

A photograph of a statue of a fisherman holding a large fish. The statue is made of a light-colored material, possibly concrete or stone, and is set against a background of power lines and palm trees. The fisherman is wearing a white tank top, dark pants, and yellow rubber boots. The fish is large and detailed, with a yellowish-brown body and a dark eye. The text "FISHER ORGANIZING IN ECUADOR: A COUNTRY CASE STUDY" is overlaid on the image in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

FISHER ORGANIZING IN ECUADOR: A COUNTRY CASE STUDY

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Purpose

This report is one in a series of six country case studies which take stock of fisher organizing in six different countries in the global south. The other case studies are of Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Taiwan, and Thailand. These case studies are produced by the Accountability Research Center in partnership with the Fisheries Governance Project's Enforcement and Victim Protection Working Group.

About the Accountability Research Center

The Accountability Research Center (ARC) is based in the School of International Service at American University. ARC bridges research and frontline perspectives to learn from ideas, institutions, and actors advancing strategies to improve transparency, participation, and accountability. For more, see www.accountabilityresearch.org.

About the Fisheries Governance Project

FGP is a funder-practitioner collaboration working together to build a shared understanding of issues and solutions at the intersection of improved fisheries governance and advancements in labor rights. They center their approach on international treaties, improved market action, and enforcement and victim protection.

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Cover photo

Statue of fisher with mahi-mahi (dorado). Credit: Connor Moynihan

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Acronyms

ASOSALAN	Association of Fishers and Divers of Salango
C 188	ILO Work in Fishing Convention (No 188)
CSO	civil society organization
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FENACOPEC	National Federation of Artisanal Fisher Cooperatives
IATTC	Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labor Organization
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
IUU	illegal, unregulated, and unreported
KG	kilograms
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
PSMA	Port State Measures Agreement
STCW-F	International Convention on Standards of Training Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel
TUNACONS	Tuna Conservation Group
US	United States
VMS	Vessel Monitoring System

1. Executive Summary

Ecuador's seafood industry is booming. They are one of the most important tuna producers in the world and they are the second largest shrimp exporter. In spite of this success, Ecuadorian fishers are struggling to access their basic social and economic rights. Fishers are endangered by the rise of organized crime and the lack of maritime security and government control at sea and at port. Since 2017, Ecuadoran presidents have sought to cut the many social support systems that fishers need to guarantee their basic rights to medical and social security. Moreover, industrial fishing operations threaten the stocks that fishers use for their livelihoods, forcing them to be out at sea longer and further than in the past.

This research focused on examples of fishers organizing in the artisanal sector, in part because there is very little fisher organizing in the industrial sector, due union repression. Ecuador's artisanal fishers are organized locally into cooperatives and associations depending on the size of organization, which then belong to larger national groups. There are several difficulties and some successes that fisher cooperatives and associations have experienced in Ecuador. Two groups in particular stood out to showcase fishers' struggles. The National Federation of Fishing Cooperatives of Ecuador (FENACOPEC) is a long standing group that has supported the demands of fishers for decades. Their role is primarily as an advocacy group, pushing for policies that benefit the sector. On the other hand, the Association of Artisanal Scuba Fishers of Salango (ASOSALAN) is a small, local organization whose recent successes are an important case of persistence in organizing.

Ecuador's artisanal fishers are fighting for government recognition and support. They are focused on national priorities, such as the fight against organized crime, access to social and medical security, the tightening of environmental regulations, and incursions from the industrial sector. Cooperatives and associations have been a locus of strength for fisher communities, but political conditions seem to affect their influence at the national level. Further research areas can include expanding the sectoral focus to assess fishers' rights in the industrial, processing, or aquaculture sectors; investigations into international financial institutions' investments in the rapid growth of aquaculture; and strategies to better harmonize government and fisher priorities.

2. The Context of Seafood Production in Ecuador

2.1 The seafood sector in Ecuador

Ecuador is one of the most important seafood producers in both the region and the world. It is the largest tuna fisher and processor in Latin America, capturing 4% of the world's tuna (FAO 2020). Ecuador's seafood exports have been important to the local economy for some time, but they have experienced a tremendous rise. In 2017, the total exports were 896 million and in just seven years that has grown to 6.68 billion in 2024 (Holmyard 2017; Trading Economics 2025). This is largely on the back of farmed shrimp, of which Ecuador was the number one global exporter in 2022 at 5 billion USD (Molinari 2023).

The growth of Ecuador's shrimp sector is meteoric; it doubled its share of world shrimp production from 2017 to 2022 with the largest year-over-year increase from 2020-2021 (Molinari 2022; CNA 2022). Ecuador's top trade partners in seafood are China, the US, and the EU.

Box 1: Research Scope

This qualitative research included a desk review of existing laws, treaties, and institutions, interviews with 17 people from fisher organizations and CSOs, and participant observation in the Congreso Nacional e Internacional de Pesca Ecuador (Fishers' Congress) in August 2023.

Of the approximately 13,648 registered fishing vessels in Ecuador, over 13,000 are artisanal (MPCEIP 2025a,b). Notably, the average seafood consumption in Ecuador is quite low at 8 kg per capita per year, and providing only 5.6% of the country's protein from animal sources (Ritchie and Roser 2024). The artisanal fleet produces enough to fill the domestic need and then sells to intermediaries who access international markets. The industrial fleet is deeply dependent on international markets to survive. Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing is a risk in Ecuador largely in the illegal shark-finning industry and in the influence of Distant Water Fleets, particularly China. In 2019, the EU issued a Yellow Card for Ecuador's failure to combat IUU, citing its outdated legal framework, ineffective law enforcement, poor control over its industries, and lack of traceability (European Commission 2019). Government actions to address these concerns include the 2019 ratification of the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), signing the Torremolinos Declaration in which they committed to ratifying the Cape Town Agreement (CTA) also in 2019, and committing to the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI) in early 2022. Nevertheless, the Yellow Card remains active.

