

**International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)**  
**IYAFA 2022: Asia Workshop -Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries**

**PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE**

The following questions aim to identify key issues for small-scale fishers and fishworkers in Asia in line with the Small-scale Fisheries Guidelines and the objectives of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) 2022. The questions cover the environmental, economic, and social aspects of small-scale fisheries, with particular emphasis on strengthening governance and organizations. The thematic areas identified by participants will guide the development of the workshop agenda.

**Response by:** Mr. Muhammed Mujibul Haque Munir, Assistant Director-Education, Food Security & Development Communication, COAST Foundation, Bangladesh

**Personal Experience**

**1. How are you linked to small-scale fisheries in your country? Can you describe the major characteristics of the sector?**

I lead COAST Foundation's work with small-scale fishers in Bangladesh. I also work as the secretarial co-ordinator of the Bangladesh Fish Workers Alliance. As head of the food security and programme at COAST, I am directly involved with fisher organizational development and mobilization. I am also involved with research and programme implementation related to small-scale fisheries in Bangladesh.

COAST has been implementing various advocacy and livelihood development programmes—seminars, meetings, training programs, documentary films—for coastal fishing communities.

COAST also works to promote alternative income-generating options for fishermen in the coasts. We implemented the Promoting Sustainable Coastal Aquaculture in Bangladesh (ProSCAB). The main objective of this project was to reduce poverty from the coastal disadvantaged fishers' community by providing secondary jobs to the poor fishers using innovative and sustainable aquaculture technologies.

COAST Trust organized the national consultation process in Bangladesh to collect recommendations for FAO guidelines on small-scale fisheries. Along with these development programmes and projects, COAST also promotes knowledge-based advocacy programs.

Bangladesh's fisheries contribute 3.57 per cent of the national GDP and provides a 60 per cent share of animal protein. About 18.5 million people are directly involved with this sector—10 to 12 per cent women.

The fisheries sector is divided into inland and marine fisheries. In 2017-18, inland fisheries contributed 84.69 per cent of fish production. Marine fisheries contributed 16 per cent.

90-95 per cent of small-scale fisheries products go directly to local consumers. The sector is a great source of employment, especially for women. I feel proud to work directly with small-scale fishers' organizations and help them raise their voice to the national and international level.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

#### **1. Do you think that some of your fishing practices are sometimes detrimental to fisheries resources and the environment (e.g. aquatic species, flood plains, mangroves)? If yes, how?**

Yes, some fishing practices are detrimental to resources. Destructive fishing techniques have resulted in signs of a significant reduction in fish stocks. Unfortunately, in many cases, small-scale fishers use gear and nets—like *moshari jal* (fine mesh seine net)—which traps the eggs, fry, and juveniles of all fish species in floodplains.

Various harmful practices are also being used in wetlands around the country, posing a threat to production and biodiversity. This comprises total wetlands dewatering, bamboo fencing, and canal fencing and traps.

#### **2. Have you been involved in conserving or managing (marine or inland) fisheries resources? Are there any lessons that you would like to share?**

I am involved with promoting safe and environmentally friendly fishing practices in Bangladesh. I provide training and awareness to fishers on harmful practices.

### **Economic Viability**

#### **1) What challenges do small-scale fishers face in getting boats, gear and engines in your country? How do they deal with these challenges?**

One major challenge in getting boats, gear, etc is the lack of access to credit. Fisher communities suffer from a scarcity of credit services and access to those existing is difficult for them. It is a reality for both inland and marine fishers. Middlemen exploit these poor communities by offering credit with very high-interest rates. There is no specific government organization that supports credit access for fishers. Additionally, fish labourers don't get proper wages because of a lack of minimum wage.

Free and fair access to open water bodies and appropriate launching and landing sites by the sea has become increasingly difficult for marginalized fishers. Access rights to open water bodies given exclusively to individuals with political influence via lease contracts issued by the government.

- 2) **What challenges do small-scale fishers and fish workers face in accessing local/regional/international markets (e.g.competition from sellers, infrastructural issues, poor access to loans)?Do they receive any support (e.g. from the government) to facilitate access to these markets?**

Most small-scale fishers rely on middlemen and money lenders to sell their fish. Nowadays, some resellers. The existing market mechanism is the main challenge here.

From producers to ultimate consumers, the marketing system works via intermediaries who perform useful commercial services. Fish suppliers (beparies), fish brokers (aratdars), and fish retailers are the three types of commercial units that make up the fish marketing system.

