

Small-scale prawn fisheries of Mongla and life in the coastal areas of Bangladesh



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Mongla, located in the southwestern part of Bangladesh, consist of 77 villages known to have excellent conditions for aquaculture, particularly for two freshwater prawn species. Due to its prized value at the international market, *Macrobrachium rosenberger* (locally called Golda) is known as 'White Gold'. Although shrimp-trading has been remarkably successful, the livelihood and socioeconomic status of small-scale fishers in the Mongla area have not received the attention they deserve. A few decades ago, these lands were agricultural; due to climate change they were converted into extensive polyculture ponds, formerly used as rice ponds and locally referred to as 'Ghers'. Currently, over thousand people, including children and women, depend on aquaculture (i.e. shrimp farming) for their livelihoods in this area.

The tidal waves of river Mongla bring the wild shrimp fry into the river where they get trapped in bamboo barriers or nets. Fishers collect those fingerlings and release them into their 'Gher'. Aside from fishing, they also make boats, bamboo nets, floating materials, aluminum containers, and white plates to sustain their livelihoods. However, these efforts are often in vein due to high frequency of natural disasters and, rather sadly, there is very little compassion shown to them. In the recent years, however, Government of Bangladesh has started to take the necessary steps towards implement strategies to mitigate this situation and make a positive impact on the life of small-scale fishers.

Photo:

Fish market in Mongla, Bangladesh. 2021. ©Abdullah Al Zabir

Location:

Mongla Upazilla, Bagherhat district, Bangladesh

Ecosystem type:

Marine, Freshwater

Main gear:

Cast net, gill net, surrounding net, traps

Target species:

Penaeus monodon, Macrobrachium rosenberger

Vessel type:

Traditional fishing boats

No. of small-scale fishers:

5601

” ... The pandemic has hit the shrimp industry hard with a total of 290 export orders, worth 4.6 million Tk, being canceled in a single month (Sarafat, 2020). Most of the people who lost their valuable work assets don't have enough savings to cover the loss and restart shrimp stocking in 'Ghers'. In the best-case scenarios, they will take a loan from NGOs or banks; in the worst-case scenario, they will borrow money from local moneylenders with high interests... “

Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

*A group of mediators controls the market and supply chain of agricultural products. Aratdar regularly undertake the duties of negotiation between buyers and sellers and support them in their own business premises upon receipt of a commission.

Due to its geographical location, Mongla, located near Sundarban, is a disaster-prone area that was hit hard by big natural disasters, including Ayla, Sider, Amphan, etc. These frequent natural calamities have caused damages to houses, uprooted trees, destructed boats and nets, caused water logging and led to a lack of safe drinking water. The severe catastrophes also caused floods during which many shrimp farms were damaged. The lives of small-scale fishers become even more complicated now that they face financial crises on top of natural hazards. Due to a high demand for freshwater prawn, both domestically and internationally, local people very much favour this profession. These fish farmer had to cultivate a huge amount of shrimp, which required steep investments. Many of them had to take loans from Aratdar* to invest in harvesting, boat, net, and etc. Even though they were able to work through all of these problems and produce a high yield, they did not get a sufficient price for shrimp sale because of a vicious marketing circle dominated by the middlemen.

In addition, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this sector faced huge losses in 2020, which exacerbated an already difficult situation for fish farmers. The pandemic has hit the shrimp industry hard with a total of 290 export orders, worth 4.6 million Tk, being canceled in a single month (Sarafat, 2020). Most of the people who lost their valuable work assets don't have enough savings to cover the loss and restart shrimp stocking in 'Ghers'. In the best-case scenarios, they will take a loan from NGOs or banks; in the worst-case scenario, they will borrow money from local moneylenders with high interests. Due to their poor socioeconomic conditions, they continuously end up in complex debt cycles, becoming ever poorer in the process.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fisheries implies traditional fisheries that require relatively low investment, which use traditional fishing gears and vessels, have limited access to well-developed fish-markets and catch fish for subsistence.



... Additional recommendations include: alternative employment, credit facilitation, development of marketing monitoring system, giving proper education and training to fisher, strengthening coastal infrastructure to prevent natural hazard, compensating victims, taking adaptation strategies, development of post-cyclone management, and smallholder subsidy arrangements, among others...



Dealing with justice

Every year, the Bangladesh government imposes a ban on wild post-larvae (PL) collection as a way of preventing adverse effect of catching wild PL. However, this has not been successfully implemented due to a lack of alternative livelihood plans for this poor community and extreme financial losses caused by climatic shocks (Ahamed et al., 2012). Again, due to poor socioeconomic conditions fishers in this area are not able to implement adaptive measures to mitigate their losses due to climate change risk. The state thus produces a cycle of low living standard.

Research efforts should be invested towards developing best practices for sustainable cultivation, training needs of the farmers, and adaptation measures for climate change (Akber et al., 2017). The government and non-government organizations have taken different strategies to minimize the losses of farmers due to COVID-19 in this area and these special efforts should be continued in the near future. However, proper monitoring should be employed to ensure a fair distribution of these efforts at all levels of the implementation process. Shrimp farming can return to its former good condition, which will play a vital role for the economy and will begin to contribute even more to the total GDP. For this to happen, a safe and favourable condition for the coastal shrimp-fishing inhabitant should be created. Lastly, the recommendations suggested by the authors include: alternative employment, credit facilitation, development of marketing monitoring system, giving proper education and training to fisher, strengthening coastal infrastructure to prevent natural hazard, compensating victims, taking adaptation strategies, development of post-cyclone management, and smallholder subsidy arrangements, among others.

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