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**Working Paper**

## Mainstreaming the social indicators of the seafood stewardship index for greater equity in the Asian seafood and aquaculture industry

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## **ADBI Working Paper Series**

### **MAINSTREAMING THE SOCIAL INDICATORS OF THE SEAFOOD STEWARDSHIP INDEX FOR GREATER EQUITY IN THE ASIAN SEAFOOD AND AQUACULTURE INDUSTRY**

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**Abstract**

This paper seeks to outline the power of benchmarking to influence social transformation in the fisheries industry in contributing to the realization of ocean equity. It will do so by drawing on the experience of the Seafood Stewardship Index of the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA), which assesses the 30 most powerful seafood industries on their pathways towards sustainability from the equity angle, which aims to ensure that the distribution of ocean wealth is accessible for workers and coastal communities whilst protecting their rights by minimizing harm inflicted on them. With the existence of cases of modern slavery in the fisheries industry, enhancing the quality of reporting has become an important reason for businesses to ensure that the supply chain process does not procure from illegal fishing and/or is not farmed by trafficked workers. This paper explains the above objectives by conceptualizing the scope and definitions of ocean equity, exploring the trends and insights based on the WBA's Seafood Stewardship Index's (SSI) scoring of the world's 30 most influential seafood companies, and further showcases how engagement with key actors is useful in driving changes among seafood companies. Finally, the author draws on policy recommendations that seek to incentivize actors with a view to achieving better social outcomes in the ocean.

**Keywords:** benchmarking, business and human rights, seafood industry, ocean equity

**JEL Classification:** F660

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Asia's seafood and aquaculture industry mushroomed in the last decade, contributing to the livelihoods and nutrients supply for its people. The number of people employed as fishers and fish farmers in 2015 rose by 64.6% to more than 52 million people compared to the numbers recorded in 1995 (FAO 2022a). As the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted seafood supply chains due to a shortage of workers and reduced automation (Mordor Intelligence 2022), the total employment in the sector was reduced slightly by 5.1% to around 49 million people in 2020. However, the primary production activities (fishing and aquaculture) in Asia employ the majority of people in this sector with more than 84% of fishers and fish farmers globally being based in Asia in 2020 (FAO 2022a). Globally, Asian countries play an important role as they supplied 70% of the world's fisheries and aquaculture products in 2020 (FAO 2022a). In 2028, the aquaculture market will reach US\$105 billion globally, with the consumption demand from Asia and the Pacific expected to increase by 75% (Global Newswire 2023).

As a rapidly growing sector with vast sources of revenues and employment in the region, the seafood industry is responsible for safeguarding the well-being of workers. The United Nations (UN 2011) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights states that business enterprises are expected to "respect human rights," which means "refraining from human rights infringement and [they] should respond [to] adverse human rights impacts." This includes actively communicating businesses' strategic plan to the public on how they respond to, and/or mitigate, the impact of their business, if any, on human rights. Operationally, this translates to: i) integrating human rights principles in businesses' policies; ii) conducting regular due diligence on the impact of a business on human rights; and iii) specifying appropriate actions on the adverse impact of human rights due to their business activities (UN 2011).

This aligns with the concept of ocean equity whose aim is to ensure that the distribution of ocean wealth is accessible for workers and coastal communities whilst protecting their rights by minimizing harm inflicted on them (Österblom, Wabnitz, and Tladi 2020). However, often, due to the difficulties in conceptualizing ocean equity, seafood businesses perceive its implementation in the field differently. Some might have proper planning to include responsible business practices that engage with and benefit coastal communities, including those that will benefit women, indigenous communities, and young people (Ocean Panel 2020), while others might focus on ensuring transparency in ocean governance, which encompasses anti-corruption measures and inclusive tax systems. Ideally, seafood industries are expected to be able to uphold all the aforementioned responsibilities to ensure ocean equity based on the principle of human rights.

Yet, despite the responsibility of business to safeguard the rights of workers in its operations and supply chain, modern slavery (i.e., forced labor and human trafficking) in Asia's seafood industries is rampant due to the growing market demand for affordable seafood and the vulnerable situation of Asia's poorest communities pushing them to find employment. More than half of global forced labor, or equivalent to 15.1 million people, reside in Asia and the Pacific (ILO 2022), with a proportion of these being contributed by labor in the fisheries sector. For instance, almost 38% of migrant workers in the Thai fishing industry were trafficked. The human rights violations in Thailand include killings of fish workers (360info.org 2022). The People's Republic of China (PRC); Japan; the Republic of Korea; Taipei, China; and Thailand, among others, have also been identified as countries with fisheries industries that bear a high risk of modern slavery, while India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam have

been dubbed as having a medium risk of modern slavery in the fisheries industry (Global Slavery Index 2018).

With the existing cases of modern slavery in the fisheries industry, enhancing the quality of reporting has become an important reason for businesses to ensure that the supply chain process does not procure from illegal fishing and/or is not farmed by trafficked workers. Ironically, in terms of sustainability reports, out of 1,664 companies—including 69 operating in the ocean economy—only 7% published their performance in the front of SDG14: *to conserve and sustainably use the world's oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development* (Sardá et al. 2023), although more than half are aware of the impact of their businesses on the ocean. In terms of upholding social equity in the ocean, challenges persist as fishing vessels are confined in a mobile space in which trafficked fisheries workers tend to have difficulties in unionizing and/or reporting any mistreatment on board, including long working hours, unsafe conditions, coercion, and wage withholding. In addition, migrant fisheries workers may not have access to their native language and/or appropriate channels to report and remediate their working status. Despite the fact that several fisheries industries have sought certification to push for a better human rights due diligence (HRDD), lack of transparency in the interviews due to threatened fishing workers and/or a tendency to falsify audit reports may arise (Clayton et al. 2022).

