

2025

Fishing cooperatives, their social, economic, and environmental impact

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Workshop proceedings



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Introduction

On May 20 and 21, 47 leaders of fishing cooperative federations in Mexico and Central America gathered in response to a call issued by the Mexican Confederation of Fishing and Aquaculture Cooperatives (CONMECOOP) and the Accountability Research Center (ARC) of American University supported by the Fisheries Governance Project to achieve three objectives:

- To collectively characterize fishing cooperatives and their relationship with the authorities in each country for the sustainability of fishery resources.
- To collectively describe the challenges and opportunities for strengthening and dignifying the fishing sector.
- To identify possibilities for action that contribute to strengthening the organizational structures of fisher organizations, their relationship with governments, and the defense and protection of their rights.

To meet these objectives, presentations, discussions, and collective analysis activities were held over the two days of the event, divided into five sessions, or moments: 1) Regional overview of fisher organizations in Central America and Mexico; 2) In-depth analysis at the challenges and opportunities facing fisher organizations; 3) fisher organizations and the protection of their human rights; 4) fisheries organizations and traditional markets; and 5) a recap of the workshop, where a letter was drafted to fisheries authorities and international organizations. Below is a summary of the event.

1. Moment One: Regional overview of fisher organizations in Central America and Mexico

1.1 Overview of fisher organizations in Central America and Mexico

Presentation by Mario Recinos

The first presentation was given by Mario Recinos, Regional Director of the Organization of the Fishing and Aquaculture Sector of the Central American Isthmus (OSPESCAS) and focused on describing: the different levels of organization of fishing cooperatives; the type and quality of collaboration between fisher organizations and governments; and the main challenges and opportunities for the fishing sector in Central America.

After providing an overview of the situation of the fishing sector, cooperatives, and confederations in Mexico and Central America, highlighting the cases of the Central American Fishermen's Confederation (CONFEPESCA) and CONMECOOP, the presenter mentioned the importance of forming alliances to increase the advocacy power of the artisanal fishing sector. To this end, the Latin American Union of Artisanal Fishermen and the Ibero-American Network of Small-Scale Artisanal Fisheries were formed.

According to Mr. Recinos, the main opportunity for the sector is to proudly position the fishing and aquaculture sector as a source of healthy food resources with economic, social, and environmental impact. This is complemented by a series of nine other opportunities:

1. Having human capital to strengthen and develop artisanal fishing.
2. Commercial species in marine fisheries that can be better exploited.
3. Inland fishing with potential for aquaculture and fishing expansion.
4. Marine and inland aquaculture for small-scale operations.
5. Capacities to strengthen storage and marketing.
6. Processing of fishery products.
7. Technological strengthening (fishing and communications).
8. Diversification (tourism, gastronomy, aquaculture).
9. Consumption of fishery products can be increased.



Figure 1: Left, Mario Recinos presents on fisher organizing in Central America; Right, fisher representatives listen to his presentation

The following were identified as the main challenges:

1. Demonstrating the credibility and value of the cooperative model in fishing.
2. Demonstrate the benefits of joining fishing cooperatives to attract more independent fishermen.
3. Ensuring that the interests of artisanal fishermen prevail in any differences between associations.

The following suggestions were made:

1. Strengthen current associations' efforts so that they are stable and sustainable over time. Gradually increase these efforts.
2. Promote and implement a plan to increase the influence of associations in regional and national decision-making.
3. Promote communication strategies that publicize cooperative success stories.
4. Capitalize on leaders who are already prepared to support associations' development.
5. Promote regional projects to strengthen associations in areas such as marketing, climate change, technological development, social security for fishermen, and the focus on association sustainability.

1.2 Discussion with fishing leaders from participating countries

Panelists: Norberto Romero (El Salvador), Omar Wilfredo (Belize), David Chacón (Costa Rica), Ernesto Vargas (Panama), Luis Ángel Montoya (Sinaloa, Mexico), and Rommel Alcocer (Yucatán, Mexico)

The second part of the event consisted of a discussion aimed at exploring the main challenges, successful experiences in cooperation between governments and fishing cooperatives, and the main opportunities for strengthening fishing cooperatives in the region from the perspectives of fishing leaders. The main points addressed by the representatives of four Central American countries and two Mexican states are presented below:

El Salvador

- Main challenge: Lack of administrative and technological capacity in the sector.
- Successful collaboration between the government and cooperatives: The creation of trust to support the artisanal fishing sector.
- Opportunities identified: Diversify fishing in terms of species; strengthen women's participation in cooperative decision-making spaces; and link fishing with tourism projects.

