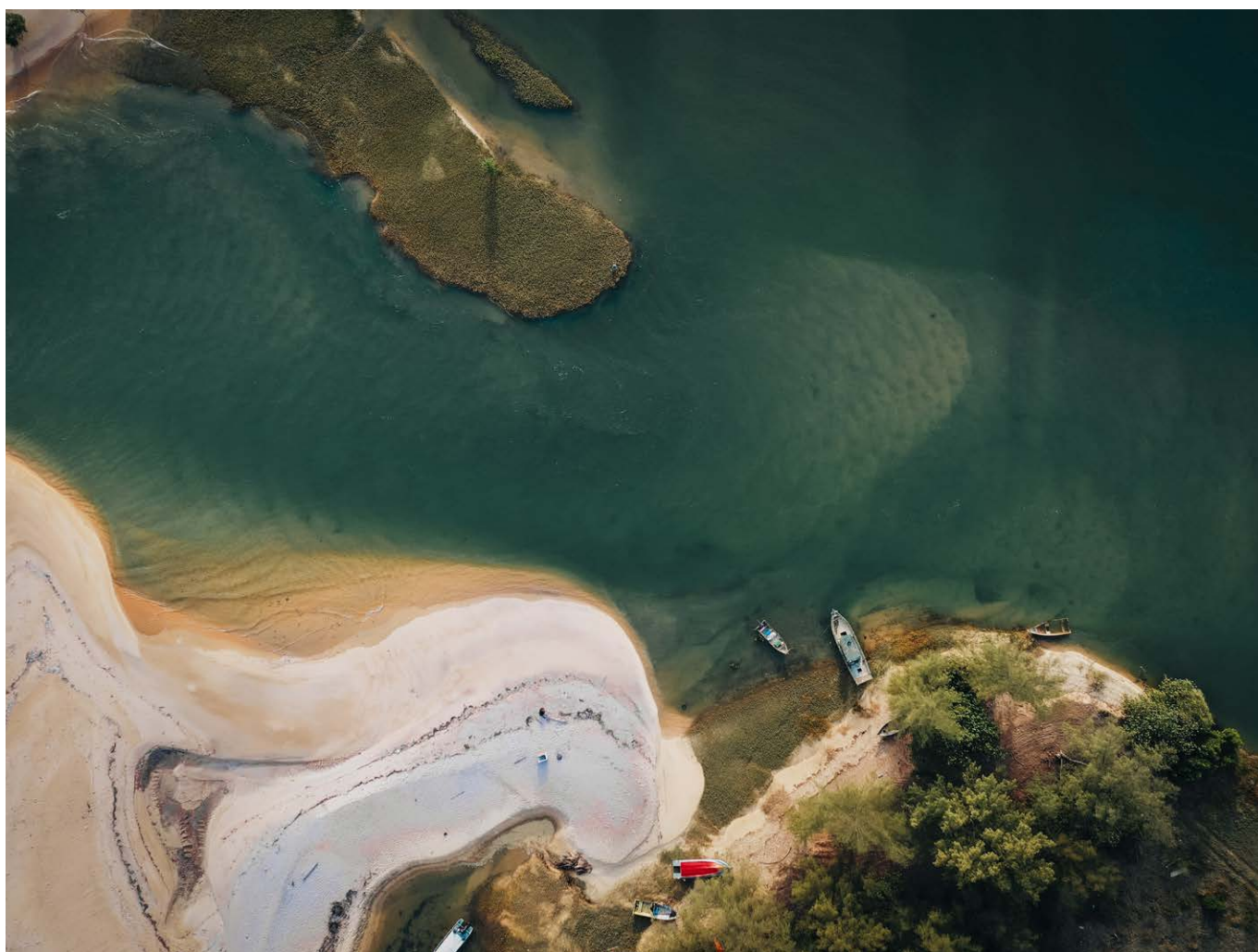


# The value of small-scale fisheries: about so much more than poverty and protein

*Seafood is widely consumed worldwide, and many of us know that the seafood we consume is more likely than not extracted by large commercial fisheries. Unfortunately, this means that we often fail to recognise the critical contribution made by other, smaller fisheries to regional food security and coastal societies. This year, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) are highlighting the importance of small-scale artisanal fisheries and aquaculture for food systems, livelihoods, culture and the environment. These fisheries are also important for several of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in developing countries where 97% of such fishers live alongside domestic or foreign commercial sectors.*



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**Small-scale fishers make their living on the ocean or the banks of rivers and estuaries, like this one, seen from high above.**

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) contribute about half of the global fish catches (about 32 million tonnes). Around 492 million people depend, or partially depend, on engagement in SSF, where 60 million people are directly employed, 53 million are engaged in subsistence fishing, and 379 million household members rely on these

fisheries. In addition, 4 out of 10 small-scale fishers are women.

