

Why ASEAN nations need to jointly fund their fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In maritime Southeast Asia, where [more than ten million fishers](#) earn their living, the impact of illegal fishing practices is particularly relevant.

The use of illegal fishing tools and bombs for unlicensed fishery

activities haunt local fishermen, who have to deal with its economic, social and environmental repercussions.

In May, Indonesia hosted the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, East Nusa Tenggara. The high-level regional meeting [resulted in an agreement](#) to protect [migrant workers](#), prevent [human trafficking](#), and address the high number of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices across ASEAN that violate both national and international law.

However, despite [agreements and discussions in the past](#), the fight against IUU fishing remains largely ineffective due to various challenges.

Fighting IUU fishing requires concrete action, rather than just normative agreements among elites. As a researcher specializing in maritime, energy, and regional issues, I advocate for a regional IUU fishing joint fund, in which member countries can pool in money to finance necessary programs, as a solution to address these challenges.

Staggering economic and other costs

The fight against IUU fishing within ASEAN faces several hurdles, including the overlapping national interests among the ten members of the regional organization.

It is difficult to quantitatively capture the losses stemming from IUU fishing in diverse Southeast Asian states, let alone adequately provide effective solutions to a common problem.

The total economic loss is estimated to reach [a staggering US\\$6 billion in 2019](#). The loss surpassed the total revenue of the fishery sector in Southeast Asia, which was [approximately US\\$48.65 million in 2020](#).

But it is important to note that it is not easy to verify this estimation. Each country adopts [a different method](#) to measure total losses from IUU fishing. As potential losses are usually measured based on boat tonnage and potential shipload or freight volume, it is also difficult to identify the total value of each illegal fishing vessels.

Meanwhile, the economic exclusive zones (EEZ)—a territorial sea where local fishermen can sail and catch fish— of each member country also vary significantly. For example, Indonesia, with the largest waters in the region, is exposed to a greater potential financial loss than its peers.

Beyond the economic implications, IUU fishing causes [severe social impacts](#) from [illegal recruitment and employment](#) of Southeast Asian workers, leading to [various types of abuses](#). Social impacts—such as the psychological burden of fishing crew who experienced abuse during their sail—are often hard to measure from financial perspective.

IUU fishing is also associated with extensive [environmental damage](#) and [marine pollution](#), due to its [capture methods and over-fishing](#)—adding more problems ASEAN needs to address.

Without knowing precisely the impacts of IUU fishing, both in economic costs and non-economic repercussions, it is hard to reach practical solutions because there is no shared indicator used to measure the total cost.

Competing national interests

Each member country has its own national interests, making it challenging to focus on regional interest ahead of the national ones.

ASEAN has carried out efforts to prevent illegal fishing and criminal activities linked to IUU fishing. This includes guidelines to prevent the

entry of IUU-sourced fish and fishery products into the supply chain in [2015](#).

However, regional agreements can lack teeth, especially when they collide with the national interests of each member country.

For example, there are still reports of [Vietnamese boats fishing in Indonesia's rich Natuna waters](#) despite the two countries having finalized 12 years of intensive talks on their EEZ boundaries in December. [The Vietnamese coast guard](#) allegedly protected the vessels according the Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI)'s satellite finding, reflecting a lack of [commitment](#) towards the agreements.

Monitoring and guarding the territorial sea requires budget, which may differ among countries. As a result, each ASEAN member only carries out and prioritizes its national interest.

ASEAN needs a concrete action plan, including creating a joint IUU fishing fund that can be used to develop a regional work plan to tackle illegal fishing practices, as well as monitoring and guarding against it.

How ASEAN nations could pay for an IUU fighting fund

The slow progress in combating IUU fishing within ASEAN can be attributed to the lack of commitment in pooling resources among [member countries](#).

While [agreements to prevent the entry of fish and fishery products from IUU fishing activities](#) into the supply chain have been made, without associated financial obligations, the impact of these agreements is limited.

The presence of a joint regional fund can potentially bridge overlapping national interests among ASEAN countries. By binding members through financial commitments, solutions offered will be less state-centric and focus on what needs to be done at a regional level.

A suitable model for joint funds can be inspired by [the COVID-19 ASEAN Response fund](#), which provides financial resources to create regional actionable programs among ASEAN members.

For instance, ASEAN can design the joint fund annually like a state budget to accommodate necessary programs. From the fund, the organization can discuss and create programs to prevent, monitor and supervise illegal fishing, making them more achievable. These programs can include financing sea patrols, educating fishermen on sustainable fishing practices and addressing illegal recruitment.

Among the possible funding scenarios are ASEAN members chipping in according to their respective sea areas and the fishery needs of each country. But this does not mean that members with little or no direct access to the ocean are excluded from contributing.

IUU fishing is a regional concern, and there have been reports that [Lao and Cambodian nationals were found among enslaved fishing crews](#), although the former has no sea territory and the latter has relatively limited waters.

If ASEAN demands its members take action against IUU fishing without requiring a similar level of financial commitment from each member country, it will only make eradicating illegal [fishing practices](#) an ongoing, losing battle.

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