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The Data Behind Somalia's Fisheries

What we know, what we do not know, and why reliable fisheries information matters for the future of the sector

OPONE | Ocean Insights

Executive Summary

Somalia's extensive coastline and access to productive waters have long been central to discussions about the country's Blue Economy. Fisheries are important to coastal livelihoods, food security, trade and economic development. Yet the ability to manage and develop this resource depends on a question that receives less attention: how much does Somalia actually know about the fish in its waters, the activity taking place at sea, and the condition of the resources on which the sector depends?

The answer is more complex than the familiar assertion that Somalia lacks fisheries data. The country has accumulated important fisheries information through government initiatives, scientific research, regional reporting and market assessments. These include historical catch reconstructions, landing-site monitoring, records submitted to the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), and the development of a national Fisheries Information Management System (FIMS).

However, the existence of these sources does not necessarily mean that Somalia has a comprehensive, continuous and independently verifiable picture of its fisheries. Catch records remain different from stock assessments. Market statistics do not establish the biological condition of fish populations. Vessel registration and licensing do not, by themselves, demonstrate where fishing takes place or how much is harvested.

The consequences extend beyond fisheries management. Incomplete information makes it more difficult for government institutions to establish appropriate management measures, for fishing communities to understand changes in local resources, for researchers to assess stock conditions, and for businesses and investors to evaluate the availability and sustainability of fish supplies.

Somalia has begun developing the institutional and technical foundations needed to address these challenges. The Fisheries Data Collection Working Group, the Fisheries Information Management System, the Fisheries Management and Development Law of 2023 and the BADMAAL Sustainable Fisheries Development Project represent important steps. Their long-term value, however, will depend on consistent field data collection, institutional coordination, scientific capacity, transparent reporting and the practical use of information in decision-making.

The central issue is therefore not simply whether Somalia collects fisheries data. It is whether the country can transform the information it already has into a reliable national evidence base for managing, protecting and developing its marine resources.

≈ 1.8×	76,026 t	2,418	US$55M
Reconstructed domestic catch relative to FAO-reported landings, 1950–2015	National catch estimate reported to the IOTC for 2024	Landing-site trips sampled, July 2024 – June 2025	BADMAAL Sustainable Fisheries Development Project

Sources: Cashion et al. (2018); Somalia national reports to the IOTC (2025); World Bank project P178032. See Selected References.

1. The Resource We Have Not Fully Measured

Somalia's marine fisheries are frequently described in terms of their economic potential. But potential is not the same as verified production, and a long coastline is not, by itself, evidence of how much fish can be harvested sustainably.

Understanding a fishery requires information about the species present, their distribution, abundance, reproductive patterns, seasonal movements and responses to fishing pressure. It also requires knowledge of the people, vessels and fishing methods involved in harvesting them.

These are different dimensions of fisheries information, and they answer different questions.

Catch statistics indicate how much fish is recorded as harvested or landed. Fishing-effort data describe the activity required to obtain that catch, including trips, fishing days, vessels and gear. Biological observations help researchers understand species composition, size distributions and reproductive characteristics. Stock assessments combine available biological, catch and effort information to evaluate the condition of fish populations and the sustainability of harvesting.

