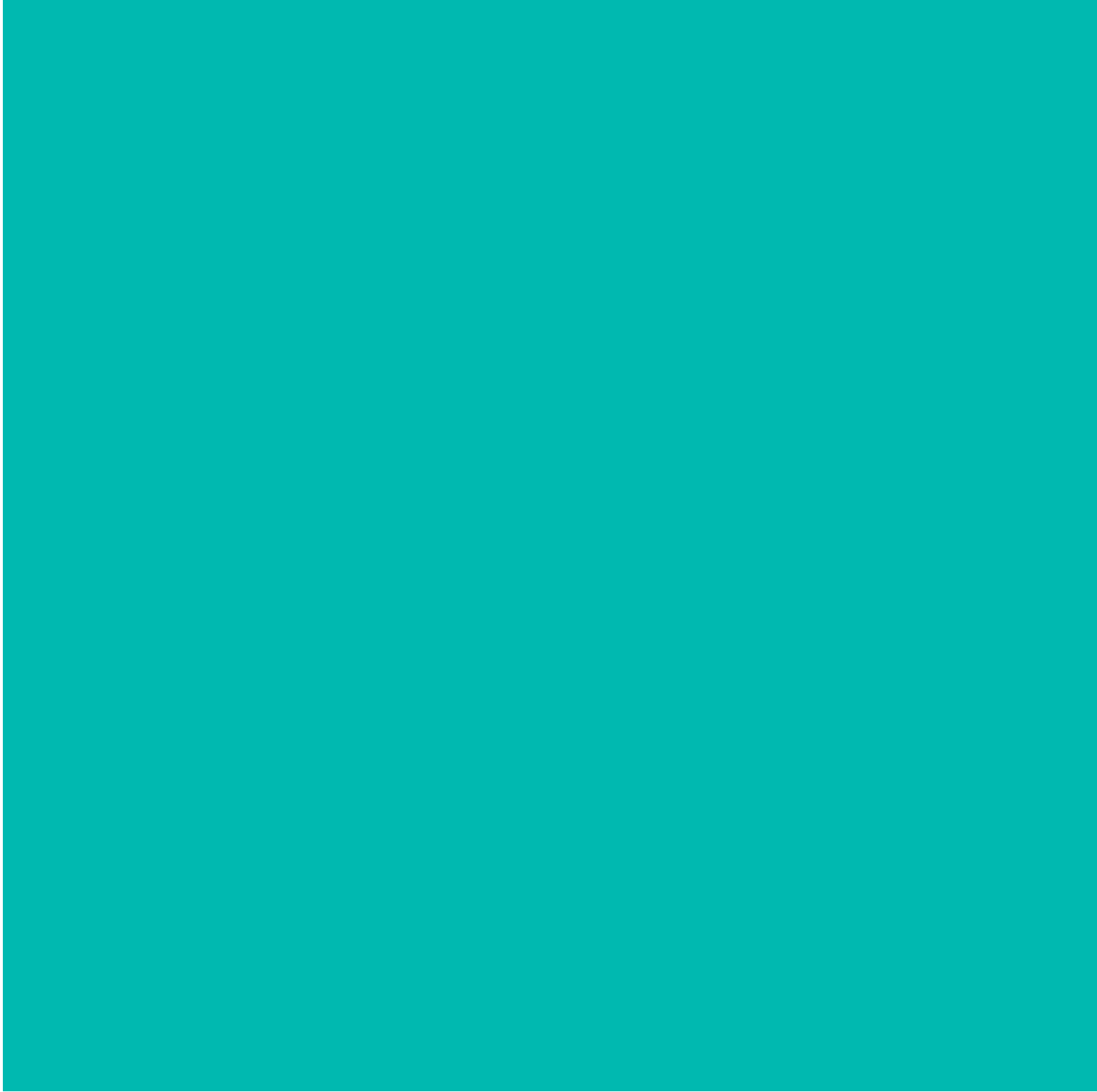




# SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES

Their Contribution to Food Security,  
Poverty Alleviation and Sustainability





# Who are the small-scale fishers and fishworkers?

Small-scale fisheries currently employ over 90 per cent of the world's fishers and fishworkers engaged in catching, processing, trading and marketing fish. About half of these are women. Small-scale fisheries contribute about half of global fish catches. When considering catches destined for direct human consumption, the share contributed by this sub-sector increases to two-thirds. Small-scale fishing and related activities often underpin the local economies in coastal, lakeshore, riverine and other riparian communities and constitute an engine, generating work and income in other sectors,

through forward and backward linkages. In many instances, fishery activities may be part-time and seasonal in nature, providing an important additional source of food and income in many communities.

Although fishing is generally regarded as men's work, women play a vital, but often hidden role. They comprise up to 90 per cent of the workforce in upstream "secondary activities", such as buying and selling, processing, and related marketing activities, referred to as the "post harvest sector". In many regions of the world women are engaged in gathering or otherwise harvesting shellfish and seaweeds from the shore. They engage, to a lesser extent, in fishing, especially in inland and inshore waters. At the same time, and particularly given that men are often away fishing, women remain responsible for sustaining and maintaining the fishing household as well as the social and cultural fabric of their communities. Women's work, however, tends to be either poorly remunerated or non-remunerated.



