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# Q&A – Fishing Subsidies Expert, Ahmed Khan

Oceana spoke to Ahmed Khan, a scientist at the University of British Columbia (UBC)'s Fisheries Center (led by Oceana board member Dr. Daniel Pauly) and a primary author – along with Dr. Pauly and Dr. Ussif Rashid Sumaila – of the Center's recent ground breaking report that discovered worldwide government subsidies to commercial fishing amount to roughly one-third (or \$30 to \$34 billion) of the total value of the global landed catch.



## **Q: Where are you from?**

A: I am originally from the Lion Mountains in West Africa (Sierra Leone).

## **Q: How was life like for you during Sierra Leone's civil war?**

A: I was forced to leave the country and live in refugee camps. First, after the military coup of May 1997, I left Freetown for Guinea and eventually moved to Ghana, where I stayed for about a year trying to wrap up my undergraduate studies. I left again when

rebels invaded Freetown in January 1999, and went to the Basse refugee camp in Gambia and later moved on to Banjul. There weren't many post secondary educational opportunities in the camps, so I took the GRE so I could apply for research assistantships in North America which eventually led me to Canada and to the University of British Columbia.

## **Q: How did you get into fishing subsidies research?**

A: In Sierra Leone, the most pressing issues were health and nutrition; as a child, I wanted to make things better. I studied fisheries because of its importance as a protein source (75 percent of animal protein intake) and as a livelihood for most people living on the coast. In the late 1990s I worked at the University of Sierra Leone, trying to understand the impact of subsidized EU fishing gear on fishing and fisher communities. When I was in the refugee camps in Gambia, I volunteered with the UN on fisheries issues and co-authored a couple of publications on fishing in post-war Sierra Leone. Later, at UBC, with Dr. Sumaila and Dr. Pauly as my mentors, I was inspired to think global — realizing that EU fishing subsidies in West Africa are just the tip of the iceberg.

## **Q: What part of your findings surprised you?**

A: I was surprised to find that the trend of subsidizing the fishing sector has been there a long time, for decades. Through the literature, I realized that fisheries subsidies started in the 1940s and 1950s in many developed countries of the world and in developing countries in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the new UN law of the sea. The idea I had was narrow in focus, limited to West Africa and Europe. So,

I developed a framework and began to identify and classify different types of subsidies first by regions and eventually worldwide, ending up with a global database.

## **Q: What are the implications of your research?**

A: The implications are international in scope. Fish stocks are not healthy so providing subsidies in billions of dollars is problematic. There are too many boats chasing few fish.

## **Q: How do subsidies impact Sierra Leone?**

A: Very much. Sierra Leone has rich fisheries, with one of the largest shrimp biomasses in West Africa. Most of the industrial fisheries are joint ventures or foreign owned and are highly subsidized. They target shrimps and large pelagic (open water) fish. In contrast, artisanal fishers use canoes developed from wood trunks that catch mostly sardines and herrings. These are sustainable fisheries. They often stay inshore but so do the shrimp trawlers. And, due to weak control measures, most of the industrial catches are not monitored which allows them to fish unsustainably, with a high level of discards. Worse still, now you have subsidized industrial boats targeting sardines and herring for fishmeal. The end result is that the local population loses protein.

## **Q: What do you think about recent efforts to limit subsidies at the WTO?**

A: I have to say that it has been impressive to see the US take such an initiative. I was reading the *Economist* and I was happy to see Director General Pascal Lamy's piece on the WTO's role in addressing fisheries subsidy reforms. It just makes me feel happy that my work is helping with an issue of such global significance. That is what I call a good day.

## **Q: What should happen to subsidies in the future?**

A: In the light of poor status of fish stocks worldwide, I think governments should be spending money on sustainable fishing programs and developing conservation measures. I think a framework that promotes both biodiversity conservation and human wellbeing would be useful, with the Millennium Development Goals as reference points. Then you could see the effect of subsidies in a positive way — trying to end poverty and promoting healthy marine ecosystems.

## **Q: What is your favorite fish?**

A: Sun dried and salted bonga (herring). It is extremely tasty, has omega 3 fatty acids and has less of an ecological footprint.