

LOCKED DOWN!

A COVID-19 Emergency
Response For Marine Fishers

November 2020



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Coordinator's Note

When the first COVID-19 induced lockdown was announced on 24th March 2020, the scale of its impact was unfathomable to many. Within 24 hours of this announcement, Dakshin staff began to receive calls from community members and fisher leaders in our sites of engagement. Quickly the unique impact of the lockdown on fishers and the alarming scale of migrant work in fisheries came to light. Thanks to understanding donors, a supportive Board of Trustees and the committed staff at Dakshin we were able to pivot from our existing work and fulfil our responsibility to the communities we partner with, to aid them in this time of crisis. Dakshin designed and delivered a coordinated, organisational response to these challenges.

Our team of 30 staff and 10 volunteers worked with civil society networks, fisher unions, government departments and officials to bring aid to migrant and non-migrant fishworkers and their families. With the help of these networks the team was able to support 15703 migrant workers stranded in various coastal states and raise funds to support 3337 of the most vulnerable households (approx. 13350 individuals) in our different field sites.

With this report, we place on record the impact of the lockdown that marked the onset of the pandemic, on fisher communities who faced an unprecedented disaster. Through our engagement in relief efforts, valuable lessons and critical insights were produced which are detailed in the document along with recommendations for similar future scenarios. We are deeply thankful to all the organisations and individuals who provided their time, support and resources.

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1 | COVID-19 and India's marine fisheries

The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has touched all aspects of human endeavour and enterprise. Although less visible, the fisheries sector, both marine and inland continues to be deeply impacted by the pandemic. Fisheries in all aquatic environments are central to the lives and livelihoods of millions of Indians. Besides its obvious place in guaranteeing food security, and contributing to poverty alleviation and national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Indian fisheries is deeply connected to numerous local, regional and global economies. Traditional practices in fisheries dominated the sector in India until the 1960s, and mostly catered to domestic and local markets. Soon after Independence, mechanised fishing technologies such as trawlers and purse seines were introduced through various development programmes, leading to a rapid transformation of Indian fisheries (Gerhardsen 1958; Mathews 2005). Marine fish production grew from 0.5 million tonnes in the 1950s to nearly 3.5 million tonnes in 2018 (Dineshbabu 2013; CMFRI, 2019). India is currently one of the top marine capture fishing nations globally (FAO, 2018), with fisheries and aquaculture contributing to 0.9% of the country's GDP (NFDB, 2020).

However, marine fishers represent some of the most marginalised communities in India, with a high prevalence of poverty in rural coastal villages (Sathiadas, 2009; Sarkar, 2012). There are currently 4 million fisher people in the country, with millions more employed in allied activities such as trade, processing and distribution (CMFRI 2010). A significant portion of the post-capture and processing workforce is comprised of women. Large-scale mechanised marine fisheries has grown dependent on are largely migrant labour force (Hiran, 2017), some of whom are from landlocked states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand with no prior seafaring experience. Furthermore, declining fisheries resources, high levels of indebtedness, coastal development pressures and resultant displacement over recent years have led to a

massive seasonal migration of traditional, small-scale fishermen across the coastal states into the mechanised sector.

The Government of India, in its national response to contain the pandemic, announced a nation-wide sudden lockdown on the evening of the 24th March 2020, with less than four hours of notice. This lockdown was declared as an emergency response and came with severe mobility restrictions and a complete cessation of all economic activity ¹, halting of all transportation, closure of inter-state borders and all forms of trade. The historical push factors within fisheries development and coastal governance mentioned above, combined with the heavy dependence of the sector on physical mobility presented a unique form of distress for India's marine fisheries sector from the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns.

1. Only 'essential activities' as notified by the Central Government were permitted. Fisheries did not figure in this list for several days after the initial lockdown causing a severe blow to the sector and its dependent fisher communities.

2 | Situating Dakshin Foundation

Since our inception in 2008, Dakshin Foundation (hereafter Dakshin) has been working closely with fishing communities in various sites where our engagement is on issues of marine conservation, resource management, environmental justice and fisher rights. Dakshin approaches these communities as partners in our efforts to meet integrated environmental and development needs for coastal India.

Dakshin has been a long-standing ally of the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF)² and acts as the secretariat for the National Coastal Protection Campaign (NCPC)³. These networks have helped Dakshin work with multiple marine fisher organisations, disseminate our work better, scale-up our learnings and support the capacity-building of groups outside of our long-term sites of engagement – Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Lakshadweep islands and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These networks are crucial to building strong civil society partnerships and solidarity to engage in India's democratic processes, particularly in environmental governance through legislation and policy-making.

When the first of the series of lockdowns was announced on 24th March 2020, Dakshin staff relied on these civil society networks and contacts within local communities and grassroots NGOs to rapidly assess and respond to the needs of fishers (both resident and migrant) and fishing communities more generally.

Despite the limited mobility there was clearly a role that Dakshin staff could play to support affected families and migrant fishworkers. With no prior organisational experience in disaster relief efforts, Dakshin was able to play a critical role in responding to the crisis in multiple ways. In the ensuing account, we describe the impacts of the pandemic on the marine fisheries

sector as we experienced it through Dakshin's emergency relief efforts and our coordinated lockdown response.

2. The National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) is a national collective of fisher unions from across the coast of India. This collective along with supporting NGOs has been on the forefront of strengthening small scale fishers and fishworkers to defend themselves against vested interests that seek to claim the coastal and marine commons of our country for private benefit.

3. The National Coastal Protection Campaign (NCPC) is a national network founded in 2006, whose members comprise NGOs, fisher unions and their networks (eg. NFF) as well as like-minded individuals. The goal of the NCPC is to address issues of unsustainable coastal development as well as strengthen management of these areas through legal and/or community-based approaches.

3 | Impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on fish workers

Marine fishing communities and fish workers have been facing a multitude of hardships since the COVID-19 countrywide lockdown was imposed in India, starting March 25, 2020. As per our needs assessment survey, the major issues are summarised as follows:

- a. **Lack of food, water and sanitation supplies:** A significant number of fish workers are highly dependent on their daily income to meet their needs and support their families. When the lockdown was imposed, these fishers were deprived of a daily income, dwindling cash reserves and rising debt, and struggled to survive. Although public food provisioning for the poor through 'rations' was provided by the government to those in need, in many cases the ration distribution was greatly delayed or was insufficient to meet the needs of these families. Furthermore, many families were excluded from government relief actions; for instance, fishers who owned a boat stated that they could not access subsidised ration supplies. However, with the loss of their livelihood, fishers were also in urgent need of food. Most fishing villages also lacked access to basic sanitation and hygiene supplies, such as soaps, sanitisers and masks.
- b. **Stranded migrant fish workers:** The bulk of India's large-scale fisheries, such as trawlers and purse seiners, are supported by a migrant work force. With the lockdown, these migrant fishers were stranded in their place of work, with no way to return to their home states. Many of these fishers were living on boats in crowded harbours and in unhygienic conditions, with no sanitation or medical supplies. In some cases, these fishers were provided ration by the boat owners, putting a considerable economic strain on the latter, while in other cases they were receiving as little as a single meal a day through government aid. In a few cases, migrant fishers were stranded without

