

# Forging Links of Resilience

The governance needs for Europe's small-scale fisheries involves principles, strategies and guarding against the predations of large-scale fishing interests

There is a saying attributed to the emerging managerial class of the 1970s: “You can’t manage what you can’t measure”. Some might argue that this is particularly relevant for small-scale fisheries (SSF) and the starting point for all their problems. Not quite: “You can’t begin to measure what you’re unable to define” may be the more appropriate starting point. Academics have spent many hours arguing about how to define small-scale fisheries (SSF), without finding clarity or true understanding. It is knowledge and understanding, rather than facts and figures, that we need if we are to find solutions to their management issues.

Returning to reality and examining the basic facts we have about SSF in the European Union (EU), we can derive very little from the simple but undeniably impressive statistical statements that SSF—defined as vessels under 12 m in length—account for 83 per cent of all EU fishing vessels and 35 per cent of the fleets’ combined engine capacity but probably no more than 45 per cent of employment in the catching sector and maybe around 25 per cent of catch value. But that statement tells a story of its own: We have accurate figures for vessel numbers, tonnage and engine capacity but only guesstimates for labour input and value of the catch. Not only does this point to areas of data deficiency but it may also suggest a rather inappropriate management approach. Much better to define SSF by reference to distinctive modes of organization, economic behaviour and dependence on local ecosystems, rather than through arbitrary but quantifiable proxies such as vessel size.

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Suspend belief, take a giant leap of faith and assume that we have a simple, universally acceptable definition and can measure the basic economic, social and cultural parameters of SSF. Where do we end up? With a huge diversity of circumstances but very few common denominators to guide our management strategies. Howsoever and wherever we draw the defining line, we are left with a mass of contradictions, anomalies and distortions, especially around the chosen limit. The overall diversity of circumstances—of motivation and aspiration as well as economic behaviour and use of resources—is the essential truth about SSF and a reason why managers have tended to shy away from the challenge.

## Coastal fisheries

There are some in Europe’s fishing industry who believe that SSF are a throwback to an earlier time and that the industry has moved on. Certainly, the rationale of SSF seems to fit more easily into a context framed by the remote, less well-developed peripheries of western Europe in the 1950s, where small-scale agriculture combined well with intensive, seasonal involvement with coastal fisheries. It made full use of the family’s labour resources, provided a reliable, diversified source of income and self-sufficiency, yielded a generally good standard of living and made for sustainable use of natural resources.

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But those days are past. Both farming and fishing became caught up in economies of scale. Economists and managers alike developed a distaste for pluriactive, part-time involvement seen as involving an imperfect division of labour, failure to maximize the value of production factors, a barrier to modernization and a lack of professionalism. Yet SSF persist in surprisingly large numbers across Europe—not necessarily as a feature of pluriactive peripheral economies—but as a distinctive subset of a modernizing fishing industry found throughout almost all coastal regions in Europe. For many, SSF are the outcome of choice rather than necessity—a preferred form of livelihood and way of life. They have survived quite draconian changes wrought by modernization, globalization and policy reforms but now face perhaps their greatest challenge to date from the privatization and marketization of fishing rights. So, what is it about SSF that makes them so distinctive and resistant, and why should we be looking to develop a policy approach that ensures their continued survival?

On the issue of distinctiveness, it is important to draw attention to two key features. First, SSF form an integral part of local social-ecological systems operating in coastal waters with highly diverse and sensitive natural environments that are shared with an increasing range of other users. The scale of their operations makes them ideally suited to such conditions. Second, SSF comprise small, independent family firms—limited in their operational range, often reliant on a combination of different seasonal fisheries and usually characterized by a particular mode of production that is, in very many ways, different from that governing the behaviour of large-scale, offshore fisheries.

This “simple commodity production” is capable of functioning for quite long periods without earning revenues commensurate with the value of the plant and equipment involved, strongly reliant on the resources of the household, willing to assume tasks normally contracted

to third parties (repair and maintenance, sales), less dependent on external sources of capital and credit and, therefore, less driven by the need to make profits to service the debt, and more concerned with the longer-term sustainability of the family enterprise. Unlike the offshore sector, locked into systems of specialization, SSF are, in theory, capable of adapting to changing circumstances through their more flexible and dynamic internal structures. These are, however, under threat from modern fisheries management.

