

Policy Briefing

Enhancing transparency in fisheries:

Best practices and recommendations for allocating fishing opportunities

November 2024

Introduction

Governments play a crucial role in managing fisheries, a shared public resource, by balancing the pursuit of economic and social benefits from fishing with the responsibility to conserve marine biodiversity. Effective fisheries management is essential for supporting livelihoods, providing food security, and safeguarding marine ecosystems for future generations.

Achieving sustainable fisheries management requires participatory processes, as well as the public availability of transparent and credible information on how fisheries are managed. As highlighted by United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, “*without transparency, we are left to act blindly.*”¹ Transparency regarding how and why specific fishing opportunities are allocated remains a challenge for many countries. Limited access to data, such as recipient allocations, decision rationales, and impact assessments, hampers accountability and restricts the ability to monitor and manage resources effectively. Even when information is available, it is often incomplete, or difficult to access. While some countries have made strides in establishing clearer frameworks for allocation processes and outcomes, considerable disparities remain.

A recent European Commission assessment underscores these transparency gaps in European Union (EU) countries, highlighting both shortcomings and instances of progress within Member States.² These findings point to an urgent need for coordinated efforts across the EU to harmonize and enhance transparency in fishing opportunity allocations.

This policy briefing presents the principles and benefits of transparency in fisheries management, examines current gaps within EU Member States, and presents case studies from the EU and beyond where steps towards transparent allocation frameworks have been taken. The briefing concludes with practical recommendations for improving transparency, equity, and accountability in the allocation of fishing opportunities across the EU.



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Transparency in fisheries management: principles and benefits

Transparency is fundamental to ensuring that shared public resources, like fish, are managed in the public's best interest. It facilitates public understanding and involvement in fisheries management, a critical component for sustainable resource use and effective governance. Transparency principles foster trust in public institutions, encourage informed public participation, and enable oversight—hallmarks of good governance.

Transparency is recognized as an essential pillar for decision-making in EU Member States. The Treaty on European Union states: *“Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.”*³ Regarding fisheries management, the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries underscores that *“States should...ensure that decision-making processes are transparent and achieve timely solutions to urgent matters,”* promoting the effective participation of stakeholders such as *“industry, fishworkers, environmental and other interested organizations”* in formulating laws and policies.⁴ Further reinforcing this, Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) mandates that EU Member States *“must use transparent...criteria, including those of an environmental, social and economic nature, when allocating fishing opportunities”*.⁵



The importance of transparency in environmental governance has long been recognized. The 1992 Rio Declaration and the Aarhus Convention underscore transparency through three fundamental principles: access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice.⁶ These principles obligate countries to make environmental data publicly available, facilitate citizen participation in decision-making, and provide legal recourse for environmental matters, empowering citizens to engage meaningfully in policy development and implementation.

The United Nations recognizes transparency as essential to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, Target 16.10 calls for *legislation that guarantees the right to information, which is vital for achieving Goal 16 and supporting other SDGs.*⁷

Strengthening transparency in EU fishing opportunities allocation

Fishing opportunities allocation refers to the systematic distribution of rights to access and harvest fish resources. This process, overseen by regulatory authorities or fishing industry bodies, aims to ensure sustainable fisheries management by assigning allowable fishing opportunities (e.g. catch limits) to specific fishing entities based on predefined criteria. These criteria influence not only the volume of fish each entity can catch, but may also dictate where and when fishing activities can occur.

The European Commission is actively consulting with Member States and relevant stakeholders—including non-governmental organizations and the fishing industry—on ways to improve transparency in this allocation process under Article 17 of the CFP.⁸ Through an analysis of the questionnaire responses submitted by Member States to the European Commission in 2023, along with a scan of EU government websites, we find several critical opportunities to enhance transparency:



Establish clear consultation processes: None of the EU Member States seem to have established clear, participatory consultation processes accessible to all stakeholders for determining and validating fishing allocations. Approximately 80% of Member States indicate some level of consultation for interested parties prior to allocation, though specifics on the scope and mechanisms remain vague. Only around 20% appear to have advisory committees—but with limitations on stakeholder representation, and incomplete or non-public conclusions—or to have plans to establish participatory processes through national legislation.



Produce socioeconomic and ecological impact assessments: None of the EU Member States seem to provide publicly accessible information on socioeconomic or ecological impact assessments related to current fishing allocations. This omission implies either an absence of such assessments, or a deliberate choice not to disclose them publicly.



Improve access to allocation outcomes: The majority of Member States do not provide publicly accessible information on the allocation outcomes by fishing vessel (company or individual), and species. While over half of the Member States claim to provide publicly available information on allocation outcomes our research suggests that in most cases, this information is either restricted to certain stakeholder groups or incomplete (e.g., available only for certain species or by gear type, but not providing clarity on the beneficial owner). Around one-third of Member States categorically state that they do not publish this information.



