

Under Their Own Steam

Natural disasters like cyclones, more than the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with lack of research on the conditions of the poor, threaten the well-being of small-time fishers in Mozambique

When the COVID-19 pandemic landed on Mozambique shores last year, it found a country in dire need of socioeconomic renewal and welfare reform. A series of natural disasters—cyclones, floods, drought—and ongoing military conflict had already reduced the most vulnerable communities of the country to fighting for scraps. Employment and income, already very low, were hit badly by the government’s restrictions on movement, in response to the pandemic. Informal workers lost jobs or other means of income and often saw themselves forced to relocate to their places of origin, away from the cities where the infection rates were high.

While the government’s strict prevention measures were necessary, several rural communities considered them unfair because their regions were not badly affected; they thought the measures had limited success in disease prevention but disrupted their business significantly. (Testing for COVID-19 was very limited in Mozambique’s rural areas in the pandemic’s initial phase.) Furthermore, some sectors like tourism felt the economic impact much harder than others, despite the rate of infection remaining comparatively low in rural areas where the businesses are located.

Joaquim Macassa, a fisheries technician from Inhambane Province, said the pandemic went on taking a terrible toll on fishers’ income, till the government relaxed its prevention measures in September 2020. “The fishers had nowhere to sell their product because, for example, the local lodges were closed for business,” he said. “On the other hand, the traditional fish buyers (who used to roam the beaches in small refrigerated cars, motorcycles, bicycles and cool

boxes to buy fish) also disappeared, fearing the pandemic.”

The slowdown in fisheries had disastrous socioeconomic impacts. Despite the fisheries sector’s relatively low direct contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) of 2 per cent in 2019, its social contribution is significant. The sector, especially the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sub-sector, generates about 400,000 direct jobs in the country, with women—despite few owning boats—strongly involved in many of them.

Small-scale fishing—including artisanal and subsistence fishing—is an integral part of Mozambique’s economic and nutritional framework.

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It provides food security to about 850,000 households, or roughly 20 per cent of the country’s total population. It doubles up as a source of income, a subsidiary livelihood strategy.

Key food component

Most fishing communities are small, isolated and poor. Fishing and marketing is usually part of a complex livelihood strategy often integrated with agriculture. Fish is a key component of the Mozambican food basket (accounting for 27 per cent of protein) and, according to a 2018 MIMAIP report, the per capita consumption of fish and fish products rose from 10.4 kg in 2012 to 16.8 kg in 2019, a level close to the 18 kg that the World Health Organization recommends. Government statistics

This article is by Simeao Lopes (ntsamuele2013@gmail.com) and Daniel Benigna Lopes (daniel83lopes@gmail.com), Mozambique

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Arrival of fishing craft at Maputo, Mozambique. The small-scale fisheries sub-sector generates about 400,000 direct jobs in the country, with women—despite few owning boats—strongly involved in many of them

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from 2019 show that artisanal fishing accounts for over 90 per cent of the country's total fish production.

Despite the obvious growth, sustainable fishing faces several threats in the country. Decline in stocks, discrepancies in abundance, distribution and size of inshore species, combined with illegal fishing, have led to steep drops in produce. These scenarios have magnified due to the degradation of critical ecosystems and the impact of climate change. Studies also point to higher rates of unemployment, and a lack of alternative sources of income, with inadequate law-enforcement measures contributing to the problem.

"Here in Mabuluku we are in good health. We have no known cases of COVID-19 despite being close to the South African border," said Agostinho, president of Mabuluku's Community Fisheries Council (CCP), when asked about the impact of the pandemic on artisanal fishing communities. "But, between April and August last year, we faced difficulties in selling our produce at the Maputo city market because buyers stopped to show up out of fear of the pandemic." The solution, he

said, was to sell the product within the community, albeit at a loss, because local buyers could not afford to pay real prices for shrimp and first-quality fish.

Conversations with several fishers across the country revealed that business was badly hit by the pandemic despite the low infection rate among the community. This was mainly due to government restrictions on movement, social distancing, self-quarantine and border closures.

