



Covid Response 2020

International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) Trust





The World Health Organization (WHO) characterized COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March, 2020. Two weeks later, a nationwide lockdown was announced in India, to ensure consistency in the application and implementation of pandemic control measures.

The lockdown adversely affected numerous fishers and fishworkers and their families. Being contact-intensive, small-scale fisheries were particularly hit hard, especially in the marine sector across India, as is evident from the stories carried in this newsletter.

ICSF Trust undertook relief work among marginalized marine and inland small-scale fishing communities in the states of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Maharashtra. ICSF worked through credible civil society organizations (CSOs) mainly in the form of providing sanitary masks, provisions for cooking and cash assistance in a targeted manner. These efforts followed a ground-up approach whereby each CSO applied its own criteria to identify beneficiaries in consultation with local communities.

This newsletter provides vignettes of ICSF's relief work, how the beneficiaries in each state were identified and what form of assistance was offered. The relief work also brought to light the impact of Cyclone Amphan that befell the eastern seaboard of India from 16 – 21 May, 2020. The double whammy literally devastated these precarious communities: thatch and tin roof houses, and other assets such as craft and gear were blown away during the cyclone, exacerbating the vulnerabilities of fishing communities amidst a COVID-19 lockdown.

ICSF thanks the Dakshin Foundation in Bengaluru; the Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA) in Kolkata; the District Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA) in Visakhapatnam; the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Thiruvananthapuram; and Vrutti in Bengaluru. They collaborated with the ICSF Trust in undertaking relief operations during May – July 2020.



Mumbai, Maharashtra
through Vrutti

India

North 24 Parganas, West Bengal

through Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA)

South 24 Parganas, West Bengal

through Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA)

East Godavari, Andhra Pradesh

through District Fisherman's Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA)

Chennai, Tamil Nadu

through Vrutti

Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu

through Dakshin Foundation

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

through Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

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East Godavari, Andhra Pradesh

through **District Fisherman's Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA)**

As COVID-19 continues to hold the world at ransom, it is increasingly evident that the social, economic and political effects of the pandemic are causing as much damage as the virus itself. For small-scale fishing communities in northern Andhra Pradesh, the lockdown coincided with peak fishing season and the annual seasonal closure for fishing. Lack of access to fishery resources combined with consumer fear, led to life-threatening situations. Not only is most family income halved, consumption has also fallen to two meals a day.

The District Fishermen's Youth Welfare Association (DFYWA) is an NGO working in the region for over three decades. DFYWA organized and provided relief packages to 500 families in two villages in East Godavari District, namely, Uppada and BVC Palem.

Given that the villages together have a total of nearly 11,000 households, DFYWA undertook a door-to-door survey with the help of volunteers of anganwadi or rural childcare centres, leaders of women's groups and village administration staff. The relief was focused towards those who needed it most—single women households, senior citizens, people with disabilities and the poorest families of the village. In addition, DFYWA included socially marginalized workers, often left out of mainstream support programmes.

A total of 300 families from BVC Palem and 200 from Uppada were shortlisted using the above criteria to benefit from relief assistance and an informal facilitation committee was formed to identify specific needs. Relief packages sourced from Visakhapatnam included rice, lentils, wheat flour, oil, sugar and tamarind. Distribution was organized with the help of several local volunteers and would not have been possible without the help of three senior village residents: Surada Nageswara Rao (in Uppada); Barre Lakshmi Narasimha Raju, the ex-Sarpanch of Coringa village; and Venkatesh Salagrama and his children.

Although the support programme was modest, given the magnitude of the crisis, for many families the support served as a morale booster. As one women leader in BCV Palem said, "It is not about how much is given and how many have received the benefit. It is about telling us that we have friends who care about us in these difficult times. Look at it as a small gift from our fellow fishers from another place!"





Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

through **Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)**

In the coastal areas of Kerala such as Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Ernakulam and Malappuram, fisherwomen largely work as daily wage vendors. With no habit of procuring groceries for more than two-three days at a time, these women were severely affected by the combined effects of COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. Although restrictions were gradually relaxed, COVID-19 protocol affected the regular functioning of the local system and many women lost their access to auction. Many women had to stand in long queues to buy fish at fixed prices at landing centres for hours, often to return empty handed. The situation worsened further as big merchants going to neighbouring provinces got infected with the coronavirus, leading to community spread.

Since many women were members of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), they contacted the union for assistance with rations and healthcare.

