Millions of people are missing out on their fair share of the $424 billion aquatic food industry
18 October 2022

Social, economic and political barriers are preventing millions of people from benefitting from the world's fastest-growing food-producing sector, a new study has revealed.

Marine and freshwater foods, or blue foods, are a vital source of income and micronutrients, sustaining livelihoods for up to 800 million people worldwide. However, a new study of 195 countries has revealed that despite generating more than $424 billion globally, the benefits of the aquatic foods sector are distributed unequally, and even directly contribute to ongoing injustices.

The authors of the study, published in Nature Food, call for urgent action to ensure the most marginalized people, communities, and countries, have more equal opportunities to benefit from aquatic foods in terms of trade, income, and nutrition.

"Current ongoing crises—from conflicts to pandemics—have only exacerbated global inequalities, and blue food systems are more vulnerable than ever," said Professor Christina Hicks from Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University and lead author on the paper.

"However, with fairer and more just access and rights, blue foods also present the opportunity to level the playing field, allowing more people to participate in and benefit from this rich and diverse sector."

Produced as one of six scientific papers for the Blue Food Assessment (BFA), the research, entitled "Rights and representation support justice across aquatic food systems," found the aquatic food sector supports both welfare-based benefits, in the form of jobs and affordable nutrition, as well as wealth-based benefits, in the form of revenues generated through increased production, trade, and consumption.

However, social, economic, and political barriers mean that countries most in need of welfare-based benefits tend to be excluded from the wealth generating benefits, limiting their potential for growth.

The international team of authors, which included experts from the natural, social and health sciences, further highlighted a tension between the two, in which the pursuit of wealth benefits risks undermining the vital gains to human welfare from aquatic foods—including supporting jobs and nutrition. For example, in some countries export-led economic growth could undermine the jobs supported by, and nutritional quality of, current fisheries and other aquatic food systems.
Across many countries, social, economic and political barriers were found to prevent these benefits from being distributed to people more equally. For example, lower income countries produced and consumed fewer aquatic foods, despite employing more people. The study also found that policies often fail to account for gender-related constraints despite evidence that greater equality for women supported more affordable food, and in production, could reduce the number of food insecure people by 17 percent.

"While 45 million of those directly involved in the aquatic food industry are women, with a majority of these engaged in post-harvest processing and sale, policies nonetheless often fail to account for gender-related constraints, with implications for incomes and household consumption," said Professor Nitya Rao, Director, Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development, University of East Anglia and co-author of the paper.

The new research suggested that policies based on principles of justice and human rights, with inclusive decision-making processes that accounted for drivers of injustice, could support more just outcomes for aquatic food systems.

"Global seafood and other aquatic food systems generate huge economic revenues and blue foods contain large quantities of micronutrients that are absolutely essential to the health and well-being of millions. However, our study shows that the system as it stands is not fairly distributing the benefits of these resources and identifies the multiple barriers that need to be overcome," added Professor Hicks.

"This is a crucial step in ensuring an equitable balance between welfare and wealth benefits and across nations, which is critical to ensuring blue foods can address undernutrition and poverty for millions of people across the globe."

The study calls for appropriate policies to be adopted to ensure the benefits from producing, consuming and trading aquatic foods can be accessible to all.
