



## Do fish scales matter? Diversification and differentiation in seafood commodity chains



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### ABSTRACT

Recent studies in the literature on fisheries trade have contrasted the challenges and opportunities associated with domestic and internationally oriented fish trade. We examine forms of domestic and international fish trade in a municipality of the Philippines to show the empirical complexities of how fish trade unfolds on the ground. We draw on insights from the literature in livelihoods to highlight how the debate on fisheries trade can benefit from closer attention to the social and economic context of fisher livelihoods. We argue that from the perspective of small-scale producers who are focused on maintaining diversified livelihoods across a range of fisheries, the distinctions between domestic and international fish trade blur locally, and are sometimes of limited relevance when assessing livelihood options and outcomes. Instead, a more important distinction for households is social differentiation based on ownership of fishing assets. We suggest that household asset characteristics strongly influence how households can access a broad range of fisheries (both domestically and internationally traded) that often co-emerge in rural areas of the Philippines. We argue that a better understanding of household diversification and differentiation provides a view of fisheries trade that is more closely aligned with the perspectives and priorities of local fishers, than a focus on whether such trade is (or should be) domestically or internationally oriented.

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## 1. Introduction

Scholars and practitioners are increasingly debating about the comparative challenges and opportunities generated by fisheries trade (Béné et al., 2010a, 2016; Crona et al., 2015; Marschke and Betcherman, 2015). Central to this analysis has been interrogating the ideal scale of market integration for poverty alleviation, economic growth and food security: comparing regional, or domestic, fish trade with global, or international fish trade<sup>1</sup>. Domestic and

international fish trade are often implicitly and explicitly viewed to be two distinct types of fish trade, with different sets of outcomes for producers.

In this paper, we caution against the adoption of generalised promotion of either international or domestic fish trade in varied local settings. Instead, it remains crucial to understand how domestic and international fish trade unfolds for small-scale producers although the term ‘producer’ is often used to refer to producers of aquaculture products, in this paper we use the term to refer to catchers and processors of capture fishery products on the ground. We examine forms of fish trade in a municipality of the Philippines to show the empirical complexities of how households negotiate multiple types of fisheries trade. We draw on insights from literature in livelihoods to highlight how the debate on fisheries trade can benefit from closer attention to the social and economic context of fishers. We argue that from the

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<sup>1</sup> The distinctions between ‘local’, ‘domestic’, ‘regional’ vs ‘international’ and ‘global’ have different terms in different contexts. The term ‘regional’, for example, is sometimes taken to mean a focus on intra-African fish trade (e.g. WorldFish, 2015), but in the context of the Philippines refers to an agglomeration of several provinces. In this paper we use the terms domestic to mean traded within a country, and international to refer to trading between two or more countries.

perspective of small-scale producers that are focused on maintaining diversified livelihoods across a range of fisheries, the distinctions between domestic and international fish trade blur locally, and are sometimes of limited relevance when trying to understand specific outcomes and livelihood options. Instead, a more important distinction for households is social differentiation based on ownership of fishing assets. We suggest that household asset characteristics strongly influence how households can access a broad range of fisheries (both domestically and internationally traded) that often co-emerge in rural areas of the Philippines.

Proponents of international fish trade suggest that fish exports will provide high cash incomes for producers, generate economic growth and provide increased revenue for governments, which will ultimately lead to poverty alleviation and improved food security (e.g. World Bank/FAO, 2009). As Béné et al. (2010b, 2016) point out, however, these arguments tend to rely on the usually untested assumptions that 'exploiting rising demand in export markets is an unproblematic means of wealth generation' (Béné et al., 2016: 185). Frequently, this argument is linked to a broader rhetoric about the financial value of marine resources, and the importance of realising this value (e.g. Cunningham et al., 2009; Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2015). Informed strongly by neo-classical economic theory, this perspective has achieved a great deal of prominence among policymakers in recent years.

