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# Going fishing

## Access to and management of fisheries resources during 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/news-and-events/detail/en/c/1272868/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fao.org/fishery/covid19/en>

## Introduction

The fishing sector employs an estimated global workforce of over 35 million commercial fishers, and almost 32 million of them are employed in the small-scale fisheries sector. Small-scale fishers are responsible for almost half of the catches in developing countries, which represents a major source of protein and other essential nutrients for humans.

The sector is also a major contributor to local and national economies, especially in developing countries (World Bank, 2012). Fish and aquaculture harvesting not only represents a source of income but is also a crucial cultural feature for many small-scale fishing communities. Hence it can be inferred that the prosperity and socio-economic development of small-scale fishers and their associated communities are highly dependent on both access to fishery resources and the land on which they live and perform their fishing and fishing related activities.

Securing resource access is important but not only for the well-being of small-scale fishers and their communities, it is also beneficial for the sustainable management of the resource. Small-scale fishing communities play a crucial role in sustainable management because their extensive knowledge can be highly beneficial to the formulation of resource management policies and regulations and in taking on stewardship responsibilities. Governments and responsible institutions involved in the management of fisheries resources should actively promote participatory management approaches, such as co-management arrangements, and facilitate the effective participation of small-scale fishing communities in decision-making processes regarding the resources on which their livelihoods depend. Effective participation

by all stakeholders, including small-scale fishers and associated fish workers, in the management of aquatic resources is more likely to promote responsible practices, resulting in benefits for both the users and the sustainability of the resources.

Disasters may affect access to and aquatic resources management. The type and degree of impact depends on a number of factors, such as the disaster itself and the degree of preparedness and could include damage to boats, gear and other infrastructure and equipment and personal security issues. Even when disasters do not directly strike coastal and waterfront areas, response plans for mitigation of these disasters may have further associated implications for access to and management of the resources, as seen with the lockdown restrictions and confinement measures imposed by some governments to reduce exposure to the virus (SARS-CoV-2) causing COVID-19. Inclusion of consideration of the impact on access to and management of fisheries resources are therefore crucial to the development and execution of emergency response plans.

This brief focuses on initiatives relating to the access of small-scale fishers to fishery resources and the important role of participatory management in facilitating access through review of response plans during the COVID-19 pandemic.



It delves into the importance of organizational capacity, implementation of co-management systems to safeguard tenure and access rights, and ensuring compliance in small-scale fisheries through, for example, monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS). These issues are provided for in the SSF Guidelines. While capacity development is a cross-cutting issue included in several chapters of the guidelines, provisions on tenure and access rights and MCS are primarily found in Chapter 5 of the SSF Guidelines.

### Paragraph 5.13 of the SSF Guidelines

“States and all those engaged in fisheries management should adopt measures for the long-term conservation and sustainable use of fisheries resources and to secure the ecological foundation for food production. They should promote and implement appropriate management systems, consistent with their existing obligations under national and international law and voluntary commitments, including the Code, that give due recognition to the requirements and opportunities of small-scale fisheries.”



# Key challenges and related responses

## Organizational capacity and fish as an essential commodity

Due to high infection rates and the difficulty of containing COVID-19, the severity of the illness and the uncertainties surrounding it, one of the immediate worldwide responses was the cessation of a wide range of economic activities and the declaration of lockdown measures to reduce contact among citizens and ensure physical distancing.

Lockdown measures are effective at reducing the spread of a biological hazard, but they also impact the socio-economic activities of citizens, especially those participating in the informal economy (ILO, 2020), including small-scale fishers. Cognizant of the impact, many countries declared several economic activities to be essential and allowed those workers to continue working to earn their livelihoods and thereby aided their food security. Fishing was generally included in the primary sector activities identified as essential and therefore allowed to continue. However, the duality of conducting fishing activities and respecting lockdown restrictions and physical distancing measures proved a difficult task in several countries and fisheries. Also, the recognition of fishing as an essential activity did not guarantee fishing to the entire small-scale fisheries sector. For instance, many small-scale fishers in South Africa, whose activity is regulated through recreational fishing permits, were partially deprived of their fishing rights during the lockdown (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020), which negatively impacted the essential contribution fishing provided to their livelihoods, food security and nutrition.