In light of the aforementioned state of play, this paper seeks to offer the adaptation of methodology used in the World Benchmarking Alliance's (WBA) Seafood Stewardship Index (SSI) as a tool to enhance fisheries and aquaculture businesses' human rights, specifically those indicators related to human and labor rights. The SSI includes the measurement area on social elements (i.e., people-oriented) which also consists of the WBA's social transformation methodology that aims to incentivize businesses in exercising responsible business conduct (WBA 2023). The uniqueness of the SSI lies in its two strengths, namely: i) a ranking system based on a set of comprehensive indices that could incentivize companies to enhance their social responsibility to progress up the ladder; and ii) the existing WBA network to which businesses will be able to connect with a view to improving their weaknesses in implementing a socially responsible seafood. This approach and case studies from the WBA's SSI will be delved into in the forthcoming sections, which consist of the introduction of a Concept on Social Equity in the Ocean, Business and Human Rights in the Asian Seafood Sector, the WBA's SSI insights into the social sector, stakeholder engagement to drive changes in the seafood industry, and policy recommendations.

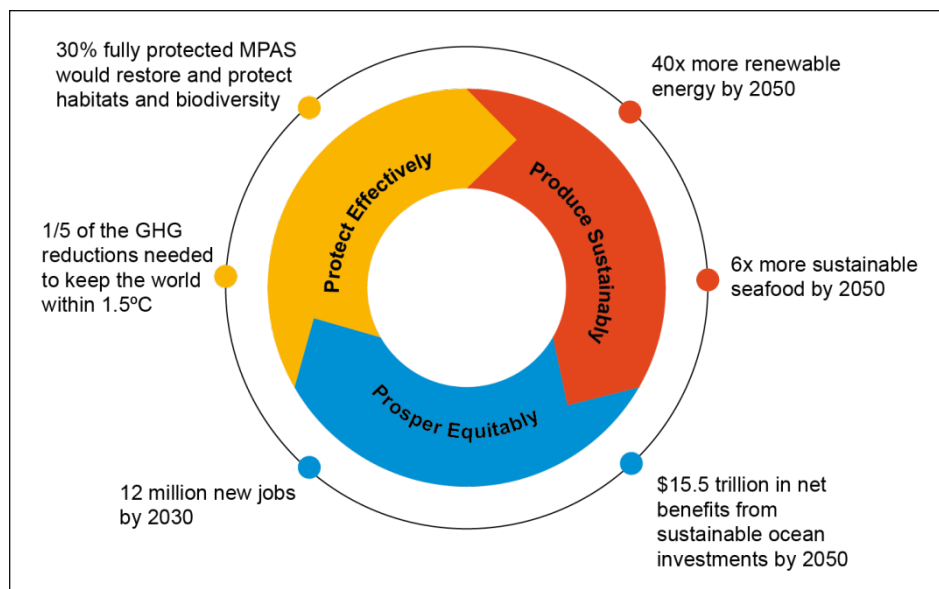
## 2. CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL EQUITY IN THE OCEAN

Different viewpoints situate the concept of ocean equity. From the governmental perspective, ocean equity has become more pronounced since the launching of the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy in 2017, which serves as a platform catalyzed by 17 world leaders to foster a sustainable ocean economy by bridging the environment quality, the prosperity of communities around the ocean, and the wealth generated from marine resources (Ocean Panel n.d.; see Figure 1). Ocean equity, therefore, has become one of the Panel's transformation agendas. In a long-term scenario, six targets were planned by the Panel to ensure that "effective protection, sustainable production, and equitable prosperity" (Ocean Panel n.d.) are in place. Effective protection includes efforts to ensure the restoration of habitats and biodiversity, as well as GHG reductions by one-fifth to ensure the world will be well within the 1.5 °C target. On the other hand, sustainable production foresees 40 times more renewable energy being used in generating wealth resources by 2050, while six

times more sustainable seafood will be produced by the same period. Finally, equitable prosperity means 12 million jobs will be generated by 2030, while sustainable investment in the ocean is expected to generate US\$15.5 trillion in benefits by 2050.

Beyond this initiative, such a concept has also been mentioned in relation to fairness of the ocean as global commons. For instance, in regard to the ocean's areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ), the continued operation of seafood businesses in ABNJ may inflict inequities as the ABNJ are distant, covering 40% of the planet yet leading to *blind spots* in the ocean economy due to the absence of authorities that regulate these areas. In this respect, a treaty may be cofounded to efficiently regulate the utilization of ABNJ based on a consensus of relevant parties instead of treating them as loose ends with infinite wealth that can be generated by any businesses (Claudet, Amon, and Blasiak 2021). Bennett (2022) further categorized six concepts from wider literatures to operationalize ocean equity: i) recognition equity that places emphasis on acknowledgement of local wisdom; ii) procedural equity that translates to the degree of inclusivity and participation in the decision-making process, as well as the applicability of good governance principles in accessing ocean resources; iii) distributional equity transpires to fair allocation of the ocean's benefits to coastal communities, which includes minimizing harm on the local groups; iv) management equity that highlights local capacity in leading and having ownership and/or authority on ocean management; v) environmental equity, meaning the assurance of ocean quality and sustainability; and vi) contextual equity that examines enablers (i.e., economic, governance, social structures, climate change, rule of law, and environmental conditions) in supporting social equity and mainstreaming it into policy and practice.