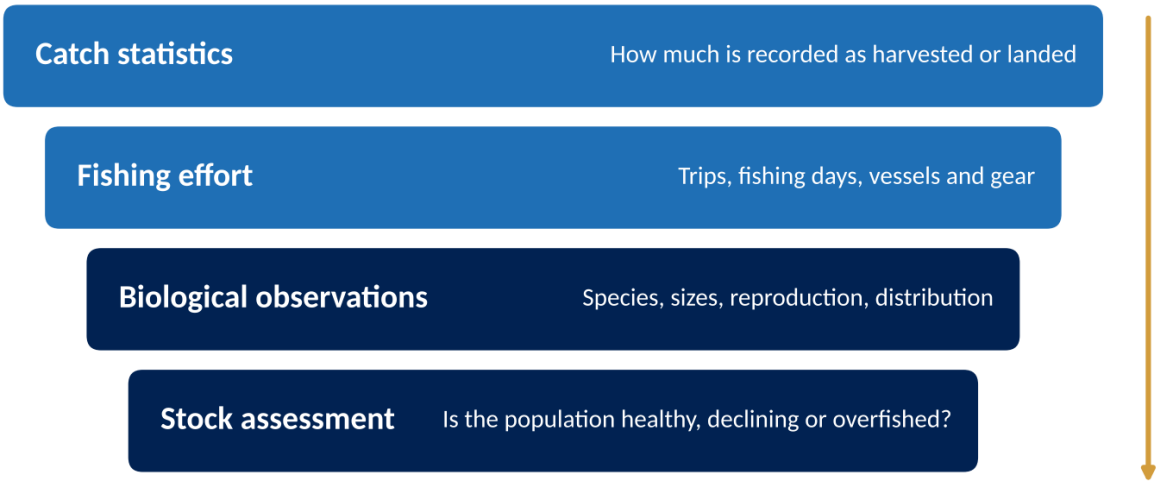


Figure 1. Four layers of fisheries information. Each answers a different question; only the last speaks to the condition of the stock.

A country may therefore collect information on fish landings without knowing whether the underlying stocks are healthy, declining or experiencing excessive fishing pressure.

This distinction matters for Somalia. Without reliable and sufficiently representative evidence, it is difficult to establish how much fishing activity the resource can sustain, whether particular species or locations are under pressure, or how management decisions should respond to changing conditions.

The challenge is not merely to count the fish being landed. It is to understand the resource, the activity affecting it and the long-term consequences of harvesting.

2. What the Existing Evidence Tells Us

Somalia's fisheries information gap should not be confused with an absence of research or data collection. Several important initiatives have already contributed to understanding the sector.

Historical catch reconstruction

One of the most significant academic contributions is the 2018 study by Cashion and colleagues, *Fisheries in Somali waters: Reconstruction of domestic and foreign catches for 1950–2015*, published in *Marine Policy*.

The researchers reconstructed historical domestic and foreign catches using available information and estimates of fishing activity that may not have been reflected in officially reported statistics.

The study estimated that reconstructed domestic catches were nearly 1.8 times the landings reported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on behalf of Somalia over the period examined. It also estimated foreign fishing removals at approximately 1.3 times reconstructed domestic catches.

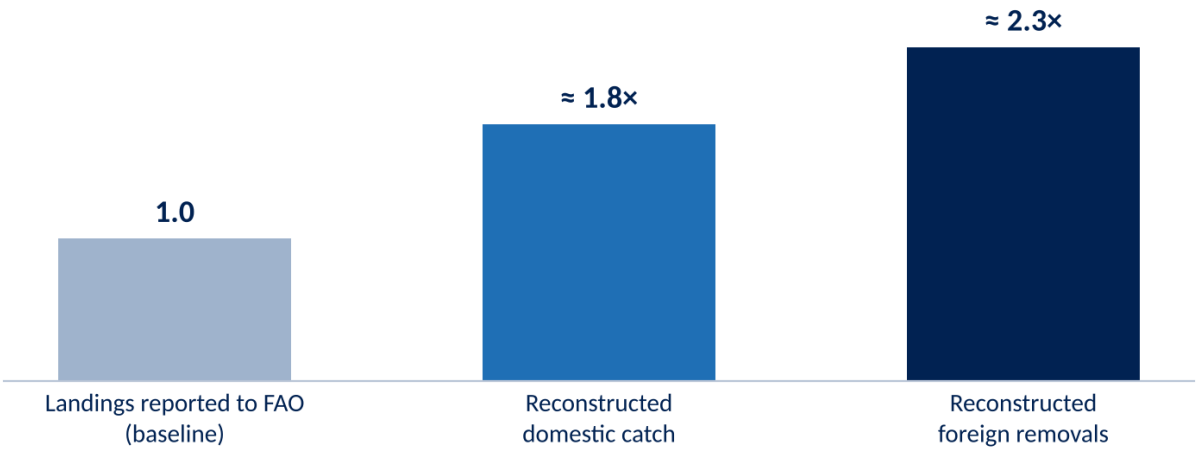


Figure 2. Illustrative index of reconstructed catch relative to FAO-reported landings (= 1.0), 1950–2015. Derived from the ratios reported by Cashion et al. (2018); foreign removals ≈ 1.3 × reconstructed domestic catch. Not a measure of current catch.

The researchers estimated that total removals increased from approximately 16,500 tonnes in 1950 to 127,800 tonnes in 2015.