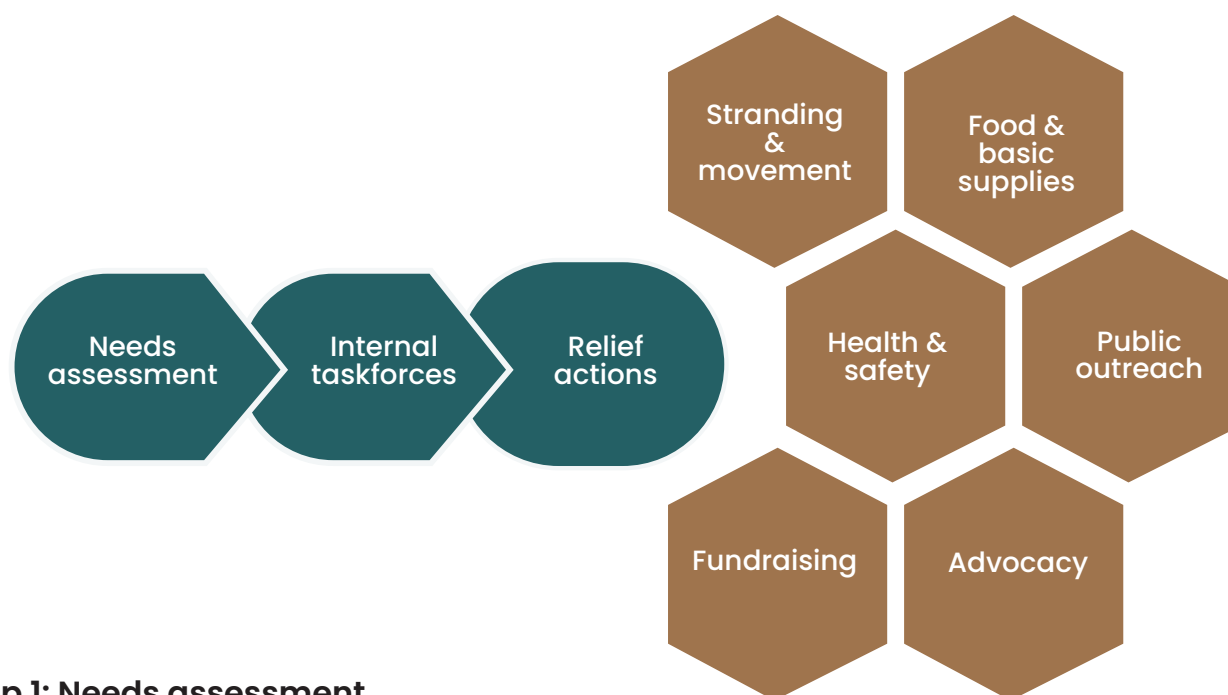
any accommodation or access to food. Over the course of the lockdown these issues combined with the physical and psychological stress and the lack of access to medical care for pre-existing medical issues even led to the death of some migrant fishers.

- c. Suspension of livelihoods:** Fishing and related activities were initially prohibited in the lockdown, leading to the loss of livelihood for millions of fishers in the country. Fishers returning from long trips had no place to sell or store their catch and were forced to dump tonnes of fish and shrimp overboard. Although fishing was eventually permitted by the Central Government as an 'essential activity' on the 10th April 2020, most fishers were not able to resume work. This is largely because the supporting infrastructure such as ice and storage facilities were not operational and the entire fisheries supply chain was disrupted. Some fishers reported only being able to fish for subsistence or having to sell their catch at extremely reduced prices⁴ at local markets. This loss of livelihood is particularly a strain on fishers at this time, due to the already reduced fish catches (and hence reduced profits) in most coastal areas over the past year. Furthermore, although the sale of fish was allowed in major shops, small-scale fish vendors were not permitted to operate. This was especially a problem for fisher women, who comprised a majority of the fish vendors in many locations. With this loss of income, these women struggled to support themselves and their families.

4. Decrease in prices was possibly due to myths circulating in the early days that COVID-19 is spread through meat and fish

4 | Dakshin's lockdown response – process and methods

In this section we outline the process followed internally during our relief efforts. There were three broad steps or processes as detailed below:



Step 1: Needs assessment

In the initial stages of the lockdown, staff from Dakshin reached out to people within the organisation's network – fisher unions, NGOs, researchers and other individuals involved in the fisheries sector – across the country to assess the needs of the fisher community. Together Dakshin staff were able to piece together the broad issues across nine coastal states. The immediate needs identified were financial assistance, access to food, access to health and sanitation, inter-state movement for migrants stranded in host states and accurate information regarding COVID -19. Additionally, there were differences in priorities across different areas. While some affected groups required greater levels of advocacy, like in the

case of migrant fishworkers from Andhra Pradesh who were stranded in Gujarat, others, like the fisher families of Odisha and Tamil Nadu, were in greater need of direct relief measures such as food rations and health supplies. All of this data was logged, assessed and a plan of action was worked out.

Step 2: Setting up internal taskforces

Based on the needs assessment Dakshin set up six taskforces internally, each of which took charge of a different aspect of the needs of these communities. Each taskforce was comprised of Dakshin staff as well as volunteers from staff networks and was headed by one or two coordinators (depending on the level of work involved). These coordinators in turn reported to a Chief Coordinator. The Chief Coordinator worked closely with the Director and the Trustees to guide the process especially in terms of fundraising, communication and advocacy support.

1. Stranding and Movement Taskforce – The Stranding and Movement taskforce played a crucial role during Dakshin’s COVID-19 response by reaching out to stranded migrant fish workers and other workers, carefully listening to their immediate concerns and taking necessary actions to bring relief to the stranded individuals and groups

Key roles of the stranding and movement team:.

- a.** Speaking to the stranded individual/groups – These included our team’s immediate response to make sure stranded groups’ details were recorded.
- b.** Engaging with the fisheries authorities, employers and labour officers – These included interactions with the fisheries department officials like Deputy Directors, Assistant Directors, etc. to bring to their notice the issues of the stranded fishworker groups and also to coordinate with government officials

for the movement of the stranded groups. There were interactions with the district labour officers to facilitate food and accommodation for stranded groups.

- c.** Engaging with the authorities in charge of movement of stranded migrant workers – These included discussions with the nodal officers, District Collectors, etc.
- d.** Engaging with fishworker unions from different states – This included liaising between unions and the government authorities to address issues of migrant fishworkers.

2. Food and Basic Supplies Taskforce – The food taskforce was primarily responsible for compiling a national-level database of organisations providing food in the form of dry rations and/or cooked meals to distressed groups in coastal areas, arrangement and supply of food/dry rations to groups in need. This was carried out in coordination with other internal teams and larger, national-level networks.

3. Health and Safety Taskforce – The primary responsibility of the health and safety team was to collate, create and maintain a database of reliable information on COVID-19, disseminate this information and facilitate health and safety relief efforts for migrant and non-migrant fishworkers and their families. The health and safety database consists of details on COVID-19 helplines, testing centres, quarantine facilities, organizations providing relief materials like PPEs, sanitary and hygiene kits, emergency medical help, etc., for every coastal state.

4. Public Outreach Taskforce – The primary responsibility of this taskforce was to engage with the general public and media outlets on the issues that faced the fisher community in

order to raise public awareness. The taskforce also coordinated communications around Dakshin's crowdfunding campaign which raised funds for relief efforts in Odisha and Tamil Nadu.

