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Everything changes: local solutions of small-scale fishers for adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Small-scale fishing communities have always been vulnerable to global shocks and changes. Because of this, fishers¹ are flexible and make daily decisions to adapt, using their experience and the available information. They can switch from one fishery to another, create new fishing techniques, and find new markets quickly. There used to be one constant, no matter what they had to adapt to, fishers would go to fish.

This time, things are different. COVID-19 has spread to impact each and every fishing community, supply chain and market². It is now six months since some Mexican fishers, such as lobster fishers, started to report reduced demand in certain export markets. Many small-scale fishers are not going out to fish, and those who do, have limited options to sell their catch. As a fisher commented in our first report³, people have compared the crisis to when a hurricane hit. However, COVID-19 has brought more uncertainty and hits everywhere at once, on a greater scale. In June 2020, Mexican fishers began to receive government support from BIENPESCA⁴, with CONAPESCA reporting that 193,200 fishers⁵ will receive the one-time payment of \$7,200MXN (USD\$325). This, however, will not be enough to sustain livelihoods during the lockdown and during the gradual reactivation of the fishery sector.

In this report, the third in the series of a national consultation, Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C.⁶ (COBI) focuses on the local actions⁷ that small-scale fishers are taking to adapt to COVID-19, both in their fisheries and in their communities. Community and fishery adaptation solutions⁸ will be critical in reactivating their activities and economies. While we do not yet know where the “*new normal*” will take us, successful local solutions should be shared and scaled to help bring the sector out of this crisis, in an inclusive and sustainable way.

What was done?

From 1st to 12th June 2020, 223 telephone interviews⁹ (60 women and 163 men) were conducted in order to understand how fishers and fishing organizations were adapting to the crisis. Fishers were asked about what mechanisms they had put in place, if any, to adapt to the restrictions placed upon them by the lockdown, loss of markets, and loss of income.

This report builds on the network of fishers who participated in the first and second reports^{10,11}. The interviews covered 69 communities, 12 Mexican states¹², 88 fishing organizations and 20 fisheries¹³. The average age of the participants was 44 years old, ranging from 20 to 73 years. Of all the respondents, 56% participate in extraction, 24% in administration, 5% in aquaculture and 15% in other stages of the value chain (cleaning, processing, distribution and sales).

Likewise, the official pages of six fishing cooperatives, 28 individual profiles (10 women and 18 men), 14 state governor's profiles and six profiles of state fishery departments on Facebook were monitored; as well as 41 profiles of fishing groups on Twitter, of which 12 were closely linked to gender issues. In total, this analysis integrates 75 profiles and 1,095 published messages.

Finally, a summary of the information shared in a WhatsApp group is presented. This group was created on 4th May 2020 with the interviewed people, and by late June had a total of 190 participants (57 women, 133 men).

Fisheries solutions - what are fishers doing to adapt?

Just over half of the fishers interviewed (58%) reported taking actions towards creating solutions to the problems they face. The number of fishers who reported taking actions was highest in Baja California (74% of fishers reported finding solutions), Campeche (73%) and Quintana Roo (65%). States with the lowest proportion of fishers implementing solutions include Yucatan (29%), Tabasco (33%) and Nayarit (44%). The oldest age group (>51 years) were the most successful, with 66% reporting to have found solutions. Younger fishers¹⁴ were less likely to report finding solutions than older fishers. In the interviews, 51% of fishers aged 20-30 reported finding solutions, compared to 56% of fishers in the 31-40 age bracket and 58% of fishers aged 41-50. There was no gender difference in the ability of fishers to find a solution (57% of women and 58% of men).

The most common action taken by fishers was changing the way they sell their products (29%), followed by searching for alternative markets (17%). These two activities are interlinked, and examples include selling lower value products locally, selling catches on social media (particularly Facebook), or directly on the street. The third most common action (15%) was activating the emergency funds of the organization. Fishers (75%) reported taking this action, come from well-organized cooperatives in Baja California, Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo. These fishing cooperatives have access to these financial options due to previous processes of internal organization in the medium and long term, that have endowed them with greater financial resilience. The funds were mainly used to maintain the salaries of administrative staff, provide a small regular payment to fishers, provide loans to fishers, or cover the costs of fishers who catch fish to donate to others. As a comparison, only three of 44 fishers interviewed in Sonora, and no fishers (from 31 interviewed) in Yucatan reported activating emergency funds.

Other examples of fishers adapting to the crisis include donating fish or selling it cheaply to their communities, providing other goods and services (e.g. motor repairs or making and selling face-masks), adjusting fishing effort, and improving communication within the community to keep colleagues safe by providing information and to continue operating remotely (often through WhatsApp, Facebook or Zoom). Fishers from Sonora and Quintana Roo represent the majority of the 29% of fishers who report using social media (principally Facebook and WhatsApp) to sell catches and communicate more effectively between organization members. Only a small number of fishers (2%, located in Campeche and Sonora) reported making investments to improve their sales, buying ice boxes, knives, and tarpaulins to keep products fresh and provide shade when selling in the street.