These findings illustrate an important weakness in fisheries statistics: recorded landings may not capture the full scale of fishing activity, particularly where small-scale, subsistence or unreported fishing is not adequately documented.

However, these figures are historical reconstructions, not measurements of current annual catches. They should not be interpreted as present-day production estimates or as proof of the current condition of individual fish stocks.

Their wider significance is that incomplete reporting can create a substantial difference between the fisheries activity taking place and the activity represented in official statistics.

Progress in catch and effort monitoring

Somalia has also made progress in collecting fisheries information through the Fisheries Data Collection Working Group (FDCWG), established in August 2019.

According to Somalia's 2024 national report to the IOTC, the group's second-phase data collection had operated across seven landing sites. It had recorded 31 unique fish categories, more than 38,000 individual fish records, weight and length measurements for more than 9,000 fish, and fishing-effort information covering more than 1,790 vessel trips.

This represents an important foundation for systematic fisheries monitoring. It demonstrates that structured data collection is possible and that information is already being generated on species, fish measurements and fishing activity.

Nevertheless, the reported coverage should be understood in context. Data from a limited number of landing sites do not automatically represent the full geographical, seasonal and operational diversity of Somalia's fisheries. The 2024 report itself notes that the data were not yet sufficiently comprehensive to extrapolate to nationwide estimates.

Somalia's 2025 national report to the IOTC Scientific Committee shows that monitoring has continued. A landings-based programme at six core landing sites sampled 2,418 trips between July 2024 and June 2025, identified more than 72,000 fish and measured more than 17,500, with roughly 5% observer coverage. The same report gives a national catch estimate of 76,026 tonnes for 2024, compared with 58,322 tonnes for 2023.

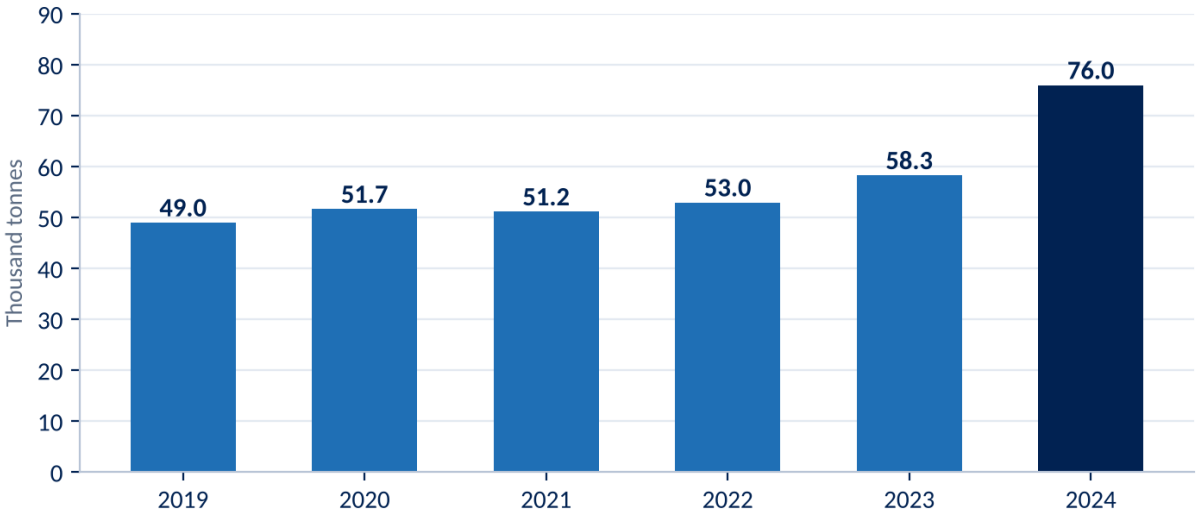


Figure 3. National catch estimates reported to the IOTC Scientific Committee, 2019–2024 (thousand tonnes). Source: Somalia national reports to the IOTC (2024, 2025). The estimates are raised from sampled landings; the rise reflects expanding monitoring and method refinement as well as any real change in catch.

These figures need careful reading. The Ministry itself describes the rising series as a correction to a historically underestimated baseline, and the estimates depend on raising factors and partial district coverage. A rising reported catch is therefore primarily evidence of improving measurement; on its own it says nothing about the condition of fish stocks.

