

# RECLAIMING RIGHTS

A study on the impacts of the fishing ban on the Naf River and its consequences in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar



*A wrecked boat, like the one depicted, symbolizes the fate of numerous small fishing boats that have been abandoned, and barred from sailing on the Naf River for fishing activities.*

The report titled "Reclaiming Rights," commissioned by the COAST Foundation, illuminates the profound impact of the fishing ban imposed on the Naf River following the Rohingya influx in 2017, specifically focusing on the challenges faced by over 3000 fishermen. The study reveals that 84% of them were exclusively dependent on the Naf River for their livelihoods. Notably, the absence of fisherwomen surfaced during sampling interviews, underscoring a significant gender disparity within the fishing community. Only 23% of respondents acknowledged receiving assistance from the government and local authorities, while a staggering 90% reported a substantial decline in income ranging from 50-60% since the implementation of the fishing ban. The report also sheds light on the complex issues surrounding identification cards.

In light of these findings, the report puts forth recommendations emphasizing the necessity of lifting the ban, introducing alternative livelihoods, and providing support. It serves as a compelling call to address the multifaceted challenges confronted by the fishing community dependent on the Naf River in Teknaf.

## Acronyms

BGB	Bangladesh Border Guard
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NID	National Identification Number (For Bangladeshi Nationals)
UP	Union Parishad
UPZ	Upazial Parishad

# Contents

- 1. Introduction: ..... 4
- 2. Objectives: ..... 4
- 3. Methodology: ..... 4
- 4. Geographical Location ..... 5
- 5. Limitations: ..... 5
- 6. Findings..... 5
  - 6.1 Fishing at Naf, Sea, and both ..... 5
  - 6.2 Male-Female Ratio in Fishing ..... 6
  - 6.3 Registered Fishermen and Non-Registered Fishermen ..... 6
  - 6.4 NID Holders ..... 7
  - 6.5 Interviewed Fishermen Family Size: Age and Gender-Based ..... 7
  - 6.6 Education Rate ..... 8
  - 6.7 Periodical ration support from the government..... 8
  - 6.8 Support receive from NGOs..... 9
  - 6.9 Early Marriage Rate ..... 9
  - 6.10 Fishing ban causes a serious impact on the livelihood of the fishermen ..... 10
  - 6.11 Contradictory Issues related to fishing at the Naf River..... 10
  - 6.12 Negative coping mechanism for surviving ..... 10
  - 6.13 Fishing ID and Ration Support from the Government..... 11
- 7. Recommendations ..... 11
- 8. Conclusion: ..... 12

# RECLAIMING RIGHTS

Revealing the Consequences of the Fishing Ban on the Naf River in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar

## 1. Introduction:

During the Rohingya influx in August 2017, the Bangladeshi government implemented a fishing ban along the Naf River to curb drug trafficking. This temporary prohibition, which persists to this day, has inflicted significant hardships on over 3000 fishermen whose livelihoods are solely dependent on fishing in the Naf River.

As per data from the Teknaf Upazial Parishad (UPZ) fishery office, there are 10,683 registered fishermen, with over 3,000 relying exclusively on fishing in the Naf River. It is important to note that a significant number of fishermen operating in this area are not registered but fish at the Naf River for their livelihood.

COAST Foundation conducted the study to find out the hardships and challenges faced by fishermen dependent on the Naf River for their livelihood, following the fishing ban imposed by the government. The study aims to offer insights into the difficulties encountered by these fishermen and provide a summary of potential short-term solutions that could be implemented to address their specific needs and challenges.

## 2. Objectives:

1. Unveiling the repercussions ensuing the prohibition of fishing in the Naf River and examining the challenges confronted by the fishing community in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar.
2. Identifying and analyzing of factors that contribute to the detrimental impact on their livelihoods.
3. Exploring solutions and outlining necessary initiatives to address the prevailing hardships encountered by the fishing community in Teknaf.

## 3. Methodology:

The study applied qualitative and purposive sampling methods, establishing specific criteria in Kobo tools to identify fishermen solely dependent on the Naf River. Among the identified 3000 fishermen meeting this criterion, 496 were selected for interviews. Notably, within this group, 415 are exclusively reliant on direct fishing, representing 14% of the total 3000 fishermen whose livelihoods depend solely on fishing in the Naf River.