With over 2,000 members in Thiruvananthapuram district alone, SEWA utilized its network to identify the most vulnerable families according to age, illness and women-led households. Poor sanitation and infrastructure facilities made the situation considerably worse, as multiple containment zones were unable to adequately isolate infected patients. SEWA provided cash assistance of INR 1,000 each to 550 families from 12 fishing villages in this district.

Beneficiaries

Pushaparani, 38

Poonthura is a coastal fishing village. The daughter of a fisherman, Pushaparani married a fisher and has two sons and a daughter. Her husband died at sea in 2017 from the cyclone Ockhi. She now sells fish at the Kumarichantha market in Amabalathara, which recently became a COVID-19 hotspot, spreading the virus through the fishing villages of Kerala. She lives in a rented house and her children go to school. The village had barely returned to normal after the cyclone when COVID-19 arrived. Severe financial problems followed, with very little catch landing. If she obtained some stock, she couldn't sell at reasonable rates. The market remained lukewarm; fish from Tamil Nadu was constantly undercutting the price, making her fresh fish unviable. Her income fell 50-60 percent. Except for the rations that arrived as help, there is no other support. Fishing is banned because Poonthura village is a critical containment zone since June. She needs help.

Joyce, 52

She is from a fishing community and lives in the coastal village of Mampally in Anjuthengu panchayat. She was vending fish even before she married Alex, a tailor, with whom she has two daughters and a son. She goes to work daily, collecting fish from Neendakara harbour in Kollam district. Sometimes, when the fish is insufficient, she travels to Thoothur in Tamil Nadu. She buys fish daily at an average of INR 15,000 – 25,000 and sells it at a street near Alamcode. Her average daily net income is INR 1,500-2,000. She and Alex have over the past 20 years educated their children, got their daughters married, bought their own house. But there are loans to repay and no savings. COVID-19 rocked their boat in March. The lockdown meant she couldn't go to Thoothur, collecting stock from the local harbours. If she got the fish, it was difficult to sell it. Then she ended up staying at home. After the lockdown got eased, business did not recover because of a general loss of purchasing power. Unemployed people got into the business, selling fish door to door at lower

prices. The public distribution system has supplied rations but, she says, they cannot survive on rice alone.

John Mary, 50

A fisherman's daughter, she married a fisherman who contracted tuberculosis; after he recovered with treatment, he became an alcoholic. Mary became the only breadwinner for her three daughters and a son, all of them now educated and married with loans from banks, selling her own house to repay them. Now, the family lives in a rented house; one daughter and her family live with her. Mary collects fish from Vizhinjam harbour and sells it at Karmana market in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation. If the stock doesn't finish, she sells door-to-door. But from mid-March this year to May, there was no fish at harbour. If she got some stock, there was no transport to reach the market in time. After the lockdown was lifted, the business did not recover due to lack of demand. Donations from the church, the free rations and financial assistance provided by welfare boards, and SEWA Union's support kept her going. She is a SEWA Union leader and expects the government to pitch in with relief and solutions.

Mercy Antony

In the fishing village of Adimalthura in Kottukal Gram Panchayat, Mercy began work at a young age because her parents were not well; they and her younger siblings became her responsibility. She even took a loan to get her younger sister married. Her husband, a fisherman, took care of the family and their three sons and a daughter. But he died in the 2017 violent cyclone Ockhi, along with her sister's husband. And now, the pandemic has hit the coastal areas very badly. They are struggling to make ends meet, with the markets shut down temporarily due to COVID-19. She took huge loans to build their house and has to repay them now. The lockdown prevents her from going to work every day. She resumed work from May, but it is still difficult. With the entire coastal area witnessing the spread of the pandemic, Mercy

regrets that nobody is worried about their survival; ration alone is insufficient. A leader and trade committee member of the SEWA Union, she has been visiting members to sensitize them.

Lucy, 50

She began vending fish at the age of 23. A resident of Mariyanadu coastal village in Kadinamkulam panchayat, her late husband was a fisherman who turned alcoholic and died of cancer five years ago. Her one daughter is married and lives elsewhere; her son lives with her and is undergoing treatment for brain cancer. This means she cannot go to the fish market regularly, the only activity that provided some financial stability. She has a housing loan to repay. She sells her fish at the Sreekaryam market. The lockdown prevented her from going to work. Restrictions were eased in May but things have been difficult. The traditional auction system has stopped; the rates have dropped, resulting in losses at times. In July, the Mariyanadu coast was also hit badly by COVID-19. Rations arrived from the PDS shops but Mercy often worries about her future.

