

What do members have to say about SeaBOS? An analysis of interviews conducted in 2018

One element of the monitoring strategy for the SeaBOS initiative is to understand how individuals perceive the initiative's impact. To capture these perceptions, individual conversations are being conducted with key members, including the CEOs of the SeaBOS companies. These conversations provide a space for reflection and learning. They can help track progress, highlight the crucial role that leadership at the executive level can have in shaping corporate and industry change, and highlight areas where SeaBOS activities need to be adapted to respond to changing conditions and opportunities.

Overview

The SeaBOS initiative rests on voluntary participation by ten of the largest companies in the global seafood industry. Documenting the experiences and reflections of participants is key to understanding the initiative's development over time, and to supporting its continuous improvement of the initiative. To this end, conversations in the form of semi-structured interviews¹ were conducted with representatives of nine companies from March-August 2018*. Oral interviews lasted 30-80 minutes, and one interview was conducted in written form. Questions were open-ended, and focused on a) individual perceptions of SeaBOS, b) the story of engagement in the initiative, c) identified effects of SeaBOS, and d) looking ahead. The data summarized below focuses on: *Perceived benefits and risks of SeaBOS, Effects of the initiative so far, and, Proposals and wishes for moving forward*, as expressed during these interviews.

Perceived benefits and risks of SeaBOS

A majority of the participants of SeaBOS see the collaborative element of the initiative as the primary benefit of SeaBOS. The fact that the largest companies are brought together, and mostly represented by top management means that a lot can be achieved, which is illustrated by the following quote: *"no one company can [play] a very important role alone. We have to work together. Not only geographically, but also value-chain wise"*. Another participant describes the importance of joining forces as

follows: "we are sharing the same ocean, so my neighbors' disease will very soon be my disease. My neighbors' lice will soon travel to my fish. So, in a way, the solutions are very much in the cooperation". The initiative creates a joint voice for the companies, ultimately enabling a greater impact on the issues at hand.

Participants further stress the advantage of SeaBOS being a global initiative which offers opportunities for dialogue between regions and sectors: *"the important thing with this organization body is [that it's] worldwide, not only Europe, not only Asia, not only the US. But the whole world region"; "it's one of the few initiatives that look at wild caught and aquaculture and feed as one continuum, because generally initiatives that we are part of look at one or the other but not all three"*.

Participants also highlight the learning opportunity within SeaBOS. Through this collaboration, the different companies can share know-how and increase each other's awareness of the sustainability issues that the initiative takes on. When compared to other sustainability initiatives within the seafood industry, one of the advantages of SeaBOS is that it is considered a safe space for participants: *"because the meetings are closed-door, participants can engage in frank exchanges of views with no concerns about the audience"*.

As shown by the following quote, beyond learning from each other, an appreciated aspect of SeaBOS is that it is connected to science: *"actually there are not that many connections between business and academia, so I was excited by that prospect"*. The participants view

* All ten companies were offered to participate and all accepted. However, one interview had not yet been conducted at the time of writing this report.



Participants engage in conversation during the Stockholm Dialogue in 2017. Photo by: Jean-Baptiste Jouffray

the Stockholm Resilience Centre as an important actor in the initiative, offering research and advice on which SeaBOS can base its decisions. However, the combination of science and business can also be challenging, for example in terms of different time scales: *"the academic timescale very rarely matches the business timescale which I think is one of the reasons why they don't work well together. Academia has a much longer time frame"*. Another participant sees a risk that research and business may have conflicting ambitions: *"from a corporate point of view, if a policy is excessive because it is misled by scientists, this could jeopardize business activities"*.

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasize the importance of SeaBOS maintaining its momentum, ensuring that the ambitious statements also lead to practical outcomes. The participants further underline the importance of each company complying with the decisions coming out of SeaBOS – if one fails, the rest goes down with them: *"if anybody was attached to modern slavery again [...] then that would damage the whole SeaBOS and you basically would just look like a fool. So, we need to have some more certainty and comfort that the standards and practices we are talking about is really followed by all members"*. Bringing everyone onboard is therefore seen as critical, and this process takes time. This

tension between acting fast and bringing everyone along is illustrated by one participant's remark, *"If you want to go fast, you go alone, but if you want to go far, you go together"*. One participant explicitly noticed the importance of patience, as changing a complex business takes time: *"Our company has many different divisions and they are different from each other. Making a change requires a lot of time. There may be times that you get frustrated by this, but it would be highly appreciated if you could keep that in mind"*.

