

Strengthening Fishermen's Cooperative Societies in Bangladesh: An Analysis of Existing Challenges and Future Prospects.

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Research Summary

Fish and fisheries resources are the primary source of fulfilling the nutritional demands of the Bangladeshi populace and significantly contribute to the nation's economy. This sector accounts for approximately 5% of the national output. As part of efforts to improve the livelihoods of the backward and underprivileged communities, the Cooperative Department organizes fishing communities to form fishermen's cooperative societies. Currently, a large segment of the country's fishing community comprises members of these cooperative societies. Fishermen's cooperative societies are established at various levels across the country to enhance the socio-economic conditions of those involved in the fisheries sector, boost fish production through cooperative management, facilitate cooperative-based fish storage management, and foster an equitable marketing system that harmonizes the interests of both fishermen and consumers. The Ministry of Land supports these societies by leasing government-owned open water bodies to them, aiming to improve their livelihoods. Furthermore, the Cooperative Department has undertaken various development projects for them at different times, supplying working capital and other necessary resources. Cooperative members receive training on modern fish farming from fisheries departmental officers, organized by cooperative training institutions and district cooperative offices, as well as IGA (Income Generating Activities) and modern fish farming training from Upazila cooperative offices.

Fishermen's cooperative societies under the Cooperative Department are structured in three tiers: primary, central, and national. Among these, there is one national cooperative society, 76 central cooperative societies, and 9,540 primary societies. The total individual membership stands at 383,878. A fishermen's cooperative society is an economic and social organization for fishermen, where they invest resources for fish harvesting and to achieve higher profits. This organization facilitates activities such as providing loans for fish purchase and sale or for acquiring fishing equipment. While fishermen in Japan, Norway, and other countries operate under successful cooperative frameworks, benefiting from loan facilities, transportation, marketing, and fish processing through cooperative management, in Bangladesh, this business predominantly sees fishermen exploited by middlemen (mahajans). As middlemen provide cash advances to fishermen, they rarely escape their clutches. Consequently, despite significant overall improvements in fish production nationwide, fish cooperatives have largely failed to play their

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desired role. Currently, a lack of necessary capital, the infiltration of non-fishermen, the reduction of water bodies, and, in some cases, a lack of cooperation from local administrations often deprive members of these societies of expected benefits, rendering many societies ineffective. As a result, marginal fish farmers/fishermen have not experienced proportionate socio-economic development, and consumers are deprived of access to quality fish at fair prices.

Currently, there are approximately ten thousand registered fishermen's cooperative societies under the Cooperative Department. Many of these societies are inoperative, and the activities of most fishermen's cooperative societies are not visible. The need for a research initiative was identified to investigate the causes and remedies for the ineffectiveness of these societies, determine actions for the sustainable development of fishermen, and identify areas and opportunities for strengthening these cooperative societies.

Objectives of the Study

This empirical research was conducted with the following objectives:

- To identify areas where fishermen's cooperatives can contribute to improving the socio-economic conditions of their members;
- To explore the causes behind the ineffectiveness of some cooperatives;
- To propose strategies for revitalizing inactive cooperatives;
- To analyze and recommend modern methods for enhancing fish production;
- To identify barriers to equitable fish harvesting and marketing, particularly those created by middlemen;
- To determine actionable steps for the sustainable development of fishermen.

Methodology

Given that the primary objective of this research is to analyze the current state of fishermen's cooperative societies and identify obstacles to improving the socio-economic conditions of their members, participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling. Although the characteristics of fishermen's cooperative societies are generally similar, some locational differences are observed across areas. In this regard, data was collected from 909 respondents from 300 fishermen's cooperative societies, selected on a random basis at a 3% rate from those districts in Bangladesh's 8 divisions where fishermen's cooperative societies exist, using a structured questionnaire. Among these respondents, 594 were general members of cooperative societies, and 315 were chairpersons/general secretaries of management committees. For data collection, semi-structured questionnaires were used for individual members and management committee members of each fishermen's cooperative society, consistent with the research objectives and goals. Questionnaires were also used for officials of departments/agencies through Key Informant Interviews (KII). Additionally, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were organized

involving cooperative fishermen/fish farmers, fisheries department officials, cooperative department officials, public representatives, and relevant individuals. Furthermore, a workshop was arranged with officials from the Cooperative Department and various other departments/agencies to gather opinions and recommendations based on the report prepared from field survey data.

