



Inclusive governance of aquaculture value-chains: Co-producing sustainability standards for Bangladeshi shrimp and prawns



Scott Bremer^{a, *}, Mohammad Mahfujul Haque^b, Arne Sveinson Haugen^a, Matthias Kaiser^a

^a Centre for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities, The University of Bergen, Postboks 7805, 5020, Bergen, Norway

^b Department of Aquaculture, Bangladesh Agricultural University, BAU Main Road, Mymensingh, 2202, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The rapid global growth in aquaculture, described as a 'blue revolution', has demanded new modes of market governance along long international value-chains. In large part this governance has been built on an expanding framework of voluntary industry-led standards, though latterly these standards have drawn some criticism. Such criticism has largely centred on (i) a crisis of trust, related to (ii) the closed development of these standards by a powerful few, and (iii) a relatively narrow framing of sustainability according to techno-scientific, best-practice criteria. This article introduces the SEAT research project, which sought to address these criticisms by co-producing indices of sustainable aquaculture indicators according to 'top-down' inputs from scientific, government and industry experts, and 'bottom-up' inputs from aquaculture stakeholders along the value-chains. It particularly focuses on how the project elicited these 'bottom-up' indicators through inclusive workshops with aquaculture stakeholders, drawing on concepts and approaches from practical ethics. It describes and evaluates the approach in one particular workshop with Bangladeshi shrimp and prawn stakeholders, and in so doing seeks to make methodological contributions to on-going debates on how to affect participatory aquaculture governance. The experience highlighted the potential difficulty in assembling a truly diverse group of stakeholders, but did demonstrate the potential of value-ranking and scenario exercises for mobilising a rich store of knowledge for the bottom-up construction of standards, as an important compliment to expert-led top-down initiatives. Workshop participants themselves emphasised the workshops as a unique opportunity for learning about the different framings of sustainability along the value-chain, and urged facilitators to emulate the workshops more widely, from the farm-scale to the global scale.

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1. Introduction

The past 40 years has seen the rapid growth of aquaculture, with this growth largely spurred by important techno-scientific advances and parallel innovations in governance. Dubbed a 'blue revolution', today almost half of the world's seafood is farmed, with the industry employing an estimated 24 million people worldwide, mostly in developing countries (Bush et al., 2013). The accelerated global development of aquaculture technologies and markets has arguably outpaced traditional approaches to state-led, centralised and hierarchal environmental management. Scholars like Stead (2005) and Chuenpagdee et al. (2008) describe the emergent self-

regulation of the aquaculture industry according to a decentralised concept of market *governance*, along 'value-chains' that stretch half way around the globe. This sees governance as networks of actors interacting across multiple private and public institutions, and steered largely by voluntary industry standards, certification schemes, codes of conduct, guidelines and principles (here collectively labelled as 'standards'). Such standards have been important governance mechanisms for shaping the sustainable development of aquaculture; mitigating its social and environmental impacts, and creating markets for aquaculture products by building trust through traceability and transparency (Hatanaka et al., 2005).

However, while ostensibly a model case of governance-under-globalisation, the framework of aquaculture standards has drawn critique from some commentators (see e.g. Bush et al. (2013); Kalfagianni and Pattberg (2013)). Much of this critique has centred on (i) the paradox of too many standards and an associated

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: scott.bremer@uib.no (S. Bremer).

crisis of trust: (ii) the exclusive development of these standards by a powerful few; and attendant (iii) the narrow framing of sustainability in these standards. Arguably the aquaculture industry has been driven by a narrow ‘techno-scientific’ discourse of sustainability, where sustainable aquaculture is defined as economic growth within ecological limits, and where those limits are defined scientifically and traversed technologically (Lebel et al., 2008; Millar and Tomkins, 2007). Such framings have arguably neglected an appreciation for the multi-faceted and political nature of sustainability, with weaker actors excluded from voicing their vision of sustainability in developing standards (Kalfagianni and Pattberg, 2013). This is the point of departure for this article, which takes up calls for more inclusive aquaculture governance.

This article discusses methodological lessons from the SEAT (*Sustaining Ethical Aquaculture Trade*) research project, which studied value-chains bringing farmed seafood from Asia to Europe, and attempted to ‘co-produce’ indices of indicators for measuring the sustainability of this trade, to be used by different governance actors. This is co-production in the sense of partnership or joint governance (see also co-creation),¹ and meant producing indices by integrating ‘top-down’ inputs from scientific, government and industry experts with ‘bottom-up’ inputs from aquaculture stakeholders along the value-chains. Here the focus is on how the project elicited these bottom-up inputs using workshops designed according to concepts and methods from practical ethics; bringing together stakeholders from along the value-chain to negotiate what is to be sustained for whom, and accordingly their own indicators of sustainability. The article describes how the workshop approach was implemented in Bangladesh with shrimp and prawn stakeholders, and evaluates this experience in terms of lessons learned on its usefulness in the particular Bangladeshi context according to some stated criteria. In this way, the article hopes to make both conceptual and methodological contributions to broader aquaculture governance debates on how to open standard-setting institutions.

