

Blue Justice

In this book, Svein Jentoft argues, with concise and precise logic, that we should not lose sight of communities when extending our perspective to the world of fisheries at large

Life above Water: Essays on Human Experiences of Small-Scale Fisheries. TBTI Global Book Series 1, 2019

Svein Jentoft is well known to readers of *SAMUDRA Report*. Many of us eagerly look forward to Jentoft's incisive comments on small-scale fisheries, fishing communities, human rights, gender, co-management, governance, and related topics. However, some of us don't know that these articles are based on talks Jentoft has given in various parts of the world. That is why they are easy to read, and so concise and precise with flawless logic. Although Jentoft's own research is mainly about Norwegian fisheries, his talks and articles are of global interest. They are also timeless. For example, his 1999 *SAMUDRA Report* article, "Beyond the Veil", about gender roles in fishing communities, is, in my view, still the seminal article on this topic.

For all these reasons, Jentoft's new book, *Life above Water*, is going to be of huge interest to *SAMUDRA Report* readers and to many others. The title is a word-play on the rather silly name of the UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 14, "Life below water". In my mind's eye, I can just see Jentoft, with his dry

... It is important when extending our perspective to the world of fisheries at large... that we do not lose sight of communities. If we forget about communities, we also lose sight of small-scale fisheries, thereby missing a lot the life that is lived above the water... With the millions of people engaged in the sector, small-scale fisheries are too important and too big to ignore.

Jentoft is, of course, one of the original members of the TBTI (Too Big To Ignore) network. It is a global research network and knowledge mobilization partnership that focuses on small-scale fisheries. In another major contribution, Jentoft was a Norwegian representative in the drafting of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (the SSF Guidelines) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which established some international principles and good practices for fishery policymakers to follow. But UN and FAO "guidelines" are just that. They are only advisory or prescriptive: much depends on the policy responses of nation states and other critical actors. Although the SSF Guidelines mention communities 72 times (*Life above Water*, p. 145), this does not mean policymakers will somehow acknowledge the importance of community and change course accordingly. Getting such points across has been a lifelong battle for Jentoft, and will continue to be a challenge for many of us for years to come.

As the SSF Guidelines point out, small-scale fisheries contribute about half of the global fish catch. If one looks at the total harvest destined for direct human consumption, the share contributed by small-scale fisheries increases to two-thirds. Small-scale fisheries are, therefore, important for

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Norwegian sense of humour, pointing out at the podium that if Sustainable Development is about people, Goal No. 14 better be mostly about fishers and fishing communities, to make any sense at all. Chapter 18, "Life above water" (that gives the name to the book) is a good summary of the issue. Jentoft says (pgs.135/136) :

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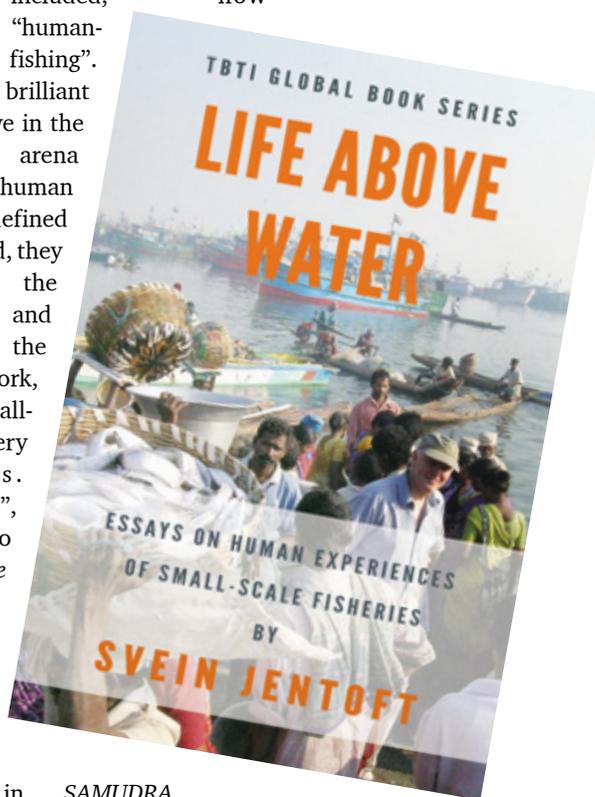
food security and nutrition, poverty eradication, equitable development and sustainable resource use. These are global concerns for all – fishers, their communities, researchers, managers, and decision-makers. Jentoft makes it clear in the foreword that the “book is not aimed at an academic research audience.” In fact, he points out, “the ivory tower can be a dull place at times.” The book, he says, is aimed at non-academics (*Life above Water*, pgs. xv, xvi).

Nevertheless, many of the articles seem to be addressing “social scientists”, presumably because many of the invitations for the talks that led to the articles in the book probably came from social-science departments and faculties. Hence, here and there, the contents of the book seem to contradict the stated objective of aiming at non-academics. To the extent that the book will engage academics, I would think that it would be of interest to transdisciplinary academics, not just to social scientists (who already know much of this) and not to biologists and economists (many of whom will keep doing what biologists and economists do). This is recognized in the theme and title of Jentoft’s other recent book, *Transdisciplinarity for Small-Scale Fisheries Governance* (edited by Ratana Chuenpagdee and Svein Jentoft. Springer, 2019).

So what are some of Jentoft’s insights and messages? A full list would not be possible here, but they include the points about the importance of secure resource tenure; significance of moral communities for trust, leading to self-management; and the fact that “as governments have become more ambitious as governors of fisheries, they have also become more intrusive into the life of communities, turning them into passive receivers of management systems” (*Life above Water*, pg. 146). One of my favourite Jentoft insights (because I initially overlooked it) concerns “rights-based fishing”. I missed it because I work in the area of commons, and rights-based fishing seems, well, just right. Yes, except that “rights-based fishing” has been co-opted in recent years by proponents of industrial fisheries. So the phrase

has become “a proxy for privatization and individual transferable quotas” (*Life above Water*, pg. 146). Hence, the proponents of small-scale fisheries, Jentoft included, now speak of “human-rights-based fishing”. I think it is a brilliant strategic move in the international arena because, as human rights gets defined and redefined, they do include the right to life and liberty and the right to work, including small-scale fishery livelihoods. “Blue justice”, Chapter 30 of *Life above Water*, captures the broader point.

Articles published in *SAMUDRA Report* between 1999 and 2018 make up about half (14) of the 30 short chapters in the book. A few (four) of the others were published in various other sources. The rest of the chapters are also based on talks but have not been previously published. Many thanks are due to *SAMUDRA Report* and other sources for permissions to reprint these articles. This is a collection worth its weight in gold! Now all we have to do is to find a way to get policymakers and decisionmakers to read *Life above Water* and internalize it. 📖



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