LDAC Advice

Addressing climate change in non-EU waters

Repercussions for EU Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs) and Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs): implications for small-scale fisheries and EU distant-water fleets

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Context

The LDAC initiated work on this topic in a dedicated Seminar on *linkages between CFP External Dimension and Climate Change, held in Stockholm on 25 May 2023*[1]*. The aim of this Seminar was to gather knowledge and expertise in identifying and analysing environmental and socio-economic impacts of climate change for the EU distant water fleet and coastal Communities.*

The LDAC has discussed this topic at several LDAC Working Group 5 meetings in 2024 and 2025 and has also drawn inspiration and ideas from a recent special report by CFFA-CAPE on "Climate Change and Small-scale fisheries", published in December 2025[2].

Preliminary considerations

Climate change is increasingly affecting the operational conditions and economic predictability for EU distant-water fleets and coastal communities reliant on small-scale fisheries. Changes in fisheries resource distribution, migratory patterns, abundance and productivity, and seasonal availability of both target and by-catch stocks introduce additional uncertainty for both EU operators and small-scale fishing communities and post-harvest (including processing and transformation) value chains in partner States, with potential implications for the fairness and value of Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs).

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[1] Agenda and presentations of the *LDAC Seminar on CFP External Dimension and Climate Change (Stockholm, 25 May 2023)* available here*:*
https://www.ldac.eu/en/meetings/archive/event-cfp-external-dimension-climate-change-25-05-2023

[2] "*From crisis to adaptation: African small-scale fishing communities are leading in climate resilience*":
https://www.cffacape.org/publications-blog/from-crisis-to-adaptation-african-small-scale-communities-are-leading-in-climate-resilience

These impacts include shifts in fish stock distribution and migration patterns, habitat degradation, coastal erosion and increased vulnerability of coastal infrastructures and livelihoods.

The LDAC considers that climate resilience strategies should be addressed pragmatically and inclusively, striking a balance between environmental sustainability, socio-economic stability, and legal certainty for EU operators.

Potential threats of climate change in non-EU waters

1. Decline in fish stocks (yield productivity) in tropical areas[3]:
As ocean temperatures rise, acidification increases and deoxygenation intensifies, the productivity of certain fish stocks in tropical areas is expected to decline. These changes affect species' growth rates, recruitment success, spawning cycles, and mortality patterns, potentially resulting in reduced biomass and leading to reduced catches and lower revenue for distant-water fleets that depend on these species.

2. Ecosystem disruptions:
Climate change can alter marine ecosystems, triggering coral bleaching or the destruction of critical habitats (e.g., upwelling zones). This, in turn, affects the structure and functioning of marine ecosystems, and can disrupt the abundance and distribution of marine species, further complicating fishing operations.

3. Increased operational costs (including fuel) and safety concerns:
Changes in the availability and distribution of fish stocks, the need for longer trips to find profitable fishing grounds, and the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events can all increase operational costs for distant water fleets and small-scale fishers. These factors may lead to higher fuel consumption and thus could increase the fisheries footprint (in terms of CO2/GHG emissions). These changes also pose concerns for the safety at sea, especially of small-scale fishers, due to dangers related to the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, as well as increased exposure to dangerous sea conditions due to the pursuit of fish stocks moving further offshore.

4. Geopolitical tensions (fisheries management in the high seas vs EEZs):
As climate change reshapes fisheries in contested or boundary zones (such as West Africa, the Southwest Atlantic or the North East Atlantic), the potential for disputes over established fishing rights may increase, leading to political tensions and risks to fleet operations.

[3] FAO's work on climate change Fisheries and aquaculture 2020 (page 11)

Why integrate climate considerations more systematically into EU fisheries relations?

Climate impacts can exacerbate existing pressures on marine resources with negative consequences for both local communities and EU distant-water fleets ("*loss-loss*" situation).

