

Less money, more problems – trying to get fisheries right

January 29 2018, by Robert Blasiak And Colette Wabnitz



Villagers enjoying the evening fishing in Kavieng, Papua New Guinea. Credit: Colette Wabnitz

Sustainable marine fisheries seem to tick all the boxes. They can [fill your belly](#), [fill your wallet](#), and do it all for a [fraction of the carbon emissions](#) generated by conventional agriculture. They are the last major source of wild food that we can forage.

But even unsustainable fisheries will do all these things —albeit for a

limited amount of time. Once depleted, the timelines and pathways to [restoring overfished stocks](#) are unclear and the subject of much debate.

That's because achieving [sustainable fisheries](#) is easier said than done. Even in the absence of any fishing pressure, [fish populations fluctuate](#) and their distribution shifts based on natural variations in environmental parameters. Add in a mix of subsistence and commercial fishing, climate change, impacts of agricultural runoff and a host of other factors, and it seems miraculous that we can point to any success stories.

Agreement in the international community

The international community has long been aware of the challenges and the benefits of achieving sustainable marine fisheries. Multiple [international declarations and commitments](#) have focused on them.

In 2015, for instance, the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) were adopted as a set of aspirational targets for the global community. Goal No. 14 is dedicated to "[Life Below Water](#)" and includes targets such as:

"By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics."

This is a tall order for the next two years. It will require good science, good policy and a lot of cooperation.

But international targets like the Sustainable Development Goals raise a deeper question: Are donor countries following through on their promises and allocating money in line with their commitments?

Official development assistance

One way to understand the priorities of donor countries is to look at patterns in the allocation of [official development assistance](#) (ODA), which is intended to foster progress, security and well-being among [recipient countries](#). Each year data is collected on the types of ODA being allocated and received.

We recently used ODA data to try to [answer a few questions](#), including: Are ODA allocations for marine fisheries aligned with stated international targets and goals? Are the parts of the world with the most vulnerable fisheries being prioritized?

In short: No and no.

Although ODA across all sectors increased from 2010 to 2016 by nearly 20 per cent, ODA grants for marine fisheries decreased by 23 per cent. Funding for fisheries research fell by 83 per cent, and funding to countries in Oceania ([where many of the world's most vulnerable countries are located](#)) fell by 53 per cent.



Bagged, freshly caught fish are seen at a local fish market in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, early in the morning. Credit: Colette Wabnitz

But it's not that simple either. More money does not necessarily translate into better outcomes. It would be counterproductive, for instance, to allocate grants aimed at developing fishing fleets in areas that are already overfished.

Making the most of financial resources

In other cases, ODA has been a catalyst for change.

In Tonga and Vanuatu for example, aid has facilitated the installation of solar powered freezers in a number of remote villages with limited energy supplies. This helps communities save money and reduce their reliance on fossil fuels.

For some coastal communities, the ability to store and transport fish without spoilage has also facilitated the sale of their catch to inland groups from whom they in turn buy fruits and vegetables.

There are in fact many ways in which ODA has the potential to support a brighter future for oceans and fisheries. Targeted capacity-building initiatives are an important example.

Such efforts include the provision of stipends for fisheries staff to study abroad or prolonged placements among regional institutions.

On-the-ground opportunities can range from providing training in clam-spawning procedures to coral reef health-monitoring methods and market-based fish collection protocols, where fisheries officers are asked to identify species, weigh catches and conduct interviews with fishers to collect important data.

Increasingly, ODA is also being used to support the development of management plans for marine resources, to assist with their implementation and to strengthen effective governance mechanisms for sustainability.

Next steps

Researchers [recently showed](#) that achieving Sustainable Development Goal No. 14 on Life Below Water would have positive impacts across all of the other 16 goals. Other research has highlighted that sustainable fisheries are [crucial for human health](#), for [economic wellbeing](#) and for

[ensuring the health of ocean ecosystems.](#)

The post-2015 [development](#) agenda aims to [bring together sustainability and development proposals](#) under a single umbrella. Considering the importance of sustainable marine fisheries for culture, provision of livelihoods and good nutrition, the decrease in funding is all the more surprising.

However, recent developments show promise. Plans are afoot to help countries secure funding to support community-based fisheries management and better prepare for the impacts of climate change, for example.

The international commitments are clear, and research has shown where action is most needed. So it is time to ensure that ODA allocations are helping us to get fisheries "right."

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