Inclusive social development and decent work for enhancing small-scale fisheries resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic

This document is part of a series of briefs framed under the provisions of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). The briefs aim to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods and sustainable development of the small-scale fisheries sector and provide examples of coping strategies.

The examples showcased in this document could potentially inform emergency response plans. Likewise, the examples provided in this document should be considered for any development initiative, even in the absence of disasters, to increase the resilience of and socio-economic benefits for small-scale fishers, fish workers and their communities.

In order to facilitate greater understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures on the small-scale fisheries sector and to highlight the examples portrayed in these briefs, a repository of coping strategies from different small-scale fisheries stakeholders from around the world was created. The repository can be found on the website of the SSF Guidelines.¹

FAO has extensive experience in the area of disaster impact and needs assessment, including in the particular context of small-scale fisheries, proof of which can be found in a number of publications developed throughout the years, such as the Guidelines for the fisheries and aquaculture sector on damage and needs assessments in emergencies and the Fisheries and aquaculture emergency response guidance. In addition, a dedicated COVID-19 task force was created within FAO’s Fisheries and Aquaculture Division to coordinate the organization’s response to the pandemic in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. The task force coordinated the development of policy briefs to provide information on mitigation, coping and adaptation strategies applicable to the fisheries and aquaculture sector. The dedicated website page of this task force includes a list of relevant documents.²

Introduction

It is estimated that, out of the total workforce employed in the capture fisheries sector, over 90 percent consists of fishers and fish workers conducting small-scale fishing activities and related pre- and post-harvest activities.

Although present worldwide, small-scale fishers and fish workers are concentrated in developing countries, with 73 percent (approximately 23 million) in Asia.

Women account for almost half of the small-scale fisheries workforce and are mainly concentrated in the pre- and post-harvest subsectors (World Bank, 2012).

In spite of its major importance to employment and contribution to food security, nutrition and poverty alleviation, the small-scale fisheries sector tends to be highly marginalized, both at the social and political level. This often means limited access to essential services such as health services, education, housing or drinking water. Additionally, employment in the small-scale fisheries sector is very often informal, which limits, among other things, the enjoyment of the right to access social protection schemes, even when countries have such systems in place. Another challenge faced by small-scale fisheries stakeholders relates to the working conditions in which they conduct their activities, both at sea, on inland waters and on land. Fishing can also be a highly dangerous occupation and usually requires long working hours.

Disasters tend to affect the social development of the small-scale fisheries sector. Therefore, the various elements mentioned above (access to essential services, social protection and decent working conditions) must be taken into consideration in strategies, plans and programmes for disaster risk reduction and disaster management and recovery. If the concept of “building back better” is applied during the recovery process and the underlying issues leading to a lack of access to essential services and poor working conditions for small-scale fisheries stakeholders are identified and dealt with accordingly, the lives and livelihoods of small-scale fishers and fish workers will benefit enormously in the long-term.

This brief focuses on initiatives that relate to the social development of small-scale fishers, fish workers and their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more specifically on their access to social protection and the promotion of decent working conditions. The contents of this brief align with all four pillars of the International Labour Organization’s Decent Work Agenda, namely a) employment creation; b) rights at work; c) social protection; and d) social dialogue. The brief’s contents also align with the provisions of the SSF Guidelines, especially those included under Chapter 6 on Social development, employment, and decent work and Chapter 9 on Disaster risks and climate change.
SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.1 states:

“All parties should consider integrated, ecosystem and holistic approaches to small-scale fisheries management and development that take the complexity of livelihoods into account. Due attention to social and economic development may be needed to ensure that small-scale fishing communities are empowered and can enjoy their human rights.”

SSF Guidelines paragraph 9.7 states:

“States should understand how emergency response and disaster preparedness are related in small-scale fisheries. Longer-term development objectives need to be considered throughout the emergency sequence and recovery should include actions to reduce vulnerabilities to potential future threats. The concept of ‘building back better’ should be applied to disaster response and rehabilitation.”
Key challenges and related responses

Access to social protection

Social protection systems comprise “sets of policies and programmes that address economic, environmental and social vulnerabilities to food insecurity and poverty by protecting and promoting livelihoods.” (FAO, 2017a). Interventions within these policies and programmes can be divided into three different groups: social assistance (non-contributory cash or food transfers, school feeding programmes, etc.); labour market protection (unemployment benefits and capacity development); and social insurance (contributory insurance programmes such as health and unemployment insurance and pension schemes) (Kangasniemi et al., 2020). Social protection systems, when established and easily accessible, are a highly effective tool to build resilience and protect small-scale fishers and fish workers from the challenges of the sector, food insecurity and poverty. In recognizing this, the SSF Guidelines recommend that states “promote social security protection for workers in small-scale fisheries. They should take into account the characteristics of small-scale fisheries and apply security schemes to the entire value chain” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.3).

