



## Moving beyond financial value in seafood commodity chains

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### ABSTRACT

Emerging forms of governance and many academic analyses of seafood commodity chains currently have a strong focus on financial value, transmitted in a linear ‘vertical’ fashion from fisher, through traders to eventual consumers. This Brief Communication argues that the social dimensions of value must be given explicit attention in analysis if seafood commodity chains are to be made more equitable and sustainable in changing governance contexts. The paper draws on evidence from selected seafood commodity chains across the Philippines, demonstrating the range of co-produced social values that are of equal or greater significance than financial value. Fishers, traders and consumers, all generate multiple social values that shape the nature and outcomes of seafood commodity chains. In contrast to forms of fisheries governance that focus exclusively on financial or ecological values, the paper suggests that integrating multiple social values into the governance of seafood commodity chains, as well as at the site of production, should become a core focus of research and policy.

### 1. Introduction

Increasing demand for seafood has converged with social and economic changes in coastal sites of production to dramatically intensify seafood trade. In response, a growing academic literature has tried to examine the causes, natures and consequences of expanding seafood trade [1–4], with a growing subset of this research analysing fisheries trade in terms of ‘value chains’ or ‘commodity chains’ [5–8]. Commodity chains are a distinct field of study, with a wide variety of perspectives, approaches and terminologies informed by different disciplinary and epistemological underpinnings [9–11]. However, the approach taken to analyse seafood commodity chains has so far mostly followed a fairly narrow subset of commodity chain approaches. Such analyses have a strong focus on *financial value*, transmitted in a linear ‘vertical’ fashion from fisher, through traders, exporters and importers through to eventual consumers. The emphasis in such studies is frequently on understanding how financial value is distributed within the commodity chain, and on investigating opportunities for actors to *upgrade* their position in the commodity chain in order to obtain greater financial value. For example, a recent major project by the FAO on fishery and aquaculture value chains focused largely on economic upgrading and prices [12].

Environmental governance practices have also shifted from a conventional focus on place-based measures (quotas, gear restrictions, seasonal closures, protected areas etc.) to a focus on seafood trade and

financial value through market-based tools such as certification and eco-labelling, catch documentation and traceability (CDT) [13]. However, prioritising value as financial in such analysis and governance practice has largely come at the expense of understanding the contextual, relational production of varied social values along seafood commodity chains. This has particular implications for the coastal poor who sit at the extractive end of commodity chains, and who are most vulnerable from changing governance approaches as well as dwindling fish stocks.

A growing field of social research has highlighted the importance of multiple values in small-scale fisheries. Literature on ‘interactive fisheries governance’ [14], for example, has shown how effective governance needs to acknowledge and incorporate multiple, often conflicting values among different groups. In particular, scholars have used the concept of wellbeing as a way to frame the multiple values affiliated with small-scale fisheries, arguing that wellbeing goes well beyond financial values to include material, subjective and relational dimensions [15,16]. However, while emerging social research on seafood commodity chains is expanding rapidly e.g. [11,17] there remains less emphasis on explicitly integrating the idea of multiple values into work on seafood commodity chains. This Brief Communication therefore stresses that not only do multiple forms of value matter along seafood commodity chains over time, but that they are also produced in a relational manner and must be understood in this context. Emphasising the importance of historical and social perspectives on commodity

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chains, the paper argues that the relational dimensions of value must be given explicit attention in analysis if value chains are to be rendered more equitable and sustainable in changing governance contexts.

The paper suggests that both commodity chain studies of fisheries and market-oriented governance practices could benefit from a broader and more contextual engagement with the idea of value. It specifically shows the significance of taking a broader view of ‘value’ and investigating how such values are changing in different contexts across scales and geographies. Rather than using the commodity chain as a formal tool with specific quantitative assessments of financial value, the paper uses the notion as a heuristic lens to more deeply contextualise and rethink the complex character of value production along the chain. The paper does so by drawing on notions of value from selected seafood commodity chains across the Philippines. The aim is to highlight how the commodity chain transmits not only financial value along the chain, but also expresses – as commodities move in and out of different social contexts, and across varied biophysical locations [18] – a range of other values (socio-cultural, political or otherwise) that are as significant as financial value but in different ways. Anthropologists, for example, have long argued that economic exchange practices are always intertwined within social relationships that give them meaning [19,20]. If, as Appadurai [20] noted, all commodities have ‘social lives’ intertwined with both capitalist and non-capitalist relations, meanings and practices, then because these vary over time and space, the production of value within and between things and peoples is contingent on specific histories, ecologies, peoples and places [21: 15]. The varied values of seafood in trade are therefore ‘produced and related to or embedded within the larger sets of social relations’ along value chains [22, 20: 15].

The Philippines is a site of particular significance for the study of seafood commodity chains for several reasons, including: its heavy reliance on fisheries for the livelihoods of millions of coastal poor; its role as a globally significant producer of fishery products [23]; the high number of governance arrangements pioneered and implemented in the country [24]; the exceptionally high marine biodiversity [25]; and the strong threats to the marine environment [26]. Examples are drawn from specific seafood commodity chains in the published literature.