Who else is involved and when were the actions implemented?

The fishers have mostly been on their own while trying to adapt to the crisis, with 74% reporting that they developed and implemented the solution without the participation of third parties. Government agencies (municipal government, state fisheries department, INAPESCA) were involved in 12% of the solutions, followed by civil society organizations (5%), the private sector (5%) and multi-sector alliances (4%).

Most actions began to be taken in March (35%), April (26%) and May (23%), coinciding with the implementation of sanitary measures in Mexico on the 23rd March 2020¹⁵, showing the rapid response capacity of the sector. A small number (11%) of fishers from Baja California, Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo, started to implement actions in January and February, due to the closure of Asian markets for exported lobster.



Implications for sustainability

Many fishers believe that the reduced fishing effort during COVID-19 is likely to benefit fish stocks. Those who continue to fish, report that they continue to respect seasonal closures and size limits.

Some sustainable fishing projects have come to a standstill. Monitoring has halted as researchers and government staff cannot visit the field sites. Restocking initiatives were also reported as being put on hold as juveniles and larvae could not be acquired from laboratories. Cooperatives with their own laboratories continue to work (e.g. abalone along the Baja California Peninsula). Two aquaculture workers report that their work has continued as normal during the pandemic and no additional action needed to be taken to adapt.

Fishers from Baja California and Baja California Sur who operate marine reserves (fish refuge, marine protected area or voluntary reserve), report that they plan to carry out the evaluations of the marine reserves as planned. They normally conduct the surveys in collaboration with civil society organizations and academics, but they feel that this is an opportunity to monitor the sites on their own so as not to lose data.

Only two fishers reported that they continue to conduct community enforcement, and they reported seeing a reduction in the number of boats entering their fishing grounds as the market for illegally caught fish had also decreased. In contrast, another fisher reported that they had had to stop community enfor-

ment efforts at sea due to lack of funds and that there had been a large increase in the number of fishers who were operating under the pretext of subsistence fishing.

In May 2020, the Mexican government gave a green light to all tourism boat owners to subsistence fish in certain areas, including inside natural protected areas¹⁶. It was anticipated that the fishing effort would temporarily increase due to the rise in the number of boats. However, a principal limiting factor on increased fishing pressure is likely cost, as interviewed fishers report that, without access to markets to provide a return, it can be hard to cover the costs of subsistence fishing when fuel, ice and boat upkeep are taken into consideration.

Factors that stopped or complicated adaptation to the crisis

Just under half of the fishers (42%) reported that they had taken no action to adapt to the crisis. The reasons for not acting were varied. The most common reasons were related to the lack of market for different products (18%), concerns about health and the need to comply with the lockdown (17%), or a perception that their cooperative or colleagues were not prepared or could not organize effectively to adapt (14%). Other reasons included having other jobs that provided income (10%), or their main fishery being in a closed season (3%). Only six fishers reported that they did not know how to adapt.

Community Solutions - how are communities adapting?

Closing or restricting access to the communities has been the main action taken to protect the health of community members, representing 26 communities in nine states. Eighty percent of interviewees reported that action was taken in March or April. Many of the communities considered in the interviews are in isolated zones, or islands, so they decided to implement their own protocols to restrict access. It is worth mentioning that many communities have now begun to lift their restrictions, with a limited number of outsiders (such as ambulant, salespeople) being allowed in. A smaller number of fishers reported that curfews were in place, many businesses were closed, alcohol sales were banned, and three fishers from isolated communities reported that they required a 15-day quarantine to be respected by people arriving in the community. At the

beginning of this series of reports (April 2020), no community reported cases of COVID-19. At the date of the publication of this report (July 2020), there are reported cases in four communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants and in two communities of between 2,500 and 15,000 inhabitants. These reports agree with the official statistics, although the official data is only available at the municipality level¹⁷.

Interviewees from nine communities reported interchanging goods with other communities (e.g. fish for beef, pork or beans), as well as fishers donating catches to the general public. One fisher from Baja California Sur stated that his cooperative had donated five tons of fish to local communities.

Findings in social media

Of the 1,095 analyzed messages, 4% mentioned taking actions. The most used words in social media include “support”, COVID-19, climatic change, communities, solutions, as well as messages related to the pandemic effects and the search of supports and markets. Of the total of solutions detected, 57% were at the fishing organizations level, while 43% were at the community level. Sixty-five percent of the messages about actions do not mention the involvement of third parties, 20% reflect civil society organization involvement, 10% governmental agencies and 5% the private sector.

For the actions taken by fishing organizations, those related to the selling or exchange of products, searching of new buyers or loans, invitations to consume national products, actions to face climate change and awareness about the benefits of the fish refuge zones (*Zonas de Refugio Pesquero*) were highlighted. Important community actions related to fabricating facemasks, food exchanges, gardening and cultivation, preparations for the “*new normal*”, support for marine reserves implementation, internal organization to sell their products and the opening of the access to beaches for tourism were also mentioned.

