



# From Equality To Equity:

## Keeping Everyone Afloat In Ireland's Small-Scale Fisheries

By Ruth Brennan

Over the last two years, I engaged with Irish offshore island fishing communities, the fishing industry and the policy environment in examining the challenges faced by island fishing communities in their efforts to manage island fisheries as a region on a collective, seasonal basis. When I was carrying out the research, several non-islander research participants who worked in, or with, the fishing industry wondered why the islands did not make better use of the fish caught by island vessels. They asked why the islands have not developed a distinctive market brand for island-caught fish or set up artisanal fish processing plants that produce island-branded seafood products on a scale that would gain market visibility. This research into small-scale island fisheries answers these questions, and more, by showing how the interface between local island realities and the fisheries management system produces inequities that particularly impact small-scale island fishers. A 'found poem', created from research interview data, illustrates, through island voices, the complexities of issues that reach far beyond a fisheries governance context.

The research questions why the State's critical policy objective to manage fisheries as a public resource is failing to maintain strong economic, social and cultural links between small-scale island fishing vessels and fisheries-dependent island communities. In answering this question, the research provides insights into the on-the-ground implications of the governance arrangements that shape the day-to-day lives of fishing communities in

Ireland's offshore islands.

The following are key findings:

- The current fisheries policy framework produces inequities for small-scale fishers despite the State's critical policy objective to manage quota-controlled stocks as a public resource. This policy is supposed to ensure that fishing opportunities are not concentrated into the hands of large fishing interests and to maintain a strong economic link between fishing vessels and the island and coastal communities where alternative economic activities may not be available.
- The Irish fisheries policy environment does not welcome challenges to the status quo, with the result that small-scale fishers continue to operate within a system that has been designed around the realities of the larger, industrial fleet. This entrenchment of the status quo constrains the agility of access to the resource that is crucial to the survival of island small-scale fishing communities who depend on fish stocks appearing in inshore waters within their reach.
- Resistance to changing the status quo of fisheries management approaches prevents the emergence of the spaces needed to trial innovative fisheries governance initiatives such as co-management of the islands small-scale fleet on a distinctive regional basis.
- To address the inequities in the system, differentiated approaches are needed that move beyond carving out sections of a historical status quo that privileges

a small number of large operators. The recently overturned policy directive banning fishing by larger vessels in the 6 mile zone is a good example of such a differentiated approach.

- Windows of opportunity are open at this time of significant policy change that involves the development of a cohesive cross-Government Islands Policy and action plan for the offshore islands alongside the development of national and regional marine plans for the sound management of Ireland's marine environment. These co-temporaneous processes provide an opportunity for the design and piloting of innovative governance initiatives for small-scale island fishing communities, that contribute towards meeting policy objectives at national, European and international scales.

The policy report based on this research has made thirteen policy recommendations, as follows:

### Recommendations

**Create spaces within the current fisheries management system for trialling innovative fisheries governance approaches** by integrating into the fisheries management system, and piloting, an agreed proposal between all parties for ring-fenced quota for the polyvalent-registered small-scale island fleet.

**Proactively support the creation of a fish producer organisation for the islands fleet.** Ireland's four existing producer organisations represent approximately 10% of the fleet. Recognition as a producer organisation

provides access to decision-making tables that are otherwise inaccessible.

**Develop and implement a cross-cutting pilot Offshore Islands Regional Plan**, that incorporates the inhabited offshore islands of Ireland and their associated marine areas out to the six mile limit. The design of innovative spatial measures for fishing (informed by the expertise of local fishing communities working together with scientists from the Marine Institute's Fisheries Ecosystem and Advisory Services) could connect with the national marine planning process, the process to expand Ireland's marine protected area network and the process to develop a cohesive national policy and action plan for the offshore islands.

**Draw on the experience, networks, knowledge and expertise of island groups and organisations** to capture the diversity of ideas on community-led co-management approaches and partnerships, and to identify from the outset potential points of conflict, as part of a pilot Offshore Islands Regional Plan. Properly resource the co-management process at grassroots level (for example, through medium to long term funded leadership roles).

**Make the roles of women in fisheries more visible** by including, for example, relevant parameters informed by women in fisheries in the design and development of fisheries apps, to encourage data collection on such roles.

**Bring fisheries and aquaculture within the remit of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill** to ensure coherence in the national marine planning process.

**Take steps to implement the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication** by including an objective to achieve Sustainable Development Goal Target 14b (Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets), in the National Marine Planning

Framework and in the Inshore Fisheries Sector Strategy. **Ensure measurement of Target 14b on a regional scale to accurately reflect progress towards this target.**

**Formally adopt the 2019 Charter for Fishers, Coastal Communities and the Islands** as guiding principles for the management of fisheries, coastal communities, the islands, marine biodiversity and biocultural diversity within the National Marine Planning Framework.

**Include the concept of 'building back better' in the National Marine Planning Framework's 'Planning Policies and Key Issues for Marine Planning for Rural Coastal and Island Communities.'**

**Bring marine-related activities within the remit of one Government Department or Agency**, such as in the Marine Scotland model, to facilitate coherent governance of the marine environment.

**Integrate objective social and environmental criteria into quota allocation practices** to ensure transparency and fairness in the system.

**Improve representation of the inshore fleet and transparency in the Quota Management Advisory Committee** through publication of minutes and inclusion of representatives from (future) producer organisations for the inshore sector, such as an islands-specific producer organisation.

**Amplify the State's critical policy objective to manage fisheries as a public resource** by committing to maintain strong economic, social and cultural links between fishing vessels and fisheries-dependent island and coastal communities, in order to strengthen the recognition that fishing is more than a commercial, profit-maximising operation.

**The full policy report can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/3qHOISP>**

**All project publications can be found at <https://www.belongingtothesea.com/publications/>**

## I love it...but I wouldn't do it

By Ruth Brennan

We have been told growing up  
"Oh don't get into fishing".  
I love it  
coming back  
and doing it over the summer  
but I wouldn't do it.  
I couldn't see myself settling for it.  
You go to college  
you get bigger ideas  
and bigger goals.  
I could do a lot of work from home.  
There needs to be financial rewards  
to keep people in these places.  
I think what needs to be done really  
is a hand up  
more than a hand out.  
Level the playing field I think.  
That could be the hand up they would need  
to make this profitable here.

Here  
it is a lot more complicated  
there is more planning.  
Being able to tie the boat at the pier  
is crucial for us to live.  
People on the mainland can just land in  
and go up to their house.  
These people are making money  
and that is what the government sees,  
and that works.  
Capitalism.

You would never consider fishing here  
because it is just such a hassle.  
You don't have the harbours  
you can't do it in the winter time  
it is just not on.

If the year is good all right  
you might get October, November.  
But after that it might be May or April  
again

before you would be able to go fishing  
because it is too shallow  
and too rough.

People were fishing here just because they  
were living here.

Fishing to us  
was a break from the land  
and you enjoyed doing it.  
It's not looked at as an attractive place  
to fish.

Because if you were a business -  
and if you are fishing  
it is a business -  
you have to think  
profit and loss  
and there is just  
too much  
loss.

*I love it...but I wouldn't do it' from the poetry collection Fishing for survival in the 'blue economy' - found poems from the Irish islands. (2020).*

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Interviews were conducted with islanders from Arranmore and Inishbofin (Donegal Islands), Inishturk and Clare Island (Mayo Islands), Inishbofin and Inis Oirr (Galway Islands), Bere Island, Cape Clear, Sherkin Island, Heir Island (Cork Islands). Focus groups were carried out on Inishturk and Clare Island.

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