

Challenges to Livelihood: The Case of a Coastal Fishing Community in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The coastal zone is the area of opportunities and vulnerabilities but above all is of significant importance for national development. The coastal morphology of Bangladesh influences the impact of natural hazards on the area. In the coastal area, natural hazards increase the vulnerability of the coastal dwellers and slow down the process of social and economic development. Tropical cyclones from the Bay of Bengal accompanied by storm surge are one of the major disasters in Bangladesh. Coastal fishing is the major livelihood for a large number of coastal people in Bangladesh. Fishing in the sea is a risky profession. Cyclone depression, robbery, loss of fishing gear due to strong current and waves make the life of the fishermen very uncertain. Through four focused group discussions (two with relatively old fishermen groups, ageing above 40 and the other two with relatively young fishermen groups, ageing below 20) and 20 household level discussions at the coastal fishermen community of 'Char Duani', the present study explored the major challenges to fishing as the livelihood strategy.

Key Words : Livelihood, Coastal, Fishing Community, Challenges.

Background and rationale

The coast of Bangladesh, comprising the complex delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system, has immense potential for development. Economically, the coastal area plays a very important role in Bangladesh. The country has a coastline of about 720 km. The coastal waters are a big source of marine and coastal fisheries and inland and marine transport. Shrimp farming has been a very lucrative business. There are two sea ports located in the coastal area, namely Chittagong and Mongla. A number of industrial complexes are situated in the coastal area¹. The Sundarban mangrove area is a big source of the country's economy. The newsprint mill established there is based on the basic raw

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¹ "Vulnerability of Bangladesh coastal region to climate change with adaptation options" by Anwar Ali. Retrieved on 28th December 2008.
<http://www.survas.mdx.ac.uk/pdfs/3anwaral.pdf>

materials drawn from the Sundarbans. Bangladesh is rich not only in terms of its vast water areas but also in terms of the biological diversity. The coastal area is very fertile for rice production. Above all, the country has a big prospect of oil and gas in the coastal area.

But there is another side of the coin. Riverine Bangladesh is situated at the interface of two contrasting settings with the Bay of Bengal and the North Indian Ocean to the south and the Himalayas to the north. This gives the country the life giving monsoons, on one hand, and the catastrophic disasters like tropical cyclones, storm surges, floods, droughts and erosion, on the other. These disasters cause huge loss of lives and properties and impede the development activities². directly of the rural areas and overall of the whole country. Some geographic locations are more vulnerable to adverse impacts resulting from climatic variations than others, such as the coast and active floodplains (Ericksen et al., 1993); these are the relatively more vulnerable parts of the rural Bangladesh.

According to Ali (1991)³ the salient and major features of coastal morphology of Bangladesh are:

- Low coastal bottom topography
- Low coastal land topography
- A large network of rivers, canals and streams
- A huge discharge of river water heavily laden with sediments
- A deep submarine canyon called Swatch of No Ground apparently controlling to a great extent the flow dynamics
- A funnel shaped Bay converging northward and meeting the Bangladesh coast
- High wind and tidal actions
- Frequently occurring tropical cyclones and storm surges
- A vast tract of Mangrove forests influencing the flow dynamics
- A large continental shelf particularly near the Meghna estuary.

Such coastal morphology of Bangladesh influences the impact of natural hazards on the area. Natural hazards increase the vulnerability of the coastal dwellers and hinder social and economic development processes.

“Vulnerability of Bangladesh coastal region to climate change with adaptation options” by Anwar Ali. Retrieved on 28th December 2008.

<http://www.survas.mdx.ac.uk/pdfs/3anwaral.pdf>

³ “Beach Erosion” by S.M.R. Islam, S Huq and A. Ali. In “Decision criteria and optimal inventory processes” edited by Baoding Liu and Augustine O. Esogbue (1999). Retrieved on 27th December 2008.