Belize

- Main challenges: The privatization of islands and territories where fishing took place and where activity and access are now restricted by the new owners. The smuggling of products from other countries was also identified as a problem.
- Opportunity identified: Increased participation of women in cooperatives, as they have managed to improve their organization and functioning. They are currently adding alternative activities such as tourism to their fishing income.

Costa Rica

- Main challenge: Pressure on land tenure due to land privatization and the development of tourism projects. This hinders the work of fishermen and fisherwomen by reducing the space where they can access their resources.
- Successful collaboration: Creation of a responsible fishing model which, although not mandatory, has led to the creation of responsible fishing areas where fishing must be carried out in accordance with certain parameters in order to protect marine life.
- Opportunity identified: Work was done on a document approved by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) that highlights the dignity of the artisanal fishing sector and establishes guidelines for its development.

Panama

- Main challenge: The lack of adequate public policies for the development of the sector and the lack of value and recognition of the artisanal fishing sector.
- Opportunity identified: Increased participation of women in decision-making spaces in their cooperatives.

Yucatán, Mexico

- Challenge: Lack of inspection and surveillance and lack of a culture of respect for closed seasons and species sustainability.
- Successful collaboration with the government: Imposition of sanctions on fishermen who do not respect closed seasons.

Sinaloa, Mexico

- Challenge: Lack of inspection and surveillance and insecurity in the region.
- Successful collaboration: The state government provides resources for inspection and surveillance activities carried out by community surveillance committees formed by the fishermen themselves. Work is also being done to strengthen infrastructure and ensure the cold chain.



Figure 2: Leaders from across Central America share their experiences on a panel.

2. Moment Two: In-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing fisher organizations

After the presentation, the discussion, and the conversations generated around them, the following were identified as the main opportunities for the artisanal fishing sector:

1. Enhance the organized fishing sector.
2. Incorporate a human rights perspective into the work to be carried out by fishing cooperatives and their advocacy processes.
3. Link the issue of fishing with food security.
4. Take advantage of the human talent available in organized artisanal fishing.
5. Promote the inclusion of women in decision-making spaces.
6. Add value to the product by improving handling, processing, and utilization.
7. Strengthen the capacities of cooperatives in the area of storage and marketing of their products.
8. Implement fishery regeneration projects.
9. Increase the capacities of fishers in the field of technological innovation.
10. Explore product diversification.
11. Promote low-interest financing schemes for artisanal fishermen.

The following were also identified as the main challenges:

1. Lack of recognition by authorities, which reveals weak institutions and inadequate public policies for the development of the sector.
2. The need to strengthen the cooperative model and its capacity for effective advocacy.
3. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and insufficient inspection and surveillance activities by authorities. This is related to the lack of respect for closed seasons, smuggling, and the glut of products from other parts of the world.

4. The threat to the land and resource tenure rights of fishing communities and cooperatives.
5. The impacts of climate change on the artisanal fishing sector.
6. The gap in access to new technologies and capacities for their operation by the artisanal fishing sector.



Figure 3: Left, Rosario Espinosa Martinez explains the "Mangle del Problema" activity; Right, A group discusses the causes and consequences of IUU fishing

Once the main opportunities and challenges for the artisanal fishing sector had been agreed upon, a collective analysis exercise called "Mangle del problema" (Mangrove of the problem) was carried out. For this exercise, the participants were divided into six groups, and each group reflected on one of the major problems identified (trunk of the mangrove), identifying its main causes (roots) and consequences (branches). The results are summarized below.

