

Hand in Hand

Though Kerala and Tamil Nadu are top performers on the Human Development Index, their advances in sustainability and social development do not reach small-scale fishers

Social development of fishing communities can be made possible only through policies and services for poverty eradication, employment generation and social inclusion that address the specific needs of the community and ensure their well-being, through successful governance processes at different levels. Being socially and economically backward and lacking access to development opportunities makes the road to social empowerment difficult for fisherfolk.

Kerala and Tamil Nadu are two of India's highest performing states in human development. There are a number of schemes and policies in both the states for the social development of small-scale fisherfolk. And yet there is a long way to go. Both the states fail

figure is substantially worse than the proportion of people below the poverty line among the general population. A string of poverty-alleviation policies and programmes do not seem to have created a sizeable improvement in their condition. Some economic, social and cultural attributes unique to fishing communities have prevented their members from reaching the degree of 'capabilities' other Kerala communities have reached. Frequent natural disasters also reverse the development process of the fisherfolk. In order to reduce poverty among fisherfolk, policies that focus on climate-change resilience have to be the first priority, be it in housing, employment or healthcare. Without this, the policies will remain unsustainable.

Culturally conditioned livelihoods lead to many disadvantages, including the least likelihood of mobility out of employment. This adds to the misery of fisherfolk. There are alternative employment opportunities for fisherfolk communities in both the states, including exclusive opportunities. Many of these are in the making, especially in Kerala. Policies and programmes in both the states seem to be less efficient in case of providing access to healthcare to the fisherfolk villages. Analyzed data reveals that Tamil Nadu should focus more on improving the healthcare facilities accessible to fisherfolk as the number of hospitals near fishing community villages is much lower than the average.

Uneducated proportion

Access to education creates inclusion in the development process. Analysis shows the existence of a much-higher-than-average proportion of uneducated people among fisherfolk.

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to pick up their fishing communities along the overall development journey. In many of the social-development indicators, fisherfolk are way lower compared to the general population, data shows. While the general population shows a relatively better state of development, it has not trickled down to the fisherfolk—economically, socially or politically. Though there exist promising policies and programmes, a big push is required in policies, schemes and welfare programmes for development to reach fisherfolk.

More than half of the fisherfolk population in Kerala and Tamil Nadu live below the poverty line. This

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The proportion of fisherfolk with higher education is also very small, which limits occupational mobility. The proportion of females who had no formal education at all is very high compared to the general population. Kerala seems to have exclusive policies to improve the education status of fisherfolk but unless access is assured through institutional inclusion, there will not be a drastic improvement in the educational status of fisherfolk. Housing is a major issue. Lack of access to land in fisherfolk villages adds to this problem. Both Kerala and Tamil Nadu seem to have exclusive policies for improving the housing conditions of fisherfolk.

Collective action has been the major strength of fisherfolk. A number of establishments dedicated towards the welfare of fisherfolk exist in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Both the states have co-operatives that work towards the betterment of the community. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have contributed vitally to the resilience of the fisherfolk in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Globally, concerns over resource sustainability have led to fishing prohibitions and withholding of fisheries subsidies. This is a tricky issue for fisherfolk. The bans and restrictions keep them away from their daily fish catch. Though both states offer compensations, the amount is very small. Then there is the disruption brought to the fishers' livelihoods by natural disasters. The uncertainties they face need a careful examination. In comparison to other fishing methods, the techniques employed by small-scale fisheries have fewer negative impacts on the ecosystem. The development of small-scale fisheries not only contributes to global food security, but it is also desirable for environmental sustainability.

The state governments must ensure land security by assuring tenure for fisherfolk. Policies and programmes need to consider the unique characteristics of small-scale fishers. They lack alternative livelihood opportunities, especially during the fishing ban period. This calls for urgent government action. The fisherfolk need increased financial assistance

during the duration of the fishing ban. Compensation for injuries and for the needs of the disabled needs to be more generous and widespread, given that fishing is one of the riskiest jobs in the world.

A large number of workers in activities allied to fisheries are women. Their work and lives are not protected adequately by social-security systems when compared to active fishers, who are mostly men. The provision of pensions for fishing-allied workers is

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needed, especially for women. Access to social development is directly related to access to education and healthcare. More public hospitals need to be built near fisherfolk villages. Community study centres need to be organized in fishing villages to make sure there are no dropouts, and that nobody is left out of school.

Complementary policies

The digital divide needs to be addressed by improving access to the Internet and information technology, critical for access to education as well as for the development of resilience. Sustainability and social development should go hand in hand because one is complementary to the other. Policies related to one must take the other into account.

For more

Nets for Social Safety - An Analysis of the Growth and Changing Composition of Social Security Programmes in the Fisheries Sector of Kerala State, India by John Kurien and Antonyto Paul, 2000

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