

# Who benefits? Struggling with diversity and power dynamics in Sisal, Mexico



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Sisal was the main port of the Yucatan State, Mexico, during the boom of the *'henequén'* industry (*Agave fourcroydes*) 1807-1871. Today, most of the fishers in Sisal are either former *henequén* workers or descendants of *henequén* growing workers who apply a range of fishing gears in harvest and post-harvest activities. Around 40% of fishers are locals and the rest commute daily from nearby municipalities. Forced by the lack of employment, some fishers have come from other states. While local catches are diverse, octopus (*Octopus maya*) is considered the backbone of the fishery, contributing to about half of the total catch.

The small-scale fisheries (SSF) in Sisal are managed by a centralized, top-down governance imposed by the federal government. The established mechanisms are mostly driven by power relationships that lead to corruption. Concerns such as resource exploitation, monopolization, and conflicts over fishing grounds among nearby fishing communities and within Sisal, create serious governance challenges. This, together with the weak capacity of the governing system and the poor quality of interactions, seriously hinders the governance effectiveness.

Photo: *Sisal fishing port, Yucatan, Mexico. 2018* ©Alicia Saldaña Millan

Location:  
Sisal, Yucatan, Mexico

Ecosystem type:  
Marine

Main gear:  
Gillnet, harpoon, hook & line, jimbas

Target species:  
Octopus, grouper, yellowtail snapper, Sea cucumber, Lane snapper, Hogfish

Vessel type:  
Fiberglass Wooden (alijos)

No. of small-scale fishing vessels:  
1302

No. of small-scale fishers:  
942

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## Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- **Market**
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- Environmental
- COVID-19 related
- **Other: marginalization of women in SSF, from capacity building programs and access to decision-making**

Small-scale fishers in Sisal have a marginal political power at the state level. These are the main injustice and inequity issues observed in the community at the time of the study (2018):

- At the federal level, subsidy programs to improve different aspects of the fishing fleet and the fishing people's livelihoods (e.g., modernization of vessels and engines, fishing fuel) are only allocated to 'legal and organized' fishers who belong to a fishing cooperative, marginalizing those fishers that lack fishing permits or work independently, leaving them in a disadvantaged position. It is not uncommon for the subsidy programs to be mostly allocated to the elites or the more powerful fishers with close relationships to other stakeholders or those who sit on local committees.
- Government initiatives tend to predominantly focus on fishers at sea and have failed to incorporate women involved in post-harvest activities into capacity building programs. There is still a lack of support and recognition for the important part women play in the value chain, leaving them in a marginalized position.
- SSF are dominated by permit-holders, a local governing actors that provide economic loans and fishing equipment to fishers. Permit-holders are well positioned in social networks, since they possess economic capital, vessels, storage infrastructure, transportation means, and have close relationships with other governing actors. This leaves fishing people with little or no bargaining power with respect to landing prices. As a result, prices are controlled by the permit-holders who monopolize the market. In addition, these actors are often given priority in decision-making, leaving local and less powerful fishers with a lack of first-hand information.

### Definition of small-scale fisheries (DOF 2000 - Official Journal of the Federation)

Artisanal or small-scale fisheries are defined as the activity of extraction of aquatic resources, carried out with small and undecked vessels; without powered machines to aid fishing operations; with the use of ice for the preservation of the product; and with a time autonomy of maximum 3-5 days. This activity is performed in inland waters, protected and oceanic waters up to three nautical miles from the coast.

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## Dealing with justice

Although scattered over space and time, the government does implement monitoring and surveillance in the region to address concerns related to over-exploitation and illegal trade of resources. However, apparently nothing has been done to address social concerns, apart from the implementation of subsidy programs which have often been inadequate. Programs such as the grouper closed-season subsidy, capacity building, and technological enhancement aim at supporting fishers to cope with difficult times (e.g., when fishing operations are restricted by institutional/environmental pressures) or improve their livelihoods. Yet, these initiatives often do not result in desired outcomes. Power relationships tend to favour elites. Hopes are high that the new federal government, which seeks to provide special attention to SSF, will correct the existing inequality. Subsidies programs and initiatives, according to the fisheries authorities, will be allocated directly to the fishers instead of to organizations in order to avoid corruption.

Scholars have addressed concerns of the fishing people in Yucatan, Mexico. Studies such as Salas et al. (2011) and author's own master's thesis have identified issues that make people vulnerable, hoping that this will offer sound advice for policy interventions to ameliorate such vulnerability. Additionally, other stakeholders such as Civil Society Organizations in Mexico have played an important role in fisheries management. Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI), for instance, has made efforts to address people's concerns related to tenure rights and promote small-scale fishing women's rights and opportunities in different regions of Mexico.

### References:

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### How to cite

Saldaña, A., Chuenpagdee, R., Salas, S. (2020). Who benefits? Struggling with diversity and power dynamics in Sisal, Mexico. In: Kerezi, V., Pietruszka, D.K., & Chuenpagdee, R. (Eds.) *Blue Justice For Small-Scale Fisheries: A Global Scan*. TBTI Global Publication Series, St. John's, NL, Canada.