



# The European Policy Centre

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## **Section: EPC Dialogues**

By The European Policy Centre

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An EPC “mini-dialogue” was held on 4 July 2002, on the case for a radical overhaul of the Common Fisheries Policy. A question and answer session followed. This is not an official record of the proceedings and specific remarks are not necessarily attributable.

There was no dispute about the nature of the problem: the speakers agreed there was too much fishing and too few fish. A failure to curb over-fishing, warned a senior European Commission official, would mean “fishing over”. And a fisheries biologist warned that the only answer was to shut down sizeable areas of fishing waters to allow stocks to regenerate.

### **The view from WWF**

The Dialogue's first speaker was **Julian Scola**, Communications Manager of the World Wildlife Fund's European Fisheries Campaign. He said fisheries had long been seen as a “marginalized, specialised topic” but this was changing, partly because of a more general shift in focus from the producer to the consumer and from production to the impact of production. The future of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was now hitting the headlines. The World Trade Organisation, development organisations, fish processors, sports anglers and environmentalists were all becoming more vocal.

There were four key areas for the EU to focus on in tackling future fisheries strategy:

***Diminishing resources.*** Fish stocks are in serious trouble, and although the EU had made impressive commitments on the sustainable use of natural resources, many of these commitments were clearly contradicted by the realities imposed by the CFP.

***Subsidies.*** Public opinion was swinging against the use of taxpayers' money to subsidise the fishing effort, unless there was a clear public benefit. There was a growing realisation that it makes no sense to subsidise those who over-exploit a finite natural resource.

***The Wider Picture.*** There is real concern that the external aspects of the CFP, and particularly the access agreements with developing nations and Africa, are not “coherent” with the EU's development policies. There is a growing feeling that Africa's fish resources might be better used to develop African fisheries and feed African people.

***Ownership of the seas.*** Oceans were no longer seen as “a remote wilderness providing infinite

bounty for hunters of fish.” It was not just that modern technology made it possible to track down every single fish, but seas were now understood to be a complex eco-system in which all species required protection. The seas, said Mr Scola, no longer belonged only to fishermen.

Things could not continue as they had done. There was substantial change in the air, with a will to match fishing effort to available fish and achieve a healthy marine environment. Some now saw reform of the CFP as a trial run for reform of CAP, and as a test of the EU's commitment to sustainable development.

### **Fisheries in trouble**

Fisheries biologist **Daniel Pauly**, Professor at the Fisheries Centre of the University of British Columbia and Principal Science Advisor for the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resource Management in the Philippines, said fisheries were in trouble everywhere. Virtually all species at or near the top of the North Atlantic “food webs” had been depleted by excess fishing and there was a steady erosion of fisheries worldwide.

Global catch statistics do not seem to reflect this decline, with catches actually appearing to increase in the 1990s. But some of this was due to over-reporting, particularly in China. About 90% of fish catches come from shelves no more than 200 metres deep. As these stocks dwindle, fishermen are obliged to fish deeper, but in so doing they are removing the fish food source of the larger species. “We are depleting the prey of the remaining big ones until they become scarcer,” warned Mr Pauly. This “fishing-down” effort was occurring wherever there were unprotected marine eco-systems.

The only reason consumers had not noticed this depletion in fish availability was because Europe was importing more, especially from West Africa. This meant that the African fishery and eco-system was now as depleted as the North Atlantic, and the situation was unsustainable.

Modern technology meant the natural respite afforded to some fisheries by icy winter conditions or storms was no longer available. The only answer was to tackle the over-fishing problem at its root - and simply shut down some fishing grounds altogether to allow stocks to regenerate. If technology can keep the fisheries open, then laws would have to keep them closed.

Mr Pauly said current EU fisheries policy - multi-annual catch quotas, reduced fishing effort and fewer fishing vessels - was just the beginning. But a small reduction in fishing fleets would not solve the problem.

### **The case for reform of the CFP**

**Corrado Pirzio-Biroli**, Chef de Cabinet of Agriculture and Fisheries Commissioner, Franz Fischler, said national interests in the carve-up of fishing quotas was partly to blame for the current position. Scientific advice, he said, was being “watered down” by political compromise. The present fisheries policy was a failure. More and more stocks were in danger of collapse, it had not prevented illegal catches and there was now a “climate of distrust”. Fishing capacity had increased, and national fisheries controls and sanctions for breaching limits in the EU countries were unequal and therefore unfair.

