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Thailand

Author : ASED

Worsening of the Poor : A Case of Small-scale Fisherfolks *

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Thailand still abounds with poor people who are unjustly treated by the system, no all in this society will receive justice.

Prof Nidhi Iawsr
a prominent Thai historian and social

To solve a country's poverty problem, national policies need not only to tackle the predicament, but also to ensure long-term well-being of their target groups. Such policies can only be put into effective practice if the government has a strong political will and accountability to its people, particularly those marginalized groups, such as the poor. Generation after generation, the livelihood of these rural folk and their communities have indispensably relied on the abundance of their natural resources. Both human and nature depend on each other. Their capability to take care of each other is recognized in the new Constitution. But the recent government decision to solve the chronic dispute between commercial fishing business and small-scale fisherfolk appears to show the state's lack of political will and accountability to over 240,000 small-scale fisherfolk whose constitutional rights are violated and sheer survival severely threatened. Not to mention the jeopardy Thailand's long-term food security will be put in.

Scenario

In June 1999 more than 1,000 small-scale fisherfolks in 350 small fishing boats blockaded Songkhla deep-sea port and more than 300 small-scale fisherfolks in 60 fishing boats blockaded the fish marketing port in Phuket province. These fisherfolks demanded the government's ban on night-time anchovy-fishing trawlers which use spotlights with 0.5 cm-mesh nets and revocation of a ministerial decree issued on 15, 1996 allowing anchovy-fishing trawlers smaller than 16 meters long to use spotlights and mesh nets with holes less than 2.5 centimeter in diameter to fish three kilometers from the coast.

The blockade is but a proof that the government is in favor of large-scale fishing enterprises and sea-food processing for export at the expense of sustainable coastal marine resource management. Before the current dispute, the small-scale fisherfolk also fought against the fishing boats using destructive fishing gears such as dragnets.

ASED

Thailand

Worsening of the Poor: A Case of Small-scale Fishers

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pushnets.

The main importers of anchovy products from Thailand are Malaysia, Brunei, Arabia, Japan and the European Union.

After the 12-day blockade in Songkhla, the government, through the National Fish Policy Committee (NFPC), decided to set up an ad hoc committee to spend four (July-October) studying the impact of night-time anchovy fishing. In the meantime night-time anchovy-fishing trawlers were allowed to continue their fishing.

Based on the study of the ad hoc committee released on November 1, the NFPC re that night-time anchovy-fishing trawlers could continue as they were not the sole cause of marine resources depletion but just accelerators. There were also no evidences showing that they destroyed a lot of other economic fish. The NFP agreed with a zoning system and seasonal closure to help conserve marine reso Under zoning, trawlers of smaller than 24 meters long can operate 5-12 kilometers coast, and the bigger ones can fish 15 kilometers further out. The area between 12 a kilometers is deemed a buffer zone. Anchovy fisherfolk will be offered alter careers, such as fish-farming and small-scale fisherfolk who want to give up f would be helped by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives.

It should be noted that the ad hoc committee did not recommend a ban on the nigh anchovy fishing trawlers because of their ostensible belief that the government ag especially the Department of Fisheries have the capacity to monitor and control the time anchovy-fishing trawlers. However, they recommended stricter registration control on the number of anchovy fishing vessels by limiting licenses.

The problem : overfishing

The night-time anchovy-fishing trawlers threatened the small-scale fisherfolks' su and damage the marine ecology as their spotlights lure fish in large numbers estimated that one boat with such lights can catch about 10 tons of fish per night; a 40 percent of the catch is not anchovies but juvenile economic fish such as gr mackerel and other species which, when grown up, could earn the small-scale fishe considerable income.

Piya Kittawon from Prince of Songkhla University pointed out that in the past 10 there has been a drastic increase of anchovy-fishing trawlers using lights with v fishing gears. Altogether there are 3,416. With these numbers, it is estimate Thailand reaches 17.97 time of the appropriate anchovy productivity. During 1996 fleets of anchovy fishing trawlers have moved between the Gulf of Thailand a Andaman Sea doing what is called "biomassfishing" meaning wiping out all ki marine resources in all areas all year round on rotating basis.

A Thai fisheries official revealed that the country has been facing over-fishi anchovy in the Gulf of Thailand since 1992. Out of 200,000 tons of anchovy pr annually by the Gulf of Thailand, the appropriate level of fish that can be caught be 60 percent of the total or around 120,000 tons. However, anchovy-fishing tr have been catching fish at the rate of 150,000 to 160,000 tons a year.

In addition, a senior FAO fisheries officer mentioned that of three million tons caught by Thais every year, only 40 percent is for public consumption. The rest is u make fishmeal.

It should be noted that instead of the government agencies bringing up overf

problem for solution, it is the small-scale fisherfolk who brought it up.

Who are the small fisherfolks?

In his study on *Small Fishery in Thailand*, sponsored by the Thailand Research Assoc Prof Kangwan Chantarachote of Kasetsart University defines small fisherfolk those who fish either without any vessels, or with vessel but no engine, or with and engine outside the vessel, and with vessel including engine of less than five gross. Taking into account the latest 1995 Fishery Consensus of the National Statistics Office, there were 44,867 households which fall into this criteria.

