

Gaoussou Gueye, President of CAOPA

Panel – Side Event, WTO Ministerial Conference, Yaoundé

Background. CAOPA represents fishermen's organisations and women processors in nearly 30 African countries. On the occasion of the WTO Ministerial Conference in Yaoundé, its President, Gaoussou Gueye, answered questions from the panel on fisheries subsidies, the Fish II negotiations and the place of small-scale fisheries in international agreements.

Q1. The small-scale fishing sector is concerned about the loss of essential subsidies. Do you think the WTO agreements address this issue? Can they?

Gaoussou Gueye: The WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies adopted in 2022 represents a significant step forward. It prohibits certain subsidies linked to illegal fishing, fishing on overexploited stocks and certain activities on the high seas.

But let's be clear: this agreement does not address the main concern of small-scale fishers. It is not small-scale fishers who are causing the problems of overcapacity and overfishing. Small-scale fishers are not asking for subsidies to overexploit resources. They are asking for support to work safely, to better preserve and market their products, to access markets and to secure a decent livelihood.

Q2. What would be the impact of broader subsidy restrictions on small-scale fishing fleets compared to industrial fleets?

Gaoussou Gueye: That is the real risk. If subsidy restrictions are applied indiscriminately, small-scale fishers could lose essential support, even though they are not responsible for global overcapacity and overfishing.

At the same time, billions of dollars in subsidies continue to fuel the overcapacity of industrial fleets. These subsidies allow industrial vessels to travel further, fish for longer and catch more fish than the oceans can sustain. A poorly designed reform could thus penalise those who fish the least and continue to support the most intensive fleets. Subsidy reform must not create a double injustice, both ecological and social.

Q3. How could Fish One be implemented in the future to support small-scale fisheries?

Gaoussou Gueye: It is essential that the ongoing discussions allow for a clear distinction to be made between different types of subsidies. We want subsidies to help support small-scale fisheries.

We call on governments to redirect subsidies towards public goods: safety at sea, local processing infrastructure, and the cold chain. The 2022 agreement is a first step, but its implementation must protect, not undermine, small-scale fishing communities.

Q4. How can the participation of small-scale fisheries be ensured?

Gaoussou Gueye: Small-scale fisheries must be fully involved in decision-making, monitoring and implementation processes, at both national and international levels. This requires genuine access to information, inclusive forums for dialogue and mechanisms that allow professional organisations to make their voices heard.

We cannot define effective policies without listening to those who make their living from the sea.

Q5. What tailored mechanisms does small-scale fisheries need?

Gaoussou Gueye: Small-scale fisheries, at both national and regional levels, need accessible funding schemes, support for co-management, information systems that take account of their realities – particularly the role of women – and public policies aligned with the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries.

Q6. The Fish 2 negotiations are underway; what are your hopes for these negotiations?

Gaoussou Gueye: The ongoing negotiations, often referred to as Fish 2, are crucial. We hope they will finally address the subsidies that create overcapacity and overfishing, whilst protecting small-scale fisheries.

It is also essential that these negotiations ensure genuine special and differential treatment for small-scale fisheries in developing countries.

Q7. Explore which provisions are essential in the Fish II draft to protect small-scale fisheries from an unfair burden-sharing whilst maintaining sustainability objectives.

Gaoussou Gueye: The same disciplines on subsidies cannot be applied in the same way to small-scale fisheries and industrial fleets. It is essential to recognise that small-scale fisheries are not the cause of the problem and that they are part of the solution.

This also brings us to the question of how to define small-scale fisheries. There is currently no single international definition, and in CAOPA's view, there should not be one. The diversity of situations is too great. However, it is possible to identify common characteristics that take into account social, economic and cultural dimensions. Small-scale fishing is also defined by its role in livelihoods, food security and traditional knowledge.

Public subsidies must feed people, not empty the oceans. And a sustainable ocean is not just an ocean with more fish. It is an ocean that continues to sustain fishing communities.

Gaoussou Gueye

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