A Commonwealth Fisheries Policy
A Call to Action to Secure Sustainability for Livelihoods, Food and Biodiversity

Report from the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council to the Commonwealth Heads of Government and Civil Society
October 2011
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The Basis for Action

*CHOGM Communiqué, 2009:* We acknowledge that the sustainable harvesting of the world’s fish stocks supports *food security* and can have long-term economic benefits. Our concern is that the *unsustainable exploitation* of the world’s fish stocks poses a threat to food security and could lead to long-term economic losses of depleted stocks. We see the *plunder caused by Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUU)* as a violation of, inter alia, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. We recognize that many developing states are particularly vulnerable to illegal fishing by foreign fleets and that *urgent action is needed to strengthen fisheries and marine management* in member states’ waters, particularly in the case of the more vulnerable member states. *Paraphrase of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, COMMUNIQUÉ (Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 7029 November 2009, p. 17 (emphasis added)).*

Executive Summary

Approval is sought from the Commonwealth Heads of Government and other Commonwealth institutions for a Commonwealth Fisheries Policy. Such a mandate would support Commonwealth nations in addressing the pressing challenges they face from illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU), from over-fishing, from marine ecosystem deterioration, and from the impact of climate change (sea level rise, ocean acidification, moving fish stocks).

Such a policy would enable the Commonwealth to coordinate action on fisheries and marine issues at such international fora as the UNFCCC COP 17 (Durban, November 2011), Rio+20 (June 2012) and the FAO Committee on Fisheries (July 2012).

The policy also supports key initiatives across the ACP countries to improve regional governance of fisheries. Significantly the 2009 Trinidad and Tobago CHOGM is credited with securing the one major substantive set of donor commitments to funding for adaptation to and mitigation of the effects of climate change at the Copenhagen COP 15.

A fisheries policy would give the Commonwealth a uniquely strong position to engage with this issue both internally and in regional and global partnerships, including with the francophonie in Africa and the Hispanic Caribbean, and through AOSIS.
1. Introduction.

What we want and why it will work.

We ask CHOGM to establish and implement a Commonwealth policy on fisheries, with targets and timetable, to substantially enhance the sustainability of Commonwealth fisheries and fisherfolk communities by 2015 (MDG review).

We also call for the Commonwealth to support and develop both enhanced regional integration of fisheries governance, and regional cooperation between Commonwealth universities and research institutes and regional and national fisheries governance organizations.

We particularly draw CHOGM’s attention to small-scale, artisanal and subsistence marine capture fisheries (hereafter ‘SSFs’). The first phase of the Commonwealth Fisheries Programme (hereinafter ‘CFP 1’), a partnership between the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHEC) and the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, showed that communities practicing small-scale fisheries are particularly vulnerable and urgently need improved Commonwealth fisheries and marine governance. Timely action would prevent further deterioration and protect a long-term sustainable resource base. Such action would include guidance on governance of fisheries and the coastal and marine environment, using evidence of such matters as subsidies, national income from fishing, economic and social benefits of small scale fisheries (SSFs).

The context for the Perth CHOGM is favourable for a fisheries policy initiative for several reasons.

The Commonwealth Civil Society Statement emphasizes the need to address climate and biodiversity issues, including fisheries (para 6, p. 6) and to affirm the MDG targets for democratic governance. The CHOGM theme of resilience is also central to the sustainability of coastal communities relying on fisheries and facing the impacts of climate change. There is also growing recognition of the need to integrate universities and the research community more closely into fisheries policy, i.e. better integrate the knowledge base for policy. Institutions from Commonwealth countries are regional and global leaders in this endeavour.

As the first of three consecutive CHOGMs around the Indian Ocean, Perth can start a process of enhanced cooperation between governmental and civil society organizations towards sustainable marine governance in the immediate region and beyond, with progress reports at both the Sri Lanka (if confirmed) CHOGM and the proposed Mauritius CHOGM in 2015.
2. **Components of a Commonwealth Fisheries Policy**

**The Industrial Fishery**

We highlight the opportunities for enhanced support for SSFs, but also recognize the **vital role played by the industrial fishery**, particularly in the economies of small islands states, exemplified in the Pacific and Indian Ocean tuna fisheries. Also, we **commend efforts** of the seafood industry, retailers and restaurateurs in many developed importing countries in partnership with NGOs to **raise consumer awareness of sustainable sourcing and traceability of fish**, and to change consumer **behaviour** to a sustainable model.