When it comes to explaining SSF’s resilience, emphasis is usually placed on a combination of self-reliance, the individual strengths of the family enterprise and the collective strengths of the fishing community. But there are some internal contradictions to be negotiated. On the one hand, we stress the independence and self-reliance of the skipper-owner, and the teamwork, co-responsibility and shared remuneration of the boat crew that contributes a sense of informal co-operation within the small-scale sector. On the other hand, we also recognize the competitiveness of small-scale enterprises bent on deploying their individual skills and local knowledge to outperform their rivals for the sake of local

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Tending lobster pots off the Yorkshire coast in a modern, plastic hulled, under-10-m boat. Small-scale enterprises deploy individual skills and local knowledge

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A scene from Galicia, Spain. A combination of self-reliance and the individual strengths of the family enterprise determine the future of small-scale fishing communities

in the conduct of its Common Fisheries Policy when it decided on a derogation that effectively surrendered responsibility for managing fisheries within 12 nm of the coast to the member States.

In looking to describe the governance needs of SSF in Europe, three policy areas can be identified. The first is the problem of organization. In England, for example, there is an issue with the reluctance of the highly fragmented small-scale sector to organize itself—or be organized—politically. Not only do we have two competing organizations (the National Federation of Fishermen's Organization and the New Under Tens Fishermen's Association) claiming to represent the small-scale sector, each with a rather different take on the way forward for SSF, but around two-thirds of under-10-m vessel owners have chosen not to subscribe to either organization. This makes it impossible to articulate a clear and coherent sectoral view on governance issues that will affect their own futures. Political indifference—or diffidence—can also make it difficult for the views of SSF to be fully represented on national, regional and even local organizations, leaving the sector in danger of being ignored, and raising concerns over the achievement of procedural and distributive justice.

### Socioeconomic considerations

The second issue concerns the knowledge base on which policy decisions relating to the SSF are made. Normally in fishing such decisions are made primarily in respect of the need to conserve fish stocks, and that must remain the prime concern in the case of SSF. However, we increasingly find socioeconomic considerations entering the equation of how best to regulate the fishery (and by “socioeconomic” managers usually mean economic!). Clearly, with SSF there is a case to be made for taking more account of the social significance of the small-scale sector and the way that SSF operate. That makes it imperative that those who make the policy decisions have a clear

bragging rights, but not intent on doing them down through aggressive competition. The term “co-operating individualists” accommodates this apparent contradiction: competitors who will help each other out in times of emergency. If catching the fish is essentially an individual activity, then collective action brings most benefit to the small-scale sector in the organization of the market for what are typically irregular, small-unit, local landings so as to add value to high-quality fresh-fish produce in what basically remains a low-price commodity market. But converting informal co-operation into more formal collective action can be problematic, especially in those parts of Europe where the co-operative movement has been less strongly developed.

Modern fisheries management systems—especially those designed in conformity with a centralized, command-and-control approach to decisionmaking—are ill-suited to the tasks of SSF management. Fisheries managers become frustrated by the persistence of a significant anomaly that appears to defy the logic of conventional economic rationality, such that a senior administrator some years ago ruefully observed that perhaps the only way to deal with SSF was to ignore them. In 1982, the European Commission showed a level of wisdom never since equalled

understanding of the social and economic mechanisms that underpin SSF. This, they currently lack.

But the main governance issue concerns the choice of policy approach. Modern fisheries management has become synonymous with restrictive regulation. Its impact has been to reduce the level of discretion available to the operator as to when, where, what and how to fish—anathema to the many small-scale operators who need the flexibility to switch between locally available species in order to build a viable business. To date, most small-scale operators have not suffered from the regulatory stranglehold to the same extent as that now imposed on their counterparts in the mixed demersal fisheries. But there are worrying signs that fisheries administrators are keen to standardize the systems of management throughout the fisheries sector. So what are the basic choices in deciding the policy approach to SSF? Three questions can perhaps help to delineate the most appropriate line of action.

