

The Featuring of Small-Scale Fishers in SDG 14: Life below but Also above Water

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1. Introduction

SDG 14, or ‘life below water’, addresses a rich variety of issues regarding the oceans. As the sustainable use of marine life depends very much on ‘life above water’¹—i.e., on human activities—its targets include people in various ways. Within its rich pallet of goals at the global level, target 14B stands out for its apparent pocket-size. It reads: “Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets”. From where did this goal and this category of people emerge? Moreover, where is target 14B leading us? These are the questions guiding this paper.

I first sketch the background leading to the inclusion of this goal in the SDGs. Attention then turns to small-scale fishers themselves and the sustainability challenges they face. Finally, I discuss the intentions with which this part of SDG 14 is currently being pursued.

2. Background

Marine fishers in the world are estimated to number thirty nine million and approximately 90% of them (or 35 million) pursue small-scale, or artisanal livelihoods (FAO 2020).² Actually, however, the numbers concerned are higher, as the small-scale sector also includes numerous processors, traders and other service providers, many of whom are women. Altogether, these professionals are sometimes grouped under the gender-neutral term ‘fishworker’. Estimates of the total number of small-scale fishworkers in the world range from 107 million (Mills et al. 2011) to 200 million (Berkes et al. 2001). As we shall see below, most of them are based in Asia and Africa,

¹ This is the title of Svein Jentoft’s keynote address to the MARE People and the Sea Conference X on 25 June 2019 in Amsterdam.

² The academic literature employs two terminologies for the same phenomenon: small-scale, or artisanal fishers. The former term suggests smallness of technology (boat, gear), capital and labor requirements and limitations in operational range. The latter term emphasizes the manual expertise involved and makes a contrast with industrialized fishing.

whereas in Europe, the Americas and Australia their numbers have been going down. Even in the latter regions, however, small-scale fishing continues, as various compendia demonstrate (Pascual-Fernández et al. 2020; Pinkerton and Davis 2015; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2015; Salas et al. 2019).

However, it is not so much the numbers of operators that has triggered the inclusion of Target 14B in the SDGs—far more important has been the adoption in 2014 by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) member countries of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (henceforth: the SSF Guidelines) and the political momentum that has come to surround the topic (Jentoft et al. 2017). The SSF Guidelines had a turbulent pre-history. Preparations can be said to have started with the FAO World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development (1984) in Rome,³ which mobilized civil society and contributed to the rise of a global fisher movement, currently united under the flags of the World Fisher Forum (WFF) and the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), as well as to a set of international NGOs, such as the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). Via parallel meetings, these civil society actors stood up to challenge the priority that governments were giving to the industrialization of fisheries and highlighted the problems that this was causing for the population of small-scale fishworkers that continued to inhabit the coastline. They argued that not only were industrialized fisheries provided unfair competition on inshore fishing grounds, these large-scale players were also causing substantial material damages to the small-scale fisheries sector. More fundamentally, these civil society actors noted that small-scale fisheries are not as old-fashioned as they are sometimes suggested to be. Instead, small-scale fisheries provide an alternative, and in many ways more appropriate model for realizing sustainability. After all, small-scale fisheries are frequently less fuel-intensive, more selective, less destructive of marine habitats, and socially and economically more inclusive. From this viewpoint, small-scale fishworkers, instead of being written off, require strong protection and sustenance. Technological subsidiarity is the direction to be pursued (Mathew 2005; Bavinck and Jentoft 2011).

To the rear of the dispute over appropriate modes of fishing lay another, more comprehensive transformation. By the 1970s, public opinion on capture fisheries and the future of the oceans had started to change. While the first three quarters of the twentieth century were dominated by the notion of an unlimited ocean and the

³ The organization of which followed from the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention that was concluded in 1982 (personal communication Sebastian Mathew).

creed of fisheries modernization, the planetary boundaries of the ocean were now becoming starkly apparent. 'Overfishing' had become the new concern, and policy efforts now came to focus on harmful fishing efforts. The FAO was called upon to develop guidelines for all capture fisheries.⁴ The ultimate result of this effort was the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995).

The latter agreement, which is voluntary in nature, contains barely any reference to small-scale fishing. However, there, under Article 6 on general principles, is the following text:

Recognizing the important contributions of artisanal and small-scale fisheries to employment, income and food security, States should appropriately protect the rights of fishers and fishworkers, particularly those engaged in subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fisheries, to a secure and just livelihood, as well as preferential access, where appropriate, to traditional fishing grounds and resources in the waters under their national jurisdiction (Article 6.18 of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries).

