

4th Oceans Forum

on trade-related aspects of Sustainable Development Goal 14

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Social sustainability of fisheries and aquaculture value chain

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As of now, from the perspective of capture fisheries, the COVID-19 pandemic situation has remarkably improved and the main concern of fishers, worldwide, seems to have moved to the rising oil prices. There are however, fears that the pandemic can re-emerge to threaten health and wellbeing of people around the world. In regard to the fisheries sector, the pandemic has amplified existing inequalities and fault lines in national and local institutions, mechanisms and processes.

At the outset, access to vaccination was uneven, and even if there was access, there were breakthrough infections, adding unpredictability to pandemic control measures.

Although fish was declared as essential food, and fishing and fish processing were declared as essential services by early-2020, access to resources and markets of both small- and large-scale fishers and fishworkers were disrupted by several factors.

In some countries, the migrant fishers/fishworkers were reluctant to continue work in fishing/fish processing and were keen to return home due to their fear of COVID-19.

In some others, crew change became almost impossible due to the pandemic control protocol. Social distancing requirements adversely affected some of the pelagic, labour-intensive, fishing operations in several countries.

Fishing and fish landing were to be restructured due to the closure of markets and traditional landing centres in a few others.

Demand for fish in local hotels and restaurants tanked due to the collapse of the tourism industry. Hardly any procurement of fish took place as part of public provisioning of food. Purchasing power of local consumers was down due to their inability to find work and generate income.

Last but not least, the social protection measures were largely inadequate to offset income losses and to provide necessary support, especially to the children, youth, and women of remote fishing communities in rural areas.

The key challenges facing the sector, worldwide, are the preponderance of an informal workforce, the want of a decent work agenda—and more worryingly—the absence of a human rights framework as applied to fisheries value chain workers. To address these, it is necessary to:

- (i) register all fishers and fishworkers (marine and inland);
- (ii) document migrant fishers and fishworkers;
- (iii) establish effective owners' and fishers' associations/unions in fisheries;
- (iv) build capacity of fisheries cooperatives towards: (a) economic empowerment; (b) resource management (e.g. sustainable fisheries); and (c) skill development (e.g. carbon-friendly fishing);
- (v) legislate occupational safety and health, and work along the fisheries value chain;
- (vi) legislate social protection and implement social protection programmes backed by financial resources and delivery mechanisms (including for children and women, and the vulnerable and marginalized) also targeting fishing communities, fishers and fishworkers; and
- (vii) develop an inclusive social dialogue mechanism along the fisheries value chain.

International Labour Organization (ILO) has called for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient at the International Labour Conference in June 2021.

Coherent and collaborative initiatives by the flag State, the coastal State and the labour-supplying State in consultation with the market State and stakeholders are needed to improve good labour and social practices along the fisheries value chain, consistent with relevant ILO instruments such as the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188), the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (No. 155) and the Work in Fishing Recommendation, 2007 (No. 199) and the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202).

To ensure that small-scale fishers and fishworkers, including women, do enjoy decent work and social protection, Chapter 6 of the negotiated 2014 Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) should be meaningfully integrated with the above initiatives.