

LECCIONES DE UNA PANDEMIA:

Poniendo a prueba la resiliencia
del sector pesquero mexicano





12 Lessons after Months of the Pandemic¹

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1. This article distills some of the lessons learned documented in the report “Lessons of a pandemic: testing the resilience of Mexico’s fishing sector,” published in March 2021 by Environmental Defense Mexico, Ethos Laboratorio de Políticas Públicas and the Mexico Sustainable Fisheries Collective Impact Initiative. The report is integrated by eight cases across the seafood supply chain and fifteen essays written by people with a broad spectrum of perspectives.

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All crises bring an abrupt break or interruption in the way we usually do and see things. Large-scale disruptions, such as COVID-19, test attitudes, premises, leadership, and established practices. The usual ways of doing things and solving problems may not work during a crisis. Therefore, it is expected that individuals, organizations, and communities' initial reaction is one of confusion in the face of new circumstances and their unprecedented effects. After the initial reaction, other responses follow, and some can help set a new course for things.

The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly impacted food systems. Border closures, trade restrictions, and lockdown measures have affected food production worldwide, putting millions of jobs and food security at risk, especially for the most vulnerable people.⁴ Even if it is considered an essential activity in almost all countries, fishing has also been affected.

In Mexico, the analyzes to date show effects in the entire sector, including the suspension of activities, the decrease in demand, the fall in prices, and radical changes in the national and international supply chains. On a social level, fishing communities have faced infections, the loss of loved ones, and difficulties accessing the health system. The list of pending tasks to mitigate the effects mentioned above is long and deserves the sector's attention, civil society, and government. It is not necessarily about finding the way back to how things were before this virus. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in Mexico's fishing sector that need to be recognized and resolved. There is an exciting opportunity to rethink the sector's course, especially considering that the future is not exempt from other major crises, including the impacts of climate change.

After a year of the so-called new normality, it is relevant to pause and ponder what the sector has experienced. In this essay, we share the lessons we extracted from the cases and articles that are part of the report. The various pieces included in the report convey experiences and reflections -from different points of view and scale- related to the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of fishing. We believe that learning from the crisis can help increase the adaptive capacity of the fishing sector. Although more lessons derive from the many perspectives reflected in the report, we present the twelve lessons that stand out for us after twelve months of the pandemic.

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people's-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>

LESSON 1

It is necessary to strengthen a fair, resilient, and sustainable food system in Mexico; fishing must be part of this dialogue and the political agenda needed to this end.

COVID-19 has made us reflect on food as a source of health, employment, and well-being. It has led us to look beyond our dishes and ask ourselves the context from which the bite we put into our mouths comes: its environment, the people, the institutions, and how it is captured, processed, and delivered to the consumer. In other words, the pandemic has made us consider not only the product itself but the food system of which it is part and whose operation was altered by the disruption. It has also forced us to recognize the already existing inequity to access food in Mexico, as well as the risk that millions of people will see their human right to adequate food be compromised.

It is essential that Mexico takes advantage of these lessons and works toward a more resilient, fair, and sustainable food system. In the words of Diana Delgadillo of The Hunger Project Mexico, we need a food system that "guarantees food security and nutrition for all people without putting at risk the social, economic and environmental bases." Delgadillo says that a resilient production, for example, "will have to consider climate change, both in its repercussions as in the capacity to reduce and mitigate its effects through food production." Lina Pohl, FAO's representative in Mexico, echoes this call by reflecting that "in post-pandemic times, the fishing and aquaculture sector should be strengthened as a driver of local development and consolidated as a fundamental element in the food supply chain in times of crisis."

LESSON 2

It is time to deepen and cultivate a culture of preventive health in Mexico in which seafood occupies a more significant role in the diet.

During the pandemic months, many people have become more aware of their health and have adopted habits to strengthen their immune system. COVID-19 has also revealed the need to improve the population's diet as a preventive measure at a national level. In the words of the businesswoman Gabriela Camara, "until we envision that health is integral, we won't be able to become more resilient. We need a health system that integrates nutrition." Camara

also reminds us that it is necessary to expand the knowledge and awareness about these issues to cultivate a preventive health culture.

