






Dual Role of Middlemen: An Opportunity or Exploitation for Fisherman?

Siti Nuraini¹, Dwitha Nirmala¹, Izzato Millati¹,
Ahmad Danang Sagita¹, Shinta Nailul Faroha¹, Weda Yurista¹

¹Airlangga University, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia
sitinuraini@feb.unair.ac.id

Abstract. This research aims to investigate the phenomenon of fishermen's dependency on middlemen and its impact on their welfare. Employing a narrative phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews, this study seeks to delve into and reconstruct the firsthand experiences of fishermen in their interactions with middlemen, thereby constructing a comprehensive understanding of the meaning and implications of the middleman phenomenon within the fishing community. The findings reveal a significant dependency of fishermen in Muncar District on middlemen for capital, resulting in limited bargaining power in price determination, restricted access to market information, and constrained marketing options. These conditions are exacerbated by insufficient access to post-harvest processing technology and fluctuating market prices. This research concludes that the current marketing system is biased against fishermen. The dependence on middlemen perpetuates a cycle that benefits middlemen at the expense of fishermen. To enhance the welfare of fishermen, efforts are needed to strengthen their bargaining position, such as the formation of fishermen's cooperatives, improved access to market information, and the development of marketing infrastructure. Furthermore, the government should play an active role in formulating policies that support the sustainable and equitable development of the fisheries sector.

Keywords: fisherman, middleman, poverty, prosperity

1 Introduction

As the world's largest archipelago, Indonesia possesses an abundant wealth of fishery resources. The national potential for capture fisheries production reaches 12 million tons per year [1]. Among various fisheries management areas, Java Sea occupies a strategic position with immense potential for fish catches. This region is the center of small-scale and industrial fishing activities, marked by the number of centrally licensed vessels exceeding 2,300 units [2]. The high level of fishing activity in the Java Sea indicates the abundant potential of fish resources in the Java region. This high level of fishing activity is reflected in the capture fisheries production data in East Java in 2023, which reached 590,685.8 tons, surpassing production in regions such as Maluku and

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Central Sulawesi. The main commodities of capture fisheries in East Java in the same year were dominated by skipjack tuna and small pelagic fish, with production of 65,532.3 tons and 79,952.3 tons, respectively [3]. The achievement of capture fisheries production in East Java makes this province the highest-producing province in Indonesia for the category of capture fisheries production in 2023.

Banyuwangi, a regency in East Java, possesses immense potential in the capture fisheries sector. Based on data from the East Java Provincial Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2021, Banyuwangi ranked second after Lamongan in terms of capture fisheries production, with a total output reaching 97,046 tons [4]. The value of Banyuwangi's capture fisheries production is also notably high, ranking fourth in East Java with a value of Rp1,582,471,801 [4]. This significant fisheries potential, particularly in Muncar District, has been a primary source of livelihood for local communities. However, behind this substantial potential, Muncar fishermen also face several challenges. One of the most critical issues is the suboptimal marketing system, where a significant portion of the catch is directly sold to middlemen or brokers.

This suboptimal marketing system is exacerbated by capital practices involving middlemen. Fishermen in Muncar are generally bound in a symbiotic mutualistic relationship with middlemen, whereby fishermen obtain operational capital for sailing, while middlemen are assured of a fish supply. This relationship is often unequal, with fishermen in a weaker position. This is due to the fishermen's dependence on capital from middlemen, forcing them to sell their catch at prices set by the middlemen. Preliminary surveys conducted to explore the problems faced by fishermen in Muncar District indicate a high level of dependence on middlemen. The researcher conducted initial interviews with two fishermen who owned boats and had a capital loan relationship with middlemen to delve into the fundamental problems faced by fishermen. First result from initial interview from fisherman 1, shows that they are dependent on middleman for capital.

Fisherman 1

"As fishermen in Muncar, we are entirely reliant on middlemen. They provide us with the capital necessary to go out to sea, but we have no autonomy in determining the price of our catch. They dictate the prices beforehand. Consequently, we are merely their laborers, constantly catching fish and selling them at low prices. Despite the abundance of our catch, it is the middlemen who reap the most significant profits." (Fisherman 1, interview, March 2023)

Thus, middleman can control selling price of fish, because fisherman have no bargaining power.

