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# The role of the State in the face of **COVID-19** pandemic The perspective of small-scale fishers



# Introduction

More than five months after the start of the global measures implemented to avoid the propagation of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (COVID-19), statistics are starting to show the social and economic inequalities between countries and sectors. The pandemic, in addition to being a health issue, has turned into a political one, with impacts varying across social classes. Considering this, it represents an opportunity to demonstrate that human rights can be guaranteed and protected by the State<sup>1</sup> and its representatives, in moments of crisis. The challenge is to balance the implications for health, economy, social welfare, and the environment.

The United Nations and member countries have made a call to confront the health emergency with measures that move countries towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery based on solidarity, cooperation and respect for human rights, especially considering the poorest and most vulnerable people<sup>2</sup>.

In Mexico, the most vulnerable groups are among the most affected. Due to the large informal work sector, the high number of people living *hand to mouth*, and the limited distribution of support, only between 20% and 23% of Mexicans can work from home<sup>3</sup>. Vulnerable groups such as the small-scale fishing sector, with approximately 300,000 people directly working in capture fisheries, have to choose between the *#Stayathome* suggested by the Ministry of Health; or continue with their activities to ensure the wellbeing of their families despite the risk of getting infected, the low price they receive for their products, and the lack of access to markets.

To contribute to national and global efforts, Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A. C. (COBI)<sup>4</sup> began a consultation process with small scale fishers<sup>5</sup> to identify the role of the State in the pandemic, as well as the opportunities and recommendations for the inclusive and sustainable recovery of the sector in the context of a *new normality*.

## What was done?

From 6<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020, 241 telephone interviews (64 women and 177 men) were conducted in order to understand and visualize the role of the State in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, from the fishers' perception. The following themes were covered: 1) subsidies and distribution, 2) State duties, 3) State performance, and 4) recommendations.

Thanks to the network of fishers that emerged from our first report, *Economic and social impacts*<sup>6</sup>, the geographical coverage was expanded from 30 to 64 communities, and from eight to eleven states<sup>7</sup> in Mexico. The number of Mexican small-scale fisheries increased from 15 to 19<sup>8</sup>, representing 80 fishing organizations (there were 43 organizations in the previous report).

The average age of the participants was 41 years old, ranging from 20 to 73 years. From the total, 54% of the respondents participate in extraction, 24% in administration, 5% in aquaculture and 17% in other stages of the value chain (cleaning, processing, distribution and sales).

Finally, Facebook and Twitter pages were monitored. The official pages of six fishing cooperatives, 28 individual profiles (18 men and 10 women), 14 state governors' profiles and six profiles of state fishery departments on Facebook; as well as 22 profiles of fishing groups on Twitter. In total, this analysis integrates 76 profiles and 1,417 published messages.

## Social wellbeing programs and distribution

Fisheries have been recognized in the framework of the activities and programs of the State. The federal government, for example, has identified fishing as a fundamental sector of the economy within the essential activities needed to attend the health emergency generated by COVID-19<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, as part of the 38 programs of wellbeing and economic reactivation<sup>10</sup> from the federal government, one is directed at the fisheries sector<sup>11</sup> (Support Component for the Wellbeing of Fishers and Aquaculturists – BIENPESCA). In 2019, this stimulus was delivered to 50,094 fishers in response to contingencies that affected their activities. On 7<sup>th</sup> April, the National Commission of Aquaculture and Fisheries (CONAPESCA)<sup>12</sup> announced that the 2020 subsidy would be brought forward. The stimulus provides \$7,200 pesos (US\$325) to 193,200 small-scale fishers and aquaculturists (21% women and 79% men) to maintain their activity during the pandemic<sup>11</sup>. The stimulus began to be delivered on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

Most of the fishers interviewed reported to be waiting for BIENPESCA and highlighted the lack of additional federal support programs designed to counter the impacts of the pandemic. One fisher pointed out: *“this (BIENPESCA) is not a stimulus for COVID-19, every year it’s given out between July and August. Due to the pandemic they decided to move it forward, but we are about to finish the lockdown and it has still not been sent”*.

In terms of support received, food supplies have been delivered by state and municipal governments (55% of the interviewees report they received food supplies), while only four<sup>13</sup> states have provided direct cash support (12%). Other kinds of support have also been received, such as gasoline, sanitary checkpoints, enforcement and bank credits (6%). Almost a third of the interviewees (29%) report that they have not received support.

