



# Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project



Report of the  
**ICSF-BOBLME Training programme on  
enhancing capacities of fishing communities**  
24-25 March 2014 • Kolkata, India

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations concerning the legal and development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The BOBLME Project encourages the use of this report for study, research, news reporting, criticism or review. Selected passages, tables or diagrams may be reproduced for such purposes provided acknowledgment of the source is included. Major extracts or the entire document may not be reproduced by any process without the written permission of the BOBLME Project Regional Coordinator.

BOBLME contract: LOA/RAP/2013/25

For bibliographic purposes, please reference this publication as:

BOBLME (2014) Report of the ICSF-BOBLME Training programme on enhancing capacities of fishing communities, 24-25 March 2014: Kolkata, India BOBLME-2014-Socioec-06

## Table of contents

1.	Introduction .....	1
2.	Participants .....	1
3.	Venue .....	1
4.	Resource persons .....	1
5.	Programme agenda.....	1
6.	Workshop proceedings - 24 March 2014.....	1
6.1.	Introduction of the workshop.....	1
6.2.	Santanu Chacraverti's presentation of his study .....	2
6.3.	Discussions .....	5
6.3.1.	Several issues faced by the community .....	5
6.3.2.	Boat License Certificates .....	5
6.3.3.	Demands/Suggestions .....	6
7.	Workshop proceedings - 25 March 2014.....	6
7.1.	Core area of the STR .....	6
7.1.1.	Sundarbans Tiger Reserve map.....	7
7.1.2.	Demands/Suggestions .....	8
7.2.	Social security plans.....	8
7.2.1.	Demands/Suggestions .....	10
7.3.	Co-operatives.....	11
7.3.1.	Demands/Suggestions .....	11
7.4.	Honey collection .....	11
7.4.1.	Demands/Suggestions .....	12
7.5.	Trade union.....	12
7.5.1.	Demands/Suggestions .....	12
7.6.	Women fishers.....	12
7.6.1.	Demands/Suggestions .....	12
7.7.	Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs).....	12
8.	Way forward .....	13
Appendix I	Feedback .....	14
Appendix II	Participants list.....	16

## Acronyms used

APL	Above Poverty Line
BDO	Block Development Officer
BLCs	Boat Licence Certificates
BMC	Biodiversity Management Committee
BOBLME	Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CRZ	Coastal Regulation Zone Notification
DISHA	Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action
DMF	Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum
EDC	Eco Development Committee
FPC	Forest Protection Committee
ICSF	International Collective in Support of Fish workers
INR	Indian Rupee
JFM	Joint Forest Management
MNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
STR	Sundarbans Tiger Reserve
WLPA	Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972
USD	United States Dollar

Currency rate: 1 USD = 60.37 INR

Rate as of 09.04.2014 (<http://www.dollars2rupees.com/>)

## **1. Introduction**

This workshop was organized as a follow up to the seven training programmes organized by the International Collective in Support of Fish workers (ICSF) and the Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA) as part of the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project (BOBLME) programme in Sundarbans, West Bengal. The objective of this workshop was to consolidate the proposals from the seven training programmes, and to get the leaders of these areas to develop common proposals for sustainable use, conservation and management in Sundarbans. The workshop also discussed the results of the study on traditional knowledge in Sundarbans initiated by ICSF in 2013.

## **2. Participants**

This workshop had 20 participants from the different regions where the earlier seven workshops were organized. Unfortunately, no fisherwomen attended, though they were present at the individual sites.

## **3. Venue**

The workshop was held in West Bengal Voluntary health association tower in Anandapur, Kolkata from 24 to 25 March 2014.

## **4. Resource persons**

The resource persons for the programmes were:

- Pradip Chatterjee and Santanu Chacraverti from DISHA, Kolkata
- Ramya Rajagopalan and Vishnu Narendran from ICSF, Chennai

## **5. Programme agenda**

The agenda for the workshop was based on earlier discussions with DISHA and Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) members, keeping in mind the experience of the workshops held at seven locations in Sundarbans.

The agenda was split into two components; first part for discussion was the study on traditional knowledge of the fishers and the outcome of earlier training programmes; the second part was to discuss and finalise the detailed community proposals.

## **6. Workshop proceedings - 24 March 2014**

### **6.1. Introduction of the workshop**

The workshop started with an introduction to the programme by Pradip Chatterjee of DISHA. He spoke briefly about the work of BOBLME and its activities in five countries around the Bay of Bengal and their association with ICSF. He also outlined the fundamental questions to be discussed and answered in the two day workshop.

He highlighted some questions to be discussed: What is the condition of the fish workers and day to-day problems they face?

- What can be done to ameliorate the situation?
- How can the resources of the Sundarbans, i.e. the wildlife, the forest, the people and the fish stocks, be sustained?
- How can fish workers be empowered and their capacities built for effective management of the Sundarbans while ensuring betterment of their life?
- How can fish workers be empowered to manage the biodiversity of the Sundarbans, considering they are usually powerless and disenfranchised in these matters?

## 6.2. Santanu Chacraverti's presentation of his study

This was followed by the presentation of the ICSF study entitled '*The Sundarbans fishers: coping in an overly stressed mangrove estuary*', by Santanu Chacraverti. The focus of the study was documentation of the traditional knowledge and perceptions of the Sundarbans fishing community in their specific geo-morphological, ecological, and social context.