Fisherman 2

“We fishermen here are like fish in the sea, we have no power. Whether we like it or not, we have cooperated with the middlemen. They provide us with the capital to buy gasoline, nets, and other fishing equipment. However, once we catch the fish, the selling price is already determined by them. We cannot negotiate. In fact, we are also not free to choose who to sell to. In short, everything must go through the middleman first.” (Fisherman 2, interview, March 2023)

The initial interview results indicate that the bargaining power of fishermen is quite low due to limited capital. Fishermen have a dependency on middlemen for capital. Limited capital is one of the problems faced by fishermen in Muncar District. This condition results in fishermen having low bargaining power in determining fish selling prices and obtaining minimal profits. In addition, the long-term attachment of fishermen to a single middleman can also limit their access to broader markets and more competitive prices. In line with the problems in Muncar, Banyuwangi, the presence of middlemen in the fisheries supply chain, especially in remote areas like the Amazon, has been a major obstacle to improving the welfare of fishermen [5]. The dependence of fishermen on intermediaries to sell their catch results in a significant decrease in income. Research on poor fishing communities in the region shows that intermediaries suppress fishermen's income by up to 27%, a figure that underscores how detrimental this system is to fishermen.

"Other studies have also demonstrated that markets in Athens have shown that eliminating intermediaries or middlemen in the food supply chain can increase farmers' income and strengthen the local economy [6]. Farmers can sell their produce directly to consumers, thus the profits previously enjoyed by intermediaries now belong to the farmers. This proves that markets without intermediaries or middlemen are not only an alternative marketing channel but also an effective strategy for improving farmers' welfare [6]. This issue is in line with previous research that explains that the characteristics of fishermen are identical to limited assets, weak capital structure, lack of bargaining power to access values of justice and economic resources, weaknesses in market access and the ability to master science and technology [7]. Under these conditions, the lives of poor fishermen in poverty become increasingly complex and multidimensional.

More specifically, the causes of poverty among fishermen include their limited ability to adopt technology, the imbalance in the market with the dominance of middlemen weakening the fish marketing network. This situation is exacerbated by the dysfunction of social institutions such as fishermen's cooperatives and the lack of government policies that favor the fishing community [7]. Similar issues of poverty among fishermen also occur in the Philippines, where Filipino tuna fishermen continue to rely on the fishing sector despite declining catches, forcing them to adapt to less sustainable

traditional methods. This necessitates concerted efforts to provide alternative livelihoods and promote environmentally friendly fishing practices [8].

Meanwhile, other studies have shown that the systematic exploitation of small-scale fishers by middlemen, driven by debt and resource conflicts, results in low selling prices for catches and encourages destructive fishing practices [9]. Another study also explains that fishers in Gusung and Malahing Islands, Bontang Bay, are trapped in poverty due to climate change, exploitation by middlemen, and environmental damage caused by industrial activities. This condition not only impacts their income but also threatens the overall well-being of the community [10]. Furthermore, another study explains that the dependence of fishers on middlemen in Bangladesh's fish distribution system has led to a significant decline in income. This is due to high production and distribution costs caused by numerous middlemen, as well as limited fisher access to markets. As a result, small-scale fishers who lack capital and are tied to daily payment systems are forced to sell their catch at low prices to middlemen [11]. More specifically, the study also explains that to improve the welfare of fishers in Bangladesh, a new and more efficient fish distribution system has been proposed. This system involves joint fish landing sites, licensed wholesale markets, and supermarkets [11].

Ragnar Nurkse's Vicious Circle of Poverty theory (1952) [12] provides a relevant analytical framework for understanding the socioeconomic conditions of fishermen in Muncar District, Banyuwangi. This cycle illustrates a situation where low income leads to low savings and investment, which in turn hinders productivity increases [13] [14]. This condition is characterized by low income, limited access to capital, and dependence on middlemen [15].

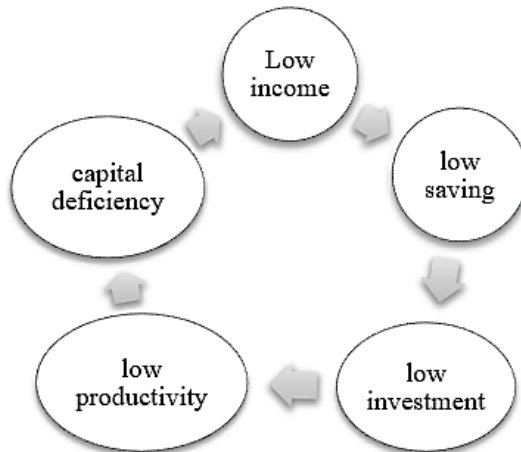


Fig 1. Nurkse's Vicious Cycle of Poverty

Nurske posited that low income is a primary cause of low productivity and capital accumulation, ultimately contributing to poverty. In a similar vein, the fishermen of Muncar lack the capital necessary for investing in fishing equipment and operational costs. As a result, they are forced to seek external financing to cover these expenses. Limited operational costs, in turn, lead to low income for the fishermen.