Some state government support programs directed at helping the sector during the pandemic were mentioned. For example, in Yucatan the

*Support for the fishing sector workers*<sup>14</sup> as part of the *Plan to impulse the economy, jobs, and health of the Yucatan people*<sup>15</sup>; was mentioned; although only 49% of the interviewees in Yucatan, reported they received the stimulus in April and May. In Campeche, the government announced that they were bringing forward a stimulus given during the closed season for certain fisheries to support the fishery economy in the face of the sanitary contingency. In Baja California and Sonora, 57% of the interviewees mentioned they received support from their governments through food supplies (80%) and cash (20%). One fisher mentioned that she participated in the small and medium enterprises program that the Ministry of Economy provides, and another said to receive support from the financial system of the Ministry of Treasury.

During the interviews for our previous report (15<sup>th</sup> April 2020), 27% of the interviewees reported that they received support (economic or food supplies) from the government (federal, state, municipal) or political parties. In the present survey (14<sup>th</sup> May 2020), 72% of the interviewees reported that their *communities* received some kind of governmental support. Of these support programs, 44% are from municipal government, 33% from provincial government, 10% federal government, and 13% reported they do not know the origin of the program. Additionally, 60% of the interviewees mentioned they received support directly. All interviewees reported that the programs have been key to sustaining their families.

Nearly half (46%) of respondents indicated that support has not been distributed evenly, 41% indicate it has been distributed evenly since it was *house to house*, and 8% did not answer. Only 34% of the interviewees answered the question about the groups that have received the support. Of them, 16% mentioned the elderly, 2% women, and 1% single mothers. The rest of the participants reported other groups including low-income people and families, people with disabilities, fishing permit holders, and/or friends of politicians.



The following concerns about the programs were highlighted. The participants perceive economic support does not reach everyone, and the quantities received are lower than seventeen minimum wages<sup>17</sup>. Food supplies have been delivered by family, and just once so far. These include, for example, oatmeal, toilet paper, rice, and one litre of milk. One fisher commented: *“If you are lucky, the municipality gives you one papaya per family,*

*one kilogram of meat or a little chicken. Could you survive the quarantine with this food and a little chicken? Of course not, the pandemic is about social classes. Where the poorest always have to sacrifice and at the same time be thankful for what we get, otherwise we do not eat. Subsistence fishing is too expensive, and catches cannot be sold well... from my fishing trips I come back with \$200 pesos (US\$9)”.*

## State duties and performance

The interviewees expressed an idealistic vision for the role and duty of the State in the face of the pandemic. They perceive the need to rely on the knowledge of the fishery sector for the design of support programs, create a temporary work program, feel listened to, get support to access new markets, and check the stimulus distribution so that it reaches all those in need. They also ask the state and federal government to accelerate the stimulus programs. One person mentioned more gender-inclusive leadership could be a good option since *“we have read that the countries led by women are getting out of the crisis more quickly”.*

Regarding the government’s performance, 50% of the interviewees think that the State has performed poorly in its response to the pandemic because *“the subsidies are limited and there has not been a direct approach to the fishers”*, 38% think performance is

average because the support exists but is not equitable, 11% answered that performance was good because *“the State does what it can with the budget it has”*, and 1% did not answer.

The government’s communication was a topic of interest for the interviewees. From all interviewees, 78% report that there has not been any approach from government to the communities, 8% report an in-personal visit, 5% by telephone, 2% by e-mail, and the rest by other means such as *WhatsApp*.

Regarding the proactivity of fishers to approach the government, 63% reported they have not communicated with the government, 14% report they have made a personal visit, 11% an approach by other means such as *WhatsApp*, 8% by telephone and 4% by e-mail.

## Gender equality in the sea

On 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020, at the Press Conference *Progress and Results of the #ProgramasBienestar and Economic Reactivation*, the Commissioner of CONAPESCA recognized, for the first time, women who participate in the fishery value chain, highlighting that 21% of the stimulus (BIENPESCA) will be delivered to women.

Of the total number interviewed, 27% were women. Within this group, 37% participate in the administration of a fishing organization, 22% in the extraction, 9% in processing, 8% in cleaning, 2% in distribution and 2% in sales. Other economic

activities are also reported (20%) such as aquaculture and tourism. In two cases, women reported combining extraction and selling.

In the communities, the fishers report an unequal delivery of the economic stimulus between women and men derived from the low number of women officially registered. A fisher mentions: *“at least they are helping them with food supplies because my wife has tried to access the fishers’ census with her cooperative and is always left out”*. In another case, a fisherwoman adds *“the stimulus is for our husbands”*.

## Findings in social media

From the 1,417 messages analysed, 10% mentioned stimulus from the government in general. Besides the word stimulus and COVID-19, the most frequent words were food supplies, loans, transport, deliveries, and hospitals; as well as messages about support to families during the COVID-19 contingency.

In the messages on the fishers' profiles, only 1% talked about support provided by the Ministry of Wellbeing (federal government). In the government profiles, 93% of the messages suggested the delivery

of some support (general, not necessarily focused on the fishing sector); 94% mentioned stimulus provided by the provincial governors and fishing secretaries; 8% reported federal supports (IMSS<sup>18</sup>, Secretary of Wellbeing and Senate of the Republic, among others).

