Report of the Webinar on

Understanding Global Experiences in Regional Cooperation to Curb IUU Fishing

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A Webinar on

Understanding Global Experiences in Regional Cooperation to Curb IUU Fishing

23 March 2026

Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO)

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Bay of Bengal Inter Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO)

The BOBP-IGO is a regional fisheries advisory body with Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka as its contracting parties. It is mandated to enhance cooperation amongst its member countries and other countries (especially, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand) for sustainable fisheries management in the Bay of Bengal region. The BOBP-IGO Secretariat is located at Chennai.

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Opening Session

Welcome

Mr Rajdeep Mukherjee, Project Coordinator, BOBLME II Project & Policy Analyst, BOBP-IGO welcomed the participants of the webinar and said that the Bay of Bengal Programme has developed a Regional Plan of Action on IUU fishing and looked to learning from global experiences to take it forward effectively.

The BOB RPOA-IUU: From Adoption to Implementation: What we intend to learn today

Dr. P. Krishnan, Director, BOBP-IGO introduced the Bay of Bengal Regional Plan of Action to combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing (RPOA-IUU), noting that it is the fifth such regional plan globally and the first in the Bay of Bengal region. The development process began in 2019 and progressed through a series of consultations over three years, culminating in a finalized draft in 2024. The plan was formally endorsed at the Governing Council meeting in Malé in February 2025, with all member countries—Bangladesh, India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka—becoming parties following Bangladesh's signature in November 2025.

The Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO) has been designated as the secretariat responsible for implementation. The RPOA-IUU is aligned with key international instruments, including the IPOA-IUU, the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF), SDG 14, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries, and legal frameworks such as the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), UNCLOS, and the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA). Its implementation period spans 2025–2030, with substantive activities commencing in 2026.

Implementation will be supported by an ongoing FAO-backed programme (Phase II, 2023–2028), which targets a 20% reduction in IUU fishing within the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem.

The RPOA comprises 20 actions organized into five thematic workstreams:

1. Cooperation and regional governance architecture (8 actions): Focuses on strengthening institutional frameworks through actions such as designation of national focal points, stakeholder engagement, implementation of National Plans of Action for Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (NPOA-MCS), development of inspection plans, inter-agency coordination, and establishment of regional information-sharing mechanisms.
2. Flag state compliance and vessel accountability (4 actions): Includes measures to prevent vessel reflagging (vessel hopping), enforce vessel marking and identification standards, adopt IMO numbering systems, ensure gear marking compliance, and maintain IUU vessel lists.
3. Capacity development and NPOA implementation (4 actions): Encompasses development and execution of NPOAs, creation of a regional MCS toolbox, strengthening technical capacities, and periodic evaluation of implementation performance.

4. Data infrastructure, traceability, and IUU monitoring (3 actions): Aims to establish a regional fishing vessel record, implement harmonized catch documentation systems, and monitor IUU fishing trends using FAO methodologies to support evidence-based decision-making and reduce market access for illegal catch.
5. Market and trade measures (1 action): Focuses on adoption of international standards for classification of fishery products and reduction of post-harvest losses.

Dr. P. Krishnan highlighted several key insights emerging from the framework. He emphasized that cooperation, rather than enforcement alone, is central to the RPOA. The actions are highly interdependent and must be implemented collectively. Investment in data systems is foundational and should be prioritized early, while capacity building and market measures serve as cross-cutting enablers.

The implementation strategy is structured in three phases. The first phase prioritizes establishing governance and institutional foundations. The second phase (mid-2026 to 2028) involves parallel execution of compliance, capacity, data, and market interventions. The final phase focuses on adaptive management through monitoring, evaluation, and iterative improvements.

The theory of change underpinning the RPOA assumes full political commitment from member states and early momentum driven by the FAO-supported programme. The secretariat will coordinate implementation, supported by regional and international partners. Initial governance milestones are expected by mid-2026, followed by progressive outcomes such as improved vessel compliance, enhanced MCS capacity, stronger data systems, and improved market transparency. Post-2028, adaptive management will guide course corrections, with national systems sustaining long-term progress. Overall, the plan aims to achieve a 20% reduction in IUU fishing in the region.

Dr. P. Krishnan noted that IUU fishing remains a complex and multifaceted challenge. The session was designed to draw lessons from other regions, including the Caribbean and Southeast Asia, particularly on addressing small-scale fisheries within IUU frameworks, operationalizing regional cooperation, sequencing implementation actions, and facilitating vessel information exchange.

The discussion also aimed to examine enforcement challenges in regions with sensitive maritime boundaries and to identify realistic indicators of success for the first year of implementation. These insights are expected to inform the detailed implementation plan to be presented at the Governing Council meeting in May 2026.

The webinar structure included a lead presentation from FAO, followed by inputs from regional frameworks, special remarks, and a panel discussion involving all speakers.

Key takeaways

- First-of-its-kind regional framework: The Bay of Bengal RPOA-IUU is the region's first coordinated response to IUU fishing, with full political buy-in from all four member countries.

- Cooperation over enforcement: The plan prioritizes regional cooperation, governance strengthening, and institutional alignment rather than relying solely on enforcement measures.

- Data systems are foundational: Early investment in vessel records, catch documentation, and monitoring systems is critical for enabling effective compliance and traceability.

- Integrated, multi-phase implementation: A phased approach - governance setup, parallel action, and adaptive management - ensures structured and scalable implementation.

- Clear outcome target with enabling support: The RPOA aims for a 20% reduction in IUU fishing, supported by FAO programmes, capacity building, and cross-cutting market and institutional interventions.

FAO Perspective on IUU Fishing in the Bay of Bengal Region

Dr. Rishi Sharma (FAO) provided an overview of the nature and scale of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Bay of Bengal region, along with key governance and implementation challenges and the range of instruments available to address them.

He began by outlining the different forms of IUU fishing observed in the region. A major area of concern relates to vessel operational documentation, including fishing without valid licenses, falsified licenses, and fraudulent vessel registrations. In some cases, multiple vessels operate under the same registration number or vessels are registered under different identities, reflecting systemic weaknesses in vessel identification and registration systems. Catch-related violations are also widespread. These include non-reporting or misreporting of catches, unauthorized landings in non-designated ports, and unregulated or poorly reported transshipment activities at sea. In addition, illegal fishing practices such as the use of destructive gear and the harvesting of prohibited species continue to be observed.

Dr. Rishi Sharma explained that a significant feature of IUU fishing in the region is its transboundary dimension. Fishing frequently occurs across maritime boundaries or in restricted areas, often leading to conflicts between different user groups. In particular, there are tensions between small-scale and large-scale fisheries, especially in nearshore areas where spatial boundaries and access rights are not always clearly respected. Encroachment across designated fishing zones and limited formal access arrangements between neighbouring countries further exacerbate these challenges.

The scale of the problem is compounded by the large number of fishing vessels operating in the region. It is estimated that there are over 1.9 million vessels, of which approximately 80 percent are under 12 meters in length. Many of these smaller vessels lack tracking systems such as Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) or Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), making effective monitoring and enforcement extremely difficult.

Dr. Rishi Sharma highlighted several structural drivers of IUU fishing. These include overcapacity and increasing fishing effort resulting from the expansion and industrialization of fisheries since

the mid-20th century. Economic pressures to maintain profitability often incentivize non-compliant behaviour. At the same time, governance systems face limitations in terms of monitoring capacity, enforcement reach, and institutional coordination.

IUU fishing is often opportunistic in nature, shaped by the perceived balance between economic gain and risk of detection or penalty. In many cases, penalties are not sufficiently stringent to act as effective deterrents. Limited successful prosecutions and the perception of IUU fishing as a relatively low-risk activity further contribute to its persistence. Weak surveillance in certain maritime areas, particularly along boundaries, creates additional opportunities for illegal operations.

