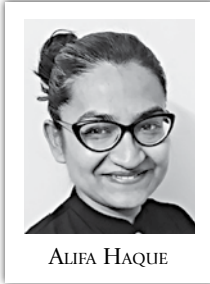


# INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

## From the distant coastline

Mitigating the disconnect between policymakers and fishers in coastal Bangladesh is key for ecological sustainability



ALIFA HAQUE

**T**HE concepts of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), blue economy or global biodiversity targets have gained traction in Bangladesh, so much so that it would not be unfair to say that the terms and phrases are often overly

used. However, what is lacking is a coherent understanding of achieving these goals or creating a process pathway at the local level. Existing conservation mechanisms are devoid of meaningful consultation with affected communities, leading to inequality, a vicious cycle of poverty, expensive and ineffective policies and inevitable non-compliance.

I specialise in marine species conservation in the Bay of Bengal, particularly sharks and rays. My work adopts an interdisciplinary lens placed at the crossroads of the biological and social sciences. In my studies, which are heavily dependent on fieldwork in the remotest parts of Bangladesh, from Dublar Char to St Martin's Island, I am striving to answer critical conservation questions and mainstream local ecological knowledge in the pursuit of answering them. When I began my work in 2016, I only felt passionate about saving all sharks and rays. After five years, I have realised that conservation is not a one-way street where we save the fish and forget the fishers.

I have no qualms admitting that there was a time when I would only think about the fish in our seas. In the not too distant past, I wrote: "Our study (2016-2020), in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh region, found an estimated 67,000-13,533,800 individuals of sharks and rays were caught per trip within the artisanal fishery. An average of 8,000-20,000 tonnes of annual shark landing and an 80-335 percent unreported trade is alarming because this includes protected species heading to unnoticed extinction due to their low resilience to fisheries pressure. All these unreported-by-catches happen to consist of at least 85 species, including 10 Critically Endangered and 22 Endangered species (sawfish, guitarfish, hammerhead sharks, manta rays), threatened with extinction. The high catch rates are due to either targeted or

unintentional interaction of fishing with these species which needs to be halted."

Yet when I began to envision what by-catch mitigation efforts may look like, I was exposed to vastly untapped vulnerabilities of fishers, which prevented them from taking positive conservation decisions. Coastal fishers in Bangladesh are poverty prone due to debt-driven fishing practices. Most of them do not own boats and nets, and they do not have a secondary source of income, efficient markets, or any facilitation to adhere to regulations. Financial vulnerabilities of fishers are exacerbated by limited access to information and technology, lack of safety at sea, or of basic amenities like education, healthcare and social security. There is little interest or political will in creating better markets that operate sustainably and ensure equal opportunities for all fishers. Yet profits from sustainable practices being returned to fishers, thereby reducing poverty and ensuring better livelihoods, could have been an equitable and effective first step towards sustainable fishing practices and species conservation. What I am trying to say is, fish and fishers are inherently and invariably interconnected. I learned that species conservation is primarily about people. However, there is a huge disconnect between global and national policies for marine conservation and small-scale fisheries protection.

During countless conversations with fishers, my team and I talked about by-catch mitigation, live release of Critically Endangered species and overall protection for critical habitats which may conflict with fishing grounds. It is worth remembering, 29 species of sharks and rays are protected under the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act (WCSA), 2012. However, the WCSA 2012 and other conservation laws and policies do not "speak" to the fishers. And because they do not speak to fishers, they are by and large ineffective.

How do we know that the laws don't reach the fishers? We interviewed more than a thousand coastal fishers engaged in sharks and ray fisheries in almost all coastal fishing communities. In 2016, most of the fishers spoke to had limited knowledge about the protected status of sharks and rays. Although in subsequent years, a small number of fishers showed some knowledge of some laws, they did not know which species were protected.



Spadenose shark being dried in one of the fish drying centres in Cox's Bazar.

PHOTO: ALIFA HAQUE

They did not know what to do if they accidentally caught a protected shark. Often during our conversations, we would become the interviewees. Fishers would ask us a range of thought-provoking questions: who is going to provide the lost income if targeted fisheries are prohibited? What is going to happen if we discard dead sharks at sea out of fear of being fined or jailed? Will our livelihood-related problems be solved if we take positive conservation decisions? And so on.

These questions come from a place where some fishers "knew" about some of the laws and regulations but hardly possessed any clarity or acceptance about such laws, or access to knowledge/information or facilitation to adhere to them. In short, "awareness" remains mainly absent, despite fisheries compensation schemes and awareness generation programmes in Bangladesh. We need to be conscious of the difference between "knowing" the law and being "aware" of it. The effectiveness of such laws and policies is directly dependent upon awareness of them, which is achieved only when one possesses a deeper understanding and accept why they need to be adhered to.

This brings us to a more fundamental

question. Why are these laws not working? In my view, what is critically missing here is democracy in real terms, which ensures fishers' participation when marine conservation laws, regulations and policies are framed and having their voices heard, respected and represented during that process. This is what will ensure the generation of the so-far elusive "awareness".

