

The fisheries sector and the Coronavirus pandemic: solving the crisis, thinking about tomorrow's fisheries

The fisheries sector is heavily impacted by the pandemic

The crisis linked to the Coronavirus epidemic has had a major impact on the European fisheries sector. It has been marked by containment measures that have prevented some fishers from carrying out their activity, but even more by a crisis in demand linked to the closure of auctions, restaurants and markets, as well as changes in the consumption habits of Europeans and a reduction in international demand. This fall in demand has led to a fall in prices.

Massive drops in seafood sales were recorded at the height of the crisis. Although fish sales have since increased, they have still not returned to their usual level.

This situation places the tens of thousands of European fishers and the entire seafood industry in a critical economic and social situation. It has forced some fishers to sell their products at a derisory price, preventing them from making a profit from their trips to sea and condemning them to remain at dockside.

The crisis linked to the Coronavirus epidemic does not affect all fishers in the same way. Small-scale fishers, whose main outlet is usually local markets, have been the most affected. High value-added fisheries, such as lobster fishing for example, and those most dependent on exports have also been particularly affected. On the contrary, larger vessels suffered less economically. These vessels leave for longer periods and catch very large quantities of fish, which they process or freeze immediately. They then sell them mainly to retailers, and are therefore less affected.

It must be ensured that during the duration of the containment measures, small-scale fisheries can have access to the distribution channels that are maintained. States and local authorities must ensure that they can access alternative distribution channels until their usual ones can be reopened.

While a resumption of activity as soon as possible is desirable, this cannot be at the expense of the safety and health of seafarers and fishers. Seafaring jobs often involve proximity that is difficult to avoid. Vessel owners must be committed to guaranteeing the safety of the crew on board, especially on large vessels such as for tuna fishing. States must contribute to maintain the salaries of seafarers and all employees in all sectors to

limit the social impacts of the crisis, for example through the use of short-time working mechanisms.

The measures put in place to combat the CoViD-19 outbreak also pose a problem for access to the seasonal workforce often employed in the sector, especially those in shellfish aquaculture. It is important that states organise safe ways of accessing production sites for the employment of seasonal workers.

A European response is necessary but needs to be fine-tuned

To combat the effects of the crisis, the European Union has taken massive action. Two packages of measures adopted in March and April 2020 made it possible to release funds from the EMFF (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund) and give more flexibility in their use. Other European funds have been redirected towards the management of the CoViD-19 crisis, allowing the fisheries sector to access these envelopes. In addition, state aid rules have been temporarily relaxed to give Member States the possibility to help fishers in difficulty.

These measures are necessary and Greens/EFA MEPs have fought to ensure that they can be implemented quickly, **but also that they are targeted and limited in time**. It is important that the fishers most affected, especially small-scale artisanal fishers, are the ones who benefit from this exceptional aid. Targeting must ensure that this emergency aid does not constitute harmful subsidies, i.e. subsidies that would contribute in the long term to overfishing.

The European Union has also put in place measures to facilitate the storage of products that cannot be sold. Those measures should be limited in volume and we must make sure that the return of these products to the market after the crisis does not destabilise the market again by causing a further fall in prices.

The CoViD-19 crisis must not result in us losing sight of the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy, particularly the need to deliver sustainability of the sector. **The difficulties encountered by the fisheries sector must not be used as a pretext for extending fishing periods or raising quotas for subsequent seasons** beyond the flexibilities provided for in the CFP or against scientific recommendations. It is important that fisheries data collection, monitoring and control measures will be maintained, through the reception of international observers and inspectors in good conditions where this is provided for in the text, but also through the deployment of remote fisheries control mechanisms.

The negotiations on the future EMFF (2021-2027) should not be influenced by the extraordinary measures. There has to be a clear difference between on the one hand the exceptional measures taken that will help the sector to get through this difficult period and let businesses survive, and on the other hand rules and subsidies for the next 7-year period of the new EMFF.

We need to ensure that the future EMFF contributes to the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy - to protect ecosystems and to promote truly sustainable fisheries, helping fishers who most need it and to reduce the administrative burden, without creating harmful subsidies that would result in overcapacity and overfishing.

In the face of the crisis, rethinking tomorrow's fisheries

The crisis has highlighted **weaknesses and inequalities in the fisheries sector**. Tomorrow's fisheries must rely on systemic transformation to prevent future crises, be it sanitary, environmental, social or economic crises. Unrestrained globalisation places fishers in situations of increased dependence and vulnerability.

This difficult period is an opportunity to **rethink distribution chains**. As in agriculture, developing short and direct sales channels is necessary to build more resilient food policies. It seems important to value local consumption of certain seafood products from sustainable fisheries, instead of focusing on their export outside the European Union.

The crisis has also shown the **vulnerability of intensive aquaculture**. While it is often presented as a solution to ensure food security and combat overfishing, the crisis has highlighted their dependence on fishmeal. An increasing share of fishmeal is being imported from developing countries such as Senegal and Mauritania, where it destabilises the fisheries sector. The development of aquaculture must be carried out in a sustainable manner, favouring structures with low environmental impact, especially regarding the impact of fish meal production on the oceans.

Developing countries are suffering even harder from the measures to combat the Coronavirus. We must ensure that the European fisheries sector, including the one fishing in the framework of Fisheries Partnership Agreements does not endanger the fisheries resources and food security of developing countries.

The crisis has also highlighted the inequalities between small-scale and industrial fishing. While small-scale fishers were forced to stay at the quayside, large-scale vessels continued to fish, often using destructive fishing techniques. This inequality in the face of the crisis raises broader questions of justice between small and large vessels. The latter are already concentrating too much of the quota and endangering the fisheries resource. Widely supported financially, these factory ships will be able to get through the crisis without difficulty.

There is a need for public action to support impacted fisheries stakeholders, such as small-scale artisanal fishers who are among the most vulnerable. In the medium term, it is important that a fairer distribution of fishing quotas is established, in accordance with Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy. Small-scale fishers who innovate and limit their impact on the environment represent the future of fishing, establishing more resilient and sustainable sector.

Finally, it is important to continue the fight against overfishing and for a healthy marine environment, through the introduction of more ambitious management measures, the fight against the various sources of water pollution and the establishment of effective and strengthened marine protected areas. These elements are crucial to enable fish stocks that are in good condition, resilient and capable of providing fish in the long term, thus contributing to food security in Europe. **Greens/EFA MEPs are committed to defending these measures, which must ensure both the good state of the marine environment and the sustainability of fisheries (abundant resources, decent incomes, etc).**

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