Movement restrictions

In Tete province, the largest producer of freshwater fish in the inland provinces of the country, the impact was felt in the markets, with as many as five semi-industrial fishing companies shutting down for lack of business. A representative of the local fisheries administration revealed that an average of 25 workers were laid off due to the shutdowns. According to her, the slowdown occurred in part due to the movement restrictions along Mozambique's borders with Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Restrictions on circulation and containment of agglomerations

hampered the fish trade. On the other hand, the number of operations decreased due to the fear of contact between the fishers, and also due to government protocols that demanded halving of boat crews. Many fishermen, lacking adequate means of storage, were forced to sell their products at lower prices, reducing their average incomes significantly.

Even while actual fishing activities by themselves did not face an impact in the first six months of the government lockdowns, the trade took hard body blows, say most observers. Their observations are consistent with the FAO's COVID-19 response plan that said vulnerable fishing communities found it difficult to access markets. Research conducted by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) in Mozambique did not, however, confirm the assumption in the same plan that "the pandemic may have exacerbated existing food insecurity and poverty among small-scale farmers, fishers and other vulnerable groups".

In the 10 months since the COVID-19 outbreak (March to December 2020), despite the impacts on fish trade and business, there remains little to indicate dietary patterns have shifted in fishing communities. Fishing and agriculture, the two main livelihood activities, continued uninterrupted, both along the coasts and in inland areas, despite the restrictions.

Farming crops

In the island of Inhaca, close to Maputo city, the first months of the pandemic saw fisher families investing in farming crops suitable for the local soil to help balance their incomes, while assuring themselves of food necessary for their family's needs.

Jorge Mapengo, a community leader in Montanhana, confirmed this. He insisted that everyone was mindful of the government's prevention measures and were adhering to them strictly. "But this does not prevent us from continuing our fishing and farming activities."

The more we looked the more it seemed that the challenges of nutrition, food security and livelihood had less to do with COVID-19 and more to do with the cyclones that have hampered the fishing structures.

Fishing-community members insisted that the pandemic has not altered their ways of living drastically. No innovations worthy of record have come from within the community to battle the pandemic.

Government interventions

Sources indicate that the government has taken several fiscal and financial measures to ensure food security and supply during the pandemic. Visible examples include: a credit line (approximately costing US\$700 mn) from the National Investment Bank, with support from the African Development Bank; two cash transfer programmes (totalling US\$200 mn),

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supported by the World Bank; a single cash transfer (of US\$25 per family) equivalent to three months of regular subsidies to beneficiaries of vulnerable families; and other unconditional cash transfers for six months to low-income families and informal workers in urban and peri-urban areas. According to a World Bank report, both programmes reached a total of 1.5 mn people.

In the fisheries sector, the government efforts were directed towards helping the artisanal sub-sector recover from the impact of cyclones and COVID-19. Support for several fishing communities included distribution of more than 1,700 units of fishing gear and 240 cool boxes of 100 litres and another with 30-litre capacity to be coupled to bicycles for fish storage; financing of more than 90 small projects with an investment of more than US\$700,000 for the acquisition of boat engines, and promoting means of conservation and (motorized) transport of fish; and subsidized credit to the private sector for the implementation of aquaculture projects that integrate communities. Several fish markets with ice machines were built close to the main fishing sites to help with fish conservation and trade.

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Fish is very important for the community in Mozambique. Fishing and agriculture, the two main livelihood activities, continued uninterrupted, both along the coasts and in inland areas, despite the COVID-19 restrictions

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Despite the rollout of various measures, it is hard to say how much impact they have had in helping fishing communities ride out these tough times. Many interviewees claimed to not know of the existence of the support packages, a clear indication that on-ground impact and communication has been inadequate.

Specific support

There seemed to be little in terms of support specifically oriented to the fishing communities from NGOs and civil society. One reason for this, many revealed, was the low rate of COVID-19 infections in coastal fishing communities. Another was the fact that many of these organizations felt government interventions were addressing the fishing community's needs adequately. Safe to say, very little remains known.

A lack of in-depth analysis on the artisanal fishing sub-sector, the numbers and types of vulnerable people and families in such

communities, as well as the specific support they need means large gaps remain between what exists and what needs doing. For now, communities continue to navigate under their own steam, with the limited—though significant—help they receive. 3

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https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_39/871_art05.pdf

Mozambique Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 in food crises May 2020 – April 2021: Stemming an emergency to prevent a disaster

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CA9123EN.pdf>

Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Crises in Mozambique & Measures to Support Private Sector Recovery, WB (2020)

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasiliza/covid-19-mozambique-team-effort-ease-economic-hardship-families>