Chacraverti began by talking about the history of Sundarbans. He noted that records indicate that the Sundarbans was entirely forested in 1800, without any human settlement (barring perhaps a few exceptions). The area was not put to any use prior to the colonial period. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British focussed on the value of trees like Sal, Teak, and Mahogany. They were unaware of the true potential of mangrove timber and the biodiversity of the Sundarbans forests in general and thus viewed the area as unused land which could be converted to farmland and settlements, and thereby to revenue resources. However attempts to populate the land during the 1780s failed; it was only in the early 1800s that people started moving into the area, cultivation started and so did other activities like salt manufacturing. Fishing was very much a part of the inhabitants' regular lives and soon developed into a profession.

There is little data on fishing in the Sundarbans. One of the more informative texts is W.W. Hunter's<sup>1</sup> 1870s work on the fish species of the Sundarbans. According to the fishers of today, though they may have heard of or seen almost all the fish mentioned on the list and more, many of these fish are depleted and some are on the brink of extinction. Both Chacraverti and the fishers at the workshop believe that there were also other varieties of fish which might be still available, but are inaccessible as they have moved away to deeper waters, away from the creeks and areas where the boats disturb them.

From 1911 to 2011 the population of the area expanded exponentially from 645,000 to 4,422,259. While there is no conclusive data on the total number of fishers in the Sundarbans, an educated guess indicates there might be 100,000 river/creek fishers with 400,000 family members directly dependent on them. The population increase is due to local growth and influx from adjoining districts — mostly from Medinipur<sup>2</sup> and Khulna<sup>3</sup>.

Community members joined the discussion, referring to local information regarding the influx of people from the 1930s to 1980s, especially during Independence and Partition<sup>4</sup>. They also noted that many political players brought their supporters for settlement in these areas. They added further, that this period saw the entry of *adivasis*<sup>5</sup> into Sundarbans from elsewhere, as labour. Some of these people settled in the Sundarbans, thus today out of the total population of the area about 10 per

---

<sup>1</sup> Hunter, W.W., A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. I, Part-II, 1876. Reprint, West Bengal district Gazetteers, Calcutta, 1998, 103.

<sup>2</sup> Paschim Medinipur is a district in West Bengal, India

<sup>3</sup> Khulna is a neighbouring area in Sundarbans but in Bangladesh

<sup>4</sup> When India gained Independence in 1947, parts of east Bengal became a part of Pakistan

<sup>5</sup> Tribals - it means the first people or first settlers

cent might be their descendants. These people have been longstanding settlers of this area now, and have even adapted regional titles/surnames, thus making it complicated to trace their roots.

The discussion on the restrictive laws and guidelines in Sundarbans was animated. Chacraverti noted that the prescriptive and unhindered rights of the people to the Sundarbans was in effect until the area started gaining the status of reserve forest<sup>6</sup> in 1928 and later in 1943, but still there was no prohibitive clause. Quoting Pargiter's *A Revenue History of the Sundarbans, from 1765 – 1870*, he said in 1867, some fishers entered the Sundarbans to fish though the lease for fishing was held by another. This led to a dispute which was adjudicated by the district magistrate of Satkhira. The judgement held that due to long years of use, the people of the area have prescriptive rights over the tidal waters (rivers, canals, and creeks that are subject to tidal action) and no one can be given special rights or leases, thereby nullifying the leaseholds over such waters. Since then the rights of the people to the waters of Sundarbans have been mentioned in official documents. The discussion of this incident spread awareness among the fishers of their prescriptive right to the waters, and led to further discussion on the laws concerning the Sundarbans forest and waters.

Chacraverti spoke of the forest laws which date to the British era and other anti-people laws which ultimately compromise the wellbeing of Indian forests and their wildlife. At this point the issue of Boat Licence Certificates (BLCs)<sup>7</sup> was also discussed briefly. A noteworthy point that came up was that neither the forest officials nor the communities knew the legal basis of BLCs. In 1973, the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR)<sup>8</sup> was declared and around 1985-86 the BLC regime was established; the prohibitive laws which came along with them were implemented following a simple notification. Thus, the rights of the people which had been longstanding in the area were gone in one strike without their knowledge. Chacraverti also laid out the exact geographical location, extent and division of the Sundarbans to clarify exactly how much of the area and its resources the community currently has access to. The total forest area of 4,262 km<sup>2</sup> is divided into the tiger reserve (2,585 km<sup>2</sup>) and reserve forest outside the tiger reserve (1,617 km<sup>2</sup>). Out of the 2,585 km<sup>2</sup>, 1,700 km<sup>2</sup> is the no-access core area<sup>9</sup>, and the 885 km<sup>2</sup> of the supposedly usable buffer area contains 363 km<sup>2</sup> of non-exploitable Sajnekhali wildlife sanctuary<sup>10</sup>. So in reality only about 522 km<sup>2</sup> of the entire forest area was exploitable area. However, of this 522 km<sup>2</sup>, the bulk is land area and an estimated 200 km<sup>2</sup> is water area. Many fishers pointed out that even this area was not completely accessible to them as the water area consists of major rivers like the Raimangal. These rivers have strong currents, making it difficult for small-scale fishers in country boats using relatively small nets to navigate and fish in these waters. Thus, the fishers were compelled to confine themselves to the creeks. Further, fishers were often shooed away from zones near the border (with Bangladesh). Last but not the least; fishers were compelled to avoid certain zones for fear of dacoits from Bangladesh. So the water area available to fishers is exceedingly small, resulting in overcrowding, for there are some 20,000 fishers plying the STR.

