

**Fisher-Buyer Trade Relations: An Oppressive Reality****Max Teody T. Quimilat**

**Abstract.** *The Philippines is a country with rich marine resources. Many of its people rely on fishing as a way of life. Even with its abundance, people relying on fishing are still stacked below the poverty line. This bounty of resources did not become advantageous to the fishing communities. Several interventions from local government units and non-government organizations have taken place, yet the problem of the fisher's well-being has been stagnant. This study sought to understand the fisher-buyer trade relations and how they become problematic and favorable to the buyer. This is a manifestation of the dependency theory in the local communities. Fisher folk and buyers were interviewed in a semi-structured in-depth interview to solicit data on the mechanism of the system. The system was found to be problematic and unfair to the front-liners in the fishing industry. Several solutions were proposed through the years yet many have failed. Successful cooperative formation in the fishing communities in other parts of the world could be an answer to this plague in the Philippines even if it has also been challenged through the years.*

**Keywords:** Dependency theory, patron client system, small-scale fisheries, poverty alleviation, fishermen's cooperative, social responsibility, anthropology, Philippines, Asia

**Introduction**

The Philippines is an archipelago and is surrounded by bodies of water. The country prides itself with the richness of marine resources. In fact, a couple of decades ago, it was recognized as the 11<sup>th</sup> top fishing nation in the world (Ali, 1997). Fishing has been a primary source of living for many in this country as its catches in 2003 comprised small pelagic (59.6%), tunas (36.2%) and demersal fishes (4.2%) (BFAR, 2005). The Philippines is a developing country where poverty has been a way of life for its citizens for a long time and those who belong below the poverty line came from those whose incomes were derived from

agriculture, fishing, hunting, forestry, and logging (Ardales & David, 1985). Small-scale fishing has particularly been a priority livelihood of its citizens. Since then, fishing has become an industry that different kinds of businesses have been anchored upon. Many Filipinos are dependent on fishing for subsistence while some depend on business related to it.

The Philippine government had its share of intervening in the fishing livelihood of the citizens. It enacted RA no 8550 otherwise known as the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998 which upholds development, management, and conservation of the fisheries and aquatic resources (RA no. 8550, 1998). The nation has seen the importance of fishing in the lives of the citizens and in the economy of the country. However, the policies imposed from above by state bodies and international agencies have not met most of the time the needs of the local people called recipients (Sillitoe, 2006). This is the reason why even today; poverty reaches the ceiling. In the rural areas in the Philippines, manifestation of this poverty is very visible in the life of the small-scale fishermen in the barangays.

Recent studies show however that, in some countries, the creation of a cooperative has become an answer to the oppressing situation. For instance, a study was conducted on a fishermen cooperative in New York in which the cooperative functioned as a vehicle for indigenous fisheries management in order to cope with environmental uncertainty (McCay, 1980) and to organize fisher folk's cooperative in Kerala (Kumar, 1988). Some of these cooperative formations were successful while others failed. Most of these cooperatives are financed and run by the government. A study on cooperative, primarily made and run by and for the fishermen, was not found in the literature. It is the claim of this study that a cooperative built upon the vision and advocacy that come from the fishermen themselves could be a solution to their pressing problem of economic turnover in their rural areas.

In different studies in the Philippines, the presence of a patron-client system in marketing the catch of the fishermen has long been exploiting the small-scale fishermen in terms of unfair trade agreements (Bavick & Vavickanandan, 2017; Fabinyi, 2012; Lamar, 1987; Macken-Walsh, 2012). This unfair relation exists in the marketing of the catch and will be discussed further in the results of the study. This is seen as a manifestation of dependency theory that eats up the resources of small-scale fishermen. It is in this hope that the creation of a cooperative in the area would somehow uplift the living conditions of the fisher folk by involving them in a cooperation rather than them being eaten by the system in which they are on the losing end. Such condition exists in a small fishing community in Brgy. Cagbungalon, Liloan, Southern Leyte. The barangay is located in Panaon Island, in Southern Leyte. The study aimed to expose how the patron-client system works in that fishing community. The contention of this paper is that this system is responsible for the current poverty situation of the fisher folk and it could be countered by a creation of a cooperative organized by farmers. This paper also

serves as a call for social responsibility to its neighboring institutions to extend assistance to the formation of such cooperative.

