

COMMENTARY

The End of the Line? How to save our fish

Mark Halle
February 2018

Few of the 169 targets contained in the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are specific in designating a particular organization responsible for a particular outcome.

Target 14.6 is an exception; it calls for the elimination of subsidies that contribute to overexploitation of fisheries by 2020, and singles out the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiation on fisheries subsidies as central to achieving this.

Why do fisheries subsidies matter?

Fisheries subsidies run at about \$25 billion USD–30 billion per year, a level that has held steady over the long period over which the WTO has been discussing how to discipline them. Of this total, the overwhelming majority—about \$20 billion USD per year—are considered harmful, in large part because they contribute to overcapacity in fishing vessels and technology. This in turn leads to two thirds of the world's 4,714 fisheries being exploited in excess of their maximum sustainable yield and, in the more extreme cases, to the point of commercial collapse.

And it matters. Forty per cent of the world population depends on fish as their primary source of protein. Though aquaculture has been expanding, it is no substitute for wild-caught fish and has its own range of issues relating to destruction of coastal ecosystems, pollution, etc.

What progress has the WTO made?

Counting on the WTO to discipline fisheries subsidies seemed like a reasonable bet; following a decade and a half of negotiations on the topic, preceded by years of solid scientific assessment and awareness raising, a solution appeared within reach. In fact, at its 11th Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires last month, the WTO hoped to announce a breakthrough on the subject.

Instead, not even the chance to rack up an early success for the SDGs was sufficient to break the WTO's long string of negotiating disappointments. The [Buenos Aires outcome document](#), with respect to the fisheries subsidy issue, states that “members agree to continue to engage constructively in the fisheries subsidies negotiations, with a view to adopting, by the ministerial conference in 2019, an agreement on comprehensive and effective disciplines that prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU (illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing.”



What this means in layperson's terms is that they agreed to continue talking, under the same mandate as before. Essentially, with only a few years to go until the 2020 SDG target deadline, no progress was made.

So what might happen in the two years leading up to the next WTO Ministerial Conference that would generate the necessary political will to clear the logjam in time for the SDG deadline?

Given that some of the richest, most technologically advanced and otherwise environmentally responsible countries contribute strongly to the overexploitation of marine resources, is it reasonable to hope that two further years of talking will mature the political will to take firm action? And can we really afford to depend on an intergovernmental process that has signally failed to deliver year after year, in the context of a negotiating round that ran into the ditch the moment it began and has been mired ever since? And if not, what are the alternatives?

In my opinion, we are all guilty of pinning far too many of our hopes on the ponderous process of consensus-based intergovernmental negotiations. Consensus formation is a slow process, and it is particularly difficult to reach among 164 members when the topic in question is linked—if only in negotiation strategy—to other, more vexing issues. Even at the national level, we are all still too wedded to the default approach of relying on the government to put in place laws and regulations and to enforce them. Experience has shown that this approach is inadequate on its own, especially with respect to fishing in international waters.



Where do we go from here?

First, we can take a lesson from the SDGs and stop relying on simple and disconnected approaches that meet neither the pace nor scale requirements for addressing the problem.

On the assumption that governments do not lead but follow public opinion, and on the grounds that the full range of market-based tools is needed to reinforce popular demand, the good news is that there are many tools available that, if properly bundled and coordinated, might begin to enjoy serious heft.

Here are a few, none of which depends on the WTO suddenly taking action:

- The standards developed by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) are increasingly accepted and offer consumers a clear means to express preference for sustainably harvested marine products. We need energetic information campaigns to empower an ever-greater percentage of consumers to insist on MSC or equivalent certification, gradually driving unsustainably caught fish from the market. New crypto-currencies allow investment to be directed in a reliable way to fishing operations that respect the rules of sustainability.
- Geo-referenced technology now allows us to track fishing vessels in real time, transmitting the data to computers on-shore. It allows us to determine where a vessel is fishing and whether it strays into prohibited waters. On-board cameras monitor (roughly) what it is catching, and accurate landing data help to check whether it is respecting its quotas and licenses. More widespread use of such technology on commercial vessels over a certain size would be a serious boost to the enforcement of existing fisheries agreements.
- Other technological developments allow better “fingerprinting” of the resources harvested, allowing better verification of the claims of fishing vessels as to where they were fishing and what they caught. New applications of blockchain technology allow “bait to plate” tracking of the full fish value chain.
- Vessels caught fishing illegally in national waters could be impounded or confiscated. Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, after all,



accounts for roughly a quarter of all fish caught in the wild. [An international group of major insurance companies](#) has already announced that it will no longer insure fishing fleets that engage in illegal fishing. This practice should become widespread.

