

The Case for Basic Income in the Fisheries

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Fisheries are crucial to the social and economic well-being of coastal regions and Indigenous communities across Canada. This brief considers how a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) may enhance socio-economic sustainability in the fisheries sector focusing on four priority areas: labour and livelihoods, sustainable food systems, climate resilience, and Indigenous self-determination.

A basic income is a cash transfer from governments to working age individuals living at or below the poverty line to enable everyone to meet their basic needs, participate in society, and live with dignity – regardless of work status.

Introduction

Fisheries are crucial to the social and economic well-being of coastal regions and Indigenous communities across Canada. Fisheries make contributions to employment and skills development, revenue generation, social and cultural well-being, and food security within and well beyond coastal regions. Those who work in the sector, which includes small-scale and subsistence fisheries as well as fish processing, face intensifying pressures from rising fishing costs, competing coastal activities, shifting location and volume of species, concentration of control over quotas, licenses, processing and market options, climate change, low wages, and shifts in labour markets.

Labour and livelihoods

There is a labour crisis in many small-scale fisheries and fish processing driven by rising costs to enter fishing, an aging workforce, low wages and other factors.¹ Seasonality and reliance on Employment Insurance (EI) are often cited as barriers to retaining and attracting workers. They are also markers of the precarious nature of the sector.² This is certainly the case for fisheries employment. It is seasonal, dependent upon resource availability, policy and politics, often without benefits and contracts in non-unionized environments and, even within those unionized environments,

vulnerable to change and negatives outcomes rooted in the intersection of capitalism and climate change. A BIG may help address these precarities while also alleviating inequities tied to the often racialized, classed, and gendered nature of work in the sector, including income disparities.

Seasonality

Approximately 40% of fish harvesters take additional jobs in the off-season to support themselves.³ Increasingly, “occupational pluralism” is being promoted as a way of making employment in a seasonal industry more attractive and rewarding.^{4,5} Potential issues with this include finding work in local communities, finding work that allows them to return to the fisheries sector, and balancing the skills, education, occupational health and safety requirements, as well as schedules of multiple jobs.⁶ For fish harvesters, there is uncertainty about the implications of working different jobs within and outside the fishery and eligibility for EI.⁷ For processing workers, changes to season length and shift schedules can limit hours and impact access to EI. A BIG may offer a way of supplementing and stabilizing seasonal employment that allows people to remain in their communities, have more control over their work choices, and make occupational pluralism more feasible and responsive to community

* We gratefully acknowledge input from Chalsie Kook-Marche, Ryan Lauzon, Sonia Strobel, Alyssa Stuart, & Rick Williams.

needs. It could also make it easier to improve skills and training that are needed for a changing and hopefully diversifying fisheries sector (e.g., new fishing practices, value-added fish products, or related activities like ecotourism involving local fisheries businesses).

The EI system, wages, and working conditions

The EI system has long been important to providing income in the off-season in fisheries. EI Fishing Benefits is a form of EI that has evolved to meet the needs of fish harvesters and is based on earnings rather than insurable hours.⁸ Harvesting continues to be male dominated; women's employment is still concentrated in processing. Processing workers' EI is still based on location and hours worked and it can be challenging to get enough hours to qualify each year. Fisheries workers remain vulnerable to annual and seasonal variations in quotas, catches and associated potential earnings reductions. This is seen currently in British Columbia with declining salmon stocks and in parts of Atlantic Canada with changes in cod, herring, crab, and shrimp quotas. While EI should be maintained, a BIG can provide an income floor when earnings/working hours may be insufficient to qualify for EI or benefits are insufficient. This can assist with recruitment and retention of workers in the sector and potentially encourage retention of work in communities and economic diversification of fisheries through fuller utilization of the resource.⁹ Further, work in fishing and processing plants is dangerous with high injury and occupational illness rates. A BIG has the potential to decrease precarity these workers face by improving wages and working conditions and by reducing their dependence on EI with its potential penalties associated with accessing workers compensation and working outside the sector in the off-season. Reducing precarity is fundamentally important as a starting point for renewal in the sector.¹⁰

Supporting new entrants

Lastly, a BIG may support new entrants to the sector by lessening precarity and thus making the industry more attractive and making it more

feasible for young people to remain in their communities. It is estimated that nearly 40% of fish harvesters are approaching retirement age¹¹ and a large proportion, particularly of women processing workers, are at close to or beyond 65 years of age. A BIG might also offer the income security that new entrants need to weather the economic risks associated with entering fishery employment. In harvesting, quota or licenses are often the most significant cost and present a high financial risk to young or new fishers who are less likely to purchase quota if fish prices or harvest volumes are uncertain, contributing to high debt levels and concentration of quota and licenses and fisheries wealth in the hands of companies and outsiders.

