

REPORT

Policy must be democratic

When talking to people who are just starting to get acquainted with the fisheries world I have often been met with disbelief about the complexities and extensive amounts of tensions and even conflicts. All sectors have their complexities, but fisheries is at the higher end of that scale.

This is not surprising. Fisheries is about providing food and livelihoods for people, from resources which are provided by nature and shared by us all. This simple and seemingly innocent statement opens a can of worms of tensions to be resolved in a landscape of incomplete knowledge.

We are dealing with fundamental human needs for food and economic opportunities which are to be met from resources we only have limited control over. We are also dealing with resources which are very difficult to measure because they are found in a different environment than ours, where our normal senses cannot observe them and where it is impossible to walk out and just measure how much is available.

All this would not matter if it was not because fish, as all natural resources, are limited. We must therefore find ways of sharing them out and we must constantly ensure that we do not undermine the possibilities in the future for ourselves and our children to benefit from these resources.

These are basic facts which we cannot change. They provide a fertile ground for tension and conflicts between fishers, who think they have a historical right to utilise natural resources, and conservationists, who believe that these natural resources should also be seen as components of healthy ecosystems, between consumers and suppliers, between the interests of present and future generations, between different groups of fishers, who compete for the same resources, between public authorities trying to meet multiple policy objectives and an industry which feels overregulated and between scientists who are asked to provide advice on options for future fisheries based on best available evidence and fishers who feel victims to ivory tower elites who have lost touch with the reality they experience as practitioners at sea.

No wonder that the ordinary citizen is baffled, wondering what is going on and what is up or down in all this.

The solution cannot be to get rid of these tensions. They are a hard wired condition, rooted in the very basic characteristics of fisheries.

We need instead to look at how we deal with these tensions, how we address conflicts, how we

Danish scientist Poul Degnbol, who was recently presented with the WWF Baltic Leadership Award in 2010 for his "endeavours to achieve sustainable fisheries", is head of the Advice Programme at ICES. He argues that fisheries policies should not be left only to scientists. In a paper originally written for CFP-reformwatch.eu he said that politicians must take the difficult decisions.

discuss between those involved in fisheries and fisheries policy and how fisheries is discussed in the public debate.

Transparency is key

The key is transparency. What is required is a policy framework which encourages a culture of trust, open debate and transparency about the basis for decisions made.

"Science can offer knowledge but this does not mean that science has access to any absolute and certain truth"

Nobody is right in any absolute sense of the word. There are perfectly rational reasons why fishers sometimes choose to focus on the payment of next month's interest on their loans, why conservationists sometimes may distrust the motives of industry, why civil servants sometimes may want to protect sensitive negotiations from public scrutiny and why scientists sometimes may be tempted to present their findings as absolute and certain truth.

But having reasons which may be rational from one's own immediate perspective does not mean that one is right and it does not mean that one has the right to claim some superiority in the debate or in policy decisions.

The only way we can manage to resolve the tensions and conflicts in a fair and civilised way is to accept that diverse and often conflicting interests exist but that we can deal with these if we are transparent about these interests and agree that claims to support any interest must be substantiated. We can only discuss

the trade-off between various interests if we know what is at stake: what are the consequences of various policy options for the various interests being impacted by a policy decision?

Exposure of impacts for various stakeholders is not something which should just be seen as formal requirement to be ticked off by a bureaucracy before it can proceed with proposals. Transparency about the interests involved and an understanding of the trade off between these interests is a fundamental prerequisite for a functioning democracy. It is a basic requirement for democracy that all parties involved must be committed to discuss on the basis of evidence, which may mean that they must provide evidence for their claims and be open to evidence provided by others.

This is where science comes in as a facilitator of transparency. Science, in the widest sense of the word, including both natural, social and economic sciences, is all about dealing with transparency and can provide a rich experience in how (and how not) to produce, discuss and judge evidence.

Science should not and can not have any mandate to define policy objectives. What science can provide is a process where the available data are analysed with methods which are transparent and can be discussed openly.

Science can help stakeholders to investigate the trade-off between different policy options by asking what-if questions. What are the expected outcomes for fishers and in terms of conservation if we increase the quota by x% next year? What are the expected benefits to bottom

POUL DEGNBOL:
head of the Advice Programme at ICES

habitat and economic losses and benefits if we close this area for mobile fishing gear? What risk do we take for the future spawning stock size if we allow for x days at sea next year?

What is the trade off between expected loss in employment and improved economic performance in the longer term if we reduce the capacity of this fishing fleet by x%? Many people involved in fisheries may have opinions about these issues but a discussion just on the basis of opinions is bound to be unproductive, inconclusive and even confrontational. In order to enter a constructive dialogue, opinions must be qualified by knowledge about the likely outcomes of various choices and there must be some agreement on the validity of this knowledge.