---

<sup>6</sup> Under the Indian Forest Act of 1927 (which is still in force), the State can declare areas as reserve forest to protect them and restrict access.

<sup>7</sup> BLCs are a permit issued to fishers to fish in Sundarban waters. Two types of BLCs are issued – 'Tiger' BLCs for the tiger reserve and 'Forest' BLCs for the non-tiger reserve forests. The number of BLCs issued is not based on any data on human population/fish stock status and was frozen several decades ago arbitrarily at 923 and 3700 respectively

<sup>8</sup> In 1973, Project Tiger was started to protect this charismatic species which was in a precarious position in the wild. Nine tiger reserves were declared initially. There are currently 43 tiger reserves.

<sup>9</sup> STR, like other tiger reserves, was divided into a core and buffer area for management purposes. However, tiger reserves, core and buffer areas were administrative classifications and had no legal basis till the 2006 amendment of the Wildlife (Protection) Act (WLPA). Notification no. 6028-For., dated 18.12.2007 was issued under section 38V of the 2006 WLPA establishing and legalizing the core and buffer of the STR.

<sup>10</sup> In India, all protected areas are declared under the WLPA, 1972. These can be wildlife sanctuaries or national parks; the latter has a higher degree of protection i.e. some use of resources in sanctuaries are allowed while in national parks, even entry is prohibited

The community members emphasised how trawl nets, and other harmful gear used by trawlers and mechanized boats, result in a dearth of fish at the mouth of rivers or creeks. There was discussion on how trawlers and mechanized boats fished not only at the mouth of the main rivers, but also in the estuarine waters deep inside the STR, in defiance of existing rules.

A natural calamity which had both devastating and beneficial effects on the Sundarbans area was the tropical cyclone of 2009, Aila. Chacraverti pointed out the cyclone had harmed soil, resulting in severe decline in agricultural output, in many areas like Shamshernagar. In such areas people were forced to take up fishing. Alternatively, the cyclone led to an exodus from the Sundarbans area, as people started looking for new means of livelihood. At this point, Gobinda Das, a fishing community leader pointed out that there are some other areas in Gosaba and Basanti which have benefitted from the effects of Aila. Though these areas received highly saline flood waters which choked agriculture initially, after four or five monsoons, the salinity of the soil reduced, and the silt brought by the flood waters enriched the soil, ultimately leading to far better harvests. Aila also affected the supply of fish in negative and positive ways. The saline water it brought killed many freshwater fish like carps, 'Singi', 'Magur', and 'Sol', and stocks of these fish saw heavy depletion. However it also brought new species such as tilapia<sup>11</sup>.

The last issue discussed was that of imminent dangers to the Sundarbans biosphere as a whole. The area and the concomitant rights and livelihoods of the locals are at stake more than ever today due to various reasons. At this point the fishers pointed out how the use of mosquito nets and trawlers is adversely affecting fish stocks. Also competition and overcrowding due to the lack of accessible buffer areas are creating tremendous pressure on the waters; there have been many instances of trawlers from other nations like Thailand, entering these areas illegally. The problem of overfishing is depleting the stock and putting their futures at risk. Also the forest department use the locals to cut down trees from the forests to be used as timber in constructing bridges, while they are supposed to purchase these timbers from other areas. Apart from these, increased tourism, hotels and the resulting encroachment and waste are polluting the environment. There are around 235 tourist lodges in nine blocks of Sundarbans. It is estimated that each day these lodges dump around to 200 to 250 kg of liquor bottles and plastic trash. Further, motorized boats leave an oil slick on the water, thus polluting the environment irreparably. Hence, Chacraverti proposed, it had become imperative to study the environmental impact of tourism in the Sundarbans and whether the carrying capacity of the Sundarbans in this regard had been exceeded. Also certain areas around the Sundarbans serve as the dumping zone for Kolkata's untreated water. Illegal and environment-unfriendly waste disposal must be curbed, and corrective measures are required, else the area will be irreparably harmed. The fishers are themselves trying to salvage the situation by planting mangroves<sup>12</sup> and cleaning the area, hence they need to be empowered further for proper execution of their goals.

In the light of the current situation, Chacraverti proposed that there should be a special protection mechanism for the Sundarbans biosphere (including the coastal waters). The rampant violation of Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ)<sup>13</sup> provisions is hampering the entire biosphere, adversely affecting those who depend on the forests and waters such as the fishers. Thus, an administrative order in the shape of a notification or even an order which uses the already existing environmental laws of the nation is required to protect the Sundarbans biosphere as a whole.

---

<sup>11</sup> Note: Tilapia is cultured in ponds in the region, the cyclone must have destroyed the ponds, washing the fish into other parts of the Sundarbans

<sup>12</sup> The exact species planted vary with locale and seed availability. However, some of the common ones are Bain (*Avicennia officinalis*), Gawran (*Ceriops decandra*), Genwa (*Excoecaria agallocha*), Keora (*Sonneratia apetala*) Hental (*Phoenix paludosa*) and Dhundul (*Xylocarpus granatum*).

