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Policy Brief

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Towards better focused and more effective small-scale fisheries policy in South Asia

Small-scale fisheries, Bangladesh

Photo: Q.S. Afroz

Purpose

The aim of this policy brief is to:

- highlight the contribution of small-scale fisheries (SSF) in generating employment and providing food and nutrition security for the South Asian people;
- outline concrete actions for the social protection, access to information and communication technology, and capacity development for improving the livelihood, food and nutrition security of small-scale fisheries;
- alert South Asian countries' governments for the need of improved management in SSF to achieve sustainable fisheries in the region.

Importance of Small-scale fisheries in South Asia

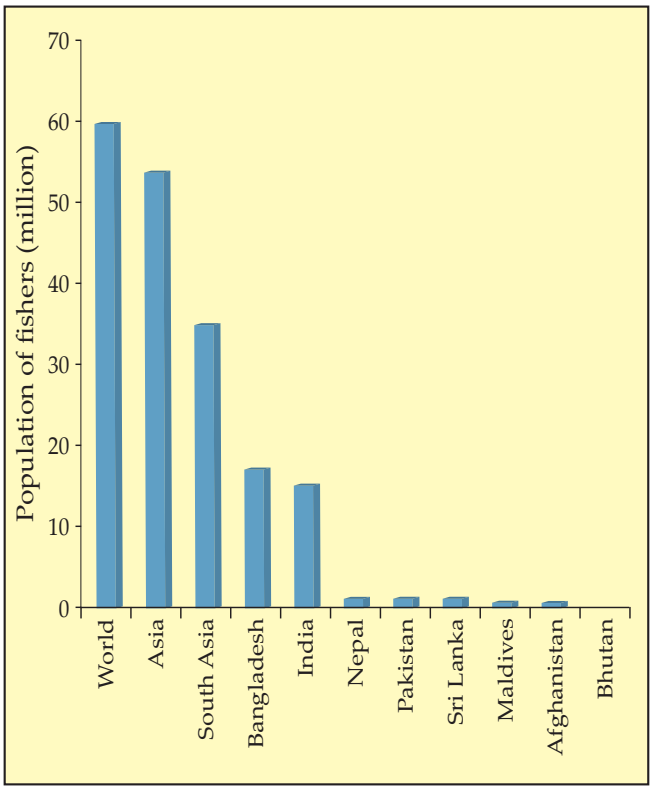
Small-scale fisheries play the crucial role as source of livelihoods and food and nutrition security for millions of poor and marginalized coastal communities in the world. The growth in the global supply of fish for human consumption in the past five decades has doubled (3.2%) than that of population growth (1.11%), resulting in increasing average per capita availability of fish beyond 20 kg. However, in South Asian region the per capita fish availability is much lower than that of world average. Two-third of the total fish catches destined for direct human consumption

are produced by the SSF sector. Most of the small-scale fishers in South Asia are self-employed and provide fish for direct consumption within their households and communities. Fish accounts for about 17% of the global population's intake of animal protein but in some South Asian countries this figure is very high, 72% in Sri Lanka and Maldives, 60% in Bangladesh and Nepal, and 52% in Sri Lanka. The sector shares about 90% of the actual numbers employed in fisheries and aquaculture across the region, which range from a few hundred in Bhutan, to twenty-thirty thousand each in Afghanistan and Maldives, about one million each in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, 15 million in India and 17 million in Bangladesh. About half of all small-scale fish workers accounted for are fisherwomen, who are mostly engaged in post-harvest and processing activities.

Challenges of small-scale fisheries

Over-capacity

In South Asia, there are too many fishers and chasing too few fish, leading to over fishing. In this situation neither maximum yields nor the high profitability is achieved. Also, increased investment in industrial fisheries has resulted in overfishing throughout South and Southeast Asia. It is now accepted fact that most of the near shore fisheries in Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea are overfished. In India, a study indicated that 55.77% of the marine fish stocks are being harvested. Similarly, a survey conducted by the Bangladesh Marine Fisheries Capacity Building Project, Department of Fisheries, reveals there is overfishing for many of the commercially important marine species. Overcapacity increases the vulnerability of fishers, their families and communities to an inevitable decline and possible collapse of their main livelihood.