2.2 Seafood and labor in Ecuador

In general, unionization in Ecuador is low and anti-union behavior is common (BananaLink 2022).ⁱ Workers in the industrial fishing sector, whether in live capture or the processing sector, are not formally organized into unions, although some associations are attempting to advocate for and negotiate on behalf of fishers. The lack of unions in the industrial sector is in part because according to the International Transport Federation (ITF), Ecuador's legal restrictions make it harder to build a broad coalition of fishers.ⁱⁱ

What organizing does exist in Ecuador is limited by the anti-union posture of the government. While the country has ratified key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions including Conventions 87 and 98 on the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, implementation is deficient. The US Department of State notes several issues with rare and uneven enforcement of labor laws, institutional deficiencies, and preferential treatment for certain unions over others (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2023).

The association Marineros de Atún (Tuna Sailors) is fighting for social security benefits and remedy for injuries sustained while working on Colombia's tuna vessels.ⁱⁱⁱ Representing both retirees and active fishers, they did not register as a union because the company that they are organizing against would not hire union members. They have received very little help from the Ecuadoran government, instead relying on support from the ITF and ILO representatives in Colombia to seek remedy from the Colombian companies that are allegedly withholding their benefits.

Cooperatives and associations are the dominant form of organizing in the artisanal fishing sector. Cooperatives are generally a democratically-run group of people that agree to share resources and management responsibilities of their activities (Ben-Yami and Anderson 1985). The ILO recognizes and promotes cooperatives in local economies, even though their function is different from that of a labor union. In Ecuador, cooperatives and associations vary from local organizations of a few to larger more regional organizations with the largest federation representing around 45,000 fishers. A further discussion of cooperatives and associations in Ecuador can be found below.

The gender split in Ecuador's seafood industry is highly sector-dependent. In capture and aquaculture, 97% of workers are men (FAO 2020). In a social audit conducted by SEAFish, they found over half of the workers in processing plants are women. SEAFish assessors noted significant levels of

informality in the processing sector, which exposes women to abuses such as low wages and weak contracts (SEAFish and Verisk Maplecroft 2020).

There is little evidence that the seafood sector, whether artisanal or industrial, employs migrants, who are at the greatest risk of forced labor in Ecuador (Freedom House 2022).^{iv} Some of the fishers interviewed have claimed that refugees and migrants from Venezuela are fishing illegally and using destructive methods to do so, but we could not find official records of such activity.

According to the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, the main risk of forced labor and human trafficking occurs not on Ecuadorian-flagged vessels, but on vessels deployed from PRC-flagged vessels fishing just outside Ecuador's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Ecuador is ranked Tier 2 by the TIP Report, with shrimp farming and fishing being two risk categories (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons 2024). In their words:

Workers in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing – which is a maritime security threat and human rights concern for South American countries, including Ecuador – are vulnerable to forced labor. Foreign-flagged fishing vessels, including reefers that belong to PRC-based companies and often using Panamanian 'flags of convenience' are found slightly outside Ecuador's exclusive economic zone. These fleets deployed small vessels into Ecuador's waters and turn off mandatory satellite radars, preventing authorities from tracking their location. Operators of foreign-flagged vessels often subjected workers to forced labor and coerced them to illegally cross into sovereign territories, risking criminalization. IUU fishing practices could cause severe biodiversity loss because of overfishing and threatened the livelihood of Ecuadorian coastal communities who relied on artisanal fishing for survival; this results in forced displacement because of environmental degradation and risked additional trafficking in alternative sectors.

Thus, the major risks according to the US Department of State are found on foreign-flagged vessels and in the increased vulnerability of domestic fishers due to overfishing. Auditors also found links between fisheries and abuses such as seafood fraud, forced labor, human trafficking, and organized crime (Verité as cited in SEAFish and Verisk Maplecroft 2020). However, the most recent List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor does not list seafood as being at produced with forced labor in Ecuador (ILAB 2024).

3. The Political Context of Seafood in Ecuador

There are several factors that affect organizing fishers in Ecuador. Below, we discuss the recent political history of the



Fishers with octopus. Credit: Gustavo Crespo

country in broad strokes. Special mention is given to the role of the Galapagos Islands in drawing funding and attention away from mainland issues. In addition, we review the international and national treaties, laws, and institutions that influence fisheries policy in Ecuador.

3.1 Politics

After the term of leftist President Rafael Correa ended in 2017, Ecuador's national politics pivoted strongly toward a liberalized, pro-business attitude. Correa was followed by his former vice president, Lenin Moreno (2017-2021) and former president Guillermo Lasso (2021-2023). Lasso's abbreviated term was marred by unrest, violence, and alleged corruption. In five years, the country went from being known as an "island of peace" in Latin America to a much more dangerous place, largely due to the rise of organized crime (Noboa Gonzalez 2024). Ecuador's geography and institutions, especially its dollarized economy, make it a prime target for narco-trafficking organizations to conduct business and launder money. The rise in physical insecurity also affects fishers as these organizations often conduct business at sea, placing fishers at risk.^v

Lasso's policies took a markedly "small-government" approach typical of neo-liberal reformers. Broadly, his elimination of fuel subsidies and deregulating of the oil and gas industries were the most unpopular of his actions, leading to a failed 2021 impeachment attempt against him (Ioanes 2023). The rising price of fuel was a consistent complaint among Ecuadorians and fishers were no different. While fishing cooperatives have established their own petrol services, they are still struggling to provide the necessary fuel at an affordable price for their members.^{vi}

On October 15, 2023 the center-right Daniel Noboa defeated center-left Luisa Gonzalez to complete Lasso's term. In April of 2025, Noboa won a

rematch in a regular election for a full term. He is the son of the richest man in Ecuador, Álvaro Noboa, whose actions in the banana industry violently thwarted union organizing and deeply undersold other banana producing countries in the region (BananaLink 2022). The 2024-2025 Ecuador development plan has several strategies for the fishing sector including strengthening small-scale production, increasing seafood farming, and combatting IUU. However, Noboa’s administration has taken little action beyond stripping fuel subsidies from the tuna sector (Molinari 2025).