### **Review of the Literature**

The dependency theory has been presented as a theory of development that improves modernization theory (Reyes, 2001). It is characterized by the relation of the dominant nations to the developing countries. Particularly, it focuses on the lack of equality in the “exchange” relation between the developing countries and the capitalist countries as source of the First World surplus (Shareia, 2015). This relation is seen to be analogous with the fisher-buyer relation. The fisher being the developing country and the buyer being the capitalist country. In this setup, it is always the developing country (fisher) at the losing end while the capitalist (buyer) takes all the surplus to their advantage.

Interventions are being done today to help improve the well-being of the fishermen. Some of the interventions failed. Yet, accounts of cooperative formation have been reported to be efficient (Rivera, Cordero, & Rojas, 2017). Some of these favorable results have been attributed to the administration and composition of the cooperative. It is important to understand first how the structure works and how fisher folk see the making of cooperative for them.

The first consideration must be that the fishermen are closely kin-affixed people. They even have their own preferences in choosing their crew and with whom they should cooperate. They tend to seek out kinsmen when looking for crew positions. This pattern was even evident with regards to sailboats (Sabella, 2000). When some craft was beached for repairs, the crewmen would look to their consanguine relatives first, then to other relatives, when seeking a temporary place on another boat. In sum, kinship and particularly the nuclear family provide the building blocks of cooperative groups (Sabella, 1980). This is because they have to share the goods within their families first before going out.

Another thing to consider is on how fisher folk are viewed with regards to their credit preferences. Due to lack of financial resources, credit does not seem to be a viable alternative for artisanal fishermen who have not been employed on industrial boats. Their low-earning potential, limited material resources, and a notorious prodigal, albeit unfair, reputation that adheres to fishermen, mark them as high-risk loan applicants. The fishermen expressed the hope that a government-sponsored intervention might address this problem better (Sabella, 1980).

In the early 1950's, cooperatives were linked to their markets by resident or migratory fish dealers, small groups of fishermen banded together in the early 1950s in order to gain more control over the conditions of marketing their fish (McCay, 1980). He continues, however, that the cooperative functions as a vehicle of indigenous fisheries management, as part of its larger function of helping its members cope with environmental uncertainty and economic disadvantages.

Sabella (1980) states that to obtain the maximum growth of the economy's fishing sector in order to make a just distribution of derived economic benefits and to contribute to the elevation of the nutritional index and to the general welfare of Peruvian citizens, the country provides fishermen with a stable market, guaranteed prices, access to capital, and a collective political voice. Belizean cooperatives have fought for laws that exclude foreign fishermen from local waters. They have lobbied against destructive fishing gears such as dragnets and scuba equipment (Price, 1987). Cooperatives were formed to deal with a disadvantageous local marketing situation faced by the unorganized fishermen (Poggie, 1980).

A cooperative operates as a vehicle of indigenous fisheries management, as part of its larger function of helping its members cope with environmental uncertainty (McCay, 1980). In India, cooperatives are used as a potential tool for all-round development of human society and especially of the rural sector. The department of fisheries of the government of India has taken up a number of schemes for improving the economic condition of the fisher folk. This includes provision of extension education, improved fishing technology, credit and subsidies (Gupta & Pongit, 2007). There are many reasons why in some fishing communities a cooperative creation is beneficial.

Cooperatives are organizations that are democratically controlled. Entry is normatively easy and voluntary. They usually operate on a one-man-one-vote rule. All members share equally in providing the capital necessary for the operation of the cooperative, and share equally in the risks of operation. It is often the case that any profit is distributed on a basis of some measure of each member's participation in the activity of the cooperative rather than on the basis of capital invested. Cooperatives are legally registered and recognized associations, not loosely organized groups of individuals (Orbach, 1980). It is in this organization that hope for a change and economic stability among fishermen could be established. Despite all this, fishermen have hesitations towards organizing one. These hesitations are product of their experience and fear of the risk of failure. A mistake in planning their productive activities could result in financial disaster; thus, the perceived risk of any change would be relatively high. Since there is a significant amount of lack of trust in combination with an image of limited good, the risks of cooperation would be perceived to be relatively high (Monnereau & Pollnac, 2012). Some cooperatives did not materialize because of the antipathy of local middlemen, insufficient information, and fear of failure (Poggie, 1980). With the high risk seen in the formation of a cooperative, fishermen tend to be hesitant towards its formation.

