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FISHING VESSEL REGISTRATION: DISCOVERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES, EFFECTS, AND ASPIRATIONS ON EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 305

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INTRODUCTION

Fishing in the Philippines is both an economic lifeline and a cultural heritage deeply woven into the fabric of coastal communities. For small-scale fisherfolk, municipal waters represent more than a source of income—they embody identity, resilience, and survival. To strengthen local governance and bring fisheries management closer to the grassroots, the Philippine government enacted Executive Order No. 305 (EO 305) in 2004, devolving the registration of fishing vessels three gross tonnage and below to municipal and city governments. The policy envisioned empowered local units capable of maintaining vessel registries, enforcing fishery laws, and providing more direct support to fisherfolk.

In Tibiao, Antique, this mandate took form through Municipal Ordinance No. 2014-02. However, gaps emerged between policy ideals and lived realities. Many fisherfolk and even some local officials lacked awareness and understanding of the ordinance, viewing the registration process as bureaucratic and detached from their livelihood concerns. This disconnection revealed key tensions between governance and livelihood, compliance and awareness, empowerment and exclusion emphasizing how regulatory intent often clashes with the day-to-day struggles of small-scale fishers.

This study examined how EO 305 is experienced and interpreted by fisherfolk, vessel owners, and local officials in Tibiao. By exploring their perspectives, it aims to bridge the divide between governance frameworks and community realities, advancing a more inclusive and empowering approach to local fisheries management.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological case study design to explore the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the implementation of Executive Order No. 305 (EO 305) in Tibiao, Antique. The phenomenological approach, grounded in Husserl's philosophy and guided by Giorgi (2009), sought to capture "what" and "how" individuals experience the phenomenon, emphasizing their subjective perceptions without imposing external interpretations. This approach revealed the human dimensions, emotions, and contextual meanings of policy implementation among fisherfolk, vessel owners, and local officials.

Complementing this, the case study design provided the sociocultural and political context necessary to interpret EO 305's operation within Tibiao's unique governance environment. Integrating these approaches enabled an all-inclusive understanding of both individual experiences and systemic dynamics shaping policy implementation.

Research Method and Data Collection

Data collection utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to elicit detailed narratives from participants. This method allowed flexibility to probe emergent themes while maintaining focus on the research questions. Thematic analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step descriptive phenomenological method, ensuring rigor and fidelity to participants' meanings.

Data collection proceeded in three phases:
Preparation. Securing approval from the Municipal Government of Tibiao and coordinating with barangay leaders for participant recruitment.
Collection. Conducting one-on-one interviews, FGDs, and written responses in participants' preferred language (Kinaray-a). Informed consent was obtained prior to each session.

Post-Interview Processing. Transcribing, organizing, and validating all collected data for analysis.

Participants and Sampling
The study involved 10 purposively selected participants representing key stakeholder groups: four fisherfolk, four vessel owners, and two local officials (municipal and barangay). Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old, possess direct experience with EO 305 implementation, and provide informed consent. Exclusion applied to individuals without relevant experience or those unwilling to participate.

A maximum variation sampling strategy ensured diversity in age, gender, and roles, enriching the range of perspectives captured. This participant mix reflected both implementers and beneficiaries, providing balance between institutional and grassroots experiences.

Locale of the Study
The research was conducted in Tibiao, Antique, a coastal municipality in Western Visayas known for its fishing-dependent communities and active maritime governance structures. Tibiao was selected for its representativeness of small coastal towns implementing EO 305 and the researcher's professional familiarity as a Maritime Police officer, which provided contextual insight into vessel registration practices and community challenges.

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, comprising seven iterative stages:
Familiarization – Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to gain a holistic sense of participants' narratives.

Extraction of Significant Statements – Identifying phrases directly related to experiences of EO 305 implementation.

Formulation of Meanings – Translating key statements into concise, researcher-formulated meanings while preserving authenticity.

Theme Clustering – Grouping related meanings into thematic clusters that reflected patterns across participants.

Thorough Description – Developing a comprehensive narrative integrating all themes and sub-themes.

Fundamental Structure Formation – Distilling the essential essence of the shared experience.

Member Checking – Returning synthesized findings to participants for validation and accuracy.
This structured process ensured trustworthiness, credibility, and confirmability in deriving the thematic essence of stakeholders' lived realities.