**Strengthening sustainability** in both small-scale and industrial fisheries **means applying the precautionary principle, and involves transparency, inclusion, institutionally strengthened fisherfolk organizations and regulating IUU fishing.**

**Preventing IUU Fishing**

While the massive losses from illegal fishing are widely recognized, the **losses from unregulated and unreported fishing** have received less attention. Good evidence about catch, or catch per unit of effort, is lacking for the artisanal and subsistence fisheries. The **impacts of IUU on SSFs need enumerating, and regulating, but with fisher communities as partners** in promoting a sustainable fishery. SSFs suffer damage to their fishing grounds by industrial trawlers, both by unlicensed vessels and by licensed vessels fishing illegally in the inshore zone. There is an **urgent need for assistance, on a regional basis, in monitoring, control and surveillance, to enforce restrictions on illegal fishing**, as well as removal of the perverse subsidies that drive overfishing.

**Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)**

Long-term sustainability requires designation of systems of **marine protected areas**, which in turn **need buy-in of the affected fisherfolk**, and agreement about reasonable access for local people to the fishery. To be effective, MPAs will need to be based on **principles of ecosystem-based management (EBM) and rights-based co-management**, actively involving affected fisherfolk, with help in developing **alternative livelihoods** where appropriate.

Commonwealth countries are also well-positioned to cooperate in the joining up of marine protected areas, or ‘**ocean zoning**’, to protect the habitats of highly migratory species in ways analogous to terrestrial biodiversity corridors.

Nevertheless **customary rights of access and ownership** of indigenous peoples, subsistence and artisanal fishers **will have to be recognized and compensated** when such designations are made.

It is vital that, as research proceeds to identify the baseline data for marine protected areas, the **precautionary principle** prevails, i.e. fishing should be restricted to sustainable levels or, if these are not known, suspended.
Alternative Livelihoods

Where fishing is restricted or suspended to improve long-term sustainability, alternative, or supplementary, livelihoods (or, ‘livelihood diversification’) will be required. These include skilled artisanal occupations (carpentry, construction), monitoring the fishery, eco-tourist development, planting sea-grasses and mangroves (to encourage fish breeding and absorb greenhouse gases), farming, ‘green economy’ skills e.g. renewable energy and sustainable transport as well as paid employment in factories. Commonwealth organizations and their partners could develop a series of pilot projects promoting such alternative livelihoods, which CFP 1 has shown are far from easy to implement successfully.

Strengthening regional governance

Many existing regional governance mechanisms for fisheries are poorly resourced. The Commonwealth, with the francophonie in Africa, could greatly strengthen regional governance mechanisms, particularly by supporting integrated coastal zone management and developing regional networks of fisherfolk organisations.

Strengthening the evidence base

There is an urgent need to improve the data base for fisheries policy, particularly in relation to unreported and self-regulated take in SSFs. Better information is especially needed about the size of the catch, by-catch, the ecological benefits and risks to fisheries of SSFs, and the conditions that sustain the resilience of fish populations. Such data is a key to making fishers active and cooperative partners in ecologically sound, rights-based community fisheries management, and would strengthen capacity for national and regional governance.

Commonwealth countries have much excellent marine policy research (not least in Perth), in universities, research centres, consultants and NGOs. These sources of knowledge could be coordinated through regional and global networks to integrate and improve policy.

The Commonwealth, through partnerships between such bodies as the Partnership for African Fisheries ‘Afro-Fish Net’, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Commonwealth of Learning’s Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) can strengthen and better integrate the knowledge base for SSFs. This knowledge base must include experts in policy and governance as well as in fisheries science. It is also important that fisheries policy makers follow the science, so that catch quotas are within sustainable limits.