Group 1. Lack of recognition of the artisanal fishing sector by authorities

- **Main causes:** lack of recognition of fishing and cooperatives as important factors for the countries' economies; lack of fisheries management, which encourages poaching; lack of adequate organization of the artisanal fishing sector to demand its rights; and economic censuses with incorrect data.
- **Main consequences:** lack of recognition of fishing as formal work; lack of adequate working conditions and benefits (access to social security, for example); difficulties in accessing loans and credit for fishermen; absence of programs aimed at sustainable fishing; lack of interest among independent fishermen in joining cooperatives as they do not perceive their value; lack of adequate public policies.

Group 2. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing

- **Main causes:** lack of presence of authorities in inspection and surveillance activities; lack of adequate regulation; bad practices by some fishermen (e.g., not respecting closed seasons or fishing without permits or concessions); lack of traceability systems; lack of scientific information on the status of populations of some species (e.g., dorado); lack of records on fishing activity.

- **Main consequences:** increased fishing effort and overfishing threaten the health of various species and fisheries; consequently, food security is put at risk; loss of economic opportunities and access to markets; unfair competition from illegal fishermen against those who fish legally; inclusion on "blacklists" of countries that fail to comply with established regulations; tax evasion by illegal fishermen; fights and clashes over fishing resources which, in the most extreme cases, have resulted in the death of fishermen.

Group 3. Lack of organizational and business skills within the fishing sector

- **Main causes:** low level of schooling and access to quality education; lack of training programs; digital divide and lack of skills in the use of new technologies; lack of technical and business assistance for cooperatives; marginalization and poverty of some fishing communities; lack of adequate infrastructure and equipment; high energy consumption rates for fishing cooperative activities; and lack of culture and love for the activity.
- **Main consequences:** slowdown in the development of artisanal fishing; lack of competitiveness in markets; inadequate administration of cooperatives; devaluation of products due to inadequate product handling; and increased poverty in fishing communities.

Group 4. Land tenure rights

- **Main causes:** Real estate pressure and increased development of tourism projects in territories where fishing cooperatives operate; illegal sale and occupation of land; corruption of state and municipal authorities; and concession of land to private individuals.
- **Main consequences:** lack of access to the beach for fishermen; indiscriminate destruction of mangroves; fights and disputes over territories.

Group 5. Lack of gender equality in the sector

- **Main causes:** *machista* culture and groups of men who relegate women because they consider them incapable; lack of recognition by men of women's work in fishing; stereotypes of women as "the weaker sex" and labeling them as "conflictive"; lack of interest from authorities who do not consider gender equality to be a relevant issue; and lack of willingness and fear of participation among women due to hostile environments.
- **Main consequences:** little or no representation of women in committees and federations; lack of recognition of women in the sector; lack of spaces for women in decision-making; loss of valuable knowledge, ideas, and opinions that women contribute when they are excluded; among others.

Group 6. Added value and good management practices

- **Main causes:** distribution problems and lack of products due to "coyotes" (middlemen) who hoard them; poor product quality due to bad practices (not keeping them fresh, for example); lack of care in cleaning and sizing the product to increase its value; high transportation costs; lack of product inspection.

- **Main consequences¹** : increased economic value of products; incentive to consume fishery products; better use of species and greater variety of products (burgers and sausages, for example); processing stages generate jobs and increase women's participation; better marketing channels are created; certifications are obtained; increased sustainability, since by increasing value, it is possible to fish in smaller volumes and obtain the same economic gains.

Closing the breakouts

Once all the groups had presented their results and feedback had been given, a closing round was held in which concerns were expressed and opportunities to address the issues raised were identified.



Figure 4: Left, a group discusses challenges to organizing recognition and under-representation of the fishing sector.

; Right, a group discusses the lack of

3. Moment Three: Fisher organizations and the protection of their human rights

3.1 Organizing fishers in global value chains

Presentation by Judy Gearhart

The second day of the event began with a presentation by Judy Gearhart, researcher and activist at the Accountability Research Center. The presentation addressed research led by the author with the aim of understanding how fishers organize themselves to access information, seek remedies, and gain influence. The research was carried out in six countries: Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Ghana, Ecuador, and Mexico.

Throughout the presentation, in addition to highlighting some differences between fishermen's organizations in each country, the main shared problems were pointed out: violence at sea; dangerous working conditions; lack of rescue at sea; and lack of protection from governments.

