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UN Development Goals: Sustaining the Southeast Asian Fisherman

By Serina Rahman

Synopsis

The UN Sustainable Development Goals highlight the need to protect the oceans, coastlines and small-scale fishermen. However, this may be in conflict with ASEAN's bid to reach the targets set out in the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint. Serious political will and effective on-the-ground effort will be vital in preserving Southeast Asia's highly endangered fishing heritage.

Commentary

THE UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the need to sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources. Aside from mooted the need to reduce marine pollution and the impacts of acidification, it specifically mentions the need to provide access for small-scale traditional fishers, regulate harvesting and end overfishing, as well as sustainably manage, protect and restore coastal ecosystems.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint also emphasises the need for sustainable use of coastal and marine resources; recommending a network of protected areas, the promotion of conservation and capacity-building coastal communities to participate in environmental sustainability. All this seems to bode well for the small-scale fisherman, but even with the policies in place, can he truly benefit from and contribute to the conservation and long-term preservation of his coastal areas?

No fisherman is an island

In truth, the ASEAN traditional fisherman has much to lose in the coming decade. Southeast Asia is booming and coastal development is at the forefront of this growth. The small-scale fisherman is already at the mercy of huge coastal tourism and property developments which usually entails reclamation and dredging in or around his favourite fishing sites; destroying mangrove, seagrass and mudflat gleaning sites and fish nurseries.

At times, entire communities are displaced. Coastal areas have seen immense urbanisation as rural folk and businesses move for jobs and untold wealth. Burgeoning, poorly planned coastal towns lead to sewage issues and increased waste of all kinds. This decreases water quality, can lead to nutrient overloading, a lack of oxygen in the water, algal blooms and fish deaths. Sedimentation and erosion as a result of coastal construction or reinforcement affects water depths and clarity. Successful

tourism projects often brings with it increased demand for freshwater, and increased human and vessel traffic to already strained natural areas.

Can our economic targets be truly sustainable?

Part of the vision in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint is enhanced maritime transport. As a major maritime transportation hub, ASEAN states are already building new ports and airports on available coastlines and islands. AEC energy goals include interconnected gas pipelines; a rational consequence of oil and gas industry success, illustrated by ever-expanding coastal petrochemical industrial complexes.

Then what of the traditional or small-scale fishermen? Thriving natural habitats make way for ports, airport runways and oil bunkering facilities. Marine pollution from passing ships and the inevitable oil spill destroys the habitats that remain. The fisherman is voiceless against the powers of big business and government. Add to that developments on land that lead to pesticide and other run-offs - all negatively impacting the seas.

Many Southeast Asian nations depend on the fishing economy. Governments offer subsidies, grants and technologies to boost national catch figures. The fisherman also has to deal with increasing competition for limited and decreasing prey. As fish become harder to get, fishermen move down the food web, taking in species that were once 'trash fish' and bringing in smaller-sized fish. 'Improved' fishing methods decimate fish habitats and transshipment enables fishing to continue 24/7. Although artisanal fishermen usually remain nearer to shore, damaged fishing grounds sometimes force them to attempt the open sea - but these have already been plundered. The seas get no reprieve.

Is there a way forward?

The future seems rather bleak. We have not even mentioned climate change and its impacts on the fishermen, their catch and their villages. If nothing or not enough is done, already marginalised fishing communities stand to be the economic (or climate change) migrants of the future. As it is, many of the young are already looking for land-based work.

Some governments encourage aquaculture as a solution. However this has often resulted in mangrove decimation, pollution and damage to nearshore waters by aquaculture wastes and the introduction of weaker or invasive species. Not every fisherman has the capital to adapt, and for many it is a poor replacement for the hunt at sea. Environmental risks are high, but microfinancing has hurt fishermen more; instead of being just poor, they become poor and in debt. Any cash earned is used to service loans instead of paying for cash-dependent needs like their children's education.

Both the SDGs and the ASCC goals state their commitment to inclusive development and the elimination of poverty. ASEAN's ability to meet these targets will determine their success in helping marginalised fisherfolk. The SDG, ASCC and AEC goals cannot be tackled piecemeal. In order to restore fishstocks, some AEC goals may need to be moderated. To provide the small-scale fisherman with access to markets, there must first be healthy habitats and toxin-free fish for him to catch.

The 2015 WWF Living Blue Planet report has shown that fish populations used by humans have fallen by at least half. Marine and coastal conservation cannot be done in isolation of industrialisation on land and terrestrial conservation efforts. Marine parks and marine heritage areas need to include seagrass meadows and inter-tidal mudflats which are often subsistence fishing and gleaning sites, and the backbone of marine species survival, yet deemed insignificant and unimportant by those in power.

From the wives who are the mainstay of the fishing effort, processing the daily catch, to the children who should ideally be inheriting the region's proud fishing heritage, Southeast Asia's roots are in its fishing traditions and customs. Serious political will and effective on-the-ground efforts to help fishing communities cope with change, prevent further habitat destruction and implement effective controls on reckless development is vital. At stake are the survival of entire fishing communities and the traditional fishing heritage that makes up so much of Southeast Asia's history.

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