



International
Labour
Organization



► Reporting forced labour in commercial fishing



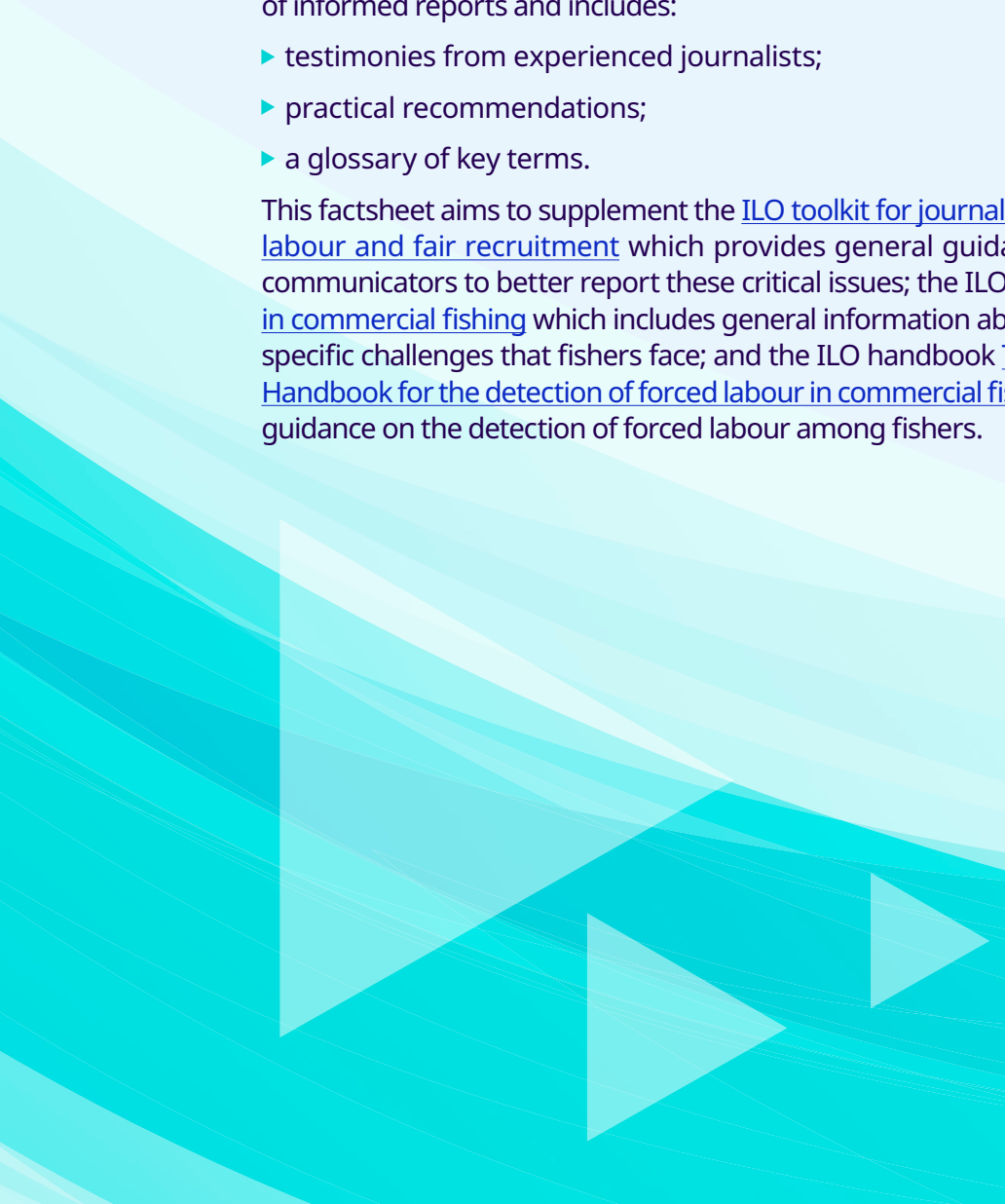
► Introduction

Acknowledging that journalists and communicators can play an important role in informing public opinion, exposing exploitative practices in the fishing industry, promoting international labour standards, and inciting business actors towards responsible and sustainable practices, the ILO establishes partnerships with media practitioners to help them better report on these issues.