The fishermen have always been marked as high-risk loan applicants. It is their hope that a government-sponsored intervention would come (Eder, 2005). It is with this light people can probe and claim that that the creation of a cooperative can help improve the living conditions of fishermen.

Not all cooperatives however were successful. Some failed due to some reasons. The belief that fishermen are somehow predisposed to reject the idea of

cooperation because of attitudes, beliefs, and values intrinsically associated with their occupation is an inadequate explanation by itself of the relative success and failure of fishermen's cooperatives (Monnereau & Pollnac, 2012). In many societies, fishermen have very low status, and this low social standing tends to make them unreceptive to the cooperative movement as a consequence of their suspicious attitude toward outsiders and their advice (Monnereau & Pollnac, 2012). These are some of the known reasons why such endeavor has failed.

There are also cooperatives that were successful. Fishery cooperatives may, under certain conditions, be remarkable vehicles for indigenous as opposed to government-imposed fisheries management, and thus they fulfill one aspect of their more general function of helping their members cope with environmental uncertainty. The fact that some cooperatives have developed internal means of controlling fishing effort is remarkable in that other institutions with the mandate to manage fisheries have experienced considerable difficulty in gaining the cooperation of fishermen (Lamug, 2005).

Today, a number of cooperatives can be found. Yet, only few cooperatives have been founded and run by the fisher folk themselves. Cooperatives have a bipolar impact also in solving the problem faced by the front liners in fishing. Few studies however have exposed the actual situation of the fishers in the literature. This is why the study focuses on exposing the real situation and suggesting that a cooperative could be a good way to answer such social responsibility.

Cooperatives may be a solution to this perennial problem. Most of the literature, though outdated, shows that cooperatives have been a tool to alleviate and understand the situation of fisher folk. However, few studies to none have studied why it is important to extend social responsibility to the front liners in the fishing industry. Environmental problems and uncertainty may have prompted cooperatives in the past yet it thrives until today but a gap in the literature about causes and situation of the fisher folk has been invisible. The real scenario in the dealings on the very heart of trading has not been much pursued by researchers. The literature revolves around the dependency system as characterized by the buyer-fisher relation. The relation of the developing countries and capitalist nations has been linked to the behavior of the fishers and buyers in the grassroots of fishing. Much of the literature has focused on the nature of the cooperatives. The study however focuses on the fisher-buyer relation and the possibility that a cooperative can counter this perennial problem. This has not been discussed much in the literature. Aside from the description of the system, it entertains the idea that cooperative making with proper capacity building can be an answer.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study focusing on the case of a small fishing community in Liloan, Southern Leyte namely Brgy. Cagbungalon. It is located in the Panaon Island which is at the bottom of the province. In order to carry the objectives of the study, I conducted in-depth interviews with three identified fisher folk in the community. These informants had been in the business for 15 to 20 years and were familiar with the intricacies of small-scale fishing. The main catch in this community is squid; thus, the catch referred to here in this study is squid.

The primary objective of the study was to understand the fisher-buyer trade relations. To capture the mechanism behind this trade relations, fishermen who were at least 10 years in the industry and buyers were needed. In-depth interviews were conducted until saturation point was reached. The data reached saturation point after interviewing three key informants. The secondary objective was to explore in the literature how cooperatives could be a possible solution to this reality. This is why many in the literature have discussed cooperatives.

