

# Towards fairer global marine fisheries

## Empowering coastal countries to negotiate fairer access arrangements

Professor Liam Campling

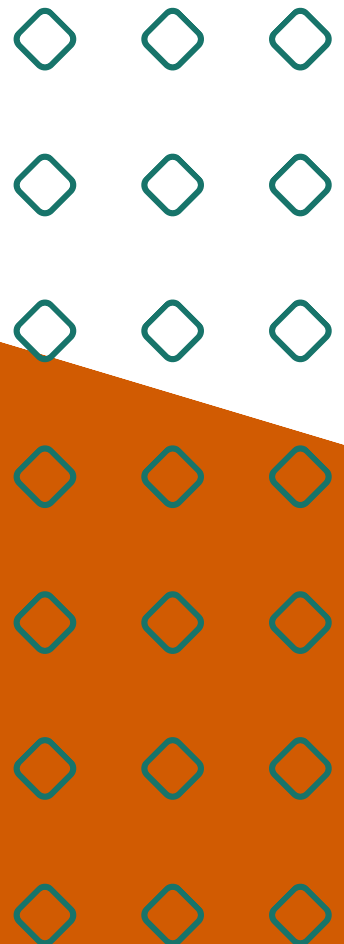
15 January 2024

### Research Insights #4

Many coastal countries in the global South lease fishing rights to fleets from other parts of the world in exchange for money or investment. However, negotiations around access arrangements are often unequal and politically fraught, influenced by powerful company interests, corruption and geopolitical dynamics. This means that coastal countries often fail to capture the full economic and public benefits of their resource-rich seas.

**Centre on Labour, Sustainability  
and Global Production**

**Cite as:** Campling, L. (2023). Towards fairer global marine fisheries: Empowering coastal countries to negotiate fairer access arrangements, Research Insights #4, School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London. Available at [www.qmul.ac.uk/busman/research/research-insights](http://www.qmul.ac.uk/busman/research/research-insights).



## Global fisheries access arrangements: a poorly understood instrument in global trade

As the world's population grows, the global demand for fish is expected to double by 2050. Some coastal and island nations – by accident of geography and marine migration patterns – have coastal waters that are rich in fish populations.

Some of these countries, typically in the global South, choose to sell fishing rights in their waters to distant-water fishing fleets from other parts of the world.

Like the agreements in oil drilling or mineral mining, these access arrangements usually involve a company or organisation from a more economically advanced country paying a poorer country to access its natural resources.



Commissioned by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, this is the first global study of the political economy of fisheries access.

**Professor Liam Campling**

As researchers, we know little about these arrangements in global fisheries due to confidentiality, commercial interests and corruption. Our research is designed to change this.

For the first time, a team of 11 researchers used interviews, policy and historical analyses to produce a baseline understanding of global fisheries access arrangements.

**Our research has produced insights that could empower coastal countries to capture the full economic benefits of their resource-rich seas.**

## Recommendations

1

Coastal countries should **recognise the public value of fish stocks** and their potential contribution to economic growth, fairer income distribution and improved livelihoods.

2

Coastal countries should **understand what they are giving away** when offering discounts to distant water fleets in return for onshore investment.

3

We need to **recognise the unequal power that large companies** wield as strategic agents in fisheries access negotiations.

4

Governments in coastal countries should **collaborate and leverage their bargaining power** when negotiating with distant water fishing fleets.

5

**Sustainable fishing should be at the core of access arrangements** to protect marine ecosystems and secure long-term benefits for local populations.

6

We need **more accountability of companies and governments in access arrangements** to ensure that the economic and public benefits from selling access are equitably distributed.

## Distant water fishing: how it works

Coastal countries have exclusive rights over the waters within 200 nautical miles of their coastline, known as **exclusive economic zones** (EEZs). Countries can choose to use these EEZs for their own fishing or they can lease access to them to distant water fishing fleets. There is a lot at stake in these access agreements, yet little is known about them. We have mapped and analysed these access arrangements to better understand global fisheries.

### Resource seekers

Fishing fleets from the EU, Japan, USA, Taiwan, South Korea, China and Russia

### Resource holders

Coastal countries from West Africa, Namibia, Myanmar, Western Indian Ocean, India and the Pacific Islands



## Types of access agreements

- **Cash for access** to waters
- **Discounted access** in return for onshore investments in processing facilities, fishing vessels being registered locally or agreements to use local goods and services

## Negotiating access agreements: an unequal playing field

Our research showed that negotiations around agreements are economically uneven and politically unequal. It is not a 'technical' process and there is often corruption on both sides. The agreements are very diverse and shaped by the local context:

- local law and regulations
- commercial priorities
- marine and ecological conditions
- geopolitical relations, including historical colonial links.

## Working towards best practices

The complexity of access arrangements, influenced by the political, economic and physical geographies of each EEZ region, means that there is no simple policy solution for ensuring more equitable relationships between negotiating parties.

However, we should work towards voluntary best practice guidelines in access arrangements, which are sensitive to different contexts and local development aspirations.

## Recognising the value of these public assets

Coastal countries should understand what they are giving away when offering 'discounts' to distant water fleets in return for localisation of vessels or onshore investment in fish factories.

While generating local economic benefits from a thriving fishing industry is a reasonable development objective, the discount agreed might be excessive. Also, the money given away by the discount, might be better spent in other ways, for example on local services.



## The role of companies

To understand access arrangements, we must move beyond a state-based analysis to examine the role of companies. Ultimately, it is companies that fish, not countries. These companies can range from small single-vessel family firms to global companies managing industrial fishing fleets. The larger companies are highly sophisticated multinational corporations and may be negotiating with individuals with far less experience.

## Towards more accountability

To help ensure that the economic benefits from selling fishing access are equitably distributed:

- Revenue from access arrangements should be seen as a public asset
- Aggregate financial flows should be made public.

## Getting the best deal for their country

Coastal states can secure a better deal for their country:

- through cooperation with their neighbours (see Pacific Islands case study)
- by designing arrangements in their favour.

Namibia, for example, prioritises locally owned fleets and encourages onshore employment.

### Case study: The Pacific Islands – an example of South–South cooperation

In the last 15 years, the Pacific Islands have worked together to boost their control over their EEZs, increase revenues and generate environmental improvements. In 2007, eight Pacific Islands implemented a **regional, rights-based approach to allocating access** whereby each island is allotted a total number of fishing days, which they can then sell as they wish.

By working together, they have dramatically increased the price fleets pay to fish in these waters. Access fees collectively increased from around USD 90 million in 2007 to USD 500 million by 2017, remaining at this level ever since.

## Underpinning research

Food and Agriculture Organization. (2022). [Mapping distant-water fisheries access arrangements](#).  
FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Circular No. 1252. Rome.

## About the author



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Political economist working on problems of corporate power, distribution and development in the global oceans. Professor Campling works collectively at the Centre on Labour, Sustainability and Global Production, is co-author of *Capitalism and the Sea* (Verso, 2021), *Free Trade Agreements and Global Labour Governance* (Routledge, 2021) and co-editor of *Labour Regimes and Global Production* (Agenda/Columbia University Press, 2022).

## Acknowledgments

**Research team:** Mialy Andriamahefazafy, Mads Barbesgaard, Siddharth Chakravarty, Béatrice Gorez, Elizabeth Havice, Dan Hetherington, Hyunjung Kim, Kwame Mfodwo, André Standing and John Virdin.

Funding body: FAO Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations

Editor: Nick Sarson  
Design: [Research Retold](#)