



# **Socio-Economic Learning Framework**

**Focus group discussion guide**

**Exploring equitable supply chains in  
fishing and aquaculture farming**

**(SAMPLE)**

## Socio-Economic Learning Framework

Advancing seafood sustainability requires inclusive solutions that work for every member of the supply chain. The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Socio-Economic Learning Framework (SELF) is designed to gather insights about the lives and livelihoods of small-scale seafood producers to inform interventions that can improve both social and environmental outcomes.

[Learn more about SELF.](#)

### About this guide

This is an example of how to use SELF to collect information through focus groups. This is not a blueprint or script and should be adapted to the local context. Users should add, omit, or rephrase questions as needed to ensure the concepts are meaningful, the process will work in the local language (if translated), and result will inform an ongoing strategy.

**Purpose:** To understand perspectives and experiences in small-scale fishing or small-holder aquaculture communities.

**Participants:** Fishers, farmers, workers, youth, other household members (e.g., elders, spouses), and relevant community members. Based on the local context, it may be necessary to conduct separate focus groups for different stakeholder groups. If the group is mixed gender, ensure there is a balanced number of voices for each.

**Format:** Facilitated group conversation, ideally with 8–12 participants, lasting 1.5–2 hours.

Questions are for both small-scale fishers and small-holder aquaculture farmers unless noted. It is not necessary to use all the questions. Consider the context and what the responses will be used for, and adjust this guide to meet your needs.

When the group is mixed gender, look for opportunities to probe differences in gender insights by including a follow-up prompt, such as:

- Does everyone in the community experience this the same way?
- Can you describe how this works for male versus female fishers/farmers?

Examples of gender-specific probing questions are included in the sample script below.

## Introduction

- Explain that the purpose of this exercise is to identify how different people and groups experience fishing/farming, and what supports or limits equity in the supply chain.
- Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers—this is about community knowledge.

## Decent work

**Goal:** Understand the nature and conditions of work for all household members.

- On an average day, who in the household performs what tasks related to fishing/farming?
  - **To probe gender issues further, add:**
    - How do the roles of men and women differ during harvesting, processing, marketing, or repair/maintenance?
    - Are there tasks considered more suitable for women? Why?
    - Do women fish or farm independently or only as part of family teams?
- Are children under 18 involved in the operation? What kind of work do they do, and how are they protected?
- Do you or others employ workers? Who are they? What are their working conditions like?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Are there differences in how men and women are hired, paid, or treated?
    - What kind of roles do female workers take on? Are they given the same opportunities for training or advancement as male workers?
- Are you ever required to work in unsafe conditions (e.g., bad weather)? If so, why? What happens if you refuse?
- What safety equipment or protective measures are available? Are they effective and accessible?
- (Aquaculture) Do you handle pesticides, antibiotics, or other hazardous substances? If yes, do you know what precautions to take?
- (Aquaculture) Have you experienced any skin problems, fungal infections, or waterborne diseases from your work?
- (Fisheries) What assistance is available if you're in an emergency at sea?

## Entry barriers

**Goal:** Identify challenges and enablers for joining the sector.

- Who typically participates in fishing/farming in your area (e.g., age, gender, background)?
- What challenges did you face when starting this work?

- **To further probe gender issues, add:**
  - Were the challenges different for women? What made it harder or easier for women to start?
  - Are there informal rules or social norms that make it harder for women to access licenses, capital, or market space?
- What is it like for young people trying to get into this work today?
- Do some groups find it harder to enter this field? If yes, who and why?
- If someone wanted to leave fishing/farming, could they? What barriers exist?
- (Aquaculture) Do you have access to suitable land and water to farm? How does your use of these resources affect others? How does the way others use this resource affect you?
- (Fisheries) Do others (e.g., other fishers, farmers, tourists) encroach on your fishing grounds or violate your fishing rights? When this occurs, what happens?

