

Small-scale but Important

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, answers questions on his report on fisheries and the right to food

What are the key recommendations of the report?

The report recommends a nuanced approach that addresses the huge threat of overfishing and marine degradation, while taking into account the importance of fish protein and fisheries-based income for many food-insecure communities in developing countries.

In regard to overfishing and the depletion of stocks, the report calls for existing treaties to be applied. The Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate

industrial distant-water fleets across the world. Stronger oversight mechanisms must be attached to LAAs in order to tackle illegal and unreported catch, while labour rights must be strengthened on fishing vessels. Furthermore, the report urges the conclusion of LAAs only on the basis of human-rights impact assessments, to be prepared with the assistance of flag States.

In parallel to these regulatory challenges, more must be done to actively support the livelihoods of small-scale fishers and the access to fish protein of food-insecure communities. The report recommends five measures to achieve this: the creation of exclusive artisanal fishing zones for small-scale fishers and greater oversight of incursions by industrial fleets; support for small-scale fishers' co-operatives in order for them to rise up the value chain; the establishment of co-management schemes to manage fishing resources locally; the avoidance of large-scale development projects, for example, sand extraction, that adversely affect the livelihoods of small-scale fishers; and the inclusion of fisheries and small-scale fishers in national right-to-food strategies.

What is the relevance of the report to small-scale fisheries and fishworkers?

The report highlights the crucial contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security, and urges governments to be supportive of this sector and to work *with* small-scale fishers to co-manage fish stocks and marine environments. The report recalls that some 12 mn small-scale fishers operate in coastal and inland marine

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Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing—the first binding agreement of its kind, adopted in 2009—must be implemented, while taking into account the role of occasional fishing as a safety net in times of crisis for some coastal communities, and recognizing the essential difference between unreported fishing by small-scale fishers and illegal industrial fishing.

Implementation of the Johannesburg Plan of Action, which mandates the reduction of States' fishing capacities and the creation of marine protected areas, must be urgently achieved.

Meanwhile, attention must be paid to Licence and Access Agreements (LAAs), which govern the activities of

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areas across the world, deriving vital income and dietary protein from fisheries in a way that contributes crucially to the food security of whole communities. Data shows that small-scale fishers actually catch more fish per gallon of fuel than industrial fleets, and discard less fish. The contribution of the small-scale fisheries sector tends to be obscured by national statistics because of under-reporting, particularly in developing countries.

The small-scale fisheries sector, therefore, is an extremely important, albeit undervalued, source of livelihoods, providing employment and income to millions of people, including women in the post-harvest sector. But it also plays an important safety-net function. In times of crisis, often caused by failing agriculture, conflict or recession, fishing provides important part-time or temporary income or relatively free food, and the increased price volatility of food commodities created by climate change and other factors could make this role played by fisheries even more important in the future.

The goal of the report is to reaffirm the importance of the sector, and the need to take it into account in food and fisheries policymaking.

The report advocates for a human-rights approach in fisheries. Why is such an approach important and what will it mean in concrete terms? How will it change ‘business as usual’?

Fisheries contribute to food security and the realization of the right to food in two crucial ways: directly by providing fish for people to eat, especially low-income consumers, improving both food availability and the adequacy of diets; and indirectly by generating income from the fisheries sector.

Globally, 54.8 mn people are engaged in capture fisheries and aquaculture, and approximately three times as many are involved in upstream and downstream activities (for example, fish processing, selling, netmaking and boatbuilding). Small-scale fisheries predominate

in developing countries, wherein most fishing-related employment resides. Industrial boats employ about 200 people for every 1,000 tonnes of fish caught, while small-scale fishing methods (used by 90 to 95 per cent of people in the fisheries sector) employ about 2,400 people for the same amount of fish. This greater labour intensiveness has led experts to conclude that the small-scale fisheries sector is particularly pro-poor. Women comprise about half of the global fisheries workforce, typically concentrated in the pre- and post-harvest sector.