Through five Focus Group Discussions (FGD), we captured the perspectives of Naf fishermen, their families, and boat and net owners. Additionally, we conducted 10 Key Informant Interviews (KII) with various fishing association leaders, including Teknaf UPZ Fishery officers, Union Parishad (UP) members, and Chairmen.

Furthermore, this study incorporates secondary data, with 30 COAST staff actively involved in the collection of information and data.

## 4. Geographical Location

Based on information supplied by the Teknaf UPZ fishery office, we strategically selected the area where the majority of fishermen reside and engage in fishing activities along the Naf River. Our data collection, including Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), was specifically conducted in the designated area outlined below.

Upazila Name	Union Name	Ward No
Teknaf	Sadar	9,8
	Municipality	Full
	Sabrang	4,5,6,9
	Hnilla	Full
	Whykong	Full

## 5. Limitations:

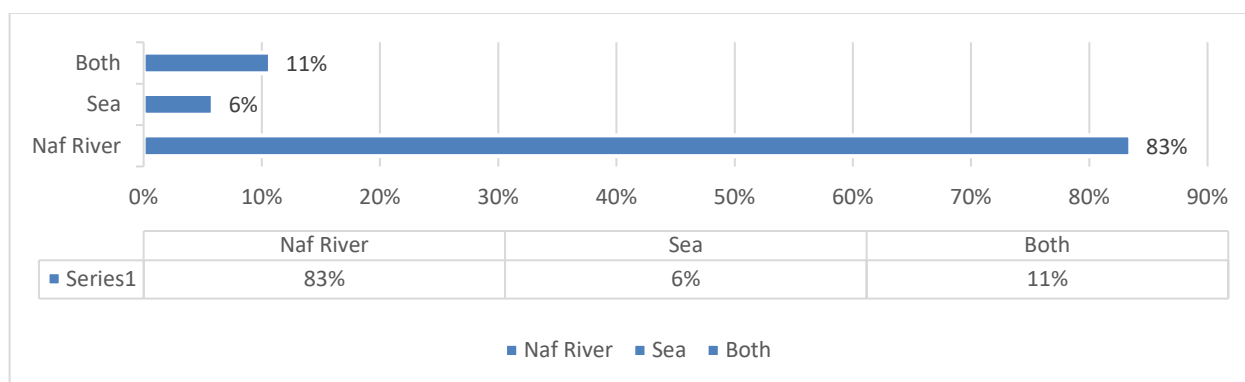
As we did not enumerate the total fishing households (HHs), the study may not accurately represent the exact figure of the total population. Our reliance is solely on secondary data provided by the Union Parishad, Fishing Associations, and the UPZ fishery office in Teknaf.

On the ground, we found two primary fishing associations. There is a potential overlap, counting individual fishermen as members of the both associations. Therefore, the research team opts to count on the data provided by the Teknaf UPZ fishery office. Challenges arose in securing an interview appointment with the BGB (Bangladesh Border Guard) spokesperson. Eventually, the BGB spokesperson directed us to engage with the District Administration on this matter. Due to some constraints incurred by the national election on 7 January 2024, and time limitations, this avenue was not feasible to pursue.

## 6. Findings

Figure 1

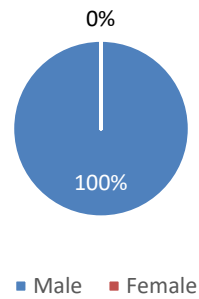
### 6.1. Fishing at Naf River, Sea and both



The study encompasses a diverse sample of 496 interviewed fishermen, unveiling distinctive patterns in their fishing practices. It's noteworthy to mention that 83% were exclusively dependent on Naf River fishing. In contrast, 6% relied solely on the sea, and 11% engaged in both Naf River and sea fishing.

