Advancing Living Wages in Aquaculture

Insights from an ASC-IDH Pilot on Wage Gap Measurement and Verification (2022 - 2025)

April 2026

1. Introduction

Between 2022 and 2025, the **Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)**, in partnership with **IDH**, implemented a pilot project to test the measurement and verification of living wage gaps in aquaculture. The objective was to assess feasibility of conducting wage measurement and verification in alignment with the Anker methodology, supported by the IDH Salary Matrix tool (from now on referred to as the 'Salary Matrix' or the 'tool'), and explore how living wage requirements could be integrated into the ASC Farm Standard.

The pilot was conducted across Ecuador, Vietnam, and India, three countries representing diverse regulatory environments, production systems, and levels of maturity in wage management. It combined tool testing with capacity building for trainers, farms, and auditors. The pilot was later extended through an addendum focused on scaling awareness and strengthening capacity for implementation of new living wage requirements across additional geographies.

The project was funded by IDH, with in-kind co-funding from ASC and other project partners. Based on the pilot findings, ASC has embedded living wage requirements into the ASC Farm Standard and developed a global capacity building strategy.

About ASC

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) is a global non-profit organisation that sets standards for responsible aquaculture and operates a leading certification programme. ASC has a strong focus on social responsibility, with living wages as a key component under the ASC Farm Standard. In this project, ASC led implementation, working with partners to pilot tools, build capacity and integrate living wage requirements into its standard.

About IDH

IDH is an international organisation bringing together public and private partners to drive sustainable and inclusive trade. It supports progress on living wage through its Living Wage Roadmap and the Salary Matrix, a tool to measure living wage gaps based on the Anker methodology. In this project, IDH provided funding, technical expertise, and training to support the application of living wage measurement in aquaculture.

Acknowledgements

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1.1 Project Objectives

The initial pilot (2022-2024) aimed to test the Salary Matrix as a tool to support living wage implementation within the ASC Farm Standard. Specifically, the project sought to:

- Assess the usability of the Salary Matrix for farms of different sizes and management systems;
- Evaluate the cost, complexity, and feasibility of verification by auditors;
- Generate initial insights into living wage gaps in selected aquaculture-producing countries;
- Determine whether the tool could support wage measurement and reporting requirements under the ASC Farm Standard.

Building on the pilot findings, the addendum focused on strengthening the enabling environment for implementation. Its objectives were to:

- Improve awareness and understanding of living wage concepts and measurement methods among producers and auditors;
- Develop localised and accessible training materials;
- Generate additional insights to inform ASC guidance and capacity-building strategies, as well as the review of the Salary Matrix.

2. Activities

The project followed a structured sequence of activities, evolving from pilot testing to broader implementation and scaling:

1. **Supply chain engagement and farm recruitment:** Farms were recruited for pilot participation in Ecuador, India and Vietnam. ASC collaborated with four retail and importer partners to engage suppliers in the pilot. These suppliers - often processors - supported the recruitment of ASC-certified farms.

- **Capacity building for farms and verifiers:** A cascade training model for farms was established. Local training organisations were recruited in each country and trained by IDH through a “train-the-trainer” approach. These trainers delivered local-language training to farms on living wage concepts and use of the Salary Matrix. Verifiers (ASC auditors, Assurance Services International staff and ASC assurance personnel) were trained in the IDH verification methodology for the Salary Matrix through a two-day online course.

2. **Measurement of wage gaps by farms:** Participating farms measured living wage gaps with the Salary Matrix using real payroll and benefits data. Follow-up support was provided to address technical questions.

3. **On-site verification of wage measurement:** Trained verifiers conducted on-site audits to assess whether the Salary Matrix had been completed accurately and in line with methodology requirements.
4. **Reflection and feedback collection:** ASC gathered feedback from farms and verifiers through debrief interviews and surveys, capturing insights on training effectiveness, tool usability, and the feasibility of prospected ASC living wage requirements
5. **Integration into the ASC Farm Standard:** Based on pilot learnings, ASC incorporated living wage requirements into the ASC Farm Standard, focusing on:
    - Living wage gap measurement;
    - Reporting on living wage gaps;
    - Planning for wage improvement.