- Countries could pass laws that allow them to cut trade in all fish products from other countries that are found to violate existing regional or international fisheries agreements on a recurrent basis. The obverse is also an option—to offer trade advantages to countries that achieve a high level of fisheries management.
- Pension funds and other institutional investors could divest from shares in companies that engage in or market products derived from illegal fisheries.
- Citizen movements could mount campaigns to eliminate national subsidies for technology that contributes to over-fishing, favouring instead investment in communities that previously depended on fishing—or that still do. This investment could be directed to small business development, retraining or even artisanal fisheries.
- Finally, these movements could mount boycotts of marine products—or indeed a wider range of products—from countries that systematically and repeatedly flout regional or international fisheries agreements, taking measures against their exports across the board.

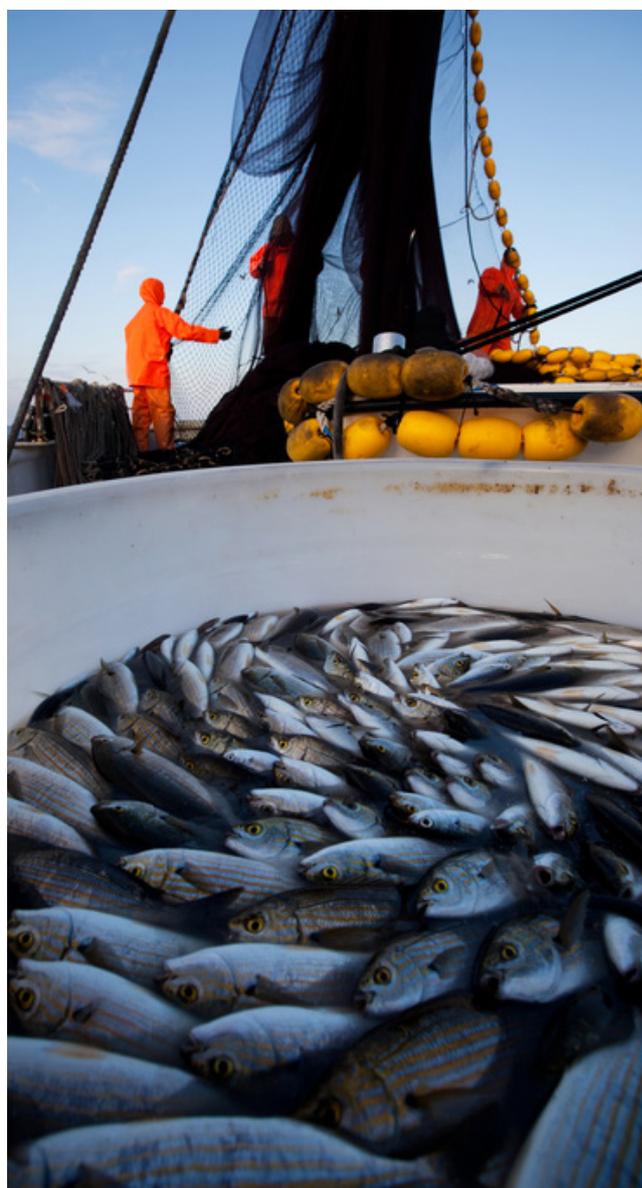
Few of the measures listed above are new and each is being applied sporadically and on a small scale in some countries and regions. What is missing is a concerted effort to “bundle” the measures such that they begin to combine, feed off one another and achieve significant impact. Our failures to date stem from reliance on approaches applied in an uncoordinated way, at a pace and scale that simply does not generate the needed impact. Or on approaches—like the WTO’s—that rely on a political will that is manifestly not present. Blaming our lack of progress on the WTO is idle and unfair.

Despite the mandate from SDG target 14.6 (a mandate the WTO never sought), success in eliminating harmful fisheries subsidies by 2020 will come only as a result of the emergence of popular demand, informed by targeted outreach campaigns, backed by application of best practice and technology, steered by strong

coalitions and guided by a favourable policy framework. We need to become adept at finding ways to circumvent the obstacles that inevitably pop up in our path. And we cannot allow success to depend on one cog in the machine.

We have learned over the years that sustainable development challenges are complex—more complex than we had previously imagined. This means that our response must be designed to confront that complexity and bring to bear on the challenges the entire toolbox of remedies that our inventiveness designs, but that are still not sufficiently deployed.

When it comes to managing fisheries sustainably, 40 per cent of our global population depends on our success.



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Published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

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Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue, Suite 325
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3B 0T4

Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700

Fax: +1 (204) 958-7710

Website: www.iisd.org

Twitter: @IISD_news

Geneva Office

International Environment House 2
9 chemin de Balexert, 1219 Châtelaine
Geneva, Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 917-8683

Fax: +41 22 917-8054

Website: www.iisd.org

Twitter: @IISD_news

