



COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

Thirty-sixth Session

8-12 July 2024

DECISIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NINETEENTH SESSION OF THE COFI SUB-COMMITTEE ON FISH TRADE 11-15 SEPTEMBER 2023

Executive Summary

This document outlines the main conclusions of the 19th Session of the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade (COFI/FT/XIX). The report is available as document COFI/2024/INF/9.

Suggested action by the Committee

The Committee is invited to:

- endorse the report of the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade;
- provide recommendations about the growing number of measures impacting the trade of aquatic products, particularly non-tariff measures;
- provide recommendations and share examples of effective national policies to improve market access for small-scale fisheries (SSF);
- welcome the continued recognition of FAO in multiple *fora* as the preeminent global authority with the technical expertise to provide scientific advice and data on aquaculture and fisheries for trade-related issues;
- emphasize the significance of supporting national and regional endeavours that promote sustainable value chains, considering the specific needs of SSF and the adoption, understanding, and dissemination of FAO guidance documents on traceability;
- call attention to the negative economic and trade consequences of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in regional and global meetings, including meetings of regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), emphasizing the importance of continuously adhering to multiple international instruments;

- highlight the significance of implementing and promoting national marketing initiatives, product innovation, and processing equipment efficiency, legislation against food waste, preventive measures against discard, and the development of policies that promote the sustainable and comprehensive use of aquatic resources in a holistic or multidimensional approach, to minimize food loss and waste (FLW) on a national and regional scale; and
- acknowledge the relevance, within countries and regionally, of the FAO Guidance on Social Responsibility in the Fisheries and Aquaculture Value Chains, which is being developed and aims to enhance private sector compliance to social issues by providing a comprehensive way of presenting associated existing related instruments.

Queries on the substantive content of this document may be addressed to:

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The 19th Session of the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade (COFI:FT) of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) was held in Bergen, Norway, from 11 to 15 September 2023. Forty-three Members of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and nineteen observers from intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations attended.

2. On behalf of the Norwegian government, Ms Astrid Holtan, Deputy Director-General of the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Fisheries and Chairperson of the Session, delivered a welcome address. Mr Audun Lem, Deputy Director of the FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Division, delivered the opening statement on behalf of Dr QU Dongyu, Director-General of FAO.

3. The working documents were organized into three major areas to facilitate discussion: (1) fisheries outlook, global themes, and cooperation with other international organizations; (2) market access; and (3) the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and post-harvest elements.

4. While Section II of this document provides a summary of the main outcomes, it is advisable to consult the full report of the Session (COFI/2024/INF/9).

II. MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE SESSION

Fisheries Outlook, Global Themes, and Cooperation with other International Organizations

(documents COFI:FT/XIX/2023/2 and COFI:FT/XIX/2023/3)

5. The Sub-Committee expressed its appreciation to the Secretariat for delivering a thorough analysis. During the discussion, the Sub-Committee examined the consequences of ongoing conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector and, more specifically, how inflationary pressures on production costs and market prices impacted aquatic product revenues and consumption. The Sub-Committee emphasized its crucial role as the primary global forum to discuss trade issues in fisheries and aquaculture, recognizing FAO as the leading international agency in these sectors while encouraging FAO to develop initiatives to raise awareness of the importance of aquatic foods.

6. The Sub-Committee stressed the significance of information sharing and FAO fisheries and aquaculture statistics in monitoring and managing the industry and analysing national, regional, and global trends. The Sub-Committee reported and urged FAO to develop a global fisheries and aquaculture statistics strategy to help countries collect high-quality data to identify trends and improve their data collection methodologies and tools.

7. The Sub-Committee also encouraged Members to sign the recent United Nations High Seas Treaty (the BBNJ Treaty) and noted the FAO's role in providing specialized technical expertise to Members and regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs). The Sub-Committee underscored the necessity for FAO to support the implementation by Members of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Collaboration with other international organizations and entities, as well as FAO's initiatives on global issues, have been commended by the Sub-Committee.

8. The Sub-Committee emphasized that FAO Blue Transformation, which aligns with the FAO Strategic Framework and the United Nations Agenda 2030, is crucial for implementing initiatives and programmes in aquaculture and fisheries, including fostering the importance of aquatic products in the global food systems agenda and FAO's involvement in the broader food system narrative.