For millions of people around the world small-scale fisheries is a socially and culturally fulfilling way of life.

# Diversity and common characteristics for securing sustainability

Small scale fisheries include a huge diversity of activities, which vary widely between different regions. This makes it hard to arrive at a universal definition, other than very generalized ones based on common characteristics. Common characteristics include:

- Largely a household enterprise undertaken as a way of life, where women play a significant role
- Fish caught is for direct human consumption. Activities where the catch is destined for animal feed, oil, fertilizer and other non-food uses are generally not considered as part of small-scale fisheries.
- Relatively small craft and small amounts of fishing equipment are used, employing “passive” techniques and non-mechanized means of gear retrieval, with relatively low capital investment, low energy use, and low negative environmental impacts.
- Fishing operations are highly diverse, both seasonally and geographically, and tend to be more skill than technology dependent. They rely on skills and knowledge acquired over generations, which need to be learned from an early age, and which rely on extensive local ecological and meteorological knowledge.
- Fishing operations are carried out relatively close to shore, and are of short duration (less than 24 hours). Notable exceptions exist where operations may last several days, with vessels venturing beyond national boundaries into international waters and waters of neighbouring states.
- Remuneration is largely based on an agreed share of the catch, rather than a fixed wage. This “share system” may extend to workers engaged in pre- and post-fish catching activities, and may also provide an important customary social security mechanism for the old, handicapped, widows and orphans.
- Access to fishing grounds is often regulated by customary rules and regulations. These may govern who is allowed to fish where, when, and with what kinds of equipment.

- The fish catch is traded and processed locally, providing affordable food to dispersed, often rural consumers, thus making an important contribution to local food security. However, the catch is now also being sent to distant and export markets, where consumers may be attracted by the freshness and quality of catch from small-scale fisheries.

- Women are often an integral part of the pre- and post-harvest activities, notably marketing and processing.

- There is considerable financial dependence on middlemen and those who buy the fish catch, and who may also provide loans for both fishing and household needs. Middlemen often use this dependence to exploit fishers, demanding exclusive access to their catch and poorly remunerating them. This dependence is

now reinforced by increasing capital needs for motorization and adoption of larger craft and greater amounts of fishing gear

- Fishery activities (fishing, processing and marketing) may be part-time and seasonal, and combined with work in agriculture, trade and other occupations

- Compared with other sections of society, fishing communities are relatively socially-insular, economically-disadvantaged and with a high degree of dependence on fishery resources and fishing related employment.

- Fishing communities, many of which live in remote and isolated locations, with poor infrastructure and services, are often plagued by high levels of poverty.





Small-scale fisheries play an important role in achieving the twin and inter-related goals of poverty eradication and food security. They contribute more directly to attaining these goals than larger scale, more intensive semi-industrial and industrial fisheries. Some reasons why these small-scale fisheries are so important are:



## Food security

Fish provides an irreplaceable source of protein and other nutrients vital for human health. It provides at least 20 per cent of the animal protein intake of three billion people (around 43 per cent of the world's population). It is an indispensable source of, vitamins, minerals, and polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids generally not found in staple foods. For people living in remote and isolated fishing communities, local small-scale fishery production provides a vital and affordable source of food. The contribution that fish can make to the nutritional status of young children and lactating women is particularly significant.

## Contribution to local economic development

Small-scale fisheries provide employment, both directly and indirectly, often in areas with few alternative employment opportunities. Fish catching generates employment in "upstream" post harvest activities including processing, trade, transport and marketing, and in "downstream" and ancillary activities of gear making and repairing, vessel construction, electronics, equipment supplies, etc. For every fishing job, 4 to 6 jobs are created ashore. Small-scale fishery activities distribute the benefits derived from fishery resources in a more equitable and spatially dispersed manner than industrial fisheries. In many situations small-scale fisheries provide an important social and economic safety net, by providing an activity to fall back on when other activities fail. This is particularly important in areas suffering from famine, drought, war, and other natural or human induced disasters.

## Foreign exchange earnings

Small-scale fisheries can and do make significant contributions to national economies through the generation of foreign exchange from international trade. Growing consumer preferences in the developed world for fish which is caught using eco-friendly methods provides an important market niche for small-scale fisheries. However, increasingly stringent hygiene standards and requirements for traceability provide barriers against products from small-scale fisheries. There are also potential conflicts between supplying export markets on the one hand, and meeting local food security needs on the other which must be addressed.



## Knowledge Base

Small-scale fishing communities have a substantial knowledge base of local ecosystems, fish behaviour, meteorological and oceanographic conditions, accumulated over time and passed on from generation to generation. This knowledge is often codified in the form of sayings, proverbs, and songs and sometimes exhibited in customary practices which may be shrouded in ritual. This local knowledge is also reflected in the technological innovations in craft and gear design and use. It has proved to play an important role in reducing accidents and loss of life, especially during natural disasters such as cyclones, tidal surges and tsunamis.

