

05 March 2025, Geneva, Switzerland (CEST)

Venue: 16:30 – 17:15 (room XIX)

International Fisheries Access Agreements – challenges and opportunities to optimize development impacts

Background

Fisheries provide significant potential for many countries, particularly developing and least developed countries (LDCs) as well as Small Island Developing States (SIDS). These benefits range from revenue generation to opportunities for value addition, export diversification, job creation, food security, poverty reduction, community development and other important social and cultural contributions.

Beyond the national fishing effort, distant water fishing (DWF) has existed for centuries and has enabled many nations, mainly from Asia and Europe, to seek fisheries resources beyond their own Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), from resource-holding coastal states mostly in developing countries. International Fisheries Access Agreements (IFAAs) are tools for governing the use of marine resources in the EEZs of coastal states, regulating the terms under which DWF fleets access fisheries stocks.

DWF constitutes a significant share of the fishing effort in many areas: it is for instance estimated to reach approximately 57% of industrial Automatic Identification System (AIS) -equipped vessels fishing effort in the Indian Ocean, while other estimates suggest that in EEZs of low-income countries the share makes up to 84%.

The way in which IFAAs are negotiated and their provisions drafted is therefore of major importance particularly for developing regions, and the topic has raised interest among several international and national actors. UNCTAD has recently published a [study on International Fisheries Access Agreements – challenges and opportunities to optimize development impacts](#), exploring the evolution and status of DWF activities and IFAAs globally, with a focus on developing regions, identifying challenges and opportunities to optimize IFAAs' development impacts and contributing to the knowledge base on IFAAs.

Ensuring sustainable fisheries management and governance, focusing on conservation and robust regulatory frameworks, should be at the core of IFAAs. At the same time, incorporating balanced economic benefits for both parties and maximizing the developmental impacts of these agreements to ensure fair and inclusive outcomes are essential considerations in IFAAs negotiations.

IFAAs can be critical tools for achieving sustainable fisheries management, while – if badly formulated and implemented – they may endanger the very same



objective. Science-based decision-making figures at the center-stage, and it is crucial to align IFAAs with international agreements and frameworks covering the area. Transparency and governance are central, including robust monitoring systems, such as Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS), and observer programs. DWF directly links to the issue of fisheries subsidies, for which a framework is now operational through the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement.

The socio-economic potential of IFAAs should be recognized, rendering it all the more crucial to effectively align IFAAs with the Sustainable Development Goals and integrating fisheries into national development strategies for economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction. Another key issue is capacity building to accompany IFAAs between developed and developing countries, enhancing sustainable fisheries management and assisting resource-holding countries in building their own fisheries sector in line with their own development priorities.

Some coastal countries have established common approaches to DWF, such as the Pacific Island Countries' Joint Harmonized Minimum Terms and Conditions (HMTCs) for foreign fishing vessel access; and the vessel day scheme (VDS) for jointly managing specific fisheries; or domestic arrangements such as Namibia's quota system. These and other experiences can provide important lessons for other countries wishing to strengthen sustainable fisheries management.

This session will present key findings and recommendations from the study conducted by UNCTAD. It brings together diverse stakeholders to discuss how to promote equity, inclusivity, and sustainability within fisheries value chains and in the DWF practice. By addressing and integrating these issues, the sector can contribute more effectively to sustainable economic development, poverty reduction, and food security. The discussions will be developed around the following themes:

- What mechanisms can enhance transparency, accountability and equitable sharing of benefits in IFAAs negotiations and implementation?
- How can benefits be equally and equitably shared between and among stakeholders including communities?
- How can capacity-building initiatives be tailored to address both governance and developmental priorities?
- What role can new technologies and data-driven approaches play in improving fisheries management?
- How can lessons from coastal countries' DWF frameworks, such as Namibia and the Pacific Island States, assist developing countries more broadly in managing their fisheries and negotiating and implementing IFAAs?

Interpretation will be provided in the six UN languages.



Programme:

Moderator: Mr. David Vivas Eugui, Chief of Section a.i. TEDB/DITC, UNCTAD

Introduction of UNCTAD study: Ms Johanna Silvander, Programme Management Officer, Division for Africa, LDCs and Special Programmes, UNCTAD

Comment: Mr Lahsen Ababouch, Independent Consultant, Former FAO Director for Fisheries Policy and Economics (video)

Panelists:

Ms. Jessy Carnelle Petit-Frere, Former Minister of Commerce and Industry (Haiti)

Mr. Yuvan Beejadhur, Senior Adviser to the Director-General, World Trade Organization (WTO)

Mr. Peter Wekesa, Environment and Natural Resource Governance Expert, Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS)

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