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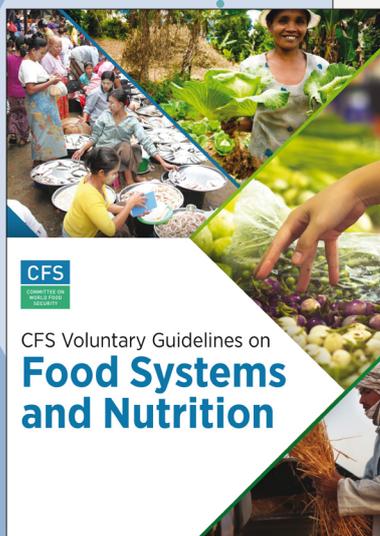
Linkages between the  
**Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries**  
in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication  
and the  
**CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition**

## Making a difference in food security and nutrition, together

Despite being enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 1, the complete eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition is still far from becoming a reality, with millions of people all over the world struggling to enjoy healthy diets (FAO, 2020). Fish and other aquatic foods are major contributors to the healthy diets of billions of people, within sustainable food systems (FAO, 2018; UN Nutrition 2021), providing a unique source of fatty acids, essential micronutrients such as vitamin A and D, iron and calcium (among others).

- These products are often also the most
- affordable sources of animal protein.
- However, small-scale fishers, fishworkers
- and their communities still face constraints
- in effectively participating in decision-
- making processes that shape their lives,
- therefore remaining marginalized, and their
- contribution to food security and nutrition
- remains under-recognized. The following two
- international instruments can help small-
- scale fisheries actors
- overcome these
- challenges.

## CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSN)



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Voluntary Guidelines for Securing  
Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries  
In the Context of Food Security  
and Poverty Eradication

- Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines)

Both:

- are built on existing human rights obligations under international law;
- aim for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food;
- are non-binding instruments;
- are global in scope;
- focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups;
- are to be implemented following a human rights-based approach;
- support efforts to strengthen governance and accountability mechanisms and foster inclusive decision-making processes; and
- are tools to guide dialogue, policy processes and actions at all levels, from local communities to global fora.

### VGFSN

- Endorsed at the Forty-Seventh Session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in February 2021 to support the progressive realization of the right to food.
- Result of a multi-stakeholder participatory process in different regions and informed by the CFS High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE).
- First international instrument centred on addressing malnutrition in all its forms and promoting healthy diets through the achievement of sustainable food systems.
- Intended to provide guidance on the implementation of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition to increase the visibility, coordination and effectiveness of nutrition actions, with an emphasis on small-scale producers.
- Based on human rights-based guiding principles: human dignity, non-discrimination, participation, accountability, transparency, empowerment and rule of law.
- Present a systemic, multi-sectoral evidence-based approach that considers food systems in their totality and looks at the multi-dimensional causes of malnutrition in all its forms.
- Promote policy coherence and reduce policy fragmentation between relevant sectors.
- Recognize the role of fisheries in sustainable food systems and in the realization of the right to adequate food, especially for the most vulnerable groups.
- Highlight the importance of providing capacity building and ensuring effective participation towards the sustainable governance of food systems.

### SSF Guidelines

- Endorsed at the Thirty-First Session of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Committee on Fisheries in June 2014.
- Result of a bottom-up participatory process that directly involved more than 4 000 participants from more than 120 countries.
- First international instrument entirely dedicated to a subsector, that of small-scale fisheries.
- Intended to support the visibility, recognition, and enhancement of the role of small-scale fisheries in global and national efforts towards the eradication of hunger and poverty.
- Based on international human rights standards and guided by 13 human rights-based principles which include human rights and dignity; non-discrimination; consultation and participation; accountability; gender equality and equity; and rule of law.
- Consider the small-scale fisheries sector as a whole, including pre-harvesting, harvesting and post-harvesting activities.
- Promote policy coherence, cross-sectoral collaboration, and institutional linkages at the local, national, regional and global levels.
- Recognize the contribution of small-scale fisheries to the eradication of hunger and global food security and nutrition.
- Highlight the value of empowering small-scale fishing communities, to allow them to participate in relevant decision-making processes.



