

Fishing Hiatus: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges and Adaptation Strategies of Fisherfolk Under the Closed Fishing Policy in Davao Gulf

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ABSTRACT

The government has implemented a closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf, prohibiting large-scale fishing in the area for three months from June to August of every year to conserve the small pelagic fish in the area. Although specifically designed as a conservation measure, the closed season also dramatically affects the livelihood of fisherfolk who work in commercial fishing vessels or whose fishing operations are prohibited by the policy. This study aims to study the challenges experienced by the fisherfolk and the adaptation strategies they employ during the closed season. Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five fisherfolk members affected by the closed fishing policy and two Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources XI officials. The researchers used thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in the participants' responses. After a thorough examination by the data analyst, seven key themes emerged: livelihood disruption with financial instability and emotional strain; compliance amid accessibility challenges and policy discontent; tension between conservation policy and the realities faced by fisherfolk; short-term relief outweighed by long-term struggle; aid distribution challenges and budget constraints by concerned office; difficulties in pursuing alternative livelihoods with limited support; and gaps in awareness, association benefits, and aid effectiveness. The results reveal how the closed fishing policy significantly affects the livelihood and economic security of the fisherfolk while presenting the challenges of the available meaningful support programs from the BFAR, such as a lack of budget. Understanding the lived experiences of the fisherfolk during the closed season offers an avenue for policymakers to create a more inclusive policy that effectively addresses and ensures the balance of both the sustainability of marine resources and the livelihood of fisherfolk.

Keywords: closed fishing policy, fisherfolk, adaptation strategies, socioeconomic impacts, alternative livelihood, Davao Gulf SDG Integration: #8 Decent Work and Economic Growth

INTRODUCTION

In pursuit of preserving the ecological sustainability of marine environments, the closed fishing policy, prohibiting large-scale fishing activities for three months from June to August, has been implemented in Davao Gulf; however, fisherfolk living in Davao City, who work in commercial fishing vessels or whose fishing operations are prohibited by the policy, struggle to find adequate income during this period. Although closed fishing policies can support the conservation of marine resources and produce positive results, they are sometimes met with mixed reactions and resistance, mainly when they result in significant livelihood losses, as observed in Ghana and the Philippines (Owusu & Andriesse, 2020; Macusi, Rafon, & Macusi, 2022).

In a 2024 study by DA-BFAR, the Davao Gulf is labeled a key biodiversity area (KBA), one of the 34 biodiversity hotspots in the world. With that fact established, the government released Joint Administrative Order No. 02, series of 2014, issued between the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), or more commonly known as the "closed season," as it aims to allow marine species to regenerate, ensuring their sustainability. This, however, creates tension between conservation efforts and the livelihood of fisherfolk, thereby making it crucial to find a balance that addresses both concerns.

According to Bagsit, Frimpong, Asch, and Monteclaro (2021), the fisherfolk, who rely on daily fishing for their livelihood, face significant challenges during the closed fishing season. With limited alternative sources of income, they often find themselves economically disadvantaged and resort to dependency and seeking support from livelihood programs (Napata, Espectato, & Serofia, 2020). The lack of viable alternative livelihoods leaves the fisherfolk economically vulnerable and disadvantaged.

In an international context, closed fishing policies have negatively affected fisherfolk. In a study conducted in Bangladesh, the fisherfolk suffered significant socioeconomic implications due to the implementation of the policy. Islam, Begum, Rahman, and Ullah (2021) illustrated how the fisherfolk shared various socioeconomic effects and impacts because of the closed season. Moreover, in a study conducted in Ghana by Owusu, Adu-Boahen, Kyeremeh, Demalie, and Eshun (2023), it has been shown that affected fisherfolk express concerns about the absence of compensation programs during the implementation of the closed fishing policy.

From a national perspective, in the Visayas, according to Napata et al. (2020), the closed season has economic implications. Thus, its implementation should be appropriate to the context or the unique situations at hand, providing alternative livelihood to aid the socioeconomic factors experienced by affected fisherfolk. On a similar note, according to Macusi, Sabino, and Macusi (2022), in the province of Surigao del Sur, when the closed season is underway, the fisherfolk serve as farm caretakers and share profits with landowners, while others seek temporary work in construction or rendering manual labor for neighbors as a means to compensate for income losses.

Locally, the scenarios that played out internationally and nationally were also observable. The affected Davao Gulf fisherfolk also resorted to crop production, gleaning, and looking for jobs in construction or manual labor as adaptive strategies (Macusi, Camaso, Barboza, & Macusi, 2021). Moreover, regarding the matter of its implementation, a research by Macusi, Liguez, and Digal (2022) found that the closed fishing policy imposed in Davao Gulf should empower fisherfolk through efficient management techniques and initiatives, and by enhancing awareness programs and encouraging memberships in fisherfolk associations.

This study's general objective is to examine fisherfolk's challenges and coping mechanisms and how these strategies connect to their livelihood, which is heavily affected by the implementation of the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf. To be more specific, this study seeks to explore the challenges fisherfolk face during the closed season and identify the adaptive strategies they employ to mitigate these challenges. The objectives of this study align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth because it aims to understand how fisherfolk adapt to livelihood disruptions and seek alternative livelihoods. Addressing these challenges and promoting alternative income sources, these strategies may contribute to enhancing economic resilience and security among vulnerable coastal communities.

The outcome of this study, consistent with the aforementioned objectives, may help fisherfolk in Davao City who were affected by the implementation of the policy of the closed fishing season in the adjacent Davao Gulf. This study may also benefit the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) XI as it extensively examines fisherfolk's challenges during their policy implementation, providing them with meaningful insights. The study also covers the adaptation strategies employed by fisherfolk during this period and thus also benefit the City Government of Davao, the coastal barangays in the city, as well as other interested organizations that provide alternative livelihood to fisherfolk, whether governmental or not, as the findings of this study may help them identify what kind of programs and alternative livelihood initiatives are appropriate to pursue to help them effectively. The researchers also believe that this study may be helpful to academic institutions and future researchers who wish to conduct additional studies regarding affected fisherfolk by closed fishing policies in other areas, not just in Davao Gulf.

