

Evaluating the Implementation and Impact of FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia and South Asia: Challenges, Progress, and Pathways Forward

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Small-scale fisheries is vital to Asia, providing livelihoods for over 46 million people and contributing nearly half of the region's capture fisheries production (FAO, 2025). Beyond their economic value, small-scale fisheries support food security, nutrition, cultural identity, and social cohesion, especially in coastal and inland communities where alternative livelihoods are limited. Recognizing both their contributions and vulnerabilities, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) endorsed the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) in 2014, the first global instrument dedicated to small-scale fisheries. The Guidelines focus on fairness, making sure fishers have secure livelihoods, equitable access to resources, gender equality, and social inclusion (FAO, 2015a).

The SSF Guidelines provide practical guidance for governments, civil society, and fishing communities, influencing policies, legal reforms, and capacity-building efforts (FAO, 2015a). Although voluntary, they are increasingly seen as a moral and political commitment in the face of climate change and socioeconomic challenges (Jentoft, 2017). In Southeast Asia, organizations like the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) and the ASEAN's Sectoral Working Group on Fisheries (ASWGF) have helped countries integrate small-scale fisheries principles through regional platforms, co-management pilots, and gender mainstreaming efforts. Countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines have embedded these principles in their national strategies. Notably, in 2024, the Philippines became the first country in Asia to adopt a formal National Plan of Action for Small-scale Fisheries (NPOA-SSF) (FAO, 2024). In South Asia, countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have revised policies and legal frameworks to align with the SSF Guidelines, focusing on tenure rights, ecosystem-based management, and supporting vulnerable groups. However, they face challenges including weak enforcement, policy fragmentation, and limited investment in small-scale fisheries-specific programs. Despite progress, these constraints highlight the need for more integrated and well-supported implementation.

To mark the 10th anniversary of the SSF Guidelines, a Regional Small-scale Fisheries Workshop was held in March 2025 in Bangkok, Thailand. Co-organized by the FAO and SEAFDEC, the event brought together representatives from 13 countries, regional partners, and civil society organizations. The workshop aimed to assess implementation progress, identify challenges and good practices, and chart a course for the future. It emphasized the importance of regional collaboration, policy alignment, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that small-scale fisheries communities in Asia can thrive sustainably over the next decade.

Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia and South Asia

From the workshop, it was found that there are key factors that directly impact the achievement of sustainable development and management of small-scale fisheries in the Asia region, particularly in areas of governance, economic viability, social inclusion, environmental resilience, and regional cooperation. The conceptual framework, including key factors and mechanisms presented in **Figure 1**, was developed through a synthesis of deliberations and case studies shared during the workshop. This framework deliberately integrated social inclusion, climate resilience, and regional cooperation as equally important pillars of sustainability.

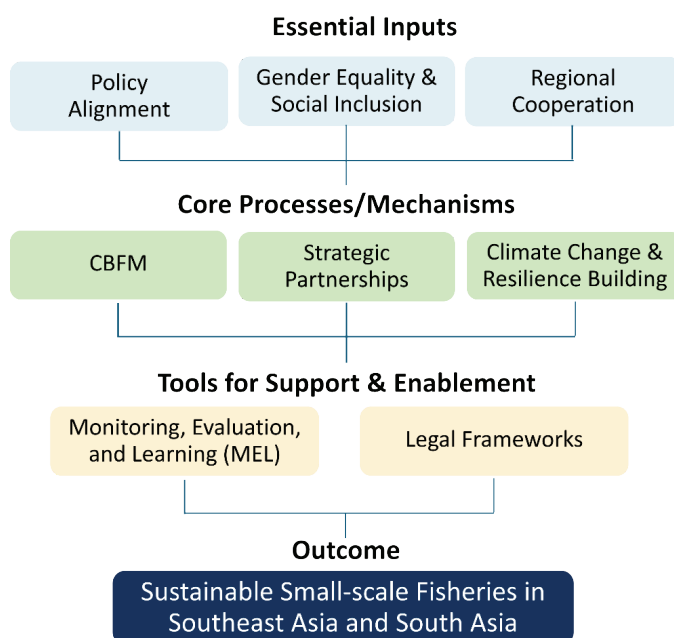


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in Southeast Asia and South Asia

Essential Inputs

The essential inputs for achieving sustainable small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia and South Asia encompass key factors such as policy alignment, gender equality, and regional cooperation. These factors pave the way to integrate an inclusive fisheries governance that reflects the holistic vision of the SSF Guidelines. Policy alignment, for instance, involves not only incorporating environmental sustainability into national fisheries strategies but also embedding social dimensions such as tenure rights, participation, and equity, elements that have historically been underemphasized. Gender equality and social inclusion are equally vital, with growing recognition that empowering women and marginalized groups in fisheries governance leads to more resilient and equitable outcomes. At the regional level, cooperation among countries and institutions, such as through SEAFDEC and ASEAN platforms, supports the harmonization of efforts and addresses shared challenges such as IUU fishing, climate impacts, and legal reform.

