

A Formidable Arsenal

Social protection schemes in the Eastern Caribbean's small-scale fisheries can be enhanced

Spanning around three million sq km, the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem (CLME) is a complex mosaic of maritime jurisdictions. It surrounds nearly 30 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with diverse ecological, socio-economic, cultural and geo-political characteristics. Providing a single perspective on social protection in CLME small-scale fisheries (SSF) is, hence, virtually impossible. In this article we focus on SSF social protection in the more homogenous Eastern Caribbean sub-region.

All fisheries in these islands are small-scale with relatively short value chains, primarily domestic labour forces, and local consumption. The landings are a mixture of coastal (for example, jacks), oceanic (tunas), demersal (conch) and pelagic (dolphinfish) species harvested by motorized vessels under 12 metres using several types of fishing gear. Many nearshore coral reefs are degraded and/or over-exploited, but there are healthier and more productive ecosystems offshore with the potential for moderate expansion of commercial fishing (with the aid of fish aggregating devices).

Post-harvest participation by women can be significant in some fisheries and locations (as with flyingfish in Barbados). The overall market orientation is mainly towards domestic sales; some are linked to tourism; a few higher-valued species are exported regionally (for example, spiny lobster) and globally (yellowfin tuna). Even with these broad-brush social-ecological system similarities, some differences exist in social protection from which we can learn.

Learning and adapting to build resilience in SSF social-ecological systems are central to the projects implemented by the University of the

West Indies, in collaboration with fisherfolk organizations. This article shares perspectives based on our applied research with local, national and regional fisherfolk organizations over several years. However, we are not writing on their behalf. Caribbean fisherfolk have strong voices for advocacy on social protection that are free of academic filters.

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The fabric of social protection

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines social protection as the “set of policies and programmes that addresses economic, environmental and social vulnerabilities to food insecurity and poverty by protecting and promoting livelihoods”. Components of social protection typically include social assistance, social insurance and labour market interventions. All are seen in the Eastern Caribbean SSF, but can be enhanced.

Social protection in Eastern Caribbean SSF was subjected to immense scrutiny during the COVID-19 pandemic. This scrutiny continued into the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022) as attention was paid to climate change and variability, disaster risk management, gender mainstreaming, value chains, decent work and other aspects of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication

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Social protection for seasonal postharvest livelihoods is important to many women. Since the total values of SSF goods and services are not easily measured and hence there has been little SSF empowerment based on true value

(the SSF Guidelines). With the 10th anniversary of the SSF Guidelines being celebrated this year, and initiatives underway that are relevant to climate justice, blue justice and social justice, there are more voices advocating for examining and improving social protection in SSF. Below we share some of the perspectives that we think require additional applied research to support and design enhancements.

Governments of Eastern Caribbean SIDS pay much attention to social and economic coastal management and development, including in many SSF communities. The real empowerment of these communities is, however, often far less apparent. During the COVID-19 pandemic and IYAF 2022 periods, the value of SSF in inter-sectoral linkages such as with tourism, was clear. For example, SSF act as social safety nets and seasonal sources of livelihoods during tourism downturns, and as

components of tourism agri-food chains and marketable cultural services in times of prosperity.

Since the total values of SSF goods and services are not easily measured, and contributions to gross domestic product are underestimated in official statistics, there has been little SSF empowerment based on true value. Retaining power over coastal community futures and shifting Blue Economy options are political priorities in Caribbean SIDS. There are many examples of the power asymmetries between SSF and economic development, with links between SSF social protection and governance of tenure. However, the underlying power dynamics are often inconspicuous and may be obscured by deficiencies in social-protection administration.

On a more positive note, many basic human rights and public services are adequately provided and governed

by State authorities. These amenities reduce or eliminate structural inequalities that could otherwise disadvantage SSF. For example, the Eastern Caribbean SIDS typically rank high in access across their populations to health, education, sanitation, housing, energy, public transportation and other basic socio-economic support systems. Child labour is not an issue and gender parity in education is the norm. Few SSF communities are so isolated or neglected that they cannot gain reasonable access to public services that meet basic needs. This is not to say that there is no poverty; just that SSF communities do not stand out in this regard.