<sup>13</sup> CRZ is a notification, under the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986, regulating land use on the coast. The CRZ was first notified in 1991 and then amended many times and finally a new notification was passed in 2011



With this the discussion on Chacraverti's presentation was concluded and the issues to be discussed as a part of the workshop taken up.

### **6.3. Discussions**

#### **6.3.1. Several issues faced by the community**

The community members, based on what they had learnt from the study, voiced certain demands. They noted that those whose livelihoods are directly dependent on the Sundarbans forests have the duty and responsibility to look after the forests and the right to do so should rest with them. They agreed that some sensitive areas should be left alone without any human interference, but said that identifying such sensitive places should be done in consultation with them and those who have scientific knowledge on the subject. They also accepted the idea of banning fishing for three months as a way to let fish breed and grow, thus replenishing the stock. However, they demanded compensation for the entire ban period. Fishers should also be given economic help from the government, employment schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), subsidies, and food supplies.

The community members present at the workshop repeatedly expressed their concern over malpractices in fishing. They demanded the use of harmful nets be curbed and proper medium sized nets be used. Also, pollution by cargo ships needs to be checked. The fishers noted the need for research on all of the issues raised here.

#### **6.3.2. Boat License Certificates**

Participants highlighted that BLCs, which have no legal basis, are a nuisance. BLC owners, who do not fish themselves, rent out their BLC to fishers without BLCs at exorbitant prices, even though they are supposed to be non-transferable and meant for certain boats which are duly marked. However, none of these boats are operational now. In spite of this, new BLCs are not issued, as affirmed by a participant who shared his experience in trying to procure a BLC from the State. Chatterjee stated that BLCs have come into effect after the establishment of the STR, though the basis for BLCs remains unknown. There are 923 BLCs for the STR and 3700 for the non-tiger reserve forest area. However, out of the 923, some 700 are valid and as there are more fishers than BLCs, 250 to 300 of them are rented out at exorbitant prices of USD 662.58 to USD 828.23. Though the constitution of BLC is unjustified (and its legality murky), since it is a reality, the question is what can be done with it?

Chatterjee suggested that the solution was to have provisional permits. He stated that those who do not go fishing in the Sundarbans but have gear and previous permits should be taken off the records. In case they want to go for fishing occasionally, they could be given a onetime provisional licence/permit. This would check the black market for BLCs, he said, suggesting that this could be a demand of the fishers.

Fishers have, in the past, demanded provisional BLCs for all those who have gear, boats, and experience. But before any of this can be actualised, all fishers must have an identity card and their boats should be registered with the fisheries department as well. However, there is no need to cancel all existing BLCs as some 300 genuine fishers are still using their own BLCs and the rest who rent them, are genuine fishers too. If all licences are cancelled, then these genuine fishers will be inconvenienced. Therefore the only way out is reinstating a process of provisional BLCs.

The fishers present at the discussion agreed to the suggestion and expressed their support. In addition they demanded that the forest protection committees (FPCs) and eco-development committees (EDCs)<sup>14</sup> in the Sundarbans area should become more inclusive; committee members are not fishers but middlemen who hamper the interests of the community as well as the forest and its wildlife.

### **6.3.3. Demands/Suggestions**

- Provisional permits for fishing must be given
- FPCs and EDCs should be stopped. Fishing communities in Sundarbans must have the right to fish in its waters. Conservation measures should be framed and implemented with the consent and participation of the fishing and other forest-dependent communities
- All fishers must have an identity card from the fisheries department and their boats should be registered with the fisheries department.

The remainder of the day's discussion focussed on introducing the issue of core and buffer area division. This discussion carried over to the next day.

## **7. Workshop proceedings - 25 March 2014**

### **7.1. Core area of the STR**

The participants were concerned about the core and buffer area distinction of the STR and its impact on their livelihood. It was reiterated that the core area need to be reduced to its original size, or certain parts of it should be made accessible. It should be remembered that the core area was formed to secure tiger habitat not to protect fish, so it has nothing to do with fishing. The fishers are not interested in (harming) the tiger, they just want their right to the waters, they said, noting '*Jol Jekhane, Jeley Sekhane*' or 'where there is water, there will be fishers'. However, they said that this does not mean that fishers will overfish; they recognize the importance of conserving fish stocks for their future, and accept the responsibility they have towards the environment. They further opined that in times of need or danger they should be allowed into the core area for shelter and innocent passage through the core should be allowed. Some of them demanded that the entire core area demarcation be removed, but others noted the impossibility of this demand. Nonetheless, they demanded access to the core area for fishing, as this serves as an undisturbed breeding ground.

---

<sup>14</sup> Under a 1991 Government of India resolution on Participatory Forest Management, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme was implemented across the country through the forest department. Forest Protection Committees (FPC) and Eco Development Committees (EDC) were set up in villages in and around forests to manage and sustainably use forest resources



multiple workers on a honey collection trip, and being alert throughout, one person was killed by a tiger. This just goes to prove that not even a moment's distraction can be afforded in such a high-risk job and area. They reiterated their benevolence towards wildlife while emphasizing their right to access the waters - '*Jal jekhane, Jele sekhane*' i.e. 'wherever there is water, the fishers will be there'.

