

THE CONTRIBUTION OF FISHERIES TO GDP: UNDERESTIMATING THE ROLE OF SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES

Dirk Zeller, Shawn Booth and Daniel Pauly

*Presented by Dr Dirk Zeller, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
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Official statistics, national accounts and economic development initiatives, including foreign aid, have often focused on commercial fisheries in Pacific islands, such as the large-scale tuna fisheries, which are perceived to be of major economic importance to these countries, and in the case of American Samoa have increased significantly in recent years. In contrast, while small-scale coastal fisheries, especially subsistence fisheries on coral reefs, have been recognized as fundamental for social, cultural and food security reasons, their catches are seldom accounted for in official statistics (despite suggestions that catches were high historically), and hence their contribution to GDP of a country are often not taken into consideration. We undertook catch reconstructions for American Samoa for 1950-2002, providing estimates of the non-commercial, subsistence catches that do not form part of the officially reported fisheries statistics. Our reconstruction suggests a large discrepancy between official statistics as reported by American Samoa (representing the artisanal commercial sector) and our reconstructed scenario (artisanal plus subsistence sectors), for the time period considered. Significantly, our reconstruction suggests a decline in total catches over the time period of interest, driven by declines in subsistence catches on the major inhabited island, likely caused by overfishing due to a very high population growth rate. For the more recent years, this is masked by large increases in catches of pelagic species by increasingly large-scale long-line vessels moving into the American Samoa pelagic fisheries. Evidence points towards the non-sustainability of this trend. We applied our reconstructed data to an approach used by the Manila-based Asian Development Bank to account for all fisheries contributions to national GDP, using value-added estimators for each fisheries sector in combination with market prices for the period 1982-2002. This suggests that the national contributions of fisheries to GDP have been substantially underestimated in American Samoa over the last 50 years. This indicates that subsistence fisheries have played a considerably more important role in national accounts as contributors to GDP than currently assumed. This should challenge our perspective with regards to the importance of various fisheries sectors to the economies of Pacific islands, and should give international development agencies, as well as local governments, pause to re-think their prioritization of development support.

Keywords: American Samoa, artisanal fisheries, coral reef fisheries, subsistence fisheries, small-scale fisheries, national accounts, GDP, catch reconstruction