

9 tips on becoming more socially responsible in the seafood sector

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Around 58.5 million people work in fisheries and aquaculture, and 600 million people depend on the seafood sector for their livelihood. Unfortunately, too many of these people are still the victims of human rights violations and poor labour conditions. As an exporter of seafood, it is important that you run your business in a socially responsible way. This means treating your employees properly, ensuring safe and healthy working conditions, avoiding discrimination, taking measures to prevent human trafficking and forced labour, and also maintaining good relations with the local community. Being a socially responsible employer has several advantages for you, including better access to the European market.

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1. Take advantage of business opportunities for socially responsible suppliers

Certification can give you a competitive edge

Buyers and end-consumers in Europe are becoming ever more interested in how companies contribute to society. They want to know whether the products they buy are produced by companies that follow good practices. Taking responsibility for social issues will give your company an advantage over companies that fail to do this.

You can demonstrate that you are making an effort by certifying your products. Certification means transparency, and shows your clients that you apply rigorous standards. Many retailers, especially in northwestern Europe, already require sustainability certifications for seafood products and other forms of certification are expected to become more important in the future.

There are [certification schemes that focus on social issues](#), but many of these do not cover seafood products. It is therefore recommended that you choose a [sustainability certification for seafood products](#) that also includes social components. The most widely recognised label for farmed products among European retailers is the [Aquaculture Stewardship Council \(ASC\)](#). [Best Seafood Practices](#) look at the working conditions on fishing vessels

and at processing plants. They certify companies for the Responsible Fishing Vessel Standard and the Seafood Processing Standard. Another organisation that provides certification for fisheries is [Friend of the Sea](#), which follows the [Wild Sustainable Fishing Requirements Standard](#).

[Pacifical](#), a company that works with tuna fisheries in the Pacific area, promotes social responsibility among their members and partners by encouraging them to apply the Responsible Fishing Vessel Standard (RFVS) on their vessels. Graham Dugdale, the managing director of [Simplot Australia](#), said in an interview about [adopting the RFVS](#) that *“Knowing that fair working and living conditions are undertaken on board these vessels is vital and integral to our business values. We are committed to increasing our visibility of human rights, enhancing practices and remediating any issues that we may find.”*

It is important to realise that certification can be costly and involves a lot of work, so find out for sure whether it will yield enough benefits for your company and workers. Make sure that the premium price for certified products is not lost to intermediaries, and contact certifiers directly. However, if you choose the right certification for your company, the benefits can include increased marketability, higher prices for your products, increased efficiency, confidence, respect and a better reputation.

Local fishers in Bitung Indonesia, who are working with the [International Pole and Line Foundation](#) and [Fish Tales](#), are the first Fair Trade certified wild-capture fishery in the world. These fishers use sustainable fishing methods and observe the standard’s social criteria. By participating in the [Fair Trade](#) programme, the fishing community has improved the welfare of its members by improving education and health. Read more about the [success story of the North Buru handline fishery](#) in Indonesia.

Contented employees will take better care of your business

If you pay your employees fairly and ensure good working conditions, there is a higher chance that they will be satisfied. Satisfied workers perform better. It also makes it easier to attract new workers and to retain existing staff. When employees stay with your company longer, your recruitment and staff training costs will also be lower. This can lead to better results for your company over the long term.

Figure 1: Contented employees mending fishing nets in the United Arab Emirates



Photo by [Shukhrat Umarov](#)

[Regal Springs](#) is an aquaculture company engaged in tilapia production that has been supporting communities in Indonesia, Honduras and Mexico. Their mission – ‘doing well by doing good’ – says it all. They have established their fish farms with the aim of providing jobs to local people. Regal Springs also has a programme called ‘[We Care](#)’, which supports as many as 100,000 people in the villages where they work.

Build your reputation

Finally, by being socially responsible, your business will improve its public image, which in turn may attract loyal customers and encourage investors to provide financing. In some cases, it can also add value to your product. On the other hand, if you pay no regard to human rights or labour laws, you risk a bad reputation, resulting in the loss of clients and a declining income.