This factsheet is intended to support journalists and communicators interested in developing stories addressing decent work deficits in the commercial fishing industry and the broader value chain. It provides concrete guidance to support the production of informed reports and includes:

- testimonies from experienced journalists;
- practical recommendations;
- a glossary of key terms.

This factsheet aims to supplement the [ILO toolkit for journalists: Reporting on forced labour and fair recruitment](#) which provides general guidance for journalists and communicators to better report these critical issues; the ILO factsheet [Forced labour in commercial fishing](#) which includes general information about the industry and the specific challenges that fishers face; and the ILO handbook [Towards freedom at sea: Handbook for the detection of forced labour in commercial fishing](#) which consolidates guidance on the detection of forced labour among fishers.



► Testimonies from journalists reporting on forced labour in fishing

► Ian Urbina

Ian Urbina worked for the New York Times as a staff reporter for 17 years, producing notably a series of articles about lawlessness at sea. In 2019, he founded The Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit journalism organization that produces investigative stories about human rights, environment, and labour concerns at sea.



Exploring forced labour issues in the fishing industry is a challenging effort. What would you say are some of the specific difficulties and what would be your advice to overcome them?

I.U.: The first challenge would be to convince an editor that this story is worth exploring. Whether you are a staff writer or a freelance, inside or outside an organization, you are pitching this story to an editor. And considering that stories about the oceans inherently have a higher barrier of access, one really needs to find convincing arguments on why a news outlet should run such a story.

“How does this situation in country A with fishing vessels from country B matter to my readers in country C? Does it tell something about global seafood consumption that might be of interest to my readers as consumers?”

Therefore, would you recommend looking for some overarching issues?

I.U.: Yes, I think it’s necessary to connect the reporting to some “meta-level” issues that will be of interest to readers: climate change, seafood consumption, global supply chains, conflict ... It is necessary to isolate those “meta-level” issues before going out to the editors.

In addition, it is important to show editors how such stories can bring something new into the discussion by providing a new angle to look at pressing issues – an angle, by the way, which can be very visual and can have a strong impact on the audience.

What are some of the other challenges you have identified?

I.U.: Fishing is quite a complex environment. You have many different stakeholders involved as well as those who work in the fishing industry: governments, international organizations, consumers, civil society actors, and so on. It is important to do some desk work beforehand to have a clear picture of the stakeholders’ map and see how different actors interact.

Specialized organizations such as the Global Fishing Watch, Human Rights at Sea or the Environmental Justice Foundation can help someone new to the topic navigate his or her way in this field. Dedicated centres or departments in universities might also prove useful. In the United States, Stanford University and the University of San Diego have such entities and this is the case in other countries as well. If there is no such entity, you can always search for a local scholar or researcher who has investigated the issue locally.

Time and financial resources are also an important constraint. There is not much funding available for such a specific issue and some reporting can involve quite a lot of expense. This might discourage some journalists from tackling such issues, especially freelancers, as they will have to take a lot of risks upfront. If time and money is a severe constraint, I would recommend looking for stories that can be done remotely, because not all the reporting necessarily has to be done on the water.

Looking at issues such as labour inspection or vocational training of fishers are examples of issues that can be done more easily, with limited time and money.



- Ian Urbina, “[Sea Slaves: The Human Misery that Feeds Pets and Livestock](#)”, *New York Times*, 27 July 2015.
- Ian Urbina, “[The Outlaw Ocean Project](#)”, website.
- Ian Urbina, “[Out on the High Seas, When News Happens No One Sees It](#)”, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 April 2021.