They suggested new innovative measures need to be developed to check accidents. They discussed the measures used by communities in Bangladesh. Some participants found it inexplicable that the core area limit increases almost annually. Not only does this affect their livelihood, the lack of information (they are rarely informed of changes) adds to their feeling of powerlessness. Participants wondered why fishing was banned when non timber forest produce collection was allowed.

One important observation that came up was that the fishers are more concerned with access to water areas, and are not interested in having the right to enter forest lands. The restrictions on water areas should be related to conservation of aquatic life forms including fish, they said.

Some participants raised the possibility of creating enclosures for the tigers, which the animals won't be able to pass through, thus allowing the fishers secure access to the waters. However, other participants said that such caging or enclosures were not possible as the food sources of the tigers are spread throughout the forest and islands, and not limited to one single spot.

In light of the present discussion, participants again asserted the importance of security measures and alertness as a well-accepted fact in their community, and how its adherence has helped reduce the number of accidents and deaths from 400 cases annually to eight or less. They noted that snake attacks have reduced greatly and there was almost no report of shark attacks.

Participants discussed at length the issue of having to navigate great distances to the buffer. Since they are not allowed to cross the core, they are forced to take a circuitous route to the buffer. The buffer's water area is hardly 200 km<sup>2</sup> in which 20,000 fishers operate, increasing the pressure on fish stocks in these areas and reducing the catch per person. Most of the water areas in the buffer are deep which means their nets meant for shallow areas and their small boats (30 by 6 ft.) are unsuitable. Hence fishers resort to the few creeks available i.e. the ones where access is allowed. Even within the buffer, some creeks are off-limits. To add to their woes, dacoits from Bangladesh target fishers in the buffer area which is near the international border. These problems push fishers towards illegal activities.

### **7.1.2. Demands/Suggestions**

- The core areas need to be reduced to its original size, or certain parts of it should be made accessible
- Core or 'no take' zone in water areas should be created, if necessary, in consideration of conservation of the aquatic life forms and this should be coordinated with other measures
- In times of need or danger they should be allowed into the core area for shelter and for innocent passage
- The reduction in the buffer area has created a route problem as well as increased the pressure on fish stocks in certain areas as numerous fishers compete for the same spots. Thus, fishing in these areas needs to be diffused and distributed as soon as possible
- Government should take immediate steps to stop the continuous security threat posed by dacoits from Bangladesh.

### **7.2. Social security plans**

The various compensation and social security plans offered by the government to fishers were discussed. The government provides three different kinds of aid to fishers (a) economic (loans etc.), (b) supplies and infrastructure (fishing nets, construction of docks and jetties), and (c) social security (insurance, pension etc.).

The social security measures were enumerated:

- Surathal accidental benefit - This includes coverage for death from lightning strikes, dog/snake bite (USD 3320 approximately), tiger attack (USD 1660 approximately). This is provided by the government through the *panchayats*<sup>15</sup>, but the block development officer (BDO)<sup>16</sup> must be made aware of the incident within a week of its occurrence
- Janata Insurance - The amount of coverage depends on the premium paid by the beneficiary, usually the coverage is USD 1660 or above (previously USD 415). The premium is around USD 1.25 and is usually paid by the boat owners, though there have been cases where they have been charged USD 1.66 per head. This plan came into effect a couple of years ago. The Janata insurance numbers of the fishers are always written beside their names in their permits.

The forest department's compensation for tiger attack is USD 1660, but it is restricted to accidents in the buffer zone. However, the paperwork to claim this compensation is challenging. The fisheries department also provides a compensation of USD 1660. Compensations are applicable to both men and women.

However, the procedure to claim compensation and receive the money from insurance companies is arduous and if the incident took place in the buffer area, insurance companies usually claim that it is not covered. It is unclear whether this is legal. The fishers argue that the location within the protected area is irrelevant; insurance must be sanctioned as the premiums are always paid.

There is also dispute over what documents are acceptable while filing a claim. The forest department says only the fisher identity card is acceptable while fishers argue that any government issued identity card should be acceptable. Compensation for loss of livestock (to tigers), it was said, was a paltry amount. For example, the maximum compensation for a Jersey cow that gives 10 litres of milk daily is just USD 166. Compensation for loss of a goat is USD 1 and for human death (from a tiger attack) inside a settlement is USD 249. Participants said the livestock compensation rates are not commensurate with market values and should be revised accordingly and that the loss of a human life should be equally valuable irrespective of location.

Participants were particularly aggrieved by the condition that if one harms an animal, even in self-defence, one is denied compensation. The fishers argue that this is in violation of Article 21<sup>17</sup> of the constitution of India

Participants noted that most accidents go unreported as people fear repercussions for entering the core area. This fear is not unreasonable as usually, instead of receiving any help, their boats are seized and if they require medical attention, they may have to wait for 8 to 10 hours. The unsympathetic and unhelpful reaction from authorities to the plight of fishers results in few deaths or accidents being reported. This situation needs to be remedied and the harassment stopped.

