



**Will the problem be solved if we just keep eating?
A critical analysis of the Marine Stewardship Council
as a response to the overfishing issue**

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Sweden)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies

(AFES)

Specialisation:

Environment and Sustainable Development

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December 2016

Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to my supervisor Mindi Schneider and my second reader Murat Arsel for taking their time to read and comment on this work, for helping me to try to paint a circle around the loose parts, and for giving me useful tips along the way that I will bring with me in the future.

I'm grateful to my friends and family for their moral support, a type of support that should really never be underestimated.

I'm grateful for this experience and what it has taught me about myself, about the topic of this paper, and about doing research.

I'm grateful to everyone who makes genuine efforts on different levels to create positive change in the world.

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List of Acronyms

| | |
|-------|-----------------------------------|
| EU | European Union |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organisation |
| FIP | Fishery Improvement Project |
| LIFDC | Low-Income Food-Deficit Country |
| MSC | Marine Stewardship Council |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |

Abstract

The overfishing crisis has become increasingly severe during recent decades, and there is an enormous urgency in putting an end to the depletion of fish stocks globally. With neoliberalism, market-based instruments to govern fisheries have gained importance, and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) eco-label has become the most influential certification system for capture fisheries. This paper attempts to analyse the effectiveness of the MSC when it comes to reducing overfishing. Based on political economy and degrowth theories I argue that to get to terms with the issue of overfishing, fish consumption needs to reduce, and seeing the uneven consumption and production patterns globally any viable solution must also work towards redistribution. I furthermore analyse to what extent the MSC addresses the need for redistribution and reduced consumption, and argue that its strategies and standards do not consider these issues sufficiently and may instead reproduce them. Based on this I argue that while the MSC may have localised effects on specific fisheries and indirect consequences in the shape of increasing awareness about the overfishing crisis, the label's reliance on a neoliberal scope of action constrains its abilities to address some of the core issues within the overfishing problematic.

Relevance to Development Studies

The broad context of this paper is the issue of overfishing in relation to the neoliberalisation of environmental governance. The industrialisation of fisheries for economic development has created a complex global issue with both environmental and socio-economic dimensions, and the responsibility for, and benefits of, the growth-based unsustainable consumption and production patterns with regards to fish are not evenly distributed between different groups and societies. In recent decades, governance of fisheries has been increasingly carried out through market-based instruments such as eco-labels and related certification systems, and the increasing urgency of the overfishing issue – particularly for poor coastal communities who depend on fishing for food and employment – gives reason to investigate to what extent eco-labels can help solve it.

Keywords

Eco-labels, overfishing, neoliberalisation, degrowth

Word count: 16 203

Chapter 1: Introduction

“If you cannot catch a fish, do not blame the sea.” – Greek proverb

“There is a time to fish and a time to dry the nets.” – Chinese proverb

“I have a lot to say,’ said the fish, ‘but my mouth is full of water.’” – Georgian proverb



Source: 'World Oceans Day', n.d.; 'Filet-O-Fish', n.d.

This paper is about the issue of overfishing and the neoliberal response to the issue in the shape of eco-labels. It is rooted in a concern for the future of the oceans (and in the extension for mankind and life on Earth), and the necessity to make political decisions that tackle the root causes of the issues that the unfolding of capitalism has brought about.

The overfishing crisis has become increasingly severe during recent decades, and there is an enormous urgency in putting an end to the depletion of fish stocks globally. Due to the perceived failure of international and national law to control fishing behaviour, since the late 1990s governance of fisheries has been increasingly carried out through market-based instruments such as eco-labels and certification schemes (Ponte 2012). Out of the labels for capture fisheries, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is by far the biggest and most influential one, their market-based strategy fitting well in the context of society's neoliberalisation. Yet, as the overfishing issue can be connected to efforts to foster a western, capitalist model of development (Mansfield 2011a), the question that lingers in relation to this market-based instrument is whether the same neoliberal and capitalist logics that are linked to the problem can be used for its solution. This paper looks at this broad question through the lens of the overfishing issue and the MSC eco-label, focusing specifically on the relation between ecological limits, consumption, and the MSC's strategy for change. The aim of the paper is to add to the literature that examines the limitations and potentials of eco-labels to solve the overfishing issue, and more broadly to

give further insights into the question of whether or not capitalism can regulate itself.

Based on political economy and degrowth theories I argue that to get to terms with the issue of overfishing, fish consumption needs to reduce, and seeing the uneven consumption and production patterns globally any viable solution must also work towards redistribution, meaning that countries with high per capita fish consumption need to be the first to reduce consumption to allow for basic human needs to be met in developing and Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries (LIFDCs). I furthermore analyse to what extent the MSC addresses the need for redistribution and reduced consumption, and argue that its strategies and standards do not consider these issues sufficiently and may instead reproduce them. Based on this I argue that while the MSC may have localised effects on specific fisheries and indirect consequences in the shape of increasing awareness about the overfishing crisis, the label's reliance on a neoliberal scope of action constrains its abilities to address some of the core issues within the overfishing problematic.

1.1. The overfishing crisis and its causes

It was long thought that the world's oceans were so huge and marine species so plentiful that human activity could never create a significant impact, that the oceans were inexhaustible. By now however, it has become clear that people have significantly impacted the world's oceans both directly and indirectly. In the surge for seafood many species of fish and shellfish have seen rapid declines. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) reports that currently 31.4 percent of all assessed fish stocks are fished at a biologically unsustainable level, and are thus considered overfished (also referred to as overexploited, depleted, or recovering), while 58.1 percent of all stocks are fully fished with no potential for increases in production (see Figure 1; FAO 2016). This leaves a mere 10.5 percent of all fish stocks globally not currently considered fully or over exploited.

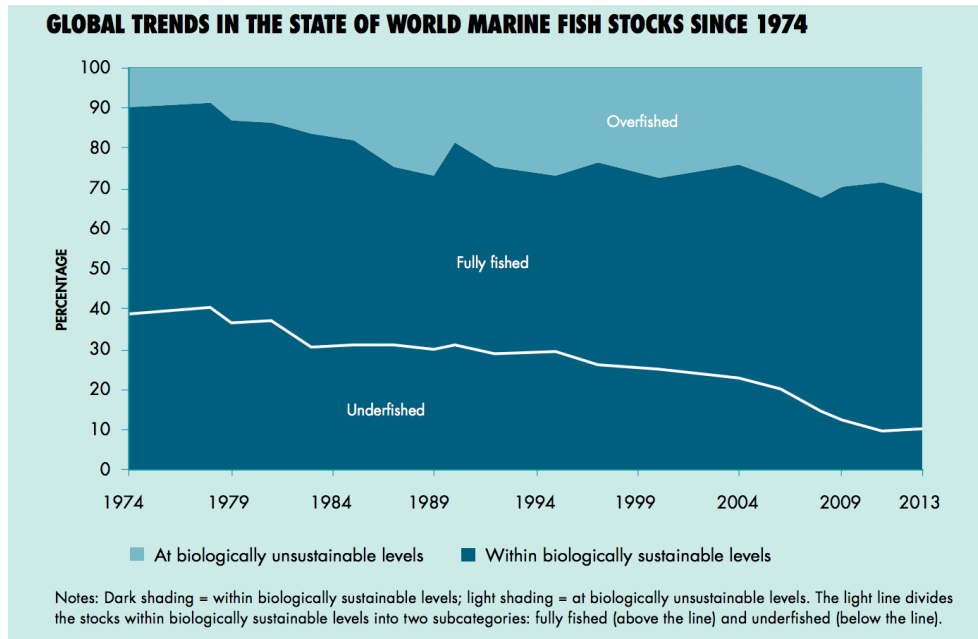


Figure 1 (FAO 2016: 39) – Global trends in the state of world marine fish stocks since 1974

Becky Mansfield (2011a) argues that overfishing is caused by the industrialisation of fisheries for economic development, tracing the issue to the rapid growth of fishing and seafood processing since World War II. She lists five features of the industrialisation of fisheries: (1) the fisheries operate on a huge scale with large vessels, advanced equipment and fish-finding technology, and very large seafood firms; (2) the global commodity chains provide relatively wealthy Northern consumers with a huge selection of fish; (3) government policies encourage the industrialisation of fisheries in the name of economic development and modernisation; (4) more equitable and environmentally friendly small-scale fisheries get displaced by industrial fisheries; and (5) the capital-intensive fish industry faces a contradiction, as firms depend on the environment to provide necessary resources, but in order to reduce costs actively avoid paying the full costs of protecting the environment on which they depend. Based on this, Mansfield argues that at the core of the current harmful industrial fishing practices lie efforts to foster a western, capitalist model of development.

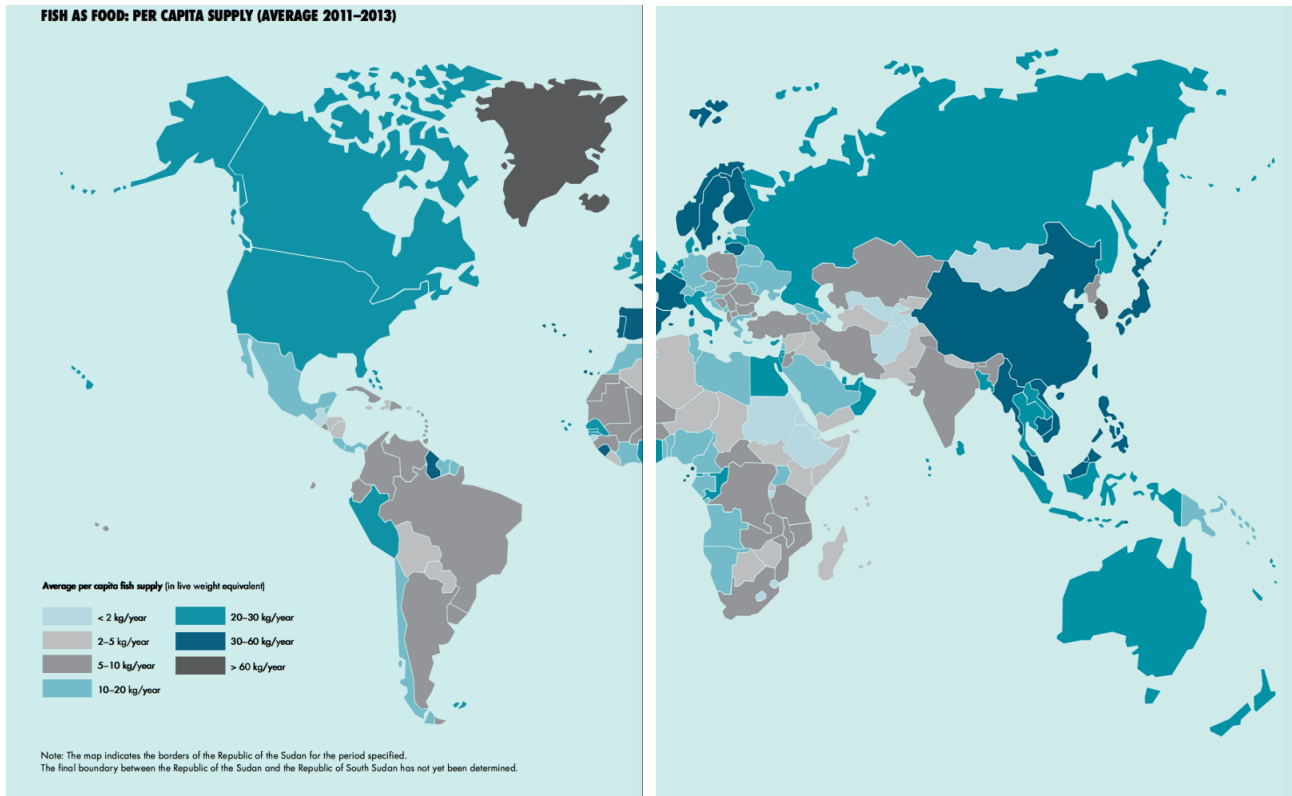


Figure 2 (FAO 2016: 74-75) – Fish as food: per capita supply (average 2011-2013)

