

# Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing in Asia-Pacific



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## OVERVIEW

The Asia-Pacific region is a vital contributor to global fisheries, accounting for approximately 54% of the world's marine fisheries catch.<sup>1</sup> However, the region also faces a significant threat from Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, which undermines economic stability, environmental sustainability, and food security. IUU fishing accounts for an estimated 11–26 million tonnes of fish annually, valued at USD 26–50 billion.<sup>2</sup> The Pacific Islands, in particular, reported an annual loss of USD 333 million to IUU fishing activities between 2017 and 2019, which demonstrates the scale of the issue.<sup>3</sup> ASEAN reported an economic loss of USD 6 billion in 2019, causing considerable damage to the economies of its fishing nations.<sup>4</sup>

## Key Messages

- **Inclusive Policy Development:** Engage fisherfolk, private sector, and relevant NGOs to ensure policies address ground-level constraints and priorities.
- **Resource Mobilization:** Secure international funding, reform national laws, and enhance enforcement through interagency coordination.
- **Capacity Development:** Provide capacity development for fisheries officers and fishing communities on surveillance, data collection, and enforcement using relevant MCS tools and systems.
- **Monitoring & Accountability:** Develop a regional MERLA framework and build national capacity for effective monitoring and reporting of the implementation of IUU policies.
- **Governance & Compliance:** Tackle corruption, realign policies to international frameworks and best practices, and establish clear implementation plans to strengthen fisheries management.

1. FAO. (2024). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2024: Blue Transformation in action*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

2. Suherman, A., Santosa, M. A., Wijayanto, D., Sunoko, R., & Juwana, S. (2020). *The Eradication of IUU Fishing in Indonesia for Economic Fisheries*. Saintek Perikanan: Indonesian Journal of Fisheries Science and Technology; Vol 16, No 3 (2020): SAINTEK PERIKANANDO - 10.14710/ljfst.16.3.154-164. <https://ejournal.undip.ac.id/index.php/saintek/article/view/32529>

3. MRAG Asia Pacific. (2021). *The Quantification of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing in the Pacific Islands Region – a 2020 Update* (p. vii). <https://www.ffa.int/download/the-quantification-of-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-iuu-fishing-in-the-pacific-islands-region/>

4. Lee, W. C., & Viswanathan, K. K. (2020). *Framework for Managing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in ASEAN*. *Asian Fisheries Science*, 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.33997/j.afs.2020.33.1.008>

# THE THREATS OF IUU FISHING

The consequences of IUU fishing extend across multiple security dimensions. Environmentally, it accelerates habitat destruction, depletes biodiversity, and weakens marine ecosystems, necessitating stronger coastal protection measures.<sup>5</sup> In terms of climate security, unsustainable fishing diminishes the ocean's ability to regulate carbon. Corporate initiatives by major tuna companies like Thai Union and Bolton Group aim to counteract this by committing to a 40% reduction in emissions by 2030.<sup>6</sup>

Maritime security is another critical concern, as

IUU fishing often involves encroachments on EEZs and facilitates transnational crimes like smuggling, forced labor and human trafficking, particularly among migrant workers who often face exploitative living and working conditions on fishing vessels. The Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA)<sup>7</sup> remains a key international instrument to prevent, deter, and eliminate IUU fishing by denying vessels engaged in such activities access to ports. Additionally, IUU fishing disproportionately affects small-scale fishers, widening socioeconomic disparities and undermining efforts toward poverty alleviation.

## POLICY GAPS

Despite the existence of various international and regional policy frameworks, significant gaps remain in policy development, implementation and monitoring. These challenges hinder the effective enforcement of measures aimed at combating IUU fishing in the Asia-Pacific region.

### 1. Policy Formulation and Adoption

A major challenge in addressing IUU fishing is the lack of ratification of key international frameworks. While agreements such as the PSMA and the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (C188) provide crucial legal mechanisms to prevent IUU fishing, several countries in the region have yet to ratify and implement these frameworks. This limits international cooperation and weakens enforcement mechanisms across borders.

Unlike the ASEAN Guidelines and Plan of Action (PoA), and the Pacific's Niue Treaty Subsidiary

Agreement and Parties to the Nauru Agreement, where sub-regional agreements provide coordinated fisheries management and enforcement. South Asia lacks a dedicated sub-regional legal framework to address IUU fishing despite having national policies and bilateral agreements like between Sri Lanka and India. This absence of a subregional legal instrument results in fragmented enforcement efforts and gaps in monitoring fishing activities across national jurisdictions.

### 2. Implementation and Enforcement

Despite the existence of international and regional frameworks, many countries struggle with the contextualization and enforcement of these policies. Legal provisions often lack uniformity, leading to inconsistent interpretations and applications of laws. For instance, some ASEAN countries face challenges in enforcing the PSMA

5. Forum Fisheries Agency. (2024), FFA Trade and Industry News – September-October 2024. [https://www.ffa.int/download/ffa-trade-and-industry-news-2024/?ind=1732147523309&filename=FFA\\_TIN\\_Sep-Oct\\_2024.pdf&wpdmdl=33859&refresh=679946a1691121738098337](https://www.ffa.int/download/ffa-trade-and-industry-news-2024/?ind=1732147523309&filename=FFA_TIN_Sep-Oct_2024.pdf&wpdmdl=33859&refresh=679946a1691121738098337)

6. UNMN. (2024). Thailand Migration Report 2024. United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand. <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/thailand-migration-report-2024.pdf>

7. Chapsos, I., & Hamilton, S. (2019). Illegal fishing and fisheries crime as a transnational organized crime in Indonesia. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 22(3), 255–273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-018-9329-8>

due to differences in legal definitions, enforcement mechanisms, and administrative procedures. These inconsistencies create loopholes that allow IUU fishing to persist, as illegal operators exploit regulatory gaps. Moreover, limited inter-agency coordination within countries often results in overlapping responsibilities and weak enforcement.