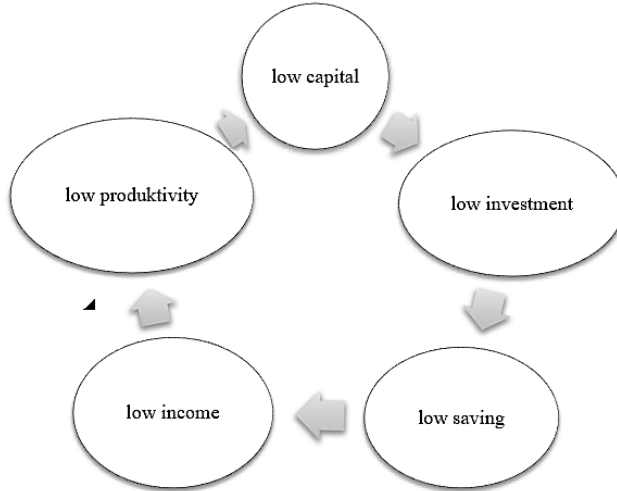


Fig 2. A Sociological Analysis of Muncar Fishing Communities

Karl Marx posited that the evolution of society can offer a compelling lens through which to examine the circumstances of Muncar's fishermen. Marx's theory of development is rooted in the notion that societies are polarized into those who own capital and those who do not, as well as landowners and the landless. Marx argued that the power of entrepreneurs lies in their ability to exploit surplus value, the difference between the actual value of a worker's labor and the wages they receive. A capitalist-oriented social structure, with middlemen as the dominant party, engenders an imbalance in economic relations. Fishermen, as primary producers, are often the exploited party.

The creation of surplus value, in this case, the transformation of money into capital, does not solely rely on the assumption that commodities have been sold above their value or purchased below their value [16]. For instance, if A sells grapes to B for \$40 and in return receives wheat worth \$50, A has transformed \$40 into \$50, generating more money from less and transforming their commodity into capital. Within the market, nothing has fundamentally changed; the total value of the exchange remains \$90. However, A gains surplus value, while B incurs a loss [16].

This research aims to narrate the dependency of fishermen on middlemen and its implications for their welfare. Based on this background, this study narrates the phenomenon of middlemen in the fishing community of Muncar District and proposes strategic solutions to enhance the bargaining power of fishermen. It is expected that this research will provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon of middlemen among fishermen in Muncar, as well as offer more equitable and efficient alternatives to improve fishermen's bargaining power over fish selling prices, thereby increasing their income and welfare to support the local economy. Through a comprehensive approach to the phenomenon occurring in the fishing community of Muncar, the findings of this research are expected to serve as a basis for policymaking that is more favorable to fishermen and supports the development of a sustainable fisheries sector.

2 Method

This study adopts a narrative phenomenological approach, with Muncar District, Banyuwangi, as the research location. The narrative approach primarily focuses on data collection through individuals based on their stories, reporting personal experiences, and chronologically sequencing the meaning of these experiences [17]. The narrative approach is used to understand how Muncar fishermen initially interacted with middlemen and became dependent on them for capital. Phenomenology refers to the common meaning held by several individuals regarding their experiences of a concept or phenomenon. The fundamental goal of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to enable the description of its universal essence [17]. This phenomenological approach aligns with the research objective of understanding the phenomenon of middlemen within the fishing community, thus enabling the development of optimal policies for fishermen. The basic questions used to explore the phenomenon of middlemen experienced by fishermen are: first, have you experienced the phenomenon of borrowing capital from middlemen? and secondly, what is your experience related to the phenomenon of middlemen that you have experienced? The researcher conducted interviews with two distinct groups: fishermen who interact with middlemen and middlemen who provide capital to fishermen. The reason for interviewing middlemen was to understand how middlemen provide capital to fishermen and how the process of middlemen acquiring significant capital enables them to lend to fishermen.

3 Result and Discussion

Based on discussions with Muncar fishermen, a dominant post-harvest pattern has emerged. The findings indicate that the fishery marketing system in Muncar District, Banyuwangi, remains heavily reliant on middlemen. This dependency creates a cycle that benefits middlemen but harms fishermen. Fishermen generally sell their raw catch to middlemen, who then determine the selling price. This demonstrates the low bargaining power of fishermen in the fishery supply chain. The relationship between fishermen and middlemen is often patron-client, where fishermen obtain operational capital from middlemen but are bound by unfavorable price agreements.