The challenges that fishers and processors face in the SSF sector, including those who fish for subsistence, are well described – high levels of poverty, impacts of climate



Mike Brufon

### Traditional fisherman in his outrigger dugout canoe (galawa) off Grand Comoro.

change and other anthropogenic ecological stressors, and the fact that as a group, they are often overlooked in decision-making processes (not only concerning resource management but also in terms of broader social and economic development). Small-scale fisheries governance is often regarded as a wicked problem to be solved. This framing means that we often overlook the immense value small-scale and artisanal fisheries hold for society, ignoring the vital role they have in sustainable development beyond securing food security at the small scale.

### Not 'just' protein – but well-being, and heritage

One of the benefits of SSF beyond food security is demonstrated by the value that fish hold for women's health and, therefore, the next generation. The "Illuminating the Hidden Harvest" report makes a clear case for the importance of fish protein to the nutritional security of women, and as a consequence, for the nutritional security of unborn or breastfeeding children (critical given the importance of the first 1 000 days of life to children's long-term development). The report's findings state that SSF landing could provide 987 million women with 50% of the recommended nutrient intake of omega-3 fatty acids, and 477 million women with over 20% of the recommended nutrient intake of calcium, selenium and zinc. This directly relates to SDGs 2 (Zero Hunger) and 3 (Good Health and Well-being).

Notably, the intrinsic value of SSFs are often obscured by the focus on statistics, which tend to render the sector in terms of its contribution to nutritional security (percentages of protein it supplies) or employment. However, the value of fisheries to well-being cannot be framed by such indicators alone. There is no clear way

to measure the value of a livelihood regarded as one's heritage or the pride felt in teaching your children to do as your grandfather taught you.

There is an oft-repeated adage that "fishing is in your blood". What does it mean if someone who subscribes to that can no longer fish? Is decent work (SDG 8) sufficient as a goal for this sector? In a country like South Africa, facing an official unemployment rate of 34.5%, the alternative livelihoods debate needs to consider such intrinsic values for the definition of "decent" – and urgently so.

In South Africa, the SSF sector, comprising approximately 28 000 fishers, shares the inshore space with a robust and well-funded recreational fishing sector that often targets the same species. The Policy for Small Scale Fisheries (#474 of 2012) explicitly recognises the role SSFs play in poverty alleviation, job creation, livelihoods, and food security. However, these fisheries' more intrinsic social-cultural importance is poorly understood and often not accounted for or widely recognised.

The South African small-scale fisheries sector is often mistreated (in terms of access, capital and governance) and maligned (as this sector is often considered the source of illegal fishers). There is also an assumption that small-scale fisheries and aquaculture are only marine – despite the long history of fishing native and introduced freshwater species. Our understanding of the critical contribution that SSF can make to development in South Africa is limited by the narrow focus of many of our discussions around the contribution SSF makes (and can make), specifically in South Africa.





Roger Bills

**Bark canoe on the Musapa River, Mozambique.**

### Complexity, engagement and hidden value

Given the wicked problem of fisheries worldwide and the particular problems of the South African context, what are the critical points for achievable research objectives in this sector? First, there is a need to move away from the binary framing of challenges, instead recognising the complexity of these systems. The traditional conservation vs social justice or economy vs conservation discourses are typical examples that lead us down a debate of “fish or people?”, “ecology or jobs?”. It is the same politically expedient argument that allows for critics of the mining sector to be silenced as anti-development.



Ben van der Waal

**Communal fishing using thrust baskets and spears in the floodplain of the Kavango River, Namibia.**

In shifting away from binary framings, we should consider a research agenda focusing on how to meaningfully improve multi-scalar governance in our fishery systems by creating communal spaces where multiple stakeholders are continuously engaged to improve decision-making. We must also seriously consider how we will create the necessary space for the heritage and identity values of fisheries to be preserved without locking our fishers into a static identity of “historical”. How do we value their input into local food value chains and economies without dismissing them when these inputs decrease over time? Given the current lack of alternative livelihoods and the difficulties associated with developing the small-scale coastal economy, agendas that seek to centre these communities as people foremost and producers second must be designed and realised.

SSF already adds immense value to humans beyond their role in food security. Considering and promoting the intrinsic values these fisheries hold can make a meaningful contribution to local and regional sustainability, which is becoming increasingly critical.

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