

Old Values, New Challenges

Associations of fisheries co-operatives have a great past in protecting and supporting Japan's fishers and fishing communities. They are now preparing for the future

Every corner along Japan's long coast has a fishing port. Where there are fishing ports, there are fishing communities working diverse small-scale and coastal fisheries daily. Its beautiful coastal landscape is Japan's identity. It is no exaggeration to say that the Fisheries Co-operative Association (FCA) system has supported such an essential coastal landscape, traditions and culture throughout its long history.

Yet Japanese fisheries are now undergoing significant change in the marine, environmental, socio-economic and policy spaces. What is the FCA's status in the face of such enormous changes? What should be their role in the future of fisheries sustainability?

and conservation activities for children such as beach clean-ups and tree planting. The FCAs now fulfil additional roles of regional revitalization, ecological conservation and environmental education. They form the basis for community-based management. Their organizational structure is clear, represented by various subordinate organizations and committees, regulations, agreements and decision-making mechanisms. As a result, intra-organizational conflicts are minimal. There is also an equitable sharing of profits and costs through pooling mechanisms and competent leadership.

A triple whammy

The incomes of fishing households is adversely affected by three important factors: one, decline in fish catch; two, low fish prices; and, three, rising costs due to high oil prices. When these three occur at the same time, it becomes a triple whammy for fishers. According to the Fisheries Agency, Japan's fisheries and aquaculture production peaked in 1984 at 12.82 million tonnes, declining to 4.37 million tonnes in 2016. Fishing households have suffered falling incomes; average income fell from ¥2.51 million in 2020 to ¥1.77 million in 2022.

Other problems are becoming apparent, too, such as a lack of successors in the family and an ageing population of fishers. The decline in the number of fishers is tangible: from 238,000 in 2003 to 153,000 in 2017. The proportion of fishers aged 65 or above has risen from 30 per cent to 40 per cent in the same period, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

Under such circumstances, FCAs continue to merge, downsize and reorganize. The data on the number of

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An institution of long standing

It is impossible to talk about the Japanese fisheries, it is well known, without mentioning the FCA system. It is essential to the nation's fisheries, managing fishery rights and resources. An FCA comprises fishers and is meant to support them on the basis of the Fisheries Co-operative Law. It guides them, coordinating the use of fishing grounds and the processing and sale of catch by its members. In many cases, FCAs operate direct-sales stores selling fresh fish and processed products from the local landing areas.

In recent years, the FCAs have engaged in environmental education

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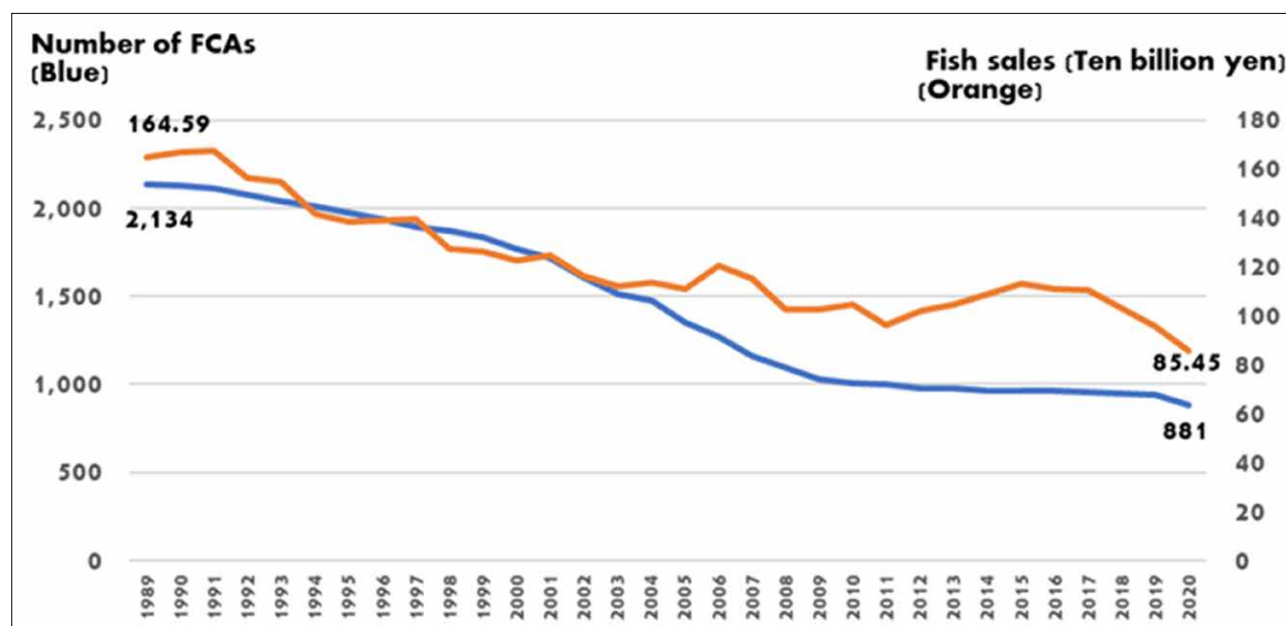


