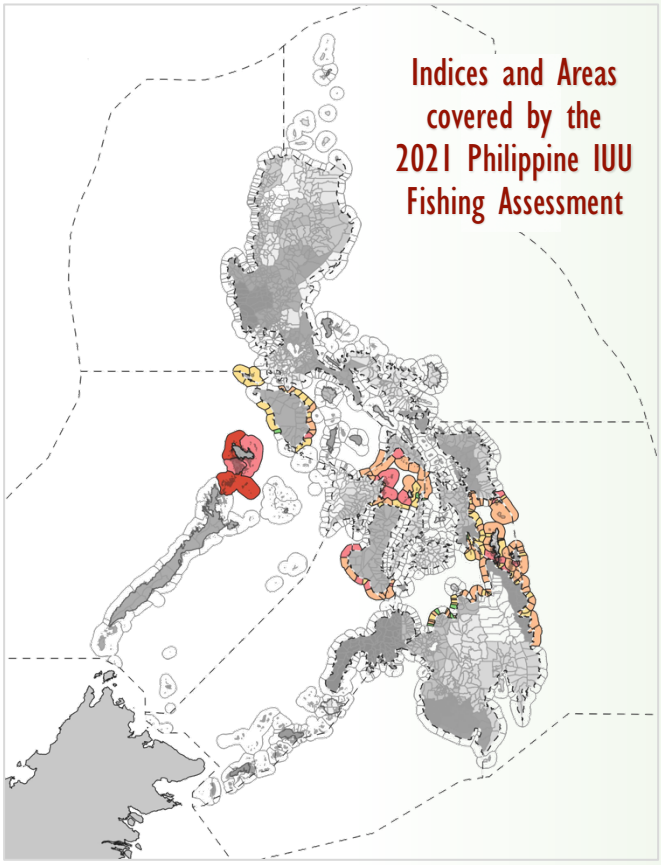
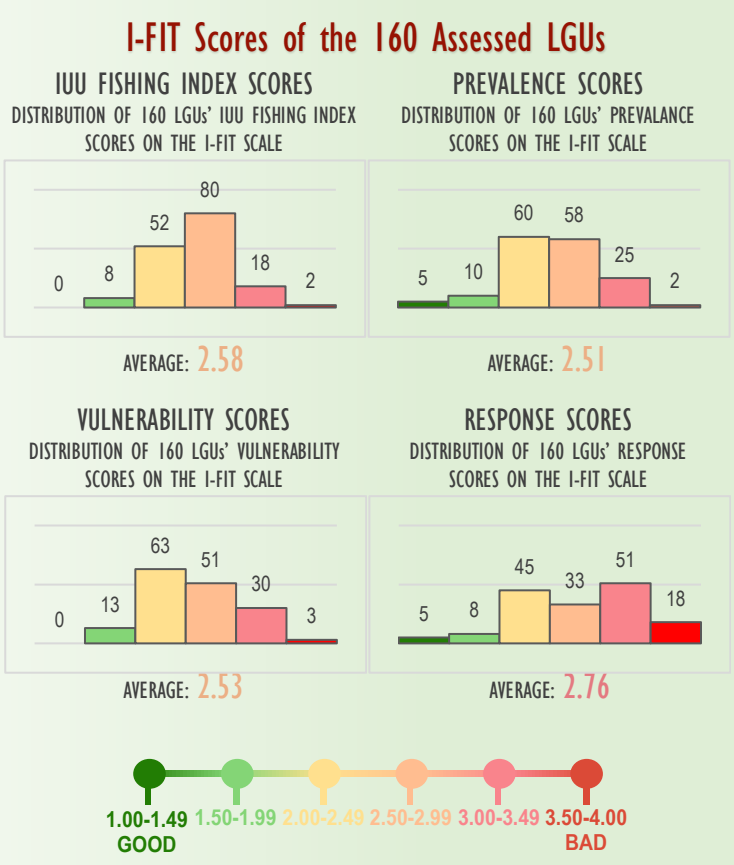
Philippine IUU Fishing Assessment Report 2021: An Executive Summary

In 2020-2021, the Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR), together with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and various partners in the field, facilitated a series of IUU fishing assessment workshops piloting the use of the Philippine IUU Fishing Index and Threat Assessment Tool (I-FIT) developed by the USAID Fish Right Program and DA-BFAR through the Marine Environment and Resources Foundation. The workshops assessed how big of a threat IUU fishing was in municipal waters (prevalence), why it was occurring (vulnerability), and what was done to address it (response). In total, 54 workshops were conducted involving 777 participants from 160 municipalities and cities in nine of the Philippines' 12 fisheries management areas (FMAs). An initial assessment of IUU fishing at the FMA level in FMA-8 was also done to estimate the prevalence in 2020 of IUU fishing by domestic commercial fishing vessels (CFVs) within the FMA, based on data from DA-BFAR, data obtained from information gathering and community reports, and the results of the IUU fishing assessment workshops for 49 LGUs (out of the 51 LGUs) in FMA-8. In addition, an assessment of poaching by foreign-flagged vessels in Philippine waters was conducted based on apprehension data from DA-BFAR and an analysis of VIIRS nighttime satellite images.