## 2. Fishers

At the extractive end of commodity chains in the Philippines, poor coastal fishers’ ‘transactional’ engagement is most often represented by a figure of financial value, such as the beach price obtained by the fisher [7], or to the proportion of overall financial value obtained by the fisher [27]. From this perspective, fishers become closely identified with the financial aspects of seafood trade, and can be labelled as ‘price-takers’ [8]. These depictions are not inaccurate – fishers at the extractive end of value chains across the country face a range of significant challenges to generate income, many of which are site and region specific. A lack of adequate post-harvest facilities, for example, means fishers struggle to add financial value to their products and remain subject to the prices offered by traders.

However, such a focus on direct financial value reduces the complexity of different roles, values and ideas involved in the act of fishing. At a broader level, for example, poor fishers at the ‘extractive end’ see fishing not simply in terms of ‘Peso value’ but also relative to the idea of livelihood (*hanapbuhay*) and food – indirectly through sales of fish but also through the ‘use-value’ of fish in terms of direct consumption by fishers. Often fishers will trade the best-quality fish for income and rice, and eat the cheaper, smaller varieties [28]. From a socio-cultural perspective, the value of fisheries production can also be valued through its linkages to reciprocity and sharing, such as how it can mediate relationships between fishers and other community members [29]. Russell and Alexander [30], for example, highlight the pressure on commercial fishers to give away portions of their catch among different members of the community. Giving away fish can be emblematic of other values such as masculinity, as in many fishing communities

generosity and fishing ability are significant markers of a gendered social status [31]. Fishing can also be valued in other non-economic ways: fishers have a variety of socio-cultural motives for fishing, such as independence [32].

Fishers also experience changing values that affect how they participate in seafood commodity chains. The mobulid ray (*Mobulidae*) fishery in the Bohol Sea, for example, has changed dramatically over the course of several decades. Originally, this fishery was based around the capture of rays, for the local consumption of meat. Since the 1980s, however, the mobulid fishery has transformed to one based around the export of gill plates, ultimately to China. It has therefore shifted from a local fishery commodity chain where the relative emphasis was on the use value of food consumption for local households, to one where the relative emphasis is almost completely now focused on a much more discrete exchange value, for the correspondingly discrete gill plates [33].

Issues of gender (and other social relations such as ethnicity) also factor into and strongly inform the production of social value at the extractive end of the commodity chain. In the fisheries sector, women’s significant roles in the pre- and post-harvest sectors have been well-established, as well as their role in gleaning [34,35]. Many of women’s and children’s labour contributions (e.g. gutting/cleaning/drying of fish, net mending, marketing) are relatively neglected in decision-making processes, and do not entitle them to the same rights as male fishers [36]. Crucially, the capitalist relations of production and exchange that underpin commodity chains often also render invisible and undervalued the unpaid female labour of reproduction, child care and other domestic chores that allow male fishers to go out to sea.

## 3. Labour and trading

Beyond the extraction of fish, individual roles and working conditions are changing, and can intensify along the chain. Small-scale capture fisheries, with smaller capital and crews, tend to operate as petty commodity producers, with kin relations playing significant roles in employment and also in terms of understandings of how fishing success is valued [37]. By contrast, the large-scale commercial fisheries that developed in the Philippines through the twentieth century [38] tend to operate on principles of firms or corporations, with contracts, wages and non-personalised crew recruitment [30]. Similarly, as large-scale aquaculture becomes more prominent across the Philippines (e.g. for milkfish, tilapia and prawns), fishers who transition to this work tend to become more subject to the broader financial goals and values of the company. The transition from capture fisheries to aquaculture also has potentially negative consequences for nutritional values of fish for consumers [39].

Multiple values in seafood commodity chains are also expressed through the diverse roles of traders. Traders are often emphasised to be the actors who extract the largest portions of financial value in fisheries commodity chains [7,27,40] and are sometimes consequently labelled as exploitative. Traders do indeed obtain greater proportions of financial value in many seafood commodity chains, and incidents of extreme exploitation have been well-documented, for example in the notorious *muro-ami* fishery of the 1980s [38], as well as more recent concerns over forced labour [41]. Yet the role of traders also generates significant value for the broader livelihoods of poor fishers. In particular, they frequently provide credit to fishers in an environment where other forms of credit (e.g. from the government or private banking institutions) are inaccessible because of stringent lending requirements, or are only offered at very high interest rates. For many fishers, the credit offered by traders is an important means to begin a new fishing enterprise. In the rural Philippines, such relationships are typically not confined to the provision of credit for fishing, but can extend as a social safety net during periods of financial hardship. For example, fishers in the live reef fish trade in Palawan frequently request loans from their buyers for rice and other essential purchases if there is bad weather

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