

GLJ-ILRF Briefing Wi-Fi for Fishers at Sea

International
Standards,
Laws, and
Practices

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Why Wi-Fi for fishers is critical

- **Access to Communication and Improved Mental Health.** Enabling fishers to communicate with friends and family while working long hours at sea will improve fishers' well-being and work experience. Fishers are likely to be more motivated and willing to continue working for the same vessel. This is beneficial to employers too, as they will not need to hire and train new workers.
- **Improved Working Conditions and Labour Rights.** Fishers working on vessels sailing for many months at sea face significant barriers exercising their fundamental labour rights. Internet access onboard will help them confirm their salary payments and remittances with family members in their home countries. Internet access will also support their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining by allowing fishers to contact their labour representatives onshore.
- **Preventing Exploitation and Ensuring Access to Grievance Mechanisms.** In the last few years, journalists, NGOs, and researchers have documented numerous cases of extreme labour abuse in the fishing industry around the world. Many fishers, especially migrant fishers, endure long working hours, a lack of food and drinking water, physical violence, forced labour, and death or disappearance at sea. One of the major causes of these inhumane working conditions is isolation and inability to reach out for help. There have been many cases, for example, where fishers' employment contracts were unilaterally terminated while they were at sea, resulting in forced deportation upon their arrival at ports. If fishers had access to Wi-Fi at sea, minor abuses could be addressed sooner, intervention could arrive in time, and extreme abuses could be prevented.



A fisher resting on the deck after catching a large tuna.
Photo credit: Anonymous Indonesian fisher, taken during his trip in the Pacific

C188: Communication equipment must be provided to all crew

In November 2017, the International Labour Organization's "Work in Fishing Convention" (also known as ILO Convention No. 188, or C188) came into force after being ratified by ten member states. It sets international standards for safety on board fishing vessels and applies to all types of commercial fishing.

Beyond setting standards on working hours, safety measurements, and accommodation, C188 also requires that communication equipment be provided to all crew members on board fishing vessels. Article 71 of C188 states:



Fishers harvesting tuna on a distant water vessel.

Photo credit: Anonymous Indonesian fisher, taken during his trip in the Pacific

“Communication equipment shall be adequately provided to all crew members on board a fishing vessel, and the expenses shall be as reasonable as possible and shall not exceed the total expenses of the owner of the vessel.”

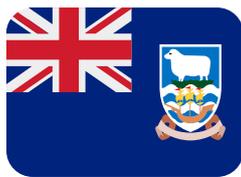
Currently, at sea, there are virtually only two ways to meet the criteria: by providing satellite phones or Wi-Fi. Satellite phones would permit fishers to speak with their families, yet the provision of Wi-Fi would further enable fishers to leave messages or send images as needed, to their families, NGOs, unions, or other stakeholders. Unlike phone communication, Wi-Fi would also give fishers access to news, information and entertainment.

Examples of related laws and policies



Thailand ratified ILO C188 in 2019 and has made satellite-based communications for crew members in the distant water fishing sector mandatory by law. See Section 16/1 of Ministerial Regulations - Protection of Labour in Marine Fisheries (No. 2):

"Employers engaged in distant water fishing as defined in fisheries laws must provide equipment or a system for satellite-based communications that provides no less than 1 megabyte bandwidth per person per month for a minimum of 25% of the crew onboard the fishing vessel to access and use in contacting or coordinating with government officials or institutions, husbands, wives or relatives at all times. The employer must pay for all costs."



In 2019, the Falkland Islands Department of Natural Resources introduced a system for the assessment of licence applications, which encourages vessel owners and their local partner fishing companies to improve the safety standards, working conditions, and crew welfare aboard fishing vessels. Under this system, only vessels that attain a high score are granted a fishing license to operate in Falkland Islands' water. This innovative approach has resulted in the installation of Wi-Fi facilities and the provision of access to Wi-Fi to crew members on most vessels operating in the Falkland Islands, including many Taiwanese vessels.



In May 2022, the **Maritime Labour Convention 2006 (MLC)**, an international treaty designed to protect seafarers' rights, was amended to mandate the provision of internet access to seafarers aboard ships. The treaty, which is expected to come into effect on 23 December 2024, has been ratified by more than 100 countries, representing over 90% of the world fleet. Paragraphs 8 and 17 read:

"Shipowners should, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide seafarers on board their ships with internet access, with charges, if any, being reasonable in amount."

Examples of practices



As early as 2016, the government of **South Korea** announced a satellite communication project that enables fishers away from home for months or years aboard deep-sea vessels to use email and social networking service (SNS) messaging services around the clock.



In **Thailand**, the USAID Asia Counter-Trafficking in Persons (USAID Asia CTIP) programme led by Winrock International partnered with Mars Petcare to pilot a communication technology to improve connectivity and safety for fishers at sea.



