



Strengthening small-scale fisheries for sustainable growth in Africa

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SUMMARY

Small-scale fisheries (SSFs) play an important role in food security, job creation, and cultural heritage across Africa. They account for over 60% of the continent’s fish production and provide 90% of the fish consumed. However, SSFs face several challenges, including competition with larger industries, vulnerability to climate change, and marginalisation of fishing communities when it comes to prioritising public service delivery.

This brief examines these issues, providing case studies on South Africa and Zambia to illustrate the contributions of SSFs to economic transformation and sustainable livelihoods. Key recommendations include improving data collection to strengthen policy decisions, building cooperative engagement structures, and aligning SSF policies across governance levels to support their role in Africa’s sustainable development agenda.

ACRONYMS	
SSF	Small-scale fisheries
AU	African Union
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
SADC	Southern African Development Community
PFRS	Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa
GDP	Gross Domestic Product

INTRODUCTION

Africa's fisheries perform a multifaceted role: generating income and employment, supporting food and nutrition security, and providing cultural value. While the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 dubs the *Blue Economy* a 'new frontier of African renaissance' and a catalyst for socioeconomic transformation, greater insight is needed to examine its impact on SSFs.

Estimates indicate that SSFs account for more than 60% of Africa's fisheries production and provide over 90% of the fish consumed across the continent (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Fish & Duke University, 2023). Yet, certain impediments affect the performance and sustainability of the sector, partly due to limited data on their activities and the challenges of capturing their full economic and social impacts (March & Failler, 2022). Furthermore, SSFs face internal challenges, arising from overfishing and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing (IUU), as well as external pressures, such as the expansion of other sectors of the economy to divert the labour force, and the impacts of climate change (Benkenstein, 2015).

Climate change, in particular, poses significant challenges for fisheries in Sub-Saharan Africa, affecting food webs, temperature patterns, and the migration and breeding behaviours of marine species. Many nations within the continent, however, lack sufficient resources to manage and adapt to these shifts. Most of the adaptation strategies mobilised by SSFs are on short-term basis, and include diversification of livelihoods, altering target species, and strengthening social networks, demonstrating their role in responding to climate variability (Muringai, Mafongoya & Lottering, 2021).

Given this context, it may be useful to unpack some of the burning challenges the sector encounters. This brief provides background on SSFs in Africa, presenting two case studies from South Africa and Zambia. We offer policy recommendations that aim at enhancing the performance of the sector and supporting coordination between the involved stakeholders in the short, medium, and long term.

BACKGROUND

Given the central role of fisheries in the livelihoods and nutrition of millions of people across the continent, sustainable fisheries management is a critical policy priority for governments. This need is underscored by the ongoing challenges of IUU and overfishing, with estimates suggesting that 57% of African fish stocks are exploited and 30% are depleted (AU, 2016). Increasing fishing pressures and declining stocks bind fishing communities into poverty traps, resulting in more intensive fishing practices (March & Failler, 2022).

In response, the AU's Blue Economy Strategy (2020) emphasises the need for sustainable, integrated management of coastal, marine, and inland aquatic resources to promote economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. However, the 'Blue Growth' agenda has been criticised for having given a much strong emphasis to large-scale industries, with some concerns that the expansion of industrial fishing and aquaculture may increase fishery competition and overshadow traditional fishing practices (COAPA, 2020).

Other frameworks, such as the UN-FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable SSF (2014) and the AU's Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa (PFRS)

(2014), have attempted to address governance issues and strengthen the contribution of SSF to food security and socio-economic development. Implementation, however, has remained weak due to inadequate institutional coordination (March & Failler, 2022).

1. South Africa

South Africa is host to a vast number of natural resources, providing opportunities for sustainable utilisation and economic growth. Fisheries provide cultural, medicinal, and spiritual value to communities all along the South African coastline. Moreover, the sector is key to food security, livelihood creation and community upliftment in traditionally more rural and poverty-stricken regions (Sowman & Sunde, 2021). South Africa's coastline supports thousands of jobs and contributes significantly to the national economy with coastal goods and services contributing 35% to its GDP. The stock levels in the country's waters have been consistently exploited, with 13 stocks being considered depleted in 2023; 4 more stocks than in 2020.

Recognising this, in 2014 Operation Phakisa was launched: an attempt to optimise ocean resources in a way which aids development objectives. South Africa's oceanic resources have the potential to contribute R177 billion rand to South Africa's GDP by 2033 and create up to one million jobs. This includes offshore gas and oil exploration, marine transport and manufacturing, tourism and the fisheries sector (South African International Maritime Institute, 2021). Operation Phakisa was formulated in line with the blue economy model, ensuring sustainable exploration and equitable resource shares. Moreover, the plan aims to develop small harbours and promote the small-scale fishing industry thus

promoting sustainable and equitable development (Loureiro, Du Plessis & Findlay, 2022)

However, for many years, South Africa's SSF had been neglected. This exclusion has affected more than 43,000 fishermen who face high levels of poverty, marginalisation and poor socio-economic conditions. Thousands of artisanal fishers have been left out of the rights allocation process, leaving communities fragmented and facing uncertainty (Sowman & Sunde, 2021). This is forcing many into IUU which, in turn, depletes stocks beyond what was partitioned for. Since fishing rights are allocated based on available stock, this decreased stock levels then, in turn, decreases the number of permits available over time. This then creates a vicious cycle of poverty and stock depletion (DFFE, 2023).