http://books.google.com.bd/books?id=Yh73UO_sPOYC&hl=en

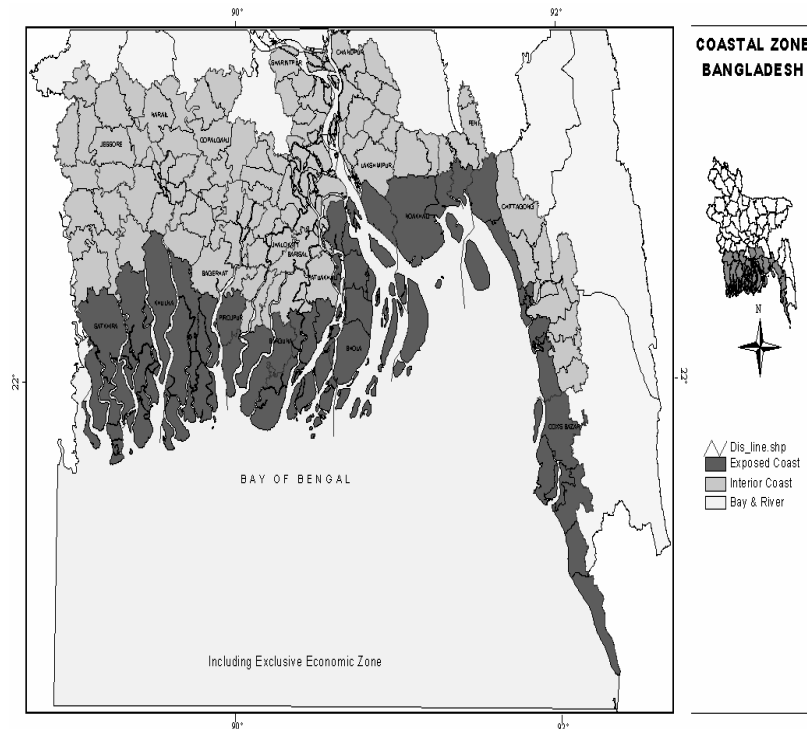


Figure-1: Coastal zone of Bangladesh (Source: Islam, 2004)

It is worth mentioning at this stage that the Bay of Bengal and its coastal areas are one of the most poorly studied areas of the world although it possesses high potential for further stock improvement (Islam, 2003). This understanding gave impetus to the present study.

Again, Total population living in the coastal zone is 35.1 million that represent 28 percent of total population of the country (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2003). In coastal areas absolute and extreme poverty is respectively 52% and 24%, which is respectively 48% and 22% in the non- coastal areas (Hossain et al., 2003). These figures also claim in-depth investigation. At the national level with major focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)⁴, the intention is to ensure

⁴ The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations-and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. The eight MDGs break down into 21 quantifiable targets that are measured by 60 indicators.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

socio-economic development. But, there are many crucial issues and problems, which need to be addressed immediately in the context of current Bangladesh. There are some missing perspectives as well, which need to be considered; such as vulnerability of marginalized groups including among others, those in geographically backward/or isolated char (coastal islands, chars) or remote areas (ecologically vulnerable) (Rahman, et al., 2005). Achieving MDGs by 2015 will highly depend on the development of all the citizens of Bangladesh.

Although coastal fishing is the major livelihood for a large number of coastal people in Bangladesh, fishing in the sea is a risky profession. Cyclone, depression, robbery, loss of fishing gear make the lives and livelihood of the fishermen very uncertain. Unfortunately even with their expertise they are not able to come out from the scorch of poverty. Thus the question comes as to “what are the livelihood challenges facing the fishermen community?” and the present study aims to identify the challenges to livelihood of a coastal fishing community in Bangladesh.

Method

The present study was conducted in Patharghata, of Barguna district, that is near the coast line. Considering the time and resource available the study was conducted only in two villages of ‘Number 3 Char Duani’ and ‘Number 2 Patharghata’ Unions. Using four focused group discussions (two with relatively old fishermen groups, ageing above 40 and the other two with relatively young fishermen groups, ageing below 20) and 20 household level discussions, data was collected in January 2006. Questions for both group discussions and household level discussions were semi structured open ended.

