



Securing Myanmar's Inshore Fisheries

Inshore fisheries' critical role in the food security and development of millions of Myanmar people

Woman cooking on the shores of Sittwe harbor. Photo by TJ Webster

SECTOR SNAPSHOT

Inshore fisheries are those less than 10 nm from the shore, including estuary fisheries and other fisheries along the coastal zone.

- Nearly half (48.68%) of Myanmar's population live in coastal states and regions.
- Coastal habitats are varied and include coral reefs, sea grass beds, mangroves, mud flats and rocky shores.
- Coastal habitats are important for Myanmar's impressive marine biodiversity, which includes endangered species such as dugongs, marine turtles and migratory shore birds.
- Fishers use small-scale gears (seines and stow nets, long lines, gill nets and traps) and target numerous species (fish, molluscs and crustaceans).
- Locally processed inshore fisheries products are a major nutritional component of the Myanmar diet and are particularly important in the dry zone and upland areas.

- Women play a vital role in Myanmar's inshore fisheries, particularly in connection with fish processing and related activities.

SUMMARY

Myanmar's inshore fisheries support the livelihoods of millions of Myanmar citizens living in coastal areas. However, in recent years, the capacity of these fisheries to support viable livelihoods and contribute significantly to local economies has come under threat. This policy brief sets out five priority areas that need immediate attention if coastal resources are to recover to more productive levels and if fisher communities are to continue to benefit from these resources. These actions must be aligned with key development principles including working through partnerships, promoting co-management and striving for greater gender equality.

KEY MESSAGES

- Management of inshore fisheries resources can be improved.
- Improved information and statistics on inshore fisheries management can be collected.
- Laws and policies affecting inshore fisheries can be harmonized.
- Coastal communities can be strengthened and fisheries-based livelihoods safeguarded.
- Closer alignment of Union and state/regional level agencies and institutions can improve inshore fisheries management and law enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar's inshore fisheries support the livelihoods of millions of Myanmar citizens living in the coastal zone. These people are among the most marginalized, poorest and most vulnerable people in Myanmar society. The coastal zone is also home to some of Myanmar's distinct ethnic minorities such as the "Salone" people of Tharyintharyi. Coastal fishing families are often asset poor, landless and have limited livelihood alternatives.

Lifting the inhabitants of coastal fishing communities out of poverty must be an important part of Myanmar's social and economic development. However, the capacity of inshore fisheries to support fisheries-based livelihoods and make a significant contribution to the local economy is under threat from a number of sources including, reductions in fish stocks, damage to critical habitats, and environmental pollution and disasters.

Sustaining and increasing the contribution of inshore fisheries to poverty reduction and food security requires addressing three interrelated problems. Firstly, the overharvesting of stocks combined with insecure tenure and competition with other users has degraded the resource base. Secondly, the sustainability of inshore fisheries is threatened by changes in the multiple uses and users of the coastal resources. Thirdly, even where local innovations address some of these threats, there is inadequate policy recognition of the importance of inshore fisheries and poor alignment of Union, state/regional and local institutions.

The challenge is to put in place governance and management frameworks that will secure a productive future for inshore fisheries and the communities that depend upon them. These frameworks must achieve a balance between meeting human well-being needs and sustaining the well-being of coastal resources.

Meeting this challenge requires coordinated action from Union and state/regional institutions working with coastal communities to re-visualise how coastal resources can be governed effectively. Many of the building blocks to do this are already in place, and while stock and natural resources recovery is a long-term challenge, much progress can be made in the short term through timely and strategic actions. In this policy brief, we highlight five key opportunities for action that will allow inshore fisheries and fisheries communities to play a productive and significant role in Myanmar's immediate and long-term future.

1. STRENGTHEN COASTAL COMMUNITIES AND SAFEGUARD FISHERIES-BASED LIVELIHOODS

Empowering and strengthening of coastal communities will be fundamental to Myanmar's social and economic progress. Empowerment can occur through giving coastal communities a stronger voice and greater role in rule-making and in fisheries co-management responsibilities. Such an approach has proven successful in many countries in the region.

Through fisheries co-management arrangements, community awareness of laws, rules and regulations relating to natural resource use will be improved. Management mechanisms can be localized by recognizing and valuing traditional and customary fishing practices and the indigenous knowledge of communities.

In many coastal communities, most if not all families depend on fishing for their livelihood. To reduce dependency on a single activity, new livelihood options like small-scale aquaculture and eco-tourism, as well as technical support to improve traditional women-led value-addition practices such as fish processing, need to be promoted in coastal communities. In this regard,

Fisheries "Co-management" is a partnership arrangement between communities and government in which responsibility and authority for management are shared.

