
JAFFNA'S FISHING COMMUNITIES: PERSISTENT CRISIS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

N. Shanmugaratnam

I read Champika Liyanaarachchi's report captioned 'Sri Lankan Army on Collision Course With Fishermen' with concern. Indeed the damage caused to coral reefs due to the construction of landing sites has to be taken seriously. However, it is not fair at all to stop at the most proximate cause of the problem and impose a quick fix in the name of saving the environment. That may not be a solution and it could well become yet another problem aggravating an already complicated situation. The fishermen of Jaffna, like their counterparts elsewhere, are quite aware of the importance of conserving the coral reefs in their fishing grounds. The construction of landing sites in prohibited areas by the fishermen is a reflection of the desperate situation of a community, which is among the worst hit civilian victims of the protracted war in Lanka. Their right to livelihood and personal security has been continuously violated. However, their plight did not draw the attention of human rights activists for a long time. These fishermen have not only been denied access to their traditional fishing grounds and landing sites because of the High Security Zones but are also being subject to a host of spatial and temporal restrictions on their mobility in the sea around the peninsula and in its lagoons. In the more restricted areas, they have to use fixed points of entry and exit. The coastline in these areas is fenced with barbed wire. Moreover, the pass system enforced by the Lankan Navy restricts their movement to particular areas while not permitting them to return to the coast with their catch before six in the morning. With such restrictions, it is not so easy for hundreds of fishermen to share existing landing sites or to choose environmentally safe areas to construct new ones. In the light of this, I would like to pose two simple questions. What does the Ministry of Defence expect the fishermen to do when it is unable to handle a problem that is causally linked to its own policies and practices in the name of security? Is it wrong on the part of the fishermen to expect the Ministry to adopt a more enlightened approach that enables reconciliation and livelihood construction?

Sensitive Responses

The situation calls for more sensitive, more creative and more humane ways of enabling the fishing communities to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. The Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), the opening up of the A9 highway and the improved communication links between Jaffna and the rest of the country provide a favourable environment for interventions that facilitate individual and collective initiatives by fishermen to rebuild their lives and revive fishery in Jaffna. However, the government has not been able to frame a creative and sensitive policy to enable the

fishing communities to take advantage of the favourable environment. By failing to do this, the government is also missing an opportunity to win the confidence of these communities. I have been to various parts of the coastal regions of Jaffna and have had discussions with many fishermen and office bearers of Fishermen's Cooperatives. Everywhere, the main grievance aired was the denial of the fishermen's fundamental right to fish without harassment. They told me that the pass system, restrictions on mobility and harassment in the name of security checks by Navy personnel make them feel like aliens and poachers in their own fishing areas. Is this an acceptable state of affairs in the North today, more than 20 months after the CFA?

Years of ban and restrictions on fishing in the Northern waters have helped a progressive expansion of the resource stock and hence a significant growth in harvestable surpluses. This should provide a favourable situation for a quicker recovery of the livelihoods of the fishing families (while benefiting the regional and national economies). Indeed the accumulated harvestable surpluses are rightfully theirs. However, the much-needed interventions, which include more socially sensitive and development-oriented policies and material support, have yet to be made. Fishing by local fishermen seems to be one activity that remains more or less completely subordinated to the security considerations and priorities of the government in the North. The security concerns are understandable but the policies and practices should not be counterproductive at a time when rehabilitation of the war-torn communities is an absolutely necessary condition for peace building. More unfortunately, foreign fishermen, including big companies using capital intensive technology, are illegally capturing the benefits of the large stocks of high value resources available in our northern sea at the expense of the local fishing communities and the Lankan economy. Moreover, the danger of the resource stock being depleted due to overfishing by these big time poachers looms large.

Indian Fishermen

It was reported (*Sunday Times*, 17 August 2003) that 34 to 36-foot Indian trawlers with 90-120 horsepower (hp) engines were illegally operating in Sri Lankan waters off Jaffna regularly and the Sri Lankan navy had turned a blind eye to poaching by Indians while strictly enforcing the pass system on Jaffna's fishermen. The fishermen of Jaffna are not permitted to use larger than 15 hp engines. In fact, most of them use small second-hand boats with 8 hp engines. Obviously these small-scale

fishermen are not capable of competing with the poachers who use powerful trawlers, which have on occasions toppled the small boats of the former and also cut through the fishing nets laid by them. We have also heard from local fishermen that the trawlers caused damage to corals and breeding grounds.