However, a survey of the Project on the Coastal Zone and River Basin Management Southern Thailand in 1997 and the Federation of Small-scale Fisherfolks in Southern Thailand shows that there were 46,930 households of small-scale fisherfolks in the South of Thailand with 242,408 population. These small fisherfolks are members of the Federation of Small-scale Fisherfolk in Southern Thailand which covers 13 southern provinces, 85 percent of the entire fisherfolk-population nationwide.

According to Kangwan's study, out of 158,604 tons of marine resource caught by small-scale fishermen in 1994, 51,410 tons were fish. And 93 percent of the fish was economic fish while the rest was fishmeal. In 1985, the catch by commercial fishermen was 3.5 times more than that caught by small-scale fishermen. But, compared in value, it was decreased to 1.9 times, as one-third of what the commercial fishermen caught was low-priced fishmeal and that caught by small-scale fishermen of higher commercial value.

Economic and Social Impacts on the Small-scale Fishermen

1. Drastic decrease of income

The main source of income of a majority of the small-scale fisherfolks comes from fishing. A study in Satun and Songkhla province done by the Federation of Small Fisherfolks in Southern Thailand and the Project on Coastal Management in Southern Thailand showed that the daily income of the small-scale fisherfolks in Satun in 1996-1997 was US\$32-40. During 1998-1999 it decreased to US\$7.50-12.50.

In Sathingphra district of Songkhla, the daily income of small-scale fishermen decreased from US\$20-25 to US\$3.75-7.50 and 95 percent of them were indebted. 62 percent were illiterate. 75 percent had four years of schooling while only one percent completed primary education.

The study of Dr Lertchai Sirichai and his team in 1999 found that before the boom in night-time anchovy fishing trawlers, small-scale fishermen could fish enough for their families and share with their fishing crew which ranged from two to almost 10. But to catch enough to feed their families was out of the question. So, they took loans from the middlemen to improve their fishing tools. As a result, they became indebted. Small-scale fishermen could not go out fishing because they did not have enough money to buy petrol. In Buddhist communities, where taking loans was not prohibited, fishermen had to pay high interest rates of 5-10 percent.

Prathin Miheem, a small-scale fisherman aged 38 said that with the decrease in income, women and family members had to bear more economic burden. When her husband got less fish, she had to get a loan from the government agency to buy fish at the market to compensate the lost income.

2. Weakening of family institution

When the men caught less fish or not enough to feed their families, family tie became troubles. Many had simply quit, sold their boats and turned to work as laborers at sea factories, or became illegal migrant workers in Malaysia, leaving their families behind. While the husbands were away, the wives who had no money had to buy necessities from the shops on installment waiting for their husbands to pay back on their return. Families could not afford to send their children to school even at primary level. Children had to stop their schooling. In many villages, the wives who had never been fishing before had to replace the disappearing crew.

3. Disintegrating community

Usually, the people in the same community are relatives. They used to help each other and share among themselves. But with the depleting resources, everyone had to struggle for their own survival. In many communities, villagers split into supporters of anchovy fishing and proponents of small-scale fisherfolks. The supporters of the anchovy fishing are those who buy fish from the anchovy-fishing trawlers for further processing which is the way to supplement their decreased income. Small-scale fisherfolks in villages do not oppose the anchovy-fishing trawlers because they are indebted to the owners who are the middlemen. In some villages, the conflict was so severe that the two sides did not talk with or help each other even at the funeral. Younger generation on both sides quarreled with each other. The conflict between the two sides expanded to conflicts with other communities.

4. Weakening of religious institution

The spirit of brotherhood was disrupted. Villagers started to do their daily activities separately. On the holy Friday, although they went to the same mosque, they separated into groups. Some of the small-scale fisherfolks started to get loans with interest, which was against their religious belief. In many communities, religious leaders also split themselves as supporters of the anchovy fishing and proponents of small-scale fisherfolks. Some of them even used microphones to persuade villagers not to support a protest organized by small-scale fisherfolks.

Now small-scale fisherfolks are gravely worried about their future, culture, identity, and their children's future. Also, the conflict within a community and the split among religious leaders have now been challenging the religious teaching and its strength.

Summary

When the blockade by small-scale fishermen started, government officials first pointed out how much it damaged the local economy. But, no one seemed to care how much the government's commercial fishing policy has cost the small fisherfolks' long-term well-being and the country's future food security.

An FAO senior official had already warned that unless corrective action was taken, Thailand would be short of 150,000 tons of seafood a year by 2014, leaving the younger generation with only heads and bones. Kangwan's study showed that the large majority of the head of households in their 25-49 age group accounted for 63.4 percent while 36.6 percent was those below 25 years old. The figures reflect that small-scale fisherfolk has become an endangered occupation.

Women from the small-scale fisherfolks have already expressed that the conflict with

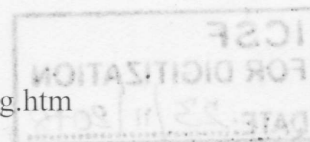
anchovy-fishing trawlers using spotlights are not the conflict over natural resource the conflict between the destroyers and the saviours of the sea.

With the existing state's fisheries policy, small-scale fisherfolks will be impoverished and excluded from their sustainable way of fishing which contributes conservation of marine resources in the long run. It's more likely that Thailand's generation will be left with the sea full of all kinds of boats and trawlers, equippe destructive fishing gears, and no fish to catch.

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