5. Fundraising Taskforce – This taskforce was created due to the urgent need expressed by our long-standing partners for funds to carry out relief work. While there was public attention drawn to the plight of migrants across the country, the struggle of the non-migrant fisher community was pushed to the side. Donors and CSR funds were harder to

6. Advocacy Taskforce – This taskforce engaged in writing larger civil society letters to the government to raise attention to the impacts that the lockdown was having on fisher families and migrant fishworkers. The taskforce also helped state fisher unions file appeals and letters to various government departments regarding issues faced by migrant workers from their state as well as issues regarding rations and health supplies for fisher families.

Step 3: Relief process

Migrant fishworkers: Dakshin assisted migrant fishworkers stranded in multiple states – Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Gujarat and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – with food, rations, sanitary kits, medicines (depending on local needs). We were able to do this despite being in different locations by connecting them to administration officials and following up with these officials remotely. Where support from the government was limited or delayed we reached out to local organisations either from our networks or who we had identified when building our database and connected them to the group in need.

Fig 1: Map showing number of cases dealt with and scale of stranding of migrant fishworkers

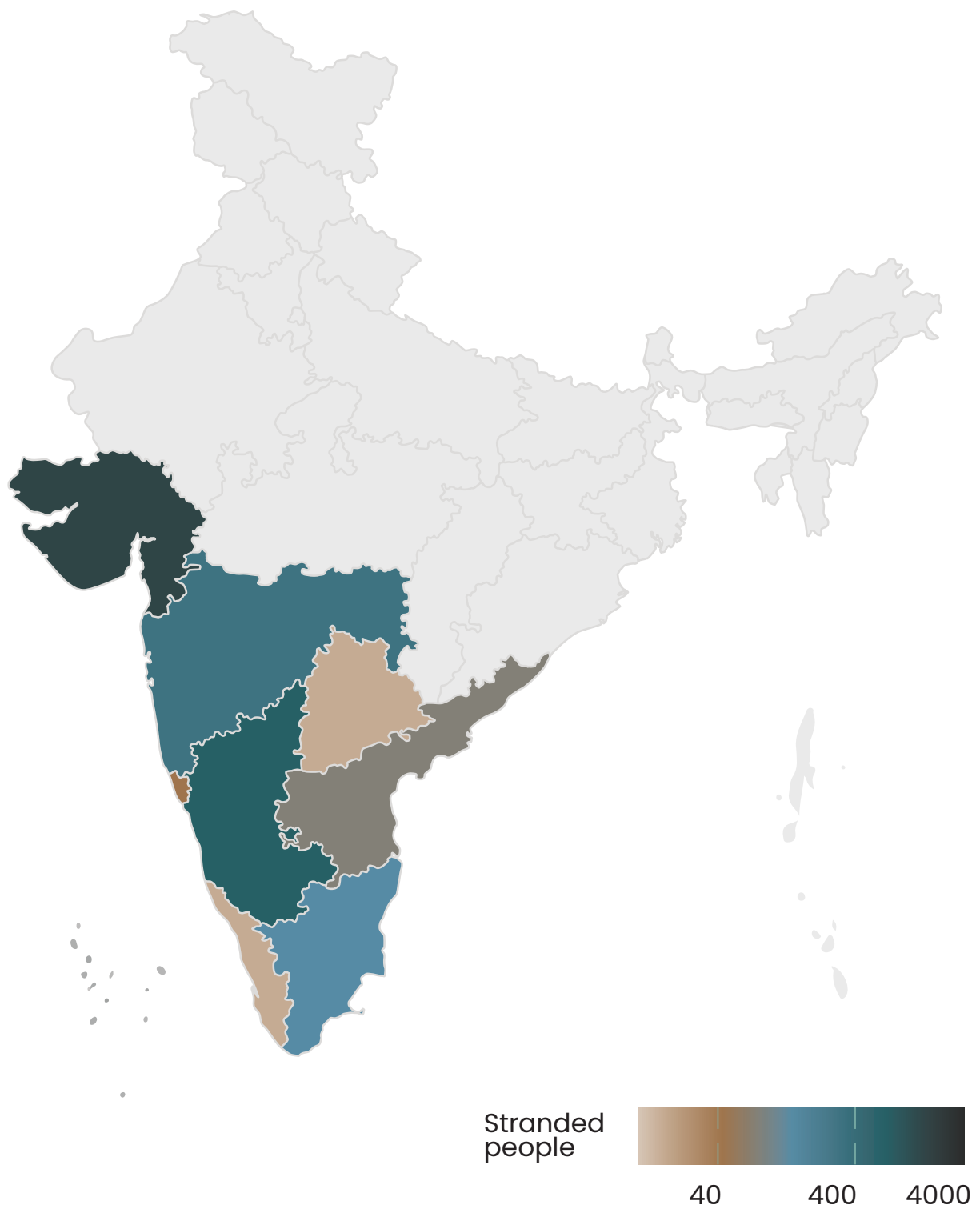


Table 1: Migrant worker cases handled per state

Host State	No.Of Cases	No. Of. Individuals
Gujarat	4	5508
Karnataka	16	3475
Maharashtra	9	2739
Tamil Nadu	25	1825
Andhra Pradesh	9	1026
Goa	6	729
Kerala	3	319
Telangana	3	76
Total	75	15697

As the lockdown extended, we followed up with their changing needs including support for travel. Most of the workers expressed their desire to return home given the uncertainty with regard to the lockdown and their work. Even when the government lifted the ban on fishing, migrant fish workers were reluctant to resume fishing activities. The fear of contracting the disease along with the extended period of separation from families seemed to be the major concern among individuals. The dwindling support from authorities and poor living conditions had pushed them to their limits and several groups expressed that they felt like outsiders in these host states due to the reluctance and poor hospitality from the host governments. Our travel support involved engaging with nodal officers for migrant travel, district administration and fisheries officials of home as well as host states to obtain Shramik Special schedule, to get travel permits and to make arrangements for medical screening and quarantine. In some cases, Dakshin coordinated with travel agencies and funders willing to support transport via buses. We also engaged in advocacy for stops for Shramik Special trains in coastal areas.

Non-Migrant fishing communities: Based on our needs assessment it was clear that food and health supplies were needed urgently by fishing communities as fishing had been halted

and most families had little savings to rely on. Our fundraising team focused on raising the necessary finances by identifying potential grants and initiating a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds for two of our long-term sites of engagement – Odisha and Tamil Nadu. Our relief efforts were restricted to these two sites as the initial assessment of the funding landscape showed us that funds would not be easily available for this community given the number of organisations and communities in need. CSR funds had also largely been diverted to the PM-Cares fund or for COVID-relief efforts in urban centres. Even within these two states, Dakshin and our partners – United Artists Association (Odisha) and SNEHA (Tamil Nadu) – were faced with the challenge of choosing between households and determining where the greatest need lay. Our aim was to make sure that the funds we raised supported as many families as possible in the area without compromising on the quality of the relief kits. Our partners provided us with the answer – to go local.

SNEHA and UAA have experience creating women-run enterprises, cooperatives and Self-Help Groups. These local institutions are a marker to India's history of rural development particularly towards micro-financing and as a means of supplementing local household incomes. By creating and marketing value-added products, such local institutions have been able to provide more local employment and play an especially critical role in households where women are the primary income earners. Among the essentials in our kits were several items like dried fish, fresh vegetables, tea powder, spices and phenyl that were bought through women's cooperative societies, producer companies or women vendors. The income from these sales ensured that our actions benefitted not just the households that comprised the most vulnerable in the community, but other local families who also needed a source of income. Other products in the kit – rice, dal, soap, etc. were purchased from local MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) or Trusts making sure that the relief funds circled back into the local economy and charitable initiatives in the area, contributing to community cohesion in a time of social distancing. We are deeply grateful to our local partners – UAA and SNEHA for their decades of experience and equal care and attention towards the identification of households for relief distribution along with planning procurement of relief supplies.

5 | Impact of Dakshin's interventions

Our efforts were at their most intensive for the first 3 months since the lockdown was announced i.e., 25th March to 30th June. By the end of June, we had supported all the migrant workers that were part of our cases with travel back to their home states and our efforts became exclusively focused on fundraising for rations and supplies for non-migrant fishing families. In this section you will see the impact that Dakshin and our partners had on migrant and non-migrant fishing families across various states in India.

Migrants

Over the course of the three months of lockdown (April 2020 to June 2020) we received 76 cases involving close to 15,703 stranded migrant workers. Of these 76 cases, 39 involved fishworkers (13,360 people) and 8 cases involved workers employed in a non-fishing sector but belonging to fishing and other coastal communities (256 people). The remaining 29 cases (2087 individuals) involved migrants unconnected to fisheries in any way who had received the Dakshin helpline number either from a government official or another NGO.

The majority of these fishworkers belonged to Odisha and Andhra Pradesh and had migrated to other states for work. Most of the stranded fish workers were living on boats with little or no access to clean drinking water or sanitation. Non-fishworker migrants had issues in procuring ration due to lack of support from the companies they were employed with.

Fig 2: Categorisation of migrant workers supported

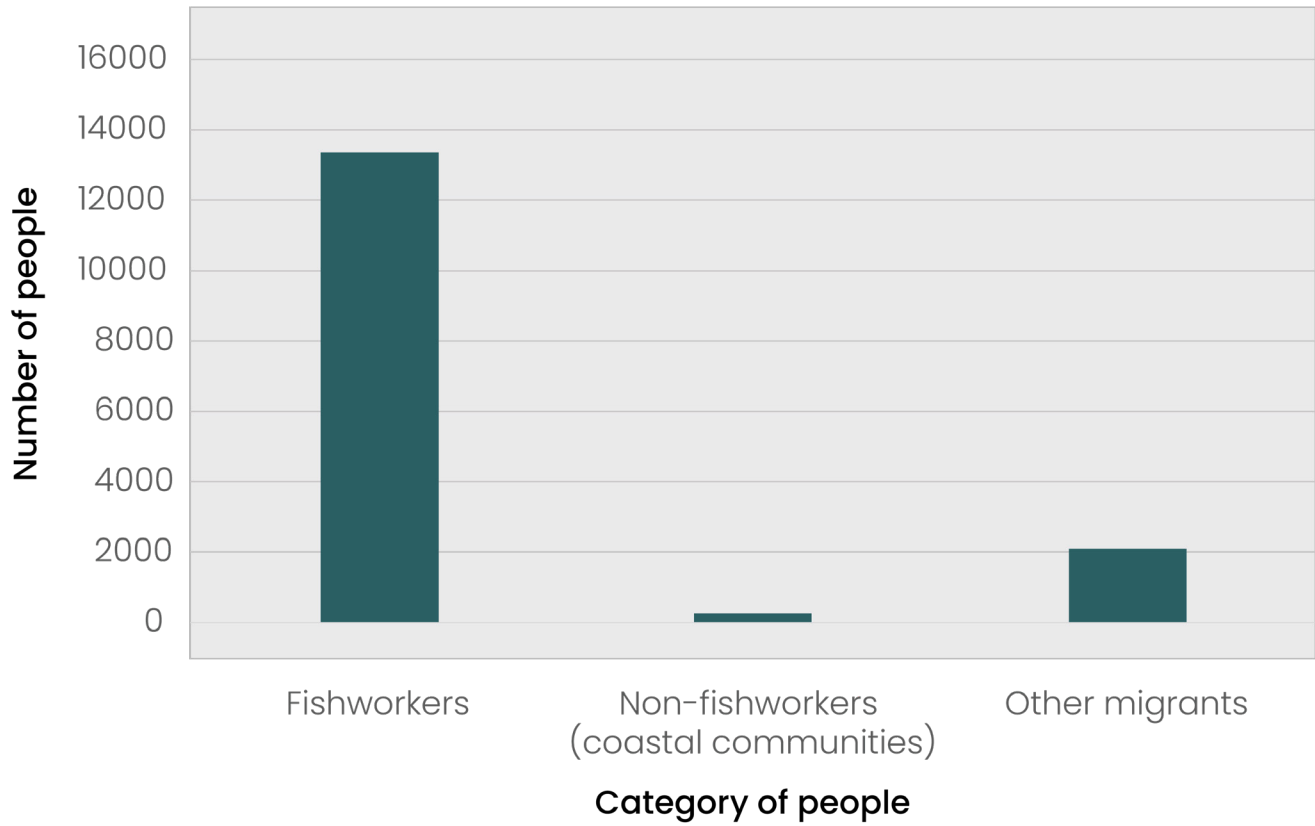
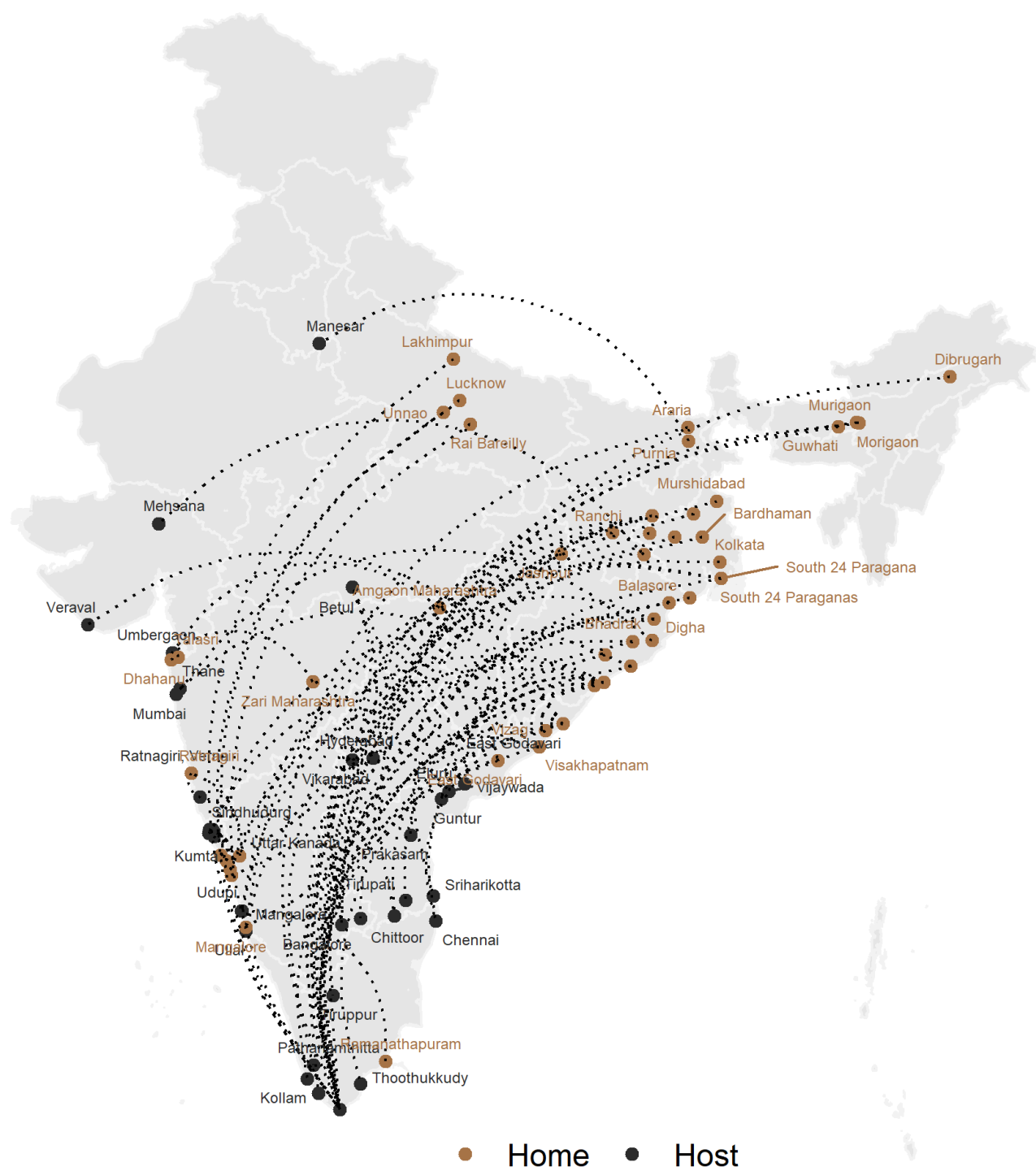


Fig 3: Migration map - Where did the migrants come from and where were they stuck?



a) Food and basic supplies

The following table indicates the number of cases that were assigned to the food team. For cases that were transferred to a partner organization or routed to the local state administration, further follow ups could not be carried out till the ultimate resolution stage (i.e., food materials reaching every individual in the distressed groups). Hence, the precise number of individuals to whom the aid was delivered cannot be tabulated. However, it is believed that the required aid was delivered to all the cases that were brought to the Food taskforce's notice.terms of fundraising, communication and advocacy support.

Table 2: People supported with food and rations

State	Number of cases received*	Number of people affected	Number of cases directly resolved	Number of cases transferred	No. of partners that helped
Andhra Pradesh	5	6840	2	3	1
Tamil Nadu	6	194	5	1	5
Karnataka	2	105	2	-	-
Telangana	3	134	3	-	2
Gujarat	1	800-900	-	1	1
Maharashtra	1	100	1	-	3
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1	250-300	-	-	-
Total	19**	~8500			

* The above figures represent the total number of cases that were received from 3rd April - 8th May (2020).

** Out of the 19 cases in total, 5 cases were pertaining to fishworkers while the remaining 14 cases dealt with migrant workers from other industries, but mostly belonging to coastal

states, primarily Odisha.

b) Health and safety

Information kits on COVID-19 were prepared by collating information from reliable sources like WHO, UNICEF, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, State government websites, etc. The kits were prepared in nine different languages and disseminated among coastal communities and stranded fishworkers. The kits reached at least 7000 fishers from more than 25 coastal districts from the states of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and the union territories of Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep. The information kits consisted of information flyers, audio and video clips, which would make information accessible irrespective of reading fluency. Further, a COVID-19 advisory produced by the National Platform for Small-scale Fishworkers (Inland) was translated by the team in eight different coastal languages.

From the first round of needs assessment, we identified 39 cases which needed help with sanitary kits, medicines and information related to COVID-19. Out of these, 17 cases were related to stranded fishworkers and 22 were related to non-stranded fishing families. Majority of these cases were from the states of Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Based on these cases we identified nearly 4500 people who were in need of sanitary supplies. Consequently, each case was either reported to the local administration or local NGOs and help groups. While we are unsure about the government intervention, we confirmed that 320 fisher families were supplied with sanitary and ration supplies with the help of four local NGOs in Visakapatnam, Chennai and Hyderabad.

c) Travel support

Of the total 76 cases, 49 groups requested help with repatriation to their home states. For

28 of these groups (7702 individuals) the team provided transport assistance (from permits to fundraising to booking buses or identifying Shramik Special trains). 11 cases were handed over to other organisations working on migrant transport, 5 cases made their own arrangements soon after contacting us. We're unsure of the status of the remaining 5 cases as the original point of contact stopped answering calls or their phones lost service.

d) Media engagement

Engaging with the media has been a crucial part of bringing attention to the struggles faced by the fishing community across coastal India. Issues faced by stranded fishers brought to light by local partners, were collated, verified, and sent to media publications to amplify. This proved crucial with the case of M. Raju, the 22-year-old fisherman from Andhra Pradesh who died of a cardiac arrest in Veraval, Gujarat.

Mobilisation to amplify this issue happened in three stages:

1. Collating a press kit.
2. Pooling in networks of journalists to write to (including the list maintained by the public outreach team)
3. Writing/following up with said contacts.

Thanks to the scale of the outreach, the news of the Gujarat fisherman was covered by more than 10 media houses, with five of them working on follow up stories. This included The News Minute, The Hindu, The New Indian Express, Times of India, Al Jazeera, to name a few.

The Dakshin team has also been writing stories for publications, several of which have already been published. These stories highlight the plight of fishworkers suffering under lockdown, and brings an insider perspective as researchers, and as persons working on relief efforts. Some of the published pieces have found a home in Scroll, Sanctuary Asia, The Bastion, and

Youth ki Aawaz.

Additionally the insights from the team was incorporated into in-depth investigative articles published in the Caravan, IndiaSpend and Hakai magazine.

e) Advocacy support

The team created multi-lingual templates of letters that unions and grassroots NGOs could file with their state and district officials to request them to reopen small scale fisheries and mark it as an essential commodity, as well as offering the organisation's support with relief efforts for the community. Over the 3 months, the team also worked with unions to file letters on specific cases that Dakshin and the union were working together on. These letters met with varying degrees of success. While the impact of some petitions could not be traced, in other instances they played a key role in resolving a crisis. For instance, in the case of repatriation of 4000 migrant fishworkers from Andhra Pradesh who were stranded in the state of Gujarat, the letters from the union along with follow up calls by our team and other partner organisations resulted in the successful repatriation of these workers by the government. The team also drafted an open petition to the government which was signed by 116 international and national scientists and practitioners associated with Indian fisheries. The letter drew attention to the crisis in India and laid out steps that the government could take in the short and medium term to mitigate impacts on the sector.

Non-migrant fishing community

Dakshin raised a total of INR 41.18 lakhs towards relief efforts in Odisha and Tamil Nadu, through a combination of grants, donations from NGOs and individuals and contributions through our crowdfunding campaign. With these funds Dakshin was able to support 2802 families (average family size was 4 members) in 22 villages across Ganjam district of Odisha, 15

villages across Nagapattinam, Cuddalore, Thiruvar and Tuticorin districts of Tamil Nadu and 1 village in the South Andaman district, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These families were primarily women-run households (widows, single women, divorcees). Additionally, relief was also distributed in some villages to households where family members were handicapped (incurring high medical expenses) or households where the members were old and without any other means of support.

Given the travel restrictions, the identification of families in these sites and the distribution of relief would not have been possible without our local partners as listed below

Odisha – United Artist’s Association

Tamil Nadu – Social Need Education And Human Awareness (SNEHA), Law Trust, People’s Action for Development (PAD), Ramnad Fishworkers Trade Union (RFTU), Centre for Community Services (CCS), Muthukuli Thozhilalar Sangam (Chank Fishers Union) and Ms. Fathima Babu of Thoothukudi

Andamans – Junglighat Boat Committee

6 | Lessons / Best practices

Several practices and processes helped ensure successful outcomes while dealing with the cases received, and this section details the main practices that helped us overcome our lack of prior experience in disaster management to successfully help the various groups in need.

1) Linguistic diversity

Dakshin was able to engage with a diverse group of migrants from various coastal and inland states because of the linguistic skills of our team. Cases received were allocated to Dakshin staff and volunteers primarily based on their language skills. Being able to engage with migrant fishworkers in their native tongue rather than adding to their stress by needing them to communicate with us in Hindi or the host state language allowed us to build relationships, understand their needs as well as come to consensus on solutions far more easily. However, the sheer case load involving workers from Andhra Pradesh meant our Telugu speaking colleagues were often in high demand.

2) Role of unions in networking and support:

Engaging in the process made us appreciate the significance of unionising. Unions have played a big role in supporting workers and negotiating with the state to ensure their basic needs are met and immediate concerns are tended to. The National Fishworkers' Forum, its leaders and member unions like the Traditional Fish Workers Union in Andhra Pradesh played crucial roles in lobbying with district and state officials for relief measures and building trust between Dakshin, other NGOs and the migrant groups.

3) Role of networks

Having access to civil society networks helped us work synergistically to resolve the food needs

of migrant fishworkers. Within a few days of the lockdown, many resources and databases of organisations working on COVID relief and response activities were being shared online on NGO networks and forums. These resources helped us update our own internal database and provided more options to reach out to for help.

4) Understanding processes of relief and response

Relief work is complex and emotionally demanding. It involves communicating with a range of groups – people in distress, unions, local organisations and government bodies – and constant follow up to ensure results. All of this was being attempted while keeping the process as democratic and collaborative as possible. Most members of our team were not specifically trained in this work, and thus at times struggled with their own limitations of understanding and efficiency. It takes time to manage personal emotions of anxiety and inefficacy that may crop up in such processes. There was a definite learning curve involved in getting used to this work, and being more forgiving with oneself. Group meetings, updates and experience over time helped the team learn how to coordinate in effective ways and to accept their own limits

5) Understanding advocacy

The work often involved advocacy efforts with the state for better conditions. Contacts were made with the fisheries department, district commissioners, police, labour department, members of parliament. Social media was also used for appeals in a few cases. There was a mixed response from the administration. While in some cases, requests are not heard, in other cases there have been swift responses. The entire process gave us insights into good and bad practices related to advocacy and the role of clear communication, persistent efforts, the right connections, and luck in achieving required goals.

7 | Challenges

Relief work can be mentally exhausting and this is exacerbated in a situation like the lockdown with all its related uncertainties. In this section we outline the challenges that the Dakshin team and other NGO partners faced – related to internal components or due to the actions of external actors like the government or donors

Internal challenges

1) Adequately meeting all needs expressed by the stranded group

While the team tried their best to meet all the needs expressed by groups, it was not possible to always do so. This was the case particularly with arranging alternate accommodation for fishworkers who were forced to live on their boats through the lockdown. Despite many attempts, it was seldom possible to arrange. Similarly, we were not always able to take food preferences and food biases into account. Providing financial support to ease their condition during this time of stress was also not possible as we consciously chose to try to arrange rations through our networks as funding sources and our bandwidth was limited. Our fundraising efforts were thus focused on providing rations and health supplies to non-migrant fishing families in their villages whose plight was overlooked by many because of the larger migrant spotlight.

2) Managing desperate reactions

It was not always easy to make the workers wait until the authorities responded. There were several incidents when a group threatened to make risky moves such as starting to walk, or travel by sea, without the necessary permits, all in a state of desperation to go home. In such

cases, it was a challenge to keep the situation in control.

3) Psychological and emotional support

Because of the suddenness and the uncertainty associated with the lockdown and its subsequent implications, this was a highly stressful and anxious time for stranded workers. Although we provided them with contacts for counselling and psychological support in cases where we could sense distress, we could also sense a general reluctance in seeking professional assistance for mental health, perhaps because of social stigma associated with it. So, all the team could do was be as supportive and sensitive to their situation as possible while interacting with them.

4) Difficulty in triangulating the information received

At times, it was challenging to get an accurate picture of the on-ground scenario because of contradictory narratives shared by different stakeholders- the informant, the boat owners, the local organisations, the workers and the administration. However, with experience the team improved their ability to recheck information through triangulation from the different parties involved. be as supportive and sensitive to their situation as possible while interacting with them.

5) Arranging for movement

One of the biggest challenges was to arrange for the movement of migrant workers from the stranded locations to their homes. Getting the required permits and making travel arrangements was fraught with difficulties because of confusing or contradictory information on trains and registration, as well as exorbitant bus fares and constantly changing regulations at the state and local levels. The digital nature of this process meant that many stranded individuals with low digital literacy or not in possession of cell-phones had to completely

depend upon others to help with the process. Holding the state accountable for this process was also difficult at times as officials of the home state and host state passed the buck between each other.

6) Getting local support

Although there have been several encouraging cases of state response, the overall responsibility for arranging for the needs of fishworkers have often fallen on the shoulders of boat-owners, thereby enforcing existing power structures and placing the workers in a position of feeling like 'charity cases' at the mercy of others. Thus, often our team also had to focus on appealing to the boat-owners for meeting urgent needs. The workers and the groups helping them would have had greater negotiating power on labour issues (like withholding payments, forced fishing trips etc.) if the state had taken full responsibility of directly supporting the workers.

Government response regarding migrant workers

1) Difficulty in arranging govt aid

Throughout the process, another key challenge that the team faced was the difficulty in communicating and coordinating with local governmental officials, either due to faulty helplines or inaccessibility of officials. In the defense of the officials, they were being changed frequently in certain regions and the control rooms often did not have the updated lists of the officers and so we couldn't access them. In areas outside city limits e.g., Red Hills (Chennai), there was some confusion about the jurisdiction of officers and that made it difficult to find the concerned officer of the area where relief was needed.

2) Confusion caused by multiple official helplines

Another general issue observed was the presence of multiple helplines from different

departments. Each helpline would redirect volunteers to another department to register the request for aid. This was especially a problem in Bangalore, where the relief work was divided between the BBMP and the Labour Department, each having different criteria and procedure for providing aid. Apart from this, in Andhra Pradesh, many of the official government helplines were either switched off or not reachable.

3) Quality and Quantity of Food

A common issue that was raised by the stranded individuals was that they were not satisfied with the amount as well as quality of food being provided by the government. The food being provided was primarily basic rations like rice and dal. In some cases, the cooked food packets that were supplied were reported to have insects. Even children from the migrant worker families had to survive with the very basic cooked food supplied by the government and other agencies, compromising on nutritional requirements.

4) Tensions between employers and workers

In most cases, government agencies had asked employers or contractors to arrange food and basic amenities for stranded migrant workers. In some of the non-fisher cases, as we contacted workers based on their requests, it led to tensions between the workers and their employers. Even though government agencies had assured adequate care to workers by their employers, many cases pointed either towards inadequate care or threats to workers. For instance, a common thread was the deduction of future wages to compensate the expenses borne by the employer.

5) More focus needed on mental health issues of workers

Stranded onboard, staying in cramped spaces without proper food and water, loss of income, uncertainty regarding the future and being away from family members in other states were

among the many reasons which eventually led to severe mental health issues amongst the migrant fishworkers. Among many, there are reports of a fisherman from Andhra Pradesh stranded in Gujarat, who allegedly died of a panic attack.

There was, and still is negligible focus on the mental health of fishworkers and their families. While the taboos surrounding mental health in our country make identifying problems difficult, we feel that the administration could have taken more effort to avoid panic amongst the migrant fishworkers and their families back home. Disseminating timely information and setting up communication channels between the workers and their families would have been of great comfort to these families.

Government response regarding migrant workers

1) Lag in policy decisions

The first lockdown began on March 25th but due to the confusion around whether fishing was considered an essential activity, many states banned fishing leading to the abrupt halt of this sector. Tonnes of fish were discarded in the initial few days as trawlers returned after multi-day trips to find harbours closed. It was only on April 10th that the Ministry of Human Affairs issued an addendum to the lockdown guidelines and stated that the operations of the marine fishing and aquaculture industry were permissible. By this time, it was too late, as migrants had been stranded on boats for over two weeks and were in no physical or mental state to restart fishing. Boat owners were also hesitant to begin as the associated infrastructure such as ice plants and the rest of the supply chain had to restart to ensure that the catches could be sold at the required prices to make the fishing trip profitable. The small-scale community and the migrant fishworkers bore the brunt of this delay with no income and little savings to rely on during this period.

2) COVID Advisory not suited for fishers

The COVID-19 advisories issued by the government did not consider the lifestyles and conditions in which most fishing families live. For example, state directives suggest washing hands frequently with running water, when many people and places associated with fisheries (boats, landing centres, households, etc.) do not have continuous access to running water. When fishing was declared an essential activity on April 10th there were no directions on the best way to observe safety while on board fishing vessels, at landing centres and during auctioning and selling. Since fisheries is a vocation where maintaining physical distancing and adequate sanitation is challenging, most fishers were worried regarding the safety involved in fishing operations. This created a panic situation and many boats did not venture out to fish, which affected income and nutritional needs of many families. Fisheries specific advisories in local languages were later issued by the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT) on the 16th of April.

3) Ration distribution

Another issue was though the government provided rations to families with ration cards, the supply was inadequate for a family of 5-6 members. The families without a ration card were left out of the benefits provided by government in many states. The scale of the issue meant that Dakshin had to prioritise support to long-term partners and sites of engagement i.e., Odisha and Tamil Nadu. Even within these sites we had to prioritise relief and choose between families with varying degrees of impact, which was extremely challenging to explain to the rest of the village.

4) Mid-day meal schemes

There was a Supreme Court order and a MHRD directive to supply the dry ration from the mid-day meal scheme to beneficiary children's houses directly. Upon enquiry by the Food

taskforce volunteers, this seems to have been overlooked in certain cases. As per news reports, Maharashtra and Telangana state governments had not taken any concrete step towards fulfilling this task of providing dry rations to 1.1 crore and 20 lakhs of eligible children in the respective states.

5) Inadequate sanitary supplies

The relief provided by government agencies and many NGOs were mostly food rations and lacked sanitary supplies like soaps, sanitary napkins etc. In Ganjam district in Odisha, even community health workers did not have adequate PPEs, putting them at a heightened risk of infection.

Challenges related to civil society

1) Lack of active NGOs in Coastal districts

In places where Government relief mechanisms were inadequate, we relied on local NGOs to connect to the on-ground problems. However, the lack of active local organizations in coastal districts made facilitating relief efforts in these parts challenging, particularly in the states of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. In parts of Odisha, local organizations were also unable to provide assistance due to lockdown restrictions.

2) Logistical limitations in providing and delivering rations

Local NGOs and partners who were contacted also faced their own challenges, especially as the lockdown got extended. By lockdown 3.0 most NGOs either had a limited supply of rations to provide or they had sufficient rations but lacked the logistics and infrastructure to deliver it to the group in need.

8 | Way forward

In this section we outline the recommendations from the Dakshin staff for a way forward, both for governments and civil society.

1) Need for state accountability and better labour regulations

The processes of struggle and coping with the COVID-19 lockdown among the migrant workers have made the precarity of Indian labour very visible. Many of the difficulties being faced by the stranded migrant workers may have been eased if there had been a clearer articulation and recognition of labour rights. A database of information on and for migrants could have also been useful for the process. Negotiations with the State for accountability would have been easier that way.

2) Non-insistence on Aadhaar for rations

In spite of the Supreme Court judgement stating that Aadhaar should not be made mandatory for availing basic necessities, most government agencies made it mandatory to register migrant workers' names with their Aadhaar numbers. This was possibly due to the fact that many of the officials believed that the workers were asking for food kits repeatedly even when they already had surplus food supplies and wanted to use their Aadhaar numbers as a reference to keep track of individuals to whom relief had been provided. Instead, the central government could have universalized the PDS system in such a way that enough cereals and pulses could be provided to the poor, regardless of their migrant status, with the help of temporary ration cards.

3) Non-insistence of Aadhar linked bank accounts for compensation

On 30th March the Ministry of Fisheries and Animal Husbandry instructed states to confirm that all affected fish workers had Aadhar-linked bank accounts since this would be a pre-requisite for financial assistance. Considering that fishers have id cards and registered with the fisheries department, there was no need to exclude non-Aadhar holders from availing relief. However, at the end of the day this was an irrelevant concern as no relief package for fishers has been announced till date. While the chaos of the lockdown has died down, fishing communities have yet to recover as fishing has yet to resume in many areas due to local lockdowns, fear of catching COVID-19 etc. A compensation package is still urgently needed.

4) Creating enabling ecosystems for rural micro-enterprises

The micro enterprises and women's cooperatives that operate in vulnerable and marginalised economies of coastal India, play a critical role in maintaining the household cash flow despite unprecedented adversities. The future appears uncertain, but a 'new normal' demands smarter and more sustainable choices, at an individual and collective level. The potential of local micro enterprises in contributing towards reducing rural economic despair and cascading malnutrition was made clear to us in this early instance of the pandemic's effect. With the right institutional frameworks and systems in place, such local enterprises will mitigate financial despair for small-income households and create opportunities for structured community businesses to thrive in rural economies.

5) Building capacities of women fishworkers

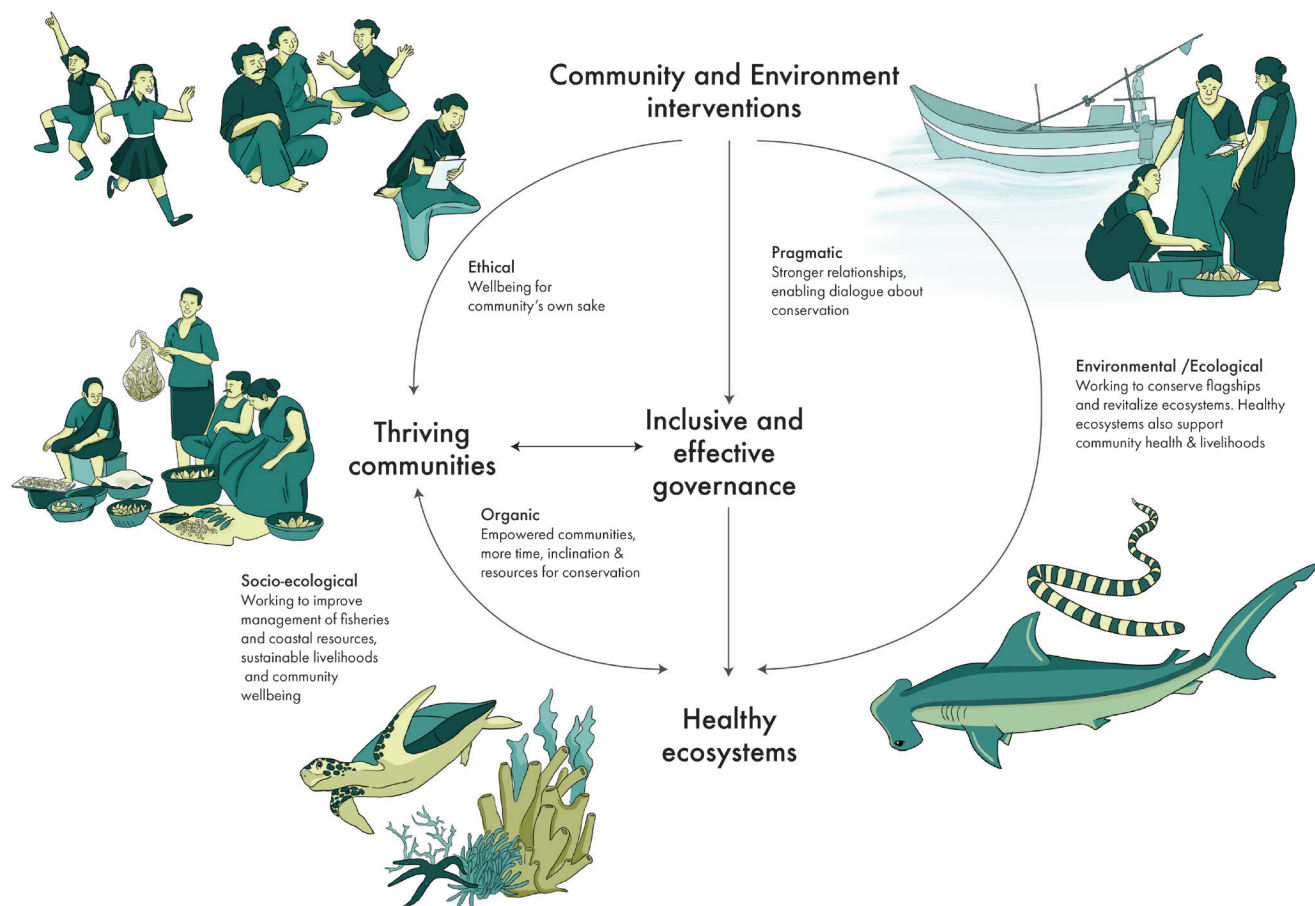
With the lockdown there was a visible increase in preference for online purchase of fish. This shift in buying practices bodes ill for women fishworkers who largely earn a living through the sale of fish – either door to door or in fish markets. In this post-COVID-19 time, extra attention needs to be paid to this group to ensure that they are able to weather any lasting transitions

in purchasing modes. Through building online platforms exclusively comprised of women vendors, capacity building in using technologies that can support online sales and increasing their mobility, these women can continue to earn a living and support their families.

6) Building and strengthening cross-sectoral networks

The lockdown highlighted the importance of working within and with networks across the country. Without national, state and local networks, civil society would not have been able to mobilise and provide the level of support documented during this period. Certainly, Dakshin's own relief efforts were made possible only because of our prior engagement with national networks as well as the new relationships built with non-fisheries or new networks such as the Hunger Collective or Right to Food. Within the fisheries sector, networks like the National Fishworkers' Forum and allied organisations were in the forefront advocating and working for the wellbeing of communities and migrant fishworkers.

9 | A SeaChange for SSF futures



COVID-19 and the lockdown in India has had an immensely adverse impact on fishing communities in India. Not only have there been socio-economic impacts, impacts on health and well-being and their access to markets and resources but the pandemic has also brought into sharp focus the structural gaps and inequities of these communities and the inherent vulnerabilities across various nodes of the fisheries sector. These observed impacts have further strengthened our internal commitment to operationalising our SeaChange framework. This framework, as outlined in the graphic below believes that for long-term,

sustainable impact, presents a theory of change wherein holistic interventions across the environment-social-development spectrum will lead to sustainable natural resource management, health ecosystems as well as fisher community wellbeing.

SeaChange aims to create environmental and livelihood benefits for coastal communities and spaces, ultimately creating community changemakers who can accelerate both social and environmental goals. The SeaChange model will build greater resilience at the grassroots by strengthening collective action and building inclusive governance models thereby enabling local communities and networks to respond in more effective and streamlined ways to future challenges.

10 | Acknowledgments

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National networks

1. Andhra Pradesh Migrant Helpline
2. Chennai Citizens COVID Fund for Migrant Worker
3. Hunger Collective
1. Kerala Migrant Help Desk
2. National Fishworkers' Forum
4. Right to Food
5. Stranded Worker Network

Organisations

1. All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), Gujarat
2. Centre for Community Services (CCS), Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu
3. Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Bengaluru, Karnataka
4. Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Andhra Pradesh
5. Cividep-India
6. Delhi Forum, New Delhi
7. Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), Mumbai, Maharashtra

8. Garments Labour Union, Bangalore, Karnataka
9. Helping Hands Charitable Trust, Maharashtra
10. Human Rights Law Network, Bangalore, Karnataka
11. Joy of Sharing, Hyderabad, Telangana
12. Law Trust, Tamil Nadu
13. Makkal Pathai, Chennai, Tamil Nadu
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16. Odisha Traditional Fish Workers Union, Ganjam, Odisha
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18. People for Social Action, New Delhi
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20. Sumanasa, Tamil Nadu
21. United Artists Association, Ganjam, Odisha
22. United Way of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, Telangana
23. Yein Udaan, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

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3. Ganesh K, Deputy Director of Fisheries, Udupi, Government of Karnataka
4. Harish Kumar, Deputy Director of Fisheries, Mangalore, Government of Karnataka
5. J.L. Ajith Stalin, Assistant Director of Fisheries, Colachel, Government of Tamil Nadu
6. Cpt. Manivaran IAS, Labour Department, Government of Karnataka

7. Mary Shilma, Inspector of Fisheries, Colachel, Government of Tamil Nadu
8. Naleen Kumar Kateel, Member of Parliament, Mangalore, Karnataka
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10. Roopa MJ, Additional Deputy Commissioner, Dakshina Kannada
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17. Wilma Elizabeth Tauro, Senior Labour Officer, Mangalore, Government of Karnataka

Individuals

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Dakshin Taskforce members

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Board of Trustees

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