

BLUE SOCIAL PROTECTION: PROTECTING PEOPLE, FISH AND FOOD

By Yuko Okamura, Gunilla Tegelskär Greig, Gianluigi Nico and Annabelle Bladon

Addressing the global decline in fish stocks has significant implications for fisheries workers, their communities, and wider society. Social protection can play a role in protecting people against shocks and troubled transitions and promoting better job opportunities, as well as facilitate fisheries policy reform for sustainable outcomes. The World Bank's "Blue Social Protection" initiative is undertaken in partnership with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) – and in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other key actors. Distilling insights and experiences from this activity since 2020, the team has developed a handbook providing practical knowledge on leveraging social protection and jobs interventions to support sustainable fisheries, focusing on small-scale fisheries.



This article introduces work led by the World Bank to assist client countries and practitioners in using social protection and labor market interventions to facilitate fisheries policy reform for sustainable outcomes – not least food and nutrition security – while protecting vulnerable communities and creating enhanced job opportunities. It outlines the foundational work already undertaken, sets out the overarching approach, and explains the key aspects of detailed guidance recently published in a handbook for practitioners.

Efforts to manage fisheries are often hindered by a focus on short-term production and profit at the expense of environmental sustainability and social equity. Most approaches have also tended to concentrate solely on the fisheries sector, without considering the broader benefits that sustainable fisheries provide and the societal risks associated with fish-stock decline. In addition, ministries responsible for fisheries and for social protection and jobs (SPJ) have different institutional mandates and few incentives to coordinate. Given the generally small size of the fisheries sector in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), this short-term, single-sector approach undercuts the justification and motivation to strengthen investments in fisheries management. Fisheries workers are thus typically expected to shoulder the short- to medium-term costs that fisheries management measures impose. These costs, such as lost income, often undermine the effectiveness of new or existing measures.

SPJ could play an instrumental role in facilitating fisheries policy reforms and supporting associated management measures, strengthening the outcomes of management interventions and promoting sustainability

and productivity across this and related sectors. However, evidence on the impact of adapting SPJ to the fisheries sector is still limited, and in a context of weak fisheries management and narrow sectoral integration, interventions can also have undesirable outcomes.

This article outlines the World Bank team's endeavors in the intersectoral agenda, Blue Social Protection: Protecting People, Fish and Food.

Overview: Blue Social Protection

The activity started in 2020 with a stocktaking exercise, which led to the development of a first conceptual framework (Bladon, Tegelskär Greig, and Okamura 2022). On this basis, five country case studies were undertaken and published, along with a synthesizing overview note (Okamura et al. 2024). Drawing on these, a handbook has been developed, setting out to share practical knowledge with government administrations and practitioners looking for innovative ways to facilitate and enable sustainable fisheries and realize the associated benefits for people, climate, and nature (Bladon et al. 2025).



In collaboration with additional partners, the World Bank is aiming to support more countries in adopting this intersectoral approach to social protection and fisheries. The team welcomes contact with country representatives and other practitioners who are either already working on these issues or have an interest in combining social, economic, and environmental objectives by developing the types of interventions outlined in this article.

Country engagement

Based on the initial conceptual framework and World Bank engagement to support government fisheries management efforts, and where dialogue had been initiated to strengthen synergies and coordination between SPJ and fisheries, country case studies have been produced (refer to the box).

The Country Notes were prepared by country teams that are closely supporting government counterparts, particularly ministries in charge of fisheries, social affairs, and labor. The World Bank team is currently undertaking a mapping exercise to identify additional countries that are exploring or have otherwise taken an interest in this intersectoral agenda.

The five case studies provide a range of country contexts in terms of geographic location, income status, data availability, the capacity of social protection systems, and motivations or demand for sectoral integration.



The **Costa Rica** case study focuses on low-income, small-scale fishing communities in two regions. It identifies avenues for improving social and economic inclusion in activities linked to or outside fishing ([Sánchez Galvis and Rodríguez-Novoa 2024](#)).



The **Kenya** case study uses official and nationally representative statistics to profile the country's fishing and aquaculture households to identify opportunities for creating new and better jobs ([Pela et al. 2024](#)).