Policy Alignment

The adoption of the SSF Guidelines by Asian nations has led to increased policy engagement, particularly in the integration of community-based management and environmental conservation into national fisheries development plans (**Box 1**). Countries such as Thailand and Indonesia have made notable progress in this area, reflecting a growing recognition of the value of inclusive and sustainable fisheries governance (Jentoft, 2017). However, this policy alignment remains uneven. While environmental components of the SSF Guidelines are relatively well integrated into national strategies, cross-cutting social dimensions, such as gender equality, tenure rights, and participation, are often addressed as secondary considerations. These issues may appear in broader social or environmental policies but are rarely centered within fisheries-specific strategies.

This shows a common problem where fisheries policies have mainly focused on increasing production, enforcing rules, and utilizing resources, without considering other important issues. This means the broader goals of the SSF Guidelines (fairness, equity, and sustainability) are not fully included in national fisheries policies.

To address this, governments must go beyond technical or environmental aspects and work toward the systematic inclusion of social and rights-based principles in fisheries policy. Countries should develop national or regional plans that bring fisheries policies in line with the SSF Guidelines.

Such plans should not only promote inter-agency coordination but also embed inclusivity and equity at the core of fisheries governance.

Box 1. Progress in policy alignment with SSF Guidelines

SEAFDEC Training Department (SEAFDEC/TD) collaborated with the Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organization (BOBP-IGO) to organize the “Regional Training on Enhancing Capacity for MCS of Domestic and international Fishing vessels to Combat IUU Fishing” in November 2024 under the FAO Project Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Phase II. The training brought together fisheries officials from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to strengthen their understanding and implementation of updated MCS protocols. These protocols were developed in response to recent legal reforms aimed at combating IUU fishing and reflect a shift toward more integrated and rights-based fisheries management. By aligning national MCS practices with the SSF Guidelines, the training not only improved technical capacity but also fostered greater regional cooperation and policy coherence.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

One of the most transformative aspects of the SSF Guidelines is their explicit emphasis on gender equality and the inclusion of marginalized groups in fisheries governance. However, many South and Southeast Asian countries lack the gender-disaggregated data and policy tools needed to operationalize these principles. Although women make up a significant share of small-scale fisheries workers, especially in post-harvest processing, they are routinely excluded from formal decision-making structures, co-management committees, and access to resources.

This exclusion reflects both cultural norms and institutional issues within fisheries governance systems. In many cases, traditional gender roles and a lack of policy awareness among fisheries officials combine to reinforce the invisibility of women in the sector. This lack of recognition limits the potential benefits of involving women, such as stronger community resilience and fairness. The justification for integrating gender more robustly into small-scale fisheries governance is thus rooted in moral and developmental logic: inclusive participation leads to better outcomes (Chambon *et al.*, 2024). Building on the pathways identified by recent gender research in small-scale fisheries, governments and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) need to invest in awareness raising, leadership development for women, gender-sensitive data systems, and inclusive governance mechanisms (Rice *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, programs that involve women directly in research and monitoring can give them a stronger voice in fisheries policy (**Box 2**).

Box 2. A workshop on gender equality and social inclusion

Co-hosted by SEAFDEC and Australia's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), the Women in Fisheries Workshop was held in Bangkok, Thailand in May 2024 under the ASEAN RPOA-IUU program. It has shown how policy alignment and targeted capacity building can lead to concrete progress on gender equality in small-scale fisheries. These efforts have helped fisheries officers across ASEAN countries develop gender-sensitive action plans, strengthen women's roles in fisheries governance, and initiate regional networks for collaboration. Such outcomes demonstrate that when gender equity is prioritized through institutional support and training, it can shift both practices and mindsets, advancing the inclusive principles of the SSF Guidelines.

Box 3. Existing regional cooperation

Regional cooperation, driven by SEAFDEC, FAO RAP, ASEAN and partners, has translated policy alignment into practical results: enhanced market access, shared fisheries databases, regional traceability systems, streamlined Port State Measures, and harmonized management plans for migratory stocks. Through participatory workshops, strategic partnerships, and Regional Plans of Action, countries have pooled expertise, standardized tools, and implemented coordinated measures, demonstrating that cross-border collaboration is essential for tangible progress on IUU fishing, trade, resource sustainability, and small-scale fisheries resilience.

Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation has been a key factor in advancing the implementation of the SSF Guidelines across Asia. Organizations such as SEAFDEC, FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (FAO RAP), and the ASEAN Secretariat have played central roles in facilitating knowledge exchange, regional dialogues, and technical assistance that support the development of both National and Regional Plans of Action (NPOAs and RPOAs). Through the workshops, countries shared experiences, align practices, and adopted common tools, particularly in tackling shared challenges such as fisheries related legal reform, climate change, and inclusive governance.

The results of these efforts show that collaboration at the regional level can assist countries to move forward faster, especially when facing common environmental and socioeconomic pressures. Regional cooperation is vital for shared problems such as IUU fishing, migratory fish stocks, and marine pollution, which no single country can solve alone (FAO, 2015b).

Nonetheless, gaps remain in sustained financing, the development of shared monitoring indicators, and the systematic inclusion of fisher organizations in regional decision-making processes, which continue to limit the depth and long-term effectiveness of regional collaboration.

To strengthen this momentum, there is a need for enhanced investment in regional platforms for small-scale fisheries coordination, including the development of shared monitoring indicators and the alignment of regional trade and conservation policies with the SSF Guidelines. Effective cooperation should also bring together diverse actors, including fisher organizations, academic institutions, and development partners, to build a more integrated and resilient regional fisheries governance system (**Box 3**).

Core Processes/Mechanisms

The key factors are operationalized through a range of processes/mechanisms. Community-based fisheries management (CBFM) is a participatory model that empowers local communities to steward their own resources. This often results in improved compliance and conservation outcomes. Strategic partnerships connect fisher organizations, governments, academia, and development partners. These partnerships support multi-sectoral collaboration and knowledge sharing to address complex and transboundary issues. Additionally, climate resilience measures are also increasingly important as coastal communities face growing climate threats. These measures include ecosystem-based approaches, early warning systems, and community-led adaptation planning.

Community-based Fisheries Management (CBFM)

CBFM has emerged as a promising model for operationalizing a participatory management process involving resource users, government agencies and institutions, an approach consistent with the principles outlined in the SSF Guidelines and aligned with the co-management framework (Jentoft *et al.*, 1998). Countries like Cambodia, with its Community Fisheries (CFi) model, and Indonesia, through co-management in anchovy fisheries, have demonstrated how locally governed systems can lead to better compliance, stronger social cohesion, and improved conservation outcomes. These initiatives demonstrate strong community buy-in and practical innovation, particularly when external support is aligned with local customs and governance systems. Gender equality plays a reinforcing role in these outcomes: inclusive CBFM arrangements that recognize women's roles across fisheries value chains tend to be more equitable, legitimate, and adaptive, thereby strengthening both social and ecological resilience. An example of a successful CBFM implementation is shown in **Box 4**.

This shows that giving more responsibility to local communities is an effective way to manage fisheries sustainably. However, scaling up CBFM remains a key challenge (Steenbergen *et al.*, 2022). Many pilot projects still face limitations such as insufficient funding, weak institutional support, and lack of policy recognition. There are two main reasons why scaling up CBFM is important: first, it supports the rights-based principles of the SSF Guidelines; and second, it strengthens the adaptive capacity of local communities.

To support this expansion, national governments should institutionalize CBFM through formal policy recognition, dedicated budgets, and integration into broader fisheries management plans. Capacity building should help both local fishers and officials, including skills for collaboration and conflict resolution.

Box 4. A CBFM success story

Ban Nai Nang, a coastal village in Krabi Province, Thailand, has established a well-organized community fisheries group that plays a central role in managing mangrove conservation, regulating local fishing practices, and promoting sustainable livelihoods. Through strong collaboration with government agencies, NGOs, and regional bodies, the community has developed locally agreed-upon fishing rules, reforested degraded mangrove areas, and implemented participatory monitoring systems such as the electronic ASEAN Catch Documentation Scheme (eACDS) to enhance traceability and transparency in small-scale fisheries. This locally driven approach has led to increased fish stocks, strengthened community cohesion, and improved income from eco-tourism activities linked to mangrove conservation. The success of Ban Nai Nang demonstrates how aligning external support with local knowledge, customs, and governance structures can lead to effective and enduring outcomes, reinforcing the importance of scaling up CBFM as a pathway toward rights-based and resilient small-scale fisheries governance.