Ana Larrañaga, Director of Coalición ContraPeso, addresses the need to promote safe, balanced, and healthy diets that provide all the necessary proteins, energy, and micronutrients. In this sense, it is essential to make visible the nutritional value of fish and shellfish and their health contribution. Fish is a food rich in micronutrients, essential fatty acids, and animal proteins. Its consumption can help cognitive development, reduce growth retardation, improve maternal and child health, strengthen the immune system and reduce cardiovascular diseases.⁵

LESSON 3

Talking about fishing is also talking about community, culture, and solidarity.

Some of the people and communities that are part of Mexico's fishing sector face significant lags in the variables with which Mexico measures multidimensional poverty. The Slow Food movement invites us to reflect on the economic model that we favor through our consumption practices and the country's public policies. In Alfonso Rocha's words, international advisor of Slow Food Mexico and Central America, it is necessary to focus on a concept that the largest economies do not consider: the community. By supporting small businesses and local economies, we help revitalize fishing communities to be prosperous, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. Juan Carlos Seijo from Universidad Marista de Mérida also comments that the attitude of solidarity in the communities is an adaptation mechanism that allows strengthening the community's capacity to deal with COVID-19 and enhance its resilience.

LESSON 4

The social conditions of fishing communities and other people involved in the fishing sector need improvement.

The pandemic has revealed severe systemic inequalities in the country, and the fishing sector has been no exception. A comparative analysis between the Northwest and the Gulf of Tehuantepec regions made by Francisco

⁵ Bennett, et. to the. 2020. *Ambio* (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-020-01451-4>)

Arreguín, a researcher at the Centro Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Marinas del Instituto Politécnico Nacional, showed that the pandemic affected in more significant proportion the fishing sector with greater poverty and with fewer possibilities of economic reactivation. The Gulf of Tehuantepec, which is part of the Pacific region, presents the least favorable socioeconomic conditions among the country's fishing regions.

The relationship between poverty levels and resilience is not surprising. Still, it is a central lesson of COVID-19: it is impossible to seek sustainability and resilience of the fishing sector without addressing the living conditions and well-being of coastal communities and other people who work in fishing. As Jorge Torre, from Comunidad y Biodiversidad, AC (COBI) points out, this reflection is consistent with the United Nations (UN) call to face the pandemic while respecting the human rights of individuals and social groups in conditions of greater vulnerability. This is a challenge that prevails in Mexico and around which we will have to cooperate.

LESSON 5

The pandemic exhibits the need for healthy fisheries and marine ecosystems. Both provide flexibility for people who depend on marine resources for their livelihoods or business and enable the ecosystems themselves to be resilient.

As Carlos Fuentesvilla, FAO Fisheries Officer, remarks, the health crisis that dominated 2020 allowed us to see that fisheries worldwide play a critical role in food supply and food security. In the past, we have treated the seas as limitless sources of resources; today, we know that it is necessary to use them within a framework of rules that allows their responsible use. In times of crisis, having sustainable and healthy fisheries can allow a temporary increase in the fishing activity without putting the resources at risk, giving fishing communities a break. Likewise, scientific evidence shows that the most diverse and well-maintained ecosystems are also the most resilient to significant environmental changes. This evidence is particularly relevant in the face of the predicted impacts of climate change, the most worrisome ecological crisis of our time.

Andrés Cisneros, a Mexican researcher at the University of British Columbia, Canada, writes that climate change will impact all fisheries worldwide. If air emissions are not reduced, a drop of at least 10% in fishing's economic value is expected for most fishing countries. While this is a disquieting scenario,

climate change's economic and social impacts can be reduced by taking measures that protect fisheries and marine ecosystems.

Larrañaga and Delgadillo advise that we must orient fisheries policies to create marine food systems that guarantee food security and nutrition for the entire population and ecosystems' health without compromising the economic, social, and environmental conditions for future generations. The latter implies using multidisciplinary scientific and traditional knowledge to decide upon fisheries management and allow transparency in these processes. It also involves promoting fair and equitable participation, integrating fisheries management with the environmental agenda, and incorporating people who live from fishing in economic rescue policies and social protection, as suggested by José Luis Carrillo, president of the Federación de Cooperativas Pesqueras Centro-Poniente de Yucatán and Pohl.

LESSON 6

Collaborations and networks of allies are critical factors for the resilience of the fishing sector.