**Figure 1: Target of Ocean Panel**



Source: Ocean Panel, n.d.

Based on the aforementioned conceptualization of ocean equity, this study will strike a balance between equitable prosperity and distributional equity, specifically by drawing from seafood industries' commitment to upholding human rights for the coastal communities and workers that are affected by the operation of seafood industries. In this regard, the study will reflect upon the existing concept of business and human rights, while practically learning from the experience of the SSI in assessing 30 major

seafood companies in translating their commitments to holding the seafood companies accountable in bringing social transformation to the industry.

### **3. OCEAN EQUITY: BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE ASIAN SEAFOOD SECTOR**

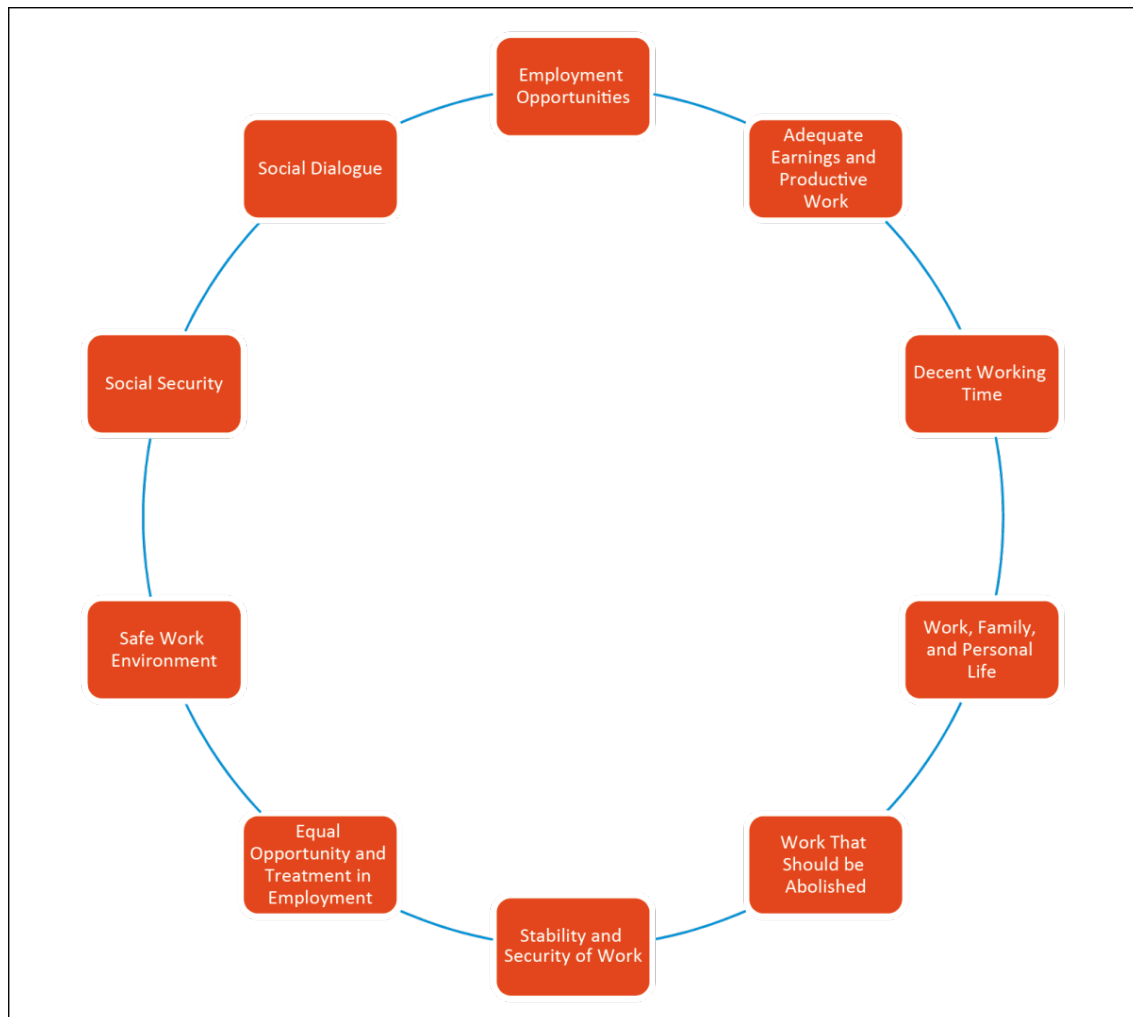
The need to preserve human rights in the fishing sector was formalized prior to the launch of the universally accepted United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in 2011. It was cofounded years beforehand by the International Labour Organization (ILO) through the launching of the Work in Fishing Convention 188/2007, which mentioned the importance of “promoting decent conditions of work and the need to protect and promote the rights of fishers.” It placed emphasis on all fishing vessels engaging in small- and large-scale commercial operations having minimum requirements for formal and informal fishers through high-quality: i) conditions of service; ii) accommodation and food; iii) occupational safety; iv) health protection; and v) medical care and social security (ILO 2007; see Figure 2 – Basic Elements and Indicators of Decent Work). This Convention updated sets of previous international conventions on the fisheries sector issued since 1959. The Convention stipulated the responsibilities of fishing vessel owners, skippers, fishers, and other minimum requirements (i.e., minimum age, medical examination to determine fitness to work, manning and hours of rest, crew list requirements, fishers’ work agreements, repatriation, recruitment and placement, payment, accommodation and food, medical care, occupational safety and health, and social security) to ensure decent working conditions for the fishers on board.

