

## **Frictions and alignments: Making space for plural ontologies in Irish fisheries governance**

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### *Abstract*

Irish fisheries policy discourse insists that fishing opportunities are a public resource that are managed to ensure that such opportunities are not concentrated into the hands of large fishing interests. Yet, an examination of the ontological assumptions underlying Irish fisheries governance reveals that access to valuable quota-controlled stocks is shaped by historical assumptions that reinforce the worlds or ontological ‘realities’ of larger vessels, while different requirements combine to frustrate the attempts of small-scale vessels to assert a reality that is designed around their differences. Drawing on ethnographic research into small-scale fishing communities in Ireland’s offshore islands, and supported by an emerging theoretical focus on the politics of diverse ontologies, I argue that we need to examine the ontological assumptions underpinning State approaches to fisheries governance to gain a fuller understanding of the on-the-ground implications of the governance arrangements that shape the day-to-day lives of fishing communities in Ireland’s offshore islands. I consider six key ontological assumptions (social-historical, ecological, geographical, technocratic, material and markets-driven) that define these approaches. I focus on two islands-driven fisheries governance initiatives that have challenged these ontological assumptions in their assertion of particular fisheries worlds, and I consider what the State’s response, of retrenchment of the ontological status quo, means for fisheries policy and governance. I conclude that by failing to accommodate diverse ontologies, the State is locked into (re)producing a fisheries seascape that is stifling the exploration of alternative governance possibilities, while privileging institutional arrangements, approaches and practices that do not challenge the ontological status quo.

Keywords: ontology; political ecology; environmental governance; small-scale fisheries; islands.

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## *Introduction*

Inshore fishing vessels in Ireland make up approximately 86% of the Irish fishing fleet.<sup>1</sup> These vessels are under 12 metres in length, generally fish close to shore in the inshore waters<sup>2</sup> and generate approximately 1% of the economic value of the Irish fishing fleet's total landings (BIM 2017). Alternatively, I could introduce Ireland's inshore fishing industry by stating that Ireland's small, rural, coastal and island communities are home to the vast majority of Ireland's fishing families, for whom managing the family fishing enterprise (including, but not limited to, time spent fishing in a small boat) is an integral part of family life, and where economic output provides only a partial reflection of its value to fishing families and their wider communities. These two opening sentences are entry points into different ontologies. By ontologies, I mean the different ways we frame (Lakoff 2010) and understand the nature of reality, the actions that are shaped by the assumptions underpinning these different framings and the various processes of assertion of particular worlds (Sullivan 2017). In short, how we understand the world is based on normative assumptions we make (consciously and unconsciously) about the (assumed) nature of a reality that is 'out there' and this influences how we act within the world, in our relationships with other beings (human and non-human) and in the choices and decisions we make. The notion that there are choices as to which worlds or ontologies to assert and enact belies the political nature of ontologies: if diverse realities can be brought into being, the assertion of some worlds may be privileged over others and different worlds may 'bump heads' (Mol 2002; Blaser 2013a; Yates et al. 2017). The attention paid by critical scholars to the social and political dimensions of knowledge construction, and the framings and cultural understandings of environmental phenomena, have laid bare the ways in which powerful interests are supported through the privileging of certain ontologies in producing policy-relevant environmental knowledge (Sullivan 2017) and the technocratic-scientific, apolitical and ahistorical terms in which environmental governance tends to be framed (German et al. 2019).

In this paper, I argue that we need to examine the ontological assumptions underlying State fisheries governance approaches to gain a fuller understanding of the on-the-ground implications of the institutional rules and practices that shape the day-to-day lives of fishing communities. Although I illustrate this argument in an Irish fisheries context, it has relevance to small-scale fisheries globally as many challenges are shared. These include challenges to accessing fishing opportunities (in particular, valuable quota controlled stocks); competing with the more powerful medium and large-scale industrial interests for fish stocks and markets; obstacles to participation in fisheries governance (for example, through fish producer organisations who mainly represent medium to large-scale fleets); difficulties

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<sup>1</sup> Although 86% of the Irish fleet is made up of 'small' vessels (i.e. under 12 metres in length), not all of these qualify as 'small-scale' vessels for the purposes of the European Union definition of 'small-scale' as under 12 metre vessels using non-towed gear (i.e. gear that is not towed behind a fishing vessel). Many under 12 metre vessels in the Irish fleet use towed gear (such as dredging gear and trawl nets that are dragged behind the boat). As such, only 63% of the Irish fleet qualifies as 'small-scale', i.e. under 12 metre vessels that use static (or non-towed) gears (Fitzpatrick et al. 2020). Static gears are mainly used to target shellfish although whitefish can be caught with static nets such as gill nets or ring nets.

<sup>2</sup> Although Ireland's inshore waters extend to 12 nautical miles from shore, under 12 metre boats are dependent on fishing within the 6 nautical mile zone for all of their income (BIM 2017).

making their voices heard in systems that value and privilege high economic output (although small-scale fisheries generally represent the majority of their national fleets in terms of numbers of vessels and fishers, their economic output is dwarfed by that of the larger-scale industrial members of the fleet whose power affords them seats at decision-making tables such as those that manage quota allocations); and being adversely impacted by policies that are designed around the fishing practices and management of larger vessels (see Linke and Jentoft 2014; Frangoudes and Bellanger 2017; Pascual-Fernández et al. 2019; Pascual-Fernández et al. 2020; Percy and O’Riordan 2020). The analysis in this paper is policy relevant as it provides insights into how ontological assumptions may, in practice, operate to inhibit the achievement of fisheries management goals such as those enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water), the European Union’s Common Fisheries Policy (Basic Regulation 1380/2013), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, all of which aim to support small-scale fisheries and their coastal and island fishing communities.<sup>3</sup>

In Ireland, the primary responsibility for fisheries management lies with the Sea Fisheries Policy and Management Division in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).<sup>4</sup> The State’s overall fisheries management goal, as articulated by DAFM, is “to implement national policies, negotiated within the Common Fisheries Policy, that support a long term sustainable seafood industry for Ireland, and to maximise the long term contribution of the seafood industry to the economies of coastal regions”.<sup>5</sup> A “critical policy” of the State is to manage quota-controlled stocks as a public resource to ensure that property rights are not granted to individual operators and so that fishing opportunities are not concentrated into the hands of large fishing interests (DAFM 2016, 1; DAFM 2019, 2).