In Bangladesh, the very existence and application of conservation laws are top-down. The law-making process does not consider crucial and indispensable local knowledge of fishers, let alone empower them. They are framed in a way that fails to consider the external impacts of those laws. For instance, when a particular law bans the fishing of sharks from a specific date, it looks good on paper, which may be a triumph for a conservationist. Still, it does not consider the income lost by fishers. As a result, most of the time, these regulations only prevail on paper. Even if they are enforced to an extent, it may come with corruption, and uninformed and unprepared governance.

One cannot help but ask: how will bans be effective when fishers' earnings are below minimum wage? It all comes down to the

overarching capitalistic way of growth that has hazardedly increased the unequal distribution of wealth and marginalisation of the poor. When the lion's share of earnings goes to the money-lending boat owners and private companies, keeping the bare minimum for the actual fishers—we need to seriously think about the existing unjust financial mechanisms relating to marine and coastal fisheries in Bangladesh. Global landings data reveals that the average fishing wages in many countries that are home to a substantial share of fishers are below their national determined minimum wage. These result in the loss of legitimacy of laws and regulations relating to marine conservation.

Collectively, our results from the field portray the marginalisation of fishers, which takes place because global and national conservation laws and policies, in many cases, treat them as less important than marine species. In stark contrast, projects focusing on human well-being look at species as of secondary interest. Our results highlight the unresolved conundrum in marine conservation laws, which seeks to protect threatened sharks and rays but fails to accommodate the welfare of small-scale fishers.

Ecological sustainability must be grounded in the well-being of the fishers and the fish together through well thought out socio-ecological policies. We call for a regime change in the way we frame marine conservation laws and policies devised in high offices, detached from the coastline. Pre-policy discussions with fishers to understand the acceptance level and feasibility of laws and policies that are being framed are the need of the hour. This may sound difficult and time- and resource-consuming, but it will be a worthwhile pursuit given that problems arising from ineffective and impractical policies will lead to expensive and irreversible consequences. Human beings are known to adhere to rules they believe in and have taken part in creating. Abiding by restrictions disseminated through signboards and summons only go so far. Through a true "behavioural change" in the offices of lawmakers, Bangladesh can lead efforts from the Global South that will collectively secure the future of the fish and fishers of the world.

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## Rethinking international aid practices in Bangladesh

The microcosm of the global aid industry we see in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar needs to be questioned more



MALIHA KHAN

**W**HILE the pandemic was a first in recent times, there has been an international aid system in place for decades now to deal with the fallout of war, hunger, poverty, refugees, and forced displacement. Yet, that system is beset

with failings to include primarily the voices of the affected—over whose entire lives, others, who may not even know them personally or contemplate living in their shoes for a day, call all the shots.

Outgoing UN aid chief Mark Lowcock recently said that the humanitarian system, much of which is funded under the UN umbrella, does "not pay enough attention to what people caught up in crises say they want, and then trying to give that to them." It "is still set up to give people in need what international agencies and donors think is best, and what we have to offer, rather than giving people what they themselves say they most need," the UN Under-Secretary General for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief said last month.

He cited aid camps in Cox's Bazar and Chad where people provided with aid were selling off some of what they received, for things they wanted more. Anyone who has worked in or visited Cox's Bazar in the last four years has seen the markets that sprung up to sell relief items distributed to the refugees such as blankets, sanitary pads, fortified cereal, and dal, especially in the bazars or on roads on the way to and from the refugee camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf. Considering they can't earn and have no money, what the refugees repeatedly said they did want was more food options or the cash to buy chicken or fresh fish and vegetables for a well-rounded meal for their families.

"Accountability runs mostly to the donors, not to the affected people," Mark Lowcock also said. While still not entirely accountable to those they are providing aid to, it is now at least standard in the industry to take feedback from those affected and there is a drive for those affected to not just be consulted, but to be involved in decision-making. In a recent comprehensive report on refugee experiences and recommendations, titled "Anáar Báfana" (*Our Thoughts in Rohingya*), brought out by the NGO ACAPS and the IOM, refugees emphasised that it was not enough to be included in discussions but not in decision-making. "Rohingya participants feel overwhelmingly frustrated and helpless as passive recipients of aid and many are losing faith in humanitarians and feel that discussing their issues is pointless," stated the report.

However, it's not just the people in crisis aid agencies don't listen to; historically, it is people from the Global South in general. For a while now, debate has raged about the decolonisation of aid, a system where Western donors and practitioners have long imposed their decisions

in humanitarian settings and in particular, control funding and leadership positions.

Global aid still works with the principles popularised in the 1960s and 1970s, when famines and subsequent interventions led to a continuation of the white saviour complex that is still rooted in the system today. In the 1990s, the humanitarian system flourished as civil wars raged in several countries with Western humanitarians going to the most dangerous places in the world to make their



PHOTO: COLLECTED

fame (and fortune—it's a myth that aid workers are underpaid). Since then, however, the global aid industry has come under backlash for the parachuting nature of foreigners flying in with Western solutions to fix crises in poorer countries, the oligarchy large aid agencies have formed, and the omnipresent paternalism and sometimes outright colonial attitudes donors in the Global North hold towards those affected, and development practitioners, in the Global South.