► Ana Santos

Ana P. Santos is an independent journalist based in Manila, Philippines. Her work focuses mainly on sexual reproductive health rights, gender issues and labour migration. As the Pulitzer Center's 2014 Persephone Miel fellow, Ana wrote about the hundreds of thousands of Filipino women who leave their children behind to work abroad as domestic workers in her report series, "Who Takes Care of Nanny's Children?". During the COVID-19 pandemic she wrote on the plight of stranded Filipino fishers.



Your project "Survival in the High Seas" focuses on Filipino fishers who are stuck at sea because of COVID-19 restrictions. How were you able to gather these testimonies?

A.S.: Filipinos in general and overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are active users of social media, especially Facebook. For many of them, these platforms are the easiest way to communicate with *their* families in their country of origin. Since I couldn't travel during lockdown, using social media to connect with sources was a natural thing to do.

To identify fishers on social media, I search for dedicated groups using keywords such as "sailors", "marines" or "seamen", since groups are often organized by profession. In the case of fishers, I've quickly come to understand that there are two types of groups: those who fish in territorial waters and those who fish on the high seas. In our culture, there is often more prestige associated with distant waters fishing as it offers more stability to the fishers.

In most cases, I would introduce myself directly within the group and present my query. In some instances, I needed an endorsement to be able to join the group, and in such cases I would seek the support of a labour rights group.

Once you have identified a fisher, will you reach out to him or her directly?

A.S.: In most cases, yes. There is little resistance in the context of the Philippines. I will also look for partners of fishers, within OFW family groups. This second-hand information can be valuable, and sometimes it is easier to get access to a fisher after having spoken to his or her partner.

For this project, I talked to 30 different sources to get the story and corroborate some of the claims. As we were talking about several months of unpaid wages, I wanted to make sure that the facts were right. And since I could not get on the boats myself and some people are not natural talkers, I needed to cast a wide net to be able to find relevant sources.

I also asked the sources to share audio and video material. Since most of the reporting is done remotely, having audiovisual material produced by the fishers adds an important layer to the story and offers the possibility for these fishers to have their voices heard, even for fishers who are very far away from their home.

You were also able to do some of the reporting from the Philippines, documenting the return of the stranded fishers.

A.S.: Most people consider that stories of stranded fishers end when the workers arrive home. I have also witnessed the same preconceived idea when reporting on kidnapped seamen once they are released. However, talking to these sources when they arrive in the Philippines, I have come to realize that the trauma often sticks with them for a long period of time. As journalists, we also must tell these stories of return and the difficult journey towards returning to a "normal life".



- Ana Santos, "Survival in the High Seas", *Pulitzer Center*, 10 September 2020.
- Ana Santos, "Ocean Lockdown: Filipino Seafarers Face Perils, Death at Sea", 23 October 2020.

► **Ian Yee, Philip Jacobson, and Basten Gokkon**

Ian Yee is a journalist, editor and producer based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He is the executive director of the Environmental Reporting Collective (ERC).

Philip Jacobson is a senior contributing editor for the non-profit environmental news site Mongabay.

Basten Gokkon is a Jakarta-based writer with interest in wildlife conservation, renewable energy efforts and indigenous peoples' empowerment.



Ian Yee



Philip Jacobson



Basten Gokkon

They were jointly involved in the ERC initiative Oceans Inc., a cross-border investigation into crimes in the global fishing industry, from the South China Sea to the Antarctic.

Ian Yee, you are the executive director of the ERC, why did you decide to investigate fishing?

I.Y.: The ERC runs one or two flagship projects each year with an interest in underreported stories. Fishing came quite naturally as a topic that is insufficiently present in the news. Considering the diversity of countries and languages involved, we thought that our model which relies on cross-border collaboration was particularly relevant. It helps news outlets cover complex stories across different regions and is financially efficient since each partner newsroom participates and alleviates the costs for the remaining partners.

