

Small-scale hilsa fishers of Hussenpara, Bangladesh living on the margin



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The hilsa fishing community of Hussenpara village of Kolapara upazila in the Patuakhali district is located in the southwestern part of Bangladesh. The community's livelihood depends on hilsa fishing in the Bay of Bengal. Fishers work full time or seasonally; besides fishing, most of them repair boats and make nets professionally.

In general, a group of 4-8 fishers goes out on a motorized, traditional fishing boat using seine and gill nets. About 40% of the village fishers catch on average 6-10 kg per day. The families of the fishers consume the fish and, later on, they sell the remaining fish to the nearest market. However, the fishers have no ability to bear the capital investment and the cost of actual fishing by themselves. For this reason, they take loans with high interest from the fish traders of the nearest markets. Besides fishing, they engage in other small freelance businesses during the fishing ban period in the Bay of Bengal. The overall socioeconomic condition of the community is not satisfactory.

Photo: *Researcher interviewing local small-scale fishers, Kuakata Sea Beach. 2019*
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Location:

Hussen Para Village, Kolapara Upazila, Patuakhali District, Bangladesh

Ecosystem type:

Marine

Main gear:

Gillnet, seine net

Target species:

Hilsa

Vessel type:

Motorized traditional boats

No. of small-scale fishing vessels:

60

No. of small-scale fishers:

300



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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- **Economic**
 - Market
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
 - Regulatory
 - Procedural
- **Environmental**
 - COVID-19 related

The community faces the impacts of frequent natural disasters linked with climate change: temperature fluctuation, tidal inundation, changing of rainfall pattern. In addition, extreme conditions such as strong wind and wave, current, cyclone, and tidal surges, occur frequently. This results in water clogging, uprooting of trees, and further impacts fisheries and their households (e.g., house damages, disease outbreaks), forcing fishers to cut their trips short. Moreover, boats and nets are destroyed, and workers get injured. This reduces fishers' income, increases their expenditure, and they are more likely to take a high-interest loan from the moneylenders.

Fisher takes a loan by forming a group from the 'Aratdar' (Trader) and invests money into a boat, net, and other utensils. However, during the ban on Hilsa fishing, moneylenders push fishers deeper into debt, creating a complex debt cycle. Fishers are forced to fish illegally and are caught by law enforcement agencies.

There are no storage facilities available for the catch. Thus, fishers often bring low-quality fish to the market and are offered lower prices. During the ban, fishers cannot go fishing, so they look for alternative jobs where they often end up being harassed by other sectors (i.e., tourism).

Fishers in this community live in poor socioeconomic conditions. About 58% and 34% of the houses of the fishers are made with tin & shack, respectively. *Katcha* sanitary facilities (open toilets) are used by 52% of the households and 54% of fishers are treated by village doctors for health issues. The monthly income of 48% of the fishers lies between 21000- 30000 BDT. About 72% of the fishers are not satisfied with the price of fish, 26% of the fishers have no education, and 52% of the fishers have only primary level education.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

The small-scale fisheries sector tends to be deeply embedded in local communities, customs, and values. In Bangladesh, small-scale fisheries are traditional fisheries engaging fishing households that use a relatively small amount of capital investment and energy, as well as comparatively small and low technology fishing vessels and gears. They make short fishing trips, close to shore, and mainly catch fish for subsistence and local markets.

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Dealing with justice

Every year, the Government of Bangladesh imposes a two-month ban on fishing in the Bay of Bengal to boost the depleted fish stock, ensure safe spawning, and increase production. During the ban, fishers who refrain from fishing get 40kg of rice per month as a subsidy. However, this aid is insufficient to cover their needs. In the aftermath of a cyclone, the Bangladesh Government gives reliefs to the affected fisher families. During these severe natural calamities, the Government also relocates them to a cyclone shelter.

This fishing community is extremely vulnerable to the catastrophic eventualities of climate change. Research has been done to address the existing coping strategies undertaken by the local community to deal with the negative influences of climate change. To adapt to these situations, the fishers are frantically trying to improve their physical capitals (i.e., house, boat & fishing inputs repairing) and natural capital (i.e., tree plantation & vegetable culture). They are also harvesting rainwater and, as part of a long-term strategy, they are trying to educate their children to abandon fishing as it is a risky profession.

Some future directions suggested by the research include, among others, the introduction of climate-resilient culture technique, insurance of fishing capital, facilitation of loan at a flexible interest rate for fishers, educating the community, creating awareness about savings, quick responses after disasters, bolstering the coastal infrastructures, and introduction of co-management.



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