With their sustainable approach to aquaculture, [Chicoa Fish farm](#) in Mozambique attracted funding from Dutch investment company [Aqua-Spark](#), a company that invests in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the aquaculture supply chain. They also received a €1.4 million loan from the [IDH Farmfit Fund](#). Chicoa helps local communities by providing juvenile fish, feed and training on growing fish. By supporting fish farmers, they create better economic opportunities and improve food security.

2. Respect fair wages, benefits and working times

It is important that all employees have an employment contract that includes the terms of their employment such as wages, working hours, overtime and remuneration rates.

Living wage

Wages have a direct effect on the everyday life of your employees. It is important to base the wages of your employees on national labour laws. If there are no such national regulations, follow the International Labour Organization's (ILO) [general principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment](#) and [ILO's International Labour Standards](#) on wages.

Also remember that the minimum wage is not always enough to live on. As a responsible employer, you should ensure that you pay your employees a living wage, so that they do not have to live in poverty. For more information on living wages, or to learn about the living wage in your region, visit the website of the [Global Living Wage Coalition](#). You need to pay wages regularly, you should never deduct money as a punishment and you may not pay wages 'in kind'.

Benefits

As well as their wages, employees may receive other benefits such as accommodation, telephone credit, a retirement plan, insurance or education. You can provide benefits to attract and retain employees. If you would like to learn more, look at [Workable's guide on common and best employee benefits](#).

Time off

Healthy workers need time off and it is important to limit the work hours they work and give them a weekly day off and annual holidays, in line with national rules and regulations. If employees choose to work extra hours or to work on their days off or holidays, pay them a higher rate for this. Finally, ensure that working hours do not exceed a certain limit. Breaks can also be mandatory and they help employees be more productive. Read more about the [minimum standards on working hours](#) set by the European Union (EU).

Tips:

Find out about employment laws and regulations in your country. You can start by looking at the [ILO online library](#), which has a collection of national labour laws.

Provide your employees with courses and education opportunities. Courses not only help the individual worker, but the employer too due to increased productivity and skills.

3. Help to end forced labour and child labour

The ILO defines modern slavery as: 'Situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, deception, and/or abuse of power.' The main forms of modern slavery in the workforce are human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage and slavery of children.

Employees on fishing vessels are especially prone to human rights violations such as forced labour and human trafficking, because they are a long way from law enforcement agencies, friends and family. Low-cost migrant

workers, women and children are especially vulnerable to trafficking and forced labour. They are often unskilled and do not speak the local language. Employees on fishing vessels sometimes work at sea for months, or even years on end, in an environment where it is hard for enforcement agencies to check on working conditions. Incidents are also often connected to other illegal activities, such as illegal fishing, document fraud and tax evasion.

The [Environmental Justice Foundation](#) has published [Blood Water](#), a report detailing examples of human rights abuses on fishing vessels. Another of their reports, [The Hidden Cost](#), revealed human rights abuses in Thailand's shrimp farming and processing industry. These reports highlight that problems such as forced labour and physical punishment still exist in the seafood sector.

It is important that your company rejects human trafficking, human rights abuses and violations of labour rights.

Recognise the signs of human trafficking

Human trafficking means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, in order to utilise their labour. There are unregulated agencies that take people from refugee camps to go work on fishing vessels, for example.

It is important to be aware of the signs of human trafficking, such as signs of physical abuse or starvation, no or minimal personal belongings, a fear of the authorities and no access to a passport. Make sure that your employees are legally permitted to work in your country. Check their names and addresses: sharing an address, this can be a sign that they are being exploited. Check that agencies fees are in line with industry standards. Unusually low rates can be a red flag. For information on which countries are involved in human trafficking for the fisheries sector, see the [FishWise](#) report: [Social Responsibility in the Global Seafood Industry](#).