### **Market access**

**Goal:** Explore how and where producers sell their goods and related constraints.

- Where do you sell your catch or product (e.g., intermediaries, markets, processors)?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Are men and women able to play the same role in transporting, negotiating, or processing what's sold?
    - Are there challenges unique to women in this process?
- Are buyers more focused on sustainable practices or low-cost, fast extraction? How do they convey this to you?
- Are there limits on who you can sell to, perhaps because of loans or penalties? What else limits your market access?
- How do things like seasonal demand or quality requirements affect your sales? Are there other things that impact sales?
- What infrastructure (e.g., storage, transport, cold chain) supports your market access?
- (Fisheries) How do you follow or experience rules like catch registration, closed seasons, or other fishing regulations? Who enforces these rules? What incentives do you have to follow these regulations?

### **Access to inputs**

**Goal:** Assess how producers finance operations and access information/support.

- How do you typically finance your activities?
- Is debt a concern? How does it affect your ability to reinvest?
- Where can you access useful information about regulations or how to improve your operations?
- Where do you get support for innovation or system improvements?

- What kinds of tools, gear, and technology do you use, and who typically has access to them?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Do women in your community have equal access to tools, land, and boats? Why or why not?
    - Who typically makes decisions about purchases or investments in your household or enterprise?
- (Aquaculture) Can you access high-quality inputs like seed, feed, or affordable energy sources? If not, what are the barriers?
- (Fisheries) Can you access affordable gear, fuel, and other inputs?

## Social services

**Goal:** Understand access to education, health care, and social protections.

- Describe the challenges you face or concerns you have about accessing health care?
- Do your children (ages 5–15) attend school regularly? If not, what are the barriers they face to attending school?
  - **To further probe gender and age issues, add:**
    - Who in the household is responsible for ensuring children attend school?
- What training or education options exist for youth interested in fishing/farming?
- Do you receive any social protection benefits (e.g., pensions, grants, unemployment)?
  - **To further probe gender and age issues, add:**
    - Are all household members—including women—covered by these programs? If not, why?
- (Fisheries) How do you access social protections during seasonal closures?

## Voice and participation

**Goal:** Understand collective organizing and community representation.

- Are you part of any cooperatives, associations, self-help, savings, or other groups? What do these groups do?
- Are spouses or other family members involved in such groups?
- What benefits do these networks offer?
- What do you have to do in return/what obligations do you have?
  - **To further probe gender and age issues, add:**
    - How is women’s involvement in fishing/farming viewed in your community? Is it encouraged, discouraged, or expected?
    - Are there leadership roles or community groups that women are part of—or excluded from?

## Economic resilience

**Goal:** Examine income stability, seasonality, and overall financial health.

- What happens to the income earned from fishing/farming? Who decides how it is spent or reinvested?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Do women earn income directly, or is the money passed through another family member?
    - How do financial decisions differ between men- and women-led operations?
- Do income fluctuations affect your ability to afford basic needs?
- Are there parts of the year when you have no income?
- Do you have other sources of income besides fishing/farming?
- How have prices changed in the past year?
- Do you think your income supports a decent lifestyle?
- Do you need to take on loans for essentials like health care, education, or ceremonies?
- Do you have an emergency fund?

## Transparency

**Goal:** Clarify the presence of formal agreements and access to shared information.

- Do you have formal agreements (written or verbal) with buyers?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Do both men and women in your community have access to buyers and the opportunity to form agreements?
    - Who usually negotiates the terms of these agreements—men or women? Why?
    - Are there differences in the types of agreements men and women enter into (e.g., volume, pricing, terms)?
- If you employ workers, do they have clear agreements about their pay and conditions?
- How do you collect and share data about your practices and results?  
Who developed this approach?

## Partnerships

**Goal:** Explore relationships with institutions and management of shared resources.

- Who do you partner with (e.g., buyers, NGOs, government)? What makes those partnerships helpful?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Are there partnerships that primarily involve men or women? Why?
    - Do men and women have equal access to trainings, projects, or meetings with these partners?
    - Whose voice is more influential in shaping those partnerships?

- Are there any conflicts over natural resources (e.g., fishing areas, water)? How are these resolved?
- What other partnerships would be useful and why? What would help you build those partnerships?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Are there partnerships that would specifically benefit women? What would those look like?
    - What barriers do women face in building or maintaining partnerships (e.g., mobility, time, credibility)?
    - What kinds of support (e.g., training, leadership roles, trust-building) would make it easier for women to engage?

