

Research for PECH Committee – Training and social security schemes for fishers State of play and perspectives in the EU



The present study on 'Training and social security schemes for fishers - State of play and perspectives in the EU' was commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Fisheries (PECH). Resulting from a general consensus on the need to support the progress of the social dimension of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), the study aims to present and analyse the current **state of play of the mutual recognition of certificates of competency** of EU fishers and the **functioning of the social security schemes** that cover them. The

standardisation of minimum levels of training among EU fishers - to improve their safety at sea and working conditions - requires an understanding of the training and certification systems currently in place. Furthermore, how these certifications are recognised - or not - among EU Member States, is essential for supporting the free movement and safety of fishers in the EU. This information is currently lacking, and the study aims at narrowing this gap. In a similar way, social security has been a neglected topic in the EU fisheries policy. Nevertheless, social security is a human right, and is considered essential for the fair and efficient functioning of the EU labour markets and welfare systems. This study is expected to break new ground and support understanding of the different social security schemes for fishers applied by Member States.

Mutual recognition of fishers' certificates of competency

The study of the mutual recognition of fisher's certificates is based on the analysis of the functioning of the Professional Qualifications Directive 2005/36/EC and on data collected from the EU Regulated Professions Database. The recognition of professional qualifications of fishers wishing to exercise their profession in another Member State is currently governed by the Professional Qualifications Directive, which is non-specific to the fishing sector.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on "Training and social security schemes for fishers - State of play and perspectives in the EU". The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/4796Dpn>

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Whereas a special regime exists for seafaring professions within the Professional Qualifications Directive, this is not the case for fishing professions. The system is based on a one-directional recognition of qualifications. The process is initiated by the applicants who received their qualifications in their home Member State, with their applications being then evaluated by the competent authority in the host Member State. Based on the Regulated Professions Database, the fishing profession is currently regulated in only 10 Member States, with 46 'regulated professions' identified, giving access to 78 'actual professions' in six categories: skipper/master (24 professions), chief/first mate (6 professions), mate/second hand (8 professions), engineers (28 professions), seaman (10 professions) and various (2 professions). This study has identified that **required levels of qualification vary greatly**, both within and between profession categories and countries, and this diversity in qualification pathways is especially high for skipper professions. Thus, regulated fishing professions differ considerably in scope in terms of required competencies, training and fields of application, which may **significantly hamper mutual recognition of certificates and fishers' mobility** across the EU.

The analysis of the decisions on recognition by host Member States under Directive 2005/36/EC showed that between 1997 and 2022, 1740 decisions for EU fishers' mobility were processed and 1427 attained positive decisions. The profession categories that were most often positively assessed were seaman, skipper, and engineer. From 2014 onwards, the share of engineering professions has increased. These numbers can be used as a proxy reflecting the mobility needs and functioning of the EU recognition system in place. However certain mobility needs may not be reflected in this analysis, for instance when it is expected *a priori* that the application will be negatively assessed based on the home country qualification, the regulated profession, or a combination of both. Over the analysed period, most positive automatic decisions were made by the competent authorities in Spain and Portugal (together accounting for 92% of the decisions), of which an overwhelming majority took place after the ratification by these countries of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F).

Social security schemes for fishers

The study of the social security schemes for EU fishers relied on an extensive literature review, online search and analysis of the data available in the European System of Integrated Social Protection Statistics (ESPROSS). **Social security coverage in the fishing sector depends on the type of fisher's employment relationship and the Member State where the profession is exercised.** Around 125 000 fishers are fully or partially employed in the EU. Most of them are employed in Spain, Italy and Greece, while large fisheries workforces also exist in Portugal, France and Croatia. For social security analysis, employment in the EU fisheries sector can be divided in two segments: (1) fishers working under standard employment relationships independently of the remuneration system (monthly fixed wage or shared remuneration system), and (2) fishers working under non-standard relationships or self-employed, including full-time and part-time fishers, under legal unpaid work and in a system of shared remuneration.

Fishers under **standard employment relationships** are almost exclusively workers in **large-scale fishing**, which involves 24% of EU vessels and 45% of fishers in the EU. **Distant water fishing** involves a very small fraction of the total number of vessels (around 0.4%) and some 4% of crew, with practically all of them working under standard employment relationships. All these fishers work under formal working contracts with a fishing company and are paid with monthly salaries or shared remunerations. Almost 80% of these fishers are full-time employees and their social security schemes – with a few exceptions in some Member States – follow the national standard schemes for workers. This study identified eight Member States where social security for fishers is subject to special laws or regimes and the services are provided by institutions especially in charge of the social

protection of workers at sea. These countries are Belgium, France, Portugal, Germany, Greece, Spain, Ireland and Denmark.

In the **small-scale fisheries** sector, the statuses of **self-employment, part-time, unsalaried and unpaid workers** are prevalent (non-standard relationships). The largest share of the EU fishers (around 50% of the total) work in the small-scale coastal fishing sector. According to STECF 2019, these fishers are in their majority self-employed fishers. The category of self-employed includes fishers that are legally under unpaid work arrangements, who are not obliged to pay any social contribution (as in the case of all small-scale fishers in Cyprus), and are not covered by any social security scheme. For the rest, self-employed fishers' social security schemes follow the schemes for all self-employed workers in EU Member States. As self-employees in the EU, small-scale fishers remain uncovered for some risks including unemployment, sickness and occupational accidents, although voluntary options have been introduced in recent years in some Member States.

Main results

This study provides the first EU-wide analysis of fishers certificates of competency and the system of recognition of these certificates across Member States since the publication of a similar report in the year 2000. After more than 20 years, the present study has identified that according to the EU Regulated Professions Database, 10 Member States have regulated fishing professions encompassing a total of 46 fishing professions that give access to 78 actual professions. Furthermore, this study has also identified that the required levels of qualification vary greatly, both within and between profession categories and countries and especially for skipper professions.

Considering the shortages of labour in certain fishing fleets and the role of the EU to facilitate the free movement of workers across the region and improve safety at sea by setting minimum standards of fishers training, this study considers that **an EU standard for training of fishers would improve the level playing field for mutual recognition of fishers' certificates, promote mobility of fishers, and contribute to the overall attractiveness of the fishing sector**. It also argues that this standard would **reduce the administrative costs and burdens** associated with the current system of recognition, in particular in countries with large fishing fleets. Furthermore, an EU-wide standard could be integrated in the current legislative framework through **specific legislation**, as is the case for the training of EU seafarers. Given the increasing number of **fishers recruited from non-EU countries** over the last years, an EU legislative act would also be an advantage compared to the ratification of the STCW-F.

In regard to social security, this study has identified large differences between Member States that could impact on the generational renewal and the attractiveness of the fishing profession. In eight Member States social security for fishers is governed by dedicated laws or regimes and the services are provided by institutions specifically in charge of the social protection of workers at sea, including fishers. While reliable statistics for the number of small-scale fishers and their employment relationships are not available at EU level, this study can conclude that **small-scale fishers are not covered by any social security schemes**, or belong to the segment of economically dependent self-employment, and **remain uncovered mostly in the branches of unemployment, sickness and working injuries**. This study therefore provides an important initial overview and acts as a baseline for future research. The European Commission could consider increasing Member State requirements for the collection of data regarding the nature and extent of employment relationships and social security, in particular in the small-scale fishing sector.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/4796Dpn>

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