

National Conclave of Small Scale Fisherfolk

Securing Tenure Rights and Advancing Climate Justice



 State Agriculture Management & Extension Training Institute,
Narendrapur, West Bengal

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Background

India's small-scale fisheries form the backbone of the country's aquatic food systems, employing millions and sustaining coastal and inland communities across states. Despite their ecological sustainability and contribution to local food security, small-scale fishworkers face growing precarity due to climate change, industrialization, policy neglect, and the increasing dominance of aquaculture and large-scale corporate fishing. The consultation on Small-Scale Fisheries, organized by ActionAid Association in partnership with the Global Partnership Network, brought together fishworker leaders, researchers, civil society representatives, and activists to deliberate on the challenges confronting fishing communities and to strengthen collective advocacy for tenure, livelihood, and gender justice.



Photograph 1 Panel Discussion: Tenure Rights and Legal Gaps

Programme Overview

Workshop Proceedings and Key Issues Discussed

1. Status of Small-Scale Fisheries in India

Participants noted that small-scale fishers account for nearly 90% of India's fishing workforce, yet remain largely unrecognized in official data. Definitions of who qualifies as a fisher remain unclear, with many practicing multiple livelihoods due to seasonal vulnerabilities. Aquaculture has overtaken capture fishing globally, raising concerns about

ecological imbalance and dispossession of traditional fishing communities. While global production and trade in fish have expanded, the livelihoods of small-scale fishers have become increasingly insecure. Discussions emphasized the urgent need to strengthen documentation and advocacy for recognizing small-scale fishworkers as primary custodians of India's aquatic ecosystems.

2. Tenure Rights and Legal Gaps

The consultation underscored that small-scale fisherfolk remain *legal non-entities*—unlike farmers, who are recognized under agrarian laws. Development projects, port expansions, and protected area declarations have frequently led to the eviction of fishing communities without due consultation. Participants from multiple states—Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Manipur, and West Bengal—shared how privatization of water bodies and contract-based systems have further marginalized traditional fishers. Calls were made to enact a **national law guaranteeing tenure rights** for small-scale fishers, ensuring access to and control over water bodies. Participants demanded legal recognition for fisherfolk, participatory management of aquatic resources, and community-led monitoring of environmental degradation.

3. Women in Fisheries: Invisibility and Struggle for Recognition

The panel on women fishworkers brought to light the severe gender disparities in the sector. Despite their central role in processing, vending, and sustaining fishing households, women remain invisible in fisheries policy and welfare boards. They face multiple challenges—lack of identity cards, exclusion from compensation during fishing bans, and limited access to cooperatives and financial schemes. Speakers highlighted cases of harassment, unsafe market conditions, inadequate sanitation facilities, and additional unpaid care work. The discussion called for an **exclusive national policy for women fishworkers**, ensuring recognition, financial inclusion, infrastructure support, and legal entitlements. Strengthening women's cooperatives and leadership in the fisheries value chain was seen as key to achieving equity.



Photograph 2 Panel Discussion: Rights of Women Fish Workers

4. Climate Change and Fisherfolk Livelihoods

Participants from across India shared lived experiences of climate-induced disruptions—floods, cyclones, pollution, and rising temperatures. In Bihar and Assam, erratic rainfall and floods have destroyed riverbank settlements, while in Odisha and coastal Maharashtra, sea-level rise and erosion have displaced entire villages. Speakers emphasized that **climate justice frameworks must integrate fisherfolk rights**, calling for fair compensation, comprehensive rehabilitation, and protection of mangrove ecosystems. The need for a **Coastal Employment Guarantee Scheme** to support fishers during lean and disaster periods was strongly advocated. The intersection of climate change with class, caste, and gender inequalities was recognized as a critical challenge.



Photograph 3 Plenary: Climate Change Impacts on Fisherfolk Livelihoods

Culmination in the Charter of Demands

The consultation culminated in the collective drafting and release of a **Charter of Demands**, articulating the aspirations and rights-based claims of small-scale fisherfolk across India. Developed through extensive deliberations and contributions from participants, the Charter was finalized and issued in **three languages—Hindi, English, and Bangla** to ensure accessibility and ownership by communities across regions.

The Charter serves as a comprehensive framework to guide advocacy, policy engagement, and collective mobilization. It calls for urgent and sustained state action to secure tenure, livelihood, gender, and climate justice for fisherfolk communities. The demands are organized across four broad domains:

1. Legal Demands

- Legal recognition of small-scale fishers as a distinct category with enforceable rights to tenure, water bodies, and social protection.
- Grant of free fishing rights and resolution of conflicts arising from sanctuary designations.
- Abolition of the contractor system and recognition of community ownership over inland water bodies.

2. Tenure Rights

- Secure tenure rights for small-scale fishers and participation in decisions on protected areas, ports, and tourism projects.
- Right to access and manage water bodies for fishing and aquaculture.
- Land rights for pre- and post-harvest activities.
- Right to protect and restore water bodies and fish resources from pollution, encroachment, and unsustainable exploitation.
- Preferential and inalienable access rights for small-scale fishers.
- Protection from eviction and exploitation under lease arrangements, with guaranteed tenure security.
- Regular water body audits to monitor ecological and social integrity.