Spatial analyses indicate that IUU fishing activity is concentrated largely in transboundary zones rather than in high seas areas. These hotspots reflect both governance gaps and the challenges of managing shared resources.

The economic implications are substantial, explained **Dr. Rishi Sharma.** According to him, it was estimated that IUU fishing in the region results in losses amounting to billions of dollars annually. This represents not only lost economic value but also undermines fisheries sustainability, as overexploitation leads to declining fish stocks and long-term ecological impacts.

In discussing governance challenges, **Dr. Rishi Sharma** emphasized the fragmentation of regulatory and monitoring systems. Key disconnects exist between fisheries management, vessel registration, crew documentation, port inspections, and maritime safety systems. These systems often operate in silos, limiting their effectiveness in addressing IUU fishing comprehensively.

Institutional coordination across agencies, such as fisheries departments, coast guards, customs, and immigration authorities, is often weak. Additionally, inspectors may lack the training or legal authority to effectively identify and act on IUU-related violations.

At the international level, multiple organizations contribute to addressing different aspects of the issue. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) each play important roles, covering fisheries management, vessel safety, and labour conditions respectively. However, gaps remain, particularly in relation to small-scale fisheries and the post-harvest sector.

Dr. Rishi Sharma pointed to a range of international instruments available to support countries in addressing IUU fishing. These include FAO frameworks such as the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) and the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), as well as emerging mechanisms such as the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. These instruments aim to strengthen flag state responsibilities, port state controls, and overall compliance.

While saying that FAO also supports implementation through technical assistance, capacity building, and tools such as global vessel registries, Dr Sharma emphasized that improving integration across systems, particularly linking vessel registries, crew documentation, inspection systems, and licensing frameworks, is critical for enhancing effectiveness.

He concluded by noting that addressing IUU fishing in the Bay of Bengal requires a coordinated and integrated approach that combines governance reforms, capacity development, improved data systems, and stronger regional cooperation. While significant tools and frameworks exist, their impact depends on effective implementation and alignment across sectors and institutions.

Key takeaways

- IUU fishing in the region is systemic, not incidental: It is driven by structural issues such as fraudulent vessel registration, weak catch reporting, and transboundary fishing, rather than isolated non-compliance.

- Monitoring gap is the core constraint: With over 1.9 million vessels (mostly small-scale and untracked), limited use of VMS/AIS severely restricts effective surveillance and enforcement.

- Economic incentives outweigh deterrence: Low penalties, weak prosecution, and high economic returns make IUU fishing a rational, opportunistic choice for many operators.

- Fragmented governance undermines enforcement: Disconnects between fisheries management, vessel registration, port controls, and labour/safety systems prevent a coherent response.

- Integration, rather than new instruments, is the priority: Existing frameworks (FAO, IMO, ILO, WTO) are sufficient in principle; the key gap lies in coordination, data integration, and operational alignment across agencies and systems.

Regional Experiences in collaboration

Southeast Asia: Regional Technical Organization Facilitating Capacity Building and Collaboration

SEAFDEC's Perspective on Regional Cooperation and Capacity Building to Combat IUU Fishing

Mr. Kongpathai Saraphaivanich from SEAFDEC's Training Department presented the role of the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) as a regional technical organization supporting capacity building, cooperation, and implementation of measures to combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in Southeast Asia.

He said that SEAFDEC, established in 1967, comprises 11 member countries, including ASEAN Member States and Japan. Its mandate is to promote sustainable fisheries and contribute to food security in the region. The organization operates through five technical departments across member countries, supported by a Secretariat based in Bangkok.

The presentation highlighted the policy framework guiding SEAFDEC's work, particularly the ASEAN Resolution and Plan of Action on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security towards 2030. This framework emphasizes strengthening cooperation among ASEAN Member States and

enhancing compliance with national and international fisheries instruments to combat IUU fishing.

SEAFDEC's approach focuses on three key areas: strengthening regional coordination and cooperation, enhancing capacity and awareness on monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS), and supporting the implementation of effective fisheries management and compliance measures.

A major component of this work is the development of regional data and information-sharing systems. The Regional Fishing Vessel Record (RFVR) serves as a key platform, enabling ASEAN Member States to share standardized vessel information. The database includes core vessel details such as ownership, registration, identification numbers, and technical specifications. It enhances transparency, supports inspections, and contributes to traceability, particularly in the context of port State measures. The system is continuously expanding, including efforts to incorporate smaller vessels.

Mr. Kongpathai Saraphaivanich explained how SEAFDEC also promotes harmonized regional instruments to address IUU fishing across the supply chain through various tools including guidelines for preventing IUU fishing, regional traceability frameworks, and catch documentation schemes. Such tools aim to align national practices and strengthen regional cooperation.

Capacity building is another central pillar of SEAFDEC's work. Since 2016, the organization has conducted training programmes, workshops, and online learning initiatives to strengthen the capabilities of fisheries officers and inspectors. These activities focus on improving practical skills in MCS implementation and enhancing awareness of compliance requirements.

A key innovation highlighted by **Mr. Kongpathai Saraphaivanich** was the development of the electronic ASEAN Catch Documentation Scheme (eACDS). This system is designed to improve traceability of fish and fishery products throughout the supply chain - from catch to market. It operates through web-based and mobile applications used by vessel operators, processors, and authorities for reporting, verification, and documentation. By enhancing transparency, the system helps prevent IUU-caught fish from entering markets. **Mr. Kongpathai Saraphaivanich** said that a number of ASEAN countries had already implemented or adapted the system, with some developing national versions based on the model.

Mr. Kongpathai Saraphaivanich also outlined the scale of SEAFDEC's activities. Between 2020 and 2025, he said that a total of 46 regional activities were conducted, involving over 1,400 participants. These activities included training, technical workshops, system demonstrations, and policy dialogues.

Priority areas for future action, identified through regional consultations, include strengthening vessel monitoring systems, enhancing MCS for both commercial and small-scale fisheries, improving regional information sharing and enforcement cooperation, expanding traceability systems, developing standardized methodologies, strengthening legal frameworks and prosecution processes, and improving monitoring of transshipment activities.

SEAFDEC's work is supported through partnerships with regional and international organizations, including FAO and other technical networks. These collaborations provide technical assistance, facilitate knowledge exchange, and strengthen regional responses to IUU fishing.The presentation also highlighted key international instruments relevant to IUU fishing, including the FAO Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), which establishes controls over foreign vessels entering ports to prevent IUU-caught fish from entering markets. The importance of regional frameworks such as the ASEAN RPOA-IUU and the ASEAN Network for Combating IUU Fishing (AN-IUU) was emphasized. These mechanisms support information sharing, coordination among national focal points, and dissemination of best practices.

Concluding, **Mr. Kongpathai Saraphaivanich** said that SEAFDEC reaffirmed its commitment to supporting ASEAN Member States in strengthening fisheries governance and promoting sustainable and responsible fishing practices.

Key Takeaways

- Regional cooperation platforms are central to effectiveness: Mechanisms such as RFVR and AN-IUU demonstrate that structured information sharing and coordination are critical to tackling transboundary IUU fishing.

- Traceability systems are a game-changer: Tools like the electronic ASEAN Catch Documentation Scheme (eACDS) strengthen supply chain transparency and help block IUU fish from entering markets.

- Capacity building is foundational, not supplementary: Continuous training and technical support for MCS implementation are essential to translate policy frameworks into operational enforcement.

