

Reboot Overdue

Small-scale fishworkers face many challenges in Peru but the government pays little attention to the informal and unregulated sector

Peru's marine waters are among the world's richest fisheries. This is mainly due to the Peruvian anchovy fishery (*anchoveta*), mostly run by industrial operations producing yields of 3-6 million tonnes per year in the last five years. Small-scale fisheries also play a significant role, with species such as giant squid (yield of 500,000 tonnes in 2019), mahi-mahi, horse mackerel, jack mackerel and white tuna. Small-scale fishing has placed Peru among the three largest producers in the world for all five species.

Landings from the small-scale segment—both for export and domestic markets—account for 70 per cent of the total labour force in the country's fishing sector.

Yet the government has historically neglected small-scale fisheries management, for several reasons.

The Ministry of Production, for example, is more interested in industrial operations, especially fishmeal production. The government pays little attention to small-scale fisheries; this has resulted in poor quality in management and a highly informal sector. That, too, in a country where economic activities often have a high degree of informality.

At the turn of this century the Congress of the Republic of Peru approved a decentralization process aimed at counterbalancing the extreme centralization of power in the 1990s. Even those involved in this movement to democratize fisheries acknowledge the weaknesses at the implementation level: Small-scale fisheries were no exception to the general problem.

Currently, small-scale fisheries face important challenges. One, the number of fishworkers and vessels has significantly increased. The Instituto del Mar de Perú (IMARPE, Peru's Institute of Marine Science) carried out

three structural surveys of the sector, in 1995, 2006 and 2015.

They show that Peruvian fleets increased threefold in three decades: from 6,268 vessels in 1995 and 9,667 in 2006, to 17,920 in 2015. The number of fishworkers increased more than twofold, from 28,143 in the first survey to 67,427 in the last.

Two, the uncontrolled growth of the fishing fleet has brought together competing vessels with highly unequal fishing capacities in inshore waters, especially within one mile from the coastline. This has put lots of pressure on habitats and stocks because juveniles and spawning stocks concentrate in

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coastal areas. Besides, several fisheries, especially coastal operations, have experienced a decrease in their catch per unit effort. In other words, costs are increasing at higher rates than catches.

Three, small-scale activities present a high degree of informality; informal operations are easier and more profitable. This gets intensified by the public administration, which encourages informality through endless red tape and arbitrary requirements for, say, professional registration as a fishworker or for a vessel's licence. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown this into high relief, showing that officially-registered fishworkers are a minority of around 20 per cent of the total.

Even though these types of fisheries often experience oversupply, accompanied by collapse of landing

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prices, the challenges outlined above have made these episodes more frequent. Without any previous coordination, a segment of the fleet concentrates efforts on one single species, such as giant squid; processing plants and storage facilities cannot fully absorb this excessive supply and part of it is, therefore, diverted to illegal fishmeal production.

Similarly, mackerel and horse mackerel are also captured by several dozens of industrial vessels, large-scale fleets that normally target anchovy. Part of the catch is marketed fresh at very low prices, bringing down the income of small-scale fishermen who try to sell the same type of fish when this happens.

Price collapse at landing sites does not necessarily imply a significant price reduction further down the value chain. This is a source of conflict, especially within the highly specialized giant squid fishery. Middlemen are ubiquitous in informal operations; they compete for the product with industrial processors or exporters.

In addition, the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management

Organization (SPRFMO) gives preference to the interests of industrial fisheries over artisanal fishing. This is happening when Chinese fleets targeting giant squid in the South Pacific region have increased significantly: from 254 fishing boats in 2012 to 516 in 2019. Small-scale operations have repeatedly denounced the entry of these vessels in the 200-mile zone.

The high seas are not under Peru's jurisdiction but the country has legitimate interests in these waters, such as decreasing fishing pressure in the area adjacent to its coastal waters, where small-scale vessels capture their main target species, giant squid (500,000 tonnes a year!).

Small fleets also face raids and attacks, with 18 fishermen killed and around 50 injured. Mainly the victims are small-sized boats without a large crew to protect them. They still contain valuable engines and equipments that can be easily taken away and sold in second-hand markets in, for example, Ecuador.

Although small-scale fisheries' rights to resources are recognized, in practice they cannot be fully exercised.

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Traditional humid, salted, horse mackerel at the Chimbote Market, Peru. Price collapse at landing sites does not necessarily imply a significant price reduction further down the value chain

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Beach landing of a craft, Cerro Azul, Lima, Peru. Small-scale activities present a high degree of informality; informal operations are easier and more profitable

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When industrial fleets target the same species as artisanal fleets, such as giant squid, small-scale fishermen's rights of access to these resources are often undermined. Other stocks have suffered the same problem in the past.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of building public participation: Citizens should be empowered to put into question poor public services or corrupt practices. Among fishing communities, women's empowerment needs support. Women are actively involved in fish processing and marketing; they are more concerned about the health and education of household members; their presence is more permanent in the family, as men tend to spend longer periods at sea.

General elections are to be held in Peru in April 2021, when the country will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of its independence. It is

a timely opportunity to reflect on all the challenges facing the fishing sector. The current government is an interim one after the previous president stepped down. It cannot address issues such as the re-establishment of a Fisheries Ministry, the legislative updates the sector needs or the necessary administrative simplification and red tape reduction. Yet, whichever government comes out successful in the ballots in 2021, it will have to discuss these issues in earnest. 📌

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Instituto del Mar del Perú (IMARPE)

<https://www.gob.pe/imarpe>

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