3. Women Fishworkers' Rights

- Adoption of an **exclusive policy for women fishworkers**, ensuring gender-segregated data collection and policy inclusion.
- Equal wages, dignified working conditions, and women-specific welfare schemes.
- Preferential access to infrastructure (markets, toilets, drying platforms), credit, training, and cooperatives.
- Recognition and protection of half-widows, with timely compensation for loss of partners at sea.

- Establishment of medical camps, social security mechanisms, and safeguards in markets and transport systems.
- Promotion of women-led cooperatives, SHGs, and producer groups.

4. Climate and Environmental Justice

- Preferential access to fish resources as a climate resilience measure.
- Accurate weather forecasting, safer anchorage facilities, and climate-resilient storage systems.
- Ban on destructive fishing practices such as bottom trawling and purse seining.
- Establishment of a **Climate Compensation Fund** and climate-resilient housing for coastal and inland fishers.
- Participatory disaster management frameworks and inclusive policy design.
- Independent scientific assessment of inland water bodies and pollution control.

5. Miscellaneous Demands

- Allocation of 3% of the Union budget to fishworker welfare.
- Regulation of fish prices and eradication of the middleman system.
- Legal recognition of traditional ecological knowledge and its integration in fisheries management.
- Comprehensive rehabilitation framework for erosion and flood-affected communities.
- Recognition of subsistence fishing as a **nutrition security right** beyond its economic value.

The Charter represents the collective voice of India’s small-scale fisherfolk—a declaration of rights rooted in justice, equity, and sustainability. It affirms that fishworkers are not beneficiaries but custodians of the aquatic commons, whose recognition and empowerment are essential for a just blue economy.



Photograph 4 Participants from across India

Conclusion

The consultation marked a significant step in consolidating national dialogue on small-scale fisheries in India. It foregrounded the intersectional realities of caste, class, gender, and ecological justice within the sector. Participants stressed that small-scale fisherfolk are not merely beneficiaries but *custodians of aquatic commons*—their recognition in law, policy, and practice is essential to achieving sustainable and equitable blue economies.

The event concluded with a call to action: to build a stronger, inclusive, and rights-based movement that ensures every fisher, especially women and marginalized communities, have secure access to their livelihoods and waters.

Annexure: **Programme Overview**

Welcome and Inaugural Session

Speaker: Ms. Dipali Sharma, Director – Organisational Effectiveness, ActionAid Association

Context-Setting Plenary: Status of Small-Scale Fisheries in India

Speaker: Mr. Sandeep Chachra, Executive Director, ActionAid Association

Panel Discussion: Tenure Rights and Legal Gaps

Panellists:

- Mr. Pradeep Chatterjee, President, National Platform for Small Scale Fish workers (NFSF)
- Mr. Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues, General Secretary, NFSF
- Mr. Ramananda Wangkheirakpam, Indigenous Peoples Perspective, Manipur
- Mr. Yogendr Sahni, Ganga Mukti Aandolan, Bihar
- Mr. Gulab Singh Jhariya, Bhim Nagar Fishermen Cooperative Society, Madhya Pradesh
- Mr. Debasish Shyamal, President, DMF
- Mr. Uday, Ganga Mukti Aandolan, Bihar

Panel Discussion: Rights of Women Fish Workers

Panellists:

- Mr. Swapan Panda, Chairman, UPMCSL (A Fisherfolk Producer Organisation)
- Ms. Esther Mariaselvam, Associate Director, ActionAid Association
- Ms. Ch. Renuka, Amma Bhavani Fisherfolk Society
- Ms. Juliet Theresita, Centre for Community Services
- Ms. Bandana Jena, Samudram
- Mr. Saurabh Kumar, State Head, Bihar, ActionAid Association

Plenary: Climate Change Impacts on Fisherfolk Livelihoods

Panellists:

- Mr. Mrinal Gohain, Regional Manager – Northeast, ActionAid Association
- Mr. Ratnam, Advisor to Fisherfolk Communities and Climate Change Activist
- Mr. Mahendra Yadav, Koshi Nav Nirman Manch, Bihar
- Mr. Pramod Kalita, Seven Weaves
- Mr. Mustaq Ahmed Lone, Kashmir

- Mr. More Balu Shantaram, Eklavya Adivasi Machhimar Society
- Mr. Debabrat Patra, Associate Director, ActionAid Association

Solidarity Platform Formation and Drafting of the **Charter**

Panellists:

- Mr. Pradip Chatterjee, President, NFSF
- Ms. Iyca Malhotra, ActionAid Association
- Dr. Irfan Nanaksha, ActionAid Association
- Ms. Reshmi Bhattacharyya, ActionAid Association

Release of the Charter

With representatives from all participating states and fisherfolk groups

Closing Remarks

Speaker: Mr. Sandeep Chachra, Executive Director, ActionAid Association

Backdrop for the Event:



GEF Partnership Network

exceed
EXCELLENCE IN EXTENSION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

DIARD
Directorate of Inland Fisheries Research and Extension
Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

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