3.1.1 Ecuador and conservation politics

The Galapagos Island chain is an important feature in Ecuador’s international reputation, especially as a funding lodestone. Ecuador leverages the symbol of the islands for many international programs, which often include efforts to curb IUU fishing (Vanegas 2023). The islands are held as a beacon of sustainable development, especially for their focus on ecotourism as a low-impact model of sustainable development. However, many at the International and National Fishers’ Congress, hosted in Ecuador by the National Federation of Fishing Cooperatives of Ecuador (FENACOPEC) noted that the impacts of so-called ecotourism can be just as, if not more, ecologically damaging than artisanal fishing. This view appeared to be linked to a general mistrust of environmental advocates, who many of the fishers interviewed perceived as outsiders imposing regulations from the top down.

3.2 Laws, treaties, and institutions

3.2.1 Laws

There are two principal laws that govern Ecuador’s fisheries, the Organic Law on the Environment (2017) and the Organic Law for the Development of Aquaculture and Fisheries (2020). Both were passed within the last decade to be update the laws that predated the 2008 Constitution. While they are here presented chronologically, the majority of the regulations on fishers come through the 2020 law.

Table 1: National Laws

Law	Objectives
Código Orgánico Ambiental (COA) (Organic Law on the Environment) (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the right of people to live in a clean environment and ecological equilibrium as well as the protection of rights for nature and the fulfillment of “<i>sumak kawsay</i>” which is Quechua for the “good life”. • The COA regulates the environmental rights, duties, and guarantees contained in the Constitution as well as the tools that strengthen its execution, those that should ensure sustainability,

	conservation, protection, and restoration of the environment without harming the establishment of other laws about the material that guarantees the same ends.
Ley orgánica para el desarrollo de la acuicultura y la pesca (Organic Law for the Development of Aquaculture and Fisheries) (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the legal regime for the development of aquaculture and fishing activities of Ecuador in all phases of extraction, collection, reproduction, raising, cultivating, processing, selling, distributing, internal and external commerce, and related activities such as the promotion of healthy food, the protection, conservation, research, exploitation, and use of hydrobiological resources and their ecosystem. • It takes an ecosystem focus to promote sustainable development that guarantees security and food sovereignty while respecting traditional and ancestral forms of knowledge and production.

A crucial point for fishers is Article 104 of the Organic Law for the Development of Aquaculture and Fisheries, which declares the first eight nautical miles of sea as exclusive for artisanal fishing. Artisanal fishers face threats both from a lack of enforcement of Article 104 against violation by industrial fishers, and from new environmental policies that limit their fishing and ability to earn.

3.2.2. Treaties

There are four treaties that constitute the basis for safe work at sea for fishers: the ILO's Convention 188 on Work in Fishing (C 188), the FAO's Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), the IMO's Cape Town Agreement for the Safety of Life at Sea (CTA), and the IMO's International Convention for Standards on Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F). In 2019, Ecuador ratified the PSMA and signed the Torremolinos declaration committing to ratify the CTA.

Table 2: Key International Treaties

Treaty Name	Ratification Status
ILO C188	-----
FAO Port State Measures Agreement	Ratified, 2019
IMO Cape Town Agreement	Committed to ratification 2019
IMO STCW-F	-----

Ecuador only ratified the PSMA in 2019. Its movement on this treaty was precipitated by the EU's Yellow Card and NOAA's classification of Ecuador as non-compliant on IUU fishing, both in 2019. In 2021, NOAA acknowledged and positively certified that Ecuador was in compliance due to improvements made, but the EU's Yellow Card remains in place. Additionally, although the SCTW-F has not been ratified by Ecuador, there are yearly training requirements for fishers to attain and retain their licenses. Ecuador has not initiated a review process to consider the adoption of ILO C 188.

3.2.3. Institutions

There are four key government bodies involved in regulating the seafood industry and three private guilds involved in promoting the interests of the industry. Only one of the private guilds, TUNACONS, explicitly works to balance environmental and industry interests.

Table 3: Institutions

Name	Sector	Roles
Ministry of Production, Foreign Trade, Investments and Fisheries (Subsecretary of Fisheries)	Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulates fishing activities in all phases Ensures compliance Drafts development plans Generates fishery management policy Supervises fisheries activities Manages financial credit Approves/supports companies' plans
Public Institute for Aquaculture & Fisheries Research	Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducts scientific research on fishery resources of commercial interest
Ministry of the Environment, Water, and Ecological Transition	Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National environmental authority Generates public policy for the conservation of biodiversity and environmental management Administration of Protected Areas
Ministry of Defense	Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marine police authority
National Chamber of Fisheries	Private Guild	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lobbies relevant public institutions Statistics & market data to members Liases with regional bodies; eg. the Interamerican Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC)
National Chamber of Aquaculture	Private Guild	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides technical assistance to aquaculture farmers Offers legal and security advice to aquaculture farmers

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps shrimp farmers export product
TUNACONS	Private Guild	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes tuna purse seiner sustainability • Promotes the application of Maximum Sustainable Yield of Tuna • Technical training programs • Reduces environmental impacts of aquaculture by promoting public and private management.

4. Problems Facing Fishers in Ecuador

Fishers are vital to Ecuador's economy, but they are facing several crises. Fishers' issues are as distinct as the highly diverse species they catch. There are conflicts stemming from different fishing methods, fisher safety, and how to manage the country's resources. The problem of physical security on the high seas is pervasive for the artisanal sector but interviewees suspect the industrial sector has fewer problems with security.

Access rights play out differently across geographies, with privatization and land-use rights playing a heavy role for crabbers, but on the water it is high fishing effort vessels conducting illegal fishing in artisanal-only waters. Therefore, while these high-level issues are salient for the artisanal sector broadly, more work needs to be done with industrial fishers, aquaculture, and processing workers to understand the fisheries sector as a whole.