Science and truth

Science can offer knowledge but this does not mean that science has access to any absolute and certain truth. The outcomes of scientific analysis are limited by the data available and all the limitations of the analytical methods used. Data are always incomplete – there may be uncertainties about the actual landings, discard information may not be sampled, too little is known about the biology, cost data may only be available for

some fleet segments or employment data may be absent. Various assumptions always need to be made, for instance about future recruitment to a fish population or about how fishing fleets will adapt to an area closure. This means that any predictions of impacts of various policy options will be uncertain. Uncertainty may be very large in some cases, less so in others, but there is always considerable uncertainty about quantitative predictions of specific impacts.

Does this uncertainty then make scientific assessments invalid, of no use for the policy debate? No, on the contrary. The uncertainty is in itself an important piece of information which must be part of decision making. Uncertainty about future outcomes of our decisions is a basic human condition which we have to live with.

What science can offer is an understanding and exposure of these uncertainties so that decisions can be made with open eyes. How to deal with uncertainty is a policy choice. It is nearly routine every year that some industry interests will use uncertainties in the scientific advice to argue for larger quotas while conservationists will call for a precautionary approach and argue that uncertainties should lead to lower quotas. It is up to policy makers and not to scientists to give



guidance on such choices. The task of scientists is to be entirely open about the uncertainties in scientific advice and do their best to communicate what these uncertainties mean in terms of risk taking for different interests.

It is a public choice to take a certain risk, whether it is an economic risk of lost yield by setting the quota low or a risk to the future stock and the marine ecosystem by setting the quota high. The role of science is to provide best possible knowledge about the nature and extent of these risks, not to make the choices or to pretend that there are no uncertainties.

Uncertainties are however many things. It is often stated in debates that scientific advice is very uncertain, implying that there is nearly no knowledge base for decisions. This is of course a rhetorical trick which misuses uncertainty to open the way for any arbitrary argument.

We are regularly in situations where large uncertainty and large certainty coexist about the same issue. We may for a certain fish stock have considerable uncertainties in the quantitative assessment of the size of a stock or the present fishing pressure. But we may at the same time have large certainty about whether the stock size is at safe levels or whether it is overfished or not.

So we can have large certainty about the direction to move to achieve certain objectives while we at the same time can have uncertainty about the quantitative effect of a specific move,

such as a specific catch quota. Presenting this situation as just uncertain and wide-open for any decision is clouding the real issues in fog.

It has been argued that an important step to improve the performance of the CFP is to make it mandatory that scientific advice should be followed. This was a point in many contributions to the public debate following the publication of the Green Paper on reform of the CFP.

I understand the intentions of such proposals. Many of our present problems are due to decision making about detailed implementation giving in to the immediate, short term pressures.

CFP performance

The performance of the CFP has justified a call for a change which will hard wire responsibility into decision making. It has in the debate on the reform of the CFP been argued that a possible way to do this could be that once certain rules about fisheries management have been decided politically, then one may ensure some certainty that these decisions will be respected in the future by 'playing ball' regarding detailed implementation out of

the political field entirely, into science.

This solution is an expression of basic distrust that politicians are able to withstand pressures for short-term compromises. One may agree or disagree that such distrust is justified. But

shrouded as science and transparency and integrity will be lost.

We are already in a situation where the tensions around the possible policy implications of scientific advice is putting heavy pressure on the individual scientists involved in the preparation of scientific advice. The organisations entrusted to provide scientific advice have developed defences to such pressure by extended peer review and by increasing transparency through documentation in the public domain and by opening the scientific process to stakeholder observation.

One of the most important ways to protect the individual scientist against political pressure is by providing an environment where a collective responsibility is taken for the advice. It is not trivial to ensure this.

ICES does for instance provide advice which has been through several steps including a group of experts assembling, analysing and reporting the evidence, an independent peer review and, based on this, a conclusion on the advice which involves scientists from all ICES member states collectively.

This is a cumbersome process and it could definitely be set up

in many other ways, but transparency, independence between different roles, critical scrutiny and protection against political pressure must be a core feature of scientific advice for marine management some way or another.

But it is even with these safeguards a misplacement to move decisions from political debate into science. It is in the interest of all concerned that the role of scientific advice remains to facilitate transparency about the consequences of political choices by exploring what-if questions in dialogue with stakeholders and decision makers. This is the only way the CFP can be an evidence-based policy.

There are alternative ways to hard wire responsibility into decision making; alternatives which maintain that policy decisions are the responsibility of those elected to make such decisions while science must help in exploring the evidence basis for decisions.

The regionalisation which has been discussed in the CFP reform debate is one such option, where it is the hierarchy between principles and implementation in decision making which should ensure that responsibility will prevail in the end.

There may be other options to support responsibility into decision making. It is in any case crucial that decision making in a future CFP is set up in a way which will ensure that it is a policy where decisions are taken transparently and with open eyes on basis of best available evidence about the trade off between the different interests.



Global seafloor mapping with Olex

Thousands of fishermen all over the world are mapping their fishing grounds with Olex. Combined with the WASSP multibeam sounder, users will attain an even higher level of detail.

Contact your local dealer for more information.

Olex

Olex AS Trondheim Norway
 olex@olex.no www.olex.no