Philip Jacobson, you were the coordinating editor of the article "Worked to Death" which focuses, within the Oceans Inc. series, on the abuse of migrant fishers. How did you carry out this investigation?

P.J.: We operated in a quite straightforward manner, looking for fishers who had worked for one fishing company that we had identified. We used different channels, relying on civil society organizations and social media to track down our first sources, searching for the name of the company and the name of the boats, asking fishers to refer us to their former colleagues.

For each fisher, we would run down all 11 ILO indicators of forced labour to see if we could characterize their experience as such. This proved to be difficult because the indicators, as defined, don't always apply clearly to work at sea. A fisher might give his passport to the captain for a practical reason; does that qualify as withholding of passports? Isolation is also a difficult indicator to assess considering the challenging environment of working on board a fishing vessel. In the end, it was difficult to make the claim that the fishers had been in forced labour, the situation was too ambiguous to take the risk of such an assertion. Therefore, we did not refer to forced labour, except through quoting from our sources, but we did describe the dire working conditions on the vessels.

The cooperation with other media outlets through ERC was critical considering the number of countries involved. The fishers were from Southeast Asia, had to quarantine for a time in the Republic of Korea, and worked for a Chinese company. They were recruited through a company in Fiji and captured fish destined for the Japanese market. The company had an Atlantic fleet with other countries involved such as Brazil or Senegal. Cooperation was key while gathering information and testimonies. It was also important for production and publication; colleagues helped in the illustration and translated the story to give it a broader reach.

Basten Gokkon, you collected testimonies from Indonesian fishers. What did you learn for this experience?

B.G.: Though I had written on fishers before, this was my first in-depth venture into the issue. I spoke with a dozen fishers, trying to understand their day-to-day experience and the difference between what they were promised and the reality. It took me a while to deconstruct myself to understand what life at sea entails. Fishers who leave for a long period of time do not necessarily have the same time frame as we have on land. Most of them are bound by a two-year contract and are working around the clock.

When I asked the sources if they felt they had been victims of forced labour, they said no, even though most workers were in a situation they could not pull out from. I think this has to do with the prestige associated with working abroad and the salaries which are higher in comparison to fishing locally.



► Environmental Reporting Collective (ERC), [Oceans Inc.](#), website.

► **Martha Mendoza**

Martha Mendoza is an Associated Press (AP) journalist, currently a member of AP's Global Investigative team. In 2016, along with fellow AP journalists Esther Htusan, Margie Mason, and Robin McDowell, she published "Seafood from Slaves" a series of reports on forced labour in the fishing industry after an 18-month investigation.



Looking back at your reporting into forced labour in the fishing industry, can you take us through some of the important aspects of your investigation?

M.M.: I live in California. Even though the reporting we did for this series was largely in Southeast Asia, my interest in the issue of forced labour in fishing started much closer to home. Going to the wharf in San Francisco, I noticed that workers from the Hawaiian fishing fleet – all of whom were from Indonesia – were not coming down from the vessels during their stay at the port. They seemed to be a bit lost, and this aroused my curiosity. Before trying to go on a complex international investigation, I would advise journalists to start locally and see what is happening in ports near to their location or to fishers within their community.

For our reporting, collaboration with our Burmese colleagues was critical, notably to be able to communicate with the fishers directly in the vernacular language. If that is not possible within the reporting staff, I strongly advise working with interpreters, even on the phone, to make sure the testimonies of the fishers are transcribed faithfully.

Lastly, I would say that two very important elements of this investigation were discretion and commitment. Discretion is fundamental when you work with vulnerable sources of information who, in this case, were quite far away from their country of origin. Commitment is also very important for this type of investigation where you are trying to connect labour practices in one region with consumption of seafood in another region. I sometimes see stories where journalists have done an excellent job at documenting specific labour abuses but have rushed to publication without necessarily investigating in which markets the products end up.

The supply chain dimension was critical in your reporting, is this how you were able to convince your editors?