Sustainable food systems

A BIG may help ensure fish harvesters, crew, and processing workers have secure livelihoods which in turn may support sustainable food systems where fish and seafood are a core component. This is important not only for the food needs and preferences of fishing-dependent communities which often rely on fish and seafood as an important part of their diets¹², but also to supplying regional, national and international markets with a healthy source of protein.¹³ A need for more diverse and resilient local food sources and for full utilization of seafood landings is emerging as a policy priority, especially in the context of a pandemic, global geopolitical uncertainty, climate change, and rising food prices.¹⁴ Achieving this requires implementing the appropriate support measures, like a BIG, to support stable and resilient livelihoods of those working in the fisheries-based food system.

A BIG would particularly benefit the small-scale fishing operations and smaller, seasonal plants which are most vulnerable to rising fishing costs and often the least supported within existing systems, including fishing subsidies which go disproportionately to industrial-scale operations.¹⁵ Supporting the small-scale sector is crucial for sustainable food systems as it is the catches from small-scale fisheries that are most likely to be available and accessible for

consumers in local and regional markets, and are often harvested using more ecologically sustainable technologies and processed locally.¹⁶

Climate resilience

Climate change and income security are increasingly connected in people's daily lives, and this is especially true for those working in the fisheries sector.¹⁷ A BIG may provide the financial resources that fishers and others in the sector need to adapt to climate change and the risks it poses to fisheries infrastructure, weather patterns, and aquatic and marine foodwebs. Lessons from the pandemic show that those with extra income and more dependable incomes are better able to adapt to shocks.¹⁸ Putting in place a BIG now before the impacts of climate change become even more severe would be a proactive step to ensuring future sustainability of livelihoods in the fisheries sector. This is especially crucial as fisheries policy in Canada has so far not been climate responsive and climate change is likely to worsen injustice in the sector.¹⁹

At the same time, a BIG may support a transition towards more local and scale-appropriate systems of technologies and practices that are better for the climate and biodiversity. More research is demonstrating the potential for a BIG to provide the income security and additional capital and ability to access further training that households and workers need to invest in adaptations for climate change and more climate friendly practices.²⁰

Indigenous self-determination

From time immemorial, fisheries have been central to the food systems, economies, culture, and ceremony of Indigenous peoples. However, communities face many struggles in continuing to fish, from dispossession of fishing rights, to maintaining fishing livelihoods, to protecting the traditional and intergenerational knowledge important to fishing activity.²¹

Resulting from years of settler-colonial dispossession and oppression, poverty is high in

many Indigenous communities. Currently, social assistance programs (often known as "welfare") are conditional and accessing them can be stigmatizing and leave applicants vulnerable to racism. A BIG may provide a more dignified measure to lessen dependence on social assistance in many communities.²² When led by Indigenous communities and implemented in ways that support autonomy, a BIG offers a potentially transformative approach to supporting fishing as a livelihood and traditional food harvesting activity with benefits for individuals, families, and communities. For commercial fish harvesters and workers, a BIG may fill in gaps in the EI system. There are also opportunities for a BIG to support sustenance fisheries for keeping food in communities and supporting traditional food access. An income security program for Cree hunters and trappers in Quebec provides promising evidence that a BIG can support on-the-land activities with positive impacts for community health and wellbeing.²³

As Indigenous peoples mobilize for justice in the interrelated areas of fisheries, food systems, and climate²⁴, a BIG could be one step towards economic reconciliation²⁵ by providing the support and autonomy needed for communities to maintain sustainable livelihoods tied to the fisheries.

Conclusion

This brief lays out the significant economic and social benefits of the Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) in the fisheries sector in Canada. Focusing on four priority areas: labour and livelihoods, sustainable food systems, climate resilience, and Indigenous self-determination, we show that the benefits of BIG are far reaching and overlap with many socio-economic issues facing rural coastal and inland fishing communities.