The **Solomon Islands** case study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the potential to integrate SPJ interventions and community-based resource management for improved coastal resource use ([Kendrick et al. 2024](#)).



The **Sri Lanka** case study is based on a literature review and nonrepresentative survey data to explore ways SPJ policies and programs may help rebuild and maintain sustainable coastal fisheries, with a focus on spiny lobster – a high-value export commodity ([Arin et al. 2024](#)).



The **Viet Nam** case study applies official and nationally representative statistics to profile the country's fisheries households and explore ways to leverage and adapt SPJ interventions in support of government efforts to address fish-stock decline, including planned decommissioning of fishing vessels ([Nguyen et al. 2024](#)).

The Blue Social Protection handbook

The [handbook](#) aims to share practical knowledge with countries looking for innovative ways to facilitate and enable sustainable fisheries and associated benefits, with a focus on small-scale fisheries. The primary target is practitioners working on SPJ or fisheries who are seeking hands-on guidance on how to achieve fisheries sustainability while reducing human vulnerability. These include individuals working in government who are responsible for fisheries or SPJ and the stakeholders and development partners active alongside them, including World Bank teams. Reflecting the varied interests and perspectives of the target users, the handbook aims to promote better understanding and coordination between SPJ and fisheries, offering opportunities to leverage SPJ for sustainable fisheries, as well as guidance on how to put them into practice and effectively evaluate the associated outcomes.

The handbook is sufficiently comprehensive and flexible to accommodate a range of contexts, size and scale considerations, interests, and objectives. It also aims to support countries in enhancing SPJ systems to be more inclusive and adaptive to climate-related and other shocks by responding to the needs of specific sectors and groups.

While the focus of the handbook is on fisheries management, it also contains information and lessons of wider relevance for addressing climate risks, disasters, and biodiversity loss and deploying SPJ to support sustainability in other sectors. Practitioners could adapt the guidance to enable and incentivize the participation of coastal or other communities in biodiversity conservation and to support efforts to enhance SPJ responsiveness to risks in other sectors, such as agriculture and forestry.

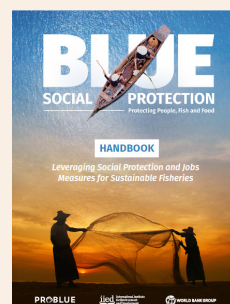
The Blue Social Protection Handbook fills a gap in knowledge on adapting SPJ to the fisheries sector, in combination with FAO's work on strengthening the coherence between social protection and fisheries policies ([Framework for Analysis and Action](#) [FAO 2022b] and [Diagnostic Tool](#) [FAO 2022a]). It also complements existing SPJ assessment tools – for instance, the [Inter Agency Social Protection Assessment Tools](#) and the World Bank's [SPL-DRM Toolkit](#) and [Stress Testing Guide](#) (World Bank 2020, 2021).

Structure and contents of the handbook

The handbook, a hands-on guidance document, commences with a comprehensive *Glossary* that presents key concepts and terminology in SPJ and fisheries to facilitate the adoption by practitioners of an intersectoral approach. Then, following a scene-setting introduction, the handbook contains four main sections. First, the *Problem Statement* elaborates on the rationale and challenges that an intersectoral approach to fisheries and SPJ could address. Second, the *Conceptual Framework* outlines opportunities to deploy SPJ for productive and sustainable fisheries. Third, the section on *Methodology and Data Sources* provides practical guidance on collecting and analyzing the information and data required to put into practice the Conceptual Framework. Fourth, the last section presents *Priorities* for practical actions to advance the approach within countries.

Problem statement: rationale and challenges

Fisheries face a range of risks arising from interlinked socioeconomic and ecological processes. Human activities, both within and beyond fisheries, increasingly drive changes in ecological systems that, in turn, amplify socioeconomic risks within fisheries, creating complex social-ecological feedbacks that further exacerbate the vulnerability of people who depend on them.