This study relates to the Opportunity Structure Theory by Roberts (1968), which holds that social and economic barriers restrict personal choices to pursue new opportunities. Using this lens, the limited range of livelihood alternatives available to fisherfolk may be influenced by deeply ingrained socioeconomic circumstances, posing challenges to their chance to engage in alternative income-generating work. Another theory in this study is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory by Rogers (1987), which discusses how well a new idea, practice, technology, or "innovation" is spread throughout a community and adopted. This theory relates to fisherfolk's adaptation to

the closed season by highlighting how new livelihood strategies and sustainable practices are accepted and pursued as responses to the imposed restrictions. The third and last theory used in this study is the Social Capital Theory by Putnam (1995), which refers to aspects of social organization like networks, shared norms, and trust that enhance a community's ability to cooperate and effectively address challenges collectively. This particular theory relates to fisherfolk by presenting how community integration can shape and support individual responses to livelihood disruptions brought by implementing the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf.

Some studies have been conducted on the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf from June to August of every year. However, the researchers believe there needs to be a study specifically designed and dedicated to exploring the challenges in financial stability and the adaptation strategies in the form of alternative livelihoods by the affected fisherfolk. The researchers also believe it is essential to understand the socioeconomic effects of policies like the closed fishing season. As affected fisherfolk experience recurring challenges due to the policy, a study on their coping strategies, available opportunities, and government interventions is warranted, and the findings of this study may help generate insights that can guide adequate support and policy interventions for these communities.

METHOD

This section features the research design and procedure, with the analysis of data and the ethical considerations, the research participants, and the research materials and instruments, which were all essential in the formulation of the results of this study.

Design and Procedure

The researchers employed a phenomenological approach to gather the data used for this qualitative study. According to Ayton (2023), phenomenology focuses on the individuals' unique perceptions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, and innate emotional responses. Moreover, since the primary data source is the individual's personal experience and insights, in-depth interviews are commonly used for data collection. Thus, the researchers opted to use a phenomenological approach to obtain empirical knowledge and valuable insights from the participants regarding the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf in a more effective, sensitive, and befitting manner.

After validating the research instrument, the researchers obtained consent from the university to conduct the study. The data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in a semi-structured format, using open-ended and appropriate questions to allow participants to share their experiences and perspectives openly and effectively. The researchers' interviews with the participants were recorded to transcribe their responses. The raw responses or raw data were transcribed word-for-word and analyzed to reveal recurring patterns, or more commonly known in research as "themes."

The data for this research were analyzed through thematic analysis. According to Jnanathapaswi (2021), thematic analysis enables researchers to examine extensive data to identify recurring patterns and develop meaningful themes. This method also facilitates the analysis of data collected under different conditions, helping to determine relationships between concepts and assess their respective significance based on relevance or frequency. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), after interviews are transcribed or textual data is reviewed, the researchers, with guidance from a data analyst, should immerse themselves in the resulting material. This critical process fosters a deeper understanding of how participants narrate their experiences and perspectives.

According to Hasan, Rana, Chowdhury, Dola, and Rony (2021), each step of the research process should be conducted by the researchers in adherence with established ethical standards. In ensuring the moral integrity of this research, the rights, well-being, and dignity of all participants were respected throughout each phase of the study. The purpose of ethical standards is not only to ensure the quality of the research but also to ensure that it is not harmful to the participants (Åkerfeldt & Boistrup, 2021). In fulfillment of such, the participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights, including their anonymity and ability to withdraw at any time without penalty (Mumford, Higgs, & Gujar, 2021). By adhering to these ethical principles, this research not only satisfied the generally accepted standards in the study but also secured its integrity and fairness.

Participants

The researchers believe the participants should have had first-hand experience and expert knowledge of the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf. In pursuit of such participants, the researchers employed non-probability sampling techniques. According to Stratton (2021), non-probability sampling is considered less objective compared to probability-based sampling techniques as they do not give every individual in the target population an equal chance to participate; instead, they are directly selected by the researchers, referred by others, or volunteer to take part on their own. Specifically, the researchers used purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling in qualitative research. According to Makwana, Engineer, Dabhi, and Chudasama (2023), purposive or deliberate sampling is a sampling technique where the researchers predetermine whether the participants qualify for inclusion in the sample based on their relevance and suitability with the research objectives. Through this, the researchers gathered qualified participants who gave invaluable insights and experiences, according to the objectives of this study.

The research participants were selected using specific criteria appropriate to the objectives of this study. They include: (a) members of the fisherfolk who work in commercial fishing vessels or whose fishing operations are prohibited by the closed fishing policy; and (b) officials from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) XI who form part of the closed fishing policy planning and implementation. The target participants were five (5) members of the fisherfolk and two (2) officials from the BFAR XI, who comprised a total of seven (7) participants. Furthermore, exclusion criteria were put in place for the vetting of participants. Those members of the fisherfolk whose fishing operations were not affected by the closed fishing policy and those not officials of the BFAR XI were not qualified to participate in this study. The researchers also offered no objection to withdrawing participants who may have felt uneasy during the interview.

Materials and Instruments

To gather appropriate, guided, and relevant data for this study, interview guides were used by the researchers to explore the unique experiences and perspectives of the participants on the implemented closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf. The bona fide research personnel of the university validated the interview guide questionnaire. It consisted of two (2) research questions: (a) the challenges fisherfolk face during the implementation of the closed fishing policy; and (b) the adaptation strategies they employ in the form of alternative livelihood. The sequence of the questions went from broad research questions, to the exploratory identifying questions, and then to the more specific probing questions.

The researchers interviewed the participants online or virtually via conferencing and phone calls. Moreover, in facilitating the interviews, a semi-structured format was followed, and according to Delve, Ho, and Limpaecher (2022), it combines both elements of structured and unstructured interviews, tapping into the strengths of both research methods. Because of the semi-structured interviewing format, the researchers could use open-ended questions and capture vital information and key insights from the participants efficiently, which proved to be beneficial in realizing the objectives of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings derived from the data gathered during the study. In this section, the participants' experience and expertise provide essential insights into the real-life and human dimension of the otherwise environmentally based policy of the closed fishing season.

The Joint Administrative Order No. 02, series of 2014, issued by the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), or the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf, prohibits the use of bag nets and ring nets, which are commonly used by commercial fishers. This regulation, enforced from June to August, aims to protect the small pelagic fish during their spawning period by limiting large-scale fishing. While small-scale fishing may continue, the fisherfolk who work on commercial fishing vessels that rely on these restricted fishing gears face many challenges during the three months. For reference, the profile of the participants is as follows: Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 are members of the fisherfolk who are affected by the closed fishing policy, while Participants 6 and 7 are officials from BFAR XI who are behind its planning and implementation.