M.M.: Getting editorial support for this type of story is an uphill battle. When you can tie the story of forced labour to your own community, it obviously becomes more relevant for editors. In the case of seafood, the supply chain dimension is very present since most countries

don't produce enough seafood for their own consumption and need to rely on large, often transnational, providers.

Are there interesting resources you recommend?

M.M.: Investigating a supply chain is not necessarily easy and reporters will need to develop skills in data mining. Resources exist to help journalists in this endeavour. In my reporting, I tend to rely on [Panjiva](#), a subscription-based website with import and export details on commercial shipments worldwide, and [Import Genius](#), a provider of business intelligence in the import-export industry.

Considering the importance of collaboration, I also recommend that journalists and student journalists have a look at the work of the [Global Reporting Centre](#) at the University of British Columbia. I have been a contributor to this programme which has a keen interest for global supply chains and has recently supported interesting investigation on the [fishmeal](#) industry.

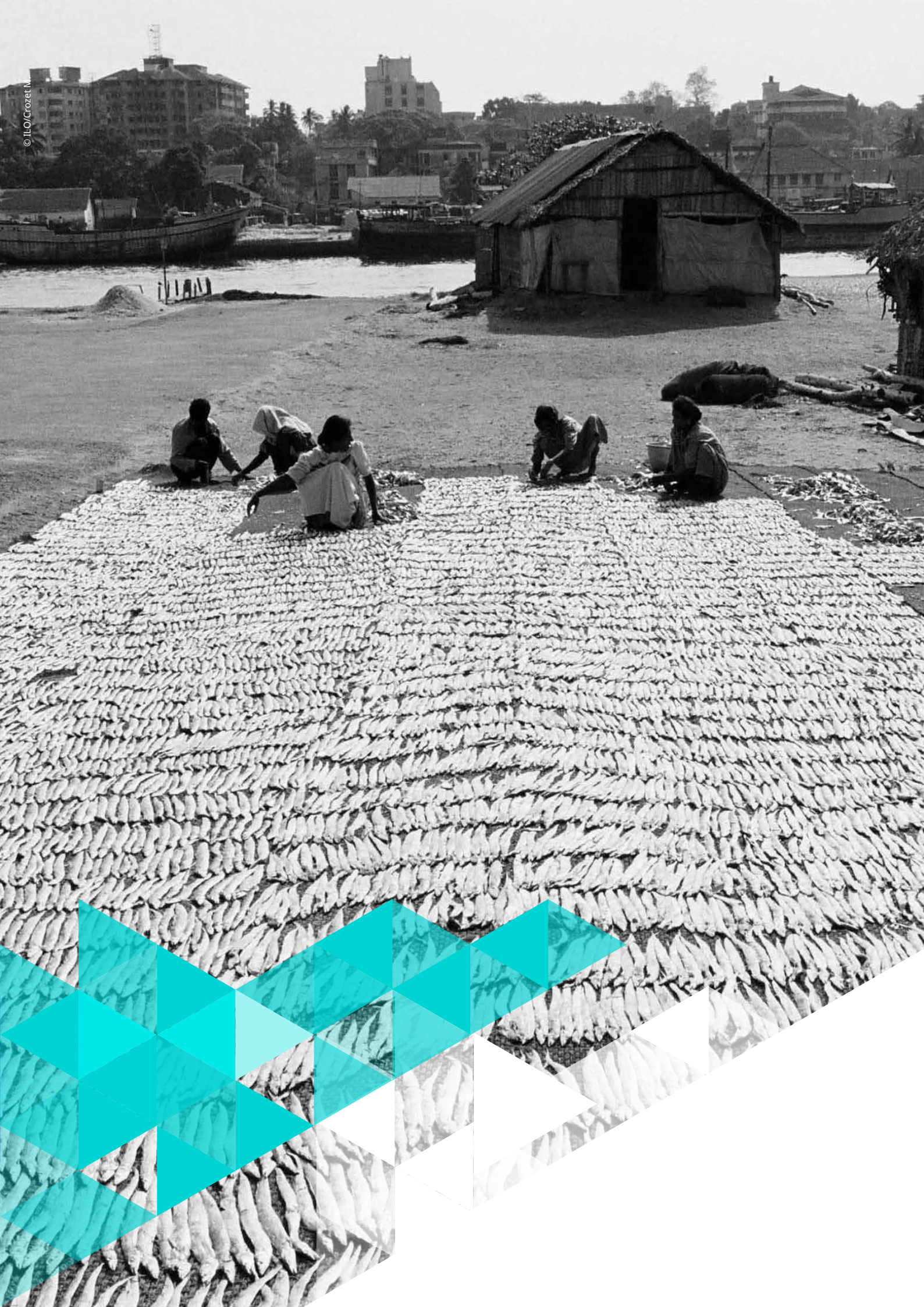
Your reporting helped free over 2,000 workers from situations of forced labour and labour exploitation. That must have been quite an emotional experience.