Horizontal policy networks

CFP 1 demonstrated the benefits of fisherfolk leaders exchanging practical experience on-site visits to successful examples of rights-based co-management. The Commonwealth could promote South-South transfers of experience between fisherfolk themselves (as in the Caribbean Netwrok of Fisherfolk Organisations – CNFO) and among fisheries experts, and expand the numbers of Commonwealth scholars (already a valuable source of support) working in this field.
Enhancing transparency

To be of use, the evidence base needs to be accessible to all parties. There is a need to improve the transparency and accessibility of fisheries data, perhaps in the style of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, both to facilitate planning for governance of the fishery, and to combat widespread corruption at all levels.

Enhancing inclusion: recognising the vital role of the fisherfolk themselves

Fisherfolk know (better than most) where the fish are, and also who has what customary rights over the fishery. They are, when organized in a way that allows them to engage in policy negotiations, valuable partners in policy. In the SSF sector, as with other common-pool resource problems, individuals may be hard to control ‘top-down’, and policy needs to be inclusive of the fishermen, so that they become active partners in policing fishing activities in their communities (type of gear used, adherence to restrictions, etc.).

High-level policy briefings

CFP 1 recognized the need for better communication of relevant evidence to high-level policy makers involved in policy negotiations, the selling of industrial fishing licenses and enforcement of fisheries legislation (such as quotas or MPAs). Key decision-makers need access to advice on more inclusive approaches to policy-making, and on the possible unintended consequences of top-down policies (e.g. confiscation of nets without replacements, leaving fisherfolk hungry, angry and exposed to increased risk in fishing; or, banning abalone fisheries without capacity to enforce the ban, with abalone poaching in exchange for drugs, as documented in CFP1). Such briefings would include strengthened capacity to participate effectively in integrated multi-level and trans-sectoral governance approaches to securing the resilience of fisheries and the marine environment, so that sustainable fisheries policies are integrated both vertically (from local to global levels) and horizontally (across relevant sectors including agriculture, economy, health, transport/infrastructure etc).

Policy fairness principles

CFP 1 showed that fisherfolk ‘buy-in’ to policy depends on their perceptions of its fairness (as someone always loses when property rights are redefined, or latent rights enforced), and on its transparency. In fact, to be effective and efficient, policy will have to be transparent, fair and inclusive. It is extremely costly and inefficient to try and regulate individual, remote fishers who oppose a policy. (Recognition of this principle will be important for Rio+20.)

Climate change

Many fisherfolk communities in tropical Commonwealth countries are feeling, and will feel more acutely, the impacts of climate change and related changes in costs. Sea-level rise will threaten homes and storage, or environmental migration; acidification and overfishing may destroy coral reef fisheries; movement of fish to
cooler water (towards the poles and further out to sea), combined with rising costs of diesel, can raise costs of fishing to unsustainable levels.

Where feasible, restoration of mangroves should be undertaken, both to improve breeding conditions, and to protect the coast in the face of extreme weather events, and fishing in coral reef fisheries must be kept at a sustainable level to maintain resilience of the reef to climate change.

Women and fisheries

Women, who comprise almost half of those involved in the SSF economy, usually in post-harvest processing and trading, need to be recognized as partners in, and included in policy for the fishery. Also, their human rights and health needs require recognition especially in regard to their heightened risk of contracting HIV/Aids.

3. Missed Commonwealth Opportunities

Even though the fundamental importance of improved governance of fisheries and the marine environment for food security, poverty alleviation and biodiversity protection is now universally acknowledged and Commonwealth action was specifically endorsed by CHOGM in 2009, neither the actions of the Commonwealth nor of its member states (with notable exceptions) appear to recognize how vital fisheries and fish trade are to the national incomes of most Commonwealth countries, particularly vulnerable small states.

Commonwealth governments are not realizing the potential benefits of well-managed fisheries. Threats to the fishery from overfishing, illegal fishing and climate change persist. And as fish scarcity increases, ‘common pool resource’ dynamics lead to a vicious spiral of rising prices, risking a further ‘rush to fish’, likely to be exacerbated in an economic downturn. The failure of governments adequately to protect the sustainability of their fishery assets is causing rising costs to present and future generations. It has to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In the last two or three years, the threat to fish stocks has again been brought home in a range of scientific and popular publications, affirming the recognition of the need for urgent action to protect fisheries, in particular in the more vulnerable member states.