The article begins in Section 2 with a discussion of the challenges facing aquaculture governance, before Section 3 describes how the SEAT project took up these challenges by attempting to co-produce indices of sustainable aquaculture, drawing on perspectives from practical ethics. Section 4 then describes how we operationalised these perspectives within a participatory workshop approach. It begins with a short introduction to the Bangladeshi context, before describing how the workshop was run with shrimp and prawn stakeholders in Khulna. Section 5 evaluates the Bangladeshi experience relative to some stated criteria, before Section 6 concludes.

2. Challenges facing aquaculture governance through standards

From earlier this century we have seen a shift towards models of global ‘governance’ of aquaculture, both among scholars (see e.g. Gray (2005), Hovik and Stokke (2007)) and international bodies (e.g. Townsend et al. (2008)). Kooiman and Bavinck (2005), p. 17, writing on fisheries and aquaculture governance, define governance as “*the whole of public as well as private interactions taken to solve societal problems and create societal opportunities; including the formulation and application of principles guiding those interactions and care for institutions that enable them*”. From this definition, we can see the choices and actions of aquaculture stakeholders as framed by the processes and institutions within

which they operate, which are in turn steered or guided by ‘rules, norms or principles’. We can consider aquaculture standards as such rules, norms or principles; bridges that link and coordinate action in different aquaculture institutions Anh et al. (2011), both internationally (see for instance international certifiers such as the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, Global Aquaculture Alliance, GlobalG.A.P, or Friends of the Sea), and nationally (see for instance Thai Quality Shrimp, or Bangladesh Shrimp Seal of Quality).

There is a growing scholarship critically examining the role of standards in global aquaculture governance (Oosterveer, 2006), with many of these critiques centred on three key challenges. The first relates to the paradox of too many standards, and the associated crisis of trust. On one hand a major strength of aquaculture governance has been the trust associated with different types of standards, while on the other hand an explosion of these standards (there are more than 400 such standards globally) has created mistrust between standards-setters and other agencies (see e.g. Bush et al. (2013) discussion of competing certification schemes). Related to this, research has shown that the more standards there are, the less accessible they are for aquaculture stakeholders, because producers cannot afford to be certified under every scheme and must strategically choose which certification standard to adopt, and therefore which processors they are permitted to sell to, to access which markets (Bush et al., 2013).

The second challenge relates to the development of aquaculture standards by a powerful few, to the exclusion of civil society organisations and Southern actors (Kalfagianni and Pattberg, 2013, p. 127). Bush et al. (2013) describe how concepts of ‘sustainability’ in most standards are narrowly defined according to the value-chain or even one node of the value-chain, and have been criticised for, “adopting a technical focus that reflects interests and values of the most powerful actors to the exclusion of others” (Bush et al., 2013, p. 1068). Lebel et al. (2008), describe how the globalisation of aquaculture has seen the dominance of international epistemic and policy networks of actors and standards that have ‘depoliticised’ important aspects of the industries development; “drawing together strands of technical expertise, management, and regulation of business which make small producers easier to control” (Lebel et al., 2008, p. 222). Embodying ‘Best Management Practice’ discourses, standards have been framed as universal and therefore requiring little input from stakeholders, or recognition of region-specific modifications.

The third key challenge, attendant to the second, relates to the narrow framing of aquaculture standards, leading to significant gaps in their scope. Arguably, the development of these standards by a powerful few has brought a narrow techno-scientific perspective on sustainability, which has in turn translated into a narrow portfolio of indicators or considerations. Haugen et al. (2013) reviewed 11 widely-endorsed standards and concluded that they are weighted in favour of *environmental interests*, *technical farm and administrative capacity*, and *food safety and security*. These findings are relatively consistent with the so-called ‘depoliticised’ best practice discourses described by Lebel et al. (2008), and see the exclusion of other socio-economic and human considerations including social welfare, human welfare, gender, working conditions or child labour for instance.

In sum, while aquaculture standards have been indispensable in steering aquaculture, they are now in need of critical review. Arguably they are facing a crisis of trust, in large part because of their profusion within the closed institutions of powerful expert groups, according to priorities that are incongruent with stakeholders along aquaculture value-chains. This has seen some scholars endorse a more inclusive approach to aquaculture governance and standards (see e.g. Bell and Morse (2008), Giller et al.

¹ To distinguish our use of the term from that used by Science and Technology Studies scholars, as the mutual influence between science and society.

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