



The Need for Social Considerations in SDG 14

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Sustainable Development Goal 14 acknowledges the need for action to achieve a sustainable future for our ocean. Many initiatives are working on ocean-related issues; however, social problems are often overlooked. In this article, we argue that to achieve a sustainable ocean, social aspects need to be considered. We explore the link between SDG 14 and SDG 8 as labor and working conditions on fishing vessels receive increasing attention. Regional Fisheries Management Organizations have the mandate to manage fisheries at the high seas, therefore, we argue that these organizations need to act on, and implement, resolutions and measures, addressing labor standards. Labor conditions related to the fishing sector have not received the level of scholarly attention that they deserve, thus more research is needed.

Keywords: fisheries management, human rights, labor conditions, regional fisheries management organizations, International Labor Organization

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the oceans is globally acknowledged with important political events happening to discuss the sustainability of our oceans. In 2020 the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development to run from 2021 to 2030 was announced by the United Nations, aiming to stimulate action and funding for ocean science (UNESCO, 2020). Interdisciplinary and solution-oriented science are imperative to achieve a healthy and sustainable ocean (Visbeck, 2018). This decade is inherently linked with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 14, *life below water*. This SDG addresses all the major issues related to the ocean, such as marine pollution, overfishing or ecosystem degradation.

The work by Singh et al., 2017, emphasized the linkages between SDG 14 and other goals and the need to link environmental sustainability and social and economic issues. The SDGs do provide a significant opportunity to build on the promise of the Rio + 20 Summit in 2012 for “the future we want” and other international initiatives related to the oceans. The UN Decade of Ocean Science provides great opportunities but may understate social and economic considerations (Fleming et al., 2019) in an emphasis on blue growth or the blue economy. We believe that a sustainable ocean cannot be achieved without taking social considerations into account (Rudolph et al., 2020). Thus, we are interested in what we believe to be a neglected area of fisheries governance, that of working conditions of crew on fishing vessels. This article focuses on the need to explicitly address linkages between SDG14 and SDG8, *decent work and economic growth*.

In this article, we are focusing on Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMOs), which have mandates to manage fisheries at the high seas. A study by McDonald et al. (2020) showed that the risk of forced labor is neither solely linked to exclusive economic zones (EEZs) nor high seas, but occurs globally. Moreover, one of the key areas of focus for RFMOs is the problem of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing that has often been linked to forced work and labor abuse on fishing vessels (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016). While we focus on RFMOs, it is, however, important to note that there are also other international fisheries organizations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization that also address this issue.

It is important to examine this issue through the lens of the SDGs since social issues and non-compliance with management regulations are linked with each other (Bennett, 2019). While not directly addressed under SDG 14, the issue of labor conditions is gaining increased attention at meetings of RFMOs. Even though some member states consider that labor standards are outside of the mandate of RFMOs, criticism that they are avoiding this topic may also increase the organization's reputational risk. We note, too, that in 2018, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) adopted a non-binding resolution on labor standards for crews on fishing vessels (WCPFC, 2018). At its most recent Commission meeting in 2020, the WCPFC agreed to work on a conservation and management measure targeting crew and labor conditions on fishing vessels (WCPFC, 2020).

Generally, it is important to address this issue in a scientific manner as currently much of the information linking IUU fishing and labor conditions has been provided by journalists and non-governmental organizations (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016). While research on this area is increasing, most peer-reviewed literature has focused on case studies such as the offshore fishery in Thailand (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016; Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020), Myanmar (Belton et al., 2019), or New Zealand (Stringer et al., 2016). The first section of the article provides an overview of the SDGs and especially key aspects and targets within SDG 8 and SDG 14. The following section addresses labor issues in the fisheries sector, noting the relative salience in contemporary fisheries governance, yet at the same time, we recognize increased attention given to this issue by the International Labor Organization. The final section of the paper provides a synthesis of these key issues and outlines the potential solutions to the current gap in fisheries governance.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was adopted in 2015 (Le Blanc et al., 2017). A number of these goals reiterate, reinforce, and/or consolidate previously agreed actions and link to existing international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement¹ (UNFSA). The SDGs evolved from the UN

Millennium Development Goals of 2000 and the principles contained in the 1992 *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (Fukuda-Parr, 2013). While considerable attention has been given to each of the goals as drivers for change, less attention has been shown toward the linkages between the goals as highlighting areas for action. Singh et al. (2017) emphasized that the different goals cannot be achieved in isolation and the separation of social and ecological aspects need to be minimized. It is time that issues of ecological sustainability are linked with social issues, as it is difficult to fully address the former without paying attention to the latter.

