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NSAC/NWWAC Advice on STECF Work on the Social Data in Fisheries

This paper was approved with consensus by the NSAC and NWWAC Executive Committee on 21 August 2025 via written procedure.

1 Background

Established to address gaps in fisheries legislation regarding social and economic considerations, the recurring Focus Group on Social Aspects convened by the North Sea and North Western Waters Advisory Councils (ACs) aims to identify missing links and propose improvements across commercial, small-scale, and recreational fisheries. Importantly, these meetings provide a platform for presenting and discussing key issues and ongoing developments in the field between a large variety of stakeholders (members and invited experts).

In light of the crucial work being currently performed by the STECF Expert Group on Social Data in Fisheries, the group's Co-Chair, Marta Ballesteros, was invited to present recent developments. These included the toolbox designed to support the social dimension of the CFP¹ which includes National Fisheries Profiles, Community Fisheries Profiles, and social indicators, as well as the latest advancements in the development of the first ever Annual Social Report (ASOR).

With this advice, North Sea and North Western Waters stakeholders aim to contribute observations on the STECF's work, supplementing it with expert insights to address potential gaps and provide concrete perspectives from the fishing sector and Other Interest Groups (OIGs).

¹ https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/stecf/stecf_24-05_social-data-in-fisheries

2 General considerations

In a rapidly evolving environment, intensified by increasing geopolitical tensions, the fisheries sector is experiencing significant social and economic impacts. To ensure relevance and accuracy, it is essential to regularly update all developed fisheries profiles and related data, ideally on an annual basis, where feasible. This is especially needed in cases where significant changes affect the communities described, potentially leading to major shifts in a country's fisheries sector. In such cases, continuous engagement with stakeholders through ACs can serve as an early warning system, allowing for timely and ad hoc updates.

Outdated data risks being misinterpreted as definitive in policy debates and impact assessments. Ensuring data quality while managing collection costs is crucial, as is identifying where fieldwork is necessary. To optimize resources and avoid duplication, collaboration with the STECF Expert Working Group on the Annual Economic Report and ICES Working Group on Social Indicators ([WGSOCIAL](#)) must be maintained efficiently, with synergies sought where possible.

Logistical factors also require attention. For example, stakeholder consultations via questionnaires often restrict input to predefined aspects, limiting the ability to address other elements of importance within the social dimensions of EU fisheries. Incorporating open-ended questions and targeted sub-questions could capture a wider range of perspectives while ensuring specific responses. This approach could then allow for anticipating and pointing attention to topics critical for the fisheries sector.

Furthermore, all relevant parties must have the opportunity to contribute to the development of social data. For instance, two major Danish fishery harbours in the North Sea have been flagged to be missing from the developed community profiles, possibly due to the absence of Danish representatives at the expert meeting. To ensure outcomes are representative and comprehensive, engagement from both sides is essential in STECF processes. A dedicated Multi-AC advice on stakeholder engagement in STECF processes was submitted to the Commission on February 7, outlining ways to strengthen collaboration².

Efforts will be made to maintain close collaboration and meaningful dialogue between the STECF EWG on Social Data and the joint AC Social Aspects FG. This will be supported through regular updates provided by the EWG Chair during FG meetings, as well as by appointing a dedicated FG member to participate as a regular observer in the EWG.

Of potential relevance to the EWG is the fact that most AC meeting reports are publicly available on the respective AC websites and, where confidentiality applies, relevant reports can be shared bilaterally with EWG experts. These reports may usefully inform the EWG's work, as they contain valuable exchanges on issues of importance to AC members, providing insights into key concerns and emerging developments within each AC.

² <https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/07-2425-Multi-AC-Advice-on-Stakeholder-Engagement-in-STEFCF.pdf>

Finally, members emphasize the importance of providing timely feedback on STECF outputs, ideally prior to their publication, to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the resulting documents.

3 National Fisheries Profiles

Although recreational fisheries were not initially included in the first version of the National Fisheries Profiles (NFP) template, the ACs welcome their increased recognition within the updated template. To ensure balanced and comprehensive profiles, it is important to develop comparable socio-economic indicators for the recreational sector. This would support more accurate policy development, marine spatial planning, and resource allocation. However, given current limitations in human resources and the need to produce high-quality outputs, the EWG's limited capacity to fully integrate recreational fisheries into its existing work is acknowledged. In light of this, the ACs express support for the STECF to consider establishing a dedicated working group to address recreational fisheries in more depth. This should include identifying data gaps and enhancing the collection of socio-economic data (i.e., data on participation rates, demographic profiles of recreational fishers, economic expenditures (such as equipment and licenses), revenues and economic value of landings). Additionally, the diversity of recreational fishing practices and regulations across countries and regions must be addressed. Data coherence is crucial, and associations should assist expert groups by providing relevant information.

Ecotourism should also be considered alongside commercial and recreational fishing within NFPs, as in some EU Member States, such as Ireland, it is becoming increasingly significant for local fishing communities.

4 Fisheries Community Profiles

Fisheries communities possess important local knowledge, and with the right mechanisms in place, this expertise could be actively engaged in gathering relevant information and the development of Fisheries Community Profiles. This would not only improve data quality but also foster a sense of ownership among stakeholders and potentially contribute to broader well-being outcomes. Pilot initiative exploring meaningful stakeholder contribution in the profile development should be initiated.

