



Small-scale fishers at sea in the Philippines. Photo: Alice Joan Ferrer

Small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia see harsh impacts of COVID-19

Editor's note: Robert Pomeroy, extension specialist and marine resource economist with Connecticut Sea Grant and UConn professor emeritus, has spent his career on research and development projects with small-scale fisheries in Southeast Asia and other parts of the developing world. While those who sell fished and farmed seafood in Connecticut were presented with significant challenges during the pandemic, those same challenges were magnified for their counterparts in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and neighboring countries. They also lacked the resources and government support programs that were critical for the Connecticut seafood industry.

In this article, Pomeroy summarizes the findings of a paper published in March with Southeast Asian colleagues in the academic journal Asian Fisheries Science. Their conclusions offer an important reminder that the ability to fully overcome crises often depends on forces beyond one's control. While the Southeast Asian fishers adapted as well as they could, the obstacles they faced highlight the need for ways to help them become more resilient before the next crisis. Pomeroy and his fellow authors give several specific recommendations to achieve this.

By Robert Pomeroy

Though global in scale, the COVID-19 pandemic did not spread its impacts equitably.

In Southeast Asia, the disparities with other parts of the world were starkly apparent among those who depend on seafood for their livelihoods, from small-scale fishers to those who process, sell and distribute the ocean's bounty.

Small-scale fisheries significantly contribute to the well-being of coastal communities in Southeast Asia as providers of food, livelihood and income. Fisher households are prone to various crises and shocks that put a lot of stress on their already vulnerable condition, making them less economically resilient.

Given the few assets of fishing-dependent households, their ability to cushion the negative impact of crises and shocks is limited. Women, who work primarily in processing the seafood harvest, are often significantly impacted. The pandemic delivered another serious threat to these coastal households and communities.

Fisher households' livelihoods, nutrition and health have been impacted. They have met with difficulties due to national lockdown measures in many countries that prohibited them from going out to sea to fish or from selling their fish.

Due to reduced demand for seafood from local markets, restaurants and hotels, the collapse of prices has reduced fishing activity. This spilled over to the suppliers, traders, processors, transporters, financiers and others in the small-scale fisheries value chain. Access to ice, fuel, bait and fishing gear has been restricted as suppliers closed due to limited fishing activity. Trade slowed as transportation restrictions prevented movement of products. Seafood processing facilities closed or are operating at reduced capacity.

The pandemic has exposed the poverty, vulnerability and marginalization of the small-scale fisheries sector. The pandemic and the accompanying policies in these countries inflicted far-reaching impacts on the small-scale fishers. It has also highlighted the importance of the fisheries sector, the problems that have long existed and presented an opportunity to reshape it.

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The effects of COVID-19 varied at different times and in different ways across Southeast Asia, reflecting the differences in their economic and social situations. Many households were unprepared and lacked viable ways to cushion the impact of fishing and market closures. The pandemic has further exposed the political and economic marginalization by many governments of the small-scale fisheries sector.

The small-scale fishers had to fend for themselves in the early months of the pandemic. Most government support to the fishers came in the middle-to-end of 2020, signifying the lack of systematic program planning and action to support the sector. Governments supplied financial help and food subsidies as short-term coping strategies to address immediate challenges brought about by the pandemic. The financial help provided to fishing households was critically important to purchase necessities. Some governments provided support to obtain fishing gear and improved post-harvest infrastructure, while others provided low-interest loans to fishers or helped to strengthen their fish marketing systems. Fishers took adaptive responses such as direct fish marketing, online marketing and home delivery services.

While short-term responses of providing food and financial assistance have been helpful, long-term support to address future pandemics and other stressors will require developing more resilient fishing households. The lessons learned from the pandemic suggest several approaches and interventions to improve household resilience and to be better prepared for similar challenges and threats in the future.

These include:

- strengthening the fishing households' social network of friends, relatives and neighbors to serve as both a social safety net and a bridge towards the transition to financial inclusion
- diversifying livelihoods to reduce dependency on the fishery and provide for additional sources of income and food
- promoting financial stability through savings, credit, digital payment products and insurance
- value chain upgrading through post-harvest fish handling and processing methods
- providing access, especially for women, to social protection measures such as government health insurance and social security.

A copy of the full paper was published in the March 2021 issue of the journal Asian Fisheries Science: (<http://www.asianfisheriessociety.org/publication/current.php>).

To learn more about Robert Pomeroy and his work, read the profile in the Fall-Winter 2020-21 issue: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/?p=6969>