EFFECTIVE FISHERIES GOVERNANCE

SEAWISE

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

Effective fisheries governance is essential for translating knowledge into practical implementation of Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management (EBFM). The following brief summarises SEAwise research on governance, outlining our work exploring the effectiveness of – and potential for improving – fisheries governance at the regional and sub-regional level across Europe.

Through a varied research approach, harnessing stakeholder insights, our work contributes knowledge on how effective governance can be understood and how well current governance processes are functioning in practice. Our findings offer insights into where improvements can be made to European fisheries governance, to ensure processes are both more effective and tailored to the unique context of each fishery.

KEY POINTS

- SEAwise has provided an evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of fisheries governance at multiple levels across four regional seas (the Baltic Sea, North Sea, Western Waters, and the Mediterranean Sea).
- We have outlined a new set of definitions and criteria designed to support effective fisheries governance surrounding EBFM.
- At the regional and sub-regional level, our findings highlight that governance processes are still lacking many of the key elements needed for them to be effective.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Our research reinforces calls for continued, concerted efforts to improve governance related to EU fisheries policies (including the Common Fisheries Policy),** to ensure governance processes are well-functioning, effectively facilitate policy implementation and change, and, ultimately, deliver on objectives regarding the equitable and sustainable management of fisheries.
- **To deliver on improvements to governance in relation to EBFM, our research, across regional case studies, highlights that achieving 'effective governance' relies upon enhancing:**
  - The perceived **legitimacy** of rules, regulations, advice and institutions;
  - levels of **trust** between different actors and institutions involved in decision-making;
  - the degree of **coordination** and **collaboration** between actors on setting priorities and defining solutions;
  - the depth of **cooperation** and inclusion within decision-making processes;
  - actors' **capabilities** and **capacities** to fully participate in this decision-making.
- **At the sub-regional level, in particular, our findings emphasise the need for tailored and context-specific improvements to governance** – responding to and mirroring the experienced challenges and specific grounded realities of those engaged in ongoing governance processes.
- **Ultimately, our research emphasises that advancing EBFM in the EU requires a focus on the human side of implementation: the processes and people involved.** As such, our work underscores the importance of **supporting research that undertakes in-depth, qualitative investigation on fisheries governance**, to generate insights on both the 'how' and 'why' of effective and ineffective governance processes – with this crucial to achieving more sustainable outcomes for both people and the sea.

BACKGROUND

Effective governance is key to achieving the social, economic, and environmental objectives that the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) seeks to achieve (1). Marine biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation remain urgent issues within European waters and beyond, amplified by the impacts of climate change. Maritime sectors, like fishing, which depend on healthy seas, are increasingly feeling the brunt of this planetary crisis – leading to significant ecological and socio-economic consequences and uncertainty. **Effective, adaptive, and inclusive governance is essential to meet these pressing challenges and secure the sustainability of marine resources for future generations.**

Despite progress on some dimensions (e.g. stock management) and a recognised need for more participatory and inclusive governance, managing fisheries in a sustainable, integrated, and coordinated way remains a challenge across Europe (2). A lack of progress on cooperation between EU, regional, and Member State levels has led to uncoordinated decision-making processes and prevented coherent management, leading to many of the policy objectives designed to benefit both marine ecosystems and coastal communities remaining unmet (2). Improvement of what can broadly be defined as 'governance' is, therefore, among the core priorities identified by the European Commission (2).
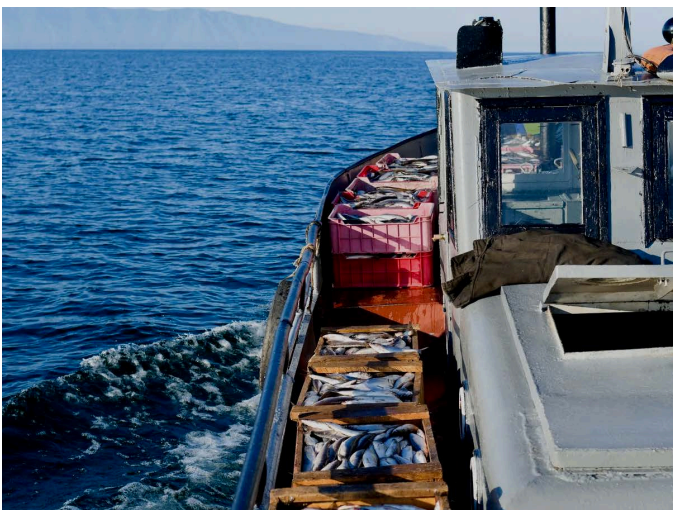

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Addressing this requires a comprehensive understanding of the governance systems shaping fisheries management across the EU, and a critical assessment of how effectively they function in practice. Through its work on governance, **SEAwise has sought to provide insights on this, undertaking an evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of fisheries governance across four regional seas** (the Baltic Sea, North Sea, Western Waters, and the Mediterranean Sea).