The failure of policy to improve the state of SSF is largely due to the implementation of said policies. Operation Phakisa makes it clear that SSFs are valued by the South African government and economy. However, there is a clear disconnect between the policies' intentions and the actions that have been taken to meet these intentions. Often the dissatisfaction felt by the SSF sector is due to the limited fishing rights which are allocated to them in comparison to commercial and recreational sectors. This is caused by weak governance, a lack of ongoing community engagement and understanding of socio-economic factors surrounding these communities as well as limited capacity to meet the policy objectives (Sowman & Sunde, 2021).

There is a missed opportunity in the economic development that could come from including small-scale fishermen themselves in the decision-making

process. SSFs are known to be more labour intensive than commercial fisheries, indicating better employment outcomes from an expanded SSF sector. In comparison, commercial fisheries are known to be more capital-intensive. Moreover, many of the small-scale fishers are self-employed and embedded in their respective communities and local economies. However, the combination of climate change and asymmetrical competition from other sectors is further impeding the SSF sector within South Africa (FOA, 2021).

2. Zambia

For Zambia, the concept of the blue economy in fisheries is not new, as the nation has identified the sector to be key for economic growth, food security and a means of enhancing livelihoods. The Zambian Government formulated its national blue economy strategy spanning from 2024 to 2030 and aimed at facilitating economic growth that is sustainable, ecologically sound, and socially inclusive. Although the strategy document itself is not widely accessible and currently undergoing validation, reports suggest that it covers the management of the fisheries sector, expansion of the water transport industry and improved utilisation of underwater mineral resources. Its purpose and focus are the development of biotechnology knowledge, environmental sustainability and ecosystem services, through the technical assistance of the AU. Hence, it is not only in line with the AU blueprint for Africa's blue economy but also the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 on life below water (COMESA, 2024).

While Zambia has made important steps in promoting aquaculture over the last decade, the SSFs, which form the backbone of local rural

communities and their local economies are under-supported. As a result, they have been underrepresented in national economic planning and received limited investment and policy support. Consequently, as much as the need to have a focused approach to actualize the aspirations of the blue economy and deliver results is recognized, not much has been done on the ground to materialise this vision into reality (Kakwasha et al., 2020). Hence, the National Blue Economy Strategy marks a progressive step towards the integration of sustainable practices into the economic framework. What is needed for the real development of the blue economy in Zambia is a balanced approach that involves strong support for SSFs, ensuring that practices are sustainable, livelihoods improved and economic contributions maximised throughout the sector.

As part of Zambia's blue economy, local food production systems like fisheries play a role in tackling poverty and food insecurity as well as contributing to the achievement of some of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Small-scale fisheries provide affordable nutrition and job opportunities in Zambia's rural areas where poverty rates are high and many people struggle with hunger, with 48% of people living in extreme poverty (under US\$1.25 a day) and more than half experiencing hunger (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2023). According to the FAO in 2021, about 30% of the animal protein that people in Zambia consume comes from fish. This statistic underlines the critical importance of the fishing sector, as highlighted in the 8th National Development Plan (2022-2026).

The low productivity levels in Zambia's fishing industry are attributed to various factors such as the rising demand and issues like overfishing and

climate change impacting the sector negatively. On top of that, illegal practices like unreported and unregulated fishing as well as inadequate investments and credit access for fish farmers restrict the growth of the fisheries sector. Regulatory framework gaps and incomplete data collection regarding small-scale, artisanal and recreational fishing further mask the true value of Zambia's fisheries within the blue economy, understating both production levels and socio-economic impact (Musumali et al., 2009; Southern African Development Community (SADC), 2021). A stronger regulatory framework and comprehensive data collection are, therefore, crucial in ascertaining an accurate estimate of value and maximising the benefits of Zambia's aquatic resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT TERM

a. Improve data collection

Government departments should collaborate with academic institutions and the private sector to increase data collection and thus improve the decision making process. In doing so, a better understanding of the complex interplay between SSF, commercial fisheries and fish stocks can be developed to better understand socio-economic outcomes.

b. Develop co-operatives and community engagement

Co-operatives allow communities to voice their concerns in a unified and structured manner. Collectivising groups of fishers improves their bargaining power and allows common socio-economic goals to be met. This will require engagement between governments and communities

(particularly community leaders) which will need to be ongoing such that policies are well informed.

c. Improve institutional quality

Governments should ensure that policies and institutions are acted upon consistently. This ensures that the designed institutions have their intended effects. Currently, the implementation of institutions within the SSF sector often falls short due to practical challenges, resulting in limited effectiveness. This disconnect undermines efforts to empower fishermen and address their needs equitably.

MEDIUM AND LONG TERM

d. Enhance policy coherence

Enhance coordination and communication of SSF management policies across continental, regional, and national levels to improve coherence, regulatory clarity, and minimise overlaps. One approach could be the implementation of standardised SSFs reporting frameworks. Achieving this will necessitate international collaboration, ongoing dialogue, and an understanding of local socio-economic and ecological contexts.

e. Encourage ecosystem-based management

Integrate ecosystem-based management and climate adaptation into SSF policies. This includes the provisioning of tools and knowledge to SSF communities for adapting to climate change impacts, like shifting fish stocks or changes in ocean temperatures, and support efforts to restore and conserve critical ecosystems. For these measures to succeed, the government and fisheries must collaborate in developing systems that are perceived as legitimate and have the support of SSF.

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