The findings in this section are essential in understanding the broader implications of the closed fishing policy that are not essentially found within the ambit of its ecological goals, that is, the protection and conservation of marine resources. While it may aim to do just that, the policy also brings unintended consequences that significantly affect fisherfolk, who, despite being part of our society's marginalized and vulnerable sector, make significant contributions to our overall economy.

Challenges of Fisherfolk under the Closed Fishing Policy

The affected fisherfolk face multiple challenges that impact their livelihood and sustainability while implementing the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf. The responses from the participants revolved around five (5) themes that feature various challenges. These challenges span livelihood disruption, difficulty accessing alternative fishing grounds, and the obstacles to obtaining government aid. Notwithstanding the struggles of affected fisherfolk, the policy implementers, in this case, BFAR XI, also encountered challenges in carrying out the closed fishing policy, especially regarding budget constraints.

Livelihood Disruption, Financial Instability, and Emotional Strain. Fishing is the primary income source for fisherfolk residing in Davao City. According to Andrews, Bennett, Billon, Green, Cisneros-Montemayor, Amongin, Gray, and Sumaila (2021), fisheries play a crucial role in providing income and livelihood opportunities for people in coastal areas of developing countries. However, when the government bans fishing activities for three months, the livelihood of the fisherfolk is guaranteed to be affected. Thus, according to Kwadzo (2022), while the closed fishing season is intended to replenish declining fish populations, its enforcement causes socioeconomic challenges that impact fisherfolk.

The researchers captured from the affected fisherfolk in Davao City an apparent affirmation that they are indeed affected by the enforcement of the closed fishing policy, as well as sentiments of frustration, exhaustion, and hopelessness during the three-month ban, citing their significant economic losses during this period. The uncertainty and stress caused by income losses often lead to anxiety and emotional distress among affected fisherfolk and their families. In an expression of exhaustion and hopelessness, Participant 4 shares a similar sentiment as he feels they are greatly affected and disadvantaged by the policy.

“Dako kaayo og epekto ni sa amoa kay tulo ka bulan nga wala mi income.” (This has a big effect to us because for three months we don't have income.) (Participant 4)

On another important note, the fisherfolk emphasized that the closed fishing policy significantly affects their livelihood, particularly those who rely solely on fishing as their primary and most dependable source of income. For these individuals, the temporary prohibition on fishing activities translates to an immediate loss of earnings. The lack of alternative income-generating opportunities intensifies the burden, leaving many fisherfolk vulnerable during the closed season.

“Sa akong kabahin, dili nako makaya kung diri lang ang akong saligan. Dili nako makaya.” (For me, it's really hard if I only rely on this. I can't manage.) (Participant 1)

Compliance Amid Accessibility Challenges and Policy Discontent. Based on the responses of the fisherfolk, a noticeable theme arises: their compliance amid the challenges, and most especially their policy discontent. According to Owusu et al. (2023), the main reasons for non-compliance with the closed fishing policy stem from perceptions or apparent truths for the fisherfolk that it is not ecologically effective, inadequate enforcement of penalties, and most especially, the absence of financial or meaningful support or aid to compensate for the fisherfolk's income loss. However, the fisherfolk continue to obey, comply, and follow the regulations set by the authorities. However, notably, their obedience or compliance often stems not from agreement with the policy but from a lack of choice, as they recall that it was easier to fish and earn money back then, when the policy was not yet implemented. Participant 3 presents this sentiment perfectly in his statement, further stressing how badly the three-month fishing ban affects them.

“Sa karon murag diperensya gyud, dili gyud pareha sauna nga wala pa gi-implementar ning closure kay bisan og asa man mi managat. Pananglitan, managat mi karong adlaw, pagka-sunod ugma wala na pud. Unsa pa kaha nang tulo ka bulan? Dako gyud kaayo nga kawala.” (Right now, there is a difference; it is not the same as before

the closure was implemented. For instance, we went fishing today, but there might be nothing again the next day. What more during those three months? It is a huge loss.) (Participant 3)

This discontent is further fueled by the perception that the policy disproportionately affects fisherfolk. According to Islam (2021), the fishers perceive the prohibition on fishing as deeply unjust, arguing that the burden of conservation efforts falls unequally on those already economically disadvantaged. As a result, their compliance becomes a quiet form of endurance, a way to survive rather than a sign of support. This struggle, however, does not end with the act of not fishing. It follows the fisherfolk home, where the impact of the policy is realized and most deeply felt in their daily lives. Without a stable income during the closed season from June to August, they are forced to stretch limited resources to cover household expenses such as food, electricity, and water bills, utilities, and most especially the money needed by their children who are studying.

“Hilabina karon nga naa koy college student, P250 na gud na kada adlaw. Unya asa man ko og pananglitan wala koy lawud-lawud?” (Especially now that I have a college student, that is already P250 per day. Where would I get that if, for instance, I do not fish?) (Participant 1)

“Naa kay mga estudyante, unya inyong konsumo sa panimalay, naa pay bayrunon sa suga ug tubig. Dili man gyud mi maka-budget og maayo kay ipit-ipit.” (You have students, and then you have household expenses, and there are also electric and water bills. We really cannot budget properly because it is too tight.) (Participant 5)

The fisherfolk's testimonies reflect the mounting challenges they face while implementing the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf. The fisherfolk's discontent with the policy, a recurring pattern in this section, is rooted in how the policy fails to consider the realities these fishers have to live through, especially when fishing is their familiar source of income. As their boats and nets become dormant and inactive from June to August, the worries at home appear. Matters like food, electricity, and water bills, school fees, and other daily essentials become an area of concern. When these are not immediately attended to, the emotional well-being of the fisherfolk is also affected. Despite the challenges and hardships presented by the fishers to the researchers, they still comply with the policy. The researchers see that fisherfolk's ability to endure, adapt, and survive reveals that they are a resilient sector of society. However, this admirable trait of resilience should not be an excuse for the policy to be unchanged. Their situation should instead push for a more sustainable management of the policy, maintaining a balance between the livelihood of the fisherfolk and the conservation efforts by the regulating authorities.

Tension Between Conservation Policy and Fisherfolk Realities. In gathering participants' responses, among the most critical concerns raised by the fisherfolk during the closed season is the difficulty in accessing alternative fishing grounds. While some participants acknowledged other areas where they can fish, most expressed the challenges of reaching these places. These hindrances include the distance of the alternative fishing grounds, the limited capacity of their boats to go to farther waters, the appropriate fishing equipment, and, of course, the dangers and perils posed by the open sea, such as vast and unpredictable waves. In a statement made by Participant 1, he emphasized how distance and sea conditions hinder their ability to explore and enjoy the resources of a different fishing area, particularly during the enforcement of the closed season.