Climate impacts are already affecting the performance and predictability of EU distant-water fleets' operations, including through reduced catches, increased operational costs and greater uncertainty regarding fishing opportunities.

In this regard, climate-induced shifts in stock distribution are already having detrimental impacts on the established fishing rights and track records of EU fleets, particularly in areas managed by Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), such as NEAFC. Any reallocation of fishing opportunities resulting from climate-driven stock movements should be based on transparent and robust scientific evidence, taking into consideration environmental and social criteria, and conducted within multilaterally agreed frameworks. Additionally, allocation decisions should ensure predictability and stability for operators that fish sustainably, recognise long-standing responsible fishing activity and investment, account and minimise the risk of furthering geopolitical tensions between fishing nations and coastal states.

In the case of highly migratory species such as tuna, climate-induced changes may alter migration routes and the time stocks spend within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of coastal States, potentially affecting the availability of resources under tuna agreements. This would have implications for both the economic returns of EU fleets and the financial compensation and sectoral support expected by partner countries and the coastal fishing communities relying on them.

In West Africa, climate change is driving ocean warming, acidification, and altered upwelling systems, disrupting the distribution, productivity, and seasonal availability of small pelagic species such as sardines and sardinella and cephalopods such as octopus or squid, which are all highly sensitive to changes in temperature and plankton dynamics.

These shifts threaten to undermine the economic viability and predictability of catches for both EU distant-water fleets and coastal communities operating in these fisheries, while posing significant food security and livelihood risks for local artisanal fisheries that depend on nearshore, climate-sensitive stocks.

In response to these challenges, evidence from civil society organisations shows that small-scale fishing communities are implementing adaptation and mitigation measures to lessen their climate-related impacts. Supporting such efforts is consistent with EU objectives on sustainable fisheries, food security, climate adaptation, and stable long-term fisheries partnerships with third countries.

The role of EU SFPAs in a changing climate

Climate change may progressively affect EU SFPAs by altering the distribution, availability or predictability of target species within certain EEZs. In such circumstances, a growing 'mismatch' may occur between agreed fishing opportunities and the actual availability of resources. This could have possible implications for the economic balance of agreements (compensation, sectoral support, fees), and consequently, for their long-term political acceptability and recognition for both partner States and EU operators.

This underlines the importance of considering more flexible adaptive approaches in the implementation of SFPAs in response to climate change.

Additionally, for coastal communities, locally led adaptation measures, such as climate-adaptive harvest strategies, ecosystem protection, diversification of livelihoods, improved landing and processing infrastructures, and community-based monitoring, can enhance resilience while contributing to sustainable fisheries management. These measures can also help reduce tensions between differentiated fleet segments and support stable operating conditions for all users of marine resources in a given area.

EU external fisheries, development and trade policies should recognise both the climate-related challenges facing small-scale fisheries in and the need to support their effective adaptation to climate change, as well as the climate-related challenges faced by EU fleets operating under fisheries agreements. Greater coherence and mutual reinforcement[4] across these policy areas is essential, avoid unintended negative impacts on coastal resilience or on the effective access to resources.

The LDAC sees value in integrating climate considerations more systematically into EU fisheries relations with partner coastal States, including through policy dialogue, relevant legislation, funding instruments and SFPAs.

4 https://ldac.eu/images/LDAC_Response_to_EU_Call_for_Evidence_Fisheries_External_Action_15_Sept_2025.pdf.

The role of RFMOs in ensuring stability and predictability

For highly migratory, widely distributed and straddling stocks, RFMOs play a central role in adapting fisheries management to climate-driven changes in stock distribution.

The LDAC underlines that:

- RFMOs must remain science-based.

- Allocation decisions must take into consideration environmental and social criteria, and follow international law (UNCLOS), ensuring that all fleets and countries with legitimate claims and established fishing rights are duly considered in the setting of fishing opportunities.

