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Comment

Going green about the gills

It takes two hands to clap and when these belong to giants like the multinational Unilever and the high-profile World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the result could be a thunderclap. Precisely such a blast can be expected from the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) planned by these two organizations.

Unilever, with global sales of US\$ 900 million in fish products and a 20 per cent share of the European and US frozen-fish market, is teaming up with an environmental NGO to 'ensure the long-term viability of global fish populations and the health of the marine ecosystems on which they depend.' The move has received great media attention in the UK. A columnist in *The Times* said that 'These last years of the century are giving birth to a new alliance: a type of ruthless, unsentimental, large-scale action which entirely bypasses governments. After years of mutual suspicion and tension, the environmentalists and the industrialists, the sandals and the suits, are working things out together...' *The Daily Telegraph* hailed the MSC as "one of the most significant initiatives to halt fish stocks decline since Iceland went to war over cod in the 1970s."

Are these claims justified? Perhaps in a situation of monopsony, with Unilever the sole buyer of fish, the MSC may help seal up the global wholesale market. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the real world. The Japanese consumer market for fish, by far the world's largest, remains totally outside the influence of the Anglo-Dutch giant. So do the retail markets of the 'Asian Tigers.' As an initiative to 'bell' the market for long an elusive link in fisheries management the MSC is welcome, especially if it complements existing fisheries regulations and instruments. Arguably, fishers who use ecofriendly gear like gill-nets, long lines, traps and pots might benefit from the MSC. If competitive conditions prevail in their domestic markets, they will realize better incomes from 'green' fishing operations.

This, however, does not mean that fish thus caught will replace those caught by non-green, 'dirty' methods. At best, a niche market for ecoconsumers will develop. Like buying organically grown vegetables, the consumer will be able to choose fish with a 'green' stamp. This implies a greater product differentiation in the market, though not the elimination of 'dirty' fish. Ultimately, both 'green' and 'dirty' fish will co-exist. Tampering with only the market mechanism, therefore, will produce only partial results.

If the real interest is the long-term sustainability of marine resources, then more needs to be done. Any measure of sustainability should also include social criteria that reflect the livelihood interests of the majority in fishing communities. Moreover, it should recognize existing fishing technologies that are selective. The principles of sustainable fisheries ought to be developed through consensus. The MSC should not unfairly penalize fishers who use 'dirty' fishing techniques. It should also give them an incentive to switch to ecofriendly methods, with perhaps some kind of income support.

The MSC initiative, however, has not won the total confidence of fishing communities, either in the South or the North, because of their great distrust of Unilever. Many consider the multinational giant to be a wolf in sheep's garb. To be sure, sustainability may make good business sense, but Unilever could just as well have waited for the sustainability criteria to ripen on its own, before exploiting it for its corporate interests. In any case, the idea would have been taken far more seriously by fish workers' organizations had WWF consulted them before plunging in.

It is too early to get overexcited about the MSC or to say if it will actually halt the decline of fish stocks, given that it may finally apply potentially to only about a quarter of global fish production. As one commentator indicates, the MSC points to the future of fisheries management. So far, such efforts have been lackadaisical. Unless the stakeholders, especially fish workers, are consulted and encouraged to participate in management programmes, the state and democratic institutions will only get more marginalized through market-led initiatives. We would like to tether the market and make it more accountable, but we can not view market intervention as the only path to sustainable fisheries. Meanwhile, given the ideologically charged and conflicting stances, it is hardly surprising that both, critics and proponents of the MSC are going green about the gills.