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We need to talk about overfishing

By jointly ending harmful fisheries subsidies, China and Europe can help tackle climate change and protect local communities' livelihoods

Although China and the European Union have many differences, they have at least one thing in common: They've both recently announced commitments to addressing climate change. China aims to be carbon neutral by 2060; the EU by 2050.

Laudable goals, to be sure, but 2050 is a long way off. However, the two governments can chip away at one chunk of the problem as early as this year: They can advocate for fuel subsidies to fishing vessels to be prohibited as part of a World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement to end harmful fisheries subsidies. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the WTO's new director-general, has said she hopes WTO members will reach an agreement by the middle of this year.

China and the EU represent 36 per cent of all the harmful fishing subsidies that governments provide to their fishing fleets, according to research published in *Marine Policy* in 2019. And the bulk of their payments are in the form of fuel subsidies, to the tune of $4.16bn — nearly 20 per cent of the $22bn that all governments provide in harmful subsidies annually.

Of course, China and the EU are not the only ones providing enormous fuel subsidies to their fishing fleets: Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the U.S. do so, too. But by taking the relatively small step of advocating for a WTO agreement to prohibit fuel subsidies, China and the EU would signal to the world that they are serious about delivering on their carbon-neutral pledges.

The problem with fishing subsidies

Capacity-enhancing subsidies, such as fuel subsidies, inflame overfishing by artificially lowering the cost of fishing — propping up unsustainable and unprofitable activity. Having depleted fish populations in the coastal

waters of their respective countries, fishers struggle to catch enough fish to sustain their livelihoods, forcing them to look beyond their own waters.

The EU and China serve as prime examples: the proportion of fish populations that are overfished in the bodies of water around the EU range from 38 percent to 87 percent, and China's fisheries are widely considered the most depleted in the world. Buoyed by fuel subsidies, fleets can then travel long distances beyond their depleted national waters and instead fish in the high seas or in other countries' waters.

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Fuel subsidies — which are either direct support to fishing fleets to purchase fuel or indirect support, such as eliminating fuel taxes — are widely recognized as the most environmentally damaging subsidies and the least effective type of support for fishers. Last year, more than 300 Chinese vessels fished in the international waters around the Galapagos Islands, a biodiversity hotspot that's home to many endangered species. And Spain has positioned so-called 'purse seine fleets' — which deploy large walls of netting that often result in the fatal bycatch of non-target species — off the coast of West Africa. This would have not been profitable without subsidies, according to a study published in *Science Advances* in 2018.

Not all fishing-related subsidies are bad. For example, some improve the management of fisheries or protect parts of the ocean where fish breed. These types of beneficial subsidies should remain in place and be strengthened — instead of exacerbating overfishing, governments should put public money toward initiatives that help fishers improve their economies and sustain them long into the future.

Not only does overfishing compromise the health of the ocean and its ability to fight the impacts of climate change, but more vessels on the water for lengthy durations also means more emissions. Each year, fisheries generate more than 179 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions, according to a paper in *Nature Climate Change* that analysed figures from 2011, the most recent year for which data was available.

Global cooperation is the way

Recognising the damage that harmful subsidies cause to the climate and the ocean, governments across the globe, including China and the EU's Member States, agreed in 2015 under the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals — specifically Goal 14.6 — to reduce harmful subsidies by the end of 2020 through a WTO agreement. Although WTO members missed that deadline, they resumed negotiations earlier this year.

The UN Environment Programme's newly released the 'Making Peace With Nature' report, which synthesises recent global environmental assessments, and says that government leaders must end destructive fisheries subsidies, among other actions, in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and create a carbon-neutral world by 2050.

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A potential WTO agreement gives the EU and China the chance to join forces and fulfil their promises. It would be inconsistent of them to commit to carbon neutrality on one hand, yet continue to dole out large sums of public money to lower fuel costs — and thus incentivise overfishing and the creation of more emissions — on the other.

Tackling climate change and investing in a resilient ocean go hand in hand; to trigger transformative change, governments need to make bold decisions. Environmental issues such as these are not confined by geographic borders — it is only through global cooperation that countries can make progress at a scale that matches the challenges they face.

Striking a WTO deal that prohibits fuel subsidies and other payments that drive overfishing is a tangible step that would help China and the EU make good on their commitments to reduce emissions, while also boosting ocean health and the livelihoods of coastal communities on their shores and around the world.



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