

## Life Above Water



*Life above water is as essential for securing the life below water, and must be nurtured structurally as well as in moral terms...*

‘**L**ife below water’ is UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 14, under which small-scale fisheries fall. Given their contribution to nutrition, food security, poverty alleviation, and community well-being, one should, of course, appreciate the

specific mentioning of small-scale fisheries in such a prominent context; they could well have been ignored in the SDGs. Yet, what is happening in small-scale fisheries, and certainly those things that catch the eye of the social scientist, is not only taking place under water but *above* water – *on* the water and *by* the water. Small-scale fishers and fish-workers make their living off the fish that swim in the ocean, but they do so with the lives they construct for themselves and with others on land. Fishing ‘out there’ is intimately connected with what is happening ‘in here’. Small-scale fishers depend on their communities as much as they depend on their boats and gear. It is as members of communities that fishers acquire the energy, motivation, skills, and meaning they need to carry out their work. For this reason, the social sciences of fisheries have always focused on the community as a unit of analysis.

However, fisheries communities do not exist in isolation, separated from the rest of society. They are also influenced by, and dependent on, what is happening outside them. Consequently, social scientists specializing in small-scale fisheries cannot limit themselves to focusing on the community level, but must broaden their focus to drivers at larger scales. Nonetheless, they always insist that communities are a useful vantage point, a place to situate themselves when trying to understand issues that also manifest themselves beyond that specific location. Fishing is indeed a way of life, but also a source of livelihood and wealth, a trade that links communities with the outside world. Fish is a commodity that travels far, and has done so since ancient times, as in the case of Norway’s cod. Mark Kurlansky did not hold back when he wrote a ‘biography’ of the cod of which the subtitle was *‘The Fish that Changed the World’* (1999).

Still, it is important when extending our perspective to the world of fisheries at large, which we also must do, that we do not lose sight of communities. If we forget about communities, we also lose sight of small-scale fisheries, thereby missing a lot about the life that is lived above the water.

I always found Paul Thompson and colleagues' *'Living the fishing'* to be an intriguing book and title from 1983, which is based on life story interviews with men and women from Scottish and English fishing communities. I found their conclusion interesting and challenging: "*[E]conomic and social development depend as much on the situation of women, and of children, and the history of and consciousness of communities, as on matters of capital, cash and profit, and today's and tomorrow's market.*" (p. 3).

With the millions of people engaged in the sector, small-scale fisheries are too important and too big to ignore. Furthermore, with the role that communities play in the lives of those who inhabit the sector, communities are also too important to fail. So maybe we should think of small-scale fisheries as made up of communities and not just fishing activities of certain characteristics, like scale. We struggle to define what small-scale fisheries are because of their enormous diversity globally, which makes it hard to find a common denominator. Perhaps the community is what we are searching for? People depend on their boats and gear, but they depend even more on their communities for their well-being, and that, I suggest, is a universal trait.

## The community

It is easy to see how small-scale fisheries contribute to fishing communities. One need only meet up at the landing site and watch the boats coming in, the fish being unloaded and carried home to be consumed or sold to vendors. The beach or wharf are busy places, buzzing with people running around doing things, talking to each other, bargaining on the price or bidding, or talking about whatever is related to their work. For the newcomer, it may seem chaotic; you are looking for some order in what you see, which may be hard to find – as for me when I visited the fishing beach in Chennai shown in the following photo.



*The author at the Chennai fishing beach [1]*

What is going on here, who is who, who are the people wearing white hats? Where are they going with the fish? Making sense of it all would take time and effort, a piece of research, and patience.

For such an investigation, you would want to quantify what small-scale fisheries generate in terms of employment, food, and income. Then you would need to follow the fish from when and where it is landed until served on the dinner table. You may have to run some surveys to be able to get the full account. When looking for trends there may be public records available to dig into. If you stay long enough, you will get a perspective on how life changes over the year with the seasons; there may be times when the fishing community seems idle, others when it thrives. Small-scale fisheries communities are dynamic entities. You may spot cultural artifacts, like old buildings, but fishing communities are not places where time stands still.