- Data standardization and integration remain key gaps: Expanding vessel registries and harmonizing data systems across countries, especially for small-scale fleets, is crucial for effective monitoring.

- Future action must prioritize enforcement and legal strengthening: Improving prosecution processes, monitoring transshipment, and strengthening legal frameworks are necessary to enhance deterrence and compliance.

Mediterranean: The GFCM compliance framework IUU vessel list, port state scheme and catch documentation

GFCM Perspective on Regional Mechanisms to Combat IUU Fishing

Mr. Ahmed Siliman presented the experience of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) in addressing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing through binding regional mechanisms, coordinated monitoring systems, and strong cooperation frameworks.

He explained that the GFCM, established in 1949, is a regional fisheries management organization covering the Mediterranean and Black Seas, with 24 contracting parties and additional cooperating non-contracting parties. A key strength of the GFCM lies in its legal mandate to adopt binding decisions on fisheries and aquaculture, enabling coordinated regional action. Its work is guided by a combination of instruments, including the GFCM Agreement, ministerial declarations such as the MedFish4Ever and Sofia Declarations, and the GFCM 2030 Strategy. The organization also implements three Regional Plans of Action (RPOAs), including one specifically focused on combating IUU fishing, alongside others on small-scale fisheries and vulnerable species.

The GFCM's approach to IUU fishing is anchored in a Regional Plan of Action adopted in 2017, which establishes responsibilities across flag, port, and coastal states. A key area of support provided by the GFCM is assisting countries in developing National Plans of Action (NPOAs). This is facilitated through a structured toolkit, including templates and technical guidance, as well as support for national consultations. Several countries, including Turkey and Albania, are in the process of adopting NPOAs aligned with the regional framework.

A comprehensive set of Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) measures underpins implementation. These include vessel monitoring systems (VMS), with a general requirement for vessels above 15 meters to be equipped with satellite tracking. In certain sub-regional management plans, this threshold is reduced to include smaller vessels, reflecting a tailored approach to specific fisheries contexts. The GFCM has also developed mechanisms for rapid information sharing, including a "sighting" system that allows countries to report suspected IUU fishing activities in real time. This system is supported by designated national focal points, enabling timely communication and response.

Port State Measures form another critical pillar. The GFCM adopted regional port control measures as early as 2008, later aligning them with the FAO Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA). These measures include designated ports, pre-arrival authorization, denial of port entry for IUU-listed vessels, inspection protocols, and information exchange systems.

A central tool in the GFCM framework is the regional fleet register, which compiles information on authorized fishing vessels across the region. Updated regularly through data submissions from member states, this register supports inspection and verification processes. Complementing this is the GFCM IUU vessel list, which identifies vessels engaged in illegal activities. The list is strengthened through a cross-listing mechanism with other regional fisheries management organizations, enhancing its scope and effectiveness.

Regional cooperation is operationalized through mechanisms such as the Joint Inspection Scheme. Initially piloted in the Strait of Sicily, this initiative enables inspectors from multiple countries to conduct coordinated inspections using shared assets, including vessels, aircraft, and drones. The scheme has since been expanded to multiple sub-regions and has demonstrated strong results in identifying infringements and improving compliance. **Mr. Ahmed Siliman** explained that traceability is further reinforced through catch documentation schemes for specific species, such as red coral and turbot. These require catch certificates to ensure that only legally harvested products enter the market.

To support integration and information exchange, the GFCM has developed a centralized MCS portal. This web-based platform consolidates data on port state measures, inspection activities, vessel lists, and traceability systems. It also supports electronic reporting and serves as a repository for compliance-related information, with provisions for future interoperability with global systems.

A distinctive feature of the GFCM approach is its structured compliance assessment mechanism. Through standardized reporting templates, member countries provide detailed information on the implementation of measures. This is followed by bilateral consultations and review by a compliance committee. The system not only identifies cases of non-compliance and triggers corrective actions but also recognizes full compliance through incentive-based recognition.

The GFCM 2030 Strategy emphasizes a tailored, sub-regional approach, recognizing that different ecological and governance contexts require differentiated interventions. Alongside regulatory measures, the GFCM provides technical assistance in areas such as vessel monitoring, small-scale fisheries tracking technologies, electronic reporting tools, and legislative reform.

Mr. Ahmed Siliman concluded by emphasizing that effective action against IUU fishing depends on a combination of binding rules, operational cooperation, technological systems, and sustained capacity development, supported by strong regional coordination.

Key Takeaways

- Binding regional decisions enable real enforcement: Unlike many frameworks, the GFCM's legal mandate allows adoption of binding measures, strengthening compliance across countries.

- Integrated MCS systems are the backbone of effectiveness: Tools such as VMS, fleet registers, IUU vessel lists, and real-time sighting mechanisms create a layered and functional monitoring system.

- Regional cooperation must be operational, not just declaratory: Joint inspection schemes demonstrate how shared assets and coordinated enforcement can deliver tangible compliance outcomes.

- Traceability and data systems drive accountability: Catch documentation schemes and centralized MCS portals ensure transparency across the supply chain and support enforcement.

- Compliance systems need both enforcement and incentives: Structured compliance assessments, combined with corrective actions and positive recognition, improve long-term adherence to rules.

Curbing IUU Fishing in Small-Scale Fisheries Contexts — Lessons from the WECAFC RPOA-IUU

Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism

Ms. Sanya Compton representing the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism Secretariat presented perspectives and experiences on curbing illegal, unreported, and unregulated in small-scale fisheries, with a particular focus on lessons from the WECAFC Regional Plan of Action on IUU fishing.

This presentation provides an overview of the challenges and rationale for addressing IUU fishing within the WECAFC region, and highlights the Commission's approach, including the work of the regional Working Group on IUU fishing.

Within the context of small-scale fisheries, one of the major challenges faced by Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS) managers is balancing strategies that are flexible enough to respond to the dynamic nature of the sector, while also accounting for limited financial, human, and technological resources. IUU fishing has long been recognized as a complex issue in the region, with persistent forms identified through earlier studies conducted by the CRFM.

Proposed solutions to address IUU fishing have often focused on strengthening governance and enhancing cooperation among regional fisheries bodies, increasing maritime assets for surveillance across territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones, improving port state controls, and reducing the economic incentives that drive fishers toward illegal activities through stronger sanctions and trade measures. However, while these measures represent an ideal, the reality is that there is no single MCS solution applicable to all fisheries. Implementation must take into account the diversity of fisheries, their interactions, and their scale.

Traditional MCS systems, which are more suited to industrial fisheries, have proven difficult to apply in small-scale contexts. As a result, there has been a shift toward governance frameworks that emphasize self-enforcement. Community-based approaches, such as coastal watch programmes, empower fishing communities and make use of their local knowledge to strengthen monitoring and compliance.

The WECAFC operates within FAO Fishing Areas 31 and 41 and includes regional entities such as the Central American Integration System and the Caribbean Community, along with their respective fisheries bodies, OSPESCA and CRFM. It also includes additional member states and observers from other regional organizations. The Commission's approach to MCS and IUU fishing is guided by international instruments, including the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines, the International Plan of Action on IUU Fishing, and the Castries Declaration. This approach aims to improve coordination and cooperation at the national level among agencies responsible for fisheries and related MCS functions.

To support a more targeted response to IUU fishing, a Joint Working Group on IUU was established, with the CRFM serving as the current convener. This Working Group is tasked with identifying cost-effective measures to prevent, deter, and eliminate IUU fishing, as well as

assessing the nature and extent of the problem in the region. It also reviews systems for collecting, analyzing, and sharing data, including information on activities by distant water fishing nations.