Strategic Partnerships

Strategic collaboration among fisher organizations, academic institutions, development agencies, and regional bodies support the implementation of the SSF Guidelines by facilitating knowledge exchange and providing tools to address key issues such as gender equality, climate change, and legal reform. For example, the Asia-Pacific Fishery Commission (APFIC) has emphasized the need to “strengthen legal and policy frameworks in line with human rights and sustainable development” as outlined in the SSF Guidelines (FAO, 2020). Partnerships make it easier to solve difficult issues such as IUU fishing and migratory stocks, which no single country can tackle alone. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such partnerships is often constrained

by structural challenges, including high coordination costs, and donor-driven priorities that may diverge from locally identified needs. Therefore, strengthening these partnerships is crucial to pooling resources and expertise for greater impact, as shown in **Box 5**. To act on this, inclusive platforms and multi-sectoral engagement must be expanded to build a resilient, coordinated regional governance system for small-scale fisheries.

Box 5. A success story in strategic partnerships

The Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI-CFF) is a successful strategic partnership involving six countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, alongside organizations like the FAO and the WWF. This collaboration focuses on sustainable marine resource management, coral reef conservation, and food security for fishing communities. Through joint efforts, the initiative has established marine protected areas, developed inclusive management frameworks, and enhanced regional data sharing. CTI-CFF exemplifies how strategic partnerships can effectively combine resources and expertise to promote sustainable small-scale fisheries and marine ecosystems.

Climate Change and Resilience Building

Climate change has increasingly disrupted small-scale fisheries livelihoods by intensifying climate-related disturbances that interact with existing socioeconomic and environmental pressures. These combined stresses heighten livelihood vulnerability, particularly in contexts where adaptive capacity remains constrained. Limited access to appropriate technologies, effective early warning mechanisms, and financial resources reduce the ability of fishing households to anticipate, absorb, and recover from climate-related impacts (Sadekin *et al.*, 2021).

Small-scale fisheries face two problems: climate impacts and limited support to adapt. These include insecure tenure, low levels of education and limited access to climate finance, factors identified in vulnerability frameworks as constraining adaptive capacity (Elías Ilosvay *et al.*, 2024). Helping fishers adapt to climate is important because they are on the frontlines – and their local knowledge can also guide wider climate solutions (Torrent Tucker, 2021). Therefore, it should focus on integrating small-scale fisheries-specific measures into national climate adaptation plans. This includes investing in early warning systems, insurance schemes, and ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries management. Community-driven vulnerability assessments and adaptation planning, supported by government and international donors, are essential to safeguard livelihoods while ensuring ecological sustainability (**Box 6**).

Box 6. A project focused on climate change and resilience building

The FAO conducted the project “Fishing for Climate Resilience” in the Philippines. This initiative supports the formal inclusion of small-scale fisheries in national climate adaptation plans and strengthens the governance of Fishery Management Areas. By aligning local fisheries regulations with climate resilience objectives, the project improved both ecosystem integrity and the security of fisher livelihoods (Rare *et al.*, 2023).

Tools for Support and Enablement

To support and enable these mechanisms, robust tools and systems are essential. Legal frameworks must be harmonized to integrate social and human rights-based principles and not just technical or environmental provisions. Similarly, the development of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems, especially those that are participatory and context-sensitive, can help track progress, ensure accountability, and facilitate adaptive management. Together, these interlinked key factors, processes/mechanisms, and support tools create a comprehensive pathway for realizing inclusive, sustainable, and resilient small-scale fisheries governance across Asia.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Although there has been progress in some areas, the overall implementation of the SSF Guidelines in Asia remains inconsistent, partly due to the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation (FAO, 2023). Only a few countries have systems in place to track the outcomes of implementation or to assess whether the actions taken are making a meaningful difference for small-scale fisheries communities. Without robust data and evaluation, it is difficult to learn from experience and improve fisheries management.

This situation reflects both limited resources and the voluntary nature of the SSF Guidelines, which means that countries are not required to report on or strictly adhere to them. Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons to invest in stronger monitoring systems. Without clear objectives and regular feedback, it is impossible to assess whether the SSF Guidelines are achieving their intended outcomes or to identify and replicate successful practices. Effective monitoring is also essential for ensuring transparency and accountability to both fishing communities and donors.

Therefore, governments and regional organizations should develop participatory monitoring systems that involve small-scale fisheries representatives, academics, and civil society. Tools such as the FAO’s SSF Guidelines Monitoring Framework, along with country-level indicators, can help make reporting more consistent while still allowing for local needs (**Box 7**). These systems should be linked to learning platforms to ensure that monitoring can help improve both policy and practice.

