

Agenda 9. The Role of FAO and Regional Fishery Bodies in Supporting Implementation of International Agreements Relevant to Fisheries and Aquaculture, including the BBNJ Agreement, the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, and CITES Decisions on Aquatic Species

International agreements must support small-scale fisheries, food security and equitable ocean governance

We take note of the information set out in document COFI/2026/7 concerning FAO interactions with international agreements relevant to fisheries and aquaculture and welcome FAO continued engagement in supporting their implementation, including the BBNJ Agreement and the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies.

These agreements are shaping the future of fisheries governance. For small-scale fisheries in developing regions, these agreements will influence access to resources, market opportunities, conservation measures and public support systems in ways that directly affect food security, livelihoods and social equity.

The multiplication of international agreements can lead to inconsistencies; greater coordination and coherence is essential. In this regard, the implementation of internationally agreed conservation objectives, trade disciplines and subsidy reforms must be aligned with the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries, the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, and, in the African region, the Kampala Declaration. Food security, decent livelihoods, human rights and social equity must remain central to implementation efforts, this is why the SSF Guidelines should serve as a benchmark to ensure that international agreements respect the rights of small scale fishing communities.

Indeed, across these international processes, coastal communities are still too often absent from decision-making processes, despite being among the ones most affected by decisions. This must change. FAO and regional fishery bodies should actively support inclusive participation mechanisms, capacity-building and improved representation of small-scale fisheries organizations in global, regional and national policy processes.

On BBNJ Agreement

The BBNJ Agreement is essential for strengthening marine biodiversity conservation and improving governance of areas beyond national jurisdiction. The undersigned support the conservation of biodiversity on the high seas, but insist that the measures adopted must not impose disproportionate restrictions on developing coastal communities. Conservation or management measures in adjacent high seas areas may unintentionally displace industrial fishing effort into coastal waters, increasing pressure on already stressed resources in Exclusive Economic Zones and intensifying competition with artisanal fishers. For this reason, FAO must support an implementation of the BBNJ Agreement that fully considers the implications for coastal developing states and artisanal fishing communities. Indeed, FAO should encourage inclusive consultation processes, strong social and environmental safeguards, and full recognition of traditional knowledge and the rights of local communities.

On WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies

We welcome global efforts to eliminate harmful subsidies contributing to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, overcapacity and overfishing. While the current WTO Agreement represents an important first step, the ongoing negotiations on additional disciplines to address subsidies contributing to overcapacity and overfishing are even more important for small-scale fisheries.

Most harmful subsidies often support large scale industrial and distant water fleets operating in or around waters of developing countries. The negotiations will determine whether the global subsidy regime can genuinely address the main drivers of unfair competition and overexploitation. Disciplines on subsidies linked to fuel, vessel construction and modernization, access arrangements, chartering and joint ventures will be decisive for reducing harmful fishing pressure and creating fairer conditions for small-scale fisheries.

In many developing countries, public funding supporting small-scale fisheries remains modest but essential. When it finances safety at sea, landing infrastructure, cold chains, post-harvest improvements, local value addition, climate resilience, co-management systems and participatory surveillance, it should not be constrained by subsidy disciplines. Therefore, the implementation of the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies must take account of the realities in developing countries and avoid penalising small-scale operators.

Transparency and accountability are equally essential. FAO should support WTO subsidy notification requirements in becoming tools for democratic oversight. Information on fisheries subsidies should be publicly available and accessible, so that coastal communities can understand who benefits from public support, for what purpose, and with what impacts.

Finally, small-scale fishers and fishworkers must be recognized as legitimate stakeholders not only in the implementation of the current WTO Agreement, including the Fish Fund, but also in ongoing negotiations on additional disciplines to curb subsidies contributing to overcapacity and overfishing.

Sustainability will not be achieved through ‘top-down governance’ alone. It requires policies that are grounded in the realities of those who depend most directly on fisheries resources.