

OCEAN SUSTAINABILITY, SMALL-SCALE FISHERS, AND FISHERIES CRIME

Summary of a dialogue forum on 5 December 2025 featuring Dr. Philippe Le Billon, Professor, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia

1 Why does scale matter in addressing illegal fishing?

- * Illegal fishing is widespread but highly context-specific, varying by jurisdiction, regulatory systems, species, fishing areas, and seasons
- * Illegal practices vary widely from single subsistence and small-scale fishers (SSF) to integrated industrial-scale transnational seafood companies
- * Although industrial scale fleets account for roughly 80% of illegal fishing, SSF are often most affected by anti-illegal fishing policies, surveillance, and enforcement

2 What are the challenges?

- * Economic pressures, depleted local fish stocks, restrictive regulations, conservation closures, and limited recognition of customary tenure and governance can push SSF toward illegal practices
- * While some illegal fishing activities can exacerbate stock depletion and undermine management, they may also contribute to employment, income, food security, and community resilience in SSF contexts
- * Anti-illegal fishing frameworks often overlook local and customary SSF governance systems, even when these systems are sustainable and legitimate
- * Enforcement often focuses disproportionately on nearshore SSF, rather than on industrial or distant-water fleets that contribute the bulk of global illegal fishing
- * Misdirected anti-illegal fishing measures can increase SSF vulnerability to recruitment by organized crime

3 What are potential strategies to mitigate these challenges?

- * Co-develop policies with SSF: ensure that global, regional, and national fishing regulations include SSF-specific provisions and reflect local realities
- * Apply discriminative, context-sensitive enforcement: differentiate between harmful, profit-driven illegal practices and those driven by subsistence needs or regulatory gaps and over-reach
- * Create SSF-specific mechanisms, such as co-management, for addressing harmful practices without criminalizing the entire SSF system
- * Allocate resources to increase the independence and effectiveness of fisheries crime agencies targeting sophisticated fraud and illicit trade