In many cases, one of the reasons for the aforementioned, is that the needs and concerns

of small-scale fishers do not reach policymaking stages and are therefore excluded from consideration, often because of a lack of proper representation and organization by the small-scale fishers. Effective representation in policy- and decision-making processes, which can be achieved through enhanced organizational capacity, can lead to enormous benefits for small-scale fishing communities in the event of any type of disaster, including improved access to available services, better exercise of their rights, and better decisions being made to the benefit of society at large (Aldrich, 2012; CARE, 2014; Partelow, 2020). Also, the recognized fact that effective organizational capacity often facilitates small-scale fisheries actors to be more effectively represented in decision making, was again confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, although the instigation and ease of lockdown restrictions were prerogatives of the state, consultations between governments and small-scale fishing associations to inform policymaking were widely reported in areas where well-connected representative small-scale fisheries networks were in place (see Box 1). Collaboration took place not only in the context of access to the resources for small-scale fishers but also when discussing other issues such as safe working conditions (Philippe, 2020). This practice is in line with the SSF Guidelines' recommendation that "small-scale fisheries stakeholders should promote collaboration among their professional associations, including fisheries cooperatives and civil society organizations (CSOs). They should establish networks and platforms for the exchange of experience and information and to facilitate their involvement in policy- and decision-making processes relevant to small-scale fishing communities" (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 10.6).

## 1 Civil society organizations' dialogue with the government to ease lockdown restrictions on small-scale fisheries in South Africa

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic forced a nationwide lockdown in South Africa, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment announced that the fisheries sector, including the small-scale fisheries subsector, would be exempted from the lockdown measures and the consequent cessation of activities, recognizing the vital role of fisheries to the national economy and food security. Notwithstanding the permission for fishing activities, interregional movements were not allowed during the initial stages of the lockdown, denying many small-scale fishers the possibility

of travelling outside their communities to fish and therefore hindering their access to the resources. In this struggle, the South African Small-scale Fisheries Collective, a CSO in support of the rights of small-scale fishers from the four coastal regions of the country, established a dialogue with the government to pass on the needs and concerns from the affected small-scale fishers and to include them in the policymaking process. The result from this dialogue was a set of enabling measures such as new regulations that allowed fishers to travel following their registration (CFFA, 2020).



## Access rights, tenure and co-management

In the context of access and management of resources, securing access and tenure rights to small-scale fishers and their communities can be crucial to their livelihoods.

Chapter 5 of the SSF Guidelines acknowledges this by stating that “all parties should recognize that responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests applicable in small-scale fisheries is central for the realization of human rights, food security, poverty eradication, sustainable livelihoods, social stability, housing security, economic growth and rural and social development” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 5.2).

Granting access after a disaster often means ensuring a source of food. Although the role of tenure and access to fishery resources in disaster management has been discussed (Courtney and Jhavery, 2017; Westlund et al., 2007), especially in the context of community resilience, its treatment is often limited to events consisting of hydrometeorological and geological hazards, as well as humanitarian crises. Restoration of access to fishing grounds, land and related infrastructure in these cases was crucial because of its direct impact on the livelihoods and subsistence methods of small-scale fishers and their communities. In addition to being evidence of the need for fishers’ tenure and access rights, the COVID-19 pandemic proved that efforts were required to ensure that illegitimate users did not gain access to fishery resources to the detriment of the livelihoods of the legitimate users. In securing access and use rights, it is important that a gender lens is applied in order to avoid social and cultural disbenefit which may limit the enjoyment of such rights by women. Provision of access and use rights should be “underpinned by special protection, positive discrimination

and privileged access for women, as well as restrictions on use rights for more powerful members” (FAO, 2020a).

Co-management systems are widely used to ensure that fishers and fishing communities enjoy their access rights and are engaged in management decisions regarding the fishery resources that are essential to their livelihoods. The logic behind this governance approach is that the collaboration and sharing of responsibilities over fisheries resources leads to more appropriate management measures to be put in place and allows for a more efficient management of resources. The inclusion of local communities, traditional users and governments and fisheries institutions, whilst providing capacity development to empower small-scale fishers, increases the likelihood that all the actors involved will comply with their individual but co-managed duties that impact the resources.

Accordingly, the SSF Guidelines recommend that states “involve small-scale fishing communities – with special attention to equitable participation of women, vulnerable and marginalized groups – in the design, planning and, as appropriate, implementation of management measures, including protected areas, affecting their livelihoods options. Participatory management systems, such as co-management, should be promoted in accordance with national law” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 5.15).



## 2 Co-management of preferential fishing rights and fishing areas to face increasing illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing during COVID-19 in Belize

Small-scale fishing communities and the Beach Trap Fishers Association from the Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in Sarteneja, Northern Belize, entered into a co-management arrangement with the Forest Department of Belize with the support of the Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development (SACD), a Belizean non-governmental organization founded in 2007 and focused on the improvement of livelihoods and empowerment of small-scale fishing communities. This co-management arrangement focuses on ensuring that local small-scale fishers enjoy fishing rights and access to grounds and participate in decision-making processes that affect

their livelihoods. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, a decrease in demand for small-scale fisheries products was reported as well as an increase of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) activities in the co-managed area. In order to adapt and ensure that the livelihoods of traditional small-scale fishing communities of the area were not compromised, local fishing communities and SACD worked in close collaboration with the government to promote the creation of a new permit system that helped shield the access rights of traditional users while legally assessing the perpetrators of IUU fishing, thus successfully reducing IUU within the protected area (Too Big To Ignore, 2020).

