

Putting the Fisheries Governance Tool into Historical Context

Traditionally, academic or institutional studies have characterized sustainability characteristics for fisheries, countries, or regions based on indicators that aim to discern factors leading to strong or weak sustainability performance. These may include environmental, social, and economic indicators and use methodologies such as interviews, expert judgment, and data to examine the achievement of desired ecological outcomes, improved economic efficiency of fisheries, benefits to coastal communities, improved net revenues of fishers, or contributions to a nation's trade balance.

Since the advent of the Marine Stewardship Council in the 1990s—which introduced independent sustainability certification for fisheries—the fishing industry, national governments, NGOs, and international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, have contributed to a diverse array of options for evaluating fishery management performance. These evaluations vary to some degree by scale and factors evaluated but have largely focused on the environmental impact of fishing activities, with more limited indicators designated for social, economic and governance performance.

When it comes to evaluating individual fisheries, schemes have ranged from voluntary, certification programs such as Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Responsible Fisheries Management (RFM), and Friend of the Sea (FOS), to seafood ratings lists, such as Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch, which are used as the technical background for other evaluations. All these approaches use science-based methods to evaluate performance relative to a set of indicators arranged in major categories.

At the country level, meaningful measurement of performance and what more needs to be done is fraught with complications. This is not least because “success” can be evaluated differently at different scales against a broad range of objectives distributed across the triple bottom line of ecological sustainability, economic viability and social/community well-being. Some analyses look directly at outcomes, while others focus on the presence of enabling factors (Anderson et al. 2015) and management attributes (Melnychuk et al. 2016) that tend to give rise to desirable outcomes. Outcome evaluations often rely on cobbling together indicators based on available data usually collected for other purposes. Finding data to characterize management attributes may be easier, but causal relationships between management interventions, external factors and specific outcomes at the national, regional, local, fishery and/or stock levels remain difficult to generalize and replicate.

The FGT takes this history and these factors into account. It was developed based upon a thorough review of existing evaluation and assessment schemes and builds upon many of the credible and widely accepted guidelines and assessment tools currently available, such as those used for certification to inform markets and indices that measure fishery performance outcomes. The FGT relies on empirical evidence from users—looking at both outcomes and the presence of enabling factors and management attributes that tend to give rise to desirable outcomes—and applies a diagnostic framework to analyze how a country's fisheries management system is performing.