

# Be Resilient, Not Vulnerable

The effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on small-scale fisheries in Istanbul, Turkey, bring out the need to address the structural inequalities and power asymmetries that bind the sector

There have been wide-ranging discussions on the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic for food production and access to food among small-scale fishing communities in Istanbul, Turkey. An unavoidable result of the pandemic was the temporary collapse of global agribusinesses dominated by long-distance trade. On the contrary, small-scale producers, including those in small-scale fisheries (SSF), have been more resilient with their local production, distribution and consumption chains, as well as their solidarity networks, even though they also suffered a lot from the pandemic.

imposed on fisher people, who were not allowed to go fishing, while farmers were exempted from this restriction. The Association of Istanbul Fishing Cooperatives (Istanbul Birlik), with about 2,500 members across 36 fishing cooperatives in the Istanbul region, wrote official letters to the city governorship, urging for permits similar to those issued during the pandemic for workers considered essential, such as farmers, and sanitary and supermarket workers.

Their demands were rejected. Until June 2020, they were not allowed to go to sea to catch fish on the weekends. Most of them were not allowed to fish during the week, either, as there was a specific restriction targeting all citizens above 65 years of age. Additionally, most of the local vegetable and fish markets were closed in Istanbul for several months, as were all restaurants, including the ones that often buy fish from small-scale fishers from their neighborhood. The sales and cooking outlets of fishing cooperatives were also closed as part of the measures to fight the pandemic.

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Immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic, government support policies tended to often target big agribusinesses first, rather than respond to the diverse needs of small-scale producers who suffered as their activities were severely restricted by lockdowns and the deepening of existing structural inequalities. These difficulties were compounded by the fact that small-scale fishing communities are characterized by aging populations in many parts of the world. However, small-scale fishers also have the potential to support each other and neighboring coastal communities in such a crisis.

In Turkey, the initial months of the COVID-19 outbreak severely affected small-scale fishers. Since end-March 2020, the government imposed weekend lockdowns in the country on and off. These restrictions were also

## Istanbul centre

In order to better understand the dynamics of small-scale fishers in Istanbul during the pandemic, we need to look closer at the organization of local seafood production, distribution and consumption. In Turkey, small-scale fishing boats—defined legally as vessels under 12 metres in length—comprise about 90 per cent of the fishing fleet. Their catch, however, constitutes about 10 percent of the total marine fish catches, while the rest is caught by the over-capitalized industrial fishing sector.

Both industrial and small-scale fishers operate around Istanbul; on the long coastline along the northern part of the Sea of Marmara; on the ecologically important Bosphorus Strait; and on the

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Bosphorus Strait with many boats in the harbour, Turkey. In many regions there is the challenge of declining and/or fluctuating stocks, with some traditionally important fish species—both ecologically as well as economically—going extinct

southern Black Sea. There is tremendous competition for marine space and commercial fish species between small-scale and industrial fishers in the seas. Istanbul Birlik is the main actor representing small-scale fishers and their interests. Especially over the last decade, Istanbul Birlik has been politically active in raising the voice of SSF communities via its members' co-operatives.

As a result, the needs and demands of small-scale fishing co-operatives have become relatively more visible recently. Firstly, for the General Directorate of Fisheries and Aquaculture, responsible for all fisheries policies in Turkey. And, secondly, for the civil society through the alliances of Istanbul Birlik with universities, local and international non-governmental organizations working on fisheries, and international organizations working for fishers and small-scale food-producers, as also food-justice organizations such as the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP), URGENCI and Nyéléni ECA, among others.

### Intermediaries

Given the structure of fisheries in Turkey, there are important challenges

that SSF communities and their co-operatives face. One, in many regions there is the challenge of declining and/or fluctuating stocks, with some traditionally important fish species—both ecologically as well as

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economically—going extinct. Two, small-scale fishers have been strongly undermined in the last decades, mostly as a result of the strong market power intermediaries in the supply chain who dominate the market, set prices and hinder the marketing possibilities of the fishing co-operatives.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, about 60 percent of all fish caught in the seas surrounding Turkey has been marketed by intermediaries, while only 2 percent was sold by fishing co-operatives in 2013. Intermediaries also serve as informal lenders to fishers,

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Small-scale fishers in Üsküdar Fisheries Co-operative, Istanbul, Turkey. Most fishing co-operatives in Istanbul cannot directly sell the fish that their members catch to consumers

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creating an ever-lasting debt cycle that fishers are not able to break in the absence of financial support and credit from government institutions.

