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Global talks on Fisheries subsidies must target big subsidisers not development

Civil society organisations from around the world are calling on trade ministers to ensure that negotiations on fisheries subsidies at the World Trade Organization (WTO) don't undermine development aspirations of small-scale fishing communities and developing countries but target those most historically responsible for the state of global overfishing.

“The current text of the negotiations is providing permanent loop holes for the big subsidisers while cutting off the ability of developing countries to develop domestic fishing industries to fish their own waters. The talks need to be targeting the big subsidisers instead of the ability of countries to develop their own fisheries” said Adam Wolfenden, Campaigner for the Pacific Network on Globalisation.

On July 15, WTO trade ministers will meet for a virtual ministerial to discuss the ongoing negotiations on fisheries subsidies. The negotiations, mandated by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14.6¹, will focus on the key issues relating to subsidies for overfishing and overcapacity, overfished stocks, and illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing.

As negotiations progress there is concern that the most vulnerable communities will be adversely impacted by the agreement.

“It is unacceptable that under the current text, subsidies for small scale fishers in developing countries are allowed only if they operate within 12 nautical miles, a limit that small scale fishers voluntarily or involuntarily cross. Applying such measures will bar small scale fishers from access to critical government subsidies. More so, the decision will be reached through negotiations which have excluded engagement of small scale fisher” said Margaret Nakato, Coordinator of the Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT) in Uganda, and Executive Director of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF).

Speaking on behalf of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), Naseegh Jaffer, from Masifundise, South Africa and also former General Secretary of WFFP said, “how can subsidies for small-scale fishers or what the WTO calls low-income, resource-poor fishers doing livelihood fishing in developing countries be time-bound? We do not stop being low-income and resource-poor within a span of 2 or 5 years, but this is what the WTO is planning to allow us under its 3 pillars of negotiations. On the other hand, the large, subsidizing nations are extracting permanent concessions for themselves”.

As the WTO pushes to conclude this multilateral set of negotiations, many voices from around the world are concerned about the impacts this will have for sustainability. The current proposals allow subsidies that build fishing capacity if a member state can show that the stocks being fished are managed sustainably.

“While marine conservation is a very important objective for us we also recognise the importance of striking the right balance between conservation of marine resources and ensuring economic opportunities for small-scale fishers. In fact the WTO is heading towards a double disaster with its

1 SDG14.6 target “ by 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing, and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the WTO fisheries subsidies negotiation.”

current text. The conservation objective cannot be met as the large subsidisers with industrial fleets are securing reverse special and differential treatment (SDT) for themselves while small-scale fishers in developing countries are going to be wiped out as actual SDT is squeezed to the minimum”, said Mageswari Sangralingam, Honorary Secretary, Friends of the Earth (SAM) Malaysia.

Marthin Hadiwinata, National Coordinator of Marine and Ecology Justice (EKOMARIN) based in Indonesia stated “the subsidy prohibition that will be set by the WTO must not limit archipelagic countries to provide subsidies to small-scale fisherfolk both in fishing activities in archipelagic waters and across territorial water boundaries. Because being a small-scale fisherfolk is not only an economic profession, but it is a culture and tradition that has been passed down for generations by the people of Indonesia as the biggest archipelago nation. In addition, SDT provisions should apply to developing and least developed countries, it cannot only be given a period of 2-5 years, but SDT is an exception provision that should be given to developing countries and LDCs.”

Under the SDG14.6 it is mandated that any outcome contain “appropriate and effective” Special and Differential Treatment for developing and least-developed countries, this would mean that those countries would have lower levels of commitments as well as flexibilities with regard to them.

“The objective of SDG 14.6 will be turned upside down if the large subsidisers escape from disciplines under the provisions of Article 5.1.1, and also imply a betrayal of Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR). Small fishers in India are extremely worried and baffled about this heavy pushback against special & differential treatment as they are not even the source of unsustainable fishing, while distant water fishing nations like the EU will continue to have the opportunity to provide domestic subsidies to their fleets”, said Ranja Sengupta, Senior Researcher with the Third World Network who is based in India.

“Special and Differential Treatment is a central part of these negotiations and is something that historically developing countries have had to fight for. The attempts to reduce that to minimal time and geographical bound carve-outs for a subset of small-scale fishers undermines the concept that was mandated by leaders to be appropriate and effective. The current proposals are neither” concluded Mr Wolfenden.

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