

# How can aid help mitigate the problem of overfishing in Africa?

## KEY FINDINGS

- Development aid aimed at increasing productivity in the fisheries sector has at times had a negative effect by encouraging or facilitating overfishing.
- A percentage increase in capacity enhancing or bad subsidies in sub-Saharan Africa, all else being equal, will increase catch loss per square kilometer within the exclusive economic zone by 0.22-0.27 per cent.

The fisheries sector in Africa currently generates revenue of US\$2 billion. Given the size and importance of this sector, it is not surprising that the fisheries sector has received a significant amount of foreign aid. Over the period 1973 to 2001, Africa benefited from 1,988 fisheries aid projects, totaling US\$4.6 billion in monetary value.

What may be surprising, however, is that despite clear evidence of overcapitalization and overfishing within the region, much of the aid given to the fisheries sector focuses on increasing productivity rather than research and development, training provision, and shaping fishing policy and management. This has led to a number of concerns being raised in international circles over the potential detrimental impact of subsidies on overcapitalization and overfishing.

### Development aid and catch losses

UNU-WIDER research confirms that these concerns are borne out by the data. Those countries with higher subsidies designed to increase fishing revenue, or lower the costs of fishing and thus enhance productivity, recorded higher losses due to overfishing and overcapitalization. A percentage increase in capacity enhancing subsidies, all else being equal, is associated with an increase in catch loss per square kilometer within the exclusive economic zone of between 0.22-0.27 per cent.



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### A positive role for development aid?

Given the evidence that development aid aimed at enhancing capacity actually harms the fisheries sector in the African context it is important to think about ways in which development aid could play a positive role in addressing the overfishing problem. There are a number of ways aid could be targeted better to achieve this.

**First**, aid could be tied to building fisheries institutions that define and enforce access rights to regulate the commons problem.

- In places where customary rights to fisheries are well-defined, communities can regulate access by controlling fishing methods, location, and timing.
- Empowering local communities to exclude outsiders from having access to fishing areas is critical if overfishing is to be prevented.



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**Second**, development aid could support research into determining desirable effort levels and expenditure on enforcement of regulations that seek to enforce effort-limiting policies.

- Assigning ownership rights alone may not guarantee sustainable fishing levels as, due to the large number of small-scale fishers, it is generally impossible to monitor landings and enforce catch quotas. Instead, it is necessary to limit efforts through regulations on net size, the use of explosives, and other productivity-enhancing equipment.



**Third**, development aid is needed for scientific research into species diversity and the functioning of ecosystems.

- Understanding the functional groups of species, migration paths, and spawning behaviour of various species can significantly improve stock management.

**Fourth**, inshore fisheries in sub-Saharan Africa are facing fierce and increasing competition from foreign fleets fishing extensively offshore.

- Insufficient budgets for enforcement make it hard for the coastal countries to monitor foreign vessels and foreign aid could help in this area.

**Finally**, foreign aid aimed at effective fisheries management in Africa must look beyond the fisheries sectors. Bad policies in the fisheries sector are usually associated with bad governance.

- Several countries within the region continue to subsidize fishing inputs for political reasons, even when evidence abound that stocks are overcapitalized.
- Corruption has been cited as an important factor leading to depletion of offshore and inshore stocks by foreign fleets. Foreign aid to the sector should be tied to good governance in the recipient countries.



## IMPLICATIONS

- Development aid should be tied to building fisheries institutions that define and enforce clear guidelines about who has the right to fish and what quantity of fish to catch in a given area to prevent the problem of overfishing.
- Development aid could support research into desirable effort levels in the fisheries sector and into species diversity and the functioning of ecosystems.
- Development aid aimed at effective fisheries management in Africa must look beyond the fisheries sectors. Perverse policies in the fisheries sector are usually associated with bad governance.

*This Research Brief is based on  
WIDER Working Paper 2013/100  
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