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Present wetland leasing system depriving fishermen **Syed Shoeb**

Around 90% fishermen are denied access to government-owned water bodies



Fishermen are seen fishing

Around 90% fishermen are denied access to government-owned water bodies under the existing system of leasing wetland areas, professionals said Tuesday.

Saying that the leasing process only allows a small quarter of fishermen to catch fishes and bars the rest of the fishing community, they added that the government needs to establish a community-based management that will benefit all families whose livelihoods depend on fishing.

The observations came at a roundtable titled “Strengthening Governance in Wetland and Water Bodies Management Policies” at city’s Daily Star conference hall. Brac University Vice-Chancellor Prof Ainun Nishat moderated the programme, organised by the university’s Institute of Governance Studies.

Speaking at the discussion, National Fishermen Association President Md Islam Ali said the existing wetland management policy, which was prepared by land ministry, is not fishermen-friendly and does not safeguard the livelihood of genuine fishermen.

“Let’s say some 20 fishermen signed a paper and created a cooperative to take lease of a water body in line with the existing provision. If there are 200 fishermen living near the swampland, 180 of them who did not join the cooperative - are no longer able to fish there,” he said.

Moreover, politically influential non-fishermen are also manipulating the leasing process and taking possession of water bodies, Ali pointed out.

The government policy defines “fisherman” as people who depend on catching and selling fish from natural sources for livelihood.

Strongly disagreeing with the definition, Ali said, “If it is enforced, the country will have no fishermen left in the long run.”

Rezaul Islam, a fisheries officer from Natore, also said the definition needs revision to help implement the policy in grassroots level.

“Recently one of our upazila fisheries officers was assaulted at his own office, over a dispute on who should be regarded as fishermen. Candidly speaking, most members of fishermen association in my district are non-fishermen,” he said.

World Fish Center Senior Fisheries Coordinator Dr Golam Mustafa said many fish species are at the risk of extinction in the country’s 27,896 wetland and water bodies.

“You cannot find 240 species of fish anywhere in the wetland nowadays. Only 10-12 species are found in abundance,” he said.

Addressing the programme, Prof Ainun Nishat said flood management, which is supportive of agriculture, did much harm to the country’s fisheries and biodiversity.

“Those who cultivate Boro paddy in raised beds require more water to facilitate irrigation, while people growing onion in low-lying land seek closure of sluice gates to control water flow. Since agriculture is high-priority for the government, fisheries are not getting the kind of attention it require.