

# Poverty Amidst Plenty

**Only comprehensive policy interventions and targeted initiatives can address systemic inequalities and ensure equitable development in the fisheries sector of Bangladesh**

**T**he fisheries sector has emerged as a significant contributor to Bangladesh's economy and food security. With abundant water resources and strategic policies, Bangladesh has become a leading producer in the global fisheries market, surpassing its production targets consistently. This success story, however, contrasts sharply with the socio-economic realities faced by fishing communities across the country. Despite the sector's remarkable achievements, fishers continue to grapple with poverty, limited access to education, healthcare challenges and occupational hazards.

This article examines the dichotomy of Bangladesh's fisheries sector's macro-level success and the micro-level socio-economic challenges faced by fishing communities, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to address systemic inequalities and ensure equitable development.

Bangladesh's abundant water resources have propelled it to the forefront of global fish production, with the country emerging as one of the world's leading producers. This success, acknowledged worldwide, saw Bangladesh surpassing its fish production target, reaching an impressive 4.8 million tonnes in 2021-22, a testament to its self-sufficiency since 2016-17. The fisheries sector's multifaceted contributions extend beyond mere numbers, encompassing vital roles in animal protein consumption, job creation, foreign earnings, aquatic biodiversity preservation, and socio-economic advancement. Constituting 2.08 per cent of the national gross domestic product (GDP) and 21.83 per cent of the agricultural GDP, fisheries play a pivotal role in Bangladesh's economic landscape.

Notably, per capita fish consumption has exceeded targets, reaching 63 grams per day, while the sector provides over 12 per cent of total employment opportunities. Furthermore, the country's prowess in fishery is internationally recognized, as evidenced by its rankings in various categories, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United

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Nations (FAO). Bangladesh stands tall as the third-highest producer in inland open-water capture production, fifth in world aquaculture production, and fourth globally and third within Asia in tilapia production. Bangladesh ranks second for the average growth rate of fish production over the past decade and proudly leads the pack as the foremost hilsa-consuming country among 11 vital nations, further solidifying its status as a global fisheries powerhouse.

## **Elaborate government infrastructure**

The transformation of the country's fisheries sector owes much to a concerted effort across individual, private and public domains, with the government playing a significant role. The Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (MoFL) spearheads governance, crafting policies, laws and regulations while overseeing key institutions like the Department of Fisheries (DoF), the Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation (BFDC), the Bangladesh

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Setting Sail: Fishermen taking rest at the local landing station in Bhola island before embarking on their fishing expedition, Bangladesh. Working conditions on fishing boats are also precarious, with inadequate safety equipment and lack of access to medical care during emergencies

Fisheries Research Institute (BFRI), and the Fisheries and Livestock Information Department (FLID).

DoF executes several functions, from extension services to law enforcement, while BFDC focuses on marketing and production. BFRI was recognized with the prestigious National Award Ekushey Padak, the second-highest civilian award in Bangladesh, introduced in memory of the martyrs of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952; it leads fisheries research and development, working in tandem with MoFL. Meanwhile, the Marine Fisheries Academy trains experts for marine fisheries management, while FLID disseminates crucial information and updates across the sector, underscoring Bangladesh’s comprehensive approach to fisheries development and management.

Among the government departments, DoF holds a key role in fisheries management, boasting an extensive official structure, spanning the national and sub-district levels. With approximately 5,960 positions under the director general (DG), including an additional director general (ADG) and various officers and staff, it ensures

comprehensive governance. Ensuring the production of safe and high-quality fish and fish products is a primary mandate, with measures like Good Aquaculture Practice (GAP) and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems rigorously implemented.

The Fish and Fish Products (Inspection and Quality Control) Act, 2020, ensures adherence to international standards. DoF also promotes aquaculture and shrimp farming through various means, including extension services, wetland management and technology application, while laws and acts are continually updated to support quality production. The department’s historical evolution, dating back to 1908 during the British colonial rule, underscores its enduring commitment to fisheries development.

Furthermore, initiatives such as Fish Seed Multiplication Farms and Brood Bank Development Projects demonstrate ongoing efforts to enhance the sector’s sustainability and productivity, also enhanced by DoF via a wide array of activities. They include disseminating improved aquaculture technologies through training and

demonstrations, providing advisory services to farmers, and facilitating the conservation and management of fisheries resources. DoF also plays a crucial role in assisting the administrative ministry in formulating policies and laws related to the sector. Quality control measures are rigorously enforced, with the issuance of health certificates for exportable fish and fish products.

The department conducts surveys and assessments of fishery resources to develop a comprehensive database for informed planning. Moreover, it facilitates arrangements for institutional credit for fish and shrimp farmers, fishers and traders, while also promoting alternative income-generating activities for the rural poor and unemployed individuals to alleviate poverty. Lastly, the DoF actively formulates and implements development projects aimed at ensuring the sustainable utilization of fisheries resources, thereby contributing to food security in Bangladesh.