Despite the State’s commitment to maintaining the Irish fisheries resource as a public asset that supports coastal communities, I argue that it is doomed to fail in delivering this vision in an equitable manner across the Irish fishing industry because its fisheries governance approaches are underpinned by ontological assumptions that establish terms of access to the Irish fisheries resource which, in practice, privilege certain groups of fishers. Moreover, the State is resistant to the disruption of the status quo by competing ontologies with potential to more effectively frame and enact the Irish fisheries resource as a sustainably managed public asset across diverse coastal and island communities. As illustrated below, current fisheries

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Target 14.b of SDG14 aims to “provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.” Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) provides “When allocating the fishing opportunities available to them...Member States shall use transparent and objective criteria including those of an environmental, social and economic nature.... Member States shall endeavour to provide incentives to fishing vessels deploying selective fishing gear or using fishing techniques with reduced environmental impact, such as reduced energy consumption or habitat damage.” Recital 19 CFP states that “Member States should endeavour to give preferential access for small-scale artisanal or coastal fishermen” and recital 20 recognises that “[s]mall offshore islands which are dependent on fishing should, where appropriate, be especially recognised and supported in order to enable them to survive and prosper.” The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund 2014-2020 (Article 18.1.i) requires Member States with more than 1000 small-scale vessels to prepare an action plan for the development, competitiveness and sustainability of small-scale coastal fishing.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper I use the terms DAFM (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine) and the State interchangeably, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/seafood/sea-fisheriespolicymanagementdivision/>

management categorisations have been devised on the basis of a particular story or historical assumptions around access to Irish fisheries resources. Although a number of scholars have examined Irish fisheries in socio-cultural contexts, and through a variety of critical lenses drawing from fields such as political ecology, human geography and anthropology (see Brennan and Rodwell 2008; Britton 2012; Macken-Walsh 2012; Donkersloot and Menzies 2015; Bresnihan 2016; Bresnihan 2019), marine policy documents tend to be dominated by a natural capital/ecosystem goods and services focus. This reinforces the economic-production-focussed and market-driven State ontologies and privileges market rationality over other ways of understanding human-environment relationships (McCormack 2017).

As changes in the Irish fisheries policy environment since 2014 have focussed on greater inclusion of inshore fishers' voices in the management of their fisheries (and, thereby, acknowledgement of the day-to-day realities of inshore fishers and their fishing communities), the concept of ontologies helps us to understand how this drive towards inclusion is happening within an ontological framing to which the terms of entry still privilege medium and larger-scale industrial interests. I propose to illustrate this by examining claims to rights by an islands organisation set up to represent Irish island communities across the marine sector, with a strong vision to create an island-communities-based, seasonal, mixed fisheries co-management approach across Ireland's offshore islands, home to almost three thousand people. In particular, I focus on two of the organisation's initiatives to achieve this vision: to have a small share of quota-controlled fish stocks allocated to registered small-scale island fishers as a distinct fishing segment within the State's fisheries licensing system; and to have island fisheries (and their community quota allocation) represented and managed by an islands Producer Organisation. Since Irish fishers are governed by rules that, according to the State's fisheries ontologies, manage fishing opportunities as a public resource, this is not a simple narrative of island fishers trying to claim collective rights or entitlements from a privatised resource, where fishing rights are allocated to individuals and can be traded on the market. Rather, I illustrate how islanders' claims to rights are attempting to reshape the ontologies underpinning Irish fisheries governance, by attempting to make island fishers visible as a differentiated category within the policies and laws that determine how, to what extent, and by whom, this public marine resource is entitled to be fished.

Using ontologies as an analytical tool, I identify six ontological assumptions or 'visibilities' (German et al. 2019) underpinning Irish fisheries governance approaches. I argue that these ontological assumptions are being challenged by islanders' attempts to make visible the 'islandness' of island small-scale fisheries within Irish fisheries governance institutions and discourses as a distinct category. I show how these ontological assumptions have stymied efforts to reimagine island fisheries governance, as competing ontologies have been cast as a dangerous step towards the privatisation of fishing opportunities by unfairly privileging a small group of island fishers. I argue that the two island initiatives (a community quota allocation and an islands producer organisation) are at ideological odds with the single-species modes of fisheries governance enacted by the State. I conclude that, by failing to make space for new ontologies in Irish fisheries governance, the State is producing a fisheries

seascape that is stifling possibilities for innovation and transformation for some, while privileging those institutional forms that do not challenge the status quo, and ultimately undermining the State mantra of Irish fisheries as a public resource that are managed to ensure that such opportunities are not concentrated into the hands of large and powerful fishing interests.

I anchor my analysis in ethnographic research undertaken between 2018 and 2020 in ten<sup>6</sup> of the small-scale fishing communities in Ireland's eighteen inhabited offshore islands, sixteen of which have registered fishing vessels.<sup>7</sup> Empirical material was collected through analysis of fisheries policy documents and through qualitative research methods, including participant observation in island communities (twenty-eight days) and at five fishing industry events, twenty-nine unstructured and semi-structured interviews with islanders, island fishers and fisheries representatives (such as producer organisations), and six semi-structured interviews with policy-makers and policy-implementers in relevant government departments and State agencies.

Firstly, I set the scene by introducing the European, national and regional policy contexts within which Irish inshore fisheries (both islanders and non-islanders) operate. Next, I set out the ontological assumptions underpinning the State's fisheries management policies and practices. I then use my ethnographic research into Irish islands small-scale fisheries to consider the challenges to these ontological assumptions that are manifesting in a changing policy environment that is, at the same time, remaining stubbornly anchored in historical fisheries governance approaches.

### *European fisheries context*

In administering and managing Irish fisheries, the Irish Government is obliged to meet targets and obligations under various European directives (Common Fisheries Policy, Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Maritime Spatial Planning Directive) and European regulations (Common Organisation of the Markets of Fishery and Aquaculture Products and the Fisheries Control Regulation). European fisheries management is highly technocratic. It relies on technical tools such as setting catch limits on individual stocks (Total Allowable Catches) to achieve a balance between catching the maximum amount of fish while maintaining stock populations (Maximum Sustainable Yield) and encouraging Member States to implement Transferable Catch Shares, essentially a privatisation of fishing rights by enabling fishing quotas (the catch limits that are set for quota-controlled commercial fisheries) to be bought and sold. (Ireland has resisted this move to privatisation – fishing quotas remain the property of the State and are not transferrable between vessels). The single species focus of Maximum Sustainable Yield for individual stocks has been criticised as inappropriate as it does not take into account stock interactions with different species, such as predator-prey interactions (Farrell et al. 2010). The majority of EU quota-controlled stocks are mixed species fisheries, meaning that most fishers will catch a mix of different species in

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<sup>6</sup> I conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with islanders from Arranmore and Inishboffin (Donegal Islands), Inishturk and Clare Island (Mayo Islands), Inishboffin and Inis Oírr (Galway Islands), Bere Island, Cape Clear, Sherkin Island, Heir Island (Cork Islands).

<sup>7</sup> Four of these islands have just one remaining registered vessel.

their nets, including species that they are not targeting, known as by-catch). The EU relies on individual stock assessments carried out by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) to inform its policies and legislation with evidence-based science. The Common Fisheries Policy governs the shared waters in the Exclusive Economic Zone of each EU Member State (12-200 nautical miles (nm) offshore). Territorial or inshore waters (0-12nm) are under the jurisdiction of Member States' national authorities. Quota-controlled species that enter inshore waters are subject to the annual catch limits imposed by the Common Fisheries Policy and managed by each Member State. Seventy five per cent of the EU's 77,501 vessels are small-scale vessels, meaning they are under 12 metres in total length and fish with static or non-towed gear (as distinct from mobile gear that is towed behind vessels). Within the EU's rapidly expanding 'blue economy', the concept of 'blue growth' is being mobilised to reconfigure access to the ocean with little attention being paid to the social and ecological consequences of this new wave of enclosures for the small-scale fishing industry which is struggling to comply with the terms of entry to the 'blue growth party' (Brent et al. 2018).

