

# Deep-rooted Problems, Great Expectations

Can the Ministerial declaration and regional plan of action signed recently in Malta turn the tide of fortune for small-scale fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea?

On 26 September in Malta, 18 Mediterranean and Black Sea coastal states committed themselves to developing “objectives, principles and concrete actions” to be applied across the region through a regional plan of action (RPOA) and thus “to ensure the long-term environmental, economic and social sustainability of small-scale fisheries”. Such a political commitment was made possible thanks to the joint efforts of

## History

The RPOA is the culmination of over five years of steady joint work by these two bodies, initiated in 2013 at the First Regional Symposium on Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, held in Malta, and organized by the GFCM in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and other partners. In fact, small-scale fisheries (SSF) have been on the GFCM agenda since 1980, rooted in a Resolution calling on its members for “the definition of a national strategy indicating in particular the place of artisanal fisheries in management schemes”.

SSF and the Mediterranean and Black Sea have for long been on the agenda of GFCM, but it is only relatively recently that the European Union (EU) seems to have woken up to their importance.

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the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean and Black Sea (GFCM) and the European Commission.

## EU Small-scale Fleet at a Glance

(Vessels under 12 m in length, not using towed fishing gear)

Number of vessels (49,029 in 2016):	70% of the fleet
Tonnage:	8% of the tonnage
Fishing days:	59% of the fishing days
Fuel used:	6% of the fuel used
Fishers employed (78,304 in 2016):	50% of at-sea employment
Landed volume:	6% by weight
Landed value:	12% of the value
Revenue:	13% of the revenue
Labour costs:	19% of the labour costs

Source: Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee on Fisheries (STECF). The 2018 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF 18/07)

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Lending a hand: African Confederation of Artisanal Fishing Organizations' (CAOPA) delegates with Maltese fishers at Marsaxlokk fish landing centre, Malta. Small-scale fisheries are the first to feel the pain of collapsing resources and therefore, it is important to build the future with them

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Until the launch of the reformed Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in 2014, SSF were considered a national issue and outside the purview of EU policy. Step by step, the socioeconomic and strategic importance of SSF as an integral component of European policy to sustain fisheries and fishing communities is gaining recognition. Europe's forgotten fleet is being rediscovered, albeit late in the day!

If SSF are Europe's rediscovered fleet, then the Mediterranean and Black Sea are its most neglected sea basins. Although the CFP was established in 1983, until 2006 the Mediterranean and Black Sea fell outside its purview. That is now changing through the MedFish4Ever process, launched in Catania, Sicily in 2016, and designed to build political consensus among Mediterranean stakeholders towards obtaining a commitment from all EU and non-EU countries to take concrete actions to address the dire fisheries situation in the region. Within the framework of the CFP, a series of multi-annual plans are being developed to cover stocks in different regions, starting with demersal stocks in the

Western Mediterranean and pelagic fisheries in the Adriatic.

Under the RPOA, SSF in the Mediterranean and Black Sea are to be characterized "as soon as possible" according to a set of indicative criteria "reflecting their socioeconomic relevance and specificities".

Given the highly diverse nature of SSF in the region and the lack of a simple cut-off point between different fleet segments (small-scale, semi-industrial, large-scale, industrial, inshore, offshore, coastal, deep-sea, etc.), the GFCM proposes to apply a "matrix approach" being developed by the FAO. Such a matrix may include characteristics spanning governance (policy, legislation, access and tenure), economy (taxation, subsidies, special preference) and management (regulation, gears, zoning).

### Strength in numbers

The Ministerial Statement highlights the strength in numbers of SSF in the region (80 per cent of the fleet by number, 44 per cent of the capacity, 62 per cent of employment aboard fishing vessels and 24 per cent of the landed

value), their socioeconomic value, relatively low environmental impact, and importance for food security. The statement also draws attention to endemic problems besetting the sector: the lack of a voice and the lack of access to decision-making processes; lack of access to resources, to markets, to credit and to support; and the limited capacities of the sector in terms of human capital.

These problems make the sector particularly vulnerable to the impact of other marine activities, such as marine pollution, habitat degradation, biodiversity and resource depletion, and to the encroachment of other activities in the areas it has traditionally occupied. In this regard, the RPOA highlights the need to both ensure that SSF are taken account of in marine spatial planning at national and regional levels, and that the sector is specifically represented throughout the entire process.

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Although the RPOA is non-binding, it is a historic step, and places SSF centre stage in the bid to reverse the declining fortunes of the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

The RPOA is the first instrument to be adopted by any Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO) that goes beyond the management of fisheries to address such issues as social inclusion, decent work, social protection, the role of women, the participation of small-scale actors in management and decision-making processes, and the incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge. The RPOA builds on the foundations laid down by the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), and draws on, and complements, other international instruments, including the 1995 FAO

Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries; the 2007 Work in Fishing Convention of the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the 2015 UN General Assembly 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It is a significant step because, thanks to the Ministerial statement and the RPOA, SSF have moved from the periphery to centre stage in the region's fishery policies and are now incorporated as part of the solution to the problems besetting the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Also, as highlighted by the EU's Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, "SSF are the backbone of the fleet, the workers, and the community. They are also the first to feel the pain of collapsing resources. It is therefore important to build the future with them".