    The ASC Farm Standard will become mandatory for all ASC-certified farms from mid-2027 onwards.
6. **Development and delivery of capacity-building:** Building on identified gaps, ASC developed aquaculture-specific materials and delivered training to farms and auditors. Training materials - including webinars, training videos and case studies - were designed to improve accessibility and contextual relevance of living wage concepts and methods. In addition, ASC conducted a survey of shrimp farms in India to gather information on wage practices and data systems, supporting the further development of context-specific training and guidance materials.

- **Testing implementation through mock audits:** ASC conducted nine mock audits with farms and auditors in seven countries (Greece, Ecuador, Chile, United States of America, Vietnam, India and Scotland) to test:
- The practical application of living wage requirements and implementation systems;
- The effectiveness of training and support materials;
- Auditor readiness to verify wage gap calculations.

3. Outcomes and Results

The project delivered a combination of practical tools, capacity-building resources, and implementation insights, alongside measurable progress in engaging farms and auditors on living wage. Specifically, the project delivered:

a) Testing of wage measurement with the Salary Matrix in aquaculture across Ecuador, Vietnam, India, Chile, Greece, United States of America, and Scotland.

- Integration of living wage requirements into the ASC Farm Standard.

b) Development of aquaculture-specific training resources for farms and auditors, including videos, interactive and localised webinars, content for a self-study module, and case studies.

c) Capacity building and awareness raising among aquaculture farms, auditors and expert trainers (see table below).

d) Three-part blog series on living wage in aquaculture.

e) Preliminary insights into wage gaps in selected aquaculture producing countries (see section below).

f) Identification of key implementation barriers.

Training audience	2022-2024	2025: # trained	Total
Farms (certificate holders)	7	7	14
Farm staff	35	35	70
Auditors	3	80	83
Expert-trainers	9	2	11
Total training participants	**47**	**117**	**159**

3.1 Measurement and verification of living wage gaps

The pilot demonstrated that living wage gaps can be measured and, in many cases, verified using the Salary Matrix. 13 farms completed a living wage gap calculation. 69% of these were positively verified.

Given the small sample size, results are not presented at country level and should not be interpreted as representative. Verification was generally more straightforward where farms had stronger data systems and prior familiarity with wage reporting, and more challenging where data was incomplete or concepts less established.

4. Learnings

4.1 Capacity and context are key determinants for implementation

The ability to implement living wage measurement is shaped by both capacity and context, which together determine the level of effort required for successful uptake.

Across all stages, the ability of farms, trainers, and auditors to understand and apply living wage concepts proved to be a primary determinant of success. In contexts with prior exposure - such as Ecuador, where national legislation mandates a “salario digno” aligned with the Anker methodology - uptake was relatively smooth. In contrast, in countries such as Vietnam and India, where living wage concepts are less established, limited baseline knowledge hindered implementation.

These contextual and capacity differences are closely linked to variations in data systems and management practices. In several pilot farms, payroll systems were not sufficiently structured meaning that working hours, bonuses, and in-kind benefits were not recorded, not centralised, or not monetised. This significantly complicates accurate wage gap measurement and verification.

Implication: Living wage implementation requires sustained, localised capacity building that is tailored to country context and risk level, including targeted support to strengthen data and management systems where needed. In more complex implementation environments, broader industry outreach and education on living wage concepts are required to build foundational understanding.

4.2 Salary Matrix tool is effective with the right guidance

The pilot showed that the Salary Matrix, while initially challenging for some participating farms, is an effective tool for measuring wage gaps with the right support. ASC therefore strongly recommends farms to use the tool to calculate and report on living wage gaps as required in the ASC Farm Standard.

However, farms struggled with interpreting data inputs, understanding how to account for elements such as in-kind benefits, and navigating the spreadsheet-based format. In addition, there was limited transparency in how calculations were performed, which reduced farms' confidence in the outputs. Inconsistencies in translations and limited availability of local-language materials further constrained usability.

Implication: Improving guidance, localisation, and transparency within the tool, including clear instructions on data inputs and benchmark selection, is key for enabling implementation. A revision of the Salary Matrix was carried out in 2025, addressing all these issues.

4.3 Implementation is resource-intensive and iterative

The project demonstrated that living wage measurement is inherently complex, particularly when done for the first time. Completing the Salary Matrix, preparing for verification, and addressing data gaps all require significant time and effort from farms and auditors.

Mock audits further showed that initial implementation often leads to errors, oversimplifications, or incomplete calculations, even where training has been provided. These challenges are a natural part of the learning process but require structured follow-up to resolve.