#### *National fisheries and the marine planning context*

This 'blue growth' squeeze is felt even more keenly by small-scale fishing communities in small, offshore island communities, such as on the offshore islands along Ireland's west coast. Their plight is recognised to an extent by the Common Fisheries Policy which provides that "[s]mall offshore islands which are dependent on fishing should, where appropriate, be especially recognised and supported in order to enable them to survive and prosper" (recital 20). It is timely to revisit Irish fisheries governance at this time through the empirical lens of its small-scale island fisheries as the policy and institutional environment for Ireland's inshore fisheries has been rapidly evolving since 2014. A cross-party government committee published a substantial report containing 29 recommendations for Irish coastal and island fisheries that focused on "the socio-economic challenges facing rural coastal and island communities" (Oireachtas 2014, 5). The 2014-2020 European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Operational Programme made it a mandatory requirement for Member States to establish an action plan for small scale coastal fisheries in order to access EMFF funding for these fisheries. In Ireland, consultative forums for small-scale fishers at national and regional levels were established in 2014 by Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM, Ireland's Seafood Development Agency), to "facilitate the development of a coherent inshore sector 'voice'" (inshoreforums.ie). Fisheries Local Action Groups (funded via the EMFF and administered by BIM) have been active since 2016 and an Inshore Fisheries Strategy was published by BIM in 2019, with a vision of a "united industry with a strong and influential voice" for the inshore sector (BIM 2019, 6).

Ireland's national marine planning framework process began in earnest towards the end of 2018. Over the course of two years, the Marine Planning and Policy Division in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government invited submissions from the public to inform a National Marine Planning Framework Baseline Report, a Marine Planning Policy Statement and National Marine Planning Framework. In 2019, a new 'Charter for Fishers, Coastal Communities and the Islands', launched by an Irish Member of the European

Parliament, highlighted the need for support for Irish small scale fisheries, fisheries-dependent island communities and called for a community-focused approach in protecting the Irish fishing sector, coastal communities, islands and marine biodiversity. Towards the end of 2019, the Marine Environment Division in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government started work with an Expert Advisory Group (consisting of academics and policy implementers) for the expansion of Ireland's network of marine protected areas, to achieve the European-level Marine Strategy Framework Directive target to protect 10% of the waters of each Member State by 2020. Although planning and management of the Irish marine environment sits in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage<sup>8</sup>, fisheries management falls within the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). While fisheries (and aquaculture) are identified as part of the National Marine Planning Framework, DAFM's competencies to govern these sectors will not fall within the remit of the new legislation underpinning the national marine planning process, which aims to bring about more coherent governance of a marine space that is subject to increasing competing demands. DAFM's decision to remain outside the new legislation's remit exacerbates the longstanding problem of sectoral management and fragmentation within Irish marine governance (see O'Hagan et al. 2020) where responsibilities are shared between at least 34 different government departments, agencies and bodies (Kelly et al. 2018).

#### *National islands context*

The Irish islands sit within a widely dispersed marine governance policy context (Kelly et al. 2019; O'Hagan et al. 2020) and an historically fragmented islands governance context (Ferriter 2018). At a national level, responsibility for the islands off the west coast of Ireland currently falls within the Department of Social Protection, Community & Rural Development and the Islands. The islands are organised into four island groups at a county or regional level which means they are governed by four different local authorities (Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork county councils). A further administrative distinction is made between Gaeltacht (native Irish-speaking) and non-Gaeltacht (English speaking) islands, with the Gaeltacht islands falling within the remit of a regional authority, Udarás na Gaeltachta, which is tasked with the economic, social and cultural development of native Irish-speaking regions of Ireland.<sup>9</sup> At a community level, the islands are represented by voluntary organisation Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann (the Irish Islands Federation) which has, since its foundation in 1984, been calling for more cohesive island policies and a national governance approach. Following years of fragmented islands governance, an Interdepartmental Committee on Island Development was set up in 2019 to bring together the disparate policies into a single "cross-Government Islands Policy with an associated Action Plan" (DCHG 2019).

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<sup>8</sup> With the formation of a new Irish Government on 27 June 2020, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government was renamed the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

<sup>9</sup> The regional authority Udarás na Gaeltachta has a service level agreement with the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht – a different department to the department responsible for the islands.

An emerging player since 2014 in this dynamic institutional and policy landscape for the islands, fisheries and the marine environment is a grassroots, island communities-based organisation and cooperative, the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation (IIMRO). IIMRO ([iimro.org](http://iimro.org)) was set up as an affiliate of Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann (the Irish Islands Federation) in 2014 to represent the voices of Ireland's island communities on marine-related matters. The eighteen islands in four island groups (Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork) are home to a dwindling population of approximately 3000 people, with 98 registered small-scale vessels, of which 33 have potting licences and 65 have general polyvalent (multi-purpose) licences. Forty-three of these island fishers are members of IIMRO and the organisation has worked to make island fishers institutionally visible through engagement in various marine fora, at regional, national and European levels. For example, IIMRO is a member of a European small-scale fisheries network called Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE)<sup>10</sup>, and is also represented on the North Western Waters Advisory Council (one of the regional councils that provides fishing industry and civil society advice on fisheries management to the European Commission). It is involved in Ireland's regional and national inshore fisheries forums, and is a stakeholder (as Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann) on Ireland's National Marine Planning Framework Steering Group. In recent years, it has, unsuccessfully, attempted to bring into being a vision for communities-based, seasonal, mixed fisheries across the islands, co-managed in collaboration with relevant government agencies and departments. DAFM and the National Inshore Fisheries Forum have both opposed proposed legislation<sup>11</sup> to allocate a community fisheries quota to the islands, arguing that this would be inconsistent with the management of fishing opportunities as a public resource. At the time of writing, IIMRO was grappling with bureaucratic obstacles to achieving recognition as a producer organisation for island fisheries.<sup>12</sup> Such recognition would be an important step towards managing island fisheries on a collective, seasonal basis.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://lifeplatform.eu/>

<sup>11</sup> The Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill 2017

<sup>12</sup> IIMRO's first application to be recognised as a producer organisation did not (and could not) fulfil a criterion imposed by DAFM that required at least 30% of the producer organisation members' catch to be landed into one of Ireland's four main fishing ports. Most island boats do not land into these big ports. They fish close to home and land into their nearest port, due to time, weather and financial constraints. As the criteria imposed by the application process were found to be out of line with the most recent EU Regulations, DAFM subsequently updated the process to include alternative criteria, to facilitate smaller vessels. However, pitfalls for small vessels remain. The organisation applying for producer organisation status must have a minimum of 30 members who are active, commercial fishers and a minimum combined value of €2 million (or combined volume of 1000 tonnes) for the members' catch. At the time of writing, 19 of IIMRO's 43 boat-owning members were deemed ineligible due to lack of documentation to prove they are actively fishing. Usually proof of commercial activity is provided by a vessel's logbook which records the catch. Many of IIMRO's members are vessels under 10 metres which are not legally obliged to keep logbooks. A record of their fishing activity is documented in the sales notes (or shellfish registration documents) generated when they sell their catch to fish buyers, who are required to submit this documentation to the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority. The fishers have no control over submission of this documentation. Where there is no documented record of a vessel's catch, it cannot be counted as an eligible vessel (ie one that is actively fishing) for the producer organisation application. At the time of writing, IIMRO was attempting to source alternative documentary evidence to prove that these boats are actively fishing, such as evidence of participation in a fisheries research project with the State research agency and evidence of receipt of funding for safety equipment from BIM (Ireland's Seafood Development Agency). However, it is not clear whether such documentation would be acceptable to DAFM as proof of active fishing.



