

Shedding New Light

The 2023 Illuminating Hidden Harvests Report is arguably the most concerted and comprehensive research effort so far to focus exclusively on small-scale fisheries but it is not enough

Jointly produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Duke University and WorldFish, the 2023 Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) Report throws light not just upon the harvest of fish, but upon the harvesters as well. It has contributions from 58 developing and developed countries across the world, with a special emphasis on Africa. The study was undertaken in support of the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines). It involved about 800 researchers and government officials—probably the most concerted effort, so far, focusing on the small-scale fisheries subsector. As noted in an article in this issue of SAMUDRA Report (page 35), the study, no doubt, is “the most comprehensive, systematic research effort to date to focus exclusively on small-scale fisheries.”

Based on the most common legal or operational definition of small-scale fisheries at the national level – ranging from foot fishers to semi-industrial fishing vessels – the report estimates that the small-scale fisheries subsector contributes 37 mn tonnes of aquatic foods, or nearly 40 per cent of the total global capture-fishery production, and generates employment for 60 mn part-time or full-time fishers, accounting for 90 per cent of capture-fisheries employment. Another 53 mn people are estimated to be engaged in subsistence fishing, and 379 mn additional household members are estimated to be depending partially on engagement in small-scale fisheries.

The catches of the subsector include those taken by gleaners, and active and passive gear groups operating gillnets, hook-and-line, longline, pole-and-line, trols, bottom trawls, purse seines, stake nets, etc. Women

comprise 40 per cent of those engaged in small-scale fisheries, mostly on the post-harvest side. Half of those in the post-harvest sector, and 45 per cent in subsistence fishing, for example are women. The report shows how the sub-sector could provide essential nutrition to nearly one billion women across the world.

The report provides an integrated understanding of small-scale fisheries and their importance in relation to economic, social, environmental and cultural objectives. It also helps in moves towards inclusive, equitable, sustainable and resilient small-scale fisheries. There is, however, a

need to go beyond a fuzzy and context-specific approach to defining small-scale fisheries. A universal circumscription would, for instance, allow for determining the contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security and poverty eradication.

To bring greater policy coherence to the harvest side, fishing associated with vessels below 12 m length overall—whether or not mechanized/motorized—may

be further illuminated under a spotlight, following the practice in many fishing nations to treat only vessels below 12 m as small-scale. Collecting and publishing disaggregated data in a timely manner of different craft-gear combinations under the <12 m matrix would help fisheries managers to monitor their respective catch shares over time, and to advise governments in maintaining a balance between active and passive gear groups in this category so that active small-scale bottom trawling or purse seining do not drive passive small-scale gill/drift nets out of existence. This will certainly safeguard the twin-objective of equity and sustainability in marine and inland fishing, and contribute to uphold the principle of inter-generational equity. 3

