



COBI
Comunidad y Biodiversidad

Mexican fishing communities' resilience to COVID-19 Economic and social impacts

4th May 2020

www.cobi.org.mx

f COBI.mx

  @COBI_mx

Introduction

The pandemic nature of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) has provoked a global sanitary crisis involving a cascading effect in societies and economies through every sector, including fisheries¹. There are global concerns about health, security, and human welfare, as well as a recognition that the poorest and most vulnerable people may be the most affected by the pandemic². Fisheries, which represent a critical social and economic activity for food security and livelihoods, especially in coastal communities, have been directly and indirectly affected. There have been reports of markets, logistic and transportation problems, and a lack of basic food and health resources, among others¹. The United Nations and member states have made a call to address the health emergency and focus on the social impact and economic response, in order to attain a sustainable and inclusive recovery based on solidarity and cooperation from every sector at every level. Respect for human rights and support for the most vulnerable people is fundamental in the response to the pandemic^{2,3}.

In order to contribute to national and global efforts, Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A. C. (COBI)⁴ has begun a consulting process with fishers⁵ in eight Mexican states to understand the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, as well as the roles of the State, the distribution of support, the effects on health, local solutions applied by fishers, gender equality, the use of technology, and impact on the environment. This first report reflects the immediate social and economic impacts of COVID-19 and concludes with a series of recommendations expressed by the fishing sector.

What was done?

Between 30th March and 15th April, 2020, 93 telephone interviews were applied to fishers (34 women and 59 men) of 30 communities, located in eight coastal states⁶, and working with 15 fisheries⁷. The average age range of the participants was between 31 and 45 years old. Ninety-three percent of the participants reported that they are affiliated with, or working in, 43 fishing organizations (78% are cooperatives) and 7% were not affiliated with an organization. The interviews were applied to identify the perceptions on social and economic impacts, including prices, markets, short-term local solutions, support networks and immediate needs.

¹FAO. 2020. How is COVID-19 affecting the fisheries and aquaculture food systems. 5p.

²UN. 2020. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). 2p.

³UN. 2020. Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVI-19. 26p.

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

⁵Throughout the text we refer to “fishers” as men and women directly involved in the extraction or processing of fish and seafood.

⁶Baja California, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Nayarit, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora and Yucatán.

⁷Abalone, clam, conch, finfish, octopus, ornamental fish, oyster, penshell, spiny lobster (California and Caribbean), seaweed, shark, shrimp, squid and swimming crab.

Furthermore, the publications of 56 Facebook and Twitter profiles were analyzed, of which 62% were individuals (12 women, 20 men) and 38% fishing organizations. The publications related to COVID-19 were disaggregated by: a) content (keywords, own/shared content), b) type (text only, photo/image, video, link), and c) category (perception of problem, concern, price/sale, solutions, support networks).

Which are the immediate economic impacts?

The COVID-19 health emergency impacted coastal communities before the virus began propagating in Mexico, due to the closure of international and domestic markets. Eighty-nine percent of the interviewees reported market closures and price reductions; 10% reported being affected but were continuing to sell their products; and 1% did not answer. The impact on the markets occurred at two different moments. The first, between December 2019 and January 2020, was reported by 30% of the interviewees, and was related to the closure of distribution and commercialization companies that export products to Asian markets. This directly affected fisheries such as red rock lobster in the Pacific (they stopped fishing before their closed season came into place) and Caribbean spiny lobster. The second, occurring in March 2020, was reported by 49% of the interviewees, and relates to the closures of the American finfish market, the spiny lobster market in Europe, as well as national markets. This second moment, coincided with Lent, a time of the year when seafood consumption (clam, crab, finfish, octopus and shrimp) generally increases, representing an important source of income for fishers. Eleven percent of the interviewees reported that their markets were impacted between February and April.

On 23rd March, when the COVID-19 pandemic was recognized as a priority in Mexico, and preparation and response measures began⁸, 48% of the participants stopped fishing activities, 41% continued selling, but reduced their landings between 30-80%, and 11% continued fishing for subsistence. Seventy percent of the interviewees mentioned a price reduction for their products, both in domestic and exportation markets. As examples, the price of red rock lobster decreased between 40-60%, Caribbean spiny lobster between 30-40%, penshell between 30-50%, and finfish between 50 and 60%.

Communities that fish a range of species show more economic resilience due to their more diversified markets. However, the market closures limit their capacity to move between fishing strategies and species. Only one fishery (seaweed, *Gelidium sp.*) was reported to increase in value due its use in the pharmaceutical industry.

⁸DOF. 2020. ACUERDO por el que el Consejo de Salubridad General reconoce la epidemia de enfermedad por el virus SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) en México, como una enfermedad grave de atención prioritaria, así como se establecen las actividades de preparación y respuesta ante dicha epidemia. 2p.

Fishers also reported a price increase for food basket products and a perception of abuse. A fisherman from Sonora replied: *“The price of the food basket has increased a lot, while they are buying from us – the producers – at a very low price. Who is benefiting from this?”*. The above, combined with confinement, limits the access of fishers to support provided by the government and other organizations that normally collaborate with the communities, and therefore, their capacity to fulfill their families’ and communities’ basic needs.

Which are the immediate social impacts?

