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TROSA LEARNING BRIEF

HILSA WATCH

**EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY FOR
INCLUSIVE FISHERIES GOVERNANCE ACROSS
SHARED GANGA-BRAHMAPUTRA-MEGHNA
(GBM) RIVER BASINS**



OXFAM





Photo: Hilsa Fishing In Meghna River/Mohammad Arju

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than a million fisherfolk's livelihood depends on Hilsa value chain in South Asian countries. Bangladesh, being a key habitat of the fish, also pioneers governance of fisheries by enforcing ban on Hilsa catching during the spawning and passage periods as well as helping the fisherfolks to survive the period under a safety-net program. India and Myanmar are gradually adopting governance processes like Bangladesh to sustain Hilsa existence and catch.

There have been outcries from the fisherfolks to revisit the current management practice in terms of the implementation timing, process and compensations.

In response, Oxfam and partners have started a voluntary reporting system 'Hilsa Watch', engaging 480 fishers and 55 young volunteers from two strategically selected locations in Meghna and Brahmaputra river basins, starting from October 2018.

The results of the first round of this activity in October 2018 indicates that the expenditure needs of the fisher families is considerably higher than the compensation package offered to them. The seasonal availability of the fish varies geographically, benefits of which is skewed towards the coastal region, in comparison with the upstream areas.

The results are being used to catalyze discussion among pro-conservation and pro-human-rights members of civil society to advocate for greater inclusion of the fisherfolks in the governance process of Hilsa fisheries, so the fisherfolks can be heard and can claim their rights to fish. In 2018, communities raised their voices to Department of Fisheries and Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute and was verbally assured that their concerns will be discussed at higher levels.

Key suggestions include promoting a participatory fisheries management system, with a win-win benefit package for fishers from all geographic locations.

INTRODUCTION

Hilsa is a culturally and commercially important fish species that swims across the shared waters from the Bay of Bengal to the eastern Himalayas in different parts of its life cycle. A major part of the fish's habitat is within Bangladesh, India and Myanmar waters. Bangladesh accounts for 60% of global catch and it's also the country's national fish.

In Bangladesh alone, the estimated number of people dependent on the Hilsa Value Chain is about 2million. It becomes larger regionally, as fisherfolks from India and Myanmar are included. It is claimed that Hilsa contributes about 1% of Bangladesh's GDP¹.

Annually, two closures are enforced to protect brood and juvenile fishes for approximately 2.5 months a year. In areas near sanctuaries, a safety-net programme is implemented, providing 40 kgs of rice to each fisher family per month. When the closure is implemented across the country at the same time, availability of fish, market price and compensation package is not the same for all geographic locations. This makes the current system unacceptable in terms of opportunity cost for fisherfolks in some locations,

especially in the upstream areas in northern Bangladesh and Assam state of India.

Resolution of this governance riddle is required for creating a win-win situation for all fisherfolk, governments, and private sectors associated with Hilsa fisheries.



Photo: Volunteers interviewing a fisherman during Hilsa watch activity in Chandpur/Oxfam

¹ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/07/24/national-fisheries-week-2018-ilish-production-up-by-150>

APPROACH

Hilsa watch is based on the citizen science approach to support river dependent fisherfolks to systematically gain negotiating capital, mainly through evidence generation, to support their greater goal of getting fair share of benefits from the fisheries. A total of 480 fishers from Kurigram and Chandpur areas volunteered to self-report on the fish catch, income-expenditure, compensation received from the government, grievances and perception about the fisheries management system, i.e. seasonal closures.

To assist the fishers, 54 volunteers (mostly youth) were assigned. Each volunteer worked with up to 10 fishers. In October 2018, these volunteers met with the fishers once a week and filled in data forms. This data was compiled and analyzed by Oxfam and its partners Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS) and Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK), to prepare insights and deeper understanding of the challenges faced and needs felt by the fisherfolks through the current management practices.

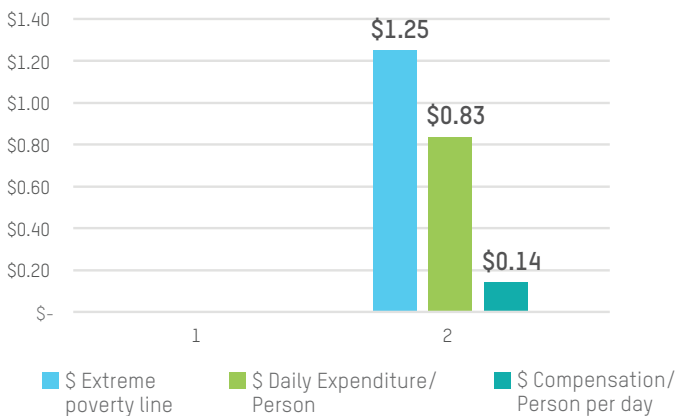
These insights are expected to be useful for evidence-based advocacy through news media, social media and stakeholder consultations.



