

A blue revolution to beat poverty

VIEWPOINT

Stephen Hall

Overfishing and poor management have left the world's seas in a sorry state, says Stephen Hall in this week's Green Room. But, he argues, fishing still holds the key to helping millions of people secure a better future.

The fruits of the seas, rivers and lakes played an increasingly important role in delivering food and nutrition to millions of impoverished people

The poor state of fish stocks in our seas and oceans could be seen as a deserved legacy of decades of overfishing on an industrial scale, and the lack of a robust global system to manage the world's waters.

For a growing number species, especially those appearing on dinner tables in the West, the only way to replenish stocks requires a complete ban on landing catches, marine scientists tell us.

They warn that anything less than keeping commercial fleets out of key spawning grounds is likely to drive certain fish to extinction and forever change the delicate dynamics of marine ecosystems.

It is against this bleak backdrop that politicians and government agencies have to rebalance economic development against environmental degradation.

'Radical change'

And here lies the problem; while environmentalists say less is more as far as fishing is concerned, many governments have made a commitment, through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to improve the lives of the millions of people in developing countries.

Yet, when the UN General Assembly reviewed progress towards the MDGs at the five-year mark last September, it concluded that we would fail to achieve the goals unless there was a radical change in our approach.

Even where fisheries are central to the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people and to the diets of millions, they are often absent from national development plans

Nowhere was this need for change more obvious than in sub-Saharan Africa where 2005 saw the spectre of famine re-emerge in parts of west, eastern and southern Africa.

But while crops and livestock withered and died in scorched fields and pastures, the fruits of the seas, rivers and lakes played an increasingly important role in delivering food and nutrition to millions of impoverished people.

For example, 200 million Africans eat fish regularly and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that fish provides 22% of the protein intake in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The prognosis is not hopeless; across the continent, people in both urban and rural areas are seizing new opportunities to improve their lives.

Enterprises are developing at all levels, using new technologies and improved access to growing markets. These initiatives provide employment and income for millions of families.

'Huge potential'

Over the coming decade, developed nations must support and develop this entrepreneurial spirit as the engine of growth for much of Africa, and one area that has huge potential for Africa is fisheries and aquaculture.

Research shows just how important carefully targeted investments in improved management of fisheries and application of new small-scale aquaculture technologies can be in improving income, nutrition and health in Africa.

For example, an investment of \$30m (£15m) in a recently launched Programme for Sustainable African Aquaculture alone could increase Africa's aquaculture production by 10% annually to about three million tonnes over the next 15 years.

This would produce some \$1-2bn (£0.5-1bn) in revenue, create employment for up to five million by 2020, and provide food security for millions more. It could also produce annual exports valued at \$50-100m by 2020.

In much of Africa, the opportunities presented by fisheries and aquaculture have, in recent years, been widely neglected in the policy debate and are largely absent from development investments.

Even where fisheries are central to the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people and to the diets of millions, they are often absent from national development plans and from food security and nutrition strategies.

The good news is that this neglect is beginning to be recognised and acted upon. For example, Presidential initiatives on fisheries and aquaculture in Malawi and Nigeria show that African leaders have now recognised the potential of the sector for Africa's development. The challenge now is to build on this political commitment.

Many would argue that Africa has not yet seen the green revolution, but it is now the time to catch up and make sure that it does not miss the blue revolution that is now in progress elsewhere.

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