



GFCM High-level conference on MedFish4Ever initiatives:

Transformative actions to address new challenges

3–4 October 2023, Malta

Conclusions

The GFCM High-level conference on MedFish4Ever initiatives, held on 3 and 4 October 2023, was hosted by the Government of Malta and organized by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), together with the European Union. It focused on the progress made since the signing of the 2017 MedFish4Ever Ministerial Declaration and what is still left to be done. High-level officials, fishers, fish farmers, scientists, managers, civil society organizations and other experts came together to survey the state of the region's crucial fisheries and aquaculture sector and agree on transformative new actions towards a sustainable future. Senior government officials from 20 countries were in attendance.

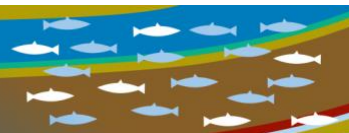
The conference opened with a series of multidisciplinary panels exploring the challenges faced by the Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries and aquaculture sector and presenting potential solutions. The discussions during the second day's high-level segment focused on how to ensure that all goals of the 2017 Medfish4Ever Declaration are fully met and how best to prepare for the future. The conclusions from the event are reported below.

Transformative actions to address new challenges

Marine capture fisheries and aquaculture are key pillars of coastal economies in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, with an annual production of over 2 million tonnes and first sales of close to USD 8 billion. They provide employment for approximately 700 000 people along the value chain and contribute to the food security of millions. The fishing community is an essential part of the Mediterranean's cultural heritage and fabric.

Existing and emerging challenges are preventing both sides of the sector from reaching their full potential. Capture fisheries production is stagnant, showing a slightly declining trend (14 percent decrease since 2017) due to the low biomass of some key stocks and the introduction of management measures to reduce overfishing. Aquaculture production has nearly doubled in the past decade, and it is critical that its continued growth maintains economic, environmental and social sustainability principles.

Overall, the productivity and ecological health of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea are affected by a combination of regional and global factors including climate change, the appearance and expansion of non-indigenous species, chemical and plastic pollution, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities, and overfishing.



Overfishing –58 percent of regional commercial stocks are currently fished outside biologically sustainable limits – prevents fish populations from replenishing themselves and producing their maximum sustainable yield, directly affecting the productivity, sustainability and profitability of the sector.

Meanwhile, IUU fishing is an ongoing scourge with effects on not only commercial species, but also marine ecosystems, livelihoods and general welfare. An ageing workforce, with 52 percent of workers over the age of 40, and gender inequality, compounded by a lack of gender-disaggregated data to illuminate the role of women, further jeopardize the future of the sector.

Aquaculture faces related challenges, and regional production is yet to fulfil its clear potential. A significant increase in responsible investment is required to drive growth and address issues such as suboptimal value chains, water scarcity, human resources capacity, the empowerment of women and young people, and the social acceptability of farmed products.

Fisheries and aquaculture are both hampered by a lack of investment in new technologies and innovations and in the training needed for their effective use. Addressing these issues to ensure a prosperous future for the fisheries and aquaculture workforce requires increased efforts to transform the sector, including through inclusive policies and social protection frameworks.

Adding to these challenges, the Mediterranean has seen an exponential increase in competition for space at sea, including for maritime transport and renewable offshore energy. This trend poses additional threats to fisheries- and aquaculture-related livelihoods and adds pressure on the marine environment.

In addition to the impacts of climate change on marine ecosystems and their services, a range of recent crises – economic, fuel- and health-related – have highlighted the vulnerability of the fishing and aquaculture sector, underlining how vital it is to be well equipped and resilient to deal with such eventualities.

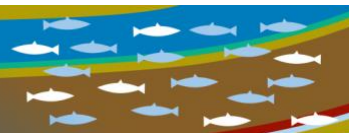
MedFish4Ever: effective governance, sustainable development

The MedFish4Ever Declaration has been a cornerstone in regional fisheries governance since its launch in 2017. It has substantially enhanced the science–policy interface within the GFCM through the efficient implementation of a subregional approach to fisheries management, the launch of dedicated management plans for key species and research programmes (including non-indigenous species), the creation of a high-level Forum on Fisheries Science, and the incorporation of stakeholder views into decision-making, including through a dedicated Small-Scale Fishers’ Forum. A regional regulatory framework for aquaculture has also been created, integrating common principles and fostering stronger national legislations. To consolidate these efforts, an ambitious capacity development programme – MedSea4Fish – has been launched for the Mediterranean.

