

The Power of Self-reliance

To strengthened the self-governance capacity of participating co-operatives, a programme points to novel pathways

A group of organizations joined hands in 2015 to find ways to strengthen Mexico's small-scale fisheries (SSF) subsector, believing that organization and collective work are key to responsible resource management. The SSF subsector was represented by the Mexican Confederation of Fishing Co-operatives, partnered by the civil society organizations (CSOs), represented by the La Sociedad de Historia Natural Niparaja

strengthen organizations within the sector; the fishers chose one, training, as a priority. As a result, in partnership with Duke University and Niparaja, the National Programme for Strengthening Fisheries Organizations (PNFOP) was developed between 2020 and 2021.

The initial stages involved defining the programme structure and roles of each of the organizations in the collaboration, the objectives and expectations for change, planning a methodology for the selection of co-operatives, designing the content and format of teaching sessions, and outlining the logistics of implementing them in rural and isolated areas in Mexico.

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Learning how to implement

In 2022 began the implementation of the first pilot programme to facilitate the development of greater functionality in six co-operatives belonging to three federations located in the states of Baja California Sur, Chiapas and Yucatan. Co-operatives and federations chose to participate in the programme at the invitation of the National Confederation of Fishing Co-operatives. The pilot programme engaged fishers in these organizations to co-create improvement plans, based on identified needs, having provided them with tools and training to address those needs while also offering constant troubleshooting support.

One team member who functioned as the community liaison was based in the locality, and was responsible for providing fishers with feedback, advice and overall support throughout the 12-month duration of the intervention. The programme's aim was to ensure that the participating co-operatives complete their collective objectives as identified in their own self-improvement plans. In the process, it was hoped, they would learn techniques and approaches

and Community and Biodiversity. They were joined by members of the academic sector, represented by the Duke University. The collaboration aimed to understand the factors that contribute to make a Mexican co-operative practicably functional.

Towards this end, in 2017 the partners designed and carried out a National Diagnostic study of Fishing Organizations (DNOP). This delineated the factors that contribute to the functionality of 41 federations and 199 co-operatives in six regions of Mexico.

According to the results of the study, co-operatives with high functionality had the capacity to create alliances with other organizations (for example, other producer organizations, CSOs or the government), displayed greater internal administrative capacity for self-governance and monitoring of internal rules and commitments, and also demonstrated external capacity to comply with requirements and processes needed by the State and the markets.

Based on these results, the collaborators designed strategies to

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Map of Mexico showing the three States participating in the first pilot of the programme. In 2022 began the implementation of the first pilot programme to facilitate the development of greater functionality in six co-operatives located in three states

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to work together to collectively manage their resources in a more responsible manner and, overall, improve their self-governance capabilities.

The self-improvement plan

In order to measure any potential change in their self-governance capabilities the monitoring and evaluation team carried out an initial assessment of the self-governance conditions of the participating co-operatives. This process also allowed the programme to be adapted to their needs. The same assessment was conducted at the end of the programme. The evaluation process was described to participants at the beginning and all results were shared with the co-operatives at the end.

After the presentation of the initial results, a workshop was held to identify, together with fishers, their collective priorities, and co-create a personalized self-improvement plan. This plan served as a roadmap of actions required to address some of their collectively identified concerns and challenges, and a way to assess whether they were achieving them or not.

The details on some aspects of the co-training process, and the importance of providing on-site support and accompaniment throughout the duration of the project, are hereunder:

Co-training process

A group of carefully selected trainers provided 28 courses over nine months, with a total of 50 hours of training, distributed over four weekly sessions, to all members of the participating fishing co-operatives. Training sessions included all members of the co-operative (and not just members in leadership positions) since it was felt that generating changes at the organizational level requires the participation of most of the individuals who make up the organization.

The full suite of programmes included topics such as communication, leadership, co-operatives, administration, fisheries management and commercialization. However, the courses were adapted to the specific needs of each co-operative, based on, for example, their geographic area, fishing resources, level of functionality, age of participants, schooling and

literacy abilities, and other available resources. The main challenge was to maintain the interest and engagement of participants with low levels of schooling who were not used to participating in workshops, and who had to cope with very demanding work schedules and responsibilities at home.

