

Empowering Coastal Fishers Communities for a Dignified and Climate-Resilient Future

“RESILIENT SHORES, STRONGER FISHERS”



Introduction

Bangladesh's 3.5 million small-scale fishers spread across coastal districts, char lands, estuaries, and major river systems form the backbone of national fish production. They contribute over 85% of the country's total marine and inland catch, supply affordable protein, and safeguard ecological knowledge passed through generations.

Yet these communities face intensifying climate shocks, fishing bans, rising debt cycles, and marginalization from policy or decision-making tables. Women fishers mostly remain invisible in statistics carry the burden of post-harvest work, unpaid care, and income instability during bans.

COAST Foundation's work over 20+ years has focused on justice, dignity, and resilience of these fishing communities through leadership development, rights mobilization, livelihood diversification, and policy advocacy.

This document presents the COAST's key achievements, impacts, challenges, lessons, and way forward of these collective initiatives for traditional fisherfolk in Bangladesh.

Our Approach and Coverage

COAST's interventions combined participatory action research, leadership training, networking, advocacy, and media engagement. A total of 900 direct and 4,500 indirect SSFs across the three districts were reached through different community-led activities, policy engagement, and awareness programs to generate the improvement areas in livelihoods and governance. The initiative followed a bottom-up learning approach, including:

Community-Led Governance & Networking

COAST developed and continue supports more than 30 fishers' networking committees in coastal and riverine communities, linked with local government bodies to facilitate fisher participation in governance and decision-making while increasing accountability at the union and Upazila levels.

Women's Leadership & Economic Inclusion

While only about 4% of fisher identity cards are held by women, women perform critical post-harvest duties and community mediation. COAST's

programs train and support women to take leadership roles in fisheries committees, improving governance and social equity.

Climate-Resilient Livelihood Diversification

COAST promotes alternative livelihood options to help climate-vulnerable fishers households reduce debt and earn reliably even during fishing bans.

Rights-Based Policy Advocacy

COAST convenes multi-stakeholder forums and fisher-led dialogues to push for legal recognition, social protection, and resource rights for small-scale fishers.

Disaster Preparedness & Ecosystem Restoration

COAST integrates disaster risk reduction into its core program including community early-warning plans and mangrove planting. These efforts aim to improve fishers' resilience and protect fragile coastal areas.

Widespread Geographic Reach

COAST's interventions span 13 coastal districts in Bangladesh. This broad coverage ensures that a diverse range of small-scale fishers not just coastal ones benefit from governance, livelihoods, and advocacy support.

Key Achievements

Strengthened Local Governance and Leadership

27 unions and 3 district-level fishers' networking committees are now operational. These platforms facilitated collective bargaining, conflict resolution, and coordination with government departments.

Women's Leadership and Empowerment

Empowered 510 women fishers through leadership, entrepreneurship, and livelihood diversification.

Diversified Livelihood Opportunities

Over 450 families adopted mixed farming models. Another 60 families started goat and duck farming. This contributing to income resilience and reduced debt dependency.



Halima Akter's Path to Prosperity through Duck Farming

In Dhonia Union, Bhola Sadar, Bhola, Halima Akter faced financial instability during fishing bans. With training in poultry management and small financial support, she began with 20 ducklings; today, she owns over 80. Her adaptation practices like raised duck shelters, show how fisher families are embracing climate-smart livelihoods. Her success has inspired other women to adopt small livestock farming as part of coastal resilience-building.

Policy & Advocacy Influence

COAST led several district and national dialogues on small-scale fishers' rights and fishing bans with participation from policymakers, CSOs, academicians, and fishers leaders.

- 1) Fishing ban compensation reformation
- 2) Legal recognition of small-scale fishers
- 3) Gender-sensitive social protection
- 4) Disaster management and fisher inclusion
- 5) Governance and access to Global adaptation funding

Regional and Global Engagement

In parallel, COAST actively represented Bangladesh's small-scale fishers in COP, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and other global stages, contributing to policy dialogues on Blue Economy, APWLD, UNCLOS, and IYFA commitments.

Key Challenges

Inadequate & Non-inclusive Ban Compensation

Hilsa and seasonal bans are scientifically justified for stock recovery, but compensation packages are frequently partial, delayed or insufficient (30-40%) to household needs.