Industrial fishers are subject to the risks of injury, withheld benefits, and perhaps most importantly, invisibility to their employers and the government. While their rights to associate and organize are guaranteed on paper, the anti-union environment of Ecuador is pervasive and makes it more difficult for them to make their voices heard. As such, we focus here on the problems facing the artisanal sector with the understanding that more investigations into employment dynamics in the industrial sector are needed to fully document fishers' struggles in Ecuador.

4.1 Insecurity

Ecuador is in the midst of a nationwide security crisis – many stories about the 2023 and 2025 elections discuss voter fears of violence at the polls and Ecuador's recent status as a country with a high crime rate (Freeman 2023). This heightened violence deeply affects artisanal fishers who often lack protection at sea. Physical insecurity of fishers comes in two forms. First is extortion, which locals call *vacunas* (*vaccines*): the bribes they pay to criminal gangs to avoid being targeted. Second is crime at sea, which can lead to a fisher being stranded at sea without a motor or, worse, murdered.

Some communities are more vulnerable to *vacunas* than others. In one community, fishers reported that organized criminals initially demanded \$100 per month. Boat owners, whose net average income is about \$428 per month, were able to negotiate this down; some interviewees reported a \$30 per month payment, around seven percent of earnings. In return for this payment fishers receive protection, but only from those demanding money and only until 2 pm. There are about 20 fishermen in each association, so this amounts to approximately \$600 per month drained from the legal economy. Other fishers reported payments as high as \$150. Other examples that have made the news reported demands of \$120 or even \$1,000 per month (Hungria 2022; Diario Correo 2024).



Fishing harbor. Credit: Connor Moynihan

FENACOPEC reported 12 murders and over 480 robberies at sea 2021 (Hungria 2022. President Gabriela Cruz informed us that in 2023 FENACOPEC has records of 15 murders and 7 disappearances at sea. In 2024, the official numbers were 63 killed and 230 disappeared (El Universo 2025). Obviously, theft and murder are bad enough, but compounding this problem is that insurance companies are unable or unwilling to insure fishers' equipment due to the higher risk. That means that fishers attacked and robbed at sea risk losing their livelihood if they can't raise the funds to replace their motor.

In addition to physical insecurity when earning their livelihood, artisanal fishers lack access to social security in the form of retirement and medical insurance. The current social security law predates the Constitution, and many – including those in Ecuador's Social Security Institute itself – have noted the need for update and reform. As it stands, there are three types of social security in Ecuador: general, voluntary, and *seguro campesino*. The latter is where artisanal fishers fall, but that policy was designed with agriculture in mind, not fishers. Therefore, a policy shift is needed to create a more effective and tailored law with fishers in mind.

The *seguro campesino* requires an organization to apply for social security and then provide it for its members, although the cooperatives and associations do not require that members enroll. This means these groups are responsible for ensuring their members pay dues. This structure is more favorable to agricultural groups who are geographically stable whereas fishers are more mobile and, in the case of day fishers, more temporary.

Most of the cooperatives and associations interviewed had very few members and most go without insurance. While *seguro campesino* is inexpensive for fishers, the medical facilities that deliver the services it funds are often too far away for artisanal fishers to reach, leading to low fisher enrollment in the program.^{vii} Fishers in the industrial sector are subject to the social security afforded to the rest of the country. Despite a reform in 2024 which extended social security coverage to the families of workers, a priority of FENACOPEC (Notiregion 2024), fishers still face difficulties in gaining access to services.

4.2 Access rights

As mentioned above, artisanal fishers are guaranteed the first eight nautical miles of sea to fish and industrial fishers fish outside of that zone. There are two concerns that fishers raised at the Fishers' Congress. The first was the lack of enforcement for industrial fishers and the second was the pending plan for the eight nautical miles of marine reserve that the government is about to implement.

The problem of low enforcement seems linked with the security problems detailed below – a common phrase across our interviews was “*no hay control*,” or ‘there is no control.’^{viii} An additional layer, however, is the problem of classification of vessels. Visiting many of these communities, vessels called *rizeros* or purse seiners were visible from shore. A purse seine places a net wall around schools of fish, and artisanal fishers view vessels that use them as part of the industrial fleet. *Rizeros* are artisanal boats illegally retrofitted with mechanized equipment, so although they see themselves as artisanal fishers, their high capacity and unauthorized gear puts them squarely outside this category. This difficulty with classification complicates enforcement efforts, even if those efforts were consistently applied.

The conflicts with these pseudo-industrial boats tie directly to artisanal fishers' concerns over their access rights to the first eight nautical miles from the coast limit, established in the 2020 Organic Law for the Development of Aquaculture and Fisheries. The government, spurred by industrial vessels' incursions into the eight nautical miles zone and international commitments, has proposed a plan to turn the zone into a Marine Reserve to be overseen

by the Ministry of the Environment, Water, and Ecological Transition. While artisanal fishers should still have fishing rights in this zone, many we spoke with expressed concern about the ambiguous details of the proposed change. They have experienced high levels of enforcement when environmental regulations are passed, so they see this new environmental measure as a threat to their rights. An interview with the Minister of the Environment states that the plan was spurred by some congresspeople discussing a reduction of the current zone from eight nautical miles to three (Carrere 2023).

Fishers interviewed expressed skepticism that the new policy would 'go hand in hand' with their fishing methods. Additionally, the proposed Marine Reserve would add a layer of institutional barriers for fishers that could prevent legitimate fishing activity. Furthermore, fishers say they have experienced uneven or ineffective enforcement surrounding parks. They have little confidence that a new Marine Reserve will do anything but force them out of business in the zone where they have access guaranteed by law.

To be clear, fishers are supportive of conservation. Indeed, FENACOPEC's members responded to an internal survey with overwhelming support for the protection of the eight nautical miles. Some of the cooperatives and associations interviewed were instrumental in creating marine reserves, or even initiated projects to ban the fishing of certain species nationwide. They organize trash pickups and are committed to conserving their resources so that future generations can continue enjoying them. Fishers are mostly worried about the implementation of this new policy.^{ix} FENACOPEC has been invited to some workshops, but some of the fishers we spoke with did not feel they had a grasp on the plans.