This practice further strengthens the dominant position of middlemen and hinders the independent development of fishermen's businesses. Fishermen typically conduct initial preservation of their catch by freezing it in large boxes using ice. Frozen fish then marketed fresh to middlemen. Middlemen, who act as operational capital providers for fishermen, have close business relationships with fishermen. This relationship is interdependent, where fishermen receive capital for fishing, while middlemen obtain a supply of fresh fish. Price and sales agreements are generally predetermined, giving fishermen little flexibility in determining the selling price and buyer.

When faced with a season of low fish prices, fishermen have two main options. First, they can sell the fish to a salted fish processing plant. However, if the fish quality does not meet the plant's standards, the second option is to process the fish into fishmeal. The decision to choose the first or second option largely depends on the quality and quantity of the catch. When faced with fish price fluctuations, fishermen have limited options. The option of processing into processed products such as salted fish or fishmeal often becomes a last resort, especially if the fish quality does not meet market standards. This limited choice further worsens the bargaining position of fishermen in the face of a fluctuating market. Based on interviews conducted with fishermen, middlemen, and fishery management personnel in Muncar, Banyuwangi, several important pieces of information were revealed by these key informants.

Middleman 1 stated,

“Let me explain. Our relationship with fishermen is mutually beneficial. We usually provide small loans to help them finance their fishing trips. If their debt accumulates, it's common for them to repay with their catch. That's only fair, isn't it?”

(Middleman 1, interview, September 2023)

Middleman 2 responded,

“Well, I have capital. So, when fishermen need to buy fishing equipment, I lend it to them. Once they have a catch, it’s only natural for them to pay me back by selling their fish here. That was the agreement from the start.” (Middleman 2, interview, September 2023)

These two explicit statements from middlemen illustrate the long-standing patron-client relationship between fishermen and middlemen in Muncar. They confirm the practice of middlemen providing loans to fishermen with the condition that the debt is repaid with fish. These statements seemingly present a mutually beneficial business relationship; however, upon closer examination, several implications disadvantageous to fishermen emerge. Notably, fishermen are highly dependent on the capital provided by middlemen to go fishing. This dependence makes it difficult for fishermen to negotiate fish prices effectively. Although both parties claim that the agreement is mutually beneficial, in practice, fishermen often find themselves in a less advantageous position. This is due to the information asymmetry and power imbalance between fishermen and middlemen. The loan mechanism followed by repayment through fish catches can create a debt cycle that is difficult for fishermen to break. This can hinder long-term improvements in fishermen's welfare.

However, the researcher has limited information regarding the practice of lending interest rates in the interactions between fishermen and middlemen in Muncar. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that fishermen's dependence on middlemen creates a complex dynamic. Middlemen, with their broader market access, cannot be entirely blamed for this situation. Fishermen's limited sales access, generally restricted to large factories or other middlemen, strengthens the dominant position of middlemen in the fishery supply chain. This is consistent with previous findings regarding the low bargaining power of fishermen and the patron-client relationship that benefits middlemen. Thus, it can be concluded that the fishery market structure in Muncar is still oligopolistic, with middlemen as the primary actors controlling prices and sales volume. This condition requires more comprehensive policy interventions to improve fishermen's welfare and create a fairer and more transparent market.

Fisherman 3 stated,

“If you want me to tell you, our relationship with middlemen is already bound. We need capital to go fishing, so we must borrow from them. But once we get the fish, the selling price is already determined. Want to negotiate? It’s difficult. If the fishing season is bad, we only have two choices: sell cheaply to the factory or process it ourselves into salted fish or fishmeal. Even then if the quality of our fish is good. So, we are always

the ones who are disadvantaged.” (Middleman 2, interview, September 2023)

Fisherman 4 added,

“To be honest, we fishermen are like commodities. The fish price is determined by the middlemen. They have big capital, big ships, and warehouses. We only have manpower and small boats. So, whether we like it or not, we must follow the price they give. And where else can we sell the fish? Only to those middlemen. It’s difficult for us small fishermen to be independent. We need government help to get better prices and have a wider market choice.” (Middleman 2, interview, September 2023)

These statements confirm fishermen's dependence on middlemen in the fishery marketing system in Muncar District. This underlines the power imbalance between fishermen and middlemen, where fishermen are in a very vulnerable position. Fishermen's dependence on middlemen's capital for fishing has created a cycle of dependence that is difficult to break. Fishermen are forced to accept the selling prices determined by middlemen, indicating their low bargaining power in determining the value of their catch. Furthermore, the fishermen's statements also reveal the limited market choices for fishermen. When fish prices are low in the market, fishermen only have the option of selling to factories at often unprofitable prices or processing the fish themselves into processed products with quality that may not meet market standards. This shows that fishermen are highly vulnerable to market price fluctuations and have little control over their economic destiny. The researcher also interviewed representatives from village-owned lending institutions or village unit cooperatives to gather more in-depth information.

