

Pillars of Decent Work

A study on decent work of tuna handline fishermen in the Philippines calls for policy interventions to ensure their rights

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The primary goal of the International Labour Organization (ILO) is to promote “opportunities for men and women to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, social security and human dignity”. Its mandate covers all categories of workers such as wage and salaried workers, self-employed, informal workers in the formal economy like fishermen, and other types of workers who ILO affirms as having basic rights to obtain decent work.

In the Philippines, the tuna handline fishery is regarded as one of the most important commercial

aspects where decent-work issues covering rights at work, employment opportunities, social protection and social dialogue are taken into consideration. While much attention has been given to the economic importance of the tuna handline fishery, little attention has been paid to the working conditions of fishermen. Hence, this study aims to assess the working conditions of commercial tuna handline fishermen on board fishing vessels, to determine how decent the work is.

This study focuses on commercial tuna handline fishermen on board small-scale (3.1 to 20 gross registered tonnage, GRT) and medium-scale (21.1 to 150 GRT) fishing vessels in General Santos City, which is known as the ‘tuna capital’ of the country. The majority of the population is engaged in the fishery, using traditional fishing methods like handline fishing.

Primary data collection was conducted using semi-structured questionnaires that were employed to solicit information among the 182 commercial tuna handline fishermen selected. Of the 182 fishermen, 111 were from the medium-scale and 71 were from small-scale tuna handline fishing vessels. Interviews with boat operators and key respondents from various concerned agencies were also conducted for supplemental information.

Indicators

This study employed a set of determinants and indicators per pillar of decent work, which were largely based on the conventions and regulations embodied in the ILO Work in Fishing Convention (2007) and on other studies. Since the Convention

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tuna fisheries, given its social benefits and contribution to the economy of southern Philippines. However, based on the preliminary assessment of the tuna handline fishery in the Philippines, the significance of this sector is increasingly threatened by a number of globalization issues like environmental degradation, poor information on the fishery, and inadequate management and regulatory systems, which impact negatively and create new challenges for the regulations of work of tuna handline fishermen.

The numerous challenges confronting the tuna handline fishery prompted this study to focus on the human dimension, particularly in terms of the labour and employment

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was specifically tailored to reflect the particular characteristics of work and the situations that fishermen face in their working lives, this study adopted the five general areas of concern that were stipulated in the ILO WFC (2007). The five general areas of concern, which were treated as determinants in this study, were categorized according to the four pillars of decent work with corresponding indicators. For rights at work, this study looked at two determinants, namely, (1) minimum work requirements, of which the indicators include age, availability of medical certificate, and availability of crew list; and (2) conditions of services that were measured using the indicators of hours of rest, availability of work agreements, and payment of fishermen. With respect to the employment pillar, this study made a reference to two determinants that included (1) career and skills development, with three indicators, namely, access to training, education level and years of fishing experience; and (2) opportunities for work that were measured using three indicators that included access to credit facilities, access to fishing-related information, and status or nature of employment. In terms of the social protection pillar, attention was given to three determinants, namely, (1) accommodation and food that was measured using the indicator of availability of living quarters, food and water; (2) occupational safety and health, with three selected indicators, including availability of protective gears, access to medicine, and access to trained medical staff on board; and (3) social security that was measured using the indicator of coverage under mandatory social-security schemes. Finally, in relation to the social dialogue pillar, this study looked at two determinants, namely, (1) dialogue, with the indicator of access to a grievance machinery; and (2) voice and representation, with the indicator of membership in fishermen's associations.

To determine the overall level of decent work of tuna handline fishermen, a decent work index was

constructed. Construction of the index adopted the shortfall or gap approach where the gaps of the fishermen respondents' scores, relative to the desired target for the indicators used, were measured against specified minimum and maximum values for each of the indicators. Expressed in index point, it is similar to the Human Development Index (HDI), where the perfect score is 100. The equation is given by the formula:

$$\text{IS} = \frac{(\text{real score} - \text{minimum score})}{\text{maximum score}}$$

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After deriving the score for each indicator, the overall labour index was computed as the sum of the average of the pillars scores.

The highest possible score that an individual tuna handline fishermen can get is 100. Hence, the resulting scores pertaining to the fishermen's decent work index were categorized into five levels to represent the level of decent work. Those percentage points below 50, which is said to be of acceptable level, were categorized either very low (0-25) or low (26-49), while those that are close to the maximum score were categorized either high, 66 or very high (81-100). The medium level is set for those scores within the range of 50-65.

Simple parameters

For analyzing the data, this study employed simple statistical parameters such as means and standard deviation. For further analysis and to know if there are significant differences between small- and medium-scale tuna handline fishermen in terms of socioeconomic characteristics and level of decent work, the t-test was used. Moreover, as the literature suggests, the four pillars of decent work influence each other in myriad of ways.

Hence, correlation analysis was likewise done to determine the relationship that exists between, and among, the four pillars of decent work.

On average, a household of handline fishermen constitutes about six persons, headed by a middle-aged adult with a low level of education (elementary), and relies heavily on the low earnings of fishermen, since the nature of their pay is based on a 'sharing system', wherein the typical earnings call for 20 per cent of the profit to be shared among the fishermen. Given the nature of the sharing system, the fishermen surveyed indicated that they never receive a fixed amount of pay and thus often receive a meagre amount that is insufficient to finance their basic needs. The survey indicated that regardless of vessel type, the surveyed tuna handline fishermen have no statistically significant differences in terms of socioeconomic character.

