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Providing Decent Employment for Pacific Fishers



Photo credits: Forum Fisheries Agency

Fishing is critical both to survival and subsistence of many Pacific Islanders, as well as long-term prosperity in the region.

Although the vast Pacific Ocean creates economic challenges for Pacific island countries – which are often small and isolated from large markets - the size and natural wealth of this ocean also contains extraordinary natural resources of fish, particularly tuna. The Pacific Islands domestic tuna sector adds around US\$446 million to the combined GDP of the region per annum, and fishing contributes to more than 10% to GDP in countries such as Tuvalu, Federate States of Micronesia and Kiribati.¹

Although the Pacific region reaps important economic benefits from licensing fees for vessels catching fish in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) – which are home to the world’s largest tuna fishery – there are still untapped opportunities to further benefit from this valuable resource.

More than 60% of the tuna caught from Pacific Island EEZs is harvested by foreign vessels and more than 85% is taken out of the region for processing, highlighting considerable scope to develop domestic industry. Pacific Islanders could not only benefit through domestic processing, but also increased employment on fishing vessels, which currently employ relatively few workers from the region.

¹ Asian Development Bank (2009) Fisheries in the Economies of the Pacific Island Countries and Territories. Available at: <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27511/pacific-fisheries.pdf>

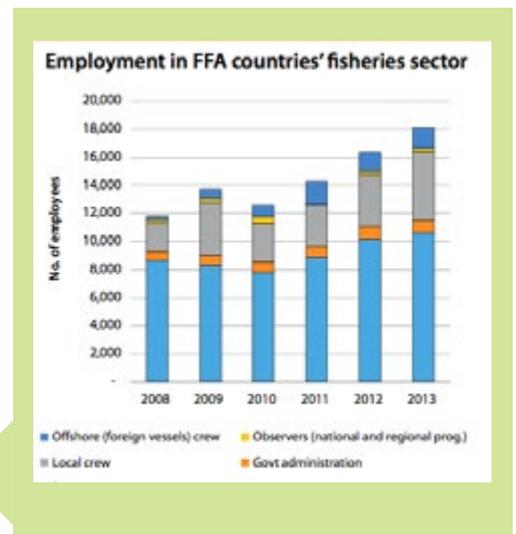


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Increasing employment in the fishing sector is a key goal...

In 2015, the Forum Fisheries Agency developed a Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries, approved by the Pacific Island leaders, which sets the direction for future management of this industry. The Roadmap identifies seven clear goals for oceanic and coastal fisheries which member states have committed to achieve over the next ten years. Among them is the important goal of creating 18,000 new jobs in the tuna industry within the next decade – which would include employment in tuna processing, vessel crew, observers and fisheries management staff.

Current figures indicate that there are around 18,000 jobs currently held by Pacific Islanders in the sector, requiring a doubling of jobs to meet the goal.



Source: FFA Fisheries Roadmap, 2015

... but cannot come at the expense of unsafe, exploitative conditions

While high unemployment figures in many parts of the Pacific certainly suggest a need for greater opportunities in the fishing sector, it is important above else to ensure that these jobs are decent and safe.

Fishers commonly have conditions of work that are vastly different from those experienced by workers in other sectors. The fatality rate of fishers is typically several times higher than for other workers. Fishing is hazardous even compared with such occupations as fire-fighting and mining. Being out at sea often means being away from professional medical care, which can be particularly dangerous in the case of serious accidents.

Many fishers live as well as work in their vessels, in conditions that can be cramped and congested. There may be long periods away from home and very long working hours. Access to adequate food and drinking water – as well as to recreational facilities when fishers are off-duty – can be an issue. Fatigue, linked to long hours, has been identified as a serious problem.



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There are other features that make the fishing sector different. For example, fishers are often paid on the basis of a share of the value of fish caught, in whole or in part, by the vessel (rather than receiving a fixed wage). Fishers may not be employees in the conventional sense, for a great number are owner-operators or considered to be self-employed.

All this means that the sorts of procedures and safeguards which may be in place for workers working in shore-based occupations and industries may not be appropriate or effective, thus contributing to a “decent work deficit” for fishers.

The ILO Convention on Work in Fishing (C188) was adopted in 2007 with overwhelming support from governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations around the world. It covers a broad range of issues particular to the fishing industry, including minimum age for work, minimum standards for work agreements, rest periods, standards for living conditions and food on board, occupational safety and health and basic medical care (see on Key Provisions of C188).

It is important to ensure that Pacific Island countries have a strong institutional and legislative framework, and an effective training regime to prepare and support fishers, to ensure that these workers can be safe and make a decent living through which they can support themselves and their families.

Ensuring good standards of work isn’t just good for workers, but also for business

The fisheries sector has been connected with slave labour and bondage in some parts of the world. The United States Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report has noted evidence of trafficking in this sector in parts of Asia, as well as in some Pacific Island countries.² This is a terrible risk for the fishers concerned, but also has consequences for the marketing of seafood products from the countries which are thought to be connected with such exploitation. Not only may consumers refuse to buy brands that are associated with abuse of workers, but large markets such as the EU may boycott exports from a country that is given a ‘red card’ under its illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) regulation.³

Thus, creating an environment where fishers’ rights are protected isn’t just good for human rights. It’s also smart for maintaining good brand reputation and increasing exports.