The next challenge is to ensure that these efforts become a sustained and representative national monitoring programme.

The importance of regional fisheries assessments

Somalia's fisheries also include migratory species that are assessed through regional scientific and management arrangements.

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission provides scientific assessments and management information for tuna and tuna-like species. These assessments are important for understanding the status of shared stocks and the wider Indian Ocean fisheries system.

However, regional stock assessments must not be confused with local assessments of fish populations along Somalia's coast. A regional assessment of yellowfin tuna, for example, cannot independently establish the condition of a particular coastal fishery, the amount harvested in Somali waters or the contribution of individual fishing fleets.

Somalia needs to connect regional scientific information with national catch reporting, vessel activity, landing-site monitoring and local biological research.

3. Beyond Catch Statistics: The Science Required for Sustainable Fisheries

Reliable fisheries management requires more than knowing how much fish is landed.

A fishery may record substantial catches while its underlying resource experiences increasing pressure. Equally, a decline in recorded landings does not automatically indicate a decline in fish abundance; it may also reflect changes in fishing effort, market demand, weather conditions, access to fishing grounds or reporting practices.

This is why catch data must be interpreted alongside fishing effort and biological evidence.

For Somalia, several categories of fisheries require stronger species-specific information.

Tuna and tuna-like species: These migratory resources are relevant to regional fisheries management and international markets. National reporting must be sufficiently reliable to distinguish the activity of Somali vessels from foreign fishing and to contribute meaningfully to regional assessments.

Demersal fish: Groupers, snappers, emperors and other coastal species require information on catch composition, size distributions, fishing pressure and habitat relationships. Localized harvesting pressure may not be adequately represented by broad national production estimates.

Small pelagic fish: Sardines and related species can be important for local food supply and coastal markets. Their abundance and availability may vary seasonally, making consistent monitoring particularly important.

High-value invertebrates: Lobster, shrimp and other commercially valuable species require information on species composition, size, reproductive patterns, fishing areas and harvesting pressure. Commercial value alone does not establish the sustainability of a fishery.

A 2019 peer-reviewed study by Glaser and colleagues, *Foreign Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing in Somali Waters Perpetuates Conflict*, highlighted the limitations of available information for assessing many Somali fish stocks. The researchers used data-poor fisheries modelling for selected species groups where conventional stock assessments were not possible. Tuna and billfish were treated separately because regional IOTC assessments were available.

This illustrates the scientific challenge facing Somalia: where data are limited, fisheries managers may have to use alternative assessment approaches, but the uncertainty surrounding those estimates must be made clear.

The priority should be to build a stronger biological evidence base, beginning with commercially important and potentially vulnerable species, while improving the quality and continuity of catch and effort monitoring.

4. Building a National Fisheries Information System

An important development in Somalia's efforts to improve fisheries information is the Fisheries Information Management System (FIMS), announced by FAO in November 2025 in partnership with the Federal Government.

The initiative forms part of the Somalia Sustainable Fisheries Development Project, known as BADMAAL, a US$55 million project financed by the World Bank and the PROBLUE Multi-Donor Trust Fund and implemented through the Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy.

The system is intended to strengthen the collection, storage, management, analysis and reporting of fisheries information, while improving access to data for decision-makers at federal and state levels.

Its development responds to a long-standing institutional challenge: the difficulty of obtaining consistent information from artisanal and industrial fishing activities across Somalia.

FIMS could become an important component of the country's fisheries management infrastructure. Its potential value, however, will depend on how effectively it is implemented and maintained.

A digital platform cannot independently solve weaknesses in field monitoring. It cannot generate reliable statistics if landing-site records are incomplete, species are incorrectly identified or fishing activity is inconsistently reported. Nor can it resolve institutional coordination challenges without clear responsibilities and effective cooperation between the institutions involved.

For FIMS to deliver meaningful results, it must be supported by:

- Trained fisheries officers and data enumerators at landing sites.
- Standardized methods for recording species, catches, vessels and fishing effort.

- Regular biological sampling and quality assurance.
- Consistent reporting across geographical areas and seasons.
- Clear data-sharing arrangements between federal and state institutions.
- Long-term financing for system maintenance and field operations.
- Appropriate access for researchers, policymakers and other authorized users.
- Procedures that translate information into fisheries management decisions.