Aratdars operate in small numbers in district (or expanded) markets and get their supplies from beparies. Fish sellers, in turn, get their supply from an aratdar or bepari, or straight from the producer at the landing places when it's opportune. The fishing industry's entire marketing function is carried out by these types of intermediaries.

Small-scale fishermen sell their catch at the local market, but few go to the district or capital market because they lack icing and fish preservation facilities.

The government provides some assistance for marketing. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, for example, they set up a phone center for fishermen.

- 3) **Do you think the income generated from small-scale fisheries is adequate to meet small-scale fishers and fish workers' basic needs?**

The income level is not adequate. A study found that the average annual income of fishing communities varies from US\$235 to US\$1174. The average annual national income for Bangladesh is US\$ 2064. There is a stark difference. The study also found that a high number of fishers are landless, homeless, have less access to electricity and rate higher on most poverty based indices.

### **Social Sustainability**

- 1) **What are the main government programmes available in your country for addressing poverty and improving the standard of living of fishing communities (e.g. education, health insurance, pension scheme, housing, sanitation)? What are the barriers to accessing such programmes?**

Realizing the SDGs is among the major thrusts for the government. The current 7th five-year plan targets reducing the poverty rate to 18.6 per cent by 2020. To achieve this, Bangladesh has formulated the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). Considering the strong link between poverty and health & nutrition, the Bangladesh government is currently

implementing the 4th (2018-2022) Health Population and Nutrition Sector Programme (HPNSP). The plan aims to achieve health, population, and nutrition sector targets of SDGs by 2030.

Poverty related programmes and efforts include various Social SafetyNet Programs. The government allocated a total of Tk 64,176.48 crore (about US\$ 7.55 billion) for different social safety net programs during 2018-19. This allocation is 13.81 per cent of the national budget and 2.53 per cent of GDP of the same fiscal year.

As a vulnerable community, fishers are in focus for poverty eradication programmes. In reality though, there is no special quota for them. Compensation for fishers during the fishing ban period is the only unique, special scheme. For that period, registered and selected fishermen receive rations.

**2) What are the most common fisher and fishworker organizations in your country (e.g. trade unions, cooperatives, community-based organizations)?**

Bangladesh has a diverse range of fisher worker organizations, from fishers cooperatives, fishers groups established by different programmes, autonomous local level fishers' organizations, national-level organizations and fisher's organization as a wing of large political parties.

**3) Are many fishers and fishworkers members of these organizations? Are women active in these organizations? How do these organizations help fishers and fishworkers improve their lives and livelihoods?**

Unfortunately most of the large co-operatives do not represent actual fishermen. Thousands of influential, people formed so-called fishermen cooperatives and lease government fishing grounds. The irony is that they then lease the same grounds to genuine fishermen.

One cooperative called Katali Dorshona Fisheries Cooperative Society has 40 members, none of whom are fishermen. These members abuse the co-operative (a necessity to lease government water bodies) for personal gain. Multiple news reports have also revealed that many such cooperatives do not have any offices, nor do the listed members of the cooperatives know about their membership. The Nuranai Fishermen Cooperative in the Netrokona district has been registered using fake ID cards from fishermen.

During the pandemic, a cooperative called Jhilpar Fishermen Cooperatives was registered to obtain support using false names and ID cards. It is clear that the fishermen's cooperatives have little role to play in resolving the difficulties and problems of the fishing communities.

FGD discussions show that, due to a lack of knowledge, leadership, and financial empowerment, workers unions, and their leaders cannot play any role as 'bargaining agents' on behalf of small-scale fishermen.

## Governance

- 1) **Do fishers and fish workers in your country have rights to fishing grounds granted by the government? Do they have traditional rights? Are their human rights protected?**

Government water bodies can be leased by co-operatives only. In Bangladesh, these co-operatives are often led by influential citizens who are not citizens. They avail the lease and then in turn lease the bodies out to actual fishers.

- 2) **What government legislation and policies are relevant to small-scale fisheries in your country (e.g. both inland and marine)? Are they developed in consultation with fishing communities? Is there an official definition of small-scale fisheries?**

The National Fisheries Policy is the major national guideline on fisheries management and development. Its primary objective is to increase fish production through optimum utilization of available resources. The policy emphasizes employment generation and poverty alleviation.

