

Scaling Success: Bluer Seas and the Path to Sustainable Fisheries in the Philippines

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Efforts to mainstream sustainability in the Philippine domestic fisheries production are still emerging. At present, only 6.9% of the country's wild fisheries are under sustainability programs, and these are largely limited to species with significant demand in global markets. Additionally, little is known about the sustainability of seafood supplied to domestic markets, largely due to data deficiencies and poor traceability

Data from 2019 indicates that up to 40% of wild-caught seafood in the Philippines came from illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, resulting in estimated annual losses of Php 62 billion (US\$1.3 billion), while depleting fish stocks and damaging marine habitats.

This issue is worsened by fragmentation and a lack of transparency in seafood supply chains, masking the grim reality that IUU-caught seafood products enter the Philippines' marketplace and eventually reach Filipino consumers.

In the Philippines:

- **About 1.9 million people** are engaged in fisheries-related industries
- **86% of marine fish is caught within 15 km** of the coastline by mostly artisanal and subsistence fishing boats, and
- **Small boats** make up the majority of the fishing fleet (266,140 vessels).



Given this, there was clearly significant room for improvement.

In 2019, SFP, through the USAID Fish Right (FR) program, a partnership between the governments of the Philippines and the United States, sought to engage influential domestic seafood buyers in promoting more responsible practices in Philippines seafood supply chains, applying the notion of Responsible Seafood Sourcing (RSS) to the Philippines reality. Working hand-in-hand with 15 fishing communities, the Better Seafood Philippines

project offered responsible seafood options, defining minimum size limits for commonly traded species to promote sustainability within the Philippine domestic market. It also secured commitments from around 30 companies to adopt business systems and policies that support RSS and established market linkages.

After seven successful years of the Fish Right program, much had changed. The project created a broad network uniting government agencies, businesses, and fishing

communities, a network that could not simply be disbanded once funding for Fish Right ended. With support from SFP, the NGO **Bluer Seas Philippines** was born, aiming to build on the work with Fish Right, maintain stakeholder engagement, and ensure the continuity of efforts to develop more transparent, responsible, and inclusive seafood value chains.



What is Responsible Seafood Sourcing?

Responsible Seafood Sourcing (RSS) is a unique strategy that enables supply chains to contribute to reducing the environmental impacts of seafood by sourcing products responsibly. It addresses the lack of transparency in the sector and demonstrates:

1

Legal Compliance - fishing in accordance with national regulations.

3

Sustainability Commitment - supporting actions that conserve biodiversity.

2

Traceability - the ability to track the origin of products.

4

Human and Social Welfare - ensuring fair and equitable working conditions.

RSS takes into account both market and regulatory factors, recognizing that both are key drivers of compliance. While traditional fisheries management has focused on regulating inputs (e.g., fishing capacity and effort) and outputs (e.g., catch quotas, size limits), RSS complements these approaches by leveraging market influence to incentivize responsible fishing and sourcing practices. It works across supply chains to foster more transparent and equitable seafood trade.



In the Philippines, many fishing communities are already fishing responsibly but lack support in accessing broader market opportunities.

The project empowers them by:

Strengthening producer **organizations and women's groups**

Enhancing access to **infrastructure, equipment, logistics, and technology**

Providing post-harvest and food safety **training and certifications**

Increasing supply chain **visibility and access to markets.**



On the market side, the project developed a buyer engagement program with a strong focus on supply chain transparency and traceability. It offered valuable tools - such as the RSS Standard, fish rulers, sourcing guides, and a rapid risk assessment methodology for data-deficient fisheries - designed to help seafood companies understand RSS and integrate it into their business practices and policies. Improving buyer and consumer awareness is also critical in generating more support and demand for responsible seafood.



Key Milestones in Advancing RSS in the Philippines



SFP strategically guided USAID to recognize the importance of developing domestic markets as a pathway to fisheries improvement - an approach deeply rooted in SFP's core strengths. This focus was subsequently incorporated into the Fish Right program, reflecting SFP's leadership and vision in this area.

2019

Development of the RSS Standard, a tool that evaluates a company's performance in legal compliance, traceability, sustainability commitment, and human and social welfare. This assessment helps identify risks within the supply chain and provides pathways for improvement.