However, despite the comprehensiveness of the Convention, it may lack enforcement as only a number of countries ratified it. As of March 2023, only 21 countries had ratified the Convention. Of the major fisheries and aquaculture producing countries in Asia, only Thailand ratified the Convention and entered it into force in 2019 (ILO 2023). This means that other nonratifying major-producer countries in Asia, such as the PRC, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Viet Nam, the Philippines, among others, do not enforce the Convention in a legally binding manner domestically, thus constraining these countries to enforce it. Consequently, with the lack of commitment from the national governments to ratify such an international convention, the seafood businesses in Asia are unlikely to practically implement continuous human rights assessment in their businesses, unless practical incentives are mainstreamed along their operations.

With this in mind, the cases of human rights violation in major-producing countries in Asia remain on the rise. This was compounded by the practice of overfishing through illegal, unreported, and undocumented (IUU) fishing, as well as shifting operation from high-income to middle-income countries with little or no robust workers documentation or traceability system in place. The Financial Transparency Coalition (2022) found that IUU fishing contributed to an economic loss of US\$50 billion annually, positioning it as the “third most lucrative natural resource crime after timber and mining.” The study also revealed 972 industrial and semi-industrial commercial fishing vessels involved in IUU fishing between January 2010 and May 2022. The geographic location where vessels were involved in these offenses was identified for half of the cases (485 vessels). Of this number, Asia was the second largest region where IUU fishing was detected, with 111 vessels, or 22.9%. The majority of IUU-related vessels in Asia operated across Indonesia; Taipei, China; and Timor-Leste. In addition, regardless of operating countries, a third of the 696 flag-identified IUU-related vessels can be

traced to the PRC, while 4.6%, 3.9%, and 3.3% of vessels were identified as coming from the Republic of Korea; Taipei,China; and Indonesia (Financial Transparency Coalition 2022).

**Figure 2: Substantive Elements of Decent Work**



Source: Developed by the ILO, in Lozano et al. (2022).

Another instance was when 116 workers employed in the IUU-related PRC's distant water fleet (CDWF) encountered a combination of human rights abuse, including withheld wages and deductions, debt bondage and guarantee money, confiscation of documents, excessive overtime, abusive working and living conditions, intimidation and threats, and even physical abuse (EJF 2022). In addition, around 52 million children are employed, with 71% of these children working in the agricultural sector, including fisheries and aquaculture. Of these, 48% face work with a health, safety, or moral threat (FAO 2019). In considering the breadth of the dangers in the fisheries and aquaculture industry, a study from the FISH Safety Foundation (Pew Trusts 2022) estimated that at least 100,000 fishing-related deaths take place annually, including those that come at the expense of IUU fishing.

As human rights violations continue to be prevalent, fisheries and aquaculture businesses may play a greater role in translating their commitment to upholding human rights for workers and coastal communities. In doing so, these businesses need to be ready and willing to publicly disclose how their operations fare in designing, implementing, monitoring, and enforcing corporate values to refrain from committing human rights abuses. This includes keeping records of human rights violations at the vessel level, committing to publishing those records, and refraining from procuring catch from vessels with a human rights violations record. In addition, as stakeholders such as CSOs, human rights defenders, and academia may have more expertise in the area, businesses may want to partner with these actors to build an effective grievance mechanism and call for a workers' union (Clayton et al. 2022). Further, beyond a procedural mechanism, incorporating social equity requires people within seafood businesses who are able to "think socially" (Bennett 2022). The limited capacity of personnel to incorporate the periodical measurement of human dimensions (i.e., rights and tenure, local culture, and communities' well-being) into the programmatic design of businesses' master plan and practice often complicates the efforts of seafood industries to translate human rights on the ground (Shapira, Ketchie, and Nehe 2017).

