

Policy Advocacy Document:
Addressing the Challenges of Water and Forest-Dependent Communities
in the Sundarbans

Prelude - An Extended General Meeting has been taken place on Saturday & Sunday, February 8 & 9, 2025, in Canning. Venue – Pather Sathi Canning - Canning Town, Near Canning Railway Station, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. This crucial gathering acted as a platform to deliberate on significant issues affecting our communities, with a special focus on the unique challenges faced in the Sundarbans region.

1. Forest Rights Act, 2006: In-depth discussions will be held to devise strategies and make decisions regarding the effective implementation of this landmark legislation in the Sundarbans. Emphasis will be placed on ensuring that the Act benefits the local population while aligning with the ecological sensitivities of the region.
2. Challenges of Water and Forest-Dependent People: The meeting will also address the pressing concerns of people engaged in occupations reliant on water and forest resources within the Sundarbans. Efforts will be made to understand their struggles and explore actionable solutions to improve their livelihoods and working conditions.

The meeting was convened by Pabitra Mandal, Convener, West Bengal Jana Shramajibi Manch, Secretary, Sundarban Jana Shramajibi Mancha and Organized by: Sundarban Jana Shramajibi Mancha. Around 50 participants, actively participated who are mainly community leaders from different blocks like Kultali, Gosaba, Canning, Hingalgunj of North and South 24 Parganas. Along with these community leaders, there glorious presence of Shambhu Saha, Secretary, Sundarban Matsyajibi Raksha Committee, Gobinda Das, Jt Secretary, Sundarban Matsyabibi Joutha Sangram Samiti, Jayanta Basu, Renowned Journalist and Sundarban Specialist, Subhash Chandra Acharyya, Ex Jt Director, Sundarban Development Board under Sundarban Affairs Department, Govt of West Bengal.

Background: The Sundarbans, a unique and ecologically sensitive region, is home to thousands of traditional fishermen, crab harvesters, and honey collectors who rely on its natural resources for their livelihoods. However, increasing restrictions, ecological degradation, and administrative challenges threaten their survival. This document consolidates the key issues raised during the meeting held on 8-9 February 2025 at Canning and proposes actionable solutions for policy advocacy and government intervention.

I. Strengthening the Implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006

1. Recognition of Traditional Fishing Rights: The principle that "where there is water, there are fishermen" must be formally acknowledged in Sundarbans policies. Fishing, crab collection, and honey gathering should be legally permitted in both core and buffer zones.
2. Mandating Gram Sabha Formation: The government must issue directives to ensure the formation of Gram Sabhas under FRA 2006, enabling local governance and participatory decision-making.
3. Clarification of Forest Boundaries and Access Rights: Legal definitions must be provided to determine which areas fall under protected zones and what rights the local communities hold in accessing these areas.
4. Unambiguous FRA Guidelines for the Sundarbans: The Act lacks clear provisions regarding the calculation of distance between settlements and forests, leading to disputes in implementation.

II. Protection of Livelihoods and Resource Management

1. Timely Issuance and Renewal of Boat License Certificates (BLCs): Delays in BLC approvals lead to significant financial losses for fishermen. A streamlined system is required to ensure prompt processing before the fishing season begins.
2. Restoration of Blocked Waterways: The Matla River and other local creeks must be restored to allow free movement of aquatic species and facilitate traditional fishing.
3. Inclusion of Sundarbans Rivers in the Ganga Action Plan: This will help restore aquatic biodiversity, ensuring sustainable fish and crab populations.
4. Expansion of Saltwater Fish Hatcheries: Like freshwater hatchery projects, saltwater species must be bred and released to replenish depleting marine populations.

III. Human Rights and Social Security Measures

1. Protection Against Harassment: Fishermen face confiscation of their catch, physical abuse, and arbitrary fines from forest officials. Immediate policy intervention is required to stop these injustices.
2. Legal Representation for Fishermen in Policy Decisions: Fishermen must be given a platform in official discussions on fisheries and conservation policies.
3. Compensation for Victims of Wildlife Attacks: Families of tiger attack victims should receive full compensation without delay, along with social security benefits.

4. Social Security Coverage for Fishermen and Crab Collectors: They should be included under schemes like Old Age Allowance and housing programs such as Awas Yojana.
5. Allowance During Fishing Ban Period: Financial support must be provided to fishermen when fishing activities are restricted.
6. Use of Machine Boats for Safety: Given the dangers of deep-water fishing, the use of small mechanized boats should be permitted.

IV. Addressing Ecological and Environmental Concerns

1. Regulating Tourism to Minimize Environmental Damage: Uncontrolled tourism is contributing to waste accumulation and ecological degradation. A sustainable tourism policy is needed.
2. Control of Mangrove Destruction: Stricter legal measures must be enforced to prevent the destruction of mangroves, which are crucial to the region's ecological balance.
3. Prohibition of Trawl Fishing Within 12 Nautical Miles: Large trawlers illegally deplete fish resources meant for small-scale fishermen. Strict enforcement of existing regulations is required.
4. Construction of Protective Embankments: Given the region's vulnerability to climate change and rising sea levels, embankments of appropriate height and width must be constructed.
5. Ensuring River and Monsoon Water Accessibility: Every household should have access to freshwater resources for drinking and irrigation.

V. Administrative and Infrastructural Improvements

1. Formation of a Multi-Stakeholder Committee: A dedicated committee with government officials, experts, and local representatives should oversee the implementation of policies benefiting Sundarbans communities.
2. Improved Communication for Fishermen: A structured grievance redressal mechanism should be established for reporting issues such as tiger attacks, net confiscation, and compensation claims.
3. Harmonizing Mobile Phone Usage Policies: Current contradictory policies regarding mobile phone use in core areas (one prohibiting use, another mandating it for disaster alerts) must be clarified.
4. Renaming Canning Station to Matla Station: The renaming of the station to reflect indigenous identity and historical significance should be considered.

The Sundarbans' fishing and forest-dependent communities are at a critical juncture, facing existential threats from policy ambiguities, environmental degradation, and inadequate government support. The above measures seek to address these concerns comprehensively. We urge government departments, legislators, and policymakers to take immediate action to safeguard the livelihoods of these vulnerable communities while ensuring sustainable ecological conservation.