A key aspect to include in community profiles is diversification opportunities, particularly relevant for small-scale commercial fishers who often face low profitability and rely on additional income sources. Diversification outcomes vary based on local contexts and individual fishers' preferences. While some prioritize maintaining traditional fishing practices, others seek more profitable alternatives. Capturing these dynamics is essential for policies that support both continuity and adaptability within the sector.

5 Social Indicators

Social indicators must reflect the diverse activities and policies across EU Member States, including the impact of both EU, UK, and other Third Countries decisions on coastal communities across Europe. While NFPs provide descriptive information on trade relationships and the short- and long-term effects of Brexit, specific indicators addressing these impacts are still lacking. An alternative approach could be to enhance community profiles by emphasizing policy frameworks in countries affected by UK legislation and agreements with Third Countries (e.g., within Coastal States).

Ultimately, social indicators should allow for a more systematic and homogenised collection of social data across Member States, an approach welcomed by both the NSAC and NWWAC. However, members wish to highlight the need to more thoroughly address an area that has received limited attention to date: mental health and wellbeing within the fishing sector across Member States. Capturing perceptions around mental health is challenging. Mental health is often linked with images of therapy or discussing personal trauma, which can feel off-putting. Nonetheless, recent research on fishers' mental health, and, more broadly, their well-being (see: Grøn, 2025³ and Micha & Kelling, 2025⁴) showcases that mental health is both shaped by and has an impact on a wide range of factors, internal and external to the fishing communities and the sector more broadly. There is a need to systematically collect and integrate mental health data to inform policy development. Doing so would also support efforts to enhance the sector's attractiveness and contribute to other relevant indicators.

6 STECF Annual Social Report

The two ACs welcome the recent announcement of the development of the first ever STECF Annual Social Report, mirroring the existing Annual Economic Report. Both ACs stand ready to support the STECF by providing any necessary information to help ensure the report is comprehensive, accurate and reflective of the diverse perspectives of all fisheries stakeholders.

AC members are well positioned to identify and communicate early signs of social or economic changes within their communities. This would help the timely detection of emerging issues, which may not yet be captured through official data collection efforts. Further, AC members can also report on unintended and local impacts of specific regulations that may not be apparent at the EU level and require local insight. Such input would enhance the ASOR, making it more grounded and nuanced, representing the sectoral needs.

Additionally, the report may consider the below aspects:

- Disconnect between public perception and the lived experience of fishers;

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1059924X.2025.2464059>

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44183-025-00107-8>

- Crew shortage and the increasing reliance on foreign crews, including associated challenges such as isolation, safety risks, language barriers, and limited integration of migrant workers;
- Impact of new national (and international) policies on rising costs and suboptimal economic conditions of the fishing sector;
- Impacts of the development of offshore renewable energies on coastal communities (both positive and negative)
- Perspectives of young fishers, particularly regarding the attractiveness of the sector, and the link between mental health and onboard safety;
- Variations across Member States in diversification opportunities and access;
- Link between fishers' earnings, sale prices, catches of other fishers, training and safety during work operations;
- Key factors affecting recruitment of newcomers (i.e., safety concerns, earnings, impacts of new regulations, public image of the sector, competing activities, well-being, future predictability).
- Effectiveness of national and EU funding support in protecting coastal communities.
- Indirect psychological effects of maritime planning on the fisheries sector
- The impact of loss of legitimacy of their activity on fishers' well-being
- Dynamics of institutional mistrust in coastal areas

7 Conclusion

Despite representing one of the three pillars of the CFP, social aspects have historically received less attention than the environmental and economic dimensions. Overlooking the social dimension of the fisheries sector and coastal communities leaves a crucial part of its identity and value unaddressed.

The work of the STECF EWG on Social Data in EU Fisheries is essential in developing a framework to effectively implement the social dimension of the CFP. The ACs welcome both the development of the social dimension toolbox and the upcoming ASOR, aiming to establish a structured and systematic approach to evaluating and tracking social aspects in the sector.

While the current work of the STECF EWG lays a strong foundation, future efforts may focus on ensuring up-to-date data on social aspects and inclusive stakeholder engagement. Additional work is needed to fill data gaps, improve representativeness, accounting for the impacts of external events (i.e., Brexit and Coastal States agreements), and systematically capturing fishers' well-being (particularly mental health) to better inform policy development.

Strengthening collaboration between STECF and the NSAC/NWWAC Social Aspects FG will be crucial for improving understanding of the social dimension of fisheries and ultimately developing more effective fisheries policies. The ACs are also committed to contributing to the ASOR by flagging early signs of change and local impacts of regulations, helping ensure the

report is comprehensive, accurate and reflecting diverse perspectives of all stakeholders. Finally, the ability to provide timely feedback on STECF outputs is welcomed, as it helps ensure the relevance and accuracy of the resulting documents.

Only by addressing the full spectrum of sustainability with its environmental, social and economic components, which are mutually reinforcing, can the EU spearhead its transition and ensure that the fishing sector will champion it.