“Kaning among ginasakyan nga bangka, gagmay lang man gud ni nga mga lantsa, dili man mi makaabot didto sa layo kay dagko na ang mga balod didto. Mao nang diri ra gyud mi.” (The boat we are riding, these are just small boats. We really cannot go far because the waves there are very big. That's why we just stay here.) (Participant 1)

These challenges reflect the findings of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, or FAO (2022), which highlights that fishers across the globe often face spatial and financial constraints that hurt their ability to adapt to restrictions in the name of conservation of marine resources, like the small pelagic fishes in Davao Gulf. The lack of access to alternative grounds disproportionately affects those with fewer assets and resources, resulting in inequality within coastal fishing communities. Participants highlighted these constraints despite knowing about the resource-rich areas of General Santos, Contra Costa, and Davao Oriental.

“Didto sa General Santos dako gyud ang panagatan didto kay lawud naman gyud na samantala diri kay daplin-daplin.” (In General Santos, the fishing grounds are vast because it is so far in the sea, while here it is just near the shore.) (Participant 3)

“Sayon ra managat didto pero layo man gud ang General Santos.” (It is easy to fish there, but General Santos is far.) (Participant 5)

These responses from Participants 3 and 5 emphasized a growing frustration over the lack of accessible and practical alternatives during the closed season, highlighting a tension between conservation policy and fisherfolk’s realities. The restrictions of the closed fishing policy have thus disproportionately impacted those without the means to explore alternative fishing grounds.

“Napapalibutan talaga from Davao Oriental, Davao de Oro, Davao del Norte, Davao City, Davao del Sur, hanggang Davao Occidental so dako gyud siya nga area. Kung capable ang mga boats nga makaadto sa East Coast then they can go there and outside Davao Gulf. Pero itong mga maliliit, mahihirapan silang lumabas.” (It’s surrounded by Davao Oriental, Davao de Oro, Davao del Norte, Davao City, Davao del Sur, and Davao Occidental, so it’s a really vast area. Now, if the boats are capable of going to the East Coast or outside the Davao Gulf, then they can go there. But the smaller ones will really struggle to go that far.) (Participant 6)

This reveals the inequality among the fisherfolk. Those with better resources or boats can reach farther fishing grounds, while the rest are confined to limited areas. As FAO (2022) points out, ensuring equitable access and livelihood resilience must be central to conservation strategies. Failure to prioritize this would lead to the marginalization of those who are least able to adapt.

On the other hand, the researchers also identified a sense of discontent among the fisherfolk with the said policy, and the researchers see this as an area of tension. While most fisherfolk accept the need to regulate fishing practices, their statements reflect dissatisfaction with how the policies are perceived and implemented. They express their sentiments towards the closed season as both a restriction and a burden.

“Sa ilaha ra mana nga polisiya nga adunay mga boundary. Bawal ka diri kay dakpon ka unya magubot na. Pero kami nga mga mananagat, wala gyud mi mahimo kay gi-implementar man nila na nga polisiya. Yuko na lang ka kay unsaon ta man? Wa man tay mahimo.” (It is their policy that created all these boundaries. This side is prohibited; if you cross over, you will get caught and become a problem. However, the fishermen really cannot do anything because those are the policies they are implementing. You bow your head and accept it, because what else can you do?) (Participant 4)

This statement by Participant 4 reflects a mixed sentiment. An understanding of the regulations imposed by the concerned authorities, but also exhibiting a sense of confusion, frustration, and helplessness over their enforcement. Fisherfolk often feel alienated from the decision-making process and adapt, not out of agreement, but out of necessity. They feel the need to comply even though they believe the policy is greatly disadvantageous to their primary source of livelihood.

This scenario points out the disparity between policy intention and fisherfolk perception. However, despite the issues raised by the fisherfolk, the regulatory authorities specifically emphasize the significance of the Davao Gulf as a primary fishing ground. This compels the researchers to also present the perceived importance of the Davao Gulf as a primary fishing ground. It remains an essential fishing zone for small pelagic species and is considered critical to the fishing industry in Davao City and the whole Davao Region. Hence, the need to implement conservation efforts to prevent over-fishing and to maintain a sustainable environment where there is a delicate balance that would ensure healthy economic activities by the fisherfolk and the fishing companies that would not compromise the population of the aforementioned pelagic fishes.

“We need to protect the small pelagic fishes kasi most of our catch, makita nato sa mga landings, based sa records, sa atong data is gikan pud sa gulpo. So, this is why one of the means to conserve our small pelagic fishes in Davao Gulf is to have this closed season.” (We need to protect small pelagic fishes because, based on landing records and our data, most of our catch is from the Gulf. So that is why one of the means to conserve our small pelagic fishes in Davao Gulf is to have this closed season.) (Participant 7)

The statement by Participant 7 emphasized the need to balance ecological sustainability with the livelihood needs of the fisherfolk. Authorities affirm that the closed fishing policy is an essential tool to ensure the long-term

viability of the fishing industry. However, as the researchers gathered, its implementation must consider the social and economic realities of those most affected.

Short-Term Relief, Long-Term Struggle. The State has a solemn duty to ensure its citizens' welfare and well-being, including the fisherfolk. According to Section 2, subsection (e) of Republic Act No. 8550 or the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998, it is the policy of the State, "to provide support to the fishery sector, primarily to the municipal fisherfolk, including women and youth sectors, through appropriate technology and research, adequate financial, production, construction of post-harvest facilities, marketing assistance, and other services..." As aforementioned, it is well within the government's mandate to provide relief or aid to the affected fisherfolk because the closed season is a government policy. Based on the data gathered by the researchers during the conduct of this study, the government support extended or afforded to the fisherfolk who were affected by the closed fishing policy primarily consists of basic relief goods, commonly referred to as "food packs," which include rice, canned goods, instant coffee, and other necessities.

"Inig mag closed season diri, ginahatagan man mi nila og bugas, mga tinapa. Makatabang gihapon ang ayuda nila." (During the closed season here, they give us rice and sardines. The aid they provide somehow helps.) (Participant 1)

"Oo, niadtong niagi nakadawat man mi og ayuda diri, sama sa bugas ug mga de lata." (Yes, back then we were able to receive aid here, like rice, and canned goods.) (Participant 3)

This initiative is a collaborative effort between the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) XI and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Participant 6 attested to this government relief effort seeking to address the affected fisherfolk's basic needs.