Related to the industrialisation of fisheries is a surge in fish consumption. The FAO (2016) reports that world per capita fish consumption has steadily increased from an average of 9.9 kg per year in the 1960s, to 14.4 kg in the 1990s, and 19.7 kg in 2013, with preliminary estimates for 2015 indicating that global per capita fish consumption has now risen above 20 kg per year. Fish consumption is not equal in all countries however (see Figure 2). In 2013, per capita apparent fish consumption in industrialised countries was 26.8 kg, while the estimation in developing regions was 18.8 kg, and in LIFDCs 7.6 kg. China is an exceptional country when it comes to fish consumption, and therefore deserves specific mentioning. The country’s apparent per capita consumption has increased from 14.4 kg in 1993 to about 37.9 kg in 2013 (ibid.). In 2013, 140.8 million tonnes of fish were available for human consumption in the world, and China, with 52.5 million tonnes, accounted for more than one third of the total.

TABLE 15**TOP TEN EXPORTERS AND IMPORTERS OF FISH AND FISHERY PRODUCTS**

| | 2004 | 2014 | APR | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------|---------------|------------|
| | (US\$ millions) | | (Percentage) | |
| EXPORTERS | China | 6 637 | 12.2 | |
| | Norway | 4 132 | 10.1 | |
| | Viet Nam | 2 444 | 12.6 | |
| | Thailand | 4 060 | 4.9 | |
| | United States of America | 3 851 | 4.8 | |
| | Chile | 2 501 | 8.9 | |
| | India | 1 409 | 14.8 | |
| | Denmark | 3 566 | 2.9 | |
| | Netherlands | 2 452 | 6.4 | |
| | Canada | 3 487 | 2.6 | |
| | Top ten subtotal | 34 539 | 77 801 | 8.5 |
| | Rest of world total | 37 330 | 70 346 | 6.5 |
| WORLD TOTAL | 71 869 | 148 147 | 7.5 | |
| IMPORTERS | United States of America | 11 964 | 5.4 | |
| | Japan | 14 560 | 0.2 | |
| | China | 3 126 | 10.5 | |
| | Spain | 5 222 | 3.0 | |
| | France | 4 176 | 4.8 | |
| | Germany | 2 805 | 8.3 | |
| | Italy | 3 904 | 4.7 | |
| | Sweden | 1 301 | 13.9 | |
| | United Kingdom | 2 812 | 5.1 | |
| | Republic of Korea | 2 250 | 6.6 | |
| | Top ten subtotal | 52 119 | 83 447 | 4.8 |
| | Rest of world total | 23 583 | 57 169 | 9.3 |
| WORLD TOTAL | 75 702 | 140 616 | 6.4 | |

Note: APR refers to the average annual percentage growth rate for 2004–2014.

Figure 3 (FAO 2016: 53) – Top ten exporters and importers of fish and fishery products

European Union (EU) fish stocks are heavily overfished, yet consumption has remained high through imports of fish from other regions of the world and through the catches of distant-water fleets (Vardakoulis & Bernick 2016). Thanks to the large and growing international seafood trade, much of the fish caught in industrial fisheries is consumed not by the poor, but by relatively wealthy consumers in the global North (Mansfield 2011a). Due to a stable demand and stagnant or declining domestic fishery production in developed countries, a large and growing share of fish consumed consists of imports. The FAO (2016) estimates that about 78 percent of seafood products, worth US\$148 billion, gets traded internationally, and the top ten importing countries are all in the North except for China (see Figure 3) – which apart from its own increasing fish consumption imports much fish to process and re-export to the North. The top ten exporting countries on the other hand include countries from both the global North and South, and recent decades have seen a steady increase in fish exports originating from developing countries (see Figure 4).

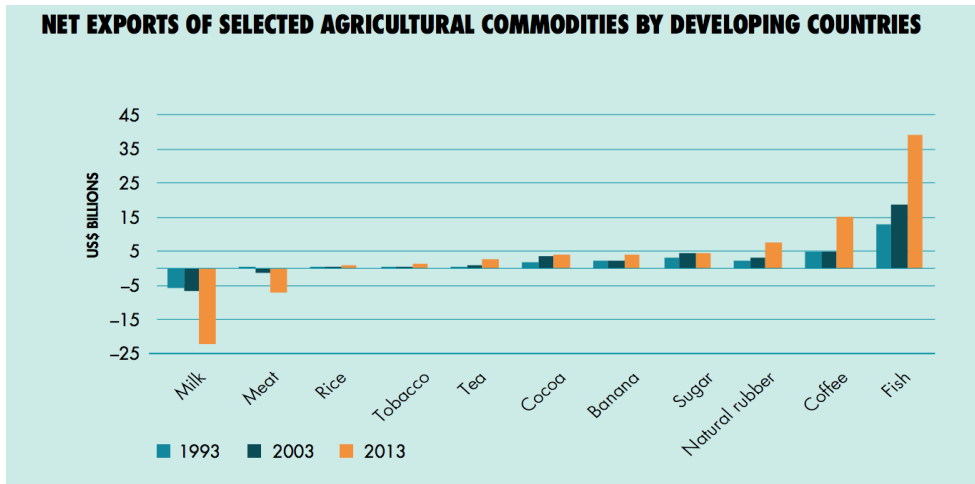


Figure 4 (FAO 2016: 61) – Net exports of selected agricultural commodities by developing countries

Mansfield (2011a) argues that overfishing is caused by the dynamics among industrial technology, consumer markets, models of development and capitalist relations to nature. Since the 1950s, “capital-intensive fishing that generates profits and foreign earnings by feeding Northern consumers has been prioritised over ‘traditional’ small-scale and artisanal fishing for subsistence, local markets, and poverty alleviation” (ibid.: 93). The capitalist need to profit by externalising cost, even if this means undermining the resources on which fisheries depend, has thus been a main contributor to the overfishing crisis. Mansfield further argues that seafood is coming to be like many other products: produced in the South and consumed in the North. This means that blame for overfishing is not equally shared among all people or places, but that there are differences in who benefits from industrial fishing.

The picture that has been painted so far is one where the vast majority of fish stocks around the world are either fully or over exploited, largely due to the industrial fishing sector and a western, capitalist model of development that stimulates overproduction and consumption. It has furthermore become clear that per capita fish consumption is particularly large in the global North and in China, with the majority of exports heading that direction. The exploitation of fisheries has paralleled the increase in consumption of seafood (Konefal 2013), and seeing that only about 10 percent of all fish stocks globally are currently not considered fully or over exploited, and the fact that we are faced with a growing human population, the conclusion must be drawn that a permanent reduction in seafood consumption is required if we are to get to terms with the overfishing issue. If wild fish stocks continue to be increasingly exploited and consumed, the world’s oceans will become radically altered, a prospect with dire consequences for all life on Earth.

1.2. Will aquaculture save the day?

Since much of the analysis of this paper will be based on the argument that there are limits to how much fish can be consumed in the world, it seems ap-

appropriate to also introduce the topic of farmed fish, and considerations regarding whether or not aquaculture can ensure that a growing population can continue increasing their consumption of fish. This section will argue that aquaculture thus far has not led to reduced pressure on capture fisheries, and at the same time creates new socio-ecological issues, which points towards an inability of aquaculture to sustainably enable continued increases in fish consumption.

As the previous section showed, we appear to be locked in a system where industrial fishing methods have steadily increased capture production and stimulated increased demand. The diminishing state of the world's oceans and wild fish stocks has led to a surge in aquaculture production during recent decades, in an attempt to continue to live up to increasing consumption habits. The FAO (2016) reports that in 2014, world aquaculture production of fish accounted for 44.1 percent of total fish production. Non-fed animal species accounted for less than a third (30.8 percent) of world production of all farmed fish species (*ibid.*).

Along with others (e.g. Konefal 2013; Naylor et al. 2000; Goldberg et al. 2001; Primavera 2005), Mansfield (2011a) argues that although farming fish can be seen as a potential answer for fish firms looking for a way out of the crisis of overfishing, aquaculture also contributes to the crisis in a range of ways. Instead of being the solution to overfishing, research shows that intensive aquaculture can become part of the problem. One reason given for this is the energy inefficiency of aquaculture, as more calories of fish meal and fish oil from capture fisheries are used to feed the popular predatory fish species that are farmed, than the calories of fish that are provided (Mansfield 2011b). Therefore, catches of low-value fish used in fish meal has increased parallel to the rise of aquaculture (*ibid.*).

Mansfield further argues that aquaculture can lead to environmental destruction and pollution of local habitats, it can introduce new chemicals into fish that can be harmful to human and environmental health, and it leads to dispossession of resources used by the poor, due to fishing grounds being turned into fish farms or ruined by pollution from nearby farms. All this points in the direction that the increasingly important role of aquaculture in fish production will not in itself lead to a solution to the overfishing crisis.

Mansfield (2011b) argues that aquaculture is an attempt to avoid crisis, yet it also produces new potential crises. She argues that aquaculture results in more and cheaper fish, as a response to increased demand, and the supply increase leads to a price reduction that further drives up demand. This exaggerates the crisis, as overall fish is becoming cheaper while wild fish is becoming more scarce and expensive to produce – meaning that scarce species that should increase in price instead become cheaper. Thus, while aquaculture may increase supply, it does so at the expense of price premiums attached to wild fish, actively undermining capture fisheries.

The central goal of aquaculture is to increase fish production in order to meet increased demand. Yet, as this section has shown, this is not leading to reduced pressure on capture fisheries, and creates new socio-ecological issues. Instead, a general reduction in production and consumption of fish is necessary. Aquaculture is still ideologically rooted in the growth imaginary, and as D’Alisa et al. (2015) argue: it is the ideology of growth that must be questioned.

