The discourse linking fisheries subsidies to over fishing and environmental degradation has gained momentum globally and influences trade and environmental geopolitics. Subsidies and state intervention are essential for the sustenance of small-scale fisheries across the world and are also necessary to promote sustainable practices. This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of fishery subsidies and to identify whether the subsidies meant for small-scale fishers had achieved their putative purpose of providing social security to fishers in the coastal state of Karnataka, India. Semistructured interviews with small-scale fishers from four fishing villages in two main coastal districts show that although a large share of the sampled population (90%) is aware of the existence of subsidies only 42% have availed of them. Results pointed to technical, political and social factors that inhibit small-scale fishers from relying on state welfare measures as a security against vulnerabilities. The study identified areas for reform in the information dissemination processes as also towards more ecologically sustainable fisheries. Introduction of new subsidies which facilitate the phasing out of small mesh size nets, high-speed engines and destructive gears can encourage better management of depleting resources.