

Small-scale fisheries: the exception should not be the rule

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In a recent meeting with LIFE, Commissioner Vella emphasised that the “tradition of exemptions for the small-scale fleet is not helpful”, and that a “one size fits all approach does not work”. This implies that small-scale fisheries need to fall more in line with the regulatory, data gathering, monitoring and control requirements of the CFP, and that this requires that special measures are designed for them.

The latest data from DG Mare shows the small-scale fleet comprises an exceptionally large segment of the fleet, but that its earnings are exceptionally, or disproportionately low.

Eighty-two per cent of fishing vessels that are active are small in scale – i.e. up to 12 metres in length using non-towed gears; but the value of their landed catches is only 14% of the total. So too, the average number of

employees per vessel and crew remuneration tends to be much lower than in the larger vessel fleet.

The issue of exceptions has at least two sides to it. On one side, the CFP has been designed to regulate the activities of larger scale fleets using mobile gears, which have a higher impact. On the other, it has been assumed that national authorities would take care of managing national small-scale fleets within their 12 mile zones. Both approaches have resulted in negative consequences for the small-scale fleet.

As a result of this blindness to small-scale fisheries, systems designed to allocate access to fish stocks; to organise fishers, fishing operations and the marketing of fish; to gather data, and to monitor and control fishing activities have not taken into account the specific requirements of the small-scale fleet.

All these exceptions mean that small-scale fisheries tend to be overlooked in management and decision taking processes, and with

their contributions to social, economic and environmental sustainability overlooked or underestimated, making them the ‘forgotten fleet’.

Rightly, DG Mare highlight that the number of stocks being fished at levels in line with Maximum Sustainable Yield is increasing. For 2016, the number of stocks in the North Atlantic (including the North Sea and Baltic Sea) managed in line with MSY is 36 compared to five in 2009.

Likewise, profitability of the European fishing fleet is showing an increasing trend, as shown by the latest data from the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF).

The exception to the good news is Europe’s small-scale fleet, which is showing declining trends. The Mediterranean Sea is also an exception to the rule of stock recovery with almost all stocks chronically overexploited, with low biomass and where it is estimated that average effort reductions of between 50% and 60% are necessary to

reach levels of fishing in line with MSY.

One of the crucial factors in the decline of small-scale fisheries is access to fishery resources. Most of the small-scale fleet are not members of the Producer Organisations to which the lion’s share of national quota allocations is made. This has a big impact on the earnings potential of the small-scale fleet, as increasingly it has to rely on access to non-quota stocks.

In other cases, some key resources on which small-scale fishers depend - for example the bass stocks in the North East Atlantic and the Western Baltic cod stocks - are in a critical state. For 2017, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has recommended a 93% cut in the TAC for the Western Baltic Cod stocks. Their calculation is based on the observation that recreational fishing catches will account for 75% of available stocks, leaving 25% as the TAC for commercial fishing.

In the case of the bass stocks north of the 48th parallel, ICES advises that

when the precautionary approach is applied, ‘there should be zero catch (commercial and recreational) in 2017’.

Both pieces of advice from ICES, if followed to the letter, will sound the death knell for the small-scale fishery enterprises that depend on these resources.

The new CFP, reformed in 2013, is full of unfulfilled promises for small-scale fisheries. It has many of the elements needed to bring small-scale fisheries from the periphery to the centre of fisheries management. It seems however that Member States lack the interest, political will or the capacity to apply them.

Article 17 could revolutionise the way access to fish stocks is allocated in ways that reward fishers who fish in the most sustainable way. Likewise, money is earmarked to support small-scale fishers to get organised, and to create space for them to participate in the Advisory Councils.

It’s high time to stop talking the talk, and to start walking the walk.