The success of FIMS should ultimately be measured not by the existence of the platform, but by whether it improves the quality of national fisheries information and changes the decisions made using that information.

5. The Legal and Institutional Foundation

Somalia's Fisheries Management and Development Law No. 008 of 2023 provides an important legal foundation for the management of the sector.

The framework addresses fisheries management, licensing, vessel registration, monitoring and reporting, data management, fisheries management plans and responsibilities involving federal and state institutions.

The World Bank's 2022 Fisheries Policy Note had already identified limited research and data, inadequate monitoring capacity and weak federal–state coordination as important barriers to fisheries development. It emphasized the need for institutional cooperation, information sharing and stronger monitoring, control and surveillance.

These findings point to a critical relationship between information and governance.

Fisheries information is not useful simply because it exists. It must be collected under consistent standards, held by institutions with clear responsibilities, shared where appropriate and used to inform decisions.

The division of responsibilities between federal and state institutions makes this particularly important. Without agreed reporting procedures and interoperable systems, information collected in different jurisdictions may be difficult to compare, consolidate or use for national planning.

Somalia therefore needs more than a technical database. It needs an effective national fisheries information-governance framework that defines who collects information, who validates it, who maintains it, who can access it and how it informs management.

6. The Missing Link Between Fisheries Data and Market Intelligence

The value of fisheries information extends beyond scientific research and public administration. It also determines how effectively businesses can understand and participate in the sector.

In September 2025, the Federal Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy produced a Fish Price Assessment Baseline Report examining market conditions across the Federal Government and Federal Member States.

The assessment covered issues including fish species, quantities traded, prices, product quality, wholesale and retail transactions, export activity, seasonality and the economic roles of people involved in fisheries markets. Its reported tables included information from 673 respondents, and it established Somalia's first national Fish Price Indicator, at US$3.81 per kilogram, with wide differences between states.

This provides an important contribution to understanding the economic side of Somalia's fisheries.

Market information can help businesses understand price differences, seasonal changes, trading conditions and the commercial opportunities available in different locations.

But market information and biological information answer different questions.

A trader may know the price of a particular fish species at a landing site. An exporter may understand the demand for that species in an overseas market. Neither necessarily knows whether the available supply is sustainable, whether it can be maintained throughout the year or whether the catch can be reliably traced to its source.

For fisheries businesses, this creates uncertainty in procurement, processing, cold-chain planning, export development and investment decisions.

Consider a company evaluating the construction of a fish-processing facility. The investment requires more than an estimate of national fisheries potential. It needs credible information about:

- The species available for procurement.
- The quantities landed in relevant locations.
- Seasonal availability and supply consistency.
- The fishing methods and vessels responsible for the catch.
- The legality and traceability of supply.
- The quality and market requirements of the intended products.

Without such information, a business may invest in infrastructure that cannot secure sufficient reliable supply.

This is why fisheries information should be treated as economic infrastructure. It helps reduce uncertainty, improve planning and support responsible private-sector participation.

7. What Better Fisheries Information Means for Different Stakeholders

The value of a national fisheries information system becomes clearer when examined through the decisions different stakeholders must make.

Government institutions

Federal and state authorities need reliable catch, effort and biological information to establish management measures, evaluate fishing pressure, administer licensing, coordinate responsibilities and protect national fisheries resources.

Without a sufficiently comprehensive evidence base, management decisions risk being based on incomplete estimates or assumptions that cannot be independently verified.

The priority is to connect fisheries information with licensing, vessel monitoring, catch reporting, enforcement and fisheries management plans.

Small-scale fishers and cooperatives

Fishing communities need information that reflects the conditions of the fisheries on which their livelihoods depend.

Seasonal availability, changes in species composition, local fishing pressure and access to fishing grounds can all affect fishing income and household food security.

Small-scale fishers should not be treated merely as sources of data. Their knowledge and participation are essential to building accurate local information systems and ensuring that management measures reflect conditions on the water.

Processors, exporters and seafood businesses

Businesses need reliable information about species, quantities, quality, seasonality, traceability and market conditions.

Better information can support procurement planning, processing capacity, product development, seafood quality assurance and export readiness.

For businesses seeking to establish long-term operations, the ability to verify supply is as important as identifying market demand.

