

A Voice for the Coast

A countrywide consultation was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on the proposed FAO International Guidelines on Small-scale Fisheries

A national consultation process on the International Guidelines for Small-scale Fisheries (IGSSF) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was recently organized in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (COAST) organized the consultation to gather recommendations from stakeholders on the proposed guidelines. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) provided financial support, while the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) rendered various resource services.

The consultation was the first of its kind to be held in Bangladesh. National-level programmes on fisheries, especially on small-scale fisheries, with the participation of members of the fisher community, are rare. There are few effective local or national platforms that fishers can use to raise their voices, which is why the Dhaka consultation process was taken as an opportunity to highlight the challenges facing small-scale fishers in the country.

They depend mainly on ponds, *beels* (small water bodies), lakes, canals, rivers and estuaries, which together cover 4.57 mn ha and employ 1.4 mn people. Bangladesh has a coastal area of 2.3 mn ha and a coastline of 714 km along the Bay of Bengal, which is also a great source of fish. About 296 fresh- and brackish-water fish species (including freshwater prawns) and 511 marine species (including shrimp) are available in the waters of Bangladesh. Most of the members of the country's fishing communities are illiterate and poor.

They enjoy few basic civic facilities, are not organized, and are not even aware of their rights as a result of which they are often exploited by moneylenders, musclemen and politicians.

In Bangladesh fishing has traditionally been the occupation of members of the Hindu Jaladas caste. Given the low social status associated with fishing, these communities historically occupied the lower rungs of the social hierarchy in rural communities. Even within the

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country's Muslim society, where caste is not recognized, groups traditionally involved in fisheries have been generally accorded a low social status. The problems facing fishing communities in Bangladesh include:

- natural disasters like floods, cyclones, tidal surges and droughts that damage crops and assets;
- social problems like dowry, polygamy, divorce, sexual harassment and land disputes;
- health problems that erode incomes due to unexpected medical expenses for the main wage earners; and
- financial problems resulting from high-interest loans from informal sources of credit, theft of assets like fishing gear and harvest, accidents, death of wage earners,

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A local Member of Parliament from Sathkhira, Bangladesh, speaking at the regional workshop held to discuss the FAO IGSSF

28

lack of alternative employment opportunities, legal expenses for dispute settlement, and so on.

In recent years, the impact of climate change has been increasingly felt on the small-scale fisheries sector. Fishers are more vulnerable to natural disasters than others of the coastal area as they are the ones who depend primarily on rivers, estuaries and littoral waters for their livelihoods. Coastal fishers contribute to between 22 and 25 per cent of the total fish production of the country, although they are the first victims of natural disasters. Each cyclone or tidal surge kills hundreds of fishers (as happened in 2007 with the super-cyclone Sidr), and force many others to seek out the coasts of foreign countries, where they often face harassment and even imprisonment.

The effects of climate change can be seen in the coastal areas of Bangladesh in the form of sea-level rise (which can destroy mangrove forests and fish nurseries), a reduction of freshwater availability due to salinity intrusion, and an increase in the frequency of cyclones. Increasing salinity affects freshwater fish production, while rising sea temperatures may affect the distribution patterns of some fish species. These days Bangladesh's fishers find it increasingly difficult to fish near the shore, and have to venture into deeper waters.

In the face of natural disasters like storms and cyclones, many small-scale fishermen in Bangladesh have had to abandon their fishing trips in order to safeguard their lives, often losing their fishing nets and boats in the process. A successfully completed fishing trip generally requires about 14 days. If a 'potentially dangerous' Level 3 signal is sent out from a fishing port to warn of extremely rough sea conditions, the fishers, who normally spend 14 days at sea for a complete fishing trip, return to shore and take shelter. In 2007, around 22 warnings indicating a disaster intensity above Level 3 were issued.

Fishing trips that are abandoned during the peak seasons cause a significant erosion of incomes, and drastically affects the livelihoods of fishing communities. Yet there is little support from the Bangladesh government to help the small-scale fishers in crisis. On the contrary, some of its recent policies have been designed to support the large-scale sector, with water bodies being leased out to influential persons rather than bona fide fishermen.