Figure 2

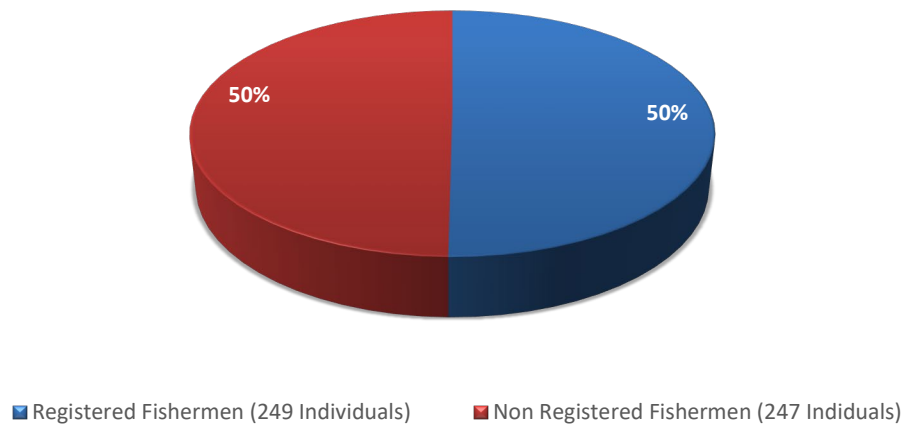
## 6.2. Male-Female Ratio in Fishing



Surprisingly, our sampling interviews brought to light the absence of fisherwomen, underscoring a notable gender disparity within the fishing community. The complete absence of women in study findings prompts questions about the limited involvement of women in fishing within the surveyed area. This absence may signal existing social, cultural, or economic barriers that deter women from participating in such livelihoods. Recognizing these insights is crucial for the development of inclusive policies and initiatives that foster gender diversity and empower women to actively contribute to fisheries-related activities.

Figure 3

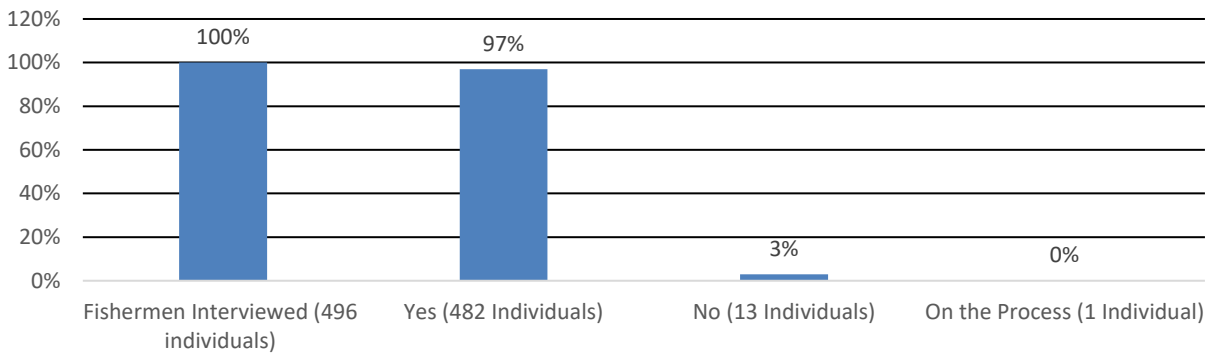
## 6.3. Registered and Non-Registered Fishermen



The study brought to light a notable disparity among the interviewed fishermen, with 249 individuals possessing a fishing ID card (Identification Card), while 247 do not. This data raises concerns about the apparent oversight on the part of the government in issuing fishing cards to a substantial portion of the legitimate fishing community. The findings suggest a potential gap in ensuring that all eligible fishermen have access to proper documentation and receive support.

Figure 4

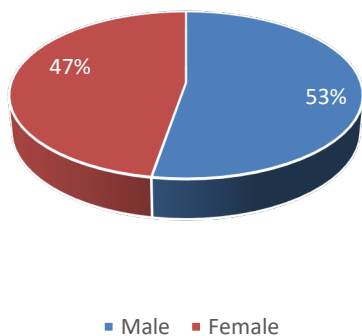
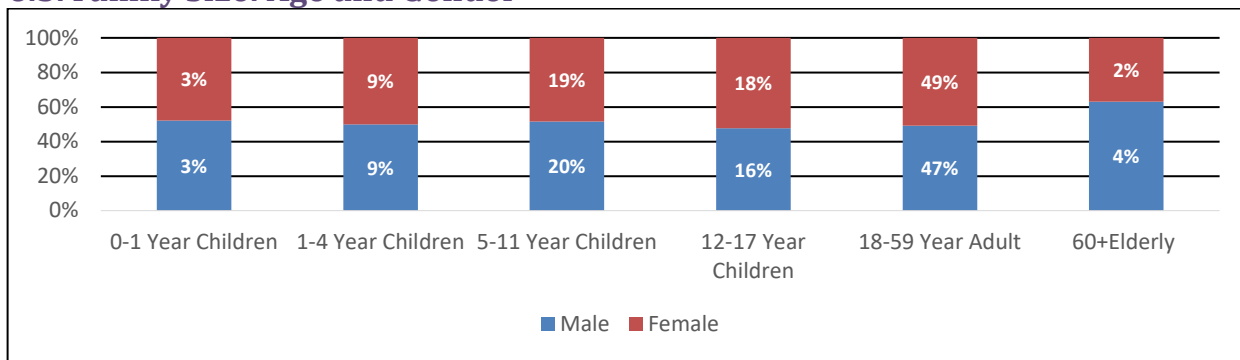
### 6.4. NID Holders