The proliferation of appropriate and accessible social protection systems is highly beneficial in the broader context of disasters, as they can be preventive (increase resilience and decrease vulnerability against potential hazards), protective (provide a means of subsistence after the disaster strikes) and promotive (facilitate that livelihoods are built back better). Although this is true for many kinds of disasters, biological hazards like COVID-19 pose a heightened challenge due to the extent to which they may disrupt the socio-economic functioning of countries and regions, and the number of people that may be affected.

Social protection can be either formal or informal. Formal social protection is instigated by the public or private sector (if it has legal backing) and informal social protection is provided for by the community through social networks and structures. One of the characteristics of formal social protection systems is that they are dependent on a formal organizational structure within the sector and on the formal recognition of the workers. The lack of formal organization or recognition, a prevalent characteristic of the small-scale fisheries sector especially in developing countries, hinders the access of many small-scale fisheries actors to social protection. Another common issue in the sector is the lack of recognition of all the value chain activities and role players that comprise the small-scale fisheries value chain. In order for social protection schemes to be truly accessible, “states should recognize as economic and professional operations the full range of activities along the small-scale fisheries value chain – both pre- and post-harvest; whether in an aquatic environment or on land; undertaken by men or by women. All activities should be considered: part-time, occasional and/or for subsistence” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.5 and Box 1).
In order to reactivate the fisheries sector of the northern Spanish region of Galicia after the halt of activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Galician regional government created the Avantemar Plan, which consisted of a series of non-contributory social assistance plans worth EUR 77 million (USD 93.6 million). Although this plan was created to assist all subsectors involved in marine capture activities, the number of small-scale fishers who were entitled to these benefits was significant due to the high volume of small-scale fishers in the region. The Avantemar Plan was designed to specifically target those fishers and fish workers who, for several reasons, had not benefited from the general COVID-19 social protection schemes created by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Additionally, as part of this aid plan, the regional government allocated EUR 400 000 (USD 486 443) to pre-harvesting workers employed in net-repairing activities (mainly women), who suffered a decrease of income due to the partial halt of fishing activities and the consequential decrease of the use of nets (Xunta de Galicia, 2020).
In a sector consisting of predominantly informal work, informal social protection can be a crucial tool to ensure that the needs of those who cannot access formal social protection schemes are met, even if partially. It must be emphasized that informal social protection should not replace formal social protection, instead, they should be complementary so that they contribute as much as possible to food security and poverty alleviation. The COVID-19 pandemic proved the importance of informal social assistance (see Box 2) which in many cases provided essential means to mitigate some of the risks and contributed to the continuation of livelihoods by providing among other things, food parcels and personal protective equipment required for fishing and fishing-related activities.

Provisioning of in-kind support as a modality of social protection is a well-extended practice in the event of disasters because it can cover some of the most essential needs and basic items, like water or food, which may be inaccessible due to physical unavailability of the resources or fragmentation of livelihoods and lack of purchasing power. In fact, this modality of social assistance represented a significant number of the total of social protection programmes in targeted rural areas affected by the pandemic (FAO, 2020). Here, local networks can be key for impact mitigation and needs procurement, because they can act by channelling resources from governmental or humanitarian organizations, and be the direct providers of this in-kind support (see Box 2).