Box 7. Application of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

The FAO and SEAFDEC demonstrate that well-designed monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems can lead to tangible progress in small-scale fisheries governance. FAO has published the Handbook for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework for the SSF Guidelines and conducted regional workshops and training sessions to support countries in developing participatory and context-sensitive MEL systems. Similarly, SEAFDEC has organized a training on socioeconomic monitoring (SocMon) and convened a regional symposium on marine debris and gear marking, contributing to practical tools and shared learning across countries. These efforts show that when MEL tools are localized, inclusive, and linked to learning platforms, they not only enhance accountability but also drive evidence-based improvements in both policy and practice, contributing to more effective and adaptive implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

Legal Frameworks

The legal frameworks across Asian countries could show that while some elements of the SSF Guidelines, particularly those related to environmental sustainability, have been formally adopted into national fisheries laws, key social principles such as tenure rights, gender equality, and transparency remain largely absent or fragmented across non-fisheries legislation (Lawless *et al.*, 2021). This pattern can be interpreted as a legacy of narrowly focused legal systems that prioritize resource control and productivity over holistic, rights-based governance. Fragmented laws weaken the goal of making fisheries fair and sustainable. Countries should review their laws to find gaps and make them more inclusive. Action should therefore focus on legal harmonization, ensuring that fisheries laws are not only technically sound but also socially inclusive, and on embedding legal reform as a central objective within national and regional plans aligned with the SSF Guidelines (**Box 8**).

Box 8. An example of a successful case on legal frameworks

The Philippines has successfully integrated SSF Guideline principles into national legal frameworks (FAO, 2024). The amended Fisheries Code of 2015 reflects a shift toward human rights-based and equitable fisheries governance. It formally recognizes the rights of small-scale fishers to access municipal waters and mandates the establishment of community-based fishing zones, which help safeguard traditional livelihoods and promote sustainable resource use. The law also supports the participation of fisher organizations and local governments in fisheries management, embedding inclusive governance directly into the legal structure. This demonstrates a comprehensive interpretation of the SSF Guidelines and their practical application through law. It justifies the view that legal reform is both feasible and impactful when grounded in inclusive and participatory principles. Other countries can draw on the Philippines' experience to guide legal reviews of their own systems, placing rights recognition, decentralization, and community engagement at the core of fisheries law and policy reform.

The conceptual framework could pave the way to achieve sustainable small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia and South Asia. By aligning national policies with the SSF Guidelines, promoting gender equality, fostering regional cooperation, scaling up community-based management, and embedding legal and institutional reforms, countries are progressively transforming their fisheries governance systems toward inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability. These efforts are further strengthened by strategic partnerships, climate adaptation initiatives, and participatory monitoring and learning frameworks, ensuring that both ecological and social dimensions are addressed. Together, these interlinked actions not only enhance the well-being of small-scale fisheries communities but also secure the long-term viability of coastal ecosystems and fisheries-based livelihoods. As these practices become more embedded and scaled across the region, they provide a clear pathway toward the realization of sustainable, equitable, and rights-based small-scale fisheries in Asia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Over the past 10 years, the SSF Guidelines have helped raise awareness and guide action to make these fisheries fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable. Some countries have made good progress by including small-scale fisheries principles in their laws and policies, supporting community-based management, and promoting gender equality. Regional organizations have also helped countries learn from each other and work together.

However, significant challenges remain. Not all elements of the SSF Guidelines are being effectively implemented, particularly those related to social dimensions such as gender equality, rights, and social inclusion. Many governments lack robust monitoring systems and reliable data to track progress and inform evidence-based decision-making. At the same time, climate change is intensifying

pressures on small-scale fisheries communities, many of which have limited access to the tools, resources, and institutional support needed to adapt. Moreover, while a number of successful pilot initiatives demonstrate promising results, scaling up these approaches requires sustained financial investment, formal institutional recognition, and coherent, well-coordinated policy frameworks.

To enhance practical applicability, the following recommendations are prioritized:

Short-term Priorities (1–3 Years):

- Strengthen participatory MEL systems using existing regional tools to generate evidence and accountability.
- Mainstream gender equality measures within ongoing CBFM and policy processes, including gender-disaggregated data collection.
- Integrate small-scale fisheries considerations into national climate adaptation plans and disaster risk management strategies.

Medium- to Long-term Priorities (3–10 Years):

- Institutionalize policy alignment through fully funded NPOAs and RPOAs that integrate social, environmental, and economic dimensions.
- Scale up CBFM through legal recognition, sustained financing, and capacity development.
- Deepen regional cooperation by harmonizing indicators, strengthening fisher organization participation, and aligning trade and conservation policies with the SSF Guidelines.

With sustained political commitment, inclusive partnerships, and community leadership, the SSF Guidelines can move from aspiration to transformative practice, securing resilient livelihoods and sustainable fisheries across Asia.

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