Unfortunately, it would appear that the thrust of the 2009 CHOGRM communiqué paragraph on fisheries (see above) has been neglected in the policy advice given to CHOGM prior to its meeting in Perth. These missed opportunities in fisheries policy deserve far greater prominence. The Commonwealth can bring its recognizably limited resources to tackle the problems of small island and coastal states to greater effect by working to create strategic partnerships with international agencies and philanthropic organizations, and in getting individual states to collaborate and share successes.
Benefits from and risks to Commonwealth fisheries

The benefits of marine capture fisheries to Commonwealth countries in terms of employment, food security, health and poverty alleviation underline the importance of SSFs, which comprise some 85 percent of the world’s fishing fleet. Artisanal and subsistence fisher communities have a sense of belonging and cohesion, are largely self-sufficient in building their own boats, and in making and repairing nets and gear. The contribution of SSFs includes barter of fish in coastal communities and nutritional benefits in the inland marketing of fish by the fisherwomen, benefits to poverty alleviation, food security and health that are insufficiently recognized by governments.

Security issues should not be ignored. If a fishery collapses, fishers’ form of adjustment may include illegal ways of surviving economically. Some become pirates, as in Somalia, or poachers, for example of abalone, which is exchanged for drugs in South Africa, despite a well-intentioned government ban on abalone harvesting in order to prevent collapse of the fishery (see www.commonwealthfisheries.org).

Also, the quality of fish caught by SSFs is higher, if it can be processed and stored safely, because the fish are not crushed together in large nets. There is a potential for enhanced self-sufficiency in subsistence fisher communities as well as for improved access for artisanal fishers to get their higher quality fish to international markets and fetch a better price, so allowing them to catch less (although this will not necessarily reduce fishing effort without accompanying measures). The latter depends on improved infrastructure, from provision of appropriate nets and cooling plant to landing sites and roads.

Demand for fish continues to rise, especially in emerging economies such as India and China, with global consumption rising from 22lb per person per year in the 1960s to nearly 38lb today (FAO State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture Report 2010), at the same time that marine capture has flattened out, so that a sustainable marine capture fishery is also dependent on development of a sustainable aquaculture and/or changes in dietary behaviour to make up the difference.

Threats to sustainability

Despite the size of their contribution to global fish consumption, developing countries have been played off against one another in bilateral trade negotiations around Fisheries Partnership Agreements. There is some hope though that regional cooperation and the review of the EU Common Fisheries Policy may mitigate this.

Estimates vary, but ‘business as usual’ in the world’s fisheries is expected to lead to the collapse of marine capture fisheries around the middle of this century. The large predators are up to 95 per cent fished out, with repercussions down the food chain. The impact of overfishing is reflected in the grossly inflated price an individual bluefin tuna can fetch at auction. (The current record is over £250K for a single fish at the Tokyo 2011 New Year auction.) Further examples are the overfishing of Chilean hake and the failure of the North Atlantic cod fishery to recover after 17 years of moratorium.
Huge sums are also lost through illegal fishing (FAO/World Bank estimates of over US$20 billions annually), and through by-catch in illegal and industrial fishing. According to the FAO, globally, the percentage of overexploited, depleted and recovering stocks is increasing and the size of underexploited and moderately exploited stocks is falling. Where progress has been demonstrated, much of this is off the coasts of developed Commonwealth countries.

Climate change is likely to bring ocean warming, so that migratory fish will move to colder water further out to sea, and towards the poles. Tropical Commonwealth countries’ fishers will find fishing more costly and more dangerous as they have to move further out into the ocean, and stay out longer, to fish. Coral reef fisheries suffer from land-based sources of pollution, warming and acidification of the ocean. Healthy reefs will be more resilient to climate change impacts, so their protection from pollution and overfishing will be vital. Sea-level rise threatens coastal communities with inundation, and fisherfolk usually live closest to the shore and will lose their homes, as well as facing increased extreme weather events when fishing.

A further, high-profile threat to security, both food security and national security, including to national tourist interests, is piracy. Poaching, although it has a lower profile, is also an important threat to the viability of marine protected areas.

