

SDG 14

Sustainable fishery or Blue Economy?

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The inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of a stand-alone goal addressing the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans – SDG 14 – has resulted in a veritable boom in global ‘blue’ initiatives. No doubt it is encouraging to see the world’s largest habitat receiving more political attention. At the same time, however, one has to take a very close look at what enthusiasm over a ‘Blue Economy’ or catchwords like ‘Blue Growth’ actually conceals and who ultimately benefits from these concepts.¹

Blue Economy vs. rights-based approaches

It generally has to be welcomed that in the ‘blue’ sustainability debates, the international community recognizes that the oceans are not an area devoid of any humans, but that coastal inhabitants hold rights to the land and the seas and have in some cases done so for a long time. In spite of this, at the UN’s first Ocean Conference in June 2017, many representatives of the artisanal fishery sector had the impression that they were not treated as equal partners but merely serving as objects of a wide range of voluntary initiatives by States, business and NGOs that were in support of ‘Blue Economy’ or ‘Blue Growth’. The human rights base of SDG 14 was hardly mentioned in this context.²

The rights of artisanal small-scale fishers were also given scant reference at other major marine conservation conferences, such as the “Our Ocean”

conference, held in Malta in October 2017,³ and in the ‘blue’ financial instruments of the World Bank and the donor community, for example, Germany’s Blue Action Fund.⁴

However, it has to be borne in mind that marine conservation and sustainable fishery issues also include respecting the centuries-old access rights of fishing communities to their fishing grounds and the economic, social and cultural rights of the coastal communities. Another aspect here is the right of people living in the hinterland of the coastal regions to a healthy and diversified diet, of which fish products are an indispensable element.

Growing recognition of small-scale fishery advocacy groups

The representatives of small-scale fisher communities are enjoying more and more recognition world-wide, just like their colleagues in smallholder farming. They are now accepted as an independent sector of fishery and can participate as holders of rights on an equal par with other actors and government representatives in developing international and national law on governing and managing fishing grounds, coasts and seas.⁵

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in

1 Standing (2018).

2 See: <https://oceanconference.un.org/>

3 See: <http://ourocean2017.org/>

4 See: <https://www.blueactionfund.org/>

5 International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) (2014).

the Context of National Food Security, which were officially endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security in May 2012, play an important role in this context.⁶ They also award fishers the right to have a say in decisions on the use of fishing grounds close to the coast, extractive industry investments and tourism ventures. The Guidelines acknowledge that fishers should not only be heard on investment projects, but that their rights are affected by these projects, and investors therefore have to seek prior consent of the coastal communities or give up their projects.

Artisanal fishery scored an even greater success in 2014, when the Voluntary Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (VGSSF) were officially endorsed by the FAO's Committee on Fisheries.⁷ In adopting the Guidelines, the committee recognized for the first time that artisanal fishery represents a distinct sector holding its own rights within fisheries as a whole. Many States refused to the last to allow this splitting up of their fisheries into industrial and artisanal sectors, but they were over-ruled. It was also thanks to the tenacious insistence of the international small-scale fisheries organizations that this materialized.

The implementation of SDG 14 and its targets for sustainable fishery cannot have any prospect of success without the integration of these Guidelines. There is a growing tendency for wild fish stocks to be fished more and more by industrial fishing fleets (approx. 30,000 fishing vessels, operating across 55% of the world's oceans) and used to provide people in the industrialized countries with fish. Almost 2 billion people for whom fish is one of the most important sources of animal protein have to manage with what is left. In addition, nearly 800 million people live on income from fishery and fish processing. Any changes towards more sustainability through marine conservation, closed seasons and species-appropriate fishing methods also have to take these dependences into account.

6 See: www.fao.org/tenure/en/

7 See: www.fao.org/fishery/ssf/guidelines/en

Sustainable fishery – for whom?

However, sustainable fishery must not mean that it contributes to a sustainable consolidation of the current inequality in the distribution of fish resources. One example of this is tuna fishing. It is no doubt right to do everything to maintain the global tuna stocks, but not for the purpose of 70 percent of these continuing to be provided as canned tuna to the population of the industrialized countries and the emerging economies. Tuna stocks must above all be used more to supply the population of the developing countries in the Pacific, in particular.

Sustainable fishery also means eliminating poverty and maldevelopment in coastal areas, ensuring access to drinking water and good health, providing sufficient education and guaranteeing gender justice, human rights and democracy for the millions of people living on fishery. Such conditions will also enable the coastal communities to achieve agreements with marine conservation, sustainable tourism and – why not? – energy or fish breeding experts and commission them to develop joint proposals to improve their economic, social and environmental situation.

Small-scale fishery organizations want to be subjects of their development in their own right (including the achievement of the SDGs) rather than mere addressees and objects of non-binding voluntary commitments of governments, corporations and NGOs.⁸

Artisanal fishery is part of the solution

Outside the discourse on the 'Blue Economy', small-scale fishery associations are often being given more attention. This applies in particular to the most important organization on governing ocean fishery activities, the FAO. In this context, in addition to the above-mentioned VGSSF, the Port State Measures Agreement, adopted in 2009, also plays an important role. It provides for stringent controls regarding the origin of fishing trawler catches and now has to be

8 Gueye (Ed.) (2016).

translated into national policies with the support of civil society.⁹

The small-scale fishery associations are also instrumental in the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI), a stakeholder platform founded in 2015 along the lines of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).¹⁰ Its purpose is to increase transparency and participation in fisheries governance for the benefit of more sustainable management of marine fisheries.

Unfortunately, neither participation nor transparency are established everywhere. One of the SDG 14 targets that is meant to be achieved by 2020 – the elimination of global fisheries subsidies – is being negotiated by the WTO in complete absence of artisanal fishery, which is indirectly affected. This recently became apparent at the WTO's Eleventh Ministerial Conference (MC11) in Buenos Aires in December 2017. To the regret of some of the major environmental organizations, a corresponding agreement on subsidies was not reached. The WTO Ministerial Conference ended with only a commitment from members to secure a deal on fisheries subsidies which would deliver on SDG target 14.6 by the end of 2019.¹¹

However, the absent small-scale fishery organizations vehemently opposed the conclusion of an agreement in the framework of the WTO, for this would not have guaranteed artisanal fishery being excepted from the ban on subsidies.

In their opinion, the negotiations concerning this topic should not be addressed by the WTO in any case, for fish is not a mere industrial and trade commodity but represents food for billions of people. Negotiations on this topic relate to fundamental human rights, in particular the right to food. It would therefore be better for the issue of fishery subsidies to be negotiated in Rome, at the FAO, instead of at the WTO in Geneva.

No doubt the huge fishery subsidies have resulted in an overfishing of the oceans and are now threatening livelihoods in artisanal fishery, especially along the coasts of the poorest countries. However, artisanal fishery continues to need State support to maintain sustainable fishery management, marine conservation, monitoring and more sustainable fishing tackle. In the interest of truly sustainable fishery, politicians must boost public financing of these sectors instead of indiscriminately eliminating it through a ban on all subsidies.

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9 See: www.fao.org/fishery/psm/agreement/en

10 See: <http://fisheriestransparency.org/>

11 See: www.wto.org/english/news_e/news17_e/mc11_13dec17_e.htm