

Challenges in minimizing illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing of small-scale fisheries sector in Thailand

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Summary

The sustainability of small-scale fisheries is highly linked on abundance of fishery resources and integrity of marine and coastal ecosystems. It is globally recognized that illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) depletes fisheries resources, destroys important habitats, and further threaten to coastal fishing communities. In a context of small-scale fisheries, illegal fishing activities such as blast fishing and cyanide fishing etc. could be found in some areas especially in coral reefs and pinnacles. Some destructive fishing gears with a very small-mesh net are also modified and used without having proper measures and regulations. Currently, large number of small-scale fishing vessels have not been registered yet, while only small portion of small-scale fishers have official licenses to fish. Besides, catch data and other statistics as well as the understandings on ecological impacts from this sector poorly reported. However, relevant agencies have already started implementing some activities, for examples, the registration of small-scale fishing vessel and fishing licenses. Besides, the Fisheries Act B.E 2558 (2015) and Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (No.2), B.E 2558 (2015) have also been official enforced in order to effectively support the management of IUU fishing in Thailand. Importantly, to overcome those challenges, collaboration among small-scale fishers, policy makers, and other stakeholders is highly required.

Introduction

Derived from the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IPOA-IUU) was initiated as a voluntary instrument that applies to all States and entities and to all fishers with the objectives and principles and the implementation of measures to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing (FAO, 2001). The issues of IUU fishing is also stated in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries reflecting the high concerns on monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to deter, prevent and eliminate all forms of illegal and/or destructive fishing practices that could have a negative effects on marine and inland ecosystems (FAO, 2015). Several organizations, especially European Union (EU) has developed its own implementation plans and regulations to regulate, prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing among the member states. The EU regulations were also applied to the fishery products that imported from the third-party countries (EU 2008). Those countries wishing to export fisheries products to the EU countries need to follow the EU standards and regulations, otherwise exporting those the IUU fisheries products to the EU member countries could be banned. Like other countries, Thailand is one of the important countries that have exported fisheries products (mostly shrimps, squids, and fish) to EU; it was reported that 167,978.52 of fisheries product were exported to EU with a total value of 27,688.91 million baht in 2004 (Department of Fisheries, 2015). However, Thailand has now facing with the warning as a "Yellow card" of EU over the IUU fisheries products. The EU commissioner are requiring Thailand to take more actions on resolving the IUU fishing practices. Consequently, various regulations and policies combatting IUU fishing have been announced by Thailand government inevitably affecting to large number of Thai fishers, especially the large-scale fishers. Yet, the the impacts of the implementation on small-scale fisheries are still questionable. This research could provide a broad-view of IUU fishing in small-scale fisheries in terms of the impacts of the current regulations and policies combatting IUU fishing as well as the considerations to govern the IUU fishing in this sector.

Methods

In this study, we described current situation of IUU fishing, and analyze how the national policies and rules affecting small-scale fisheries sector in Thailand as well as to possible options for managing IUU fishing. In-depth interview and focus group discussion of key small-scale fishers, fisheries experts, and officials were conducted.

Results and Discussion

The roles of small-scale fisheries are very prominent in Thailand, given that about 90 percent of fishing households are small-scale (Juntarashote and Chuenpagdee, 2011). Officially, small-scale fisheries refer to fishing without a vessel, fishing with a non-powered vessel, or with an outboard engine powered vessel. The inboard engine vessels holding capacity of less than five gross tonnages are also considered small-scale. In all cases, fishing involves uses of simple gears such as gillnets, traps, set bag nets, push nets, lift nets, hooks and lines (Pimoljinda 2002). The fishing is usually operated within 3 nautical miles from the shores. Illegal fishing activities (such as blast fishing and cyanide fishing) could be found in some areas especially in coral reefs and pinnacles. Some destructive fishing gears with a very small-mesh net are also modified and used without having proper measures and regulations. Since the EU's recommendations on IUU fishing in Thailand, the government has established the Command Center for Combating Illegal Fishing (CCCIF) to lead and coordinate relevant organizations in resolving the IUU fishing. Relevant regulations have been developed, especially, the Fisheries Act B.E 2558 (2015) and Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (No.2), B.E 2558 (2015). Besides, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has declared an order that bans the use of some fishing gears including push net with motorized vessels, set bag nets, surrounding nets with the stretched mesh size of less than 2.5 cm operating during night time, multiple collapsible traps, trawl nets with the stretched mesh size of the bottom net of less than 5.0 cm.

Most small-scale fishers agreed on combatting illegal fishing but they are still concerning about some regulations that may generate the additional costs such as the registration fee of the fishing vessels and fishing license which might affect to small-scale fishers who are mostly poor. They added that the government should provide some helps and support to small-scale fishers. Since fishing vessels and gears of small-scale fisheries are quite different from the large-scale fisheries, the regulations on fishing vessel registration and licensing should be more specific and conformed with the livelihoods of small-scale fisheries. Of the fishery experts and ecologists' points of views, database management of this sector, especially the fishing vessel statistics and catch data, should be highly developed. The research on ecological impacts from this sector should be supported. The establishment of appropriate mesh size of nets should also be highly considered in order to avoid catching juvenile fish, as well as the development of bycatch reduction devices. In addition, the community-based management with collaboration among small-scale fishers, policy makers, and other stakeholders is highly recommended. Importantly, establishing any regulations and policies must be based on an integration of scientific information with the concerns of socio-economic impacts.

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