M.M.: Contributing through reporting to getting people out of forced labour is indeed something emotional. I remember one story from our investigation of a worker who had been trapped in exploitation for 22 years. Our team was there when he was reunited with his family, a very special moment.



► Associated Press (AP), "[Seafood from Slaves](#)", website.

► Martha Mendoza, "[Exposing Human Trafficking](#)", Global Investigative Journalism Network, YouTube, 12 March 2018.





► Practical recommendations

Reporting stories related to commercial fishing is not an easy task, particularly for journalists with limited prior experience. Reaching out to sectoral trade unions working in fishing might be a good starting point to understand the main challenges faced by fishers.

In addition to rigorous journalism techniques, good stories will require skills related to business, environment, labour or human rights. The following recommendations can help media professionals find the necessary support, resources and tools to bring their projects and ideas to fruition.

1. Explore all dimensions of decent work

When first exploring stories about fishers, journalists may want to focus on the lived experience of workers on board fishing vessels. For different reasons such as access or safety, this may prove difficult. Exploring other aspects of the labour experience, such as **recruitment** or **social reintegration**, can offer other interesting angles. **Labour inspection**, access to **social protection** or **support mechanisms for survivors** of abuse can be other angles worth exploring.

2. Engage with journalists in cross-border collaboration

A growing number of stories are being crafted by teams of journalists working transnationally through collaboration. This is the case of Oceans Inc. described in the testimony of Ian Yee, Basten Gokkon and Philip Jacobson. Several organizations offer support for cross-border journalism, as is the case with the [Arena Labour Network](#). The ILO has supported cross-border reporting projects, notably for student journalists, and organized a webinar on [cross-border labour migration reporting](#).

3. Tap into open-source information

“Open-source intelligence” (OSINT) reporting is particularly suitable when reporting labour in fisheries, given the global nature of the industry. For monitoring purposes, fishing vessels carry wireless transponders which provide real-time data. Using websites such as [VesselFinder](#), journalists can access the precise location of vessels and, in many cases, additional information on vessels such as the flag, recent port calls, vessel characteristics, and so on. In “[Tracking Illegal Fishing with Open Data](#)” (19 March 2021), Techjournalist gives a detailed analysis on how to harness the potential of OSINT.

4. Consider looking at the whole supply chain

Ian Urbina and Martha Mendoza point out in their testimonies the importance of placing stories about the working conditions of fishers in a broader perspective, considering the full value chain of fish-based products. The Global Investigative Journalism Network has gathered guidance on the matter (“[Investigating Supply Chains](#)”, 15 August 2018) and updates a [supply chain database](#) listing relevant tools and organizations.