"We started it last year, and then provided them with food pack assistance through the DSWD. Kasi ang maaapektuhan talaga ay iyong basic needs nila, diba? We have provided 2,603 food packs to those affected individuals, both fish workers on commercial boats and the iyong mga municipal fishers with the same fishing operations. So, yon muna, but this year we have additional support." (We started it last year and provided food pack assistance through the DSWD. We did that since their basic needs are most affected, right? We have provided 2,603 food packs to those affected individuals, both fish workers in the commercial boats and those municipal fishers with the same fishing operations. We can do that now, but have additional support this year.) (Participant 6)

The government relief efforts in the form of food packs distributed by the government during the closed season were received by the fisherfolk. They provided temporary relief amid the apparent loss of income. However, the question regarding its adequacy and sustainability arises. It should be noted that fisherfolk heavily rely on fishing as their primary source of income, and due to the closed season, which prohibits fishing for three months, the fisherfolk are rendered jobless and in a delicate economic state. Whether it would suffice for three months is a critical concern among them. While the relief efforts in food packs provide temporary alleviation, they fall short of covering the fisherfolk's and their families' daily consumption and subsistence needs. This particular sentiment is expressed by Participant 1.

"Katong food packs makatabang gyud to sa amoa, pinakataas siguro ana mga napulo ka adlaw. Human ana, wala na, magsalig na lang pud mi og naay masudlan nga trabaho. Sama ani nga tiguwang na ta, wala nay mudawat nato nga trabaho." (The food packs really help but I think they would last for ten days at most. After that, we just relied on whatever work we could find. At my age, no one wants to hire me anymore.) (Participant 1)

Participant 1 clearly expresses that the government aid he received was not enough to satisfy or meet his family's basic needs. This proves that despite distributing food packs containing rice and canned goods, their support only lasted a few days, leaving a prolonged food and income security gap. This account reflects a broader structural issue in the design and delivery of government relief programs. While necessary and helpful, short-term assistance often fails to address the sustained economic displacement posed by the closed season. This proves the theme title to be accurate, **Short-Term Relief, Long-Term Struggle**, as based on the responses of the fisherfolk, the aid they received was short-term relief, but did not truly address their long-term struggles. The

researchers deduce that without more comprehensive, inclusive, and long-term government interventions, the fisherfolk and their coastal communities remain vulnerable to poverty and marginalization.

Aid Distribution Challenges and Budget Constraints. Based on the results gathered, many fisherfolk reported receiving aid while implementing the closed fishing policy. However, this does not change the fact that although the government provides aid such as food packs, its distribution does not come without challenges. One major issue is the lack of accurate identification of legitimate beneficiaries. In some cases, a lack of such leads to confusion, delays, or exclusion of genuinely affected fisherfolk. This inefficiency hurts the effectiveness of relief efforts and contributes to perceptions of unfairness and neglect among coastal communities.

“Kanang ayuda, dili man na permanente ba, naay uban makadawat, naay puy uban wala.” (The aid, it is not permanent. Sometimes some were able to receive it, while some were not able to.) (Participant 2)

According to Participant 2, government aid is often challenging to obtain or inconsistently distributed when it arrives, leaving many fisherfolk and their families struggling to meet basic needs. They feel neglected and excluded from decision-making processes that directly impact their livelihood. This stresses the need for a more transparent and inclusive system, where aid is timely, equitable, and reflective of the economic losses the fisherfolk must endure. The concerned regulating authority acknowledges this problem, the BFAR XI, as shown in Participant 6’s statement.

“Hindi naman sa delay mismo ng pag-provide ng assistance but in terms of identification kung sino ba talaga yung affected ng closed season. Doon lang medyo natagalan. Kasi, especially on the ground, may arise in conflict. Bakit hindi nasama ito or bakit wala sila ganun.” (It is not really about the delay in assisting but in terms of identification, of who truly are the affected by the closed season. So, that is where we experience delays. Conflict may arise, especially on the ground. Why wasn’t he included? Why weren’t they included?) (Participant 6)

This proves that the affected fisherfolk in Davao City face multiple challenges during the closed season, particularly regarding income loss and unequal aid distribution. Many feel disadvantaged by policies restricting their livelihood without sufficient and reliable support. Government assistance, often distributed inconsistently and unequally and perceived as unfair, fails to meet the needs of many affected fisherfolk. The fisherfolk cited that there are indeed difficulties in receiving aid. Participant 3 illustrated this too in his response.

“Nakasinati gyud ko og kalisdanan pero mao man gyud ni, dili man nako ni mapugos kay balaod man gyud na nila.” (I have experienced difficulty, but this is how it is. I cannot do anything about it because, after all, it is their policy.) (Participant 3)

The challenges in aid distribution, ranging from difficulty getting aid to identifying the rightful and legitimate beneficiaries, reveal the gap between policy intent and the on-the-ground realities. These inefficiencies contribute to a sense of neglect and deepen the vulnerability of the affected fisherfolk. Part of this problem may be attributed to the limited resources and logistical capacities of the concerned and implementing agencies, such as the BFAR XI. The researchers identified an irregularity or issue in the aid distribution and the budget constraints that may have caused some of the problems the fisherfolk are facing in the first place. It is revealed by Participant 6 that the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources XI has no separate budget intended solely for alternative livelihood or aid to the affected fisherfolk.

“BFAR has a minimal budget, and we do not have a separate budget for providing alternative livelihood for the Davao Gulf closed season affected individuals. Kasi iyong central office din very limited iyong pondo na binibigay so wala talagang sa BFAR XI alone na separate na pondo for the closed season.” (BFAR has a minimal budget, and we do not have a separate budget for the individuals affected by the Davao Gulf closed season. Because even the central office has a limited budget, there is no separate budget for the closed season here in BFAR XI.) (Participant 6)

Based on the response of Participant 6, the BFAR XI faces constraints in addressing the economic displacement of the affected fisherfolk in Davao Gulf during the closed season due to the absence of a specifically dedicated budget for this intervention. The existing funds are primarily allocated to broader programs such as capture aquaculture, leaving little to no budget for the fisherfolk during the closed season. In response to these

limitations, the BFAR XI has collaborated with other government agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). According to Mendez (2023), collaborative efforts ensure that the policies are carried out more effectively and in a way that addresses the needs of the target population, in this case, the fisherfolk. The researchers deduce that these inter-agency initiatives are done in good faith as they aim to extend support mechanisms to the affected fisherfolk. These collaborative efforts between the BFAR XI and other agencies, such as DA and DOLE, are attested to by Participant 6 in the following statements below:

