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Sustainable Marine Fisheries and Their Contribution to Food Security and Coastal Economic Development

Ahmad Fauzi[1]*, Nur Aisyah Rahman[2]

[1] Department of Fisheries Socio-Economics, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

[2] Department of Marine Resource Management, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: ahmad.fauzi@ui.ac.id

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Abstract

Sustainable marine fisheries play a critical role in ensuring global food security while simultaneously supporting the economic development of coastal communities. Overexploitation of marine resources, climate change, and ineffective governance have posed significant threats to fisheries sustainability, particularly in developing coastal regions. This study aims to examine the contribution of sustainable marine fisheries to food security and coastal economic development through a systematic literature-based and empirical assessment approach. A mixed-methods design was applied, combining secondary data analysis from international organizations and peer-reviewed journals with qualitative insights from coastal fisheries management practices. The findings indicate that sustainably managed marine fisheries significantly enhance protein availability, stabilize livelihoods, and promote inclusive economic growth in coastal areas. Furthermore, fisheries governance frameworks that integrate ecosystem-based management and social equity principles demonstrate higher resilience against environmental and economic shocks. The study concludes that sustainable marine fisheries are not only a food production system but also a strategic economic pillar for coastal development. Strengthening policy coherence, community participation, and adaptive management is essential to maximize the long-term contribution of marine fisheries to food security and coastal economies.

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Introduction

Marine fisheries constitute a fundamental pillar of global food systems due to their critical role in supplying animal protein, essential micronutrients, and livelihoods for millions of coastal households. In many developing and island nations, fish represents a primary source of dietary protein and a culturally embedded food commodity. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, fish accounts for more than 20 percent of animal protein intake in numerous coastal and small island countries, underscoring the strategic importance of fisheries in achieving food security objectives (FAO, 2014). This high level of dependency places marine fisheries at the center of sustainable development agendas, particularly in regions where alternative food and income sources are limited.

Despite their importance, marine fisheries face mounting pressures that threaten their long-term sustainability. Overexploitation of fish stocks, habitat degradation, marine pollution, and the accelerating impacts of climate change have collectively reduced the resilience and productivity of marine ecosystems. Rice and Garcia (2011) emphasize that climate-induced changes in ocean temperature, acidity, and circulation patterns have altered fish distribution and stock dynamics, increasing uncertainty in fisheries production systems. These ecological disruptions directly affect food availability and income stability, particularly for coastal communities whose livelihoods are closely tied to marine resources.

In response to these challenges, the concept of sustainable marine fisheries has evolved into a multidimensional framework that integrates ecological conservation, economic viability, and social equity. Sustainability in fisheries management is no longer confined to maintaining fish stocks at biologically safe levels but encompasses broader socio-economic considerations, including livelihood security, equitable benefit distribution, and social inclusion. Harper et al. (2013) highlight that fisheries sustainability must account for the contributions of diverse actors along the value chain, particularly women involved in post-harvest processing and marketing activities. Ignoring these social dimensions risks undermining the overall effectiveness of fisheries governance and development interventions.

Marine fisheries also play a strategic role in coastal economic development by generating employment, income, and trade opportunities. The sector supports a wide range of economic activities, from capture fisheries and processing to transportation and retail, creating both direct and indirect employment. In many developing countries, small-scale fisheries serve as the economic backbone of coastal communities and contribute significantly to poverty reduction and food access. Kent (1997) argues that small-scale fisheries are particularly important for vulnerable populations because they provide affordable food and relatively accessible livelihood opportunities. However, despite their economic and social value, small-scale fisheries are frequently marginalized in national development planning and policy frameworks.

The expansion of industrial fishing has introduced additional challenges to the sustainability and equity of marine fisheries systems. Large-scale, capital-intensive fishing operations often prioritize export-oriented production and maximize short-term economic returns, sometimes at the expense of local food systems. Faruqhar (2023) notes that industrial fishing can undermine domestic food security by diverting fish supplies away from local markets and limiting access for small-scale fishers. This dynamic creates a paradox in which coastal regions rich in marine resources continue to experience food insecurity and economic vulnerability.

