



Connecting the Disconnected: Building a network for Atlantic fisheries & aquaculture

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Summary

Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture rely on collaboration between fishers, local communities, industry, and policymakers. However, there is a significant disconnect between these groups, leading to unsustainable outcomes. Small-scale fishers, aquaculturists, and insular and Indigenous communities in the Atlantic are often excluded from resource management and policymaking, despite being directly affected by these decisions. This results in policies that fail to consider their needs and can lead to communities facing more challenges.

To address these gaps, we propose the Atlantic Fisheries and Aquaculture Network (AFAN): a platform designed to amplify the voices of these smaller communities. AFAN will ensure the concerns and interests of fishers and aquaculturists are incorporated in decision-making and policy development through inclusive governance structures, while also allowing for knowledge sharing and increased resource access.

AFAN will be built on existing structures and frameworks such as the SSF Hub and AAORIA networks. An accessible online platform will be designed to host features such as an interactive map of fishing and aquaculture initiatives, a chat forum for stakeholders to discuss pressing matters, and downloadable frameworks outlining 'best practices' for fisheries and aquaculture. Additionally, AFAN will foster resource partnerships via a mentorship & innovation programme, facilitating mutual support and collaborative growth in the sector. This network will give a voice to the most vulnerable groups — small-scale fishers, aquaculturists, indigenous communities, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and ultraperipheral regions — leading to more inclusive, effective, and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.

Introduction

A dire problem faces millions of small-scale actors in fisheries and aquaculture across the Atlantic. They are the most affected by marine management and policy yet remain vastly underrepresented and left out of the decision-making processes. This leads to a major disconnection with decision and policy makers, who end up creating and implementing adverse policies and management for small-scale actors. For many of these stakeholders, their voices remain unheard – whether due to separate governance systems or low economic outputs disincentivising governing bodies to include them. Atlantic coastal communities should have a say in the decision-making and governance of their waters and stocks, no matter how small a role they may play. The AAORIA declaration and the UN Ocean Decade Challenges, particularly C3 (Sustainable Blue Food), C4 (Sustainable Ocean Economy), C6 (Community Resilience), C9 (Capacity Development), and C10 (Behaviour Change), highlight the need to accelerate inclusive and sustainable ocean governance.

To take a step towards tackling this issue, an Atlantic Fisheries and Aquaculture Network (AFAN) must be established, overcoming this sense of disconnect by working to connect small-scale actors, researchers, policymakers and industry at both local and international level. The aim is to create a network for inclusive, sustainable and economically resilient Atlantic small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. The network would act in a mutually beneficial way, allowing for an exchange of knowledge, whilst providing a seat at the table for those whose concerns are so often overlooked in marine policy.

Explanation of network

The AFAN intends to uplift Atlantic fishers and their communities by ensuring their voices and needs are reflected in the relevant marine policies, management, and governance. The goal of this network is to be more than another online platform by disseminating information and providing fishers and aquaculturists with the means to improve their livelihoods. The AFAN also aims to support conversations about sustainable fishing and aquaculture practices to promote a healthier future for the Atlantic.

It is clear small-scale fishers, and their communities are our target audience. Once the network is up and running, we plan to reach out to regional leads involved with local fishers and aquaculturists to promote the network and associated services (Table 1). Entering at the regional level fosters trust between local communities and potentially international stakeholders with the capacity to support gaps in action. Innovation can occur through partnerships, matching entrepreneurs with blue solutions and investors to build the ocean we want. This network will enable knowledge sharing, as well as diverse economic, political, and social opportunities. The AFAN will strengthen community resilience and equity through community building on local, regional, and All-Atlantic scales.

Services provided

The following table outlines the four types of services our network will provide, which will be tailored to unique community needs.

Table 1. Services provided by the Atlantic Fisheries and Aquaculture Network.

Service	Deliverable(s)	Function
Knowledge hub	Interactive map Information center	Identify small-scale fisheries and aquaculture across the Atlantic and initiatives working to improve the fishing/aquaculture industry
Theme-specific dialogues	Chat forum	Facilitate conversations on various scales (local to international) on

	In-person meetings	topics such as food security and 'best practices' in the industry
Resource partnerships	Mentorship & innovation programme	Link those with resources (knowledge, funding, time, facilities, etc.) to those in need of resources
Monitoring, verification and reporting framework for policy implementation	Downloadable frameworks	Standardize practices assessing the quality and effectiveness of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture Provide steps to implement 'best practices' as brought forth through dialogues and information center

Recommendations

1. Embed the Atlantic Fisheries & Aquaculture Network (AFAN) in the structure of AAORIA

The AFAN should be integrated into AAORIA's mission to benefit from the Alliance's ability to funnel funding and to provide logistical support. This integration can have different forms, such as the designation of AFAN as an AAORIA associated project or as an AAORIA designated network, similar to the Coastal Resilience Beacon Sites Network. This embedding would guarantee the long-term functioning and stability of the AFAN, which is paramount for collaborative networks.

2. Collaborate with and build upon pre-existing structures

The AFAN should build upon pre-existing networks rather than scoping local nodes from scratch, especially in regions that lack decentralised systems or governance. This can include existing similar structures, such as the Small-Scale Fisheries Hub (SSF Hub) or the NGO Low Impact Fishers Europe (LIFE), which connects small-scale fishers throughout the globe or throughout Europe respectively. Also, it can include Indigenous organizations and structures across the Atlantic, such as the Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management (AAROM) organizations in Canada and tribal councils across North America.

3. Connect the network to advisory and policymaking processes

While the core of the network is based on knowledge exchange from fishers and aquaculture farmers throughout the Atlantic, the network should include a permanent advocacy node to connect it to relevant policymaking processes. This connection of the AFAN to policy processes can be done at the regional, national or international scales, and should include connections to international organisations, such as the FAO, ICES or to relevant RFMOs.



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