1.3. Eco-labels as a response to the overfishing crisis

1.3.1. The rise of eco-labels

Governing marine fisheries is bound to be a complex matter, with a globalised fish trade and both fish stocks and fishing fleets moving easily across national borders. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982 marked the beginning of global fish governance, and subsequently the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development emphasised the need to create effective management regimes for both fisheries and coastal areas. Yet, Oosterveer and Spaargaren (2011) argue, the effects of these initiatives, along with FAO and UN guidelines to protect existing fish stocks, have remained modest, partly due to lack of commitment and/or capacity by different governments to implement recommended guidelines. They further argue that this has led to fish becoming a globally traded food without a set of relevant, well-functioning global governance arrangements.

The so-called sustainable seafood movement emerged in the late 1990s, as part of a broader neoliberal trend of regulation that moved from being mainly governmental or intergovernmental in nature to taking more private and ‘hybrid’ forms (Ponte 2012). The movement was a response to the changing political and economic conditions, and to the perceived failure of international and national law to control fishing behaviour (Konefal 2013; Ponte 2012). Today there are numerous organisations that attempt to conserve fisheries and marine environments by using mainly market-based approaches, and in the United States the sustainable seafood movement has even become the most prevalent marine conservation effort (Konefal 2013). Among these organisations, transnationally scaled, multi-stakeholder product certification systems are becoming increasingly important for neoliberal environmental governance (Klooster 2010). Generally, such systems include a body of standards, an independent inspection, and a product label. One such certification system is the Marine Stewardship Council, which will be put under scrutiny in this paper. This label will be described in detail in the following section.

1.3.2. The MSC, its aims and strategy

The MSC is an eco-label for capture fisheries that was established in 1997 as a joint project between the world’s largest seafood buyer at the time, Unilever, and the international conservation organisation World Wildlife Fund. Despite the development of other seafood eco-labels during the past few decades, the MSC remains by far the most dominant player in this field, holding a semi-monopoly both in the supply market (number and coverage of certified fisheries) and in the demand market (market share among fishery eco-labels used by

retailers and branded processors) (Ponte 2012). Many of the world's largest retailers have embraced the MSC, setting goals to only source fish from capture fisheries that have been MSC certified (goals that are often not obtained however, which will be returned to later in this paper). The label has even become a part of certain countries' strategy for fisheries regulation, as for instance the Dutch government has set up a fund to help the country's fishing industry become MSC certified (Washington and Ababouch 2011).

The MSC emerged as part of a broader movement of neoliberal restructuring, and is a market-based attempt to safeguard seafood supplies for the future. Using standards and collaborating with the fishing industry and retailers, it aims to create market incentives to improve the world's fisheries. On the website of the MSC, it is stated that the organisation was established to address the problem of unsustainable fishing and to safeguard seafood supplies for the future (MSC n.d.-i). Their stated vision is for the world's oceans to be teeming with life for generations to come, and they argue that a 'sustainable seafood market' is crucial to make that vision a reality. By recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing practices and influencing the choices people make when buying seafood, they aim to transform the seafood market, and thus redeem healthy fish stocks.

An important part of the MSC's strategy is to set standards for sustainable fishing and supply chain traceability. Organisations must then meet these standards in order to demonstrate the sustainability of their products. The MSC has two standards, one for the sustainability of the source fishery and one for the integrity of the 'chain of custody' through which the product passes from the fishery to the end consumer. The MSC owns the standards while independent third-party certifiers assess conformance.

The MSC Fisheries Standard is intended to assess if a fishery is well-managed and sustainable, focusing on three core principles: independent scientific verification of the sustainability of the stock; the environmental impact of the fishery; and the effective management of the fishery (MSC 2014d). To determine if the three principles are met, the Fisheries Standard comprises 28 performance indicators (MSC n.d.-g). The first principle of the fisheries standard contains that a fishery must be conducted in a manner that does not lead to the overfishing or depletion of the exploited population. For those populations that are depleted, the fishery must be conducted in a manner that demonstrably leads to their recovery. The second principle requires fishing operations to allow for the maintenance of the ecosystem on which the fishery depends. The third principle stresses the effective management of the fishery, with respect for local, national and international laws and standards (MSC 2014d).

The Chain of Custody Standard is a traceability and segregation standard that is applicable to the full supply chain from a certified fishery to final sale, aiming to protect against products from uncertified fisheries carrying the MSC label. Each company in the supply chain handling or selling MSC products need to have a valid Chain of Custody certificate (MSC n.d.-b). Five principles must be

met to achieve certification, namely: (1) certified products are purchased from certified suppliers; (2) certified products are identifiable and (3) segregated; (4) certified products are traceable and volumes are recorded; (5) the organisation has a management system (MSC 2015b).

An important factor in the MSC assessment is ‘sustainability’, a concept that through the years has become watered out and currently can mean a broad range of things. According to the FAO (2016), sustainability is generally considered to be about natural systems continuing to provide benefits to society in the long term. In terms of fisheries, the FAO considers these benefits to primarily consist of food, employment, income and nutrition. The social aspects of sustainability however also include maintenance of fishing communities, equity in income and gender, and basic human rights (FAO 2016). The FAO (ibid.: 40) argues that “market drivers of sustainability should integrate social concerns”.

At its set-up, several commentators advised the MSC to incorporate wide standards that also encompass social issues, but the MSC made the decision to keep their principles and criteria narrower, only addressing fishing operations and environmental issues (Gulbrandsen 2009). On a basic level, the MSC states that sustainable catches should be at levels that ensure that fish populations and the ecosystems on which they depend remain healthy and productive for today’s and future generations’ needs (MSC 2011). On their website they furthermore declare that fisheries can only be MSC certified if the stocks they fish are at sustainable levels or if fishing does not hinder their recovery. Fishing activity must be at a level which ensures it can continue indefinitely (MSC n.d.-f). They go on to say that understanding if a fish stock is sustainable requires data in the shape of catch records and stock surveys. Fishing operations must be managed to maintain the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem.

Independent research has however shown that the MSC’s system is flawed (Christian et al. 2013; Froese and Proelss 2012). According to an article by Froese and Proelss from 2012, almost one third (31 percent) of the fish stocks that were certified by the MSC at the time, and for which status information was available, had overfished stock sizes and were subject to on-going overfishing. The authors argue that a possible reason behind the certification of overfished stocks is that the assessors of the fisheries in the case of the MSC are for-profit companies that are chosen and paid by the fisheries to be assessed – a situation that can lead to the assessors being biased towards bending the rules in favour of their clients.

Using market-based approaches and operating within the borders of neoliberalism implies an acceptance of the assumption of growth. By working together with seafood brands and retailers, the MSC aims to stimulate consumption of fish carrying their label and increase the market demand for MSC certified seafood. The MSC states on their website that they hope that a growing supply of sustainable seafood will lead to an increase in market awareness and demand,

and that this “expanding cycle of supply and demand” will lead to sustainable seafood becoming the norm (MSC n.d.-c). Growth is thus a major part of the MSC’s strategy to accomplish their goal of conserving sustainable seafood supplies for the future, and the fact that they receive about half of their income from license fees (a share of the price paid by the consumers for certified products) may lead to a further stimulus to certify and sell increasing amounts of fish (Froese and Proelss 2012). The relationship between the MSC, growth and consumption will be a topic of analysis in this paper.

1.4. Research question

The rest of this paper centres around the following question:

Can the Marine Stewardship Council effectively reduce overfishing, and if not, why not?

Sub-questions:

- Can a system based on market-logics and aimed at getting people to consume more of a certain commodity at the same time assist attempts to reduce consumption of the same commodity?
- Does the MSC pay attention to overconsumption or distributional issues, either in its standards, framing or guidelines?
- What effects does the MSC have on distributional issues with regards to consumption and production patterns?

1.5. Methodology and methods

For this research, I have employed an ethnographic approach towards knowledge, rather than a positivist epistemological approach that assumes that there is an objective ‘truth’ out there for the researcher to find and report on (Hammersley 1992). The ethnographic approach entails focusing on in-depth knowledge and ‘telling cases’, aiming not to achieve statistical representativeness, but instead to purposefully select cases of theoretical and conceptual significance (Huijsmans 2010). This approach is relevant when looking at a particular example that is rich in depth and in turn also speaks to a larger debate, which is well-matched with my focus on the MSC and the broader implications of the neoliberalisation of environmental governance. In the context of my research, an ethnographic approach means reflection on why particular cases and examples are chosen and the logics of those choices, as well as reflections on how a particular case is generalizable to a wider debate. It also means a style of writing that gives actors to statements, reflecting an understanding of knowledge as partial, situated and produced interactions (Rose 1997).

Exploring whether or not eco-labels can effectively reduce overfishing required thorough literature reviews, along with analyses of various forms of secondary data. I began with a literature review that helped me build the framework used to study and understand the eco-label, based on literature on the neoliberalisation of environmental governance, consumption, eco-labels and (the political

economy of) limits. This framework was then combined with an analysis based on specific information about the MSC, using secondary data consisting of policy documents, public certification documents, reports, statements, different websites, organisational documents, and published material such as flyers and bulletins. My interest in finding out whether or not the MSC pays attention to overconsumption or distributional issues in their framing, standards or guidelines made this structural investigation of secondary data a suitable approach.

Confining the analysis to publically accessible documents keeps this work open to external evaluation. I do however believe that a number of semi-structured interviews with relevant people involved with the label could have added additional depth to my data and analysis. It would have been interesting to hear the reasoning around the issue of overconsumption in relation to the overfishing issue from the people in charge of setting the MSC's standards and those trying to influence the public to change their consumption habits. I do not believe that this would have influenced my findings in a significant way, as the MSC's strategy for change is quite clearly and openly communicated through their website and the different documents I have examined, but it could nevertheless have added more depth to the case of my analysis.

1.6. Scope and limitations

Although I use literature that broadly claims that environmental degradation increases due to the growth-dependence of capitalism, and that generally productive and consumptive activities thus need to fundamentally change, my findings are not representative for all eco-labels or even all eco-labels for fish. The study also does not give a comprehensive overview of market-based environmental governance instruments. Rather than representativeness, the focus is on generalisability, as I have tried to purposefully select a case of theoretical and conceptual significance in order to try to add to the conceptualisation and theorisation of processes and dynamics that underlie findings of other more comprehensive studies (e.g. Guthman 2007 and Gunderson 2014). As such, this study of the MSC eco-label for capture fisheries highlights some of the contradictions of using a consumption-oriented, market-based strategy to address social and environmental implications of development.

Overfishing is an immensely complex global issue, with a myriad of factors playing a role in causing and preventing it. Partly due to this complexity, it is hard to come up with strong empirical evidence to what effects eco-labels have on the issue. What can be known, is the status of particular localised fish stocks, how the amount of fully or over exploited fisheries continue to rise globally, and how human consumption of fish changes. None of this is enough to support any strong causal relationships however, it merely provides pointers, which can be put in relation to certain theories and thus reflected upon. Therefore, the reasoning on which I make my argument remains rather theoretical.