This briefing synthesises this work and outlines recommendations relating to effective fisheries governance, signposting to potential avenues for improving fisheries governance at the regional and sub-regional level within Europe.

SEAWISE AT A GLANCE

Involving 24 universities and research organisations from across Europe funded under Horizon2020, the **SEAwise project has worked to deliver the knowledge needed to support fishers, managers, and policy makers in the practical implementation of Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management (EBFM)** across European waters.

Building upon the recognition that societal and ecological objectives are interdependent under EBFM, SEAwise has assembled a new knowledge base that captures the social, economic and ecological complexity of European fisheries. Drawing on this to develop predictive models, tools, and ready-for-uptake advice, SEAwise's work enables stakeholders to evaluate the potential trade-offs of management decisions and forecast their long-term impacts.

Through this, SEAwise has laid the foundation for a whole-ecosystem approach to management in Europe – one that would equip both fisheries and management with the resilience needed to successfully navigate future challenges and change.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'EFFECTIVE FISHERIES GOVERNANCE'?

Drawing on existing knowledge and research undertaken across the EU and beyond, **SEAwise outlined a new set of definitions and criteria designed to support effective fisheries governance surrounding EBFM.**

Within SEAwise, we understand governance as a social process, steering the interplay of both public and private actors (e.g. governments, regional authorities, civil society and private industry) with the shared aim of tackling societal problems and creating societal opportunities (3). Regarding fisheries governance, this includes the overall framework of politics, policies, laws, norms, values and regulations that guide the management and conservation of fisheries resources (4).

For fisheries governance to be effective, one core element – among a number of others – is that this broad constellation of actors must be able to speak to one another (**cooperate**), **coordinate** their efforts, and **collaborate** in defining, framing and understanding problems, to ultimately reach informed solutions (4). Crucially, decision-making processes must include actors in a way that is fair, equitable and transparent – with measures taken to ensure actors have the **capability** and **capacity** (e.g. through access to human and financial resources) to meaningfully participate (4). Only through this can decision-making processes engender the necessary **trust** and perceived **legitimacy** required to ensure that governance is effective (4).

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Building on these definitions and criteria, SEAwise set out a framework of attributes and indicators to be used in evaluating the effectiveness of fisheries governance at the regional seas level (i.e. the four SEAwise Case Study regions) and the sub-regional level (i.e. the Patriakos Gulf within the Mediterranean Sea). This framework included an extensive range of indicators, including those relating to (4):

- **Legal and legislative objectives**, i.e. records of accountability with respect to laws and policies.
- **Governance structures**, i.e. conflict resolution processes available to deal with disputes.
- **Voluntary codes and standards**, i.e. the existence of standards or codes, such as the Marine Stewardship Council Fisheries Standard, that may supplement or replace legislation, or challenge it to improve.
- **Decision-making processes**, i.e. evidence of stakeholder group collaboration in decision-making processes, or processes to ensure that participants are informed and processes are transparent.
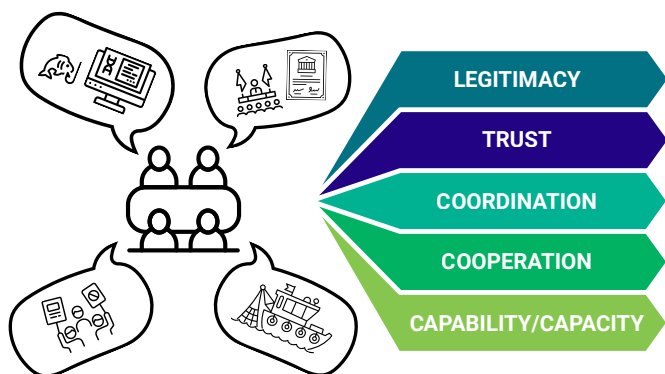

Figure 1: 'Ingredients' of effective governance.

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE

Drawing on this framework, **SEAwise examined the effectiveness of, and potential for improving governance at the regional, and sub-regional level of its four regional seas: the Baltic Sea, North Sea, Western Waters, and the Mediterranean Sea (**5).

This work followed two main lines of inquiry: understanding stakeholder perceptions of current fisheries governance in Europe, and, through testing and illustrating different methods of examining governance processes, capturing insights on a broad spectrum of governance-related issues across varied contexts.

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INSIGHTS ON GOVERNANCE AT THE REGIONAL SEAS LEVEL

At the regional seas level, SEAwise utilised an online survey to explore stakeholder perceptions on governance – specifically regarding how people and organisations collaborate and the challenges they face (5).

In harnessing perceptions, we drew on stakeholders' intimate knowledge of regional governance processes, and sought to obtain insights into key elements of governance, such as legitimacy, trust, and cooperation.

Our findings here were limited by a low survey response rate (likely a result of stakeholder fatigue) (5) – highlighting the importance of a coordinated approach to stakeholder engagement and ensuring valuable feedback is provided to ensure continued support. Despite this, for the Mediterranean region, we did receive a slightly greater number and spread of responses – allowing us to pilot the analytical approach we had intended to apply more broadly, illustrating the potential of this approach to pin-point areas of governance in particular need of addressing (see below).

