Small is beautiful – or is it? The challenges of integrating human rights principles into sector policies favourable to artisanal fisheries and mining

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Raising awareness about opportunities for transdisciplinary work and ethical grounding to meet the global challenges to the professions is paramount. Issues of justice and living within the planetary boundaries become also more prominent in the life, social sciences and humanities questioning disciplinary silos. Institutionalising alternatives that create and sustain broader knowledge ecologies for sustainable living is yet to be systematically enabled through new learning and educational pathways. We argue, that there are considerable mutual learning opportunities between artisanal, small-scale mining and small-scale fisheries.

The global employment in the artisanal gold mining sector is estimated at some 10 to 15 million people, of whom 4.5 million are women and 0.6 million children. Some 40 million people are estimated along value chains in the artisanal fishing of whom 50% are estimated to be women. In both sectors informality is high, production very incompletely recorded and relations with governments and local administrations tend to be difficult as perceptions about the negative sides of the artisanal operations are pervasive in a policy context modelled on industrial exploitation and value chains. Where attempts have been made to quantify production and role in employment, food security or even in contribution to GDP and international trade, the numbers almost always justify policy change in favour of the small-scale sectors. In the face of disruptive technologies liable to make many industrial jobs redundant, opportunities for a new brand of artisanal operators in higher value added segments would be possible with suitable investment in people and institutions. This could go well beyond the poverty discourse into which artisanal miners and fishers are often confined, a notion vigorously rejected by many fishers e.g. in West Africa.

The 2018 “Mosi-oa-Tunya Declaration on Artisanal and Small-scale Mining, Quarrying and Development” and the “Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication” with its grounding in human rights and adopted in 2014 by the FAO Committee of Fisheries are starting points for demarginalising artisanal operators. The small-scale fisheries academy (SSF academy) in Senegal offer an example of how this could be enabled. Some 600,000 people are estimated to work along artisanal value chains in the country.
The SSF academy explores the possibilities to use bottom-up training of trainer approaches to empower individuals (men and women) and communities to improve their livelihoods. Inclusive, participatory methods of active learning based on “Gender Actions Learning System” (GALS) are being tested to enable experiencing positive local change in relation to global policy goals like the SSF Guidelines in the context of Agenda 2030. The SSF academy offers a safe space where diverse actors can meet, confront their different knowledges and experiences and develop social and technological innovations. Wider sharing builds capabilities and practice of advocacy and collective action thus also paving the way for forms of more participatory governance. Demonstrating feasibility may entice policy reform that would benefit from long-term societal views to counter wide-spread short-termism, for fishers and miners.