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OIG position on COVID-19 and fisheries

Context

The fishery sector in the Mediterranean, like most of the economic activities, has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

Besides an overall reduction of the fishing effort, a number of new factors including increased cost for seafood distribution, a reduction and in certain cases collapse of the demand and market availability of fresh seafood products, as well as the total closure of recreational fisheries in many countries, started to reshape the fishery landscape in the Mediterranean in this time of crisis.

While the fishing effort is dropping in general, the pressure on certain stocks, such as small pelagics for canning, has shown an increase due to a higher demand for non-perishable seafood products, as a response to market demand. Similarly, the importance of subsistence fishing (fishing for food security) and the pressure on respective target stocks has evidently increased. In addition, there is a solid risk of an increase of illegal fishing, in a context where controls at sea might certainly not be a priority or are limited by safety requirements. Consequently, a significant reduction of effort in monitoring, control and surveillance can already be observed in several countries and fisheries.

Recommendations

- The safety of all fish workers men and women, along the supply chain, needs to be ensured as a first priority. This includes the secured provisions of personal protection equipment (PPE) and physical distancing measures, including in the fishing operation and the sale of fish in direct sales to secure fish supply in coastal communities and to wider supply chains, according to the national provisions.

- Fisheries, like other economic activities, should benefit from public funds to safeguard the employment levels and mitigate the economical impact of the COVID-19 crisis. In particular state aid should compensate for closures of fishing activities, provided that this is beneficial to both the economic dimension, and the recovery of the stocks. It is of paramount importance that any dilution of current and future measures aiming at the recovery of fish stocks must be avoided to support the resilience of ecosystem services in this and future crises. This includes technical measures, gear selectivity, identification and implementation of closed areas, spatio-temporal restrictions, MCS measures and fishing effort reductions limits.

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Where food security is not impaired, a moratorium of all fishing activities, aimed at catalyzing the rebuilding of overfished stocks, should be considered.

- The reports on challenges in global and European trade, mostly linked to disrupted supply chains, accumulate. The crisis has highlighted the importance of the availability of local production to ensure seafood supply at local level under the current conditions. Small scale producers in particular, face unprecedented economic challenges where market demand is heavily reduced and traditional supply chains impaired. This also underlines the importance of options for diversified supply chains, including more direct marketing that, while respecting reporting requirements, can increase the value of productions at first sale for fishers.

- Especially in this time of crisis, there is a high risk for fishers to be in a weaker position in the negotiation with brokers and fishmongers who could take advantage of the critical situation to purchase fish at a lower price and establish unsound economic relations. This dynamic can incite fishers to a "race to fishing" once the crisis is over, in order to overcome this vicious circle. For this reason, the re-starting of fishing activities should be progressive so that supply and demand find a new equilibrium at a fair price for everyone (fishermen and consumers) and unused fishing days should not be rolled over to 2021.

- Especially small-scale fishers risk being in a less powerful position when it comes into a price negotiation. It is hence paramount, in alignment with SDG target 14b, to offer alternatives for fishers against unfair agreements, promoting and supporting new solutions to shorten the supply chain, escape from fish traders' monopole and ensure a legal and diversified market, both during and after this emergency situation.

- Even if the temporal horizon of the crisis is still unclear, the moment to re-think and plan how the resume of fishing activities will look like is now. In this unprecedented situation, the opportunity to assess the impact of such a radical change, including on the abundance and recovery of fish stocks needs to be evaluated and realized. Particularly possible changes in consumers' patterns (mainly in cities that are far from the sea) will have to be scrutinized.

- Sustainability of fisheries should be the priority when fisheries activities start to resume. The fishery sector should learn from the positive effects of the reduced pressure on fish stocks in terms of increased CPUE, increased size, volume, quality and value of the catch, lower costs and lower footprint of the fishing operation. This is an unique opportunity to rethink fishing activities, improve

fisheries management and fast-track the recovery of fish stocks, delivering on regional policies for healthier marine ecosystems and a higher resilience for nature and people in the future.

- The dialogue between EU and non-EU countries in the GFCM context is now more important than ever. Co-operation should be maintained and re-established where its importance has been temporarily put on hold. This is a time for cooperation and solidarity. The harmonization of measures at regional level is crucial to avoid that some parties profit from the current crisis at the costs of others and the Mediterranean overall. This is also the time to keep fighting illegal fishing and avoid any potential increase of IUU activities. In doing so, the application of measures against IUU fisheries in the EU and GFCM context, national rules and regulations, as well as reporting of infringements and non-compliance, must be strengthened and pursued with even more determination during these challenging times. REM can be an excellent tool to be used as a future-proof method of control which even respects social distancing for the benefit of fishers and inspectors.

- In a time of such crisis, countries bearing the biggest responsibility through having the largest fleets and hence fishing effort, need to lead by example and put forward measures in line with the above for the sake of a highly productive and resilient future of the Mediterranean.

- Regarding recreational fishing, we consider that it should be authorized respecting the social distancing measures recommended by the health authorities. Recreational fishing helps its practitioners stay physically active and improve their mental health, all of which help to strengthen the immune system. In the same way, it allows the provision of fish for food within a framework of food sovereignty. The economic damage that the recreational fishing sector is suffering (material brands, specialized stores, etc..) is being very serious, and if the current situation continues, the impact could be unsustainable for the sector.

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