Remarkably, 97% of the 496 interviewed fishermen possess National Identification Cards (NID), indicating a high level of identification and documentation within the group. However, the remaining 3%, consisting of 13 fishermen, lack a NID, with only one individual currently in the process of obtaining it. The study identified a significant challenge for the fishing community in acquiring the essential Fishermen Identification Card. The stringent requirements for NID, influenced by the presence of Rohingya refugees in the region, create a bottleneck, impeding the fishing community's ability to obtain the Fishermen Identification Card. Highlighting the impact of these challenges underscores the need for a pragmatic approach in the identification process to facilitate the fishing community's access to obtaining the fishing card.

Figure 5

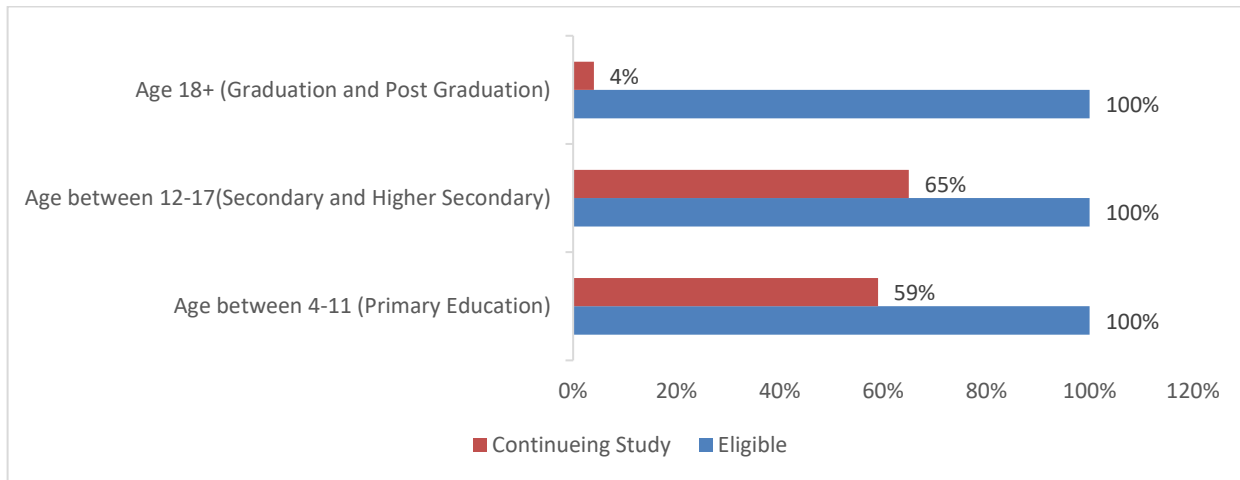
### 6.5. Family Size: Age and Gender



The study finds a total of 2,890 family members associated with the 496 interviewed fishermen, including 1,367 females (47%) and 1,523 males (53%). This data provides a comprehensive insight into the age and gender distribution among fishing communities in the targeted area, highlighting essential demographic patterns. Notably, the age group between 18-59 years old emerges as the most significant demographic segment across various age categories, representing the core working-age and earning members engaged in fishing at the Naf River.