Population of fishers (million) in the world, Asia, South Asia and South Asian countries

Climate change impacts and other external drivers

Climate change influences the migration pattern, life cycle, behavioural changes, feeding, reproduction and catch size of fish. There are complex pathways through which climate change severely influence the productivity and distribution of fishery reserves, the resilience of fisheries and their associated livelihood and economic linkages. The fisheries in the tropics are predicted to fall by 30% by 2050 due to climate change impacts. Since 1985, the catch statistics of Indian oil sardine and mackerel have highly fluctuated. Tsunami and Ockhi cyclone decreased the fishing effort over 50% in the region. Hilsa spawning has been delayed due to delay in onset of monsoon. Climate change has severely influenced the productivity and distribution of fishery reserves as well as the resilience of fisheries and their associated livelihood and economic linkages.

Social justice, legitimacy and deterrence

The fisher communities are deprived in terms of education, housing condition, electricity supply, health and sanitation facility and recreational facilities etc. Fishing is considered as a low-status occupation all the times and the majority of the fishing families are belong to socially neglected classes. Despite significant contributions, women in fisheries face income inequality, workplace segregation and health risks. Illegal and accidental fishing across the maritime zones are the major causes of conflicts among

neighbouring countries. The lack of policy protection has resulted in loss of fishing grounds, poor infrastructure development, marginalisation and low representation of the fisher community to address urgent issues that they face.

Value chain for market and trade prospective

Small-scale fisheries are the highly disorganized sectors in South Asia and the fishers are unable to sale their catches or products directly to the consumers. Insufficient landing centres, wholesale and retail market infrastructure, cold chain, post-harvest processing facilities and logistic supports are the major deterring factors of low access of fisheries products in the market and export. Almost 30% of the landed fish are marketed fresh, 40% marketed as fresh in ice and 20% as sun-dried. Value addition of the catches increase the customer demand. The market price of catches is mostly decided by the money lenders. A Bangladesh study reveals eight layers middlemen roles between fishers and consumer in Hilsa marketing channel, and the fishers get only 1.5% of the final consumer's price

Resilience in SSF for poverty reduction

Major factors restraining small-scale fisheries' contribution in to food security and poverty reduction are pollution, urban development, and destruction of estuaries, mangroves and coral reefs. Over exploitation of fish stocks, IUU fishing and poor handling of captured fishes leads to low income and living standards. Very often small-scale fishers face the problem of displacement, deprivation and conflicts of land use and access.

Urgent actions needed

Despite the significant contribution, the issues constraining the sustainable development of SSF are not clearly understood. The SSF in the region is shadowed by the industrial fisheries, which has been favoured by governments as the more efficient method of marine resource exploitation. The South Asian national governments are not well-prepared to deal with SSF's potential socio-ecological outfalls. Therefore, it is important to assess the role of SSF and to translate this knowledge to timely and relevant policies on sustainable fisheries and marine management for food security in the region.

Effective policies and technology to enhance SSF

- Multidisciplinary approach (public sector, private sector, fishers' communities with adequate women representations and NGOs) for managing complexity in SSF for its sustainability.
- Preferential access rights and legal frameworks for community level decision-making and management of coastal and inland waters by the small-scale fishers.
- Declaration of 5-10 km as no fishing zones on both sides of the international maritime zone and marker buoys with flags would help in preventing accidental intrusion of fishers into each other's jurisdiction.
- International fish trade and export should not adversely affect the nutritional needs of local people for whom fish is critically a nutritious diet and other comparable sources of food are not readily available or affordable.
- Development of climate resilient fisheries technologies and restriction of variety gears would maximise sustainability in SSF.

Small-scale fisheries, Nepal Photo: S.S. Giri

Social safety nets

- Establishment of cooperatives and support through microfinance system to break the dependence on middlemen.
- Creation of alternate livelihood options and implementation of social security measures (insurance, health, education etc.) for poverty reduction of small-scale fishers.

Targeting and packaging of information

- Developed market information system to safeguard the interests of small-scale fishers by enabling them to obtain better prices and profits.

Emphasising practical and needs-based education and training

- Empowering SSF stakeholders through capacity development programs (training, education, exchange and exposure visit, collaborative programs), institutional strengthening through active institutional linkages and better communication among the SAARC member States and international partners.

Further reading

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Where has this come from?

The policy brief is prepared from the outcome of the SAARC Regional Consultation on 'Small-Scale fisheries in South Asia', held in Islamabad, Pakistan in 2018. The SAARC member countries nominated expert representatives to the consultation meeting to discuss their country status in the subject and future needs for small-scale fisheries in the South Asian region. Also, the governmental, non-governmental and academia participated in the meeting and discussed the issues.

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