IIMRO (as Comhhdháil Oileán na hÉireann) had also proposed the offshore islands as a pilot regional case study for the national marine spatial planning process, in an effort to promote planning and management of the islands as a coherent regional group and to counter the fragmented approach to islands governance mentioned earlier.

Analytically, it is useful to think about IIMRO's actions as attempting to assert a particular world or ontology that is "bumping heads" (Blaser 2013a, 25) with various ontological assumptions underlying the State's approach to fisheries governance. Following Blaser (2013a) and Yates et al. (2017), I consider the points of ontological friction where these worlds 'bump heads', and apply "situated questioning" (Joronen and Häkli 2016, 14) to the ontological assumptions underpinning Irish fisheries governance. This approach counters a simplistic reading of the struggle as one of marginalised islanders trying to commandeer quota for island fisheries and foregrounds the practical and political consequences of denying space to diverse worlds that refuse to conform to dominant governance imaginaries, which in turn resist being reconfigured. I argue that this intransigence and persistence of the status quo is counterproductive not only for the islands but also for the State as it is actively impeding the State's commitment to protecting and supporting the important socio-economic links between fishing vessels and fisheries dependent coastal communities (see DAFM 2016; DAFM 2019).

This ontological analysis is also relevant for small-scale fisheries in other European jurisdictions, where a shared challenge is the policy focus on large-scale fisheries (Pita et al. 2020b). Thinking about the ontological assumptions underpinning governance approaches can provide insights into what may be impeding differentiated governance approaches for small scale fisheries. For example, fisheries governance in Norway is characterised by a political focus on finding negotiated solutions through co-management that work for particular contexts, rather than being underpinned by any consistent ideology that might restrain the diversity and flexibility necessary for small scale fisheries to survive as both a part-time activity and a full-time profession (Johnsen 2020). While protection of the small scale fleet is an important policy focus in Norway, its pragmatic fisheries governance approaches are quite different to Ireland's, such as a regulatory framework that supports small-scale fishers to have increased access to fish when stocks appear in the inshore waters (Johnsen 2020). Such a pragmatic approach is hindered by fisheries governance approaches that are underpinned by inflexible and unquestioned ideologies that have been designed around a minority of the fleet. Another shared challenge across several European countries is a lack of access to quota-controlled species which impedes small-scale fishers from diversifying into different fisheries and forces them into the precarious situation of relying on a reduced number of species (Pita et al. 2020b). For example, in Scotland, as in Ireland, licensing and quota management practices have increasingly forced the small fishing communities in Scotland's Outer Isles to depend largely on shellfish for their income, local management systems are lacking and there are calls for national policy frameworks to facilitate the diversity that is needed for the small-scale sector to function properly (Symes et al. 2020). Acknowledging and supporting the social-ecological diversity of Swedish small-

scale fisheries, beyond differences in vessel size, has been highlighted as a key to escaping decline and meeting future challenges in that jurisdiction (Björkvik et al. 2020).

This sets the scene for a consideration of the ontological assumptions or ‘stories’ underlying the State’s fisheries governance approaches in Ireland and how they generate friction not only with an islands-based vision for fisheries governance but also with the State’s own stated desire to protect and support fisheries-dependent coastal communities. In the next section, I turn to the ontological assumptions underpinning the State’s fisheries governance approaches.

#### *The ‘stories’ that underpin fisheries governance approaches in Ireland*

I have identified six ontological assumptions or stories within Irish State fisheries governance approaches which generate friction with IIMRO’s attempts to assert island small-scale fisheries as a differentiated ‘world’ within this governance system. I have categorised these stories as social-historical, ecological, geographical, technocratic, material and markets-driven:

- (i) **Social-historical:** The resource is a public asset, any fisher who has a polyvalent licence can access fishing opportunities for quota-controlled species and any move towards privatisation of the resource would be detrimental to fisheries-dependent coastal communities and should be resisted.
- (ii) **Ecological:** Fisheries are managed as single species stocks.
- (iii) **Geographical:** Fishing vessels are not tied to a specific geographic location.
- (iv) **Technocratic:** Smaller vessels can be managed within the paradigms of the current governance system.
- (v) **Material:** The inshore fleet is a cohesive community of shellfishers, targeting non-quota species and sharing collective interests.
- (vi) **Markets-driven:** The economic value of the resource should be maximised to avoid waste such as unused quota. The most (economically) valuable and productive operators are entitled to preferential access to certain stocks.

I have framed these assumptions as ontological (what we know), even though I recognise that they contain elements of epistemology (how we know what we know) and axiology (how we think about and manage values and preferences). As such, I agree with Williams (2014; 2018) that ontological, epistemological and axiological pluralism are fundamentally interrelated. For example, the Technocratic and Markets-driven assumptions are embedded in a utilitarian worldview that understands preferences and values as external to the policy process, interest-based, and subject to trade-offs. The Social-historical, Ecological, Geographical and Material assumptions reflect an epistemology that does not acknowledge its positionality and that is defined by those in positions of power (for example those who have access to decision-making tables where they can leverage their interest-based preferences).

*(i) Social-historical: The resource is a public asset, any fisher who has a polyvalent licence can access fishing opportunities for quota-controlled species and any move towards*

*privatisation of the resource would be detrimental to fisheries-dependent coastal communities and should be resisted.*

The State's ontological assumption that the fisheries resource is (and should be) a public asset is clearly articulated by the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM):

“In Ireland, quota is a public resource and is managed to ensure that property rights are not granted to individual operators. This is seen as a critical policy in order to ensure that quotas are not concentrated into the hands of large fishing companies whose owners have the financial resources to buy up such rights. In Ireland, any movement towards privatisation and concentration of rights into the hands of large companies would seriously risk fishing vessels losing an economic link with Ireland's coastal communities and undermining the socio-economic importance of the fishing industry in the coastal communities dependent on fishing. The result of this long standing policy is that the Irish fishing fleet involves a balanced spread of sizes and types of fishing vessels who have retained a strong economic link with our coastal communities and have delivered economic activity including vital employment in these communities, where there are very limited alternative economic activities” (DAFM 2016, 1; DAFM 2019, 2).

In Ireland, unlike in other EU Member States, quota is State property and is not transferrable between vessels (although the Quota Management Advisory Committee can engage in quota swaps with other Member States). The Quota Management Advisory Committee<sup>13</sup> (also known as the whitefish committee) determine how much of each quota-controlled whitefish stock in Irish waters can be fished by the various fleet segments each month. According to this story of a public resource that is accessible to all polyvalent licence-holders, no fisher or group of fishers is deserving of differentiated treatment because “everyone in Ireland is equal, they are Irish, so they have access to Irish waters.”<sup>14</sup>

In practice, however, differentiated treatment exists within the fisheries management system for certain categories of fishing vessel and fish species. Ireland's specialised mackerel and herring fleets are entitled to specific quota allocations for individual vessels while other (non-pelagic) vessels fish against two different common quota pots, depending on whether a vessel is over or under 18 metres (with the over 18m vessels getting double the quota allocation of the under 18m vessels):

“The Quota Management Advisory Committee...set [quota] ratios that are maintained, these are historical ratios and there are different ratios for different species.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Quota Management Advisory Committee manages whitefish stocks and mackerel stocks targeted by under 18m vessels using ring nets. Members of the Quota Management Advisory Committee include representatives from DAFM, the four Fish Producer Organisations, the Fishing Co-operative Association, the Irish Fish Producers and Exporters Association and, since 2016, the National Inshore Fisheries Forum. These members sit on separate management committees for pelagic stocks such as herring and mackerel, which are managed on an annual or seasonal basis, with catch limits largely determined according to historical catch records.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with representative of Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2019

