

Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries: *Unlocking Socio-Economic Benefits*

Executive Summary

Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) are a critical pillar of food security, employment, and economic development across Africa, providing livelihoods to millions and contributing significantly to trade and nutrition. Globally, SSF contribute over 40% of the total fish catch and employ nearly 90% of the world's fisheries workforce, a large portion of whom are based in Africa. Yet, despite their vital role, SSF actors remain marginalized, grappling with poverty, weak political representation, and increasing competition from industrial fisheries, coastal tourism, and infrastructure development.

This policy brief identifies systemic barriers limiting the socio-economic potential of SSF, including: Outdated or poorly enforced policies and legal frameworks; Limited political will and inconsistent institutional support; Weak or fragmented organizational structures; Low awareness of the benefits of collective action; Poor competitiveness and market integration; Insufficient socio-economic and sectoral data to inform decision-making.

The recommended strategic actions include: Strengthen legal and policy frameworks to support the formation and sustainability of SSF cooperatives and associations; Formally recognize and institutionalize SSF organizations to enable their participation in governance and markets; Conduct comprehensive socio-economic assessments to inform inclusive policies and targeted investments; Ratify and implement international instruments (e.g., FAO SSF Guidelines) to safeguard SSF rights and promote decent work; Establish national SSF platforms to improve access to decision-making and amplify fisher voices; Invest in capacity building to develop accountable, inclusive, and well-structured SSF organizations across the value chain; Improve safety and infrastructure, and implement marine spatial planning that includes exclusive zones for SSF; Promote policy coherence across sectors (fisheries, environment, tourism, trade) to ensure integrated development; Facilitate knowledge sharing and replication of successful SSF models across regions.

Realizing the full potential of SSF requires deliberate political commitment and coordinated investment in governance, infrastructure, data systems, and organizational development. Empowering SSF actors through inclusive policies and institutional support will not only improve livelihoods and resilience but also drive sustainable blue growth across Africa. The African Union Member States are urged to place SSF at the center of their blue economy strategies and national development agendas to ensure no fisher is left behind.

Introduction

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) account for over 40% of the world's total fish catch and provide employment to approximately 60.2 million people across the value chain, representing nearly 90% of the global fisheries workforce (FAO, Duke University & WorldFish, 2023). In Africa, the SSF contribute significantly to food security, employment and opportunities for income diversification, economic growth, and provide an affordable and highly nutritious source of protein. Additionally, SSF contribute to foreign exchange earnings and government revenues through trade.

Despite their vital role in food security and local economies, the actors in small-scale fisheries (SSF) remain among the poorest, most politically neglected, and socially marginalized communities across the continent. They continue to face persistent food and livelihood insecurity. Maritime competition further exacerbates their vulnerability—industrial fishing vessels often encroach upon zones reserved for SSF, while aggressive tourism activities disturb fish populations, and industrial developments degrade marine and coastal ecosystems. These pressures result in significant economic losses for SSF communities. Moreover, the lack of strong organizational structures limits their participation in decision-making processes, access to fair markets and prices, appropriate infrastructure, and targeted capacity-building programs.

This policy brief aims to provide actionable recommendations for unlocking the socio-economic potential of small-scale fisheries (SSF) by addressing key challenges and promoting inclusive, sustainable management practices

Barriers to unlocking socio-economic benefits

Key underlying challenges hindering the socio-economic development of the Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) sector include weak and outdated policy and legal frameworks, inconsistent political engagement, inadequate institutional frameworks to support effective governance and development., limited awareness of the benefits of organised group structures, competitiveness of the sector and insufficient data.

Weak/outdated Policy and legal frameworks

- Inadequate or non-existent legislation, along with poor enforcement and limited domestication of existing laws, undermines effective governance of small-scale fisheries and cooperative structures.

Inconsistent political engagement

- SSF are marginalised in the planning processes with limited financial support. There is limited prioritisation of the SSF

Inadequate Institutional frameworks

- Inadequate institutional frameworks hinder government efforts to establish, support, and promote cooperatives and associations within the SSF.
- Small-scale fisheries (SSF) are often not organized into formal associations, and where such groups exist, they are typically too weak to effectively participate in resource management or market systems.

Limited awareness

- Limited awareness of the benefits of organized group structures, combined with a lack of support for transparency and accountability in the management of cooperatives and Economic Interest Groups (EIGs), further weakens their effectiveness and sustainability.

Competitiveness of the sector

- As a result, the sector's competitiveness is significantly undermined at national, regional, and continental levels—limiting its potential to contribute to economic growth, food security, and sustainable livelihoods.

Insufficient data

- The social and economic contribution of SSF is not well known.
- The Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) provides a framework to align national policies with global best practices and protect SSF rights.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing the root causes hindering socio-economic development of the SSF mentioned above is essential to ensure meaningful contribution to livelihoods, food security, and economic growth, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

- Development, strengthening, and enforcement policy and legal frameworks that support the creation, protection, and sustainability of SSF cooperatives and associations.
- Promotion of the formalization and legal recognition of SSF cooperatives and associations to ensure their full participation in governance, market access, and service delivery.
- Comprehensive assessment of SSF contribution to socio-economic significance of the society
- Ratification and domestication of key international and regional instruments, such as ILO Convention C.188 on Decent Work in the Fishing Sector
- Enforcement of the SSF related legislation framework by the government.
- Enable existing community groups and associations to actively participate in policy formulation and decision-making processes related to fisheries governance.

- Enhancement of access to decision-making platforms for small-scale fisheries (SSF) by establishing or strengthening a unified national platform of cooperatives and associations to represent SSF interests in dialogue with government and stakeholders.
- Establishment of strong, well-structured organizations, all along the value chain, trained in organizational dynamics.
- Establishment of strong, well-organized, and effectively managed structures along the small-scale fisheries (SSF) value chain would significantly empower fishers and fish workers
- Set up search and rescue response systems, and equip community management groups with tools and training for sea safety, emergency prevention, and disaster preparedness.
- Facilitation of knowledge sharing, experience exchange, and capacity-building programs among fishers and fish worker cooperatives and associations
- Establishment and enforcement of exclusive fishing zones (EFZs) for small-scale fishers (SSF), supported by robust marine spatial planning and MCS systems.
- Strengthening MCS infrastructure by incorporating the advanced technologies (satellites, live feeds)
- Promotion of policy coherence among sectors (tourism, coastal development, environment and fishing) that safeguards fishing areas for SSF, protect fish habitats and ensures equitable access to marine resources for local communities
- Ensure timely dissemination of data, information, and feedback to fishers and fish workers, enabling informed participation and adaptive management at the community level.
- Documentation and wide dissemination of successful, evidence-based case studies of effective cooperatives and associations to inspire replication and inform policy and practice.

Conclusions

As outlined in this policy brief, strengthening organizational structures among small-scale fisheries (SSF) actors across the value chain is critical to unlocking key benefits—such as access to high-level decision-making processes, improved market opportunities, socio-economic protection schemes, and targeted capacity-building programs. These advancements are essential for improving the quality of life and livelihoods of fishing communities across the African continent.

Notably, successful examples already exist within Africa, demonstrating the potential of community-driven initiatives. It is therefore imperative that AU-MS and regional bodies support the replication, scaling, and dissemination of these innovative efforts. This includes fostering knowledge exchange,

References

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