**Transferable Lessons from Practice**

Amongst a wealth of best practice examples encountered in CFP1, we should mention the efforts in Mozambique to support small-scale fishers, the success of Belize in moving from Flag of Convenience to generating substantial income from a reformed vessel registry, the Pacific programme of Locally Managed Marine Areas in Fiji with support of the University of the South Pacific, the Caribbean Network of Fisher Organisations project of the University of the West Indies and CANARI, the new Fisheries Landing Sites in Sierra Leone supported by the African Development Bank, or the quality of management of the industrial fishery in Namibia or South Africa.

Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom *inter alia* are presently embarking on comprehensive marine protected areas policies.

There are also useful lessons from unintended consequences of policy, documented at [www.commonwealthfisheries.org](http://www.commonwealthfisheries.org) and in the CFP1 book *From Hook to Plate: The State of Marine Fisheries. A Commonwealth Perspective*, such as issues of top-down approaches to designation of marine reserves or allocation of rights to fish without sufficient inclusion of, or acceptance by, fishers, who are then less likely to respect boundaries or restrictions.
4. Conclusion

Efforts are made, in this summary report, to demonstrate the importance of sustainable fisheries to Commonwealth countries’ economies, food security, poverty alleviation and social cohesion, as well as some of the risks of failing to act on fisheries. It is also important to note the strengths of the Commonwealth in fisheries science and policy, and the potential of transfer of lessons from both best practice and from apparently well-designed policies that went wrong.

We have identified key principles, consistent with prior Commonwealth commitments to environmental and biodiversity sustainability: the precautionary principle, inclusiveness, transparency and accessibility of data and policy development.

There is a major opportunity, at this the first of three Indian Ocean CHOGMs in succession, for the Commonwealth to unify in support of a sustainable fisheries policy, particularly in the areas of support for small-scale fisheries and their communities, and in enhanced capacity for regional governance of fisheries. This includes improving policy evidence and guidance by better integrating Commonwealth universities and other sources of marine policy research into policy making at national and regional level.

The Commonwealth, north and south, has the necessary expertise in marine science and policy. Commonwealth nations are also more ‘sinned against than sinning’ in terms of IUU fishing. They are victims, not perpetrators, of international illegal fishing, although much remains to be done to manage domestic unreported and unregulated fishing. The Commonwealth’s maritime legacy means that the Commonwealth as a whole is well-placed to take a lead on sustainable fisheries, marine governance and fisherfolk livelihoods. A common voice of 54 countries could make the difference between business as usual and the prospect of long-term sustainability of, and prosperity from, well-managed and governed fisheries.

We therefore commend the following key issues for action by the Commonwealth (see over):
Key Issues for Commonwealth Action

1. Develop a Commonwealth Sustainable Fisheries Policy (CSFP) based on principles of equity and sustainability, to underpin a unified Commonwealth voice in international negotiations (e.g. Durban COP 17, Rio+20, FAO Committee on Fisheries 2012) as well as a strategy for implementation of the CSFP.

2. Design and, in partnership with others, secure funding for a strategy for improved regional integration of fisheries policy, including better integration of universities and other sources of evidence and expertise (including research institutes, independent specialists and NGOs) in provision of data and guidance for policy, especially for small-scale fisheries (SSFs).

3. Support capacity development of fisherfolk organizations to engage effectively as partners in securing an equitable and sustainable fisheries policy, including South-South exchanges for fisherfolk to learn from Commonwealth best practice.

4. Support high-level capacity development (i.e. of senior decision-makers) in fisheries governance and negotiations.

5. Secure agreement on adaptation measures for SSFs and their communities threatened with climate change impacts including inundations from sea-level rise, ocean acidification and extreme weather events.

6. Support the initiative of the Norwegian national advisory group against organized IUU-fishing to have illegal fishing declared a transnational organized crime (UNTOC), so facilitating confiscation of the assets of owners engaging in large-scale illegal fishing operations.

7. Include reviews of progress on sustainable fisheries policy at the two following Indian Ocean CHOGMs in 2013 (Sri Lanka) and 2015 (Mauritius).