

# Supporting small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia: need, challenges, and recommendations

Panitnard Weerawat

JTF 6-2 Pillar III.  
Promotion of sustainable  
development of inland  
fisheries in Southeast Asia

**Keywords:** small-scale fisheries, fisheries management, co-management, Southeast Asia



This article highlights the results of the Regional Workshop on Towards a New Era of Support for Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia organized on 29-31 August 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand. The Workshop was aimed at 1) compiling the description/recognition/contribution of SSF in the region (or in each country), 2) obtaining the current concepts and approaches of small-scale fisheries management systems in the region, 3) compiling the critical challenges/needs on small-scale fisheries management in fisheries resources, human, governance, socioeconomic contexts, etc., in the SEAFDEC Member Countries, and 4) identifying the recommendation and ways forward to strengthen small-scale fisheries management in the region that aligns with international norms and regional best practice and guidance. The Workshop was one of the activities of the project implemented by TD in 2020-2024 entitled “Small-scale Fisheries Management for Better Livelihood and Fisheries Resources Project” supported by the Japanese Trust Fund. The Project was in line with the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) to ensure that small-scale fisheries are sustainable for small-scale fishers, fish workers, and their community and society at large.

Small-scale fisheries encompass all activities undertaken by women and men along the value chain from pre-harvest, harvest, to post-harvest, and play an important role in food security and nutrition, poverty alleviation, equitable development, and sustainable resource utilization (FAO, 2015). Typically, small-scale fisheries are characterized by

year-round or seasonal fishing activities in coastal or inland areas and small-sized and the use of non-motorized or low-powered fishing gear and vessels. Globally and regionally, specifically in the Southeast Asian region, the characteristics of small-scale fisheries vary in the respective countries in terms of fishing zones, types of fishing gear, mode of fishing operations, size of fishing vessels, and engine power of fishing vessels, among others (SEAFDEC, 2024), which restrains the establishment of a general definition of small-scale fisheries. Nonetheless, the significance of small-scale fisheries is noteworthy — accounting for at least 40 percent of the global catch from capture fisheries, employing an estimated 60.2 million people or 90 percent of the total number employed in fisheries globally across the value chain, and involving four women in every ten people in small-scale fisheries value chain (FAO *et al.*, 2023; FAO, 2024).

## Needs and challenges in small-scale fisheries

Most fishers in the Southeast Asian region engage in small-scale fishing operations that are fundamental to the social and cultural structures of the fishing community (SEAFDEC, 2022). However, small-scale fishers face complex and dynamic issues including ecosystem health, social justice, livelihood, and food security. Therefore, in the past decades, SEAFDEC developed and promoted several policy recommendations, guidelines, programs, and projects for sustainable small-scale fisheries in the region. Under the

current project “Small-scale Fisheries Management for Better Livelihood and Fisheries Resources Project” implemented by TD, the Regional Workshop on Towards a New Era of Support for Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia (SEAFDEC/TD, 2023) identified the challenges of small-scale fisheries management in Southeast Asia in ecological, human, and governance contexts (**Box**). Furthermore, the Workshop also provided recommendations to address such challenges and needs as specified below.

Box. Current challenges and needs of small-scale fisheries management in Southeast Asia
<b>Ecological:</b> Fishery resource depletion due to overfishing, habitat degradation, illegal fishing, climate change, and pollution
<b>Human:</b> A circle loop of the fishers’ low fishing efficiency, low catch, and low income led to no savings, low capital, low education, and insufficient living condition
<b>Governance:</b> Lack of updated and accurate scientific evidence (including information on small-scale fisheries), no consensus in scientific evidence, and the limitation of participation of SSF in legal framework formulation; Policymakers in many countries focus mainly on life underwater (SDG14) and pay less attention to life above water (fishers), blue economy and blue justice

## Recommendations to support small-scale fisheries

There is a need for consideration of the international and regional frameworks on small-scale fisheries, including the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and ASEAN-SEAFDEC Resolution and Plan of Action on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region Towards 2030 (RES&POA-2030). The SSF Guidelines provide advice and direction for the enhancement of responsible and sustainable small-scale fisheries, through the development and implementation of participatory, ecosystem-friendly policies, strategies, and legal frameworks. The SDGs present a holistic framework with 17 SDGs which are an urgent call for action by all countries in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go together with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. The RES&POA-2030 serve as a policy framework and priority actions to support the sustainable development of fisheries and enhance the contribution of fisheries to food security and better livelihood of people in the region. At all levels of fisheries management, especially for policymaking, there is the need to truly understand the contributions and impacts of small-scale fisheries which can be reached through a multidisciplinary approach. The study “Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH)” was carried out in support of the implementation of the SSF Guidelines.



