

FAO Committee on Fisheries, 7-11 September 2026

Agenda 11: Supporting Small-Scale Fisheries and Aquaculture and Elevating their Contributions to Food Security, Nutrition and Livelihood Support

Securing the future of marine and inland small-scale fisheries and aquaculture: empowering the youth

Across the world, marine and inland small-scale fisheries provide affordable, nutritious aquatic foods, sustain millions of livelihoods and support vibrant local and regional markets. Yet despite their enormous contribution, small-scale fisheries remain insufficiently recognized and supported. Ensuring their future matters not only for employment and local economies, but also for food security and nutrition. Supporting the next generation of small-scale fishers, fish farmers, processors and traders is therefore essential to sustaining these contributions.

The future of small-scale fisheries depends on making the sector attractive and viable for young women and men. For too many young people, small-scale fisheries are perceived as an insecure, difficult way to earn a living, and insufficiently rewarding. The challenge is therefore to create the conditions that make the sector an attractive choice for decent work, entrepreneurship, innovation and long-term livelihoods.

This is not simply about keeping young people in fisheries. It is about enabling current and future generations, including new entrants, to build viable livelihoods and bring skills, innovation and entrepreneurial ambition into the sector. This requires action across the entire value chain.

Young people entering the sector face multiple barriers: insecure access to fish resources, limited access to finance, inappropriate infrastructure, unsafe working conditions, insufficient training opportunities and limited participation in decision-making.

Young women face even greater barriers. Despite playing central roles in processing, trade and post-harvest activities, they often remain excluded from access to productive resources, finance, infrastructure, training and leadership opportunities.

A first priority is to secure equitable and preferential access to fisheries resources for small-scale fisheries. Without secure access and fair opportunities, young people will not invest in the future of the sector.

Investment in infrastructure remains essential. Landing sites, cold chains, storage, processing facilities, transport and market infrastructure improve working conditions, reduce losses and increase incomes.

These investments are also critical for strengthening food systems. Without successful generational renewal, the capacity of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture to provide affordable and nutritious aquatic foods will decline over time. Better infrastructure and value chain development can significantly reduce post-harvest losses, improve fish quality and availability, and increase access to affordable aquatic foods.

Young women and men are already driving innovation across fisheries value chains, including in processing, cold chains, digital marketing, circular economy initiatives and value addition. Tailored financial services, credit mechanisms and support for entrepreneurship are needed to unlock innovation and investment.

Capacity development is equally important. Young people need access to technical training, digital tools, and innovation opportunities to strengthen their own resilience and that of their communities, and adapt to changing environmental and economic conditions.

Similar challenges and opportunities exist in small-scale aquaculture. Young entrepreneurs can play an important role in increasing local fish supply, strengthening food security and creating employment opportunities.

Young people must also actively shape fisheries policies. Their meaningful participation in co-management systems, producer organisations and decision-making processes is essential. This participation must go beyond symbolic consultation. Too often, they are invited to comment on decisions that have already largely been made. Effective participation requires real influence in policy design, implementation and monitoring.

Young people entering the sector today will spend their entire working lives confronting the impacts of climate change. They therefore have a critical role to play in building climate-resilient fisheries and helping communities adapt to environmental, ecological and economic change.

Finally, the future of small-scale fisheries also depends on addressing structural pressures affecting the sector. In many regions, small-scale fisheries face increasing competition from industrial fleets and competing uses of coastal and marine space, such as oil and gas production, tourism, shipping. Public policies should support inclusive and sustainable fisheries systems that generate livelihoods, food security and local economic value, protecting them from more powerful, often destructive and polluting, competing sectors.

Without intergenerational renewal, many small-scale fisheries risk losing knowledge, skills, labour and long-term viability. Supporting the next generation is therefore not optional: it is essential for the future sustainability of the sector.

We call on the Food and Agriculture Organization and Member States to make generational renewal a specific priority in policies and investments supporting small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. National and regional strategies should set out concrete, adequately funded actions to improve young women's and men's access to fisheries resources, finance, training, infrastructure, decent working conditions and decision-making. These actions should be guided by the SSF Guidelines and relevant regional and national fisheries frameworks, and progress should be regularly assessed with the meaningful participation of small-scale fisheries organizations and young people.