Figure 1 Trends in the numbers of the FCAs and its sales handling amount (1989-2020)

Source: from Fisheries Agency. (Accessed October 2023)

https://www.jfa.maff.go.jp/j/kikaku/wpaper/r03_h/sankou/sankou_4_4.html

coastal FCAs and the fish sales at their markets from 1989 to 2020 reveal a sobering picture (see Figure 1). Both have decreased significantly. FCAs have fallen in number from 2,134 in 1989 to 881 in 2020; fish sales have almost halved from ¥16.459 billion in 1989 to ¥8.545 billion in 2020. The primary source of income for FCAs is commission on fish sales. Such a decline in sales has significantly impacted their operations.

It has reached the point where FCAs now seem to hinder the development of fishers. For example, the associations prevent fishers from developing their sales channels outside the FCA network. Many fishers have begun to regard FCAs as a problem.

Seicho-sangyoka and new challenges

In response to the decline in the fishing industry, the Japanese Fishery Act was legislated in 2018 and enforced in 2020. It was the first major reform of the sector in 70 years. The main goals of the revision was *seicho-sangyoka* (growth-industrialization) and resource management. Heated discussions ensued about the pros and cons of the revised law that puts an end to priority in granting fishery rights and eases the entry of private capital into the fishing industry. Plans

are afoot to broaden the total allowable catch (TAC) system into small-scale and coastal fisheries.

While the original Act from 1949 had put much emphasis on democratization of fisheries and comprehensive and advanced use of fishing grounds, the new law focuses more on resource management and fishery efficiency. It remains to be seen how Japan will secure sustainability in fisheries in the era of big change.

Because of the lack of sufficient discussion and communication between fishers and government authorities, it is unknown how many and what types of justice issues will small-scale fisheries face under the new law. From the Blue Justice perspective, there are many aspects of small-scale fisheries that need to be considered before realizing *seicho-sangyoka*.

The revised law leaves unresolved several issues relating to fishers' rights, social justice and maintenance of fishing communities. It is crucial to adopt the Blue Justice lens, which calls for a critical examination of how small-scale fisheries and their communities may be affected by ocean development initiatives, such as those promoted under the Blue Economy and Blue Growth agendas.

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Shirasu fish landing for the community festival, Mochimune fishing port, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. Yet Japanese fisheries are now undergoing significant change in the marine, environmental, socio-economic and policy spaces

22

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Significant role

In such circumstances, FCAs should play a more significant role than ever before. The question is: Can they do so amidst the existing difficulties?

In keeping with the spirit of the times

A general term for a series of economic activities carried out by the community, *Umigyo*, is gaining momentum in Japan, drawing great support from national and local governments. *Umigyo* centres on the fishers' response to the diverse needs of marine and coastal community resources. Its primary purpose is to increase the fishing households' income and widen its base by boosting non-fishing income. This it aims to do by utilizing all the resources in the fishing communities, such as fish restaurants, direct-sales stores, fishing boat cruises, recreational fishing, and environmental education. As a refrain goes, "Protecting life above water leads

to life below water". *Umigyo* emphasizes the 'who' part, that is, the community. It aims to enhance the viability of fishing households through a complementary any synergistic relationship.

Umigyo recognizes the nature of FCAs as social enterprises closely tied to the community. That the associations are more accessible for business than individual fishing households. FCAs display a spirit of mutual help that connects, manages, reunites and creates a value of shared community resources. Separately, it will leave the fishing communities scattered and unorganized. *Umigyo* is embedded in the future of FCAs, in supporting fishers and fishing communities, in protecting their rights and livelihoods. While the conditions are changing, the FCAs values and social role remains unchanged. 3