The Working Group evaluates appropriate technologies and methodologies for MCS, collaborates with other technical groups, and contributes to the development of strategies and protocols. It plays a key role in strengthening cooperation among member states, improving legal frameworks, promoting data sharing, and enhancing capacity for enforcement and prosecution of fisheries-related offences. Transparency in fisheries governance is also a major focus, including improvements in licensing systems, catch reporting, and financial compliance.

In addition, the Working Group supports institutional development and resource mobilization, with participation from member states, overseas territories, and technical experts. Members implement agreed activities at the national level, report on progress, and contribute to ongoing coordination and collaboration.

One of the key practical measures promoted by the Working Group is the marking of fishing gear as a deterrent to IUU fishing. Gear marking enables identification of ownership and links fishing activity to specific vessels, crews, and licenses. It also supports the reporting, recovery, and management of abandoned or lost gear.

The importance of inter-agency coordination has also been strongly emphasized, leading to the establishment of multi-agency task forces in some member states. Despite ongoing enforcement challenges, including limited capacity and reluctance in some cases to enforce regulations against domestic fleets, cooperation remains essential for building knowledge, strengthening responses, and addressing fisheries-related crimes.

A major outcome of the Working Group's efforts has been the development of a Regional Plan of Action on IUU fishing, endorsed in 2019. This plan calls on member states to develop and implement National Plans of Action aligned with the International Plan of Action. The CRFM has supported this process by developing standardized templates to ensure consistency across countries.

Several countries, including Belize and Guyana, have already approved their National Plans of Action, while others are integrating theirs into broader sub-regional strategies. Incorporating these plans into national or regional security frameworks has proven to be an effective way to enhance uptake and implementation.

In conclusion, traditional MCS approaches often fall short in small-scale fisheries due to their dispersed and diverse nature. Effective management requires a shift toward governance systems that empower communities, leverage local knowledge, and promote cooperation across institutions. Practical measures such as gear marking offer immediate benefits, while regional coordination mechanisms and national planning frameworks provide the foundation for longer-term success in combating IUU fishing.

Key takeaways

- No One-Size-Fits-All MCS Solution: Small-scale fisheries require flexible, context-specific approaches rather than traditional enforcement-heavy systems.

- Shift Toward Community-Based Governance: Empowering fishing communities through self-enforcement and local knowledge is critical for effective IUU control.

- Regional Cooperation is key: Institutions like WACAFC and the Joint Working Group enable coordination, data sharing, and harmonized policy responses.

- National Plans of Action Drive Implementation: Aligning national strategies with regional and international frameworks improves coherence and effectiveness.

- Simple Tools Can Have High Impact: Practical measures like gear marking, combined with inter-agency coordination, can significantly deter IUU fishing despite resource constraints.

South West Indian Ocean

South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission (SWIOFC)

Strengthening Regional Cooperation to Combat IUU Fishing: The SWIOFC Minimum Terms and Conditions - Harmonizing Access, Enhancing MCS, and Supporting Sustainable Tuna Fisheries in the Southwest Indian Ocean Region.

Mr. Jon Lansley, Secretary, SWIOFC, said that Tuna in the Southwest Indian Ocean are highly migratory species, and fishing activities within one Exclusive Economic Zone can directly affect stock status in neighbouring waters. This creates an inherent interdependence among Southwest Indian Ocean states and underscores the need for coordinated regional management.

With respect to foreign access agreements, many countries in the region negotiate bilaterally with distant water fishing nations. However, prior to the development of the Minimum Terms and Conditions, standards varied widely. This resulted in inconsistent oversight and, in some cases, suboptimal financial and ecological outcomes.

The development of the Minimum Terms and Conditions, or MTC, began in 2012 and progressed through extensive national and regional consultations between 2013 and 2015. This was followed by technical studies in 2016 and further negotiations through consultancies until 2019. The MTC was ultimately endorsed in 2020. Importantly, the guidelines were intentionally aligned with existing international legal instruments to ensure that they could be recognized and implemented within established legal frameworks.

In the context of this webinar, **Mr. Jon Lansley** said that the MTC offers a practical regional model for operationalizing cooperation frameworks to combat IUU fishing. It reflects how broad principles of cooperation can be translated into concrete, implementable tools.

The core objective of the MTC is to establish a common access regime and avoid the "patchwork problem," where differing national licensing rules create loopholes that undermine collective management efforts. The framework also promotes predictable and fair economic returns, reducing competitive underpricing among neighbouring states. At the same time, it strengthens conservation by formalizing measures related to bycatch, fishing gear, fishing zones, landing requirements, and reporting, thereby supporting the sustainability of tuna and tuna-like species.

A key strength of the MTC lies in harmonizing systems, reducing duplication, and improving the reliability of regional information elements that are fundamental to combating IUU fishing. Notably, the MTC applies not only to fishing vessels but also to supply and transport vessels, which are often exploited by IUU operators.

Among its core components are licensing prerequisites, including pre-licensing inspections and risk screening to identify any history of IUU fishing or related illegal activities. Conditions of operation clearly define authorized fishing zones within Exclusive Economic Zones and on the high seas, reducing ambiguity and strengthening enforcement.

The establishment of a regional vessel record is a major pillar of cooperation. By maintaining a shared and continuously updated register, member states can better detect unlicensed activities, monitor vessel movements, and prevent practices such as flag hopping.

Harmonized reporting formats facilitate interoperability and enable cross-checking across Vessel Monitoring Systems, observer data, and port inspections. Landing requirements further strengthen control, requiring foreign vessels to land all catches at designated ports, with bycatch also required to be landed, except in the case of endangered, threatened, or protected species, which must be released.

The guidelines also emphasize flag state responsibility, ensuring that compliance obligations extend beyond coastal states and that flag states are held accountable for the conduct of their vessels.

Turning to Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance elements that require regional cooperation, Mr Lansley said that the harmonization of VMS and AIS systems is critical. Real-time or near real-time sharing of positional data reduces surveillance gaps across EEZ boundaries and the high seas. Regional observer programmes provide continuity and ensure consistent biological and compliance data collection as vessels move across jurisdictions.

Harmonized implementation of port state measures reduces the risk of IUU fish being landed in less stringent ports, while coordinated transshipment controls address one of the most significant vulnerabilities in global fisheries, where many IUU activities occur. Standardized measures for bycatch management and fish aggregating devices, including FAD logbooks, further strengthen ecological management and reduce opportunities for regulatory evasion.

Despite these advances, there were several challenges that remain, according to Mr Lansley These include legal ambiguities because key terms such as "foreign fishing," "fishing-related activities," and "supply vessels" are not always clearly defined, leading to uneven national

implementation. Capacity constraints also vary significantly across countries, as highlighted in a 2021 assessment, affecting the ability to implement MTC provisions effectively.

Data governance remains another critical issue. Effective regional cooperation depends on timely and accurate information exchange, yet weaknesses in data systems limit VMS interoperability and the accuracy of vessel records. In addition, Mr Lansley pointed to industry resistance posing a challenge, as requirements such as observer carriage, transshipment restrictions, landing obligations, and FAD monitoring can increase operational costs for fishing fleets.

A fundamental limitation is the voluntary nature of the MTC. As a non-binding instrument developed under an advisory body, implementation often lacks urgency and consistency. Stronger impact would likely require more binding commitments; however, the institutional mandate does not currently allow for this.

Looking ahead, **Mr. Jon Lansley** pointed to several steps that can strengthen implementation. These include conducting a structured legal review, organizing targeted capacity-building workshops, and reinforcing regional working groups. Greater alignment with broader regional initiatives such as MCS coordination centres and tuna management bodies could further enhance compliance and support joint action.

