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2021 COFI DECLARATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE



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Endorsed at the Thirty-fourth Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI)
on 1 February 2021, in the context of the celebration of the
Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF)

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FOREWORD

As we explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and how to build back a better world for all, it is important to note that we are not on track to defeat hunger and malnutrition. The number of undernourished people has been steadily increasing since 2014 and urgent action is needed to support a shift that makes healthy diets affordable and accessible to all. The pandemic is not making this fight any easier, with significant additional impacts on food production systems and related livelihoods. We need to refocus our efforts if we are to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

At the SDGs Summit in September 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General called on all sectors of society to mobilize for a Decade of Action to accelerate the development of sustainable solutions for the world's biggest challenges. The fisheries and aquaculture sector has much to contribute to securing all the SDGs, not only SDG 14, as fish and fish products have an essential, growing, and yet largely unrecognized role in fighting hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been the leading policy document influencing fisheries and aquaculture sustainability principles across the world. However, since its endorsement 25 years ago, the fisheries and aquaculture sector has changed significantly with a constantly growing demand and consumption of aquatic food, and a shift of source from capture to culture: aquaculture production is now 200 percent larger, fish trade 300 percent larger, and per capita consumption almost 40 percent higher than in 1995. While these changes have come hand in hand with significant improvements in fisheries sustainability in some regions, implementing effective fisheries management systems remains a challenge in many regions, especially in the Global South. At the same time, aquaculture has become the fastest growing food production sector globally. As a result, fish consumption has grown at a rate twice

that of population growth, thus making a net contribution to our food and nutrition security.

The Declaration for Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) was developed to mark the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, with two specific objectives. First, to acknowledge the achievements of the fisheries and aquaculture sector since the endorsement of the Code, as recognizing success is crucial to understand the remaining challenges. Second, to gather collective momentum in identifying and tackling the challenges and opportunities ahead of us to secure the long-term sustainability of the sector. The Declaration acknowledges the need to take action to ensure that our aquatic food systems are resilient and meet growing demand for nutritious, safe and affordable food while maintaining sustainable ecosystems, economies and societies that leave no one behind.

The COFI Declaration is the result of an extensive consultative process led by the COFI Bureau and negotiated with all FAO Members from December 2019 to January 2021. It was endorsed at the Thirty-fourth Session of COFI on 1 February 2021.



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We, the Ministers and Plenipotentiaries representing Members, Member Organizations and Associated Members of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) at the Thirty-fourth Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in Rome in 2021, and celebrating the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF), adopted in Resolution 4/95 by the FAO Conference on 31 October 1995.

Recalling the goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to end poverty and hunger everywhere, and **noting** that the world is not on track to achieve Zero Hunger (FAO *et al.*, 2020), with close to 750 million people exposed to severe levels of food insecurity in 2019, while one in four children under five remain chronically malnourished.

Recognizing fisheries and aquaculture's role in supporting countries to achieve sustainable development, particularly in the fight against poverty, hunger, and malnutrition, bearing in mind the continuous positive growth of the sector, which in 2018 contributed 32 million tonnes of aquatic plants, as well as 156 million tonnes of fish¹ for direct human consumption, which is a 7-fold increase from 1950, and provides 3.3 billion people with almost 20 percent of their average per capita intake of animal protein (FAO, 2020).

Noting also the Agenda's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, and the critical role sustainably managed fisheries have in achieving biological diversity outcomes, in line with sustainable and inclusive ocean economies.

Recognizing further that women are critical to all SDGs, in particular as agents in achieving food security and improved nutrition in poor and vulnerable households, and the fisheries and aquaculture sector's potential for growth in opportunities for women.

¹ The term "Fish" in this declaration includes all aquatic food production groups, including molluscs, crustaceans and other aquatic animals, but excludes aquatic mammals, reptiles, seaweeds and other aquatic plants.

Acknowledging the important role and contribution of artisanal and small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in poverty eradication and in providing livelihoods, as well as ensuring food security and nutritional needs of local communities.

Noting with concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to aggravate poverty, hunger and malnutrition, including an unprecedented impact on the fisheries and aquaculture sector.

