Preferential Access Areas for Small-Scale Fisheries

Report of an informal exchange among small-scale fishers from Asia and Africa

Rome, on the margins of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI), 7 September 2026, Hotel Ripa Roma, Rome



1. Background and purpose

During the COFI meeting in Rome, an informal exchange was organised to bring together small-scale fisheries (SSF) representatives from Asia and Africa. The purpose was to share information and lived experience on preferential access areas (PAAs)- zones in which small-scale fishers hold priority or exclusive access to coastal fishing grounds and resources.

Participants described how access arrangements are set out in law, how they work (or fail to work) in practice, and what has helped communities secure their rights. This report brings together the experience of each country that contributed, followed by cross-cutting themes and the practices participants identified as working well.

2. Framing the discussion

The exchange opened with introductory remarks placing PAAs within the wider international policy framework and the practical concerns of fishing communities. The main points raised were:

- **Guidelines and calls to action.** The SSF Guidelines and the Tenure Guidelines, the SSF Call to Action, and access arrangements in Africa provided the reference framework.
- **Transnational fishers.** Access questions extend across borders, as fishers and stocks move between countries.
- **Traditional and cultural aspects.** Access and PAAs are not only technical or legal matters; they carry traditional and cultural meaning for communities.
- **Community participation.** Communities are often consulted only after access policies have already been made, rather than in shaping them.
- **Participatory surveillance.** Collaborative data collection and community involvement in monitoring were highlighted as tools for protecting access areas.
- **Inshore exclusive zones.** In September 2024, the 8th Meeting of OACPS Ministers Responsible for Oceans, Inland Waters and Fisheries in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, resulted in a declaration encouraging the establishment of artisanal stewardship areas (ASAs) and the strengthening of inshore exclusive zones (IEZs). However, the implementation remains the problem- in some places a zone is declared while the resources within it are not actually protected.
- **Women and displacement.** The effects of access loss and displacement on women in fishing communities were raised as a concern.

3. Overview of country experiences

The table below summarizes what participants shared. Detail for each country follows.

Country	Access / zone arrangement	Main issue raised
India	State laws in 9 coastal states; National Policy on Marine Fisheries 2017; access right but no tenure	Trawler/mechanised encroachment; no tenure security; mechanised boats take ~80% of the 0–100 m depth catch- Tenure rights must include access, use and protection rights
Senegal	Fisheries Code: 6 nm for SSF (12 nm requested); SSF-managed protected areas	Incursions by industrial vessels; Code under revision; shared stocks across borders
Kenya	12 nm for SSF; fisheries Act, BMUs and landing sites; have co-management approach- 8 co-management areas	PAAs largely on paper; industrial encroachment; oil exploration, tourism, cage culture in inshore zones
South Africa	No PAA at all; 1972 lobster sanctuary	Lobster traps caught in pelagic nets; oil and gas; anchoring of big boats within 4nm damaging reefs; PAAs should give access not only to ocean but also to land and social protection
Angola	Law provides PAAs of 4 nm	Industrial (incl. armed foreign- Chinese) vessels encroach; catch not landed for local markets, Big vessels destroying resources

Country	Access / zone arrangement	Main issue raised
Philippines	Exclusive access for municipal fishers within 10 km; co-management bodies	Implementation and funding challenges
Namibia	Limited PAA	Competition, oil and gas, no market places, aquaculture
Indonesia	SSF (<10 GT) may fish within 12 nm	No regulation to keep industrial/commercial vessels out of 12 nm
Ghana	Vessels split into 3 categories	Trackers placed on industrial vessels to monitor them

4. Country experiences

India

Conflict between trawlers and small-scale fishers dates back to the 1970s. It led the Majumdar Commission to discuss exclusive zones for SSF. Each of India's nine coastal states now has its own law on the matter.

These laws, however, did not ensure tenure rights. Tenure here means secure rights to access, use and protect natural resources. Encroachments along the coast are blocking fishers' access, and while an access right exists on paper, there is no tenure. The Marine Fishing Policy of 2017 is the current national policy. Participants noted that the 0–100 m depth zone accounts for a large share of the catch, and mechanised boats take around 80% of it.

Senegal

Senegal's Marine Fisheries Code reserves 6 nautical miles for small-scale fishers. Industrial vessels nonetheless intrude into this zone, and fishers are asking for 12 nautical miles. The Fisheries Code is currently under revision.

Some protected areas are managed by SSF communities themselves, and in some of these areas fishing is allowed. Management of sardinella shows how community-backed rules can operate: fishing is closed for six months of the year and a minimum catch size applies. Senegal also offered the regional example described in section 6.