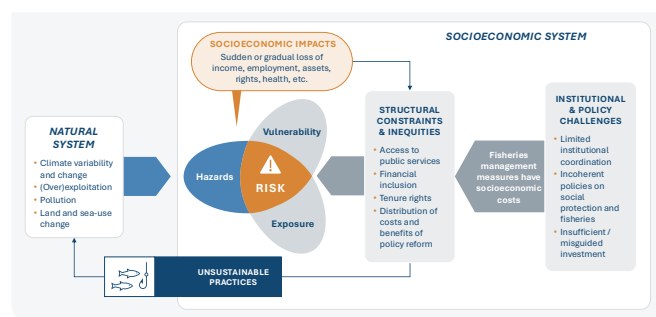


- 1 | Introduction
- 2 | Problem statement
- 3 | Conceptual framework
- 4 | Methodology & data sources
- 5 | Priorities moving forward

Small-scale fisheries activities are typically informal, that is, they are conducted without registration or formal accounts, and dispersed across remote areas. Fishers and fish workers therefore tend to be poorly accounted for in national statistics and poorly understood (Porras 2019). In much of the world, this invisibility has led to political and social exclusion, and limited policy attention and investment in the sector (FAO, Duke University, and WorldFish 2023). These problems are heightened by the diversity of the sector – both in terms of activities and socioeconomic characteristics – that policy makers typically fail to acknowledge (Short et al. 2021).

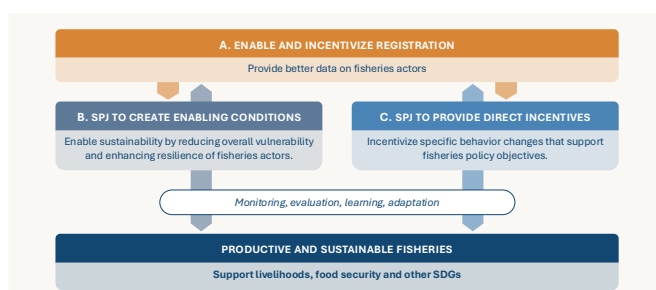
At an institutional level, differences in mandates and objectives between the fisheries and the SPJ sectors limit the incentives for coordination. The ministries responsible for fisheries tend to focus on production and related environmental issues and usually deal less with broader poverty and vulnerability issues, while the ministries responsible for SPJ tend to focus on poor households, rather than specific economic sectors such as fisheries. As a result, SPJ and fisheries policies and associated strategies tend to be disconnected and incoherent, leading to inefficient and often ineffective programs.

The social-ecological risks faced by the fisheries sector, along with policy and institutional challenges, can be illustrated as follows:



Conceptual framework: opportunities

Three main opportunities have been identified for SPJ to facilitate and enable more productive and sustainable fisheries, as follows:



SPJ interventions can be deliberately designed or adapted to directly incentivize specific behavior changes that support fisheries policy objectives (point C in the figure). There are two main options:

- First, SPJ programs, such as conditional transfers, public works, and temporary unemployment benefits, can offset the short- (but

potentially recurring) and medium-term socioeconomic costs of management measures designed to reduce fishing effort, such as seasonal closures.

- Second, where longer-term interventions are required to reduce the total number of fisheries workers in a specific fishery value chain or area, SPJ programs can facilitate livelihood diversification and support transition away from those activities. Examples include active labor market programs and economic inclusion approaches that combine upskilling or reskilling with grants and complementary financial services.

Even if an SPJ intervention is not directly linked to any specific fisheries policy objective or associated behavior change, it can still help create enabling conditions for sustainable fisheries (point B in the figure). Countries can leverage existing mainstream SPJ programs to reduce overall vulnerability and enhance responsiveness to climate shocks and natural disasters by adjusting eligibility criteria to extend coverage to fisheries households, which should influence the motivations for environmental stewardship. However, these approaches can also increase fishing effort if interventions are not aligned or coordinated with fisheries policy and complemented by proper monitoring and enforcement of management measures.

Furthermore, SPJ benefits and services can help enable and incentivize fisheries actors to register themselves, their assets, and their activities (point A in the figure). If supported by targeted outreach, this can provide data that are fundamental to fisheries management and inform SPJ design and support implementation.

Methodology and data sources

To design and adapt SPJ interventions to promote sustainable and productive fisheries, it is necessary to collect and analyze data relevant to the fishery or geographical area of interest. This section of the handbook provides practical guidance on socioeconomic profiling and assessing the social-ecological risks in fisheries, in addition to conducting rapid assessments across SPJ and fisheries on institutional arrangements and policies, programs and implementation systems, and financial context.