Recognizing that 65.4 percent of fish stocks are fished within biologically sustainable levels, that where fisheries are effectively managed stocks are above target levels or rebuilding, while where fisheries management is less effective, stock status and trends are worse.

Noting with concern that fisheries management improvements have not been sufficient to reverse the global declining trend of overfished stocks, as 34.2 percent of all marine fish stocks monitored by FAO are currently fished beyond biological sustainable limits, a threefold increase since monitoring started in 1974 (FAO, 2020).

Recognizing that challenges in implementing effective fisheries management measures are complex, region-specific and multidimensional, and are often due to insufficient data to support science-based decisions, as well as limited institutional and human capacity, highlighting the need for a concerted effort in waters within and beyond national jurisdiction that does not only encompass conservation measures but also capacity-building and support, particularly for small island developing states and least developed countries.

Recognizing further that sustainable fisheries management requires integrating fisheries into broader planning and ocean governance frameworks, within the context of the ecosystem and precautionary approaches, and strengthening the political will and capacity to improve the implementation of existing policy frameworks.

Recognizing that aquaculture has been the fastest growing food production industry over the last five decades, is responsible for the doubling of global per capita fish consumption since 1960, and is making increasing contributions to the provision of food and livelihoods for a growing population, **recognizing further** the need to ensure that the sector promotes sustainable feed sources, and develops in a sustainable manner, including by improving aquatic health and biosecurity, reducing the burden of disease and encouraging the responsible and prudent use of antimicrobials.

Noting that the significant challenges posed to the fisheries and aquaculture sectors by changing climate and ocean conditions, in particular where warming water temperatures, deoxygenation, and acidification in aquatic environments are already impacting the distribution and abundance of fish stocks in many regions, there is an urgent need to address these through innovative, inclusive, effective and adaptive fisheries management measures, and by ensuring healthy and productive ecosystems, including through the use, based on the best available scientific information, of effective time and area-based management tools, providing for conservation and sustainable use of fish stocks, including, where appropriate, in accordance with international law and national legislation, protected areas.

Further noting that, if well managed, our response to these challenges can also generate opportunities, including that the fisheries and aquaculture sector can contribute to the reduction of emissions, through the employment of energy-efficient practices.

Acknowledging that urgent targeted action is needed to ensure aquatic foods² and products continue to provide inclusive, effective and sustainable pathways to reduce poverty, secure livelihoods and underpin food security and nutrition, as vital to achieving the goals set in Agenda 2030.

Noting that the purpose of 1995 CCRF was to establish principles for responsible fishing and fisheries activities, including aquaculture development, with a view to ensuring the responsible conservation, management and development of living aquatic resources.

² Aquatic foods include finfish, crustaceans, molluscs and aquatic plants such as seaweed.

We

1. **Reiterate** our commitment to the objectives of the CCRF, and to the effective implementation of relevant binding and non-binding fisheries and aquaculture international tools and instruments elaborated since the CCRF was adopted, as appropriate.
2. **Acknowledge** that in order to scale up recent fisheries sustainability successes we need to implement and improve fisheries assessment and management systems in all regions, particularly in those where fish stock status is declining or unknown, including through coordinated capacity building programmes that address the needs and priorities of developing countries, with particular attention to data-poor regions and towards reducing the digital divide.
3. **Recognize** that we need to strengthen the scientific basis in support of fisheries and aquaculture management decisions, including through the use of new technology, such as electronic monitoring and reporting, and the promotion of international scientific cooperation, especially transdisciplinary research, capacity-building, education and training, and ensuring that the best available scientific, sector-based advice is duly considered in the decision-making process, taking into account the 2021–2030 United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.
4. **Reiterate** the importance of the ecosystem approach as an effective framework for integrating conservation and sustainable utilization objectives, and promote the application of management measures across all aquatic systems, consistent with the complexity and uniqueness of each resource and habitat, and to reduce the impact of marine litter, abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear, reduce discards and by-catch issues and eliminate harmful fishing practices.
5. **Recognize** the potential of aquaculture for further growth, particularly through innovative practices which support environmental stewardship, as well as the benefits of new and ongoing inclusive

sustainable aquaculture development programmes, and the need for investments to support capacity building, research and extension services, with a particular attention to regions where population growth will challenge food systems most.