### **A contrasting reality**

Even as the fisheries sector contributes significantly to employment generation, protein provision and overall economic development, the socio-economic conditions of the fisher community remain a cause for concern. While some development initiatives have reached these communities, they continue to lag behind significantly. A comparison between national data and the socio-economic indicators at the fisheries level reveals glaring disparities. Despite the sector's vital contribution to the national economy, fishers face daunting challenges, from low incomes and limited access to education to higher rates of landlessness and homelessness. These discrepancies underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy measures to address the systemic inequalities faced by fisheries communities and ensure their equitable participation in the country's development trajectory.

The stark disparities between national averages and the socio-economic conditions of fishing communities paint a disconcerting

picture of inequality and marginalization. While the national per capita income stands at US \$2,064, the income of fishers languishes far below, ranging from \$235 to \$1,176, indicative of their economic vulnerability. Similarly, adult literacy rates among fishers are alarmingly low at 37.7 per cent, significantly trailing the national average of 74.4 per cent. Education remains a significant challenge, with only 28.33 per cent of fishers completing primary education, compared to the national rate of 81.3 per cent.

Landlessness is a pressing issue also, affecting 12 per cent of fishers, slightly higher than the national average of 11.33 per cent. As much as 25 per cent of fishers find themselves homeless, starkly contrasting with the national homelessness rate of 4.96 per cent.

**The lack of accessible schools, coupled with financial constraints and the need for child labour to support family incomes, perpetuates the cycle of educational disadvantage among fishing communities**

Access to basic amenities also reveals disparities, with fishers exhibiting lower rates of access to electricity, sanitation and land ownership, compared to the national averages.

Despite these challenges, it is encouraging to note that fisher communities have achieved full access to improved drinking water, although much work remains to be done to address the pervasive inequalities they face. These disparities underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies to uplift fishing communities and ensure their equitable inclusion in national development efforts. With no minimum wage set for fishworkers, employment terms are often informally agreed upon, leading to uncertainty and lack of guaranteed benefits such as weekly holidays and incentives.

### **Health and education: Poor conditions**

Working conditions on fishing boats are also precarious, with inadequate safety equipment and lack of access

to medical care during emergencies. Despite legislation like the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, the implementation of occupational health and safety (OSH) regulations remains inadequate, leaving workers vulnerable to life-threatening risks. Studies reveal alarming statistics, with a high percentage of labourers reporting poor workplace security, occupational risks, sickness and accidents. In sectors like shrimp processing, long hours of work in harsh conditions result in various health issues, including musculoskeletal pain and respiratory illnesses, underscoring the urgent need for improved workplace safety measures and healthcare provisions for small-scale fisheries workers in Bangladesh.

Access to adequate healthcare remains a significant challenge for marginalized communities, particularly those in coastal areas, where appropriate health facilities and skilled healthcare providers are scarce. Despite the presence of government sub-district and district-level hospitals, community clinics and private clinics, fishers in island areas often rely on local pharmacy owners and unqualified practitioners for medical assistance, as formal healthcare services are limited. This poses considerable risks for fishworkers, especially those at sea, who have no mobile or floating hospitals available in emergencies.

Research conducted by Atiqur Rahman Sunny and colleagues in 2020 found limited medical facilities in fisher communities, with 60 per cent of respondents resorting to traditional remedies due to the absence of specialized hospitals nearby. Furthermore, studies by Shibaji Mandal and his colleagues in 2017, and others in 2020, reveal alarming statistics, with a majority of fishermen reporting dizziness, vomiting, fever and other health issues during fishing expeditions and upon return. These findings underscore the urgent need for improved healthcare infrastructure and services tailored to the unique needs of fisher communities in Bangladesh. Other studies also highlight the fishers' reliance on unqualified practitioners, further emphasizing the need for accessible and reliable healthcare services in these areas.

The association between poverty and educational exclusion among fishing communities in Bangladesh is starkly evident, as highlighted by several studies. For instance, Altaf Hossain Benjamin Zeitlyn underscored in 2010 that poor health, inadequate school facilities and proximity to non-governmental schools predominantly attended by economically disadvantaged students contribute to the silent exclusion of children from education. The Seventh Five Year Plan of Bangladesh acknowledges the significant educational disparities, particularly at the secondary level, with the gross enrolment rate for the poor lagging behind significantly, compared to their non-poor counterparts. Moreover, approximately five million children remain out of school due to poverty-related factors, a situation that is particularly prevalent among fishing communities.

In the fishing communities surveyed, access to education is challenging, with limited availability of secondary schools and vocational institutes. Most schools are government-owned primary schools or madrasas, often situated at a considerable distance from students' houses. Despite primary education being accessible, the dropout rate after completing fifth standard is notably high, especially among girls, primarily due to financial constraints and parental illiteracy. Data collected reveals a concerning disparity in educational attainment between female members of coastal fishing communities and the overall education situation, with significantly lower completion rates observed among female members of fisher families.

The lack of accessible schools, coupled with financial constraints and the need for child labour to support family incomes, perpetuates the cycle of educational disadvantage among fishing communities. Overall, these findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions and targeted initiatives to improve educational access and attainment among fisher communities in Bangladesh.

**For more**

**Social Development and Sustainable Fisheries: Bangladesh**

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