For my PhD research I lived in a fishing community (Lurøy on the coast of Norway about where the Arctic Circle crosses the country)

for two years in the late 1970s. I wouldn't say that I knew everything about that community when I left, but I grew fond of the place and the people I knew. I established friendships that still last. When I returned to this community after forty years, I could see that much had changed. I was not even sure it could be called a fishing community anymore. Many of the homes of the fishing families were converted into second homes for city people. What used to be a busy harbor was mostly empty of fishing boats. Some of the fishers I knew (and also fished with), I found in the graveyard, some were retired, and their children have moved away. In Norway, this is the fate of many small-scale fishing communities.

In any case, to get a sense of what a fishing community is, you would need to hang out with the people wherever they gather, and join their meetings if you are allowed in, which I was. You will get to know them and what they do, but only if you let them learn who you are and why you are there. You will listen to their stories, hear about their concerns, and they will wonder if you share them. You will engage in conversation about their problems and challenges in the fishery, in the community and in the world. This is a natural way to socialize, which you do when you do this kind of research. Then you will understand that the community is also a place where things occur which are important also for the functioning of the fishery but which we normally do not think of as such. You will realize that the community is more than a landing site, but also as a place that people call home.

Moreover, you will notice that those who fish do other things as well, that they have multiple roles and responsibilities outside the boat and the crew. They are family and friends, they help young people to become fishers but also responsible human beings, they help to make the community a good place to grow up. Not all take part in fisheries activities, but still make an important contribution to the well-being of the fishing community. Not only fishers and fishworkers make the fisheries communities a good place to live. Indirectly, also non-

fisheries people provide key services in the community that the fishery sector could not be without. These people run the school and daycare center, they operate the local store and restaurant, which has fish on the menu. They manage the local soccer team, they nurse the elderly, they drive the school bus, they conduct the school band, and so forth. You may learn from what other people have written about the place, but you better experience it out for yourself. This is what it means to do fieldwork and participant observation in the social sciences.

Although often away for weeks and months, fishers also engage in their communities. Sometimes they have a second career after retiring from fishing. Birger, my best friend in the community where I lived those years ago, built a fisheries museum after he retired from fishing. He fished all his life with his father and two brothers. If you visit the community, he will proudly show you the museum and run the old engines that he keeps there. With the museum he helps to keep the memory of the fishing community alive, preserving what it once was. Thus, he has made it possible for local people, as well as visitors, to orient themselves in the world, to know from where they are coming and where they are visiting. For this and many other initiatives Birger has taken in his community after he stopped fishing, he received the King's Medal of Merit.

## Women's roles and rights

The boat is usually the men's world. However, women provide essential support for the boat to be operative. They are therefore the 'veiled crew' whose crucial but often invisible role is often ignored. In a paper titled '*Woman the Worrier*', Dona Lee Davis (1983) observed that women release their men by taking over their worries associated with the risk of fishing. They also do bookkeeping for the fishing enterprise. The men can therefore go about their daily business without much anxiety. The fishing family, as the fishing communities, involves a division of labor that is gendered.

Why then are women's contributions so often ignored? Why are they marginalized, and excluded from the rights that their male counterparts enjoy, for instance when quotas are allocated and inherited? Especially in small-scale fisheries, one would think that the opposite would be the case. Many of women's contributions are subtle, as illustrated by Donna Lee Davis mentioned above. Yet often they are tangible and visible. Still, women's contributions are taken as a given, and therefore not taken into account - as if their work had no value. I once argued in a talk I gave at the Women's World Conference in 1999 (see chapter 16 in this book) that one important reason why women's roles and inputs are often overlooked is because the community is disregarded. If you do not have an eye for the community, or if you think of it as just an offshoot of the fishery, you easily miss out on women's work. If the community is not a focus, you do not recognize the many independent but indirect contributions that women make to keep the community alive, and hence the fishery thriving. Women's work, and their knowledge about the community as a whole, are an important condition for what else is happening. Women have interests and concerns that must be secured for their own sake, as stressed by The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries endorsed by FAO member states in 2014. However, women's contributions also must be recognized for what they bring to the community, and therefore also to the fishery.

## Community failure

A small-scale fishing community is always more than a landing site. Fisheries communities are also more than a value chain within which goods and services flow. They are also moral communities where social norms and cultural values are building blocks. Fishing communities have a material base, but we should not think that the material base necessarily is the beginning from which everything

else flows. The moral community, and the culture it represents, is not necessarily a 'super-structure', as Marx would have it. Weber questioned this determinism, that the causal arrow is unidirectional from material base to superstructure. I believe Marx and Weber are in a sense both right; the arrow runs both ways and that men and women are typically riding each of them. There are exceptions to this rule – of course. With the enormous diversity of small-scale fisheries around the world, there are exceptions to every rule.

Bonnie McCay and I published a paper in 1998 which posited that the evaporation of the moral fabric in the community is a factor to be reckoned with in IUU (Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated) fishing. Breaking rules, cheating on your quota, betraying your fellow fishers, and neglecting your social responsibilities may be beneficial in the narrow economic calculation. But it is also a moral issue, a break with norms of honesty and solidarity, without which there is no trust. In these conditions, people will not be able to cooperate, even when they see the need for it. Without cooperation, the community (in the sociological meaning of the word as a social group and not just a place) will not function. Community failure (as opposed to 'market failure') is therefore something that must also be addressed in dealing with IUU fishing. Stricter control and surveillance, with or without the use of satellites, will not do the trick; they may perhaps make the problem even worse. People will always find ways to circumvent rules if they feel they must, if they see nothing wrong with it, or if the community does not sanction said rules. The problem has no technical solution, but that seems to be the only thing management agencies can think of these days. Instead of asking why people break rules, we should ask why they follow them. Sanction is hardly the whole answer.

With a strong moral fabric, communities have a better capacity for self-management, or co-management, which may not only help to release the control and surveillance function of an external authority like the state. The moral fabric is also essential for other things that require collective action and the pooling of resources in the



community. Communities may well be poor in financial capital but still be abundant in social capital. Paul Onyango, who has studied small-scale fisheries communities in Lake Victoria over the years, talks about what he calls ‘invisible presences’ – the intangible human resources and relationships they are able to mobilize when needed. Fisheries development projects tend to start with the ‘visible absences’, while they perhaps should commence from those human relationships and resources that are already there but not visible to someone unfamiliar with the community. Thus, one should search for those institutions where people learn to be moral and trustworthy. For this, you would need to look beyond fisheries, into the family, the school, the places for worship, where people gather, and where they learn to distinguish between what is right and wrong, including what it means to be trustworthy. “*It takes a village to bring up a child,*” as the African proverb says. Hillary Clinton adopted it for the title of her 1996 book. It also takes a village to bring up a fisher.

## Why community?

In order to have trust, it matters whether social relationships are equitable or not. The SSF Guidelines rightfully talk about equity, especially in the context of human rights and governance. Equity is about entitlements, but also about rectitude – it speaks to our moral values and sense of justice, on how we relate to each other. But equity also has functional merits. You work better with people who are your equals, with whom you share history, your values and goals, and destiny. With the rights-based fishing approach, and the privatization of resources previously held in common, inequities follow that may be detrimental for communities.

Communities, however, have a deeper and more existential reason to be. If you say that we need small-scale fisheries to support local communities, or communities to support small-scale fisheries, you would need an argument why you need both to begin with. In Norway,

we have been thinking of securing small-scale fisheries (or fisheries in general) to support a decentralized settlement structure, which many think of as a value in itself, but also because it makes it easier to claim our territorial fishing rights. A deserted coast would give such claims less clout. This was a concern underpinning the Norwegian argument in the Anglo-Norwegian Fisheries case about where to draw the baseline that was brought to the Hague in 1951. From time to time since then, the argument has popped up in defense of coastal communities on the brink of losing their economic base. We need to keep coastal communities alive for our territorial sovereignty. People who inhabit the communities have their own reasons to do so, of course. No matter what the government would think about the settlement structure, these communities are home to people. Belonging to a community is part of who we are.

