

FAO hosts Meetings for Improving Information on Aquaculture Status and Trends

Alan Lowther
Fisheries Information, Data and Statistics Unit,
alan.lowther@fao.org

The rapid growth of the aquaculture sector has increased the need for accurate and reliable information with which to enact rational and sustainable management policies. To work towards improving information on global status and trends for aquaculture, in January of this year the FAO Fisheries Department convened two meetings of international aquaculture experts. The first of the two meetings, the Expert Consultation on Improving Information on Status and Trends of Aquaculture, was held 20-23 January. The 16 experts, chosen for their technical expertise, included participants from five continents and a mix of government aquaculture officials, academic researchers, and representatives of producers associations and regional aquaculture organizations.

Following the Expert Consultation, the Working Group of Experts on the FAO Aquaculture Questionnaire "FISHSTAT AQ" met from January 24-26 to suggest improvements to the data collection form used by FAO in its annual inquiry to member countries for aquaculture statistics. They were asked to deliberate improvements, while keeping in mind the relevant recommendations of the preceding Expert Consultation. Many of the same experts participated in the Working Group, but additional participants representing national providers of data to FAO, as well as two survey research specialists in questionnaire design, took part in the Working Group.

These meetings are seen as the beginning of the parallel process to what has been done for status and trends reporting for capture fisheries. The outcome there was the adoption of the Strategy for Improving Status and Trends Reporting on Capture Fisheries, which has been formally agreed on and accepted by the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI). The process for aquaculture status and trends was envisioned to produce a similar Strategy document for the aquaculture sector.

The Expert Consultation

To support the continued sustainable development of aquaculture, the Expert Consultation identified six key themes that status and trends reporting should address:

- Aquaculture production quantities, species and values
- Aquaculture resource use and environmental management
- Contributions of aquaculture to poverty alleviation and improving livelihoods
- Contributions of aquaculture to food security and food demand
- Contribution of aquaculture to national economies and trade
- Development of institutions to support responsible development of aquaculture

The group further identified measurable indicators for each theme and made suggestions on how the information would be collected. All six themes were recognized as important for decision-making, but at the same time it was realized that there would be difficulties collecting information for some themes, and that this may influence data and information collection priorities, especially in the context of limited resources.

Outcomes, conclusions and recommendations of the Expert Consultation

In addition to outlining the above themes, the Expert Consultation made some general recommendations for methods to improve status and trends reporting. A high priority was given to improving and expanding socio-economic data collection efforts. Employment data, in particular, was noted as an area where better information was needed.

Increased collaboration among FAO, national fishery and aquaculture ministries, and regional aquaculture organizations (for example, NACA, the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific) was cited as a way to improve and

share information and reduce duplication of efforts in data collections.

FAO was called upon to provide guidance to countries in the appropriate data collection methodologies. FAO has developed standard software tools based on survey sampling methodology to collect and estimate fishery statistics. The system has been implemented in several countries and the expansion of the system to include aquaculture is now ready to be tested.

The Expert Consultation endorsed the creation of a standing group, with representative from international organizations, to deal with issues related to aquaculture data, statistics and trends analysis – much like the role of the Coordinated Working Party in capture fisheries. Such a group would work to establish standardized and internationally-accepted definitions, and could review further improvements to FAO aquaculture data collection methodology.

Finally, the consultation discussed and produced a draft "Strategy for Improving Information on Status and Trends for Aquaculture." The Strategy is a broad document that outlines the basic needs and goals of data collections for aquaculture. Guiding principles are outlined including those of sustainability, inclusiveness, objectivity, transparency, timeliness and flexibility. Required actions and standards are laid out including tools and methods to build the capacity of developing countries to collect and analyze the necessary information. Once finalized, it is envisioned that this document will be submitted for approval to the next session of the COFI Subcommittee on Aquaculture, to be held in 2006 in India.

The Working Group

At the conclusion of the Expert Consultation, the Working Group of Experts on the FAO Aquaculture Questionnaire "FISHSTAT AQ" was convened to suggest improvements to the data collection form used by FAO. Each year, FAO asks its member countries to complete the FISHSTAT AQ questionnaire. This form requests national data on aquaculture production and value by species, production method and environment. In addition, data are requested concerning hatchery production.

Concerns have been raised because responses to the inquiry have been inconsistent, particularly regarding production by method and the value of aquaculture products. Many

countries provide production statistics but do not have the other requested information available. Because of this, often countries feel discouraged from completing the form at all. The ease-of-use of the form has been another general complaint. On the other hand, those responsible for developing and implementing aquaculture policies are requesting even more, and different, types of information (for example, the recommendation of the Expert Consultation for improved data on employment in the aquaculture sector). The Working Group tried to keep in mind the balance between competing needs and capabilities.

To obtain additional information concerning the FISHSTAT AQ form, two survey research professionals conducted cognitive interviews with several of the participants before the start of the meeting. These interviews consisted of one or both researchers sitting together with a data provider and asking specific questions concerning their reaction to the form. For example, "Which parts of the form are difficult?" "What do you think when you read this question?" "Do you have this information available in your country?" Based on these interviews, the researchers redesigned a simplified version of the form. Then, based on their own deliberations and the recommendations of the Expert Consultation, the Working Group analyzed the redesigned form and made some minor modifications – for example, including the request for information concerning employment. A new form, based on the work done, should be ready for testing with national correspondents in the near future and hopefully will be implemented for the 2005 data collection cycle (for 2004 data reporting).

The reports of the two meetings as well as the Strategy document will soon be available at the FAO Fisheries website, www.fao.org/fi. The background documents for the Expert Consultation are currently available at: http://www.fao.org/fi/NEMS/events/detail_event.asp?event_id=14402. The documents for the Working Group are available at http://www.fao.org/fi/NEMS/events/detail_event.asp?event_id=14403. It is hoped that the outcomes of these two meetings will help improve the available information on aquaculture status and trends, and that this will contribute to the sustainable and responsible development of the sector.