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**8<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF OACPS MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR OCEANS,  
INLAND WATERS and FISHERIES**

**9 to 10 September 2024**

**Dar es Salaam, The United Republic of Tanzania**

**Agenda Item 3(v)**

**Improving Sustainable Fisheries Governance through Transparency and  
Stakeholder Collaboration: Experiences from Member States of the OACPS**

**POLICY BRIEF**

**Purpose**

1. This Policy Brief:
  - Emphasises the importance of transparency and stakeholder collaboration for the sustainable management of marine fisheries;
  - Highlights the continuous progress demonstrated by OACPS member States as well as the increasing support from donors, to strengthen fisheries transparency and collective action as core pillars of fisheries governance;
  - Provides practical recommendations for making fisheries management more transparent, inclusive and beneficial, to support OACPS member States national economies and livelihoods, citizens and fishing communities, and businesses that depend on a healthy marine environment.

**Strategic Alignment**

2. Transparency is an underpinning principle of good governance in fisheries and wider open government efforts. It is enshrined in several international legal and normative fisheries frameworks and agreements, such as the:
  - United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA), which requires States to ensure transparency in the decision-making processes and other activities relating to shared/migratory fish stocks.
  - FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, which requires States to adopt measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of fish stocks based on the best available scientific evidence, and to collect and share complete and accurate data and information about fishing activities.
  - FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests, and the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication,



which emphasize the importance of collating and sharing information with all stakeholders.

- United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs, a universal, ambitious blueprint for peoples, planet and prosperity, which embraces a standalone SDG for the Ocean (SDG 14 'Life below Water'), but also calls on all States to adopt legislation or policies guaranteeing the right to information (SDG 16.10).
3. Transparency and accountability in fisheries are also expected outcomes in regional policies of the OACPS, such as the:
    - Noumea Strategy (2015), in the Pacific.
    - Caribbean Community Common Fisheries Policy (2020), in the Caribbean;
    - Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture (2014), in Africa.
  4. Furthermore, the “importance of transparency in fisheries governance and sustainable fisheries management as a concrete benefit and contribution to building resilience and sustainability at local, national, and regional levels” was clearly recognised by the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of OACPS Ministers in Charge of Fisheries and Aquaculture, 5 – 8 April 2022 in Accra Ghana, calling:
    - for enhancing transparency in fisheries management as well as in all blue economy related activities as a crucial part of strengthening fisheries governance and securing long-term benefits, drawing from the lessons learned and successful experiences of member states through voluntary initiatives; and,
    - on development partners to support national and local actions to strengthen and facilitate enhanced transparency in fisheries governance through investments leading to tangible successful outcomes.
  5. This political momentum is also manifested in OACPS’ ‘Strategic Plan of Action for Fisheries and Aquaculture – 2030’<sup>1</sup>, which recognises transparency as a key enabler. For example in strategic priority area 1: Strengthening the enabling environment to realise sustainable, inclusive and better governed fisheries and aquaculture.
  6. Non-governmental stakeholders are calling for strengthening fisheries governance through transparency and stakeholder collaboration. For example, in a ‘*Call to Action from small-scale fisheries*’<sup>2</sup> in 2022, small-scale fishers from six continents call(ed) on their governments to, inter alia, be transparent and accountable in fisheries management by publishing relevant fisheries information to the minimum standards of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI).

### Key Messages

7. Good governance in marine fisheries – and its underpinning principles of transparency, stakeholder participation and accountability – is not only enshrined in international, regional and national legal and normative fisheries frameworks and policies. It is also increasingly demanded by stakeholders, including civil society organisations, small-scale fishers, investors and donors.

<sup>1</sup> OACPS (2022): [OACPS Strategic Plan of Action for Fisheries and Aquaculture – 2030](#), 38pp.

<sup>2</sup> [Call to Action – small-scale fishers](#) (2022)



8. Public availability of credible information is paramount to achieving sustainable fisheries. Without reliable information the capacity of national authorities to make decisions based on the best available data is diminished. So is the ability of non-governmental stakeholders to exercise effective oversight, demand accountability and engage in public dialogue.
9. Unlike other natural resource sectors (such as oil, gas and minerals), governments are only now starting to disclose basic information on their fisheries sector. Yet, recent years have shown inspiring progress by voluntary commitments from countries, and in particular OACPS member States. The governments of Cabo Verde, Madagascar, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe and Seychelles are already enhancing fisheries governance through transparency and stakeholder participation by implementing the Standard of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI), while the governments of Comoros, Ghana and Guinea have publicly committed to do so as well.<sup>3</sup>
10. Lessons learned from these OACPS member States – and others – demonstrate that enhancing transparency in marine fisheries management is most effective, cost-efficient and widely-accepted if it is based on several core aspects, most notably:
  - A commonly accepted transparency framework, following clearly defined requirements of what information should be published online by national authorities and holding all committed countries to the same global standard;
  - Stakeholder participation, involving actors from governments, industrial and small-scale fisheries, as well as civil society to ensure that the published information is perceived as trustworthy and understandable;
  - Progressive improvement, recognising that increasing transparency in fisheries management should be based on a gradual approach, wherein public authorities disclose the information they have and where important gaps are identified and improvements are made over time.
11. In addition to strengthen the governance of the sector, enhancing transparency and stakeholder collaboration in fisheries management is increasingly yielding tangible benefits for stakeholders. For example, enhanced political reputation, market-based incentives (such as an improved investment climate in the country's fisheries sector), as well as the shielding the sector against misinformation and unfair, adverse publicity.
12. Member States of the OACPS should consider enhancing transparency as a crucial part of strengthening fisheries governance and securing long-term, sustainable fisheries benefits through using a standardised, internationally recognised framework, such as the Standard of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI).

