

# Backs to the Wall

Through a mix of downplaying, intransparency and undertesting, the largest archipelago nation in the world paid little heed to its vulnerable fishers during the COVID-19 pandemic

**E**dy, a fisherman on Indonesia's Pari island said: "For almost three months we did not travel outside the island. Earlier, we got additional income from tourism during the holiday season. This time around, there was no supplementary income because our tourist attractions were closed. And then our income from fishing, too, dropped by 50-70 per cent."

It took the Indonesian government more than two long months last year to negotiate and categorize the COVID-19 pandemic a 'national disaster'. By then, the country had registered 4,557 cases of infection and 399 deaths due to the pandemic. Before establishing any health safety protocols and mitigation measures, the government established quarantine measures at three major

a statement only served to push under an already drowning industry.

## Breach in income

The timing couldn't have been worse. The pandemic countermeasures were implemented in the country right at the start of the fishing season. Economic difficulties caused by the pandemic meant a lot of fishers chose to simply stop going to fish. "The price of fish has fallen to half of the normal price. It is very difficult to get a return on investment, even to meet daily needs," said a fisherman in East Lombok.

Simply put, fishermen did not have the capital to go to sea. In many cases they had only enough to buy fuel oil for the boats. The situation was unprecedented. Even during famines and cyclones, fishers had continued to find employment and go to sea, despite the dangers and the high risk of death. COVID-19 changed that. It became impossible to earn an income to meet their daily needs.

## Uneven distribution

"The income from catch decreased drastically due to many limiting activities like social distancing," said Rustan, a fisherman from the island of Tarakan, in June last year. "Fish is only sold at local markets. In fact, catch commodities are usually sold as export commodities. Fish prices have fallen by almost 90 per cent from the normal prices. Fisherfolk have gone through this in the past three months, from March to May. In addition, the social assistance programmes planned by the government are not evenly distributed. Out of 1,000 people consisting of fishing labourers, fisherfolk, seaweed farmers and others, only 300 people got help."

In East Java, one way fishers chose to curtail the spread of the pandemic was to reduce the number of crew on each boat. It was also a way to reduce costs of operating at sea.

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entry and exit points of the country: ports, airports and national land border posts. Panic ensued almost immediately. Lockdowns, restrictions on movement and reduction in number of workers meant an economic slowdown like the rest of the world.

As the rate of infections kept rising, the country's president, Joko Widodo, announced a food deficit in a number of regions of the country. The fisheries sector, already reeling under restrictions on movement and lack of adequate planning for transport, was hit hard. To compound matters, the president made an additional, ill-advised statement on the lack of scientific evidence on fish improving immunity. For a country that had anyway shifted to eating instant food in the midst of the pandemic, such

This article is by **Marthin Hadiwinata** ([hadiwinata.ahmad@gmail.com](mailto:hadiwinata.ahmad@gmail.com)), Executive Director, The Marine and Ecology Institute, Indonesia



Fishers in Batubara, North Sumatra, Indonesia selling clamshells in the market. Fisher families began pawning possessions to make ends meet and these practices were adopted only in times of famine earlier

Even as fishing continued in one way or another, fish prices plummeted. Fish that went for Indonesian Rupiah (IDR) 250 before the pandemic was barely fetching half that value in the market during the pandemic. Fishermen were salvaging what they could just to buy back fuel oil. Moreover, in certain areas like East Java, fisherfolk went to sea using loan capital from investors—the skippers. They sold their catch to the investor as a form of instalment or return on capital.

Fisher families began pawning possessions to make ends meet. These practices were adopted only in times of famine. The only difference was that in times of famine earlier, many fisherfolk sought, and often received, alternative employment as construction labourers or repair workers. The pandemic changed that, leaving them stuck at home, with nothing to do and no way out.