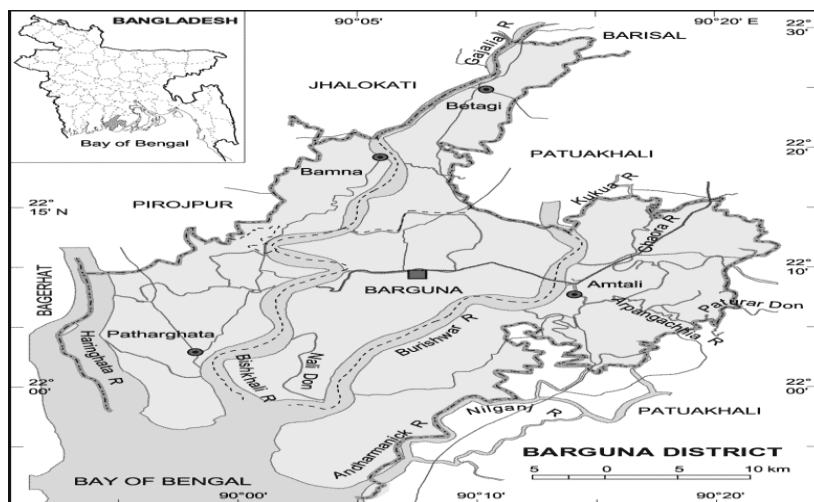


Figure-2: Study Area (Source: Integrated Coastal Zone Management, Bangladesh⁵)

⁵ Integrated Coastal Zone Management, Bangladesh. Retrieved on 28th December 2008. http://www.iczmpbangladesh.org/district_info/dis_info.htm

Results and Discussion

Analyzing all the factors identified as livelihood challenges through all the focused group discussions and household level discussions, the following table is produced. The identified challenges are arranged according to the level of severity as indicated by the respondents.

Fishermen Groups & household discussions Challenges

Disasters and consequences

Population

Fish stock depletion

Having no alternative to taking loan and inaccessibility to friendly credit program

Forceful intervention of social elites

Disasters and consequences The most severe of the disasters is cyclone. Sometimes the ‘in the sea’ fishermen do not get proper signal of severe storm or cyclone. Many fishermen die in disasters. The young members (9-20 years old) don’t dare taking the same profession. Many disaster victim fishermen have stopped going to the sea for fishing. A few of them were found to have developed mental disorders (Sharmin, 2006).

Population Population in the village has reached an unmanageable level. Earlier there used to be a very few fishing trawlers in the bank of river “Baleshwar”. The older fishermen showed concern about the increased number of fishing trawlers as even those also are unable to meet the need of the community. The space has become insufficient for the community and many of the fishermen look for possible alternative livelihood.

Fish stock depletion As population grew, pollution also grew. To meet the need of the coastal population fishing has become intensive and fish stock depletes. Disasters and uncertain weather are the other causes.

Having no alternative to take loan and inaccessibility to friendly credit program Most of the fishermen need to take loan. Majority of them take loan mainly from the Dadondar (money-lender, takes very high interest). The fishermen in these two villages have large families and they do not have trawler and net of their own. They work with others in group. As a result, maximum portion of fish goes to the owner of the trawler and net and the rest is divided between the fishermen. The fishermen need to arrange their food stock themselves for the days in the sea. They usually stay 15-20 days in the sea altogether. For those days they borrow the food

staff from the local shops for which they must pay back the high amount decided by the shop owners. A Disaster, robbery, bad luck may bring even more severe disaster to their livelihood, if could survive. The fishermen also take loan from various NGO's. Though it is typically thought that Fishermen should be brought under micro-credit program to save themselves from *Arotta*⁶ and *Dadondar* (money-lender), the reality seemed different. The money to be returned to the NGOs is no less than the rate of the *Dadondar*. Many a times after any accident in the sea, the fishermen escape from the NGOs, shop owners and *Dadondar* by leaving the village and livelihood.

Forceful intervention of social elites The fishermen are dependent on the trawler and net owners for their livelihood. As a result they must follow the orders of the trawler and net owners. Even when they get sick in the sea or get a signal, they are not allowed to return to the shore if not permitted. The trawler and net owners always exploit them. Being deprived of merely any right the fishermen prefer alternative livelihood.

Conclusion

In the absence of government policies to preserve the interest of the fishermen community, without any alternative livelihood option, and any additional skill for livelihood the coastal fishermen communities of these two villages don't find any way to come out of the poverty trap. They don't want to carry on a livelihood so dangerous for themselves and for the family. Some of them said that they don't want to get their children involved in this profession. The women in these communities don't have any skill to earn a livelihood. So when the earning fishermen are dead or lost or disable to earn any more, very little children are sent to the sea for fishing. Risks involved with the existing challenges to the fishermen livelihood need immediate attention to ensure sustainability of coastal fishing livelihood.

⁶ fish businessmen who have fish preserving facility.

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