The problem of access rights also manifests in the struggle of the collectors of crabs and shells against encroachment by aquaculture, and especially shrimp farmers. Shrimpers have built their world class industry on leases of government-owned mangroves. However, crab and shell pickers are charged with protecting those same mangroves. Their responsibilities include raising the alarm when mangroves are clear-cut, but they say when they do alert officials it often falls on deaf ears. Outgoing President Lasso proposed an executive decree to privatize coastal aquaculture zones (shrimp ponds) which were being held as state concessions – a move that crab and shell pickers staunchly oppose. The decree was framed as an adaptive measure to respond to the El Niño phenomenon, a natural climate pattern which causes periodical change in temperature and rainfall. The proposed change would have placed power in the hands of shrimp farmers and harmed the ability of crab pickers to earn a living and to fulfill their duties as protectors of wetlands and mangroves. After significant protest, FENACOPEC and its

partners presented their case for repeal before the constitutional court. They succeeded and the measure stalled before being signed into law.

There are two trends worth highlighting about access rights.

The first is the government's willingness to take a restrictive conservation posture to satisfy environmentally focused groups. Artisanal crab pickers and fishers are well aware of the foreign dollars flowing into Ecuador, especially in shrimp aquaculture – over half a billion dollars have been invested in shrimp businesses over the past two decades (Southern Shrimp Alliance 2023). From the fishers' view, environmentalists are siding with the powerful government and corporate interests in fisheries.

The second is the withdrawal of the state, both in the lack of enforcement on the ocean and the leasing of coastal land traditionally relied upon by crab pickers to industrial shrimp farming. This further alienates fishers from the conservation policies of the government, which are seen as restrictive and hollow. The withdrawal of the state fits in with a trend of neo-liberalization that began with the Moreno presidency, which prioritized the role of private sector development.

4.3 Institutions

The Subsecretary of Fishery Resources is housed within the Ministry of Production, Foreign Trade, Investments and Fisheries. This clearly explains the government orientation toward the export-oriented segments of the fisheries sector; tuna and farmed shrimp exports are big moneymakers for Ecuador, generating more than 20% of export income, second only to the oil and gas sector (Trading Economics 2025). In the past, there was a separate ministry entirely for fisheries and aquaculture, but it was demoted to a Subsecretariat in 2018 as part of an effort to streamline government bureaucracy. Many fishers at the Fishers' Congress expressed interest in a distinct ministry that could handle all issues related to the sector. According to President Gabriela Cruz of FENACOPEC, it is time to re-create a new ministry of fishing and aquaculture that can address the growing and diverse Ecuadorian seafood industry.

The problem of fishers' issues being neglected seems to largely stem from the institutional overlap between the Ministry of Production, Foreign Trade, Investments and Fisheries and the Ministry of the Environment, which oversees Marine Reserves. One ministry is interested in the export income generated and the other is focused on environmental conservation, but neither is mandated to prioritize fishers' wellbeing. This creates an institutional environment where fishers are mired in red tape with little assistance. In light of the designation of the first eight nautical miles as a

reserve, fishers are interested in having a “one-stop shop” where they can resolve any issues or obtain permits without having to juggle the needs of other ministries or institutions. It is unclear if there is any appetite for this type of reform in the government.

5. Fisher Cooperatives and Associations

Cooperatives and associations are a common way of pooling resources, creating a stable local economy, and representation for many in the cities and the countryside of Ecuador. While fishing can be done on an individual basis, the overwhelming majority of small-scale fishers do so under the auspices of a fishing organization. In Ecuador, there are cooperatives and associations in eight regions: Guayas, Santa Elena, Manabí, El Oro, Esmeraldas, the Galápagos Islands, Aguas Interiores Los Ríos and the Amazon.

In researching the organizing challenges and solutions proposed by fishing organizations, the team focused primarily on the work of cooperatives and associations which have deep connections to their communities. We were privileged to interview cooperative leaders whose organizations ranged from 20 members to 2,000 or more. This report focuses on the Federación Nacional de Cooperativas de Ecuador (FENACOPEC) as an aggregate of the interests and efforts of those cooperatives and the Association of Artisanal Divers of Salango (ASOSALAN), as an example of independent local efforts by a cooperative. ASOSALAN is not a member of FENACOPEC, but they often work with the national federation.

5.1 Organization of cooperatives and associations

For this report, “cooperative” is used in the broad sense to signify organizational structures meant to pool the resources of small-scale fishers. However, in Ecuador, there is a hierarchy of structures that includes, but is not limited to that single word. At the smallest level, a minimum of 15 fishers, is the association. These are hyper localized and generally involve only one community. The next step up is a cooperative, which can be local or regional in scope and includes many more fishers. Finally, there are Federations, such as FENACOPEC, which are organizations of cooperatives and associations. Individuals are represented at the Association and Cooperative level, but generally Federations represent groups, not individuals. This context is important to understand, and in this report, we will use “cooperatives and associations,” following the Ecuadorian convention.

5.2 Successes in common

Cooperatives and associations in Ecuador typically work on issues close to their members' needs and goals and there is high variance in their efforts. Some issues on which cooperatives and associations are performing well, include: capacity building, external relations, and environmental aims.

Cooperatives and associations, as collectives of fishers, are good at leveraging resources for capacity building. In our interviews, this came typically in the form of either fund raising and partnerships with international actors or education of their members. Many groups were able to leverage connections to raise funds from development organizations, private funders, or their communities. This ability is important as fishers are low-income and face many financial pressures from the licit and illicit economy. Co-ops are also trusted organizations where fishers can find information regarding issues such as new regulations, changes in the law, or sustainable fishing methods.

