

No way to transfer fish quotas

By experimenting with different forms of quotas for its cod fishery, Norway is ignoring the lessons of other countries

The existence of stocks of Arctic cod forms the basis of the settlements in the northern part of Norway. The end of the 1980s saw a sharp decline in these stocks due to extensive trawling. This led to heated debates in the country on responsible fishing and the future structure of the fishing fleet.

As part of the debate, the government proposed to introduce individual transferable quotas (ITQs) in the fishery. These sought to ensure an 'optimal allocation of resources' in the context of the overcapacity of the fishing fleet resulting from the decline in stocks. ITQs were meant to eliminate the need for detailed management of the fishery, leaving it to the market and the industry to allocate fishing rights—a sort of 'stock market' for fishing quotas, with certain restrictions to safeguard the smallest boats and ensure regional distribution.

The government held up Iceland and New Zealand to showcase the advantages of ITQs. It was claimed that the numbers of fishermen were reduced and where fishing rights tended to get concentrated in a few hands, limits were set on the transfer of quotas from one fleet or region.

The Norwegian fishing industry's reactions to the concept of ITQs were diverse. The trawl owners argued that the restrictions would inhibit the proper functioning of the system. "We need bigger markets and fewer restrictions on the transfer of quotas between the fleet groups," said Audun Marak, secretary general of the trawl owners' union.

Environmentalists and the small-scale fleet reacted in the opposite fashion. "Privatization of fishing rights will only allocate them to the capital intensive fleet," said Bente Aasjerd, spokesperson

for the Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature. The organization also warned that a quota which is sold is legally protected by the constitution. If, at a later stage, the government wishes to cut quotas, it might have to buy them back from boatowners in order to execute the necessary regulations. Einar Hepsoe, the leader of the fishermen's union, called the proposed set-up a "tragedy for the coast".

The coastal people can not accept the idea that someone should own the fish in the ocean. Fish was a common resource and the fishermen fished on behalf of the community as a whole, and not as owners of the resource. This fact has been an important part of Norwegian culture.

The debate spotlighted certain events in Norway's history, like the 'Trollfjord battle' of 1989, when a steamboat had set up a net, closing the mouth to the narrow Trollfjord in Lofoten. This infuriated the hundreds of fishermen outside the area of the net. They attacked the steamer whose crew retaliated with jets of steam from the boat's engine. But the fishermen managed to break through.

That incident led to the banning of purse-seining in Norwegian cod fisheries. The Trollfjord battle became a symbol of the common rights to fish resources.

Idea abandoned

The pressure on the Labour Party government against ITQs grew and during the election campaign in the fall of 1991, the idea was abandoned. The experiences of other countries suggest that this may have been a wise step. Iceland, which was the Norwegian government's prime example, has seen a drastic rise in its trawler fleet and a drop in fish resources. The ITQ system makes it more tempting to fish in the high seas, where the quotas are

'free'. The Icelandic trawler fleet is now fishing Norwegian Arctic cod beyond Norway's 200-mile EEZ.

This has been strongly opposed by the Icelandic coastal fishermen too, not only for moral reasons but also because money made from high-seas fishing is used to buy up quotas from a coastal fleet in economic difficulty. ITQs thus favour the big, mobile fleet and forms yet another threat to the small-scale fleet.

When the ITQs were stopped, the Norwegian government settled for a system of boat-quotas. Depending on its size, each boat gets a certain quota. This closure of the commons has led to severe problems in recruiting for the coastal fleet. People used to enter fishing by starting out with a small boat, fishing in the evenings or on weekends and holidays, to first get a feel of the skill.

But now that fishing rights are given only to registered vessels, this option is unavailable. Very few youngsters can afford to buy a vessel with fishing rights, which is much more expensive than one without a quota.

In a way, the system still is one of transferable quotas. The only difference is that quotas from several vessels can not be now bought and acquired for a single large vessel nor can one person own many vessels.


Now that this system has been in operation for a few years, its weaknesses have become clear. It takes away from the coastal communities the control over the transfer of their own knowledge.

Today, the skills needed to become a fisherman must be 'bought' from the school system. It is much more difficult to start up as a coastal fisherman since you must put up with three years of expenses at 'school', in addition to the annual expenses on boat and gear.

The new system also threatens society in another way. In small communities, people combined fishing with farming or other skills like plumbing or electrical work. When fishing is closed, many of them move out to bigger regional centres. The communities they leave behind end

up having to pay more for the services of these other skills. The municipality also loses tax that these craftsmen would have otherwise paid.

Traditionally, local fishing grounds in Norway have been managed by the community as a whole. When this system breaks down, the small fisherfolk no longer have a voice and the management is left to larger coastal vessels like the Danish seiners.

Open access to fish resources is the backbone of Norwegian coastal culture. Limits must therefore be set on the capitalization and the efficiency of fishing fleets. Only this will ensure flexibility for the community at large and not just power for the rich few. 

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