

Hard times

Fishing communities in Mexico grapple with the challenge of maintaining sustainable practices during the pandemic

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COVID-19's impacts have exacerbated challenges in the three dimensions of sustainability: social, economic, and environmental. As social and economic issues have been prioritized worldwide through the emphasis on the access to health, food production, basic services and jobs, environmental issues have taken second priority. Mexican small-scale fishers, aware of the importance of protecting fishery resources, have implemented solutions and good practices towards sustainability and marine conservation over many years, thus improving their quality of life. However, due to the global crisis, today the Mexican small-scale fisher finds herself between a rock and a hard place as she is forced to choose between livelihood or sustainability. How are they to maintain sustainable practices during times of such adversity?

In October 2020, COBI (Comunidad y Biodiversidad AC) conducted a national consultation with 161 fishers (20 per cent women) from 62 fishing communities, covering 14 states in the Pacific coast, Gulf of California, Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on

the environment. Half of the interviewed people (54 per cent) reported complying with no-take-zones (official and voluntary reserves) regulations in their communities. They further reported that the management of these areas, in general, has not changed due to the pandemic with fishers continuing to respect the rules.

However, this may be related to the fact that 91 per cent of the interviewees reported to have suspended or changed their economic activities at the sea, mainly small-scale fishing, since March 2020 due to lockdown measures. While fishing, classified as an essential activity, was never banned, because the severe lockdown of the first three months of the pandemic effectively shut down markets, fishers had all but given up fishing. Lockdown restrictions were gradually eased, and seven months down the line, 85 per cent of interviewees reported having resumed their activities (mainly small-scale fishing) while following conservation and sustainable fisheries practices. Before the pandemic, 51 of the 62 communities that were interviewed mentioned having been involved in implementing sustainable practices. 67 per cent of the interviewees (29 women and 79 men)

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Fisherwomen in Altata, Mexico, sorting shrimps by size. Government agencies should provide adequate support so that the right measures are collectively implemented across the fisheries. United efforts are needed for the inclusive and sustainable revival of the small-scale fisheries in Mexico

reported that before the pandemic struck, they used to participate in at least one of the following activities: beach cleanups; collaborative research with universities; enforcement; and fishery, oceanographic and underwater monitoring. During the pandemic, almost half of this group continued carrying out sustainable and marine conservation practices despite the lockdown. Twenty-one per cent of the interviewees reported that they had suspended these activities in the beginning but resumed them later, while 35 per cent reported having discontinued these activities altogether.

One of the main global concerns for the fishing sector, threatening sustainability and marine conservation, is illegal fishing. Throughout our interviews, the one activity that most people reported participating in was enforcement. Half of the interviewees (83 individuals) monitored their fishing grounds, beaches and piers, and conducted night patrols in 46 communities during the crisis period. It may be mentioned that enforcement is led by

fishing cooperatives, with marginal involvement of government agencies.

Of concern, however, is the fact that even though fishing communities were implementing sustainability programmes to take care of their resources, illegal fishing became much more widespread during the pandemic. This had had a discouraging effect on sustainability volunteers, potentially affecting their involvement and willingness to collaborate with others. Furthermore, the federal government has been unable to respond to the fishing community's urgent requirement for proper safety guidance for the small-scale fishing sector. Effective protocols for the fishing sector addressing the complete value chain are missing.

Government agencies should act quickly to provide adequate support and coordination so that the right measures are collectively implemented across the fisheries. United efforts are needed for the inclusive and sustainable revival of the small-scale fisheries in Mexico. ■

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