The study revolved around the whole Panaon Island. At the time of this study, it was composed of four municipalities namely Liloan, San Francisco, Pintuyan, and San Ricardo. The island is rich in marine resources. This is the main reason why on this island, most of the people depend on fishing for their living. Since then, fishing has been the primary livelihood activity of the locals. The place is blessed with different kinds of marine species but one common specie is famous on this island. This specie is not only a common catch on this island but also in the neighboring island. Squid fishing has become an industry in this part of the country. It has become one of the known places where squid is caught and marketed. The abundance and development of squid in the area however does not translate into good living conditions to the life of the frontlines. The fishermen remained below the poverty line.

### **Results**

The fisher-buyer trade relations start in the preparation of the fishing gears until the actual economic relation between the fisher and the buyer with regards to the catch. The buyer does not only come in during the buying of the catch but has rooted his or her involvement from the very beginning.

#### **Fishing Gears and Processes**

The squid is caught on the shores of this island. Before, it could only be caught near the shore but today it can be caught farther than the previous location where it was usually done. Fishermen either use their motorized boats, usually called “pump boats” or boats “baroto” to traverse to the location of the squid. This is usually done during night time. The fishing gear used today is a squid light with different

colors like blue, green, and white. These colors are more effective during the season.

“First we used squid light which we call ‘kaha’ and then to catch the squid we used ‘sarangat” (Informant 1). It is a kind of fishing gear with many hooks and the bases were attached to each other. Then it is usually used with a bait which is the tail of a squid being used to catch squid. The line can accommodate a catch only per session. This means that countless sets would be made in order to get a kilo of squid.

In the olden times, catching squid was not as tedious as of today. The folk could have 60 kilos of squid at exactly one in the morning while today to get the same volume of the catch, one must fish until morning.

*Catching squid is very tiresome, each pull there is only one squid in the “sarangat” but if its season, it’s very fast. Before we could get 60 kilos already by 1 am but today if you want to get 60 kilos you have to fish until dawn or even until morning.* (Informant 3)

One of the difficulties of fishing is the big waves encountered at sea, taking into consideration the fact that boats are not large. The common boat used can only accommodate two fishermen.

### **Local Patron-Client System**

The fishermen catch squid primarily for subsistence and secondarily for other needs. This is why they get the most squids that they can take in order to sell it for cash. This is where the patron-client system or locally-known as the buyer-suki system thrives. Based on observation, when one looks at the living conditions of the buyer and the fishermen, there is disparity. Most of the buyers have made their living conditions better.

*Many buyers get rich. From being a simple fisherman then someone improves into a buyer. The squid industry is very lucrative but only the buyers get rich. Some of the buyers even finance their fishermen with boats to ensure that the catch goes directly to them. The boat is thus paid on an installment basis and through the catch of the fisherman.* (Informant 2)

The unfair trade in this local system is exposed in the next paragraphs. Once the fisherman comes back from the sea with the catch, he has an option depending on the catch to sell it all to the buyer or to bring some to the family. Sale is usually done with “the buyer who has the highest bid” (Informant 3). However, there are other factors that may lead a fisherman to a certain buyer most of the time. These factors are discussed below.

### Ways of Trading

The nature of the first way of trading is with regards to the pricing of the catch from the buyer. “The price is not fixed and it depends on the catch. If the catch is high, the price goes down and the price does not go back if the catch goes less again. It becomes steady for some time” (Informant 2). At the beginning of the season, the catch is bought at a price of 60 pesos per kilo. This price however is good only if the fisherman’s catch reaches 15-20 kilos of squid. On the next day of fishing when each boat could catch around 20-30 kilos, the price of the catch turns to 50 pesos per kilo. When the catch is still at its peak, the price of the squid goes lower but if the catch of the squid goes back to normal, the price remains the same. It can only go back to 60 pesos per kilo when fishing stops for a while. Table 1 below provides a better view of this trading.

As seen in the table, on the fifth day, the catch started to get lower yet the price per kilo remained 30 pesos. This is the price given when the volume of the catch reaches 30 kg. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day however when the catch really goes down, the price did not change. This goes on as the fisherman continues to fish and stops only when the fisherman stops. This is the first way of the unfair trade seen in the buyer-suki system. According to the fisherman, this is true not only in Panaon Island but in all parts of the Philippines.

