



Poverty evaluation in the Malaysian Fishery Community



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ABSTRACT

Despite the efforts of the Malaysian government, which were initiated in the 1990s to reduce the poverty level in Malaysia, many population groups and areas in Malaysia still require government support. The poverty level among fishermen, for example, has reached a critical level that requires immediate government support. There are a great number of factors for the failure of government intervention, one of which is insufficient information concerning the local living conditions. As a means to mitigate such failures, this study applies the Alkire and Foster multidimensional poverty index to a set of deprivation dimensions identified through a survey on Malaysian fishermen. The survey includes dimensions that are often missing, such as economic exploitation, physical safety, empowerment, and psychological well-being. The findings show that young Malaysian fishermen are more often multidimensionally poor. The results also show that the poverty of females employed as fishers or in fishing related work is greater than males in terms of insurance, health, and education. We found that multiple domains of deprivation complicate the efforts to tackle poverty among fishermen in all Malaysian states and ethnic groups, thereby requiring a more comprehensive and coordinated approach by the government.

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1. Introduction

Fishing constitutes the most significant source of income, employment, and food security among the poor and is important in households with poor quality farmland (Martin et al., 2013). However, fishing and crop farming are the two sectors in which the incidences of poverty are the greatest (Stanford et al., 2013; Rashed-Un-Nabi et al., 2011; Dien, 2009).

Fishing communities are frequently characterized by overcrowded and sub-standard living conditions, low levels of education, and poor access to services like schools, health care, and infrastructure, such as roads or markets. Access to fishing grounds may or may not be secure, and alternative employment opportunities are few (Béné and Friend, 2009, 2011). Poor land tenure is also a problem; many fishers do not have the rights to the property in which they live. As suggested by many studies, notwithstanding the aspect of income that plays a significant role in the poverty level of fishermen and other population groups, other variables, such as health and education, and access to basic amenities, constitute important dimensions of investigation for a

comprehensive analysis of this community (Lawson et al., 2012; Béné and Friend, 2009).

Marine fishermen are under increasing threat from environmental change, such as increasing sea surface temperatures, ocean acidification, and rising sea levels (Cochrane et al., 2009; Johnson and Welch, 2010). Fishermen are also affected by the economic policies, such as the Convertibility Plan, privatization of the main public utilities, deregulation of numerous economic activities and markets, and the progressive liberalization of foreign trade (UNEP, 2002).

Many studies have emphasized that, despite the natural resources, the poverty of fishing communities is dependent upon income and unemployment (Lawson et al., 2012). Bene (2003) showed that poverty among fishermen was explained through the intrinsic biological limits of the resource and the undisputable negative impact that resource degradation or depletion has on the livelihood of the fishermen (through income and food supply). Further studies showed that other factors affecting poverty include age and experience at sea (Primyastanto et al., 2013).

In order to reduce the poverty level of the fishing communities, various researchers have suggested different methods. Islam and Chuenpagdee (2013) recommended that poverty alleviation in small-scale fishing communities in Bangladesh requires intervention that not only targets risk minimization, but also the endowment of fishermen with socio-economic capital to assist them in

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managing varying degrees of risk and shock. A number of studies pointed out that co-management has contributed to improving the livelihood of the fishermen and alleviating their poverty through increased production, and enhancing the value of the fishermen and products of other stakeholders (Khan et al., 2012; Njifonjou et al., 2006).

Other studies argued that policies that improve the knowledge and practices of the fishermen (Retired and Mbezi, 2010), allocate resources among a larger population of small-scale fishermen (Eide et al., 2011), and promote the sharing of the experiences of successful fishermen with the fishing communities, governments and nongovernmental organizations (Chuenpagdee and Jentoft, 2011) would benefit not just the fishers but their entire households and communities by alleviating poverty and improving nutrition. Williams (2008) showed that the incidence of poverty among the fisheries households in the East Coast of Malaysia might have been lower if gender dimensions had received more attention.

Thorpe et al. (2006, 2008) believed that the representation of the fishing sector in national development discourse, in itself, does not guarantee an increase in the benefits derived from the resources of the fishermen, and a reduction in the poverty level and vulnerability of the fishermen.

While fishermen commodities demonstrated a strong contribution to domestic consumption and development in developing countries, especially in rural areas (Thorpe et al., 2006; Andrew et al., 2000; Allison et al., 2009), fishermen lived under conditions that make them vulnerable to natural disasters and social pressure (Chuenpagdee and Jentoft, 2011). As a developing country, Malaysia has experienced a high level of economic growth in recent decades. However, despite the steady positive growth of its economy, this country continues to suffer from relatively high levels of poverty, mainly in rural areas. For example, in 2009, in the rural areas of Sabah, approximately 33% of the population were poor and their headcount ratio was roughly 9%. However, in the urban areas of Sabah, poverty was estimated at 20% of the population with an approximate headcount of 5% (Department of statistics, 2009).