Anthony Cohen, in a paper about Whalsey, a fishing community in Shetland, explains this well:

*“Belonging’ implies very much more than merely having been born in the place. It suggests that one is an integral piece of the marvelously complicated fabric which constitutes the community; that one is a recipient of its proudly distinctive and consciously preserved culture – a repository of its traditions and values, a performer of its hallowed skills, an expert of its idioms and idiosyncrasies.”*

This paper appears in a book titled ‘*Belonging: Identity and social organisation in British rural cultures*’ (1982). With his book in my bag, I visited Whalsey in the spring of 1988, intrigued by the place and the people I met there. What the ITQ system has since done to this fishing community is a story in itself, told by Emma Cardwell and Robert Gear in a paper in *Marine Policy* in 2013.

People who fish need more than secure tenure to access their fishing grounds. Just like anyone else, they also need a place to call home. The

communitarian school of thought, often associated with names like Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, and Amitai Etzioni, argues the case for people's sense of belonging, for living in community with others in order to stay mentally and physically healthy. Communities provide support in times of personal need, as when fishers perish at sea. Small-scale fishing is still among the most dangerous of occupations, and the wreck of a fishing vessel can have devastating effects on families and communities. This happened to a neighboring island to where I lived. I met the crew on the wharf when they were mending their seine; father, two sons, and a son-in law. A year or so after, the boat went down, apparently hit on the side by a big wave. I will elaborate on the safety at sea issue in the next chapter.

As Thomas Friedman argued in his book *'The Lexus and the Olive Tree'* (2012), we cherish the things that come with modernity, like communication and information technology, which also make fishing more effective and secure. But we also need the roots that we associate with our home, with the place where we grew up, as they do not only provide us with values, knowledge, skills, and identity, but also security. Although it is true that communities make us safer, they come with a sacrifice of freedom, as Zygmunt Baumann (2001) pointed out, as the voice of the community may well hold us back from pursuing our individual ambitions that breaks with norms of equity and equality: "*Don't think you are better than us.*"

Nevertheless, as Cohen points out, communities provide the cultural identity – a sense of self – that we need to have in order to know who we are, both as an 'I' and a 'We'. Communities inhabit some dilemmas, but I do think that Baumann takes us a bit too far when he says "*community deprives us of individual freedom.*" Janis Joplin sang "*Freedom's just another thing for nothing left to lose.*" That is a degree of freedom that we would feel happy with, as it would mean being entirely on your own with no attachment to other people, to place and things. You would be entirely on your own, a free but lonely spirit. Such a person hardly exists, as the sociologist Norbert Elias argued.

We are dependent on other people. Therefore, individuals and society are not two separate categories (Elias 1939/1983).

A fisheries policy that destroys the community, and in so doing erodes people's sense of self, takes away life happiness. It would amount to human rights violations, which the SSF Guidelines seek to avoid. There are many ways that fisheries policies may do exactly that, for instance by taking away the resource or territorial rights which make the community secure. People cannot feel secure if their community is not. Their identity is cultural, and culture needs a secure material base. This is why 'Defending the Beach' has been the label for one of the big research questions of Too Big To Ignore (TBTI). It is also why TBTI flags 'Blue Justice' in one of its recent campaigns in the context of all the excitement about Blue Economy and Blue Growth. With these new drives, small-scale fisheries seem to be ignored and risk being displaced from the place they work and live. From the perspective of small-scale fisheries communities, there are obvious limits to what Joseph Schumpeter (1942) called 'creative destruction'. Communities are easier to destroy than create. Small-scale fisheries communities also have tipping points.