He concluded his presentation explaining that institutionally, the MTC work is embedded within a broader governance structure, where multiple working groups and task forces report to the Scientific Committee and the Commission. He said that the Task Force on Minimum Terms and Conditions, operating under the Working Party on Coordination and Collaboration, had been specifically mandated to assess implementation progress and identify ways to improve effectiveness.

Key takeaways

- MTC addresses fragmented governance ("Patchwork Problem"): By standardizing access agreements, licensing, and reporting, the MTC reduces loopholes created by inconsistent bilateral arrangements with distant water fishing nations.

- Stronger MCS through integrated regional systems: Tools such as shared vessel registers, harmonized VMS/AIS, observer programmes, and port state measures significantly enhance detection and deterrence of IUU fishing.

- Implementation gaps persist despite strong design: Legal ambiguities, uneven national capacity, weak data systems, and industry resistance continue to limit effective implementation across countries.

- Voluntary nature limits impact, next steps must focus on operationalization: As a non-binding framework, the MTC depends on political will; strengthening legal clarity, capacity building, and alignment with regional institutions is critical for real impact.

The SADC MCS Coordination Centre

Coordinating regional fisheries MCS to combat IUU fishing

Dr. Stanley Ndara, Chair of the SADC Board of Directors began by providing a historical perspective on the region and the commitments that have been made over time to protect fisheries resources. A key milestone was the SADC Protocol on Fisheries adopted in 2001, which recognized the importance of fisheries for the social and economic well-being of the people of the region. This was followed in 2008 by a statement of commitment from SADC Ministers responsible for fisheries, reflecting growing concern about the impact of harmful and illegal fishing practices on the sustainability of marine resources, both for present and future generations. Building on this, in 2017, the Ministers committed to establishing a charter to operationalize a regional Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance Coordination Centre (MCSCC) in Maputo, Mozambique. This Charter came into force in 2023 and provides the legal framework for the establishment of the Centre as a sub-regional body.

The MCSCC is mandated to coordinate measures relating to fisheries monitoring, control, and surveillance, as well as to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and associated fisheries crimes. In essence, it focuses on all illegal activities connected to the fisheries sector. The Charter currently includes 16 member states, comprising inland, coastal, and island countries, although not all have signed the agreement. Despite this, the Charter entered into force upon reaching the required threshold. The Centre is based in Maputo, Mozambique, and works to promote best practices in fisheries governance and the sustainable blue economy, while fostering synergies and collaboration across the region.

Operationally, the Centre became functional in 2023 with support from the SADC Secretariat based in Botswana. It is guided by an Operational Task Force consisting of technical experts, supported by a Secretariat, and works closely with a range of regional and international partners. The primary focus is to coordinate activities related to IUU fishing and to facilitate information sharing through intelligence platforms. Strong support from member states is essential for the effective functioning of such a regional body. In addition to its member states, the Centre engages with non-contracting cooperating states such as Kenya and Somalia, providing information to support due diligence processes for vessels entering their waters. This reflects an open and collaborative approach, grounded in mutual trust and shared objectives.

Dr. Stanley Ndara explained that a significant area of work involves supporting the implementation of the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA). Many SADC member states are parties to this agreement, and the Centre, together with its partners, provides training and capacity building on inspection procedures, risk assessment, and enforcement practices. These efforts have included recent trainings in countries such as Angola and Namibia, demonstrating the importance of regional cooperation in strengthening enforcement capacity.

The governance structure of the Centre includes a Board of Directors composed of representatives from inland, coastal, and island states, as well as experts in legal, financial, and risk management fields. Board members are appointed through a competitive process and serve fixed terms. The Board provides oversight to the Secretariat, while an Operational Task Force

offers technical guidance. Recruitment of an Executive Director is underway to further strengthen institutional capacity.

Beyond governance, the Centre contributes to knowledge sharing through policy briefs and analytical outputs, which are disseminated to member states to support evidence-based decision-making. A core function of the Centre is to act as a regional information hub, aggregating data from across member states to support risk assessment and intelligence-based decision-making. This includes assessing vessel risks and supporting port state controls.

The Centre had also established partnerships, including a memorandum of understanding with the Fisheries Committee for the West Central Gulf of Guinea, to enhance inter-regional cooperation across Africa. Risk assessment played a central role in port controls, enabling authorities to deny entry to high-risk vessels. Strengthening harmonization of inspection procedures, advance reporting requirements, and risk profiling across the region was a key priority.

A major development has been the approval of a regional register of fishing vessels by the SADC Council of Ministers. This register supports vessel identification and verification, strengthens the evidence base for port entry decisions under the PSMA, and complements existing national and regional vessel lists. It also helps reduce the risk of "port shopping," where vessels seek out less stringent ports to land illegal catch.

Dr. Stanley Ndara said that training and capacity-building initiatives remain a cornerstone of the Centre's work, covering areas such as risk assessment, inspection techniques, legal interpretation, and coordination with port authorities. These efforts enhance the effectiveness of national enforcement systems and promote consistency across the region. Dr Ndara used practical examples to demonstrate the importance of regional cooperation. In one case, a vessel was denied entry into the Seychelles due to its risk profile and subsequently denied entry into Mauritius as well, illustrating how shared information and coordinated action can effectively prevent IUU activities. He said that the Centre continues to build partnerships with a range of organizations and initiatives, recognizing that collaboration is essential to addressing the complex challenge of IUU fishing. It operates within a network of regional and international actors, ensuring that efforts are aligned and mutually reinforcing.

Dr. Stanley Ndara concluded his presentation saying that significant progress has been made in establishing the physical infrastructure of the Centre with a dedicated building in Katembe, Mozambique, nearing completion and expected to be officially handed over in June 2026. This would mark an important milestone and provide a permanent base for the Centre's operations, with plans to host partners and stakeholders for its formal inauguration.

Key takeaways

- Regional Cooperation is Institutionalized through MCSCC: The SADC MCS Coordination Centre (MCSCC) provides a formal mechanism to coordinate MCS efforts, combat IUU fishing, and address fisheries crimes across member states.

- Strong Legal and Political Foundations Underpin Action: Commitments from 2001 (SADC Protocol), 2008 (Ministerial Declaration), and the 2023 Charter demonstrate a long-term, evolving regional commitment to sustainable fisheries governance.

- Information Sharing and Risk-Based Control are Game-Changers: The Centre functions as a regional intelligence hub, enabling vessel risk profiling, coordinated port denials, and proactive enforcement through shared data systems.

- Capacity Building and PSMA implementation are central: Training on inspections, risk assessment, and enforcement strengthens national capabilities and ensures more consistent application of port state measures across the region.

- Harmonization Reduces IUU Opportunities (e.g., Port Shopping): Tools like the regional vessel register and standardized procedures help prevent vessels from exploiting weaker jurisdictions, making enforcement more effective collectively.

Remarks

PSMA Secretariat, Rome

Ms. Alicia Mosteiro Cabanela, PSMA Secretariat, FAO, Rome said that previous speakers had already touched on key areas that should be considered to be efficient in the fight against IUU fishing of which foremost was the integration of international requirements into regional conservation and management measures, and also at the national level into laws, regulations, and standard operating procedures. The second key element is cooperation and coordination among different countries, in their different roles, which has also been widely mentioned by previous presenters. The third aspect she would highlight was information sharing, which was not very common in the past, but is now gradually improving at global and regional levels. She was part of the PSMA Secretariat, and said that her presentation would be complemented by her colleague Angela Lentisco from the FAO Regional Office in Bangkok. Together, they would present an overview of what should be happening at the global level, and how this connects with regional and national mechanisms.