The question of an integrated or differential approach was raised by the EU's 2009 Green Paper that set out an agenda for the reform of the CFP. It outlined an approach that would leave the large-scale sector, where capacity adjustment and economic efficiency remain core concerns for policy makers, to be managed according to market-based systems of resource allocation (transferable fishing concessions). By contrast, the small-scale sector would be managed through non-transferable individual allocations of quota and effort entitlements (or through local community quota schemes). While this proposal received widespread support from member States, the majority verdict was that it should be left to the coastal States to decide how to manage their SSF. That still leaves us with the need to devise more nuanced systems of management that take account of the particular conditions in the countries concerned.

The second question—a sectoral or zonal approach—asks whether we need a policy approach that is dedicated to SSF howsoever defined or one concerned with the management of inshore waters. The focus has to be the inshore waters defined by the 12 nm territorial sea or possibly extended to 20 nm.

Such a framework opens up realistic opportunities for genuine ecosystem-based management (in place of the current token concessions), closer integration between fisheries and environmental management (instead of the attempt by marine conservation interests to impose their will through unscientifically selected marine protected areas), properly balanced marine spatial planning (rather than the hegemony of large corporate interests), and the delegation of management responsibilities to local institutions.

The framework would also allow for preferential treatment of SSF through limitations on vessel size and use of specific gears in all or parts of the inshore zone.

Inshore management may not embrace the entire operating range of

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all small-scale enterprises but it would arguably contain the major part of SSF interests.

### **Delegation**

The answer to the third question—national or local management—follows on from the previous argument. If the management system is to respect the distinctive nature of SSF, the regional variations in their make-up, and reflect and build upon their association with fishing communities, it can only be achieved through the delegation of responsibility and authority to local, stakeholder-led organizations. What is surprising is how uneven this

transfer has been in Europe. There appear to be relatively few fully devolved systems of governance for inshore fisheries: one of the more successful examples occurs in the United Kingdom—or, more precisely, England—where for around 120 years there has been a viable system of local co-management based on Sea Fisheries Committees (SFCs) made up of local authority members and representatives of the fishing industry.

With bylaw-making powers and other fisheries-specific instruments, SFCs had the capacity to take a wide range of management decisions, subject to the consent of the central administration. Moreover, each SFC had its own seagoing and land-based enforcement capability.

Recently, the system has been modernized and renamed Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), indicating a shift in emphasis towards the integration of fisheries and environmental management.

Among the more important policy objectives for SSF are fair allocation of access to fishing opportunities; protecting the sector from the unintended consequences of conventional management measures targeted at the offshore sector; maintaining the flexibility of small-scale fishing activities that facilitate the sector's adaptation to both short- and long-term change; and focusing on (re)building the sector's resilience.


Across Europe, we already have sufficient knowledge and understanding to appreciate the economic, social, cultural and regional importance of SSF, and we are beginning to get to grips with the difficult challenges of ensuring their effective governance and establishing their rightful place in the overall management of valuable yet vulnerable living marine resources.

However, we still have some way to go to convince the scientific, managerial and political elites of the need for investment in alternative management approaches. There is no single template for the governance of

SSF within Europe. While the broad principles of good governance may be universal, strong contrasts in the physical and cultural geographies of Europe dictate the need for the evolution of local solutions rather than the imposition of a basic structure.

The role of the higher levels of governance is to define the principles, outline a broad strategy, and create a firewall to protect SSF from the predations of large-scale fishing interests; but it will be the task of local co-governance institutions to manage the fisheries.

There are several internal issues that the sector must resolve for itself: leadership at the local level, organization and representation—and with these, the ability to find a clear and coherent voice to express its own views on how to manage its future, and the will to act collectively in pursuit of its common goals. But the tasks facing the small-scale sector go a little deeper.

The fishing industry, in general, and SSF, in particular, sometimes stand accused of too much introspection, of cultivating a ghetto mentality and ignoring—and being ignored by—the wider world around them. There is, therefore, a need to reconnect with local society, to forge links with other sectors of the coastal economy and to build political alliances at the local level that will help to strengthen its resilience in the challenging years ahead. 

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