Investors and financial institutions

Investors need credible information to evaluate the availability, sustainability and commercial accessibility of fisheries resources.

Uncertain supply forecasts increase the risk of investing in vessels, processing facilities, ice production, cold storage, transport and other fisheries infrastructure.

Improved fisheries information can strengthen investment assessments by making resource and supply-chain assumptions more transparent.

It does not eliminate commercial risk, but it helps investors distinguish between genuine opportunities and projections based on unverified resource potential.

Researchers and universities

Research institutions need access to standardized, consistent and sufficiently detailed datasets to conduct stock assessments, monitor changes in fish populations and develop evidence-based management recommendations.

Strengthening national research capacity is therefore essential. Somalia needs sustained investment in marine science, fisheries biology, data analysis, research infrastructure and collaboration between national and international institutions.

Development and conservation partners

Development partners need credible baselines and measurable indicators to assess whether fisheries programmes are improving resource sustainability, livelihoods and institutional capacity.

Conservation organizations also require evidence on species, habitats, fishing pressure and ecosystem changes to design effective interventions.

A stronger national information system can help move fisheries programmes away from reporting activities alone and toward measuring actual outcomes.

Women in fisheries and coastal communities

Women play important roles in fish processing, trading and other activities across fisheries value chains. Their economic contributions and constraints must be represented in national fisheries information.

Market assessments should capture women's participation, employment, income, access to infrastructure and exposure to market shocks.

If fisheries statistics focus primarily on vessels and catches, they risk overlooking a significant part of the sector's economic and social contribution.

Regional fisheries institutions

Somalia's participation in regional fisheries management depends partly on the quality of its national reporting and scientific cooperation.

Reliable national information helps regional institutions understand shared migratory stocks, improve assessments and coordinate management across the Western Indian Ocean.

Strengthening national data systems therefore has implications beyond Somalia's maritime boundaries.

8. The Cost of Managing What We Cannot Measure

The consequences of weak fisheries information are interconnected.

For government, incomplete evidence can undermine licensing decisions, monitoring and enforcement, fisheries planning and the ability to evaluate the performance of management measures.

For fishing communities, limited information can make it difficult to understand changes in local fisheries, participate meaningfully in management decisions or demonstrate the economic importance of their activities.

For researchers, fragmented datasets and inconsistent sampling limit the ability to establish long-term trends and assess the condition of fish populations.

For businesses, uncertainty over supply volumes, species composition and seasonal availability can increase operating costs and weaken investment decisions.

For development partners, the absence of consistent baselines makes it harder to measure whether interventions are delivering sustainable economic and environmental outcomes.

These costs are not always immediately visible. They appear in the form of poorly informed investment, underdeveloped research, weak resource management, inadequate planning and missed opportunities to create value from fisheries.

The broader implication is that the fisheries information gap is not separate from Somalia's Blue Economy ambitions. It directly affects the country's ability to translate marine resources into sustainable economic activity.

9. A Practical Roadmap for Closing the Information Gap

Somalia does not need to solve every fisheries information challenge at once. It needs a coordinated and realistic approach that builds on existing systems and strengthens the foundations required for reliable national reporting.

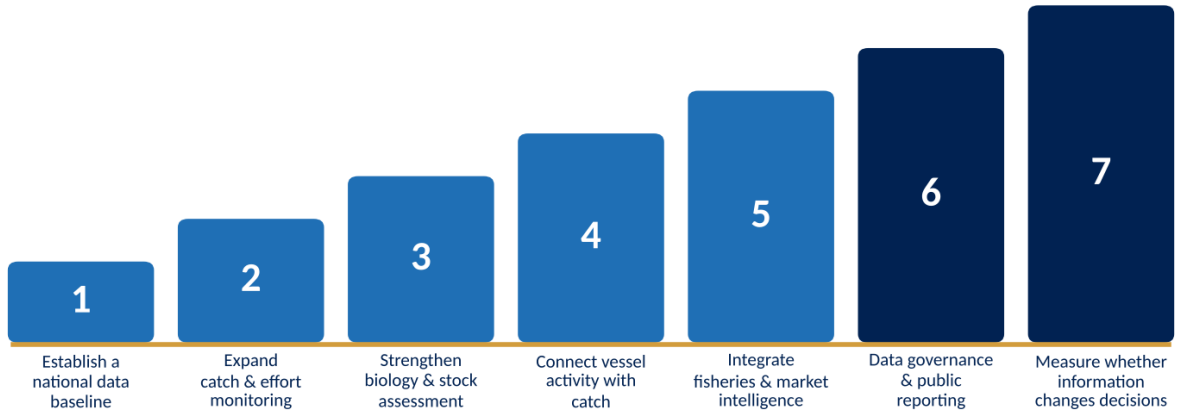


Figure 4. The seven priorities of the roadmap, from understanding what already exists to measuring whether information changes decisions.

