

## “ Certification is not an end in itself ”

In our no 3/2015 issue, we presented a project run by the WWF on sustainable tuna fisheries in the Philippines. The project was aiming for Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification for the yellowfin handline fisheries in the project sites. Last month, on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, a group of small-scale tuna fishers and tuna processor-exporters in the country were certified. A brief assessment by WWF Programme Manager Joann P. Binondo.

**Ms Binondo, the MSC certification is the latest development in a decade-long fisheries improvement project being run with handline tuna fishers. What has changed since the project started ten years ago?**

When we started the project in 2011, there were gaps in the knowledge of local tuna fishers with regard to environmental conservation and sustainable fishing practices. They also lacked political organisation. Through our work, though, we were able to facilitate the organisation of 21 Municipal Tuna Fishers Associations and two Fisher Federations, one for Lagonoy Gulf and another covering Mindoro Strait. Prior to our work, differences in priorities had caused much mistrust amongst the different stakeholders in the tuna supply chain. But through the alliances we helped them forge, they have been able to work past these differences in pursuit of MSC certification, and the larger goal of sustainable fisheries.

Much was also lacking in the management of the Mindoro Strait and Lagonoy Gulf fisheries when we began our work. Without a management plan to refer to, and with small-scale fishers kept out of governance of their very own fisheries, compliance with fisheries policies remained low, which resulted in a high incidence of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, or IUUF. Now, however, tuna fishers are strongly represented in their local fisheries management councils, with their elected leaders making recommendations to the policies that manage the conservation of the marine resources they rely on.

Moreover, our partner fishers once depended on local traders and consolidators to finance their livelihoods and the needs of their families. Without

alternative sources of income and vulnerable to predatory business practices, they found themselves in a cycle of debt, without the capacity to negotiate better prices for their catches. Now, however, they have come up with ways to augment their livelihoods through social enterprises. They have also been able to pool capital within their community through Group Savings and Loan Associations, which has helped them gain more leverage for themselves and their communities within the supply chain.

So, by coming together, organising themselves and lobbying for their rights and better representation, and with the support of partners who have helped bridge whatever gaps in knowledge and capital that may have once existed, our partner fishers are in a better position to work towards environmental sustainability for their fisheries. MSC certification is an important milestone on this path.

**I suppose this was not an easy process ...**

There are many different parties within the tuna supply chain, each of whom holds varying degrees of trust and confidence in the other stakeholders. It took us several years just to get representatives of each party onto a single dialogue platform. As we gathered the stakeholders, we also had to level the playing field such that the fishers themselves could stand on their own in these conversations. We worked with our partner fishers to build their confidence towards articulating the issues that concerned them, so that they wouldn't be intimidated by those further upstream in the tuna supply chain. Bringing together traders and processors at the negotiating table was another matter. They see themselves as competitors and were cautious when it came to disclosing important catch data and trade information – all needed for the effective management of these fisheries.

And the geographic behaviour of tuna across its lifespan was a challenge of its own. Tuna are highly migratory; managing their species requires agreements and organisation beyond borders, on a trans-national scale, which we have tried to achieve along with the other nations of the Western Central Pacific. Harmonising our conservation management measures as one region has been difficult. The stakeholders' consultation process has proven to be tedious given the wide range of parties involved, spanning the entire Western Central Pacific. However, it is necessary for us to gain consensus for the representative management plans we have been preparing.

**How do fishers and fishing communities benefit from the MSC certification?**

The certification process has opened our partner fishers the opportunity of being recognised by various sectors of the tuna industry that they had never before interacted with, building their political clout in areas such as national government. The MSC Certificate itself will also give them access to markets concerned with quality and sustainability, and has empowered them towards having a greater influence in tuna supply chains.

**So what is next?**

While the fishers may have earned MSC certification, maintaining it is another matter. The Philippine Tuna Handline Partnership will continue working among them to maintain their MSC certificate, and will continue to collaborate with the other stakeholders in the tuna supply chain. Their next goals are to ensure that their catches are being fairly and transparently priced, through the implementation of a traceability system that spans the breadth of the tuna supply chain, from hook to cook. The client group also aims to be represented in fisheries councils at national level, in order to influence national and regional policy. What our partner fishers have stressed and what we fully agree with is that certification is not an end in itself, but rather an important milestone in their ongoing journey towards environmental sustainability.



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Full-length interview: [www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)