Chapter 2: Analytical framework

2.1. The neoliberalisation of nature and environmental governance

This study builds on the notion of the neoliberalisation of nature and environmental governance, as well as on attempts to analyse whether or not a reliance on a neoliberal scope of action constrains the ability of environmental governance institutions to promote sustainable development (Klooster 2010). The theoretical framework will therefore begin with an introduction to this notion and how it relates to the topic of this study.

Simply defined, neoliberalism is a political philosophy of free markets and less government (Klooster 2010). More specifically, Heynen and Robbins (2005) argue that neoliberalism is a diverse and interlinked set of practices that reflect an evolved and more destructive form of capitalism, stressing the need to consider neoliberalisation as a process instead of neoliberalism as a ‘thing’. They identify four dominant relations inherent to capital’s neoliberal agenda, namely:

governance, the institutionalised political compromises through which capitalist societies are negotiated; *privatisation*, where natural resources, long held in trust by regional, state and municipal authorities, are turned over to firms and individuals; *enclosure*, the capture of common resources and exclusion of the communities to which they are linked; and *valuation*, the process through which invaluable and complex ecosystems are reduced to commodities through pricing (ibid.: 6).

The initial phase of neoliberalisation, ranging from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, was dominated by the ‘roll-back’ of traditional forms of state regulation and existing welfare state institutions, leading to massive instabilities and inequalities (Klooster 2010; Robertson 2004; Guthman 2007). After this followed a period which Peck and Tickel (2002) have dubbed ‘roll-out’ neoliberalisation, with attempts to stabilise and redress some of the worst consequences of roll-back, and to re-regulate the system through state-led encouragement of civil society institutions to provide previously retracted services and compensatory mechanisms. These new institutions include public-private cooperation, multi-stakeholder and/or non-governmental organisations, voluntaristic mechanisms, and reliance on the social responsibilities of rational economic individuals and ethical corporations (Klooster 2010). Julie Guthman (2007), among others, argues that eco-labels provide a typical example of this type of neoliberal environmental governance, as they create multi-stakeholder organisations and audit systems to achieve action at a distance, entail forms of enclosure in ways that produce scarcity, and rely on neoliberal ideas of consumer responsibility and the preference of markets over more direct instruments of regulation.

A key question, as highlighted by Klooster (2010), becomes the degree to which this type of certification systems can successfully challenge negative aspects of neoliberal productions of nature, despite the fact that they make use of the same neoliberal ideas. A broader interpretation of the same question is whether or not capitalism can regulate itself. Using three arenas of literature – on eco-labels, consumption and the political economy of limits (which will be elaborated upon in the following sections) – this paper will examine the issue of overfishing and its response in the shape of the MSC eco-label, in order to improve the understanding of the neoliberalisation of nature and environmental governance as well as to explore the limitations and potentials of eco-labels to solve the overfishing issue.

2.2. Eco-labels: a neoliberal mechanism

In order to establish whether or not eco-labels for fish can effectively reduce overfishing, it is important to first understand the eco-labels themselves: how they are defined, and what logics and visions for the food system they use. This will settle in what ways eco-labels are a neoliberal mechanism. Julie Guthman's extensive work on voluntary certification schemes will be my main point of reference for this. As mentioned in the previous section, Guthman (2007) strongly backs the statement that eco-labels are part of the neoliberalisation of environmental governance, arguing that they not only accept the market as the locus of regulation, but also employ tools designed to create markets where none previously existed.

To know what logics voluntary certification schemes use it is important to know what sort of broader politics they provoke and constrain. As mentioned in the previous section, the emergence of eco-labels can be linked to the roll-out phase of neoliberalisation. Hatanaka et al. (2005) argue that the rise of voluntary certifications schemes as a significant regulatory mechanism reflects a broader shift from government to governance that has been associated with this phase, where government refers to the power and rule of the state, and governance refers to non-state mechanisms of regulation. Governance implies using tools that indirectly encourage subjects to act in particular ways, and a situation in which public policy increasingly plays the role of facilitator while market forces play a greater role in regulation. Ponte (2012) argues that it was due to the perceived failure of international and national law to control fishing behaviour after the roll-back phase that governance of fisheries has increasingly been carried out through voluntary codes and market-based instruments.

Part of the explanation to the occurrence of eco-labels, and the increasing importance that is given to them, can be found in the taking for granted of the capitalist market system, including the assumption that regulation and governance is best managed through market mechanisms. Busch (2014) argues that the usage of market-based instruments like eco-labels and standards to tackle environmental issues has led to that previously social actions have been individualised as financial calculations, and the grammar of markets has become hegemonic in both social life and individual selves.

In shifting regulatory responsibility from the public sector to non-governmental actors, Guthman (2007) argues that voluntary labels correspond with another dominant piece of neoliberalism: privatisation. Konefal et al. (2005) argue that private standards cause the standard making process to increasingly move from the front stage – where it is open to public debate and democratic decision-making bodies – to the backstage.

Capitalist valuation assumes that the market will assign high prices to scarce resources. Guthman argues that both standards and verification create scarcity by establishing barriers to entry – as standards-based regulation rests on the presumption that only some can meet those standards. What allows for value-transfer to happen is thus exclusion, which becomes a critical point to consider in terms of the political effect of labels, leading us to explore who or what is being protected by the labels as a way to understand who is being excluded. Guthman (2007) argues that even in the ideal, the protection various labels offer is uneven and not always directed to where the need is greatest. All protective labels seem to be dependent on some sort of created scarcity, and the highly exclusionary labels seem to be most effective, protecting those with access to resources, and not the most economically or socially vulnerable. Guthman argues that the extent to which the labels generate competition and reproduce inequality – both features that have been connected to neoliberalism – implies that they should be studied as a form of neoliberal governance.

Based on the above paragraphs I will argue that eco-labels are indeed a neoliberal mechanism, both a product of and a contributor to the neoliberalisation of environmental governance. This argument will form part of the foundation of my analysis. I will also use the work of Guthman to analyse the necessary exclusion that standards and eco-labels bring with them, in order to investigate what the political effects are of the MSC. An important question posed by Guthman (2007) is whether or not eco-labels can help induce ‘push back’ of neoliberalism at the same time as they obviously incorporate the techniques of roll-out neoliberalisation. In reflecting on this question Guthman also argues for considering how the eco-labels could work within a broader dialectic, and what type of indirect and/or unintended consequences they may provoke. This question will be connected to the overfishing issue and the MSC at a later stage of this paper.

2.3. The role of consumption

The previous section outlined the connection between eco-labels and the neoliberalisation of environmental governance. This section will zoom in on one important aspect of that connection, namely the focus on the role of consumption and the consumer when it comes to accomplishing change. The aim is to investigate the role of consumption as well as which implications this focus of the labels has in relation to social and environmental issues.

Starting by sketching the perceived role of the individual within the logics of eco-labels, Konefal (2013) argues that a cornerstone of this type of neoliberal

restructuring is a strong notion of individualism where people are free to pursue their self-interests. This has led to the construction of people as primarily consumers, as opposed to for instance citizens or members of a group. Thus, Konefal argues, with neoliberalisation, consumption has emerged as a leading form of agency in society, where environmental change becomes a matter of individual will rather than a collective struggle. Similarly, Mensink (2015) argues that in the past 150 years the responsibility of trade problematics has moved from those who hold the means of production to those who buy the goods.

Guthman (2007) argues that one of the processes through which eco-labels reinforce the neoliberal political economic project is devolution, by putting regulatory control at the site of the cash register. A central question here is whether or not the labels generate sufficient knowledge to support important decisions concerning for example ecological and public health risks. Guthman questions how individual consumption choices can even pretend to produce broad public benefit, arguing that regulating at the scale of the (often privileged) consumer is not proportionate to the scale at which social and ecological problems are created, and will thus inevitably have very uneven effects.

A central aspect for the focus on people as individual consumers is the idea of consumer sovereignty, the reliance on ‘choice’ as the basis for the global economy – a choice that is supposed to be free and informed (Eden 2011). Mensink (2015) argues that this idea in itself for several reasons is rather problematic – for instance because there will never be sufficient amounts of information available for all consumers to always make informed and thought-through decisions. In addition to this, purchase depends on cost and incomes, and consumption choice is not based on knowledge and desire alone but is always a collective action dependent on choice-sets and information made available through a range of institutional actors (Eden 2011; Emel and Hawkins 2010).

In relation to consumerism, Slavoj Žižek has coined the term ‘cultural capitalism’ to describe the idea that you can buy things and at the same time ‘do good’. He sees ethical consumerism as an attempt of people to buy redemption from all the evils that they see (Žižek 2010). But these remedies, he argues, do not cure the ‘disease’, but merely prolong it, as they themselves are part of the disease. Žižek argues that it could be considered immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the evils that themselves result from the institution of private property. He furthermore argues that intertwining market mechanisms with charity makes people blind to the fact that they with this type of idealism at the same time keep in place a materialistic system, which is largely aimed at increasing consumption instead of decreasing it. The proper aim would instead be to try to reconstruct society on such a basis that ‘un-ethical consumption’ would not be possible – an aim that Žižek argues is being prevented by altruistic virtues.

So far, all the mentioned authors have argued that the consumption focus of neoliberal tools such as eco-labels has made it the responsibility of individuals

to manage various environmental and social justice issues. They furthermore reject individual consumption choices as a tool for change, as (1) it keeps a materialistic system in place (which is a big part of the problem), (2) the scale of the consumer is not proportionate to the scale of the issues, and (3) the idea of consumer sovereignty is at best problematic.

After this review of eco-labels' focus on the individual consumer, the rest of this section will look at the role of consumption in relation to environmental issues and eco-labels. The main point of focus is a questioning of the assumption of growth, and the argument that reduced consumption, particularly in the global North, is necessary to come to terms with the root causes of global environmental issues.

Focusing on the connection between growth and ethical consumption, Johnston (2002) questions whether fair trade and other 'ethical products' can qualify as ethical consumption at all, since it fails to challenge (hyper) consumerism. She argues that the opposite message is conveyed: that the best way to help people and the planet is to buy more and more ethical products. The detriment of this is illustrated by Latouche (2007: 178), who argues that consumerism participates fully in the growth society that is responsible for the world's social and ecological injustices, and that "there is no growth in production without unlimited growth in consumption sparked by all possible means, especially by the systematic manipulation of the consumer". He argues that a society built on unlimited, consumption-fuelled growth for the sake of growth will exceed the planet's carrying capacity and generate intolerable injustice.

Serge Latouche is an influential theorist within the degrowth movement – a movement that is challenging the supposed inevitability and desirability of growth. Degrowth proponents denounce economic thinking and systems that see growth as the ultimate good, pointing out the social and ecological unsustainability of growth and ever-increasing consumption (Fournier 2008). Similar to Marx's point with his concept of commodity fetishism, as well as to political economy theories, one of the starting points of the degrowth movement is to politicise the economy and reveal it as an abstract idea rather than an objective reality. Fournier (2008: 529) argues that the main target of the degrowth movement is not growth in itself but the ideology of growth:

a system of representation that translates everything into a reified and autonomous economic reality inhabited by self-interested consumers. It follows that to challenge the 'tyranny of growth', it is not sufficient to call for lesser, slower or greener growth for this would leave us trapped within the same economic logic; rather we need to escape from the economy as a system of representation.