#### **Key Policy Actions / Recommendations:**

13. Senior Officials are invited to recommend to the 8th Meeting of OACPS Ministers responsible for Oceans, Inland Waters and Fisheries to:
  - i. **Recognise** the importance of transparency and multi-stakeholder collaboration for responsible fisheries management as a concrete benefit and contribution to

<sup>3</sup> In addition, the following non-OACPS member States also committed to enhance fisheries transparency by implementing the FiTI: Chile and Ecuador.



building resilience and sustainability of the fisheries sector at local, national and regional levels.

- ii. **Emphasise** and strengthen the multi-stakeholder approach and initiatives consistent with SDG 17.16 for improved fisheries governance through a collective partnership of governments, business, civil society, international partners, and financial and technical assistance providers.
- iii. **Recognise** Cabo Verde, Madagascar, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe and Seychelles for their exemplary leadership in increasing transparency and stakeholder collaboration in fisheries management, and **acknowledge** Comoros, Ghana and Guinea for their commitments towards enhancing transparency in fisheries management.
- iv. **Reiterate** our call on development partners to support national and local actions to strengthen and facilitate enhanced transparency in fisheries governance.
- v. **Welcome** the assistance by development partners, such as the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Embassy of Ireland in Tanzania, in supporting national efforts to enhance the accessibility, credibility and usability of national fisheries management information within and between OACPS member States.
- vi. **Call** upon relevant OACPS member States to enhance transparency of national fisheries management information, drawing from the lessons learned and successful experiences of other OACPS member states through voluntary initiatives, such as the internationally recognised framework of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI).

## BACKGROUND

### Context

14. Marine fisheries are a critical resource that fulfils the economic, and food security and nutrition needs of millions of peoples around the world and in the members and regions of the OACPS. For millennia those who dedicated themselves to fishing for family consumption, recreational interest or as a commercial activity had no cause to worry about the sustainable management of this natural resource. Fish stocks replenished themselves with ease. But this is no longer the case.

15. Alongside climate change and pollution, overfishing is one of the main threats to the health and well-being of the Ocean and its resources. Within overfishing, several factors are accelerating the decline of marine resources, such as harmful fisheries subsidies, the disregard of scientific advice on fishing limits, illegal activities (such as IUU fishing and corruption), and poor fisheries management. This often goes hand-in-hand with a lack of accountability, as well as concerns over the inequitable allocation of resources and sharing of benefits between stakeholders – including between small-scale and large-scale fisheries, and in some cases, local and foreign operators.



16. The FAO's latest report, *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022*<sup>4</sup> warns that almost 38 per cent of global fish stocks are already being fished at biologically unsustainable levels. At the same time, the report emphasises that "effective fisheries management leads to stock recovery, and urgent action is needed to replicate successful policies and reverse declining sustainability trends."
17. Fisheries management is an integrated system of: (i) collating scientific information, to understand the status of stocks, setting limits for catching and fishing efforts; (ii) compiling social and economic information, to understand how benefits are shared; as well as, (iii) conducting monitoring, controlling and surveillance activities, to ensure compliance with fisheries policies.
18. While each of these functions has its own peculiarities and characteristics, they all have one foundational aspect, and that is information transparency. Without the public availability of information, fisheries management systems cannot be effective.
19. Transparency is often mistaken as the sole process of putting facts and figures into the public domain, for example through government websites. Yet achieving sustainable fisheries is a complex challenge, which cannot be tackled by one actor alone (for example, government). Instead, a collaborative approach that draws on the knowledge and experiences of multiple actors is needed for creating an enabling environment for ensuring sustainable fisheries.