This is clear with respect to SDG14 (*Life below water*) that aims to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development” (SDG14 – **Supplementary Appendix 1**) and provides a focus for ongoing action by addressing seven targets and three sub-targets many of which have a direct influence in emerging fisheries governance (Haas et al., 2019), see **Supplementary Appendix 1**. For example, SDG14 Target 4: “By 2020 effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans” . . . , reinforces the role of regional fisheries management organizations (United Nations [UN], 2018). This target has a direct link to Article 10 of the UNFSA that outlines the “functions of subregional and regional fisheries management organizations and arrangements” (United Nations [UN], 1995).

Effective regulation and management of natural resources are important for the realization of human rights. The issue of labor standards and decent work conditions is addressed by SDG 8 (*Decent work and economic growth*) and its 12 targets. This SDG aims to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all,” see **Supplementary Appendix 2**. Fishing involves hard and dangerous work, often called 3Ds work (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) in an unforgiving environment. While the International Labor Organization (ILO) recognize that a majority of fishing vessel operators comply with regulations and avoid “decent work deficits” (ILO, 2016) it is also recognized that the sectors “is notorious for severe decent work deficits and has come under scrutiny over the past years for the use of forced labor and child labor, as well as links to human traffickers and people smugglers” (ILO, 2016: v).

In the context of fisheries, two targets of SDG 8 are especially relevant as they can be directly linked to two targets of SDG 14. Target 8.7 – end modern slavery, trafficking and child labor – is partly dependent on the progress made in Target 14.4 – sustainable fisheries – which calls for an end of all illegal, unreported and unregulated fisheries. As previously noted, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing has often been associated with forced work and low labor standards (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016). Target 8.7 is also linked to target 14.6 – end subsidies contributing to overfishing – as subsidies play a notable role in overfishing, which pressurizes fishing companies to save money on labor costs to make a decent income. The second

relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks (in force as from 11 December 2001).

¹The United Nations Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982

target is 8.8 – protect labor rights and promote safe working environments – which is also linked to the targets 14.4 and 14.6.

LABOR CHALLENGES IN CURRENT FISHERIES GOVERNANCE

Fishing is important for the livelihood of millions of people. Approximately 59.5 million people worked in the primary sector of fisheries and aquaculture in 2018 (FAO, 2020a). Most of the workers live in developing countries and where a lack of controls and regulations make these workers especially vulnerable to labor abuse (OSA, 2020). It had been estimated that around 24.9 million fisheries workers have been forced to work (OSA, 2020).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has adopted two instruments in the last decade which are central to addressing these matters: the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188) and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (PO. 29). These instruments are claimed by the ILO to provide a comprehensive framework for regulating working conditions (ILO, 2016). Other key ILO instruments, including the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87), the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), the Labor Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81), and the Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181) are important to the promotion of decent work in fishing (ILO, 2016: v).

The most important instrument for labor issues in the fisheries sector is the ILO Work in Fishing Convention No. 188. This convention sets standards for issues such as occupational safety, health and medical care at sea and ashore, written work agreements and living conditions on board (ILO, 2017). While this convention entered into force in November 2017, following ratification by 10 states (eight of whom were coastal states), to date it has only received 17 ratifications and so is not considered to be as influential as it could be in driving changes.

Another important instrument is the Cape Town Agreement developed by the International Maritime Organizations. This agreement (concluded in 2012 but yet to enter into force) provides minimum global standards, aims to ensure the safety of fishing vessels and their crew (FAO, 2021). Other important instruments concerning labor standards and crew welfare include for example the IMO Convention on Training and Certification for Fishing Vessel Personnel or the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, especially article 8, which calls for decent employment and social security (FAO, 2020b).