## SSF Guidelines

Concern for community runs throughout the SSF Guidelines; the document mentions communities 72 times. They are correct in pointing out in the foreword that "*small-scale fisheries serve as an economic and social engine, providing food and nutrition security, employment and other multiplier effects to local economies while underpinning the livelihoods of riparian communities.*" They are similarly correct when stating that "*small-scale fishing communities ... commonly suffer from unequal power relations.*" Indeed, the SSF Guidelines are spot-on about many of the things they say about small-scale fisheries communities. Article 5.5 makes a point that speaks to the link to what is happening below and above water: "*States should recognize the role of small-scale fishing*

*communities and indigenous peoples to restore, conserve, protect and co-manage local aquatic and coastal ecosystems.”*

What makes communities capable of fulfilling such a role is also important. Communities need secure rights, which is why the SSF Guidelines discuss the importance of tenure and leave out the concept of ‘rights-based fishing’, which is a proxy for privatization and individual transferable quotas. Communities must also function socially and culturally, with all of the things that this implies for cooperative relations and interactions, as well as common identities. In short, communities must work as institutions.

The SSF Guidelines point to functions and responsibilities that are not about fisheries in a narrow sense. For this reason also, all 17 Sustainable Development Goals are of relevance for small-scale fisheries, and not just target 14b, which talks about small-scale fisheries. Therefore, the SSF Guidelines do not only speak to fisheries management departments, but also to authorities that deal with issues concerning health, education, public services, and other community matters. For those services, communities also have an important role to play. These services are better provided in proximity to where people live. You need to know the people you are dealing with. Fisheries communities are multipurpose and multifunctional, and they have local knowledge which must maintain in order to effectively manage the food resources that they draw from below water while still caring for the people who sit around the dinner table.

State governments are a natural audience for the SSF Guidelines. Government can provide valuable support to their implementation, but can also do damage to communities and even cause them to disintegrate. As governments have become more ambitious as governors of fisheries, they have also become more intrusive into the life of communities, turning them into passive receivers of management systems, thus dis-embedding and dis-empowering them. The SSF Guidelines see the need for governments to do the opposite: *“Due attention to social and economic development may be needed to ensure*

*that small-scale fishing communities are empowered and can enjoy their human rights.” (article 6.1.)*

## Deep conversation

We can have an idea about what small-scale fisheries are from studying them from afar, but we will not really know how they work and what they mean to the people who depend on them. You may sit at your desk and come up with a definition, but you cannot be sure that you have hit the nail. We cannot really know what small-scale fisheries mean for those who live them unless we engage with them. We cannot know how it feels to be poor unless we have been poor ourselves, and poverty may mean different things to different people. Nor can we know what it means to have grown up in a fishing community without the personal experience. We cannot even know what growing up in another fishing community besides our own is like. In his book *The Children of Sanchez* (1963), which is another book that inspired me in my early career, Oscar Lewis showed that even growing up in the same family can be a different experience for different members. His children recalled the same things in their own distinct way.

We do not know how to be another person, because we cannot be that other person. We are unique even if we are similar. Nevertheless, as Clifford Geertz said, even if we cannot know how people see their world, we can at least understand what people see their world *with*; i.e. how they conceptualize what they see, by which words they explain what they know. Natural scientists do not have to bother with how fishes describe their situation; but social scientists cannot avoid how fishers do it. People have their own theories, which we must have access in order to understand how they perform.

As social scientists, we seem now to let the government define our research questions more than we used to. There are valid reasons for this: governments increasingly set the fisheries agenda, and the

politics of fishing are captivating whether we like them or not. The SSF Guidelines call for governments to act, which they must do in order for small-scale fisheries to advance, and we need to track whether governments fulfill what they promised when they endorsed them. However, in our effort to understand how governments think and act, we must not forget how people understand their own world, which governments enter into when they implement the Guidelines. That means thinking of communities not just as focus but also as locus of your research. We need to situate ourselves there to see what happens now that the SSF Guidelines are implemented and how they intervene into people's lives. Government policies may look very different from the side of the community.

However, as social scientists, we also need to look beyond government. Even if government takes up more and more space in its attempt to govern sustainably, we must look beyond government into the life of fishing people, their communities, and their struggles to survive. The human rights approach, which the SSF Guidelines advocate, is also about protecting the freedoms of communities. Therefore, communities are spaces worth supporting and exploring.

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[1] Photo - Credit: Steef Meijknecht