Support to Fuel Consumption for Fisheries

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Tom Moerenhout

Introduction

Support to fisheries comes in many forms and at many stages in the value chain. It can include measures such as grants, tax breaks, and access to below-cost goods and services, all of which can affect fishers’ incomes, resource management, cessation of fishing activities, infrastructure, vessel modernization, and research and development. Many governments also provide targeted support to fishing activities in vulnerable regions and communities. Studies find that many such subsidies lead to unsustainable levels of production. For example, Sala et al. (2018) estimate that, without subsidies, as much as 54 per cent of current high-seas fishing grounds would be unprofitable.

Governments also provide support to fuel consumption for fishers. This is not surprising, because fuel is an important cost component of fishing activities. Globally, roughly 30–50 per cent of fishing expenditure is on fuel, with fleets in developing countries often more fuel-intensive than their counterparts in developed countries (Parker & Tyedmers, 2015). Nonetheless, government subsidies to fuel are prevalent in both developing and developed countries.

Because fuel costs are an important part of overall production costs, fuel support policies affect the marginal cost of fishing. Fuel subsidies might also be used to counter oil price volatility, which makes the production cost of fishing, and consequential income for fishers, uncertain. The oil price boom up until 2014 was much more rapid than the growth in fish prices and, thus, in the absence of fuel price support, would have had negative impacts on the income of fishers (Parker & Tyedmers, 2015). While safeguarding the profitability and competitiveness of fishers through such support is an important policy objective for many governments, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in a review of empirical and economic studies of fisheries subsidies, finds that support to variable inputs such as fuel is most likely to increase fishing activities and least likely to ultimately support fishers’ income (OECD, 2017; see also Martini & Innes, 2018).

In an effort to curb the use of subsidies that lead to overfishing and overcapacity, members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) are currently negotiating new rules to limit subsidies to the fisheries sector. How to tackle fuel subsidies is a particularly difficult issue in WTO negotiations.

1 The author would like to thank the two external reviewers of this brief, Charles Julien (White and Case LLP) and Roger Martini (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), for their useful comments.
Some proposals would include fuel subsidies (with different degrees of scope), while others propose to exclude some forms of support, like “fuel de-taxation schemes.” This issue brief aims to provide an up-to-date evidence base for these discussions by collecting the information available on fuel support to fishing from WTO subsidy notifications, WTO Trade Policy Reviews and the OECD’s fisheries support database.

Types of Fuel Support for Fisheries

The OECD Fisheries Support Estimate (FSE) database and WTO subsidy notifications cover some of the same forms of support, but also differ in important ways. WTO members are required to notify support that (i) meets the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (ASCM) definition of a subsidy and (ii) is “specific,” meaning specifically provided (in law or in fact) to an enterprise, an industry, or a group of enterprises or industries (ASCM Article 25.2; Van den Bossche & Zdouc 2017). Many notifications, however, explicitly state that they are made without prejudice to the measures’ legal status under the ASCM.

The OECD FSE database includes fuel support in the form of budgetary transfers, such as grants, as well as non-budgetary transfers, such as fuel tax reductions or exemptions, in as far as governments consider that those reductions and exemptions are targeted to fisheries but without prejudice to whether these support measures are subsidies or not (Martini, 2012). In order to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible, this note looks at both WTO subsidy notifications and fuel support recorded in the OECD FSE database, while respecting the differences between the two kinds of information.

Both budgetary and non-budgetary transfers share the same goal of reducing fuel costs for fishers. Contrary to direct grants or price support, cross-country comparisons of tax measures are difficult, since there is no single comparator (i.e., no single cross-country benchmark of how fuel “should” be taxed). Rather, tax measures within a jurisdiction are compared with a standard tax rate for other consumers within that same jurisdiction. Tax measures are thus about differential treatment of one sector compared to another. Figure 1 illustrates the way that fuel tax concessions are often derived; a national pre-tax price for fuel is based on the international price plus transport costs and any tariffs applicable, to which governments often add excise and value-added taxes (VAT). Different industries (fisheries and others) may be exempted from some or all of the excise taxes and VAT.

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2 The latest compilation of negotiating proposals is available in WTO (2018).
3 Estimates are current to June 2019.
WTO notifications and the information available in the OECD FSE database likely do not cover every form of regulation that affects the price of fuel purchased by fishers. If a government provides a fuel price benefit to a wide number of economic sectors—only one of which is fisheries—and that government does not consider that it meets the “specificity” requirement, it will not notify it to the WTO. WTO members have tended to adopt a very restrictive definition of the “specificity” concept, which partially explains why notifications of subsidies in general, and fuel subsidies in particular, have been limited. Similarly, when countries implement universal pricing policies that price fuel at below international market rates (or below production costs for producing countries) for several types of consumers, this type of universal support is often not accounted for in discussions of support to fisheries.