Large INGOs and UN agencies dominate the country's aid landscape, commanding the largest amounts of funding while the rest scramble for what they can get, with local NGOs at the bottom of the food chain. Many local NGOs, which had been at the forefront of the developing Rohingya refugee crisis for years, were quickly pushed to the back of the room while predominantly European and American-based organisations and people flew in following the largest refugee influx into Cox's Bazar in 2017.

What has emerged since in Cox's Bazar very much displays the traditionally skewed power dynamics, where UN agencies and INGOs are at the top of the pyramid with national and local NGOs largely being treated as subcontractors. And while the INGOs and UN agencies hire locals and other Bangladeshis, leadership at these organisations is almost exclusively from the Global North. The uneven power dynamics are reflected in different pay scales for those from the Global North and those here in the

Global South—the same position fulfilled by an American or a Bangladeshi with the equivalent level of skills and experience would be very different. It is evident in a two-tier hiring practice at these aid organisations where skilled locals and nationals are only hired for low-paid frontline jobs while aid workers from the Global North, transplanted in from headquarters or another crisis for a short time, are placed in leadership positions.

While those part of the system are not necessarily at fault and have inherited a hegemonic structure within which they have to work, national staff in the UN system should reckon with the fact that they will almost never rise to the top of a system that is stacked against them. Even at the highest levels of the UN, leadership for certain positions goes to certain countries by default and not through any semblance of merit. Outgoing Mark Lowcock, for instance, will most likely be replaced as head of humanitarian affairs by another Briton put forward by the UK. In a system set up decades ago, the five countries that emerged victors from World War II sit permanently on the Security Council and can veto decisions on the fates of the other 190 countries. In a more informal power-sharing practice, they also put forward their own people for five of the top leadership positions in the UN.

That the UN agencies are as fallible as other organisations, and whose scale alone means it is more fallible in cases, is not a narrative well-acknowledged in the country. The current aid industry is pointlessly bureaucratic, has seen large-scale failure in several countries and disasters, and is based on an outdated global standing that emerged from the fallout of the Second World War. Global aid narratives now acknowledge bloated organisational capacity and misused resources, which sees a large portion going to administration and marketing rather than actual causes, and it's time we did too.

Jargon-y aid work means various days are celebrated in the name of tackling crucial social and humanitarian issues such as ending violence against women and children, but which has become about wearing a certain colour and holding empty-of-actual-meaning conferences and workshops that few outside of the organisations watch or read about. Many of these practices have seeped into local and national NGOs' work, which depend on the UN and donor governments for funding and work on projects based on donor agendas. The amount of funding national and local NGOs have to work with, however, is minuscule in comparison—passing through several hands before some, after operations costs at every level, dribbles down to the local implementing NGO. In the "Grand Bargain" agreement, donors and international aid organisations pledged to allot 25 percent of all funds to local and national organisations "as directly as possible" and to reduce transactional costs. Local NGOs in Cox's Bazar, in particular, have been clamouring for

this practice to become commonplace for some time now.

Involving those affected, rethinking how aid can be provided and distributed in a fair and dignified way, and channeling greater funds to training and capacity development here and directly in the refugee camps and other crisis areas can go

some way in addressing international aid practices often inconsistent with realities in the Global South. Locals and affected communities themselves can take care of their own and the global aid industry should work towards making this the norm, not the exception.

Maliha Khan is a journalist at *The Daily Star*.



IOM International Organization for Migration  
OIM Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations  
OIM Organización Internacional para las Migraciones

**INVITATION TO SUBMIT EXPRESSION OF INTEREST**  
(For Short listing of Construction Companies)

**Reference No: REI- BD21-010**  
19-May-2021

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is an intergovernmental humanitarian organization established in 1951 and is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits both migrants and society.

In the framework of Health and Gender Support Project for Cox's Bazar District, IOM now invites Expression of Interest (EOI) from Construction Companies for the **Reconstruction of Community Clinics in Cox's Bazar District**. Along with this invitation, drawings are shared for reference to the interested bidder.

The Expression of Interest shall contain information on the following:

- range of relevant construction services offered,
- qualification and experience of relevant professionals and technical personnel currently maintained and proposed for the implementation of this project.
- track record and experience of the Construction Company in similar assignment including list of major clients served and
- other relevant information.

The Expression of Interest shall be submitted in original and duplicate copy and should be received either by hand or through mail by IOM with office address at **Muktijodha Building Complex, Motel Road, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh** no later than **14:00 hours 2nd June 2021**.

On the basis of the above information, IOM shall draw up the shortlist of Construction Companies and only short-listed Construction Companies will be invited to submit technical and financial proposals.

Interested Construction Companies may obtain further information from IOM Website at <https://bangladesh.iom.int/opportunities/work-as-service-provider>

IOM reserves the right to accept or reject any Expression of Interest, and to annul the selection process and reject all Expression at any time, without thereby incurring any liability to the affected Companies/Service Providers.

Very truly yours,  
IOM Cox's Bazar Procurement Unit