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NSAC Advice on stakeholder engagement in ICES Advice Request formulation

This paper was approved with consensus by the NSAC Executive Committee on 4th October 2023 via written procedure.

1 Background

This paper was inspired by the NSAC's participation in the ICES workshop on the implementation of the ICES Stakeholder Engagement Strategy ([WKSTIMP](#)) on 16-18 May 2023 at ICES HQ In Copenhagen. The strategy and workshop are the most recent on a list of actions ICES has and will have undertaken over the years to bring fisheries science closer to its stakeholders, and vice versa. Previously somewhat unstructured, though far from absent, stakeholder engagement in various ICES processes revealed the usefulness and added value of such endeavors and it is no secret that ICES not only welcomes wider stakeholder involvement but makes significant efforts to foster it.

In November 2021, ICES published a paper by Dickey-Collas and Ballesteros 'The Process in ICES of Opening up to Increased Stakeholder Engagement (1980–2020)¹' documenting the timeline of this opening-up by ICES to stakeholders and the rationale behind it, reflecting the increasing prominence of participatory knowledge production. The policy is also warming up to a structured inclusion of stakeholders, the establishment of Advisory Councils being a clear sign of that. At the Commission's 2023 Fisheries Science Seminar dedicated to Citizens' Science for fisheries, where stakeholder engagement in data collection and wider scientific endeavors (i.e. development of innovative gears) was discussed, DG MARE Director-General

¹ Dickey-Collas, M., and Ballesteros, M. 2021. The process in ICES of opening up to increased stakeholder engagement (1980–2020). ICES Cooperative Research Report, Vol. 353. 26 pp.
<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8516>

Charlina Vitcheva encouraged further structured dialogue between stakeholders and advice providers (yet there was no mention of advice requester).²

In this paper we aim to emphasize the importance of stakeholder involvement in fisheries science and argue that, in order for stakeholder engagement to live up to its full potential, it must be ensured at all levels of the science-policy continuum, that is, indeed, including in stages where requests for advice are formulated by ‘the managers’ (advice requesters). We provide an overview of ICES’ strengthening of stakeholder involvement as an exemplary case of participatory governance, which, we argue, should also be adopted by the advice requesters in the process of developing scientific advice requests.

2 Stakeholder engagement in ICES

Already in 1980, ICES recognized the need for and the importance of stakeholder engagement, as it gradually started opening its science and advisory processes to stakeholders. According to witnesses, this was driven by both internal (need for transparency) and external (need to increase advice legitimacy and salience) factors. (Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)³ The criticism of the ‘black-box’ nature of ICES advisory processes led to the reforms initiated in 2008, which allowed external observers into its Advisory Committee (ACOM), the advice drafting groups (ADGs), and into groups developing methods (benchmark workshops). (Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)⁴ This process of opening up the advisory process to observers is considered a colossal step in ICES stakeholder engagement contributing to improved trust in the system (Cvitanovic et al., in Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)⁵.

Today, ICES’ mission and vision establish stakeholder engagement as imperative for improving the scientific basis in decision-making, as well as ensuring coherent and solid science for policy-making. (Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)⁶ Moreover, the importance of stakeholder engagement has been recognized in the latest reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), aiming to achieve sustainable exploitation of Europe’s marine biological resources through management guided by the principles of good governance including decision-making based on “broad involvement of stakeholders at *all stages* of the policy from conception to implementation.” (EU in Aanesen, 2014; emphasis ours)⁷ In addition, there is a growing body of research on stakeholder engagement in fisheries science (see, for example,

² NSAC report from DG MARE Fisheries Science Seminar. 2023. https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/NSAC-report_Fisheries-Science-Seminar_30-June-2023.pdf

³ Dickey-Collas, M., and Ballesteros, M. 2021. The process in ICES of opening up to increased stakeholder engagement (1980–2020). ICES Cooperative Research Report, Vol. 353. 26 pp. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8516>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Aanesen, M., C. W. Armstrong, H. J. Bloomfield, and C. Röckmann. 2014. What does stakeholder involvement mean for fisheries management? *Ecology and Society* 19(4): 35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-06947-190435>

Ballesteros & Dickey-Collas⁸, Mackinson et al.⁹, Steins et al.¹⁰, Schwermer et al.¹¹), transforming the questions from “if” to “how”.

