

Vila dos Pescadores, Cubatão, state of São Paulo, Brazil: Improving livelihoods and promoting dialogue in the community

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Key Messages

- Many members of the community of Vila dos Pescadores rely on artisanal fishing for their livelihoods;
- The industrial activity in the Santos estuary has led to the pollution of mangroves, affecting fish stocks and impacting human and ecological well-being;
- Although the community works with government institutions, private partners and local NGOs to improve their community and restore the mangroves, further dialogue is needed with decision-makers.

Community Introduction

The community of Vila dos Pescadores (Figure 1) is an urban slum located in a mangrove area, in the city of Cubatão, Brazil. This community is located in the Santos Estuary, where many of the people living in the community use the mangroves for artisanal fishing, which is a large source of income for people living in the area (Figures 2 – 5). For many populations in the mangrove slums of Cubatão, artisanal scale fishing contributes to their food security.



Figure 1: City of Cubatão, Brazil. (Source: Google)

Conservation and Livelihood Challenges

Being a very impoverished mangrove-based neighborhood, mangrove conservation is vital to the livelihoods of Vila dos Pescadores. The mangrove vegetation serves to secure the land, preventing erosion while stabilizing the coast, and the roots of mangroves act as filters in retaining sediment. Further, mangroves⁽¹⁾ play an important role as an exporter of organic matter to the estuary, contributing to primary productivity in the coastal zone. It is in the mangroves where many aquatic and terrestrial species with ecological and economic value, such as fish and shellfish, have the ideal conditions for breeding, nursery and shelter.



Figure 2: Fishers painting their boats (Photo Credit: Cintia Gillam)



The community of Vila dos Pescadores also suffers from environmental vulnerability by being located in an industrial hub in the Santos Estuary, where the largest port in Latin America is located. Garbage accumulates in the mangroves of the community and the pollution affects fishing by trash accumulation in spawning sites for fish and shellfish, and destruction of fish nets.

Another factor that affects the community and the fishers' well-being are environmental disasters in the estuary that harm fishers' livelihoods by causing fish mortality and environmental pollution. The latest environmental disaster in the Santos estuary was a fire in the Ultracargo fuel company which began on April 2, 2015 and reached six fuel tanks. After this environmental disaster, fishers at Vila dos Pescadores were temporarily unable to fish, affecting their main sources of income and livelihood. The impossibility of fishing not only economically affected fishers, but also affected their wellbeing, as fishing is part of their identity as fishers.



Figure 3: Fisher and her son in the Santos Estuary (Photo Credit: Cintia Gillam)

Community Initiative

The Vila dos Pescadores community leader José Arnaldo dos Santos (Vadinho) works extensively with government agencies, the private sector and NGOs to improve the wellbeing and living conditions of community members. Vadinho is a fisher and also the president of the Community Association of Vila dos Pescadores. The Community Association is a research partner with

the 'Instituto de Pesca' (Fisheries Institute - São Paulo State) which gives the community important support about fishers' rights and environmental education⁽²⁾. The São Paulo state Fisheries Institute, located in the neighbouring city of Santos, has begun to engage in dialogue with the community. The Institute does significant research on coastal resource management in the area.



Figure 4: Fishers at Vila dos Pescadores (Photo Credit: Cintia Gillam)

This linkage allows the Fisheries Institute to carry on important projects in the community in partnership with the Community Association. One of the partnership's projects aims to assess sustainability through quality of life with fishers in the Santos Estuary and the Southern Coast of São Paulo state. Researchers intend to apply this approach in the estuary of Santos adding the analysis of social vulnerability, which will be helpful to assess the socio-environmental problems encountered by fishers and other community members in Vila dos Pescadores. This research will allow further development of human and natural resources in the area.



Figure 5: Fishers at Vila dos Pescadores (Photo Credit: Cintia Gillam)



The community leader Vadinho also works with local private partners and NGOs in the area aiming to improve the wellbeing of the community. One of these NGOs is “Teto⁽³⁾” (meaning “Roof”). Teto’s community work is focused on the most excluded slums, with its main engine being the joint action of its residents and volunteers, who work to generate concrete solutions to social problems considered a priority: poverty.

In July 2015, Teto’s staff and volunteers worked with Vadinho, aiming for the mobilization, and self-management and support networks, of Vila dos Pescadores community members. The NGO’s goal is for the community to achieve their basic rights, through the regularization of community members’ property, the installation or settlement of basic services, construction of permanent housing and improving community infrastructure⁽³⁾. This is an important step in improving the lives of fishers and other community members, as there is a large number of people living in shacks in the community of Vila dos Pescadores.

Practical Outcomes

In the Vila dos Pescadores community, this research assessed the wellbeing of fishers and the community in general, the community’s livelihoods and conservation challenges, and the dialogue between the community and the government. The analysis of fishers’ wellbeing is important at the policy level to allow interventions such as selective urbanization, involvement of fishers in conservation initiatives and implementation of racial consciousness projects in the community.

Conservation measures are needed for the long term, but with the economic pressure in the Santos estuary, as the largest port in Latin America, often fishers are not a political priority for any of the three government levels. The existing social capital among community members, with key leadership from Vadinho, is a first step in fighting for fishers’ rights and conservation of mangrove areas of Vila dos Pescadores.

Following the Ultracargo disaster in April 2015, fishers and community members had a ‘wakeup call’ to fight for their rights. Women and fishers want to actively participate in conservation in the community. The fisher Helena Barros held women’s and fishers’ meetings at her house after the disaster. Many women in the community reunited again to discuss fisheries and livelihood issues.

These women were friends during their adolescence, when Helena Barros organized (in her house) craft courses for 35 teenage girls in the 1990s. The girls learned how to make hand painted dishcloths for sale to improve food security in the community. The women also shared pictures of a state government funded mangrove reforestation project in 1992 that involved fishers at Vila dos Pescadores and discussed the need for more mangrove conservation projects involving women and fishers in the community (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Mangrove restoration in 1992. (Source: Helena Barros)

The relational wellbeing in the community is relevant as women in the community, wives of fishers and/or fishers themselves, have reunited to fight for fishers’ and community’s rights after the Ultracargo disaster, which proved to be a starting point for community members to fight for their fishing, environmental and conservation rights in Vila dos Pescadores. This environmental disaster led community members to get involved with the Fisheries Institute and local NGOs. Locals are now more engaged as members host meetings and post



pictures related to fisheries issues and mangrove conservation.

Fishers have pride in their profession and deep environmental knowledge of the mangrove areas of Cubatão, in the Santos Estuary. Once powerful actors, such as environmental NGOs and government agencies, give support to fishers and community members, conservation efforts have a great potential for expansion and improving food security in this impoverished community. Vila dos Pescadores has a pool of social capital and local environmental knowledge that can be channelled to conservation projects. Recently developed linkages between universities, municipal and state government agencies, NGOs and the community has led to a positive impact on the implementation of conservation initiatives in the community.

Possible solutions to the problems of environmental degradation in Cubatão are investing in public policies for environmental education in slums and the industrial hub, empowering communities in mangrove conservation projects and intensification of dialogue on the environmental and sustainable development among government, business and civil society. Although dialogue is improving, conversations between the community and external entities needs to continue, and the message of conservation needs to reach the ears of policymaker and decision-makers.

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