



TRADE POLICY BRIEFS

FAO SUPPORT TO THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS AT THE 13TH MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE FOR FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE PRODUCTS

KEY MESSAGES

- Fisheries and aquaculture products are among the most widely traded food items worldwide. In 2022, trade volume reached 68 million tonnes, valued at USD 190 billion. Approximately 37 percent of total production was exported.
- Trade in fisheries and aquaculture products significantly contributes to economic growth in several developing countries, providing economic opportunities and a source of export earnings.
- In 2016, small-scale fisheries (SSF) accounted for more than 40 percent of worldwide capture fisheries landings in volume and 44 percent in value, with large shares being exported.

Authors: Audun Lem, Marcio Castro de Souza and William Griffin

Importance of fisheries and aquaculture

The fisheries and aquaculture industry has grown in recent decades, making aquatic products increasingly important to human livelihoods and subsistence, as well as to nutrition providing protein and macronutrients (FAO, 2022). Since the 1960s, the per capita consumption of edible fish has risen from 9.0 kg in 1961 to 20.2 kg in 2020. Such expansion was due primarily to increased production (especially from aquaculture) and trade, growth in global income, and technological improvements at the processing and value chain levels (FAO, 2021).

Fish proteins are important in the diets of many countries, and fish comprised 17 percent of animal protein and 7 percent of all protein consumed worldwide in 2017. Fish proteins are particularly crucial in small island development states (SIDS), like Kiribati and Maldives, and highly populated countries with low protein consumption, such as Bangladesh and Cambodia. In 2017, there were 29 countries where fish comprised at least 30 percent of animal protein intake, of which 17 were least-developed countries (LDCs), and 15 were low-income food-deficit countries (LIFDCs) (FAO, 2021).

Production and trade in fisheries and aquaculture products

Total production of aquatic products (fish, crustaceans, molluscs, and other aquatic animals) has expanded significantly over the last three decades, from 71.9 million tonnes (live weight equivalent) in 1990 to 185.5 million tonnes (projected) in 2023. Aquaculture, in particular, has grown from 20 million tonnes in 1990 to 91 million tonnes in 2021, producing more than half of all fish for human consumption (Table 1). This is mainly due to increased production in lower-income countries, particularly in Asia. In contrast, wild capture has been stable, with annual catches fluctuating between 86 and 96 million tonnes since the late 1980s (FAO, 2023).

Global exports of aquatic products have also grown significantly, from 21 million tonnes in 1990 to a projected 68 million tonnes in 2023 (approximately 37 percent of total production). In 2022, the trade of fisheries and aquaculture products represented approximately 1 percent of global trade at a value of USD 190 billion, becoming one of the most extensively traded commodities in the world (FAO, 2023).

In 2020, fish and crustaceans accounted for 90 percent of total fisheries and aquaculture trade values, with salmon, tuna, shrimps, and prawns exports accounting for 42 percent of total trade (USD 62 billion) (FAO, 2023). Salmon, formerly unknown outside its local markets, today leads fish's growth in international trade, as major salmon processing centres in producing and non-producing countries annually export approximately 3.6 million tonnes. Most tuna is fished in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and canned tuna is one of the most important traded items. Sushi and sashimi-grade tuna are increasingly popular outside Japan, especially in Asia. Asia also dominates shrimp production, but Latin American producers have become prominent. Prawns are another important seafood item, with increased supply and global demand. China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Ecuador lead in terms of production, while Ecuador is the largest exporter in terms of volume, followed by India, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand.

The significance of small-scale fisheries (SSF)

In March 2023, FAO, jointly with Duke University and WorldFish, released the study "*Illuminating Hidden Harvests: The Contributions of Small-Scale Fisheries to Sustainable Development (IHH)*" (FAO, Duke University and WorldFish, 2023). Covering 58 countries and territories, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of the production and trade of SSF, being the first study to tackle their contribution to aquatic food exports.

