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RESEARCH BRIEF

Small-Scale Fishing communities in the Colombian Caribbean: New insights for development and sustainability

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- Small-scale fisheries play an essential role in food security for both fishing and non-fishing households.
- Small-scale fisheries play a double role in fishing households: household consumption and income generation.
- Livelihood diversification, including fishing for a variety of species and income-earning activities by household members in addition to the head of household, is key for diversifying risk and allowing households to meet their consumption needs year-round.
- Fishing communities face significant restrictions in access to financial markets, jobs, and education.
- Although fishing households are better off than non-fishing ones in terms of income, they exhibit much lower education and literacy.

Coastal communities that depend on small-scale fisheries are poorly understood. Designing policies to address their vulnerabilities requires an understanding of their socioeconomic context. Unfortunately, that type of information is usually incomplete in developing countries. This study seeks to close this gap by examining the household characteristics, assets, livelihood strategies, food security, and poverty levels of Barú, which is a fishing village in the Colombian Caribbean. We studied both fishing and non-fishing households. The analysis follows a sustainable livelihoods approach to understand the households' livelihoods. To do that, we administered a monthly survey during a whole year to fishing and non-fishing households.

Fishing in Barú plays a double role: (1) as an income-generating activity (similar to farmers raising a cash crop) and (2) as a food-generating activity (similar to farmers raising a crop for household consumption). Thus, fishing is not only important in terms of improving food security per se, but also as an income-generating activity that improves livelihoods, including nutrition.

We found that the frequency of animal-protein consumption is significantly higher in fishing than in non-fishing households, although the proportion of monetary expenditure on protein is relatively equal for both. In other words, fishing households enjoy a diet with higher protein content for the same amount of monetary expenditure.

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When having to deal with unexpected income losses, fishing households are able to use fishing as a safety net to cover immediate food needs.

We found that 2% of fish caught is given as a gift to other households. Further, nearly one-third of the fishers give fish as a gift and nearly one-third of households receive fish as a gift, particularly those in the worst condition in terms of food security. Those findings show a support network and altruistic behavior within this community.



Fishing households in Barú exhibit higher occupational diversity than non-fishing households, likely because of the uncertainty associated with fishing. Fishing households diversify their earning activities significantly more than non-fishing households. Not all members of fishing households fish, but this activity is their highest source of income.

In general, the community of Barú faces restrictions in terms of access to different forms of capital, such as land, education, or loans, which makes it difficult to develop job skills, start a business, or find a job that pays well. These restrictions seem to be more of a challenge for fishers, who tend to be older and have lower education levels than non-fishers.

Households in this community differ in their illiteracy rate, which is about seven percentage points greater for fishing than non-fishing households, and even greater if only the heads of household are considered. Our results also suggest that things are changing for new generations. For one thing, young people might be less interested than

their parents in fishing. For another, fishing households are currently investing more in education.

The estimated rate of people ages 18-28 years old who are not in education, employment, or training is twice as high in Barú as that reported nationally, showing the scarce opportunities that young people have in rural and fishing communities. For women, this rate is even higher: 7 out of every 10 women in this age range are neither working nor studying.

One of the most important findings of this study is that the poverty and extreme poverty levels of fishing households are lower than those of non-fishing households. Despite their limited education, financial services, and land, they do have access to natural resources, and they tend to have diverse sources of income. This allows them to solve basic needs to reduce food insecurity. The poverty figures for fishing households are similar to national levels, while the figures for extreme poverty are better for fishing households than they are for the national average. This shows the importance of fishing as a buffer against the vulnerability of rural poor households.

Should there be restrictions on fishing to conserve fish stocks? Our results suggest that restrictions on fishing for these communities, without providing income-earning alternatives or social protection programs, could harm their living conditions. Prohibitions on fishing would require, for example, cash transfers to compensate them for participating in conservation, as well as other social protection programs that allow households to cope with the effect of not fishing on income and food security. Together with conservation strategies, efforts to improve opportunities for employment, education, and investments in local businesses would allow a wider range of sources of income. Another suggestion that some fisheries use is to assign property rights in the fishery to individuals or communities, as an incentive to use the resources sustainably. Ultimately, strict conservation strategies must be accompanied by policies that give these communities better alternatives than overexploiting fisheries.

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