Although national social security insurance schemes are available in these SIDS, people in informal sectors and workers who are self-employed such as most fisherfolk perceive the benefits and options available to be inadequate. Contributory schemes do not take the seasonality of SSF livelihoods adequately into account. Consequently, national schemes are under-subscribed by fisherfolk who are also unable to afford private social insurance schemes. Some fisherfolk organizations in the sub-region have tried to assist their members by forming insurance pools, but the economies of scale required to achieve affordable premiums usually cannot be reached. There is also a perception in recent times that national insurance schemes risk depletion due to population longevity and irresponsible State spending from them during global economic downturns.

Caribbean innovations

On the other hand, the region has been innovative in introducing parametric insurance that can simplify and expedite payments for loss and damage due to climate-related hazards. Insurance products are available in some countries to sustain the livelihoods of fisherfolk and promote resilient fisheries via disaster risk reduction. This is supported by initiatives such as the Fisheries Early Warning and Emergency Response (FEWER) mobile app suite and institutional communication system

co-designed with fisherfolk to allow better preparation for, and response to, increasingly extreme weather events. In recent times, cost-effective SSF vessel monitoring systems (VMS) have been introduced in several countries to improve search and rescue by coast guards, with the potential for self-help through community-based assistance in cases that are not life-threatening.

State-run financial services and private-sector commercial credit are available to both women and men with small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) along entire fisheries value chains. Funding sources range from State agency micro-credit windows to co-operative credit unions and mainstream commercial banks. Their services span capital investment through to operating expenses, although high-risk venture capital for SSF is scarce. Loan interest rates may be concessionary, but grants and revolving loan schemes are becoming less common. When property is required as collateral, men may have an advantage in successfully obtaining credit, but women are usually seen as less risky debtors regarding repayment. Women frequently subscribe to, and run, the community-based rotating credit associations that remain culturally embedded in many SSF. Informal social protection needs to be better documented in SSF to understand social capital assets and avoid their depletion.

Turning to labour force considerations, most complementary income-generation and alternative livelihood initiatives targeting SSF have generally been project-linked and situation-specific. Few efforts have resulted in more sustainable livelihoods, with an exception being some small-scale marine algae aquaculture at the household level. Tourism-oriented diversification includes coastal transportation such as water taxis, tours such as sea turtle encounters, and food services such as the 'fish fry'. Labour market interventions also tend to be associated with marine protected areas (MPAs) where capture restrictions, no-take zones and displacement of fishers occur. In a broad view, such initiatives may prepare fisherfolk for developing more Blue Economy roles.

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Caribbean SSF communities are vulnerable to climate and other risks need insurance coverage. Decent work, with occupational health and safety in all components of fisheries value chains, are more recent areas for fisherfolk advocacy in SSF social protection

Self-employed fishing industry workers do not receive seasonal unemployment benefits at present, but at no time are all fisheries closed, and entry into fisheries is usually easy.

Decent work, with occupational health and safety in all components of fisheries value chains, are more recent areas for fisherfolk advocacy in SSF social protection. Issues arise more often in post-harvest activities. These are linked to ensuring high-quality seafood standards and are maintained in state-run fish landing sites that serve as public markets, allowing fisherfolk to have their own small businesses. State maintenance and operating standards for equipment, sanitation, ice supply and refrigerated storage may fall below the needs of trained SSF businesswomen, threatening their livelihoods and household income while compromising public health. State-induced uncertainties are a major concern when added to ecological and

economic uncertainties such as from climate change, natural capture fishery variability and global energy costs. It is often in response to uncertain SSF livelihood structures and processes that we hear the loudest calls for social protection.

