



# Fisheries as social struggle: A reinvigorated social science research agenda

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## ABSTRACT

Many social scientists in the field of fisheries display a strong concern for the social engineering of environmental sustainability, but also a tendency to identify with the concerns of government. This paper posits that social scientists have their own responsibility in the fisheries field, and that this responsibility includes more attention to the realm of social struggle and distributional justice. Social struggles within and over fisheries are argued to be globally intensifying, as a result of four trends: (1) the condition that inshore fisheries have now largely become a zero sum game; (2) the new sets of controls that are occurring in the fish value chain; (3) the incursion of new business interests into marine and coastal space; and (4) the increasing participation, if not interference, by governments in what used to be mainly fisher affairs. Not only does a reinvigorated social science agenda create attention to other, neglected domains of fisher society; the authors argue that addressing distributional justice concerns may be a precondition for achieving sustainable human-nature relations.

## 1. Introduction

*La Terra Trema*, the prize-winning film directed by Luchino Visconti (1948), is about an isolated fishing community in eastern Sicily that suffers from the vicissitudes of nature, but also from exploitation by fish traders who pay low prices and charge exorbitant interest rates, thus keeping fishers mired in poverty. It highlights the fortunes of one family that tries to break free from this oppression, but tragically fails. The recent South Asian movie, *TiraiKadal*, directed by Janaki Viswanathan, also features struggle, but one that is taking place between trawl fishers of India, who have become habituated to fishing across the border, and a large population of Sri Lankan small-scale fishers who are losing important livelihood opportunities because of trawl incursions. The conflicts that takes place between the two groups of fishers involve courts, navies, political parties, ministers and presidents, and fisher leaders. The hero and heroine in the film belong to the two antagonistic parties and, like modern-time Romeo and Juliets, die in their attempt at reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

The point these films, and many others of their kind, make, is that fisheries are about relationships: between fishers and nature, but also between fishers and others in their human environment<sup>2</sup>: other fishers, traders, government officials, and competing interest groups. The

contemporary, mainstream fisheries literature seems to be mainly concerned with ‘getting the relationship with nature right’. The main issue is overfishing, and the aim is to arrive at a more ‘sustainable’ relationship between fishers and the marine environment. This matter is of undeniable importance, for fishers and the policy world alike, but it is only part of a larger picture. Fishers also have other concerns that follow from the manifold struggles they are involved in; such struggles centre on the distribution of resources, on political recognition, and on what they see as fairness.

This paper argues that social struggles within and over fisheries are globally intensifying. The intensification of such struggles follows from four trends: (1) the condition that inshore fisheries have now largely become a zero sum game, with the gains accruing to one person or group automatically resulting in losses to another; (2) the new sets of controls that are occurring in the fish value chain that add to the earlier exploitation of fishers by merchants; (3) the incursion of new business interests into marine and coastal space, which changes the opportunity structure of access to fish resources and markets; and (4) the increasing participation, if not interference, by governments in what used to be mainly fisher affairs. These trends must be viewed in mutual connection, because they tend to reinforce each other. Each trend is discussed separately in Section 3 below; the argument is that many injustices are

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<sup>1</sup> In view of the highly politicized nature of the conflict, and the director's fear for reprisals, at the time of writing *TiraiKadal* has not yet been released.

<sup>2</sup> “[P]eople confront nature through social interactions and relations and the mental universe produced, reproduced and transformed in these relations (including their images of nature), while nature acts upon them” [75]: 70).

repairable by political, institutional and legal reform, but easily get stuck in disadvantageous power relations. Social struggle often occurs over efforts at remediating perceived unfairness.

The contention is that current academic debates on fisheries are largely myopic, and require broadening. Scholarly attention to the struggles in which fishers engage is relevant, for one thing, because this impacts their relations with nature. Thus, as Fabinyi et al. [24] point out, while fishers are “in many instances aware of and keen to act on resource sustainability, this concern [is] overridden by concerns over: who obtains benefits from the fishery; who is responsible for resource degradation; and who should bear the costs of regulation.” [24]. In other words, addressing social justice concerns may be a precondition for achieving sustainable human-nature relations. For another, it reminds us that fisher societies – like all others – are driven by more concerns than one, and that the scope is to be widened if their workings are to be understood [8,43].

The next section provides an analytical perspective on social struggle as it relates to fisheries. Section 3 presents evidence that social struggle in fisheries in the Global South and the North is often increasing and explores the trends that have caused this increase. The final two sections return to the need for a reinvigorated social science agenda in fisheries, in which social struggle and its policy implications are given more attention.

## 2. The nature of social struggle in fisheries

For fishers to engage in fishing, they rely on potentially conflictive relationships with a wide range of actors. These include a) other fishers with whom they compete for fish resources, b) post-harvest actors with whom they negotiate for getting adequate prices, c) coastal developers with whom they fight for coastal space, and d) formal and informal authorities with whom they negotiate about the setting and application of rules.

