regard as a necessary condition is already happening.

The ssf Guidelines are an important instrument for policy-makers and civil society organizations who share a vision of a positive future for small-scale fisheries. It is also an instrument that can help empower small-scale fishing people and their organizations in expressing their human rights, obtaining legitimacy, securing access to resources and markets, and gaining general recognition of their important contributions and inherent values. The implementation of the ssf Guidelines is now underway around the world. Thus, it is essential that the academic community pays attention to their uptake as well as actively contributes to its success. The ssf Guidelines recognize the important role that research may play in this process. Now it is up to the academic community to deliver.

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9 See Information System on Small-scale Fisheries website, https://issfcloud.toobigtoignore.net.
10 J. Kooiman, Governing as Governance (London: Sage, 2003).
11 S. Jentoft and R. Chuenpagdee, eds., Interactive Governance for Small-scale Fisheries: Global Reflections (Switzerland: Springer, 2015).
12 S. Jentoft et al., eds., The Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines: Global Implementation (Switzerland: Springer, 2017).