2.1 ICES and Advisory Councils

Advisory Councils (ACs) are recognized by ICES as relevant and well-defined stakeholder entities with a legitimate basis granted by the CFP. ICES has used the creation of ACs as an opportunity to extend its dialogue with requesters, stakeholders, and observers and regards them as a powerful mechanism for building trust (Cvitanovic et al., in Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)¹².

There is a direct and regular line of communication between ACs and ICES through MIACO meetings and through the annual presentation of ICES Advice at relevant AC Working Groups. At times and increasingly, ICES is invited to present at other ad hoc events, the most recent being the NSAC Webinar on Climate Change and North Sea Fisheries¹³ and NSAC Workshop on MSP and Stakeholder Engagement¹⁴. The NSAC considers its liaison with ICES essential and a significant added value to its work on marine policy-related issues and, in particular, on the management of fisheries.

There is little doubt that increased stakeholder engagement in ICES processes and positive regard for this by ICES has improved the overall trust and legitimacy of fisheries science in view of the fisheries stakeholders. The fact that ICES is approachable and willing to engage has changed the previously held perception of ICES and the broader scientific community as ‘ivory towers’. Our members feel considered and heard, which in turn contributes to their feelings of accountability and ownership. Understanding scientific and policy-making processes is crucial for meaningful engagement. A holistic, whole-of-society approach is needed to address the so-called ‘wicked problems’, such as climate change, and ‘the tragedy of the commons’ - challenges which can only be resolved with inclusive governance.

⁸ Ballesteros & Dickey-Collas. 2023. Managing participation across boundaries: A typology for stakeholder engagement in the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308597X22004365>

⁹ Mackinson et. al. 2010. Engaging stakeholders in fisheries and marine research.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308597X10001375>

¹⁰ Steins et al. 2022. A will-o’-the wisp? On the utility of voluntary contributions of data and knowledge from the fishing industry to marine science. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2022.954959/full>

¹¹ Schwermer et al. 2020. A Literature Review on Stakeholder Participation in Coastal and Marine Fisheries

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20389-4_2

¹² Dickey-Collas, M., and Ballesteros, M. 2021. The process in ICES of opening up to increased stakeholder engagement (1980–2020). ICES Cooperative Research Report, Vol. 353. 26 pp.

<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8516>

¹³ <https://www.nsrac.org/projects/nsac-webinar-north-sea-fisheries-and-climate-change/>

¹⁴ <https://www.nsrac.org/projects/nsac-workshop-on-marine-spatial-planning-and-stakeholder-engagement/>

2.2 ICES Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

The 2021 ICES workshop on stakeholder engagement identified that poor stakeholder engagement could compromise the objectivity of ICES science and its reputation as an objective knowledge-broker. To mitigate such risks, the workshop recommended developing an engagement strategy outlining definitions, objectives, monitoring, and evaluation of stakeholder engagement. (Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)¹⁵ The ICES Stakeholder Engagement Strategy¹⁶ was published in January 2023. The development of the strategy had been an iterative process and stakeholders were asked to provide feedback, which had later been integrated into the final document.

On 16-18 May 2023, ICES organized a workshop on the implementation of ICES Stakeholder Engagement Strategy (WKSTIMP). This was an intensive 3-day event with mixed format in which participants worked to outline the stages of implementation and actions necessary for its effective realization. The NSAC was represented through the Secretariat and raised the issue of stakeholder participation in advice request production. While it was recognized that this remains external to the ICES' sphere of influence, it was generally agreed that ICES processes could benefit from comprehensive stakeholder engagement in the early stages of advice production, including the formulation of the advice requests.