Ms. Alicia Mosteiro Cabanela said that there is an international framework that addresses IUU fishing from different angles. There are five binding instruments regulating what can or cannot be done, and five non-binding instruments, including the International Plan of Action on IUU and voluntary guidelines on flag state performance, catch documentation schemes, gear marking, and transshipment. Although some of these instruments are voluntary, they have all been approved by FAO member countries, meaning that they represent a global consensus. Therefore, they should be integrated or domesticated at the national level and considered at the regional level as minimum baseline requirements.

The International Plan of Action on IUU is important because it describes what constitutes illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and outlines the responsibilities of different types of states: flag states, port states, coastal states, and market states. These responsibilities are further developed in specific instruments such as the Port State Measures Agreement, which focuses

primarily on port state responsibilities. These responsibilities and minimum requirements should also be implemented at regional level by regional fisheries bodies, so that coordinated action at national, regional, and global levels can contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 14, particularly targets 14.4 and 14.6.

It is important to note that there is no universally agreed legal definition of IUU fishing. Instead, there is a description of activities that fall under illegal, unreported, or unregulated categories. These can be further defined at national or regional levels based on specific contexts. Illegal fishing refers to activities conducted in contravention of laws, regulations, and international obligations. Unreported fishing refers to activities that are not reported or are misreported. Unregulated fishing refers to activities that are not covered by existing regulations, including those carried out by vessels without proper nationality or by states that are not members of relevant regional fisheries organizations.

Regarding responsibilities, flag states must properly register, license, and monitor vessels. Port states are responsible for preventing IUU-caught fish from entering markets. Coastal states must monitor activities within their Exclusive Economic Zones. Market states must ensure the legality of fish entering trade.

Information sharing and cooperation are critical, as fisheries activities often span multiple jurisdictions. Without coordination, even well-implemented measures in one country may be undermined elsewhere.

Ms. Alicia Mosteiro Cabanela said that the Port State Measures Agreement, which entered into force in 2016, is a unique multilateral control treaty. It allows multiple port states to inspect foreign vessels and verify compliance with national, regional, and international rules. Rather than setting new rules, it focuses on ensuring compliance with existing ones. The PSMA is a cost-effective tool because it shifts enforcement from the high seas to ports, where vessels can be inspected more easily. It also includes a global information exchange system that allows parties to share compliance data and enforcement actions, supporting risk analysis and decision-making. Currently, there are 85 parties to the PSMA, representing a large portion of coastal states worldwide. This has significantly reduced opportunities for IUU fishing by limiting access to ports.

The agreement operates through regular meetings of parties, supported by working groups and coordinated by FAO as the Secretariat. At the national level, implementation involves three key stages: verifying vessel information and conducting risk analysis, taking enforcement actions such as inspection or denial of entry, and reporting outcomes to relevant parties. Information exchange is central to the effectiveness of the PSMA. It requires agreed standards, designated contact points, and coordination with regional systems. The global information system supports processes such as port entry requests, inspections, denials, vessel profiling, and tracking enforcement actions.

She said that over the past ten years, FAO had supported around 80 countries in building capacity to implement port state measures, including legal reforms, training, and operational support. Approximately 22,000 inspections are conducted annually, with thousands of inspection reports shared globally, contributing to improved compliance. These efforts have led to enhanced

cooperation among states, stronger fisheries control systems, and a growing culture of compliance. Looking ahead, there is a need to further monitor implementation, develop indicators, and assess the impact of these measures in preventing and deterring IUU fishing.

In conclusion, **Ms. Alicia Mosteiro Cabanela** said that countries are encouraged to implement these international requirements at the national level, strengthen coordination with neighbour states, and enhance information sharing to effectively combat IUU fishing.

Key takeaways

- Global instruments provide a strong foundation: Both binding and voluntary frameworks (PSMA, IPOA-IUU, and related guidelines) are widely agreed upon and should serve as minimum baseline standards for all countries.

- Port-State responsibility framework is key: Effective IUU control depends on coordinated roles of flag, port, coastal, and market states no single actor can address the issue alone.

- Port State measures shift enforcement to ports: The PSMA offers a cost-effective approach by inspecting vessels in ports rather than at sea, blocking illegal fish from entering markets.

- Information sharing is the critical enabler: Standardized, real-time data exchange across countries and systems is essential for risk analysis, enforcement, and closing loopholes in global supply chains.

- PSMA is working, but gaps remain: Increased membership, inspections, and global data systems show strong progress, but effectiveness depends on wider participation, stronger national implementation, and better inter-agency coordination.

FAO-RAP, Bangkok

Dr. Angela Lentisco, Fishery and Aquaculture Officer, FAO-RAP. Bangkok focused on the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem project targets. She said that one of the key targets of the project is achieving a 20 percent reduction in IUU fishing, along with supporting the endorsement of the Regional Plan of Action on IUU and assisting member countries in developing and implementing their National Plans of Action. The project also aims to establish regional training platforms for knowledge sharing and capacity building.

This was the second phase of the project. There was a gap between phase one and phase two, from around 2015 to 2023, when activities resumed. During this time, countries made progress in developing their National Plans of Action on IUU. However, a gap was observed between the requirements for implementation and the actual capacity of countries to implement these plans effectively.

There were also changes in fisheries legislation and policy frameworks. Additionally, for countries that have become parties to the Port State Measures Agreement, new implementation needs

have emerged, which the project was trying to support. There was also a need to ensure that Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance frameworks are adapted to resource constraints and the specific characteristics of the region, particularly the large number of small-scale fisheries.

She said that the project builds on earlier commitments, such as the Chattogram Declaration on fisheries MCS and the 2021 Regional Plan of Action on IUU. It is currently supporting countries in reviewing and updating their National Plans of Action, as well as facilitating the ratification and implementation of the PSMA. Out of the seven countries in the region, five are already parties to the PSMA, while India and Malaysia are not yet parties.

The project promotes capacity development and knowledge exchange within the region and across regions. This includes joint training programmes and collaboration with organizations such as UNODC and Skylight. A major focus is on how to measure progress toward the target of reducing IUU fishing by 20 percent, including developing methods to assess performance and risk.

Looking ahead, she said that the project will focus on establishing national and regional working groups to support the implementation of Regional Plans of Action. Rather than creating new frameworks, the emphasis is on strengthening coordination and collaboration among existing institutional mechanisms, including those in South Asia and ASEAN.

Capacity-building programmes will continue, with a stronger focus on targeted training based on country-specific needs. The project will also explore the use of digital technologies to support implementation and develop risk-based monitoring and reporting frameworks to better track the scale and impact of IUU fishing.

An important area of work is improving the measurement of IUU fishing. **Dr. Angela Lentisco** said that the FAO has developed several guidelines to support this, including methodologies for estimation and the development of performance indicators. These tools are essential not only for understanding the magnitude of the problem but also for assessing progress in reducing IUU fishing. She said that additional technical guidelines and checklists are available, particularly in areas such as legal frameworks, MCS systems, and operational procedures. These resources are accessible through the FAO IUU fishing website and are intended to support countries in strengthening their efforts to combat IUU fishing.

Key takeaways

- BOBLME II has a clear target: 20% Reduction in IUU Fishing. The project is outcome-driven, with a measurable target supported by RPOA and NPOA implementation.

- Implementation Gap is the Core Challenge: While many countries have developed NPOAs, capacity constraints limit effective execution.

- Regional Coordination Over New Frameworks: The focus is on strengthening existing regional mechanisms rather than creating new ones.
- Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing are core requirements: Training, partnerships, and cross-regional learning are key tools for improving MCS effectiveness.

