

Agenda Item 12. FAO's Programme of Work in Fisheries and Aquaculture under the FAO Strategic Framework

Protecting small pelagics for food security, livelihoods and blue transformation

Small pelagic fisheries, particularly in West Africa, are of strategic importance for achieving the objectives of the FAO Strategic Framework and the Blue Transformation roadmap. Small pelagic species are the main source of animal protein for millions of African families. Species such as sardinella, bonga and mackerel provide affordable food to millions of people and sustain extensive local value chains involving fishers, women processors, traders and coastal communities. These fisheries therefore contribute directly to poverty reduction, economic resilience and social stability in the West African region.

Recent scientific assessments conducted by the FAO Committee for the Eastern Central Atlantic Fisheries (CECAF) indicate that several of these small pelagic stocks in Northwest Africa are fully exploited or overexploited. Industrial fishing pressure on small pelagic species is threatening regional food security. This situation points to the need for substantial reductions in fishing pressure, - CECAF advises around 60% for certain fisheries-, to rebuild stocks and restore their long-term productivity. Climate change, insufficient regional coordination and growing competing uses of these resources, like the production of fishmeal and fish oil, are further increasing pressure on these stocks.

Because small pelagic stocks are shared across national boundaries, their effective management and long-term sustainability require stronger regional cooperation, harmonized management measures, improved scientific monitoring and inclusive governance mechanisms involving all stakeholders.

We therefore encourage FAO to strengthen support for CECAF as a key regional platform for scientific cooperation, stock assessment and inclusive policy dialogue on shared fisheries resources. It has a crucial role to play in providing the scientific basis for evidence-based management and facilitating stronger coordination among coastal states. We further encourage FAO to support the development of effective regional management frameworks for small pelagics, including clear harvest strategies, precautionary management measures and improved mechanisms for monitoring implementation in all countries concerned.

Regional management efforts should also be supported by stronger transparency and data-sharing mechanisms. This includes better compilation and publication of data on total catches across all fleets, including artisanal and industrial fleets, and foreign fishing vessels. There should also be improved data on the quantities of small pelagics used for fishmeal, fish oil and other non-food



purposes, as reliable and transparent information on all uses of small pelagics is necessary for informed policy decisions.

Importantly, management of small pelagics should explicitly integrate objectives such as food security, nutrition, decent livelihoods and social equity. Processing small pelagic fish into fishmeal deprives local communities of their main source of protein. Policies allocating access to small pelagics should prioritize those who contribute most to direct human consumption and local livelihoods.

It is encouraging to see that some countries are already taking precautionary measures in this direction. We welcome the recent decision by Guinea-Bissau to halt fishmeal and fish oil production both on land and at sea. This is an example of a policy approach aimed at safeguarding fish resources for human consumption and protecting local value chains.

We therefore call upon FAO and its members to promote fisheries governance approaches that integrate ecological sustainability, food security, social and economic objectives, especially the needs of small-scale fisheries and women involved in artisanal processing and trade.

Participatory governance is equally essential. Fishers, fishworkers must be fully involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of management measures for small pelagics. Regional dialogue mechanisms bringing together governments, scientists, professional organizations and civil society should be strengthened to improve trust, legitimacy and compliance.

Protecting and rebuilding small pelagic stocks in West Africa is more than a fisheries management issue: It is an issue of resilient food systems, social justice and sustainable development. If Blue Transformation is to deliver on its promise of better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, safeguarding small pelagics for food security and local livelihoods must become a strategic priority.