Moreover, VGF distributions in recent years shows strong government intent, but gaps in targeting and adequacy persist at the local level. This mismatch produces acute food insecurity and secondary crises like domestic violence, indebtedness, etc.

Climate Vulnerability

Increased cyclones, tidal surges, and erosion in Bhola and Cox's Bazar severely affect fishing assets, housing, and mobility. Limited adaptation infrastructure continues to hinder recovery.

Gendered Inequality and Social Protection Gaps

Women are experiencing acute stress during ban periods. While women's leadership is rising, formal social protection (cash, food, healthcare) is not yet gender-responsive. Apart, we found women's post harvest labor is mostly unpaid. They have limited access to assets, boats, credit and leadership spaces.

Legal and Tenure Insecurity

Lack of formal recognition of customary fishing grounds and tenure rights undermines fisher claims to resources and exposes communities to land/sea grabbing in the name of "blue economy" or infrastructure projects.

So, tenure recognition, mapping initiatives and inclusion in fisheries management committees and coastal zoning plans are essential to protect rights and livelihoods.

Key Learnings

Targeted, On-Time Support Prevents Debt & Distress Migration

Timely mixed compensation packages significantly reduce seasonal hunger and loan dependency.

Gender Inclusion Strengthens Governance

Women-led advocacy reduced gender-based violence, dowry, and early marriage cases, proving social empowerment's link to resilience.

Secure Tenure Reduces Conflict & Protects Ecological Balance

Riverine and coastal case studies show clearer boundaries reduce gear conflict and overfishing.

Livelihood Diversification Enhances Resilience

Families with mixed income sources (fishing, livestock, farming) were less affected by climate shocks and economic disruptions.

Recommendations

1. Include genuine fishers in the govt. fishers list for social safety net.
2. A mixed compensation package (cash+food+livelihood) should be developed for all registered fishers during seasonal bans. The distribution process need to be announced in advance, digitally tracked, and inclusive of women-headed fishers households.
3. Support women with credit, training, and asset ownership.
4. Encourage youth engagement to access soft loans, micro-grants and technical assistance for enterprises, eco-tourism, and fisheries entrepreneurship.
5. The National Adaptation Plan (NAP) and Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) not only ensure the fisherfolk participation but also easy access to finance at least 15% in different adaptation projects.

Way Forward

Dignified Ban Compensation and Timely Social Safety Nets

- a) Advocate for inclusion of genuine fishers in the fishery database.
- b) A mixed support packages during fishing bans (cash+food+livelihoods).
- c) Push the Government to use rapid release mechanisms and match with national VGF processes.

National Fisher ID and Social Protection Integration

Conduct lobby with Ministry of Fisheries & Livestocks for the integration of digital national fisher registry with unique portable ID. This ID could be linked to social protection platform to close the exclusion gaps and avoid duplication.

Scaling Up Livelihood Diversification

Promote integrated coastal farming models combining aquaculture, livestock, and saline-tolerant crops. Mobilize microcredit and cooperative financing for women fishers.

Gender-Responsive Fisheries Governance

Lobby and campaign to recognize women's unpaid contribution to post-harvest activities. Ensure women's access to credit, training, and assets ownership.

Climate Resilience and Ecosystem Restoration

Invest in mangrove rehabilitation, coastal or sanctuaries co-management, and eco-friendly fishing practices. Encourage youth-led innovation in sustainable fishing gear and waste reduction.

Regional Solidarity and Policy Advocacy

Continue engaging with WFFP, ICSF, and other regional forums to amplify Bangladesh's position on small-scale fisheries, blue economy impacts, and trade justice.

Conclusion

The collective experiences of small-scale fishers across Bangladesh reveal a story of transformation from exclusion to participation, and from vulnerability to resilience. By prioritizing women's leadership, inclusive governance, and climate-resilient livelihoods, coastal communities have demonstrated that locally driven action can shape national policy and global advocacy.

COAST Foundation remains committed to advancing the rights and sustainability of small-scale fishers, ensuring that every fisher family living in coastal areas can live with dignity, equity, and resilience in the face of climate uncertainty.