Besides direct support measures such as direct grants and fuel tax concessions, there are some indirect support measures that could incentivize fuel purchases. First, support for operational expenditure can constitute a hidden fuel subsidy given the generally high percentage of fuel costs relative to total operating costs in the fishing sector. Second, certain transportation cost support programs give incentives for transporting fish from the harbour to production sites or from places with excess supply to markets with excess demand. Such a transportation cost subsidy might in some circumstances constitute fuel consumption support since the distance travelled by vessels is directly linked with the amount of fuel consumed. And third, some ASCM notifications and Trade Policy Reviews (see tables 2 and 3) note the existence of development support programs for fisheries in vulnerable regions but fail to specify what that support is aimed at. As with general support to operational costs, this support might include support to fuel, especially since vulnerable regions are often more remote and more remote regions often pay higher fuel prices. Higher transparency on vulnerable regions’ support measures could help policy-makers to understand what costs this support targets and thus the potential impacts of such support.
Notification and Data Availability

This review assessed fuel tax concessions and direct budgetary support for fuel among 29 OECD members and 14 non-OECD economies (those in the OECD FSE database and the four G20 economies not listed in the OECD database: India, Russia, Saudi Arabia and South Africa). This brief relies on three data sources:

1. The OECD FSE database: These estimates are constructed by analyzing various support schemes from the bottom up. These reports include fuel tax concessions and price support that reporting governments consider to be targeting the fisheries sector (OECD 2018, 2019).

2. WTO members’ ASCM notifications: This review relies on the latest available full notification from countries under the ASCM to the end of June 2019.


Table 1. WTO members reviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OECD economies</th>
<th>Non-OECD economies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Denmark,</td>
<td>Argentina, Brazil, China, Chinese Taipei,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece,</td>
<td>Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Indonesia, Malaysia,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea,</td>
<td>Peru, Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands, New</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Spain,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support to Fuel for Fisheries

This review finds that fuel support policies for fisheries are prevalent in both OECD and non-OECD WTO member countries. While most countries use tax concessions, some also provide direct market price support in the form of grants to fishers. Most fuel tax concessions and direct support in both OECD and non-OECD WTO member countries are given regardless of vessel length, area of fishing or fishing behaviour.

Among OECD economies, nine out of 29 currently appear to use fuel tax concessions that target fishers, and one economy uses market price support (i.e., subsidizing the price of diesel or gasoline).
often via the reimbursement of fishers) for fuel used by fishers (see Table 2). The nine economies using fuel tax concessions had combined support of about USD 306.8 million in 2017, the latest year for which data is available. Combining this with the market price support to the value of USD 24 million in Mexico, OECD economies provided total fuel support for fisheries of about USD 330.8 million (OECD, 2019).

Of the 14 surveyed non-OECD economies, four used fuel tax concessions and four used direct price support in 2017 (see Table 3). Tax exemptions accounted for USD 227 million and direct price support for USD 2.030 billion, so the total amount of fuel support to fisheries amounted to about USD 2.257 billion. These numbers appear very large in comparison to OECD economies, but this is mainly the result of support provided in China and Indonesia, two very large fishing countries. China’s direct fuel support for fisheries amounts to about USD 2 billion, the largest support measure in the OECD FSE database. Indonesia’s fuel tax exemptions reach USD 133 million. The third largest subsidies were found in India, where states allocated a total of USD 95 million (OECD, 2019). These numbers exclude the Philippines’ fuel tax exemption for fishing in high seas, as there was no quantitative estimate available.

The evidence from the OECD FSE database bears out the importance of safeguarding the profitability and competitiveness of fishers as a policy objective, independent of the form of the subsidy. In Brazil, the direct price support grant operates much like a fuel tax concession. Brazil equalizes the price with the international market price for diesel to increase the competitiveness of national fishing. There is thus no provision of fuel below-market costs, but rather a reimbursement of fishers that qualify and ask for its equalization. This benefits fishers in comparison with other sectors in the Brazilian economy but does not provide for a lower price in comparison with international market prices. The Costa Rican scheme operates in the same way, except that fishers receive fuel directly at the import price (adjusted for distribution costs).

