



FACTSHEET

HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES AT SEA

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Violations of human rights at sea, including forced labour, child labour, slavery, and crew welfare are global in nature and are often closely associated with transshipment operations and other illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices. This is because longline fishing vessels spend months or even years at sea, allowing them to avoid returning to port while continuing to operate in fishing and transshipping of catches to carrier vessels, out of sight and unnoticed.

This situation allows IUU fishing activities to thrive at sea and impede conservation and management efforts in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) region resulting in overfishing, and contributes to other criminal offences such as trafficking in people, drugs and weapons through laundering and lack of oversight by national authorities on the high seas. Similarly, in the Pacific context fishing crew working on longline fishing vessels are vulnerable to trafficking, abuse, violence and other crimes that violate fundamental human rights. Fisheries observers face similar problems while serving on longline fishing vessels, with additional threats due to the nature of their oversight role. Pacific Island countries (PICs) national laws covering employment or working conditions relating to fishing vessels are not well structured as their respective national fisheries laws.

Despite this, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) members are taking steps to address human rights abuses on fishing vessels operating in respective exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Regional cooperation and implementing crewing standards and fisheries observer safety on FFA's Harmonised Minimum Terms and Conditions (HMTCs) are essential between PICs to effectively address labour and human rights issues on all fishing vessels that operate within FFA waters. FFA members have been instrumental in the adoption of a non-binding resolution on minimum labour standards for crew at the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) level. FFA members are also involved in the discussions and development of a binding WCPFC measure to promote safe and decent employment for crew on fishing vessels.

RECOMMENDED OPTIONS TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES AT SEA

- Build and enhance a shared understanding of the problem at the international, regional and national level
- Impose stringent sanctions upon countries that engage in criminal activities
- Increase electronic monitoring (video surveillance) onboard fishing vessels to better ensure acceptable worker conditions and penalising offenders that do not comply with these measures
- Incentivise the purchase of fish or fish products from responsible fishing companies that can prove that they are not involved in IUU fishing practices
- Impose strict penalties and effective cross-border law enforcement cooperation can result in significant reductions in human rights violations committed on the high seas and hopefully, strengthen responsible fishing practices worldwide

It is essential that enhanced transparency of fishing operations and traceability of fish or fisheries products be mandatory to address and mitigate the issues relating to IUU fishing, human trafficking, forced labour, and other criminal activities, resulting in more responsible managed fisheries globally. Although IUU fishing and organised crime undermines global efforts to promote sustainable developments as well as a sustainable ocean economy, the fact remains more effective and coordinated enforcement is required at the national, regional and international level.



(Source: © Ocean Panel, 2022)

CURRENT STEPS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE

- Improve job prospects and safety at sea for fisheries observers during the current pandemic was part of the key focus during the 114th Forum Fisheries Committee (FFC114) meeting organised by FFA in 2020
- Fiji, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea and Kiribati are the six FFA member countries that have signed the Torremolinos Declaration, in promoting the Cape Town Agreement to enter into force by 2020. The Agreement covers safety standards for crew and observers on fishing vessels
- The FFA member country Ministers adopted amendments to the HMTCs on human rights and labour during the 16th Annual Session of the Forum Fisheries Committee Ministers Meeting (FFCMIN16) organised by FFA in 2019
- The WCPFC adopted a non-binding resolution on labour standards in 2018 for crew on fishing vessels. Due to reports on number of deaths of crew and observers, work is in progress that a binding Conservation Management Measures on labour standards for crew on fishing vessels be developed prior to WCPFC18. This work remains a priority for FFA members countries
- The International Seafood Sustainability Foundation (ISSF) called for a new conservation measure on social and labour standards that will be required for all of its members, involving major tuna processors, traders and marketers
- The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) continues to advance and debate its work to develop human rights guidelines
- Since 2018 the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) has introduced requirements that all MSC certified fisheries report on the actions they take to address forced and child labour, and combatting IUU fishing

WWF is working with these partners to address issues on IUU Fishing in the WCPFC.



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