Key Findings and Observations

The findings and observations derived from reviewing the information obtained through survey questionnaires, interviews conducted by the research team, FGDs (Focus Group Discussions), and secondary sources are as follows:

Demographics and Economic Status:

Analysis of the data obtained from the research indicates that the majority of cooperative fishermen are between 18 and 65 years old, and most are minimally educated. Cooperative fishermen families rely on a single earner. Fish harvesting is their primary profession. However, many are also involved in agricultural activities alongside this profession. Most fishermen have been engaged in this profession for over 10 years, with a per capita monthly income below BDT 10,000. Analysis of the data reveals that a large portion of fishermen expressed satisfaction with their involvement in the profession. This is an indication of this community's love for their profession.

Organizational Status:

Observing the organizational status of the cooperative societies to which cooperative fishermen belong, it is found that most societies have elected management committees, a large portion of which hold regular monthly meetings. These societies possess almost no fixed assets. Although there is information that some societies earn profits at the end of the year, most societies do not undergo annual audits by the Cooperative Department. Despite the organizational activities of the cooperative societies, there is little connection or communication with the Cooperative Department.

Support and Services:

Management committee members reported that these societies provide various types of assistance to their members. Members of the societies expect assistance from their society in terms of loans, training, and equipment. The societies primarily provide training and assistance with fishing equipment to their members. However, this number is not very high—just over half. The remaining societies do not provide much assistance. Occasionally, the Department of Cooperatives assists with training programs.

Access to Government Schemes:

The government periodically publishes policies to support fishermen in Bangladesh. Concurrently, it undertakes supportive programs. To benefit from these policies or programs, one must possess a government-issued fisherman's card. Although most cooperative fishermen who provided information hold fisherman's cards, a significant portion has not yet received them. Consequently, cooperative fishermen are failing to achieve satisfactory success as fishermen. Due to the lack of a fisherman's card, most cooperative fishermen face various problems, particularly in acquiring water body leases and receiving government assistance during fishing prohibition periods. Additionally, they encounter difficulties in accessing services from various departments as fishermen. For these reasons, most cooperative fishermen have prioritized the provision of fisherman's cards to simplify access to assistance or services.

Profitability and Marketing:

For those engaged in fish production alongside fish harvesting, the profit is not commensurate with production costs. Furthermore, the desired profit is not achieved from harvested fish. The primary reason for the unsatisfactory profit from fish harvesting sources is that they are often obtained through rent or lease. Additionally, marketing problems, transportation issues, and a lack of modern knowledge related to production are also responsible for not achieving the desired profit.

Ownership and Control of Resources:

Ownership of fish harvesting sources is the most crucial determinant for decent employment for fishermen. According to research data, most of these sources are acquired through lease rentals, and even if some are under the ownership of the societies, it is not significant. Analysis of the society's organizational data reveals that cooperative fishermen maintain communication with their societies and are hopeful of receiving assistance through them. For this reason, it is profitable for fishermen or fish farmers to have fish harvesting sources operated or controlled by genuine fishermen's cooperative societies.

Training and Technology:

Fish is one of Bangladesh's most economically valuable resources. To ensure desired fish production, proper production techniques must be applied. Therefore, training related to fish production or fish farming plays a crucial role in fish production and marketing. Most fishermen reported receiving such training. The Cooperative Department and the Department of Fisheries have organized such training. However, the training provided is insufficient to ensure maximum profit. More modern training needs to be organized with the help of the Cooperative Department and the Department of Fisheries under the supervision of cooperative societies. However,

relevant researchers or teachers from universities have a significant opportunity to play a crucial role in this matter. The results of efforts can be increased geometrically due to the unprecedented technological advancements worldwide. The research findings indicate that cooperative fishermen are not at all aware of modern technology. The use of modern technology is indispensable for environmentally friendly and quality fish production. Although the Department of Fisheries has undertaken some initiatives in this regard, these initiatives have not been successful due to other related challenges. Experts emphasize the importance of cooperatives in this matter.