¹ Unlike the other groups, this group analyzed the consequences of adding value and having good management practices; that is, the positive impacts that this generates.

Six characteristics were described as the main attributes of strong fisher organizations: a quota system and financial independence; community building among its members; the ability to negotiate with employers and/or traders; democratic representation; conflict resolution skills; and political independence.

The author identified three areas of challenge for fishermen's organizations: repression and policy inconsistency; the isolation of fishing communities; and the lack of services in ports. To promote greater organization among fishermen, three areas of action are also proposed: increased awareness of human insecurity; strengthening the culture and identity of fishermen; and increasing economic resources.

Finally, the author presented four main conclusions:

1. Policy inconsistencies and obstacles to fishermen's organization need to be addressed.
2. National coordination and coordination with international movements are very necessary.
3. Fisheries organizations need resources and financial independence. Non-governmental organizations can help, but grassroots organizations must define their priorities.
4. International trade policies can drive political, economic, social, and environmental reforms, but only grassroots organizations can ensure their effective implementation.



Figure 5: Left, Judy Gearhart presents on human rights in the fishing industry; Right the conference listens to the presentation before breakouts.

3.2 Further discussion on fisher organizations and human rights

Once the presentation was over, the floor was opened to the audience, from which some conclusions and comments were drawn:

- Insecurity is a fundamental issue, and officials must promote the protection of fishermen on the high seas, as there is still a lot of piracy, theft, and assault against small-scale fishermen while they carry out their activities.

- Including more women could improve the effective organization of cooperatives. Cases were mentioned in which women managed to improve the organization of their cooperatives in Yucatan.
- It is necessary to promote the FAO's voluntary guidelines for responsible fishing.
- Another major challenge for the organization and for ensuring access to human rights for fishermen is the presence of fisheries officials with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out their work.

After the plenary discussion, groups formed, and they reflected on how the recommendations provided by Judy Gearhart can be put into practice in fishing federations and cooperatives. The following is a summary of the results:

- Through human rights training so that cooperative fishermen and women can learn about their rights in order to advance public policies that protect them.
- Generating advocacy processes to improve fishermen's access to their rights.
- Conducting analyses of cooperatives to identify which human rights are lacking or not being adequately fulfilled.
- Raising awareness among fishermen about human rights and their importance.
- Designing participatory strategies to improve access to rights for people in cooperatives.
- Demand competent officials who are knowledgeable about human rights issues.
- Implement training on gender equality issues to strengthen women's leadership and participation.
- Create opportunities for cooperatives to exchange experiences and information on human rights issues. For example, a group of fishermen offered to advise cooperatives on how to apply for social security services.
- Carry out sea clean-up and restoration campaigns to promote the right to a healthy environment.
- Provide training on rescue and first aid to increase the safety of fishermen.

4. Moment Four: Fisher organizations and traditional markets

4.1 Discussion with CONMECOOP executives on the impact of markets on fishing activity and possible alternatives

Panelists: José Luis Carrillo (President of CONMECOOP), José Flores (Director of Inspection and Surveillance at CONMECOOP), and Alfonso Chaparro (Treasurer of CONMECOOP)

This discussion was structured around three objectives:

- To identify the main impacts of market behavior on artisanal fishing activity.
- To explore alternatives to facilitate market access for artisanal fishing producers.
- Learn about success stories in marketing and market access by fishing cooperatives.

The first question addressed to the panelists was to identify the main requirements of the current market for placing their products nationally and internationally. The following demands were identified:

- Lack of certified plants to process export products.

- Aggressive competition from products imported from other countries and exported to the same regions. In this regard, the case of shrimp production and export by Ecuador was highlighted. Ecuador ranks second worldwide in shrimp production and competes with Mexican shrimp.
- Having an adequate market strategy. It was noted that there are few market studies and therefore little knowledge about who would be interested in buying and consuming the products.
- Meet the product volumes established by the international market and potential customers at the national level.

