

# The Power Game of Language

If people in small-scale fisheries wish to make the Blue Economy work for them, they must take control of the language, to avoid a rhetoric that further marginalizes them

**T**he risks and opportunities of small-scale fisheries in the 'Blue Economy' is a topic I have talked and written about for a while now—also in *SAMUDRA Reports* (Nos. 82 and 83, 2020). I have argued that if States do nothing to implement the

Guidelines in developing countries, which is great. But it is not possible to see any trace of the Guidelines in Norwegian domestic fisheries policies, which is a pity. The SSF Guidelines are also needed for small-scale fisheries in the Global North, Norway included. The guiding principles apply regardless of region.

A Norwegian fisher was quoted as telling a local fisheries journalist: "If coastal fishers had been a distinct marine species, they would have been on the red list for more than 40 years now." (*Fiskeribladet*, 15 May 2021) One should perhaps not expect that the SSF Guidelines would lead to immediate and drastic policy moves. But if we take in what this fisher is saying, we do not have much time. We cannot afford to be patient, or small-scale fisheries may soon be gone in my part of the world.

The SSF Guidelines are a landmark achievement. It is the first global instrument directly targeting the small-scale fisheries. I am happy to have been involved in the process of developing them, as a member of the Norwegian delegation during the Technical Consultations in 2013 and 2014. For me, it was an interesting experience in many ways, including as a process of language development. The SSF Guidelines are a text of sentences and words spread out in hundreds of paragraphs. Therefore, the negotiations that led to their final endorsement in June 2014 were about how sentences should be phrased, which words to use, and what they meant. There were strong disagreements about whether certain words and sentences should be used at all.

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Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (the SSF Guidelines), the Blue Economy will come at a loss to small-scale fisheries. There is enough evidence to suggest that the risk is real, present, and that it must be taken seriously.

The full name of the SSF Guidelines includes the phrase "in the context of poverty eradication and food security." Both poverty eradication and food security are social-justice issues related to the human rights of small-scale fisheries people, their rights to food, wellbeing, equity and freedom. If the Blue Economy can deliver on these issues, threats may yet turn into opportunities. But only then.

In my own country, Norway, there is a lot of talk about the Blue Economy and its opportunities for marine industrial growth, but no mention of the SSF Guidelines themselves. Norway is supporting the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) financially to implement the SSF

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Beach seine in Pântano do Sul in Santa Catarina, Brazil. The true meaning of the Blue Economy is not to be found in glossy pamphlets about the ocean as a new frontier for economic growth, but in how the Blue Economy works in practice for small-scale fisheries communities

### Delegates' suggestions

For instance, it did not take delegates long to take down the suggestion that the SSF Guidelines should have a definition of 'small-scale fisheries'. 'Governance' was a concept that proved controversial. Should the word 'redistribution' appear in the text? How about 'rights-based fishing'? The dispute around the term 'colonization' almost killed the SSF Guidelines. In the end, it was replaced with another word that changed the meaning of the article where it appeared.

The phrase "as appropriate" appears 18 times in the SSF Guidelines. For example, in article 5.8: "States should adopt measure to facilitate equitable access to fisheries resources for small-scale fishing communities, including, *as appropriate*, redistributive reform." (Italics mine). It was unclear to me whether delegates meant the same thing by using the phrase. Is the term a way to put at ease those who had reservations against a particular article, or is the idea that context matters

and that a pragmatic and flexible approach is needed? Clearly, the term satisfies both concerns, and it works to underscore the voluntary nature of the Guidelines. The problem is that States might easily find reasons why the SSF Guidelines, or particular articles in them, should not apply, especially when their implementation is painful in one way or the other.

The Blue Economy and Blue Growth concepts are not in the SSF Guidelines. These concepts are almost universal now. The pace in which concepts travel these days is amazing. Globalization is also about the proliferation of language. They are part of the way we talk about the future for small-scale fisheries. The opposite is rarely the case. There is hardly any mention of small-scale fisheries and the SSF Guidelines in the Blue Economy rhetoric.

### Language is power

We use language to understand what we see and do. What we see and do, hence, is dependent on language. We

use language to make other people see what we see and to explain and legitimize what we do. We use language strategically in an argument or dispute. By implication, the one who controls the language (to the degree that it is possible) controls the conversation, and the one who controls the conversation controls the action. Therefore, language is an instrument of power, intimately connected with any other form of power, like economic and political power. Power is also an issue in the SSF Guidelines, as in the preface: “Small-scale fishing communities also commonly suffer from unequal power relations.” The ‘marginalization’ of small-scale fisheries—a word that pops up 19 times in the SSF Guidelines—is also about language.

Consequently, if small-scale fisheries people want to make the Blue Economy work for them, they must

“Just imagine a garden with hundreds of different trees, thousands of different flowers, hundreds of different fruits and herbs. Now, if the only botanical distinction the gardener knows is that between edible things and weeds, he will not know what to do with nine-tenths of his garden. He will uproot the most enchanting flowers, fell the finest trees, or at any rate detest and frown upon them.” (*Steppenwolf*, 1927, p. 68)

Clearly, the gardener would benefit from a richer language: He would see more of the biodiversity and appreciate the beauty in front of him. He would also be cautious about what he does with his garden. Instead, however, because of the paucity of his language, he will destroy what he is there to protect and nurture. The richness of small-scale fisheries and their enormous diversity globally, which made it difficult to find a definition that would suit all, illustrates the need for a similar language. We need more than a few words in a sentence or two to describe them.