The assessments are not intended as a gauge of performance of either the LGUs or DA-BFAR. Rather, they are meant as an indication of IUU fishing risk exposure, as a guide for planning and operational decisions on the fight against IUU fishing, and as a baseline for monitoring progress towards IUU fishing reduction.





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Key Findings and Their Implications

The scores derived from I-FIT fall mostly within the 2.00-3.00 range of the I-FIT scale, with the national IUU fishing index, prevalence, vulnerability, and response scores averaging 2.58, 2.51, 2.53, and 2.76, respectively, indicating an overall moderate risk to IUU fishing. This is borne out by participant observation indicating that, in about half of the assessed LGUs, enforcement was fairly strong, and there was a decrease in IUU fishing between the year in review and the year before. The close agreement between the prevalence and vulnerability scores suggests that the prevalence of IUU fishing in a given area is associated with that area's vulnerability (attracting factors) to IUU fishing.

The FMA-level assessment reported an average fishing index score of 2.55 for FMA-8. Prevalence, vulnerability and response scores averaged 2.49, 2.58, and 2.66, respectively, across the 49 LGUs assessed. Key vulnerability factors for FMA-8 included the perceived richness of its fishing grounds, the CFVs' better ability to withstand the rough seas compared to DA-BFAR's enforcement vessels, and the IUU fishers' unscrupulous and aggressive attitude.

With regards to poaching, DA-BFAR apprehension data from 2016 to 2019 show that half of the apprehensions involved vessels with unknown flag states, which means these vessels engaged in both illegal and unregulated fishing. An analysis of nighttime satellite images from April 2012 to July 2021 meanwhile reports an increasing trend in average detection of potential fishing vessels in the West Philippine Sea.

There are five implications from the assessment that are of particular note for future research, policy, and practice on IUU fishing:

1. **The I-FIT results will enable response to be more targeted and purposive to specifically reduce the more immediate and harmful threats, and not simply address what is more visible from shore.** I-FIT has provided greater clarity at a granular level on where the hotspots and what the top fishing threats could be. For example, fishing with fine mesh nets was reported in 74 percent of the assessed LGUs. This suggests that the volume of illegal catch may be composed mainly of juveniles of species that, if left uncaught, can grow to a much larger size as they mature, and thus would be equivalent to a much bigger loss in potential adult catch than its face value would suggest.
2. **A major effective and sustainable effort is needed to encourage and incentivize the registration and licensing of all fishing boats**, both municipal and commercial, in line with what is scientifically sustainable. This view is based on the findings that the largest contributor (by volume) to IUU catch during the period in review was fishing without registration, permits or licenses, and that in areas with weak registration or licensing, there was an increase in illegal fishing, repeat offenders, and related violence compared to the previous year.
3. **DA-BFAR intends to apply I-FIT at FMA scales (including poaching in the exclusive economic zone), while also assisting LGUs nationwide to use the tool regularly to improve compliance.** As well as providing tools for reducing IUU fishing, I-FIT lays out a systematic approach for assessing, monitoring, managing, and communicating IUU fishing risk. The assessment results serve as a baseline and building block for understanding the magnitude of IUU fishing in the Philippines, designing and implementing targeted responses to specific problems in various areas, and tracking progress in reducing those problems.
4. **DA-BFAR will continue to provide national support in areas that are especially vulnerable and difficult for LGUs to manage on their own**. A variety of attracting factors for IUU fishing can be gleaned from the I-FIT data to identify proactive and preventive IUU fishing measures, such as those that promote voluntary compliance and discourage high-risk or non-compliant practices.
5. **There may be possible best practices that can be replicated nationwide to strengthen overall compliance.** While enforcement teams in a majority of LGUs are reported to be on the weaker side, there are good examples to follow with nearly half of the LGUs rated as having fairly strong enforcement teams, and with IUU fishing observed to be decreasing (compared to the year before) in half of the LGUs. BFAR is ready to help these LGUs strengthen their compliance efforts.

About USAID Fish Right

The USAID Fish Right Program is a partnership between the governments of the United States and the Philippines to promote fisheries management and marine biodiversity conservation. Fish Right enables sustainable fisheries by reducing threats to biodiversity and improving marine ecosystem governance.