

Recovering Connections

Improving the lot of small-scale and artisanal fisheries in Costa Rica will lead to the betterment of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and other vulnerable groups

Located in Central America, Costa Rica is a country where only one-tenth of its territory is made up of land. Official data shows the territorial extension of Costa Rica to be 51,079 sq km continental and 530,903 sq km in the Pacific Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). For its part, the Caribbean EEZ has not yet been defined, since it is still necessary to negotiate and precisely define the border with Panama.

As a result, fishing is very important for Costa Rica at several levels – tuna fishing for the national processing industry and for a productive economic sector, and for local economies and food security for communities. Although the country recognizes (through INCOPESCA, the government institution in Costa Rica that manages, regulates and promotes the development of the fishing and aquaculture sector with an ecosystem approach, under the principles of sustainability, social responsibility and competitiveness) that there are nearly 2,000 formal artisanal fishers, international studies indicate that more than 15,000 people are involved in artisanal fishing. This is because artisanal fishing is mostly in the informal sector. This has important socioeconomic consequences, since the vast majority of people engaged in this type of fishing do so in vulnerable conditions, many living below the poverty line.

This situation persists despite Costa Rica having a solid set of regulations for fishing, with public policies that recognize the importance of the fair and equitable distribution of the wealth produced by fishing activity. There exists an important institutional framework that provides support to artisanal fishers to operate according to the law. In this regard, the country's main challenge is to recognize and

incorporate into the framework small-scale artisanal fishers who operate informally in these spaces, in order to protect their fundamental rights and ensure a good quality of life for the fishing population.

This article is based on a study conducted in 2020. A legal analysis allowed the construction of matrices that correlated international commitments, analyzed the regulations developed and the institutions created, and their contribution to the social development of the small-scale artisanal fishing sector in the country.

The study draws on interviews with the authorities of public institutions created for promoting social development; academic centres; national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

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working on social development and human-rights issues in light of their impact on small-scale artisanal fisheries. Also analysed were interviews and focal group discussions directed at the main leaders—men, women and youth—who represent the small-scale fishing sector in the country.

The small-scale and artisanal fisheries sector in Costa Rica finds itself in a complex historical situation. The Costa Rican government does not have a fishing census that can accurately determine the number of people dependent on small-scale and artisanal fishing. It is thus difficult to propose comprehensive solutions for this population group.

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Cabo Blanco marine management area, Costa Rica. Decisions and budgets aimed at supporting economic and psychosocial reactivation must consider the vulnerabilities of coastal communities

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The social-development vision of public institutions and NGOs in this sector is not homogeneous. One view is focused on productive development linked to the generation of employment; this is often unrelated to fishing knowledge and culture. The other perspective is closer to a social-development vision, articulated with a human-rights approach, with a comprehensive view of the full and dignified development of the sector, including aspects of education, healthcare, decent work and culture.

Rural development efforts are often directed at the agricultural sector, leaving the small-scale artisanal sector invisible—women fishers even more so, as they are often not considered active participants in fishing. This significantly impacts their development, limiting their opportunities to attain benefits at the economic, social and cultural levels.

Interviews with women, men and young fishing leaders reveal that the social-development vision responds better to the needs of coastal marine communities. It was evident in all the consultations carried out that this

vision of development is based on the opportunities that the context provides for nutrition, healthcare, education and organization. The respondents, from their position of leadership in fishing communities, identified the importance of their own actions in changing their living conditions. They consider organizational spaces a fundamental forum for influencing public policies linked to small-scale and artisanal fishing.

Young people display a positive feeling and attitude towards fishing despite weak public policy efforts. Attention is required through affirmative action to enhance the capacities of the young population in artisanal fishing to face the new technological and educational challenges of the changing times. Regarding the NGO sector, even when initiatives for financial support and human resources development do reach the community, they have often proven unsuitable. It has been difficult to promote the integrated development of these communities and measure the impact of social actions on the quality of life of the people.

Cultural adaptability

There is a need for greater inter-institutional articulation and more favourable visions of human rights and cultural adaptability in coastal marine areas. Costa Rica has made a commitment to cross-institutional co-ordination in order to provide a better response to the interests of communities in terms of well-being, work, violence prevention, and attention to diverse populations—Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees. Yet the country has not yet succeeded in implementing such policies from a truly intersectional approach that might result in clear actions to advance along these lines. The efforts articulated among public institutions and NGOs are very scarce; they require analysis so that they can be disseminated and multiplied in other areas.

This study reveals that artisanal fishing is not attuned to the cultural, environmental and social reference points required. The projects that reach the communities, especially for women and young people, are not linked with traditional knowledge, with participatory research, with the strengthening of governance to promote artisanal fishing as an activity linked to food security, or with the cultural and historical role of this work in the country. Land tenure continues to remain an unresolved problem. This directly hits the social development of coastal towns. The institutional framework has tried to generate jobs and enterprises that fail to respond to the cultural realities of women, youth and fishers in fishing communities.

The fisheries sector is very vulnerable to the effects of climate change. None of the measures communicated to the territories is sustainable or supportive of the communities facing climatic uncertainties. Decisions and budgets aimed at supporting economic and psychosocial reactivation must consider their vulnerabilities.

Despite Costa Rica's Indigenous Law, the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 and consultation mechanisms, there are no regulations that encourage indigenous populations to recover their connections with the seas and rivers. There is nothing to nurture the knowledge and resources linked to

terrestrial and marine biodiversity, and to enhance and protect them in the interest of sustainability. At the national level, there is an immediate need for public policies with an integral strategy oriented towards the small-scale and artisanal fishing sector.

The Ombudsmen Office must be urged to ensure progress on the recognition and formalization of the small-scale artisanal fishing sector, as an entity committed to the observance of compliance with human rights in this sector. An urgent call should be made

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to the country's National Emergency Commission (CNE) to consider a differentiated and specific budget for the coastal marine communities most affected by climate variability.

It is essential that the country promotes discussions and forums with respect to the social and environmental scopes and impacts of the Blue Economy in the lives of artisanal fishers, relying on the recognition of new visions based on social development, linked to the effective fulfillment of human rights and responding to the Voluntary Guidelines towards the Sustainability of Small-scale Fishing in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Reduction (SSF Guidelines).

A focus on intersectionality is still lacking. Women fishers, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant populations need greater visibility. These concerns are currently not being addressed with the urgency required from a human-rights-based approach.

Active participation

Joint efforts of a public-private nature are recommended for effective compliance with these measures, including those designed to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting the active participation of the artisanal fishing sector in economic and social reactivation within a framework of human rights, equality and equity. 📌

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