Market Access

(documents COFI:FT/XIX/2023/4, COFI:FT/XIX/2023/5, COFI:FT/XIX/2023/6, COFI:FT/XIX/2023/7, COFI:FT/XIX/2023/8 and COFI:FT/XIX/2023/9)

9. For food safety and quality of aquatic products, the Sub-Committee expressed appreciation for FAO's work in this area. It emphasized the importance of collaboration with other agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). The Sub-Committee supported FAO's scientific advice on the standard-setting process within Codex and appreciated FAO's assessment of fish consumption advantages and disadvantages.

10. Additionally, the Sub-Committee requested guidance on evaluating and managing marine biotoxins, emphasized the need for data availability on contaminants and nutrients, and urged more analysis on import notification data and guidance on food safety hazards. It expressed appreciation for the FAO's work on bivalve sanitation and on microplastics in food. The Sub-Committee commended FAO for its technical assistance in drafting national antimicrobial resistance action plans and capacity-building efforts.

11. In the area of aquatic food traceability and catch documentation schemes (CDS), the Sub-Committee commended FAO for its continued efforts in normative, capacity-building and technical assistance work. It encouraged the ongoing collaboration with various organizations in this field. The Sub-Committee noted national, regional, and international initiatives to enhance supply chain transparency, legality, sustainability, and food safety. It emphasized FAO's importance in supporting Members in implementing the Voluntary Guidelines for Catch Documentation Schemes (VGCDs) and developing robust traceability systems, mainly focusing on efficient data verifiability using electronic solutions and tools.

12. The Sub-Committee emphasized the necessity for improved consistency and compatibility between CDS and other market instruments, raising concern regarding the widespread use of unilateral schemes. It advocated increased support for RFMOs in building appropriate electronic CDS in line with VGCDs. FAO's publication of the guidance document "Advancing end-to-end Traceability"¹ was commended by the Sub-Committee. It also expressed its appreciation for the continuous progress of studies on traceability analysis in SSF and aquaculture, underscoring their importance in facilitating the access of SSF in international fish trade.

13. Regarding enabling sustainable market access and trade for SSF, the Sub-Committee recognized the importance of fish trade for SSF for local, regional, and global supply chains, equitable development, and sustainable resource utilization. It acknowledged the significance of SSF for the livelihoods of coastal communities and Indigenous Peoples. The Sub-Committee welcomed the Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) report² and appreciated its comprehensive examination of production, livelihoods, nutritional contribution, women's empowerment, and governance in SSF.

14. The Sub-Committee welcomed FAO's work in addressing market access challenges facing SSF by implementing the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines). The Sub-Committee commended FAO's efforts in generating knowledge products, data, and information and capacity development activities for SSF, including on GLOBEFISH³. The Sub-Committee noted that certification standards, an increasingly used tool to measure and assess fisheries and aquaculture product sustainability, are not always well adapted to SSF and could act as non-tariff barriers, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and non-discrimination.

15. For IUU fishing, the Sub-Committee acknowledged the detrimental impact of IUU fishing on trade and markets and reaffirmed the importance of combatting IUU fishing. It recognized the significance of trade-related measures and various international instruments, including the Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated

¹ <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1640146>

² <https://www.fao.org/3/cc6062en/cc6062en.pdf>

³ <https://www.fao.org/in-action/globefish/fishery-information/en/>

Fishing (PSMA). It emphasized the need to strengthen PSMA implementation at all levels and expand its application among Members.

16. The Sub-Committee acknowledged the connections between reducing the infiltration of IUU fishing products and enhancing traceability, maximizing the economic advantages of value chains, and ensuring food security. The Sub-Committee also expressed appreciation for the innovative analysis presented for the 19th Session of COFI:FT, urging FAO to further explore the intricacies and trade-related aspects of IUU fishing and potential strategies for its mitigation.

17. The Sub-Committee highlighted the importance of coordination with RFMOs in combating IUU fishing and noted the ongoing efforts by Members in bilateral and multilateral initiatives to address IUU fishing-related challenges. It also stressed the importance of utilizing international instruments to enhance transparency, availability, and reliability of information for traceability purposes in combating IUU fishing.

18. On biodiversity conservation initiatives and international trade, the Sub-Committee stressed the importance of utilizing the best available scientific and technical information in developing and implementing environmental instruments. It reaffirmed FAO's position as a worldwide authority on scientific and technical information about fisheries and aquaculture, welcoming FAO's expert advisory reports providing scientific advice on species conservation criteria. The Sub-Committee highlighted FAO's support to Members in implementing biodiversity conservation initiatives such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) and the BBNJ Treaty. It emphasized the need for policy coherence between fisheries and biodiversity instruments.