When using a supply chain lens, journalists may be interested in scrutinizing how companies who source fish or fish-based products in their activities ensure that their procurement practices are compliant with labour rights standards. One interesting example at the sectoral level is the [Hospitality Alliance for Responsible Procurement](#), launched by hospitality groups and global purchasing organizations. In announcing this partnership, partners identified “responsible fishing” as an issue of concern.

5. Look for support through grants or networks

Marine-related reporting is receiving increasing attention with the growing awareness on climate change adaptation and biodiversity protection. With regard to fishing, this has led to several journalism projects, usually with a strong focus on the environmental dimension. Some projects have a dedicated interest on fishers’ labour conditions, offering grants or other forms of support through networking or mentoring. See for example:

- ▶ The Pulitzer Center [Ocean Reporting Network](#), launched in May 2023
- ▶ The [Outlaw Ocean Institute](#) fellowship project
- ▶ The Journalismfund Europe grants, through the [Environmental Investigative Journalism](#) or the [Modern Slavery Unveiled](#) programmes
- ▶ The Earth Journalism Network which offers regular [opportunities](#) and curates an [online group on ocean issues](#)

6. Apply for awards

While reporting on the working conditions of fishers is less developed than other genres, reports exploring these issues have received some of the most prestigious awards in the field of journalism. Martha Mendoza and her colleagues received the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service reporting for her series of reports and Ana Santos was a finalist of the 2021 [ILO global media competition on labour migration](#). Students or early-career professionals can also consider awards: the winners of the 2023 edition of the ILO global media competition, in the student category, were students from University Diponegoro for their [story on Indonesian fishers](#).

► Glossary of key terminology

Abandonment

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) 2001 guidelines on abandoned seafarers (see [Resolution A.930\(22\)](#), adopted on 29 November 2001) state that a case of abandonment is characterized by the severance of ties between the shipowner and the seafarer.

Abandonment occurs when the shipowner fails to fulfil certain fundamental obligations to the seafarer relating to timely repatriation and payment of outstanding remuneration and to the provision of basic necessities of life, inter alia, adequate food, accommodation and medical care. Abandonment will have occurred when the master of the ship has been left without any financial means in respect of ship operation.

Aquaculture

The farming of aquatic organisms including fish, molluscs, crustaceans and aquatic plants. Farming implies some sort of intervention in the rearing process to enhance production, such as regular stocking, feeding, protection from predators, and so on. Farming also implies individual or corporate ownership of the stock being cultivated, the planning, development and operation of aquaculture systems, sites, facilities and practices, and the production and transport.

Child labour

The term “child labour” is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development. It refers to work that:

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or
- interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

For more information, see: ILO, [What is child labour?](#)

Coastal States

Coastal States have the right to issue fishing licences to vessels within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and part of such licences may include stipulations on the nationality of fishers on board a vessel and their working and living conditions. In many cases, however, enforcing the terms under the licences may prove challenging, especially outside territorial waters. Allowing fisheries observers (who come on board to monitor practices in order to address fisheries crime and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing) may be part of the access agreements, and the observers have a potential role to play in also monitoring labour conditions on board.

Debt bondage

Debt bondage exists when labourers (sometimes with their families) are forced to work for an employer in order to pay off their own debts or those they have inherited. The victims of debt bondage, if they try to leave their employment, are usually caught and returned by force. Providing wages or other compensation to a worker does not necessarily indicate that the labour is not forced or compulsory.

Decent work

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

For more information, see ILO, [Decent work](#).

EEZ

The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), under which the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of the Convention.

Fish stocks

The living resources in the community or population from which catches are taken in a fishery. Use of the term fish stock usually implies that the particular population is more or less isolated from other stocks of the same species and hence self-sustaining.

Fishing

Fishing refers to all fishing operations, including on rivers, lakes, or canals. It includes subsistence fishing and recreational fishing. In the present document, the word fishing or fishing industry refers to commercial fishing and therefore excludes subsistence and recreational fishing.