This includes challenging the reduction of human beings to their economic function as producers or consumers.

Fournier argues that reclaiming citizenship – with its collective and political nature – and privileging this role over economic ones such as that of the consumer, opens up an escape route from the economy. She argues that calling upon citizens serves to link individual choices and behaviours into collective action in a political context, so that isolated lifestyle decisions are lifted into a wider political domain. Fournier furthermore argues that the general consumption strike that is advocated by the degrowth movement works as a strategy for people to reclaim themselves as citizens.

What is important to note here is the general focus of degrowth on consuming and producing *less*, rather than merely differently, as well as the differentiation that is made between individual choices to consume, and political choices *not* to consume, for which degrowth sees a potential of political organisation to transform the system. The point of degrowth is thus not so much to ‘blame the individual consumer’ for social and environmental issues, but instead to find ways out of the current economic system by reducing consumption.

This section has treated eco-labels’ focus on the individual consumer to achieve change, as well as the relevance of considering growth and consumption in relation to social and environmental issues. I will use the arguments brought up here in my analysis; firstly, to argue that reduced consumption of fish is necessary, and thus for eco-labels to have a positive effect on the over-fishing issue they need to work in a way that helps achieving this; and secondly, to analyse whether or not the MSC does anything to reduce consumption of fish that works to counter the effects of focusing on the individual consumer in driving consumption.

2.4. The political economy of limits

One central assumption in the process of neoliberalisation is growth. Yet, many would argue that this implies a contradiction with the notion of ecological limits. The previous section already brought up some of the existing critique against the ideology of growth, but this section will take a closer look at the relation between the neoliberal focus on growth and the political economy of limits. More specifically, it will explore how to deal with the unequal distribution of responsibility for growth-based and unsustainable production and consumption patterns. With this motive in mind, first an investigation will follow as to what it means to talk about ecological limits, as well as how they are perceived, conceived and determined.

A good entry point to the topic of limits is the influential work of Johan Rockström et al. (2009) on developing a planetary boundaries framework, which has received much attention during recent years. The authors have defined a set of boundaries within which they expect that humanity can operate safely, following the question: “What are the non-negotiable planetary preconditions that humanity needs to respect in order to avoid the risk of deleterious or even catastrophic environmental change at continental to global scales?” (Rockström et al. 2009: no pagination). In a follow-up on the original report (which is also co-

authored by Rockström), Steffen et al. (2015) argue that by now, four out of nine planetary boundaries have already been transgressed: for climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, land-system change, and changes to the global phosphorus and nitrogen cycles.

Rockström et al. argue that the current and expected rates of biodiversity loss, including marine species, make up the sixth major extinction event in the history of life on Earth, and it is the first one to be caused specifically by human activities. They further argue that the importance of biodiversity for ensuring that ecosystems function, and for preventing ecosystems from tipping into undesired states, makes the current accelerated biodiversity loss particularly serious. The assessment of Rockström et al. is that science is not yet able to provide a boundary measure that at an aggregate level captures the regulating role of biodiversity. Instead they suggest using extinction rate as a provisional indicator, concluding that “humanity has already entered deep into a danger zone where undesired system change cannot be excluded, if the current greatly elevated extinction rate ... is sustained over long periods of time” (ibid.: no pagination).

In the planetary boundaries framework we thus see the idea of a set of non-negotiable thresholds, that cannot be defined with complete certainty, but which will have to be respected for humanity to be able to continue to operate safely on this planet. The work on the planetary boundaries is building on earlier similar work, such as the 1972 book *The Limits to Growth* by Meadows et al. The basic message from Meadows et al. is that exponential and infinite growth on a finite planet is impossible. They argue that if society continues to strive to produce more people with more food, material goods, clean air and water for each person, it will eventually reach one of many earthly limitations. “Even the ocean, which once appeared virtually inexhaustible, is losing species after species of its commercially useful animals” (Meadows et al. 1972: 28). Yet, they argue, the focus has often evolved around the principle of fighting against limits, e.g. by applying technology, rather than learning to live with them.

Another author who has engaged with the topic of limits, and particularly the political economy of limits, is Bhaskar Vira. He argues that though the science of planetary limits is important, “the most significant societal challenges are not about how close we are to the limits, but involve finding mechanisms to reconcile the difficult trade-offs that inevitably arise when we consider alternative human pathways in the present and the future” (Vira 2015: 762). For this he suggests a political economy approach that focuses on comprehending how finite resources at different scales are shared between the conflicting claims of different groups in society.

Vira argues that despite the mounting ecological evidence of certain planetary limits, there is little evidence that any fundamental shifts are likely to occur with regards to current production and consumption patterns. He further argues that the responsibility for the unsustainable production and consumption patterns is not evenly distributed between different groups and societies, and

neither are the benefits and costs of exceeding planetary boundaries. Similarly, Andrew Dobson (2003) argues that the disproportionately large ecological footprints of wealthy countries define relations of obligation, especially from the rich to ensure a more just distribution of limited ecological resources.

When talking about ecological limits it is inevitable to consider population growth, and the fact that many more people doubtlessly will be inhabiting the planet at the end of the twenty-first century than did in the beginning of the century (Vira 2015). If current trends continue, these people will most likely also be more wealthy, consume more, and seek more material well-being. Vira argues that this is not likely to be sustainable, unless humanity's material impacts on nature reach more stable levels, meaning that some people need to reduce their consumption demands in order for others to increase their consumption.

If ecological trends suggest that humanity will have to move away from a dependence on material growth as a basis for defining prosperity, and redefine new patterns of well-being which are not as dependent on ever-increasing consumption, this potentially raises serious implications for how development strategies are pursued, and what the ultimate goals are for society in this ecologically-constrained world. More importantly, choices need to be made in such a constrained world about which types of consumption are acceptable, and for whom, and which patterns of over-consumption need to be curtailed, and by whom. (ibid.: 768).

Many of the arguments of Vira are compatible with the ideas of the degrowth movement (which was referred to in the previous section). Kallis et al. (2015) contend that it is the exploitation of Southern natural and human resources at low cost by the North that has led to poverty in the South, arguing that degrowth in the North will reduce the demand for natural resources and industrial goods, making them more accessible to the developing South. Also Angelovski (2015) argues that consuming and producing less is not enough per se, but that a focus on more equal distribution among people is key. Another degrowth author, Farley (2015), furthermore argues that if we must limit throughput, we must consider who is entitled to use it, and that since we cannot grow our way out of poverty, redistribution becomes necessary. The following quote from him is an important contribution to this section about the political economy of limits and the necessary focus on redistribution:

While degrowth is essential for the planet as a whole, there are nearly a billion people living in dire poverty, unable to meet basic human needs. The marginal benefits of growth to the poor are immense. Within developed nations, there is little evidence that doubling per capita income in recent decades has improved life satisfaction, but abundant evidence that the world's poorest regions will suffer the most from climate change and other unintended but inevitable consequences of that income doubling. Fur-

thermore, the rich and poor compete for finite resources in an economy that weights preferences by purchasing power, resulting in simultaneous crises of obesity and malnutrition. Greater equality is strongly correlated with a reduction in social and health problems. This empirical evidence suggests that it would be possible to dramatically reduce consumption in the wealthier countries without reducing quality of life, freeing up the resources required to meet basic human needs in the poorest nations. (Farley, 2015: 51-52)

Vira argues that environmental concerns and ecological boundaries bring to the centre deep and fundamental questions about the nature of growth itself, concerning what kind of growth we will have, for whom, decided by whom. According to Vira, the political economy challenge is to identify the hidden losers when environmental decisions to deal with limits are made. “The injustice of unequal consumption patterns between and within countries forces attention on the material demands not of people in general, but of particular people in particular locations, and the systems of production and reproduction that sustain their relative positions in the hierarchy of resource access and use” (Vira 2015: 771). Also Leach et al. (2012) bring up similar considerations when discussing how to deal with ecological limits and planetary boundaries, arguing for the necessity of taking seriously how the safe operating space is shared between different people, and asking questions about who gains and who loses from particular policies and innovations aiming to navigate within it.

This section has made it clear that there are limits to growth and to planetary systems, something that in this paper is reflected in the overfishing issue and the exhaustibility of the oceans. With regards to handling these limits, this section has also made it clear that the responsibility for, and benefits of, growth-based unsustainable consumption and production patterns are not evenly distributed between different groups and societies. This requires critical engagement. Any solution to the overfishing issue must incorporate an understanding of limits and also consider distributional aspects when dealing with them. For my analysis, I will consider Vira’s political economy questions regarding the relative positions of different people and places in the hierarchy of resource access and use, in order to analyse whether the MSC can help achieve more equal distribution of fish consumption in respect of limits. This requires identifying differences in fish consumption patterns between different people and locations, as well as the systems of production and reproduction that sustain these differences. It furthermore requires investigating the effects of the MSC on these systems and its capability to achieve redistribution, as well as identifying the hidden losers that emerge as a result of the MSC.

Chapter 3: Can the MSC help reduce the demand for fish?

In the introduction of this paper it was argued that the root issue of the current fisheries crisis is the capitalist industrialisation of fisheries, and that a reduction in production and consumption of fish is needed to come to terms with the crisis, especially in countries where per capita consumption is disproportionately high. The same chapter outlined the aim and strategy of the MSC eco-label to tackle the problem of unsustainable fishing and safeguard fish supplies for the future. This chapter will begin to analyse whether the issue and the response in the shape of the MSC eco-label are compatible. Based on Guthman's (2007) inquiry about whether it is possible for eco-labels to help induce push back of neoliberalism at the same time as they incorporate the techniques of roll-out neoliberalisation, the main focus of this chapter will be to investigate whether or not a system based on market-logics and aimed at getting people to consume more of a certain commodity at the same time can assist attempts to reduce consumption of the same commodity. I will argue that the MSC pays no attention to the need for reduced fish consumption in its strategy, and that the label assumes growth of a consumer market, which is incompatible with a focus on reducing demand of seafood. My argument is supported by FAO statistics showing that both seafood consumption and capture fisheries production has increased since the MSC was established.

3.1. The MSC and the overconsumption issue

As previously argued, the current state of the world's oceans is not sustainable: the number of fish stocks that are depleted, overfished or fully fished continue to grow every year, and aquaculture does not appear to become the solution it was hoped to be. This means that fish production and consumption cannot continue to grow, and will actually need to reduce, if we are to reach more sustainable levels. This particularly goes for per capita consumption considering the expected population growth during coming decades. It might be argued that the MSC will steer consumption towards fish stocks and species that can be sustainably harvested in large numbers, and so the consumption will merely be shifted and not reduced. However, as previously mentioned only 10.5 percent of global fish stocks are currently not considered fully or over exploited, so even a shift in consumption will not allow increased fish consumption for a growing population. Thus, for the MSC to really do something about the problem of unsustainable fishing, and safeguard supplies for the future, somewhere along the line it would have to do something about the issue of overconsumption and production.