He said that politicians were “getting in the way of sustainable management of the system”. They passed the buck for reforming fisheries to their successors, and meanwhile fishermen were

anxious to make a living “as long as it lasts”. The situation was self-defeating, with no-one taking responsibility for the long term. Unless we stop over-fishing, he warned, fishing will be over. Only a new CFP would offer a brighter future for fishermen. Without better protection of stocks, there will be no fishing industry.

### **Objectives of CFP reform**

The Commission objectives were:

- Sustainable development in the ecological, economic and social sense.
- A healthy marine eco-system.
- A successful and competitive fisheries sector that works for consumers.
- A fair economic framework for those dependent on fisheries.

Success required better conservation measures, multi-annual stock management plans, and the scrapping of part of Europe's fishing fleet. Vessels scrapped with public money could not be replaced, he said, and the use of private money to build new boats would be limited to the replacement of existing capacity.

The issues to be addressed were the use of structural funds for renewal and social measures in the fishing industry. There also had to be uniform control and enforcement measures across Europe, with a joint inspection structure to coordinate national control activities with harmonised sanctions. As an additional guarantee of fair play, inspections would be carried out by teams from different Member States to give fishermen confidence that the rules were being applied evenly.

The international dimension to the CFP required a wider fight against illegal fishing, a new fish stock assessment procedure to accompany any third country fishing agreement and a new effort to promote international dialogue on fisheries problems.

### **Member States and CFP reform**

Reform is simply a response to the state of stocks in various EU waters, which means that tougher remedies are required in the northern part of the EU than are needed in the south. Surprisingly, the biggest complaints about CFP reforms were coming from the south, where fewer reforms were needed, while northern countries, which will bear the brunt, were being more realistic. The end result must be fair treatment for all Member States, with a smaller but more competitive fishing fleet better adapted to available resources. Fish stocks would then recover, pressure on prices would recede, and those leaving the industry would have a brighter future, insisted Mr Pirzio-Biroli. . “If, instead of changing CFP, we bury our heads in the sand and ignore the problems, our fishing industry will suffer death by a thousand cuts.”

### **Discussion**

Mr Pirzio-Biroli acknowledged that, due to qualified majority voting, a group of **large EU countries could scupper reforms**, but it was up to everyone to accept the need to change - and to accept that if change had come earlier then the remedies being proposed now would have been less harsh. There was a lot of opposition, he said, but it was possible that the politicians were

more opposed to the reforms than the fishermen themselves.

He recalled that in the Agenda 2000 CAP reform proposals there had been a point at which only one Member State was in favour, and yet 95% of the Commission's plans had ultimately gone through. There was always the possibility of compromise - but the **Commission did not intend to compromise very much on CFP reform.**

Asked if EU ministers would agree to losing power over the **setting of fish catches and national catch quotas**, Mr Pirzio-Biroli indicated that there was a need to avoid crucial decisions on fisheries being threatened by politics, because the nature of politics in fisheries was always to permit more fish catches than the Commission, on the basis of scientific advice, recommended. Also, the scientific advice itself could be difficult to assess, because there were often differing expert views.

In reply to one questioner, Mr Pauly described fishermen as being “like tenants in a house and it is perfectly reasonable to ask tenants not to trash the place, or to leave.”

For the Commission, one problem was to resolve the feeling amongst fishermen that there is no **level playing field in the management of the CFP**, hence the need for regional management committees with their full participation. These would be advisory councils involving consumer groups and local authorities as well.

## **Conclusion**

Summing up, **Stanley Crossick** said it was clear that drastic reform was vital, in close cooperation with fishermen and in the interests of all stakeholders. One difficulty was that politicians had short-term perspectives, but fisheries reform required long-term strategies. Previous policies had not been right, particularly in the area of monitoring and control. Now it was up to Mr Fischler to “battle on”, in the interests of the revival of fish stocks and future job security for the industry. As was said during the meeting, fishermen, however, appeared to be taking the view that the industry had no future and that, therefore, it was better for them to make as much money in the short-term and to educate their sons to follow another profession.