Moderated Panel Discussion and Q&A

Moderator: Dr Rishi Sharma

Dr. Rishi Sharma: He said that having heard quite a bit about what is happening in different global forums to combat IUU fishing, in this session, the focus would be on a few specific areas. He said it was unfortunate that there was no representation from SSF perspective at the moment. He said that he would begin with the first question for this panel discussion, and leave it open for anyone who would like to respond. The question relates to operational mechanisms for changing behaviour.

Specifically, how have you incentivized the industry, or the small-scale fisheries sector, to change their practices in order to minimize the occurrence of IUU fishing?

Mr. Ahmed Siliman highlighted that the GFCM has developed a Regional Plan of Action (RPOA) for Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF), supported by a structured monitoring framework. The framework tracks implementation through defined indicators, with annual assessments conducted by contracting and cooperating non-contracting parties. Findings are presented at annual sessions, where priorities and country-level activities are determined.

A key feature of the GFCM approach is its bottom-up, participatory model. The SSF Forum provides a platform where small-scale fishers from different countries can collaboratively discuss issues such as: Adoption of new technologies, Implementation of management measures, Social and economic impacts of regulations. Siliman emphasized that social dimensions are critical, particularly when implementing measures like Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS). Ensuring fisher buy-in through participatory processes strengthens compliance and effectiveness.

To address linguistic diversity in the Mediterranean region, GFCM facilitates multilingual engagement by providing interpreters, enabling fishers to participate in their native languages. This ensures inclusivity and allows grassroots perspectives to inform policy advice to the Commission.

Dr. Rishi Sharma broadened the discussion beyond SSF to include the commercial fisheries sector, while reiterating that SSF constitutes the majority of the fleet in the Bay of Bengal region. He raised questions regarding: Incentive structures for industry compliance, Adoption of technologies such as Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) and Electronic Information Systems (EIS) and Lessons from other regions in driving behavioural change within fisheries sectors.

Mr. Jon Lansley clarified that SWIOFC is a Regional Fisheries Advisory Body (RFAB) with a limited mandate, primarily focused on scientific advice rather than regulatory enforcement. Key points that he made include the facts that no Regional Plan of Action exists for combating IUU fishing or for SSF, there were no compliance mechanisms, such as compliance committees, there was no regional VMS or AIS systems in place and there was limited progress on MCS collaboration, despite ongoing discussions. While there are informal collaborations and dialogue with organizations such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and regional initiatives, tangible

implementation remains minimal. Lansley noted that past efforts (e.g., SEAFDEC collaboration initiatives) had not translated into sustained action.

Mr. Shoukot Kabir Chowdhury emphasized the distinct nature of small-scale fisheries in the Bay of Bengal, noting that approximately 80% of vessels are below 12 meters. Key challenges that he identified include: low awareness of IUU fishing regulations, weak data and information systems for SSF, limited licensing, tracking, and reporting mechanisms, and lack of legal compliance due to informal or unregulated operations. He stressed that capacity building, training, and motivation of fishers are essential for effective implementation of RPOA-IUU. Integration of SSF into national and regional frameworks requires strengthened licensing systems, improved tracking and reporting infrastructure and Enhanced network coordination under regional initiatives (e.g., BOBLME).

Mr. Rajdeep Mukherjee raised two structural questions: How governance systems (federal vs. unitary) affect RPOA implementation and whether linguistic and cultural diversity facilitates or hinders regional cooperation.

Dr. Rishi Sharma asked how jurisdictional differences between the centre and states were to be dealt with because that was an issue common in the Bay of Bengal region, especially with Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka. And then, how to deal with issues of language differences while looking at a broader transboundary region. Even within India, there were seven or eight different languages in the Bay of Bengal region, and then addition of Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh resulted in a complex linguistic landscape, including numerous dialects along the coast. So how was standardization to be dealt with in that context as it was very difficult to address.

Ms. Alicia Mosteiro spoke about some ideas that she had seen, particularly focused on small-scale fisheries, which relate to the earlier questions and also to this one. First, regarding port State measures, it is important to apply equivalent measures to both foreign and national fleets. Control should not be limited to foreign vessels; national fleets should be monitored with similar efficiency.

When a region has 80% small-scale fisheries, it may seem unrealistic to apply measures like VMS or AIS to all vessels. If there was no means to equip every vessel with such systems, alternative approaches to monitoring, control, and surveillance must be considered. Most small-scale fisheries fall under flag State responsibility. Therefore, countries can establish national control and inspection plans tailored to this segment, incorporating risk analysis or random inspections. These plans must be designed to suit national circumstances.

Another issue is the encroachment of small-scale fishers from neighbouring countries into national waters. Addressing this can be difficult without patrol vessels or satellite-based monitoring. However, there are alternative approaches. For example, community-based reporting systems can be effective. Fishers can use mobile applications to report sightings of foreign vessels, including taking photos and sending them to control centres. This allows for community participation in monitoring activities.

Regarding jurisdictional complexities, if foreign vessels enter a country's harbour, they fall under that country's jurisdiction, and action can be taken in accordance with national and international law. If vessels operate within a country's waters but cannot be intercepted due to limited capacity, cooperation with other states becomes essential. For instance, flag States can request port States to take action when their vessels enter foreign harbours. Similarly, coastal States can identify illegal activities through community reporting or other means and share this information with the relevant flag State. This cooperation can lead to enforcement actions such as license withdrawal or other penalties.

She said that each situation requires a context-specific solution. Countries must assess their capacities and constraints and work with the resources available. While advanced technologies like VMS are desirable, alternative, cost-effective methods can also provide effective control. Organizations such as the International MCS Network have highlighted such approaches for small-scale fisheries in the past.

Dr. Rishi Sharma said that there were a couple of good ideas here - developing context-specific solutions using innovative technologies or randomized sampling approaches as mentioned by Alicia. There is also the possibility of fisher groups and cooperatives working together to develop their own monitoring mechanisms, so they can report illegal activity to some authority. However, that requires an authority to be established to track this information, as well as systems for information exchange between neighbouring countries or states. There also needs to be a body that can arbitrate these issues.

The next questions raised by Dr. Krishnan were: how do we make cooperation work within EEZ boundary sensitivities? And how do we make regional vessel information exchange operational?

This, Dr Sharma felt, was more of a database-related question. He said that while FAO is working on a global record of vessels, the question was how we make vessel information exchangeable. While this may work well at a commercial level, it becomes more challenging in the small-scale fisheries context. So, how do we address both vessel information exchange and cooperation within EEZ sensitivities?

He said that for information exchange, we need some form of standardized database for monitoring vessel activities. A vessel registry database would be required, which can be shared across the seven countries - possibly eight if Myanmar is able to participate in the future. If such a platform is established and accessible to all parties, it would allow tracking of vessel activities and flagging of vessels observed in other jurisdictions. The first step would be to develop a standardized operational database of all commercial and small-scale vessels.

However, small-scale vessels present a major challenge due to their sheer numbers. For example, if there are around 2 million vessels, even registering 20% which was about 400,000 vessels would be a significant task. But even partial coverage could help generate useful inferences and provide a basis for tracking and reporting.

Ms. Alicia Mosteiro agreed that information sharing and a regional record of authorized vessels are important steps. However, she pointed out that when we move into the small-scale fisheries domain, things become much more complicated.

The main purpose of a regional vessel record is to share information on vessels engaged in international activities. This may apply in some cases, as small-scale vessels do sometimes operate across borders, although such activities are often governed by bilateral agreements. Therefore, implementing such a system at the small-scale level may not be straightforward, but it remains an important long-term goal.