6. **Reiterate** the importance of international cooperative governance mechanisms to help improve sustainable fisheries and aquaculture and protect the ocean environment, including supporting efforts to implement international instruments, where applicable, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and its 1995 United Nations Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the UNCLOS of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks (Fish Stocks Agreement) and the FAO Agreement on Port State Measures and complementary instruments to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, including by supporting their associated funds, in order to reduce overfishing and IUU fishing.
7. **Remain committed to strengthening**, where applicable, the conservation and management regimes of Regional Fisheries Advisory Bodies and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations, and improve their performance to enhance fisheries governance and better preserve and restore marine ecosystems and biodiversity, while more effectively contributing to food security; sustainable food systems; the fight against IUU fishing; as well as sustainable growth and jobs.
8. **Encourage** the consumption of fish, aquatic plants and their products derived from sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, caught in accordance with applicable conservation and management measures, recognizing they are among the healthiest foods on the planet, and especially the consumption of underutilized resources, while acknowledging that warming water temperatures, deoxygenation, and acidification in aquatic environments is expected to rapidly change the productivity and current distribution of target and non-target fish species in the ocean, seas and inland waters.

9. **Promote** policies that support and recognize the contribution of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in food security, employment and income, **improve** data collection systems, especially from small scale and artisanal fisheries, and **further support** the access of small-scale fishers and fish farmers to local, national, and international markets, ensuring equitable and non-discriminatory trade for small-scale fisheries and aquaculture products, including through the implementation of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication.
10. **Ensure** that fish are fully considered in national, regional and global food security and nutrition strategies, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of food systems to eliminate hunger and address the triple burden of malnutrition, and reducing diet-related diseases.
11. **Encourage** the reduction of pre- and post-harvest loss and waste in the sector, including discards, by implementing internationally agreed standards through appropriate actions, including awareness building, education and training, according to national context, capacities and priorities, in particular, safety and quality standards, to improve fish processing, distribution and consumption, thereby also increasing the value of fish products in support of sustainable and inclusive ocean economies.
12. **Recognize** the importance of rule based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable trade of fisheries and aquaculture products, through cooperation in relevant regional and multilateral fora, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing and by ensuring that trade and technical measures are transparent, based on scientific advice, non-discriminatory, consistent with internationally agreed rules and standards, and do not result in non-tariff barriers or undermine conservation measures.
13. **Promote** the attainment of safe, healthy and fair working conditions for all in the sector, support efforts to prevent and halt forced labour,

facilitate access to social protection programmes for fishers and aquaculture producers and their communities, support measures to improve safety at sea, and work towards enhancing the standards of living for all in the sector, in cooperation with other relevant international organizations, including the International Labour Organization and the International Maritime Organization.

14. **Ensure** women's empowerment by enhancing women's full access to and equal opportunities in the fisheries and aquaculture sector through gender-based policies, taking effective action against discrimination and abuse in the workplace, facilitating women's access to education and training, technology, credit, entrepreneurship opportunities, natural resources, and providing equal opportunities at all levels, including for leadership and decision making, and by combating systemic gender inequalities that disadvantage women.
15. **Support** the implementation of integrated and coordinated multi-sectoral, evidence and ecosystem based management approaches, as well as temporal and spatial planning, noting that our efforts would be implemented in the context of growing external pressures in marine and inland aquatic systems, such as pollution in all its forms, unregulated practices, natural disasters, climate change, biodiversity loss, increased competition for the use of marine and coastal areas and other demands over freshwater and land access.

We conclude that the above supports an evolving and positive vision for fisheries and aquaculture in the twenty-first century, where the sector is fully recognized for its contribution to fighting poverty, hunger and malnutrition, its ability to prepare for and respond to changing climate and ocean conditions, and its commitment to sustainability.

We recommend that the further development of this new vision, as appropriate, be placed under the stewardship of COFI, as the main global forum for discussions and decisions on fisheries and aquaculture-related issues, to further strengthen participatory and science-based solutions.

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