

Supporting sustainable fisheries

January 2023

- Over USD 10 billion in public money goes to support fisheries every year. Investment in assessing and ensuring fish stock health is beneficial to the industry and contributes to a sustainable ocean economy. But some support also drives unsustainable fishing practices.
- There is scope to improve fisheries support policy mixes to better support fishers in need, increase fishing productivity, and minimise the risk of harming fish stocks and ecosystems at the same time.
- Governments need to move away from support that directly enhances fishing capacity and unsustainable fishing – notably support for fuel, vessels, and access to infrastructure.

What's the issue?

The fisheries sector makes a key contribution to global food security and the ocean economy. Government support can enhance this contribution when it helps ensure the health of fish stocks and ecosystems, increases fish stock productivity, and builds resilience in the fisheries sector. But poorly targeted government support can also have undesirable outcomes when it encourages the build-up of excess fishing capacity, and overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

The risk that support ends up encouraging unsustainable fishing fundamentally depends on two things:

- The type of support policy and how directly it affects fishing costs and benefits, which determines how directly it may encourage over-capacity, over-fishing and IUU fishing in the absence of effective fisheries management.
- The condition of the fisheries benefiting from support – in particular, whether they are effectively managed, and whether there is scope for fishing the target stocks more intensely without compromising the stock's health.

The OECD has developed a tool to help governments assess the risk that their support policies may present for fish stock health. It classifies fisheries support types based on the level of risk they may pose to fishery sustainability, and lists mitigating factors that can limit this risk (effective management, targeting stocks that are underfished and policy design restricted to effectively managed or underfished fisheries).

A historical step forward that can take global fisheries a long way

In June 2022, after 20 years of negotiations, Members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) adopted an [Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies](#), which prohibits some of the most harmful fisheries subsidies, i.e. those that benefit IUU fishing, overfishing and fishing in the unregulated high seas. Governments now face the challenge of implementing this agreement and will continue negotiating to also eliminate subsidies that encourage overcapacity and overfishing, as pledged in Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life below water.

Support to fisheries at a glance

The *OECD Review of Fisheries 2022* presents data on support to fisheries for 40 OECD countries and other large fishing nations covered by the OECD Fisheries Support Estimate (FSE) data set, which together accounted for 90% of world landings over 2018-20. Together, they provided average annual support of USD 10.4 billion to the fisheries sector over that period. But how much of this support contributes to sustainable outcomes, and how much risks causing damage to fish stocks and livelihoods?

Fisheries policy mixes vary considerably across countries, and, on average, the policy mix is quite different in OECD countries and in emerging economies (Figure 2). Overall, 42% of the support provided in OECD countries over 2018-

