

Key Messages

- Improving the governance and management of fisheries exploitation is the principal means of securing the contribution wild capture fisheries to food security.
- The fisheries policies of tomorrow need to include not only data on environmental issues and fisheries resources, but also be complemented with research data on the patterns and dynamics of fish trade, value chains and end user consumption.
- To distribute the benefits of fishing more equitably, the responsibility for management and decision making should be devolved to the level where the incentives for fisheries to meet the widest community objectives are highest.
- For fisheries reform and policy implementation to be successful, primacy should be given to honest inclusive stakeholder dialogue.
- As fisheries do not exist in isolation, multi-sectoral perspectives and approaches need to be developed and supported.

There is a growing recognition that the fisheries policies of the past have been driven primarily by environmental and economic research agendas. This may have been due to the influence of the more powerful actors in the fisheries policy debate: foreign governments, conservation organizations, the scientific establishment, development bodies, and finance institutions. The actors without a voice at the table have been the millions of small-scale fishers, less educated, less organized, and with little economic or political weight.

This is not to say that all fisheries policies in the past have been failures. Far from it. Although the latest FAO assessment (for 2009) of the status and trends of world fisheries states that 30% of stocks were over-exploited, depleted or recovering, with a moderately increasing trend in the proportion of over-exploited stocks over the past 20 years, not all and every fishery is in a state of terminal decline. There is, however, a general consensus that the current status of global fish stocks does give cause for concern.

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In particular, our knowledge of stock status in South, East and Southeast Asia is poor as insufficient data has so far been collected and analyzed. The situation for freshwater or inland stocks is also less well understood than for their marine counterparts. However, current evidence showing a decline in the mean size and age of the catch suggests heavy fishing pressure. Although the precise status of both

marine and inland fisheries remains uncertain, there is little doubt that current global production is at, or close to, the limits that natural systems can provide.

Although aquaculture has been touted as a game changer for supplying the fish the world needs, recent analysis of data shows clearly that the countries in the world that are most dependent on fish to meet the nutritional requirements of their populations depend on wild capture fisheries for their supplies; and most of these countries are in the developing world. Although aquaculture continues to grow, there is no immediate prospect that it can replace capture fisheries because it is currently a relatively small contributor to total supply in these highly fish dependent countries. This is particularly true for most of the African and Small Island Developing states. Although recent aquaculture growth rates for some of these countries are among the fastest in the world, the low starting base makes it unlikely they will make a major contribution to national fish supplies in the next 10 to 15 years, even under ideal conditions. Thus, although aquaculture will grow, there is no immediate prospect that it will replace any losses of local wild fish. Therefore, wild capture fisheries will remain critically important to food security in many developing countries.

Although policies to control the production side of fisheries are crucial for maintaining sustainable supplies, relatively little emphasis has been placed by policy makers on the essential role of fisheries in our food supply system and the contribution they make to nutrition security and human welfare. In order for these aspects to be incorporated the research agenda needs to be broadened to include these dimensions. This is especially true, given the well-documented complexity of the links between food production, availability, entitlement and access.

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One of the obstacles to this inclusion is the inherent complexity in small-scale fisheries compared to their large-scale counterparts. This is, to no small extent, due to the wide variety of ecological environments, fish stocks, fishing methods, and the characteristics and requirements of the fishers themselves. For small-scale fishers, fishing is frequently part of a highly diversified livelihood strategy—a reality that is often be ignored in policy development. Of the approximately 45 million people engaged in fishing many are part time rather than full time fishers, and a further 6 million are estimated as only occasional fishers or farmers. For many fishing is a 'safety net' income source when experiencing temporary or seasonal hunger, or unexpected unemployment.

Policies formulated for an open ocean trawling fleet whose catch is primarily destined for an export market need to differ substantially from those prepared to best manage the catch from an inshore canoe fishery serving local consumers and a regional trade in dried fish. Again, a different set of policies and management will be

needed for a lake fishery exploited by part time fishers, many of whom migrate to the lake seasonally as part of a diversified livelihood strategy. The key concept to be drawn from this is that small-scale fisheries are extremely context specific, and a one-size-fits-all set of fishery policies will generally be inappropriate; hence policies and management plans need show sensitivity to the details that differ from one fishery to another.

Where it is recognized that the primary function of small-scale fisheries is to provide healthy, nutritious and affordable food to those most in need, to improve food security and reduce poverty, fisheries policies can be framed to support these objectives rather than being aimed only at increasing sustainable yield and raising economic returns.

To help navigate the challenges of future fisheries reform and promote a broader and more inclusive set of policies based both on environmental and sociological criteria, four guiding principles are recommended.

1 Appropriate level for decentralization

The first principle considers the degree of decentralization of management and decision making that would be optimal—from central government to regional, community or local level. These key activities should be carried out at the level where the incentives for fisheries to meet the broadest set of shared community objectives are highest. In some states this could reasonably remain at the central government level, while in many developing countries decentralization to regional or local government or even to community level will often deliver the most favorable results.

It is important that within this devolution of responsibilities the wider context of political accountability is kept in mind; even local level or traditional authority elites are not immune from bias and self interest. Also, for devolution of management responsibilities to be successful, the stakeholders must possess the necessary knowledge and skills, and be granted the authorization to carry out management tasks. Without the necessary empowerment, prospects for successful long term reforms are weak. Formal analysis of incentive structures and institutional relationships will therefore be of great value in helping to decide on the appropriate level for decentralization, rather than the narrow adoption of any particular “off-the-shelf” community management model.

2 Primacy of stakeholder dialogue

The second principle is to give primacy to fully inclusive stakeholder dialogue over both the direction of future fisheries policy changes and how implementation will occur. ‘Dialogue’ is used to mean a genuine open two-way conversation and exchange of views designed to solve problems through collaboration, rather than a “consultation” used to legitimize a pre-selected technical solution. Failure to respect the needs and concerns of stakeholders significantly reduces the probability of a successful outcome.

3 Take the whole value chain into account

The third principle is to complement the data from current environmental and stock-based fisheries research with data that explains what happens to the fish after it has been landed. This includes data on processing, marketing, the value chain, and the behavior of the consumer when offered variations in product quality and price. This information will provide insight into how access and entitlement can be promoted to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable groups such as young children or nursing mothers.

4 Incorporate fisheries in a multi-sectoral perspective

Fisheries do not exist in isolation. Decisions taken in other areas of government or business have the potential to affect both fisheries resource sustainability and the well-being of the people who depend on them, both positively or negatively. Developments in infrastructure, new roads linking fish landing sites to markets, social safety nets, insurance schemes, access to banking and credit, issues of public health and labor market reforms can all have important impacts. This demands that fisheries policy reform is incorporated into the broader spectrum of rural development policy and that fisheries are viewed from a multi-sectoral perspective. Critical to this is bringing fisheries governance and economic development considerations together, for example through representation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

Harnessing research that makes a difference

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