The second way of trading is based on the nature of the squid when iced. “The nature of the squid is that if you weigh it fresh, a kilo will have 32 squids but if you iced the squid it grows and makes a kilo with around 20 squids only” (Informant 3). This is an additional income to the buyer. They earn more by icing the squid. This is why most of the squids in the market are iced.

Table 1:

*Daily Projected Catch Price*

Days	Catch by Kilos	Price from Buyer	Total Amount from buyer	Total Amount at 60 php per kilo
1	15 kg	60 php	900 php	900 php
2	21 kg	50 php	1050 php	1260 php
3	25 kg	40 php	1000 php	1500 php
4	30 kg	30 php	900 php	1800 php
5	23 kg	30 php	690 php	1380 php
6	10 kg	30 php	300 php	600 php

The poor fisherman is at the losing end even if the iced squid is sold to a third party by the buyer and not back to the fisherman in terms of the amount of work exerted. The buyer may have made interventions but his income should not exceed that of the fishermen who are the ones taking much risk in the ocean to catch the squid. On the other hand, it may not be considered unfair trade because of the nature that businessmen look forward to higher income but it is a kind of injustice when the players who risked much earned less in this setup.

Aside from the above disparity on the price, here comes another way wherein the fishermen are still on the losing end in this trading practice. The difference of the kilos when fresh and iced shows it all. There is a big difference in the kilos being bought from the fishermen to the number of kilos being sold in the market. By this alone, the buyer surely gets a greater income than the fishermen.

The third and final way of trading is the number of kilos being sold to the buyer. It has been a practice among fishermen and buyers that in every kilo of fish being sold to the buyer, there must be additional 100 grams per kilo. "In every kilo of squid being sold to the buyer, the weight should be 1 kilo and 100 grams so if it's 5 kilos then the weight is 5 kilos and 500 grams" (Informant 3). This is to ensure that the buyer can have an income on the catch. The same practice applies to squid even with the fact that it grows when iced. In every 10 kilos, the buyer gets a kilo from that. This kilo is from the 100 grams per kilo from the catch of the fishermen. The tables below show how this works.

Table 2:

*Quantity of Iced Squid per Kilo*

No. of Kilos when fresh	Pieces when fresh	Kilos when Iced
10 kilos	320 pcs	16 kilos
15 kilos	480 pcs	24 kilos
5 kilos	160 pcs	8 kilos

Table 3

*Actual Weight Gathered by Kilo*

No. of Kilos	Price at 60php/kilo	Actual weight taken	Amount enjoyed by the buyer (100 per kilo)
1 kg	60 php	1.1 kg	110 php
10 kg	600 php	11 kg	1100 php
50 kg	3000 php	55 kg	5500 php
100 kg	6000 php	110 kg	11000 php

This is another kind of trading that puts the fishermen at the aggravated end. The buyer does not even sell the kilo to the market with the same price he got from the fishermen. According to the buyer, the average kilo of the squid in the market is 100-120php per kilo. Taking the trading styles above, the buyer surely gets the good side of this arrangement.

From these trading practices, the process goes on as the buyer sells it to the market.

*First we buy squid here then transport it to our broker in Ormoc City and then he is the one who sells the squid to the vendors in the market. We buy it here at 60php then sell it at 100php to the broker. The highest price in Ormoc is 120php and the lowest is 100php depending on whether or not there is a shipment for Manila. (Buyer)*

### **Buyer- Suki Relationship**

Part of this system is the relationship that the buyer has with the seller. This is a strategy used so that fishermen continuously sell their catch to the buyer even with the kind of trading presented above. First in the relationship is the credit bondage the suki has with the buyer. In the beginning of the fishing season, the buyer lets the fishermen borrow an amount or supply of what is needed for the fishermen to fish into the sea. The buyer supplies them until the time that the fishermen start to have a catch. When the catch comes, the supplies given to them are considered debts payable when they have the first catch. Part of their mutual agreement is that the fisherman will always sell his catch to this buyer. "Well, I can ask for debt with... [the buyer]. I can run to him in case I need cash at a time. This is not only limited to fishing expenses but even with family matters. That is one reason why even if other buyers exist, I sell my catch to him" (Informant 2).