² United States Department of Labour, Trafficking in Persons Report 2014

³ In April 2016, the European Commission noted that ratification of C.188 is particularly relevant to the fight against illegal fishing.



Photo credits: Fransico Blaha for FFA

The Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) works to strengthen national capacity and regional solidarity amongst its 17 members of the Pacific region to better manage, control and develop their tuna fisheries. Based in Honiara, Solomon Islands, the FFA has, since 1979, facilitated regional cooperation to enable Pacific countries to benefit from the sustainable use of tuna, which is critical to so many livelihoods in the region.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN agency specializing in promoting decent work for all women and men, is based in Geneva but with a regional office in Suva covering ten Pacific Island countries. One of the ILO's mandates is the development of labour standards, including in the fishing industry, which can be found in the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No.188) and the Recommendation on Work in Fishing (No.199).



Photo credits: Forum Fisheries Agency

Challenges exist to creating decent work

Employment conditions can vary significantly between different vessels and types of vessels.

Ensuring good working conditions can be particularly challenging in the longline fisheries where very cheap labour is readily available and living and working conditions can be sub-standard.

However, establishing more rigorous and standardised fishers' work agreements, or minimum elements of such contracts, is possible, and can be an effective strategy to protect fishers.

The ILO's Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188), and the accompanying Work in Fishing Recommendation, 2007 (No. 199) set important standards for safe and decent employment on fishing vessels (see on Key Provisions of C188).

Another important priority is to ensure that Pacific Island workers are properly trained and more likely to be recruited by companies operating in the region.

... But there are ways to progress forward

Some of the key priorities going forward are:

1. Establishing regionally agreed minimum standards, consistent with international standards, to ensure that countries in the Pacific are not played off against each other in a race 'to the bottom'.
2. Developing a harmonized approach to intervention by port states with regard to labour matters on foreign flagged fishing vessels visiting their ports (see Box on 'Understanding Key Terms'), including what to do in serious cases such as forced labour and trafficking. This would minimize negative consequences on the development of the port states' seafood processing sectors.
3. Supporting recognition of qualifications and employment pathways. The vast majority of Pacific Island vessel crew are serving in relatively lower-level roles with limited opportunity for promotion, including to role of captains, fishing masters and chief engineers. It is important for training to be recognized not only among Pacific Island countries but by other flag States fishing the Pacific.
4. Expanding domestic processing capabilities. While recognising that not all States have the opportunity to expand or develop domestic processing opportunities, this sector has seen the greatest increases in employment over the past 10 years, specifically in Papua New Guinea but also in the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Republic of Marshall Islands and Kiribati. In particular, the sector employs a large number of women, which can be good for increasing gender parity, but should also make States consider the need for personal safety standards and child care provision. Opportunities can be further enhanced through ensuring that countries have a conducive climate for investment, well-developed career pathways and associated training and priority systems to link fisheries access to enhanced domestic investment and associated processing. Several countries already provide preferential access to locally based fleets that supply processing plants, and may have scope to require more of this fish to be landed for processing. Members can also consider requiring minimum landings by foreign access vessels.

The region needs to work collaboratively on innovative and enforceable options creating decent jobs in this sector, with the support of organizations such as the FFA and the ILO.

Understanding Key Terms

What is a flag state?

A flag state in relation to a fishing vessel, is the State under whose laws the fishing vessel is registered or licensed. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, in Article 94, provides, among other things, that "every State shall effectively exercise its jurisdiction and control in administrative, technical and social matters over ships flying its flag". This includes fishing vessels. Convention No. 188 sets out that a State "shall effectively exercise its jurisdiction and control over vessels that fly its flag by establishing a system for ensuring compliance with the requirements of this Convention..."

What is a port state?

Port states are those in whose ports foreign fishing vessels may stop. Port states which ratify C.188 may inspect the conditions of such foreign fishing vessels ('exercising port state control') for compliance with the Convention and may take action when conditions on board are found to present a hazard to the safety and health of the crew.





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Key provisions of C188

The Convention on Work in Fishing addresses issues essential to ensuring decent work on fishing vessels. In particular, the Convention:

- Establishes the responsibilities of fishing vessel owners and skippers for the safety of fishers on board and for the safety of the vessels (Article 8);
- Sets a minimum age for work on board fishing boats and requires special protection for young fishers (Article 9);
- Requires fishers to undergo periodic examinations of their medical fitness for work on fishing vessels (Articles 10-12);
- Requires that fishing vessels are sufficiently and efficiently manned (crewed), are under the control of a competent skipper, and that the fishers on board are provided sufficient rest periods (Articles 13-14);
- Requires fishing vessels to have a crew list and fishers to have the protection of a signed work agreement, setting out the terms of the work they are performing (Articles 15-20, and Annex II);
- Entitles fishers to be repatriated when their agreements expire – and for other reasons, and prohibits making fishers pay to obtain their jobs, or blacklisting them (Articles 21-22);
- Addresses how fishers are paid and that they shall have the means to send money home to their families at no cost (Article 23-24);
- Sets standards for living accommodation and food on board (Articles 25-28, and Annex III);
- Establishes requirements for occupational safety and health, as well as a basic level of medical care on fishing vessels; (Articles 31-33);
- Ensures that fishers benefit from social security protection no less favourable than that provided to other workers in their country; and, at a minimum, provides protection in cases of their work- related sickness, injury or death (Articles 34-39).

Further information on the Convention can be found at: www.ilo.org