<sup>15</sup> Interview with representative of Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2019

As such, the quota management system involves categorisations and quota allocation ratios that continue to enact (or bring into being) particular fisheries ‘realities’ that are “historically, culturally and materially located” (Mol 1999, 75) and, thereby, to stifle other, possible realities that ‘bump heads’ with the status quo. It is difficult to transform the status quo when it is reinforced by the locking in of elements in the system by path-dependent decision-making (Kelly et al. 2019). A good example is the persistence of the historical categorisations of fleet segments into under 18m vessels and over 18m vessels. The material realities of smaller (under 12m) vessels are subsumed within a categorisation that is designed around larger vessels, although attempts have been made to acknowledge these material realities. Since 2014, the State-created National Inshore Fisheries Forum (representing under 12m vessels) has occupied a seat on the Quota Management Advisory Committee (QMAC), who meet monthly to decide on catch limits for quota-controlled whitefish stocks. In deciding on monthly quota allocations,

“the QMAC operate by examining in detail each month the operation of each fishery, available quota and uptake patterns for the different métiers of fishing vessels, including inshore fishing vessels. There are detailed discussions each month on allocations taking account of the divergent situation of the fleet, including that of smaller inshore fishing vessels, and of the market. The Committee may also take account of the weather/sea conditions in the preceding quota period and the impact this may have had on the industry during that period, particularly in respect of the smaller vessels.” (DAFM 2016, 1).

The problem is that current fisheries management categorisations have been devised on the basis of a particular story or historical assumptions around access to Irish fisheries resources. Ontological assumptions that long predate the more recent policy recognition of smaller-scale vessels thus underpin which fishing entities exist within DAFM’s fleet segment categories and the practices by which they become known (eg whether they are entitled to an individual quota allocation or depend on a lottery or a carve-out<sup>16</sup> to access quota-controlled species). As such, particular ‘worlds’ or ontological ‘realities’ are reinforced by the categorisations and the practices they require (Sullivan 2017). The dominant ontological reality that has been historically structured around larger, specialised, industrial vessels has not been disrupted by the ontological realities inhabited by small-scale (under 12m) vessels. Rather, the State has, quite literally, carved out sections of this historical status quo for these smaller vessels in the form of small percentages of quota allocations that are set aside for smaller vessels. An exception to this practice was a policy directive that prohibited over-18 metre vessels from fishing within six miles from shore. The ban, which took effect in January 2020, was subsequently overturned (on the basis of a procedural issue) in a court case taken by the owners of three over-18 metre vessels.<sup>17</sup> This means that larger vessels continue to compete

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<sup>16</sup> By carve-out, I mean circumstances where a small percentage of a quota-controlled species may be set aside for vessels of a particular size and/or using a particular type of gear, who do not fulfil requirements to access fishing opportunities for such species. For example, since under 10 metre vessels are not required to maintain logbooks they cannot provide documentation to show a track record of fishing for certain species.

<sup>17</sup> Kennedy and Minihane v The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2020) IEHC 497

with the smaller vessels in the inshore waters on which the under-12m vessels rely for all of their income (BIM 2017). Despite the concessions mentioned above, the historical fisheries management categories continue to reinforce a ‘world’ that privileges larger, specialised vessels, as different requirements combine to frustrate the attempts of small-scale vessels to assert a reality that is designed around their differences. The dominant ontological reality is not disrupted. IIMRO’s efforts can be understood as deliberately disruptive as it seeks to assert recognition of a many worlds reality, or pluriverse (Blaser 2013a) as the material realities of island small scale fishing communities cannot fully assert themselves within the dominant ‘one-world world’ (Law 2011 cited in Blaser 2013b). The next section reinforces how the social-historical assumption of access to fishing opportunities as a public resource is challenged by the socio-ecological rhythms of island small-scale vessels fishing inshore waters around the islands.

*(ii) Ecological: Fisheries are managed as single species stocks*

As explained previously, single species stock management is the basis of fishing management approaches in the EU, including Ireland. Fisheries scientists, policymakers and implementers are, of course, aware of multi-species interactions (eg predator-prey) and technical interactions in a mixed species fishery (such as bycatch or non-target species being mixed in with target species). The latter is of critical concern since the introduction of the EU’s landing obligation (a ban on discarding unwanted fish) in January 2019, which could lead to early closure of mixed fisheries when the catch limit for one of the stocks has been reached (DAFM 2019).

The ontological insight here is that the single species stock management approach asserts a reality that is aligned with larger vessels using specialised fishing gear and covering large distances to *follow* and target large volumes of a high value, single species (such as mackerel or herring) within season limits set by the fisheries authorities.

A different ecological reality materialises in the fishing grounds accessible to small-scale vessels, whose waters are characterised by mixed stocks that appear and disappear at different times of the year, according to a variety of factors, such as migration patterns. Small-scale vessels inhabit a reality where they must *wait* for different stocks to appear within their much more limited reach (discussed further in the Geographical story (iii) below). The seasonal appearances of quota-controlled stocks in inshore waters around the islands may not correspond to the official season for certain species (when fishers are permitted to start fishing for certain quota-controlled species), thus failing to ontologically capture the socio-ecological rhythms of the inshore waters experienced by island fishers:

“I think the herrings, you can only fish them later in the year. Say if they were here early, that we would be allowed to catch them when they are in our area rather than having to wait until the season is open. ...[so] when the fish arrive on our shores that we could automatically catch them while they are there...they will disappear again.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, Cork islands, 2019

The reinforcement of the dominant ontological reality of larger industrial vessels is visible in how the seasons for pelagic species are determined:

“The fishing of pelagic species is generally confined to the spring and autumn months with the fisheries being opened and closed by the Minister on the basis of *industry recommendations* and catch levels” (DAFM 2016, 2, emphasis added).

The pelagic fleet (numbering 50 vessels) is a highly specialised, industrialised and economically profitable fleet, in particular the 23 vessels belonging to the ring-fenced Pelagic Refrigerated Sea Water fleet segment, who benefit from individual vessel allocations of the vast majority of quota for pelagic species. Pelagic vessels tend to fish far offshore. As the season limits recommended by the pelagic industry are unlikely to focus on the timing of appearances of valuable pelagic stocks such as mackerel and herring in inshore waters (which may not even be predictable from year to year), the dominant ontological reality of larger industrial vessels is not disrupted by the carve outs from pelagic quota allocations for smaller vessels.

The Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill, proposed in 2017, can be understood as an attempt to assert and make legible within fisheries policy a world of socio-ecological rhythms familiar to island fishing communities, whereby a small percentage of Ireland’s annual quota allocation (decided at EU level) would, in relation to island relevant species, be ring-fenced as community quota for polyvalent-registered island fishers who would be identified in a new, differentiated sub-segment of the polyvalent (multi-purpose) fleet segment. This would allow smaller island boats to fish this ringfenced quota more flexibly, for example by fishing valuable pelagic stocks (within the ringfenced allocation) at the times those stocks *appear* in island waters, even if this does not coincide with the industry-determined limits of the specialised, offshore pelagic fishery. This legislation would therefore do what the quota carve outs fail to achieve – namely, to disrupt the dominant status quo of an ontological reality historically built around a large, profitable, specialised fleet with the capacity to cover vast distances to exploit their fishing opportunities. The legislation has the potential to be an essential element to bringing into being a fisheries governance reality of co-management of a seasonal mixed fishery for the islands by an islands producer organisation working with fishers, technology, island institutions, government agencies, fisheries scientists and social scientists. The practices needed to bring into being such a seasonal mixed fishery reality for the islands do not fit within the general principle of fisheries managed as single species stocks:

“We’re not treating mackerel in isolation and they [DAFM] are. They have a specialised mackerel fleet. Smaller boats fish a lot of different species, they’re not specialised. If you’re not in some of these fisheries you can’t get into them. You need track record and tonnage and kilowatts. .... We want to base [islands] fisheries management on science...rather than track record, kilowatts, tonnage, fleet segment.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Paraphrased from notes of telephone conversation, Donegal Islands, 2019

The legislation's attempt to reconfigure island fisheries as a differentiated sub-segment within the State's fleet segment categories has generated significant friction with those ontologically aligned with the State's approach to fisheries governance (DAFM and the NIFF), who, as previously mentioned, view the legislation as a move towards privatisation of Irish quota. Accordingly, the legislation must be resisted, as per the social-historical story outlined in (i) above. I consider below (in *iv*) *Technocratic*) the contradictions within this reading of the proposed legislation and how this resistance is undermining the State's commitment to protecting fisheries-dependent communities.

*(iii) Geographical: Fishing vessels are not tied to a specific geographic location*

The privileging of the 'world' of specialised fleets, underpinned by single species stock management, feeds into the ontological assumption that fishing vessels are not tied to a specific geographical location, and that fisheries policy should not provide fishing opportunities based on differentiated geographical constraints across the fleet. Despite the State's awareness of the "divergent situation of the fleet, including that of smaller inshore fishing vessels", a reinforcement of the ontological reality of the larger, more specialised vessels is clear from an explanation given by a DAFM representative as to why a ringfenced quota for island small-scale vessels would set a dangerous precedent:

"Boats don't obey a geographical location. They land fish and catch fish based on where the fish are and where they get the highest price. The sea is joined up wherever you are, it is only the land that separates it. There would be huge hostages to fortune if the Department established the principle that gives different opportunities based on where you are geographically. Fish move, boats move and you can land into different ports."

The assumption that fishing vessels are not tied to a specific geographical location also underpins the allocation of fishing opportunities. In practice, smaller vessels have more limitations than larger vessels, and access fishing opportunities differently. For safety reasons, smaller vessels cannot fish in the same conditions or as far offshore as larger vessels. Smaller vessels have a much shorter range and do not travel far from their home port. Bad weather conditions limit their days at sea, choice of fishing grounds and result in shorter fishing seasons. Larger vessels tend to be more specialised in gear, in the species targeted and can travel far from their home ports. As mentioned above, the State is clearly aware of the "divergent situation of the fleet" to the extent that such differences are stated to be considered in quota allocation decisions. The point here is twofold: (i) the ontological assumptions underlying the fisheries governance system privileges those vessels that are not tied to a geographical location, that can *follow* fish rather than wait for them to *appear* and that can choose which port to land into and (ii) recognition of the "divergent situation of the fleet" while remaining embedded in a system that was historically constructed around the ontological reality of an extremely profitable and comparatively small part of the fleet (approximately 14% of the Irish fleet fish in offshore waters), reinforces the notion of a 'one-world world' (Law 2011 cited in Blaser 2013b) where other 'worlds', such as that of island

fishing communities, are relegated to a carved out niche within a ‘world’ to which they do not belong.

Although it does not explicitly mention preferential access for small-scale fisheries, Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy attempted to account for such differences within Member State fleets by requiring Member States, when allocating fishing opportunities to their national fishing vessels, to “use transparent and objective criteria including those of an environmental, social and economic nature.... Member States shall endeavour to provide incentives to fishing vessels deploying selective fishing gear or using fishing techniques with reduced environmental impact, such as reduced energy consumption or habitat damage.” In practice, the European Commission is powerless to challenge Member States on whether measures they have implemented pursuant to Article 17 (such as carving out certain quota allocations for artisanal and small-scale fishers) are effective in providing equitable access to quota controlled species for smaller vessels, as Member States have discretion on how to implement this provision. While DAFM has implemented certain measures pursuant to Article 17, such as carve outs for smaller vessels without track record to access certain quota-controlled species, such access does not always materialise in practice, when the access is determined by the technocratic rules of a ‘world’ that has been designed for vessels inhabiting a different material reality.

*(iv) Technocratic: Smaller vessels can be managed within the paradigms of the current governance system*

As argued earlier, the recognition by the State of fleet diversity is embedded in a system that is designed around an assumption of commensurability between small and large vessels in terms of ability to access fish stocks. This assumption can also be found amongst fish producer organisations (POs), whose members tend to be larger vessels. Commenting in a webinar on “Producer organisations and cross-border cooperation in small-scale coastal fisheries: challenges & opportunities”, the CEO of one Irish PO observed that “*a Polyvalent 5m vessel share of the monthly quota is the same as a 17m vessel showing the smaller vessel has more fish to catch than the larger vessel up to 17 m boat.*”<sup>20</sup> A similar line of argument was put forward by the (then) Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in a 2019 parliamentary debate on the draft legislation proposing ring-fenced community quota for island fishers. The Minister argued that the legislation was unnecessary because an imminent exclusion of larger (over 18 metre) trawlers from the six mile coastal zone represented a likely reduction of 2.6% (€5.5 million) of their overall landings, which translated to a potential increase of 62% in the value of their landings for smaller vessels, who would have the opportunity to fish herring and sprat in bays and coastal areas no longer accessible to large trawlers. This equation of *-2.6% for >18m vessels = (potentially) +62% for <18m vessels* ignores the fact that the polyvalent (multi-purpose) fleet segment has two sub-segments that separate over 18m and under 18m vessels. It is not permitted to transfer

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<sup>20</sup> (Patrick Murphy CEO IS&WFPO 10 June 2020 Producer organisations and cross-border cooperation in small-scale coastal fisheries: challenges & opportunities 10 June 2020. Organised by DG MARE and Tetra Tech International Development)



capacity (quota) between these sub-segments. The smaller boats cannot apply to access herring quota that would have been used by the larger trawlers to fish herring in these bays and coastal areas, as this quota has been allocated to a sub-segment to which the smaller vessels do not belong (R. Brennan 2019).<sup>21</sup> Although there is a carve out for north west herring of up to 5% of the quota, this is for “vessels under 20m without a track record on the basis of modest monthly catch limits” (DAFM 2016, 4) and not specifically for small-scale vessels. The north-west herring carve out that is specific to small-scale vessels is restricted to “punts” (small, open deck vessels) that use a specific type of fishing gear (“Artisanal draft ring-net fishing” (DAFM 2016, 4). This means that small-scale vessels without track record for herring that are not punts (such as half-deckers<sup>22</sup>), and that use gill nets rather than ring nets to commercially fish for herring, are not able to access this carve-out. They must compete with larger, more mobile vessels (up to 20 metres) for “modest monthly catch limits” that are not specific to small boats.