The types of support highlighted in social media were food aid (31%), medical and sanitary equipment (30%), cash (16%), loans (16%) and support for enforcement (7%). All the governors reported that they were delivering food aid.

## Fishers recommendations to the State and the *new normality*

Fishers, concerned about their wellbeing, propose the following actions for the remainder of the lockdown and beginning of the *new normality*:

**Distribution.** Create community committees that verify equitable delivery of the stimulus, to speed up delivery, facilitate the requirements for a more inclusive delivery, improve the fishing registry, and access stimulus without depending on permit holders.

**Technology.** Open new digital commercialization channels, while also preventing digital exclusion of older people or those without access to stable internet.

**Communication.** Look for mechanisms to inform the more isolated fishing communities about the evolution of sanitary measures being implemented to confront COVID-19 during the lockdown and in the *new normality*.

**Economic reactivation.** Make the budget for fishing and aquaculture equal, or at least proportional, to that of agriculture and livestock. Design an economic reactivation plan for fishing communities, for the *new normality*.

Considering the current situation, the fishers perceive the role of the State as fundamental for the economic and social reactivation of small-scale fisheries. The approach to, and collaboration with, the sector for a more just distribution of subsidies, as well as for its inclusion in integrated programs targeting national markets are fundamental for this reactivation.

In COBI, we created a communication channel to connect fishers that participated in the interviews in order to mobilize information about COVID-19 and recovery in the *new normality*. Likewise, we will continue expanding the geographical coverage and number of fishers, to give voice to the small-scale fishery sector, during its economic and social reactivation. The next report will focus on *Local solutions for recovery in the pandemic* and will be published in the first week of July.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, the State was identified by the interviewees as the federal, state and / or municipal government.

<sup>2</sup> UN 2020. Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. 26pp.

<sup>3</sup> CEEY. 2020. ¿Quién puede trabajar desde casa? Evidencia desde México. 6pp.

<sup>4</sup> Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI), is a civil society organization that has promoted marine conservation and sustainable fisheries for 21 years through the participation of all stakeholders. **Email:** [covid19@cobi.org.mx](mailto:covid19@cobi.org.mx)

<sup>5</sup> In the text we refer to “fishers” as both women and men working directly in the extraction and/or processing of fishery products.

<sup>6</sup> Spanish version: <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COBI-Reporte-1-Covid19-y-Pesca-Espanol-1mayo.pdf>

English version: <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COBI-Reporte-1-Covid19-y-Pesca-Ingles-1-mayo.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Baja California, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Ciudad de México, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco and Yucatán.

<sup>8</sup> Abalone, clam, squid, penshell, shrimp, crab, conch, sea urchin, swimming crab, spiny lobster, spiny lobster (California and Caribbean), seaweed, jellyfish, oyster, finfish, ornamental fish, sea cucumber, octopus, and shark.

<sup>9</sup> DOF 2020. Acuerdo por el que se establecen las acciones sanitarias para atender la emergencia sanitaria generada por el virus SARS-CoV2. 2pp.

<sup>10</sup> DOF 2020. Decreto por el que se establecen las medidas de austeridad que deberán observar las dependencias y entidades de la Administración Pública Federal bajo los criterios que en el mismo se indican. 3p.

<sup>11</sup> Press Conference: Avances y Resultados de los #ProgramasBienestar y Reactivación Económica realizada el 17 de mayo. <https://www.facebook.com/gobmexico/videos/927261167725726/>

<sup>12</sup> CONAPESCA. 2020. Comunicado del gobierno federal sobre incentivos del Componente Apoyo para el Bienestar de Pescadores y Acuicultores. 07 de abril de 2020. En: <https://www.gob.mx/conapesca/articulos/adelantara-gobierno-de-mexico-incentivos-del-componente-de-apoyo-para-el-bienestar-de-pescadores-y-acuicultores-bienpesca-239869?idiom=es>

<sup>13</sup> Baja California (4 people), Campeche (2), Sonora (5) and Yucatan (17).

<sup>14</sup> Direct monetary support to fishers and people engaged in fishing \$2000 (\$US90) to 12,500 people

<sup>15</sup> Consult: <https://apoyos.yucatan.gob.mx/>

<sup>16</sup> Total number of recipients: 1,100.

<sup>17</sup> Considering that the food basket became more expensive \$106 (\$US 5) (12%) at the end of the first quarter of the year. In January the real cost was \$835 (\$US 38), and it closed the quarter in \$971 (\$US 44). The support given to the fishers (\$2000, \$US 90) allowed the purchase of two food baskets to overcome the lockdown.

<sup>18</sup> IMSS. Mexican Social Security Institute.