Expand disclosure of allocation processes and criteria: Not all Member States make publicly available information on the allocation process, such as criteria (often based on “historic catch records”) and the methodology for calculating allocations. In some cases, access seems to be restricted to certain stakeholder groups, or the information is not disclosed at all. Critically, 0% of Member States explain how criteria for allocating fishing opportunities for all commercial species were weighted to consider social, economic, and environmental outcomes. Additionally, there is no clarity on the criteria applied when fishing organizations are tasked with determining the allocation among their members.



Create a centralized repository or standardized format: The lack of a centralized repository or standardized format to report on the allocation of fishing opportunities by EU Member States complicates efforts to understand, monitor, and learn from measures put in place. Information provided online, when available, is typically disperse across governments websites, often not in a central location, and presented in ways that makes quick translation and understanding challenging. Each Member State follows its own system for allocating and reporting fishing opportunities, leading to inconsistent data presentation, varied formats, and a lack of standardized information on allocation processes and outcomes.

Case studies: Advancing transparency in the allocation process of fishing opportunities

The following case studies illustrate efforts by various EU Member States and other nations in Europe to increase transparency in the allocation of fishing opportunities, specifically through enhanced information accessibility and participatory processes. These cases do not evaluate the overall effectiveness of each country's fisheries allocation to support social, economic and environmental objectives, but instead focus on practices that improve public access to information and stakeholder engagement. By understanding these initiatives, policymakers can identify approaches that may enhance transparency within their own fisheries management frameworks.



Transparency in the allocation process



Spain: Legislative framework for participatory criteria development

Spain's legislative framework offers a promising approach for developing transparent allocation. Article 32 of Law 5/2023 mandates that allocation criteria, along with their weightings, be developed for each fishery in consultation with stakeholders.⁹ Spain's case exemplifies how legal provisions can support a participatory process for determining allocation criteria. By engaging stakeholders to define and weigh these criteria, the government can make the rationale behind its decisions more accessible and understandable to the public. Though this process has not been put in place yet, it offers the opportunity for a transparent and participatory model.



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Ireland: Fishing Advisory committee (QMAC) input on allocation process

In Ireland, the QMAC model, while limited to fishing industry and government representatives, provides a structure for stakeholder participation. The QMAC meets monthly to make quota allocation recommendations. The objectives, participants, and meeting minutes are accessible on the government website, providing a level of transparency in Ireland's allocation process.¹⁰

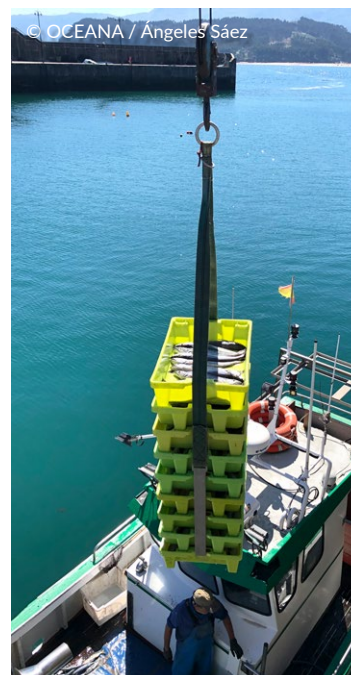
It should be noted, however, that the published meeting minutes severely lack detail about decision rationale, and it is unclear how the committee ensures fair representation of the fishing sector. Expanding participation beyond industry representatives would strengthen inclusivity.



Bulgaria: Criteria weighting for a fish species

Bulgaria's Executive Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture outlines the criteria and weightings for distributing individual quotas for turbot in 2024 on its government website. A table summarizes evaluation criteria, such as historical quotas and vessel compliance, and assigns a point value to each criterion, ensuring a clear assessment of vessels to determine eligibility for quotas. It clearly explains how different criteria are weighed initially.¹¹ This approach is significant, as many countries only consider historical catch records and fail to transparently explain the weighting mechanisms for when other criteria are used in conjunction.

It should be noted that Bulgaria does not apply this approach for all commercial species. The document was also challenging to locate on the website, and the document format made it difficult to translate from the original language. The document also does not explain how the criteria "compliance history" and "historic catch" consider social, economic, or environmental needs in fisheries, nor does it provide the assessment results for each recipient.