Domestic consumption wasn't the only segment affected. Many countries imposed strict regulations on the movement of goods to places outside during the pandemic; some of these had been destinations of exports or import for Indonesia. Export prices for fish

dropped by 50 per cent. According to the Central Statistics Agency, Indonesia's exports in May 2020 were US\$10.53 bn, a decrease of almost 29 per cent compared to the last year. Cumulatively, Indonesia's export value from January to May 2020 was at US\$64.46 bn, a decrease of almost 6 per cent compared to the same period in 2019.

### Quality improvement

Despite these dropping numbers, the Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries said that exports in the fisheries sector recorded an increase of 6.9 per cent in the first semester of 2020. Unfortunately, the news was tempered by the fact that the cost of fish processing and raw material standards rose, making it tougher on fishermen to operate in the ways of the past. The ministry asked fishers to improve the quality of produce to keep the demand up, but failed to provide them with solutions to counter the outflow of income due to higher standards being put in place regarding production itself.

### Impact of government interventions

In a special effort to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 on the fisheries sector, the

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government put forth an eight-point agenda. One of its first interventions was to purchase all fish catch without prejudice. The idea was to maintain prices during the pandemic through supportive purchase. Efforts were made to steward the various stakeholders of the sector—suppliers, retailers, fisheries associations—in the same direction.

Additionally, the government worked on curtailing the red tape for transport of fish cargo, and prepared cold storage units at ports to help aid the process. The preparation of cold storage units served as a way to ensure quality of fish for transport as well as to maintain stock in the off-season, especially during the months of Ramzan.

The government made some social interventions among fisher communities with a view to rehabilitate them. In most cases, however, the services never reached the people it was intended to

benefit; in many cases, such efforts were undone by the social distancing norms that had already been put in place. “We recently received social assistance of 5 kg of rice and several other foodstuffs from the government,” said a fisher in Medan. “We also stood in line for the collection system. Even though there’s a pandemic going around, how come we were ordered to queue up?”

Complaints also ranged around how the quality of assistance was not adequate. Enquiries revealed that fisherfolk felt they were insufficiently compensated for their daily needs. In Medan, for example, an average family has four to five members. The government provided each family with 5 kg of rice, 1 kg of sugar, eggs, and some packs of instant noodles. A rough estimation suggest the provisions would last them a maximum of two weeks.

Integrated social welfare data further showed that fisherfolk made up a mere 0.9 per cent of the total recipients of the social safety networks. According to the research by Zakariya Anwar and Wahyuni, about 90 per cent of fisherfolk in Indonesia—that is 14.58 mn out of a


total of 16.2 mn—live below the poverty line.

Civil society organizations as well as independent community interventions played a big part in rehabilitating fisherfolk during the pandemic. The Matahari Fisherfolk Network took fish directly from small-scale fisherfolk and fisheries to distribute for free to the wider community affected by the outbreak. The network also collaborated with religious institutions to raise donations and public assistance.

On Kodigareng island, the pandemic caused a drop of 50 per cent in fish prices. The area was struggling with catch even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak due to fishing grounds sustaining damage from sand mining. Fishermen’s wives took the initiative to add on to their family income by shredding mackerel for sale in the area.

In Bintan island, wives of fishermen started planting hydroponic vegetables in existing yards to supplement the family income. They planted mustard, lettuce, soup leaves and other vegetable crops and ended up selling the produce online as well as in community stalls.

#### Tight regulations

Despite the varied aid responses to the crisis, it was clear that little was done to help fisherfolk get back to sea and recover their business. Although many businesses opened up, fish markets, restaurants and hotels remained tightly regulated. Fish consumption is yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels. The government is going about its business as usual, denying scientific and database-driven approaches for policy. Chaos has ensured greater suffering for the work force. 

#### For more

##### Lack of Transparency

[https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue\\_83/4422\\_art\\_Sam\\_83\\_art01\\_%20Indonesia\\_Marthin.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_83/4422_art_Sam_83_art01_%20Indonesia_Marthin.pdf)

##### Reclaiming Rights

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##### Immediate impact of COVID-19 across tropical small-scale fishing communities

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0964569120303926>