The mission of the MSC is to “contribute to the health of the world's oceans by recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing practices, influencing the choices people make when buying seafood, and working with [their] partners to transform the market to a sustainable basis” (MSC 2014d: 5). The eco-label's ‘theory of change’ is that working on increasing market demand for certified seafood will lead to more fisheries improving their practices and getting certi-

fied, and at the end of the line the entire industry will have transformed according to the standards of the MSC (MSC n.d.-c). This intention of the MSC to change the system through people's consumption choices is problematic to the extent that it keeps a materialistic system aimed at increasing consumption in place. The focus on consumerism, as argued by Latouche (2007) equals a full participation in the growth society, which in turn is responsible for the overfishing issue in the first place. When the ideology of growth is at the root of the issue, it is not enough to call for lesser or greener growth within the same economic logic, but instead we must escape from the abstract idea of the economy as a system of representation (Fournier 2008). An important question in order to understand if the MSC can help tackle the root issue of overfishing thus becomes whether or not it does anything (through its framing or standards) to incorporate the idea of a need for reduced consumption, and indeed if that is even possible for an eco-label that operates within the logics of neoliberalism. By reviewing the MSC's standards, theory of change, and published material in the shape of brochures, policy documents and its website, I will argue that the MSC does nothing to promote reduced fish consumption and that its neoliberal focus on growth of a consumer market may instead lead to increased fish consumption.

The three core principles of the MSC's standard for sustainable fishing are: (1) healthy fish stocks; (2) that the fishery does not jeopardise the supporting ecosystem; (3) that management systems ensure the long-term future of all resources (MSC 2011). The standard and performance indicators are clearly directed at aspects such as harvest strategies, stock status and management frameworks, and thus try to address issues at the supply side of the overfishing problematic. One of the intentions of the standard is to prevent overfishing or depletion of the exploited populations (MSC 2014d), and this might lead to that MSC certification will result in a reduction in production of certain fisheries (although most of the fisheries that have been certified by the MSC so far were already following practices similar to the MSC standards prior to the certification, meaning that the certification merely leads to an acknowledgement of this; Konefal 2013).

However, at the demand side of the issue, the MSC is doing quite the opposite of trying to reduce consumption, in their attempts to increase demand for their product. Their informational leaflets encourage consumers to choose seafood with the MSC label and "impress your friends and family by cooking delicious and sustainable seafood dishes" (MSC n.d.-d). Collaborations with fast food-multinationals like McDonald's and KFC also suggest that overconsumption of fish is not at all considered to be part of the issue. Their "what you can do"-infographics mention nothing about the need of a general reduction in fish consumption, and this despite the fact that they are almost solely found in affluent countries with disproportionately excessive per capita fish consumption. This type of messaging indicates that the level of seafood consumption is not considered to be a problem, it is only a matter of the 'right' kind of seafood consumption. As Konefal (2013) argues, if sustainable seafood organisations were to instead advocate reduced seafood consumption, they would threaten the profitability of retailers and industry. Such an approach would furthermore not support the MSC's own 'theory of change', which is based on increased

consumption of certified products.



Source: 'Positive difference' n.d.

In one of their brochures the MSC lists the benefits for businesses of sourcing certified seafood. The benefits supposedly include greater market access, price premiums, increased sales, enhanced reputation and brand affinity, positive media coverage, and additional marketing opportunities to engage consumers (MSC 2013a). The fact that increased sales is mentioned is interesting as it could assume that the introduction of MSC certified products would attract consumers who are currently not consuming 'regular' fish products – thus increasing overall fish consumption. All of the listed benefits show a support of processes of capital accumulation, a support that Konefal (2013) has argued means that at the same time as the sustainable seafood movement is trying to enhance the sustainability of fisheries, they reinforce the exploitation of fisheries. This argument follows political economic theories arguing that capitalism and environmental sustainability are contradictory projects. As processes of capitalist accumulation and the competitive character of capitalism are conceptualised as creating incentives for environmental degradation, Konefal argues that by contributing to neoliberalisation and its aim to liberate the market from any constraints, the sustainable seafood movement is also contributing to the deepening and extension of capitalist processes. Following this argument, the MSC here chooses to market the very same mechanisms that produce capitalism's discontents as their own solution. In light of the need for reduced seafood consumption, the neoliberal mechanisms used by the MSC could be reproducing the very causes of the overfishing issue.

The strategy of the MSC that has been described so far shows no recognition of the need for reduced fish consumption to come to terms with the overfishing issue; not in its standards, nor in its framing or vision for a solution. A telling example of the difficulty of combining the above described strategy of the MSC with a focus on reduced consumption is given by UK retailer Sainsbury's. They had to drop their goal of selling only MSC certified fish by 2010, because they realised that not enough fisheries would carry the requisite certification in time (Washington and Ababouch 2011). This shows the problematic relationship between consumption and eco-labels for fish in the current food system. Sainsbury's, seeing the growing consumer demand for certified fish products, would be interested in selling only certified products, but not at the expense of stocking a smaller amount and/or fewer species of fish. Yet, there is a contradiction occurring here, as this type of reasoning assumes that eco-labels will allow us to eat the same amount of fish as before (or more) – an amount that has taken us to the current situation with overfished oceans – only this time

the fish will be certified. This relates to Konefal's (2013) argument that the seafood market has not shifted as a result of the sustainable seafood movement, but simply become more diverse, which does not mean that the collective market for seafood has become more sustainable.

The example of Sainsbury's is one of many, and also on nation-level similar commitments are being made, as the entire Dutch supermarket sector in 2007 announced that by 2011, all wild-caught fish and seafood at every food retail chain in the Netherlands would come from MSC certified fisheries (MSC n.d.-h). This has in 2016 not yet been accomplished. The reason why these pledges keep getting postponed or given up on is that there is 'not enough' certified fish. Yet, there is something missing in the equation if we assume that we can continue eating the same amount of fish as we currently do, and at the same time make all fisheries sustainable.

Through its focus and strategy, the MSC assumes growth of a consumer market. Yet, as argued by Hobsbawm (2011: 12), "there is a patent conflict between the need to reverse or at least to control the impact of our economy on the biosphere and the imperatives of a capitalist market: maximum growth in search of profit". Following the argument of degrowth authors like Latouche (2007) and Kallis et al. (2015), economic growth unavoidably increases throughput and negatively impacts the biosphere, and the unlimited consumption-fuelled growth that this society is built on is responsible for the world's social and ecological injustices. It is clear that in reality what will cause less harm to the ocean environment is to consume less fish, and the strategy of the MSC is in some cases effectively preventing those choices to take place, in their focus on merely changing consumption instead of reducing it, and on expanding the seafood market.

3.2. Fish production and consumption has not decreased

Seeing the focus of this paper on the need for reduced production and consumption in order to come to terms with the overfishing issue, and to support the above made argument that the MSC is not an instrument that will make this happen, it is of relevance to include actual statistics of how fish production and consumption has changed since the MSC was introduced. The previous section showed that part of the MSC's strategy is to stimulate consumption of certified seafood. However, in order not to lead to increased overall seafood consumption, the consumption of certified seafood would need to replace other seafood consumption, and to have an effect on the overfishing issue it would need to lead to an overall reduction in consumption. This section reviews FAO statistics to come to terms with whether or not it does. Based on the fact that global capture production as well as the total consumption of seafood has increased since the introduction of the MSC, I argue that rather than creating a market for sustainable fisheries it appears as if the MSC so far merely has managed to create a market for sustainable fish.

The MSC certified its first fishery in 1999. That year, the global fish catch was 92.6 million tonnes (FAO n.d.), with a global per capita consumption of 15.7 kg per year (FAOSTAT 2016). Since then, global total capture production has reached 93.4 million tonnes in 2014, and world per capita fish consumption has increased to 19.7 kg in 2013, with preliminary estimates for 2015 indicating that global per capita fish consumption has now risen above 20 kg per year (FAO 2016). In Europe, where MSC certified fish is prevalent compared to many other places, average per capita fish consumption has risen from 19.1 kg per year in 1999, to 22.2 kg in 2013 (ibid.).

According to the MSC (2016), 9.4 percent of global wild fish catch was certified by them in 2015. The retail market value of seafood carrying the MSC label has reached US\$4.8 billion, with more than 23 000 MSC products available in over 100 countries. The three countries (all European) in which the MSC is most prevalent in terms of number of products on the market and number of Eco-label License Agreements are Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands (MSC 2015a). Both Germany and the Netherlands have seen increases in per capita fish consumption since the MSC was introduced: Germany going from 12.3 kg per capita in 1999 to 14.2 kg in 2011 (2011 being the latest year for which the FAO currently provides this specific information) and the Netherlands increasing their per capita consumption from 22.2 kg in 1999 to 23.6 kg in 2011 (FAOSTAT 2016). Per capita consumption in the UK has not increased, but also not decreased significantly, going from 19.7 kg in 1999 to 19 kg in 2011.

What these numbers show is that global capture production has not decreased since the MSC was introduced. Instead we have seen an increase in fish catches, and no real improvement in the state of the world's marine resources – at this point almost a third of commercial fish stocks are fished at biologically unsustainable levels (FAO 2016). At the same time, (per capita) fish consumption continues to increase, both at global, regional and national levels, also in countries where the MSC is most prevalent.

After close to two decades of the MSC the demand for fish is higher than ever, which has resulted in continued declines of fish populations. Konefal (2013) argues that despite the increasing number of fisheries that get MSC certified, the significant degradation of fisheries and marine environments largely continues. According to him, what has occurred is at best a partial greening of the market for seafood – meaning that the seafood market has simply become more diverse through the labels. Phillips et al. (2008) argue that the MSC has not been able to show any major achievements in marine biodiversity conservation and that the programme has not managed to contribute significantly to solving environmental problems in the fisheries sector. Also Jacquet and Pauly (2008) claim that the MSC so far has failed to demonstrably stop the decline of fish stocks.



Source: 'Let's make overfishing history' n.d.

It is not an explicit intention of the MSC to reduce seafood production and consumption. It is however its aim to safeguard seafood supplies for the future and make sure that catches are at levels that ensure fish populations and the ecosystem on which they depend remain healthy and productive for today's and future generations' needs (MSC n.d.-i). The label furthermore urges consumers who are concerned with the overfishing issue to eat MSC certified fish (MSC 2013a). Yet the connection between overfishing and overconsumption of fish is completely lost in the label's focus and strategy, and the above numbers show that the label indeed has not accomplished any (unintended) impact on this very prominent aspect of the overfishing issue either. Based on the above figures, the MSC certified fish appear to end up next to other options in the supermarket shelves, catering to a certain group of consumers, but failing to sufficiently reduce demand for seafood generally, which is what will be necessary to truly address the overfishing issue.