Conflict provides a useful entry point for examining the nature of social struggle in fisheries. Various scholars have enquired into the nature thereof. Most attention has been devoted to understanding conflicts between competing fisheries sectors in the context of common pool resource usage. For examples, Palsson [51], in line with McGoodwin and Platteau [47,54], argues that “[M]any fisheries conflicts derive from the different rationales of production of the household economy of local small-scale fishing and the market economy of industrial fleets” (2015:227). In an earlier paper, Acheson [1] suggested that to resolve such conflicts, fishers “use force and political pressure [...] in an attempt to reserve access to the resources” [1]:289). [18,19] and Bennett et al. [12] use a broader lens and argue that fisheries conflicts follow primarily from contradictory economic interests and competing worldviews. Bavinck [4] adds to this the notion of legal pluralism, arguing that conflicting fisher groups often refer to different bodies of law and therefore do not agree about the principles and approaches to solving conflicts (cf. [38]). More recently, Pinkerton [52] discusses conflicts in fisheries in relation to the effects of neoliberal policies of enclosure, privatization, and deregulation. Jentoft [39] addresses the conflicts that follow in the wake of new stakeholders entering and competing for marine space.

The choice of the term social struggle – rather than conflict – is deliberate, highlighting three features. The first is that social struggle is a collective, not an individual effort. Second, it is not momentary, but prolonged, stretching out over longer time periods. Finally, it is a serious and never a frivolous matter, involving substantial investment of resources, such as human and social capital, and having objectives that are important to people. It is clear that social struggle may take place horizontally, that is, between groups of more-or-less equal strength, but also vertically, whereby the parties involved possess and may apply different levels of power [56]. In the latter case, power inequalities are often structural in nature, resulting in various manifestations of exploitation. Yet the notion of social struggle is also suggestive for the

possibility of resistance and change. Hence, the term social struggle includes recognition of the suffering that occurs from marginalization and the hope for transformation thereof.

Social struggle possesses at least three dimensions. The first dimension consists of the material stakes involved, which can include money, time, power, and health. The idea here is that social struggle can be ignited under conditions of exclusion from (access to) resources for some, in conjunction with accumulation of the same resources by others. Harvey [35] refers to this phenomenon as ‘accumulation by dispossession’.

The second dimension concerns the observation that such objective deprivation is rarely the only factor explaining the mobilization of social groups. Instead, people’s subjective feelings of injustice are necessary for spurring contestation [58,75]. As Sen [63] points out: “What moves [human beings], reasonably enough, is not the realization that the world falls short of being completely just [...] but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate” (2009: vii). Bavinck and Johnson [7] further argue that perceptions of injustice are triggered when fishers are unable to act upon established fishing rights. When perceived injustices are suffered by collectives, social struggle is born.

While perceived injustice is important in understanding people’s motivational drivers, it is not necessarily able to explain when and how collective responses take shape. In other words, strong perceptions of social injustice do not necessarily lead to collective agitation. For the third dimension one therefore needs to turn to Tilly’s [69-71] historical investigations of contentious action (or, popular collective action), in which “linked sets of people make claims on individuals or sets of individuals outside their own number” (1987:227) and to subsequent authorship on contentious politics and social movements (e.g. [67,68]). As Scholtens [58] points out, in this literature “collective action is understood as a typically contestatory strategy of ordinary people to pursue their claims for social justice against better-equipped opponents” (2017:934). In the course of history, fishers across the world have formed movements, unions and cooperatives to pursue a range of collective strategies for asserting their resource claims in the face of perceived injustices [44,58].

In conclusion, this paper understands social struggles as the result of fishers’ material deprivation, perceived injustices, as well as collective responses. Importantly, this means that one can also speak of social struggle in the absence of visible agitation, as such direct action may be suppressed, co-opted or diluted. The next section argues that fishers’ struggles have frequently intensified over the past century because of a range of changing human conditions.

## 3. The intensification of struggles

### 3.1. Capture fisheries as a deepening zero sum game

Many years ago, Foster [29] wrote an influential article called ‘the image of limited good’, criticizing peasant societies for their restricted notion of the world as a place in which one person’s increasing welfare will automatically result in another person’s loss. Assuming that fishers can be categorized as ‘peasants’, one can argue that, contrary to Foster’s perception at the time, fisheries are increasingly the scene of such zero-sum games: the gains of one fishing fleet are the loss of another and the allocation of space or resources to another party goes at the expense of fishers. It is therefore no surprise that fisheries are characterized by strong expressions of social struggle.

FAO [28] estimates current world catches at 93.4 million tons, with 89.5% of fish resources being fished to a maximum or beyond. Figures suggest that, despite tremendous increases in fishing capacity and fishing effort [11], total landings have stagnated since the 1990s. The average reported harvest per capture fisher has declined from just under 5 t annually in 1970, to only 2.3 t in 2012 [25,27,78]. However, such figures of declining catch per unit of effort hide an essential

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