

Reclaiming Rights

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

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.

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.

Findings: The study encompasses a diverse sample of 496 interviewed fishermen, unveiling distinctive patterns in their fishing practices, 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. The sampling interviews revealed a significant gender gap in the fishing community, with no fisherwomen participating. The study revealed a disparity among fishermen 249 have fishing ID cards, while 247 do not. The study identified a total of 2,704 individuals eligible for education. Of this, 833 people, aged between 4-11, only 59% (491) of them are taking primary education. Additionally, 289 individuals, aged between 12-17, with only 65%(188) of them taking secondary education. Aged 18 and above (a total of 1,382 individuals), only 4%(55) are pursuing higher education. Among 496 interviewed fishermen, only 23% of respondents acknowledge receiving assistance from the government and local government. while 77% of fishermen, reported that they government. 18% of respondents acknowledge receiving one-time support from NGOs, indicating a temporary assistance provision while 82% of fishermen report not receiving any support from NGOs since

the Rohingya influx. Early marriage is always a question in this locality especially the vulnerable communities like fishing communities. Among the respondents, 6% of fishermen reported instances of early marriage events in their families, while a significant majority of 94% denied it. The fishing ban on the Naf River has inflicted considerable financial losses upon the fishermen. The study reveals that 70% of the respondents have adopted day labor as an alternative and competing with the Rohingya labor force. 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. Moreover, 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. Many fishermen are resorting to loans to sustain their livelihoods. However, the financial the 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. 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 two months.

It has resulted in a significant loss of livelihoods within the fishing community. Furthermore, the presence of Rohingya robbers in the area adds another layer of complexity to the challenges faced by the fishermen. 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. A significant number of fishermen undertake 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. 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. 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. Lack of support after the death of a fisherman was also exposed. Many families, having lost their sole breadwinners during fishing accidents, reported receiving no assistance from any institutions.

Recommendation:

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.
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14. Strengthen security measures at the Naf River.

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.



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