Ethical Considerations
Ethical standards were upheld following principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Consent forms, available in English and Kinaray-a, detailed the study's purpose, procedures, and participants' rights, including withdrawal without consequence. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and all data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

The principle of non-maleficence ("do no harm") guided all interactions. Participants could skip or terminate interviews at any time. Special accommodations were made for women, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities to ensure equitable participation.

Scope and Limitations

The study focused on the lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of Tibiao's stakeholders regarding EO 305 implementation. The scope was limited to Tibiao's coastal barangays and data collected between April and June 2025. While the findings offer deep contextual insights, they are not generalizable to other municipalities due to the study's qualitative and localized nature.

Potential limitations include researcher bias arising from the author's professional background in maritime enforcement and participants' possible social desirability bias. To mitigate these, rapport-building, confidentiality assurances, and reflexive journaling were employed throughout the research process.

Dissemination of Findings

To ensure community relevance, results will be disseminated through:

Community Forums – Presentation of findings in Kinaray-a using visual summaries for fisherfolk and barangay leaders.

Policy Briefs – Concise, actionable reports submitted to the Municipal Government of Tibiao and relevant national agencies (BFAR, DILG).

Academic Publication and Conferences – Submission of the full manuscript for peer review and presentation in relevant academic venues.

This dissemination strategy ensures that findings inform both local empowerment and policy refinement, bridging academic research with real-world governance and community practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of fisherfolk, vessel owners, LGU officials, and barangay officials in the implementation of EO 305

Theme 1: Legalization Brings Security, but Clarity and Equity Remain Elusive

The first theme underscores the paradox of EO 305's implementation in Tibiao. While the policy is widely perceived as a mechanism that legitimizes small-scale fishing, its uneven dissemination and limited participatory communication constrain its effectiveness.

Theme 1.1: Sense of Legitimacy and Confidence

Fisherfolk recognize EO 305 as an avenue for legal recognition, which enhances their confidence and moral standing as legitimate fishers. This aligns with Binobo et al. (2024), who argue that formal registration mechanisms institutionalize fisher representation and accountability in co-managed systems. Similarly, Licuanan et al. (2018) emphasize that registration not only prevents overfishing but also fosters equitable resource access. In this context, legal identity translates to psychological assurance and a sense of belonging within the fisheries governance framework.

Theme 1.2: Reliance on LGU-Led Dissemination

Awareness about EO 305 largely emanates from LGU announcements, reflecting a top-down communication approach. While this structure ensures policy reach, it restricts opportunities for clarification and dialogue—echoing Oracion's (2014) observation that decentralized resource governance often depends on LGUs whose limited capacity constrains inclusivity. Thus, legitimacy is achieved administratively, not through participatory engagement, revealing a structural gap between policy awareness and ownership.

Theme 1.3: Uneven Depth of Awareness

Although EO 305 is widely known, comprehension levels vary significantly. Many fishers comply out of obligation rather than informed consent. This phenomenon parallels Yeboah et al. (2023), who found that compliance in Ghanaian fisheries was strongest when fishers participated in rule formulation. Likewise, Cvitanovic and Fulton (2022) stress that co-managed fisheries succeed when formal enforcement is supported by community-led awareness and trust.

Synthesis
The themes together reveal a disconnection between legal legitimacy and participatory legitimacy. While EO 305 provides formal recognition (structural empowerment), the lack of dialogic communication and uneven comprehension weaken substantive empowerment. This tension between authority-led implementation and community-led understanding is a recurring dynamic in decentralized fisheries governance.

Lived Experiences and Challenges in Complying with EO 305
Barriers to Compliance Undermine Legitimacy and Participation
Despite the intended inclusivity of EO 305, its implementation introduced new inequities that disproportionately affect small-scale fishers.

Theme 2.1: Cost and Access Barriers
Financial constraints—document fees, transportation, and lost fishing time—emerge as primary deterrents. These burdens mirror findings by Fabinyi et al. (2025) and Hara & Geldenhuys (2022), who argue that socioeconomic inequities shape perceptions of fairness and compliance. In Tibiao, the high transaction costs of legality risk transforming formal recognition into exclusion, particularly for subsistence fishers.

