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THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS ON COASTAL FISHERIES IN SRI LANKA

SUMMARY

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The following is a summary of an extensive report that analyses the impacts of lockdowns imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on coastal fisheries in Sri Lanka prior to August 2020.

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- In response to the surge of COVID-19 cases across the globe, the Sri Lankan government imposed an island-wide police curfew on 20 March 2020, followed by lockdowns and travel restrictions of varying nature[1]. This study was conducted by Oceanswell to analyse the impacts of these restrictions on the coastal fishing communities around the island.

- Four hundred and fifteen surveys were conducted across 13 study sites along the coast of Sri Lanka from 29 July to 29 August 2020. The government had not reported community spread during this period. The main known impacts of COVID-19 on fisheries in Sri Lanka prior to the survey period were due to the island wide curfew, cross border mobility restrictions and trade regulations.

- Among the surveys conducted, 25% were from female fisheries actors, a majority of whom were processors.

- The study included fishers, sellers/traders and processors, all of whom reported that restrictions negatively impacted their respective fisheries related activity. The inability of fishers to go to sea disrupted the whole fisheries value chain. Eighty four percent of the respondents reported a decrease in their income, which could be attributed to the inaccessibility to the fisheries related activity, the decrease in consumer demand and the steep decline in export.

- A comparatively lower number of processors reported that the lockdown negatively impacted their work. This could be due to the longer shelf-life of their product, which renders more control over their stocks during market shocks such as this.

- Sea food price showed no clear trend in any direction. However, a larger number of offshore/deep-sea fishers reported a decline in seafood price. This could be attributed to the fact that they catch high value seafood[2], which was impacted by the decrease in purchasing power, trade restrictions and the decrease in export demand.

- The most common adaptation strategies reported were utilising savings and credit services, while a small number of respondents mentioned that they depended on the government allowance provided. The respondents requested financial assistance and better suited financial services such as lower interest loan schemes.
- Overall, this study showed that the inaccessibility to the ocean, and thereby fishing, negatively impacted small scale fisheries communities due to limited coping strategies and lack of alternative modes of income.

- The results of this study can be used as a model to predict and prepare for unforeseen shocks that can limit access to seafood stock and disrupt the fisheries value chain. The consequences of overfishing, climate change and climate change-induced factors such as storm surges, sea level rise and coastal flooding are examples of potential future shocks that can threaten seafood stocks and limit access to them. The results of which would render traditional fishing grounds unproductive and fishing gear and methods ineffective[3]. In response, larger vessels, longer trips and the development of new gear will be crucial to a viable future of the industry, these adaptation strategies will be more challenging for the increasingly vulnerable small-scale fishers[4].

- These compounding effects, along with pre-existing vulnerabilities, related to structural, social and economic inequality, can in turn increase the effect that COVID-19 and similar shocks will have on health and socio-economic factors in fisheries communities [5].

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