

FAO Committee on Fisheries, 7-11 September 2026

Agenda Item 7. Decisions and Recommendations of the Second Session of the COFI Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management

Making access arrangements instruments of equitable governance for sustainability, food security and development

We take note of the conclusions of the Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management as set out in document COFI/2026/5. We particularly welcome the report and recommendations, particularly their emphasis on strengthening fisheries governance, improving management effectiveness, supporting science-based decision-making and ensuring more inclusive approaches to fisheries management.

For many developing coastal states, fisheries management necessarily includes addressing access arrangements. Access arrangements shape resource allocation, sustainability, food security, public revenues, local economic development and the future of coastal communities. The conditions under which access is granted determine who benefits from fisheries resources, how benefits are distributed, and whether access contributes to sustainable and equitable development. This is particularly important in African coastal states, where marine fisheries resources are central to food security, livelihoods, employment and local economies. Access arrangements must therefore be approached as part of fisheries governance.

As highlighted during discussions at the Sub-Committee, fisheries management decisions must increasingly account for broader ecosystem, social and economic dimensions. This principle should apply equally to fisheries access arrangements. Well-designed access arrangements can support sustainable fisheries management, scientific cooperation, local value addition, decent employment and public revenue generation. Poorly designed or inadequately implemented arrangements can contribute to overcapacity, excessive fishing pressure, weak transparency, inequitable benefit-sharing and growing tensions between industrial and small-scale fisheries.

Where fisheries resources are shared or access arrangements concern stocks managed at regional level, coherence with the measures and objectives adopted by relevant Regional Fisheries Bodies and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations is essential. These regional bodies have a key role in providing the scientific advice, management frameworks and regional cooperation needed to inform sustainable access decisions. They should therefore have sufficient resources and capacity to fulfil these functions effectively. Access arrangements should therefore be better aligned with broader public policy objectives, including sustainable resource management, food security, local development and equitable governance. In particular, access arrangements should not undermine the primary role of small-scale fisheries in food security, employment, livelihoods and domestic fish supply. In this regard, the collection of data, including social data, is essential for effective and fair fisheries governance.

Moreover, the principles of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries should be systematically reflected in access governance. This means ensuring meaningful participation of small-scale fisheries stakeholders in decision-making, recognizing

their tenure and access rights, and properly considering impacts on local livelihoods, markets and food systems.

Access agreements concluded without transparency and without community involvement create power imbalances and undermine governance. Greater transparency is needed regarding the financial terms of access arrangements, fishing opportunities allocated, monitoring obligations, compliance conditions, beneficial ownership structures, charter arrangements and joint ventures. Without transparency, it becomes difficult to assess whether access arrangements genuinely deliver equitable benefits and sustainable outcomes.

This is particularly important as access arrangements include a variety of models, including chartering, reflagging, joint ventures and other forms that can obscure effective fishing capacity and economic control.

The time has come to strengthen international guidance on fisheries access arrangements. Despite the growing recognition of the need to address fisheries access arrangements as part of global fisheries governance, there is currently no international framework defining guiding principles on transparency, equity, participation, sustainability and benefit-sharing across the different models of access arrangements. FAO is uniquely placed to support this process.

We therefore encourage FAO, in collaboration with coastal states, regional fisheries bodies and Regional Fisheries Management organisations, small-scale fisheries organisations and other stakeholders, to initiate a process towards the development of voluntary international guidelines on fisheries access arrangements. Such guidance should help ensure that access arrangements become instruments supporting sustainable fisheries, equitable partnerships, stronger national governance and resilient coastal food systems, bringing lasting value for coastal states, fishing communities and future generations.