Figure 6

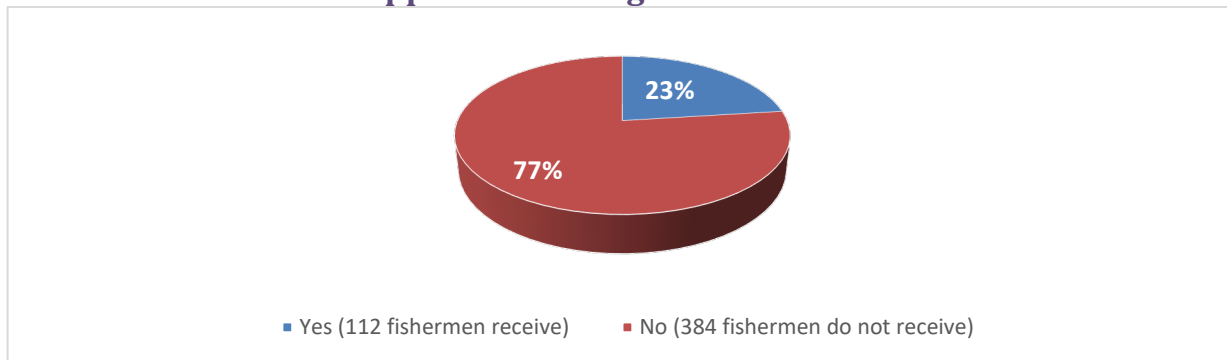
### 6.6. Education Rate



Among the family members of the respondents, the study identified a total of 2,704 individuals eligible for school attendance. Of this, 833 people, aged between 4-11, are eligible for primary education, but only 59% of them are currently attending. Additionally, 289 individuals, aged between 12-17, are eligible for secondary education, with only 65% of them attending. For those aged 18 and above (a total of 1,382 individuals), only 4% are pursuing higher education.

Figure 7

### 6.7. Periodical ration support from the government

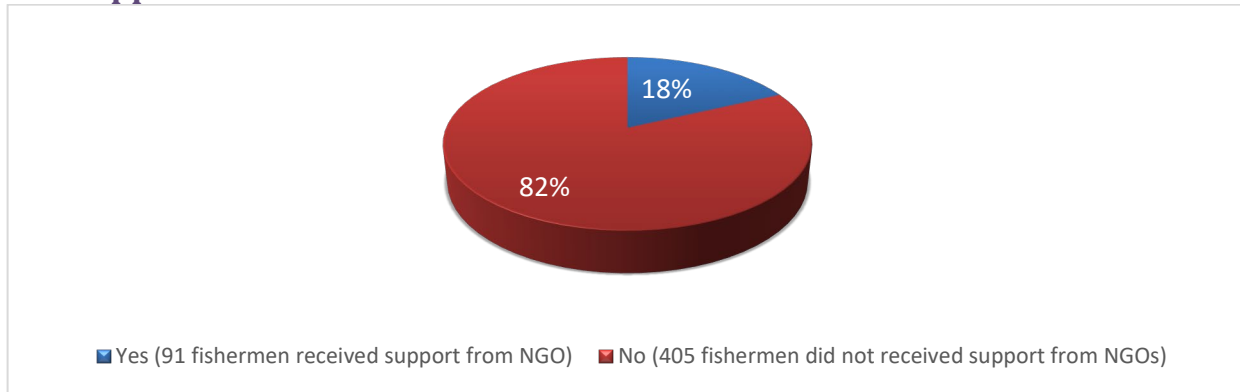


The data obtained from the 496 interviewed fishermen reveals a significant disparity in the receipt of government ration support within the community. Only 23% respondents acknowledge receiving assistance from the government and local government. However, the majority, comprising 77% fishermen, reported that they do not receive ration support from the government. This data indicating a substantial number of fishermen that are excluded from government aid.