Getting a compensation sanctioned depends on many factors like timely reporting, meeting all relevant criteria, and a proper report after the post-mortem. Participants pointed out that this becomes complicated if the corpse is not found. To this, Chatterjee noted that there is an indemnity bond that can be issued to the next of kin (assuming the victim is deceased) after a period of six months, with the caveat that the beneficiary has to return the money if the victim returns. He noted that the six-month waiting period is an odd feature; after all an indemnity bond is being issued. Participants added that the *panchayat* is often unwilling to process such claims. Chatterjee suggested that a first person account by the victim's companions/ witnesses be noted as proof, based on which the insurance money can be given immediately. He noted that the *panchayat* needs to be sensitized regarding this issue.

---

<sup>15</sup> Panchayats are a local-level self-governance body

<sup>16</sup> The BDO is a local level government official

<sup>17</sup> Article 21 of the Constitution states: No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law

Participants brought up the issue of child labour in fishing, noting that children often help their families in fishing and also learn the ropes of the business. Women and children are not recognised as fishers/fish workers and therefore are not eligible for any benefits. The women, they said, swim across rivers risking crocodile attacks. The consensus was that fishers must be paid compensation no matter where the accident occurs, whether in the core or buffer zone. For those without permits, a recommendation from the concerned *panchayat* should be acceptable, if and when needed.

Some important measures to be adhered to by the fishers are - (a) registration of their boats, (b) maintenance of identity proofs and log books (as per the orders of the fisheries department). The log book should contain all information about their fishing trips - location, duration, date/time as well as their license details. Participants were unanimous in calling the laws followed by the forest officials, anti-human, noting that they do not factor in the demands of the inhabitants of the area whose life and livelihoods depend on the forest and its resources. Token gestures by the forest officials, of building roads, giving limited rights on certain local produce, are inadequate.

Another important issue raised was that of asset depreciation. A boat, for example, lasts 10 years at the most but most fishers cannot afford to replace their boat every 10 years considering the current market rate for a standard boat is USD 2075. When a fisher cannot replace his boat, he has no alternative but to switch from being a boat owner to a worker (on someone else's boat). To address this problem fishers demanded that once their boats are registered with the fisheries department, they should also get coverage for protection against asset depreciation. This insurance should cover the depreciation of boats/assets as per market prices at the end of a particular period, beyond which the boat cannot be used anymore; so that the cycle of boat owner reducing to the position of boat worker may end. Thus the expansion of asset coverage should be beyond damages caused by accidents. They also demanded that premiums for coverage of manual boats should be removed.

Monthly pensions for retired fishers and for incapacitated (for whatever reason) fishers should be implemented, they said. The pension should be no less than USD 49.8 given the current prices of essentials. Participants were also concerned that non-fishers should not access benefits meant for fishers and demanded that more resources be spent on pension schemes for fishers.

They called for the unscientific demarcation of Below Poverty Line<sup>18</sup> (BPL)/Above Poverty Line (APL) and its resultant confusion to be done away with or handled with vigilance. This particular division has impeded the proper functioning of the Gitanjali housing scheme meant for the economically weaker sections of society. The scheme is a central government scheme which is jointly funded by the centre and the state. Families classified as BPL are given priority in the allotment of free houses. However, the BPL/APL divide is often distorted due to corruption. These issues need to be addressed. Further since most fishers are unaware of the documents required to access such benefits, raising awareness on this is essential.

### **7.2.1. Demands/Suggestions**

- Actual fishers must be paid compensation in the relevant cases no matter where the accident occurs, whether in the core or buffer zone. For those without permits, a recommendation by the concerned *panchayat* should be acceptable, if and when needed
- Fishers are unaware of the documents required to access several benefits; hence awareness campaigns are needed
- Fishers will adhere to rules like registration of their boats, maintenance of their identity proofs and log books

---

<sup>18</sup> Below Poverty Line is an income threshold used by the government of India to identify individuals and households in need of government assistance. In 2011, the government's BPL cap was set at USD 0.53 and USD 0.43 per day for urban and rural areas respectively. This sparked much recrimination in the country with the cap being derided as unrealistic.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/now-planning-commission-lowers-the-poverty-line/article3013870.ece>

- Once boats are registered with the fisheries department, insurance should be extended to cover asset depreciation
- Division of BPL and APL and its resultant confusion should be either done away with or handled with vigilance.
- Resources allocated for fisher pension schemes must be increased. Monthly pension plan for retired fishers and for incapacitated (for whatever reason) fishers must be established.

### **7.3. Co-operatives**

Fishers obtain an advance payment called '*dadon/dadon*' of USD 830 – USD 1660 from wholesale fish merchants and this has to be returned within nine months at 7 to 10 per cent interest. In addition a commission is charged. Fishers also borrow money from moneylenders or '*Mahajans*', who charge 20 per cent interest. These loans are essential for fishers who typically have a cash flow problem. Unfortunately, the government is unwilling to provide loans as fishers have a history of defaulting on loans. Hence the government provides only sanctioned subsidies. Participants felt co-operatives could be a way out. A participant noted that a fisher cooperative could be started without government support. The area covered by the cooperative can be decided by the community. The cooperative could borrow from moneylenders and distribute to its members instead of individual fishers approaching the moneylender, he said. Members could then take part in the traditional modes of fishing and tank-based fishing.

In addition to being a bulwark against the moneylenders, the cooperative can also provide gear, transport, supplies etc. to members. Further, it provides an alternative livelihood as some fishers can take part in tank-based fishing, dissipating the mounting pressure on fish stocks.