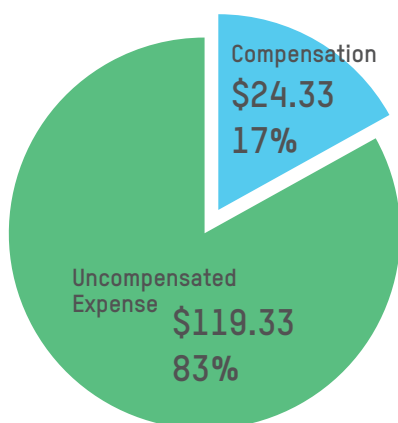
Figure 1: Steps of Hilsa Watch Process

KEY FINDINGS

Comparison of perday avg compensation per person with per day expenditure of fisherfolks and Extreme Poverty Line



Coverage of compensation offered to fisherfolks for compliance of fishing ban



- Except for the closure seasons, availability of Hilsa fish is negligible in both Chandpur and Rowmari. Fisherfolks identify overfishing in the Bay of Bengal and Meghna Estuary areas as key reason behind this.
- Fishing ban period is pick time for Hilsa fish availability for upstream fisherfolks, so they try to make a good income from that season, even if it is illegal.
- The compensation package covers less than 17% of even the monthly expenditure of fishers, which makes it difficult for the compliant fisherfolk to continue even a modest living.
- Majority of the fisherfolks reported that they are unhappy with the current management practices. Apart from this process being heavily dependent on policing, and not accounting for 'all needs of fisherfolk families', fisherfolks also showed unhappiness about visible non-compliance as a reason to allure others to defy the ban.
- In the Brahmaputra basin, the compensation package has not been rolled out. This has contributed to difference in fisherfolks' attitude towards the management system. While the fisherfolks in Meghna basin were reticent about the issue, fisherfolk in the Brahmaputra basin were more vocal and more confident about participating in the Hilsa watch process.
- Cumulatively, 133 fisherfolks have been sentenced to jail for defying the October 2018 Hilsa ban in Chandpur. None of them received any legal aid from CSOs or government.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Continuing the Hilsa Watch activity till 2020 for longitudinal understanding
- Expanding geographic scope to include Indian parts of Hilsa habitat
- Communications and media product development based on current results
- Continued consultation with CSOs for strategic planning for policy influencing
- CSO-facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogue between fisherfolks, government and private sector associated with Hilsa toward a win-win situation for all stakeholders, through more participatory fisheries management system.

HOW THE STAKEHOLDERS BENEFIT

Governments:

Government of Bangladesh has been trying to make the Hilsa fisheries management system more participatory through processes like co-management and safety-net programmes. The success of such initiatives depends on the acceptance by the fishers and utility of the system for the fisherfolks. The Hilsa Watch will provide the government with important insights, and reasons behind non-compliance by some fishers, providing better chances to improve the current system.

Private Sector: The private sector plays an important role in the Hilsa value chain, especially through finance and marketing. Often, they play a grey role as financiers of fishing during closures or production of the illegal fishing. Reflections from the Hilsa Watch process is expected to help revisit the current business models and set the basis for identification of a more sustainable, legal business model.

Civil Society Organizations: So far, CSOs have been more vocal about stricter implementation of the seasonal closure, a more transparent process in the safety-net programme for fisherfolks and zero-tolerance for corruption, mainly to ensure protection for the brood and juvenile Hilsa fishes. The Hilsa Watch process has created scope for CSOs to better understand the fisherfolk community and to revisit their agenda based on the needs expressed by the river dependent community, potentially increasing the CSO's chance of getting more public support and expanded network on the ground. Most importantly, the activity will provide negotiating capital for the influencing work of relevant CSOs.

Fisherfolks: This creates scope to reach out to the most influential stakeholders, opening up opportunity for more inclusion of the fisherfolks with greater access and control over benefits from the Hilsa fisheries.

FURTHER READINGS

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About TROSA

TROSA is a five year (2017-2021) regional water governance programme being implemented in the transboundary river basins of Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) in Nepal, India and Bangladesh and the Salween in Myanmar. Adopting a human-rights based approach, TROSA facilitates river dependent communities' participation in water governance and help them uphold their rights to water. As part of this, it also supports and promotes multi-stakeholder partnerships and collective action for inclusive water governance policies and practices at various levels. TROSA is funded by the Government of Sweden and managed by Oxfam.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed in this brief are those of the author and don't represent the views of Oxfam or Government of Sweden.

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