# Why are small-scale fisheries important?



## Cultural significance

Fishing and seafaring provide an important way of life marked by a sense of adventure and independence; and a cultural heritage, with literature, music, drama, sport, and gastronomy. This heritage is preserved and regenerated in small-scale fishing communities; providing a strong sense of identity and cohesion in these communities. Fishing culture and associated social institutions also play an important role in generating respect for fishery ecosystems and in promoting the conservation of biodiversity.

In the culture and belief systems of many indigenous and local fishing communities the land and sea are interrelated, undifferentiated systems, an understanding which can contribute meaningfully towards implementing an ecosystem approach to fisheries. For these communities secure access to and control over their lands and the waters are integrally linked to the protection and promotion of their traditional knowledge systems, customary systems of law and their cultural identity.



# What are the challenges facing small-scale fisheries?

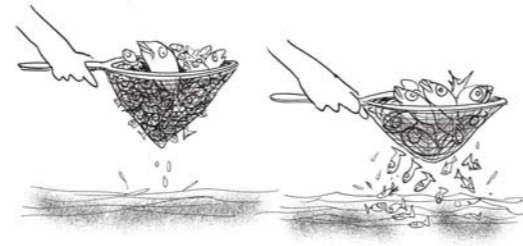
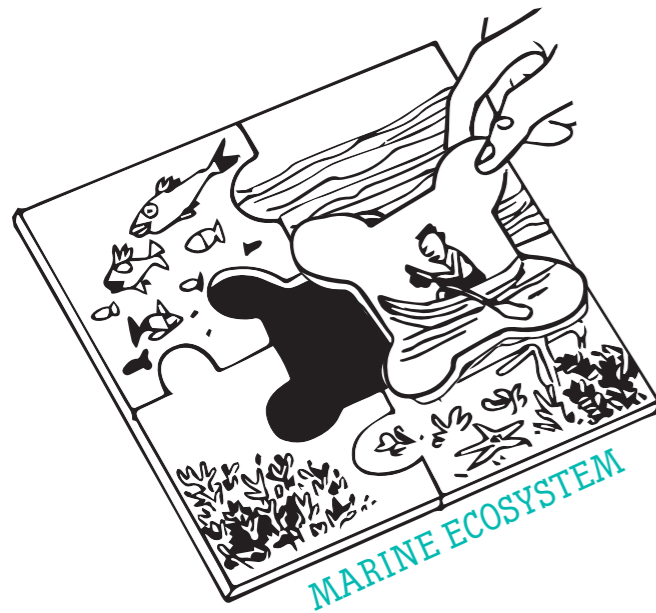
Living and working conditions in small scale fisheries are often precarious and far from satisfactory, for reasons that include:

- Small-scale fishworkers are often on the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder, and are therefore open to exploitation;
- Inadequate returns to labour, poor access to markets and exploitation by moneylenders, where credit is used to secure catches and drive down prices, effectively trapping fishers in a cycle of debt.
- Poor access to basic services such as education and health and to social security
- Weak organizational base (e.g. the lack of well-functioning co-operatives; associations and unions)
- Insecure tenure rights/ loss of rights to lands that have customarily been used for housing, occupational and other purposes by fishing communities
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- Insecure rights/ loss of rights to access fisheries resources in inland, coastal and marine areas due to competition from industrial fleets, and other activities (real estate, aquaculture, tourism, energy generation, petroleum extraction, mining etc.), displacing fishworkers from their fishing grounds. Recent trends towards privatization of access rights and establishing markets for trading fishing rights have similar consequences. Such "resource grabs" are akin to land grabs affecting small farmers.
- Top-down conservation initiatives that establish marine parks and protected areas that exclude small-scale fisheries
- Pollution and degradation of natural habitats and vulnerability to natural disaster and climate change.

# Are small-scale fisheries **sustainable**?

As a general rule, small-scale fisheries are more sustainable than industrial fisheries, given their relatively lower destructive impact on the environment, lower energy use, selectivity of the gear used, and lower by-catch, among other aspects. However, several aspects of small scale fisheries give cause for concern. These include:

- The use of destructive fishing practices, including poisons, explosives, and fine-meshed nets.



- A growing tendency to adopt energy-intensive and highly efficient gears and technologies that have led to the blurring of the divide between small-scale and industrial fisheries (for example the use of mini-trawls and ring seines).

The sub-sector needs to urgently find a way to address such internal challenges where they exist. Ignoring them would, in effect, mean that the small-scale sector would lose what are really its inherent strengths—its capacity to contribute to food security, poverty alleviation and sustainability. If the several challenges before the sub-sector, both internal and external, are effectively addressed, there is little doubt that small-scale fisheries can provide the most sustainable model for developing fisheries in ways which address multiple objectives.

The FAO-led process to develop International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) could be relevant in this context. Using a human rights approach, the Guidelines seek to address the challenges faced by the sector and to enhance the already important role of small-scale fisheries and the contribution they make to global and national efforts towards the eradication of hunger and poverty. The adoption and implementation of the Guidelines could well help secure the future for small-scale fisheries in particular and for sustainable fisheries in general.