The survey results indicated that the conditions of work of tuna handline fishermen were fairly vulnerable to decent-work challenges, yet are still insufficient to realize the full potential of the fishermen, as indicated by the scores for each of the indicators used. It may be noted that tuna handline fishermen scored relatively high in most of the indicators. However, it can also be observed that for both small- and medium-scale tuna handline fishermen, eight indicators posted a score below 50 per cent, which was said to be of at least an acceptable level. These eight indicators included medical examination, provision of a work agreement, payment of fishermen, training, educational attainment, social-security coverage, access to dialogue mechanism, and membership to associations.

The conditions of work are being influenced by the work relations between fishermen and financiers, and the long-standing practices that exist in the tuna handline fishery. The relationship between fishermen and financiers, who also act as boatowners and boat operators, has remained feudal in many ways, wherein the financier exercises much

control over the fishing operation. Moreover, the relationship is based on loyalty and trust, and the practice of returning a favour is very much in place. Traditionally practised sharing systems and the very informal work arrangement, which is merely based on verbal agreement, still persist in the tuna handline fishery. Further, it can be inferred that rights at work affect all aspects of work. For instance, as a result of the lack of a formal work agreement or contract, it is difficult for fishermen to negotiate any terms of work, including their payment or earnings, or to advocate for themselves when payment practices are considered unfair. Consequently, due to their low earnings, participation in social-security schemes is on a voluntary basis.

Another notable observation is the difference in the percentage point between the small- and medium-scale tuna handline fishermen, as far as the indicator on access to grievance machinery is concerned. The difference may be attributed to the idea of kinship. In a small-scale handline fishing vessel, the majority of the fishermen indicated that it was easier for them to raise their concerns since a crew was more than a company of workers, and the crew members are usually related in many ways.

Social relations

In small-scale handline fishing vessels, a crew may consist of father and son, brothers, or a mixture of close or more distant kin. On this note, the many-sided social relations mitigate conflicts on board. On the other hand, crew members of medium-scale handline fishing vessels indicated that they hesitated making complaints about their working conditions due to the fear that it might exacerbate or further worsen their current working conditions. They indicated fear of being blacklisted or barred from future employment.

Based on the 19 indicators, this study revealed that the overall decent work level of both small- and medium-scale tuna handline fishermen fall at a medium level, since they score

62.9 ($SD=7.9$) and 62.6 ($SD=11.9$) points, respectively. This is attributed to the medium-level scores in the majority of the pillars of decent work.

It may be noted that among the four pillars of decent work, the social-protection pillar falls at a high level since the tuna handline fishermen scored relatively high, except for the social-security coverage, where a large percentage of them are not covered under any of the social-security schemes like SSS and PAG-IBIG, which can protect fishermen and their beneficiaries in conditions of disability, sickness, old age, death and contingencies resulting in loss of income and other financial resources.

The medium-scale tuna handline fishermen scored low with respect to social dialogue since their scores for the indicators of access to dialogue mechanisms and membership in fishermen's associations posted a percentage point below 50. In relation to the access to dialogue mechanism, most of the medium-scale tuna handline fishermen fear that making complaints about their working conditions may further worsen their current working condition. In terms of membership to fishermen's associations, unlike other occupations in the Philippines, fishermen have never been organized into unions due to the offshore nature of fishing, whereby their often precarious employment status and lack of higher education preclude them from asserting their rights to organize themselves into unions.

Further, the result of the statistical test indicates that there is no significant difference between the small- and medium-scale tuna handline fishery with respect to the four pillars of decent work. This is fairly understandable since the surveyed fishermen have relatively the same socioeconomic characteristics and are exposed to the same social conditions with respect to work relations and practices that exist in the tuna handline fishery.

As the literature suggests, the four pillars of decent work influence one another in many ways. Hence, for further analysis, the interdependencies

of the four pillars were examined. Correlation test results showed that for both small- and medium-scale tuna handline fishermen, all the pillars of decent work were positively and significantly correlated with one another. This implies that the four pillars of decent work are mutually reinforcing and equally significant for the achievement of the overall decent-work index for the tuna handline fishermen.

This study reveals that the conditions of work for tuna handline fishermen are influenced by various factors like socioeconomic characteristics, long-standing practices that exist in the tuna handline fishery, particularly the 'sharing system' for fishermen's pay, and the very informal arrangements that exist in the sector, largely controlled by the financier, which have greatly influenced the working conditions of the tuna handline fishermen.

Although the overall decent-work index of tuna handline fishermen falls at a medium level, the sector cannot remain complacent for much remains to be done in order to reach its full potential in ensuring that tuna handline fishermen are accorded the necessary decent-work conditions while on board fishing vessels.

Understanding the nature of work of tuna handline fishermen and the factors that either enhance or inhibit their level of decent work are crucial inputs in formulating and managing more appropriate and effective policy interventions. Interventions being currently undertaken for the continued development of the tuna handline fishery must not undermine the human dimension of it, and particular attention must be paid on how to ensure the rights, safety and protection of fishermen. To improve the working conditions of tuna handline fishermen, no single pillar of decent work should be left out.

For more

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Gap Analysis of ILO Convention 188, Work in Fishing Convention, 2007

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The Philippines Tuna Industry: A Profile