In the meantime, she suggested another approach: establishing a network for intelligence sharing. This would not be a fully standardized database which can take years to develop but rather a system of designated contact points in each country. Through this network, countries can share information about activities within their EEZs, ports, or vessels suspected of illegal activities. For example, if a vessel is detected engaging in illegal fishing and is believed to be moving toward a neighbouring country, that information can be shared along with any available evidence.

This approach, she said, has been implemented in Latin America, where Pacific-bordering countries have created such networks. They do not rely on fully standardized data systems but instead share alerts and relevant intelligence to track vessels moving across jurisdictions and to support enforcement efforts.

Dr. P. Krishnan emphasized that vessel registries should not be limited to large-scale or high seas fishing vessels, but must also include all vessels operating within EEZs, in line with the scope of the RPOA. He stressed that the priority should be building capacity among member countries to establish and maintain national vessel registries. He highlighted the need for harmonization of digital systems and the development of minimum data sets for vessel registration. Referring to experiences from SEAFDEC, he noted that standardized minimum datasets for fishing vessels and pilot initiatives linking catch documentation systems with vessel registries have already been tested in select harbors and fleets.

He suggested that a regional framework could be piloted across countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, even if full national-level implementation is not immediately feasible.

Mr. Rajdeep Mukherjee raised a question regarding the relationship between the RPOA framework and tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs), particularly in the context of the Indian Ocean, and asked what mechanisms could support collaboration between these systems.

Dr. Rishi Sharma responded that tuna RFMOs have already developed comprehensive compliance systems, including compliance committees and established vessel registry databases that facilitate data sharing, monitoring, and identification of IUU fishing activities. He noted that while these systems are well-developed, they are sector-specific, primarily focused on tuna fisheries. However, he suggested that regions could adapt and borrow elements from such frameworks particularly from bodies like the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) to

inform broader regional mechanisms. He recommended knowledge-sharing arrangements and technical guidance from RFMO compliance bodies as a practical pathway forward.

Mr. Rajdeep Mukherjee clarified that the intention is not to burden countries with entirely new structures, but rather to align or integrate with existing mechanisms where possible.

Mr. Shoukot Kabir Chowdhury added that countries in the Bay of Bengal region are already members of the IOTC, where an active record of fishing vessels is maintained. While acknowledging that this registry primarily covers tuna vessels, he highlighted it as a useful model for developing a broader regional registry. He suggested that countries could adapt this methodology by defining appropriate criteria such as vessel size (LOA) for inclusion of small-scale vessels in a regional system.

He also pointed to the Global Information Exchange System under port State measures, which enables the sharing of information on non-compliant vessels among countries. He proposed that the RPOA Secretariat could establish a similar regional e-platform for maintaining a shared vessel registry, defining inclusion criteria for vessels and facilitating information exchange on illegal activities such as poaching. He concluded that further study of existing systems such as the PSMA Global Information Exchange System and the IOTC vessel record would be essential for designing a regional vessel information exchange mechanism tailored to the Bay of Bengal context.

Dr. Rishi Sharma emphasized the importance of identifying realistic measures of success for the first year of the RPOA, particularly in relation to the proposed 20% reduction in IUU fishing. He raised key concerns around establishing a baseline and determining how progress toward this target would be effectively tracked.

Ms. Shelley Clarke (FAO) responded that it is critical to begin discussions on indicators as early as possible, rather than delaying this process. She stressed that establishing a baseline depends on early agreement on relevant indicators, and noted that waiting until later stages (such as 2028) would hinder the ability to measure change effectively. She encouraged the group to prioritize indicator selection and baseline development at the outset.

Dr. Rishi Sharma invited suggestions on what specific indicators could be used, acknowledging the need for practical and measurable approaches.

Ms. Angela Lentisco noted that while efforts are underway to develop methodologies for measuring IUU fishing, no perfect formula currently exists. She explained that initial work has focused on retrospective baseline setting, including assessing conditions prior to the project's start in 2015.

She highlighted an approach based on identifying risk areas or "hotspots" where IUU fishing is most prevalent, and then tracking reductions in those risks over time. She acknowledged that measuring IUU fishing is complex and suggested that a dedicated discussion or workshop would be required to fully address methodologies and indicators.

Dr. P. Krishnan clarified that first-year success should not be limited to establishing a baseline, but should also include completion of foundational governance and implementation steps. He emphasized that within the first six months, several core institutional and operational actions already identified in the implementation framework must be completed.

He outlined several priority areas for early action:

- Development of a catch documentation system, which is currently absent in the region
- Creation of traceability frameworks, drawing from existing pilots in other regions
- Designing a small-scale fisheries vessel registry framework, tailored to national contexts
- Initiating pilot projects in selected ports and harbors to demonstrate feasibility and build confidence
- Developing guidelines for interoperability and data exchange systems

He stressed that early progress on these foundational elements is critical to avoid delays, particularly given the time-intensive nature of government implementation processes. Rapid action at the Secretariat level would allow more time for national-level adoption and community engagement.

Dr. Rishi Sharma reflected that progress measurement should go beyond a single indicator, such as IUU reduction, and instead include multiple tangible and achievable milestones that capture broader project implementation progress.

Ms. Alicia Mosteiro cautioned that measuring IUU fishing levels and demonstrating reductions is inherently complex and difficult at national, regional, and global scales. She noted that even the development of indicators under frameworks such as the PSMA is proving challenging.

She suggested complementing indicator-based approaches with alternative assessment tools, including:

- Flag State performance assessments, conducted at the national level
- Port State performance evaluations, particularly for addressing foreign vessel activities

She emphasized that these tools allow countries to conduct self-assessments using established checklists and guidance, and to identify common challenges across the region. Such analyses can inform targeted actions and regional cooperation strategies in subsequent phases of the project.

Prof. Oscar Amarasinghe from Sri Lanka highlighted that stronger coordination among national institutions and regional cooperation are important to curb IUU fishing. He emphasized that empowering community-based organizations (CBOs) through “resource stewardship” could

align fishers with social objectives and help reduce IUU fishing, as current CBOs mainly facilitate entry rather than manage or control resources.

Dr. P. Krishnan: Regional Framework for collaboration among RFBs in combatting IUU: https://openknowledge.fao.org/bitstreams/9242904a-f8cc-4e43-8688-0e93a37db702/download

Dr. Azam, DoF, BD: Thanks to BoBP for organizing the knowledge sharing event. BoBP can give attention to develop regional VMS standard and MCS coordination modality. At least we can pilot some of the best practices of other regional organizations. We can harmonize our MCS framework and some of the management tools focusing on SSF.

Dr. Nitin Verma: The Information exchange between RFMOs and its accessibility to flag states to establish the historical data of IUU fishing vessels may help in law enforcement.

Dr. Alicia Mosteiro: In the interest of time, I wanted to also mention another initiative in Latin America which is an IUU Network, to share "information" on IUU fishing. This is not a formal information ("data") sharing mechanism but more of a network of contact points that raise alerts among countries of IUU events happening basically sharing intelligence.

Closing and way forward

Dr. P. Krishnan expressed appreciation to all speakers and participants for their contributions. He noted that the discussions would be synthesized and used to refine implementation priorities, particularly for the first six months of work in 2026.

He outlined the upcoming process:

- An in-person consultation with legal experts to assess national-level legal challenges
- Preparation of a draft implementation plan based on technical inputs
- Review of the draft at the Technical Advisory Committee meeting (mid-April)
- Presentation at the Regional Project Steering Committee (mid-May) and subsequently to the Governing Council

He emphasized that the RPOA on IUU fishing is a long-term framework, extending beyond the current project timeline, and should be viewed as a tool to support broader project objectives. He concluded by noting that further bilateral consultations with partner organizations would be conducted to refine aspects such as budgeting, timelines, and activities.

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