Theme 2.2: Process Delays and Bureaucracy
Participants describe registration as an arduous, unclear process that consumes both time and income. Isaacs and Jentoft (2022) similarly highlight that bureaucratic rigidity alienates small-scale fishers from governance processes, while Filipe et al. (2024) refer to this as an "anticommons" effect—where overlapping administrative procedures create barriers to participation.

Theme 2.3: Unequal Enforcement
Perceived inconsistencies in enforcement further erode trust and community solidarity. Atuo (2021) and NOAA Fisheries (2023) both stress that fair and transparent enforcement fosters voluntary compliance. In Tibiao, unequal application of the law fractures social cohesion, transforming collective stewardship into competition.

Synthesis
Theme 2 highlights how economic, procedural, and enforcement barriers intersect to delegitimize an otherwise inclusive policy. Together, these subthemes expose the implementation gap between the intent of EO 305 and the lived realities of marginalized fishers. The conceptual framework's dimension of participatory governance is thus weakened by inequitable access and procedural opacity.

Effects of EO 305 on Fishing Practices, Livelihoods, and Local Communities
Theme 3: Legal Recognition Offers Hope, but Economic Strain and Social Fragmentation Remain
EO 305 has produced both empowerment and alienation. Legalization bolstered confidence and expectations for support, but financial and social burdens persist.

Theme 3.1: Legal Security and Confidence
Legal documentation fosters emotional stability and pride among registered fishers, consistent with McCay et al. (2014) and Dawson et al. (2022), who link legal inclusion to increased self-worth and governance trust. Here, psychological empowerment complements institutional empowerment, bridging personal and structural legitimacy.

Theme 3.2: Anticipation of Government Benefits
Registration is seen not merely as compliance but as a symbolic entry into state recognition and welfare. Fishers equate legitimacy with entitlement to social protection and livelihood programs, as noted by Christie et al. (2022) and Agyekum & Nielsen (2024). Yet, when such expectations are unmet, it risks reversing compliance motivation into disillusionment.

Theme 3.3: Mixed Financial Impact
The uneven financial burden reflects the socioeconomic stratification within fishing communities. Gietzen et al. (2022) and FAO (2024) stress that equity-sensitive governance tailored credit, insurance, and subsidies, is essential to avoid exacerbating vulnerability.

Synthesis
Theme 3 extends the discussion of legitimacy by illustrating how legal inclusion without material support results in conditional empowerment. While EO 305 advances psychological and structural legitimacy, its failure to address livelihood sustainability and equity risks reinforcing existing vulnerabilities.

Stakeholders' Recommendations for Improving EO 305 Implementation
Theme 4: Call for Inclusive and Supportive Policy Implementation
The fourth theme consolidates fisherfolk's aspirations for a more equitable and participatory policy. It represents a shift from regulatory compliance to governance co-ownership.

Theme 4.1: Financial Accessibility through Free or Subsidized Registration
Fishers urge for reduced or free registration, reflecting a direct link between livelihood insecurity and policy compliance. Perez et al. (2022) and FAO (2015) support this, noting that lowering transaction costs enhances engagement and compliance.

Theme 4.2: Material and Logistical Support from LGUs
Participants envision LGUs as partners rather than enforcers—providing boats, fuel, and tools. This echoes Manlosa (2021) and Jentoft & Chuenpagdee (2022), who emphasize that decentralization succeeds only when paired with institutional support and capacity building.

Theme 4.3: Genuine Consultation and Participatory Governance
Fisherfolk demand to be consulted before implementation, resonating with Isaac & Jentoft (2022) and Estevez & Gelrich (2022), who argue that meaningful participation transforms compliance into co-ownership, ensuring policy legitimacy.

Synthesis
Theme 4 reaffirms the conceptual framework's call for participatory and equity-oriented governance. The recommendations bridge structural legitimacy (Theme 1) and procedural justice (Theme 2) by advocating for transparent, inclusive mechanisms that recognize fisherfolk not merely as subjects of policy but as co-managers of marine resources.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings
The lived experiences of fisherfolk, vessel owners, and local officials in Tibiao regarding the implementation of Executive Order No. 305 (EO 305) revealed nuanced understandings, multiple challenges, and varied coping strategies.