Having the decision-making power in the room is considered a prerequisite for success and several participants stress the importance of commitment from the highest level in all the companies, hoping that all CEOs will be present at the keystone dialogue in Tokyo in September. Furthermore, participants emphasize that SeaBOS should focus on a small number of issues where it can really make a difference: *"Let's focus on a few areas. Don't be too broad because then it will be diluted"*.

Lastly, participants of the initiative conclude that, while the SeaBOS companies are the key actors in terms of developing the solutions for a sustainable seafood industry, they are also the first ones to lose if the marine ecosystems collapse: *"I think, if fishing is not sustainable, the party who is really suffering is us fishing companies. There is*

nothing we can do without fish in the sea. Actually, maybe we should be the major engine, claiming sustainability before NGOs". In addition, SeaBOS is seen as a way to respond to the growing awareness and demand by consumers that companies engage in sustainable fishing practices.

Effects of the initiative so far

With SeaBOS still being in an early stage, the participants mainly identify progress and effects within the initiative itself. Here, many return to the value added from opening up a dialogue and communication between, primarily, western and eastern companies and business leaders: "I haven't seen any actual changes yet, but the fact that SeaBOS brought some companies to the table who would otherwise be difficult to engage with is certainly a sign of positive change".

Several participants claim that SeaBOS has definitely increased the awareness of sustainability and helped move sustainability issues to the top of the agenda, both within and outside of SeaBOS. This is due both to the scientific support provided and the collaboration between companies: "I guess I have learned a lot. I learned from the scientific material that was presented. And I learned from the other companies how they are working with sustainability". In addition, the initiative has made several participants aware of their power, in terms of political influence but also in terms of influencing other actors and companies within the seafood industry.

Some participants also note tangible progress within their companies. Examples include carrying out a thorough internal review of the company's sustainability work and performing an inventory of each species and its sustainability status. In the following quote, one company illustrates a direct consequence of engagement in SeaBOS: "We made our sustainability plan. Participation in SeaBOS and the information we gained there helped us to set the direction in creating this plan".

Proposals and wishes for moving forward

The participants of SeaBOS are hopeful about the future. A shared opinion is that SeaBOS has the potential to create the necessary changes that are required to create a sustainable seafood industry. Many argue that the initiative can take leadership on sustainability with a unique power to influence: "we should use it [our unique power] to have that high ambition level and I think that was what attracted us. We saw that this was an organization that could do something that we haven't seen before".

The major wish for the future amongst participants is to make SeaBOS even more global by including companies from the US, China and Russia. By doing so, participants believe that SeaBOS can become even more influential: "that makes us international and that makes us more powerful in influencing government or the rest of the seafood industry [adding companies from China, US and Russia]".

In terms of work strategy, several participants wish to see "hard" targets and deadlines set for each working group, and that the work towards these is transparent. Many believe that others in the industry will follow what SeaBOS does or decides: "once the largest companies commit, essentially everyone else would need to [do it] because mostly our supply chains all interact with each other. Similar on transparency, if we agree to a framework for transparency for those of us who are the largest companies, then that would set the standard for the seafood industry".

Most participants hope that SeaBOS will focus deeply on a few areas and issues to maintain momentum, but there is also receptiveness to taking on new challenges in the future. One participant suggests "to decide strategically a few high-level topics where we make a difference. One of them could likely be to show industry leadership with regards to plastic in the ocean". Another participant would like to see SeaBOS contributing to the development of sustainable innovations, such as alternative modes of transporting fresh fish to air transport.

References

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Acknowledgements: The authors acknowledge support from the Walton Family Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and Mistra, providing a core grant to the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

Graphics and layout: Jerker Lokrantz/Azote

Printed on FSC certified paper