Other participants noted that earlier attempts at cooperatives have not worked. Disputes have led to assets being sold and the cooperatives have become defunct. In spite of this, the cooperatives have not been liquidated; they continue to exist on paper. Without the cooperative being formally closed down, a new cooperative cannot be formed in the same area. In addition political interference in the functioning of cooperatives and ensuring smooth interaction with the government are stumbling blocks.

#### **7.3.1. Demands/Suggestions**

- Co-operatives must be formed and should act as a middleman between *Mahajans* and fishers.

### **7.4. Honey collection**

The honey collection season is from April 1 to June 30 and many fishers venture into the forest to collect honey. Honey collectors are allowed two trips each by the forest department in two batches. The collectors are not sure why they are not allowed access for the entire season. All the honey collected is handed over to the forest department at a rate fixed by the officials. This rate is a fraction of the market rate. This inequality leads some collectors hiding some honey for sale in the open market.

Participants were upset that the forest department has rights over the honey and not the collectors and called for these discriminatory practices to be done away with. Participants also noted that collectors often get injured (most beehives are on *Hetal* trees which are thorny). There is no mechanism to protect them from injuries. In addition, participants were aggrieved that beehives are preserved incorrectly, due to lack of adequate measures, leading to wastage. The collectors do not have any contract or any documents indicating their wages etc.; instead collectors must buy permits worth USD 0.42 from the forest department. Participants noted that honey collectors want contracts to be put in place. Collectors are also not allowed to keep honey for their personal consumption; this was a sore point. They also demanded that they be given first rights on the produce and be allowed to sell the honey as they please.

#### **7.4.1. Demands/Suggestions**

- Honey collectors should have the first right on produce and on the sale of honey
- A clear contract with the forest department is a must.

#### **7.5. Trade union**

Participants felt there were a need for an independent fisher's trade union as well fisher cooperatives. These organizations should complement each other; work in harmony without any political interference, and with a chief at the helm who will address all their grievances and demands. It should also be ensured that non-fishers are not involved in these organizations. Participants stressed that these organizations need to be strong and honest unlike some existing bodies.

#### **7.5.1. Demands/Suggestions**

- An independent trade union for fishers should be set up and it should work for their needs in a collective fashion, without external interference
- Trade unions and cooperatives should work closely and in harmony and without any political interference.

#### **7.6. Women fishers**

The women fishers were represented by the men who presented various demands on their behalf.

The women, through the men, demanded a mobile medical support system be set up for the women who work in the saline waters of Sundarbans at great risk. Women fishers/crab catchers function in various areas including Howrah and Hoogly, yet there is no mention of them in any government documents or records. Since they lack recognition, they have no access to benefits. Participants noted that the women are subject to sexual harassment from male forest department officials (there are usually no female officials) for entering reserve forests. The absence of female officials in such situations is illegal. Immediate steps to ensure the safety of women must be taken, they said.

The lack of women participants indicated the need for women's unions which will work to better the condition of women and empower them (as they believe that administration, leadership etc. are the preserve of men and thus, shy away from asserting themselves).

#### **7.6.1. Demands/Suggestions**

- No interception or inquiry of women should be conducted by male officers
- Women's unions must be set up.

#### **7.7. Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs)**

Ramya Rajagopalan of ICSF spoke on forming Biodiversity Management Committees<sup>19</sup> (BMCs) in the Sundarbans, the process involved and its benefits.

Participants were concerned about resistance to BMCs from sections of their community/area and wanted advice on how this could be overcome. They were glad to hear that BMCs can be formed by just a few hamlets. Participants felt BMCs could be a legal remedy to many of their problems like the establishment of hotels near the river, felling of mangroves for prawn cultivation by external parties etc. They also had several questions on the process of forming BMCs. Rajagopalan clarified that BMC

---

<sup>19</sup> Under the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, BMCs must be set up at the local level-both rural and urban, to promote conservation, sustainable use and documentation of biological diversity, including preservation of habitats, conservation of land races, folk varieties and cultivars, domesticated stocks and breeds of animals and microorganisms. BMCs are also required to document biological resources and chronicle knowledge related to those resources. BMCs consist of a chairperson, and six members nominated by local bodies. BMCs are required to have women (33% representation) and SC/ST communities (18%).



formation is a self-determined one, and there is no statutory requirement for it to be formed at the revenue village level.

## **8. Way forward**

Rajagopalan concluded the workshop by thanking participants and urged them to go back to their villages and discuss the plans formulated in the workshop with rest of the community and also to think about setting up of BMCs in their areas.

The community leaders will now take forward the discussions in individual blocks before June 2014, so that a dialogue can be organized between the fisheries department, forest department, and the community to take this forward.

