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Growth and diversification of uses in fishing ports. The role of the Common Fisheries Policy in Galician ports in the 21st century

Jesús Felicidades-García

jesusfe@uhu.es  0000-0002-4194-8768

*Universidad de Huelva. Departamento de Historia, Geografía y Antropología,
Facultad de Humanidades. 21007 Huelva, España.*

María Ángeles Piñeiro-Antelo

manxeles.pineiro@usc.es  0000-0002-8837-989X

María José Piñeira-Mantiñán

mariajose.pineira@usc.es  0000-0003-3223-2239

*Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. Departamento de Geografía
Facultad de Geografía e Historia. 15703 Santiago de Compostela, España.*

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The European fisheries sector, and the Spanish one in particular, is heavily subsidised and subject to a set of common rules applicable to all Member States with the aim of guaranteeing the sustainability of fishing, the stability and quality of employment in the sector and the conservation and recovery of living aquatic resources (Milt, 2022). Fishing ports have been benefiting from these CFP funding lines because they are considered the first entry point in the seafood trade chain.

Since the end of the 20th century, a significant part of the European funds invested in fishing ports have been devoted to improving working conditions and promoting their development as a dynamic and modernising element of the activities linked to the sector. The result has been the enlargement of the port area and the improvement of its facilities. Although not all the investment made in fishing ports comes from these European funds, their impact must be considered high, especially among small and medium-sized ports, those highly specialised in fishing and those located in areas with high rates of dependence on the activity –proportion of employment in the sector and contribution to the local economy (Surís-Regueiro & Santiago, 2014).

The main objective of this research is to examine the impact of public subsidies from the Common Fisheries Policy on port infrastructures at regional level in Galicia (Spain), analysing the interest of financial instruments and funds derived from this policy in relation to fishing ports, the scope of subsidised measures, and the growth and diversification of port surface area and uses since the 1990s. Another objective of the paper is to study how the functional development of these ports has influenced the interaction with the surrounding city, in a context of loss of weight of the fishing sector and the consolidation of Blue Economy strategies.



From a methodological point of view, this research is developed in several phases to analyse the repercussions of the implementation of CFP funds on the process of growth, requalification and diversification of Galician fishing ports. The first phase of the paper focused on the analysis of the policies, regulations and actors involved in the process. In order to address the objective of analysing the potential of fisheries aid in ports, the research explores the different planning and regulatory documents of EU funds (communications, resolutions and programmes), as well as those coming from the national and regional levels.

In a second stage, the case study, centred on two Galician ports (Ribeira and Muros) has been carried out with a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis, using statistical and cartographic sources. For the cartographic treatment of the port information, vectorial geographic information from the topographic bases of the National Geographic Institute of Spain (IGN) and the cartographic service of the Xunta de Galicia has been used, as well as images from the National Aerial Orthophotography Plan (PNOA) and other photogrammetric flights since 1984, also available at the IGN. All the analysis was carried out using GIS for the delimitation of perimeters, buildings and port facilities and their quantification. Subsequently, this photo-identification phase was cross-checked through the DEUP reports, the exploitation of the Spanish Land Occupation database (SIOSE, between 2005 and 2016), information on land cover and land use, and field work in the two ports of the study. Finally, a detailed assessment of the degree of evolution and transformation of these infrastructures and spaces was also carried out using the GIS, which integrated all the aforementioned data sources.

Through this paper, the functional development of fishing ports and their capacity to directly condition their urban environment and their morphology and functionality (Hoyle, 1989; Hesse, 2018; Hein, 2021) has been explored in depth, making visible the co-dependence between urban and port development. Indeed, the processes of economic diversification of areas traditionally dependent on fishing have their physical expression in port spaces, and thus in port cities and “fishing places” (Urquhart & Acott, 2013). The growth and diversification observed in the ports of the study is due to a transfer of functions in line with the socio-productive restructuring encouraged by the EU in fishing and coastal communities. This process experienced by ports and cities has led to moments of more or less intense attraction or repulsion produced by the socio-economic relations generated between them (Hoyle, 2011), but in general has broadly enabled a way of life that generates a deep-rooted attachment to place and builds an ‘identity of place’ in coastal communities.

Increasingly, however, the development of policies favouring city-port integration is becoming more prevalent, based on the consideration of ports as places that make cities more attractive to their inhabitants and visitors (Márquez, 2022). In the case of fishing ports, these integration processes are stronger, as these places actively contribute to the sustainable development of coastal areas (Kahkzad & Griffiths, 2016; Urquhart & Acott, 2013), and play a key role in what Symes & Phillipson (2009) call the transition towards a more diversified local economy of fishing communities.

This is the process that has been observed in the ports of Ribeira and Muros where, with public funds, interventions have been financed that, more or less directly, humanise the port spaces, and determine mixed places of coexistence between port uses and citizens. In general, this dynamic has led to a significant increase in the surface area of almost all the fishing ports in Galicia. Although the Galician port geography is characterised by its high “smallholding” and a strong fishing vocation, and by constituting a complex port system dedicated to fishing, at present most ports are multifunctional spaces in which there is a progressive diversification-tertiarisation derived from the incorporation of nautical-sports, tourist and commercial uses and not strictly port uses.

From a financial point of view, 73,8 MEUR of public funds (European, state and regional) were allocated in Galicia between 1994 and 2013 to the construction and expansion of port facilities, which contributed to an increase in their facilities without any medium-term growth in the sector. In both case studies, the growth in surface area (since 1984 in Muros by 310 % and in Ribeira by 375 %) and in port facilities (since 1999 in Muros by 240 % and in Ribeira by 175 %) was not supported by the increase in the number of vessels based in the port, which decreased considerably, nor by the increase in fishing production, which reached much more modest values between 2004 and 2021, 5,6 % in the case of Ribeira and 15 % in the case of Muros.



Funds from the CFP financial instruments improved port services in general. However, the investments went hand in hand with a process of reduction of the fishing fleet and were not supported by a defined growth strategy according to the expectations of the sector, but were favoured by the strong availability of public subsidies coming, among others, from the European CFP funds. In this sense, the authors consider that an opportunity has been missed to organise, from a regional approach, the services available in the ports for their specialisation, which would have contributed to improving their competitiveness and to favouring the development of sustainable fishing, both in the small-scale and industrial fishing segments, both in European and international fishing grounds.

On the other hand, it is also a missed opportunity not to have articulated until now mechanisms for integration between the planning of port areas and the territorial and urban planning that affects above all the port umland. In this respect, there is a lack of projects to encourage the creation of governance structures at local level to facilitate coordinated decision-making. The challenge for fisheries policy is therefore to implement a sectoral policy from a territorial perspective with an emphasis on local development. Policy strategies for fisheries require a strong commitment to a fisheries sector and its ports that are placed at the heart of the local (blue) economy. Indeed, securing fishing activities is the basis for the diversification of fishing ports.