Small-scale fishers' communication channel

The WhatsApp group with the interviewees created the space for fisher to fisher communication in the coastal states of Mexico. The issues discussed are related to illegal fishing and enforcement, the BIENPESCA fund, budget

cuts in the government sector, the current state of different fishing communities, as well as general information about COVID-19 and weather (weather forecasts, and links of interest).

Recommendations to build adaptive capacity

Support sustainable fisheries in times of crisis. Most fishers want to be sustainable, and several interviewees expressed their concerns about projects that they had been working on, included eco-certifications, restocking and restoration. However, actions for sustainability often have associated costs, and economic and health necessities will always be prioritized in times of crisis. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that sustainability programs can continue at a basic level during these times, as well as to continue promoting sustainability initiatives. One opportunity is to design the *National Award for Sustainable Fishing and Aquaculture 2020* in the context of sustainable solutions in times with COVID-19 to recognize and encourage best practices.

Work with younger generations to build adaptive capacity. Our results suggest that younger fishers were the least able to adapt. While our interview did not explore the reasons behind this difference, less experience, developed networks, and available capital likely play a role. It likely also reflects the low number of younger fishers in decision-making roles, as older fishers who were interviewed were in administrative positions in fishing organizations ¹⁸.

Adaptation seems to be an organizational issue, rather than an innovative one. Only a small number of fishers reported that they did not know how to adapt, but many waited for others to move first (in many cases their cooperative) or were restricted by a lack of capital. Innovation requires taking some risks, and people tend to be more conservative in times of crisis. This suggests that if fishers were supported by stronger institutions, or had opportunities to access capital, they would be more willing to test innovative ideas.

Fishers are willing to share and replicate solutions. Almost all fishers expressed interest in being able to share, consult, and replicate examples of successful solutions implemented by other fishers. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to work together to solve problems that have impacted the entire sector. There is an opportunity to share successful and sustainable solutions to inspire other fishers to take action, to innovate, and to replicate solutions.

The communication channel to connect the fishers that participated in the interviews will be maintained in order to mobilize information and sustainable solutions to face the impacts of COVID-19 and adapt to the “*new normal*”. The geographical coverage and number of fishers involved will continue to be expanded, to better represent the voice of the small-scale fisheries sector, and move towards an inclusive and sustainable reactivation. The topic of the next report will be *Gender equality in the sea* and will be distributed in the first week of August.

¹ In the text we refer to “fishers” as both women and men working directly in the extraction and/or processing of fishery products.

² Bennett, N. J., et al. 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic, Small-Scale Fisheries and Coastal Fishing Communities. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08920753.2020.1766937>.

³ <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COBI-Reporte-1-Covid19-y-Pesca-Espanol-1mayo.pdf>

⁴ Support Component for the Wellbeing of Fishers and Aquaculturists from CONAPESCA. This subsidy program (previously called PROPECSA) is given annually to fishers during closed seasons. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the government brought forward its delivery.

⁵ <https://www.gob.mx/conapesca/articulos/adelantara-gobierno-de-mexico-incentivos-del-componente-de-apoyo-para-el-bienestar-de-pescadores-y-acuicultores-bienpesca-239869>

⁶ Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI) (www.cobi.org.mx), 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*

⁷ An action is the first step to developing a solution. It is a period of experimentation and adaptation.

⁸ A solution is a product, project or service developed by a coastal community to adapt and has resulted in increased resilience against change (e.g. climate, social or economic change).

⁹ The interviews were conducted by COBI with the support of Smartfish, A.C.

¹⁰ <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COBI-Reporte-1-Covid19-y-Pesca-Espanol-1mayo.pdf>

¹¹ <https://cobi.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1.-COBI-Reporte-COVID-19-Rol-del-Estado-1jun2020.pdf>

¹² Baja California, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Chiapas, Ciudad de México, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco y Yucatán.

¹³ Abalone, clam, squid, penshell, shrimp, crab, crown conch, conch, sea urchin, swimming crab, spiny lobster (California and Caribbean), seaweed, jellyfish, oyster, finfish, ornamental fish, sea cucumber, octopus, shark and yellowtail (mariculture).

¹⁴ “Youth” represents the 12-29 age bracket, as per the law of the Mexican Youth Institute (Ley del Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud DOF 02-04-2015). All interviewees were 18 years old or older.

¹⁵ DOF. 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.

¹⁶ For example: <https://www.gob.mx/conanp/prensa/acuerdos-sobre-la-pesca-de-consumo-domestico-en-quintana-roo-a-prestadores-de-servicios-turisticos>

<https://www.elsudcaliforniano.com.mx/local/municipios/en-loreto-permiten-la-pesca-para-autoconsumo-5154924.html>

¹⁷ At <https://coronavirus.gob.mx/fHDMMap/mun.php> and <https://www.biodiversidad.gob.mx/atlas/covid19/>

¹⁸ Of the interviewees, just 3% of under 30’s were in an administrative role (three women from small cooperatives), whereas 43% of over 50’s work, at least partially, in administration and decision-making.