

# Looking at the Long Term

**A survey of fisherfolk in the Indian state of West Bengal shows that relief measures for natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic must take into account long-standing vulnerabilities**

**T**he two most important concepts to set the agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs) are 'social development' and 'sustainable management'. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been the key player in raising awareness and providing guidance on sustainable aquaculture development and management, as stated in the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, laid down in 1995. Almost two decades later, in 2015, FAO introduced the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) Trust to conduct a study on social development and sustainable fisheries in the state.

The study intended to examine the socioeconomic conditions of the fisherfolk in West Bengal, with special reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and cyclone Amphan that hit the state on 20 May 2020. It was an opportunity to study various aspects of fisheries and the means to improve the social conditions of the fishing community, especially the small-scale and traditional fishers of the state. It was also a search for viable solutions to 13 specific day-to-day challenges facing the fishing community. This was to happen within a rights-based framework, looking into several fisheries concerns: improved access of full-time, part-time, occasional and subsistence, informal and formal, migrant and resident, women and men fishers and fishworkers; health, education, housing, sanitation, potable water and energy, as well as social development, social security and standard of living.

The state has rich natural endowments and fishing occurs in various kinds of water bodies, a feature that makes India the country with the second-highest fish production in the world. The small-scale and traditional fisher community are the primary custodians of these natural water bodies. They strive to maintain, protect and conserve the water bodies and fish resources. The challenges they face are well documented: declining access to resources; weak processing units; lack of proper market and infrastructural facilities; poor economic status; non-implementation of existing laws; exposure to natural disasters, especially in the district of South 24 Parganas; marginalization of women fishworkers; and gender inequalities.

**Ensure the social development of fishing communities through basic amenities like education, access to drinking water, food, shelter and healthcare.**

Partly in recognition of the SSF Guidelines, the Indian government brought out the National Policy on Marine Fisheries (NPMF, 2017), the Draft National Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (NIFAP) and the National Fisheries Policy (2020). They aimed to create a conducive environment for an integrated and holistic development and management of fisheries for the socioeconomic development of fishers and fish farmers, keeping in view the concerns of sustainability, biosecurity and the environment.

Despite the importance of fisheries to livelihoods, food security and economic development, fisherfolk are often poor and marginalized. This is especially true in West Bengal, which prompted the International Collective in

*This article is by **Shilpa Nandy** (shilpanandy@yahoo.co.in), Assistant Professor, Khudiram Bose Central College, Kolkata, India, and Advisor, Women's Wing, Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum, West Bengal, India*

To stand up to these threats, fishers have been organizing themselves, and participating in movements at regional, national and international levels. Their usual hardships were multiplied in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in lockdowns. Then tragedy arrived with the gale winds of the tropical cyclone Amphan. Its devastation was wide-ranging, damaging fishing communities, in particular. The pandemic magnified the vulnerabilities of women in these communities—the single, the widowed, the old and the infirm. The study showed that government schemes, federal and provincial, offered social and occupational security through welfare measures that provided succour during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the cyclone. Significant relief efforts also came from fisherfolk organizations, voluntary associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public trusts and individuals at all levels: regional, state, national and international.

The study allowed researchers to distill the most important demands

and recommendations of the fishing community of West Bengal, which are summarized below:

- Ensure small and traditional fishing communities' control over resources like land, water, forests, fish resources, the commons and livelihoods, especially in preserving the fish and ecological resources of the Sunderban area.
- Provide preferential access to the small-scale fishers and implement—in letter and spirit—the West Bengal Marine Fisheries Regulation Act and FAO's SSF Guidelines.
- Cease illegal and unauthorized encroachment of fishing areas. The government should proactively confer community user rights over fishing grounds to the fishing communities.
- Recognize and establish the rights and entitlements of fishworkers by mobilizing the community with specific awareness programmes that enhance skills and capacities. These must be built on a mandatory interface of the fishing community and government representatives.

SHILPA NANDY



Kathi Nona Jol fishmarket, West Bengal, India. The government schemes, federal and provincial, offered social and occupational security through welfare measures that provided succour during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the cyclone

MILAN DAS,DMF



Impact of Amphan cyclone, south 24 Parganas, India. The devastation of cyclone Amphan was wide-ranging. Besides shattering the livelihoods of communities, the cyclone destroyed basic amenities like shelter, housing, food, healthcare and education

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- Introduce effective efforts to form and sustain fishworkers' collectives at all levels: local government, block and district, and state government. Develop and strengthen fishworkers' co-operatives as a step towards democratization of society and the economy.
- Sensitize state and local government institutions to identify gender gaps and gender discrimination prevalent in the community. Policymakers must give prime importance in framing welfare laws that directly benefit and empower women in the fisher community, especially the most vulnerable among them—old, infirm, single, widowed—who are dependent on fishing activities.
- Create national and state commissions for people who depend mostly on natural resources like land, water and forests.
- Ensure the social development of fishing communities through basic amenities like education, access to drinking water, food, shelter and healthcare.

This study has provided an overview of the concerns and demands of small-scale fishers of West Bengal.

The immediate priority, however, is access to basic amenities for fishing communities in the state, which has been rendered very difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as this is emerging as the vital concern of fisheries organizations across the world, efforts to provide basic relief from the COVID-19 pandemic's consequences must also incorporate a long-term perspective. 3

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