

FAO Committee on Fisheries, 7-11 September 2026

Agenda Item 6. Decisions and Recommendations of the Twentieth Session of the COFI Sub-Committee on Fish Trade

Fair fish trade: fish should feed people first

We take note of the conclusions of the Sub-Committee on Fish Trade as set out in document COFI/2026/4, and welcome particularly its strong emphasis on food security, small-scale fisheries, women participation, sustainable value chains and inclusive trade systems.

For small-scale fishers and fishworkers, fish trade is fundamentally about food security, nutrition, livelihoods and social equity.

In many developing countries, access to affordable fish is becoming increasingly difficult. Fish that traditionally supplied local and regional markets is increasingly diverted towards export markets, industrial processing, or, as seen in West Africa, reduction into fishmeal and fish oil.

The findings of SOFIA 2026 remind us of the urgency of food security and nutrition, particularly in Africa, which has the lowest per capita availability of aquatic foods in the world, at only 9,1 kgs per person per year. Even more concerning, while total fish supply in Africa may continue to grow, per capita availability is expected to decline by 2034. Ensuring sufficient and equitable access to fish products is a strategic food security issue. In this regard, fish trade must be consistent with food and nutrition security strategies.

One essential response is to strengthen regional trade in fish products. Small-scale fisheries supplying regional markets play a critical role in food security, nutrition and livelihoods. Much of this trade is carried out through informal and semi-formal cross-border networks led by women. Non-tariff measures, when they are complex or inappropriate, disproportionately penalise small African operators. Regional, and increasingly continental, trade systems should be actively supported through reduced tariff and non-tariff barriers, better transport and cold-chain infrastructure, and trade procedures adapted to small-scale operators, especially women.

In addition to strengthening regional markets, fair fish trade also requires secure and equitable access to resources for small-scale fisheries, in line with SDG 14.b. Artisanal fishers face growing competition from industrial fleets, fishmeal factories and other industrial operators. Governments and partners must ensure, in line with SDG 14b, that trade and investment decisions reinforce small-scale fisheries' access to resources and markets.

Fair access must also be accompanied by investment in local value addition and post-harvest infrastructure. We welcome initiatives such as the FAO Blue Ports Initiative. However, infrastructure development must not come at the expense of artisanal fishing communities. Port modernization should protect landing sites, fish processing areas, and the tenure and access rights of fishing communities, especially women fish processors and traders. Investments should prioritize infrastructure designed with fishing communities: landing sites, cold storage, safe processing spaces, sanitation and market facilities.

Who benefits from investments in infrastructure matters. In many developing countries, women are the backbone of fish trade. They dominate fish processing, preservation, and local and

regional marketing. There needs to be stronger recognition of women's economic contribution, including by ensuring their effective participation in decisions on infrastructure and market development, and equitable access to finance, processing facilities and other productive resources.

We also welcome the Sub-Committee's work on transparency and FAO's efforts to strengthen traceability, in particular through electronic systems tailored to small-scale operators. Traceability and catch documentation systems can strengthen sustainability and combat IUU fishing. However, we ask FAO to ensure that these systems do not create new barriers for artisanal fishers and women processors. Traceability systems must remain inclusive, proportionate and accessible to small-scale operators. Digital systems should therefore be accompanied by infrastructure investment, capacity-building and simplified procedures adapted to artisanal fisheries realities.

Finally, we welcome the development of the FAO Guidance on Social Responsibility in Fisheries and Aquaculture Value Chains. Social responsibility must include labour rights, decent work, social protection and gender equality. For artisanal fisheries, this is especially important for women, youth and migrant workers. These voluntary guidelines should complement, not replace, binding labour protections, and the effective implementation of relevant ILO instruments, including ILO Convention C188.

Beyond the value it generates on global markets, fish trade must be assessed by its contribution to food security, decent livelihoods and resilient fishing communities.