

# SOCIAL IMPACT OF SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES IN MEXICO

Proposals to Promote  
Social Welfare in Mexico's  
Fishing Sector

JULY 2019



# EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW





**Fishing in Mexico is an activity that has never been correctly valued.** Historically, it has not been considered an economic priority for the country. There are very limited resources destined to promote fishing. Furthermore, its great potential as an excellent and healthy food source for Mexicans is underestimated. Many of the hundreds of thousands of small-scale fishermen and women in Mexico live in precarious conditions in coastal communities, with a huge lag in terms of infrastructure and access to basic services such as health, education, water, and sanitation. **Small-scale fisheries simply do not stand out.**

**Fishing is an activity that provides healthy and nutritious food, and that constitutes an important supply chain and food trade in Mexico.** Every day, thousands of tons of fish and other seafood arrive at the Central Market in Mexico City—the second largest market of marine products in the world. From there, they are distributed to hundreds of thousands of homes, restaurants, local markets, informal markets, fish markets and other places where seafood is consumed. It is an extensive food network for Mexico that could become one of the most important worldwide. For example, a California yellowtail that is fished one morning in the North Pacific basin can be, in a few hours, on its way for sale in Mexico City, in the United States, in Japan or Europe. The infrastructure necessary for this to happen efficiently is, without a doubt, one of the key elements that must be considered to develop better public policies. Other elements that must be considered go from a comprehensive development of coastal communities to sanitary permits for export and transportation.

**The great distribution network of seafood is very complex and specialized,** and, in many segments, it is still a winding and stony path. Despite some specific efforts, the Mexican government has failed in providing basic human rights for the integral development of these communities and the promotion of their welfare. This must be one of the cornerstones so fisheries public policy in Mexico boost local and regional development and strengthen a long value chain that goes from the sea to Mexican households' tables.

All these reasons have motivated us to provide an analysis that seeks, in the first place, **to identify the factors and components that are necessary to make visible and detect "opportunity areas" in the public policies that have been implemented over the last 30 years. Secondly, the analysis has allowed us to propose some useful ideas for the design of a comprehensive fisheries policy that promotes fishing from a local and regional perspective.**

**This public policy design must, at all times, place the fishermen at the center of the discussion and the solutions process**—and not just include them as another element. Public policy should focus on the welfare of fishers, their families and their communities.

*“The social impacts of fishing have not been a priority in the creation of public policies; we need information on the welfare state of fishing communities ... and according to this, contribute to the discussion and to the public policy agenda.”*

- Anonymous

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(All comments included in the study will be cited this way as agreed with the participants in the in-depth interviews and the collaborative workshop.)

**There are large information gaps.** Currently, we have very few data available about fishers' access to social security, their educational level, the weight of their economic activity in their communities or the socio-economic conditions that prevail in those localities. **Without adequate and reliable information, it is difficult to generate a robust assessment of the social impacts of fishing** in communities that allows us to identify public policy alternatives to drive the welfare of coastal communities. Therefore, it is essential to have the proper analytical tools.

To give a logical order and coherence to what in the beginning was an extensive matrix of proposals and ideas, **this document starts from the conceptual framework of fundamental human and social rights**, which allows us to better identify those opportunity areas in the public policies of the fishing sector. In the same way, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 U.N. Agenda for Sustainable Development are useful mechanisms targeting structural causes of poverty, combating inequalities and generating opportunities to improve the living standards of people on a sustainable basis. The recommendations established by the SDGs work as a platform to meet three interconnected elements of sustainable development: **economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.**

Therefore, in line with the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) issued by FAO in 2015, to promote a human rights-based approach for the eradication of poverty and ensure the right to adequate nutrition and equitable socio-economic development of fishers and fishing communities, it is immediately evident that a significant challenge for small-scale fishing communities<sup>1</sup> in Mexico is the lack of access to universal social and economic rights.

In other words, **most of the fishers and their families lack access to basic human rights deriving from their occupation and place of residence.** Numerous coastal communities suffer great shortages in basic services such as education, health, drinking water, sanitation, and electricity, which worsen depending on the conditions of the geographical isolation of some remote communities.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the social and economic rights of fishers are not guaranteed or materialized, which prevents them from enjoying the benefits of economic justice, social welfare, participation, and fundamental conditions on an equal basis in comparison to other rural and urban communities, only because they pursue this activity.

Considering the context that we have briefly described, the main objective of the study “Social Impact of Small-Scale Fisheries in Mexico” is to identify and understand the principal socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts that small-scale fisheries have on families, communities and regions where this activity is performed. Additionally, the second objective is to propose a series of public policy recommendations based on the knowledge of experts, that place small-scale fishers at the center of the discussion and that consider the socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts of this activity.

These public policy proposals aim to empower fishing communities, to guarantee their economic, social and cultural rights, and to ensure that they have a greater impact on the conditions that determine their welfare as key communities for the economy, food security and the conservation of marine ecosystems throughout the country.

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1 FAO, 2018, The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2018. Meeting the sustainable development goals, p. 155.

2 COBI-ICPMX, 2018, Integration of social development information in Mexican fishing communities, consulting work document, p. 5.



The following analysis concludes with a series of public policy recommendations from a comprehensive perspective, at the center of which are the fishers and the fishing communities.

We classified the recommendations in **four priority pillars**, one transversal and three strategic, which were built around the fundamental rights of fishers as the central node of the policy:

1. The **Transversal Pillar** consists of the creation of a fisheries policy with a regional and intersectoral approach that considers social, economic, cultural and ecological differences between the main fishing regions of the country, due to their diversity and variations.



2. The **Socio-economic Pillar** focuses on increasing the productive, financial, and human development capabilities, and horizontal integration among fisheries' value chains through access to technologies, infrastructure, capacity-building and basic services (water, electricity, roads).



3. The **Socio-cultural Pillar** seeks to recognize the importance of social and cultural values of the fishing activity not just as an economic activity, but also as a way of life for many small-scale fishing communities. That is, to place the fishers at the center of public policy through social participation spaces from a perspective that considers their empirical knowledge.



4. The **Organizational Pillar** focuses on strengthening the organization and integration of communities around fishing, through the accompaniment and development of organizational capabilities for fishing cooperatives and through technical and technological training on several useful topics.



**The FAO-U.N. recognizes that small-scale fishing can be a factor for change in many coastal communities** and play a key role in the fight against poverty, in achieving food security and the nutrition of millions of people, as well as the sustainable use of fishery resources, but it is necessary to implement structural reforms to reach these goals. Otherwise, it is almost impossible to put these sustainable development mechanisms into action.

Finally, it is important to mention that the opinions expressed in this compendium and the proposals developed arise from a collective reflection and exchange of ideas based on the experiences of various fishers, professionals, academics, and members of social organizations, experts on the impact and importance of the small-scale fishing activity in the country.

In this endeavor, **Environmental Defense Fund Mexico (EDF de México)** only set the table; all the information that shaped this document was provided by the people that participated in several interviews and a collaborative workshop, including producers, leaders, scholars, NGOs, and experts from the fisheries sector. Everything was done with the objective of contributing proposals and alternatives that may be useful to the authorities to handle the actual needs of the sector, drawing on the normative basis of fishers' human rights and the social rights of small-scale fishing communities.

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