Priority 1: Establish a national fisheries data baseline

The first step should be a comprehensive review of the information already available.

This should identify existing catch databases, landing-site monitoring programmes, biological studies, vessel and licensing records, market assessments, research outputs and their institutional custodians.

The review should assess data quality, geographical coverage, time periods, collection methods, accessibility and known limitations.

The objective is to understand what Somalia already knows before investing in duplicative data-collection systems.

Priority 2: Expand representative catch and effort monitoring

Catch and effort monitoring should be strengthened across relevant landing sites and fishing operations.

Standardized reporting should capture species, quantities, fishing methods, vessels, trips, landing locations and seasonal patterns.

Monitoring should be designed to represent different geographical areas and fisheries rather than relying on a limited number of locations.

Small-scale fishing activity requires particular attention because informal and dispersed operations can be difficult to capture through conventional reporting systems.

Priority 3: Strengthen biological research and stock assessment

Somalia should prioritize species-specific research for commercially important and potentially vulnerable fisheries.

This includes biological sampling, species identification, fish measurements, reproductive information and assessment of fishing pressure.

Where information is insufficient for conventional stock assessments, data-poor methods can provide an initial basis for management. Their limitations and uncertainty should be clearly communicated.

Research institutions and universities should be supported to develop the technical capacity required for sustained marine science.

Priority 4: Connect vessel activity with catch information

Vessel registration, licensing, monitoring and catch reporting should become more closely connected.

Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS), Automatic Identification System (AIS) information, landing-site records, inspection reports and catch documentation can contribute to a stronger picture of fishing activity.

However, AIS should not be treated as a complete record of fishing. Not all vessels carry or continuously transmit AIS equipment, and vessel-tracking information needs to be interpreted alongside other monitoring and reporting sources.

The objective should be a more verifiable system in which vessel identity, authorization, fishing activity and reported catch can be cross-checked.

Priority 5: Integrate fisheries and market intelligence

National fisheries information should connect resource and production data with market information.

This would help authorities and businesses understand how species availability, landing volumes, seasonal supply, prices and market destinations relate to one another.

Such integration could support investment planning, market development, seafood traceability and more informed infrastructure decisions.

Priority 6: Establish clear data governance and public reporting

Somalia needs clear institutional responsibilities for data collection, validation, storage, sharing and publication.

Federal and state institutions should agree on common standards and reporting procedures. Researchers should have appropriate access to scientific datasets, while commercially sensitive and personal information should be protected.

Regular publication of fisheries statistics and data-quality assessments would also strengthen transparency and public confidence.

Priority 7: Measure whether information changes decisions

The effectiveness of fisheries information systems should be judged by their contribution to better management and economic decisions.

Relevant indicators could include landing-site monitoring coverage, catch-reporting completeness, species-level information, biological sampling, stock-assessment coverage, vessel reporting compliance, data publication frequency and the use of evidence in fisheries management decisions.

These should be established as measurable national indicators with defined methodologies, responsible institutions and reporting schedules.

10. From Data Collection to Fisheries Intelligence

Somalia's next step should be to move beyond collecting isolated datasets and toward an integrated fisheries intelligence system.