The credit bondage also extends to the needs of the family during off-season times. The suki goes to the buyer and borrows money for his family needs since they cannot fish. This gives them a certain feeling of debt of gratitude to the buyer. The fishermen see this as a developed friendship between them and it is his responsibility to give back to the buyer by selling his catch to him regardless of the price per kilo.

Different buyers also have different styles in maintaining their fishermen.

*We provide them with starting gasoline to be paid with their catch. Then if they have a catch, we get the initial money used for gasoline but we also make sure that they still have some amount for their families and leave the other debt for the next fishing trip. So, you should give a brotherhood feeling to the fishermen so that they can feel like family in here. (buyer)*

Some buyers give loans for making a boat and securing fishing gears for the fishermen. These boats are payable in 3 years but the condition of the loan is all

their catches should be sold to them. This is the dependency theory that exists also among the countries in the periphery and the core.

In order to solve this problem, there was an organized cooperative before in the area but was not well managed. The cooperative did not last long because of poor management among the administrators coupled with corruption. According to the informants, the cooperative lacked transparency with regards to the capitals. It was corrupted by the managers. Because of that, they stopped joining the cooperative, which led to its downfall but when it was running well, it helped them for quite some time.

It is with the above findings that the situation of the fisher folk is alarming. This system is undoubtedly a contributor of the ongoing prevalence of poverty in the country. The buyer-suki system continues to exploit the poor fishermen in their own fishing communities. The fishermen cannot do otherwise but to let themselves be victims.

The situation calls for a possible solution from conscious societies and communities. Heeding this call to assist the fisher folk is our social responsibility towards our fellow citizens in the fishing industry. It is with this regard that a creation of a cooperative is an answer to counter this buyer-suki system in our shores. Based on the findings, there was a failed cooperative in the area before. With this discussion, it is important to try to understand the reason of failure and what the ways are to create a cooperative that would become successful.

Brumett and Williams (2000) suggest the need for close cooperation among government agencies, research and extension teams, fishermen groups, and cooperatives for the development of an integrated system for sustainable fishery management. Part of such cooperation should be to explore the idea that a cooperative could help sustain the economic life of the fishermen. This cooperation could possibly put a stop on this buyer-suki system and put the greater advantage to the fishermen than to the buyers. There are few recent studies in the literature with regards to cooperative making and if this study leads to the creation of one, it could be another focus of study.

With the buyer-suki system that is continuously eating up the resources of the fisher folk, a fishermen's exclusive cooperative exclusively administered by them for the interest of the common good is a solution to this localized dependency. It should be a cooperative whose members are all fishermen contributing to the improvement of their own cooperative. The cooperative buys their fish and establishes the market. Such a system could support the fisher folk more effectively even in fishing supplies and maintenance tools. Towards the end, incentives for the good of the fishermen will surface and, in the long run, alleviate the living conditions of the fishers.

The cooperative could be an answer to this perennial problem but it is only a vehicle that depends on its drivers. It could be the solution but it is not an easy task.

It could face many challenges caused by the fishermen themselves. Problems that would boil down into values formation and fairness among them. This becomes a problem when they take their feet off the ground of fairness and try pursuing individual gain instead of community progress. This is why an extensive values formation should precede the organization, and this is where educational institutions should come in.

The only problem faced today is that of who will answer the call of social responsibility through initiatives in the creation of the cooperative. It needs serious planning, implementation, and funds. An organization washed up from corruption can only be the recipient of this call. A genuine hand should stretch out to the fisher folk to get such a cooperative running and towards the betterment of the national economy. Doing this can create a ripple effect to other players of the national economy and bump the economic development of the whole country.

### **Conclusion**

Rooted in the dependency theory characterized by the core and the periphery, the buyer-suki system has also extracted the resources of the fishermen to their advantage. This is seen as a kind of exploitation. To counter this economic downfall, a cooperative run and managed by the fisher folk can be a refuge and may uplift the status of the fishermen. This becomes a call now for social responsibility among neighboring organizations and institutions to assist the fisher folk in the creation of such a cooperative.

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