Kenya

In Kenya, PAAs exist largely on paper. Industrial fishers encroach on areas meant for small-scale fishers. SSF are entitled to 12 nautical miles, but blue economy activities such as oil exploration and tourism compete for the same space.

The Fisheries Act provides for Beach Management Units (BMUs) and landing sites, and Kenya follows a co-management approach with eight co-management areas. Some sites are legally recognised while others are not. Participants stressed the importance of legal protection and of communities speaking with strong, unified, collaborative voices. Cage culture in inshore zones was also mentioned as an emerging pressure.

South Africa

South Africa has no PAA at all. A lobster sanctuary was established in 1972, but lobster traps have been caught up in pelagic nets, and offshore lobster fishing extends to around 500 m depth. Access in some cases is limited to less than 5 nautical miles.

Participants stressed that PAAs should mean more than access to the ocean: communities also need access to land, to resources, to areas, and to social protection. Oil and gas exploration raises the further issue of access to information, and the anchoring of large vessels within 4 nautical miles was reported to be destroying reef.

Angola

Angolan law provides for PAAs of 4 nautical miles, yet industrial vessels encroach on them. Policy does not require industrial vessels to stop and sell fish to the local market. Foreign, including Chinese, vessels carrying weapons were reported in the area, and large vessels also destroy the resources on which small-scale fishers depend.

Philippines

Commercial fisheries are limited to a maximum vessel size (of less than 3,000 tons, as noted). Municipal fishers have exclusive access within 10 km of the shore. Co-management bodies exist, but implementation and funding remain challenges.

Namibia

Namibia has a limited PAA. Fishers face competition for space and resources, pressure from oil and gas activity, a lack of market places, and questions around aquaculture development.

Indonesia

Small-scale fishers in Indonesia are defined by vessel size, meaning boats under 10 gross tonnage (GT). About 96% of the country's boats are SSF. Small-scale fishers may fish within 12 nautical miles, but there is no regulation restricting industrial or commercial vessels from operating within that same 12 nautical miles.

Ghana

Ghana divides fishing vessels into three categories. Trackers have been placed on industrial vessels, providing a means of monitoring whether they respect the areas reserved for others.

5. Cross-cutting themes

- **Paper rights versus practical protection.** In Kenya, India, Senegal, Angola and Indonesia, zones or rights exist in law but industrial or mechanised vessels continue to operate inside them. Declaration without enforcement does not protect resources.
- **Access is not the same as tenure.** India's experience shows that a right to access, without secure tenure over use and protection of resources, leaves communities exposed to encroachment.

- **Different zone widths.** Reserved zones range from 4 nm (Angola) and 6 nm (Senegal) to 10 km (Philippines) and 12 nm (Kenya, Indonesia, and the IEZ instrument), with some countries having none (South Africa) or a very limited PAA (Namibia).
- **Competing uses of coastal space.** Oil and gas exploration, tourism, aquaculture and cage culture were raised by Kenya, South Africa and Namibia as growing competitors for coastal areas.
- **Co-management needs legal backing and resources.** Kenya's BMUs and co-management areas, and the Philippines' co-management bodies, illustrate both the promise of the approach and its dependence on legal recognition and funding.
- **Monitoring and surveillance.** Ghana's use of trackers and the discussion of participatory surveillance and collaborative data collection point to monitoring as central to making PAAs real.
- **Broader dimensions of access.** Access touches land, information, social protection, women and cultural tradition, not only the sea.



6. What has worked well

- **Uganda and Tanzania: unified voices.** Small-scale fishers speaking together were highlighted as an effective way to secure attention and influence.
- **India: full tenure with legal recognition and participatory enforcement.** Participants concluded that full tenure is needed, with legal recognition of tenure and enforcement carried out through participatory engagement with communities.

- **Senegal and West Africa: joint management of shared resources.** A joint committee for shared resources brings different countries together to manage conflict between them, as in the case of sardinella. A fishing protocol agreement supports this, and boat captains are trained to remain within their own territories.

7. Key messages and way forward

Drawing on the exchange, the following messages emerged:

- PAAs need legal recognition, secure tenure and effective enforcement, not declaration alone.
- Small-scale fishing communities should take part in shaping access policies, not only in responding to them after they are made.
- Community-led and participatory monitoring, supported by tools such as vessel trackers, should be used to keep industrial vessels out of reserved zones.
- Co-management arrangements require sustained funding and legal backing to be implemented.
- Shared and transboundary stocks call for joint committees and protocol agreements between countries.
- Unified fisher voices, as in Uganda and Tanzania, strengthen the case for access.
- Access must be understood broadly, including land, information, social protection, and the position of women.

Next step: participants decided to continue these conversations through information exchange meetings organized online and in person.