Further technicalities complicate access to herring for smaller vessels as State fisheries policy requires a vessel to have ‘herring tonnage’ in order to access the valuable, quota-controlled herring stocks. As one small-scale fisher explained,

“If I buy a bigger boat I have to buy herring tonnage from another boat in order to be able to fish herring with that bigger boat.”<sup>23</sup>

All fishing vessels must buy general tonnage as part of the licencing process. The amount of tonnage required is measured according to the amount of water displaced by the vessel (so smaller vessels require less tonnage). However, to fish herring commercially (outside the carve outs mentioned above), a vessel must have specific ‘herring tonnage’ which is tonnage with herring fishing rights attached to it. These rights will have been allocated to vessels according to their track record of fishing herring during particular reference years. As a result, herring tonnage is concentrated in the larger fleet as smaller vessels were often unable to provide the documentation to prove a track record of fishing herring. Tonnage is valuable as it can be traded separately to the vessel. Herring tonnage is particularly expensive and difficult to find on the market in the right quantity for a smaller vessel. The herring tonnage owner can sell a portion of his or her tonnage but cannot split the herring rights across different portions of that tonnage. In other words, the owner of herring tonnage must sell all of the herring tonnage to avoid being left with less valuable tonnage that has no herring rights attached. These technocratic obstacles effectively exclude small-scale fishers without herring track record from fishing the herring stocks that appear in their waters above “modest monthly catch limits”.

To appreciate the frustration that this creates, we need to bring into view the broader picture. Time and again during the fieldwork for this research, I heard from islanders that a

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<sup>21</sup> As mentioned earlier, this ban on larger vessels from fishing within the six mile limit was subsequently overturned in *Kennedy and Minihane v The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine* (2020) IEHC 497

<sup>22</sup> A half-decker has a small enclosed cabin, which means the deck is not completely open. A punt does not usually have an enclosed cabin.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Donegal islands, 2019

significant issue with developing and marketing a niche brand for “island fish” was a difficulty in accessing fish. One island business owner invested in a processing kitchen with the aim of sourcing whitefish from local fishers, a brilliant initiative that was frustrated by lack of volume and inconsistent supply of island fish. On this island, there is only one boat left that catches whitefish. However, this whitefish catch is incidental as the main focus of this boat is targeting shellfish. The fishers might cast their nets for whitefish on returning from a day shooting or hauling shellfish pots but whitefish is not their main target.

“If there was five fishermen out there working the exact same as Francis I think it would make life a lot simpler for us without a doubt.... Sometimes the five on a Thursday evening phone call of I have a load of boxes of pollock and you just want to tear your hair out, you are really going ‘f\*\*k’! Did you have any idea you were going to do that? If I had known that yesterday...”<sup>24</sup>

This lack of diversity in target species for the small-scale fleet is linked to the difficulty in accessing quota species, a shared challenge across European small scale fisheries (Pita et al. 2020). The increasing lack of diversity in Irish small scale fisheries has been recognised by the State:

“Over the past 20 years, fishing vessels under 12m in length have become increasingly specialised, targeting fewer species and becoming increasingly reliant on a limited number of fish stocks. The majority of their fishing effort is now directed on shellfish (lobster, crab, shrimp, clams), whereas previously they also fished for salmon, skates and rays, whitefish (cod, haddock, whiting, pollack), flatfish (turbot, plaice, sole) and herring among others. There is a domino effect here as the number of stocks available to the sector has declined so that pressure on the remaining stocks increases. Fishing on the main species of shellfish now occurs practically year-round, as opposed to seasonally, because the availability of whitefish and flatfish inshore is now too low to be commercially viable in many cases” (DAFM 2018a, 21).

There is, however, no recognition that this development of specialisation in the small-scale fleet is a familiar characteristic in a privatised fisheries system. In addition, the lack of diversity appears to be an acceptable status quo within the current fisheries governance system. This is reflected in the existence of a separate potting segment (for vessels licensed to catch shellfish only) and the prevailing policy discourse which deals with the inshore fleet as specialising in a limited number of shellfish species, but a distinct lack of support for a separate island fleet segment that could help to reverse the reliance of small island vessels on a limited number of stocks.

*(v) Material: The inshore fleet is a cohesive community of shellfishers, targeting non-quota species and sharing collective interests*

Since it achieved visibility in the policy environment in 2014, the inshore sector has been typically characterised as a shellfish fleet that is represented by a “unified voice” (BIM

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, Galway islands, 2019

2019). The vision of a “united industry with a strong and influential voice” for the inshore sector (BIM 2019) is a fundamental part of the State’s ontological framing of the inshore sector since the establishment of the national and regional inshore fisheries forums in 2014. At the parliamentary debate on the Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill, the (then) Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine emphasised that the national and regional inshore fisheries forums (NIFF and RIFFs) “are supporting initiatives that seek to protect the *collective interests of the inshore sector* in Ireland including on our islands. The NIFF has been effective in its participation on the quota management advisory committee, advocating on behalf of all small-scale fishers to influence how Ireland’s uptake of quota is achieved.” (Oireachtas 2019, emphasis added). The July 2020 Ministerial Briefing for the new Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine makes it clear that the role of the Inshore Fisheries Forums is management of non-quota species (i.e., mainly shellfish):

“The National (NIFF) and 6 Regional (RIFFs) Inshore Fisheries Forums are multi-stakeholder consultative bodies to foster industry-led development of proposals for the management of non-quota stocks within six nautical miles” (DAFM 2020, 14).

A press release from the state agency responsible for (amongst other things) fisheries management research described inshore fishing as taking place “in many rural communities with fishermen using small vessels to catch species such as lobsters, crabs, oysters, scallop, razor fish and clams.”<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, a DAFM representative told me (while discussing quota-managed species) that “the only thing that’s of interest to the inshore fleet is brown crab. There is more than enough mackerel for inshore boats under the artisanal set aside of 400 tonnes...as it has never been used up.”<sup>26</sup>

The ontological framing of the fleet as mainly a shellfish fleet, creates a tension with the ‘world’ that IIMRO is trying to assert, of an agile island fleet that can flexibly and sustainably access a mix of whitefish and shellfish species, informed by scientific advice and supported by local management of a ring-fenced community quota for the islands through an islands-specific producer organisation.

This is not to deny that the inshore fleet is, today, largely reliant on shellfish stocks. Indeed, islanders have expressed frustration that “the fishing base is too narrow in that it is almost exclusively shellfish and almost exclusively lobster.”<sup>27</sup> The point is that this status quo is difficult to transform within a system that is designed for a different fishing ‘reality’, so the casting of the inshore fleet as a shellfish fleet reinforces the dominant ontological framing that whitefish and pelagic species ‘belong’ to the larger boats. This discourse not only creates a tension with a different ‘world’ where small-scale fishers enact seasonal, *mixed* fisheries reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature-society boundaries of seasonal fish stocks that appear and disappear around the islands (Nightingale 2013), it stifles that world from being enacted

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<sup>25</sup> Marine Institute Press release 17.6.20 <https://www.marine.ie/Home/site-area/news-events/press-releases/explore-ireland%E2%80%99s-coastal-communities-oceans-learning-series>

<sup>26</sup> Interview, DAFM representative, 2019

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Galway islands, 2019

and belies a lack of connection with the lived realities and visions of small scale fishing communities on the ground, the ageing demographic of the fleet, the impact of administrative requirements on their communities and the lack of a reliable internet service on many of the islands and in rural coastal areas. The ontological reinforcement of the State's assumption that whitefish are not really relevant to the inshore fleet is also reflected institutionally. DAFM's inshore fishing unit deals with potting and shellfish while its sea fisheries policy management division deals with the larger boats and quota management for whitefish and pelagic species.