### Table 2. Tax concessions and direct budgetary transfers for fuel for fishers in OECD member countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OECD</th>
<th>OECD FSE</th>
<th>ASCM notifications (latest)</th>
<th>Trade Policy Reviews (latest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Regional fuel tax concession for authorized off-road commercial purposes (2017)</td>
<td>Regional fuel tax concession (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 38 million (2017)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 418,000 (2017)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>OECD FSE</td>
<td>ASCM notifications (latest)</td>
<td>Trade Policy Reviews (latest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 43 million (2008) – discontinued</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 43 million (2014)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 345,000 (2016)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 79 million (2017)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 57,000 (2017)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 32 million (2017)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 48 million (2017)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions: USD 58 million (2008) – discontinued</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dates in brackets represent the year of the estimate in the case of OECD FSE data, and the year of notification and report in the case of ASCM and Trade Policy Reviews, respectively. Sources for the OECD inventories, ASCM notifications and Trade Policy Review reports are provided in Annex 2.
Table 3. Tax concessions and direct budgetary transfers for fuel for fishers in non-OECD economies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-OECD</th>
<th>OECD FSE</th>
<th>ASCM notifications (latest)</th>
<th>Trade Policy Reviews (latest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Direct price support: USD 2 billion (2016)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Taipei</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Direct price support (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Fuel tax concessions (USD 88.2 million) and direct support (USD 6.61 million) for a total of USD 94.81 million (2019)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Direct price support: USD 17 million (2016)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Direct price support (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Tax rebate on fuel for fishing in high seas (2017)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dates in brackets represent the year of the estimate in the case of OECD FSE data, and the year of notification and report in the case of ASCM and Trade Policy Reviews, respectively. Sources for the OECD inventories, ASCM notifications and Trade Policy Review reports are provided in Annex 2.
Transparency Challenges

Few of the tax concessions reported to, or estimated by, the OECD were reported by WTO members in their ASCM notifications. Only five members notified fuel subsidies for fishers in their latest notifications: (1) India provided a comprehensive overview of fisheries subsidies in various states, including with monetary estimates; (2) Canada reported a fuel subsidy for the region of Yukon; (3) Mexico reported direct price support for marine diesel and coastal gasoline; (4) Brazil reported its direct price subsidy for diesel; (5) the Philippines reported a tax rebate on fuel for fishing in high seas. Only a few more forms of fuel support were discussed by the Trade Policy Review Body. Even given the more restricted scope of the WTO notification obligation, the disparity hints at a real lack of data within the WTO on fuel subsidies to fisheries.

In addition to a general lack of notification, regional fuel support policies likely lack clarity. Canada and India were the only members reporting regional fuel tax exemptions for fishers. In its notification, Canada explained that this subsidy was not specific but a part of a larger subsidy for off-road commercial purposes. Russia also notified subsidy programs for the development of fisheries industries in particular regions. These programs included subsidies granted to fishing organizations for the partial compensation of costs, but the notification does not detail which operating costs are covered.

Discussion in the 2017 Trade Policy Review of Canada mentions that some provincial governments within Canada grant fuel tax exemptions to fishers but does not provide further information. The Trade Policy Review Body also noted the existence of exemptions on VAT for fishers and other sectors in some Chilean municipalities, but discussion did not go into whether this was linked to fuel purchases. Similarly, it noted that some tax policy measures related to fisheries exist within Indian states but did not dig into whether such state measures provide support to fuel for fisheries. In its 2019 ASCM notification, however, India provided a comprehensive overview of fuel subsidies. Other than this, there were no reports in Trade Policy Reviews of regional fuel support policies for fishers.

Finally, there are still other schemes for support to fishers that may or may not result in fuel support. Much like the Russian regional programs, Korea mentioned in its latest 2017 ASCM notification that it had specific subsidies (loans) for the general support for fishing activities. Finally, the OECD reported Norwegian transportation support that was aimed at reducing cost disadvantages caused by geographical or structural conditions. This support reached USD 4 million in 2017 and was aimed at securing supplies to the processing industry in vulnerable regions.