### **Blue Justice**

Now that 2022 is going to be the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture, how should we talk about them then? It is important that we must make sure that the implementation of the SSF Guidelines and the Blue Economy do not become separate discourses, with no link in between. But to create that link, we need a new language. The issue came up during the World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress in 2018 when Moenieba Isaacs from South Africa introduced us to the concept of ‘Blue Justice’. It has since become a key focus of the the Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) initiative. Rolf Willmann, the architect at FAO of the SSF Guidelines, suggested during the 2019 Mare conference that we should try to get the concept into Wikipedia, which we have done.

Blue Justice is a composite and complex concept, but it is also intuitive and at the same level of abstraction as the Blue Economy. We may, therefore, talk about Blue Justice as easily as we talk about the Blue Economy. Once brought into the Blue Economy ‘language game’—to use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept (*Philosophical Investigations*, 1952), it would require a response, just like in any other game. Games have rules, and it is essential that the rules of

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take control of the language, to avoid a rhetoric that further marginalizes them. With the SSF Guidelines, they are better equipped to speak for themselves about issues that are close to their heart, and they are likely to lose out in the Blue Economy if they do not. The question that concerns me here is how they should do that—which brings me into the age-old philosophical discourse on language, about how words get their meaning. Notably, this is not just an academic issue with no practical implication. Quite the contrary. Fisheries governance, including the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, is totally language-dependent. We cannot govern without language. We must be concerned with how language functions in governance settings. We, therefore, have all the reasons in the world to explore how language works to shape the Blue Economy as far as small-scale fisheries are concerned.

The German-Swiss novelist and 1946 Nobel Prize winner, Hermann Hesse, illustrates the point in a revealing way. I quote from his book, *Steppenwolf*:

the Blue Economy language game are not imposed on small-scale fisheries. It is not for States alone to decide which topics are relevant and can be raised, which arguments to make, which concepts to use, whose voices should be heard and how the conversation should evolve. In a democratic small-scale fisheries governance process, that is for all of us to determine.

Freedom of speech is a human right and thus also a matter for the SSF Guidelines. The Blue Justice concept carries a long tradition of philosophical argumentation. It also has a moral foundation that is difficult to reject. Notably, the Blue Justice concept, as TBTI defines it, is beyond the narrow, legal interpretation, which is used in connection with illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and law enforcement, as in the 2018 Copenhagen Declaration. Blue Justice, in the broader meaning offered by TBTI, is relational, multi-dimensional, material as well as moral, and works at different scales. We think of it as a process of social struggle requiring mobilization of those whose lives and livelihoods are being interrupted in the Blue Economy. The SSF Guidelines are a treasure chest for those short of words to capture what Blue Justice means for small-scale fisheries people.

It is also important to stress that the Blue Justice concept requires a narrative founded in practical, lived experiences of those for whom injustice is part of their history and daily life.

Wittgenstein argued in his *Philosophical Investigations* that a word at the outset does not get its meaning from other words but from its actual use in a practice in its particular context. The same word may have different meanings in different contexts. The word fish, for example, can refer to what we have for dinner, but it can also be what a person is out on the sea for. In the first instance, it refers to food on the dinner table, in the second to the purpose for his fishing trip. In TBTI's interpretation, the Blue Justice concept is to be understood in the context of the Blue Economy, but it would also mean different things for small-scale fisheries people in different Blue Economies.

Wittgenstein inspired Jakob Meløe, my longtime colleague and mentor in the philosophy department of

my university, when he wrote: "Our concepts of the world come from our activities in the world." He added the example: "Without coastal fishing, or seafaring, in boats too large for the crews to draw them ashore, there is no place for the concept of harbour." The "original home" of our concepts is, according to Wittgenstein, in the activity in which they are used.

The true meaning of the Blue Economy is not to be found in glossy pamphlets, seductive language and political statements about the ocean as a new frontier for economic growth, but in how the Blue Economy works in practice, like for people in small-scale fisheries communities. Then we should not forget that justice also has emotional dimensions. When we see injustice,

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we get morally upset, but are often also rendered speechless. However, the paucity of language does not make injustice less real in the Blue Economy. It just makes people defenseless.

Wittgenstein observed: "Concepts lead us to make investigations, are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest." Therefore, we need a concept like Blue Justice to bring attention to an issue of utmost importance to small-scale fisheries, which cannot simply be defined away and by that, ignored. You cannot insist that 'this' is not what the Blue Economy is about, if 'that' is what it does. You cannot say that marginalization is not what the Blue Economy means if that is what it does to small-scale fisheries. Without a concept like Blue Justice, the Blue Economy would do what Hesse's gardener does to his garden. Without the Blue Justice concept, there is a bigger risk that small-scale fisheries get overrun in the Blue Economy language game, a game they cannot afford to lose. 📌

#### For more

##### Blue Justice

[https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue\\_82/4419\\_art\\_Sam\\_82\\_art15\\_Review\\_Fikret\\_Berkes.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_82/4419_art_Sam_82_art15_Review_Fikret_Berkes.pdf)

##### Blue Gold

[https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue\\_82/4419\\_art\\_Sam\\_82\\_art15\\_Review\\_Fikret\\_Berkes.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_82/4419_art_Sam_82_art15_Review_Fikret_Berkes.pdf)

##### The Human Relationship with Our Ocean Planet

<https://oceanpanel.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Human%20Relationship%20with%20the%20Ocean%20Full%20Paper.pdf>