Few governments have been able to manage the pandemic successfully. Most of them, including Mexico, have been overwhelmed by the magnitude of the event. Limited government resources have been allocated to the fishing sector to help it respond to the crisis. Collaboration between the government and the fishing sector has been and will continue to be instrumental since, as mentioned by Humberto Becerra, President of the National Chamber of the Fishing Industry (CANAINPESCA), the sector needs the government to address issues such as illegal fishing, regulation, and foreign trade. However, the health crisis made it clear that the fishing sector also needs to strengthen its agency capacity, unite to respond to the new circumstances, and assume that the government will not solve all of the needs caused by the crisis.

Networking and building alliances within and outside the sector can help fill in the gaps left by changes in budgets and the reach of government actions. Jesús Camacho, President of the Mexican Confederation of Fisheries and Aquaculture Cooperatives (CONMECOOP), and José Luis Carrillo see this precarious moment as an opportunity for the fishing sector to reinvent itself and innovate. Working in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs), universities, distribution networks, and other key actors will be essential. In this regard, Torre and Fuentesvilla reflect that CSOs are crucial partners for the fishing sector since, both in Latin America and Mexico, CSOs have shown

that they can implement concrete actions quickly in times of emergency. Torre describes some of the roles CSOs can play, including giving a voice to those who do not have it (such as nature and those most vulnerable), acting as information nodes, and mobilizing resources and financing. He also mentions organizations' role in monitoring impacts, seeking solutions together with stakeholders, and coordinating and developing collaborative platforms.

LESSON 7

The transformation of the fishing sector will also occur when it is recognized as a diverse sector and takes steps towards inclusion.

In recent years, various organizations and stakeholder groups have begun to make visible how diverse the fishing sector is and women's role in this food system. However -as described by Inés López, Jorge Torre, Neyra Solano, and Francisco Fernández from COBI- during the pandemic, the invisibility and underrepresentation of women in fisheries worldwide have worsened. The cases of Alexia Chávez, in Sonora, and Claudia Reyes, in Baja California Sur, attest to how gender inclusion strengthens the sector. In her essay, Delgadillo emphasizes that it will be essential to recognize and make visible the inequalities faced by women who participate in the production and transformation of seafood to ensure equal access to men's rights.

In the different cases and essays included in the report, we observe that there is an implicit desire, and sometimes explicit as Jesús Camacho expresses it, to take advantage of this disruption to transform the sector. Such transformation can start when the fisheries sector sees itself as innovative, prepared, and inclusive. Social equity is key to change and implies that women have equal access to opportunities and decision-making spaces, which will play an important role in the post-pandemic world. Inclusion will be a necessary aspect of adaptation and the way forward.

LESSON 8

The fishing sector will have a greater adaptive capacity by being better organized and strengthening its administrative capacities.

We identify two relevant factors for fishermen and fisherwoman's resilience: the level of organization of their groups (cooperatives, unions, federations, communities, and others) and the competencies they have. A well-organized

group can share information quickly, identify effective solutions to its problems, and respond to emergencies more effectively. Camacho, an artisanal fishing leader, talks about how well-organized cooperatives will have a better capacity to overcome the pandemic's effects in the medium term, in contrast to those with a lower level of organization.

The example of the "Guardianas del callo" in Baja California Sur shows that when a group is organized, it can achieve its goals. This organized group of women responded quickly to the adverse economic effects that resulted from temporarily losing its buyers by becoming seamstresses and selling a new product (masks). A better-organized sector will also influence public policies more effectively, for example, for building the necessary infrastructure that was evident in the case of Chiapas.

Also, the more skills a group has, the greater the potential for creative, effective, and lasting responses and solutions to different challenges. Some capabilities are particularly relevant to social and economic resilience, such as managing financial resources effectively. It is essential that cooperatives keep track of their income and costs and that they begin to promote a savings culture. Keeping administrative information up to date and having savings provide stability during crisis times, as highlighted by Juan Gabriel López Hermosillo from the Mojarra del Arrecife cooperative. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of thinking in the medium and long term to be prepared for future difficulties.

LESSON 9

The fishing sector will be more resilient if it diversifies its products, its distribution, and sales channels, as well as its customer base and markets.