Mary, 39

Born and brought up in the coastal village of Pulluvila in Karimkulam panchayat, Mary is from fishworker family. Her father is a fisherman and her mother is a fish vendor. She has a sister and a brother. After failing to pass 10th standard, Mary



migrated to work in a prawn factory. She worked for six years in Gujarat and Mumbai. Later, she returned to begin working with her mother in the fish market. At the age of 24 she got married to an alcoholic fisherman. She ended up sending her two daughters, now 16 and 14 years old, respectively, to an orphanage in Ernakulam, Kochi. She is separated from her husband to save herself from the intense psychological and physical trauma she suffered for years due to his alcoholism. The 2017 Ockhi cyclone disrupted fishworkers in a big way.

When fish is not available to sell in the market, she works as a housemaid or as wage labour. Her village was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her situation is getting worse, as there is a lack of fresh fish. Her two daughters have stopped going to school already. They have to replay a loan of INR 200,000, taken to build their house. The lockdown's relaxation hasn't helped.



Mumbai, Maharashtra

through **Vrutti**

The lockdown enforced to combat the spread of COVID-19 has affected a large number of workers and the self-employed in India. The marine fishing community, in particular, has been very badly hit by cumulative effects of consumer fear, economic lockdown and the seasonal fishing ban. Vrutti is a not-for-profit organisation working to provide livelihood support for over two decades now. Vrutti distributed ration kits containing provisions to over 300 families living in six villages in Mumbai.

Informed primarily by members of the Daryavardi Mahila Sangh (DMS), an upcoming union of women fish vendors, Vrutti first sought to identify the most affected families in need of support. Local institutions such as fisheries cooperatives and community organisations provided crucial support in this effort, also volunteering later on to assist with distribution of materials.

A total of 316 families were identified across three villages: 200 in Charkop, 66 in Kandivali and 50 in Versova. Situated in creek areas, Charkop and Kandivali are areas with very poor families, a majority of whom have lost land to reclamation drives. The high fluctuation in catch from creek waters, combined with the arrival of monsoon and closure of local markets, made life extremely difficult for them. For Preetham Bhandari, 40, the fluctuations and loss in business have left little to support his wife and two young children. Due to its large size, the city's Versova area faced severe lockdown measures when it was declared a containment zone.

Each kit distributed contained five masks and provisions, including, rice, wheat flour, cooking oil, sugar, tea powder, pigeon peas, chick peas, white peas, salt, chilli powder and turmeric powder.



Beneficiaries

Sunanda Mhatre, 45

A fish vendor in Mumbai's Kandivli locality, she works in the local market. She lives with her husband, two daughters, a son, and an ageing mother-in-law. Her husband and son have moved into vegetable vending in the same market for additional income. The lockdown has made it difficult for the family to manage its basic needs, even for essentials such as the children's education.

Preetam Bhandari, 40

A fisherman in Mumbai's Charkop village, he lives with his wife, a fish vendor in the local market, and two young children. He depends on fishing in the creek for livelihood; the volume of the catch

fluctuates wildly. During the two months of lockdown there was very little business; it was very tough for Bhandari to meet his family's needs.

Gangabai Bhanji, 60

A fish vendor in Versova, Mumbai. She is a widow and lives with her son, his wife and a young grandson. She sells dry fish in the market with help from her daughter-in-law. Her son works as a casual labourer in the local fish landing centre. During the lockdown there was very little work, made worse by the many restrictions in place. The non-availability of dry fish also affected her business. The family is still struggling to make ends meet, looking for odd jobs for supplementary income. With immediate needs covered, it is possible to look for work opportunities.



Chennai, Tamil Nadu

through **Vrutti**

Given their strong network of women leaders in the region, Vrutti's relief effort in Chennai was conducted through personal outreach to several women-led families. Many of them were severely affected by lockdown restrictions since their headload vending involves walking long distances between local harbours and residential areas. Thilakavathi G, 23, procures fish from Nainarkuppam, Chintadripet market and Kasimedu harbour and vends it in Kotturpuram area, where her mother also works.

Together with local women leaders, Vrutti identified 376 families in three villages: 250 in Panaiyur Kuppam, 104 in Besant Nagar and 22 in Nainarkuppam. The distribution system used in these areas was unique as Vrutti tied up with Reliance Supermarket and several neighbourhood stores to stock provision kits for distribution. Women fish vendors were then issued tokens by women leaders, and they collected their kits following a schedule worked out with each of the stores to avoid interference with regular business. Each kit was worth INR 750 and contained three items: rice, lentils and cooking oil.