Informal social protection: in-kind support for small-scale fishers from Salina Cruz, Mexico

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in Mexico, stakeholders from the entire Mexican small-scale fisheries sector reported losses that put their livelihoods at serious risk. In this context, small-scale fishers from Alianza Pesquera de Oaxaca, a small-scale fishers association from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, reached an agreement with the state government through which fuel would be provided freely, with the condition that catches were allocated as in-kind support to families in need in the region. This initiative, which resulted in the allocation of more than two tonnes of fish to local communities, helped ensure that their nutritional needs were met with high quality animal protein (Ramirez, 2020).
On 1 August 2020, the State Government of Amazonas, Brazil, launched several funds to support the small-scale fisheries sector of the region which had been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A first R$ 350 million (USD 68.5 million) package was created to pay for the acquisition of fishing gear and related material such as isothermal containers and other tools used by local small-scale fishers. A second package worth R$ 300 million (USD 58.7 million) was used to buy 81 tonnes of fish originating from close to 600 local small-scale fishers and R$ 100 million (USD 19.5 million) specifically targeted catches from indigenous small-scale fishers. All the purchased fish was donated to 8,000 families facing poverty and overall social vulnerability. When these kind of state-led initiatives are present in a disaster response, governments can incentivize the economic recovery of the small-scale fisheries sector while ensuring that the most vulnerable do not remain unattended (Secretaria de Produção Rural do Amazonas, 2020).

Social protection schemes targeting Amazonian indigenous small-scale fishers

A common issue within the provision of essential services and social assistance is the systematic exclusion of certain sectors of the population; this applies not only to social protection but also to access to health services and education, to name a few. Small-scale fishing communities have long suffered from this exclusion, which exacerbates their vulnerability and decreases their resilience towards potential stresses. However, it must be highlighted that not all stakeholders from the small-scale fisheries sector face the same degree of exclusion and vulnerability. Indigenous peoples, women and youth, for instance, are often the most vulnerable groups within the sector, especially in the event of disasters (FAO, 2017b). Therefore, their needs, concerns, and the specific challenges that they face should be given due consideration in any development process, including in the design, or revision, of any social protection scheme that should benefit them. The SSF Guidelines state “preferential treatment of women, indigenous peoples, and vulnerable and marginalized groups – in providing services and giving effect to non-discrimination and other human rights – should be accepted and promoted where it is required to ensure equitable benefits” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.2 and Box 3).

Social protection schemes that involve vulnerability assessments in their designing process, contribute to resilience building and incorporate the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, especially the most vulnerable groups, are more likely to be effective, not only in the absence of disasters, but also when they do strike. The inclusion of these features into social protection schemes renders less likely the proliferation of negative coping strategies by small-scale fisheries actors.

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Promotion of decent working conditions

Fishing is considered a dangerous occupation. Working conditions at sea and on inland waters are often harsh in the small-scale fisheries sector due to long working hours, risks related to bad weather, limited space on board, poor maintenance of the vessels and lack of protective equipment and location-tracking systems, among other reasons. Work hazards are present in all stages of the value chain. For instance, among the many hazards present on board fishing vessels are: crowded conditions; working at night; bad weather and poor or non-existent weather warning systems; heavy loads; and sharp objects. In the pre- and post-harvest stages of the value chain, hazards may be: exposure to smoke; cuts; heavy loads; and inappropriate machinery or equipment for processing the fish (FAO, 2016). Improving occupational health and safety, and safety at sea has been for a long time a concern for states and intergovernmental organizations such as FAO, the International Labour Organization and the International Maritime Organization (ILO, 2017; IMO, 1974), including specifically for small-scale fisheries (FAO, 2019; FAO/ILO/IMO, 2012).

The promotion of decent working conditions across the entire small-scale fisheries value chain is a crucial requirement for improving the livelihoods of small-scale fishers and fish workers. The sector presents a wide range of historical long-lasting labour-related issues and challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that small-scale fisheries stakeholders enjoy safe working conditions and the socio-economic benefits of the sector. Some of these challenges are: data and policy gaps; ineffective labour regulations; low levels of organization and participation; and high rates of informality (FAO, 2016). With these challenges in mind, the SSF Guidelines call states to “promote decent work for all small-scale fisheries workers, including both the formal and informal sectors” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.6).

The SSF Guidelines recommend states to “address occupational health issues and unfair working conditions of all small-scale fishers and fish workers by ensuring that the necessary legislation is in place and is implemented in accordance with national legislation and international human rights standards” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.12). This call for legislative action is the result of the long-standing labour-related deficiencies faced by many small-scale fisheries stakeholders. Multi-stakeholder participation through fisheries associations and community-based structures is critical because these structures can channel the voices and concerns of small-scale fishers and fish workers with regards to their work conditions, which can then be used to better inform decision making, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Box 4).
Promotion of long-term decent working conditions for the small-scale fisheries sector: the case of a fisheries organization in Côte d’Ivoire