According to the study, in 2016, small-scale fisheries accounted for at least 40 percent of total capture fisheries landings in volume and 44 percent in value in the analysed territories. Extrapolating the data from the countries and territories assessed, between 2013 and 2017, SSF contributed USD 77.2 to the global average annual landing value, (USD 58.1 billion marine SSF and over USD 19 billion inland SSF).

Using data from case studies, the report determined that international trade, including informal trade, is very important for SSF in all regions of the globe. According to estimates for 22 countries, which account for 48 percent of the world's marine capture fisheries production, on average, nearly 26 percent of the marine SSF catch by volume was exported between 2013 and 2017. According to estimates for nine nations

representing 25 percent of the world's inland capture fisheries production, on average, slightly more than 16 percent of the inland SSF catch was exported between 2013 and 2017.

In 2016, estimates extrapolated from 78 national household-based surveys showed that SSF employed 60.2 million people across the value chain, namely 90 percent of the worldwide capture fisheries workforce. Moreover, employment in the sector represented 6.7 percent of total employment in crops, livestock, forestry, and fisheries and 1.9 percent of the global workforce. Concerning gender disaggregation, women comprised 35 percent of the SSF value chain workforce (20.9 million) and 49.8 percent of post-harvest workers. At least 491.7 million people - 6.6 percent of the global population and 13.2 percent of the 46 LDCs - depend on SSF for their livelihoods.

Table 1. World Fisheries and Aquaculture Production

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Aquatic animals						
<i>million tonnes (live weight)</i>						
Aquaculture	76.5	79.6	82.5	85.2	87.6	90.9
Capture fisheries	89.5	93.2	96.2	92.1	89.6	91.2
Total	166.1	172.8	178.7	177.3	177.2	182.1
<i>Share in total quantity (percentage)</i>						
Aquaculture	46.1	46.0	46.2	48.1	49.5	49.9
Capture fisheries	53.9	54.0	53.8	51.9	50.5	50.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aquatic animals and algae						
<i>million tonnes (live weight)</i>						
Aquaculture	108.2	112.2	115.9	119.8	122.7	126.0
Capture fisheries	90.6	94.4	97.2	93.2	90.7	92.3
Total	198.8	206.5	213.1	213.0	213.4	218.4
<i>Share in total quantity (percentage)</i>						
Aquaculture	54.4	54.3	54.4	56.3	57.5	57.7
Capture fisheries	45.6	45.7	45.6	43.7	42.5	42.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: FAO. 2023. Fishery and Aquaculture Statistics. Global production by production source 1950-2021 (FishstatJ). In: FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Division [online]. Rome. Updated 2023. [fao.org/fishery/en/topic/166235](https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7874t).

Note: Totals might not match due to rounding.

Actions to address key challenges:

- ▶ Considering the significance of international trade to fisheries and aquaculture products, it is necessary to diversify markets, including evaluating opportunities in neighbouring countries, to mitigate the adverse effects of eventual shocks and disruptions affecting trade.
- ▶ Increase awareness about the nutritional and macronutrient benefits of fisheries and aquaculture products as an affordable and easily accessible animal protein.
- ▶ Implement knowledge-sharing actions to facilitate the access of the small-scale fisheries sector (SSF) to international markets.

References

- FAO.** 2021. FAO Yearbook. Fishery and Aquaculture Statistics 2019/FAO annuaire. Statistiques des pêches et de l'aquaculture 2019/FAO anuario. Estadísticas de pesca y acuicultura 2019. Rome/Roma, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7874t>
- FAO.** 2022. The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. Towards Blue Transformation. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0461en>
- FAO.** 2023. Fishery and Aquaculture Statistics. Global production by production source 1950-2021 (FishstatJ). In: FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Division [online]. Rome. Updated 2023. [fao.org/fishery/en/topic/166235](https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7874t)
- FAO, Duke University & WorldFish.** 2023. Illuminating Hidden Harvests – The contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc4576en>

Required citation:

Lem, A., Castro de Souza, M. & Griffin, W. 2023. *The importance of international trade for fisheries and aquaculture products*. Trade policy briefs, No. 52. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9061en>



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) licence

Markets and Trade Division
www.fao.org/markets-and-trade

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, Italy