

Situation of the fishing communities in Guatemala facing COVID-19

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Fundación Mundo Azul



Introduction

COVID-19 is a recently discovered virus part of the coronavirus family that started its outbreak in December 2019¹. Currently the infectious disease induced by this virus is a pandemic that has affected most countries around the world. The nature of the virus has caused governments to take measures to contain the disease such as home confinement, travel restrictions and the closure of businesses, among others, which has caused an economic crisis that has reached all levels of the worldwide economy ².

In Guatemala, the virus was first detected on March 16, 2020, since then, sanitary measures have been implemented to try to control the infection. The economic situation has been seriously affected, especially in the tourism, informal, medium, and small business sector³.

The food supply system is considered an essential element for the daily life of the population, reason why they keep operating, however, the government restrictions affect the transportation and distribution of products. The fishing sector is subject to indirect impacts of the pandemic due to changing factors such as consumer demand, access to the markets, sales in places where mobility is restricted, and border restrictions.⁴

Under this perspective, Fundación Mundo Azul wants to contribute to the local consultation efforts with low-scale fishermen to find out what are the impacts that the pandemic has caused to the communities. The research has been carried out in 5 fishing communities: El Quetzalito and Sarstún in the Caribbean coast; Las Lisas, Sipacate and Buena Vista in the Pacific coast. This research was done with the objective of knowing the social and economic impacts, as well as the roles of the different government institutions in terms of the support given to families that depend on fishing, the actions that the members of the community have taken on this unexpected situation.

¹ WHO. 2020. Coronavirus disease outbreak (COVID-19). Available in:

<https://www.who.int/es/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

² WHO. 2020. Mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on food trade and markets. Available in:

<https://www.who.int/es/news-room/detail/30-03-2020>

³ Galindo Retena, S. 2020. La pandemia del Covid-19 y sus consecuencias sobre la economía nacional. [*Covid-19 Pandemic and its consequences on the national economy*]

⁴ FAO. 2020. How is COVID-19 affecting the fisheries and aquaculture food systems 5 p.

Methodology

This initiative used the methodology employed by the organization *Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI)* for their report on "Resilience of the fishing communities in Mexico facing COVID-19"⁵; which was shared with Fundación Mundo Azul to develop our own analysis for Guatemala. During the month of June 2020, telephone interviews were conducted with 39 people involved in the fishing activity (fishermen, merchants, boat owners and fishermen's wives) from 5 fishing communities, 2 on the Caribbean coast and 3 on the Pacific coast. , all of them working in artisan fishery.

The interviewees have an age range from 28 to 73 years. Most of these people are engaged in fishing (82%), while the rest are engaged in fishing activities such as the sale of the product, collaboration with fishermen to prepare and unload fishing tasks, fishermen's wives, and fishing equipment owners. 72% of the people interviewed in the two Caribbean fishing communities in Guatemala are part of a committee of fishermen. While people in the Pacific are independent fishermen, working individually or with fishing fleets of some owners of fishing equipment.

What are the economic impacts on the fishery activity?

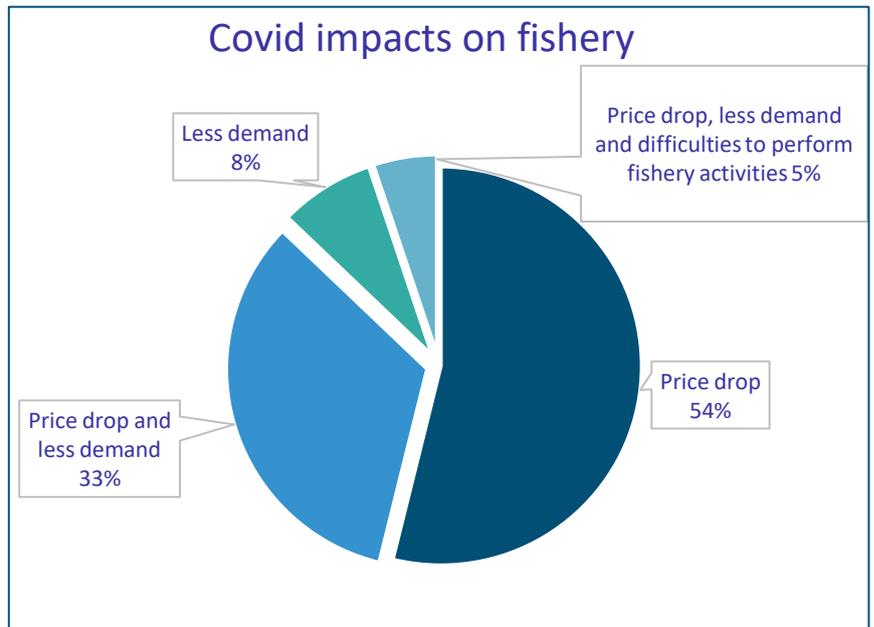
The necessary measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 have caused disturbances in all phases of the fishing activity. This virus has strongly impacted low-scale fishermen and exporters of fishery products, mainly those that sell their products in Asian markets and others that were closed in the first months of the year due to the health emergency, this situation has been evidenced mainly in the Pacific of Guatemala.