Understanding and Awareness
Participants generally associated EO 305 with the legal requirement to register fishing vessels below 3 gross tons (GT). Awareness was mostly acquired through barangay assemblies, LGU announcements, or during actual registration. However, the depth of understanding differed—some participants could articulate the purpose of EO 305, while others admitted they became aware of it only when they were asked to submit documents or attend meetings. This disparity suggested that information dissemination was uneven and often reactive rather than proactive.

Challenges to Registration
Respondents frequently described the registration process as difficult and inaccessible. The financial cost of acquiring cedulas and clearances was seen as a major barrier, especially for small-scale fishers whose income was already constrained. Moreover, the need to travel to the municipal center—often involving long distances and additional expenses—further discouraged participation. Several participants also spoke of how the process was confusing, repetitive, and time-consuming, which led to frustration and sometimes resignation.

Perceptions of Fairness and Compliance
Many registered fishers voiced their concerns about inconsistent enforcement. They felt disheartened when they saw unregistered fishers continue to operate without facing consequences, despite their own compliance. This fostered a

sense of unfairness and deepened community tensions. In contrast, those who had completed the registration reported feelings of security, legitimacy, and peace of mind. Some also anticipated benefits such as insurance, fuel subsidies, and support during calamities, though these remained expectations rather than guaranteed outcomes.

Community Dynamics
The impact of EO 305 extended beyond individual compliance—it shaped relationships within fishing communities. In some areas, fisherfolk collaborated and supported each other through the registration process. In others, resentment and competition emerged, especially where perceptions of favoritism or selective enforcement existed. These community-level effects revealed the complex social dimensions of policy implementation.

Stakeholders' Recommendations
Participants offered specific and heartfelt recommendations to improve the policy's implementation. Many called for the reduction or elimination of registration costs, citing their economic limitations. Others proposed bringing registration services closer to the barangays through mobile units. Respondents emphasized the importance of clear, consistent orientations and more inclusive consultations. A recurring appeal was for government support—not only in the form of information but through tangible assistance such as fishing gear or fuel.

Conclusions
This study concludes that the implementation of EO 305 in Tibiao is marked by a tension between policy intentions and grassroots realities. While awareness of the policy exists, it is often superficial or procedural rather than substantive. Many fisherfolk navigate EO 305 with limited understanding, shaped largely by practical necessity rather than informed engagement.

The structural barriers to registration such as financial, logistical, and procedural disproportionately affect those with fewer resources, leading to patterns of exclusion. Compliance is also undermined by perceived inequities in enforcement, weakening trust in local governance.

Nonetheless, compliance with EO 305 does carry symbolic and practical significance for many respondents. Legal registration is seen as a marker of legitimacy, enabling fishers to engage in their livelihood with greater confidence. Yet this sense of security is fragile and often dependent on the delivery of expected benefits and fair enforcement.

The findings underscore the importance of community-based approaches, clear and consistent communication, and sustained support. The EO's effectiveness does not rest solely on regulation but on building trust, fostering inclusion, and responding to the lived realities of those it aims to govern.

Recommendations
Grounded in the voices of the participants, the following recommendations are offered to improve the implementation of EO 305 in a manner that is responsive to local contexts:
Subsidize or Waive Registration Costs. Participants strongly recommended that fees for cedulas, clearances, and other documents be reduced or removed, especially for low-income fishers.

Bring Services Closer to Communities. To address the burden of travel and time, mobile registration units or barangay-based schedules can make the process more accessible and less disruptive.

Conduct Regular, Grassroots-Level Orientations. Clear and consistent information must be delivered in a manner that is understandable and culturally appropriate, ensuring deeper comprehension of EO 305.

Ensure Uniform Enforcement. Equal application of the law is vital. Selective enforcement breeds resentment and undermines the legitimacy of the policy.

Provide Tangible Support to Registered Fishers. Beyond legal recognition, registrants should receive meaningful support such as nets, fuel, or repair assistance, as incentives for compliance.

Institutionalize Participatory Consultations. Involving fisherfolk in the revision and implementation of EO 305 can strengthen accountability and foster shared ownership of the policy.

Strengthen Fisherfolk Associations. These associations can serve as vital platforms for advocacy, education, and mutual aid, supporting both compliance and community solidarity.