Beneficiaries

Thilakavathi G, 32

A resident of Nainarkuppam in Chennai. She studied up to the 10th standard and her husband Govind is a fisherman working on board a fibre reinforced plastic (FRP) vallam (craft). She got married in 2016 and began fish vending right after, looking for additional income for the family. She has four years of experience working as a headload fish vendor. She has a son and daughter, both studying. She does business in the Kotturpuram area, where her mother is also involved in fish vending. She procures fish from Nainarkuppam, the Chintadripet market and Kasimedu harbour.

Kalpana A, 40

A resident of Panaiyurkuppam in Chennai has studied up to the 9th standard, discontinuing her studies after she had an early marriage. Her

husband Anbu is a fisherman working in FRP vallam. She began fish vending in 2004 to supplement the family income and has 16 years of experience vending headloads of fish in the Medavakkam area. Her son and daughter are studying. She procures fish from Paniyurkuppam and Kasimedu harbour.

Kanaka, 58

After the death of her husband, she had no option but to take up fish vending to support her family of two daughters, being the sole member capable of work. She lives in Panaiyurkuppam in Chennai and has attended school. Kanaka sells fish in the Sholinganallur fish market and procures the fish from the Chintadripet market and Kasimedu harbour. The timely support by way of a ration kit has been very helpful to her, she said.

Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu

through **Dakshin Foundation**

COVID-19 has affected workers from small-scale fisheries across the world. In India, particularly, the plight of migrant workers in urban areas has gained much citizen concern and media coverage. The difficulties faced by those on the margins such as the extremely vulnerable fishing communities of Ramanathapuram, however, have been completely hidden from view.

For a community dependent entirely on day-to-day fishing for economic security and daily subsistence, the COVID-19 lockdown has proved near fatal. Already forced to borrow to meet additional costs such as repair work during the annual fishing closure, extending from April to June, these families now find themselves steadily sinking into debt as the lockdown restrictions aggravate the strain. Seaweed collectors such as K. Atha Ponnu, 65, a widow and the sole breadwinner of her family, are some of the most affected. Women working as dry fish vendors are another particularly vulnerable community as physical distancing norms have brought their work to a brutal halt.

Despite the COVID-19 relief measures that were announced, specific concerns of the fishing communities are not fully addressed. As a result, only an insufficient amount of annual relief related to the fishing closure is provided for these families. Further, these relief measures have failed to include migrant fishers, leaving several workers stranded elsewhere along the coast.

Relaxation of restrictions during phase three and four, with small-scale fisheries allowed to operate, has provided little relief for many families as only the use of traditional boats was permitted. Thirty-year-old Yosiya's husband works on a mechanized boat to provide for her and their two daughters; he has remained unemployed throughout. Even for those families who do have traditional boats, most were severely damaged by the Cyclone Amphan. The lack of public transportation has made repair work impossible for Forty-two-year-old Manjula and her family.

In light of these circumstances, People's Action for Development (PAD) has distributed relief packages provided by Dakshin Foundation, to 250 families from 25 villages that fall within the Ramanathapuram district. Families engaged in seaweed collection, dry fish vendors, widows, people with disabilities and families with three or more girl children were specifically identified and included. Distributed in the first week of June, these packages contained provisions such as rice, lentils, basic spices for cooking, garlic, tamarind, soap and facial masks. Precautionary measures such as the use of gloves, masks and physical distancing were followed throughout. Existing PAD Community Based Organizations (CBOs) such as Women's Livelihood groups, Child Protection Committees, youth groups, and more were all utilized for effective coordination.



Beneficiaries

K Atha Ponnu, 65

Her family has drawn its livelihood from collecting seaweed for several generations. Her husband died 25 years ago, leaving her to fend for four girls and one boy. Since his childhood the son helped her to collect seaweed. In time, her four daughters got married. About 12 years ago, however, her son met with an accident and became bedridden. From then onwards, she has been the sole breadwinner. The COVID-19 pandemic hit them like a bolt. Seaweed collection stopped due to lockdown restrictions. Free rice and groceries from the state government's fair price outlet helped, but everything turned difficult. As the restrictions were eased came the Amphan cyclone. This is when timely help of rice and groceries arrived.

Manjula, 42

With the COVID-19 pandemic bringing to a halt all fishing activity, her family faces a financial crisis. Access was lost to basic amenities like food and healthcare. Auto rickshaw drivers refused to ply when children or elders fell ill, fearing contracting

the new virus. Public transport closed down. Just then, cyclone Amphan broke some boats; repairing them was impossible due to the lockdown. The NGO PAD reached a relief package to the family. Manjula attests that each of its items was of sound quality. The relief brought smiles to the distressed faces.