Most Ministers highlighted the traditional nature of SSF, and their cultural importance. Few spoke about their importance to food security. Some highlighted the low incomes and poor capacity of the SSF sector to provide decent work. Some mentioned the problems of invasive species and the vulnerability of the sector. A few mentioned the need for improved data collection. One – Turkey – mentioned "legacy" – the importance of the heritage that we will bequeath to the next generation. Palestine (not a contracting party) made the most passionate speech. The Minister invited everyone to visit his country to witness "one of the most vulnerable small-scale fisheries", which should not be left behind. Spain's was one of the most supportive speeches, emphasizing the special characteristics of SSF, the freshness of their products, their low environmental footprint, and the important role of women in the sector.

### **Problems**

Needless to add, the problems besetting the Mediterranean and Black Sea go way beyond fisheries. The semi-enclosed nature and large catchment areas of these sea basins make them highly vulnerable to human impacts. The Mediterranean is a hotspot of

## A matrix approach to characterizing fisheries

The matrix provides users with a tool to describe a fishing unit across multiple dimensions or characteristics of scale. The flexible nature of the matrix means that the fishing unit being assessed can either be an entire fishery/fleet, a part of it, or an individual vessel/ fisher. This flexibility allows the matrix to be applied to diverse types of fishing activity around the world. Applying the matrix generates an aggregate score for the given unit under assessment, with relevance for discussions of scale. A given fishing unit may have characteristics typically associated with both smaller-scale and larger-scale fisheries, so many will receive lower scores in some categories and higher scores in others. Scoring allows for an objective characterization of the fishing unit, indicating whether it tends towards small-scale or large-scale.

Once scores from all the categories are aggregated, an overall picture emerges that facilitates differentiation between larger- and smaller-scale fisheries. By analyzing different scores for different fishing units, it is possible to determine if there is a clear cut-off between distinctly SSF and distinctly large-scale fisheries. In theory, if the matrix is working well, it should highlight those fisheries which may be on the edge of small-scale and large-scale (for example, a small vessel with a high-powered engine and large-scale level of fishing effort), assigning them their own category. Furthermore, by incorporating multiple dimensions, the matrix approach seeks to avoid misleading or inappropriate characterizations of fisheries as small-scale or large-scale, which can sometimes occur when a single criterion, such as vessel length, is emphasized. 

biodiversity, with a great variety of marine and coastal habitats, including wetlands, lagoons, dunes, reefs, seamounts, canyons, and sandy and rocky coasts, which are all important fisheries grounds.

The ever-burgeoning human population – with the coastal population doubling during some tourist seasons – along with expanding economic development, has resulted in increased environmental degradation. These vulnerable marine environments face a worrying combination of pollution from land sources and ships, including plastics and litter, and from aquaculture production, with impacts on biodiversity and coastal degradation, along with climate-change-related consequences. These are considerable challenges that such an RPOA cannot address on its own. Furthermore, a large proportion of the marine area is in international waters and falls outside national jurisdiction, making fisheries and the human impact on fisheries even more difficult to manage and control. Therefore, this RPOA needs to be fully integrated into wider maritime policy spheres, especially in the context of the development of the Blue Economy.

It is significant that Malta was chosen as the venue for this historic signing. Over 90 per cent of the Maltese fleet is comprised of small-

scale coastal fishing vessels (under 12 m, using non-towed gears), numbering some 950 vessels. Traditional Maltese fishing boats are made of wood, and use a wide variety of gears, namely, nets, traps, and hooks-and-line, along with ancillary equipment like fish aggregating devices (FADs) made from palm fronds, and *lampara* vessels to attract shoals of fish at night.

However, as with SSF across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea region, this once-vibrant fishery sector is facing a number of challenges. These were discussed at an informal gathering of Maltese, Cypriot and Italian (Pantelleria island) small-scale fishers, hosted by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), ahead of the Ministerial summit, and attended by the Maltese Minister for Justice, Culture and Local Government. These challenges include:

- Illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing and organized fishing crime, a transnational activity with well-organized and equipped criminal gangs. This was highlighted by the Europol-led Operation Tarantino, which resulted in the arrest of 79 people involved with IUU fishing for tuna, and fraudulent trade and marketing of illegal tuna across France, Italy, Malta and Spain;
- Forced labour of migrant workers in fishery operations;

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Participants at the High-level Conference on Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, Malta, 25-26 September, 2018. The Ministerial commitment to supporting SSF through the RPOA is both timely and necessary

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- Encroachment into SSF of larger-scale interests, such as feed fisheries for aquaculture and tuna fattening;
- Unregulated sports fishing across the Mediterranean;
- Climate change and invasive species;

**...the unregulated fishing activities of innumerable leisure boating enthusiasts – be it for sport or their own consumption – displace fishers...**

- Pollution, notably from plastic waste (marine debris and micro-fibres and micro-particles); and
- The promotion of Blue Economy activities (tourism, aquaculture, energy generation, bioprospecting, seabed mining, oil and gas extraction, etc.) that impose themselves in areas traditionally occupied by SSF.

