

***Putting fish on the plates, securing catch for the future:
Towards transforming the Philippine fisheries sector***



Pacifico Cay, a Filipino fisher in the southeast of Manila, earns around \$7 a day to feed his family of nine. With more and more Filipinos preferring to eat pork and chicken, Pacifico finds it hard to sell fish and deals with daily decreases in the volume of the fish sold. To make things harder, he is losing his regular bulk buyers due to travel restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the need to feed his family, he is forced to trade his captured fish with a kilo or two of rice to survive.

Meanwhile in a nearby barangay, Miriam Petalcorin and her husband, Gerardo, also Filipino municipal fishers, earn \$7 - \$10 per day to support their five children. Every day, Miriam and Gerardo struggle in managing their expenses with their decreasing income. While having difficulties selling fish, they face numerous problems such as the rising prices of raw fishing materials and inputs, lack of financing, declining fish catch due to coastal degradation, and conflicts with commercial fishers illegally operating in municipal waters. Worse, they often find their fishing nets torn by destructive gears, leading them to resort to informal loans for the replacements and digging them deeper into a life of debt.

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This is the usual story of small-scale fishers in the Philippines. Pacifico, Miriam, Gerardo, and many other small-scale fishers experience steep decline in income, insufficient support from the government, and the growing threats to coastal resources, their main source of food and livelihood.

Philippine fisheries sector issues

Filipino municipal fishers remain as one of the poorest of the poor in the Philippines, living way below the poverty line. This is despite being a maritime nation with rich aquatic resources, placed eighth globally in fish production with a total fisheries sector value of 7.26 billion dollars, and despite having a vibrant fish export market. The Philippines' seas and aquatic habitats are also continuously being damaged by destructive fishing practices.

Apart from these, several interconnected concerns such as declining fish catch and species composition, inconsistent policies and programs for sustainable fisheries, and weak institutional and stakeholder capacity are constantly being faced by the sector, driving the fishers into a situation of hunger and extreme poverty. Several forms of illegal fishing, overfishing, and unregulated fishing management practices are also huge concerns that have been catching great attention from environmentalists due to threats to natural resources. Small-scale fishers expressed that these seemingly uncontrollable practices are linked to cultural conflicts and political interests, reflecting systemic issues that need to be resolved.

Addressing these concerns are part of a larger, ideal scenario of a transformed fisheries sector in the Philippines – a vision of a country where the fishing waters are healthy and can support the increasing needs of the fisheries sector; a country with a fisheries sector strengthened by the support of various stakeholders and consumer groups; where appropriate laws and protocols governing the fishing activities and Philippine seas are being strictly enforced at the national and local levels; and a country where the fishers are prosperous, food-secure, and happy.

For decades, various organizations and government agencies have tried to address the perennial problems of the fishing industries towards reaching this ideal state. While there has been progress, transformational results are yet to be seen. But what if, the takeoff point towards helping Pacifico, Miriam, Gerardo, and the rest in the Philippine fisheries sector is something not too complex but something that is loud and clear?

Transforming the fisheries sector

Imagine turning this country of 111 million people into a fish-consuming nation, increasing consumer awareness on the nutritional and socio-economic benefits of consuming fish and influencing their preference towards choosing fish over other less healthy food options. What could this mean to the 1.6 million fishery workers nationwide?

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Although living in an archipelagic country with 7,641 islands, most Filipinos are pork and chicken eaters. A survey published by the Philippine Statistics Authority in 2017 reported that pork and chicken were the major meat products in the country with about 62 to 63 percent of households consumption. Even among the people living in rural barangays which are nearer the coastal areas, meat consumption is reported to be higher than fish consumption.

With the country's population expanding at an average rate of 1.6 percent yearly or nearly 5,000 new persons to feed per day, we see vast opportunities to transform the fisheries sector by engaging the consumers. Influencing the food preference of the Philippines' pork-loving nation and shifting their mindsets towards choosing healthier food choices such as fish might help shape a constituency that will call for more extensive support for the fisheries sector, and increase the profits of small-scale fishers.

More specifically, if more people would be aware of the nutritional and socio-economic benefits of consuming fish, and more aggressive promotional campaigns will be pursued to shift consumer preference, then markets might shift and changes in social and political structures will follow, triggering much-needed long-term solutions to systemic problems faced by Pacifico, Miriam, Gerardo, and the other Filipino fishers.

Especially today with the increasing global demand for the ASEAN region's fish produce, it is urgent and imperative to accelerate the growth of the sector and address these systemic concerns faced by the Philippine fisheries sector. The consumers present a strong force that could fuel radical and innovative solutions awaited by small-scale fishers. The entry point to transformation could be massive and aggressive nationwide communications campaigns that promote healthier diets and re-introduce fish products as affordable and accessible sources of necessary protein and essential nutrients. Another is by tapping mainstream and digital media channels and creative agencies and soliciting the support of famous personalities and influencers to create a louder buzz to develop a more inclusive national fisheries development plan.

Aside from these, there could be other modes of intervention such as marketing and value-adding strategies to make fish products more attractive to consumers, and information on better fish choices readily available, accessible, targeted, and understandable. These can also be linked to the initiatives that call for collaborative efforts to prevent and manage the alarming rate of childhood overweight and obesity in the Philippines.

This leverage point is also seen to lead to increased market demand for fish and heightened support in terms of financing and budget allocations, research and product development, technologies, and capability building for fishers and extension service workers. Once we build a community of allies of the fisheries sector and platforms for collaborations have been established, resources can be pooled to advance fishing communities. With more people supporting the sector and monitoring the progress of strategic initiatives, proper governance

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mechanisms might be enforced to implement laws more strictly and slowly eliminate political barriers.

Looking beyond, driving consumer awareness and preference could also cover improvements in the education curriculum to train little kids to consume fish at the early stages of growth and maturity. Moreover, since fisheries is connected to other sectors such as financing, transportation, processing, and post-harvest, concerted efforts to address these cross-cutting concerns will also benefit other industries. Thus, from individual consumption changes, we anticipate seeing structural and institutional shifts. There will be some trade-offs but tough decisions have to be made following proper consultations and planning to balance risks and rewards and reverse the negative effects to the sector and the coastal ecosystems.

Harnessing the power of the many, co-creating a societal will, and adopting a whole-of-society and food systems approach to transform the fisheries sector-- increasing fishers' income over time, addressing poor diets, and responding to critical threats to coastal habitats-- might be non-traditional entry points, far-fetched, and difficult. But if the Filipinos who are known for their communal unity, because of their heightened knowledge and commitment to make better food choices, would demand a more responsive, consumer-sensitive, and health-conscious agriculture sector and choose to speak on behalf of the fishers, *how do you think the stories of Pacifico, Miriam, and Gerardo would change?*



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