“We must converge with other big national departments, like DSWD, DA, and DOLE. So, we started it last year, and then we were able to provide food pack assistance through the DSWD.” (Participant 6)

The challenges experienced by the affected fisherfolk relate to the theories used in this study. The Opportunity Structure Theory by Roberts (1968) explains that systemic barriers, not personal choices, drive the hardships of fisherfolk as their struggles and continued compliance despite frustration reflect how limited options, not mere unwillingness, shape their actions. This also applies to BFAR XI's case, which cited budget constraints as a significant hindrance to providing meaningful aid and support to the affected fisherfolk. Not only that, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory by Rogers (1987) also highlights how the difficulty faced by the fisherfolk in accessing alternative fishing grounds was because of several factors, namely economic feasibility and physical danger, which explains the policy discontent of fisherfolk due to the conflict between the policy and their realities. Lastly, the Social Capital Theory by Putnam (1995) sheds light on the challenges of aid distribution. According to him, social capital refers to the connections, engagements, trust, and norms of cooperation, enabling communities to work effectively. Hence, faulty listings reflect the need to enhance and reinforce social capital by fostering greater trust, effective coordination for the collective good, and more equitable access to support.

Adaptation Strategies of Fisherfolk to the Closed Fishing Policy

The fisherfolk affected by the closed fishing policy, in finding ways to compensate for the challenges they have experienced, especially regarding their financial instability, practice adaptation strategies such as pursuing other means of income-generating work. Two (2) themes present the fisherfolk's adaptation strategies and other factors related to their pursuit. They include fisherfolk's struggles pursuing alternative livelihoods, lack of awareness, and the perceived benefit of joining associations. Moreover, on the side of the BFAR XI, there are gaps in aid effectiveness and a lack of studies for further meaningful action.

Struggles with Alternative Livelihoods and Limited Support. Based on the data gathered by the researchers, with the implementation of the closed fishing policy in Davao Gulf, many fisherfolk face serious struggles in finding alternative livelihoods to sustain their families for three months. Fishing is often their only source of income, and entering into other types of work during the closure period is challenging. According to Nyavor, Amposah, Owusu, and Boateng (2023), fisherfolks also need to enjoy alternative and additional livelihood training to promote economic stability alongside the limited and short-term government relief efforts provided. This requires the government to establish supportive conditions by providing the requisite facilities and logistics to train and enhance the fisherfolk's capacity to adopt alternative livelihoods as an effective and meaningful adaptive strategy.

However, in the participants' responses, they did not attest to any government-led or endorsed alternative livelihood initiative. The most common pattern observable is that the fisherfolk resort to manual labor or working in construction in their capacities. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 all report the same experiences when the closed season is underway, that is, to work in construction, with some of them even facing challenges in pursuing such work, either due to age (Participants 1 and 3), lack of skills (Participant 1), and lack of education (Participant 4).

“Ako, tung closed season diri, nangapply mi anang mason ba. Nasuko gane akong anak kay nganong nag apil-apil pa daw ko nga tiguwang na. Alangan! Wala man koy matrabahuan diri. Unya pag abot didto sa among gi-applyan kay wa man pud mi gipangdawat kay kamao ra mi mumasa-masa pero kanang mga hard labor di na mi kamao. Wala gihapon mi nadawat, nanguli mi tanan nga walay trabaho.” (When the closed season is here, we apply for jobs as masons. My child even got angry at me because I am still looking for a job despite my age. Of

course! I do not have any other work here. We were not hired when we arrived because we only knew how to knead, not hard labor. So, we were not hired and all went home, jobless.) (Participant 1)

“Mudiskarte gyud ka. Bisan unsa na lang gyud kutob lang sa makwartahan ug mapanginabuhian sama sa mu-sideline og trabaho sa construction. Hilabi na karon nga naa na koy edad, diperensya naman gyud.” (You have to be strategic. I will do anything so long as I can earn money and live off of it like sideline work in construction. Especially now that I am old, there is no difference now.) (Participant 3)

“Usahay mag-helper ka, tagagunit ka og pala kay mao naman lang gyud na ang pwede nga trabaho kay wala man tay grado. Iingon na lang gyud nga wala tay grado. Ngano muingon pa man nga naa tay grado nga akong kaya kutob sa panagat ra?” (Sometimes you can just work as a helper, shoveling. That’s all that I can do since I don’t have an education. I’ll say it as it is, I have no education. What’s the point of saying otherwise when fishing is all I can do?) (Participant 4)

This observable pattern reveals a form of adaptation strategy among the fisherfolk. However, the challenges related to age, skills, and education reflect the structural barriers that limit the fisherfolk from fully exploiting the sustainability and inclusivity of these alternative means. It is also worth noting that doing manual labor does not rule out the dangers it poses to the individual worker. This is shown by Participant 5 in his description of his alternative job while the closed season is in effect.

“Parehas anang mangatop ka ug mamintura ka anang mga C purlins... Init kaayo musaka unya munaog na pud ka kay mahutdan ka og pintura sa ibabaw. Maghinay-hinay gyud ka kay basin madisgrasya ka...” (For instance, you are roofing, you are painting C purlins, it is scorching hot, and you have to go up and down because you are out of paint up there. You have to be careful because you might end up in an accident.) (Participant 5)

According to Justice, Mensah, Sandylove, and Jeffrey (2020), because their other means of income were insufficient to sustain them throughout the closed season, fisherfolk who relied only on fishing for their food and money were economically disadvantaged. Based on the participants’ responses, the researchers gathered that their earnings when they were working in construction and doing manual labor were significantly less in comparison to the earnings they got when they were fishing. This creates another problem for the fisherfolk. Not only were their usual and familiar livelihood prohibited for three months, but the jobs they undertook did not compensate for their income losses. This is apparent in the responses of Participants 2 and 5.