Climate change further exacerbates these structural challenges by intensifying environmental variability and increasing the frequency of extreme events. Changes in fish migration patterns and stock productivity complicate fisheries management and reduce the predictability of fishing outcomes. Rice and Garcia (2011) stress that adaptive and ecosystem-based fisheries management approaches are essential for maintaining ecosystem services and economic benefits under changing climatic conditions. Without such adaptive capacity, the contribution of marine fisheries to food security and coastal economic stability is likely to decline.

In recent years, the blue economy framework has gained prominence as a development paradigm that positions sustainable marine resource use as a driver of economic growth and social well-being. Within this framework, sustainable fisheries are recognized not only as food production systems but also as engines of inclusive economic development. Andaiyani et al. (2022) and Pramesti and Hidayat (2023) argue that integrating fisheries into blue economy strategies can enhance food security while promoting sustainable livelihoods in coastal areas. However, Bennett et al. (2021) caution that blue economy initiatives must be implemented with a strong emphasis on social justice to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities and marginalizing small-scale fishing communities.

Although a substantial body of literature has examined fisheries sustainability from ecological, economic, and governance perspectives, fewer studies have explicitly integrated food security and coastal economic development within a single analytical framework. Existing research often treats these dimensions separately, limiting the ability to capture their interdependencies. This gap is particularly evident in developing maritime nations, where marine fisheries simultaneously fulfill subsistence, commercial, and socio-cultural functions (FAO, 2023). A more integrated perspective is needed to understand how sustainable fisheries management can simultaneously support nutritional outcomes and economic resilience.

Furthermore, policy and governance frameworks for fisheries often struggle to balance competing objectives, such as maximizing economic output, conserving marine ecosystems, and ensuring equitable access to resources. Centralized management approaches may overlook local knowledge and community needs, while purely market-driven strategies risk excluding small-scale actors. Kent (1997) and Harper et al. (2013) emphasize that participatory and inclusive governance mechanisms are critical for achieving sustainable and socially just fisheries systems. Strengthening community involvement in fisheries management can enhance compliance, stewardship, and long-term sustainability.

Against this background, this study seeks to examine the contribution of sustainable marine fisheries to food security and coastal economic development. By synthesizing ecological, socio-economic, and governance perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how sustainability-oriented fisheries management can enhance protein availability, stabilize livelihoods, and promote inclusive economic growth in coastal regions. The analysis focuses on developing coastal contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, where fisheries play a central role in food systems and local economies.

This study contributes to the existing literature by bridging the analytical gap between food security and coastal economic development within the context of sustainable marine fisheries. The findings are expected to offer policy-relevant insights for fisheries governance and development planning, emphasizing the importance of ecosystem-based management, social equity, and adaptive strategies. Ultimately, understanding the multifaceted role of sustainable marine fisheries is essential for designing interventions that ensure long-term food security and resilient coastal economies.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the contribution of sustainable marine fisheries to food security and coastal economic development. The mixed-methods approach was selected to allow a comprehensive analysis that integrates quantitative evidence on fisheries production and economic contribution with qualitative insights into governance practices and sustainability frameworks. This design enables triangulation between numerical trends and contextual interpretations, thereby strengthening analytical rigor and replicability.

Data Sources and Scope

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed academic journals, official reports, and international fisheries databases. Key sources included publications from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and internationally indexed scientific journals. The data covered the period from 1997 to 2025 to capture long-term trends and recent developments in marine fisheries sustainability, food security, and coastal economic performance.

The geographical focus of the analysis was on developing coastal regions, with particular attention to Southeast Asia. This regional emphasis was chosen due to the high dependence of coastal populations

on marine fisheries for both food consumption and livelihoods, as well as the region's exposure to sustainability challenges such as overfishing and climate variability. However, the study also incorporated relevant global perspectives to contextualize regional findings.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data included indicators related to marine fish production, per capita fish consumption, employment in fisheries-related activities, and the economic contribution of fisheries to coastal economies. These data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify patterns, trends, and relative contributions of sustainably managed fisheries systems. The analysis focused on illustrating relationships between fisheries sustainability, food availability, and economic stability rather than establishing causal inference.