The fishing communities mobilized to apply the federal government recommendations from the third week of March. Some of them have implemented the following additional actions:

- Access restrictions to small communities (<2,500 people).
- Search for local and national markets. Some cooperatives are selling door to door, freezing and canning products.
- Fishing low value products because they are sold more quickly (finfish), leaving higher value species in the water (e.g. lobster, octopus, penshell), with exception of the high value products that are canned and stored (i.e. abalone).
- Some cooperatives and well-organized fishing groups reported that they are providing credits, distributing saving and reducing wages. Nevertheless, others have done the contrary; freezing the distribution of loans and savings fund to members. Some cooperatives have also distributed protective equipment to those people that are still working, and have delivered food supplies to their members and communities. Finally, these groups have been the spokespeople and connection with the government; for example, providing members’ names to obtain financial support from the program *Bienpesca*.

Forty-five percent of the participants believe that they have adapted to the situation, by diversifying their product sales in the local market, or door to door. At the same time, it is striking that 44% of the fishers mention that they have not been able to adapt, and they have stopped selling their products due to lack of buyers or storage space.

Within the communities, 58% of the interviewees mention that their organizations have helped them, or they have collaborated to help themselves. Nevertheless, 42% report that they have not received any support. Twenty percent of the participants said that they have received economic support or food aid from the federal government. Seven percent of the interviewees mentioned they will receive support from CONAPESCA (*Bienpesca*) or they are already receiving help from state and municipal governments, as well as from political parties.

In addition, some fishers reported that they had received support from Navy (SEMAR) and park rangers from the National Commission for Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) to perform enforcement and transport merchandise.

The principal short-term needs identified by the interviewees included:

- Food aid, including infant and baby food.
- Economic support in cash, because it is becoming scarce.
- Medicine and personal protective equipment (masks, disinfectant gel and soap, among others).
- Maintaining prices.
- Opening national markets.
- Receiving more information about COVID-19.
- Access to communication channels and spokespeople to present their needs to the government.

Only 8% of the interviewees mentioned they do not need help for now and they show interest in helping others.

Due to their isolation, the answers provided by the coastal communities show a greater level of social resilience, since they have resources to subsist (*“We are not going to starve”* – community leader, member of two cooperatives). However, if a case of infection occurs in the communities, their vulnerability would be much higher due to a lack of infrastructure, health personnel and preventative materials (deficient or inexistent sanitary installations), and sometimes, the distance to the nearest hospitals. This could convert the communities into transmission hotspots, due to the greater ease of virus transmission and the lack of preventive measures. This is why, before official regulations were even passed, many of the communities had closed or restricted the access to outsiders. The disruption of these measures, even when the intentions are good (i.e. food aid), could bring significant consequences to the communities.

The fishing groups with higher levels of organization show a greater adaptability to change, which translates into having emergency and savings funds, in order to confront contingencies like this, at least for a while.

The opening of some closed fishing seasons between July and September causes concern to several of the interviewed fishers due to the uncertainty about the end of sanitary measures in place and the likely increase in illegal fishing.

The interviewees reported that illegal fishing now has *carte blanche* in the seas. Fishers mentioned that some community surveillance programs have been prohibited by the government (before the pandemic), but several coastal communities reported organizing themselves to continue surveillance to protect their resources and prevent the entrance of outsiders into their communities.

Although some fishers mentioned similarities between this crisis and other contingencies (i.e. hurricanes), they report that they do not feel ready to face the pandemic due to its global scale, uncertainty about how long it will last, and the uniqueness of the situation.

Social media monitoring

Of the 338 analyzed messages, besides COVID-19, the most frequent words were: fishers and community; food security and support; as well as messages about raising local awareness about the absence of markets.

It was noticed that 56% of the publications shared content from other sites, and the other 44% of the content was made by user. The most used content was pictures and photographs (71%) followed by links from other sites (19%). Links were not published individually, but as a complement to a photo or video post. Few videos were included (6%), and the least used content was text without visual accompaniment (4%).

Fifty-six percent of the messages reported a problem related to COVID-19, 22% stated ways to solve the issue, 10% reported to be supporting other people, 6% talked about price and marketing of their products, and 6% spoke about the support they are receiving.

Recommendations

- Streamline the support network of governmental, academic, civil society, and community organizations, to attend the immediate needs expressed by the fishery sector: a) food aid, b) economic support to buy basic products, c) medicines and personal protective equipment. If these needs are not covered, it will be difficult to count on a motivated and creative fishery sector to work towards economic recovery. Medicine and personal protective equipment are fundamental in case infections occur in the coastal communities. At present, the best protection measures in the communities are access restrictions.
- Facilitate the delivery of the *Bienpesca* program to start local economic recovery. If possible, with the support of local government and leaders, to ensure the most vulnerable fishers are included.

- Integrate seafood into the food basket due to its important nutritional contribution, and the growing demand of healthy food given the health issues (e.g., overweight, malnutrition) Mexicans are facing, before the pandemic. Mexican Food Security (SEGALMEX) has a key role to play at integrating fisher's products and fair prices, as part of the aid programs that have been implemented.
- Incentivize the domestic market. Including the fishery sector in the Mexican producers/products programs is strategic. Campaigns for local and Mexican consumption have begun. However, the connections between sectors are lacking, and considering the necessary sanitary measures, fish products should not be left behind.
- Use technology in order to create an integrated communication and information system, that attends the need to access reliable information. This communication system can include local solutions applied by the fishers in their communities, that can be shared and replicated in others.
- Consider the gender perspective. Every response and recovery action for COVID-19 must consider a gender perspective, in order to be inclusive and not generate greater inequalities.

Finally, in COBI we will be expanding the geographical coverage and number of fishers, to make visible their needs and proposals, and to link them with response and recovery mechanisms in the face of the pandemic. The next report will be distributed in the first week of June and will cover the state role opportunities and distribution of support.