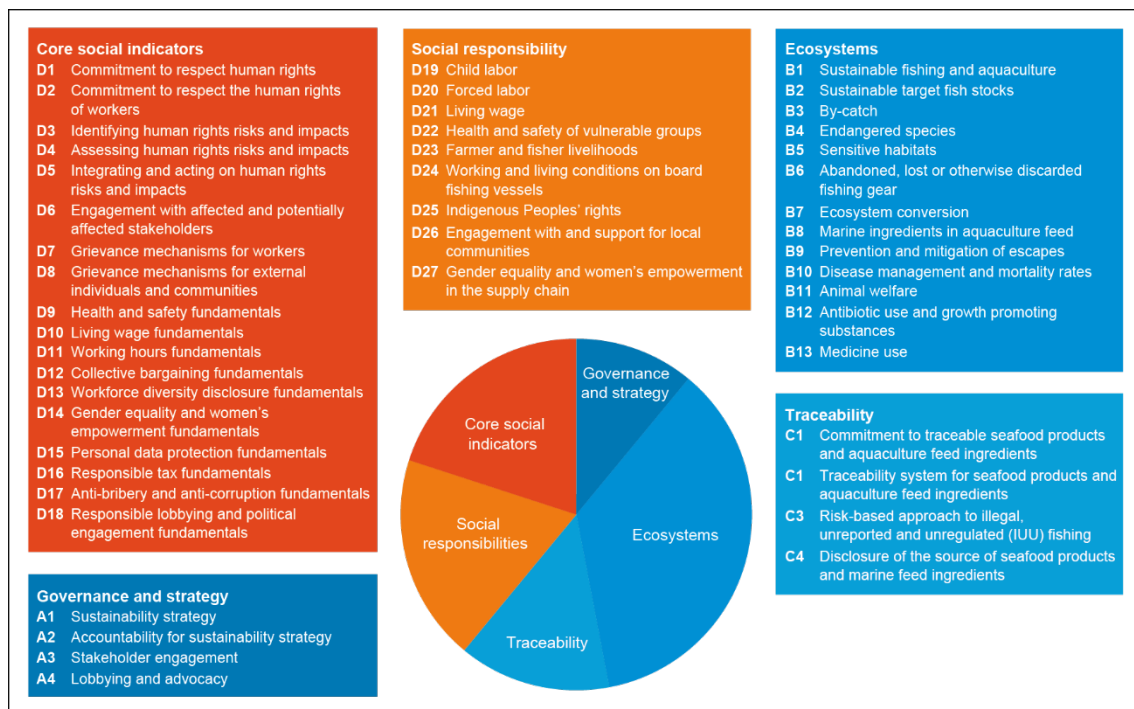
In this regard, the Seafood Stewardship Index (SSI) launched by the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA), which stems from the social benchmark that was designed based on the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark (CHRB) in line with the vision of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPR), can serve as guidance for fisheries and aquaculture businesses to refine their efforts in advancing the quality of human rights in their operation. This includes equipping their unit with the right personnel who can utilize such a methodology and measurement from the SSI in assessing the performance of human rights in their businesses. In the next section, this paper will offer the WBA's SSI and Social Transformation Benchmark as guidance to incentivize seafood and aquaculture businesses in building a movement as they will be able to crossmatch their efforts with other companies' measures in the same sector. Further, the study will illustrate how the current WBA's SSI reveals the state of information disclosure of the top 30 seafood companies in ensuring their workers' rights are safeguarded and their products are ethically sourced; as the WBA has a network of allies, fisheries businesses may select the relevant stakeholders in providing insights to improve the state of fisheries' businesses' operation to safeguard the human rights of their workers and/or source their products ethically.

## **4. BENCHMARKING AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN THE OCEAN**

Benchmarking is pivotal as it helps stakeholders to monitor and evaluate the existing practices in translating their commitment, including on their promise to uphold human rights. The WBA's SSI was launched with the aim of providing clear and succinct measurement for businesses to take part in disclosing how they translate their commitment from the human rights standpoint. This Index consists of 27 indicators aimed at measuring businesses' performance in respecting human rights, providing and promoting decent work, and acting ethically and with social responsibility (WBA 2022a).

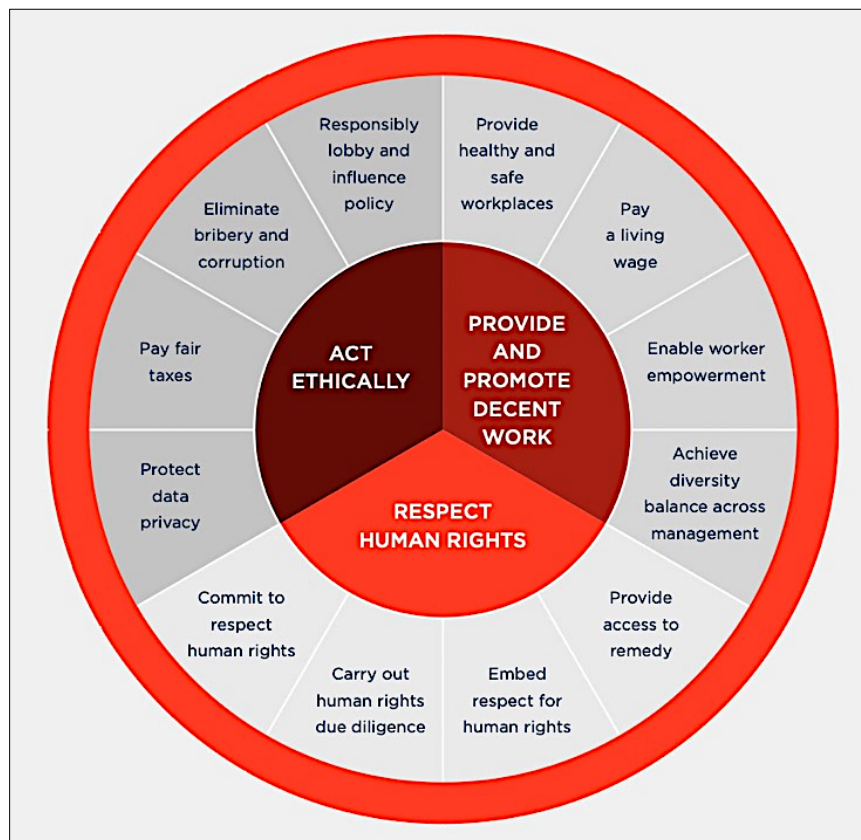
The social indicators and social responsibility dimension and/or measurement area under the WBA's SSI was sourced from the Social Transformation Framework. This Framework is intended to provide free and publicly accessible benchmarks to assess and incentivize companies in leaving no one behind in adhering to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Social Transformation Framework highlighted the 2,000 most influential companies putting people at the core of their operation in fulfilling the SDG targets. These 2,000 companies are referred to as keystone companies that are believed to be able to influence other businesses and catalyze systemic transformation. Parts of the Social Transformation Framework that were adapted to the WBA's SSI were on respecting human rights, providing and promoting decent work, and acting ethically (see Figure 3) (WBA 2021).