A central focus of fisheries management in this system is ensuring that quota allocations are efficiently used as a profit-maximising resource. There is concern that allocation of valuable fishing opportunities to the small-scale fleet might be wasteful and result in quota allocations not being fully used. One State representative reflected that "fishermen like to chase pieces of paper entitlements in the belief that that gives them something. They would never fish the herring but but will book into the fishery anyway as they want the piece of paper. 'I was part of the herring so you have to let me in again.'"<sup>28</sup> This is indicative of the markets-driven logic dominating the system.

*(vi) Markets-driven: The economic value of the resource should be maximised to avoid waste such as unused quota. The most (economically) valuable and productive operators are entitled to preferential access to certain stocks.*

Despite the State's ideological commitment to safeguarding fisheries as a public resource, the national quota management system has historically developed to favour the largest, most efficient and most productive operators.

"Fishing is rooted in those who are willing to take risks back in the eighties and nineties and everything was set in stone after that. That is why they get preferential access to it now, nothing has changed that view since."<sup>29</sup>

The State's focus on "improving the economic performance of the fleet" under its Fisheries Operational Programme (DAFM 2018b, 10) underlines how the State continues to equate the value of fishing with economic output. Amongst the small scale island fleet, some fishers appeared to accept this approach as inevitable:

"But that is realistic because these people are making money and that is what the government sees, and that works. Capitalism."<sup>30</sup>

The State's response to increased fishing pressure on mackerel stocks at the turn of the century was clearly driven by market logic. It ringfenced virtually all of the mackerel quota to the larger vessels, effectively creating a specialised mackerel fleet. Thus, in 2010, the

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, DAFM representative, 2019

<sup>29</sup> Interview, DAFM representative, 2019

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Mayo islands, 2019

eighty per cent of Ireland's annual mackerel quota that had been ringfenced to twenty three pelagic vessels a few years previously, was joined by a new ringfenced category: twenty seven of the larger polyvalent boats were allocated the remaining twenty per cent based on their track record of catching mackerel. The only open access mackerel quota that remained was the four hundred tonnes carved out or set aside for the small-scale, artisanal fleet who possessed boats with polyvalent licences.

It is clear that the State believes that this rational, market-driven approach is based on fairness:

“The Irish fish quota management system is designed to ensure, having regard to fishing patterns and market conditions, a fair and rational allocation of quotas between fishing vessel operators and management to support fishing seasons and the availability of by-catch quotas during the year” (Oireachtas 2020).

Once again, the issue here is not the existence of a markets-driven ontological assumption in and of itself. Rather it is the resulting erasure of different ‘worlds’ or ontologies that should also be legible within the policy domain. The overturning of the ban on larger vessels fishing within the six mile limit was a huge blow to the inshore sector, not least because this spatial initiative had recognised, at a policy level, the need for a differentiated approach for the small-scale fleet. The Norwegian “mixed economy” approach to fisheries governance shows that, despite a shift towards neoliberal, market-based approaches in that country, it is possible to create policy outcomes that address the inequities, inequalities and power imbalances that would arise from an over-reliance on the market to regulate itself. In Norway, the State, cooperative institutions and market instruments work together on negotiated outcomes by blending hierarchical, co-management and market-driven approaches and pragmatism and a focus on finding solutions is valued over any particular ideology (Johnsen 2020). As Johnsen (2020, 457) observes,

“In the Norwegian governance system, negotiations and partnership arrangements form a bridge between hierarchical state control and market forces. The legal framework in Norway mandates co-management solutions. However, the laws do not specify in detail the regulatory instruments to be used, thus giving freedom to find practical solutions. Negotiated solutions between stakeholders and authorities that are politically guaranteed through compromises in the Parliament are thus common in Norwegian fisheries’ policy. Some of the compromises, such as the system for allocating quotas to vessel groups, have survived for more than 25 years.”

#### *Concluding remarks*

This paper has argued that the squeeze on island inshore fishers is not simply spatial, it is ontological. It has demonstrated this ontological squeeze by identifying the consistent ideologies that underpin the State's fisheries approaches, and how these have prevented the creation of spaces that enable island inshore fisheries to be enacted through island logics. The ontological assumptions shaping the State's fisheries governance approaches fail island

inshore fisheries by failing to provide space for fisheries governance approaches that are rooted in the material realities of island life. Despite the State's ideological commitment to maintaining Irish fisheries as a public resource that supports fisheries dependent coastal and island communities, the last two decades have seen the small scale fleet become increasingly specialised while access to quota controlled species is concentrated in the hands of the larger, industrial vessels. In practice, access is contingent on being aligned with the logics of the State ontology, such as being a 'productive' fisher in the right fleet segment and satisfying the requisite technical parameters (track record, tonnage and/or kilowatts). This reproduces existing asymmetries of power within fisheries governance, privileging the larger, industrial fleet, whose material realities dominate current fisheries governance approaches.

Read through the lens of the State, which frames the fishing enterprise as efficient, profit-maximising fishers extracting resources from the sea, Irish small-scale fishers can find little, if any, space for the enactment of different fisheries ontologies. In particular, this constrains the agility of access to the resource that is crucial to the continuation of island small-scale fishing communities who depend on fish stocks *appearing* in the waters within their reach. This raises questions around the persistence of the ontological assumptions that underpin, and shape, Irish fisheries governance approaches. For example, why is the State's discourse of fisheries as a public resource, that is critical to the survival of coastal communities, (re)producing a fishing industry that is dominated by the logics of privatisation and profit-maximisation? What kind of fishing ontologies should governance logics, institutions and discourses aim to nurture in order to be more inclusive and to support a more diverse, innovative and sustainable fishing industry?

I have not proposed definitive answers to these questions, not least because I believe that answers (and perhaps new questions) are to be found in the emergence of more inclusive governance structures that are decoupled from the ontological assumptions that have produced a national fishing fleet with characteristics more familiar to a privatised system of fisheries resources. Although the creation of the national and regional inshore fisheries forums can be seen as embracing a deliberative approach, the Inshore Fisheries Sector Strategy's goal of a united voice and consensus across such a diverse fleet risks reinforcing the position (and positionality) of those whose voices are strongest (Williams 2018; Flannery et al. 2019). I have argued that the State's commitment to protecting Ireland's many fishing communities cannot be realised within a system that has been designed to privilege the minority of the national fleet. Changing this requires a more pluralist governance framework that facilitates differentiated approaches to a highly diverse fleet, not just between large and small vessels, but within the small-scale fleet itself. Williams (2018, 297) has observed that "a key resource for transcending different positionalities may be simply the result of people having to co-exist in a shared space (or acknowledge that they are co-dependent in some way on that space) even if they share little else." The goal should not be to achieve a definitive consensus or a unified voice, but to work on the basis that "[a]t its best, democratic consensus is ephemeral and episodic" (Williams 2018, 297), that agreements are contestable and that adaptation may be needed. There is an opportunity to adaptively organise governance practices by making visible the 'world' of the islands fleet in the form of an islands-specific

producers organisation and trialling a community quota initiative, perhaps in the broader context of a regional pilot for the islands as part of the National Marine Planning Framework. This could be a significant step towards managing diversity in a way that keeps everyone afloat.

## [Acknowledgements]

## Conflict of interest

The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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