So far, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission is the only RFMO that has a non-binding resolution in place concerning this issue (WCPFC, 2018) and at the 17th Commission meeting in 2020, the members agreed to work intersessionally on a conservation and management measure (i.e., binding) on improving crew labor standards. However, the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organizations performance review panel highlighted the need to engage with this topic due to increasing global interest (Ridings et al., 2018).

Besides the issue of working conditions, forced labor and at worst slavery is another serious issue in the fishing industry

(Tickler et al., 2018). This issue is addressed by SDG 8.7 and 8.8 which aim to eradicate forced labor, protect labor rights and promote safe and secure working environments (**Supplementary Appendix 2**). While the issue of labor conditions received some attention in RFMOs, the issue of forced labor and slavery has not yet been addressed.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM – LINKING THE SDGs TO ACTION

To fully achieve the aspirations of SDG 14 it is important to address social concerns such as labor issues. RFMOs are the main organizations handling fisheries matters in areas beyond national jurisdiction, thus, we argue that these organizations need to acknowledge and address this issue. RFMOs need to follow the example of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and adopt a resolution or binding conservation and management measures concerning labor standards. As a result, there is a need for greater collaboration between RFMOs and the International Labor Organization, to assure that members are enforcing labor standards on their fishing fleets and to encourage members to ratify the ILO Convention No. 188. Even though it can be argued that these matters are outside the traditional mandates of RFMOs, RFMOs are the only organizations that directly address the fishing industry and, therefore, are a key platform from which to discuss labor issues.

It is important that RFMOs establish binding standards and guidelines, as national laws are severely limited in application to international waters. One important aspect is the collection of data. The increasing application of monitoring control and surveillance systems provides an opportunity to collect these data but also to ensure compliance with existing resolutions and measures. Moreover, there is a strong push for member states to enforce the UNFSA and the FAO Port State Measures Agreement. These latter instruments would provide another layer of monitoring and surveillance of working conditions.

The Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (Port State Measures Agreement) was adopted by FAO members in November 2009. The Agreement entered into force in 2016. A key element is “the threat of the denial of the use of ports and their services is a key enforcement thread that runs throughout the 2009 Port State Measures Agreement” (Witbooi, 2014, p:300).

Port state control is a key tool in the regulation of merchant shipping and is a key tool in addressing ship safety, environmental performance (i.e., control of ship-sourced pollution) and seafarer safety and welfare. Port state measures have been relatively slow to be applied to fisheries, even though there is no doubt that a coastal “state can assert maximum enforcement jurisdiction over their internal waters” (Telesetsky, 2015: 1244). Witbooi comments that “although RFMOs, on the whole, have agreed on adequate strict port state measures, they are frequently at fault for failing to ensure that their members implement these measures consistently and effectively” (Witbooi, 2014, p:302).

Under UNFSA a port state has the right and duty to take certain measures, including to “inspect documents, fishing gear and catch on board vessels when such vessels are voluntarily in its ports” (UNFSA, Article 23, see Serdy, 2016, p: 427). A port state may adopt regulations “prohibiting landings and transshipments where it has been established that the catch has been taken in a manner that undermines the effectiveness of subregional, regional or global conservation and management measures on the high seas” (UNFSA, Article 23, see Serdy, 2016, p: 427).

A further issue relates to at-sea transshipment of fish, which indirectly also impacts labor conditions. For example, the members of the WCPFC proposed a transshipment ban on the high seas. While this proposal may be driven by economic interests gained by port access fees, transshipment is also linked with illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. Furthermore, banning high seas transshipment could reduce human trafficking, forced labor and bad labor conditions due to greater control over the respective vessels (Ewell et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that addressing IUU fishing only marginally addresses the issue of labor abuse, as it is more an add-on than a primary factor affecting working conditions (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016).