Implication: Scaling living wage implementation will require a phased and iterative approach, with continued investment in training, testing, and refinement of tools and guidance.

4.4 Verification requires both technical and contextual expertise

Verification of living wage data proved to be both resource-intensive and uneven in quality across contexts. In some cases, the process required more time and support than anticipated, particularly where farms were unfamiliar with the tool or underlying concepts.

In practice, verifiers frequently took on a dual role - both assessing and supporting farms in completing the Salary Matrix - which is not sustainable. This was particularly evident in contexts where training had insufficiently prepared farms for implementation. At the same time, some audits lacked sufficient depth, particularly in verifying the inclusion and valuation of wage components such as bonuses and in-kind benefits.

Implication: Verification systems must be strengthened through targeted, localised training for auditors, clearer methodological guidance, and closer integration into existing ASC audit processes. Preparation support for farms is also essential to facilitate efficient and credible verification.

4.5 Clear communication, trust, and incentives drive engagement

Engagement with farms was shaped not only by technical capacity, but also by how living wage requirements were understood and perceived.

Despite repeated training and communication efforts, there was persistent misunderstanding regarding ASC living wage requirements. Some producers interpreted the requirements as an obligation to immediately pay a living wage, rather than to measure and progressively improve wages over time. This created hesitation and, in some cases, resistance to participation.

At the same time, farms expressed concerns about sharing sensitive wage data and about the potential implications of identifying wage gaps. In some contexts, producers also questioned the relevance or accuracy of living wage benchmarks, particularly where these did not align with their perception of local costs. These factors contributed to reduced openness and, in some cases, incomplete or cautious data reporting.

Implication: Effective implementation requires clear communication and trust-building, reinforcing that ASC's approach focuses on measurement, transparency, and gradual progress. Positioning living wage as a shared responsibility across the value chain, rather than a farm-level obligation, is key to strengthening engagement and transparency.

4.6 Shared responsibility is critical to enable progress

The project highlighted that the ability of farms to act on living wage gaps is not only a question of awareness or willingness, but also of economic feasibility.

Across training and pilot activities, producers raised concerns about their limited ability to increase wages without risking their competitiveness. Farms frequently expressed a willingness to improve wages but indicated that doing so unilaterally could price them

out of the market. This challenge was particularly pronounced in highly competitive and price-sensitive supply chains such as shrimp.

While ASC requires farms to identify wage gaps, closing those gaps often requires changes beyond the farm level, including pricing structures, purchasing practices, and long-term buyer commitments. These dynamics underscore that living wage implementation cannot be addressed only at farm level. Without alignment and support from other value chain actors, there is a risk that measurement becomes a compliance exercise rather than a driver of meaningful improvement.

Implication: Achieving living wages requires shared responsibility, where retailers, importers, and other buyers support wage improvements through pricing, responsible purchasing practices, and longer-term partnerships. Measurement should be accompanied by strategies and collaborations that enable farms to translate insights into action.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The project confirms that living wage gap measurement can be implemented in aquaculture and credibly integrated into certification systems. However, successful implementation depends on capacity, effective engagement, and contextual adaptation, rather than requirements and development of tools alone.

The pilot and addendum demonstrate that while awareness can be built, consistent and credible application requires sustained support and iterative improvement. They also reinforce that progress on living wages depends on shared responsibility across the value chain.

Recommendations

- **Scale capacity building:** Prioritise localised, practical training and ongoing support for farms, auditors, and trainers, particularly in higher-risk contexts.
- **Strengthen tool guidance and localisation:** Provide clear, practical instructions on data inputs, treatment of wage components, and benchmark selection, supported by local-language materials.
- **Optimise verification in ASC audits:** Ensure effective and efficient verification through strengthened processes, guidance, and auditor and farm capacity.
- **Reinforce shared responsibility:** Reinforce that requirements focus on measurement and improvement and engage supply chain actors to support a shared responsibility approach.
- **Ensure continuous improvement:** Enable continued learning, refinement of tools and guidance, and strengthening of systems over time.

ASC is keen to collaborate with partners, including supply chain actors and local organisations, in the next phase of work to measure and improve wages in aquaculture. To explore opportunities, contact the ASC Human Rights team on human.rights@asc-aqua.org.