### **Additional gender perspectives (optional)**

These are examples of questions that could be included in a group of men and women to gather additional insights about gender dynamics. These questions can be inserted into the guide or serve as an independent topic in the survey.

- What are the biggest challenges women face in this sector? And men?
- How has the role of women in seafood work changed over the past 10–15 years?
- Have there been any specific programs or initiatives to support women? What's worked?
- How are girls and boys being prepared for future roles in fishing/farming work? Are expectations different?

### **Closing prompts**

- What changes would you most like to see in how supply chains work in your community?
- Are there any stories or experiences you think are important to share that haven't come up yet?
- What are your goals for your operation in the next five years?
  - **To further probe gender issues, add:**
    - Do women and men have similar aspirations? Are there specific challenges that hold women back?
    - What supports do women need to grow or transition into leadership roles?

The following is an example of how SELF can be applied for a focus group of wives of small-scale fishers or aquaculture farmers to understand how other members of the household impact outcomes. This could be tailored to include additional household members.

### **Focus group guide: wives of small-scale fishers/farmers**

**Purpose:** To understand the roles, perspectives, and challenges of women whose husbands are involved in small-scale fisheries or small-holder aquaculture.

**Partners:** Wives/partners of small-scale fishers/farmers.

**Format:** Facilitated group conversation, ideally with 6–10 participants, lasting 1–2 hours.

#### **Introduction**

- Explain the purpose is to understand the experiences and perspectives of women whose households depend on fishing/farming.
- Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers—this is about community knowledge.
- Encourage open sharing and confidentiality.

#### **Livelihood and household roles**

**Goal:** Understand the role of women in the household and their connection to fishing/farming activities.

- What's a typical day like for you? What kinds of responsibilities do you manage?
- How does your husband's work in fishing/farming affect your daily routine?
- Do you help with any part of the fishing/farming business? If yes, what do you do and how often?
- If your husband is away for long periods of time, how do you manage household or family responsibilities in his absence?
- Describe the various ways that women in your community collaborate or help each other.

**Probing questions:** What's the most challenging part of managing everything? What kind of support do you wish you had?

#### **Financial decision-making and contributions**

**Goal:** Explore women's role in household finances and income generation.

- Who decides how money from fishing/farming is spent in your household? Are you involved in those decisions?
- Do you have other/your own source(s) of income? If so, what kind of work do you do, and how important is it to the household? How do you, or your family, make decisions on spending this additional income?

- Are there times when you've had to borrow money or find other income when fishing/farming earnings were low? How did you manage?

**Probing questions:** What are the biggest financial stresses? What helps you feel more secure?

### **Gender norms and empowerment**

**Goal:** Understand women's voice, inclusion, and confidence in fishery/farming-related spaces.

- Do you have an opportunity to include your voice when decisions are made in the household or community? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been invited to meetings or trainings related to the fishery/farm? If not, would you want to attend? What would the benefits be?
- What would help women in your community feel more involved or supported in fisheries/aquaculture? What impact would that have on your family? Community?

**Probing questions:** Have there been any changes over the years in women's participation? What would make it easier for women to engage?

### **Children and future aspirations**

**Goal:** Understand children's involvement and family hopes for the future.

- Do your children help with fishing/farming activities? If so, what do they do and at what age did they start?
- Would you like your children to continue working in fisheries/aquaculture? Why or why not?
- What kind of future would you like for your children, and what do you think they need to get there?

**Probing questions:** Are there any differences in what you want for your sons versus what you want for your daughters?

### **Perceptions of changes and outlook**

**Goal:** Understand how changes in fishing/farming affect families and what women hope for.

- Have you noticed any changes in the fish catch, farming success, or market prices over time? How has that affected your family?
- What worries you the most about the future? What gives you hope?

**Probing questions:** Have there been any recent events that made things especially hard or better?

### **Closing prompt**

- Are there any stories or experiences you think are important to share that haven't come up yet?