



POSITION
PAPER

2020

WWF MEDITERRANEAN MARINE INITIATIVE THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND FISHERIES

APRIL 2020

Context

The fishery sector in the Mediterranean, like most of the economic activities, has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

Along with an overall reduction in fishing activity, a number of new factors have started to reshape the landscape of fisheries in the Mediterranean at this time of crisis. These include the increased cost of seafood distribution, a reduction and – in certain cases – collapse in demand for and market availability of fresh seafood products, as well as the total closure of recreational fisheries in many countries.

While fishing effort is falling in general, the pressure on certain stocks, such as small pelagics for canning, has increased disproportionately due to higher demand for non-perishable seafood products as a response to market demand. Similarly, the importance of subsistence fishing and the pressure on respective target stocks has increased. There is also the genuine risk of an increase in illegal fishing, in a context where controls at sea might certainly not be a priority. A significant reduction in monitoring, control and surveillance can already be observed in several countries and fisheries.

Recommendations

The safety of all fisheries workers, men and women, along the supply chain, needs to be ensured as a first priority. This includes the guaranteed provision of personal protection equipment (PPE) and physical distancing measures where required, including in fishing operations and in the direct sale of fish, to secure fish supply in coastal communities and to wider supply chains.

Fisheries, like other economic activities, should benefit from public funds to safeguard employment levels and mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, state aid should compensate for **closures in fishing activities** as long as this is beneficial for both the economic dimension and the recovery of stocks. It is important that there is no dilution of the current measures for recovery of fish stocks to support the resilience of ecosystem services in this and future crises. This includes technical measures, gear selectivity, identification and implementation of closed areas, as well as spatio-temporal restrictions.

Where food security is not impaired, a moratorium on all fishing activities to catalyse the rebuilding of overfished stocks should be considered **with the support of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) or other financial tools**.

Reports of challenges in global and European trade, mostly linked to disrupted supply chains, proliferate. The crisis has highlighted the importance of the availability of local production to ensure seafood supply at a local level under the current conditions. Small-scale producers in particular face unprecedented economic challenges where market demand is heavily reduced and traditional supply chains impaired. This also underlines the importance of options for diversified supply chains, including more direct marketing which respects reporting requirements and can **increase the value of production at first sale for fishers**.

At this time of crisis there is a high risk of fishers being in a weaker position in negotiations with brokers and fishmongers, who could take advantage of the critical situation to purchase fish at lower prices and establish unsound economic relations. This dynamic could incite fishers to a “race to fishing” once the crisis is over, in an attempt to overcome this vicious circle.

Small-scale fishers, in particular, are in danger of being in a less powerful position when it comes to negotiating prices. It is fundamental, then, in alignment with SDG target 14b, to offer alternatives to fishers to compensate for unfair agreements, promoting and supporting new solutions to shorten the supply chain, escape the monopoly of fish traders and ensure a legal and diversified market, both during and after this emergency situation.

Although the temporal boundaries of the crisis are still not clear, now is the moment to re-think and plan for a resumption of fishing activities. In this unprecedented situation, the opportunity to **assess the impact** of such radical changes, including in the abundance and recovery of fish stocks, needs to be evaluated and acted upon.

The sustainability of fisheries needs to be the priority when fisheries activities begin again. The fishery sector will have a unique opportunity to take advantage of the positive effects of the reduced pressure on fish stocks in terms of increased Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE), increased size, volume, quality and value of the catch, lower costs and lower footprint of fishing operations. This is an opportunity to **replan fishing activities and fast-track the recovery of fish stocks**, delivering on regional policies for healthier marine ecosystems and a higher resilience for nature and people in the future.

The dialogue between EU and non-EU countries in the context of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) is more important now than ever before. Cooperation should be maintained and re-established where its importance has been temporarily put on hold. This is a time for teamwork and solidarity. It is crucial to **harmonize measures at a regional level** to avoid some parties profiting from the current crisis at the cost of others and the Mediterranean overall. It is also essential to avoid any potential increase in Illegal, Unregulated, Unreported (IUU) activities. The application of measures against IUU fisheries in the GFCM context, the enforcement of GFCM recommendations, national rules and regulations, as well as **reporting of infringements and non-compliance, must be strengthened and pursued with even more determination during these challenging times.**

Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) can be an excellent tool to be used as a future-proof method of control which respects social distancing for the benefit of fishers and inspectors.

At such a time of crisis, countries bearing the greatest responsibility through having the largest fleets and hence fishing effort need to lead by example and put forward measures in line with the above for the sake of a highly productive and resilient future for the Mediterranean.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.