Another major challenge is resource mobilization in finance, human capacity, and access to technology. Many countries lack adequate financial resources to sustain enforcement operations, modernize fisheries monitoring infrastructure, and train personnel. This financial gap prevents governments from investing in Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS) systems, such as vessel monitoring systems (VMS) and automatic identification systems (AIS).

Additionally, a shortage of trained personnel—including fisheries inspectors, port managers, and policymakers—hinders effective law enforcement. Many enforcement agencies also lack technical capacity in communication systems and electronic monitoring, further weakening oversight. Infrastructural deficiencies at ports, landing sites, and fisheries control centers further complicate enforcement, allowing IUU operators to evade detection.

### 3. Policy Monitoring and Evaluation

Many countries lack an effective framework for tracking compliance, measuring impact, and adapting policies as needed. While various international agreements require periodic reporting and assessments, national governments often lack the technical expertise and institutional capacity to collect and analyze data efficiently. Many fisheries agencies also struggle with maintaining up-to-date records on vessel activity, making it difficult to track IUU fishing trends over

time. Without a well-structured monitoring system, policy decisions are often reactive rather than proactive, limiting their long-term effectiveness.

Implementing Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting, Learning, and Adaptation (MERLA) framework requires trained personnel with specialized expertise in data collection, reporting, and analysis. Without adequate human resources, policy monitoring remains weak, reducing accountability and limiting the ability to refine strategies based on real-world outcomes. Many governments also fail to establish feedback loops that allow lessons learned from policy evaluations to be integrated into future decision-making processes.



## RISKS OF INACTION

1

### Economic Consequences

Continued IUU fishing will devastate small-scale fishers, reduce government revenues, and weaken national economies.

2

### Environmental Degradation

Depleting fish stocks and marine habitat destruction will accelerate ecosystem collapse.

3

### Social and Political Unrest

Marginalized groups will face worsening economic instability, exacerbating poverty and inequality.

4

### Maritime Insecurity

The expansion of illicit fishing activities will fuel regional conflicts and organized crime networks.

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## R.1 Contextualisation of International and regional policy frameworks

R.1.1 - National governments should institutionalize inclusive and open consultations with fisherfolk communities, the private sector, academia and NGOs to ensure that international and regional policies are contextualized within National Plans of Action (NPOA) for IUU fishing and reflect ground-level constraints.

R.1.2 The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) should establish a regional cooperation mechanism to combat IUU fishing, leveraging the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) as a platform for legal and policy alignment among Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

## R.2 Resource mobilization for effective policy implementation

R.2.1 Regional intergovernmental organizations such as ASEAN, SAARC, and the Pacific Islands Forum should secure increased financial contributions from international stakeholders like the EU, World Bank, and ADB to enhance policy ratification, regional enforcement infrastructure, capacity development for fisheries officers, and surveillance programs.

R.2.2 national governments should identify resource limitations, strategically reallocate domestic resources for policy implementation, and engage with regional organizations for financial and technical assistance, while integrating independent third-party organizations to ensure transparency and accuracy in reporting mechanisms.

R.2.3 Within six months of policy ratification, national fisheries agencies should establish training programs for fisheries officers and local communities, incorporating GPS tracking, mobile surveillance applications, and illegal fishing identification tools, while ensuring policies include technological and equipment requirements for compliance.

R.2.4 national governments should reform and update legal frameworks to align with regional and international policies, conduct annual reviews of fisheries laws, and enhance enforcement through interagency coordination via a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) among key agencies and stakeholders.

R.2.5 FAO legal experts should provide technical guidance and training to law enforcement officers and fisheries managers on PSMA interpretation, while national governments facilitate accurate translations into local languages and conduct biannual updates to inform local governments and communities on policy development capacity-building initiatives.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (cont.)

## R.3 Enhance monitoring, evaluation and reporting of policy implementation

R.3.1 Regional organisations such as FFA, WCPFC and IOTC should develop an integrated MERLA Framework to go with the policy, establishing the parameters and financing mechanism for policy implementation, and monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the status of implementation at different levels.

R.3.2 Regional and International organizations must include financing mechanisms to provide capacity development for national MERLA officers, to bring their knowledge about MERLA mechanisms to an international level so that their reporting capacity is up to par. This capacity development will at the same time assist regional organisations monitor implementation with ease and at expected level.

R.3.3 National governments must develop a national implementation plan with specific milestones and timeframe within 6 months to implement ratified policy, the plan must include local communities where necessary.

R.3.4 National governments should identify the appropriate personnel within 6 months for capacity development and to carry out monitoring and evaluation activities and at the same time provide advice to the national governments on progress made and update regional organisations on implementation rate.

R.3.5 National governments must identify national fisheries personnel and establish a working group, who will provide data to MERLA officers.

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