Cooperatives and associations are also instrumental in representing fishers to other entities. This is obviously true in the context of joining larger networks of cooperatives and associations such as regional or national bodies. However, cooperatives and associations have been successful on a variety of other initiatives. ASOSALAN, profiled below, is an excellent example of this, sustaining an effort with the government to recognize their fishing activities, lobbying for environmental restrictions on fishing, improving relations with park officials that monitor the local Marine Reserves, and supporting NGOs to promote marine conservation. Others have achieved such successes as managing mangroves, joining regional management committees, or coordinating with local groups focused on other sectors, such as tourism.

Cooperatives and associations have also led many environmental and conservation efforts and continue to push for them. In addition to pushing for responsible fishing practices, cooperatives and associations are leaders in coastal cleanup efforts around the country. FENACOPEC led a nationwide clean up where they removed thousands of tons of plastic from their coasts. Some have led efforts to fine bad actors that clearcut mangroves. Still others are experimenting with seaweed cultivation as a sustainable supplement to their fishing activity. As a group, fisher cooperatives and associations in Ecuador are very active and see themselves as leaders in environmental efforts.

5.3 Shared struggles among cooperatives and associations

Despite local differences, cooperatives and associations face a common fight across the sector in several ways. These struggles are sometimes described

differently, but the threads weave a similar tapestry across the interviews conducted. These struggles broadly relate to how the government categorizes their work, enforcement or lack thereof, and their (diminishing) ability to demand entitlements.

Artisanal fishers have had a number of struggles with the way governments categorize fishers. Perhaps the starkest of our interviewees is ASOSALAN, profiled below, which struggled for over a decade for recognition of their fishing method (diving and harpoon fishing with a oxygen tanks). Other organizations wish to add equipment to their boats that would force them out of their artisanal status and require them to comply with an additional set of laws. Related to the problem of enforcement below, is the demoralization of fishers who obtain the proper permits and maintain their legal rights only to see those who do not follow the laws go unsanctioned.

Enforcement was a problem raised by nearly every fisher interviewed, often coming in the form of “*No hay control,*” or there is no control. This manifests in free rein for illegal fishers, high levels of crime at sea, and the prevalence of extortion in fishing communities. In the case of the crab pickers of Churute, they struggle with the shrimp farms encroaching on the mangroves essential to the crabs they rely upon. Fisher cooperatives and associations have also asked for a significant crack down on the previously mentioned illegal “artisanal” purse- seiner and trawling fleet. The rise in fishing effort, or the amount of fishing gear used over a certain amount of time, but especially illegal fishing and aquaculture, are major worries for fishers in Ecuador.

Fishers have difficulty fighting against organized crime for political and economic reasons. For example, while there is a process to take complaints or reports of crimes to the authorities, interviewees said never received remedy. Complicating this process further, the jurisdiction for a crime committed may be far from the home community of the fisher. Moreover, with financial pressure from organized crime, fishers in many cooperatives and associations feel the squeeze of the license fees such as International Maritime Organization’s (IMO) course fees, which they are required to complete each year. Based on available estimates, this might be seven percent of their net monthly earnings. A final example comes from the satellite technology (Vessel Monitoring Systems or VMS) that fishers have on industrial vessels, which should help in the case of crime at sea, but the devices are often defective. Yet the government will soon require satellite systems on the entire fishing fleet, which will be quite costly for artisanal fishers.

6. Cases of Artisanal Fisher Organizing in Ecuador

6.1 FENACOPEC

Table 5: Overview of FENACOPEC

Year Founded	1986
Size of Organization	~45,000 fishers
Species	Large and small pelagic fish, demersal fish, crustaceans, molluscs
Fishing Area	Ecuador's EEZ

The fishers that created FENACOPEC began organizing in the early 1980s. While the contemporaneous neoliberalization of Ecuador's policies is not cited directly, it is unsurprising that marginalized people would have strong negative reactions toward austerity and structural adjustment policies. The primary impetus that rallied fishers to form FENACOPEC was to defend their rights and to have representation in dialogue with the government. The rhetoric coming from the national government sought to typecast fishers as disregarding fishery management and using certain methods harmful to the marine species. After successful protests and direct actions that protected fishers and their activities, FENACOPEC was founded on August 30, 1986 and recognized in 1988.

As told by FENACOPEC's President Gabriela Cruz, the foundation of FENACOPEC saw many successful opportunities for international support and capacity building. They received grants for offices, updated equipment, and personnel development which taught leaders to organize both nationally and internationally. Sra. Cruz was elected to her current position in the early 2000s following several internal leadership crises. Although she faced many difficulties, especially as a woman in a male-dominated industry, she has persevered in her role.^x

FENACOPEC largely organizes at the national level and its ability to accomplish successful advocacy cleaves to political tides. The decade of *Correista* rule (2007-2017) was a notable period for Sra. Cruz. FENACOPEC often had a seat at the table when it came to fishers' issues. For example, the federation had sponsored a mapping of the sea floor and studies based on the local ecological knowledge of fishers. They brought the studies to the President and lobbied to have industrial trawling vessels banned due to the damage they caused to the seabed and marine resources. They won that fight at the cost of creating a divide between the industrial and artisanal sectors. Correa and his government, while sympathetic, were not always in lockstep with FENACOPEC. However, his regime was marked by negotiations and presentations of budgets for projects and programs and fishers were taken seriously by the government.

By contrast, the artisanal sector faced extreme pushback from Correa's successor, Lenin Moreno, who went so far as to seize FENACOPEC's resources, sometimes doing so with police authority. In spite of poor relations with the government, FENACOPEC's major effort was to promote the regulation of the



Fishers on the beach. Credit: Gustavo Crespo

purse seine industrial sector, which was encroaching on the first eight nautical miles of coast that is exclusively reserved for the artisanal sector. This led to further heightened animosity from the industrial sector, which Cruz says targeted her publicly. She also suspects their coordination with the Moreno administration. According to Sra. Cruz:

... under Lenin Moreno's government we suffered political persecution where we were robbed seven times in the office premises of computers, laptops, appointment documents, etc.; [they were] looking for something to implicate us and [they made] complaints through the Ministry of Defense seeking to silence us and put me in prison and they took away the infrastructure, investments that had been given to us by the previous government ...