Descriptive analysis was considered appropriate given the study's objective to synthesize existing empirical evidence across multiple contexts. Quantitative findings were used to support and contextualize qualitative insights, ensuring consistency between numerical data and interpretive analysis.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were derived from policy documents, governance frameworks, and empirical studies addressing fisheries management practices, social inclusion, and sustainability outcomes. A thematic content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes related to ecosystem-based fisheries management, community participation, livelihood security, and governance effectiveness. This process involved systematic coding of textual data to extract patterns relevant to food security and coastal economic development.

The qualitative analysis emphasized governance arrangements and management approaches that integrate ecological sustainability with socio-economic objectives. Particular attention was given to studies highlighting the role of small-scale fisheries, gender participation, and community-based management systems, as these elements are closely linked to inclusive development outcomes.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by two complementary conceptual frameworks: ecosystem-based fisheries management and the sustainable livelihoods approach. Ecosystem-based fisheries management provided a foundation for assessing how ecological considerations, such as stock health and ecosystem resilience, influence long-term fisheries productivity. The sustainable livelihoods approach was used to evaluate how fisheries contribute to income generation, employment, and food access for coastal communities.

By combining these frameworks, the study assessed sustainability not only in ecological terms but also in relation to economic viability and social equity. This integrated perspective allowed for a balanced evaluation of the role of marine fisheries as both food systems and economic assets.

Validity and Limitations

To enhance analytical validity, data were cross-referenced across multiple reputable sources, and findings were interpreted consistently with established literature. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data strengthened the robustness of the conclusions by reducing reliance on a single type of evidence.

Nevertheless, the study is subject to limitations inherent in secondary data analysis. Variations in data collection methods across sources and regions may affect comparability. Additionally, the study did not involve primary data collection, which may limit the depth of context-specific insights. These limitations were addressed by adopting a cautious interpretive approach and focusing on well-documented and widely cited empirical evidence.

Results and Discussion

Contribution of Sustainable Marine Fisheries to Food Security

The analysis indicates that sustainably managed marine fisheries play a critical role in enhancing food security by ensuring the availability, accessibility, and stability of fish supply. Empirical evidence from FAO reports shows that countries with stronger fisheries management frameworks consistently record higher per capita fish consumption and improved dietary protein intake (FAO, 2014). These findings confirm that sustainability-oriented fisheries governance is directly linked to long-term food availability rather than short-term production gains.

Fish remains a primary source of affordable animal protein in coastal and island regions, particularly in developing countries where alternative protein sources are limited. FAO (2014) and Rabo et al. (2014) demonstrate that marine fisheries contribute not only to caloric intake but also to micronutrient sufficiency, including essential fatty acids and minerals. Sustainable management practices help stabilize fish stocks, reducing fluctuations in supply that can undermine household food security. Table 1 summarizes the empirically documented contribution of marine fisheries to food security indicators based on FAO and related studies.

Table 1. Contribution of Marine Fisheries to Food Security Indicators

Indicator	Empirical Evidence	Source
Share of animal protein intake	>20% in many coastal and island nations	FAO (2014)
Per capita fish consumption	Higher in countries with effective fisheries management	FAO (2014)
Nutritional contribution	Source of protein and essential micronutrients	Rabo et al. (2014)
Food availability stability	Improved under sustainable fisheries governance	Rice & Garcia (2011)

These results support the argument that fisheries sustainability is a prerequisite for maintaining food security over time. Overexploitation and weak governance, by contrast, are associated with declining fish availability and increased vulnerability among coastal populations.

Economic Contribution to Coastal Development

Beyond food security, sustainable marine fisheries generate significant economic benefits for coastal communities. The results indicate that fisheries support employment across the value chain, including harvesting, processing, distribution, and marketing. Harper et al. (2013) highlight that post-harvest activities, many of which involve women, contribute substantially to household income and local economic resilience. These findings emphasize the inclusive economic potential of sustainable fisheries systems.