On-site community liaison

For approximately one year, the community liaison from each state worked closely with two co-operatives. In other words, there were three community liaisons, one in each state. On-site and continuous support was vital to create and maintain momentum throughout the development of the co-operatives' plan for self-improvement. The community liaison's responsibility was to link the programme with the co-operatives while facilitating, troubleshooting, guiding and providing whatever was needed to support the programme to assist the co-operatives to achieve their objectives. The community liaison's role was not to do the work for the co-operative, but to facilitate the initiation of collective action when needed. The importance of creating practices of self-reliance and not dependence on the project hinged on the community liaison's personal ability to navigate this delicate balance between providing support and creating dependence. This was particularly important since at the end of the programme the self-improvement plan would be adapted and expanded into an ongoing work plan for the co-operative to be implemented by the fishers themselves, without a community liaison.

How to measure change?

Conducting an initial assessment of the status of co-operatives was necessary to understand whether the training and overall approach was effective or could be improved. For the six co-operatives in the programme, a team, led by collaborators from Duke University, evaluated them before, during and at the end of their participation in the programme. More than 500 surveys were conducted along with 36 focus groups and several interviews with members of the participating co-operatives and federations (including a control group).

During the implementation of the training, participant observation was carried out, measuring, among other things, the time and resources invested by the co-operatives during their participation in the programme.

Changes after one year

The exit evaluations of the co-operatives showed increases in the level of functionality in three of the six participating co-operatives, compared to their initial evaluation. Five co-operatives expressed increased confidence in their future capacity for self-governance. However, only three co-operatives increased their interest in understanding and solving their internal problems. One year after their participation in the programme, the two co-operatives with the most notable changes in their functionality had improved the marketing of their products, changed their internal administration, and formed new alliances with other organizations from the public and private sectors. These two co-operatives also had higher participation and attendance during training sessions throughout the entire year of the programme.

We also observed that most changes came from younger co-operatives with low levels of functionality. More time is needed to see changes in more mature co-operatives with higher baseline levels of functionality, as they have more ambitious goals or require deeper or more complex changes in their work culture.

The learning

Overall, the results showed that the programme was able to generate short-term changes that strengthened the self-governance capacity of the participating co-operatives. Whether they were able to generate change or not seems to have depended largely on their initially sustained level of commitment to participation and their initial level of functionality. There were other factors involved such as support from their own fishing federation leaders, and the close accompaniment of the liaisons that also influenced the outcomes of this process. However, the durability of the project, once it ends, remains to be seen.

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Member of the Jaiberos de la Gloria Cooperative located in the state of Chiapas. At the end of the programme this cooperative was able to formalize the commercialization of its fishery products


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Some challenges were identified that probably limited the co-operatives' investment of time in this initiative, such as the inability to generate collective interest among co-operative members, lack of sufficient attendance of members in large co-operatives, resistance to changing deeply-rooted habits and ways of working, as well as the ingrained political culture of receiving material support in exchange for participating in capacity-building activities. The practice of receiving material support has been historically promoted by local, provincial and federal authorities.

Several questions remain, such as how long should the community liaison remain in the locality? Will co-operatives be able to maintain collective action and implement changes that will eventually translate into responsible and sustainable management of resources in the long term? In order to find answers to these questions changes must be monitored over time.

Finally, as a partnership among the fishers, the academia and the civil

society, all with different worldviews, collaborators constantly face the challenge of how to collectively build a better and more productive dialogue that leads the group to reach consensus agreements for the benefit of fishing co-operatives and the entire sector. Stock-taking of these and other issues is under way, as also the work on implementing a second pilot, as part of learning what works and what can be improved within the programme.

This time around the programme will work with nine co-operatives located in two regions of Mexico. In each region, the co-operatives will be characterized by their sharing a common fishing area with all the other participating co-operatives. It will be monitored whether they can learn from one another. This second pilot will end in 2025. At the same time, work is ongoing to develop medium-to long-term monitoring measures for the co-operatives from the first pilot. The collaborators will continue to learn from their efforts. 

For more

Collaboration strengthens Mexican fisheries

<https://rethink.earth/collaboration-strengthens-mexican-fisheries/>

Accounting for existing tenure and rights over marine and freshwater systems

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s44183-024-00084-4>

Confederación Mexicana de Cooperativas Pesqueras y Acuícolas SC de RL de CV

https://www.conapesca.gob.mx/wb/cona/confederacion_mexicana_cooperativas_pesqu_acuicola

Diagnóstico Nacional de Organizaciones Pesqueras

https://issuu.com/niparajaac/docs/npj_dnop_folleto_web

National Diagnostic of Fishing Organizations: Summary of Organizational Results

<https://sites.nicholas.duke.edu/xavierbasurto/files/2020/06/Folleto-NPJ-DNOP-English-compressed.pdf>