



Aim

This project aimed to address gaps in our understanding of the social impacts of management changes on fishers, their families and communities. It examines how and why fishers respond and adapt their livelihoods to change and the implications of this for the long-term resilience and sustainability of fishing communities.

Introduction and methodology

Fishing families in the UK (and globally) are experiencing diverse and fast-paced change. Being responsive to change is an inherent characteristic of fishing, with fishers, their households and communities pursuing myriad adaptive strategies to maintain livelihoods and a valued way of life. Understanding the different ways that fishing households are able, and unable, to respond to change, and the factors that influence decision-making around adaptation, is fundamental to wellbeing and building resilience, addressing vulnerability, and supporting innovation in the fishing sector. UK fisheries policy is explicit in its commitment to understanding and supporting fishing communities to adapt to change.

This project reviewed published literature from the UK and geographical regions with comparable fisheries contexts (Europe, Scandinavia and Canada) to distil current understanding of the livelihood adaptation strategies that are employed in commercial fishing and factors influencing those strategies. Based on the literature review a conceptual framework was developed for understanding fisher adaptation decision-making processes, behaviours and social resilience. A small number of interviews were undertaken with commercial fishers to situate findings from the review with the lived experience of fishers in the UK and to test the framework.

Results

The review found that evident in the fisheries literature were different livelihood strategies in response to change. Strategies included coping (short to medium term, day-to-day activities that households adopt to mediate the impact of gradual or sudden change), adaptation (practices aimed at systematically reducing potential harm or taking advantage of opportunities that result in long-term fundamental change, including inter- and intra-sectoral diversification) and, transformation (more radical change such as exiting fishing, either permanently or temporarily). In addition, 'maladaptation' can occur where changes to livelihoods result in undesirable outcomes such as reduced resilience, wellbeing and sustainability. Fishers' responses to change and decision-making in livelihood adaptation were found to be influenced by a wide range of demographic, psycho-social, environmental, economic, socio-cultural and governance factors. The literature highlights that to understand fishers' choices and decision-making processes, multiple and intersecting influencing factors, fishers' goals and the extent to which they have a choice (agency) must be considered. Barriers and enablers to livelihood adaptation were found to span intrinsic, demographic, knowledge, technical, environmental, social, financial, business and political domains. Barriers and enablers can be experienced simultaneously and have a cumulative effect on fishers and influence the extent to which they may be able to cope, adapt or must transform.



Conclusions and recommendations

Social heterogeneity in response decisions and capacities means that fishing policies might unintentionally advantage or disadvantage one group of fishers over another, and hence social factors should be considered in management decision making. Importantly, the degree of agency that an individual has in their decision-making will determine the extent to which they have capacity to cope, adapt or transform, with the ultimate desired outcome of social resilience.

The report provides recommendations for fisheries management to better understand and recognise the diversity of the fishing sector in terms of the differentiation of impacts across different parts of the fleet and to support equitable access and improve the agency of fishers to enhance and sustain the social resilience of fishers, fishing households and communities. It also outlines further research needed to understand fisher decision-making and livelihood strategies, and responses to and impacts of fisheries management measures, suggests three questions sets for inclusion in Defra's Fishing Lives survey.

MMO comments

The conceptual framework developed in this project provides a useful heuristic for understanding adaptation decision-making processes, behaviours and social resilience. The framework and evidence synthesised in the report will support MMO to better consider the impacts and trade-offs of management decisions and the ways that fishers may respond to management change. The work is, however, heavily theoretical and at this stage has limited direct practical application.

Further information

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