It was in this context that the Dhaka consultation sought to:

- bring together under one roof all government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private-sector parties involved in small-scale fisheries;
- develop co-ordination among the groups working with the small-scale fisher community;
- ensure interaction with national-level policymakers on IGSSF, and engage in advocacy for the betterment of the lives and livelihoods of the small-scale fishers of Bangladesh; and
- prepare recommendations on IGSSF and also on how to engage in greater networking and advocacy for sustainable small-scale fisheries in Bangladesh.

Ensuring participation

To realize these objectives and to generate maximum and effective participation of fishers and related stakeholders, COAST organized the

Dhaka consultation in a different manner. To ensure participation from all possible regions of the country, COAST selected five sample regions of fisher communities—one from the coastal area, three from the riverine area (one sweet-water, one mixed-water and one saline-water) and one from a *haor* (a large water body) area.

In each area, two focus-group discussions (FGDs) were arranged with 15 participants in each FGD. Regional workshops were also arranged in each area to validate the FGD findings and to make a wider assessment. To complete the regional-level FGDs and workshops, a national-level workshop was organized in Dhaka with representatives from all the five regions, followed by a seminar to sum up the grass-roots consultations and presentations for the benefit of national policymakers.

A two-day orientation programme was held for the field resource persons in which 25 participants from five regions participated. Of the five from each region, three were small-scale fishermen community leaders and two were NGO officials who led the FGDs and district-level workshops. The regions represented were Bhola, Cox's Bazar, Khulna, Bogra and Sunamganj.

A total of 500 persons participated in the Dhaka consultation—300 fishers, 17 government officials, 19 political leaders, 35 journalists, 26 NGO workers, 40 businessmen, 34 academicians and 29 representing other professions.

One of the key objectives of the consultation was to create an effective platform for the marginalized fishers of Bangladesh and to identify who small-scale fishers are and what comprises small-scale fisheries. The participants defined small-scale fishers as those who earn their living and ensure their livelihoods by capturing fish from rivers and the sea. Other characteristics of small-scale fishers are: social and economic marginalization; the use of small fishing gear and vessels; nearshore (not deep-sea) fishing operations; reliance on open water bodies;

manufacture of vessels and nets on a small scale; and culture and processing of fish with investments of under 40,000 Bangladesh taka (BDT) or around US\$490.

The major problem identified by the participants at the consultation was the lack of legal recognition of fishers or fishworkers in the policies or laws related to the fisheries sector of the country. That was the reason for one of the key recommendations of the consultation—to provide identity cards for small-scale fishers. It was strongly suggested that fisher community members themselves should be asked to prepare the list of bona fide small-scale fishers.

Another major recommendation of the consultation was to search for alternative livelihood or income-generating options, considering that fishing is often seasonal. Financial support should also be provided

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during official fishing embargoes. A social-security net in terms of special quotas for the fisher community members was also demanded. Female members of the community should be trained for employment in fish culture and poultry farming.

Inadequate healthcare services for the fishers was pointed out as a severe problem. Demands were expressed for community clinics and mobile health centres on the rivers and the sea so that fishermen in distress can get free emergency treatment and medicines.

Educational demands

In the sphere of education, demands were made for primary schools in embankment areas, free educational material for the children of fishing communities, and special scholarships to help eliminate child labour.

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30

A first-of-its-kind national consultation on the FAO IGSSF was recently held at the CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka, Bangladesh

There are various anomalies in the distribution of *khas* (government land) among the poor. At the consultation, fishers, who are mostly landless, demanded proper distribution of *khas* land.

Considering the power exercised by middlemen and moneylenders on the community, participants also recommended easy access to credit for fisher community members, which would help them access markets better.

Fishers in Bangladesh do not enjoy any health insurance or emergency medical aid schemes. In this context, demands were made for potable water supply, ambulance services and free health insurance.

Cancellation of the leases on open water bodies was strongly recommended to make sure that small-scale fishers enjoyed continuing access to fisheries resources.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the Dhaka consultation was the creation of an organization for the fisher community of Bangladesh, the National Fisher Folk Solidarity Forum. COAST will provide the secretarial and technical support

for the Forum, which is expected to become an effective community-based platform that fishers can use to make their voices heard locally and nationally. 3

For more

www.coastbd.org

The Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust

www.coastbd.org/images/stories/events/seminer18102012/English_Press_release.doc

Press Release about the Workshop

www.fisheries.gov.bd

**Department of Fisheries,
Government of Bangladesh**