3.3. With regards to overconsumption of fish, the issue and the response are incompatible

The MSC's 'theory of change' to address the overfishing issue involves both supply-side and demand-side aspects. With its standard, it attempts to get specific fisheries to move towards more sustainable methods. This may indeed lead to certain fisheries adopting less intensive practices and have a localised positive impact on limited eco-systems. The above critique has however mainly been directed at the demand side of the label's strategy. Part of the MSC's 'theory of change' is the assumption of consumer market growth, and I have argued in this chapter that this causes a major incompatibility in relation to the overfishing problem. The label gives no attention to the need for reduced consumption in its strategy, and its dependence and focus on growth means that a reduction in seafood consumption could not possibly be a direct consequence of the MSC. This statement is supported by the fact that both overall fish catch and consumption has increased since the introduction of the MSC, also in countries where the certified products are widespread.

There is reason to believe that the MSC simply puts more seafood products on the market, which is the very opposite of what needs to happen to tackle the overfishing issue. Moreover, in their efforts to convince people to eat MSC

certified seafood, they may be taking focus away from real efforts, such as reduced consumption. Julie Guthman (2007) has argued that eco-labels do not and cannot represent and capture a value that maps onto the ‘true cost’ of production, yet they must persuade people that this is what they are doing. In one of their brochures, the MSC writes that “commercial seafood buyers and consumers around the world are increasingly aware of the problem of overfishing and are seeking seafood choices that don’t deplete or harm the ocean environment” (MSC 2013a: 2). They go on to say that when buying MSC certified products, consumers can know they are making sound environmental decisions. The fact that the MSC aims to convince people that by eating certified seafood they help tackle the overfishing issue and make sure future generations can enjoy seafood is quite problematic given the reviewed data, and although there is no particular reason to doubt the good intentions of the label, such statements are not well enough grounded to be made. Gómez-Baggethun (2015) argues that the focus on monetary valuation and market incentives as a pragmatic short-term strategy to communicate and capture the value of biodiversity in a language that reflects dominant political and economic views is a well-intentioned strategy that oversees the broader socio-political processes through which markets expand their limits and monetary value colonises new domains. Even if the MSC manages to make certain fisheries a bit more sustainable on the production side of things, something that has been questioned by other reports (Phillips et al. 2008; Froese and Proelss 2012), their demand-side focus on stimulating growth in consumption has the opposite effect of what is necessary to address the overfishing issue.

In the case of the MSC, what it comes down to is that using the logics of capitalism will not suffice when these logics are part of the problem in the first place. The industrialisation of fisheries led to a surge in fish consumption, and demand and supply of fish have since driven each other in the growth-based system that shapes modern society. What I am questioning here is the MSC’s intention to let an ‘expanding cycle of supply and demand’ solve the problem (MSC n.d.-c). When overproduction and consumption is causing the issue, the solution must be based in less focus on markets, not more. The MSC is an attempt to respond to the overfishing issue, but instead of focusing on real solutions, it has legitimised the growth-based system that caused the problem to begin with. An ideological rootedness in the growth imaginary, and aims to re-launch growth, is not the solution, but the problem (D’Alisa et al. 2015). The MSC, with its strategy based on market-logics and aimed at promoting consumption, is not designed to assist attempts to reduce fish production and consumption, which is needed to address the overfishing issue. Instead the label may be further entrenching the problem.

Chapter 4: Does the MSC enable redistribution?

The previous chapter argued that the MSC gives no attention to the need for reduced fish consumption to come to terms with the overfishing issue, and that its focus on growth of a consumer market can actually lead to increased fish consumption. This chapter will continue to analyse whether or not the issue at stake – the overfishing crisis – and the response in the shape of the MSC eco-label are compatible. The main focus will be the distribution aspect of the overfishing issue, with the intention to investigate what effects the MSC has on distributional issues with regards to production and consumption patterns. I will argue that the MSC disadvantages small-scale and developing country fisheries and lacks redistributive qualities in its focus. This reproduces existing injustices and will not be of help in attempts to accomplish redistribution as a step towards coming to terms with the overfishing issue.

4.1. The relevance of a distribution focus

In the introduction it was made clear that per capita fish consumption varies significantly depending on which country you look at, with industrialised countries consuming by far the most per capita as compared to developing countries and LIFDCs. At the same time, the decline of fish populations is often especially hard on poor coastal communities where many depend on fishing and fishing related industries for food and employment (Mansfield 2011a). To get to terms with the overfishing issue, not only must we reconsider the ideology of growth on which the current economic system is built, we must also, as Vira (2015) argues, consider how finite resources are shared between competing claims of different groups in society.

Farley (2015) argues that there is empirical evidence that it would be possible to dramatically reduce consumption in the wealthier countries without reducing quality of life, while allowing the poorest nations to access the resources required to meet basic human needs. If we must limit throughput, we must consider who is entitled to use it, and since we cannot grow our way out of poverty, redistribution becomes necessary. While the issue of overfishing is caused by certain productive activities rather than certain countries, if those countries and people who have benefitted the most from the activities that have caused the issue, and who are able to reduce consumption without reducing quality of life, are not the ones who start making concessions, the question as to why anyone else should do it becomes increasingly difficult to answer.

As argued by Dobson (2003) and Vira (2015), the disproportionately large ecological footprints of wealthy countries define relations of obligation. An overall global reduction of fish consumption is needed, but recognising the fact that many poor nations are struggling to meet basic human needs justifies a focus on reduced fish consumption in industrialised countries to start with, to make sure that reduced consumption does not happen at the cost of livelihoods. A true solution to the overfishing issue, in line with the political economy of lim-

its that was outlined in the theoretical framework, would need to consider and work towards accomplishing social justice and redistribution.

4.2. The MSC disadvantages small-scale and developing country fisheries

Vira (2015) argues that when finite natural resources constrain the possibilities of ever-expanding consumption for all, it becomes the political economy challenge to identify the hidden losers when environmental decisions are made in the context of dealing with limits. Guthman (2009) argues that standards-based regulation requires that only some can meet those standards, which means that it establishes barriers to entry. This necessary exclusion that is involved when standards are established leads this paper to take a closer look at who or what is being protected by the labels, and who is being excluded, in the interest of investigating the labels' redistributive potential. I will argue that the costly assessment processes as well as the mismatch between the MSC standard and the typical conditions in developing countries create a disadvantageous situation for small-scale and developing country fisheries. This points in the direction of Busch's (2014) argument that eco-labels are another example of how the enactment of neoliberalism favours those who are already wealthy or powerful.

One major aspect to consider when investigating who is being protected and who is being excluded by the MSC, is the differing circumstances for small-scale fisheries as opposed to larger-scale or industrial fleets. Small-scale fisheries are very common both in developed and developing countries, and Sainsbury (2010) argues that one of the biggest challenges for them in relation to eco-labelling is that the cost of meeting the requirements for management (such as monitoring, assessment, decision-making and implementation of management measures) can be out of proportion to the value of the fishery. Fisheries in developing countries often include many different species and use a range of different gears and landing sites. Moreover, they often incorporate a mix of subsistence and various forms of commercial fishing, and the catches often get distributed via a wide variety of channels – ranging from local cooperatives to animal feeds and export markets. This ecological and managerial complexity means that human and material capacity to address monitoring, assessment and management may be lacking (*ibid.*).

Ponte (2012) argues that while the market for fish in general has become more globalised in recent decades and an interest in sustainability is becoming increasingly common, the market for certified sustainable fish continues to be a Northern affair – this despite the fact that about half of total global exports of fish originate from the global South. According to the FAO (2016), developing countries account for 54 percent of the world's traded fish and seafood by value, and 60 percent by volume. The global fish market thus depends heavily on fisheries in developing countries, yet these fisheries only represent a small minority of certified fisheries. Washington and Ababouch (2011) argue that this underrepresentation is largely explained by three factors: (1) a lack of an economic incentive for certification, due to a limited presence in the markets and species where pressure to be certified is strongest; (2) eco-labelling schemes do

not translate well into the typical conditions of the fisheries environment in developing countries; (3) the costs of certification are often too high for small-scale or resource-poor fisheries.

The costs of getting MSC certified are generally paid by the producers. The size and complexity of the fishery have an impact on the costs, which in the year 2009 ranged from about US\$10 000 for a simple small fishery to more than US\$250 000 for a large and more complex fishery (Washington and Ababouch 2011). The costs also vary according to which company is carrying out the assessment. For MSC certification, the overall cost depends on the time involved in the certification, and this time in turn depends on the complexity of the fishery and on whether or not reliable scientific data is available. If there are sufficient amounts of pre-existing data, the process will be less costly. This means that certification is relatively cheaper for fisheries in countries where there is an effective fisheries management generally, and costlier for fisheries in data-deficient countries (*ibid.*). Most of the fisheries that have been MSC certified so far are large commercially significant fisheries – thus fisheries with an ability to pay. The fisheries are furthermore primarily located in industrial countries where the required management systems are already in place. Fisheries in industrial countries also have the added advantage that their governments can afford supporting their potential certification. An example of this is the Dutch government's decision to provide the country's fisheries with funding to become MSC certified (Washington and Ababouch 2011).

Gulbrandsen (2009) points to the fact that certification schemes may have consequences that were not intended or anticipated by their initiators, and that understanding these consequences are fundamental to assessing the effectiveness of eco-labels. The above paragraphs have made it clear that the MSC can have the effect of excluding small-scale and developing country fisheries, largely due to costly assessment processes that are based on standards and procedures that do not match well with the typical conditions of the fisheries environment in developing countries. The MSC may thus in effect widen existing inequalities by benefitting larger-scale/industrial fisheries in developed countries.

As argued by Jacquet and Pauly (2008), small-scale fisheries are potentially, and in many cases actually, more sustainable than large-scale fisheries. They generally use less energy-intensive fishing gear and cannot operate far offshore. They furthermore discard little to no fish, as opposed to industrial fisheries, and they are able to target different fish species based on their availability. Yet despite all of these factors, they are disadvantaged by eco-labels whose aim it is to address the problem of unsustainable fishing. This corresponds with Bitzer and Glasbergen's (2015) argument that market-based efforts like standards and certification schemes seem to strengthen the position of large-scale producers and businesses, while further pressuring and marginalising small-scale producers in global value chains.

4.3. The MSC and distributional issues

The previous section made it clear that small-scale and developing country fisheries have so far been disadvantaged by the standard-based system of the MSC eco-label. This section will investigate whether or not the MSC pays any attention to distributional issues in their framing and guidelines. By reviewing the MSC's standards, theory of change, and published material in the shape of brochures, policy and organisational documents, reports and statements, I will argue that although the MSC acknowledges the risk of small-scale and developing country fisheries being disadvantaged by the label, it does nothing to fundamentally address the distributional issues of the overfishing problematic.

An issue with standards and certifications is their claim to be universally applicable, while place and context-specific factors may be hugely relevant when it comes to judging the 'sustainability' of different practices. Bitzer and Glasbergen (2015: 38) argue that business-NGO partnerships (like the MSC) often embody Northern precepts about sustainable change in value chains, which encounter "vastly different realities in the various places of production, which may or may not fit and harmonise with these precepts". Furthermore, Jacquet and Pauly (2008) argue that there are real technical difficulties involved when it comes to defining sustainability criteria for fisheries that are data poor.