Figure 8

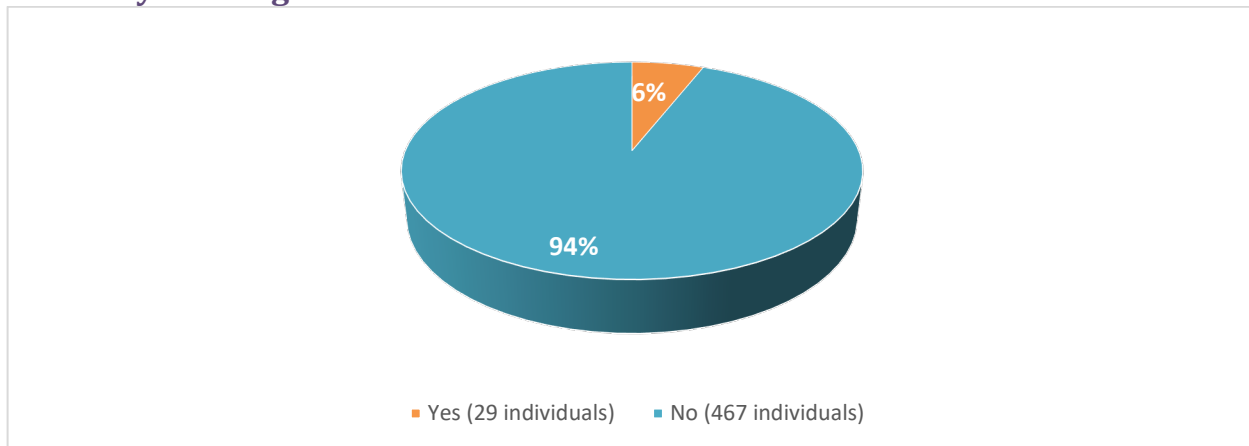
### 6.8. Support receive from NGOs



The data provides a glimpse into the support landscape following the Rohingya influx, with revealing insights into the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Notably, 18% respondents acknowledge receiving one-time support from NGOs, indicating a temporary assistance provision. In contrast, a significant majority of 82% fishermen report not receiving any support from NGOs since the Rohingya influx. This disparity in NGO support signals a dynamic and evolving assistance scenario, where a portion of the fishing community has benefitted from one-time interventions, while a larger number of fishermen remains untouched by NGO aid. Understanding the deprivation and vulnerability is crucial for shaping future NGO initiatives to ensure more targeted and sustained assistance. The data emphasizes the need for comprehensive evaluations of the impact of past interventions and underscores the importance of continuous, strategic support to address the evolving needs of the fishing community affected by the ban due to the Rohingya influx.

Figure 9

### 6.9. Early Marriage Rate



The data reveals a noteworthy pattern regarding the occurrence of early marriages within the community. Among the respondents, only 6% of fishermen reported instances of early marriage events in their families, while a significant majority of 94% denied any occurrence of early marriage within their households.

## **6.10. Fishing ban has had a profound impact on the livelihoods of fishermen**

The enduring consequences of the fishing ban on the Naf River have inflicted considerable financial losses upon the fishermen. Since its imposition in 2017, the fishing ban has dramatically transformed the livelihoods of many, painting a bleak picture as a substantial number of them have transitioned into day laborers. The study reveals that 70% of the respondents have adopted day labor as an alternative, but this shift has also led to a change in their living standards. The situation is compounded by the challenging reality of competing with the Rohingya labor force for job opportunities, further intensifying the economic vulnerability of the fishing community. The data also highlights that a significant portion of the fishermen has transitioned into alternative professions such as driving auto-rickshaws, engaging in farming on other lands, initiating small enterprises, and venturing into small-scale fishing businesses.

The present plight of the fishing community is rooted in the reality that many of these fishermen have been engaged in this profession across generations, rendering them less adaptable to alternative occupations. Moreover, the data highlights a significant economic downturn for them, with 90% acknowledging a substantial decline in income ranging from 50-60% since the imposition of the fishing ban.

The ban on fishing at the Naf River has plunged fishermen into a dire economic situation, abandoning their primary source of income. Confronted with a dwindling source of earnings, many fishermen are resorting to loans to sustain their livelihoods. However, the financial burden of these loans, coupled with high interest rates, poses a significant challenge for fishermen as they struggle to repay them. This predicament has compelled them to sell household assets for survival, further exacerbating their economic vulnerability. The once-available opportunity to cut wood and farm in nearby forest land is now non-existent due to the presence of Rohingya camps. The deteriorating state of their once-valuable fishing equipment, including damaged boats and rotten nets, not only signifies the financial loss of the fishing community but also reflects the faded quality of life they might endure for an indefinite period.

## **6.11. The goal and contradictions surrounding the fishing ban at the Naf River**

The frustration expressed by the fishermen raises questions about the goal and effectiveness of the fishing ban. Originally intended to curb drug trading, the ban was imposed for a two-month period. Respondents said that this initiative did not achieve the desired outcomes, as drug trafficking persists. Instead, it has resulted in a significant loss of livelihoods within the fishing community."

An alarming aspect highlighted during discussions is the alleged practice of some fishermen managing to continue fishing on the Naf River. Respondents questioned, how such activities could persist in plain view of the authorities concerned.