In the Eastern Caribbean SSF, harvest-sector labour conditions are not as problematic as in other parts of the region and the world. Fishing enterprises operate primarily within kinship and community social structures that provide culturally embedded forms of protection and stewardship. However, the closely packed countries have not institutionalized maritime trans-boundary mechanisms for movement of people and capital, or social protection, which are desirable.

Migrant fisheries are not an issue, but illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing exists. Some IUU fishing is an artefact of national and trans-boundary SSF governance

being unresponsive to customary fishing practices, but there also is a need to combat crime at sea using (often stolen) fishing vessels for the illegal movement of goods and drugs, as well as human trafficking. Fisherfolk are often the victims, rather than perpetrators, of these crimes. Adequate social protection includes attending to their safety. The regional programme of action to combat IUU fishing requires additional resources for more comprehensive implementation.

Approaches to the future

Professionalization of Caribbean SSF, for the purpose of social protection, can be quite contentious. There is a general move towards fisherfolk attaining formal certification for their skills and knowledge all along the fisheries value chains. It is beneficial to become qualified in safety, navigation, seafood handling, customer service, and so on. But fisherfolk are wary of state-designed professionalization resulting in increased administrative burdens, licensing barriers, restrictions that impede occupational mobility, and rules that impact culturally embedded kinship or community-based apprenticeship systems for SSF livelihoods.

An uninformed approach to professionalization could reduce their current adaptive capacity to deal with the uncertainty and variability of multi-species, multi-gear, seasonal SSF facing increasing climate risks. SSF livelihood flexibility is critical to self-organized social protection that needs to be maintained.

Another challenge to improving social protection in the Eastern Caribbean is the limited institutional capacity of fisheries authorities for ecosystem approaches to fisheries (EAF). This applies especially to the human dimensions of EAF for which most officers are not prepared. The recent trend of assigning SSF to ministries responsible for the Blue Economy, instead of their conventional colonial location within ministries of agriculture, has opened windows of opportunity for SSF to engage more comprehensively across multiple sectors of the economy and society that can enhance social protection.

However, limited sex-disaggregated socio-economic data, few multi-dimensional poverty assessments, and no gender analyses or other social-science evaluations constrain the fisheries sector. Fisheries officers are few and most lack social science education or specialized training relevant to social protection. This is slowly improving with more regional advanced inter-disciplinary marine programmes, but there is an immediate need for better networking with partners to fill these gaps.

Fisherfolk are playing important roles in filling gaps to create a well-informed foundation for social protection such as through the Leadership Institute of the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organizations (CNFO). Their capacity-development initiatives, designed and delivered by the fisherfolk of the region, can address a lack of trust in social-security systems, limited knowledge about rights of access to social protection, and perceptions that social-protection benefits are not relevant to everyone engaged in SSF. Succession planning to prepare young fisherfolk, and more women, for leadership can significantly improve knowledge on, and advocacy for, social protection. Some regional NGOs and academics have partnered with fisherfolk to add climate justice and blue justice to their arsenal of reasons for improving social protection.

Overall, our perspective on social protection for SSF in the Eastern Caribbean is positive despite the shortcomings. It is encouraging that more fisherfolk are becoming aware of the importance of social protection as their right, and that expanding multi-stakeholder partnerships with governments, NGOs and academia are in place to address the issues. All the topics discussed above could benefit from more and better applied research, but just as important are the many initiatives of the fisherfolk themselves in advocacy and policy influence to improve their social protection. 3

For more



Social protection to foster sustainable management of natural resources and reduce poverty in fisheries-dependent communities. Report of the FAO Technical Workshop, 17–18 November 2015, Rome

<https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/473035/>

Building food security and resilience into fisheries governance in the Eastern Caribbean

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10113-014-0703-z>

Building the Barbados National Union of Fisherfolk Organisations

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A First Look at the Science-Policy Interface for Ocean Governance in the Wider Caribbean Region

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2015.00119/full>