Lease and Policy Implementation:

Challenges: Water bodies play the most significant role in natural fish harvesting. Although fishermen's cooperative societies have priority in leasing water bodies, real fishermen are deprived of the benefits of the lease system due to the unavailability of fisherman's cards, the dominance of middlemen, lack of necessary capital, and political influence. Despite government policies on the water body lease system, its proper implementation is not practically possible.

Need for Infrastructure:

Marketing plays a very important role in achieving desired profits in fish marketing. However, cooperative fishermen or fish farmers are unable to market their harvested fish properly, on time, or safely. Firstly, there are an insufficient number of storage facilities in the country. A major obstacle to profitable marketing is the lack of accurate information about which market to send their produced fish to and at what time. Furthermore, there is no tolerable and safe system for transporting perishable goods like fish. In most cases, fishermen or fish farmers are forced to sell fish to local traders in local markets. Consequently, they are deprived of fair prices. Since storage, suitable transportation, and information management are expensive, there is ample opportunity to adopt these systems through cooperatives.

Investment and Financial Access:

Investment is necessary to avail the benefits of leases, fishing equipment, technology, training, and information. This is often not possible for cooperative societies. Although it is a very large economic activity, cooperative societies or their members do not have the capacity to invest in this sector. They are compelled to seek financial assistance from others. Alternatively, middlemen exploit innocent fishermen to arrange this investment. As a result, fishermen are unable to earn the necessary income from their primary livelihood. Despite holding onto a profession, they love for their livelihood, there is little change in the daily lives of fishermen, even with significant financial transactions in this sector. To develop this community, which is engaged in the production of one of the country's most valuable economic resources, investment opportunities in their field of work must be prioritized for them. Adequate loan provisions must be made for fishermen. In this case, any bank or cooperative institution could be the loan

provider. The Bangladesh Cooperative Bank has significant opportunities to play a role in this regard.

If fishermen's cooperative societies are strengthened organizationally and financially, they will be able to play a supportive role for their cooperative fisherman members. In this regard, the Cooperative Department can issue necessary policies. Concurrently, the Bangladesh Cooperative Bank can act as a financial provider. This will require cooperation from the government and Bangladesh Bank. The National Fishermen's Cooperative Society, as the apex institution of fishermen's cooperative societies, can be strengthened.

Recently, there has been extensive development in fish production due to the use of technology. With increased production, there is a large surplus of fish. Consequently, the price of fish has significantly decreased. To overcome this situation, opinions were received regarding arranging for the marketing of processed fish. In this context, the potential for the establishment of a fish processing industry has emerged. This industry could be developed in association with fishermen's cooperative societies. There is a demand for Bangladeshi fish abroad, indicating a large potential for fish export. Fishermen's cooperative societies have ample opportunities to engage in fish exports. The Cooperative Department and apex cooperative institutions can take initiatives to provide training and capital for this purpose. A coordinated or single project could be undertaken by the Cooperative Department, possibly in collaboration with the Department of Fisheries.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were suggested by the research participants:

- Strengthen the organizational and financial capacities of cooperatives;
- Involve Bangladesh Cooperative Bank as a key financier;
- Empower the national apex cooperative for fisheries;
- Establish processing units, hatcheries, feed mills, cold storage, and cooperative fish markets under integrated projects;
- Promote branding and online platforms for fish marketing;
- Simplify ID card issuance and integrate data systems;
- Improve access to training, market information, and weather updates through community radio and digital services;
- Ensure the participation of universities and researchers in training design and policy formulation;
- Facilitate fish exports by building fishermen's capacity and ensuring capital availability.
- weather, and natural risks. Implementation of these suggestions can bring about revolutionary changes in the cooperative-based fisheries sector.

Conclusion

The development of the fisheries sector is indispensable for fulfilling the nutritional needs of the large population, promoting economic development, creating employment, alleviating poverty, and addressing protein deficiencies in the country. The Government of Bangladesh consistently undertakes various programs for the development of this sector. If necessary, steps, programs, and projects are adopted and implemented in line with the research recommendations, it will not only improve the socio-economic conditions of fishermen/fish farmer cooperative members but also enable fishermen's cooperative societies to play a positive role in the overall economy of the country.