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in Côte d’Ivoire, the initial response from the government consisted of an increased enforcement of public hygiene and a call for physical distancing measures to limit the spread of the virus. With these measures in place and considering that many small-scale fishers and fish workers in the country live off the earnings from their day-to-day activities, the continuation of fishing and fishing-related activities was in most cases necessary. This continuation, however, evidenced deficient working conditions in many fish-related facilities (e.g. processing facilities) such as a lack of safe running water, sanitation and protection items, meaning increased risk for small-scale fishers, fish workers and consumers (Philippe, 2020). In this context, the Union des Sociétés Coopératives des Femmes de la Pêche et assimilées de Côte d’Ivoire (USCOFEP-CI) discussed with the fisheries ministry how to address these deficiencies and developed a long-term working plan to improve overall working conditions for small-scale fish workers in the country. Among USCOFEP-CI’s recommendations were improved surveillance of water quality and sanitation of fish-processing and related facilities (Philippe, 2020).
The promotion of decent working conditions however, goes further than concentrating efforts on eliminating hazardous conditions. Instead, a series of other elements and actions such as training, awareness-raising and data collection, must be taken into consideration to ensure long-term decent working conditions. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic for instance, awareness-raising and training on sanitation of facilities and personnel contributed to reducing the risk of infections during processing in markets and on board fishing vessels, resulting in safer working conditions for small-scale fishers and fish workers, not only as a measure to avoid infection, but also to lead to healthier and more sanitary working conditions in the future.

The SSF Guidelines state that “the role of existing institutions and community-based structures for increasing compliance, data collection, training and awareness, and search and rescue operations should be recognized in this process” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.17). Although the ultimate responsibility for decent working conditions resides with the state (see Box 5), fostering decent work can simultaneously be part of the agenda of other actors, from non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations to intergovernmental organizations and development partners (see Box 6).

5 Government-led awareness-raising on safe working conditions for Venezuelan small-scale fishers and fish workers

Right after the first case of COVID-19 was registered on 13 March 2020, medical personnel from the Regional Health Directorate of Nueva Esparta, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, conducted awareness-raising sessions for small-scale fishers and fish workers from four Venezuelan islands (Margarita, Coche, Aves and Los Testigos). The sessions included information on prevention of COVID-19, which allowed local small-scale fishers and fish workers to better understand the risks of the pandemic and how to operate in a safe manner to mitigate risks to both their livelihoods and lives (Sol de Margarita, 2020).

6 Awareness-raising on safe working conditions for Ghanaian small-scale fishers and fish workers

From 20 July to 4 August 2020, under the project Empowering Women in Small-Scale Fisheries for Sustainable Food Systems, FAO, in collaboration with local partners in Ghana, conducted a series of awareness-raising sessions on containment of COVID-19 in 12 fishing communities from the four coastal regions of Ghana. A total of 529 small-scale fish workers (491 women and 38 men) attended the sessions and it was expected that attendees would carry the acquired information to the members of their respective communities, which would increase the reach of the awareness-raising exercise. The sessions included valuable information regarding COVID-19 safety protocols in the country (e.g. hand washing, wearing of masks, disposal of potentially infected materials and physical distancing) and live demonstrations of proper hand washing.
In the event of disasters, the already dangerous conditions under which small-scale fishers carry out their activities becomes riskier due to the increased exposure of small-scale fishers and their vessels to meteorological and extreme weather events when out at sea or on inland waters. Although countries have undergone processes to improve the various components that comprise occupational health and safety at sea, namely minimum standards for the construction of boats, communication and tracking systems, and on-board safety equipment, there are still many developing countries that lack appropriate regulations for these components (Westlund et al., 2007). Notwithstanding the efforts made in this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a series of new considerations to be kept in mind in terms of safety at sea and occupational health and safety on board fishing vessels which had not been considered in the past. For example: sanitation of equipment and vessels; containment measures in the event of symptoms on board; and boarding and disembarking of crew when biological risks are present. As stated in the SSF Guidelines, “all parties should recognize the complexity that surrounds safety-at-sea issues (in inland and marine fisheries) and the multiple causes behind deficient safety. This applies to all fishing activities. States should ensure the development, enactment and implementation of appropriate national laws and regulations” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.16). They also have the obligation of updating or creating new, if applicable, safety at sea protocols every time new safety issues are identified so that maximum occupational health and safety measures can be ensured. When creating new protocols, the participation and consultation of small-scale fisheries stakeholders is highly beneficial, because their knowledge and experience can inform decision-making in order to obtain better tailored protocols (see Box 7).