## Small-scale fisheries and sustainable aquatic food systems: a path towards the enjoyment of the right to adequate food

Sustainable healthy diets are those dietary patterns that are adequate in quantity and quality, accessible, affordable, safe, equitable and culturally appropriate and have a low environmental pressure (UN Nutrition, 2021). Although the composition of a healthy diet may vary from one individual to another and due to the context in which the individual is located, healthy diets across the world share the commonalities of being safe, diverse, balanced, based on nutritious foods, and containing the necessary nutrients that allow for optimal growth and development; supporting physical, mental, and social wellbeing; and serving as protection against any kind of malnutrition.

According to the VGFSN, “food systems are complex and multidimensional webs of activities, resources and actors involving the production, processing, handling, preparation, storage, distribution, marketing, access, purchase, consumption, and loss and waste of food, and the outputs of these activities, including social, economic and environmental outcomes” (paragraph 21).

According to the HLPE, another characteristic of food systems and each of their components is that they “do not exist in isolation but interact with one another and with other systems (such as health, energy, and transportation)” (HLPE, 2017). In addition, the concept of food system is underpinned by the right to adequate food. What makes a food system sustainable is its ability to “enable food safety, food security and nutrition for current and future generations in accordance with the three dimensions of sustainable development” (VGFSN, paragraph 21). In this context, the VGFSN

- recognize the fundamental role that sustainable food systems play in promoting healthy diets and improving nutrition through sustainable production, sustainable management and use of natural resources, and improved socio-economic conditions and livelihoods – all of which are underpinned by the SSF Guidelines.

- Despite the importance of small-scale fisheries in stewarding sustainable aquatic food systems and providing livelihoods, income, food security and nutrition, small-scale fisheries actors face marginalization and lack of participation and representation in relevant decision-making processes, which limits their crucial contribution. This represents a challenge for healthy aquatic food systems, as active, free, effective and meaningful participation is an essential component of their governance. Both the SSF Guidelines and the VGFSN emphasize the importance of facilitating participation in order to ensure sustainable governance by including participation as one of their guiding principles.

- Sustainable governance of aquatic food systems also requires coherent policies and programmes that balance domestic fish consumption for food security and nutrition at the national level, on one hand, with other development efforts, such as the promotion of international fish trade, on the other. At the same time, such coherent policies and programmes need to be informed by research on the essential role played by small-scale fisheries in sustainable aquatic food systems and the nutritional benefits of consuming fish and aquatic foods harvested by small-scale fisheries.



# Promoting the complementary implementation of the VGFSN and the SSF Guidelines

The following areas provide major opportunities for a synergistic implementation of the two instruments

## Access to healthy diets

It is estimated that close to 1.3 billion people suffer from food insecurity, be it because they cannot access sufficient food or because the food they have access to is not of sufficient nutritional value (FAO, 2019). Fish and aquatic foods play a crucial role as providers of essential fatty acids, micronutrients and high-quality animal proteins that are critical to healthy growth and development, especially in key developmental periods such as the first 1 000 days<sup>1</sup> and throughout adolescence (UN Nutrition, 2021). In addition, promoting the consumption of fish can also contribute greatly to improving small-scale fisheries' livelihoods. Because of this, "States and other parties should promote the consumption of fish and aquatic foods within consumer education programmes" (SSF Guidelines, paragraph 11.11).

Although often directed to local and national markets, aquatic food products, including from small-scale fisheries, are increasingly reaching international markets (FAO, 2005), with some fisheries relying heavily on catches to be marketed through

- international trade. Despite the positive impact on
- livelihoods that international trade may have, high
- dependence on international markets may also lead
- to local communities being partially deprived of access
- to nutritious fish and aquatic foods. States should
- carefully assess the impacts of international fish trade
- to avoid potential adverse effects on the nutritional
- needs of those for whom fish is critical to a nutritious
- diet, health and well-being (SSF Guidelines, paragraph
- 7.7), while promoting inclusive participation of fishers
- and fishworkers (VGFSN, paragraph 3.1.1.c and SSF
- Guidelines, paragraph 7.6)

- Although coastal communities often benefit from the
- nutritional value of fish and aquatic foods, people in
- rural and inland areas may face challenges in accessing
- them. States and other relevant stakeholders should
- facilitate the affordability of and access to healthy
- diets that include fish and aquatic foods, especially
- for vulnerable groups, through appropriate social
- protection programmes such as cash transfers and
- school feeding programmes (VGFSN, paragraph 3.3.2.c).

