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## **Revitalising Indonesia's Waters: The Impact of Indonesia-China Fisheries Cooperation**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

**Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff** critically examines the 2024 fisheries cooperation agreement between Indonesia and China, exploring its potential to revitalise Indonesia's fisheries sector. While the agreement presents strategic economic opportunities, it also introduces significant environmental and socio-economic challenges.

### **COMMENTARY**

On [9 November 2024](#), a fisheries agreement was signed in Beijing, marking a significant milestone in Indonesia-China cooperation. The Technical Cooperation Guidelines (TCG), signed by Indonesia's minister of marine affairs and fisheries and China's minister of agriculture and rural affairs, was witnessed by Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto and Chinese president Xi Jinping during a high-profile state meeting.

As part of a broader implementing arrangement established in September 2024, the TCG aims to enhance sustainable fisheries cooperation through joint ventures, modernised fishing operations, and quota management, all in alignment with Indonesian maritime regulations. It also includes infrastructure development, skills training, and data-sharing mechanisms to boost sustainability and efficiency within the sector.

Beyond economic considerations, the agreement emphasises improving fishery workers' welfare by enhancing processing and marketing practices. A key feature of the TCG is its commitment to continuous evaluation mechanisms to ensure sustainable fish stocks, prevent illegal fishing, and maintain environmental integrity.

These safeguards highlight the strategic importance of this cooperation in strengthening food security and generating economic benefits for both nations.



The Indonesia-China fisheries agreement presents both economic opportunities and challenges, requiring inclusive policies and sustainable practices to protect local fishing communities and marine ecosystems. *Image source: Anthonikovii, [CC BY 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.*

## **A Boost for Indonesia's Fisheries Sector**

The fisheries sector plays a vital role in Indonesia's economy, contributing significantly to GDP and employment. By the third quarter of 2024, the sector [accounted](#) for approximately 2.54 per cent of national GDP, generating IDR 407 trillion (approximately US\$25 billion). Some estimates suggest that its contribution could rise to [5–6 per cent](#), signalling untapped potential that could be realised through strategic partnerships and modernisation.

A key advantage of the Indonesia-China fisheries agreement is the expected influx of Chinese investment, which is poised to modernise Indonesia's fishing fleet, enhance processing capabilities, and improve operational efficiency. These upgrades could boost productivity and improve the quality of marine products, strengthening Indonesia's competitiveness in the global seafood market.

Additionally, the agreement is set to expand market access for Indonesian fishery products, particularly in China's vast consumer market. Enhanced export opportunities could drive revenue growth, benefiting local fishing communities and industry stakeholders.

Beyond trade, the collaboration is projected to generate employment across the fisheries supply chain, from fishing operations to port-based processing hubs. By fostering sustainable job opportunities, the agreement could provide a much-needed economic boost to coastal communities, reinforcing the sector's role as a pillar of Indonesia's maritime economy.

## **Concerns over Sustainability and Local Livelihoods**

Despite its economic promise, the agreement raises significant concerns regarding sustainability and the welfare of small-scale fishermen. Past experiences with foreign fishing partnerships and news about [China's practices](#) demonstrate how large-scale

commercial fishing can lead to the marginalisation of local fishers, [resource depletion](#), and the disruption of traditional livelihoods.

One major challenge is ensuring that [local fishing communities](#) are not pushed out of their own waters. Large commercial fleets, even when regulated, often have the advantage of better equipment, greater efficiency, and larger quotas, which can make it harder for small-scale fishers to compete. Without specific safeguards, there is a risk that this partnership will exacerbate existing inequalities, allowing industrial-scale fishing to dominate at the expense of local livelihoods.

Additionally, unsustainable fishing practices — such as overfishing and habitat destruction — must be carefully managed. Indonesia's marine ecosystems have already been affected by illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and an increase in fishing activities without strong environmental protections could lead to severe ecological damage.

To address these concerns, inclusive policies must be developed to ensure that local fishermen benefit from the agreement, rather than becoming collateral damage in a rapidly modernising industry. Strong community engagement, access to technology, and resource-sharing mechanisms will be crucial in ensuring that economic gains do not come at the cost of traditional fishing communities.

### **The Need for Strong Oversight and Enforcement**

Given these challenges, effective oversight and [enforcement](#) will be crucial in ensuring that the Indonesia-China fisheries cooperation delivers equitable and sustainable benefits. Stakeholders have emphasised the need for protective measures, including designated fishing zones for small-scale fishers and technological upgrades to improve efficiency without displacing traditional practices.

A major concern is overfishing, which could deplete fish stocks and destabilise marine ecosystems. To prevent this, robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms must be implemented to ensure compliance with quotas, environmental regulations, and fair-trade practices. Given Indonesia's history of IUU fishing, strict regulatory frameworks are necessary to protect marine ecosystems and local fishing communities.

Lessons from past partnerships highlight the dangers of weak enforcement, opaque governance, and uneven benefit distribution. To prevent history from repeating itself, the TCG must incorporate stringent oversight mechanisms, clear legal frameworks and inclusive decision-making processes. In particular, local fishing communities should have a voice in policy decisions to prevent economic marginalisation.

Ultimately, without strong governance structures, this partnership could exacerbate existing disparities rather than foster inclusive economic growth. A commitment to effective enforcement, equitable resource management, and stakeholder accountability will determine whether this initiative revitalises Indonesia's fisheries sector or perpetuates systemic vulnerabilities.

## Conclusion

The Indonesia-China fisheries agreement presents a transformative opportunity for Indonesia's fisheries sector, balancing economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity. On one hand, the partnership promises modernisation, expanded export opportunities, and job creation. On the other, without strong regulatory frameworks and inclusive policies, it risks exacerbating overfishing, marginalising local fishermen, and harming marine ecosystems.

The Indonesian government must take a proactive role in ensuring that this cooperation serves national interests while upholding sustainability and fairness. This requires robust oversight, stringent enforcement mechanisms, and transparent governance.

Ultimately, the success of the Indonesia-China fisheries cooperation will depend on striking a delicate balance — leveraging economic opportunities while safeguarding environmental and social well-being. If managed effectively, this agreement could set a regional precedent for sustainable and inclusive fisheries partnerships, positioning Indonesia as a leader in equitable maritime resource management.

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