

Rethinking Fisheries Subsidies:

Giving Voice and Justice to Small-Scale, Low Impact Fishers

Across Europe and beyond, small-scale and low-impact fishers play a vital role in preserving marine ecosystems, ensuring local food security, and sustaining coastal communities. Yet the majority of them remains excluded from support schemes, and face administrative barriers that prevent them from accessing financial support meant to help them.

Unequal access to subsidies

In Europe, while small-scale fishers represent 70% of the European fishing fleet and 53% of engaged crew¹, small-scale fishers represent only 20% of EU funds beneficiaries.²

- EU funds for fisheries (i.e. the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund) fail to meet the needs of small-scale and low-impact fishers:
 - » Calls for proposals are too technical, require bank guarantees that fishers can't provide, or exclude those in debt.
 - » Application process are too complex, too slow, and disconnected from reality, it mainly benefits large-scale operators and industrial projects at the expense of sustainable, artisanal fishing.
- At the EU level, between 5% and 12% of EMFAF funding is channelled into biodiversity-harming subsidies³ which can be instead redirected toward sustainable fisheries and marine protection.

“The small-scale fisher has difficulties in applying, while the big industry has an accountant, specialized people in offices who are involved helping them accessing call for tenders. The small-scale fisher goes out to sea and in the remaining time he has to repair his net. — Paolo Fanciulli (Talamone, Tuscany, Italy) / trammel net fishing

“We would like to be a little more recognised, yes. We would like to be more respected by the community, because we are small and when you're small, they don't see you. The EU should understand that there is also the little one down there and not just the big one, that's it. — Mario Nicola Chiaramonte (Marina di Carrara, Tuscany, Italy) / Cuttlefish Fishing with Trammel Net

“The future of fishing can only exist if there are guardians of the sea”
— Paolo Fanciulli
(Talamone, Tuscany, Italy)

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Lack of tailored support and transparency

Fishers are left alone to navigate the system. With no access to information regarding available funding, no tailored administrative assistance or adequate representation, most don't even try to apply. Small-scale, low-impact fishers often require flexible, accessible financial instruments that reflect their limited cash flow, seasonal income patterns, and lower investment capacity.

“Liquidity is a real barrier, as many projects require up-front investment that is reimbursed later. For fishers with limited cash flow, this can be challenging. — Dino Bozanic (Island of Vis, Adriatic Sea, Croatia) / longlines fishing

“In the end, there are no facilities that can help fishers: we are not informed (...) when you have access to a call for proposals, you need a bank that supports you. And if the bank doesn't support you, you can't apply for the call for proposals, because invoices today require three quotes. — Paolo Fanciulli (Talamone, Tuscany, Italy) / trammel net fishing

Generational and gender barriers

Young people avoid entering the sector due to instability and lack of support. Meanwhile, older fishers are often excluded from schemes due to administrative complexity and barriers.

“There is no hope, and you see it with the young people too. If we go looking for someone to come to the boat, they don't want to come anymore, because there aren't the resources there were in the past, and it is difficult to earn something. — Angelo (Marina di Carrara, Tuscany, Italy) / trammel net fishing

“The status of women in fishing is more difficult because there is already pressure from society. People are not used to having women around. There is still a barrier to taking women on board. — Emmanuelle Frésil (Granville, Normandy, France) / fishing crabs and lobsters with traps

Our Recommendations

To tackle these issues and empower small-scale, low impact fishers, we recommend:



"To the European Union, I say: help us, because our lives are at risk. That is all we ask, that you come to our aid, especially small-scale fishers, who have been abandoned by everyone."
— Angelo (Marina di Carrara, Tuscany, Italy) / trammel net fishing

Simplified and fair access to subsidies

- Streamline application procedures by reducing administrative burdens and helping small-scale, low-impact fishers understand how to apply and who to contact.
- Remove banking barriers:
 - » Remove the requirement for bank guarantees for grants targeting small-scale and low-impact fishers.
 - » Allow for phased or up-front disbursement of funds for small-scale, low impact fishers projects, rather than requiring full up-front investment with later reimbursement.

Dedicated funding for small-scale, low-impact fishers

- Specific and separate budget for small-scale, low impact fishers (from industrial fishers).
- Creating national contact points and local administrative support would help scale, low-impact fishers navigate the funding process. This could involve raising awareness on funding opportunities, providing technical support, assessing their needs and simplifying funding applications for them, as well as connecting them with credit institutions, and assisting with funding applications.

Stronger institutional recognition

- Ensure that small-scale, low impact fishers have a voice at all decision making levels, especially during the negotiations of EU funds dedicated for fisheries. Specific funding opportunities should help them in attending important events in Brussels where they can meet and dialogue with decision-makers.

More support for the people and the ocean

- More support to coastal communities. Support should prioritize those who add value, protect ecosystems, and maintain coastal livelihoods, rather than subsidizing overcapacity or environmentally harmful methods.
- Facilitating access for the young people and women.
- More support for the Ocean and the protection of marine ecosystem. The EMFAF should evolve to better recognize and solely reward only sustainable practices.

1. European Commission, Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) - The 2024 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet.
2. ClientEarth, Report on 'Small-scale fishers revealed as least supported recipients of EU funds', 3 April 2023.
3. WWF, Briefing on 'Can your money do better?', 13 May 2024.