Ensure that employees are working voluntarily

Make sure that your contracts with your employees are clear and have been understood by both parties before signing. Workers are free to leave the workplace and you may never keep their identity documents Or force workers to work to pay off a debt. If you send employees out to sea, it is important to limit their time on the vessel.

In Asia, members of the shrimp and tuna supply chains have formed the [Seafood Task Force](#), which is actively engaged in tackling social, economic and environmental issues in the supply chain. One of its projects is a responsible recruitment programme to combat forced labour, which includes raising awareness and building capacity for companies in the supply chain and recruitment agencies. Find out [how to become a Seafood Task Force member](#).

Young workers

Make sure you check the legal minimum age for different jobs and follow local legislation or the [ILO principles](#). Be aware that children below the minimum age cannot work in your company. Ensure that young workers (usually between 15 and 18 years old) are not exposed to dangerous working conditions and that their work does not interfere with their schoolwork. The ILO has raised the minimum age for working on board fishing vessels to 16 years. You can find more [labour standards specifically for workers in the fishing industry](#) on the ILO website.

Tips:

Learn more about human trafficking and forced labour from the websites of the [ILO](#) and [RESPECT International](#).

If you operate fishing vessels, read [Fishers first: Good practices to end labour exploitation at sea](#).

Do not use informal agencies and companies to hire your employees, nor agencies that ask money

from workers to get a job.

Make a public commitment or pledge to follow human rights in your business and community.

4. Make sure your employees are healthy and safe

Take precautions to make sure your employees are safe at work. Working in the seafood sector can be difficult and dangerous, and fishing is said to be one of the three most dangerous professions. However, many things can be done to reduce the health and safety risks.

Safe and clean workplace

Better health and safety will lead to higher productivity and improved product quality, fewer accidents and less absence due to sickness. The cost of serious work-related illnesses, accidents or even death can be very high. As a company it is therefore in your best interest to ensure a safe and hygienic working place.

Since prevention is better than cure, make sure that preventive measures are in place to avoid injuries and illness. Provide your employees with the required protective gear such as helmets, life jackets, gloves and facemasks. When employees live on the work site or vessels, make sure you provide clean and safe accommodation. Finally, arrange regular medical check-ups for your employees.

Figure 2 and 3: Employees wearing safety equipment such as boots, life vests and gloves



Source: Kyra Hoevenaars



Source: Kyra Hoevenaars

Medical emergencies

Equipment and procedures should be in place in case health or safety issues occur. Make sure that first aid kits are available, and that these are always complete and no items have expired. Have a vehicle available for emergencies to drive to the nearest medical care centre. Provide accident-related insurance for employees if they are not covered under national law. Keep a record of health and safety related accidents, respond to them, and evaluate them to prevent them from happening again.

People working on fishing vessels are a long way from professional medical care, and often work with dangerous machinery in a challenging marine environment. It is therefore crucial that fishing vessels carry appropriate medical supplies and have radio or satellite communication equipment on board in case of a serious injury or health emergency.

Violence and harassment

Violence, abuse and harassment are another threat to workers. Sexual harassment, whether physical, verbal or using non-verbal gestures, is a frequent issue, sometimes involving employers themselves, leaving no route to make a complaint. It is important that employees have a place to turn to in the event of such problems. For more information on [violence and harassment](#), visit the World Health Organisation website.

Tips:

Carry out a health and safety risk assessment and identify preventive actions. Read the EU guide on [risk prevention on small fishing vessels](#) or the [Aquaculture Safety Code of Practice](#) published by Prince Edward Island.

Provide employees with safety training. The ILO published a safety and health [training manual for commercial fishing in Thailand](#). Information on fishing safety can also be found at the [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#). For floating fish farms, check out the [health and safety manual](#) by the Health and Safety Executive.

5. Treat everyone fair and equal

Fair and equal treatment is a human right. It is important to consider people's skills, and not their race, nationality, religion, age, disability, gender or sexual orientation. By treating your employees fairly and consistently, you can also build trust, strengthen loyalty and increase productivity. By favouring certain employees over others, you risk engendering resentment towards favoured individuals and the company. Communicating properly about fairness in your company will make your employees feel respected, valued and heard.