After receiving critique that so few developing country fisheries have been certified and that the certification process generally is not accessible to fisheries in developing countries, the MSC started recognising the issue in the mid 2000s. Since then it has set up a "Developing World Programme", with aims including raising awareness of the MSC and ensuring that the MSC standard is applicable to small-scale and developing country fisheries (MSC n.d.-a). The programme includes a number of 'accessibility tools' and information brochures aimed at facilitating the engagement of these fisheries.

The mechanisms developed by the MSC that are aimed at supporting developing country fisheries working towards certification include stakeholder training and capacity building, guidance on setting up and implementing improvement projects, and tools for tracking and reporting on progress towards certification (MSC 2014b). For fisheries who do not live up to the MSC standard, so called Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs), the MSC has created a Benchmarking and Tracking tool, to compare and track the environmental performance of a fishery against the MSC standard (MSC 2014a). It measures the status of a FIP, indicating if the fishery is closer to meeting the MSC standard, as well as the "rate and type of improvements required to become sustainable" (ibid.: no pagination). The MSC has also developed guidance tools to "support fisheries that want to make improvements before embarking on a full assessment process" (MSC 2013b: 1).

The MSC's engagement with FIPs has proven quite problematic however. As previously mentioned, many Northern retailers make pledges to source more certified fish, and Sampson et al. (2015) argue that due to the limited amount

of certified seafood available, fish derived from FIPs start to play a bigger role in the seafood market, as retailers turn to FIPs to make good on their sustainability declarations. The authors however find that nearly two-thirds of the FIPs in developing countries have obtained market access but are not yet delivering fisheries improvements, and overall less than one-fourth of fisheries in FIPs have reached a stage at which they are delivering any policy or conservation gains. Legitimised by the MSC Benchmarking and Tracking tool as fisheries on a path to sustainability, FIPs are creating sustainability claims recognised by retailers in the supply chain, which can lead to a ‘race to the bottom’ in standards for sustainability. Furthermore, Sampson et al. (2015: 505) importantly argue that FIPs can have “uncertain effects on fishing communities when they result in increased pressure on local and regional marine stocks and push fisheries toward export rather than local markets”. Market access may create economic returns for fishers that lead to expanded fishing efforts and larger harvests to meet growing demand, meaning that the race to secure sustainable wild-caught seafood could stimulate a race to fish. The fact that most FIPs focus on single species and that FIPs could generate incentives to fish single stocks can also lead to a concentration of fishing capacity by those fishers with access to capital and high-value markets, instead of supporting communities built on multispecies fisheries (ibid.).

While the above-mentioned initiatives show the acknowledgement of the MSC that there is a risk that small-scale and developing country fisheries become disadvantaged by the label, they do not fundamentally address the distributional issues of the overfishing problematic, nor the primary difficulties for this type of fisheries when it comes to achieving certification, which were described in the previous section. The Benchmarking and Tracking tool still assumes that the MSC standard can be applied to all types of fisheries and management systems, and expects fisheries to adapt to that, while in reality the varied, multi-species, managerially and ecologically complex developing state fisheries do not easily allow the type of monitoring, assessment and management that is required. It also continues to assume conditions where a lot of data is available, which as previously mentioned is not the case in many developing countries. The MSC’s Developing World Programme furthermore does nothing to address the fundamental issue for small-scale and developing world fisheries to cover the costs of assessment and meeting the management requirements – costs that can be higher in developing countries due to the absence of scientific data.

The MSC tries to attract new business partners by claiming that benefits of the MSC include “preserving livelihoods for those who depend on seafood as a source of income to sustain their families” (MSC 2014c: no pagination). Yet, fisheries in developing countries remain largely underrepresented in the MSC programme to date, with only 8 percent of all MSC certified fisheries located in developing countries (MSC n.d.-e), and the steps that the MSC has taken so far to increase this number have seemingly not yet proven to be effective. While acknowledging the issue of disadvantaged fisheries in developing countries, the MSC does little to actually tackle distributional issues.

4.4. No redistribution, but reproduction of issues

To come to terms with the overfishing issue, fish production and consumption needs to decrease, starting in affluent industrial countries with high per capita consumption. The previous chapter showed that the MSC with its strategy based on market-logics and aimed at promoting consumption is not designed to assist attempts to reduce fish production and consumption, and that consumption and production has continued to increase since the introduction of the label. This chapter has shown that the MSC furthermore disadvantages small-scale and developing country fisheries, thus reproducing existing distributional issues and injustices.

The MSC's attempts to increase consumption of certified fish, in combination with this fish thus far being found almost solely in countries where fish consumption is already high and caught by industrial country fisheries, makes for the opposite of a focus on redistribution. The aim of the MSC is supposedly to safeguard seafood supplies for the future. Yet, as Farley (2015) argues, from an ethical perspective it makes little sense to care about the needs of the unborn while ignoring the basic needs of those alive today. The MSC lacks redistributive qualities in its focus, and the steps that have been taken so far by the label to address the disadvantaged position of developing country fisheries have not been aimed at solving the fundamental issues. The fact that the MSC advantages Northern and large-scale fisheries, and stimulates more exports to and consumption in the North, leads to a reproduction of existing injustices and will not be of help in attempts to accomplish redistribution as a step towards coming to terms with the overfishing issue.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

A wise person once said that we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. This paper has looked at a neoliberal response to a global environmental issue that has been created by the logics of the capitalist system, in an attempt to analyse whether the response is effectively targeting the issue. I began this paper by setting up the scene around the overfishing issue, including the assumption that to get to terms with the overfishing issue, fish consumption must decrease globally, and that the current unevenly distributed patterns of production and consumption demand a re-distributional focus. Following the research question "Can the Marine Stewardship Council effectively reduce overfishing, and if not, why not?", I subsequently attempted to analyse what effect the strategy of the most prevalent eco-label for fish, the MSC, has on the from overfishing inseparable issue of overconsumption and on the redistribution that is required. My conclusion is that the strategy of the MSC is not set up in a way that can effectively reduce overfishing, and it appears as though the label's reliance on a neoliberal scope of action and adherence to and legitimation of an ideology of growth constrains its ability to stimulate positive change.

While the MSC may have some localised positive supply-side effects on the practices of particular fisheries, I have argued that the MSC's strategy to stimulate demand of certified fish, assuming growth of a consumer market, causes an incompatibility in relation to the overfishing problem. The fact that the label does nothing to include the overconsumption part of the issue in its framing or strategy, along with its dependence and focus on growth, means that a reduction in seafood consumption could not possibly be a direct consequence of the MSC, and indeed FAO statistics show that neither overall fish catch nor consumption has decreased since the MSC was introduced.

Through its focus, external communication and campaigns, and retailer initiatives, the MSC is supporting processes of capital accumulation, commodification and consumption. The MSC aims to let an 'expanding cycle of supply and demand' solve the overfishing problem, but its strategy lacks consideration of the fact that this cycle must actually stop expanding at a certain point for it to be any different from the cycle that is powering the issue in the first place. This is not to say that if the MSC was to focus on reducing fish consumption it would be fit to solve the overfishing issue, but rather to say that the label's absolute dependence on market-logics and promoting consumption to reach its goal makes it incompatible with the need to reduce production and consumption of fish. The result of this dependence and the label's strategy is a legitimation of the growth-based system that causes overfishing.

The MSC furthermore lacks redistributive qualities in its focus, and the costly assessment processes associated with the label – which are based on standards and procedures that do not match well with the typical conditions of the fisheries environment in developing countries – lead to small-scale and developing

country fisheries being disadvantaged. The combined failure of the MSC to address the overconsumption part of the problem and to stimulate redistribution may have the effect of further entrenching the overfishing issue and widening existing inequalities.

While the above findings are based on studying a single eco-label, they point to potential limitations of eco-labels more broadly to tackle environmental issues. As argued by Gunderson (2014: 113), “capitalism is growth-dependent and exists to expand and accumulate capital and, empirically, environmental degradation increases as economies grow”. Degrowth authors like Latouche (2007) also point to the social and ecological unsustainability of growth and ever-increasing consumption, which is why the (hyper) consumerism of the current system must be challenged.

This study has looked at the potential direct consequences of the MSC’s strategy for change, and the results point toward that the label cannot fundamentally counteract some of the root causes of the overfishing issue. At the same time, as Guthman (2007: 474) points out, seeing the current political-economic conditions, “it may be folly to disregard tools that have even a modicum of efficacy in mitigating the injustices and destruction of contemporary neoliberalism”. In relation to this, it might be so that the saving grace of the MSC (and eco-labels more broadly) is to be found in their indirect consequences; in creating a broader consciousness about environmental issues and perhaps enlisting ordinary people into broader projects of social change, which in time could “develop forms of governance more commensurate to the socialised problems before us” (ibid.). By reclaiming citizenship, with its collective and political nature, an escape route can be opened up from the economy as a system of representation (Fournier 2008).

This study has not been able to include considerations of this type of indirect consequences of the MSC, and it also lacks some empirical evidence that the MSC is not assisting attempts to come to terms with the overfishing issue. Due to the complexity of the overfishing issue, and the many factors playing a role in causing and preventing it, it is difficult to provide strong empirical evidence for a causal relationship between a specific eco-label and variations in fish production and consumption. The FAO data that I have used have therefore merely acted as pointers to support an otherwise mainly theoretical argument.

If eco-labels are indeed one of the best hopes for change within the neoliberal system, a topic for further research is to look at what type of indirect consequences the MSC and other eco-labels (can) have, how desirable indirect consequences can be stimulated and magnified, and how the labels can be used strategically for broader projects of social change. Yet in relation to this, the fact that the labels can potentially also reproduce the issues they set out to solve must also be considered and dealt with. More broadly in terms of the overfishing issue, more research is needed to explore ways to accomplish degrowth in practice, and to develop approaches that challenge the norms, ideology and practices of neoliberalised forms of capitalism.

A final conclusion of this research is that the MSC is not an instrument that sufficiently addresses the root causes of the overfishing issue. The fact that the label is looking to convince people that they can eat themselves out of the fisheries crisis is problematic and misleading, and this could support the argument of authors such as Žižek (2010) and Gunderson (2014) that eco-labels mask the harms of capitalism by convincing society that the harms of capitalism can be rehabilitated with the commodity form itself. This paper points to the importance of not making the potential contribution of the MSC to solve the overfishing issue bigger than it is, especially considering the risk of the label reproducing the issue. The MSC may have localised effects on specific fisheries, and it may have indirect consequences in the shape of increasing awareness about the overfishing crisis and potentially even help produce “more collectivist political subjects” (Guthman 2007: 474). But the problem will never be solved if we just keep eating the same amount of fish, certified or not. In order to work towards a true solution, we need to start by fundamentally questioning the growth-based economic model and the capitalist productive activities upon which it relies.

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