“Kung naa ka sa construction, permanente man ang sahod, pero og sa lawud ka, mubigla ang kwarta... Mas labaw gyud ang panagat kay bulto ang kita.” (If you’re in construction, the salary is permanent. But the thing is, if you fish, the money comes in big. Fishing is greater because the earnings comes in bulk.) (Participant 2)

“Mas gwapo ang panagat kaysa construction. Pananglitan makakuha mi og tres mil kilos, naa na mi porsyento ana gikan sa tag iya.” (Fishing is better than construction. For instance, we get three thousand kilos, we get our share from our boss.) (Participant 5)

On the side of the concerned regulating authority in this matter, BFAR XI reports that the government has offered many alternative livelihood initiatives. However, these efforts do not cover much of the affected fisherfolk population because they are limited to a very few slots. They include the provision of livestock, such as chickens and goats, and crops, such as fruits and vegetables. There is also the Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers or TUPAD, a Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) initiative, which provides 10 to 30 days of short-term employment to vulnerable sectors through community-based projects, offering regional minimum wage to boost economic resilience (Respicio, 2024). The researchers noted that these initiatives, as stated by Participant 6, were not attested to by Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

“We have already started coordinating with the Department of Agriculture to provide crops and livestock, and they have already committed to provide chicken and goats. Pero for 80 lang siya. And then we still have to follow up with the concerned office down there regarding providing crops, like vegetables and fruits... We also partner with DOLE through the TUPAD Program, which has 100 slots for affected individuals. Ang maximum nila na working days is ten days, and then minimum wage is, I think, P481 iyon siya? So, at least naay P4,810, no? Dako na pud siya nga tabang. (We already started coordinating with the Department of Agriculture to

provide crops and livestock, and they have already committed to providing chickens and goats. However, it is only for 80 individuals. We still need to follow up with the concerned offices providing crops, like vegetables and fruits. We also have a partnership with DOLE through the TUPAD Program. We have 100 slots for the affected individuals. Their maximum working days are 10 days, and the minimum wage, I think, is P481? So, at least they have P4,810. It is a big help already.) (Participant 6)

Lack of Awareness, Association Benefits, and Aid Effectiveness Gaps. Deriving from the fisherfolk's responses, the central theme was how many of them face challenges in accessing support due to insufficient information, minimal engagement with organizations that could help them, and the inconsistent implementation of support programs. According to Rashid (2020), there are various perceptions of the closed fishing policy due to a lack of awareness, understanding, proper dissemination, and funding aid. In response to that, according to Asio, Ramirez, Garcia, and Gulac (2024), the government and other concerned agencies should ensure improved access to support or financial assistance, strengthen implementation, encourage community participation in fisheries management, and provide locally designed education and incentives for skill and technology innovations for the fisherfolk.

Another form of support program for the fisherfolk was provided for by Belardo (2025), who proposes that the government should provide educational scholarships for the children of the fisherfolk to ease the financial burden they endure, allowing them to allocate their limited income for daily necessities instead. He also proposed that, in compensation for their income loss, alternative livelihood initiatives such as seaweed farming, handicraft production, souvenir-making, and tourism-related ventures may also be encouraged within the coastal community during off-peak fishing seasons, or in the case of the fishers in Davao City, during the implementation of the closed season. However, in this study, the researchers gathered that the fisherfolk participants expressed that they were unaware of any formal government programs to provide alternative livelihood or financial assistance during the closed fishing season. Participant 3 expressed a poignant sentiment that, due to the absence of a support program for the affected fisherfolk, when the closed season is underway, he feels it is every man for himself.

“Wala koy alam ana. Diskarte ra gyud. Karong June ani, sugod na og iyahay og diskarte ug asa padulong.” (I am not aware of any of that. I have to rely on my strategies. This June, it is every man for himself on what is next.) (Participant 3)

Without any objective and comprehensive support program for the fisherfolk, Participant 1 offered thoughtful recommendations to address the gaps in assistance and the fisherfolk's realities.

“Mas gwapo unta nga pag mag-ingon sila nga mag closed season sila, dapat tabangan ug hatagan nila og higayon o trabaho ang mga mananagat pangdependa lang sa pang adlaw-adlaw namong gasto.” (It would be better if they help and give job opportunities to the fisherfolk during the closed season to sustain our day-to-day needs.) (Participant 1)

The researchers gathered that the only form of support mentioned by the fisherfolk was the distribution of food packs, often including rice, canned goods, and instant coffee. While helpful for short-term consumption, participants consistently described these as insufficient to sustain families during the three-month-long closed season. Some participants also said that some fisherfolk were given pump boats, which could fish near the shore and are not prohibited by the policy, so long as it does not employ ring and bag nets. However, those working in commercial fishing vessels received nothing.

“Mao ra man to pag closed season, nakadawat mi og bugas ug tinapa, mga food packs.” (That is it, when it is closed season, we only receive rice and sardines and food packs.) (Participant 1)

“Mao ra man tung bugas. Ang katong uban, nakadawat og pambot. Kami nga mga taga-lantsa, wala man.” (That was it, they gave rice. Some were given pump boats, but we who work in fishing vessels, there was nothing for us.) (Participant 3)

This disparity between different types of fisherfolk points to inconsistencies in aid distribution criteria, further reinforcing the notion of ineffective program implementation. Interestingly, one participant mentioned that being

part of a fisherfolk association provided some access to training related to fisheries and coastal resource management. According to Amadu, Armah, and Aheto (2021), being part of a fisherfolk association or group increases the chances of achieving a more resilient livelihood. These associations provide avenues for knowledge exchange and empower leaders to represent their members' interests in consequential concerns. However, as the researchers gathered, these opportunities were again limited in scope and not uniformly experienced by all participants.

“Naa man sa fisherfolk association, mga tudlo-tudlo bahin sa pandagat.” (There was support in the fisherfolk association. They were about training on fishing.) (Participant 2)

On another note, Participant 7 from BFAR XI noted the benefit of existing fisherfolk associations in facilitating aid coordination, but did not confirm any widespread or consistent training provision beyond sporadic activities.

“Yes, mas easier siya kung may fisherfolk association kasi it would be easier for us to directly coordinate kung naay existing association, cooperatives, or alliances kay at least dali makapatapok, dali namo sila ma-identify, mas dali makahatag og provision. So, mas beneficial siya kung naay existing association, organizations, or grupo.” (Yes, it would be much easier if there were a fisherfolk association. It makes it easier for us to coordinate directly if there is an existing association, cooperative, or alliance; at least we can gather them quickly, identify them easily, and assist faster. It is more beneficial if there is an existing association, organization, or group.) (Participant 7)

This means that belonging to an association may be a key determinant of access to information and the aid itself. However, it also raises concerns regarding excluding unaffiliated or isolated fisherfolk. Even among implementing authorities, in this case, BFAR XI, there is an admitted lack of assessment regarding the effectiveness of the available support programs. The implementation is in its early stages, with no precise data to back claims of impact, sustainability, or effectiveness. These focus on a reactive rather than proactive response in aid delivery, without consistent monitoring and feedback mechanisms, risk the policy of becoming tokenistic, where it is based on fulfilling policy mandates on paper while falling short in practice.