After identifying the main market demands, the panelists discussed the tools and alternatives available to the artisanal sector to meet those demands. A summary is presented below:

- Practice sustainable fishing and communicate this to consumers. In addition to certifications, creating stories around the product attracts consumers who are increasingly interested in consuming responsible products.
- Design consumption strategies and promote campaigns with allies to help position the product. Mayan octopus is an example of a product that is currently well positioned in the market thanks to consumption campaigns.
- Include traceability systems to reduce illegal fishing and facilitate exports.
- Provide training on health regulations and protocols for the domestic and international markets.
- Strengthen the marketing capabilities of cooperatives and federations so that they do not have to depend on intermediaries, a process which requires sources of financing that are appropriate to the needs and conditions of the cooperatives.

Finally, the panelists were asked about the role of CONMECOOP as an organization in supporting its members in processes such as adding value and strengthening their marketing areas, as well as a closing message for the attendees.

- It was pointed out that CONMECOOP is working on a marketing project for the sale of products with personalized labels that delve into the history behind fishing and the people who benefit from its commercialization.
- The success of cooperatives in Baja California Sur was discussed, which have managed to place their fish products in select markets by designing successful marketing strategies and processes that add value to the product.
- The experience and knowledge of the cooperatives were recognized, as well as their effort and willingness to move forward. These characteristics are considered key to



Figure 6: The leaders of CONMECOOP discuss market access for cooperatives

overcoming the complex context that cooperatives are currently facing, and the need to form alliances within the sector to move forward was emphasized.

The following points were raised by the audience:

- To add value to the product, the cost of gasoline, among other factors, must also be considered. In this regard, the importance of exploring new technologies was discussed, and the case of small boats powered by solar panels, currently in the testing phase in Yucatán, was mentioned.
- It is recommended that a directory be created among the cooperatives of the confederation to know what products each one handles and to try to cover the necessary volumes if there is a demand to enter specific markets and small cooperatives or federations are unable to achieve these volumes on their own.

5. Moment Five: Recap of the workshop

Drafting of a letter to international authorities and organizations

In the last part of the session, taking into account the challenges, opportunities, and proposals identified over the two days, a letter was drafted so that participants could share it in their countries and regions. This letter is presented below.

To regional authorities and international organizations that promote the well-being of the fishing sector

We, the undersigned coastal fishers belonging to various cooperatives in Mexico and Central America, are writing to you to draw your attention and commitment to the urgent challenges facing communities and cooperatives engaged in artisanal fishing in the region, and to offer our experience and talent to help find inclusive solutions.

In this International Year of Cooperatives, we highlight as the center of our concerns the dignification and recognition of the artisanal fishing sector as an agent of change in the current context of social, economic, and political complexity.

We recognize that the context can be adverse. Among other aspects, the following factors affect our activity: the decline of fisheries due to overexploitation; the increase in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; the impacts of climate change; growing demand in the national and international markets; and ambiguity and instability in resource tenure rights.

In addition to this, a significant part of the artisanal fishing sector lacks basic human rights guarantees. The lack of social security, access to health services, quality education, and labor protection is the reality we face in our communities.

In fishing cooperatives, we bring together dedicated people who have known the sea and its resources for generations. Knowledge is passed on and we regulate ourselves in a collective and organized manner.

Through our organizations, we generate social benefits and well-being for families that depend on fishing. Thanks to our work, a large part of the population has access to high-quality protein and nutritional value. It should be noted that in certain communities located on the coast and in river basins, fish is the main source of protein, and they depend on it to ensure their daily food supply. In this sense, fishing is an essential element of the desired food security.

Therefore, the recognition and dignification of the artisanal fishing sector must go hand in hand with the participatory design of public policies with a focus on human rights, social security, labor rights, gender equality, and sustainability, which regulate fishing activity in order to promote our organization, improve our quality of life, and guarantee present and future access to our fishing resources.

We urge you, as the authorities and international organizations responsible for this area, to join us in the work we are carrying out in the region to promote policies and programs that dignify and recognize the contributions of our sector.

Those of us who are dedicated to fishing will continue to work for the well-being of our communities and resources. We extend our hand to those who want to work with us in a coordinated and collaborative manner.

For the dignity of the artisanal fishing sector.

Facilitation and reporting of the workshop: Rosario Espinosa Martínez and Pablo Yáñez González from the *Impacto Colectivo* Support Team for Mexican Fisheries and Aquaculture.