19. The Sub-Committee requested that FAO continue its collaboration to support the implementation of CITES provisions for commercially exploited aquatic species, overall technical assistance to RFMOs, and to enhance cooperation with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in biodiversity conservation efforts. The Sub-Committee also supported the proposed FAO work programme for 2023-2024, which included promoting biodiversity mainstreaming throughout FAO Divisions, Regional Offices, and Members.

20. For the FAO database on trade agreements, the Sub-Committee welcomed FAO's initiative to develop a database focused on trade agreements related to fisheries and aquaculture products. It highlighted the potential benefits of such a database in increasing transparency and knowledge in international trade, which could positively impact economic development, food security, and livelihoods, improving market access, particularly for developing countries and SSF. It requested that the FAO start designing the database focusing on non-traditional trade issues related to environmental and sustainability requirements in fisheries. The Sub-Committee also suggested surveying interested Members and relevant organizations to assess any broadening of the database's scope. It reiterated the principles guiding the database's development, including being global, factual, non-discriminatory, and user-friendly, with functionalities for querying and downloading information to facilitate market access.

The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and Post-Harvest Elements

(documents COFI:FT/XIX/2023/10, COFI:FT/XIX/2023/11 and COFI:FT/XIX/2023/12)

21. In the section of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) that deals with the process of revising the Article 11 Questionnaire, the Sub-Committee emphasized the significance of the Questionnaire as a tool for monitoring and promoting efficient and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture practices in post-harvest and trade activities. It also acknowledged the ongoing efforts to improve and clarify the Questionnaire, commending FAO for its efforts in developing the new platform, highlighting features that make it easier to provide responses and lower the likelihood of misinterpretation. In addition, the Sub-Committee suggested that FAO coordinate its multiple questionnaires to reduce burdens and eliminate situations in which the reporting information is duplicated.

22. Regarding the nexus between trade and aquatic food utilization, the Sub-Committee highlighted the crucial role of aquatic food products in food security and nutrition. It called on FAO to assist Members in combating malnutrition by reducing FLW in aquatic food value chains and improving the trade and utilization of fish by-products. The Sub-Committee underscored the importance of initiatives to reduce FLW, increase the use of fish by-products for human consumption, and promote seaweed consumption as low-cost sustainable options that create employment opportunities, particularly for women. The Sub-Committee emphasized the necessity of using a holistic or multidimensional approach to identifying and resolving variables influencing national capacities in FLW prevention. It emphasized the significant role of women in post-harvest fisheries activities, particularly in processing, marketing, and trade. The Sub-Committee supported FAO's analysis of the importance of markets in reducing FLW, enhancing nutritional outcomes, and providing economic opportunities. Additionally, it acknowledged the essential role of small pelagic fish and fish powder in human consumption. It supported FAO's efforts to develop a toolkit to assist countries in incorporating fish into school feeding programs.

23. The Sub-Committee reiterated its support for the FAO's Guidance on Social Responsibility in Fisheries and Aquaculture Value Chains (FAO Guidance). It highlighted that the FAO Guidance should be voluntary, practical, and based on current instruments. The Sub-Committee took note of the option for Members to comment on the industrial fishing appendix within a set deadline. It emphasized the importance of ongoing engagement with Members and stakeholders, including relevant institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and industry associations, when developing additional appendices on SSF and aquaculture. The Sub-Committee asked the Secretariat to look into measures to speed up the process and expedite the Guidance's development.

III. RELEVANT DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE LAST SESSION OF COFI:FT

24. The Committee is presented with an overview of certain activities being carried out by FAO since the 19th COFI:FT session, which includes both the standard ongoing initiatives of FAO and some particular recommendations received or discussed in previous COFI:FT sessions:

Collaboration with other international organizations

- World Trade Organization (WTO)
 - The continuation of providing technical assistance in connection with the current negotiations on fisheries subsidies, including support for the implementation of the agreement through the "fish fund" managed by the WTO.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
 - Coordinated a regional collaborative event to clarify and examine the OECD Fisheries Support Estimate within the framework of the fisheries subsidies negotiations to assist Members.