**Figure 3: Overview of Indicators under WBA's SSI**



The WBA's SSI from 2021 revealed that among the top 30 seafood companies measured, social responsibility commitments have not yet translated effectively as the public disclosure for all topics are either "absent, inconsistent, or incomplete." They are chosen based on their control of a significant portion of marine catch, aquaculture production, and the seafood value chain with a global representation from East and Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States.<sup>1</sup> Generally, the performance on the social responsibility front under the WBA's SSI fared worst compared to other measurement areas as only two companies scored above 30% with an average score of 14%. Most companies also do not have a specified time bound set for achieving a commitment to human rights, and the seafood companies do not explicate clearly how they address issues on human and labor rights in their supply chain (WBA 2022b).

<sup>1</sup> These seafood companies are headquartered in Canada; the PRC; Denmark; France; Greenland; Japan; Italy; the Netherlands; Norway; Spain; the Republic of Korea; Taipei, China; Thailand; the United Kingdom; and the United States.

**Figure 4: Expectations on Business for Social Transformation**

Source: WBA (2021).

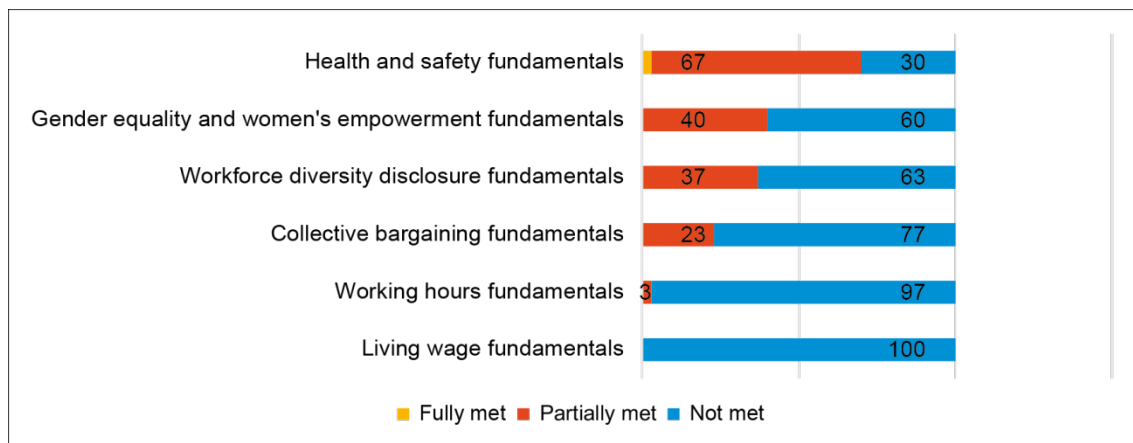
With an already low number of companies committing to safeguarding human rights in their practices, most do not disclose the human rights procedures they have in place. In 2021, only 15 out of 30 companies published their commitment to protecting human rights, with only 37% disclosing their commitment to respecting labor rights (see Figure 5). This was a slight reduction from the 22 companies (73.3%) that published their commitments to the human rights procedure in place in 2019 (WBA 2022b). In addition, out of 30 companies, only the Thai Union Group clearly carried out the first three steps of the human rights due diligence (HRDD) process in 2021. Also, only three companies reported relevant information in measuring the human rights of stakeholders. Of the 30 top companies being assessed, only 43% disclosed their grievance mechanism for workers. As for communities, only a third of the 30 companies published their grievance mechanisms for individuals and communities to channel redress (WBA 2022b).

Most companies did not perform well either in disclosing their foundations in providing and promoting decent work. Although 70% of companies disclosed their health and safety fundamentals, the commitment to publishing the working hours and living wage fundamentals remained low. At least 97% of companies did not publish their working hours fundamentals. Meanwhile, no companies disclosed information about living wage fundamentals. Finally, as regards gender equality and workforce diversity, 40% and 37% of companies, respectively, 'partially met' in the fundamentals of these two indicators.

**Figure 5: Performance on Core Social Indicators: Respecting Human Rights**

HRDD = human rights due diligence.

Source: WBA (2022).

**Figure 6: Performance on Core Social Indicators: Providing and Promoting Decent Work**

Source: WBA (2022).

In terms of ethical business conduct, companies performed strongly in anti-bribery and anti-corruption fundamentals, although they lacked in showcasing the fundamentals of responsible lobbying and political engagement, as well as responsible tax practices. At least 63% of companies disclosed the fundamentals of their businesses' anti-bribery and anti-corruption procedures, as well as demonstrating a moderate transparency in publishing personal data protection fundamentals, with 47% showcasing their fundamentals in personal data protection. However, only 20% of seafood and aquaculture companies partially disclosed their companies' information on ethical lobbying and responsible taxation (WBA 2022b).