Important drivers for better working conditions are the attitudes of market states. For example, in 2015 the European Union issued Thailand with a “yellow card,” which affected Thailand’s ability to export fish products to the EU. In 2019, the EU lifted the “yellow card,” as Thailand had successfully addressed shortcoming in its fisheries management approach. The EU highlighted work done on human rights abuse and forced labor in the fisheries sector as part of these reforms (European Commission [EC], 2019). Generally, non-state actors such as industries play an important role in addressing the issue of labors and work conditions, and there has been an increasing call for the inclusion of social conditions in fisheries certification schemes and assessments (Fleming et al., 2020). For example, the members of the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation (ISSF) have adopted a conservation measure that requires seafood companies to have policies for social and labor standards in place, throughout the whole supply chain (ISSF, 2020) (**Box 1**). Another example is the International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF) also committed to social sustainability, addressing areas such as decent working conditions and gender equity (IPNLF, 2021). While these are only two examples, it shows that the industry is starting to tackle this issue seriously. The fishing industry also influences decisions in RFMOs and might be an important driver to emphasize the importance to address labor issues on RFMO level. The development of third-party assessment and certification in fisheries open further areas of activity. This includes a continuum of processes and approaches from producer-based self-certified and labeled place-, or product-based label, through to rigorous third party independent certification, using processes external to, and separate from, the producer (Potts and Haward, 2007). Third-party non-state actors have long been active in debates over sustainable resource exploitation. One of the most known certification standards in the fisheries sector is the Marine Stewardship Council.

BOX 1 | ISSF.

The ISSF is a non-governmental organization aiming to undertake and facilitate science-based initiatives to ensure long-term sustainable use of tuna resources and minimizing environmental impact. Participating companies are all members of the International Seafood Sustainability Association, which have to comply with the ISSF conservation measures. Members include for example Tri Marine, Bumble Bee, or Thai Union. To achieve its mission the ISSF engages with RFMOs, for example.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), established in 1996, is an example of an approach to governance that steps outside state-based governance and address market and consumers directly through product certificates and ecolabels (Potts and Haward, 2007). The heart of the MSC process is the certification of “sustainable fisheries” under its standard defined by Principles and Criteria, and linking this certification to a logo that influences consumer behavior and provides price signals (Potts, 2006; Lee, 2009). This certification process is independent of the MSC; it does not directly perform certifications but remains a standard-setter that accredits qualified certification organizations and trains them in the methodology to be applied. Control over the certification process, that is auditing certifiers and the application of standards, are the core functions of the MSC. MSC currently accredits organizations, termed Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) for MSC certifications. The CABs are also subject to monitoring by a further independent body, the Accreditation Services International (ASI), providing further checks and balances in the process.

Of the three principles that underpin the MSC process, Principle 3 is the most relevant in this case. Principle 3 states:

The fishery is subject to an effective management system that respects local, national and international laws and standards and incorporates institutional and operational frameworks that require the use of the resource to be responsible and sustainable (MSC, 2018).

Principle 3 requires vessel operators not only to comply with local, national, and international law but also with regulations enforced by RFMOs. Companies which are flagged under a country which has ratified the ILO Convention No. 188 have to follow labor standards. This emphasizes the role of RFMOs in considering and promoting labor standards. The MSC has often been criticized for the lack of social consideration (Ponte, 2012; Kourantidou and Kaiser, 2019). However, assessing social considerations requires expertise which might not be covered by the MSC. Partnerships with organizations, which are focused on social accountability, might provide a way forward in addressing issues related to appropriate labor standards and link such standards to sustainable seafood production.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we argue that ocean sustainability cannot be achieved without adequate attention being given to social issues such as safe and humane working conditions. It is a clear failing of current fisheries governance that more attention is placed on the assessment of the conditions pertaining to fish

being harvested than the assessment of the conditions of the people who are harvesting the fish. Therefore, we suggest a key way forward to address this failure is to actively explore the connection of SDG 14 and other SDGs, such as SDG 8, that deal, *inter alia*, with decent work conditions. There is an increasing interest and push toward increased working labor conditions on fishing vessels. It is important that RFMOs, which are responsible for international fisheries, act and implement resolutions or binding conservation and management measures. While members of these organizations might argue that labor standards and conditions are not within the RFMO's mandate, we argue that it is not only a social responsibility but also that there is an inherent reputational risk if RFMOs do not address this issue. Thus, RFMOs need, for example, establish greater collaboration with the International Labor Organizations and encourage its members to ratify the ILO Convention No. 188 on labor standards for fishing vessels. There is an increasing push

from market states and non-state actors to consider social issues in the fisheries sector. Thus, it is important to further explore the linkages between SDG 14 and other social-related goals.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MH and BH contributed equally to the concept development and writing the manuscript. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2021.632282/full#supplementary-material>

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