Development of on-board health and safety protocols against COVID-19 in Peru

On 4 April 2020, the Peruvian National Agency for Fish Health released the Guidelines for the Establishment, Implementation and Enhancement of Preventive Measures in Fishing and Aquaculture Infrastructures against the Propagation of COVID-19. Even though the Guidelines were created to safeguard the entire fisheries sector, small-scale fisheries from around the country had to limit their activities due to the safety measures established by the government. Considering this threat to the livelihoods of small-scale fishers and fish workers, the Comité para el Manejo Sustentable del Calamar Gigante del Pacífico Sur and the Comité Regional del Mahi Mahi, in collaboration with academia and small-scale fisheries stakeholders, developed complementary guidelines with information specific to the small-scale fisheries sector on topics such as boat disinfection, awareness-raising and response in the event of symptoms. These guidelines aimed to inform national authorities and decision-makers and allowed them to update official guidelines with improved consideration of the occupational health and safety in the small-scale fisheries sector during the pandemic (Mac et al., 2020).
The participation of and consultation with small-scale fishers and fish workers during decision-making about safety at sea and occupational health and safety – as with any other decision-making process affecting their lives and livelihoods – are essential to ensure that their needs and concerns are heard and that new protocols are clear. This will lead to better application of and compliance with occupational health and safety protocols and to overall safer working conditions. In this regard, the SSF Guidelines recommend states to “recognize that improved sea safety, which includes occupational health and safety, in small-scale fisheries (inland and marine) will best be achieved through the development and implementation of coherent and integrated national strategies, with the active participation of the fishers themselves” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 6.17 and Box 8).

Inherent to the emergency response after virtually any type of disaster is the provision of emergency services and public assistance in order to minimize health impacts and meet basic subsistence needs (UNISDR, 2009). This provision, which can extend from the early stage of the response to the recovery stage, as in the case of water supplies, will depend on the typology and impacts of the disaster and the degree of vulnerability and resilience of the affected community. Certain disasters, like those consisting of biological hazards, may require the provision of personal protective gear and other items for personal and communal sanitation, along with essential goods such as water and food. These hazards, instead of compromising the structure of working facilities, modify the way in which work is conducted, e.g. physical distancing and requirement for sanitation due to the risk of infection. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing personal protective equipment and sanitation items after biological disasters can be highly beneficial for small-scale fishers and their communities, as these allow them to conduct their activities in a safer manner (see Box 9).
Provision of personal protective equipment for small-scale fishers and fish workers

Small-scale fisheries in Peru are responsible for approximately 95 percent of the aquatic foods and products consumed in the country and therefore play a crucial role in domestic nutrition and food security. When COVID-19 first hit Peru, the government declared mandatory social isolation that, even if fishing activities were allowed to continue, resulted in a decrease of approximately 80 percent of fishing activities (Aroni, 2020). Due to the characteristics of the virus and the high risk of infection, the already dangerous fishing activity became riskier because space in small-scale fishing vessels in Peru is often limited and physical distancing measures are difficult to implement. Coupled with this heightened risk, was the fact that the provision of personal protective equipment by the government to the entire population was an economic and logistical challenge. In addition, institutional exclusion and long-standing limited access to medical infrastructure, due to geographical distances, threatened the lives and livelihoods of many small-scale fishers and their communities. In order to help address this issue and allow small-scale fishers to go to sea with safer working conditions, Future of Fish, a non-profit fishery organization working on fisheries development in Peru, Chile and Belize supplied personal protective equipment and sanitation items such as soap, hand sanitizer and thermometers to small-scale fishing communities from the Peruvian locality of La Islilla. With access to these items, small-scale fishers were allowed to continue their activities under safer working conditions, allowing for the continuation of livelihoods, food security and nutrition for both them and their nearby communities (Budkowski, 2020).
References


Bibliography

The following resources can be consulted for further information on initiatives in support of small-scale fisheries during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- WorldFish’s COVID-19 Portal: www.worldfishcenter.org/pages/covid-19/?utm_source=E-Alert&utm_campaign=556c23f220-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_03_29_02_45_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0a4d9ec4ca-556c23f220-133800089