In contrast, critics of international trade have argued that international fish trade contributes to both local food insecurity and poverty. They argue that such international trade may heighten food insecurity (Kaczynski and Fluharty, 2002; Van Mulekom et al., 2006), that returns from fish exports are often not invested locally so local fishers subsequently capture few of the benefits (Béné et al., 2010b; Sadovy de Mitcheson and Yin, 2014), and that increased trade can in some cases increase local prices (Béné et al., 2016: 185). From an environmental perspective, international fish trade has also been identified as a key cause of overfishing and declining fish stocks (Jackson et al., 2001; Cinner et al., 2013). In addition to the traditional policy and donor focus on international markets, therefore, domestic fish trade is now receiving greater scholarly and policy attention as a potential means to improve food security and poverty alleviation (e.g. Béné et al., 2010a; HLPE, 2014; WorldFish, 2015). Partly in response to these critiques, some scholars have promoted domestic fish trade. The authors of the recent High Level Panel of Experts on Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture for Food Security and Nutrition (2015), for example, suggest that for small-scale producers who may not produce one of the relatively small number of internationally-traded species, greater demand at a domestic level may exist for diverse types of seafood products. Domestic fish trade would also offer fewer barriers to entry for small-scale producers, many of whom are marginalised by constraints such as strict regulatory conditions for food safety (Henson et al., 2000) or environmental sustainability (Ponte, 2012). It would also generate a greater supply of fish locally, contributing to food security goals. Finally, it would more generally re-orient private and public investment in the small-scale sector, with consequential impacts on food security and nutrition (HLPE, 2014: 62–63).

Beyond this specific debate, international and domestic fisheries are often held to be discrete types of fish trade with different characteristics. The distribution of benefits from internationally-traded fisheries, for example, are frequently viewed, implicitly and explicitly, as generating higher levels of inequality than locally-traded fisheries (Fabinyi et al., 2012; ADB, 2014; Wamukota et al.,

2014; Sadovy de Mitcheson and Yin, 2014). In this way, the differences between international and domestic fisheries trade have tended to harden in much of the literature.

This debate about the normative ideal scale of fish trade engages a range of important larger-scale concerns that have significant implications for local producers, including the relevance of certification and standards, and how fish supply affects food security. In particular, arguments for greater attention to domestic fish trade provide a valuable corrective to the unexamined assumptions about capturing wealth and increasing 'efficiency' prevalent in much mainstream fisheries policy discourse (cf. Béné et al., 2016: 185). However, it is not our goal to add to these critiques – in part because they are already well articulated<sup>2</sup>. Instead, we suggest that from the perspective of local fish producers, whether or not fish is domestically or internationally traded is less relevant than a range of other concerns. As geographers writing on the social construction of scale have discussed at a conceptual level, scale is not a given or natural phenomenon, but highly socially constructed and contested (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Neumann, 2009). Accordingly, the characteristics of a particular scale or scalar arrangement cannot be assumed *a priori*, and no particular scale is inherently more desirable than another in terms of local perspective (Brown and Purcell, 2005: 608–609; Born and Purcell, 2006). This extends to the scale of fish trade, where we suggest that an undue pre-occupation with the scale of fish trade can potentially lead to the promotion of policies that are disconnected from the perspectives and priorities of small-scale producers.

Instead, we argue that further attention needs to be directed at how domestic and international fish trade unfolds for producers in context. We argue for greater attention to the broader social and economic context in which domestic and international fish trade takes place, and in particular, the livelihood context of small-scale producers. We suggest that from the perspective of a producer with a diversified livelihood, distinctions about the scale of fish trade are of often limited relevance. Instead, for local producers, more important ways of understanding different types of fisheries relate to the level of capitalisation and profitability of the fishery, and their position within the particular fishery they are most engaged with.

Our call for greater attention to the socio-economic context in studies of fish trade resonates with recent shifts in studies of trade in international development more broadly. In the social sciences, the concept of 'global production networks', for example, has developed partly from a critique of the earlier 'global value chain' approach (Coe et al., 2008). Many global value chain studies have tended to focus primarily on inter-firm relations, or the linear, 'vertical' relationships among participants in a value chain, with a narrow focus on economic upgrading. In contrast, one of the contributions of the literature on global production networks has been to highlight how elements of social context, or 'horizontal' relationships such as culture, the state, and social relationships are of key importance when trying to understand distributional and governance outcomes (Coe et al., 2008; Hamilton-Hart and Stringer, 2016). As Bolwig et al. (2010: 178) note, 'attention has to be paid both to the vertical links – the value chains that link local livelihoods upstream and downstream to distant networks of production and exchange – and to the horizontal ones – the ways in which the impact and nature of integration into globalised

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a range of types of fisheries trade are likely to be appropriate in different contexts (Andrew et al., 2007; Ratner and Allison, 2012).

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