SPOTLIGHT ON THE MEDITERRANEAN

Utilising the Mediterranean as a sample region, we were able to demonstrate the 'traffic light'-inspired analytical approach we had intended to apply across the SEAwise regional seas (5) – with this illustrating the potential of this approach, capitalising on the more numerous data gathered for the region.

From this, we observe that a key area of low level effectiveness in the Mediterranean is in the area of inclusivity, trust, and legitimacy. On the other hand, there is a high level of effectiveness in the area of people and organisations cooperating, working both independently and together.

Governance Theme	Level of Efficacy
Inclusivity, trust & legitimacy	LOW
Decision-making & information sharing	MED
Relationship between people's actions/behaviour & rulemaking	MED
Managing fisheries at different scales	MED
Ability for people/organisations to work independently & together	HIGH

Table 1: Governance effectiveness matrix for the Mediterranean

KEY RESULTS AT THE SUB-REGIONAL LEVEL

At the sub-regional level, we explored four case studies, each relating to different governance processes taking place within SEAwise's regional seas.

These case studies allowed us to explore the complex, multi-level dynamics of fisheries governance at the sub-regional level (5). Rather than seeking direct comparisons across cases, we adopted a tailored research approach attuned to local contexts and/or specific ongoing initiatives which yielded rich and context-specific findings.

NATURA 2000 AREAS IN THE NORTH SEA & WESTERN WATERS

Our research in the North Sea/Western Waters case study examined governance processes for adopting fisheries regulations in the regions' Natura 2000 areas (5). Insights reveal stakeholders' dissatisfaction with governance outcomes due to **siloed decision-making, limited flexibility in regulatory outcomes**, and **insufficient consideration of cumulative impacts on fisheries and the marine environment.** This case study emphasises the need for **transparent, inclusive, and timely stakeholder consultations** to ensure effective and equitable fisheries management measures in this sub-region, preferably in a more integrated regional framework for governance, including all the main sectors and interests.

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ADVISORY COMISSIONS FOR THE BALTIC SEA

Our work within the Baltic, informed by insights from members of advisory commissions, examined the organisational structures within each country's high-level fisheries advisory commissions (5). SEAwise findings here stress the importance of **clear task descriptions, realistic timelines, balanced composition**, and **effective stakeholder involvement.** This case study emphasises the need for **well-structured secretariats and experienced leadership to navigate complex policy areas,** ensuring that commissions can effectively address environmental and socio-economic challenges in fisheries management.

Photo credit: Colourbox

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS IN THE PATRAIKOS GULF, GREECE

In the Mediterranean case study of Patraikos Gulf (Greece), we assessed stakeholder perceptions of fishery governance quality (5). Our findings here reveal widespread dissatisfaction with governance, highlighting issues like **lack of trust, top-down approaches**, and **insufficient stakeholder involvement**. With the region experiencing a decline in commercially valuable hake stocks and overall ecosystem health, our findings emphasise **the need for tailored management strategies that are attuned to the needs and context of the region,** and **governance that effectively balances and addresses both socio-economic and environmental needs.**

FISHERIES RESTRICTED AREAS IN THE ADRIATIC SEA

SEAwise's work on the Mediterranean case study of the Adriatic Sea examined the establishment of Fisheries Restricted Areas (FRAs) to protect marine biodiversity and manage fish stocks (5). Our findings highlighted that the governance processes were seen as **transparent** and **consensus-driven,** with stakeholders engaged from the initial proposal stage and united around strict surveillance enforcement. **This approach was viewed as effective and has contributed to the Adriatic having the highest seabed protection coverage in the Mediterranean** – a key objective for fisheries sustainability under Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management.

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CONCLUSIONS

Well-functioning governance processes are essential to facilitating equitable and sustainable management of fisheries as well as facilitating policy implementation and change.

Advancing EBFM in the EU also requires a focus on the human side of implementation – the processes, actors, and people involved. Effective governance, built on active and collaborative stakeholder participation, is essential to not only the implementation of EBFM but also achieving the objectives of both the CFP and Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).

Given the focus within SEAwise on developing predictive models, different ways of collecting data on effective fisheries governance was explored, some of which could potentially be translated into scores or values that could be used in future modelling work. Collecting data on the performance of governance for further use in modelling of future fisheries management strategies is still in its infancy and, therefore, needs further attention.

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This policy brief has been produced as part of **SEAwise's work theme on 'Social and Economic Effects'**. For further information on this work and to dive into our findings in-depth visit: https://tinyurl.com/SEAwiseSocialEcon.

This work theme was led by Isabella Bitetto, COISPA Foundation, Italy, as part of the broader SEAwise project coordinated by Prof. Anna Rindorf, Technical University of Denmark (DTU).

This brief sits as the first of a series of six policy briefs offering an overview of SEAwise's research, coinciding with the culmination of the project in September 2025. These briefs can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/SEAwisePolicyBriefs.

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