## Appendix I Feedback

### Questions

1. Was all the workshops interesting?
  2. Did you learn anything that can help you in the future?
  3. Any comments you would like to make?
- Rajat Jubilee – S.R.D.S, Lahiripur, Gosaba
    - 1) The workshop held on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> March, like the preceding 7 workshops, was rather interesting, captivating, important, helpful, informative and in keeping with contemporary times.
    - 2) The suggestions made and demands put forth in the discussions in this workshop deserve to be actualized into reality; for this purpose it is essential to work with the laws while amending them where need be, only then will we succeed.
    - 3) The acceptance of our demands by such workshops and organizations, and their efforts in making these demands heard in the government offices, is a great encouragement for me personally as well as our entire community
  - Ansar Ali Khan, c/o Abdul Hossen khan, Naamkhana/Dwariknagar Ph - 9800289052
    - 1) All the 7 workshops along with final one on the 24th and 25th of March have been extremely satisfying. We have acquired scientific knowledge and logical explanations on a lot of issues.
    - 2) In these two days, I have learnt a lot from the experiences of the participants who had come from different areas.
    - 3) The discussions and the stories of the participating fishers have encouraged me personally. We have also learnt about various legal issues of interest to us, but the participation of women needs to be encouraged.
  - Krishnapada Mondol
    - 1) The workshop was very interesting and informative.
    - 2) It was very useful and it will benefit a lot of people. It is the way forward.
    - 3) If the demands are raised here are accepted and the suggestions realized, then we, the people of the fishing community, will be benefited as a whole, as all our problems will be solved.
  - Kartik Samanta, Pathar Pratima (Sridharnagar)
    - 1) I am really pleased and satisfied with the workshops.
    - 2) Efforts should be made so that the answers found in this workshop can be realized.
    - 3) The entire process is very encouraging for us and will help us move our movement further.
  - Santanu Chacraverti Dey
    - 1) Interesting.
    - 2) Useful.
    - 3) The interactive process was informative indeed. But the proposals and/or recommendations were so diverse, that to sum them up in single points would be difficult enough if not impossible.
  - Milan Das
    - 1) Workshop - Good
    - 2) Useful
    - 3) 2 things are very important for organizations – a) Prescriptive Right from study, b) B.M.C
  - Surajit Maity, Kultoli
    - 1) I really liked the entire process.
    - 2) I came to know many new facts which i was hitherto unaware of as a fish worker.
    - 3) I am going to go back to my village and start a Gram Sabha Committee with my peers and work for a better future.

- Ashok Kamila, Chandanpiri ,8972184443
  - 1) I enjoyed all 7 workshops.
  - 2) The discussion was very useful for us.
  - 3) The information received from these workshops have encouraged me greatly and I am now aware of various issues and items which we can demand rightfully, like honey collected from the forest, the proceeds from their sale etc.
- Sushanta Karan, Chandanpiri

This workshop will help us fish workers better the quality of our lives and help us become financially self-sufficient in the future.
- Subhash Mondo!
  - 1) Yes
  - 2) Yes
  - 3) I am going to try and implement in my life all that I learned from here.
- Rajab Ali Laskar, Canning, Block – II
  - 1) I enjoyed the workshop and found it very interesting. These kinds of programmes should be organized more frequently.
  - 2) This kind of effort will help BPL people greatly.
  - 3) This workshop has encouraged me greatly.
- S. Burman
  - 1) Yes
  - 2) Yes
  - 3) Yes. I found the discussion rather useful.
- Ganesh Mondal, Member of 'Subodh Mridha'
  - 1) Yes
  - 2) Yes
  - 3) Yes

I believe what we have learnt at this workshop will help us fishers in future and improve our quality of life if all the proposals made here are implemented.
- Gobindo Das, Co-chairman, 'Dakshin Banga Matsyajibi Samiti of Sundarbans Matsyajibi Joutho Sangram Samiti', Canning

All the 7 workshops and the final one held on 24th and 25th March saw a number of fishers from various areas and associations participate and share their stories. Their narratives have been recorded, and due to the help of the organisations like ICSF, BOBLME, DISHA the discussions on the problems and grievances of fishers have been explored in detail and at length. The proposals made here and the discussions held, have helped us outline the core issues of the fishers, and this will help us further our movement in the future. This kind of an effort hasn't been made before, but it is a novel approach and should be organised frequently.

## **Appendix II Participants list**

### **Dakshin Samsernagar, Kalitala**

Krishnapada Mondal

Bishwarup Mondal

### **Amalamethi, Gosaba**

Ashok Mondal

### **Dakshin Chandanpiri, Namkhana**

Sushanta Karan

Ashok Kamila

### **Sridharnagar, Pathar Pratima**

Kartik Samanta

### **Amjhara, Block - Basanti**

Nabir Ali Sanphui

### **Lahiripur**

Arjun Mondal

Subhash Mondal

Subhendu Goddar

Subhendu Barman

### **Purba Gurguriya, PBlock Kultali**

Surajit Maiti

Gaur Baran Das

### **Amjhara, Block - Basanti**

Mihir Mondal

### **Sundarban Matsyajibi Joutha Sangram committee**

Ganesh Mondal

Gobinda Das

### **Dwariknagar**

Ansar Ali Khan

### **S.J.S.M**

Pabitra Mondal

### **Jibantala, Canning - 2**

Rajab Ali Laskar

Mojund Molla





Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand are working together through the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project to lay the foundations for a coordinated programme of action designed to better the lives of the coastal populations through improved regional management of the Bay of Bengal environment and its fisheries.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is the implementing agency for the BOBLME Project.

The Project is funded principally by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), Norway, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the FAO, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the USA.

For more information, please visit [www.boblme.org](http://www.boblme.org)



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



Norad