Conclusion

Research indicates that fuel support is among the largest forms of support to fisheries. According to Sumaila et al. (2019), fuel subsidies constituted 22 per cent of total fisheries subsidies in 2018, followed by subsidies for management at 19 per cent. In absolute terms, their total fisheries subsidy estimate for 2018 reached USD 35.4 billion, of which USD 7.7 billion was allocated to fuel subsidies. Of that, about USD 5.9 billion in subsidies was granted in developing countries. Another estimate by Martini (2012) placed the value of fuel tax concessions in OECD countries at around USD 2 billion in 2008.
We found USD 2.59 billion in fuel tax concessions and direct price support grants reported in the OECD fisheries support estimates and ASCM notifications covering the years 2014 to 2017. While these years had relatively low oil prices compared to previous years—which would result in lower totals, as support is usually provided as a proportion of the price of fuel—our total is still far below Sumaila et al.’s (2019), whose estimates are for 2018. At around USD 65 per barrel, the average oil price in 2018 was not that much higher than the 2017 price of USD 51 per barrel to explain the difference. These observations suggest that many fuel subsidies are still missing, from WTO notifications in particular.

We can also conclude that, of what is known, both OECD and non-OECD countries allocate fuel support for fishers. Nine out of 29 OECD economies and four out of 14 non-OECD economies appear to use fuel tax concessions targeting fishers. In addition, one OECD economy and four non-OECD economies use forms of direct price support for fuel used by fishers. Given other estimates, it seems likely that this is a conservative estimate and that fuel subsidies to fishers are pervasive in other countries as well. A consolidated effort to bring more transparency to the debate around support for fisheries is thus needed.

The push for transparency should go without immediate judgment on policy objectives. Some of these taxation and pricing policies are not merely intended to provide a competitive advantage to national or regional fisheries sectors but are also used to safeguard fishers’ ability to operate, including by stabilizing the price of fuel given the increased volatility in international oil markets. This is meant to protect fishers’ incomes. However, it has been suggested that this policy objective is not best met by fuel support policies. Fuel subsidies are administratively easy but can also be particularly expensive, both in terms of their monetary cost and the unintended environmental, social and economic consequences they can have. By encouraging unsustainable levels of fishing, they can ultimately jeopardize the stated policy objectives they are meant to support.

In moving this issue forward, governments could consider how lessons from the reform of fossil fuel consumption subsidies could be applied to fisheries. In fossil fuel subsidy reform, the real question is how to rapidly develop systems of social protection that are more targeted, effectively achieve policy objectives and are less prone to negative externalities. Establishing pathways for the reform of fuel subsidies to fishing will require careful policy work in different national contexts. Establishing global disciplines on fishing subsidies that help to motivate and incentivize this domestic reform could also help. These would be aided significantly by a more accurate global picture of the government support provided to fuel for fishing.
References


Annex 1: OECD Inventories

OECD members


**Non-OECD members**


**ASCM Notifications (OECD members)**

*Note: All ASCM Notifications can be found at [https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/FE_Search/FE_S_S001.aspx](https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/FE_Search/FE_S_S001.aspx).*


Chile. (2017). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/315/CHL.


Iceland. (2017). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/155/ISL, G/SCM/N/186/ISL, G/SCM/N/220/ISL, G/SCM/N/253/ISL, G/SCM/N/284/ISL.

Japan. (2019). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/343/JPN.


USA. (2018). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/315/USA.

**ASCM Notifications (non-OECD members)**

Argentina. (2019). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/343/ARG.


Columbia. (2011). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/186/COL, G/SCM/N/220/COL.


Indonesia. (2012). Notification of laws and regulations under Articles 18.5 and 32.6 of the Agreements. G/ADP/N/1/IDN/3, G/SCM/N/1/IDN/3.


Philippines. (2017). New and full notification pursuant to Article XVI:1 of the GATT 1994 and Article 25 of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. G/SCM/N/38/PHL, G/SCM/N/48/PHL, G/SCM/N/60/PHL, G/SCM/N/71/PHL, G/SCM/N/95/PHL, G/SCM/N/123/PHL, G/SCM/N/155/PHL, G/SCM/N/186/PHL, G/SCM/N/220/PHL, G/SCM/N/253/PHL, G/SCM/N/284/PHL, G/SCM/N/315/PHL.


South Africa. (2005). Notification of laws and regulations under Article 32.6 of the Agreement. G/SCM/N/1/ZAF/2/Add.1.

The Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu. (2018). Notification of laws and regulations under articles 18.5 and 32.6 of the agreements. G/ADP/N/1/TPKM/1/Suppl.2, G/SCM/N/1/TPKM/1/Suppl.2.


**Trade Policy Review Reports (OECD members)**

*Note: All Trade Policy Review reports can be found at [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tpr_e/tpr_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tpr_e/tpr_e.htm)*


Trade Policy Review Reports (non-OECD members)

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