Sweet dried fish produced by a women’s group in Krabi Province, Thailand

In implementing fisheries management in conjunction with data and information, fisheries management is the translation of data to actions to reach the goal of sustainable development. It is the governance actors in different institutional frameworks and the rules and regulations in management plans in a fixed time. In this sense, there is a need for baseline knowledge about small-scale fisheries and to give priority to data collection and analysis categorized into ecological well-being, socioeconomic well-being, and governance. For the pillar of ecological wellbeing, the information should cover the extraction of species, such as landings, state of commercial stocks, discards, impacts in food webs, threatened species, etc., contamination (substrate and water quality, productivity), invasive species, and climate change. For the pillar of socioeconomic well-being, the data should be based on fleets and processing industry, including fleet structure (crew, number of vessels, capacity, age), fishing activities and production (landing and fishing effort), employment and average salaries, costs (fuel, personal, and others), processing, marketing, and trading. For governance, the required information should include information, vessel information, marine fishery data, management system, and fisheries management and governance.



Small-scale fishers harvesting bivalves from the Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia (*left*) and Semi-dried Pangasius in Cambodia (*right*)

The existing policy and legal frameworks should be harmonized to align with the SSF Guidelines, and incorporate a human rights-based approach in small-scale fisheries governance. In enhancing fishery resources, countries can consider taking appropriate management actions with the country's policy context such as restoring fish stocks, reversing resource degradation, improving habitat and ecosystem health, making marine protected areas, marine spatial planning, fish *refugia*, etc. as conservation measures for small-scale fisheries. There is also a need to strengthen the capacity of small-scale fishers through education and training, to empower them in resource management, decision-making, and livelihood. Changing the behavior and mindset of all involved actors and enhancing collaboration among stakeholders through knowledge and information sharing would reduce conflicts in resource use.

Furthermore, identifying and promoting appropriate alternative livelihoods, which are doable to increase income is also crucial. The cost-profit should be initially analyzed for the investment decisions. For the processing of fish and fishery products as livelihood, capacity-building should include hygiene, packaging, and market accessibility. Establishing small-scale fisheries cooperatives and community-based organizations, supporting microfinance initiatives, and providing fair financial support mechanisms would be also beneficial to small-scale fishers.

Finally, it is important to strengthen the integrated approach that incorporates the entire ecosystem, including humans, into resource management decisions. Strengthening community-based fisheries management and mainstreaming gender across the board should be supported to mitigate and adapt to climate change and disaster impacts and foster resilience.

## Way Forward

The countries in the region could consider each of the recommendations provided above that apply to their respective small-scale fisheries. Regarding the implementation, the countries are encouraged to describe each strategy or action by fulfilling the question of why, what, where, how, and who and by applying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. The monitoring and evaluation would help adjust the strategies and actions.

## Acknowledgments

The author sincerely thanks the representatives from the SEAFDEC Member Countries and staff from the SEAFDEC Secretariat and SEAFDEC Inland Fishery Resources Development and Management Department (IFRDMD) for sharing their ideas during the Regional Workshop. Special thanks to resource persons from the Food and Agriculture

Organization of the United Nations/Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (FAO/RAP), Too Big to Ignore (TBTI), Mahidol University (MU), Asia-Pacific Rural and Agriculture Credit Association (APRACA), Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF) for their invaluable contribution. The author also commends the staff from the SEAFDEC Training Department for their support in preparing and organizing the event.

This article is part of the project “Small-scale Fisheries Management for Better Livelihood and Fisheries Resources” implemented by the SEAFDEC Training Department (TD) with support from the Japanese Trust Fund. Ms. Panitnard Weerawat is the Lead Technical Officer for this Project.



## References

- FAO. (2015). *Voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication*. Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/4356en>
- FAO, Duke University & WorldFish. (2023). *Illuminating hidden harvests – the contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc4576en>
- FAO. (2024). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024*. Blue Transformation in action. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0683en>
- SEAFDEC. (2022). *Small-scale fisheries of Southeast Asia: A regional digest*. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center. <https://repository.seafdec.org/handle/20.500.12066/6947>
- SEAFDEC. (2024). *Fishery Statistical Bulletin of Southeast Asia 2021*. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center. <https://repository.seafdec.org/handle/20.500.12066/7437>
- SEAFDEC Training Department. (2023). *Report of the regional workshop towards a new era of support for small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia*. Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12067/1953>

### About the Author

Ms. Panitnard Weerawat is a Fisheries Management Senior Researcher at SEAFDEC/TD in Samut Prakan, Thailand. She is the Lead Technical Officer of the project “Small-scale Fisheries Management for Better Livelihood and Fisheries Resources Project” supported by the Japanese Trust Fund. She was also a technical staff of the Regional Workshop on Towards a New Era of Supporting for Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia. (Email: panitnard@seafdec.org).