## EXAMPLE

### Increasing fish consumption during the first 1 000 days of life in Malawi and Zambia

Chronic malnutrition in children under five years old is a frequent threat in many countries. For instance, levels of malnutrition and food insecurity in Malawi and Zambia are well above the global average, with stunting rates reaching over 35 percent in both countries (World Bank, 2019). In this regard, WorldFish, McGill University and Bioversity International, with the collaboration of the Governments of Malawi and Zambia governments, implemented the project entitled "Strengthening Capacity of Local Actors in Nutrition-sensitive Agri-food Value Chains in Zambia and Malawi", a component of which focused on improving nutrition among infants through increasing the availability, accessibility and consumption of fish-based products during the first 1 000 days of life. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying products that were suitable to local diets, recipes and feeding practices. One of the findings of the project was that, together with awareness-raising and promotion of consumption of fish-based products, improving small-scale infrastructure was required, as production of these products within the household results in subpar quality and increased workload, showing that nutrition interventions require holistic approaches that include other aspects such as improvements of the relevant value chains (Ahern et al., 2020).



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<sup>1</sup> For further information, see also the brief on the linkages between the SSF Guidelines and the Right to Food Guidelines: <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1135en/cb1135en.pdf>.



## Participatory governance in small-scale fisheries

Despite their enormous contribution to food security and nutrition worldwide, small-scale fishers, fishworkers and their communities have long suffered from insufficient representation in decision-making processes relevant to their lives and livelihoods. When they are not present or properly represented in such processes, their needs and concerns remain unheard and therefore often unaddressed. By rendering them an active part of these processes, the underlying issues behind food insecurity and potential areas of improvement may be identified more easily.

Ensuring participation in decision-making processes may be ineffective if small-scale fishers, fishworkers and their communities are not provided with the necessary capacity building to participate effectively and meaningfully. States and other relevant stakeholders can play a role in providing small-scale fishers, fishworkers and their communities with tools to fully and effectively participate in the formulation of policies and strategies relevant to them and their access to and enjoyment of sustainable food systems (VGFSN, paragraph 3.1.4.b). It is to be noted that, even when

- small-scale fishers, fishworkers and their communities
- are included in decision-making processes and are
- provided with the required capacity building, vulnerable
- groups such as indigenous peoples, women, youth and
- migrants may remain at risk of being excluded. In this
- regard, specific attention should be paid to the need
- to work towards the equitable participation of these
- groups in decision-making processes relevant to the
- food systems in which they participate. Inclusive and
- transparent accountability mechanisms that promote
- good governance, management of conflicts of interest
- and safeguards against power imbalances should also
- be put in place (VGFSN, paragraph 3.1.4.a and SSF
- Guidelines, paragraph 12.1).
- Within the governance of small-scale fisheries and its
- influence on the access to sustainable food systems,
- local governance structures are of vital importance,
- as they may contribute to a management of small-
- scale fisheries that is more effective and inclusive
- of representatives from the grassroots level (SSF
- Guidelines, paragraph 10.7).

### EXAMPLE

#### Participatory development of National Plans of Action to implement the SSF Guidelines

FAO has a long history of working in small-scale fisheries governance, and more specifically, in ensuring that such governance is characterized by a high level of participation. As part of these efforts, FAO developed a toolkit for the preparation of a National Plan of Action in Support of the Implementation of the SSF Guidelines (NPOA-SSF), to facilitate the creation of context-specific National Plans of Action that contribute to the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the small-scale fisheries sector. The NPOA-SSF Toolkit was designed in a way that facilitates the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders relevant to the small-scale fisheries sector (from government representatives and CSOs to the small-scale fishers and fishworkers themselves) from the first stages up until the end of the process, so that the needs of small-scale fishers, fishworkers and their communities are properly assessed and addressed. Among the many benefits resulting from the creation and implementation of a participatory NPOA-SSF is the development of more sustainable food systems through which the contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security and nutrition can be enhanced.



## Improving collection and analysis of appropriate and disaggregated data

Responsible and effective governance of small-scale fisheries is conditional on the availability of timely and appropriate data. Although many countries have established monitoring systems for fisheries data, many of these systems do not fully account for the smallest fisheries, thus creating an information gap that hinders the understanding of the role of small-scale fisheries as employment, income and food providers. Likewise, food composition databases often lack data on the nutritional value of many fish and aquatic foods that are harvested by small-scale fisheries and are crucial for the food security and nutrition of many, especially among coastal communities. Information gaps in both areas lead to the marginalization of small-scale fisheries from policy-making processes, thus limiting the possibility of participatory governance, which in turn reinforces a lack of investment in data collection.

