POLICY BRIEF 4

THE RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT FOR SMALL-SCALE ARTISANAL FISHING COMMUNITIES OF BANGLADESH

BACKGROUND

Bangladesh has achieved self-sufficiency in fish production, and while a large part of the production comes from fresh-water inland capture fisheries and aquaculture, marine capture fisheries account for more than half of the production. And within the marine fisheries sector, artisanal small-scale capture fisheries still account by far for the biggest share of the production, even though the marine industrial fisheries sub sector has also been growing steadily.

A sector-wide human rights impact assessment (SWIA) was carried out in small-scale artisanal fishing communities in Barguna and Cox's Bazar Districts in Bangladesh during 2019-2020. With the support of DIHR, the SWIA examined the living- and working conditions of poor small-scale fishers and their families through a human rights lens. The report contains findings on the labor conditions, the standard of living, the situation of women – and the environmental and climate change-related human rights issues at stake in the fishing communities. This Policy Brief presents findings related to the small-scale fishing communities' right to a healthy environment, along with a series of recommendations to improve the situation.

Manusher Jonno Foundation
COAST Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust
BILS
Sweden Sverige
THE DANISH INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
14 LIFE BELOW WATER

THE SCENARIO

Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to climate change, especially around the coastal areas, due to its susceptibility to cyclones, floods and other extreme weather events. A recent report by Germanwatch enlists Bangladesh as the seventh most vulnerable country on the Climate Risk Index 2020, and as one of the countries that has been most affected by climate change in the last 15years. The population's high dependency on agriculture and fisheries, and the poverty and high population density, exacerbate the situation further. Climate change has multidimensional impacts on the ecosystems in which artisanal small-scale fishers operate, and is likely to affect the reproduction process, migration patterns and survival rates of fish. At the same time, environmental degradation stemming from pollution and overexploitation of natural resources have profound effects on the small-scale fishers' livelihood resources. Needless to say, the combined effects of climate change impacts and environmental degradation will have profound effects on the livelihood and general standard of living of the artisanal fishers now and in the years to come, and will affect their income, food and nutrition, health, and general wellbeing. On top of that, their right to water, housing and a broad range of social and economic rights is impacted by frequent flooding, cyclones and storm surges that damage coastal infrastructure. And while the Government has taken firm action to protect the fish stocks by introducing fishing bans, creating marine sanctuaries, etc., these measures risk pushing vulnerable fishermen into desperate poverty.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM THE SWIA

Around half of the fishers acknowledge that overfishing can lead to depletion of the fish stock

88% respondents said that climate change has caused a decrease in their families' income

The perceived effects of climate change described by the respondents include rising temperatures, increased flooding, less rainfall, more cyclones – and a decrease in the number of fish species as well as in the size of the fish stocks

52% find that climate change has had a negative effect on their families' income

Many also report that climate change has had negative impacts on the water quality and reduced the quality of drinking water

Changes in fish stocks over the course of recent years may indeed be related to climate change-induced patterns of change in the ecosystem

Such changes will have profound effects on the livelihood and general standard of living of the artisanal fishers now and in the years to come

It is recognized that states have a duty to protect the environment in order to live up to their obligations to protect and fulfill human rights

This includes protecting ocean resources from degradation stemming from pollution, overfishing, climate change-induced changes in the ecosystem and the fish-stock, etc.

It also includes a duty to take special care to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of those who are most at risk from environmental harm, in a broader sense, in defense of human dignity

The full SWIA report is available at:
http://www.manusherjonno.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SWIA-Report-Final.pdf

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the artisanal small-scale fishers in the SWIA sites, the right to a healthy environment is under threat both in the sense that the ocean ecosystem on which their livelihood it built is under pressure from pollution, overfishing and climate change impacts that affect the fish stock – and in the sense that their housing, water and other infrastructure is under pressure from climate change induced frequent extreme weather events. Major specific recommendations include:

- Sustainable yield/total allowable catch (quota) must be determined through thorough assessments on a regular basis
- Regulate industrial fisheries with a view to shift extraction-oriented practices to sustainably managed operations
- Adopt science-based fishery management practices to fine-tune spatial and temporal closures and gear modifications
- Strictly and equitably enforce the ban on prohibited, non-selective fishing gear
- Adopt science-based, informed management plans for existing and newly proposed protected marine areas and critical ecological areas
- Trespassing at sea during ban periods must be monitored and effectively stopped, including trespassing by foreign trawlers
- Reduce the ban period on marine fishing based on scientific research and synchronize it with neighboring countries
- Ensure active participation of fishers in environmental governance, including policy-making and monitoring initiatives