Most fishing co-operatives in Istanbul cannot directly sell the fish that their members catch to consumers through their own outlets due to the lack of permissions from the municipalities, as there is some ambiguity in the law that municipalities tend to interpret against the interests of the fishing

**Direct access to local markets would improve the livelihoods of small-scale fishers by providing them a decent income for their efforts.**

co-operatives. Even in the Istanbul Wholesale Fish Market in Gürpınar, there is no sales space belonging to fishing co-operatives; the wholesale market is also dominated by commission agents and intermediaries. After the last local elections in 2019, officers from the Istanbul Wholesale Fish Market began to acknowledge awareness of this situation and promised to work to ensure a sales

space for Istanbul Birlik and its member co-operatives. However, no positive steps have been taken yet.

According to Erdoğan Kartal, the head of Istanbul Birlik, at the beginning of the pandemic the initial contact with government authorities on legal and financial support was quite weak. After several attempts, Kartal could get an appointment with the vice-governor of the city. Istanbul Birlik also got in touch with the General Directorate of Fisheries and Aquaculture in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to request for some support for small-scale fishers.

In order to help its member co-operatives financially, Istanbul Birlik suggested that rental payments of fishing harbours (run by local fishing co-operatives in each neighborhood) be cancelled for the period March-May 2020, during which fishing harbours were closed due to the pandemic. That request was accepted only partially: the payments for these three months were rescheduled to 2021, even though the law would—if interpreted correctly and in a manner supportive of fishing co-operatives—hold the co-operatives not responsible for payment at all, as the fishing harbours were closed and were unable to generate any income at all in this period.

Istanbul Birlik and the intermediaries in the Istanbul Wholesale Fishing Market then turned to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality as another potential source of support. In response, the municipality lowered the fee it charges in the market. Yet, according to Kartal, that only benefits the intermediaries because there are no direct fisher sales there. The municipality continued to organize meetings to listen to the needs of small-scale fisher people afterwards. One positive outcome of these meetings is that the municipality will now support small-scale fishers in the costs of maintaining their boats via their co-operatives.

To counter the severe effects of COVID-19 on their fisher members, Istanbul Birlik undertook measures to ensure internal support and solidarity among—and within—member co-operatives. Birlik was able to raise funding to provide about 50 needy fisher families with food and financial support. These fisher families were the ones most in need as the majority of their members

were above 65 years of age and thus had to comply with the restrictions during the weekdays; moreover, they had no source of income apart from fishing. In a situation where local and national authorities were not able to detect those who were most in need, this self-organization and support among the fisher people was a very important step for vulnerable small-scale fishing communities.

Responding to the question of whether COVID-19 affected SSF communities and industrial fishers in different ways, Kartal said that industrial fishers have not been affected as severely because the prices of economically valuable species that they catch rose significantly during the pandemic. Moreover, the industrial fishing season was already about to finish on the 15th of April 2020, two weeks after the lockdown began last year. Hence, the losses of industrial fishers were not that significant.

Although the period in which industrial fishers could not go out to the sea was relatively short, Kartal said this had a positive impact on reducing the fishing pressure in Istanbul. Scientific studies confirm such a short-term positive effect on fast-growing species. The experiences of small-scale fishers also provide some hands-on evidence that for some species, stocks improved in the months after the lockdown in the seas surrounding Istanbul. For instance, small-scale fishers discovered, with pleasure, that juveniles of *lüfer* (bluefish) were much more abundant in January 2021. That effect, however, will probably not be long-lasting as extractive industrial fishing activities resumed.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Istanbul Birlik had already been struggling for a range of direct sales mechanisms—like co-operative shops in all districts of Istanbul—and engaging with Community-Supported Fisheries (CSF) projects. These efforts aim at establishing economic and social justice for small-scale fishers as well as ensuring the sustainability of fish stocks.

Istanbul Birlik is aware of the need for direct sales spaces, where fishers and their families, including women and young members, would themselves sell, process, cook and serve the fish they catch. Such direct access to local

markets would improve the livelihoods of small-scale fishers by providing them a decent income for their efforts. Their plans also include adding a cultural space to these co-operative shops, to increase the awareness of the public

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about fish species, fishing activity and small-scale fishers in Istanbul. This would also help strengthen the ties and solidarity between already existing (agro-ecological) consumer groups and co-operatives in Istanbul, raise the value of the efforts of small-scale fisher people, preventing the debt cycle created by the intermediaries in the market.

If these objectives could have been achieved prior to the COVID-19 crisis, small-scale fishers in Istanbul would have been more resilient than they are now. Additionally, the structural inequalities and power asymmetries with regard to intermediaries and other industrial actors could also be overcome. For this purpose, the right to fish and access to local markets need to be supported with government policies.

As the WFFP representatives highlighted, the current crisis is a reminder of the need for prioritizing local food systems that focus on small-scale food providers and access to nutritious food for local people, communities and consumers. In such critical periods, the inequalities become more visible; the failure to incorporate a human rights approach to food production and consumption becomes more obvious. Therefore, improving the working conditions of fisher people, the sustainability of fish stocks and, finally, empowering democratic and participative structures such as fishing co-operatives, and their access to local markets, consumers, and civil society will be crucial in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. 📌

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