- 3) **Have you heard of the *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines)*? If yes, how can the SSF Guidelines improve your well-being?**

I was the co-ordinator of the National Consultation on the VGSSF and was personally involved with the district-level campaign and national advocacy. VGSSF has specific recommendations to ensure rights and benefits for fishers. Thus, implementation of the guidelines can be beneficial to fishers.

## Gender Equality and Equity

- 1) **What are the major challenges faced by women in fisheries in terms of access to resources, markets and participation in fisher and fish worker organizations in your country?**

In Bangladesh, it is estimated that 43 per cent of rural women contribute time to agriculture and/or aquaculture and fisheries-related activities in addition to their household responsibilities. One research showed that average fish production increased by 10–20 percent at the study site as a result of women's participation.

Despite this, women's achievements remain insufficiently acknowledged and under-reported in national statistics, though their role is significant. Their level of participation in decision making processes at the family level is poor. According to our research, 82 per cent of respondents did not participate in local 'Salish' or village courts.

Gender based violence is also rife in fishing communities. 62 per cent of respondents had been a victim of some sort of violence against women.

**2) Are there laws or policies that benefit or protect the rights of women in fisheries**

Bangladesh has several policies intended to promote gender inclusion and equity in aquaculture relevant sectors. The National Agricultural Extension Policy (NAEP) of 2012 addresses gender equity issues. The Agricultural Extension Policy of 1996 was revised to include gender mainstreaming as per recommendations of an assessment report. In contrast, in the aquaculture and fisheries sector, the National Fisheries Policy of 1998 only states that "Females will be encouraged in fish culture and be trained accordingly."

**3) What are the major programmes, policies, initiatives or organizations that help improve the visibility and participation of women in the fisheries sector?**

To ensure women's empowerment, Bangladesh implemented a National Development Policy in 1997. It was revised in 2011. National Action Plan to Prevent Violence 2013-25 with a vision for a world without violence against women and children has been planned to protect women from violence against women and children by 2025.

**Food Security and Nutrition**

**1) Is there any legislation or policy recognizing food security and nutrition as a human right in your country (e.g right to food act, nutritional guidelines)?**

Bangladesh's constitution does not list the provision of food as a right of citizens, but rather as a duty of the state. The provision relating to food insecurity is found in the chapter on essential principles of state action rather than in the chapter on fundamental rights.

As a result, the Bangladeshi Constitution treats this socio-economic right as a state duty that is not enforceable in court. The right to food is not included in the Constitution's list of essential rights, possibly due to the state's economic instability at the time it was drafted.

**2) How do small-scale fisheries contribute to local food security and nutrition?**

The fisheries sector contributes 3.57 per cent to the national GDP, and provides a 60 per cent share of animal protein.

**3) Are there similarities between fishing and farming communities in your country (e.g. in terms of challenges, opportunities, culture, social organization)?**

The challenges for two sectors are almost the same.

## Resilience

- 1) **What kind of changes did the COVID-19 pandemic cause in small-scale fisheries in your country? How did fishers and fishworkers respond to these changes? Did they receive any support from the government or other organizations during the pandemic?**

To combat Covid-19 Bangladesh imposed a range of movement restrictions. As a result, fish dealers and fishermen were unable to access sale areas, and demand for fish plummeted. Fishing became even more difficult due to limitations. When many fishermen were unable to organize transportation for their most recent catch at the start of the crisis, they lost money. Fishermen frequently owe debts to wholesalers and boat owners that they are unable to repay.

While the government's fiscal stimulus packages were mostly for the corporate sector, there were some incentives for the agriculture and fisheries sectors too. The Prime Minister has announced a package of around US\$ 588 million for the agriculture sector. This fund is for farmers and fishers at a 5 per cent interest rate. The Government also provided loans to support the pandemic-hit fisheries sector.

What kind of changes did the COVID-19 pandemic cause in small-scale fisheries in your country? How did fishers and fishworkers respond to these changes? Did they receive any support from the government or other organizations during the pandemic?

Pre-existing vulnerabilities of fisher communities in Bangladesh made them more vulnerable during the pandemic. Very few (less than 5 per cent) availed support from others. None received any support other than advance salary from boat owners or fish traders.

Their main strategy to cope with the situation was just waiting it out. Some families sought alternative livelihoods. We found fishermen working as hawkers, rickshaw pullers, etc.

**Are there any other national, regional, or international issues relevant to small-scale fisheries that the workshop should address?**