On the other hand, the artisanal fishery sector is being strongly impacted by the global pandemic, particularly damaging the health, employment and living conditions of the most vulnerable groups of people in the country. In this context, the coastal

⁵ COBI. 2020. Resiliencia de las comunidades pesqueras de México ante COVID-19, impactos económicos y sociales. 7p. [*Resilience of the fishing communities in México facing Covid-19, economic and social impacts. 7p.*]

communities do not escape this health and work reality, mainly due to the vulnerability conditions present in most of the fishermen's homes.

In Guatemala, the first impacts perceived by artisanal fishermen on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts were noticeable during the last weeks of March and the first weeks of April. 54% of the interviewees indicated that the main problem they face is the price drop of their products. In addition, 33% indicated that apart from the price drop there is also a



decrease in the demand and market for the fishery product. 8% mentioned only the problem of decreased demand, and 5% of those interviewed, added to the above problems, mobility difficulties, due to the restrictions enforced by the government to stop the massive COVID-19 contagion.

Top products, such as snapper, sea bass and even shrimp, came to a price lower than 50% of the average price that they have handled in previous months and years; while lower category products reached prices that was not profitable to carry out the fishing activity, for that reason some fishermen of these species have monetarily stopped the fishery activity while others go irregularly to their fishing activities. On the other hand, the markets of fishery products were affected by the border closures or interdepartmental restrictions, for example, Las Lisas community sells part of their products in El Salvador.

The limited market for fishery products and the low prices that intermediaries are currently paying make it almost impossible for fishermen on both coasts of Guatemala to invest in more than one fishing trip, as they regularly did in previous years. Many of the interviewees mentioned that it is not convenient to make an investment knowing that they run the risk of not being able to sell the product or sell it at a relatively low price than was managed before the health crisis.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that a strong impact on the business of fishery products was due to the restrictions during Lent and Easter, a period where more fishery products are consumed in the country. These measures also impacted the business of the communities that tend to receive large numbers of national tourists during that season. May was also a difficult season, when the containment measures by the government were more restrictive, reason why the fishermen from the Pacific coast stopped fishing for 15 to 20 days.

100% of the people interviewed mentioned that their income has decreased between 75% and 80% compared to previous years, due to the current health crisis. 66% of the people interviewed mentioned that they are also engaged in other economic activities such as agriculture (69%), construction (19%), commerce (11%), livestock (11%) and tourism (7%), participating in certain occasions in two or more economic activities other than fishing. However, these activities are not carried out throughout the entire year and they have had difficulties accessing them due to the mobility restrictions enforced by our Government.

The lack of income has not only brought problems to cover the daily expenses of food, rent and basic services, but it has also prevented many fishermen from carrying out their fishery activities. This situation is more serious if we remember that the members of artisanal fishing communities, in their great majority: 1) are informal, that prevents them from accessing social or productive aid programs for the sector, 2) they are not insured 3) they have low or no savings, and 4) they live in locations where health systems are deficient or non-existent.

The fishing communities of the Caribbean coast of Guatemala and the Directorate of Fisheries and Aquaculture Regulations -DIPESCA-, have held for fifteen years the declaration of fishing prohibitions through an annual calendar, which stands out as a key tool for fisheries management. However, this year the prohibitions were suspended due to the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing fishermen to continue the fishing activities. In this situation, 42% of fishermen in the Caribbean mention that they disagree with the decision made, because there will be no control over the fishing activity and the small fishing area that they have will be damaged. In addition, they point out that the problem is that other fishermen are not respecting the restrictions and go out fishing even during the hours where mobility has been restricted

by the government and without respecting the verbal agreement regarding the corresponding areas within the Amatique bay. While 58% mentioned that it is a good decision to keep the prohibitions suspended, mainly because they depend on fishing.