Ahmad et al. (2003) showed that the poverty rate of Malaysian commercial fishing households was higher at 10.2% compared to the traditional fishing households at 7.1%. However, Busing (2001) found that the Malaysian fishermen in the Banggi group of islands were among the poorest in Sabah with an average household income of below RM300, which was far below the poverty line. In addition, Yeo et al. (2007) showed that more than 80% of the husbands of the fishers in the East Coast of Malaysia did not have any paid employment, and, on average, over 70% of the household income was from fishing. Only one-third of households were above the official Malaysian poverty line. The socioeconomic overview study by Yahaya (2001) showed that women who were involved in shore-based activities in small-scale fisheries received an income that was far below the poverty line.

In general, fishermen in Malaysia as well as those in other developing countries, often flirt precariously with poverty. They predominantly reside in rural areas and often have poor access to basic amenities. The Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–10 (9MP) placed fishermen among the 70 000 poor families benefiting from the Skim Pembangunan Kesejahteraan Rakyat (Citizen Peace/Harmony/Wealth Development Scheme). The plan acknowledged that the poverty levels (in terms of income level and access to basic amenities) in the rural and agricultural areas of Malaysia, in which the majority of the fishing communities are located, are relatively high. In an attempt to remedy this unfortunate condition, the government introduced a special programme to diversify and enhance the sources of income of these communities.

The present study is based on a survey conducted on fishing communities throughout Malaysia in 2010. The survey sought to

research fishing communities to identify their state of welfare and the type of programme best suited to advance the welfare levels of fishing communities and improve their fishing methods. The success of the survey is dependent on an accurate assessment of the needs, opportunities, and outcomes of the fishermen, as well as an understanding of the barriers to inclusion based on the economic, cultural, and social environment.

The current study explores the disparities in the various dimensions of deprivation of the fishermen to better inform anti-poverty strategies. Recognizing the need for an in-depth investigation of multidimensional fisheries poverty, the present paper applies these concepts to investigate the situation of the fishermen in the specific emergency and conflict context of Malaysia. It also explores the patterns of multidimensional fishermen poverty and how they vary based on the demographic and geographical characteristics.

Traditional models use welfarist univariate monetary measures based on income or expenditure to define poverty (Trani and Cannings, 2013). Since these models are insufficient for assessing the well-being of individuals, the concentration of empirical studies in recent decades has been reluctant to assess poverty in individuals' attributes other than income. Whereas economic well-being, capability and social inclusion are treated as poverty indicating proxy concepts, which are monetary and non-monetary elements, the multidimensional approach incorporates all three as separate dimensions of poverty (Wagle, 2008). Multidimensional measures, which aggregate data across dimensions of poverty and then across poor individuals, provide more comprehensive and accurate outcomes than those from any unidimensional approach. It also provides an accurate, easy to comprehend, in-depth and integrated view of poverty that allows for change over time (Trani and Cannings, 2013; Bourguignon and Chakravarty, 2003). A major advantage of multidimensional indices is that they can show whether the same individuals influence from deprivations in different dimensions (Mittra et al., 2013).

2. Methodology

2.1. Data source

Our analysis uses data gathered through the above-mentioned survey on fishermen in rural areas in all the 13 states of Malaysia. In 2010, the fishermen population in Malaysia was around 129 622, hence, we employed random cluster sampling to select 2.2% of these households (i.e. 2 816) to conduct a questionnaire on fishermen and various aspects of their economic standing. The questionnaire includes the characteristics of the fishermen, such as gender, age, marital status, employment, education, religion, income; their assets, such as type of housing, land ownership, boat ownership, vehicle ownership; and access to government facilities, such as piped water, electricity, good roads, and health clinics. One of the advantages of our survey is that it investigates the status of fishermen who do not have a licence from the government. These fishermen are likely to be more vulnerable than those fishermen who receive government support.

2.2. Multidimensional poverty measure

This research employs a multidimensional poverty measurement, which was introduced by Alkire and Foster (2011), and has been applied in a number of related studies, such as Trani and Cannings (2013), Alkire and Santos (2013), and Mittra et al. (2013). The methodology utilizes dual cut-off criteria in which the first cut-off relates to each dimension separately, and the second cut-off

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