

# The Big Picture

**Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals can be guided by the kind of innovative, holistic thinking found in the SSF Guidelines**

**A**round the world, fishing communities and fisher organizations are at the forefront of conserving the ocean and inland waters. There are countless cases of fishing people, and their communities, taking action to ensure fish for the future, and to keep their communities healthy. Sometimes those actions involve some local sacrifice—such as choosing to stop fishing in certain locations where fish spawn or juveniles grow up, or taking the time to clean up a local environment. Sometimes the actions involve protest against those from outside who would damage that environment. And sometimes the action is one of lobbying government for more supportive policies, to sustain local ecosystems and communities.

The motivation behind these conservation efforts often combines the crucial goal of safeguarding local livelihoods with a love of the place, the home and the community, where people live. It is clear that there can be big results coming from small communities; there can be power in people coming together. That needs to be more widely acknowledged by decisionmakers nationally and globally. Fishing communities and organizations are making, and can continue to make, a difference in sustaining local ecosystems and local economies.

I find the efforts of fishing communities and fisher organizations absolutely inspiring. As a researcher, studying and supporting such initiatives has become a big part of my own work. I mention this to give an idea of the perspective I am taking here in discussing Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14), which is described in its briefest form

as being about “Life Below Water” and more fully as “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources”.

First, let us focus on the iconic graphic developed by the United Nations and widely used to depict the set of 17 SDG. Each SDG is summed up in just a couple of words, which is understandable given the need to be succinct. For example, the first two SDG are listed as “No poverty” and “End hunger”, certainly strong aspirational goals. In fact, most of the SDG are similarly expressed—for example, “Quality education” and “Gender equality”. But the wording for three SDGs (9, 14 and 15) do not

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depict a clear goal; what are we aspiring to with SDG 14’s “Life Below Water”? The more substantial “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources” is a considerable improvement, but even this has something missing. Who is to benefit from the “conserving” and who is able to make a living from “sustainable use” of the oceans? Is it one large fishing corporation, or millions of small-scale fishers in coastal communities around the world? So neither expression of SDG 14 gets at the core question: What are the human values here?

Fortunately, SDG 14 is not silent on values and issues of equity. The goals are accompanied by targets,

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and here, two particular targets stand out. Target 14.7 states: “By 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism.” Target 14.b is to “provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets”. The latter is, importantly, accompanied by a measurable indicator (14.b.1: <http://www.oceanactionhub.org/sdg-14-targets->

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Not only do humans rather obviously benefit from healthy ecosystems, at the same time human well-being and sustainable livelihoods create the conditions for effective conservation actions.

That leads to the reality that the 17 SDGs must not be taken one at a time. They are all linked together. There is a risk that some, whether engaged in fisheries and other ocean uses, or in the marine conservation field, may focus excessively on just SDG 14, and not on the essential linkages among the SDGs. Can we really achieve healthy oceans if the world is lacking food security and food sovereignty (SDG 2), decent work (SDG 8) or strong institutions (SDG 16)? Can we be doing the right thing with oceans if we ignore poverty (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5) or climate action (SDG 13)? Of course not. There are strong two-way connections between these SDGs and the conservation and sustainable use of fishery and ocean resources. Happily, the wonderful SSF Guidelines recognize these connections clearly, with a groundbreaking integration of fisheries with matters that go beyond the fishery per se—in the surrounding community, social, economic and governance systems. Indeed, I suggest that implementation of SDG14 should be closely informed by the content of the SSF Guidelines—not only for small-scale fisheries, but indeed in terms of the future of fisheries and of oceans more broadly.

context-and-indicators) to monitor “progress by countries in the degree of application of a legal/regulatory/policy/institutional framework which recognizes and protects access rights for small-scale fisheries”. So these aspects of SDG 14 are certainly aiming in a direction to combine both ocean well-being and human well-being, something well worth emphasizing for SDG 14 overall.

Indeed, I had the privilege recently of serving as a moderator of an online discussion within the “Ocean Action Hub” hosted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the Governments of Sweden and Fiji, leading up to the UN Ocean Conference in June 2017. The online forum, co-moderated with FAO, UNEP, UNDP and university partners, was on the theme “Ensuring Sustainable Marine and Coastal Ecosystems”. Interestingly, while that theme may have seemed to have a more ecological than a people focus, in fact the interventions in the forum were largely about issues of human well-being and of governance. That reflects the reality, so commonly expressed in the practical actions of fishing communities and fisher organizations, that ecosystem well-being and human well-being are inextricably linked.

That truth—of interactions among the SDGs—is reflected in recent statements by several governments, in preparation for the UN Oceans Conference. That is certainly the case with my own country, Canada—a nation that not long ago developed the dubious distinction of almost thwarting international acceptance of the SSF Guidelines. That record was under the previous national government, which was also well known for cuts to ocean science and management, cancelling the national census, a lack of interest in our indigenous peoples, and opposition to action on climate change. We have now emerged from that ‘dark decade’

and things look relatively good in comparison—although there is still room for improvement.

