

Enhancing Organizational Structures in Small Scale Fisheries

Executive Summary

Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) are essential to food security, nutrition, and livelihoods across Africa, yet they remain vulnerable due to challenges such as declining fish stocks, environmental degradation, post-harvest losses, and exclusion from policy processes. A key underlying issue is the lack of strong, organized structures among SSF actors, limiting their ability to access resources, influence governance, and benefit from sustainable fisheries management.

This advocacy note highlights the urgent need to strengthen organizational structures—such as cooperatives and associations—within SSF to amplify fishers' voices, improve service access, and foster partnerships. Despite their potential, several barriers persist, including weak legal support, fragmented institutional coordination, limited leadership capacity, and distrust of collective models due to past failures.

To address these, the note recommends: Strengthening legal and policy frameworks to recognize and support SSF organizations;Establishing national and regional coordination mechanisms; Increasing SSF participation in decision-making; Sharing best practices (e.g., Beach Management Units); Building leadership and awareness; Promoting behavioral change to rebuild trust.

The African Union Member States (AU-MS) are urged to prioritize the institutionalization of SSF organizational structures to enable inclusive governance, improve livelihoods, and drive a more sustainable and resilient fisheries sector across the continent.

Introduction

Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) are vital to millions across Africa contributing significantly to food security, nutrition and improved livelihoods. Despite their critical role, SSF are faced with numerous challenges including: declining fish catches, environmental degradation, increasing post-harvest losses, inequality and conflict, all of which compromise the expected benefits. In addition, the situation is aggravated by the fact that SSF are frequently undervalued, unrecognized, and inadequately supported.

Furthermore, SSF in many Africa Union Member States (AU-MS) are not formally organized, and where such structures exist, they lack the capacity and influence to effectively contribute to the management, processing and marketing of the fisheries.

Successful SSF require structured governance systems that foster both development and sustainability. This requires organizing fishers into formal groups, associations, or cooperatives that can effectively participate in management of the fisheries at community level.

Why Organizational Structures?

- ***Amplified collective voice:*** provide a unified and stronger platform for influencing/informing policy and participating in decision-making processes.
- ***Enhanced bargaining power:*** enable effective negotiations for improved services

- ***Improved access to resources:*** facilitate better access to financing, healthcare, education and other essential support services
- ***Strengthened partnerships:*** make collaborations and engagements with government agencies, NGOs and private sector partners more efficient and impactful.

What issues hinder the development and performance of organizational structures in SSF?

It has been observed that issues that hinder development and performance of organisational structures fall within four governance thematic areas as highlighted below:

Policy, legal and regulatory frameworks

1. Weak or lack of legislation to support the formation, governance and effective operationalization and management of co-operatives, associations, or other fisher-based economic interest groups.

Institutional frameworks

1. Weak or lack of institutional frameworks by governments to foster development and sustainability of SSF
2. Fragmented and multiple uncoordinated organizations working within the SSF resulting in duplication of efforts, inefficient use of resources, hence reducing the overall impact of these organizations

Transparency, accountability and rule of law

1. Lack of transparency, accountability and internal management which may result in low trust in leadership and governance thus discouraging many fishers from participating in fisher group activities.
2. Political interference in the management of fishers community organizations leading to internal conflicts that undermine the core purpose and independence of establishment of these associations.

Capacity development and leadership

1. Limited awareness on organizational structures and their associated benefits among fishers that deters their ability to actively engage in the organization activities.
2. Limited decision-making capacity among fishers due to lack of organizational, technical or leadership skills for effective engagement in policy dialogue or management decisions
3. Negative perceptions and attitudes towards existing organizational structures (e.g. cooperative models) persist in some fisher communities often stemming from past failed experiences associated with similar initiatives.
4. Resistance to change caused by reluctance of fishers to move away from their traditional way of living and doing their fisheries activities thus hindering their adoption of new practices/innovations/technologies with a potential to enhance fisheries sustainability and productivity.

What needs be done to enhance the organizational structures in SSF?

- Develop or strengthen legal and policy frameworks of specific legislation to support formation, operationalization and management of the SSF groups. Ensure legal recognition of these organisations to enhance their legitimacy and ability to engage in formal processes
- Foster coordination and collaboration by establishing structured coordination mechanisms at both national and regional levels to engage all relevant stakeholders. Promote networking and alliance building among fisher groups to enhance collective impact and facilitate the exchange of best practices
- Improve access to decision making platforms (including digital platforms) and processes for SSF to ensure fair representation and inclusive participation in fisheries management and policy formulation
- Disseminate best practices and lessons learnt to influence acceptance of organizational structures in SSF – the case of co-management structures e.g. Beach Management Units (BMUs)
- Build awareness and capacity through promotion of awareness raising programmes on the benefits of organisational structures (focusing on the fishers, policy makers, media) to enable active engagement. Provide training on leadership, financial management, democratic governance, new technologies, marketing opportunities within fisher organisations.
- Promote behaviour and mindset change through engagement of community leaders, elders, and youth