2.3 Stakeholder engagement in ICES Advice production

Once the value of stakeholder engagement is no longer questioned, other kinds of debates arise, such as at what stage(s) should stakeholders be allowed to participate. Increasingly, there is a recognition of the value of comprehensive and early engagement. At the workshop, the issue of advice request formulation was raised as a typical black-box type of process. While this stage takes place outside of ICES, it was recognized by the workshop participants that ICES advisory procedure may benefit from stakeholder engagement as early as possible, that is in the formulation of the request to produce advice. The WKSTIMP report notes that: *“The WKSTIMP widely supported articulating an iterative process built on increasing transparency in the scientific advisory process. This will help to promote trust, credibility, and impartiality of the ICES output products. It will also help further avoid hiding (intentionally or unintentionally) political bias and to enable accountability. To achieve this, a clear definition of each of the ICES products, procedures and methods must be put in place; as well as a public*

¹⁵ Dickey-Collas, M., and Ballesteros, M. 2021. The process in ICES of opening up to increased stakeholder engagement (1980–2020). ICES Cooperative Research Report, Vol. 353. 26 pp.
<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8516>

¹⁶ ICES. 2023. ICES Stakeholder Engagement Strategy. Version 01. ICES Guidelines and Policies. 12 pp.
<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.21815106>

disclosure and statement of all the assumptions (not only technical but also political) used in a "black box" assessment model." (ICES WKSTIMP 2023)¹⁷

Generally, the production of ICES advice entails four stages: (i) request formulation, (ii) knowledge synthesis, (iii) independent peer-review, and (iv) advice production. The two main types of advice are regular (recurrent) advice and one-off, special advice (requests). All ICES Member Countries and international organizations (e.g. EU, OSPAR, and NEAFC) can request advice from ICES based on a bilateral agreement. (Dickey-Collas & Ballesteros 2021)¹⁸

The advice production process is affected and driven by the assumptions held by the advice requesters. ICES Advice directly emanates from the related request, which reflects the policy-makers' knowledge and expectations about the science used to build their policy decisions. In this sense, ICES Advice is constrained by the framework of its request, as it is bound to answer the questions posed by requesters. One apparent example is the application of ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM) for which ICES possesses the necessary data and methodologies, yet the policy seems to not yet be ready to integrate them in the current policy framework, despite calls to move to more holistic management of fisheries resources.

By now it is widely recognized that simple questions providing simple answers might not be apt for addressing complex problems such as fisheries management. A more integrated and inclusive system is needed that produces robust evidence for decision-making, avoiding missing out on important factors that simple models might not capture. It is for this reason that the NSAC firmly believes in strengthening stakeholder engagement in scientific and policy processes in a systematic and inclusive way, without compromising their objectivity. While policy-making may benefit from the expertise of its stakeholders, the final policy formulation remains in the hands of (well-informed) managers and politicians.

3 NSAC Advice and conclusion

Considering the above, the NSAC would like to reiterate similar pleas to the Commission of fellow ACs to allow stakeholders to engage in the drafting phase of advice requests. With their broad constituency of fisheries and environmental civil organizations, ACs are best placed to draw attention to the shortcomings and factors to be considered when designing requests that inform the production of science and consequently affect fisheries management. Well-formulated requests are a vital step in ensuring that scientific advice provides well-informed answers to complex environmental questions. The inclusion of stakeholders provides added

¹⁷ ICES. 2023. ICES Stakeholder Engagement Strategy. Version 01. ICES Guidelines and Policies. 12 pp. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.21815106>

¹⁸ Dickey-Collas, M., and Ballesteros, M. 2021. The process in ICES of opening up to increased stakeholder engagement (1980–2020). ICES Cooperative Research Report, Vol. 353. 26 pp. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.8516>

value and constitutes a kind of checks-and-balances and sense-testing, which in turn strengthens the advice.

The NSAC appreciates that a change from a top-down to a more inclusive, bottom-up governance is incremental and not straightforward. True co-management is in its infancy in fisheries, and it may take many trials and errors to establish a system that is fair, objective and effective. With this, **the NSAC calls on the Commission and the Member States (MS) to follow the ICES example and start opening up to stakeholder engagement in the request design stages for recurring and non-recurring/special scientific advice.** This could be done through direct observation of the process which might in time evolve to active participation, or through a more indirect way, for example by commenting on draft requests, something akin to Member States' consultation with ACs on the draft Joint Recommendations of the regional groups.

To conclude, industry-science collaboration has advanced significantly in the past years and many positive experiences can be drawn from such projects. The overall perception of fisheries governance has improved since the establishment of ACs, which can be considered their direct legacy. It is now time to bind science, the fishing sector and its stakeholders, and marine governance in a truly whole-of-society approach to fisheries and ecosystem management, in all its stages. The ACs stand ready to engage in discussions on how to improve the science-policy interface to cater for truly integrated fisheries management.