Chapter 13

Fishermen on Oman’s Batinah Coast: A Lookout for Policy Interventions

Rakesh Belwal
Sohar University, Oman

Shweta Belwal
Sohar University, Oman

Omar Al-Jabri
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Fadhil Al-Shizawi
Ministry of Social Development – Shinas, Oman

ABSTRACT

Oman has a well-established history of fishing where most of her citizens depend directly or indirectly on fishing or fishing-related activities. Oman’s long coastline is home to several inhabitants involved mainly in artisanal or traditional fisheries. Commercial fishing is largely prohibited in Oman barring a few regions. Batinah coast forms one of the biggest inhabited regions for fishermen in Oman. Although fishermen in the Batinah coast account for approximately 20% of the national catch, they face poor income conditions. This chapter gives a descriptive account of fishermen on the Batinah coast of Oman and the reasons affecting their growth and development. This chapter observes that the situation of Oman is different than the other developing countries. Fishermen face problems in earning a decent livelihood, and their expenses affect their savings and advancement. The Government of Oman is concerned with the state of fishery in the region and has put many efforts into developing a decent infrastructure across the region. However, not much emphasis has been placed on the human resources and enterprise. While fishermen need training and interactions with the government officials, government needs to be more observant and concerned about the not-so-well-off fishermen. The role of facilitators such as training institutions and banks becomes important in imparting fishermen the necessary skills and tools of productivity. All the facilitators and stakeholders need to come closer, sharing a common platform to advance fishing activity and its scope in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Oman is one of the prominent countries of the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East. It is known as the land of sailors and fishermen. Fishing has been one of the vital activities supporting the normal life. Oman’s economy has developed significantly in the past few decades and there have been a significant boost in the infrastructure. However, Omani fishing industry, which demanded stimulation and modernization for a long time (Mallakh, 1972: 422), have not reflected a similar pace in development.

Characterized with a 3165 km long coastline, the Sea of Oman is home to variety of fish and crustaceans. The total fish stock, which was estimated as 4.69 million tonnes in 2000 (MOI, 2000), indicates a potential stock; however, the total fish catch and export figures over the last few years reveal a low output or productivity. Notwithstanding, much has been done to expand and modernize this traditional industry over the past three decades. Fish marketing has emerged as a lucrative business to some promising fisher folks amidst the demand from the local and the expatriate community and a flourishing hotel & restaurant sector.

The industry witnessed a major revival in 1978 with the introduction of the Fishermen’s Incentive Fund. This fund offered fishermen financial assistance in the purchase of small fiberglass boats, outboard engines, depth-finders, fish detection systems, and communications and miscellaneous equipment. In 2008, the fishing industry had 37,520 registered fishermen operating 14,796 small craft, which grew to 42,553 and 19,245 respectively in 2012 (Fisheries Statistics Book, 2012). Plans are under implementation, under the Master Plan for the Economic Vision 2020, to equip the industry with new fishing harbors, boats, research laboratories, private sector joint ventures, and a fleet of modern trawlers. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MOAF) has also taken a number of steps to develop commercial fishing while conserving fish stocks and the livelihood of traditional fishermen. These include restricting fishing during some seasons, regulating the size of nets and equipment used in fishing, and defining the areas, depths, quantities, and kinds of fish that may be caught commercially (MOI, 2000). Besides, there are financial institutions, mainly the Development Bank, who help fishermen in getting access to finance.

The regional headquarter of Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries for the Al-Batinah region is located in Sohar. It grants licences to the fishermen for driving, for selling fish, for opening shops to sell equipment or repair works, and to establish an ice-factory inside the fishing port. It supports fisherman with boats, machines, cooling boxes, devices to monitor under-water activity, and it oversees the activities of related departments. There are local fisheries offices in each wilayat. These are departments, which grant permissions, conduct audits, and implement the fishing rules and regulations, with some power to grant sanctions and impose punishments.

The Development Bank of Oman has most of its customers as fishermen. It provides fishermen with an interest-free loan to a maximum of OMR 5000 per person on projects that are related to fishing. Interest at the rate of 3% applies on loans higher than that. Fishermen taking loans are expected to start paying back after six months, and to pay every quarter within five years. A Fishermen Training Institute, which was established by Ministry of Manpower in January, 2007 gives a two-year vocational diploma in different fields of fisheries to secondary school graduates and also provides short-term training to the fishermen identified and recommended by the regional office of the Ministry.

Tradition fishermen are the backbone of the fishing industry in Oman. However, their growth is not commensurate with that of the development witnessed elsewhere in Oman. While some fishermen have become better off, the majority are still struggling to earn a decent livelihood. Although
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