Improving data collection, assessment and monitoring systems allows for more informed decision-making

- processes which take into account the needs and concerns of small-scale fishers, fishworkers and their communities. In addition, developing and improving such systems may facilitate a better understanding of the potential nutritional deficiencies of small-scale fishing communities, as well as identify possible ways to counteract them (e.g. establishment of nutrition-sensitive social protection schemes).
- It is the responsibility of the state to establish data collection systems that gather, harmonize and disaggregate social, economic and nutritional data to inform decision-making processes (VGFSN, paragraph 3.1.3.b), with special attention to producing data relevant to vulnerable groups from the small-scale fisheries sector, such as women and indigenous peoples (SSF Guidelines, paragraph 11.1).

### EXAMPLE

#### The Illuminating Hidden Harvests study – innovative methodologies for assessing small-scale fisheries

In 2012, FAO participated in the development of Hidden Harvest: the Global Contribution of Capture Fisheries, a multi-partner research project that contributed to the understanding of the true social, economic and environmental impacts of capture fisheries around the world. Although it threw light on areas suffering from major lacks of data, such as subsistence fisheries and the role of women in the sector, continued efforts in terms of data collection and analysis were needed to ultimately support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the sector. With this in mind and to contribute to alleviating the data gap that still characterizes the small-scale fisheries sector and hinders its governance, FAO, in collaboration with WorldFish and Duke University, is currently working on an updated study named Illuminating Hidden Harvests, which delves deeper than its predecessor into the contribution of small-scale fisheries. The data gathered from the project will inform global, regional and national policy-making processes that affect the lives and livelihoods of those involved in small-scale fisheries (FAO, 2020).



# ACTION POINTS

## For governments

- Work towards the implementation of the SSF Guidelines and the VGFSN to promote a more sustainable small-scale fisheries sector and the proliferation of sustainable food systems that small-scale fisheries actors can enjoy.
- Recognize and promote the role of local governance structures within the management of small-scale fisheries and sustainable food systems.
- Invest in the development of capacities required for small-scale fisheries actors to effectively participate in the sustainable management of small-scale fisheries and food systems.
- Invest in the development and/or improvement of data systems to gather small-scale fisheries and food systems-relevant data.
- Develop social protection programmes that facilitate the access of small-scale fishing communities to healthy diets.
- Promote the consumption of products from responsible small-scale fisheries through food system and nutrition interventions, such as food based dietary guidelines or public procurement programmes.

## For the private sector, donors and investment institutions

- Promote responsible investments that support small-scale fisheries in the adoption of sustainable practices and in the production of fish and aquatic foods that contribute to the healthy diets of both coastal and inland populations.
- Invest in the development of capacities required for small-scale fisheries actors to effectively participate in the sustainable management of small-scale fisheries and food systems.
- Invest in the development and/or improvement of data systems to gather small-scale fisheries and food systems-relevant data.

## For small-scale fisheries actors and their supporters (non-governmental organizations and others)

- Conduct and participate in trainings on the SSF Guidelines and the VGFSN with small-scale fisheries actors, to promote their empowerment and participation in decision-making processes.
- Promote the creation of small-scale fisheries networks that support the contribution of small-scale fisheries to sustainable food systems.

## For all

- Spread the word, inform, share experiences and generate consensus and public support on the importance of the SSF Guidelines and the VGFSN.
- Try to consume fish and aquatic foods that come from responsible small-scale fisheries.
- Raise awareness at relevant events, such as the:
  - 2021 UN Food Systems Summit
  - 2021 Nutrition for Growth Summit
  - 2022 International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture
  - UN Decade on Family Farming 2019–2028
  - UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–2025
  - Annual sessions of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

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## LEARN MORE

The SSF Guidelines: [www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries](http://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries)

The VGFSN: [www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs2021/Documents/CFS\\_VGs\\_Food\\_Systems\\_and\\_Nutrition\\_Strategy\\_EN.pdf?45](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs2021/Documents/CFS_VGs_Food_Systems_and_Nutrition_Strategy_EN.pdf?45)

Food security and nutrition in small-scale fisheries: <http://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/guidelines/nutrition/en/>

Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture for food security and nutrition. A report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE): [www.fao.org/3/a-i3844e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3844e.pdf)

CFS Policy Recommendations on Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture for Food Security and Nutrition: [www.fao.org/3/av032e/av032e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/av032e/av032e.pdf)

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS): [www.fao.org/cfs](http://www.fao.org/cfs)

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