Funding Institution's Perspective:

“In the past, this cooperative not only provided loans to fishermen but also purchased their fish catch. Now, we can only provide loans because our role has been taken over by middlemen.” (Village-owned lending institutions, interview, September 2023)

This statement from the funding institution regarding the shift in its role from a buyer of fish catch to a mere loan provider further reinforces the findings of discussions with Muncar fishermen. The dominance of middlemen in Muncar's fishery supply chain has created an unjust system that hinders the development of fishermen's businesses. Previously, the funding institution acted as a counterbalance by directly purchasing fish catch from fishermen, giving them more options for selling their catch. However, with

the absence of the funding institution as an alternative buyer, fishermen are increasingly trapped in patron-client relationships with middlemen. This dependence on middlemen has created a vicious cycle that is difficult to break, where fishermen continuously find themselves in a weak position in determining the selling price and fate of their catch. This situation is exacerbated by the limited post-harvest options available to fishermen. The option of processing fish into value-added products such as salted fish or fishmeal often becomes a last resort when market prices are low, or fish quality does not meet standards. This indicates the low value added that fishermen receive from their catch. As a result, fishermen only earn very small profits, while most of the profits are enjoyed by middlemen and other parties in the supply chain. To address this issue, a comprehensive approach is needed. In addition to expanding fishermen's access to business capital, efforts must also be made to increase the value added of the catch through the development of small-scale fish processing businesses or cooperatives. Strengthening fishermen's institutions and developing alternative markets are also key to increasing fishermen's bargaining power and breaking the chain of middlemen dominance. In this way, fishermen can obtain more stable and prosperous incomes. The government, although having a role in regulating the fisheries sector, has not significantly addressed the problems faced by fishermen regarding the setting of fish prices. The market mechanism, dominated by agreements between fishermen and middlemen, makes it difficult for the government to directly intervene in determining selling prices. This results in fishermen often being in a disadvantageous position, especially when fish prices decline. This research has revealed the complexity of the fishery marketing system in Muncar District, Banyuwangi, which is dominated by fishermen's dependence on middlemen. The fundamental weaknesses in fishermen's business processes identified are as follows:

Low Bargaining Power

Selling Price Set by Middlemen, Fishermen have very limited control over determining the selling price of their catch. Middlemen, with more capital and wider distribution networks, often set prices that benefit them;

Dependence on Capital, The need for capital for operational fishing makes fishermen vulnerable to pressure from middlemen. They are often forced to accept the offered price, even if it is not profitable.

Limited Market Options

Dominance of Middlemen, Middlemen often become the only buyers of fishermen's catch. This limits market options for fishermen and strengthens the bargaining position of middlemen;

Limited Capital, Investment in processing technology requires significant capital, which is often not available to small-scale fishermen.

This condition is in line with previous research findings that show fishermen's dependence on middlemen is a global problem. In many countries, small-scale fishermen often fall victim to unfair marketing systems. The findings of this research are consistent with previous studies conducted in various coastal areas. Other research has also highlighted similar problems, namely the low bargaining power of fishermen, dependence on middlemen, and lack of access to market information [7] [11]. Another study in the Amazon found a similar phenomenon, where intermediaries significantly suppressed fishermen's income [5]. Meanwhile, other studies show that eliminating intermediaries in the food supply chain can increase farmers' income [18]. These studies highlight the importance of strengthening fishermen's bargaining power, for example through the formation of fishermen's cooperatives, access to market information, and government support for the development of marketing infrastructure.

4 Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal that the fishery marketing system in Muncar District, Banyuwangi, remains heavily dependent on middlemen, creating patron-client relationships that disadvantage fishermen. Fishermen's reliance on capital provided by middlemen for operational expenses at sea traps them in a debt cycle that is difficult to break, reducing their bargaining power in determining the selling price of their catch. Limited market options, especially during periods of low fish prices, further strengthen the dominance of middlemen in the fishery supply chain. To improve the welfare of fishermen and create a more equitable market, comprehensive policy interventions are necessary, including the development of small-scale fish processing businesses, strengthening fishermen's institutions.

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