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# Case for Basic Income in the Fisheries

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**THE CASE  
FOR BASIC  
INCOME  
SERIES**

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# Basic Income in the Fisheries

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## SUMMARY

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 beyond coastal regions. Those who work in the sector 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. This brief considers how a Basic Income Guarantee 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.

### ABOUT BASIC INCOME

Basic income means different things to different people. The Case for Basic Income series defines basic income as an income-tested and targeted unconditional cash transfer from governments to individuals to enable everyone in Canada to meet their basic needs, participate in society, and live in dignity, regardless of work status.

Some Case project teams make more detailed recommendations about the principles to guide the design of a basic income program in Canada.

### ABOUT THE CASE FOR BI SERIES

The Case for Basic Income series explores the impacts of a basic income program for various communities and policy areas across Canada. Each Case has been developed collaboratively by subject matter experts and basic income advocates to consider the distinct issues and concerns between the Case topic and income insecurity - and the difference that basic income might make.

Every Case is unique in both function and form and is guided by its authors and contributors.

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# Case for Basic Income in the Fisheries

## 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 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. 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 BIG is an unconditional cash transfer from governments to individuals to enable everyone to meet their basic needs, participate in society, and live with dignity – regardless of work status.

## Labour and livelihoods

There is a labour crisis in many small-scale fisheries and fish processing. This is driven by rising costs to enter the fishing industry, an aging workforce, low wages and more (Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters [CCPFH], 2018). 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 (Vosko, 2003). This is certainly the case for fisheries employment. It is seasonal, dependent upon resource availability, policy and politics. It is also often lacking benefits and contracts in non-unionized environments and, even within unionized environments, vulnerable to change with negative 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 (CCPFH, 2018). Increasingly, “occupational pluralism” is promoted as a way of making employment in a seasonal industry more attractive and rewarding (CCPFH, 2018; Food Processing Skills Canada, 2019). 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 (Foley et al., 2016). For fish harvesters, there is uncertainty about the implications of working different jobs within and outside the fishery and eligibility for EI (Foley et al., 2016).

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For processing workers, changes to season length and shift schedules can limit hours and impact access to EI. A BIG could offer a way of supplementing and stabilizing seasonal employment to allow people to remain in their communities, have more control over their work choices, and make occupational pluralism more feasible and responsive to community 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 (for more details, see the Government of Canada's EI fishing benefits [webpage](#)). Harvesting continues to be male-dominated; women's employment is still concentrated in processing. Processing workers' EI is 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. It is also being felt 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 (for discussion on labour disincentives, see Robertson, 2021 and Card & Krueger, 1993). 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 (labour gaps are also being filled by Temporary Foreign Workers; for more on how these workers are vulnerable to exploitation by employers, see Corak, 2022).

#### 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 age (CCPFH, 2018) and a large proportion, particularly 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

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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 diets (Lowitt et al., 2020), but also for supplying regional, national and international markets with a healthy source of protein (Loring et al., 2019). 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 (Government of Canada, 2022). 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 (Schuhbauer et al., 2020). Supporting the small-scale sector is crucial for sustainable food systems as the catches from small-scale fisheries are most available and accessible for consumers in local and regional markets, and are often harvested using more ecologically sustainable

technologies while being processed locally (Arthur et al., 2021; Stoll et al., 2021).

### **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. 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 (Stoll et al., 2021). 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 important as fisheries policy in Canada so far has not been climate responsive and climate change is likely to worsen injustice in the sector (Daly et al., 2021).

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 (Green Resilience Project, 2022).

### **Indigenous self-determination**

From time immemorial, fisheries have been

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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 necessary to fishing activity (von der Porten et al., 2019).

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 (Berman, 2018). When led by Indigenous communities and implemented in ways that support autonomy, a BIG offers a potentially transformative approach to supporting fishing as both a livelihood and a 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 well-being (Moriarity et al., 2021).

As Indigenous peoples mobilize for justice in the interrelated areas of fisheries, food systems, and climate (Pictou, 2018), a BIG could be one step towards economic reconciliation (Avveduti, 2020) 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.

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