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THE OCEANS AND FISHERIES PARTNERSHIP

LEARNING SITE: GENERAL SANTOS CITY, PHILIPPINES

OVERVIEW

In 2016, the Oceans and Fisheries Partnership (USAID Oceans) conducted a study on the labor profile of Philippine fisheries, with a particular focus on General Santos City. The study was undertaken by Verité, a global non-profit organization that conducts research, training, and advocacy for safe, fair, and legal worldwide work conditions. Verité undertook research to describe labor conditions in the tuna sector in General Santos City, Philippines, and to note ways that labor and social concerns could be integrated with an emerging Catch Documentation Traceability System.

FINDINGS

TYPES OF WORK AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Vessel Based

The following table provides an overview of common fishing methods, gear used, and associated fisher demographics.

	Gear	Trip Length	Vessel Type	Fishing Grounds	Fisher Sex	Fisher Origin	Fisher Age	Fisher Education
Handline Palaran	Hook and line	Overnight	Small	Municipal waters	Male	General Santos	Adult	Little to no formal
Handline Pamarile	Hook and line	3-21 days	Motherboat plus small	International	Male	General Santos	Adult	Little to no formal
Purse seine	Netting	6-12 months	Motherboat plus small	International	Male	Coastal Mindanao	Ages 26-36	High school

Land Based

Canning: Workers in this labor-intensive sector conduct repetitive tasks such as removing fins and scales, cutting, removing intestines and bones, cooking, sorting, bone removal, canning, inspection, sealing and labeling. 80% of workers are women aged 20-40, local workers and migrants, and most are high-school educated.

Fresh Frozen Processing: Fresh/frozen/chilled tuna processors prepare tuna for fresh and frozen export. Most workers are local, and are men aged 20-40 with at least some high school education.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Recruitment, Fees and Hiring

Vessel based: The boat captain or vessel owner recruits handline vessel workers directly on an informal/unregulated basis. Employment transactions are often undocumented and only basic information on the employment is provided to workers. For purse seiners, recruitment is conducted via more formal processes, with contracts and formal orientation.

Land based: 90% of recruitment and hiring in land-based facilities is brokered by employment agencies through a formal process. Informal workers are employed on a daily/per-transaction basis.

Contracting

Vessel based: All handliners surveyed reported not having signed any written agreements. Most handline fishers work for the same operator/captain or fishing fleet owner for several years. Purse-seine workers reported that they signed contracts but were not provided copies.

Land based: Almost all workers are subcontracted or outsourced, employed by agencies or cooperatives that have direct contracts with the facilities. Workers are frequently rotated to different facilities, find it unclear who their employer is, and are not provided a copy of their contract.



The General Santos Fish Port supports FishR, an initiative to register municipal fisherfolk to develop a standardized national registration system.

Land based: Purse-seine and land-based facility workers have more formal arrangements, but many still have limited knowledge of labor rights and laws or company policies, and are subject to poor working conditions. Workers involved in unions have better awareness.

Disciplinary Procedures and Grievance Mechanisms

Vessel based: Handline vessel operators supervise the boat crew, serve as the arbiter of grievances, and make decisions regarding pay. For purse seiners, disciplinary actions and grievances are handled by the vessel captain, or pass through the captain to the fishing company. Workers complain about a lack of grievance system to report issues on the captain.

Land based: Workers reported being scared to report grievances for fear of being blacklisted.

Harassment, Abuse and Discrimination

Vessel based: Handline fishers reported a fear of being blacklisted if they report verbal abuse and severe working conditions.

Land based: Factory workers reported constant verbal and psychological abuse and occasional physical abuse from supervisors and management.

Freedom of Association

Vessel based: Some fishers reported being represented by a national labor federation, but none could form or join a union.

Land based: Some factory workers are warned not to join unions, while others report that while management does not explicitly forbid them, they are afraid to exercise their right to join a union. Approximately half of the workers interviewed were unaware of their right to association.

Working Hours

Vessel based: Handliners said fishing is a continuous activity; fishers work for anywhere from one to ten months and then stay home for one to two weeks. Workers are not always informed regarding the length or location of their trips, which may be lengthened without notice. Purse seiners work from five am to midnight. Overtime is not given for work days exceeding eight hours, and days off are not provided. Workers cannot leave the vessel during long trips, but when replaced, may be stuck on the vessel unpaid until a ship is available to take them home.

Documentation

Vessel based: Most handline fishers lack documentation, but captains and handline operators have fisher IDs. Formally employed purse seine workers have work permits or visas, seaman’s books, and passports, but the captain holds the documents while at sea. In many instances, if the worker leaves, they must repay the cost of the documentation.

Land based: Some processing workers are required to have typical employment documentation, such as a biodata sheet, government-issued ID, and police clearance. Frequently workers “borrow” others’ documents to skirt requirements and, during peak season, less than full documentation is required.

