

Flawed Floors

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the global inadequacy of social-protection floors in safeguarding marginalized communities, in the process exacerbating poverty and vulnerability

The social-development case studies in this issue of SAMUDRA Report (pp 63-93) clearly demonstrate how the small-scale fishing communities in Asia, the Caribbean and Central America took a major hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles show how they slipped unprecedently below the poverty line not only due to poor access to fishing grounds, landing sites and markets, lack of income and alternative livelihoods, but also due to lack of social-development infrastructure and access, and gross inadequacy of social-protection measures. The COVID-19 social-distancing protocols also prevented the fishing subsector from acting as an employer of last resort, as had been the case during economic slowdowns and droughts in the past.

COVID-19 response exposes the huge inadequacy of social-protection floors across the world to protect marginalized communities, in the process exacerbating poverty and vulnerability.

The dire situation, more than ever, highlights the urgent need to invest in social-protection systems and floors, and to provide basic social-protection guarantees to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle, especially to benefit children, women and older persons.

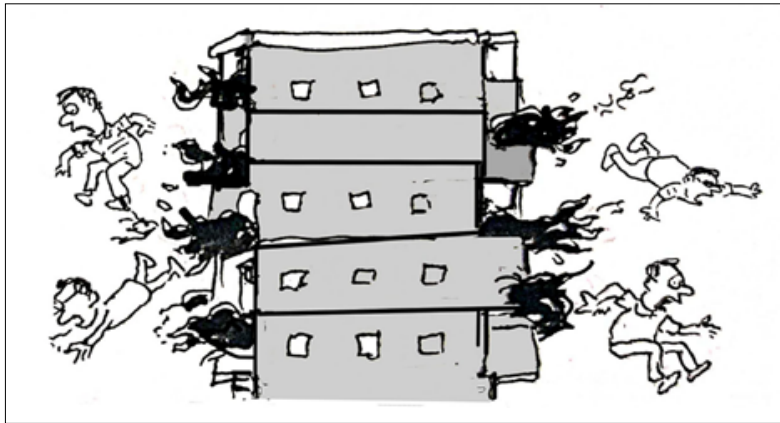
How can social-protection floors for fishing communities be developed and implemented? First, these floors should, at the outset, provide children in fishing communities with access to nutrition and education, as well as older persons with basic income security. Second, these floors should provide essential health care to all members of fishing communities, including maternal care. Third, they should provide basic income security for fishers and fishworkers who are unable to earn sufficient income in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability. If the social-protection needs of fishing communities – among the most marginalized of the population – are met, one can well assume that the social-protection needs of all others in society at large also met.

Under social-protection systems, a combination of contributory social-insurance schemes (for example, for formal sector fishers and fishworkers) and non-

contributory social-assistance schemes (for example, for informal sector fishers and fishworkers) may be considered, depending on employment, income and the organizational profile of fishers and fishworkers.

Migrant fishers are often excluded from social-protection schemes designed only for citizens of a receiving State. This lacuna should be addressed by designing, creating and implementing social-protection assistance for migrants by the United Nations and its specialized agencies in collaboration with the sending and receiving States.

The International Labour Organization flagship report – the World Social Protection Report 2017-



19 – draws attention to social protection as a human right that upholds the right to security in the event of lack of livelihood. While the 2014 SSF Guidelines seek social-security

protection and social development, the 2020 FAO Declaration for Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture urges accelerating access to social-protection programmes for fishers and their communities. Further, the SDG Target 1.3 advocates nationally appropriate social-protection systems and floors by 2030, especially to benefit the poor and vulnerable, while Target 10.4 highlights how adopting social-protection policies can progressively achieve greater equality in society.

While every effort must be made at the national level to beef up investment in social development and social protection, the fisheries administration, at the most effective level, must be vigilant to ensure that fishers, fishworkers and their families, in all types of formal and informal arrangements, are able to benefit from social-protection schemes, and that they also have sufficient awareness about these schemes. Fisheries authorities should, on behalf of these communities, speedily liaise with social-protection authorities for maximum coverage, focusing progressively on the adequacy of benefit. Not to do so would be unjust and disheartening for marginalized communities grappling with poverty and vulnerability. **3**