Understand the difference between equality and equity

In order to treat your employees fairly, you first need to know [the difference between equality and equity](#). Equality means that everyone is given the same treatment. Equity means adjusting the opportunities and resources to each individual in order to achieve equal outcomes, because everyone has different circumstances and needs. Not everyone in your company will need the same things to be successful. Both equality and equity are important. Working to ensure equitable outcomes can fill in the gaps that may persist when equality is the main focus.

You achieve equality by treating everyone in your company in the same way, irrespective of their gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality or disability. You provide all employees of the same level with the same salary, resources and opportunities. Equity, meanwhile, can be achieved through recruitment, training, promotion and day-to-day engagement. Examples of equity are wheelchair access workspaces, hiring people based on their skills not their education, and providing a work schedule with flexible hours to a parent with young children. For more information on equity, you can read the ILO guides on [Promoting Equity](#) and [Promoting Diversity and Inclusion](#).

Be gender aware

Women play an important role in the primary seafood sector. Around 28% of people working in aquaculture and 18% in fisheries are women. However, in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture, there are often significant differences between men and women in terms of conditions, involvement, limitations, hurdles, options and benefits. The percentage of women working in processing and marketing is very high, but women in low and middle-income countries face many challenges including limited access to resources such as land. They may also struggle to combine work with their work at home, there may be cultural and social norms that limit women to certain jobs, and they may face obstacles in setting up their own business. In an interview, [WorldFish Director General Dr Blake Ratner](#) said that '*Women lack access to key assets such as ponds for aquaculture, financing for processing and trade business, and education and training opportunities*'.

For example, an [analysis of gender roles in Philippine fishing communities](#) found that areas with high-value fish species are controlled solely by men. In Zambia, only men can own land, so women can only [access land for](#)

[aquaculture through a male relative](#). In other countries, such as Uganda and Bangladesh, it is a taboo for women to enter fish ponds.

These limitations mean fewer opportunities and lower incomes for women. To learn more about gender equality, watch this video by WorldFish on [why gender equality matters in fisheries and aquaculture](#) and read the [policy guidance note](#) by FAO.

You can become more gender aware by focusing on diversity when you hire workers. Make sure you have no internal bias and use gender-neutral language in the job description and other company documents. Women and men should receive equal pay for the same work, have the same chances of promotion, play an equal role in organisation and decision-making processes, have access to their own bank account and have equal access to resources, training and services. For more ideas about what you can do achieve gender equality and diversity, consult ILO's [Gender diversity journey: company good practices](#).

Develop fair policies

You can minimise inequality and discrimination by implementing the following measures (adapted from [ILO 2022](#)):

Put a written policy in place with clear procedures on non-discrimination and equal opportunities; and communicate this both internally and externally.

Make a strong commitment. When you take responsibility for equal employment issues and demonstrate a commitment to diversity, you send a strong signal to other managers, supervisors and workers.

Conduct an assessment to find out whether there is discrimination in your company. You can use a [self-assessment tool \(section E\)](#).

Train your employees on what is and is not acceptable in the workplace.

Set measurable goals and specific time frames to achieve these goals.

Monitor progress to see what improvements have been made.

Modify work organisation and the allocation of tasks, if necessary, to avoid negative effects on particular groups of workers. This includes measures to allow workers to balance work and family responsibilities.

Ensure equal opportunity to develop skills, including allowing time off work to participate in training.

Make sure employees have a place where they can voice their concerns

Provide support for employees who experience discrimination.

Promote efforts to build an environment of equal access to opportunities (like training programmes and health and childcare services).

Enforce rules consistently

Once you have put your policies in place, it is important to enforce them consistently and fairly. If employees see that certain individuals are being treated better than others, morale will suffer. It is important to avoid favouritism, such as when certain employees are given more time off, receive an undeserved promotion and are allowed to arrive late or leave early. On the other hand, employees are more likely to accept disciplinary action or try to improve their conduct if they feel that the disciplinary process is fair.