Currently, fishing remains banned along some 81 km of the 379 km of the northern coastline. In the early 1980s, around 22,500 families depended on fishing for their livelihood in the peninsula. The majority of these families were displaced during the war. Many of them were displaced more than once and a considerable number sought refuge in India. Displaced fisher families began to return to Jaffna since mid-1996 and by 1998 some 8600 families had returned. This trend accelerated after the CFA. Today, more than 60% of the peninsula's displaced fishing families are back although not all of them are living in their own original homes or villages. Many of the displaced families are still living in welfare camps 'like fish out of water' as an elderly displaced woman in a camp in Uduvil told me in August 2003. The same woman also said that for her peace meant being able to return with her family and others to their native village of Myliddy and revive their lives as a fishing community. The vast majority of Jaffna's fishermen lack the means to rebuild their basic capital stock. A considerable number (probably about a quarter of the total number of fishermen) is unable to do any fishing at all as they are displaced and pauperised. This group also includes female-headed households. The recently concluded

Needs Assessment Survey reported that more than 90% of the boats, engines and gear might have been lost or rendered unusable in Jaffna.

A summary of the main problems and some possible measures to enable livelihood and regional economic revival in Jaffna's fishery sector

The North, which once produced over 25% of the country's fresh fish and 57% of the dry fish output and was an exporter of high-value sea food to East Asia, continues to face serious constraints to the revival of its fisheries even 20 months after the signing of the CFA. The deprivations and violations suffered by the fishing communities in Jaffna call for urgent action to enable these victims of the war to rebuild their livelihoods and regain their human dignity.

The matrix below gives an overview of the main problems and some ideas regarding short and medium term solutions. It should be evident that there are some choices for the government in the current phase if it is really keen to ease the hardships of the fishing communities. The government may choose a combination of measures without seriously compromising its security priorities. A deeper exploration of the possibilities may help find more innovative alternatives. The LTTE also has a role to play. It should

Main problem	Possible short and medium-term solutions
Heavy restrictions on fishing, harassment by security personnel; insecurity felt by fishermen	Review the current situation in consultation with representatives of fishermen's cooperatives and District fisheries officials. Consider removing or reducing spatial and temporal restrictions on fishermen's mobility in lagoon and sea. Permit the use of larger than 15 hp engines (raise the upper limit on hp). Permit fishermen to return to shore after finishing fishing without having to wait till 6 am. Practice a more dignified enforcement of the pass system. Reorient and conscientise the security forces that today their role also involves assisting the fishermen to rebuild their lives. Develop better public relations with the fishermen and make them feel that the government is doing its best to support the reconstruction of their livelihoods.
Lack of fishing boats and equipment. Many fishermen depend on old second-hand boats with inefficient 8 hp engines and inadequate equipment. Jaffna had more than 550 3.5t trawlers in 1990 but it has none at present. OBM boats, vallams and catamarans have also been reduced.	Revive/strengthen Fishermen's Cooperatives (FCs). Mobilise funds to provide grants and to set up revolving funds to extend credit to needy fishermen to rebuild their capital stock through FCs; revive the boat building and fishing net industry in Jaffna.
Lack of cold storage Loss of marketable surplus due to lack of	Provide cold storage facilities; improve collection.

storage and timely collection by traders → loss of income	
Lack of efficient marketing facilities (see above)	Improve marketing facilities; improve collection by introducing more trucks with cold storage facilities. Consult leaders of the FCs Federation, Jaffna Chamber of Commerce and marketing agencies in Colombo.
Lack of processing facilities	Develop processing facilities; revive export of high value seafood, assist FCs Federation
Lack of efficient transport facilities	Related to above.
Lack of landing sites	Remove/reduce restrictions on mobility (time and distance); facilitate sharing of existing landing sites; assist construction of new sites in environmentally safer areas.
LTTE's taxes	Remove taxation of small fishermen; Provide loan facilities to fishermen and local traders through TRO, etc.
Poaching by Indian and other foreign fishermen/ big companies	Take immediate action; dispel widespread perception in the North that SL Navy is colluding with the poachers (especially the Indian) against local fishermen and against national interest.
Displaced fisher families living in welfare centres for many years without alternative livelihoods	Address this as an urgent problem; assist them to find alternative livelihood.

not tax the small fishermen and fish vendors. It should encourage its development agencies to play a more active role in assisting the fishermen to rebuild their livelihoods.

It should be evident from the above that much can be done within the existing security constraints. What is needed is a special livelihood construction package for the fishing communities of the

North in the current and interim phases. Such a package should be designed with due consideration to the peculiarities of the security situations in different parts of the peninsula and the needs of the fishermen to practice lagoon and sea fishing. The authorities will do well not to forget that the environment and people's livelihoods are inseparable and the former cannot be protected as long as the latter is not seriously addressed. ■

Dr. N. Shanmugaratnam is Professor at the Agricultural University, Norway.

lines - May 2003 Vol. 2 No.1

Articles by Vasuki Nesiah, Nanthikesan, Ahilan Kadirgamar, Yasmin Tambiah, Sophia Elek, Muttukrishna Sarvananthan, Jean Dreze, C.R.de Silva, Pradeep Jeganathan