Such a system would connect five essential dimensions:

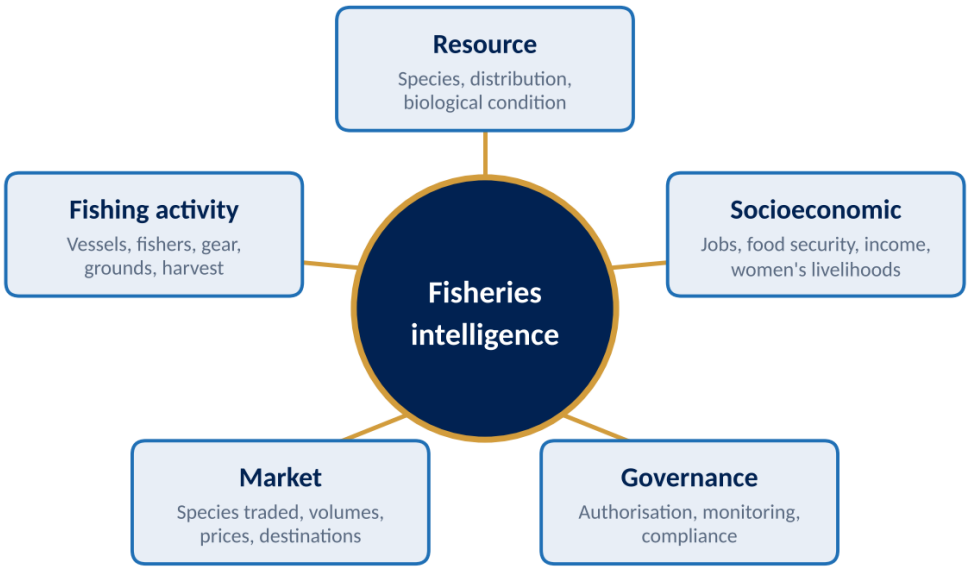


Figure 5. The five dimensions of an integrated fisheries intelligence system.

Resource information: What species exist, where they occur and what is known about their biological condition.

Fishing activity: Which vessels and fishers operate, where fishing takes place, what methods are used and how much is harvested.

Market information: What species are traded, in what quantities, at what prices and through which markets.

Governance information: Which vessels are authorized, how fishing activity is monitored and whether management measures are being followed.

Socioeconomic information: How fisheries support employment, food security, household income, women's livelihoods and coastal development.

Together, these dimensions would provide a more complete understanding of the sector.

The value of integration is practical. When resource information is connected with fishing activity, managers can make better-informed decisions about harvesting pressure. When catch records are connected with market information, businesses can plan supply and investment more effectively. When both are linked to governance and compliance information, authorities can improve accountability and transparency.

This is the difference between having fisheries data and having fisheries intelligence.

Conclusion: The Future of Somalia's Fisheries Depends on What We Know

Somalia's fisheries future will not be determined by marine potential alone. It will also depend on the country's ability to understand, measure and responsibly manage the resources it seeks to develop.

Important foundations already exist. Historical research has exposed weaknesses in reported catches. The Fisheries Data Collection Working Group has demonstrated the feasibility of structured landing-site monitoring. Regional scientific assessments provide information on shared migratory stocks. The Fisheries Information Management System represents an opportunity to strengthen national data infrastructure, while the Fisheries Management and Development Law provides a framework for improved governance.

These developments should be recognized, but they should not be mistaken for a completed national fisheries information system.

The remaining challenge is to make information collection continuous, representative, scientifically credible and institutionally coordinated. It must also be accessible enough to support research, public accountability and responsible commercial development.

For government, this means making decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions. For fishers, it means ensuring their activities and knowledge are represented in fisheries management. For researchers, it means building the scientific foundations required to understand fish populations. For businesses and investors, it means having credible information to assess supply, sustainability and commercial risk.

Somalia does not need more estimates of marine potential without stronger evidence about the resource itself. It needs the capacity to measure what is being caught, understand what remains, identify who is fishing and use that knowledge to make better decisions.

A fishery cannot be sustainably managed, responsibly financed or strategically developed if the country cannot reliably measure what is being caught, where it is being caught, who is catching it and what remains in the water.

For Somalia, building that knowledge is not simply a technical exercise. It is a fundamental investment in the future of its Blue Economy.

About this Maritime Brief

OPONE Maritime Briefs examine the policies, markets, infrastructure, resources and governance shaping Somalia's Blue Economy and the wider Western Indian Ocean. Through evidence-based analysis, OPONE aims to contribute to informed decisions, responsible investment and sustainable ocean-based development.

OPONE — Know the Ocean. Create Value Responsibly.

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Note: Historical catch reconstructions, regional stock assessments, reported monitoring outputs and announced programmes describe different types of evidence. They should not be interpreted as interchangeable measures of current national fish production or stock condition.