

Environmental conservation vs. sustainable livelihoods for fishers — battle or balance?: The case of Sundarbans, Bangladesh



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Sundarbans is the largest, single tract of mangrove forest on this planet located at the mouth of one of the largest tide-dominated deltas – the mighty Ganges-Brahmaputra. One-third of Bangladesh's coastal population is dependent on the Sundarbans, with over 3.5 million people depending directly or indirectly on the resources of this mangrove ecosystem for their livelihoods. The fishing communities around this mangrove forest are predominantly small-scale fishers who fish from the rivers, creeks, and canals passing through the forest, as well as from the adjacent coastal waters. The Sundarbans mangrove forest and its water bodies are controlled by the central government through the Forest Department. Traditional access rights of the local community to Sundarbans is allocated through membership in village community, which are dominated by local elites. These rights are not formally regulated but are inherited as the birthright. Common property and access rights are no longer recognized in this tenure system. Multi-use, common resources in public lands, including parts of the mangrove forest, have evolved into private properties through leases issued by the government. Local fishing communities have long failed their traditional management systems governing the sustainable exploitation of resources. The ecosystem of Sundarbans is now endangered from over-exploitation of resources and destructive fishing techniques (fishing with poison, small meshed set-bag nets).

Photo: Fishers untangling nets after fishing. Passur river, Sundarbans, Bangladesh. 2019. ©Eurida Liyana

Location:

The Sundarbans Mangrove Forest, Bangladesh

Ecosystem type:

Marine, Freshwater, Brackish

Main gear:

Cast net, gillnet, lift net, poison, seine net, push net

Target species:

Scylla serrate, *Penaeus monodon*, *Tenualosa ilisha*, *Chelon parsia*, *Lates calcarifer*

Vessel type:

Both mechanized boats and non-mechanized wooden boats

No. of small-scale fishers:

200,000

” ... Stricken by poverty, the coastal fishing communities are politically and socially marginalized, and are far from the lights of coastal development facilities. Local leaders dominate the community, control the market value-chain, and take advantage of most of the facilities that were meant to benefit the common fisherfolk...

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Justice in context

Types of justice:

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

Seasonal Fishing Bans

Every year the government imposes a 65-day ban on netting fish in the entire EEZ of the country in the Bay of Bengal, starting from May 20 till July 23, aiming to boost the regeneration of depleted fish stocks. Besides commercial trawlers, all types of marine fishing activities are prohibited during this ban. On top of that, a second fishing ban is imposed annually from July 1 to August 30 that prohibits all types of fishing in all the creeks and canals and 13 rivers inside the Sundarbans. These concurrent fishing bans leave around 50,000 fishers jobless. Despite the raging protests and pledges of the local fishing communities, concerned authorities keep blaming the fishers for overfishing and poisoning the waters for fishing, constantly overlooking the dire need to ensure alternative income sources to secure the livelihoods of thousands of fishing families.

No-take MPA

The Swatch-of-No-Ground is one of the four fishing zones inside the EEZ of Bangladesh. The 'Swatch-of-No-Ground MPA' was declared in 2014, and parts of it overlapped with the fishing zone. The artisanal fishers of Bangladesh usually have only a handful of alternative livelihood options, and this fishing ground serves as a major 'bread-winner' for the small-scale fishers in the Sundarbans. The government's lack of consultation and inclusion of the local fisherfolks and other major stakeholders in the decision-making process has, in turn, resulted in a loosely regulated and managed MPA with continuous illegal fishing activities. While local fishers are criminalized, detained, and their fishing equipment seized by the coast guard if they are found fishing within the MPA territory, at the same time, due to the proximity of the MPA with the Indian EEZ border in the Bay of Bengal, major illegal fishing activities occur from foreign fishing vessels intruding the MPA zone. The improper planning, management, and regulation of this MPA has resulted in a situation where neither the ecosystem is truly protected, nor is socioeconomic sustainability achieved.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Artisanal or small-scale fisheries are defined as inshore, estuarine or marine fishing practices in water depths of less than 40 meters, involving the use small fishing vessels/boats, both mechanized and non-mechanized, with low tonnage, small capital investments, and employing diversified fishing gears.

“ ... Most of the coastal small-scale fishing communities are dependent on fishing for their daily subsistence and many of them are day labourers who need to borrow money from local money lenders. The fishing communities of Sundarbans are no exception. Despite these simultaneous fishing bans rendering them temporarily jobless, these poverty-stricken fisherfolk are forced to repay their loans to powerful local elites with the same rate of interest...”

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Dealing with justice

During the 65-day ban in the Bay of Bengal, the government of Bangladesh provides 40 kg of rice per month to each coastal fishing family, under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) program. However, only the families of licensed/registered fishers get this subsidy, and yet they constantly complain to the authorities that allotting only one type of food subsistence is not enough to sustain their families adequately. Moreover, a few influential local leaders and comparatively wealthy fishers often dominate over the rest of the generalized fisher community and they seize the ration provided by the government. Thus, the amount of subsidy most of the fishers actually receive is often insufficient to see their families through the whole fishing ban period. That being said, no such governmental assistance is provided to the fishing communities during other seasonal fishing bans. On the other hand, when assessing the legal frameworks, almost none of the laws and policies, which safeguard the interest of the local community (e.g. ‘The National Fishery Policy, 1998’ which includes policies to promote and manage sustainable shrimp farming in coastal areas) have been implemented to this date. The government should respond to the concern of the local people in the management practices within the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, and ensure the participation of all the major resource users. Local fishing communities must be given a voice and the often corrupted, top-down governance approach should be withdrawn. Traditional knowledge and wisdom should be valued and the knowledge available to all stakeholders needs to be taken into account during decision-making regarding the environmental conservation initiatives. To facilitate fisheries conservation and sustainable fisheries exploitation in the Sundarbans and its coastal waters, Community-Based Fisheries Management projects may provide fruitful solutions to this wicked battle prevailing between conservationists and fishing communities.

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How to cite

Liyana, E. (2021). Environmental conservation vs. sustainable livelihoods for fishers — battle or balance?: The case of Sundarbans, Bangladesh. In: Kerezi, V. & Chuenpagdee, R. (Eds.) *Blue Justice For Small-Scale Fisheries: A Global Scan*, Volume 2. TBTI Global Publication Series, St. John's, NL, Canada.