“We cannot say kay wala mi study nga naay positive impact. However, when we say support, at least meron na kaming nabigay na support sa kanila to address their basic needs.” (We cannot say since we do not have any specific study indicating a positive impact. But when we say support, at least we already gave them something to address their basic needs.) (Participant 6)

“Mag-study pa gyud ta ani kasi lisod man kung kita mutubag na it is effective pero wala tay study conducted or information directly from the fisherfolk on how effective it is... At the end, kung magkaroon ta ng resulta with our monitoring and planning, sa atong gihatag nga provision, diha ma-decide-an nato kung talagang enough ba or kulang ba and appropriate nga pwede talagang maka-sustain sa ilaha for the period of closed season.” (We still need to study this because it would be improper if we were to say it is effective, but we have no study conducted to derive information directly from the fisherfolk on how effective it is. At the end, if we have a result with our monitoring and planning on the provisions we have given, only then can we decide if the support we give is enough or lacking, or what should be the appropriate support to give that could sustain them for the period of the closed season.) (Participant 7)

Regarding the Davao Gulf closed season initiatives, the researchers could deduce an apparent lack of meaningful support programs to benefit the affected fisherfolk. The fisherfolk only reported on the food packs given to them. They were unaware of any sustainable support programs in the form of alternative livelihoods designed to compensate for the income losses they experienced during the closed season. The BFAR XI also opined that the effectiveness of their supposed support programs, in this case, the food pack aid and the limited slots for their collaborative efforts with their parent department, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Labor and Employment, is not yet backed by studies indicating the fisherfolk's sentiments.

The theories used in this study relate to the adaptation strategies employed and the many related matters brought about by the affected fisherfolk through implementing the closed fishing policy. The Opportunity Structure Theory by Roberts (1968) perfectly captures how the fisherfolk's pursuit of better work opportunities was limited

by deeply ingrained socioeconomic barriers, namely poverty and lack of education or appropriate skills. Referencing Roberts, this is not a case of their shortcomings but instead of the structural barriers they have long been subject to. Another one is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory by Rogers (1987), which reveals how the fisherfolk have already adopted working in construction as their apparent alternative livelihood option during the closed season. However, the question of fully adopting working in construction for good remains unlikely, as the earnings they get from it are significantly less. Moreover, for the last one, the Social Capital Theory by Putnam (1995) reveals the benefits of joining fishing associations; however, this is not uniformly practiced by the fisher participants. Lastly, the lack of studies by BFAR XI on the fisherfolk reflects the need to strengthen institutional-community networks, as trust and engagement can lead to more informed and responsive support initiatives.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This section covers the key findings and reflections derived by the researchers from the study, presenting how the affected fisherfolk respond to the challenges of the policy of the closed fishing season, as well as the adaptation strategies they employ to deal with the same.

Conclusion

This study uses phenomenology, a qualitative research method, to derive participant data. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to accurately capture and gather, using their own words, their experiences, challenges, and insights on the closed fishing policy. The participants were five (5) fisherfolk members affected by the closed fishing policy and two (2) BFAR XI officials.

The researchers conclude that the closed fishing policy significantly affects the fisherfolk who work in commercial fishing vessels or whose fishing operations are prohibited by the closed season. They experience financial instability, affecting their ability to sustain their families. There is also widespread policy discontent as they perceive the closed season as greatly disadvantageous to their livelihood. The tension between the policy's intent and fisherfolk's realities is evident in their limited access to other fishing grounds, which are known but costly and hazardous to pursue. Regarding the aid afforded to the fisherfolk during this period, they reported receiving food packs. However, they attested to this being more of a short-term relief rather than a practical aid for their long-term struggle. The researchers also identified challenges in aid distribution and, more importantly, the budget constraints faced by BFAR XI.

On their adaptation strategies, the fisherfolk resort to working in construction. However, the earnings they get from it are significantly less than the earnings they usually get from fishing. There is also a certain lack of awareness among the fisherfolk of any meaningful government support programs available. The cause for this lack of awareness is that very few programs are available, with some being limited to only a few slots. The positive impact of joining fisherfolk associations is also stressed, but not uniformly pursued yet. The BFAR XI also concedes that they have not yet conducted any study on the fisherfolk's experiences that would help them craft policy improvements and adjustments.

The Opportunity Structure Theory by Roberts (1968) revealed that the challenges faced by the fisherfolk are not due to their shortcomings but instead by the deeply rooted socioeconomic barriers, such as poverty and lack of education or skills. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory by Rogers (1987), on the other hand, reveals that the fisherfolk had already adopted the "innovation" of working in construction; however, it is unlikely that they are full-time construction workers, as their earnings were significantly less. Lastly, the Social Capital Theory by Putnam (1995) highlights how the social capital or relationship between the fisherfolk and BFAR XI needs to be strengthened to achieve their collective goals more effectively.

Implications

In deriving the results of this study, the researchers could deduce that the closed fishing season policy is not sensitive and inclusive to the cause of the fisherfolk and affects them negatively; thus, the researchers declare

that the need for policy adjustments is warranted. With the fisherfolk experiencing difficulty in pursuing other means of livelihood and citing barriers such as lack of education and skills, the concerned regulating authority, BFAR XI, as well as other interested organizations or government agencies, should listen to their sentiments in crafting comprehensive, sustainable, and appropriate support programs. In echoing the proposals of Belardo (2025), the government's support programs should also include educational scholarships to the fisherfolk's children, as funding their children's education is one of their main priorities in budgeting their fishing earnings. Alternative livelihoods such as seaweed farming, handicraft production, souvenir-making, and tourism-related ventures could be undertaken by BFAR XI, in collaboration with the right agencies, to assist the affected fisherfolk.

The researchers also recognize the plight of BFAR XI officials in their call for budget allocation, as they cite receiving little to no budget dedicated explicitly to funding aid and support programs for the affected fisherfolk. We believe that the national government should appropriate more funds to BFAR XI to better equip them in their interventions and other meaningful support programs to the fisherfolk affected by the closed season, as they serve as one of the most resilient sectors in our society and contribute significantly to our overall economy.

As a final reflection, the closed fishing season is not a bad policy as it is a consequential and necessary step towards a sustainable marine environment in Davao Gulf. However, as we put efforts into protecting the small pelagic fishes in the area, we shall also protect the fisherfolk whose livelihoods are severely impacted. Finally, we, the researchers, sincerely hope this study serves as a call for meaningful action that bridges the gap between policy intent and the realities of the affected fisherfolk.

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