Fish consumption accounts for 15 per cent of all animal protein consumed worldwide, and 22 of the 30 countries where fisheries contribute over a third of total animal protein supply are low-income food-deficit countries—and, therefore, among the most food-insecure. In west African countries such as Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon and Ghana, fish provide almost 50 per cent of a person’s animal protein needs.

A human-rights approach means ensuring that fisheries resources are managed in a way that remains sensitive at every stage to the need for the most vulnerable people to be able to either produce or procure food. This means securing the access of



STEVE NEEDHAM / RFLP

Fish consumption accounts for 15 per cent of all animal protein consumed worldwide, more in the case of low-income food-deficit countries like Timor-Leste

fisherfolk to fishing waters, and ensuring that these waters are not depleted or degraded by overfishing, while ensuring that fish and other sources of quality protein remain available, affordable and accessible to poor consumers.

What this means in concrete terms is that current trends will be thoroughly reassessed, with a sensitivity to the access to food of the world's poorest. This could mean reassessing the pros and cons of aquaculture. Aquaculture may now provide up to 45 per cent of fish for direct human consumption, but as is the case for terrestrial agri-food

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systems, food moves not to where needs are greatest, but to where purchasing power is highest. Such is the imbalance of purchasing power that the prices wealthy consumers are willing to pay for farmed fish make certain wild catch more lucrative as an input to this process than as an end product for people who would be willing to consume it directly.

The report has extended strong support to the guidelines on small-scale fisheries being developed by FAO. How can the process of developing and implementing these guidelines contribute to securing human rights and the right to food?

Small-scale fisheries, despite their very important potential as an entry point for poverty alleviation, are very often neglected in rural-development or poverty-reduction initiatives. Putting human rights at the forefront of the FAO process would help to ensure that these Guidelines do not fall into this trap.

Participation is a cornerstone of human rights. Free, active and meaningful participation is necessary to create ownership, sustainability and, ultimately, effective outcomes.

The participation of small-scale fishers is key in the management of fisheries, and it is also important that small-scale fishers participate in wider decision-making processes that affect them.

Participation is also key for the effectiveness of fisheries policies and programmes. Such policies and programmes will be based on better information, and they will be better designed, implemented and monitored when grounded on the meaningful participation of the fishing communities they seek to support.

A human-rights approach can also help to ensure that the objectives of the Guidelines are not undermined by developments in other areas: ensuring coherence across policy areas is a key tenet of human-rights approaches. Where fisheries are concerned, policy developments in the areas of trade, land use, water pollution, and the management of rivers, lakes and coastal areas can have a major impact on strategies aimed at securing the role of small-scale fishers.

How was the report and the recommendations received at the United Nations General Assembly?

The feedback received from the governments who took the floor during the debate was overwhelmingly positive, though the negotiations on the resolution of the General Assembly on the basis of the report haven't concluded yet at this time. However, the main impact of the report should be at the national level, in guiding States' approaches to the fishing sector; in the negotiation of the International Guidelines on Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in FAO; and in the discussion that shall take place on fisheries as a source of food security at the Committee on World Food Security, which decided to put this issue on its future agenda. My reports are not the final word; they feed into processes, and they help frame the international conversation on these issues.

What are the dissemination mechanisms to ensure the report reaches a wider audience? How



Fish being sorted by members of a fishing village in Myanmar. The participation of small-scale fishers is key to the management of fisheries, according to the UN Special Rapporteur

can the recommendations of the report be taken forward?

It is my hope that civil society groups, particularly those uniting fishers, fishworkers and fishing communities, will play an essential role in disseminating the messages of the report. Over recent years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors have been commendably active in drawing attention to the perils of overfishing and marine degradation, and the public is now becoming more sensitive to these issues. Consumers and governments alike must refuse to accept unsustainable practices, and civil society groups must continue to make their messages heard in order to continue this process of awareness-raising. Under-reporting, and the fact that it sometimes constitutes an occasional activity for coastal communities in times of crisis, results in a situation in which the importance of small-scale, artisanal fishing is sometimes not well understood. I hope that this is gradually changing. 🍄

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