Diversifying the supply of seafood products is key to balancing losses and optimizing profits. Over the past year, we have seen a transformation in seafood demand. Cecilia Blasco, Octavio Tolentino, and Rocío Rivera from Grupo SmartFish observe that frozen and packaged fish products' demand increased. Paloma García, the editor of Animal Gourmet, comments that canned sardines also had an overdemand, mainly when panic shopping occurred (although the increase in some costs balanced these profits).

Social distancing, one of the main strategies to deal with COVID-19 around the world, catalyzed digital commerce. According to Javier Van Cauwelaert, who directs the commercial area of Grupo SmartFish, setting up digital sale

channels is complex and requires technical skills, equipment, and strategy. The current context could be considered an opportunity to make strategic alliances between different sectors for venturing into the online market. Another valuable tool in the digital age is the use of social networks. They provide the opportunity to get closer to new and different partners, customers, markets, and the final consumers.

It is also necessary to diversify customers and markets. The Kun Products case is an example of diversification: having numerous clients is not the same as having different clients. Kun Products used to sell to several restaurants that closed during the most critical moments, at the beginning of the pandemic. It was then that Iván del Mazo, Director of this company, began to think about new products, new sales channels, and new clients. It now has three primary customer groups, and the company learned that it is necessary to diversify by not "putting all of the eggs into one basket."

LESSON 10

The supply chains that have best withstood the impacts of the pandemic are those that are short, transparent, and where there is a good relationship between buyers and producers.

In February 2020, producers who export lobster to Asia began to feel the first effects of what would become a historical event of our lives. Markets in China and Hong Kong began to close, and with it, a cascade of disruptions started through the global seafood supply chains. In countries like the United States and Canada, local markets began to gain relevance. In Mexico, in the Buena Pesca, SmartFish AC, and Del Pacifico Seafoods cases, we observed a similar phenomenon. In these cases, their supply chain models have positively impacted fishing communities during the pandemic. These models have the following characteristics in common:

- Producers are at the center of the business model and receive fair prices.
- They take care of the environment.
- The models are based on short supply chains.

These elements have been critical during 2020, allowing fishers to be flexible and adapt to changes, minimize income losses, take advantage of market opportunities, and generate bonds of trust between parties. This type of business relationship, governed by transparent and fair agreements, can be part of the diversification of supply chains and promote local development, which is critical for resilience in the opinion of Pohl and Arreguín.

LESSON 11

Seafood consumers have the potential to catalyze positive change in the fishing sector.

Each purchase we make sends a signal; our collective consumer habits can change entire food production schemes. Mexico is witnessing a growing consumers' awareness and power, as manifested through the new legislation of transparency in labeling processed foods. It is time for consumers to assume new responsibilities, ask ourselves where our food comes from, who and how it is produced, how much it costs to be produced and the impacts and waste our consumption patterns generate.

During the pandemic, consumers have altered sales channels and prioritized online purchases. Also, at a local level, consumers are the core component of short seafood supply chains. Delgadillo mentions that we must consider our consumption as a political act. As consumers, we can make a difference by diversifying the species we consume, learning about the environmental impacts generated by the products we buy, rewarding producers who strive to work within the limits of nature, and favoring the consumption of legal and national products. In this way, consumers contribute to promoting the construction of a more supportive and sustainable food system.

LESSON 12

The ability to reflect and learn from what has been experienced during COVID-19 will be vital in increasing the fishing sector's resilience to future health and climate disruptions.

Blasco, Tolentino, and Rivera, from the SmartFish Group remind us that the ability to learn and adapt to change is a central aspect of resilience. Unlike natural systems, resilience in socioeconomic systems -such as fishing- involves a learning process in response to contingencies. The impacts of contingencies will be less severe as the fishing sector has more opportunities and tools to learn and adapt. Learning improves knowledge, and this, in turn, increases our ability to act effectively. Failing to understand and address the sector's vulnerabilities exposed by COVID would be detrimental to the sector's ability to prepare better to face future health and climate disruptions.

The pandemic has tested the resilience of the Mexican fishing sector. Perhaps, the last twelve months' central lesson is that we need to learn from what we have experienced and strengthen the sector's capacity to respond and adapt to change. We hope that this report will contribute to the fishing sector's necessary discussions about what has to be done to have a sector that sustainably takes advantage of fishery resources.

What lessons do you rescue?

