A Framework for Socially Responsible Seafood

Background

According to the United Nations, global fisheries employ more than 200 million people. Revelations regarding human rights abuses in the seafood industry — ranging from abrogation of wages to slavery — have brought social issues to the forefront of the sector. Businesses, governments and organizations are mobilizing to address these issues, making an aligned, global approach for social responsibility imperative. While the scientific community has spent decades determining key elements for environmental sustainability in fisheries and aquaculture, research considering social sustainability is now required.

To address these voids, Stanford researchers collaborated with 20 organizations to develop a comprehensive framework for social responsibility in the seafood sector. The framework, provided in a recently published paper, covers: (i) protecting human rights, dignity and respecting access to resources; (ii) ensuring equality and equitable opportunities to benefit; and (iii) improving food and livelihood security. The authors also outline key opportunities for the science community to support the integration of social responsibility into policy and practice.

THE FRAMEWORK: PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS, DIGNITY, AND RESPECTING ACCESS TO RESOURCES

In the seafood industry, violations of human rights (e.g. such as slavery, poor working conditions, restrictions on freedoms, abrogation of wages) are prevalent in developing and developed economies.

- To protect human rights, labor rights must be protected and adequate working conditions and safety standards must be provided.
- More attention should be given to ensure tenure and access rights to resources, including respect of traditional and customary rights.
- Social, economic and cultural rights are especially relevant in small-scale and customary fisheries, but typically lack regulatory institutions to protect fishers’ interests.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

In 2016, the Center for Ocean Solutions has convened a community of scholars, funders, practitioners and fish workers to begin co-designing and co-producing an applied research project on socially just governance of small-scale fisheries. The Stanford researchers involved in this study include: Larry Crowder (Professor, Hopkins Marine Station), Elena Finkbeiner (Early Career Fellow, Center for Ocean Solutions), Elodie LeCornu (Research Analyst, Center for Ocean Solutions), Julia Mason (PhD student, Hopkins Marine Station), & Fiorenza Micheli (Co-Director, Center for Ocean Solutions).
THE FRAMEWORK: EQUALITY AND EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES TO BENEFIT

Marginalized groups are often discounted in terms of their role, knowledge or influence in fisheries, and the high prevalence of migrant labor in the industry can create conditions ripe for discrimination.

- To ensure seafood is equitably produced, benefits derived from its production should accrue to all participants regardless of financial or political power.
- Workers should receive appropriate recognition, voice and engagement, no matter their gender, ethnicity, nationality, culture or socioeconomic status.
- Failure to recognize issues of equity and social justice in the seafood industry can result in misguided policies, which often lead to significant consequences for small-scale producers, indigenous peoples, migrants or women.

THE FRAMEWORK: IMPROVING FOOD AND LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

Certain practices in the seafood industry place vulnerable populations at risk, and run counter to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Extraction by foreign fleets, in coastal fisheries in Africa, for example, can reduce the fish available for local communities, impacting their nutritional and income security.

- Improving food and livelihood security requires that ocean-dependent communities do not suffer from global seafood trade.
- Businesses and governments should seek to improve livelihood conditions where they operate, and should consider food security where seafood is a critical component of local communities’ diets.
- Businesses and governments should provide fair access to markets and preserve capabilities for workers to maintain income generation in the face of social and environmental change.
FIGURE 1. Three essential components of socially responsible seafood, derived from relevant research, policy and practice.

Protect Human Rights, Dignity, and Access to Resources
• Basic human rights and dignity are respected, labor rights are protected, and adequate living and working conditions provided.
• Rights to resources, including tenure and access rights, are secured.

Ensure Equality and Equitable opportunity to Benefit
• Equal opportunities to benefit are ensured to all workers.
• Recognitions (standing), voice, and respectful engagement for all groups, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic status.

Improve Food and Livelihood Security
• Nutritional and sustenance needs of resource-dependent communities are maintained or improved.
• Livelihood opportunities are secured or improved, including fair access to markets and capabilities to maintain income generation.

Considerations for the Scientific Community
1. Ocean science must evolve to incorporate a stronger focus on social dimensions and their connections to environmental issues. Social science concepts, such as agency, inequality and social justice should be considered in sustainability efforts, and social science capacity should be expanded. The research community can also play an important role in assessing the linkages between environmental sustainability and social issues, bringing necessary expertise together to inform responses by business, government and nonprofits.

2. The science community should contribute to research, monitoring and analysis of the sector, including indicators, assessment approaches and rigorous, objective evaluation to track performance.

The research community can help integrate social responsibility indicators into global sustainable seafood standards with ratings and certification organizations and also into private sector sourcing policies. Development of research approaches, tools and technologies will be critical in ensuring transparency and accountability, producing credible information, reducing risk for businesses and securing market incentives for businesses.

3. The research community must be responsive to real-world needs of the sector by better integrating the priorities of stakeholders and decision-makers into research. This requires a shift in the way social and environmental research is conceptualized and conducted with stakeholders; a shift in the expertise prioritized in the development of research capacity and initiatives; and a shift in the level of resources directed
toward these issues. The ocean science community could also benefit from looking at the successes and failures of other production sectors (e.g. forestry, energy and mining) in addressing similar challenges.

Conclusions
The framework described above supports the integration of social responsibility into policy and practice, and can drive global alignment of governments, businesses, civil society and nonprofit organizations to improve social performance in the sector. Increased investment from public and private sources will be needed to ensure the level of resources and expertise committed is equivalent to the scale of the challenges. The seafood sector has the opportunity to take steps to ensure a healthy ocean will benefit humanity, and the scientific community has an important role to play.