Child Labor

Vessel based: Most fishers said they were underage, as young as 13, when they started working. Most workers interviewed were now above 18 years of age, and have already been working for as many as five years.

Land based: Workers reported that some workers aged 16 are currently employed in factories (commonly canning factories) and that during peak season employers do not check documentation to verify age. Some workers “borrow” or forge documentation to hide their young age.

Worker Awareness and Training

Vessel based: Handline fishers receive no formal trainings or written policies, but many management practices are well-established and implemented across the sector.

Land based: Most work 12 hours per day, six to seven days a week. Regular working hours are not always followed and workers do not receive advance notification when required to report to work or work overtime. Many workers do not receive days off, and if they go on leave, they are often demoted.

Wages, Benefits and Deductions

Vessel based: Fishers that are part of profit sharing schemes are vulnerable to unreliable wages and become increasingly dependent on loans to smooth income disruptions. On the vessel, food and medicine at inflated prices exacerbate fishers’ debt loads. Handline fishers report delays in payment post-trip, or no payment at all, depending on fish pricing. Purse seine fishers are paid monthly and pay is well-documented, although largely they do not receive any other benefits or allowances. Positive interviews noted that wage rates of purse-seine workers in one of the biggest fishing companies that was compliant with DOLE’s standards, and was given a Certificate of Compliance (CoC) are as follows: basic rate (starting at minimum wage) + 50%; or basic rate +25%; depending on their rank or position on the vessel. Workers are also provided productivity bonuses when the catch is good. Workers normally get their pay when the vessel docks (usually in six to ten months), however, the company has made arrangements for workers’ families to regularly receive part of the workers’ salary, and to make loans or advances during emergencies.

Land based: Processing plant workers are supposed to be paid the minimum wage, but commonly do not receive it because they are paid on a target production output basis, and the recording of hours and output is inaccurate. Workers tend not to understand how wages are calculated.

Health, Safety and Security

Vessel based: Fishers often experience accidents and injuries. Some boats have medical equipment, but safety training is insufficient. If crew fall overboard, they are often reported missing. In addition, interviewees reported detentions and threats being made against them.

Land based: Workers reported being provided some safety training. Some injuries reported included minor cuts and burns, as well as fatigue and body pains from long hours of standing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DATA COLLECTION

Recruitment and Hiring: Collecting additional data could provide transparency and standardization of the process. Useful data is summarized in the table below.

Vessel based	Land based
Registry of: Fishing vessel and fleet owners Employees and agents/contractors Handline operators Handline fishers Pamariles boats Data on capacity of each boat	Registry of: All company facilities Subcontractors Suppliers Labor agencies and cooperatives Industry workers
Written job description for each job function	Written job descriptions for each job function
Standard contracts or fishing agreements	Standard contracts or employment agreements
Vessel registrations	Government-issued and authenticated IDs
Fisher IDs, seaman’s books, passports	Training materials and records

Onsite Management and Working Conditions:

Collecting data on the following could improve conditions:

- Company organizational charts and policies;
- Production capacity and production schedules;
- Registry of regularly employed workers, cooperative/agency/outsourced workers and juvenile or minor workers, plus contracts for all categories of workers;
- Training materials and records;
- Payroll records and pay slips as well as benefits remittance records;
- Attendance and work hour records; and
- Grievance, discipline and termination records.

AVAILABILITY OF LABOR DATA AND SYSTEMS

Data on formally employed vessel and land based workers should be maintained by the companies or agencies/cooperatives for verification against Department of Labor and Employment records.

LEVERAGING CDT DATA FOR LABOR

Using CDT data, along with existing data-gathering mechanisms, can help government agencies verify companies’ adherence to international anti-IUU and GSP+ requirements (a component of the EU’s Generalised Scheme of Preferences).

INSPECTION

The Department of Labor and Employment should be included in multi-agency vessel inspections to augment labor inspection criteria and coverage to vessels, particularly handline operations. Inspection/auditing should be expanded to include vessels, especially handline operations, using a multi-agency team to conduct checks during “port-out and port-in.”

METHODOLOGY

Verité’s field research consisted of a rapid appraisal, follow by a validation visit to General Santos City. Verité conducted approximately 100 interviews with workers at a variety of worksites and employers, as well as interviews with expert informants from government, business and civil society. Verité also conducted observations, document review and desk research to triangulate, validate and establish context for the information. Verité mapped and assessed various labor-related and parallel traceability and sustainability initiatives, and evaluated factors driving labor conditions in the supply chain.

The Oceans and Fisheries Partnership (USAID Oceans), a partnership between the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC), is working to strengthen regional cooperation to combat IUU fishing, promote sustainable fisheries, and conserve marine biodiversity in the Asia-Pacific region. The backbone of the program is the development and implementation of country-specific, financially sustainable Catch Documentation and Traceability (CDT) system. This CDT system will be integrated with existing government systems, will also incorporate human welfare data elements, and will be demonstrated within an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) framework.

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