In an unprecedented acceleration of commitments, eight of the ten current GFCM multiannual management plans were adopted since the launch of MedFish4Ever, along with technical measures regulating fisheries activities and others directed towards the mitigation of fisheries impacts on four different vulnerable species groups.

There has also been a significant increase in the use of spatial management to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems and essential fish habitats, with about 58 percent of the Mediterranean now protected from bottom trawling, including below 1 000 m.

Three GFCM Subregional Technical Units in the Mediterranean have been established, and a new Mediterranean Aquaculture Demonstration Centre has been launched, promoting the efficient implementation of aquaculture activities in the field and the exchange of good practices and technological know-how.



Meanwhile, advances in national and international inspection regimes are boosting monitoring, control and surveillance capacities among GFCM members. The foundations for a culture of compliance were laid through the adoption of a range of legal tools, such as harmonized inspection schemes, sighting procedures and a compliance assessment. Now, it is vital to improve cooperation between administrations and at the GFCM level to reinforce these stronger compliance capacities among all members.

MedFish4Ever has enabled the GFCM to modernize and adopt a new regional approach to address the specificities of the basin, creating a context of cooperation at the national, regional and local levels, as well as promoting dialogue between scientists, stakeholders and national administrations.

The measures adopted have helped to reduce overfishing by 31 percent since 2012*, including by as much as 77 percent for some of the species under management plans (e.g. common sole in the Adriatic Sea), thereby successfully meeting the GFCM mid-term strategy objective of reverting historic negative trends.

The Declaration has also set the basis for the growth of the marine aquaculture sector and reinforced trans-sectoral cooperation between a variety of actors, bridging north–south and east–west divides, as well as fostering a regional sense of accountability and commitment at all levels.

Securing the future: increased efforts required

The remaining years of the MedFish4Ever Declaration’s mandate – through 2026 – must see increased levels of engagement from its signatories, supported by the action plan of the GFCM 2030 Strategy. The GFCM must continue to play its central coordinating role, fostering synergies and commitment at all levels, securing political engagement and accelerating progress, as well as ensuring the full implementation of the recommendations of the second GFCM performance review, carried out in 2021.

In particular, the following needs must be addressed:

- establishing science-based management plans for all key species;
- effectively implementing existing capacity-development programmes to level the playing field in both aquaculture development and fisheries science and management across the region;
- continuing adopting technical and spatial management measures to minimize the impacts of fisheries and aquaculture on the marine ecosystem, including on vulnerable species;
- advancing towards identifying nature-based solutions and designing an ambitious strategy to address climate change and creating future-proof management plans;
- ensuring enhanced compliance with existing regulatory frameworks; and
- supporting fisheries- and aquaculture-related livelihoods and their associated value chains for an equitable, profitable and sustainable sector across the region.

Along with accelerated action to achieve the objectives of the MedFish4Ever Declaration, considerations must be made on how to ensure the sustainability of the progress made within the Declaration and how to address future challenges beyond 2026, which the next MedFish4Ever ministerial conference must have firmly in view.

In this context, the GFCM Forum on Fisheries Science in 2024 will provide valuable indications of areas where increased scientific research is particularly needed. The 2024 Small-Scale Fisheries Summit and the mid-term review of the Regional Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries will provide practical solutions for this vital part of the sector, with the critical involvement of stakeholders at all levels. The Bari +10 Aquaculture Conference will provide an updated analysis of the priorities and ambitions for



aquaculture development, as well as the tools and solutions available for achieving them. These fora should serve as the basis for a foresight exercise to identify the future needs of the sector and to lay the groundwork for the next declaration.

With these elements in place, Mediterranean countries are taking the urgent action needed to ensure that the objectives of MedFish4Ever are met while continuing the journey towards securing a long-term sustainable future for this key sector.

<https://www.fao.org/gfcm/meetings/MedFish4Ever/>

All figures were updated after the MedFish4Ever Conference in order to reflect the most recent statistics on the status and management of fisheries and on the aquaculture sector in the region published in the 2023 special edition of *The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries*.

FAO. 2023. *The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries 2023 – Special edition*. General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8888en>