2021 - 2022

Bluer Seas Philippines' mission is to transform the Philippines seafood industry into an effective steward of healthy aquatic and marine ecosystems and a driving force for fishing communities' prosperity, as well as to inform and influence research, policy, and practice in support of responsible seafood sourcing.

2016-2018

Initial efforts and stakeholder dialogues to develop a domestic standard for sustainable seafood, primarily involving high-end hotels and restaurants; led by the private sector.

2020

Baseline assessment of the supply and demand for sustainable seafood in the domestic market. This phase introduced the concept of RSS and redefined the terminology to favor "responsible" over "sustainable."

February 2023

Bluer Seas Philippines was officially registered as a non-stock non-profit conservation organization, to provide a sustainability mechanism for the growing movement.



Pilot testing of the RSS Standard; in parallel, private sector partnerships were fostered.

2022

First meeting post-pandemic with industry partners, 12 companies committed to adopt RSS.

May 2022

Value chain development efforts initiated under the RSS framework.

2023 -2025

June 2023
Formation of industry technical working groups.

September 2023
First Responsible Seafood Summit held, recognizing RSS leaders, adopters, and advocates among fishing communities, businesses, and government.

2024
An increase in the number of industry partners, particularly on the retail side; Launch of RSS efforts in Western Visayas.

The Emergence of Bluer Seas Philippines: Challenges and Opportunities

Bringing the idea of responsible seafood sourcing to the Philippines involved several organizational and external challenges across different levels of the government, community, and market.



One of the most complex early hurdles was the perception among certain stakeholders and actors that their prior efforts were being overlooked. Initially, this created resistance, as the project was introducing a novel approach that generated skepticism. However, through the demonstration of tangible outputs and impacts, the various stakeholders gradually came to understand the added value of the initiative. The long process of building trust and demonstrating impact ultimately resulted in a



shift, as both government actors and the private sector not only recognized the legitimacy of the work but also expressed interest in collaborating going forward.

At the community level, the team worked with various approaches, particularly in engaging artisanal fishers who were already organized into community-based groups. The project's emphasis on strengthening

the value chain and creating economic opportunities proved to be effective. By identifying and supporting “champions” within the fishing communities, the team helped make their products become more competitive in the market. Special attention was also paid to building the capacities of women-led organizations, reflecting a broader commitment to inclusivity and gender equity. Nevertheless, geographical

limitations and logistical constraints posed additional challenges, especially in terms of market expansion and providing consistent support across remote areas. Issues related to product quality and food safety further added layers of complexity, requiring sustained mentoring and organizational support.



On the market side, the primary barrier was integrating responsible sourcing practices into existing business models. However, once the project team was able to clearly articulate the “how” of integration, stakeholders in the private sector began to see the relevance and value of these efforts, facilitating deeper engagement.

In early 2022, it became clear that in order to sustain the progress made, especially regarding RSS, a dedicated local organization would be necessary. SFP proposed the creation of a new NGO in the Philippines to sustain and build on the progress achieved through the Fish Right program. This proposal was enthusiastically embraced by the USAID team and by

May 2022, with a growing base of commitments and a recognized niche in the sector, the concept for Bluer Seas took root. The organization filled a critical gap: no other non-profit groups were keen on strengthening the domestic market for responsible seafood, and yet the potential of the industry and the growing stakeholder interest were both evident.



Bluer Seas' approach builds upon three pillars:

Science-based

People-centered

Holistic and sustainable

To ensure long-term sustainability, Bluer Seas Philippines is pursuing a strategy centered on diversifying its sources of funding. As a young non-governmental organization, it requires foundational support to further develop its internal capacities and secure its position in the field.

The creation of Bluer Seas reflects the legacy of the Fish Right project, SFP, and a forward-looking vision of a more responsible and equitable seafood industry - not only in the Philippines, but potentially in other regions where responsible seafood initiatives remain underdeveloped.



If you'd like to learn more about SFP's support to Blue Seas and sustainable fisheries in the Philippines, please e-mail: info@sustainablefish.org.