- Climate change should not be used as a justification for unilateral reallocation/appropriation of quotas by non-EU countries or exclusion of EU fleets in coastal waters/EEZs of CPCs (as has recently happened for NEAFC with regard to small pelagic stocks).

Within the context of fisheries management in RFMOs, the EU should actively defend its fleets' legitimate expectations and established fishing rights, derived from historical participation and grounded in consistent compliance with agreed rules, high environmental and social standards, and their contributions and efforts to ensure the sustainable management of stocks.

LDAC Recommendations to the European Commission:

1. ***Integrate climate resilience considerations into the design of SFPAs through the development of climate-informed management approaches for fisheries. Relevant tools and frameworks may include the use of management strategy evaluation and setting fishing opportunities based on a harvest strategy that is scientifically tested to be robust to climate change scenarios. This should translate into enhanced focus on climate change in the work of the SFPA Joint Scientific Committees and relevant consideration by the Joint Committees.***

2. ***Evaluate and address data requirements for climate-related monitoring as part of ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM) implementation, ensuring that SFPAs can support capacity-building and scientific cooperation in this area. Any such measures should build, where possible, on existing data collection frameworks and avoid creating additional reporting obligations for EU fleets. This consideration should include evaluation of the potential added value of comprehensive ocean observation systems, including fisheries-independent surveys, and robust fisheries-dependent data programming.***

3. ***Integrate climate resilience considerations into the design, implementation and evaluation of SFPAs, including adaptive approaches to access and financial contributions where appropriate, based on scientific evidence and mutual cooperation and agreement.***

4. ***Earmark EU external funding for fisheries-related climate adaptation measures, including for the decarbonisation of EU distant-water fleet operations, climate-resilient infrastructure, ecosystem restoration and post-harvest improvements.***

5. ***Promote the development and operational use of advanced forecasting tools for fish distribution and abundance, in cooperation with RFMOs, scientific bodies and industry, in order to:***

    - ***Anticipate climate-driven stock shifts.***
    - ***Prevent conflicts between coastal States and distant-water fleets.***
    - ***Ensure adaptive but legally secure management decisions within the existing multilateral framework of international ocean governance.***

6. ***Ensure that EU external fisheries, development, climate and trade policies consistently recognise both challenges facing developing coastal communities and the need to support their effective adaptation climate change, including to address impacts to food security. These policies should support activities that may contribute to local resilience and address the climate-related challenges faced by EU fleets operating under fisheries agreements.***

7. ***Support the systematic inclusion of fisheries, and particularly small-scale fisheries, in national and regional climate adaptation strategies in partner countries, including capacity building and data collection on climate impacts on fish stocks.***

8. ***Encourage regional cooperation, in particular in Africa, on climate-related fisheries management, stock monitoring and preparedness for climate-driven changes in stock distribution, in coordination with relevant regional organisations.***

9. ***Integrate climate resilience considerations into the design, implementation and evaluation of SFPAs, including:***

    - ***Consideration of climate risks in sectoral support programming.***
    - ***Transparency and dialogue with local stakeholders.***

- ***Safeguards to ensure that adaptation measures support sustainable resource use and stable operating conditions for all fleets***.
- ***Consideration of climate-informed harvest strategies when setting fishing opportunities.***

Conclusion

Adapting to climate change impacts and integrating climate resilience and flexibility into fisheries management in non-EU waters, through both SFPAs and RFMOs, is essential to preserve their economic balance, legitimacy, and long-term viability. Such an approach can help ensuring that climate impacts do not undermine either EU distant-water fleets or the food security and livelihoods of coastal small-scale fishing communities.

Supporting climate resilience in small-scale fisheries aligns with the EU's long-term interests in sustainable fisheries, food security, and predictable external fishing relations. A balanced, cooperative and evidence-based EU approach included in the future EU Strategy on Fisheries External Action could serve to strengthen partnerships with coastal States while supporting adaptation to climate change in a manner acceptable to both industry and civil society.

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