Yosiya, 40

Her husband is from a traditional fishing community and works as crew member on a mechanized boat. With his meagre income from fishing, the couple still manages to send their two daughters to school. The lockdown brought everything to a halt. It became a problem to get food and groceries, send children to school, or even go to sea for work. The family somehow managed to buy groceries during the first phase of the lockdown; in the second phase, though, there was no money to buy food. Even with the relaxations during the third phase, boats were not going to sea. Cyclone Amphan destroyed several traditional boats. This is when food relief packages arrived from PAD and Yosiya's family was among the recipients.

South 24 Parganas & North 24 Parganas, West Bengal

through **Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA)**

While fishing communities across the country have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, those in West Bengal have also faced the terrible misfortune of Cyclone Amphan. Not only were their livelihoods impaired by lockdown restrictions and loss of business, many also lost family members and homes to the battering super storm. Four districts—South and North 24 Parganas (including the Sundarbans), Howrah and Purba Medinipur—were especially devastated when the cyclone hit South Bengal. Many fisher families are now stuck in relief camps, having lost almost everything in the past few months. There is a dire need for food packets, tarpaulins, hygiene kits, water purifiers and equipment.

The Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA) as well as Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) have worked extensively in the region to provide relief for affected families. With the support it received, DISHA has supplied 225 fishworker families with rations and tarpaulin. Efforts began on 4 June for 65 families in Bamnia and Sandeshkhali, an island in the river Vidyadhari. The waters here have been severely polluted. What's more, the post-cyclone water surge destroyed many mud embankments, making fish and shrimp farming impossible.

Later that week, 100 victims were identified in Lahiripur, Gosaba Block. Adjacent to dense forests of the Sundarbans, this area has a very high rate of tiger attacks, leaving multiple households to be led solely by widows. The 32-year-old Sikha, for instance, has been the sole earner for her family after her husband was killed by a tiger in 2015. With local market sales and river fishing restricted during lockdown, she was forced to rely completely on the Public Distribution System. Making matters worse, the storm blew away the corrugated iron shed in which she lived. Well aware of the difficulties in getting assistance after struggling for years, especially after her husband's death, Sikha has little hope for gaining timely compensation from the emergency relief agencies.

Further along the Gosaba Block, 20 fishworkers were identified from Kumirmari. Here, water salinity prevents agriculture and forest department restricts fishing trips. The workers were provided with tarpaulins, health kits and food bags.

On 25 June, DISHA and DMF went to Magurkhali, Baduria Block. Living on government land, fishers here don't have land tenure and many were shifted to shelters when their huts were destroyed in the cyclone. The tarpaulin thankfully came to use for people like Marjina whose tile roof was blown to pieces by the wind.



Beneficiaries

Sikha Mondal, 32

Her husband was on a fishing trip in the Sunderbans in September 2015 when a tiger attacked and killed him. She was left with two children and an old mother-in-law. With the help of DISHA, she chased different agencies for a compensation of INR 2.5 lakh and the insurance claim of INR 1 lakh. Sikha began farming fish in the family tank and fishing in a river close to her village, selling the produce in the local market. The COVID-19 lockdown brought fishing in the river to a halt. Even if she got a few fish, there was no market to sell it. The public distribution system was the only hope. On 20th May came the supercyclone Amphan, wreaking widespread devastation. The corrugated iron shed of Sikha's house was blown away, the house was severely damaged. DISHA and the DMF reached her village on June 7 with relief support. There was a tarpaulin for temporary shelter, a packet of food including rice, lentils and edible oil.

Marjina Biwi

Rahim Mondal arrived about 1980 in village Chaita as a refugee from Bangladesh. With no fixed income, Rahim procuring fish at a wholesale market in Barasat and selling it in the village market, also collected fish from inland fish farmers. Hard work brought stability and a small piece of land with a hut and a small pond for his wife and daughter. In March 2020, he got electrocuted by a live electric wire by the roadside and died. With no savings, the family fell into penury. Help arrived in the form of money and food from Rahim's fellow vendors and the DMF. Then the super cyclone Amphan hit. The house was damaged, especially the tiled roof. With help from fish vendors Marjina began vending fish from her husband's corner in the market. She thanked the fellow fish vendors for helping her tide over the tragedies and stand on her feet.



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