Progress has been made in creating laws to better manage fisheries at local scales. In 2015, Rakhine passed a new Freshwater Fisheries Law that was drafted following extensive consultation with communities, private sector actors, NGOs and CBOs. This new law explicitly supports community fisheries organisations and small-scale fisheries development.



Inshore fishermen unloading catches in Sittwe. Photo by TJ Webster

2. HARMONIZE LAWS AND POLICIES FOR INSHORE FISHERIES

There is currently some confusion and conflict among Union, regional and state legislation and regulations, which is constraining inshore fisheries legal reform. Coherence among these laws is the foundation for effective decentralized governance and the improved management of fisheries. A strong legal foundation for co-management arrangements is the basis for empowering communities.

We recommend a comprehensive review of Myanmar's natural resource laws and policies to enable more effective policy and regulation in support of the reform of inshore fisheries governance. Greater participation by communities and local institutions as well as the integration of traditional/customary laws will result in greater acceptance of and compliance with laws and policies. An important component of legal and law policy reform will be a reduced emphasis on revenue collection and a greater focus on the sustainable development of inshore fisheries and communities. Harmonized Union and state/regional laws and policies will provide a solid foundation for securing the contribution of inshore fisheries for future food security and development.

3. STRENGTHEN INTEGRATION AND COORDINATION TO IMPROVE MANAGEMENT AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

The Myanmar Constitution supports the decentralization of inshore fisheries authority to States and Regions. A review of this decentralization process is required so that States and Regions can be guided on ways to harmonize approaches to the governance of inshore fisheries. Collaboration between different Union and State/Regional organizations is essential for improving inshore fisheries management. For example, 1) coastal communities frequently complain about the number of offshore fishing vessels fishing illegally in shallow coastal areas. Surveillance of illegal fishing and enforcement of fisheries laws requires close cooperation between and coordination among several different bodies, including the Department of Fisheries (DoF), Navy, coastguard, and communities. 2) The protection of coastal conservation areas

CONCLUSIONS

These five actions are required urgently if Myanmar's inshore fisheries are to be secured for future generations. We believe that progress towards implementing these five proposed actions can only be done through the establishment of partnerships involving government, CSOs, NGOs, the private sector and communities. These partnerships would begin to "turn the tide" on the damaging practices that are degrading these resources and threatening the viability of coastal community livelihoods.

is regarded as a major strategy to achieve fisheries sustainability. Clarification of responsibilities and improved cooperation between environment agencies and the DoF is also required. 3) In many of Myanmar's coastal areas, tourism is growing fast. Cooperation between tourism related agencies and the DoF, is essential so that responsible (eco-)tourism is promoted and coastal resources, including fish stocks, are not damaged as a result of poorly planned infrastructure development and waste management.

4. IMPROVE THE MANAGEMENT OF INSHORE FISHERIES RESOURCES

Critical to managing Myanmar's inshore fisheries resources is the need to strengthen existing fisheries management systems and develop new approaches. To begin with, inshore fisheries boundaries are poorly defined and variable across states/regions and need to be standardized and delineated. This should be followed by an institutional review of the DoF's management functions, structures, and working practices, including revenue collection and allocation. New fishing gear license collection arrangements should be developed that are transparent and not overly burdensome to fishing communities.

Given the widespread threat to inshore fisheries from illegal fishing, there is a critical need to develop and implement strategies, involving all co-management partners (DoF, NGOs, the private sector and communities) to eradicate illegal fishing. Capacity building of all partners in fisheries co-management will be critical. Special measures are required to protect and conserve Myanmar's most critical coastal habitats (coral reefs, mangroves and sea grass meadows) and their extraordinary biodiversity (e.g., dugongs and turtles).

5. IMPROVE INFORMATION AND STATISTICS FOR INSHORE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Information collection from coastal communities and fisheries currently focuses on licensing and fish production statistics for State/Regional and Union reporting. There are many inconsistencies in the statistics, and they provide a weak basis for effective fisheries management. There are currently no species-specific data collected on catch and effort in Myanmar inshore fisheries.

We recommend priority investment in the design and implementation of a national fisheries statistics system that includes inshore fisheries. Effective implementation of this system will require the integration of Township, District and State/Regional agencies as well as the training and resourcing of DoF officers in collecting, managing and analyzing these data. Information gathered should be explicitly linked to the improved sustainability of fisheries rather than solely for use in national production planning and reporting. More broadly, there is an urgent need to build Myanmar's fisheries research capacity through establishing research partnerships between the DoF, universities, NGOs, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and communities and through strengthening the Fisheries Research Development Network.

PURPOSES

The aim of this brief is to inform policy makers at the Union and State/Regional level about:

1. The importance of inshore fisheries;
2. The threats that fishing communities face; and
3. Options for improving management of this sub-sector.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)



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