A particular problem across the Mediterranean highlighted by all the fishers is the rapid colonisation by invasive species from the Red Sea, along with the displacement of

traditional species. Two of the main culprits are the rabbit or toad fish (*Lagocephalus sceleratus*), and the lionfish (*Pterois miles*). The toad fish can grow up to 1 m in length and weigh as much as 7 kg, with sharp teeth that cause extensive damage to fishing nets. Additionally, it has no commercial value as it is highly poisonous. The lionfish has highly venomous spines that can inflict severe pain and even death. Both fish are also hazardous to the environment – the toad fish is a bottom feeder and can cause extensive damage to seabed habitats, and the lionfish is highly predatory. The lionfish makes for good eating, but is difficult to handle and is not well known to consumers. In other parts of the Mediterranean, the Blue Crab (*Callinectes sapidus*), native to the Eastern seaboard of the Americas and a voracious predator of shellfish, has become a cause for concern in the south of France and the east coast of Spain.

Last but not least, across the Mediterranean, the unregulated fishing activities of innumerable leisure boating enthusiasts – be it for sport or their own consumption – displace fishers from their harbours, and impact stocks.

## Benefits

For the Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE) one of the principal benefits that the RPOA could deliver is improved governance through co-management. An entire section is devoted to the “participation of small-scale fishers in decision-making processes”. Linked to this is the call of the RPOA “for fisheries management plans with specific rules designed to ensure preferential access for sustainable and low-impact fisheries along the coastal band.” Such preferential access will only bring benefits if coupled to a system of genuine co-management where both responsibility and decision-making powers are devolved to co-management committees, and where small-scale fishers are empowered to form, and run, their own autonomous organizations.


For LIFE, the top-down model of command-and-control fisheries management, as applied in the Mediterranean, has become dysfunctional. Small-scale fishers have been alienated from management decision-taking processes, and, combined with a lack of capacity and political will at the national level to enforce regulations, this has encouraged overfishing, habitat destruction and IUU fishing activities.

In such a context, new forms of governance are required that build trust and co-operation between national authorities and fishery stakeholders, promote co-responsibility, and bring about unity in the common purpose of sustainable fisheries and the fight against IUU fishing and organized fishing crime. This requires a paradigm shift away from a top-down command-and-control approach to a bottom-up approach based on co-management.

Around the Mediterranean there are examples where relatively small, localized, and often informal co-management projects have successfully brought state and non-state actors together and facilitated a dialogue and collaboration between them, establishing a basis for co-responsibility and improved acceptance of legally binding regulations, which, in turn, helps address IUU practices and social conflict.

Of course, co-management is not a panacea, but it could provide an important tool for managing SSF, to be used alongside others (including closed areas reserved for SSF, effort control, etc.). In this regard, co-management has the potential to empower fishers and build their capacities to become responsible and competent actors in fisheries management.

There seem to be critical efforts in co-management that are now coming together – the recent incorporation of co-management into fisheries law in Catalunya through a decree putting co-management alongside maximum sustainable yield (MSY), monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS), technical measures, etc. is an inspiring example. There are also many relatively small local initiatives associated with marine protected areas (MPAs) that are beginning to reach a critical mass and joining up through networks and scaling-up initiatives.

The Ministerial commitment to supporting SSF through the RPOA is both timely and necessary. We hope the positive political will fostered over the last five years will ensure that necessary resources are invested in putting the RPOA into practice. We need to transform the ink on paper into action at the grass roots. 

### For more

<http://www.fao.org/gfcm/news/detail/en/c/1154586/>

**Regional plan of action for small-scale fisheries in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea: a common commitment for the future**

<https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/43805/2262384/STECF+18-07+-+AER.pdf>

**Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee on Fisheries (STECF). The 2018 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet (STECF 18/07).**

[https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/mediterranean\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/mediterranean_en)

**DG Mare webpage on the Mediterranean**

[https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/mediterranean/rules\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/mediterranean/rules_en)

**DG Mare webpage on the rules in force in the Mediterranean**

<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i8134e.pdf>

**Workshop proceedings on Improving our knowledge on small-scale fisheries: data needs and methodologies, June 2017**

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/how-illegal-bluefin-tuna-market-made-over-eur-12-million-year-selling-fish-in-spain>

**Europol Press Release: How the illegal bluefin tuna market made over EUR 12 million a year selling fish in Spain**

<http://lifeplatform.eu/life-calls-inclusive-blue-growth/>

**LIFE calls for inclusive Blue Growth at the Our Ocean Conference**

<http://www.fao.org/gfcm/publications/en/>  
**General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) - Publications**