Despite this harassment, FENECOPEC's lobbying succeeded and the National Assembly included the eight nautical mile reservation for artisanal fishers in the 2020 Organic Law for the Development of Aquaculture and Fisheries.

6.1.1 Current struggles

Fundraising is an important issue for the federation as their main method for showing political resistance is to lead marches with fishers from across the country. Outside of this internal problem FENACOPEC has a long list of priorities that reflects its coverage of a number of geographies and

communities. While some of these issues fall along the lines of the problems outlined above, others are unique to FENACOPEC's national standing.

On the topic of security, FENACOPEC has proposed that the government allocate a budget toward the armed forces and law enforcement to invest in rapid response boats, drones, weapons, and radios to improve monitoring and surveillance on the water. They also propose that the government invest 10 million USD in VMS devices on boats, to help defray the costs for fishers, who would still be responsible for a percentage of the costs. This would assist in monitoring and surveillance and improve the ability to rescue stranded fishers. Finally, they tie VMS monitoring to environmental benefits, noting that greater policing will slow overfishing of certain species.

Social welfare is another important issue for FENACOPEC. This takes several forms including the reform of *seguro campesino*, health insurance, retirement funds, and education. Important to their reform efforts of *seguro campesino*, is the inclusion of fishers' children, who are isolated and not covered by any social security which was accomplished in the 2024 reform. However, health coverage under social security is insufficient because of the lack of access to medical facilities. Therefore, FENACOPEC is exploring options with the private sector to get fishers better rates. FENACOPEC hopes to propose establishing a retirement fund for fishers in the future.

6.2 ASOSALAN

Table 6: Overview of ASOSALAN

Year Founded	2015
Size of organization	20
Species	Octopus and demersal species
Fishing Area	Within and outside the first eight nautical miles; Marine Reserve Bajo Copé National Park Machalilla

The Association of Artisanal Harpoon Fishers of Salango (ASOSALAN) is a unique association because of the long trajectory of their fight to defend their fishing method: using scuba gear with an oxygen tank and a harpoon gun. ASOSALAN is not a member organization of FENACOPEC, but they do sometimes coordinate action with the national body. They officially formed in 2015, but the struggle of the fishers in Salango predates that year. In fact, the fishers connect their activities to thousands of years of culture and tradition, diving for bivalves and other fish. The modern use of the harpoon gun began in the mid 1970s. The new technology – the use of scuba gear and oxygen tanks – allowed divers to go from five minutes to an hour or

more below the water. In the early 2000s, a number of accidents, and the fact that the injured had no insurance, motivated the community to form an association.

The first action that the organization took in those early years was an *auto-veda* or self-restriction on the capture of the spondylus species (*spondylus calcifer*, *s. princeps*), commonly known as spiny oysters. The species has not been evaluated by the IUCN for inclusion on its Red List for species at risk, but the locals saw its over-exploitation and received confirmation from scientists that they brought to their community. This highlights the need for local ecological knowledge to be incorporated in scientific evaluation, data, and policy decisions. They voluntarily took on the responsibility of protecting this important resource.

Historically, spondylus shells were used as a currency and were considered sacred by some indigenous people on the Pacific coast, including some of the oldest civilizations on the continent. The shells continue to have significance as the eponym for the Spondylus Highway, the symbol of a binational agreement between Ecuador and Peru (Arzuza Buelvas 2018). It was through the petition of ASOSALAN that the government issued a national ban, Ministerial Accord SRP No. 136, on the capture of all species of spondylus (Lodeiros et al. 2016). They continue to push for more comprehensive enforcement of the ban, even confronting then-President Rafael Correa over his eating spondylus in a restaurant at a time when it was forbidden.

ASOSALAN's longtime goal was the legalization of their fishing method, which was considered illegal due to the use of oxygen tanks. This long fight had many setbacks which were affected by lost documents, earthquakes, and changes in government. Through it all they persisted, and they were able to change the legal status of fishing with their methods in 2019, officially legalizing their longstanding fishing practices in Ministerial Accord 0074-A. In that accord, they included the prohibition on fishing octopus for two months of the year along the entire Ecuadoran coast.

6.2.1 Current struggles

When , the fishers of ASOSALAN were primarily focused on violence on the water. A few days before we arrived in Salango, a fisher had just been robbed of his motor, his scuba equipment, and the fish he had caught. He was rescued because another fisher allowed him to use a phone to call his family who then had to organize the effort to go out to sea to bring the vessel home themselves. About two months after we left, a leader in a neighboring community was killed for unknown reasons. Members of

ASOSALAN do not want the government to do much for them, simply keep them safe.

Extortion is a problem here as well; fishers reported there are several protection rackets active in the area. Therefore, fishers have to pay one criminal group, but are not protected from the others. In addition, the “protection” provided only lasts until about 2pm, after which fishers are left to fend for themselves.

Social vulnerability is high in ASOSALAN. Ninety percent of its fishers do not have social security and the majority go to private hospitals when needed. Those that do sign up for the *seguro campesino* often pay 50% of the cost of any medications since the whole price is not covered by the government insurance. Some fishers also say the process to become insured is too tedious; there is also low digital literacy among the fishers, placing further barriers on access to social security. This is in addition to the aforementioned problems with the government health insurance and fishers’ struggles to access medical care facilities.

6.2.2 Successes

ASOSALAN has a long history of pursuing its interests and it has had some success. The main strategies have been using the normal legal channels the government has offered, and community organizing.

The first was critical to their campaign for legitimacy as only the government could offer them legal status. They began at a local level, providing support for and meeting with local officials. From there, they had to climb the bureaucratic ladder until 2019 when they reached the appropriate rung of authority. Throughout this process, they were able to be confrontational, even with then-president Rafael Correa, while still maintaining cooperative members’ support for the self restriction on spondylus capture. The formation of the association was critical to coordinating the self-ban. An individual petitioning government officials for an official ban would have been too easy to disregard. This provides strong evidence that support for local, community-led institutions is critical to defending community rights and local environments.