Footnotes

- ¹ CCPFH. (2018). CCPFH fisheries labour market information study: Summary of the findings, policy perspectives and next steps. Retrieved from <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FOPO/Brief/BR9786342/br-external/CdnCouncilOfProfessionalFishHarvesters-e.pdf>
- ² Vosko (n.d.) defines precarious employment as that which “involves those forms of work involving atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low job tenure, low wages and high risks of ill health.” Vosko (n.d.). Precarious employment in Canada: Taking stock, taking action. Retrieved from <http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume3/pdfs/vosko.pdf>
- ³ CCPFH. (2018). CCPFH fisheries labour market information study: Summary of the findings, policy perspectives and next steps. Retrieved from <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FOPO/Brief/BR9786342/br-external/CdnCouncilOfProfessionalFishHarvesters-e.pdf>
- ⁴ ibid
- ⁵ Food Processing Skills Canada. (2019). Securing Canada’s fish and seafood workforce. Retrieved from <https://fp-sc-ctac.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/executive-summary-atlantic-canadian-fish-and-seafood-lmi-study-final-report.pdf>
- ⁶ Foley et al. (2016). Opportunities for and challenges of occupational pluralism in seasonal fisheries: Regional cases from Atlantic Canada. On the Move Partnership. Retrieved from <https://www.onthemovepartnership.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/OP-final-web-OTM.pdf>
- ⁷ ibid
- ⁸ For more details see <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/ei-fishing.html>
- ⁹ Although concerns are sometimes raised that people will stop working if they get a BIG, there is no evidence that income support programs create a labour disincentive or shortage. See: Robertson, W. (2021). A report to the Senate of Canada: CERB and labour shortages in Canada. Available at https://www.basicincomenb.com/uploads/2/5/8/0/25806130/cerb_and_labour_shortages_in_canada_a_false_narrative_-_final_report.pdf; Card, D., & Krueger, A. (1993). Minimum wages and employment: A case study of the fast food industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at <https://davidcard.berkeley.edu/papers/njmin-aer.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Labour gaps are also being filled by Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs). Within basic income modelling, TFW's have not yet been factored into the process, but, hopefully, a Federal/Provincial demonstration project such as is being envisioned for PEI will make space for respectful treatment of TFWs within larger labour market considerations. Restrictions on employment make TFWs vulnerable to exploitation by employers. Corak (2022) argues the recently expanded federal government Temporary Foreign Worker program (see <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2022/04/government-of-canada-announces-workforce-solutions-road-map--further-changes-to-the-temporary-foreign-worker-program-to-address-labour-shortages-ac.html>) is the “opposite of what policy directed to an inclusive labour market should be doing.” Corak, M. (2022). What will COVID mean for the future of social and fiscal policy? Retrieved from <https://milesorak.com/2022/06/06/what-will-covid-mean-for-the-future-of-fiscal-and-social-policy/>
- ¹¹ CCPFH. (2018). CCPFH fisheries labour market information study: Summary of the findings, policy perspectives and next steps. Retrieved from <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FOPO/Brief/BR9786342/br-external/CdnCouncilOfProfessionalFishHarvesters-e.pdf>

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- ¹² Lowitt, K. et al. (2020). Empowering small-scale, community-based fisheries through a food systems framework. *Marine Policy* 120.
- ¹³ Loring, P. et al. (2019). Fish and food security in small-scale fisheries. In: Chuenpagdee, R., Jentoft, S. (eds) *Transdisciplinarity for Small-Scale Fisheries Governance*. MARE Publication Series, vol 21. Springer, Cham.
- ¹⁴ Government of Canada. (2022). Canada's national pathway document. Retrieved from <https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/about-our-department/transparency-and-corporate-reporting/public-opinion-research-and-consultations/share-ideas-toward-healthier-more-sustainable-and-more-equitable-food-systems-consultation-canadas/canadas-national-pathways-document>
- ¹⁵ Schuhbauer et al. (2020). The global fisheries subsidies divide between small- and large-scale fisheries. *Frontiers in Marine Science* 29.
- ¹⁶ Arthur et al. (2021). Small-scale fisheries and local food systems: Transformations, threats and opportunities. *Fish and Fisheries* 23(1), 109-124; Stoll et al. (2021). Alternative seafood networks during COVID-19: Implications for resilience and sustainability. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 31.
- ¹⁷ Energy Mix Productions. (2022). Conversations on climate change, income security and community resilience. The Green Resilience Project. Retrieved from <https://greenresilience.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Green-Resilience-Project-Final-Report.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Stoll et al. (2021). Alternative seafood networks during COVID-19: Implications for resilience and sustainability. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 31.
- ¹⁹ Daly et al. (2021). Changing climates in a blue economy: Assessing the climate-responsiveness of Canadian fisheries and oceans policy. *Marine Policy* 131.
- ²⁰ Energy Mix Productions. (2022). Conversations on climate change, income security and community resilience. The Green Resilience Project. Retrieved from <https://greenresilience.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Green-Resilience-Project-Final-Report.pdf>
- ²¹ von der Porten, S., J. Corntassel, and D. Mucina. 2019. Indigenous nationhood and herring governance: Strategies for the reassertion of Indigenous authority and inter-Indigenous solidarity regarding marine resources. *AlterNative* 15(1): 62-74.
- ²² Berman, M. (2018). Resource rents, university basic income, and poverty among Alaska's Indigenous peoples. *World Development* 106, 161-172.
- ²³ Moriarity, R.J. et al. (2021). Health measures of *Eeyouch* (Cree) who are eligible to participate in the on-the-land Income Security Program in *Eeyou Istchee* (northern Quebec, Canada). *BMC Public Health* 21, 628.
- ²⁴ Pictou, S. (2018). The origins and politics, campaigns and demands by the international fisher peoples' movement: an Indigenous perspective. *Third World Quarterly* 39(7): 1411-1420.
- ²⁵ Avveduti, K. (2020, June 15). It's time for big ideas - time for a First Nations Universal Basic Income program. Policy Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.policymagazine.ca/its-time-for-big-ideas-time-for-a-first-nations-universal-basic-income-program/>