#### **State-of-Play**

20. Since the 1992 Earth Summit, it has been widely accepted that the equitable and sustainable management of natural resources depends on public access to information. However, For marine fisheries, the call for improved transparency has gained momentum much later. Unlike other natural resource sectors (such as oil, gas and mining), governments are only now starting to disclose basic information on their fisheries sector, such as vessel registries, permits, fishing agreements, stock assessments, financial contributions, catch data and subsidies.
21. A lack of transparency in fisheries management has been shown to:
  - Diminish the capacity of national authorities to make decisions based on the best available data;
  - Reduce the ability of non-governmental stakeholders to exercise effective oversight, demand accountability and engage in public dialogue;
  - Marginalise or undervalue certain fisheries groups or sub-sectors, in particular small-scale fishers and the importance of women in fisheries supply chains; and,
  - Limit the visibility and attention that is given to the entire fisheries sector in a country's national sustainable development agenda, amongst others.
22. Further, it has been shown that the lack of publicly available information does not necessarily stem from a lack of stakeholder demands or regulatory requirements. Many of the elements included in campaigns for transparency in the fisheries sector are already established in international agreements or policy papers on fisheries reforms, such as FAO's landmark Code of Conduct on Responsible Fisheries or its Voluntary

<sup>4</sup> FAO (2022) '*The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. Towards Blue Transformation*', Rome: FAO (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0461en>).



Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries. Likewise, Freedom of Information laws regularly demand that the public is able to access information held by governments (including on the country's fisheries sector) with only limited, explicitly defined exceptions arising from confidentiality claims and security matters.

23. Likewise, a lack of transparency in fisheries management is not always deliberate. What may be perceived as opacity or secretive practices is often the result of other factors, such as the complexity of the fisheries sector, a lack of technology, expertise and staff, or legal concerns. In addition, if no demand or interest is shown in a particular field of information, governments under pressure to balance competing issues may give priority to other areas. Of course, such arguments can also be a convenient excuse to avoid public scrutiny and restrict public access to data on how national authorities are managing common resources such as fish on behalf of its citizens.

### **Main Issues, Challenges and Opportunities**

24. Inspiring and notable progress has been achieved in fisheries transparency through voluntary commitments from countries, and in particular from OACPS member States. For example, the governments of Cabo Verde, Madagascar, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe and Seychelles are already implementing the transparency framework of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI) – a global voluntary multi-stakeholder partnership. They are increasingly making previously unpublished information publicly available for the very first time.
25. This includes fishing access agreements signed with foreign entities, data on the status of fish stocks, information on various types of fisheries subsidies and detailed information on vessels, fishing licences and catch data. At the same time, these countries are also acknowledging where data gaps still exist. For example, regarding discards or small-scale fisheries, and are gradually and intentionally addressing these gaps. Other countries, such as Comoros, Chile, Ecuador, Ghana and Guinea are following these leads, and they are expected to provide similar information to the public soon.
26. Improved transparency in fisheries management is allowing these fishing nations to demonstrate to commercial partners their capacity for sustainable fisheries management, as well as giving investors, suppliers and international partners higher confidence in their sourcing, trade and investment decisions of seafood. For example, a recent independent evaluation of the FiTI process in Mauritania showed an improved investment climate in the country's fisheries sector by reducing uncertainty and the perceived risk caused by a lack of information. Similarly, a recent report commissioned by the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management, showed tangible benefits for government transparency when fisheries seek eco-certification such as the Marine Stewardship Council.<sup>5</sup>
27. Providing accessible, credible and understandable information to stakeholders also prevents misinformation and fosters confidence and trust in the fisheries sector. This is urgently needed and is especially pertinent given the current state-of-play where clear warning signs of depleted fish stocks and struggling economies are becoming commonplace, and most importantly, peoples livelihoods and wellbeing are at stake.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.havochvatten.se/en/eu-and-international/international-cooperation/swam-ocean---improving-lives-through-sustainable-use-of-the-ocean/use-blue-growth-and-fisheries.html>





28. Furthermore, given managing fisheries is complex, stakeholders the World-over are fast realising that the most effective approach is based on inclusive, public participation.<sup>6</sup> But stakeholders cannot effectively and constructively participate without access to credible government information. At the same time, early transparency efforts have shown that an increase in public information does not directly lead to more (non-governmental) stakeholder involvement in public policy making. Seychelles and Madagascar have therefore started a pilot approach to increase the impact of transparency on sustainable marine fisheries by creating a more inclusive policy-making environment.

29. Increasing transparency in fisheries management does not need to be a burdensome or costly endeavour. It can and should be built and based on a progressive approach, wherein public authorities disclose the information they have and where important gaps are identified, improvements are demonstrated and continued over time – ultimately resulting in enduring and sustainable benefits for a country's peoples, economy and environment.

*This paper was prepared by the Secretariat of the OACPS in cooperation with the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FITI).*

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states in its 'Review of Fisheries' (2020) [Chapter 5 'Governing fisheries'] that "An inclusive process, which incorporates data and views from the full range of impacted stakeholders both within and outside government, is essential to ensure policies and policy changes are accepted and upheld by fisheries actors."