

# Increasingly Vulnerable

A study has come up with specific recommendations for the development and welfare of the fisheries sector and its small-scale fisher communities in Bangladesh, the 'Land of Rivers'

**W**ith 230 rivers coursing through the country, Bangladesh is called the 'Land of Rivers'. It also has the world's largest flooded wetland. Rivers and water resources have made Bangladesh one of the world's leading fish-producing countries with a total production of 4.27 mn metric tonnes (MT) in 2017-18. The fisheries sector contributes 3.57 per cent to the national gross domestic product (GDP), 25.30 per cent to the agricultural GDP, and provides a 60 per cent share of animal protein. About 18.5 mn people are directly involved in this sector, of whom about 10-12 per cent are women.

A study was recently carried out with the backing of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). Titled 'Bangladesh: Social

districts, namely, Bhola, Cox's Bazar and Bagerhat. The COAST Trust, a national-level non-governmental organization (NGO), supported the study.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in eradicating poverty. In this regard, there are a number of initiatives and projects, including extensive social safety-net programmes. It is, however, rare to have a separate scheme for fishers. Poverty remains a major challenge for Bangladesh fishers, despite the benefits from a number of poverty-eradication initiatives. According to this study, the country's fishing communities are still suffering from various forms of poverty.

Both the field data and secondary information show the unfortunate condition of the Bangladeshi fishermen in terms of almost all the indicators used in the study. The average annual income of the fishing communities was found to vary from US\$235 to US\$1,174, while the annual national income for Bangladesh is US\$2,064. The difference is very obvious. The data shows that the fisheries sector has, on average, more landless and homeless people than in other sectors, and fewer with access to electricity. The number of people under extreme poverty is higher. Though data shows fishing families have more access to drinking water and sanitation, in several areas they have to travel far to collect water. The sanitation quality is not up to the mark.

The survey showed that about 90 per cent of the houses are made of bamboo, tin and wood. The houses are small and congested, being between one to 50 years old. The houses are not safe, especially in the coastal region, which is susceptible to storm surges.

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Development and Sustainable Fisheries', its objective was to discuss the overall fisheries sector of Bangladesh, bringing out some social-development issues of the country's fishers' communities, focusing on small-scale and marginalized fishers. The study identifies some evidence-based situations, analyses the data and offers some specific recommendations. It uses both primary and secondary data and information. To fathom the socioeconomic conditions of the coastal fishing communities of Bangladesh, a survey was carried out to gather data, while interviews provided information from three coastal

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## Creating jobs

Bangladesh has unique policies and initiatives in place to create jobs for all of its people. The government is introducing a number of measures to combat unemployment. There are special stimulus programmes for the manufacturing sector as well as for small and medium businesses and agriculture. The fisheries sector is given special attention. The Draft National Job Policy 2019 calls for assistance in the production of fish, because employment in this field comes under 'green jobs'. The policy also recognizes the importance of fisheries as one of the main rural industries.

Bangladesh has some specific policies and provisions in place to ensure that the labour sector as a whole has a decent working environment. But, in many cases, the reality lags behind the International Labour Organization (ILO) standard. The fisheries sector receives little attention in many cases. The study finds that small-scale fishers and fishworkers face a severe lack of decent working conditions.

The country's constitution gives the country an 'inclusive' character as it legally guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all. However, there are gaps and discriminations in several aspects of society, and in some cases there is a tendency to narrow the differences and to discriminate between sections of the population. The study did not find discrimination towards fisher groups for being fishers. In numerous cases, however, they face discrimination as disadvantaged and oppressed communities.

The State's policy is to ensure health services for all. It has a strong occupational health and safety policy. The public health programmes of the government are vast, reaching the village level with community hospitals. But the sector suffers from severe corruption and mismanagement. Though several sectors are trying to ensure occupational health and safety, the fisheries sector is yet to benefit much from such efforts. This study found that no support for occupational safety reached fishers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Education is recognized as a fundamental right in the country's

constitution under Article 15. Primary education is compulsory. Girls get special scholarships and free education until class 10. Fishing communities also benefit from these measures, but the study found that fishers lag behind in terms of education and literacy, compared to the national situation.

The citizen's right to shelter is guaranteed in the constitution and there are various housing programmes in the country. Though there is no special housing exclusively for fishers, they do benefit from projects and programmes for the poor and the marginalized. Coastal fishers get support as people vulnerable to climate vagaries.

Bangladesh has special policies and programmes on water, sanitation and energy. There are schemes for the poor that encompass fishers. The study found almost all the fishing communities have access to drinking water and sanitation. The source of water in many areas is a bit far to access, and the quality of the sanitation is yet to improve.

**...women members of fishing families still lag in terms of empowerment and other socioeconomic indicators.**

Bangladesh is a pioneer in creating a national strategic plan and policies and programmes to fight the negative impacts of climate change. Fishers of Bangladesh are among the most vulnerable communities in this regard. While government policies and programmes do benefit fishers, the study shows that the suffering of these communities is increasing and their vulnerabilities are getting more severe.

A range of policies and strong measures protects women in Bangladesh. The country has some remarkable accomplishments with respect to gender equality. But, according to the report, women members of fishing families still lag in terms of empowerment and other socioeconomic indicators.

## Access to justice

Multiple policies and processes are in place to ensure access to justice

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Fisher's house, Pathrghata, Barguna, Bangladesh. The data shows that the fisheries sector has, on average, more landless and homeless people than in other sectors, and fewer with access to electricity

for the oppressed and marginalized. Yet, according to the study, fishers are unaware about government programmes and thus fail, in many cases, to obtain timely justice. Poverty and lack of information, networking and negotiating skills create barriers to the provision of proper facilities for fishers from various organizations.

The study has also come up with some specific recommendations for the development of the fisheries sector and for the welfare of the small-scale fisher communities. These include: legal recognition of small-scale fishers; special safety nets for the fishing communities; ensuring access to the open-water bodies, and protection of resources; access to credit and market for small-scale fish producers; measures to provide health services such as floating medical centres at sea; education facilities for children; and safety-at-sea measures. Gender-segregated data is a must to recognize the contribution of women. Also necessary are special

income-generating activity (IGA) support for the women members of the fishing communities; initiatives to ensure the sustainability of water bodies; insurance for fishers; provision of decent work; and measures for occupational safety. 3

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**Making women in fishing visible**

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