## Compliance and monitoring, control and surveillance

Small-scale fishers' access to aquatic resources is not only influenced by the degree of access and management applied to the fisheries, but also by the state of the resources themselves.

According to FAO (2020b), the percentage of marine stocks fished at biologically unsustainable levels increased, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s, from 10 percent in 1974 to 34.2 percent in 2017.

The depletion of fish stocks has direct impacts on small-scale fishers, as the stocks may form the basis of their livelihoods.

Additionally, increased efforts to locate the fish stocks that sustain their livelihoods is sometimes required, with small-scale fishers having to fish further from the coast and exposing themselves to greater risks. Even if the depletion of fish stocks has traditionally been attributed to larger operations, activities from the small-scale fisheries sector also contribute to it, differing from one fishery and region to another. Together with the increased demand for fish, the proliferation of IUU fishing activities conducted by both large- and small-scale operators, also during the pandemic (GFCM, 2020a), further contribute to the depletion of fish stocks and the destruction of marine habitats, which threatens coastal ecosystems and the livelihoods of the small-scale fishers and communities that depend on them.

Although the disruption of fishing activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic served as a temporary relief for fish stocks, studies suggest that this may not be enough to allow depleted stocks to recover, as longer periods of reduced fishing effort are needed, and must be accompanied by appropriate management measures (Hudson,

2020). Also, the measures to ensure human safety amidst the pandemic and the decreased expenditure on MCS have led to a reduced number of inspections at sea or at port (GFCM, 2020b). This may in turn have contributed to the increase of IUU fishing. Stakeholders from the small-scale fisheries sector have long called for the improvement of and increased investment in MCS, as these are key tools in the management of fisheries. Similarly, the SSF Guidelines call on states to “ensure the establishment of MCS systems or promote the application of existing ones applicable to and suitable for small-scale fisheries. They should provide support to such systems, involving small-scale fisheries actors as appropriate and promoting participatory arrangements within the context of co-management” (see SSF Guidelines paragraph 5.16).

An improvement in compliance would not only help decrease IUU fishing but also contribute to the proper functioning of fisheries management systems and therefore improve the livelihoods of small-scale fishers and their communities. Additionally, improving registration of fishers and fishing activities, could be beneficial in the event of future disasters because up-to-date registries allow for more accurate recovery interventions such as efficient social protection schemes.





### 3 Improving traceability of the Jamaican small-scale fisheries sector

The fisheries sector of Jamaica is characterized by a vast majority of small-scale fisheries, with estimates that small-scale fisheries account for up to 95 percent of the total, with approximately 17 000 small-scale fishers. The great majority of these small-scale fishers operate in the southern waters of Jamaica, predominantly in the Pedro and Morant banks. Together with the overexploitation of fish stocks in the northern shelf, both banks have been largely overfished, leading to depleting fish stocks, both low and high-value ones, that affect almost the entire country. This overexploitation of fishery resources, coupled with a high prevalence of informality and unregulated fisheries, hinders the assessment of the actual exploitation of these resources. In 2018, the Government of Jamaica passed a new Fisheries Act with the objective of improving the licensing system applied to small-scale fisheries by establishing a licensing authority

to regulate both local fishers and local and foreign fishing vessels. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the country, the Government of Jamaica made funds available for the small-scale fisheries sector so that fishers and their communities could cope with the reduction in demand due to the closure of the tourist sector. Only small-scale fishers with registered and traceable (through GPS trackers) boats were eligible for these funds. With these requirements, the government promoted the formal registration of fishers and improved MCS in the country while promoting the livelihoods and sustainability of the small-scale fisheries sector during the pandemic. This new, up-to-date registration system may be crucial for an effective social protection system in the country. Also, the improved MCS in the sector will facilitate the management and sustainability of the country's fishery resources. (Northrop et al., 2020).

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- Selling the fish - Access to markets for small-scale fisheries during the COVID-19 pandemic: [www.fao.org/3/cb8102en/cb8102en.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/cb8102en/cb8102en.pdf)
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- FAO Family Farming Knowledge Platform: [www.fao.org/family-farming/decade/en](http://www.fao.org/family-farming/decade/en)
- International Collective in Support of Fishworkers: <https://covid.icsf.net>
- 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](http://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)



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