

The importance of global transshipment guidelines: An opportunity for Pacific Island countries

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A tuna longline vessel transshipping at sea. (image: ©Jiri Rezac)

Introduction

In 2018, 66% of tuna landings in the world, worth USD 26.2 billion (end value), came from the Pacific (McKinney et al. 2020). For many of these fisheries, transshipments continue to be an important component of the seafood supply chain. The practice of transshipment, however, is also widely recognised as one of the main ways that illegally caught fish finds their way to market. Within the western and central Pacific Ocean, it has been estimated that USD 142 million per year of tuna and tuna-like products are involved in illegal, at-sea transshipments (MRAG 2016). There is a clear need for improving and harmonising the monitoring and control of transshipment in the world's high-seas fisheries, and Pacific Island countries will have the opportunity in early 2021 to support and participate in a Food

and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) process that will develop a set of these global guidelines.

Regulation in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

The convention establishing the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) defines transshipment as “the unloading of all or any of the fish onboard a fishing vessel to another fishing vessel either at sea or in port” (WCPFC Convention Article 1). Article 29 (1) of the WCPFC Convention states, as a general rule, “In order to support efforts to ensure accurate reporting of catches, the members of the Commission shall encourage their fishing vessels, to the extent practicable, to conduct transshipment

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in port.” Recognising this point, the Commission adopted Conservation and Management Measure (CMM) 2009-06, which states that there shall be no transshipment on the high seas except where a CCM² has determined, in accordance with certain guidelines (para 37) that it is impracticable for certain vessels to operate without being able to transship on the high seas and has advised the Commission of such (see para 34 of CMM 2009-06).

The current situation in the western and central Pacific Ocean

In recent years, the number of reported at-sea transshipments within the WCPFC Convention Area increased by 166%; from 554 transfers in 2014 to 1472 in 2019 (WCPFC 2020a). Furthermore, as of 13 November 2020, 62% of vessels on the Record of Fishing Vessels (WCPFC 2020b) were authorised to transship in the high seas (WCPFC 2020b). High seas transshipments are now the norm, rather than the exception.

Monitoring and management issues

Although the monitoring of in-port transshipments is generally good in the Pacific Islands region, a Pew-sponsored study (MRAG 2019) showed that there are a number of problems in the monitoring of at-sea transshipments.

- There is limited use of standardised forms or manuals, and only a fraction of data collected by observers has made its way to the WCPFC. The absence of observer information on catch volumes and species composition, limits the capacity of the WCPFC Secretariat to independently verify information submitted in transshipment declarations.
- There is no agreement around guidelines for “impracticability”. A key component of CMM 2009-06 is a prohibition on vessels transshipping on the high seas unless “it is impracticable for certain vessels ... to operate without being able to transship on the high seas...” Despite a few attempts, no guidelines have yet defined “impracticability”.
- There has been no serious attempt to encourage vessels to transship in port. In the spirit of encouraging vessels to transship in port, paragraph 35 (v) of the CMM requires CCMs of both offloading and receiving vessels involved in high seas transshipments to “submit to the Commission a plan detailing what steps it is taking to encourage transshipment to occur in port in the future”. Apparently, no WCPFC member has ever submitted a plan.

The 2020 WCPFC Annual Transshipment Report notes that “the majority of CCMs who were involved in high seas transshipment in 2019 seemed to affirm that all high seas transshipments conducted in 2019 were 100% covered by observers.” Yet, the report does not include any information about observer reports received by the Secretariat (Pew 2020). In 2017, the Secretariat reported at the 13th WCPFC Technical and Compliance Committee meeting that it had received only one observer report for the 955 high-seas transshipping events that were reported to have occurred in the Convention Area in 2016 (WCPFC 2017). The WCPFC Secretariat clarified that, to date, the Commission has not prescribed the minimum data fields that Regional Observer Programme (ROP) observers are expected to collect when they monitor high-seas transshipment activities. Consequently, the data and information that are collected by ROP observers deployed on vessels involved in high-seas transshipments, are not currently required to be provided to the Secretariat, but may be available to the national or subregional observer programme that deployed the observer on the vessel.

The way ahead

Improving and harmonising management and oversight of transshipments should be a priority of regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs), including the WCPFC. There is not, however, a standardised approach to ensure uniform and effective regulations of these high-seas operations across the world’s ocean basins. Recognising this need, FAO has begun the process to develop overarching guidelines for consistent transshipment reporting and monitoring globally and will take further steps in the upcoming months.

At the 2018 meeting of FAO’s Committee on Fisheries (COFI), members “called for in-depth studies to support the development of guidelines on [transshipment] best practices...” In response, FAO prepared a background study that collated results from surveys of states, RFMOs, relevant non-governmental organisations and industry stakeholders on global transshipment practices. This report also presented two case studies – transshipment in tuna and squid fisheries – and discussed their operations, economic rationale, and regulations.

The study identified five key types of transshipments, summarised in the FAO Transshipment Pamphlet,³ and provides key recommendations for non-binding global guidelines, such as the use of International Monetary Organization numbers, vessel monitoring system, vessel lists that ensure vessels are flagged to relevant RFMO members where transshipments occur, and standardised transshipment declaration forms that include all species transshipped. The study

² CCM = Commission Members, Cooperating NonMembers, and Participating Territories of the WCPFC

³ <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb0987en>

also includes a recommendation to implement formal information-sharing procedures among relevant flag, coastal and port states and RFMO secretariats.

The findings of the report were discussed throughout the month of December 2020 and will also be in January 2021 through a series of webinars hosted by FAO. The webinars gave fisheries representatives from around the world, including the Pacific, an opportunity to properly discuss the report. At these webinars, FAO presented key findings from their report and highlighted elements to be considered in the development of global transshipment guidelines such as requirements regarding notification, authorisation and reporting.

Once finalised, these voluntary guidelines will help support the development of clear and effective transshipment monitoring and reporting at all the RFMOs, including the WCPFC. As FAO member states, Pacific Island countries have the opportunity to share their vast knowledge and experience with transshipment, and play a key role in the development of global guidelines at the upcoming COFI meeting. As members prepare for the COFI 34 virtual meeting in February (2021), Pacific Island countries that want to get involved can:

- contact their national FAO focal points to ensure they are registered for the meeting;
- formally intervene and lead discussions at the meeting to ensure FAO develops transshipment guidelines that support consistent oversight; and
- unite to vocally support FAO's work to draft transshipment global guidelines at the COFI meeting.

Through the FAO process, Pacific Island countries can help the global fisheries community take a large step towards improving the overall transparency and stability of the fisheries they manage, safeguarding the many species that fishers and communities depend on.

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