Based on guiding questions included in each subsection, the handbook outlines resources and data that may be considered as a starting point, along with additional methods, resources and tools for when these are not available.

Example



Key questions for characterizing social-ecological risk:

Socioeconomic profiling of fisheries actors

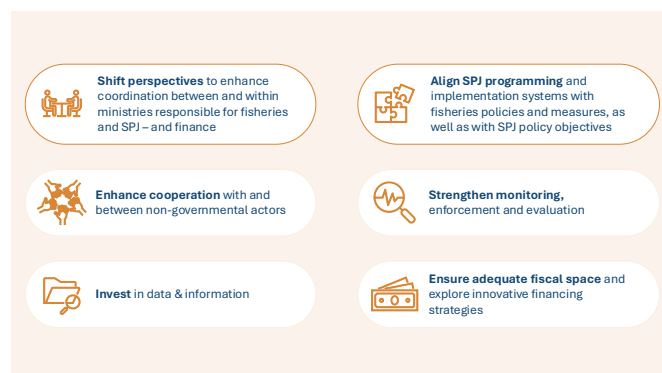
- What are the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics (including livelihood activities)?
- What are the types and levels of vulnerabilities?

Assessing social-ecological risk

- What is the status of, and trends in, fish-stock abundance and productivity, and what are the potential socioeconomic impacts of any change?
- What are the current and projected climate and environmental trends and related socioeconomic impacts on the fishery/fisheries sector?
- What are the potential socioeconomic impacts of fisheries management measures?

Priorities

Based on the experience from country case studies and the development of the handbook, the following six key priority actions have been identified that governments and development partners can take to maximize the use and potential of SPJ for sustainable fisheries:



1. Enhance intra- and interministerial coordination to increase coherence between SPJ and fisheries policies. This can include joint programming and performance-based budgets, common monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and collaborative impact assessments before introducing new fisheries management measures.
2. Improve cooperation with and among nongovernmental actors to support SPJ implementation and build on existing informal SPJ functions. These actors might include fisheries organizations, community-based organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, which can play an instrumental role in supporting outreach, SPJ provision, and monitoring, especially in remote areas.
3. Increase the quantity and quality of socially inclusive and gender-sensitive socioeconomic data on fisheries. This can be accomplished by adapting existing data collection mechanisms, such as household survey questionnaires, to include basic information on fisheries households and by expanding the sample to ensure it is statistically representative.
4. Align SPJ programming with fisheries policy objectives and associated management measures. This includes adapting eligibility criteria and target populations for SPJ interventions and ensuring that benefit and service packages are appropriate relative to the costs fisheries workers and communities incur because of fisheries management measures.
5. Strengthen monitoring, enforcement, and evaluation to ensure that SPJ interventions are effective and efficient. This includes addressing limitations in fisheries monitoring and enforcement through collaborative and community-based approaches and evaluating the impact on human vulnerability and sustainable fisheries.
6. Ensure adequate fiscal space and explore innovative financing strategies for SPJ to support sustainable fisheries. This includes

reforming and repurposing harmful fisheries subsidies, exploring more innovative means of financing incentives for sustainable fisheries, and accessing international climate and nature finance.

Conclusion

By enhancing coordination among ministries, improving cooperation with nongovernmental actors, increasing the quantity and quality of data, aligning SPJ programming with fisheries policy objectives, strengthening monitoring, enforcement, and evaluation, and exploring innovative financing strategies, countries can leverage SPJ interventions to create a sustainable and productive future for fisheries, the communities that depend on them, and wider society.

Links to resources

- [Blue Social Protection Handbook](#) (Bladon et al. 2025)
- Country case studies: [Overview note](#) and [five countries](#) (Arin et al. 2024; Kendrick et al. 2024; Nguyen et al. 2024; Okamura et al. 2024; Pela et al. 2024; Sánchez Galvis and Rodríguez-Novoa 2024)
- [Conceptual Framework note](#) (Bladon, Tegelskär Greig, and Okamura 2022), with [Infographic](#) (Bladon 2022)
- [Blog](#) (Bladon and Okamura 2022)
- Webinars: [February 2025](#), [November 2024](#) (World Bank and IIED 2024, 2025)

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