To do this, employees need to know what the rules are and what will happen if they are broken. Depending on the seriousness of any breach of the rules, the consequences may include verbal or written warnings, suspension, or termination of employment. Involving employees in improving company rules and regulations will reduce complaints in the future.

Tips:

Keep records according to gender so that you can understand the risks that are faced by male and female employees.

Translate the policies and procedures of your company into your employees' own native languages.

6. Learn about due diligence requirements

It is important that you can demonstrate that you are not party to human rights violations. There are many resources that can help you to improve social responsibility and the transparency of your activities.

The European Union (EU) has published a [draft regulation on human rights and environmental due diligence](#). All large EU companies will need to do due diligence on their own company *and* their value chains. This means that if you supply one of these companies, you will need to comply with the due diligence requirements too.

For example, Ahold Delhaize is one of the world's largest food retailers and is committed to supporting and respecting human rights in its own operations and supply chains. Their due diligence focuses on health and safety, remuneration, freedom of association, women's rights, forced labour, discrimination and harassment and child labour. For more information, read their [Human Rights report](#).

What does due diligence mean with respect to human rights?

Human rights due diligence (HRDD) is a continuous process that helps companies to identify adverse situations involving human rights, labour rights and the environment with the aim to ending, preventing or mitigating the associated risks. A [guide developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#) supports companies through the HRDD process. Many governments have used these guidelines as the basis for their responsible sourcing standards. The OECD guidance outlines six steps that make up the HRDD process (see Figure 2).

Figure 4: The six steps of the human rights due diligence process (OECD (2018))



Source: [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#)

Follow the six steps of the HRDD process to ensure you are meeting your responsibilities with respect to human rights:

Make sure you have written company policies in place that show your commitment to respecting human rights, labour rights and the environment.

Carry out a risk assessment with respect to human rights. [Conservation International](#) has developed a '[Social Responsibility Assessment Tool for the Seafood Sector](#)' for evaluating human rights in seafood supply chains. The tool can also be used by companies to identify gaps and risks.

After completing the risk assessment, develop a plan to prevent and mitigate current and potential adverse situations.

Monitor the implementation and results of the plans developed under point 3.

Publish information on the measures you take in order to create awareness. You could do this in the form of an annual report, on your website or through other media, for example.

If undesirable situations are occurring, make sure you help those affected immediately.

Tips:

Educate yourself on social issues and how to meet industry requirements. Online courses are provided by the [International Labour Organisation](#), [Udemy \(ISO 26000\)](#) and [Macquarie University](#).

Work with human rights organisations or NGOs to improve your company policies, risk assessment and implementation plan. Examples include [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), [UN Watch](#) and [Anti-Slavery International](#). Also look at the [Tools for Ethical Seafood Sourcing](#), which provides information to help you address social responsibility challenges.

Involve your employees in identifying current issues and risks.

Invite communities and stakeholders to provide input during the HRDD process.

Work with other SMEs to develop a responsible business code of conduct.

7. Make sure your product is traceable

Human rights due diligence needs to be done for the whole supply chain in order to sell products that are socially responsible. In other words, every actor in the supply chain needs to play their role in minimising risks and ensuring traceability. Traceability ensures that seafood can be traced throughout the supply chain and is described accurately to consumers.

The main reasons for tracing seafood products is to ensure that the product is safe to eat and prove where it came from. But without traceability, human rights abuses cannot be identified and eliminated either. Traceability also means transparency and helping to identify and mitigate risks such as human rights and labour abuses.

For you, this means keeping records that show where your raw materials came from, and where the product goes after it leaves your company. Relevant records include information on suppliers and buyers, production, sales and transportation data, as well as invoices and delivery orders.

Traceability is often a regulatory requirement. To ensure social responsibility throughout the supply chain, audits of all the companies in that supply chain are carried out. You can work together with the other companies in your supply chain to improve the responsibility of your products through assessments, evaluations and regular meetings.