Fish meal and fish oil

In the United Kingdom the term “fish meal” means a product obtained by drying and grinding or otherwise treating fish or fish waste to which no other matter has been added. The term “white fish meal” is reserved for a product containing not more than 6 per cent oil and not more than 4 per cent salt, obtained from white fish or white fish waste such as filleting offal.

These are semilegal definitions, and for convenience fish meal can be defined as a solid product obtained by removing most of the water and some or all of the oil from fish or fish waste. Fish meal is generally sold as a powder, and is used mostly in compound foods for poultry, pigs and farmed fish; it is far too valuable to be used as a fertilizer.

Fish oil obtained from fish fat is used in both human and animal feed.

Flag State

Flag States have the right to confer their nationality on fishing vessels registered in their State and have primary

prescriptive and enforcement jurisdiction over activities taking place on board vessels on their register. Flag States also have the right and responsibility to regulate and enforce working conditions on board fishing vessels. While most small and middle-sized vessels are flagged in their home State, larger vessels may be flagged in international open registers. This poses a number of challenges from a decent work perspective.

Forced labour

Forced labour can be understood as work that is performed involuntarily and under the menace of any penalty. It refers to situations in which persons are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation, or by more subtle means such as manipulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities. Forced labour is defined by the [ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 \(No. 29\)](#).

For more information, see ILO, [“What is Forced Labour”](#).

High seas (or international waters)

All parts of the sea that are not included in the Exclusive Economic Zone, in the territorial sea or in the internal waters of a State, or in the archipelagic waters of an archipelagic State (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Article 86).

IUU

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a broad term that captures a wide variety of fishing activity. IUU fishing is found in all types and dimensions of fisheries; it occurs both on the high seas and in areas within national jurisdiction. It concerns all aspects and stages of the capture and utilization of fish, and it may sometimes be associated with organized crime.

For more information, see FAO, [“Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated \(IUU\) fishing”](#).

International labour standards

International labour standards are legal instruments drawn up by the ILO’s constituents (governments, employers and workers) and setting out basic principles and rights at work. They are either Conventions (or Protocols), which are legally binding

international treaties that may be ratified by Member States, or Recommendations, which serve as non-binding guidelines.

For more information, see ILO, [Conventions and Recommendations](#).

Market States (and trade States)

Trade and market States include those involved in the processing, wholesale, and retail of fish and fish products.

Occupational safety and health

Occupational safety and health (OSH) is identified as the discipline dealing with the prevention of work-related injuries and diseases as well as the protection and promotion of the health of workers. It aims at the improvement of working conditions and environment.

Port States

During transshipment or discharge of catch, harbour authorities and fisheries and labour inspectors have direct access to vessels. Thus, port States play a key role in detecting labour exploitation and abuse on board. Fishers are also sometimes stranded in port without means of repatriation. Port States with fisheries “hubs” – ports frequently used by foreign vessels – are considered hotspots. A port State may not necessarily have a large national fleet operating in its EEZ, but may instead be a “host” to international deep-sea fishing vessels.

Regional fisheries body (RFB) / regional fisheries management organizations (RFMO)

Organizations through which different parties work on the conservation, management or development of fisheries. Some RFBs operate at the regional level on all forms of fisheries (e.g. North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission – NEAFC) while others focus on specific species (e.g. Indian Ocean Tuna Commission – IOTC). A comprehensive [list of RFBs](#) and a [Regional Fisheries Bodies Map Viewer](#) are available on the FAO website.

Social protection

Social protection is defined by the ILO as the set of public measures that a society provides for its members to protect them against economic and social distress caused by the absence or a substantial reduction of income from work as a result of various contingencies (sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age or death of the breadwinner), the provision of healthcare and the provision of benefits for families with children.

Work in Fishing Convention

In 2007, the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference adopted the [ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 \(No. 188\)](#) and its accompanying [Recommendation No. 199](#). They address such matters as minimum age for work on a fishing vessel, medical standards, work agreements, occupational safety and health, and social security.



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