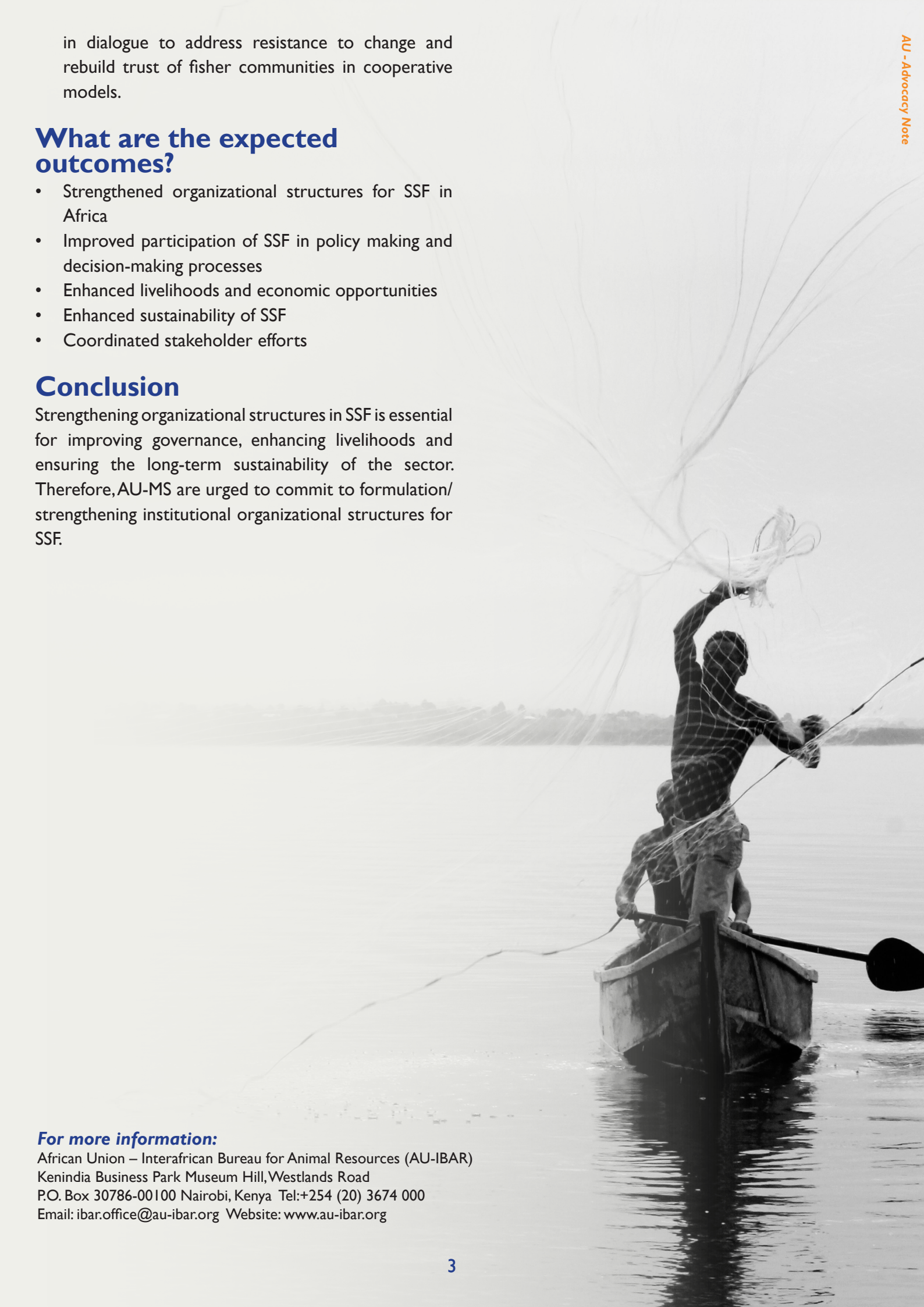
in dialogue to address resistance to change and rebuild trust of fisher communities in cooperative models.

What are the expected outcomes?

- Strengthened organizational structures for SSF in Africa
- Improved participation of SSF in policy making and decision-making processes
- Enhanced livelihoods and economic opportunities
- Enhanced sustainability of SSF
- Coordinated stakeholder efforts

Conclusion

Strengthening organizational structures in SSF is essential for improving governance, enhancing livelihoods and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sector. Therefore, AU-MS are urged to commit to formulation/ strengthening institutional organizational structures for SSF.



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