

Small Scale fishers exist on the margin amid COVID-19 pandemic

By Iftekhhar Ahmed Fagun

The small-scale fisheries sector tends to be solidly established in local communities, customs and values. A large number of small-scale fishers are independent contractors and commonly supply fish for direct intake within their domestic or localities. The fisheries sector portrays one among the foremost fecund and dynamic sectors in Bangladesh. It adds 3.57 % to our national GDP and around one-fourth (25.30 %) to the agricultural GDP according to the Department of Fisheries (DoF). Small-scale fisheries also feature considerable importance within the fisheries sector of Bangladesh.

The COVID-19 outbreak has sparked a public health emergency accompanied by an ongoing economic turmoil due to as a consequence of the actions adopted by the government. Albeit COVID-19 does not have an impact on fish; the fisheries sector remains



exposed to indirect repercussions of the epidemic. Besides, small-scale fishers are within the

Small-scale fishers folk are fishing with their traditional non-mechanized boat and gear, Baniachong, Habiganj, Bangladesh, 2020. By I. A. Fagun

most jeopardized condition amid this pandemic. Consequences from the lockdown were perceived across the entire sector with restrictions on mobility reasoning small-scale fishers incapable of moving their harvest to markets. Consumers notably desolated retail markets owing to verminophobia and lockdown actions, lowering the price of fish swiftly, and there is poor access to storage and substitute marketing contrivances. These circumstances left small-

scale fishers of Bangladesh in serious trouble by their curtailed income and ability to earn their bread and butter.

Fishers are also having challenges to meet the new sanitary essentials and the social distancing measures. These difficulties were not only felt in case of fishers who engaged in inland fishing but also in the Bay of Bengal. Heaping sorrow upon sorrow, a 65-day fishing ban was implemented by the government in the Bay of Bengal from May 20 to July 23 to ensure secure breeding of marine species, conservation and sustainability. In such an instance, small-scale fishers are at perils. Regrettably, researchers and personnel of DoF are unable to go into the fishing localities to assess how the COVID-19 epidemic is impinging the small-scale fisheries sector because of restrictions on movement.



Small-scale fishers smiling while holding their catch, Ratargul Swamp Forest, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 2020. By I. A. Fagun

However, The Daily Star reported that the fishers from Jhalakathi district said they are bound to catch fish in this time of coronavirus, amid vigilance by Bangladesh Coast Guard, as they have no food in their house. Fishers from Patuakhali reported

that usually, they go for fishing as a group; in the current situation they are scared to go out for a fishing trip and as a result, they are unable to meet the food demand of their families. Besides, in many parts of the country, small-scale fishers reported that they did not get any reliefs.

These are the primary consequences of COVID-19 on small-scale fisher's livelihood. However, in the long run, COVID-19 might have catastrophic impacts on the socio-economic status of small-scale fishers and the fisheries sector. As this kind of fisher buys their fishing inputs from borrowed money, they may need more loans soon to secure their livelihood. They may be under pressure to pay the interest and to procure it, and they may take some pernicious actions. They may increase the fishing efforts and pressure, which will foster the increased use of

destructive gears, and it may disrupt the sustainability of fisheries resources. As their income diminishes, they may get curtailed access to health care amenities.

Social strife among fishing communities may augment due to chronic hunger and unstable economic condition. Their children may become susceptible to engagement in child labour and abuse instead of schooling. After the end of the pandemic, it may lead to an increased unreported, unregulated and illegal fishing. Needs assessment-working group of Bangladesh have placed food security and nutrition as the most prioritized sector in their multi-sectoral anticipatory impact and needs analysis technical report.

While our comprehension of the repercussions of the epidemic is still inadequate, there is a dire need to formulate a systematized appropriate plan and execute effective short- and long-term measures to this predicament. The Bangladesh Navy warned and notified fishers and their families in the coastal territories to increase awareness while delivering masks, sanitizers and soaps. The government of Bangladesh is noted to have taken a few actions to relieve the financial stresses upon fisheries stakeholders. The government opened a 'control room' at the beginning of April as well as a hotline where people engaged in fisheries could call for support. Fishery officials were said to be drawing up a list for the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock so they could be included as part of a \$0.6 billion national financial assistance stimulus package.

Government and developing organizations, non-government organization (NGO), donors, the private sector and researchers should take actions to assist the small-scale fisheries sector. Governments and development organizations have a significant responsibility in commencing targeted economic relief packages, financial aid and loan remission for small-scale fishers, continuing health favours and increasing supplies in rural settings, efforts to safeguard supply chains, and raising local sales. Researchers functioning with small-scale fisheries can use their skills, and networks to carry out study on the instant economic, social and food security upshots of the epidemic, communicate about the factors and focus forward suggestions via various approaches, redirect the research grants to assist COVID-19 responses, determine solutions and provide insights to planning effective and appropriate policy. There will be a need for longer-term and reflexive study- including topics such as residual socio-economic consequences, implications for long-term food and nutrition security, issues leading to vulnerability, impacts on resource management and the environment, and lessons for future epidemics. Private sectors should ensure market access and strengthen social safeguards. Public and private donors need to swiftly identify how they can

assist in this challenging time, re-orient previous funds and provide flexibility to alleviate the short-term impacts of the disaster.

Small-scale fisheries play a crucial role in global food and livelihood security, and as a developing country, in Bangladesh, the small-scale fisheries sector is significantly essential. Short-term responses must be rapid and aimed to the most vulnerable group of small-scale fisher, and in the long term, there is need to formulate a coordinated response and support network to recuperate the condition of the food system and resilience of the small-scale fisheries sector.