This article in the Code of Conduct underlines not only the contributions small-scale fishworkers are held to make but emphasizes their protection, suggesting that they even deserve preferential access to fishing grounds and resources.⁵

While proponents were pleased that the concerns of small-scale fishworkers were finally being recognized and included in international legislation, albeit of a 'soft' kind, a more specific, and elaborate instrument for the protection of the sector was felt to be essential. Efforts thus continued to realize a code specifically for the small-scale fisheries sector. This FAO-spearheaded endeavor involved many years of planning, extensive consultation with civil society actors, and intense negotiation among member states. One of the scholars partaking in this effort aptly summarizes the joy that accompanied the realization of the SSF Guidelines: "For the millions small-scale fishing people around the world, many of whom are poor and marginalized, this was no doubt an historic event and a potential turning point." (Jentoft 2014, pp. 1–2).

In line with other trends in international law, the SSF Guidelines follow a human rights approach. Article 3.1.1 in Part I reads:

⁴ The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995) originated in the Cancun Declaration (1992), which was adopted in response to the tuna-dolphin dispute between Mexico and the United States (personal communication Sebastian Mathew).

⁵ Needless to say, preferential access is more of a paper than a physical reality. While many governments pay obeisance to the notion of artisanal fishing zones, the implementation hereof is heavily flawed and deficient.

Recognizing the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable human rights of all individuals, all parties should recognize, respect, promote and protect the human rights principles and their applicability to communities dependent on small-scale fisheries.

Its guiding principles thus emphasize the respect of cultures (Art. 3.1.2), non-discrimination (Art. 3.1.3), gender equality and equity (Art. 3.1.4), as couched in justice and fair treatment of all people and peoples (Art. 3.1.5), “ensuring active, free, effective, meaningful and informed participation” for small-scale fishers in relevant decision-making processes (Art. 3.1.6). The latter section of the SSF Guidelines identifies key topics of relevance to small-scale fishers: the securement of tenure rights to resources (Art. 5), social development, employment and decent work (Art. 6), value chains, post-harvest and trade (Art. 7), gender equality (Art. 8), and disaster risks and climate change (Art. 9).

While the adoption of the SSF Guidelines was widely celebrated, their proponents recognized, however, that, as in the adage, ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating’. As Jentoft puts it: “the challenge now is to make sure that [the SSF Guidelines] will be implemented” (2014, p. 1). A broad coalition of international actors—including intergovernmental organizations (FAO), international NGOs (e.g. the International Collective for the Support of Fishworkers—ICSF), research organizations (e.g., WorldFish/The Transnational Institute—TNI) and networks (e.g., Too Big To Ignore—TBTI), and member organizations (e.g., WFF and WFFP)—are engaged in precisely this effort, and it is their perseverance that has probably triggered the inclusion of the small-scale fishworker issue in SDG 14.⁶

3. The Condition of Small-Scale Fisheries

I noted above the fact that—according to criteria of technology, as well as labor and capital extensiveness—the large majority of the world’s fisher peoples are small in scale. Still, their variety is impressive. As Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2015) point out: “Globally small-scale fisheries display enormous diversity as a result of differences in natural, social, cultural and political factors” (p. 37). This diversity makes what is considered small-scale in some contexts (North America, Europe)

⁶ Thus, Sebastian Mathew points out that ICSF worked with the Brazilian and the Indian delegations to retain Article 24(2)(b) of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (1995) in the review conference outcome document. ICSF also worked with the Brazilian and EU delegations to retain this reference in the outcome document of the Rio+20 Ocean Conference in 2012. From this document, it moved into the SDG 14 (personal communication).

large-scale in others (Asia/Africa/Latin America). As a consequence, there exists no single definition of what constitutes small-scale fishing. Some governing actors, like the European Commission, have formulated a minimalist description, limiting the field of small-scale fisheries to those making use of vessels less than 12 m in length. However, as Pascual-Fernández et al. (2020) in their chapter on the small-scale fisheries of Europe point out, even this definition is problematic, excluding some fishers that properly belong, and including some that should not be included in the category.

Moreover, small-scale fishing is never fixed but highly dynamic: target species, fishing grounds, fishing practice, and market changes from one moment to the next. What is common practice today may change tomorrow. As a consequence of these dynamics, Johnson (2006) suggests that fishers should globally be arranged on a fluid scale ranging from subsistence to industrial fisheries. Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2015) take a different approach, however, arguing that small-scale fisheries “must always be considered in their particular context” (p. 37).