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Estonia: User-friendly website interface with overview of allocation process

Estonia's Ministry of Rural Affairs provides a centralized page on its website outlining the criteria and methodology used to assign fishing quotas. It includes references to relevant laws and technical details about the processes, along with outcomes per commercial species.¹² Our research indicates that information about the allocation process and outcomes in many Member States are dispersed across multiple pages of government websites and Estonia's page provides an example of how to centralise this information in a single page.

While Estonia's page improves accessibility, there is great room for improvement. It is unclear how allocation criteria integrate social, economic, and environmental objectives, or whether participatory processes and impact or risk assessments are conducted.

Each of these case studies demonstrates various approaches to enhancing stakeholder engagement or public access to information in the allocation process. The absence of advisory committees in many Member States represents a significant opportunity for enhancing stakeholder engagement by establishing formal consultative boards that include diverse voices from the fishing sector and beyond. Participatory processes can facilitate stakeholder input in co-developing criteria, while user-friendly information platforms can centralize access to relevant data on processes and outcomes. The criteria weighting methodologies used for quota assignments are gaps in many Member States and improving documentation and clarity around these processes is vital for fostering stakeholder trust.



Transparency in outcomes: public access to allocation results

Digital tools have emerged as powerful means to increase transparency in the outcomes of fishing rights allocations. These tools allow the public to see who holds the quotas, track quotas use, and assess whether allocations align with policy objectives. Examples of countries that have made strides in this area include:



Sweden: Real-time quota monitoring tool

The Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management (HaV) hosts a publicly accessible tool that provides daily updates on the status of demersal and pelagic quotas, broken down by fishing vessel and species quantities.¹³



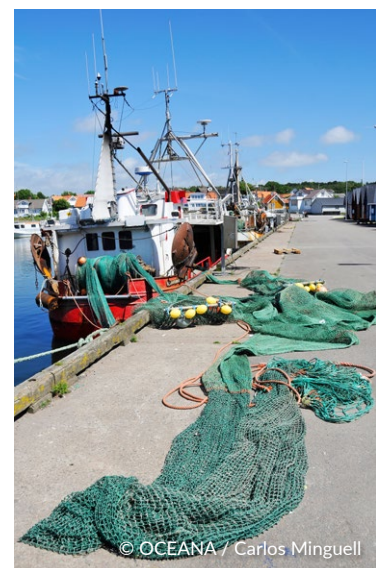
United Kingdom: Fixed Quota Allocation (FQA) register

The UK's FQA register, developed in collaboration with UK fisheries administrations, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), publicly lists quota holder names (company and individuals), and the quantity allocated per commercial stock.¹⁴



Iceland: Digital quota distribution per fishing year

Iceland's Directorate of Fisheries provides an open digital tool displaying data on the division of catch shares between vessels by species and the allocation of catch quotas. A separate webpage summarizes annual quota allocations, listing total quotas, vessel and party counts, major allocation holders, and significant changes.¹⁵



In Sweden, the UK, and Iceland, digital tools with searchable interfaces enable stakeholders and the public to monitor quota allocation, recipients, concentration, and use throughout the year. These tools not only improve transparency but also build public trust that fisheries management aligns with social, economic, and environmental goals.

Recommendations and checklist for transparent governance in fishing opportunities allocation

Fisheries resources are a public resource, and transparent allocation systems for fishing opportunities is a step towards managing them efficiently and sustainably for generations to come.¹⁶ To facilitate transparency and accountability in the allocation of fishing opportunities, we encourage EU Member States to consider the following checklist:



Clear participatory consultation process: A participatory consultation process, open to all stakeholder groups (eg. fishers, scientists, environmental NGOs) should be put in place to establish and validate the criteria for the allocation of fishing opportunities, with outcomes from each consultation published.



Accessible information on allocation criteria details: Allocation criteria, including justification for why it was used, and how was it determined and weighted for all commercial stocks, should be published and accessible to the public.



Detailed public disclosure of allocation recipients: Information on the allocation recipients, including how much the recipient was given, for all commercial stocks should be published and accessible to the public.



Regular socioeconomic and ecological impact assessments: Socioeconomic and ecological impacts of current fishing opportunities allocation should be regularly assessed, with recommendations for any necessary adjustments, and published.



Standardized reporting format across countries: A standardized reporting format for allocation processes and outcomes should be in place, developed in collaboration with the European Commission.



Centralized information access: A single, centralized section on government websites should consolidate information on allocation processes and outcomes, using a format consistent across Member States to facilitate comparison and understanding.

The European Commission is encouraged to provide clear guidance on transparency requirements and best practices for Member States in its upcoming *vademecum* on fishing opportunities. Additionally, the development of a digital repository of *European fishing opportunities allocation system* could serve as a centralized platform that compiles all the information on Member States's allocation processes and outcomes in a standardised format.





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