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Fish trade and food security

1140 words

Does international fish trade damage local and national food security? A background paper prepared for UNCTAD with officials of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said an FAO-commissioned study with 11 country case studies in 2005 concluded that mostly international fish trade had a positive effect on local food security but resulted in increased pressure on fish stocks. It said that “preserving fish resources through effective fisheries management was necessary to increase food security and sustain international trade in fisheries resources in the long term” (page 8). The UNCTAD paper points out: “This supports the notion that market demand needs to be couple with a sustainable resource management policy” (8).

The special place of aquaculture

“This situation can be different for aquaculture,” it adds. “Production is often planned for export markets. Fish imports can increase domestic food supply and may keep prices stable. Thus, countries can equally be major exporters and importers of fish, as is the case for Thailand, China, Viet Nam, Nigeria or Egypt” (8-9). But this has led to concerns about degradation of natural coastal habitats.

Few species in LDC trade

Fish and seafood represent the top five exports for 14 or the world’s 47 Least Developed Countries (LDCs). But most involve just a few products. “The three most exported fish products account for roughly half of all fish exports from LDCs” (9). These account for 71% of Uganda’s exports and 98% of the Comoros’.

LDCs must take steps to increase exports

But to increase their fisheries export potential, LDCs must meet market requirements of importing countries, reduce trade costs and improve sustainability and aquaculture resources. “There are successful LDCs whose experiences can be duplicated and upscaled in other countries [...] – such as ports, processing plant and cold stores” (10).

Bangladesh and Tanzania examples

It added: “Countries such as Bangladesh and the United Republic of Tanzania have shown that investments aimed at raising and enforcing norms and standards, particularly in relation to fish exports, can significantly boost export earnings” (10).

Fish and protein intake

The paper reported that fish production accounts for 17 per cent of global animal proteins and essential micronutrients with fish harvests at around 21 kg per capita per year (vi). “Fish and seafood consumption accounted for 20 per cent of animal protein intake for 3.2 billion people. About 26 per cent live in LDCs, 19 per cent in developing countries, and about 16 per cent in Low Income Food Deficit countries (LIFDCs)(5).

Reducing 93% of heat from human activities

“Oceans and wetlands produce half the oxygen we breathe, absorb around 30 per cent of the anthropogenic emissions of CO₂ and around 93 per cent of the heat arising from human-driven changes to the atmosphere.” (4)

Consumption has more than doubled

Fish and seafood “consumption has more than doubled since 1973,” met largely by an increase in aquaculture (growing 6 per cent on average during 2001-2015) (5).

No potential for increase in most productive fish

The ten most productive species of fish account for about 27 per cent of harvests. “However, most of their stocks are fully fished with no potential for increases in volume,” the paper declares. “The remainder are overfished with increases in their volume only possible after successful stock restoration” (12).

‘Alarming’ state of Mediterranean and Black Sea

It describes the situation in the Mediterranean and Black Sea as “alarming” (12). “Catches have dropped by one third since 2007.”

Fish and jobs

“Around 59.6 million people were employed in fisheries and aquaculture in 2016 and some 200 million direct and indirect employment opportunities. [...] In developing countries [...] they often represent the only opportunity for livelihoods, earning an income and improving the quality of life for the family” (6).

Over 50% increase potential

“The value of fish harvest from marine fisheries and aquaculture is estimated at over \$150 billion. FAO and the World Bank estimate that an additional US\$83 billion could be extracted from the oceans if the productive capacity of currently overfished stocks was restored” (6).

Among most traded food: a third of fish harvest enters world trade

“Fish and seafood are among the most traded food commodities: [...] 35-38 per cent of world production enters international trade.[...] Over 50 per cent of this trade originates in developing countries whose net trade income (export – import), valued at \$37 billion in 2016, is greater than their net trade income [in] most other agricultural commodities combined” (6).

Over 1000 species consumed, more than 200 countries trade

“Over 1000 fish species are consumed worldwide and more than 200 countries have reported trade in fish and seafood” (7).

Nearly 90% of production destined for human consumption

“The share of world fish production destined for human consumption has increased and diversified significantly, up from 67 per cent in the 1960s to 88 per cent currently” (7). “In 2016, more than 200 countries reported exports and imports of fish and fishery products” (7). “About 78 per cent of seafood products were exposed to international trade” (7).

China major producer, and importer

“China is the main fish producer and the largest exporter of fish and seafood. It is also a major importer due to outsourcing of processing from other countries as well as growing domestic consumption of species not produced locally.

Norway no2 exporter, Viet Nam now third

“Norway, the second major exporter, recorded high export values in 2015. In 2014, Viet Nam became the third major exporter, overtaking Thailand, which has experienced a decline in exports since 2013, mainly linked to reduced aquaculture shrimp production due to disease problems.

EU biggest importer

The European Union is still by far the largest single market for fish and seafood imports, followed by the United States of America and Japan. These three markets accounted in 2016 for approximately 64 per cent of the total value of world imports of fish and fish products” (7-8). Internal EU trade accounted for 8 per cent of this.

Fishing accounts for up to 80% of exports from fish

In the Pacific, small island states earn 30-80% of their exports earning from fishing, particularly for high-value tuna. In West Africa, fish can account for 5-12% of GDP. Fishing licence fees and “an important source of government revenue and foreign exchange earnings for several developing countries” (6).

Since July received 14 papers and 3 more strategic papers.

The 50-page paper, produced by UNCTAD and FAO Senior Fisheries Consultant Lahsen Ababouch, legal officer David Vivas Egui and Assistant Economic Officer Lorenzo Formenti, is available online.

The one-week Trade Forum organized by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) is designed to feed into the UN climate summit. It is discussing overfishing, biotrade, and ocean plastics as well as trade in climate mitigation efforts.