

## Fisheries management

## Remoteness and alienation

### The “democratic deficit” in European fisheries management is a problem that cannot be wished away

**E**uropean fisheries management suffers from “democratic deficit”: the problem of remoteness and alienation that arises from decisions being transferred to a European level

The fisheries of Europe display an enormous diversity with regard to socioeconomic, cultural and political-institutional characteristics and histories. The situations in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Biscay, the North, the Baltic and the Barents Sea—to name a few of the regional seas—differ vastly, except for the fact that fish resources in all these settings are under heavy pressure and have been pushed beyond safe biological limits. Each country has its own management system, based on its institutional traditions.

Public-private management or co-management as a new governance model in fisheries is not a very hot issue in European countries, although it is at least a topic of debate. It would also be an exaggeration to say that it is at the top of the agenda of the European Union (EU), but it is a theme that is gaining growing attention in Europe as in other parts of the world.

The EU constitutes an attempt to build stronger and more cooperative relations among countries along social, economic and political dimensions. This raises very complex demands of governance that have taken years to address and which are still changing, particularly now as a number of States of central and eastern Europe are becoming new members.

My own country, Norway, is not part of the EU. Neither are Iceland and Russia—which are, along with Norway, major fisheries States. However, Norway and Iceland have both negotiated

extended economic agreements with the EU, which, to a large extent, make them members of the common market.

It is only to be expected that integration along all these dimensions will influence the way governance is organized and exercised at both EU and member State levels. Integration has certainly made it more complicated for member States to agree on common policies, for instance, in fisheries, and there is every reason to assume that new obstacles will surface in the future.

European integration is a long process, which has so far taken four decades, and will certainly take many more. Problems that have arisen have been met with a varying degree of success. One problem that has yet to be resolved is the so-called “democratic deficit”: the problem of remoteness and alienation that arises with respect to citizens’ involvement and influence when decisions are transferred from a national to a European level.

When the EU members adopted the so-called “subsidiarity principle”, they expressed the ambition that there should not be any unnecessary centralization of decision-making power and that decisions should be taken at the most appropriate level. Precisely what this should mean for the many dimensions of integration and for different policy areas such as fisheries has proven difficult to determine.

#### Highly contested

The principle is highly contested as countries and political groups tend to regard subsidiarity in their own ways in concrete situations. Does it apply only to the relationship between the EU and member States? Or should it also be applied within member States? What

exactly does it entail for a sector like fisheries?

**T**he democratic deficit is generally perceived as a problem in most member States. It was also one of the issues that made a majority of my Norwegian fellow citizens reject membership of EU in two referendums—in 1972 and in 1994. In both instances, the fishery issue was the trickiest one and the one that tipped the vote negatively. In the eyes of the average EU citizen, the current policy-making process in the EU is not transparent and participatory. The Commission, which is the most powerful EU body, is not a representative institution, elected by EU citizens. The popular impression also holds that special-interest lobby groups have too much power, and civil society is not involved as fully as it should be. As a consequence, the democratic deficit undermines the legitimacy of EU policies, which are often highly disputed. The Common Fishery Policy (CFP) is no exception to this rule.

It must be emphasized that the situation is not static. Increasingly, attention seems to be directed toward the political process and not only to outcomes. For instance, in a 2001 White Paper on European Governance, delivered by the Commission, non-governmental organizations are viewed as positive contributors to the definition and

implementation of European policies. Their involvement is seen as a way of broadening the debate on EU policies and getting citizens more actively involved in the political process. The same attitude is articulated in the Nice Treaty, which talks about the input of “organized civil society” (Article 257). The ideas of forming “regional advisory committees” of stakeholders in policy making and of decentralizing certain management responsibilities in order to address local and emergency situations, as was expressed in the 2001 “Green Paper” on the future of the CFP, are tangible expressions of such a public-private governance model. For those who believe in public-private partnerships as a governance model, these developments are positive.

#### **Subsidiarity principle**

It could be argued, however, that public-private management or co-management is nothing new in European countries. Neither was it (and the subsidiarity principle) invented by Eurocrats. In most countries, fisheries management is an interactive process between government authorities and fishing industry organizations. Some of these arrangements have a very deep history, such as the Spanish *Confradías*, the French *Prud’hommes*, and the Polish *Mazoperias*. Also, more recent public-private management systems can be found, such as the British Producer

Organizations, the Sea Fisheries Committees in England and Wales, the regulatory advisory boards in fisheries in Scandinavian countries, and the Biesheuvel groups in the Netherlands.

**T**hese co-management systems vary from country to country—and sometimes within countries—with respect to the kinds of relations that shape the public-private dyad. Some fall short of being described as truly co-management. Thus, real co-management in European fisheries exists but in a limited and patchy form. These examples do suggest, however, that a EU policy aimed at strengthening stakeholder involvement has some concrete experiences to build on. Public-private partnership (and co-management) is thus not an abstract concept, but an idea that mirrors a certain reality. There is no doubt, however, that many of these systems could be much improved: that they could become more coherent, representative, transparent and effective. Stakeholder participatory democracy through public-private arrangements does represent a challenge to the representative democracy of citizens. It is important to make sure that partnership arrangements do not compete with, but become an addition to, citizen democracy, thus broadening and deepening the democratic process as a whole. This is no less important in fisheries than in other sectors of society.

There is no doubt, however, that European countries have a long way to go in order to live up to the subsidiarity principle that they have committed themselves to. This is true for fisheries and for other sectors of society. Thus, the democratic deficit is likely to persist for years to come. **3**

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