Table 1 provides a summary overview of fisher numbers by continent. Although these figures—which relate only to those actually engaged in the catching of fish—do not distinguish small-scale from industrial-scale fishers, we can safely assume that, in all cases, the large majority of fishers belong to the ranks of small-scale operators.

Table 1. Fisher numbers by geographical region in thousands (2018).

Region	Numbers	Change Since 1995 (%)
Africa	5021	+183%
Asia	30,768	+127%
Europe	272	-39%
The Americas	2455	+137%
Oceania	460	+0%
Total	38,976	+132%

Source: FAO (2020), Table 12.

Table 1 points out that in some regions of the world, the fisher population has increased substantially, whereas in others, their numbers have declined. Such variations relate to differing conditions for social mobility. Whereas in the Global South, macro-economic and social conditions tend to keep people locked in fisheries, a very different set of conditions in the Global North has encouraged them to seek other forms of employment. It is not unreasonable to assume that in some situations

people are in fishing largely ‘because they are poor’ (Béné 2003) and do not have other livelihood opportunities. In an earlier publication related to South India, I have noted that a substantial immigration of poor agriculturalists into fishing had probably occurred (Bavinck 2011). Such a process appears to have taken place in other parts of the world too.

4. Looking Ahead

I have argued that international attention for small-scale fishing has increased dramatically in recent years, with some arguing that it is now just ‘too big to ignore’.⁷ At the same time, one cannot ignore the dark clouds that gather on the horizon. While fishing is one of humankind’s oldest maritime occupations, and the sector still provides large numbers of people with gainful employment, the range of competing endeavors, gathered under the denominators of ‘blue economy’ or ‘blue growth’, is increasing fast. Aquaculture, coastal tourism, deep sea mining, oil and gas exploitation and wind parks are making their mark on oceanic and coastal space, resulting in complaints of ‘ocean grab’ (Bennett et al. 2015) and ‘coastal grab’ (Bavinck et al. 2017). With governments anxious to capitalize on new investment opportunities and opting to see small-scale fisheries as an obsolete enterprise, small-scale fishworkers suffer stiff competition for shoreline and ocean space. Some knowledgeable authors (Percy and O’Riordan 2020) therefore express pessimism toward the future.

The international conservation movement has been making demands of small-scale fisheries, pointing out that the erosion of biodiversity and the challenges of climate change require urgent addressal (Garcia et al. 2014). Although small-scale fisheries arguably have a better environmental record than large-scale fisheries (Kolding et al. 2014), small-scale fishworkers also have a contribution to make toward achieving resilience. The objective, then, as argued by Charles et al. (2014), is to achieve win-win-win solutions across the three dimensions of sustainable development, while simultaneously taking into account the specific vulnerabilities of small-scale fisheries.

The fact that small-scale fisheries are included in SDG 14 is a sign that resilience is still deficient. Target 14B emphasizes provision of access to marine resources as well as to markets. The former can be achieved in various ways: by delimiting

⁷ Too Big to Ignore (TBTI) is the title of a recent project funded by the Canadian Social Science Research Council. This project has contributed to a flood of new academic interest in the topic.

specific small-scale fishing zones, providing quota, or, to the contrary, by limiting the prerogatives of other actors, such as industrial fishers. Access to markets is a parallel concern, meant to make small-scale fisheries economically sustainable, meanwhile contributing to the food security of rural and urban populations. Both forms of access are crucial to the future of small-scale fisheries. In turn, small-scale fishworkers have responsibilities toward other targets of SDG 14, such as the sustainable protection and management of marine and coastal ecosystems (Article 14.2) and the effective regulation of harvesting (Article 14.4).

In past decades, small-scale fishworkers have garnered a wealth of influential support, and their cause is being fought in international, national and local arenas. The alliances they have forged with other rural movements, such as the Via Campesina, have lent force to their actions. The oncoming International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (2022) will provide a useful rallying point for continued engagement, with, as a provisional objective, the realization of Target 14B in 2030. Time will tell of its accomplishment.

5. Conclusions

This chapter has attempted to explain why SDG 14, which largely deals with 'life below water', includes a direct reference to the human dimension. Article 14B expresses support of the livelihoods of small-scale fishers with regard to access to resources and markets. I have argued that the inclusion of this anomaly is rooted in the international history of fisheries regulation, and the growing attention that social movements have drawn to the marginalization of small-scale fishworkers. The last section looked forward to the future of this sub-sector, which was sketched as highly uncertain. However, the fact that small-scale fishers have organized themselves provides some confidence that Article 14B may actually have teeth.

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