

Fisheries policy

Anxiety-ridden fishing community

Pakistan fishermen are demanding that their government introduce sustainable fisheries management policies

Last month, a packed hall of a hotel in Pakistan's port city of Karachi saw citizens, experts and policymakers assemble to discuss the issues of the fishing community, especially the fishworkers engaged in the traditional fisheries along the 350-km Sindh coastline, and rivers, reservoirs and lakes scattered across many parts of the province.

The Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) had organized the event and invited the experts and policymakers to support the preparation of a fisheries policy draft that would alleviate the livelihood conditions of the community. However, in the absence of effective participation by government officials, the official point of view did not come across.

Saeed Baloch, General Secretary of the PFF, gave a brief overview of the aims of the seminar. He said that whenever policymakers introduce policy measures, they rarely bother to invite the real stakeholders for discussions. Despite the fact that about 1.6 mn acres of fertile land have been destroyed due to acute shortage of fresh water, the Pakistan government has decided to build new dams on the River Indus, he maintained.

Those who have been involved in agriculture for generations have joined the fishing sector because their agricultural lands in the coastal region have been destroyed. The influx of people from other sectors adds to the burden of the fisheries sector. There are no checks and balances on the part of the government, and traditional fishworkers have been forced to be jobless as fish catches decline day by day.

Sikandar Brohi of the Centre for Information and Research of the Shaheed

Zuklfiqar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), in his presentation, detailed the highlights of the proposed draft prepared by the PFF. Discussing the problems in introducing the policy, he said, "It is the responsibility of the government to introduce favourable policy, but here, the officials concerned are indifferent. While government itself should have taken efforts to introduce a favourable fisheries policy in the country, the PFF is forced to do so."

Tayyaba Ahmed, a doctoral student of Karachi University researching the women-in-fisheries sector, gave a presentation of the women involved in fish-related activities in their coastal localities. Tayyaba said that although women in shrimp-peeling centres in coastal neighbourhoods work hard, they get low wages. Besides, there are no personal or work-related facilities for them at these workplaces. Neither is there any concept of social security for these women workers.

Ghulam Mustafa Meerani, from Manchhar Lake, said: "There are 1,200 water bodies in the Sindh province, of which 600 have been dehydrated due to persistent water shortage. There is no freshwater downstream, hence all lakes in these two districts have dried. Hundreds of fishermen who have been engaged in fishing in these waters for a livelihood since time immemorial have become jobless."

Policy draft

Meerani added: "The government's policymakers have never tried to take the stakeholders into confidence during the preparation of certain policy drafts." For instance, he said, though there is a separate director for the inland waters in

the Fisheries Department, he is practically ineffectual. Besides, he said, influential landlords have occupied water bodies in the province. The largest Manchhar Lake was once witness to 52 fish and 65 bird species, apart from hundreds of trees. But now the once attractive lake is ruined, and several fisher families have migrated to other water bodies in search of livelihoods.

According to Meerani, when the Sindh Irrigation Department officials recently released water from Manchhar Lake to the River Indus, about 50 people died drinking the polluted water. But the irony is that the people of Manchhar Lake continue to use the same poisonous water.

In his presentation, Mohammed Ali Shah, PFF chairperson, said: "We have a mission to launch an effective struggle for the solution of the problems of fisher communities. In this matter, we are engaged in advocacy and lobbying with the government to solve the problems."

"Making policy is the responsibility of the government, but we are working to improve the policy draft and hope that we can launch these efforts on the occasion of World Fisheries Day on 21 November 2004," he added.

Shah said that hundreds of fishermen are facing unemployment and poverty

because the government failed to introduce a sustainable fisheries policy. Fisher families, he said, are the real custodians of these waters, but due to the indifferent attitude of the government, their lives and livelihoods are at stake.

Officials in Islamabad have issued licences to deep-sea vessels that help destroy the country's fish stocks. Besides, the wide use of destructive nets, increasing marine pollution and overfishing are the other main problems, which have played havoc with the lives of the traditional fishing community.


"We have always demanded that the government allow the trawlers to operate 50 nautical miles away from the seashore. We have suggested that a proper survey of fish stocks be carried out to identify the quantity of fish off the country's coast. Then we may be able to determine the number of trawlers or vessels sufficient for the exploitation of the fish stocks."

Sustainable policy

Majeed Motani, a traditional fishworker, said that a sustainable fisheries policy may be key to the survival of future generations of fishing communities. "There are 17 creeks in the Indus Delta, which are linked with 5,000 other water outlets. The most horrible thing is that hundreds of destructive nets, including *boolo* and *gujjo*, are used at these creeks, which are playing havoc with our own

natural resources. These nets catch juvenile fish and cause destruction of fish species. The poor fishworkers with small boats and nets face many problems," Motani said.

Fishing is the only source of livelihood for about 3 mn people living along the 1,050-km coast. Pakistan's coastline is divided into two parts the Sindh province, with a 350-km area, and the Balochistan province coast of 700 km. The Sindh coast fisherfolk live in settlements and villages in Karachi, Thatta and Badin districts of the province.

Haji Shafee Jamot, Director, Fishermen's Co-operative Society, opposed the ban on traditional nets, saying these have been uses for centuries and are not harmful like the *boolo* and *gujjo* nets. If a ban on traditional fishing nets continued, it will affect the fish sector as well as force hundreds of traditional fisher families into joblessness, he said. He added that government officials should decide the optimal mesh size of the nets to be used, instead of banning traditional nets altogether. 

This report is by Jan Khaskheli (Jan_khaskheli@yahoo.com), a freelance writer from Karachi, who also works with the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum