

Unlocking the potential of Pakistan's fisheries sector

Muhammad Junaid | 21st Nov 2024



Pakistan's fisheries sector, long overshadowed by other industries, is a hidden gem waiting to be unlocked. With over 1,050 kilometers of coastline and vast inland water resources, the country has the natural endowments to become a major player in global fisheries markets.

Yet, the reality on the ground tells us a different story. While the sector generates over \$534 million in export revenue annually and employs thousands across Sindh and Balochistan, it remains underutilized and mismanaged.

Challenges such as climate change, overfishing, and regulatory inefficiencies stifle its growth, leaving Pakistan lagging behind regional competitors like India and Bangladesh. Without immediate reforms, the sector risks further decline, jeopardizing the livelihoods of fishing communities and exacerbating the country's trade deficit. Now, more than ever, Pakistan must recognize the critical role this sector can play in driving economic growth and ensuring food security.

The fisheries sector faces a multitude of challenges, each exacerbating the other. Among these, climate change looms largest, threatening inland and marine ecosystems alike.

For example, Manchar Lake in Sindh, once a thriving hub for fish production and trade where almost 200 species of fish were produced, is now in decline. Pollution and algal blooms due to contamination of waters deoxygenated the water, which reduces the fish population, while rising temperatures and reduced water flows from the Indus River have devastated its biodiversity, pushing fishing communities into economic despair.

Marine fisheries fare no better either. Overfishing, coupled with the illegal use of banned nets, has depleted stocks in the Arabian Sea. Pollutants from urban runoff poison coastal ecosystems, further diminishing fish populations. For exporters, the business environment presents significant hurdles. High fuel prices, combined with inadequate cold storage facilities, drive up costs and erode profit margins for investors majorly including exporters.

With this, the complex regulatory frameworks requiring multiple licences for every marine product stifle the growth of small-scale exporters and deter investment. Like marine, inland fish farming is another key component of the sector and faces its own set of challenges.

Farmers report exorbitant input costs, with expenses for fuels as a major cost, feed, seed, and labour often exceeding 400,000 rupees per acre. Water shortages and fluctuating temperatures add to the uncertainty, making aquaculture a high-risk venture for small-scale operators.

Despite these challenges, the sector holds untapped potential. Pakistan's coastal geography offers proximity to lucrative markets in China, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. However, unlike regional competitors such as India and Bangladesh, Pakistan has failed to leverage these advantages.

India, for instance, has capitalized on government-supported aquaculture initiatives, becoming one of the world's largest exporters of shrimp. Bangladesh, too, has invested heavily in sustainable practices, earning global recognition for its fishery reforms.

Pakistan's fisheries sector, by contrast, remains underdeveloped. It lacks the infrastructure and policy support needed to compete on a global scale.

For example, while countries like Vietnam have modernized their cold storage facilities to minimize post-harvest losses, Pakistan struggles with outdated technology and frequent electricity outages. Similarly, limited investment in research and development has left the sector ill-equipped to address the impacts of climate change or adopt innovative farming techniques.

The path to revitalizing Pakistan's fisheries sector requires a multipronged approach, balancing immediate interventions with long-term strategies. Here are some actionable steps the government and private stakeholders can take.

The bureaucratic maze that exporters must navigate is a significant deterrent to growth. Consolidating licensing requirements into a single-

window system can reduce delays and encourage investment. Moreover, stricter enforcement against illegal fishing practices such as the use of banned nets will help restore fish stocks and protect marine biodiversity.

Furthermore, a lack of cold storage facilities is a major bottleneck for both domestic and export markets. Upgrading storage and transportation infrastructure can reduce post-harvest losses, ensuring better returns for farmers and exporters alike.

Subsidized electricity rates for these facilities could further alleviate the burden of high operating costs. To mitigate the impacts of climate change, the government must invest in research focused on climate-resilient aquaculture practices. This includes developing high-yield, temperature-resistant fish breeds and promoting modern techniques like Biofloc, which enables efficient fish farming in water-scarce urban areas.

Additionally, collaboration between the government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations can accelerate the sector's development. For instance, partnerships could fund vocational training programmes for fish farmers, ensuring they have the skills and resources to adopt sustainable practices.

With this, drawing lessons from India and Bangladesh, Pakistan can introduce targeted incentives for sustainable aquaculture. This includes tax breaks for eco-friendly fishing methods and subsidies for high-value exports like shrimp and lobster.

Additionally, fostering regional partnerships can facilitate knowledge-sharing and joint ventures, boosting Pakistan's standing in international markets. Also, in the case of the digital economy, it offers immense potential for expanding Pakistan's fisheries market. E-commerce platforms can connect fish farmers directly with consumers and

exporters, eliminating intermediaries and ensuring better profit margins. Improved marketing strategies, both domestically and internationally, can further enhance the sector's visibility and profitability.

The challenges facing Pakistan's fisheries sector are daunting, but not insurmountable. What is needed is a collective, coordinated effort to address systemic issues while capitalizing on emerging opportunities. Policymakers must prioritize sustainable practices, recognizing that environmental health and economic growth go hand in hand.

This is not just a matter of economics, but also one of social justice. Revitalizing the fisheries sector can uplift entire communities, reducing poverty and creating pathways to prosperity.

At the same time, exporters and farmers must embrace innovation, adopting modern techniques that increase efficiency and reduce waste. Collaboration between the government and private sector is vital to ensure that this transformation benefits everyone in the value chain, from fish farmers in rural Sindh to exporters competing in international markets.

With the right policies and investments, Pakistan can transform its fisheries sector into a thriving, sustainable industry that contributes to both economic resilience and food security. The fisheries sector is more than a source of income for coastal communities; it is a vital national asset. Saving it requires vision, commitment and, above all, action.

Muhammad Junaid

The writer is an MPhil Scholar at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad. He can be reached via Email: junaidjadee912@gmail.com

[Newspaper Link](#)