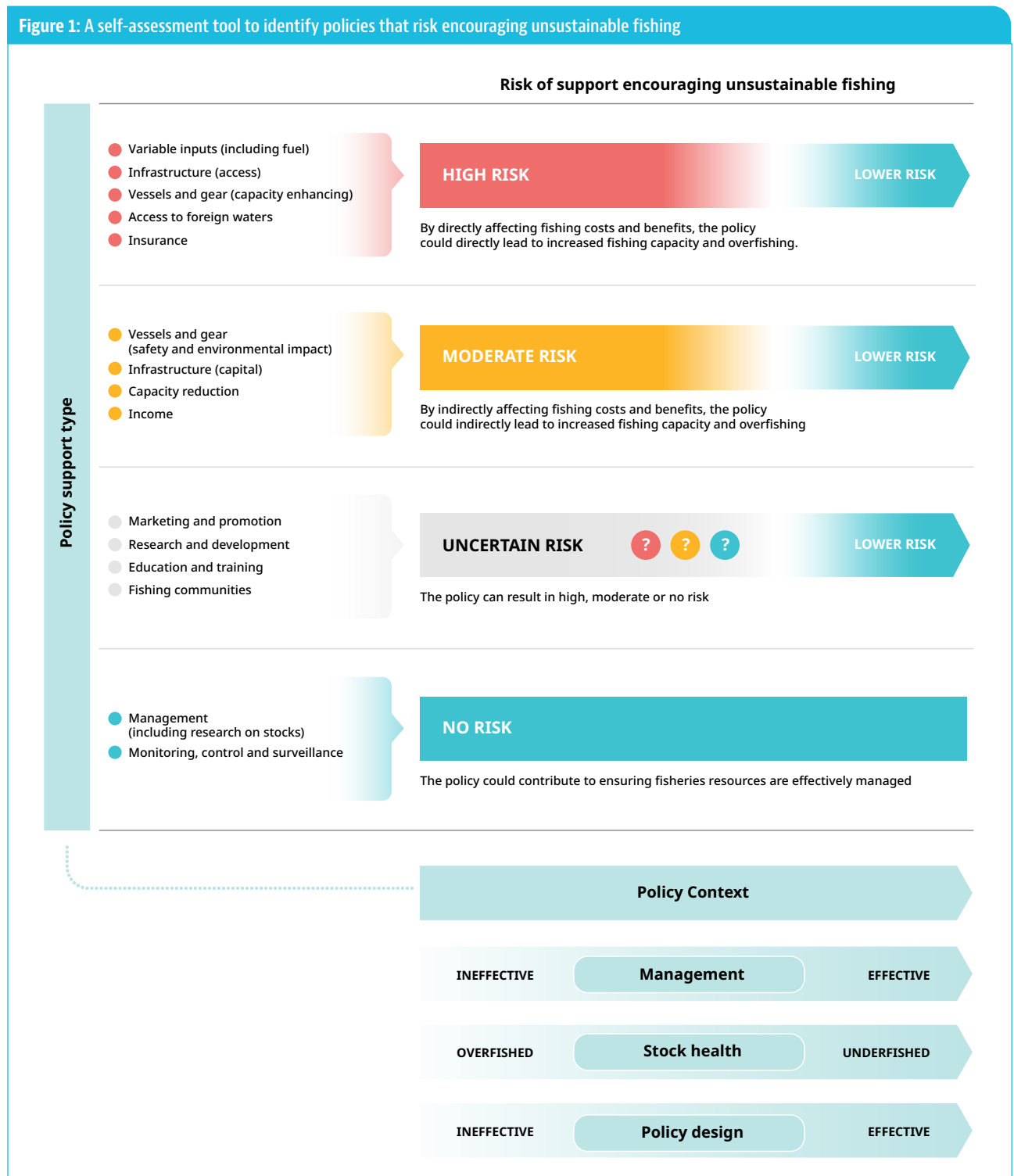


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20 presented no risk of encouraging unsustainable fishing, as it was targeted at ensuring productive and sustainable fisheries through spending on management, monitoring, control, and surveillance (MMCS). Having increased over time, spending on MMCS is now the largest type of support in these countries. Conversely, only 12% of OECD fisheries support presented a high risk of encouraging unsustainable fishing in the absence of effective fisheries management – and this support mostly consisted in

subsidised fuel and vessels. Support to infrastructure and income, which can present a moderate yet non-negligible risk, accounted for another 33% of support. In emerging economies, on the other hand, the majority (53%) of support provided in 2018-20 came from policies that present a high risk of encouraging unsustainable fishing in the absence of effective fisheries management (mainly support to fuel).

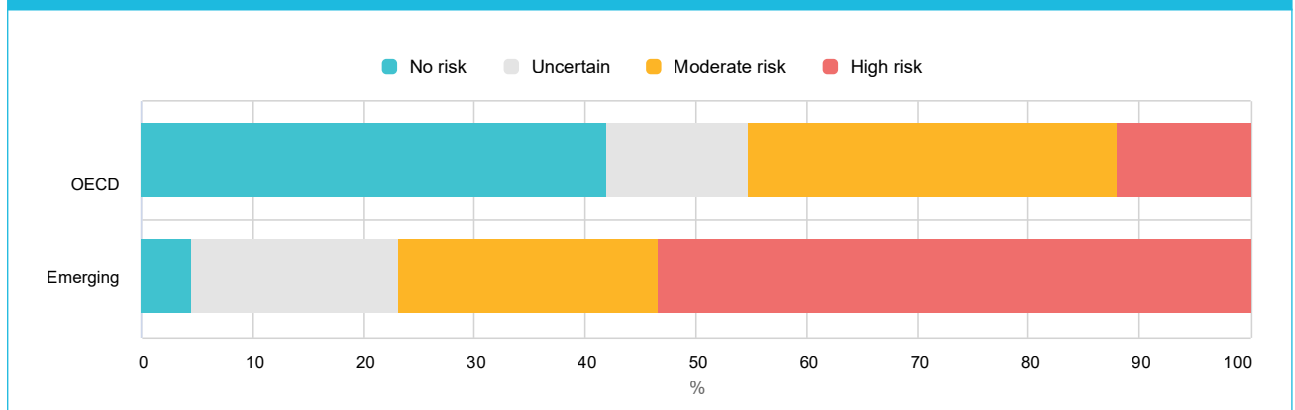
Figure 1: A self-assessment tool to identify policies that risk encouraging unsustainable fishing





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Figure 2: Risk profile of fisheries support in OECD and Emerging Economies 2018-20



What can governments do?

Ensuring that support to fisheries does not undermine the health of fish stocks is key to achieving socio-economic objectives and a sustainable ocean. Policies that encourage unsustainable fishing are also detrimental to society and the environment more generally as they result in a sub-optimal contribution to global food security and greater impacts on fish resources and ecosystems, as well as increased greenhouse gas emissions. Countries should:

- The type of support policy and how directly it affects fishing costs and benefits, which determines how directly it may encourage over-capacity, over-fishing and IUU fishing in the absence of effective fisheries management.
- Where possible, re-purpose government spending away from support that directly enhances fishing capacity and unsustainable fishing – notably support for fuel, vessels, and access to infrastructure – and invest more in sustainable fisheries management, enforcement and research into the health of fish stocks and the impact of climate change.
- Restrict eligibility to support packages that risk encouraging unsustainable fishing to fisheries that are managed effectively and based on underfished stocks.

- Make sure all those involved in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing are excluded from government support.
- Accept the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies so that it can enter into force, and continue negotiating at the WTO to agree to eliminate other potentially harmful subsidies, such as those that encourage overcapacity and overfishing.



Further reading

- [OECD \(2022\), OECD Review of Fisheries 2022, OECD Publishing, Paris.](#)
- [Download Fisheries Support Estimate data](#)
- [OECD Policy Brief: Managing fish stocks sustainably](#)
- [OECD Policy Brief: Eliminating government support to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing](#)

