

Marine Stewardship Council

Who's being seduced?

As the Marine Stewardship Council tries to sell itself in the South, critics are starting to question its market orientation

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is trying to tackle an issue of global concern: the sustainable use of fishery resources for the benefit of current and future generations. As part of the process of setting up the MSC, 'Principles and Criteria' are being established and developed for sustainable fishing. These will eventually provide the logic for a certifying scheme that will be used to qualify (or disqualify) fisheries products for the MSC ecolabel. This aspect of the MSC has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the whole sustainability debate, and is to be welcomed.

The process of consultation being undertaken by the MSC project in devising and developing its Principles and Criteria is being conducted in an extremely open and transparent manner. The project is seeking to consult with, and be guided by, the views of as many stakeholders in the fisheries sector as possible. This is also a very positive aspect of the project and is proving to be highly successful in stimulating debate.

However, of considerable concern to many people is that the MSC is based on a Northern-driven neoliberal agenda. According to Carl-Christian Schmidt the recently appointed Project Manager of the MSC, "Ecolabelling is a neoliberal tool and the MSC is going down that path." From a neoliberal market perspective, livelihoods and cultural traditions are no different from consumer durables like cars, and, as such, can be valued and traded. In the neoliberal marketplace, selling your fish quota (and your livelihood from fishing). is no different from selling your car.

Yet, it is likely that it will be the trading interests, like supermarket chains and

retail outlets, which will support the MSC, and determine whether or not fish with MSC ecolabels become popular consumer items. In the UK, supermarkets account for around 60 per cent of fresh fish and 80 per cent of frozen fish sales. These stores, conscious of their public image and their market shares, will be the ones to welcome the MSC ecolabelling scheme, not consumers themselves.

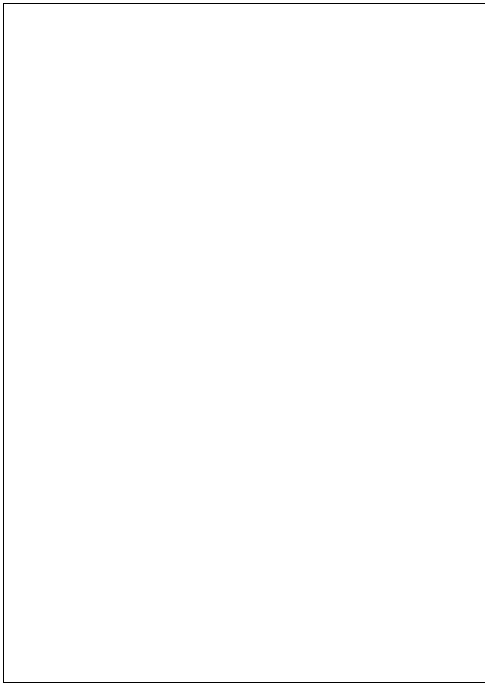
The MSC's interest in the South would seem to be mainly as a source of fish products which could be accredited. Fish sporting the MSC label will only be marketed in the North. It is unlikely that they will be sold in the South.

On 5 May, Schmidt, Julia Novy, the consultant recently appointed to help the MSC devise its strategy for the South, and several key people from WWF and Unilever hosted a 'Less Developed Countries Workshop' in London. The agenda included three key questions: Who are the relevant stakeholders? What are the key issues facing the introduction of the MSC in developing countries? What should be the strategy and action plan for the MSC in developing countries?

Of the 12 participants, six were WWF, Unilever and MSC staffers. Except for a participant from Papua New Guinea, the rest were from a variety of UK NGOs and consultancy firms with interests in the South. Laura Cooper of the WWF'S Endangered Seas Campaign explained that, as far as the South is concerned, the application of the MSC to developing countries was being put off until after the core programme was established.

Lots of questions

"We know we don't know how to do it right (in the South), we know we need to ask a lot of questions", she said, adding



be the main determining criteria for accreditation, while social factors may be pushed into the background.

Although the MSC deals with inter-generational, not allocation, issues, fisheries where allocation issues are resolved through privatization (for example, through management systems based on individual transferable quotas) will be easier to certify. It will also be easier for the MSC to certify fisheries on scientific evidence, than on more socially based traditional knowledge systems.

In the fisheries of developing countries, traditional community-based resource allocation systems and socially based management systems are widespread but not widely recognized or acknowledged. With its scientific and technical bias, will the MSC discriminate against these?

The question of exporting a Northern agenda to the South is also a major issue for many people, who see the MSC as Northern neocolonialism in another guise. There are many in the South who do not share the North-devised neoliberal agenda on which the MSC is based, and who would, therefore oppose its imposition. There are also many who feel that the North should rather be questioning and regulating its own patterns of consumption, rather than let consumerism drive its citizens' lives.

More work left

Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done before the MSC will be fully up and running. According to Schmidt, it should be completely independent and functional by end 1998. Given this tight deadline and its inherent partiality, how serious can the MSC initiative be as a tool to encourage long-term sustainability, as opposed to being just another short-term marketing gimmick?

that the workshop and subsequent consultations were designed "to put them in touch with the people who they need to be in touch with."

Schmidt clarified that the MSC would be limited to taking a "slice of the fisheries sector." The MSC might set right some, but not all, wrongs. "We are living in a second-best world and have to apply second-best solutions," he said.

MSC accreditation will require participants to buy into the certification scheme by paying for accreditation and subsequent monitoring. Smaller fleets of large ships able to offer bulk supplies will have an advantage over larger fleets of small vessels whose supplies may fluctuate.

Small-scale, decentralized, community-based fisheries, prevalent in the South, might be discriminated against, because they would not be able to buy into the MSC certification scheme. It could also prove too costly for MSC certifying agents to accredit the many small-scale, decentralized fisheries. The MSC may thus favour more centralized, company-owned fishing operations.

As the process of developing the MSC Principles and Criteria advances, boundaries will need to be drawn around what the MSC includes and what it excludes. This may mean that environmental and technical factors will

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