ASOSALAN is a critical group for understanding the nexus of local, small-scale fishers and environmental defenders. They are supporting the restoration of environmentally degraded areas in their communities. An example is the restoration of patches of coral near the islands of their communities with the support of local NGOs. They are fighting for their right to continue fishing as the national government looks to create new marine reserves.

7. Conclusion

Ecuador's role as one of the most important seafood producers in the region has little impact on the thoughts of artisanal fishers, who often feel forgotten or unseen. In other words, they often experience signals from the international community differently than one might expect. Ecuador holds a high position in the imagination of international environmentalists – especially bolstered by the Galapagos Islands – but fishers generally view the resulting initiatives as outsiders impinging on their livelihoods. Their organizing efforts are much more focused on national objectives than any international agendas.

7.1 Fulfillment of government duties

The Western view of organizing typically envisions a world of managers and laborers. Fisher organizing in Ecuador, since it is primarily in the artisanal sector, is directed toward moving fisheries governance and management policy in a more sustainable and equitable direction. In fishers' view, the government must fulfill its basic responsibility to protect the lives and welfare of its citizens, which include fishers, who are often forgotten. With fisher deaths and strandings escalating over the years, fishers view the failure of government to protect them as an integral problem that needs fixing. This hits on combatting organized crime as drug cartels are often blamed for these problems. Organized crime is outside the scope of this report, but what bears repeating is that fishers are focused on this as a national priority, not something coming from the FAO or Convention on Biological Diversity.

Fishers are just as preoccupied with their social welfare as their physical safety, and these problems have a longer history in the sector. While fishers are covered by a form of social security, the law that governs this system predates the current constitution and is in drastic need of an update. This speaks to the long neglected status of fishers by the government. Fishers' attempts to secure their own health insurance plans are an example of their resourcefulness, but that quality should not excuse the government from its responsibility to ensure the well-being of its citizens.

7.2 Environmental regulations and enforcement

Fishers in Ecuador are, as a group, suspicious of those that would regulate on environmental grounds. They also highly value their own role as conservationists, often asserting their interest in conservation and ability to perform conservation activities. Therefore, the problem for fishers seems to be the imposition of regulations from on high. This makes sense given the

government's spotty record with implementation, which has eroded trust in this and other areas.

There also seems to be a disconnect between the leadership and the membership of cooperatives and associations. For example, at the Fishers' Congress, many cooperative representatives expressed reservations about the proposal to make the first eight nautical miles into a marine reserve. They saw it as the government adding a layer of bureaucracy that would only punish artisanal fishers. They did not mention competition with industrial ships, which is what FENACOPEC leaders emphasized as their reason for supporting the policy. The extent of this misalignment is hard to assess, without conducting a broader range or in depth interviews with FENACOPEC members. It does suggest, however, that more communication between leadership and members is warranted.

7.3 Further research and action

Ecuador is an important regional player in seafood and this report found many rich areas for diving deeper. There are four areas of interest for further research.

1. Natural resource management and conflict resolution: The tensions between fisher organizations and environmental initiatives merits a deeper review of potential dialogue spaces. Such an effort could help identify common ground and a better understanding among environmental initiatives about the challenges fishers face around threats to their livelihoods, physical security, and access to social security.
2. The industrial capture sector: Though union organizing faces an uphill battle in Ecuador's industrial fisheries, there are some examples of fishers organizing. The Marineros del Atún are one example of organizing among industrial sector fishers that merits more research.
3. The rise of shrimp in Ecuador: Shrimp farms are harming mangroves essential for biodiversity and marginalizing crab pickers and placing their livelihoods and traditional way of life at risk. Shrimp farming companies have received international support, such as loans from the IFC (Southern Shrimp Alliance 2023). Labor practices in aquaculture and seafood processing were outside the scope of this report, but as the number two source of shrimp in the US, Ecuador's industry should be subject to additional scrutiny.
4. The industrial processing sector: Research is needed on Ecuador's seafood processing sector, both for farmed shrimp and other species. Forced labor has been identified in Thailand's and India's shrimp aquaculture and processing sectors, highlighting problems with failed certifications from the corporate-led Best Aquaculture Practices in the

past (GLJ 2013; CAL 2024). This indicates the need for more scrutiny into Ecuador's processing sector, especially given its rapid growth.

ⁱ They have also ratified ILO Convention 29 on forced labor and ILO Convention 190 on harassment and discrimination.

ⁱⁱ Chris Williams, leader of ITF Fisheries, interview by Connor Moynihan 2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ These vessels fish in a number of geographies including the deep sea, Columbia's EEZ and Ecuador's EEZ. They frequently land fish in Manta, which is the largest tuna port in the region.

^{iv} This references the formal sector. For obvious reasons, the informal sector would be difficult to obtain firm numbers on. However, we did hear some anecdotes about refugees that would set crab traps. We also know that in the busy season, many factories hire women to take on the extra work, some of whom could be migrants.

^v Early in 2023, President Lasso invoked a clause in the constitution called the *muerte cruzada* (or "crossed death"), which dissolved government and called an immediate election for a new president to serve out the rest of his term. Although Lasso had defeated an impeachment effort in 2021, he may have used the *muerte cruzada* to prevent his opponents from mounting another impeachment drive.

^{vi} Notably this incentivizes businesses to cut costs in other areas and the easiest for them to control, especially in the absence of strong collective bargaining, is labor.

^{vii} Some interviewees mentioned that some fishers might be farmers in the off season and access the seguro campesino through these means. We could not find specific numbers to back up this claim.

^{viii} This was echoed in the industrial sector relating to the lack of rigorous labor inspections.

^{ix} As of June 2025, there is no discernable movement on this policy.

^x Gabriela Cruz, interview by Connor Moynihan in 2023.

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