An important aspect of the good news from Canada lies in the words of politicians, who express support for inclusivity as a society (with accompanying support for immigration and refugees), support for gender equality, and support for forging partnerships within the country and around the world. Many in Canada see these as reflecting core national values. There are concerns, however, when it comes to concrete actions, and the funding needed to make them happen. For example, despite the positive words on partnerships globally, there has been little growth in international development aid.

Here I will focus on the Canadian government's thinking on fisheries and oceans, as portrayed in statements made at the Preparatory Meeting for the Ocean Conference, held in February 2017 at the UN.

**Statement 1:** "...we endorse the proposed substantive dialogue on increasing the economic benefits to Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries, and addressing the issue of access for small-scale fishers."

*Comment:* It is a positive thing to see a national government recognizing "the issue of access for small-scale fishers". On Canada's Atlantic coast, small-boat fishers are struggling to have the government properly enforce its own rules designed to ensure long-term access for the small-scale fishery, by avoiding concentration of control in the fishery, something that has already happened on the country's Pacific coast. If the Canadian government could lead by example, in ensuring "access for small-scale fishers", that would be a very positive practical development.

**Statement 2:** "Sustainable fisheries management will be critical in achieving the goals of eradicating poverty and ensuring food security".

*Comment:* This, I would say, is a true statement. Equally true would be the recognition that eradicating

poverty and ensuring food security are critical to achieving sustainable fisheries management.

**Statement 3:** "The declaration should urge States and organizations to make tangible investments in scientific research, scientific co-operation and knowledge sharing to underpin efforts toward multiple targets."

*Comment:* The good news is that Canada's government restored the funding cuts that plagued its fishery science labs over the previous decade, and encouraged scientists to report publicly on their studies. The bad news is that Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans still lacks research staff able to address the human side of fisheries and other ocean uses.

**Statement 4:** "To achieve the targets under Goal 14, indigenous peoples as well as local knowledge will need to be meaningfully included in planning, decisionmaking, and implementation. This is true of all the targets, and, in particular, target 14.b regarding small-scale artisanal fishing. The Call to Action should reflect this need to consult with and engage local and indigenous people in implementing Goal 14."

*Comment:* This is an important statement. It needs to be put in place fully both within Canada and internationally. On the west coast

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A fishing community on Canada's Atlantic coast, where small-boat fishers are struggling to have the government properly enforce its own rules

of Canada, indigenous and local knowledge, combined with scientific studies, underlie the efforts of the Nuu-chah-nulth indigenous people to develop and implement their own fishery-management measures. Unfortunately, the government has continued to pursue a court case against the Nuu-chah-nulth, seeking to thwart the indigenous Nation’s efforts to self-manage fishery resources.

**Statement 5:** “All work toward achieving the SDGs also requires an understanding of the active role that women play in sustainable

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from stakeholders that will be needed for implementation. Internationally, more expert work is needed on the question of what ‘other measures’ means.”

*Comment:* This looks like a somewhat technical statement, but, in fact, underlying it is the important reality, noted earlier in this article, that many local fishing communities and fishery organizations around the world have demonstrated the capability to set aside ocean areas that have good conservation results. These may be done for religious or cultural reasons, or explicitly to protect spawning or juvenile fish. In any case, while not top-down governmental protected areas, they are nevertheless ‘effective area-based conservation measures’. I cannot be certain whether Canada appreciates this interpretation of the words, but there is potential here to empower fishers and fishing communities to determine for themselves when and where area-based conservation should take place in the vicinity of their communities.

In sum, I see the SDGs as a pivotal accomplishment for the planet. Yes, words are cheap, but if implementation of the SDGs can be guided by the kind of innovative, holistic thinking found in the SSF Guidelines, if the good words of governments, such as that of Canada, can be put into practice both at home and abroad, if the synergies between the goals can be embraced, then we can go far. That is the inspiring challenge! **3**

development, poverty alleviation and peace building. Addressing these issues effectively requires gender-sensitive interventions, reporting and data requirements, and indicators. Women make up about half of the fishers and fishworkers in small-scale and artisanal fisheries worldwide. Women have an important role to play in the governance and conservation work of protected area management. The Call to Action needs to emphasize that engaging and including women in implementing Goal 14 will be crucial to achieving the suite of targets.”

*Comment:* This is an excellent statement. The Canadian government could usefully note whether it is taking measures itself to engage and include women in implementing SDG 14.

**Statement 6:** “To achieve the goal of conserving and protecting 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas by 2020, we must be flexible in our approach, such as using other effective area-based conservation measures. Recognizing the contribution of other effective area-based conservation measures allows the use of the most appropriate tool in each context to maximize marine biodiversity conservation and foster the buy-in

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