In **China**, a Chinese state-owned company, China Mobile established an "Ocean Satellite Broadband" service, integrating the existing satellite broadband service and 5G wireless technology to install mobile Wi-Fi stations on fishing vessels. In 2020, more than 1,350 vessels based in the Zhoushan (舟山) area installed this satellite broadband facility.



In **Taiwan**, many fishing vessels have voluntarily installed Wi-Fi for captains and engineers onboard, and sometimes for migrant fishers as well. Purse seine vessels are among the vessels with the highest installation rate, whereas only a few longline fishing vessels have installed equipment to provide Wi-Fi onboard. A selective list of fishing vessels is attached on the next page.



Preliminary research

Stella Maris conducted research with migrant fishers working on 15 vessels regarding the accessibility of Wi-Fi aboard Taiwanese fishing vessels. Several large vessels reported having Wi-Fi equipment installed, but in many cases, Wi-Fi is not accessible to fishers. Among vessels that do provide Wi-Fi to fishers, the frequency of Wi-Fi provision varies, ranging from once per month to once every two days.

Size*	Vessel Name (partially anonymised)	Total Crew Members	Can Fishers Use Wi-Fi?
CT7	X Tong No. 3 (X統3號)	16 Indonesians, 32 Filipinos	Not every day, each time for 3 hours
CT7	X Da YNG (X大盈)	31 Indonesians, 7 Filipinos	Once every two days
CT8	X Feng No. 188 (X豐188號)	40+ Indonesians; ~10 Filipinos	Once per month, depending on the city, 20mb
CT7	X Kuo no. 1 (X國1號)	20 Indonesians, some Filipinos	Once per month, 30mb
CT7	X Li Fa (X立發)	24 Indonesians, 26 Filipinos	Once per week, limited access
CT7	X Hao (X豪)	30 Indonesians, 30 Filipinos	There used to be, but currently facing technical issue
CT7	X Bai Fa (X百發)	25 Indonesians, 20 Filipinos	Wi-Fi only for the chief engineer and captain
CT7	X Soon Fa No. 1 (X順發1號)	26 Indonesians, 30 Filipinos	Wi-Fi only for the chief engineer and captain
CT7	X Jin Fa (X錦發)	20 Indonesians, 22 Filipinos	Wi-Fi only for the chief engineer and captain
CT7	X Da Ye (X大益)	25 Indonesians, 23 Filipinos, 1 Vietnamese	Once every 3 days for 15 minutes
CT8	X Tong No. 101 (X統101號)	29 Indonesians, 14 Filipinos	Wi-Fi only for the chief engineer and captain
CT8	X Hung no.168 (X鴻168號)	21 Indonesians, 25 Filipinos	Each week for 4 hours
CT8	X Ta Horng no.101 (X大鴻101號)	10 Indonesians, 26 Filipinos	Each day for 3 hours
CT8	X Yi no.1 (X億1號)	23 Indonesians, 10 Filipinos	Currently no Wi-Fi, but there was Wi-Fi when the vessel was in Argentina and the Falkland Islands
CT8	X yang (X洋)	29 Indonesians, 22 Filipinos	Each week, limited access, only a few minutes

*CT8 is the largest, meaning the vessel is above 1000 tons. CT7 means that the vessel is between 500 to 999.9 tons.



Indonesian fishermen working on Taiwanese fishing vessels attending a social gathering organised by the Indonesian Seafarer's Gathering Forum (FOSPI).
Photo credit: Mina Chiang/HRC. Location:

Call to action: Mandatory Wi-Fi for fishers

This briefing serves as one of the first pieces of literature documenting the international standards, laws, and practices related to providing Wi-Fi for workers in the commercial fishing industry. For fishers who are at sea for months at a time, Wi-Fi is critical to provide access to communication and promote fishers' well-being, improve working conditions and labour rights, and prevent exploitation and ensure access to grievance mechanisms. Wi-Fi has numerous benefits to fishers, captains, vessel owners, and all stakeholders interested in promoting decent work and sustainable fisheries.

Compared with a few years ago, technology can no longer be said to represent a barrier to providing Wi-Fi at sea. Many cargo ships, private yachts, and cruise ships, operating in both coastal and distant waters, have found solutions to provide Wi-Fi on board. The ILO has also made clear that fishers and seafarers must have access to the internet at sea. Despite these technological solutions and international standards, commercial fishing vessels have lagged behind.

Governments should enact legislation to make Wi-Fi a requirement for fishers at sea and work with industry to overcome financial and other barriers to Wi-Fi provision.

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Picture: Indonesian fishermen working on Taiwanese fishing vessels attending a social gathering. Photo credit: Mina Chiang/HRC. Location: Donggang, Taiwan.