

Seeking blue justice through collective effort: a case study in the Gulf of California, Mexico



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Puerto Libertad is a fishing village in the Midriff Islands Region, Gulf of California, in the state of Sonora, Mexico. In this small coastal community of 2,782 inhabitants, there are two main employment sectors: the thermoelectric plant established in the 1980s and small-scale fisheries. Approximately 295 fishers, both men and women, harvest grouper, sharks, rays, clams, and others 37 other species. The fishing grounds constitute the area of 14,027 km² (Moreno-Baez et al. 2010). Artisanal fishing is organized through seven cooperatives, five individual permit holders, and forty-five women that clean the fish that is landed. CONAPESCA, the official Mexican fisheries agency, is in charge of fisheries management; it sets the rules and grants the official access to marine resources through permits and concessions. However, the rules are poorly enforced due to the lack of government presence in the region.

In 2011 the Fishing and Aquaculture Committee of Puerto Libertad was created to promote sustainable fishing. This self-organizing group of cooperatives, permit holders, and free fishers follows its own set of informal rules (e.g., no fishing without authorization).

Photo: "Deschurupadoras of Puerto Libertad". Puerto Libertad Sonora, Mexico. 2019. ©Gerardo Hernández

Location:
Puerto Libertad, Sonora, Mexico

Ecosystem type:
Marine

Main gear:
Dredge, gleaning, harpoon, hook and line, surrounding net, by hand

Target species:
clams, sharks, groupers, rays of 37
mains species, 25 of them targeted
species

Vessel type:
boats "pangas"

No. of small-scale fishing vessels:
112

No. of small-scale fishers:
295



Fisher Gabriel, a community leader, said: "This situation [solar power plant] has caused social problems in the community, such as alcoholism and violence, and neither the government nor private investors informed the community properly or consulted them. We have not seen the benefits of this project because the produced energy is not for us. We paid one of the most expensive electricity tariffs in the country."



Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- Economic
- **Market**
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- Regulatory
- **Procedural**
- Environmental
- COVID-19 related

Before the formation of the Fisheries Committee, Puerto Libertad fishers faced several problems, such as imbalanced power-dynamics with the industrial fleet, perilous work environment caused by the lack of decent labor conditions, and increased costs of operations.

The main justice issue concerns general corruption and excessive bureaucracy of CONAPESCA. Fishers are waiting up to eight years to receive their fishing permits, despite the efforts from the fishers' collective to change this. Delays in the renewal of permit cause loss of income as well as missed commercial opportunities for a cooperative to sell their product to gourmet restaurants and markets in Mexico City, and other cities in the country. The lack of fishing permits due to extreme delays, puts fishers in a situation to be extorted and excluded from subsidies, training, and other types of support, which leads to illegal fishing. Inequality and social injustice spark anger and frustration within the community.

Furthermore, the community is concerned about large-scale energy projects, based on renewable (solar energy) and "greener" fossil fuels developed in the area. The largest solar power plant in Latin America was built at Puerto Libertad lands, with 1,222,800 photovoltaic panels covering a space of 10km² (333 football fields) (Acciona, 2019). For the construction of this plant, 1300 workers were employed, many of them working in precarious conditions. Approximately 100 of them stayed in Puerto Libertad after the plant was finished. The total number of permanent jobs created is 38.

Also, the growing use of cheap imported natural gas from the fracking industry of United States has boosted the constructions of pipelines for its transport. There are talks of a possible marine pipeline passing through the fishing grounds and that an exclusion zone of 600 meters will be decreed. No information has yet been released to the public.

Definition of small-scale fisheries (Salas et al., 2007)

Activity generally practiced by small numbers of fishing crew, community-based, operating in nearshore areas, using low levels of technologies with limited capital investment, using multiple gears and fishing techniques.

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Dealing with justice

Fishers, organized around the Puerto Libertad Fisheries Committee, managed to improve their key fisheries elements. Thanks to their requests, the local office of CONAPESCA has re-opened, and with it, the process of obtaining permits has been simplified (e.g. the documents can now be locally validated before they are sent to federal offices).

Meanwhile, since 2010, COBI has been working in Puerto Libertad and has collaborated with fishers in many initiatives, such as the implementation of ecosystem approach into the management of artisanal fisheries and the establishment of a fishing refuge in 2017 (Espinosa-Romero et al. 2014).

In October of 2017, a transdisciplinary workshop was held in Puerto Libertad, Sonora. The team included members from COBI, the Center for Research and Advanced Studies of the National Polytechnic Institute (CINVESTAV), the College of the Southern Border (ECOSUR), PGR Consulting, and TBTI (Canada). The participants included eleven men and one woman from the Fisheries and Aquaculture Committee of Puerto Libertad.

The goal of this workshop was to present the transdisciplinary approach to the community and showcase how it can help to identify problems, particularly justice issues, their nature, and the possible solutions, which would consider a range of perspectives and take into account the context of the community and the Fishery Committee (Salas et al., 2018).

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