

Defending fishing space: Conflicts and marginalization of small-scale fisheries in the Saint Martin's Island of Bangladesh



**By Md. Ruyel Miah and
Mohammad Mahmudul Islam**
Sylhet Agricultural University, Bangladesh

Bangladesh is endowed with one of the world's most suitable territories for fisheries due to its large flooded wetlands and high aquatic biodiversity. The fisheries sector is divided into three major sectors: inland open-water fisheries, inland closed-water fisheries, and marine fisheries. The Saint Martin's Island is the only coral-bearing Island of Bangladesh, situated close to one of the major marine fishing grounds. The area of Saint Martin's island is 600 hectares, characterized by large areas of sand dunes and scattered mangroves (Islam, 2002). The resources in and around the island include finfish and shellfish fisheries, coral and associated reef fisheries, seaweed, seagrass, and mangrove forests (Hossain, 2007).

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) are the dominant livelihood strategy for the islanders. The socioeconomic situation of island dwellers is below the average compared to mainland communities, and illiteracy is widespread. This island is a popular touristic spot, and tourism is becoming a major economic activity. The government of Bangladesh declared the island as an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) in 1999 to address the degradation of biodiversity driven by high demographic pressure, tourism activities, and infrastructure construction.

Photo: *Small-scale fishing boats at the shore, Saint Martin's Island, Bangladesh. 2019*
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Location:
Saint Martin's Island, Bangladesh

Ecosystem type:
Marine

Main gear:
Dredge, gleaning, harpoon, lift net, harvester machine, hook & line, seine net

Target species:
Parrotfish, surgeonfish, groupers, snappers, butterfly fish, spiny lobster, and shrimp

Vessel type:
Local mechanized or semi-mechanized boats

No. of small-scale fishing vessels:
190



Foreign fishers enter Bangladesh waters with modern equipped fishing gear and harvest the fish. This kind of activity creates conflicts between the two nations, and the local communities suffer the most.



Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

Political marginalization: Most of the state benefits end up in the hands of those politically active, with influence and links to higher authorities. These individuals are able to escape the scrutiny of authority in cases of illegal activities or any other crime. The enforcement of rules and regulations is poor and the small-scale fishers are often overlooked in decision making. The local political elite tends to control the local fishing organizations.

Foreign Fishing: Fishing by foreign fishers is a frequent occurrence in the Bangladesh waters, especially around the Saint Martin's island, as it is close to Myanmar. Foreign fishers enter Bangladesh waters with modern equipped fishing gear and harvest the fish. This kind of activity creates conflicts between the two nations, and the local communities suffer the most. Occasionally, when the Bangladeshi coast guard catches foreign fishing trawlers, they present themselves as refugees to avoid ending up in jail.

Multiple scales of fishing operations: There are two main types of fishing operations around the Saint Martin's island: SSF and LSF (Large scale fisheries). The former operates within the 40m of depth and the latter below 40m of depth. Researchers found that deep-sea fishing is declining due to LSF occurring in spaces traditionally occupied by SSF, which consequently creates conflicts among the two sectors and adds additional pressure on the resource.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Fishing practices that take place in less than 40-meter depth of water.



The conflicts occurring on Saint Martin's Island paint just a section of a much bigger picture of the fisheries sector in Bangladesh. Overall, a better management system and an equitable distribution of benefits would lead towards the solution of the present situation on the island.



Dealing with justice

It is essential to preserve the abundance of natural resources on Saint Martin's Island. Different types of conflicts exist between stakeholders, including fishers, fish traders, money lenders, cruise ships, and local government officials, mostly based on resource utilization. In such a situation, local elites often dominate over fisherfolks. To better preserve this island and keep maintaining the livelihoods of small-scale fishers, these conflicts need to be resolved, and cooperation between them must be established. The different stakeholders should follow the policy guidelines in accessing resources. The enforcement of rules and regulations should be strengthened to ensure that no-one is above the law. Destructive and illegal fishing activities should be strictly controlled. Both the government and non-government organizations should arrange some training and awareness-raising programs for islanders regarding ecosystem services and better utilization of the resources.

The conflicts occurring on Saint Martin's Island paint just a section of a much bigger picture of the fisheries sector in Bangladesh. Overall, a better management system and an equitable distribution of benefits would lead towards the solution of the present situation on the island. Local communities should be involved in decision-making processes, which would lead to more flexibility and improved compliance.

References:

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