

Backgrounder

Fish

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Espen Rasmussen

Sustainable fisheries certification

Adapting marine certification schemes to developing country needs: a research gap

Facing fishless oceans?

World fish stocks are running dangerously low. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 52 per cent of global fish stocks are already fully exploited, 19 per cent are over exploited and 8 per cent are depleted. Only one per cent are on track to recover from this depletion. If current trends continue, we are very likely to see 'fishless oceans' by 2050.

Intergovernmental agreements such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries have failed to address these problems. Regulatory approaches such as minimum mesh sizes for fishing nets, quotas, or temporary or permanent closures have been ineffective.

A crucial resource

Yet developing world marine and coastal resources provide livelihoods for millions of people. They provide the world with 'ecosystem services', ranging from biodiversity and food provision, to carbon storage and flood protection, to recreation and tourism. About a billion people, largely in developing countries, rely on fish as their primary animal protein. Developing world fisheries also represent roughly half of global fish exports.

Worldwide, some 43.5 million people work directly in fisheries, the majority in developing countries. Including those in associated activities (like processing and marketing), fishing supports nearly 200 million people. So achieving sustainable fisheries management and development is a global

VITAL STATISTICS

- Almost 80 per cent of fish stocks are at risk globally — 52 per cent are already fully exploited, 19 per cent over exploited and 8 per cent depleted.
- Nearly 200 million people depend on fish-related activities, with 43.5 million employed directly by fisheries — most of them in developing countries. Developing world fisheries represent roughly half of all global fish exports.
- The world's largest wild capture certification scheme is run by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). In 2012–13, there were almost 200 MSC certified fisheries, landing around 7 million tonnes of seafood — 7 per cent of global wild capture seafood.
- Only 7–8 per cent of MSC certified fisheries are in developing countries.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

With nearly 80 per cent of global fisheries at risk, producing and consuming sustainably caught fish is becoming popular in the developed world. Large numbers of retailers stock seafood products certified as sustainable, providing an incentive for more fisheries to achieve the standard for certification. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification scheme dominates the market for sustainable seafood but both consumption and production of MSC certified seafood remains almost entirely limited to the developed world. To achieve global sustainability for fisheries, developing countries need to become both producers and consumers of sustainable seafood.

Available evidence suggests that the data, cost and management barriers

social and economic, as well as an environmental, challenge.

Introducing certification

Recently, voluntary market-based instruments — including certification — have emerged as a way to encourage sustainable fishing and consumption.

Experience in other natural resource sectors has shown that certification can have real impact — on policy, on management understanding, and on market demand. But market coverage of certification remains limited (though is growing) in most sectors, and poverty alleviation has been achieved in isolated cases only. Small-scale producers in the forest sector, for example, tend to be excluded from certification because of the high costs involved in getting and staying certified. Europe and North America account for 88 per cent of sustainably certified forests, but make up only 34 per cent of the world's forests. Africa and South America, by contrast, have six per cent of certified forests but make up 38 per cent of the world's forested area.

In addition, international certification schemes have so far been unable to increase demand for sustainably certified produce significantly within developing and emerging economies — yet these are beginning to dominate demand for the world's natural resources.

The Marine Stewardship Council scheme

The Marine Stewardship Council — a sustainability certification scheme founded in 1997 by WWF and Unilever — bases its standard on three core principles: (i) health of the stock; (ii) the fishery's environmental impact; and (iii) effective management. The standard focuses on environmental and management issues.

Consumers can buy around 20,000 MSC certified products worldwide, sourced from nearly 200 wild capture fisheries. MSC certified fisheries landed around 7 million tonnes of seafood in 2012–13 — about 7 per cent of global catch. Despite these impressive achievements, the MSC's market coverage — in terms of both catch and consumption — is restricted to the global 'North': fewer than 8 per cent of MSC certified fisheries are in developing countries.

Developing world fisheries beginning to participate

The MSC is striving to become more accessible to developing world fisheries. It has a Developing World Working Group, is

finding easier ways for small-scale fisheries to enter the certification scheme and encourages partnership-based projects that prepare for certification.

Certified developing world fisheries have risen from five in 2009 to 15 in 2013, and the MSC's recent Global Impacts Report shows management and environmental improvements associated with certified fisheries (such as improving stock levels). But there should be potential for much more. Good information is needed that will help scale-up the change: information on what helps and hinders developing world fisheries' participation, information on how certification affects socioeconomic issues, and information on how well tools designed to make the MSC scheme more accessible are actually working (and how to expand or improve them).

Looking ahead

The time is ripe to produce definitive evidence of how relevant, effective, efficient and equitable certification can maximise fishing's contribution to sustainable development. This information would help both fisheries' sustainability and provide lessons for certification in other sectors.

IIED, with partners MRAG and WWF-UK, is seeking funding to analyse the MSC's role and potential in developing world fisheries. We hope to explore how certification can meet developing countries' needs and aspirations, and what is needed for certification to work best. This research will be based on stories of change, using in-depth case studies of selected developing world fisheries, semi-structured interviews within fisheries and among relevant stakeholders, and a workshop and literature review. It aims to inform people designing and implementing certification, as well as other fisheries stakeholders working for a transition to sustainable fishing.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

to achieving MSC certification stop developing world fisheries from joining the scheme, but there is no detailed and rigorous analysis of either the challenges or potential solutions. Governments, donors, NGOs, businesses and the MSC itself urgently need this knowledge to inform their strategies for supporting sustainable fisheries in the developing world.

SOUTHERN VOICES

In Mozambique we are working towards MSC certification for deep-water shrimp. This process has been helpful in bringing together a number of partners who are supporting our efforts via a fisheries improvement project. But we still have questions about MSC certification—can we afford to pay for the high costs over the longer term, what benefits we will see from getting certified and will other fisheries in Mozambique, including artisanal fisheries, be able to achieve MSC certification? This research will help us answer some of these.

Nilza Dias, a fisheries biologist from the Mozambique Fisheries Research Institute

FIND OUT MORE

IIED's work on the Marine Stewardship Council is part of our Shaping Sustainable Markets Initiative and our growing programme on the economics of marine and coastal fisheries. Find out more at www.iied.org/sustainable-markets and www.iied.org/fish