Small-scale fisheries emerge as particularly important for coastal economic development. Kent (1997) shows that small-scale fisheries provide relatively accessible employment opportunities and function as safety nets for low-income households. When sustainably managed, these fisheries help stabilize incomes and reduce poverty in coastal areas. Conversely, unsustainable exploitation increases income volatility and exacerbates economic insecurity. Table 2 presents a synthesis of empirical findings on the economic contribution of sustainable marine fisheries.

Table 2. Economic Contributions of Sustainable Marine Fisheries

Dimension	Observed Contribution	Source
Employment generation	Jobs in capture, processing, and marketing	Harper et al. (2013)

Dimension	Observed Contribution	Source
Income stability	Higher under sustainable management regimes	Kent (1997)
Gender inclusion	Significant role of women in post-harvest activities	Harper et al. (2013)
Local economic resilience	Strengthened through community-based fisheries	Kent (1997)

These results confirm that sustainability enhances not only ecological outcomes but also economic performance at the local level. Fisheries that balance conservation with livelihood needs are better positioned to support long-term coastal development.

Governance, Sustainability, and Resilience

The findings further demonstrate that governance plays a decisive role in determining the contribution of marine fisheries to food security and economic development. Ecosystem-based fisheries management approaches are associated with higher ecological resilience and reduced risk of stock collapse. Rice and Garcia (2011) argue that such approaches enable fisheries systems to adapt to environmental variability and climate-related stressors, thereby safeguarding both food supply and economic benefits.

Community-based and participatory governance models show more favorable socio-economic outcomes compared to centralized management alone. Kent (1997) notes that local involvement enhances compliance and stewardship, which in turn supports sustainability objectives. These governance arrangements strengthen the link between resource conservation and livelihood security.

The results also reveal structural challenges posed by industrial fishing expansion. Faruqhar (2023) documents that export-oriented industrial fisheries can undermine domestic food security by diverting fish away from local markets. This finding highlights the importance of aligning fisheries governance with food system priorities rather than focusing solely on economic output.

Integration within the Blue Economy Framework

The integration of sustainable marine fisheries into blue economy strategies amplifies their contribution to both food security and coastal economic development. Studies by Andaiyani et al. (2022) and Pramesti and Hidayat (2023) show that when fisheries are embedded within broader sustainability-oriented development frameworks, their economic and nutritional benefits become more resilient and widely distributed.

However, Bennett et al. (2021) caution that blue economy initiatives must explicitly address social equity to avoid marginalizing small-scale fishers. The results of this study reinforce this concern, indicating that sustainability outcomes depend not only on ecological considerations but also on inclusive governance and fair access to resources.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sustainable marine fisheries play a vital role in strengthening food security and supporting coastal economic development, particularly in developing coastal regions. The findings confirm that fisheries managed under sustainability-oriented governance frameworks contribute to stable fish availability, improved nutritional intake, and enhanced livelihood security for coastal communities. By maintaining ecological balance and stock resilience, sustainable fisheries ensure the long-term provision of affordable animal protein and essential micronutrients.

From an economic perspective, sustainable marine fisheries generate employment and income across the fisheries value chain, reinforcing local economic resilience. Small-scale fisheries, in particular, function as critical sources of livelihoods and food access when supported by inclusive and adaptive

management systems. The study further highlights that ecosystem-based and participatory governance approaches strengthen the capacity of fisheries to withstand environmental and economic shocks, including those associated with climate change.

The integration of sustainable fisheries within blue economy strategies amplifies their contribution to development outcomes, provided that social equity and community participation are prioritized. Without such considerations, sustainability initiatives risk reinforcing existing inequalities and undermining local food systems. Overall, the study underscores that sustainable marine fisheries should be recognized not only as a food production sector but also as a strategic economic pillar of coastal development. Strengthening policy coherence, governance effectiveness, and social inclusion is essential to maximize the long-term benefits of marine fisheries for food security and coastal economies.

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