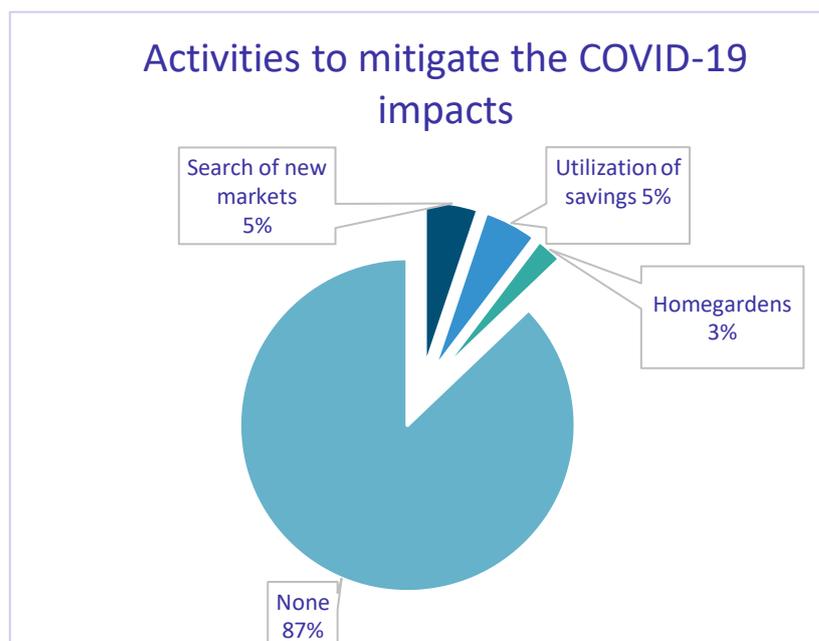
What are the social impacts on the fishing communities?

People in the fishing communities have complied with government regulations on social distancing and mobility restrictions since the beginning of these safety measures, those have prevented the entry of the disease. Some communities have also established additional security measures, such as in the communities: Las Lisas and Sipacate, the entry of outsiders is not allowed, with an exception for the essential activities such as food distribution. In El Quetzalito, the tires of vehicles entering the community were fumigated, although this measure was only carried out during the first two weeks of the establishment of security measures.

Coronavirus prevention measures have come to impact the main livelihood of these communities, fishing. Fishermen are perceiving the direct effect on the local economy. In these communities there is access to food from the sea and coastal areas, which is why they have had the availability to consume these products, however they mention that it has been difficult for them to access other products such as basic grains and baby food that are vital to meet their daily needs. In addition, the products that are part of the basic food group have increased in price due to the health crisis caused by COVID-19, making it difficult for most people to have access to these products.

This virus has also come to impact the way people feel, as a fisherman from Sipacate mentions: "People here are too uncertain and even afraid of Coronavirus; There were rumors that some people were infected. People were not going fishing because of that." Another basic need that the residents mention is the supply of basic medicine in clinics and the technical equipment necessary to attend emergencies in the population. Some people in El Quetzalito also mentioned that it is important that the authorities train them in the COVID subject, because they only hear that it is a virus but not how to proceed if a person gets infected.

Few fishermen have implemented actions to mitigate the problems caused by this virus to improve their economy. Only 5% have searched for new markets to sell their products, while 5% have used their savings and only 3% have made gardens in their homes to have access to food.



Support for the fishing communities

External support has been quite different in each one of the interviewed communities. However, the main help received has been food for families. In the Caribbean coast, the Sarstún community has received the most support, coming from 4 NGOs, people outside the community, the Municipality of Livingston, and the central government, that has helped many families. In El Quetzalito community, they have received support only from outside the community, one NGO and from the municipality of Omoa, Honduras, since there are people from the neighboring country living in this community. One of the fishermen comments "We have received support from the people we least expected, more than from our own authorities" -referring to the municipality of Omoa. On the Caribbean Coast there is a *Fishermen network*, an association that most of the fishing communities are associated with. However, they mention that during this pandemic no support has been given to fishermen in the region.

On the Pacific coast, the community of Sipacate has received the most food support, which has been provided mainly by the municipality and to a lesser extent by the central government. In Las Lisas community the main help has been given by people in the community who now reside abroad; the municipality gave bags of groceries once, but the interviewees mentioned that the products given are not enough to meet the needs of the family. While Buena Vista, has been one of the most neglected communities since they have received help only from the central government, only once, to few families.

Recommendations:

- Create an intersectoral support network to help the fishing sector that can provide basic food products, medicine, protective equipment, and economic support in emergencies.
- Coordinate the support offered by the central government to make sure it reaches the highly vulnerable communities with limited access to basic products and services.
- Promote the consumption of fishery products from artisanal fishing nationwide to support the recovery of the economy sector.
- Encourage the implementation of projects focused on food security (home gardens and animal husbandry).
- In Guatemala, the fishing sector does not have access to insurance or loans that help ensure their well-being at critical moments such as those that have caused the coronavirus pandemic. For this reason, it is important to promote with the fishermen a structured community organization that allows them to generate savings and access benefits such as loans and other sorts of support in a better way.
- Develop the internal market through a) the identification, promotion and strengthening of the different links of the commercialization chain of the fishery resources in the local market, and b) the implementation of communication and education programs for local consumers.
- -DIPESCA- needs to play an essential and strategic role in supporting artisanal fishing in the current contingency. Not only being an institution that contributes to the development, but also in the mitigation, recovery, and reactivation of the artisanal fishing economy.
- Design, implement and disseminate health protocols for all of the links part of the artisanal fishing chain.