Furthermore, the presence of Rohingya robbers in the area adds another layer of complexity to the challenges faced by the fishermen. In order to avoid brutal treatment, fishermen often find themselves compelled to provide ransom to these Rohingya robbers.

## **6.12. Negative coping mechanism for survival**

The narratives shared by the interviewed fishermen unveil the negative consequences caused by the fishing ban. Faced with economic hardships, some fishermen have resorted to leaving their families and marrying Rohingya women as a survival strategy, opting to reside in the camps with the possibility of receiving support from NGOs.

A number of families have been displaced, and many have resorted to selling their residences due to the impact on their livelihood caused by the fishing ban. Another alarming consequence is the significant number of fishermen undertaking risky journeys by boat to Malaysia, etc. in search of improved livelihoods. Unfortunately, most of these journeys have resulted in loss of lives, individuals going missing, and victimization by trafficking groups—those who are unable to provide ransom for redemption.

### 6.13. Challenges in Fishing ID Acquisition and Ration Support from the Government

The findings from the UPZ fishery office revealed a concerning disparity in the issuance of fishing ID cards, with an estimated 400-500 fishermen at the Naf River still lacking IDs. In Teknaf Upazila as a whole, approximately 8000-9000 fishermen are reported to be without ID cards. Respondents' experiences of providing bribes for obtaining these IDs raise questions about the fairness and transparency of the ID issuance process.

Moreover, the grievances expressed by the respondents about government-allocated rations and their distribution are notable. Despite possessing valid IDs, a significant number of actual fishermen claim to be deprived of their rightful rations. The existence of fake fishermen with IDs further exacerbates the issue, as they illegitimately access government-periodical ration support, according to 77% of respondents who claimed to receive no ration support. The research reveals a clear division in the fishing community, marked by the presence of two different associations. The leaders of these groups appear to prioritize the interests of their own members, contributing to divisions within the community.

Responders expressed frustration regarding the lack of support after the death of a fisherman. Many families, having lost their sole breadwinners during fishing accidents, reported receiving no assistance from any institutions.

#### ***Fishing Ban Tragedy: A Fisherman Takes His Own Life***

*Sona Mia, a fisherman lived in Jalia Para, Shaporir Dvip in Teknaf Upazila. A normal fisherman, who used to fish at the Naf River. Having a wife and two children it was kind of going well. The fishing ban imposed at the Naf River incurred misery to his life. Leaving no choice, he had to go through starvation with his family members for many times. With no other skills, it was difficult for him to go with other professions. In 2021, he went to the bank of the Naf River with his hand net. While he was trying to catch fish, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel found and chased him. Somewhat he could manage to escape but could not manage anything for his family to feed. On the agony, he also managed himself to be free from this world. Out of frustration, he hanged himself on that day in the place where he went to fish.*

## 7. Recommendations

The respondents proposed the following recommendations:

1. Withdraw the fishing ban as it has not proven effective in curbing drug trafficking.
2. Consider conditional fishing opportunities at the Naf River; authorities can set a time frame for fishing and designate specific areas. Fishermen would register and, depart from and return to a fixed point, if necessary.
3. Identify the most vulnerable fishing families and offer them support.
4. Create alternative livelihood opportunities for the affected fishermen.

5. Identify women-headed families whose primary earners have passed away and provide them with special livelihood opportunities.
6. Ensure government ration support for all fishermen.
7. Identify fake fishermen and confiscate their IDs.
8. Provide interest-free loan facilities.
9. Offer skill development and technical training, especially for women.
10. Provide support for boats to enable fishing at sea.
11. Strengthen security measures at the Naf River.

## 8. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the study conducted by the COAST Foundation illuminates the profound challenges confronting fishermen in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, in the aftermath of the fishing ban at the Naf River. Originally intended to curb drug trafficking, the ban has resulted in far-reaching consequences, significantly affecting the livelihoods of over 3000 fishermen who depend solely on fishing at the Naf River. The findings underscore the extensive hardships faced by the fishing community, encompassing economic struggles and the absence of government support. However, moving forward, it is imperative for government authorities and NGOs to give due consideration to the recommendations outlined above. Formulating strategies based on these suggestions will be crucial in prioritizing the well-being, economic sustainability, and enhanced livelihoods of the fishing community.

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