Companies generally demonstrated a low commitment in disclosing their strategy and/or approach in a wide range of social responsibility indicators, including a lack of appetite in supporting the development of local communities, eliminating child and forced labor, empowering small-scale producers' living wage, respecting indigenous and customary rights, ensuring health and safety conditions, and promoting gender equality. At least 57% of companies were only able to disclose output-level practice instead of a long-term approach in engaging local communities under their strategy. In addition, out of 30 companies being assessed, only 10% disclosed evidence of having commitments and procedures in eliminating forced labor. Meanwhile, none of the companies disclosed monitoring procedures on the use of forced and child labor abuses, either from their suppliers or their own operations. Furthermore, none of the companies were able to elucidate the long-term impact of their programs on small-scale producers despite more than a third of companies providing evidence of activities to improve farmers' and fishers' productivity. An absence of disclosure of the implementation of programs that respect indigenous and/or customary rights was also observable. On the other hand, only 20% of assessed companies issued policies to address working and living conditions on board fishing vessels. Of these, only two companies had monitoring procedures to track their commitments. Finally, 90% of the assessed companies are not committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment across their business operation (WBA 2022b).

Reflecting on the results of benchmarking for the top 30 seafood companies, it can be inferred that although these companies amassed revenue of US\$70 billion, this revenue has not yet translated to promoting a sustainable and decent working environment for the workers nor to making a clear commitment to human and labor rights. Overall assessment of the disclosure from the seafood companies underlined two stark observations. First, the WBA's SSI insight revealed a lack of disclosure of a comprehensive approach to translating the companies' social commitments into practice. This means a number of businesses may have already intended to incorporate the commitment to upholding human rights into their long-term strategy; however, detail of how the operationalization of these commitments would take place has not yet been ironed out. Second, as a consequence of lacking a detailed approach, a comprehensive monitoring process to measure how the commitment is translated into practice is nonexistent. As the strategy was only set on the macro level, the output-level and outcome-level measurement to measure short-term and medium-term accomplishment will be unclear.

Therefore, although the WBA's SSI has offered comprehensive indicators to measure how companies translate their commitments to preserving human rights in their businesses, and may serve as a starting point for companies to reevaluate their strategies and approach, the expected positive progress can only be relied upon to the extent that seafood businesses ought to reflect on the lessons learned drawn by the WBA's SSI into their human rights team and policy, as well as across their supply chain and business lines. In doing so, companies may require expertise beyond that existing in the structure and to connect with external stakeholders to incorporate the feedback effectively and comprehensively. In the next section, this paper will delve into the second strength of utilizing the WBA's SSI as a benchmarking model for businesses and/or companies as the WBA owns a network of allies that can be connected depending on the needs of the businesses to refine their approach to preserve human rights.

## 5. WEAVING MULTISTAKEHOLDER EXPERTISE AND SUPPORT FROM WBA ALLIES

In the context of Asia's aquaculture and fisheries industry, the realization of safeguarding social dimensions in the sector has been led by multistakeholder movements. For instance, the Southeast Asia Forum to End Human Trafficking and Forced Labor in Fisheries (SEA Forum for Fishers) was established in 2018 after the conclusion of the Southeast Asia Conference on Regional Coordination and Action to Combat Trafficking and Labor Exploitation in Fisheries attended by multistakeholder participants from eight Southeast Asian countries. In September 2022, the SEA Forum continued its activity at the Fair Seas Labor Conference held in Bali, Indonesia attended by SEA Forum country members, as well as labor unions such as the Employers' Confederation of the Philippines (ECOP), the Fishers' Rights Network/ITF Fisheries, the Confederation of Indonesia Prosperity Trade Union/*Konfederasi Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia* (KSBSI), the Cambodian Labor Confederation (CLC), the Lao Workers' Union, and the Associated Philippines Seafarers Union in discussing the possibility of revitalizing the Forum and producing outcome documents as a basis for strengthening coordination among the stakeholders in Southeast Asia to promote safe and fair labor migration, as well as decent work in the fishing and seafood sector. Thailand also has A Social Venture for Better Protection of the Vulnerable and the Ocean, previously known as the Multistakeholders Initiative for Accountable Supply Chain of Thai Fisheries (MAST), which was established in March 2016 to better respond to, and mitigate, human trafficking and IUU fishing in Southeast Asia through technology, thus protecting vulnerable people from human trafficking and forced labor (MAST Human 2022).

In the WBA's ecosystem, companies have also improved in terms of their accountability of making their businesses move towards sustainable efforts after SSI benchmarking has been done. For instance, after the 2021 SSI was launched and commented on the lack of evidence on how commitments translate into activities on the ground related to ocean equity, the Thai Union Group published a story on how the company is "working with suppliers to drive continuous improvement in the seafood sector" (Murai 2022). Additionally, Aviva, a global multinational insurance company and asset manager, has testified that the SSI has provided them with valuable insights that allow them to better engage with existing and prospective seafood investments by giving useful context and best practice for their work with FAIRR's (Farm Animal Investment Risk and Return) sustainable aquaculture engagements with large aquaculture companies. According to an ESG analyst at Aviva, "[b]y being aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and providing a comprehensive assessment of 30 of the largest seafood companies, the Seafood Stewardship Index provides us with valuable insights that allow us to better engage with existing and prospective seafood investments" (WBA 2023). Based on these instances, the participation of businesses and/or industry in multistakeholder initiatives to uphold human rights, act ethically, and promote decent work is still limited.