For more information and recommendations for the seafood sector, read the FishWise white paper on seafood traceability: [Advancing Traceability in the Seafood Industry: Assessing Challenges and Opportunities](#). You can also refer to tip 7 in [9 tips to go digital in the Seafood sector](#).

8. Maintaining a good relationship with the local community

As well as treating your employees well, it is also important to build and maintain good relations with the community where you operate. Your operations may have a significant impact on the lives and existing livelihoods of members of the local communities near your company. Examples include the pollution of public waterways by aquaculture and conflicts between fishers and the tourism sector over water use. You can also influence the community positively by providing educational activities and fresh fish.

Proper planning, communication and mutual respect are important in maintaining good community relations. To see the potential conflicts are between your company and the community, you need to engage with them through open and transparent conversations while considering local beliefs and customs. You can use various communication channels such as stakeholder consultations, social media and newsletters.

Figure 5: Community consultation for an aquaculture project in Zambia



Photo by Kyra Hoevenaars

Find out who the leaders of your community are. You can start with people you already know. At the first meeting, it is important to listen and get as much information from them as possible: let them do the talking. First get to know the community members and communicate your concern for the community. When questions or concerns come up about your business activities, answer these in a friendly way. If you need time to answer or find more information, you can tell them you will get back to them at a later stage. Also ask them who else they think you should talk to and go from there.

You can also organise activities and projects to engage with the community. [Huon Aquaculture](#) in Australia, recognises the importance of engaging with local residents and local government. They organise clean-ups and site tours, have an internship programme, and provide grants to the community. [Blue Ventures](#) trains community members and [presents fisheries data](#) to the community to increase their understanding of managing fish stocks around the Barren islands.

For more information, read the International Finance Corporation's [stakeholder engagement guidelines](#) and the World Bank's [community engagement strategies](#).

Tips:

Prioritise hiring people from the local community when hiring new employees or day labourers.

Always provide the community with information if there is a potential health and safety risk.

Support a local charity with financial or in-kind contributions.

Do not limit the community's access to common resources such as sources of freshwater and fishing grounds or areas that play an important role in local beliefs and customs.

9. Resolve disputes

Even when you treat your employees and community well, issues can still occur and lead to disagreements. Examples of disputes include complaints about harassment by other employees, dissatisfaction over wages, a neighbour who complains that you are polluting a local river, or another fishing company claiming exclusive rights to exploit certain resources instead of you.

It is important to address problems and respond to concerns and complaints openly, honestly and fairly. Dispute resolution is the process whereby two or more parties work towards a solution to a problem or disagreement.

It is advisable to put a labour conflict resolution policy in place to handle and resolve issues involving employees. Keep a written record of disputes, responses and solutions. Make sure that disciplinary actions are appropriate, focus on educating employees and never violate the rights of employees. Docking wages or imposing fines are not acceptable as disciplinary measures. Never punish, threaten or humiliate employees or take steps that might affect their physical or mental health.

Five steps towards dispute resolution are:

What is the problem?

The more information you have, the better. Give everyone the chance to speak and hear them out. If more people are involved, it may be best to talk to everyone individually in a safe and quiet place. Separate the people from the problem.

What other factors are involved?

Sometimes there is more to the problem than it seems. Ask more questions to see if there are deeper issues or emotions at stake.

What is the common goal?

How can the problem be resolved? What is the best outcome? If the issue is work-related, look at what is best for the company. If it is personal, you can focus on building trust.

What are the solutions?

Focus on the bigger picture. Are there alternative solutions? What compromises need to be made? How can you learn from the perspective of the other person?

Agree on a way forward


Highlight the benefits of the solutions and the lessons learned, and make sure everyone involved feels valued and respected.


For more information on disputes in the workplace and how to resolve them, watch this video on [best practices in conflict resolution in the workplace](#), and read the planning and implementation [tool on conflict management, negotiation and consensus building](#).


Kyra Hoevenaars and Jonah van Beijnen of [VB Consultancy](#) carried out this study for CBI.

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