Market access

- Sustainable market access and trade for SSF
 - FAO continues to provide support for implementing the SSF Guidelines, particularly in the countries participating in National Plans of Action for SSF.
 - Intensifying efforts to disseminate report information and inform associated actions involving SSF, including the development of Illuminating Hidden Harvest (IHH)⁴ country⁵ and regional briefs in a participatory manner, as well as gender-specific

⁴ <https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/ihh/en>

⁵ Tanzania (<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc7606en>) and Uganda (<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc7604en>).

briefs⁶; dissemination of IHH at multiple regional and global events; in-country follow-ups; capacity development workshops and publication on the IHH country case study approach.

- IUU fishing
 - FAO has published three volumes of guidance to quantify illegal, unreported and unregulated catches⁷. As an alternative to direct estimation, a fourth volume outlining a simplified approach involving indicators will be published in mid-2024. Although indicators do not directly measure IUU fishing, the formulation of indicator metrics to monitor rates of port entry denials, apparent infringements detected in port control processes, and the number of vessels subject to these processes has been discussed at regional meetings of the Parties to the PSMA. Metrics of this nature would facilitate the assessment of the degree to which control measures are being effectively implemented and the extent to which this control is being tested by potential IUU fishing. Comparable approaches might be applied to issues on trade and traceability. For example, indicators of control coverage could be the proportion of trade regulated through catch documentation schemes or third-party certification. Instances of mislabelling or border rejections may be employed as metrics to quantify identified non-compliance. Applying these metrics at the national, regional, or international level may facilitate and improve the assessment and adjustment of relevant policies.
- FAO database on trade agreements
 - The development of the database parameters is presently underway, and the Bureau of COFI:FT will be duly informed of the progress of each incremental phase upon its completion.
- Information products
 - An electronic iteration of the WCO-FAO Handbook on the Harmonized System for Fisheries and Aquaculture Products⁸ is under development to facilitate consultation.
 - An economic analysis of fisheries access arrangements (FAA) was published in a follow-up report⁹ to the Report Mapping Distant-Water Fisheries Access Arrangements¹⁰. This new report identified opportunities to enhance the trade of fisheries-related services, with a particular emphasis on developing countries, through analyzing institutional and economic aspects of distant-water FAAs in greater detail through specific country case studies.

The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) and Post-Harvest Elements

- Questionnaire on Article 11 of the CCRF
 - After the 19th COFI:FT Session, Members were invited to provide feedback on the revised Questionnaire on Article 11 of the CCRF. The COFI:FT Secretariat is currently analysing the feedback received from Members, and the final version of the Questionnaire will be developed accordingly. The next edition of the Questionnaire on Article 11 will be launched in the first quarter of 2025.
 - Before its launch in 2025, a webinar will be organized to provide Members with extensive knowledge regarding the revised Questionnaire on Article 11 and optimize the reporting procedure.

⁶ Philippines (<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc7603en>), Ghana

(<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc7630en>), Malawi (<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc7629en>).

⁷ “Principles and Approaches” volume, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6434en>), executing the study (“Practical Guide” volume, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9076en>), and selecting an appropriate estimation methodology (“Catalogue of Examples” volume, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9054en>). A fourth volume outlining a simplified approach involving indicators will be published in mid-2024.

⁸ <https://www.fao.org/in-action/globefish/publications/details-publication/en/c/1643866/>

⁹ <https://www.fao.org/3/cd0351t/cd0351t.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/CC2545EN>

- The FAO Guidance on Social Responsibility in the Fisheries and Aquaculture Value Chains (FAO Guidance)
 - After the 19th COFI:FT Session, Members were invited to provide feedback on the draft version of the industrial fishing section of the FAO Guidance until 31 December 2023. Fifteen Members provided FAO with comments that were assessed and integrated into the draft text of the industrial fishing section. Simultaneously, FAO initiated the procedures for developing the sections on SSF and aquaculture production, utilizing the same inclusive and transparent development process as industrial fishing. FAO expects to conclude the elaboration of these two sections (consultations with international organizations, Members, and stakeholders) by the end of 2024. In addition to the sections, the development of the general part of the FAO Guidance, which will include internationally recognized principles and address additional horizontal factors applicable throughout the value chain, is expected to begin by the end of 2024. Moreover, during the development process of the FAO Guidance, in particular, after the 19th COFI:FT Session, FAO has strengthened its collaborations and partnerships with other significant international organizations, such as the Interpol and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).