With this in mind, seafood and aquaculture businesses in Asia may adopt the model of the WBA's SSI benchmarking, while utilizing the WBA's allies to build an ethically based seafood industry moving forward. Mobilizing allies will allow companies to compete for the greater good, following up the results of the benchmark.

First, in the benchmarking and reporting platform category, businesses may utilize expertise from some of the WBA allies to set an internal monitoring measurement. For instance, the WBA has also partnered with the Business and Human Rights Resource Center (BHRRC) in the UK, which provides wide-ranging expertise on human rights policy and performance for over 10,000 companies in more than 180 countries. The BHRRC is also able to assist with human rights concerns for entities ranging from NGOs and communities to businesses (BHRRC 2020). In the seafood sector specifically, the BHRRC has investigated working conditions in Canada, the PRC, and Australia.

Second, for the cluster of CSOs, companies may gain expertise in ensuring their operation procures from sustainable seafood to promote human rights in businesses. Companies may network with Fish Choice, which was established in 2008 as a technology-first organization that provides information on sustainable seafood that can be purchased by thousands of businesses. Similarly, companies may also approach FishWise, which has been around since 2003 and provides, among other things, services to improve traceability and counter IUU fishing, which is a major source of violation of workers' rights in the seafood industry. In addition to this, FishWise also provides advisory services aimed at identifying and mitigating human rights risks.

Finally, as regards the consultancy/professional services firm category, businesses may network with a social venture called Seafood Legacy, which offers consulting services that allow them to adhere with international standards of sustainable seafood. This includes incorporating social responsibility in businesses' operation, as well as upscaling the sustainable investment and financing for the seafood industry.

Partnering with the proposed aforementioned allies is not exhaustive for seafood businesses in Asia, remembering that the WBA itself has more than 300 allies, and other nonally organizations may prove to have the right expertise for seafood industries. For instance, the Seafood Taskforce in Thailand serves as a multistakeholder alliance to oversee the seafood supply chain that focuses on supervising possible illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) that is closely linked with social issues in the seafood sector (Seafood Taskforce 2014).

The crucial part of identifying the right network to connect with is carefully addressing the components that need to be improved by the seafood industries reflecting the WBA's SSI benchmarking methodology. An accurate identification of the core issue that prevents businesses from upholding social determinants in their operation will determine the extent to which the external stakeholders may support the said businesses. As the issue of safeguarding the social dimension in fisheries and aquaculture will remain a complex factor moving forward, multistakeholder collaboration will certainly be relevant.

## **6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

As previously explained, pushing companies to adopt the methodology from an internationally recognized benchmarking such as the WBA's SSI may incentivize the businesses to jump on the bandwagon in adopting best practices to ensure socially responsible practices in the seafood and aquaculture industry, thus eliminating human rights violations in the sector. Yet, in order to strengthen and incentivize businesses to follow the recommendations made by the WBA's SSI, governments may exercise the following policy recommendations.

First, the nonratifying countries may consider ratifying and implementing the ILO C188, as well as the UN Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA). By ratifying these instruments, countries with major seafood production may have a solid basis from which to force private industries to support their efforts in upholding human rights in seafood industries. Such ratifications may well also be translated at the local governmental level where they closely liaise with vessels from multinational companies. In this regard, the central government may design national regulations following the ratification that can, on the one hand, stipulate that the local government closely investigate possible human violation practice under their jurisdiction, while on the other hand instructing local government to issue a mandatory human rights due diligence (HRDD) performed by businesses operating under their authorities.

Second, contextualizing and localizing the methodology enshrined in the WBA's SSI by national governments may be required. As a number of vessels are closely linked with coastal communities, to which the trafficked workers may come from the poor families who belong to these communities, utilizing the methodology of the WBA's SSI contextually will be pivotal. The result of contextualizing the benchmark may then be produced as readily accessible guidance for businesses to bridge the issue of different understanding of the existing benchmarking tools. This includes providing clear metadata and localized terminology indicators that businesses can follow the guidance and recommendations. For instance, the Ministry of Law and Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia (*Kementerian Hukum dan Hak Asasi Manusia/Kemenkumham*) is currently in the process of designing an Index of Indonesian Human Rights. Moving forward, Indonesia's government may benefit from following some indicators from the WBA's SSI methodology for local seafood businesses to fit in the local government assessment on human rights indicators under the social dimension. In scaling up this adoption, governments may also reward local government with top-performing seafood companies operating in their areas in terms of upholding human rights.

Finally, in addition to the WBA's SSI, governments may want to issue a community scorecard to rate the practices of fishing vessels in their area to inform the rate of subsidies and/or tax relief provided to the businesses. As coastal communities are at the forefront of field operations in the fishing industry, a periodical candid assessment from the locals will incentivize companies to empower and/or build the capacity of these groups. In addition, this will provide a balanced assessment and allow a cross-checking process with the ranking produced by the WBA's SSI.

The aforementioned recommendations are subject to the conditions of respective countries. For instance, in countries where legal enforcement is lacking, the second, third, and fourth recommendations may face hurdles in their implementation as transparency and accountability have become persistent issues domestically – not to mention the fact that countries with rampant bribery and corruption cases will face challenges in implementing the second recommendation. However, these recommendations may be suitable should an open collaboration between different stakeholders be promoted to ensure the accountability of the government. In the end, benchmarking may effectively serve as a tool that provides data-based analysis and offers an evidence-based course of action. Yet, the most pivotal factor will be the support of government and companies to ensure the sustainability of the benchmarking itself.

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