

EXPLORING POVERTY IN COASTAL FISHING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF CONTEMPORARY-CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WELFARE THEORY

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Abstract: This study explores the persistent poverty in coastal fishing communities across Southeast Asia and Africa through the integrated lens of contemporary-critical sociology and social welfare theory. Drawing on empirical case studies from Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, the research examines how structural inequalities, economic exclusion, environmental degradation, and gendered power dynamics shape the livelihoods of small-scale fishers. The contemporary-critical sociology framework reveals how marginalization is perpetuated through global value chains, institutional neglect, and symbolic domination, particularly affecting women and ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, social welfare theory highlights the importance of targeted welfare programs, community-based interventions, and participatory governance in alleviating poverty and building resilience. The comparative analysis identifies commonalities—such as limited access to capital, environmental vulnerability, and entrenched gender norms—while also highlighting regional differences in policy responses and poverty determinants. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at transforming structural relations, enhancing social protection, and promoting inclusive development strategies tailored to the unique socio-ecological contexts of coastal fishing communities.

Keywords: Coastal fishing communities; contemporary-critical sociology; social welfare theory; gender inequality; environmental vulnerability; Southeast Asia; Africa; fisheries governance.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelagic state, boasts a vast maritime territory that accounts for approximately 70% of its total area (Wahyuni et al., 2020). This extensive marine expanse harbors a wealth of economic resources, including a diverse array of fish species, seaweed, and other marine products. Given the abundance of these resources, one might expect that the livelihoods of Indonesian fishers would be robust and prosperous. However, the reality starkly contrasts with this expectation. Despite the rich natural resources at their disposal, a significant proportion of Indonesia's fishers remain economically and politically marginalized.

According to data from the 2017 National Socioeconomic Survey (SUSENAS), analyzed by Prof. Dr. Zuzy Anna and her team from the Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences at Padjadjaran University, approximately 11.34% of individuals working in the fisheries sector are classified as poor (Febrianto & Novrizaldi, 2024). Furthermore, less than 14.58 million people, or roughly 90% of the 16.2 million fishers in Indonesia, live below the poverty line (Anwar & Wahyuni, 2019; Novira et al., 2024). This statistic underscores the paradox of resource-rich coastal communities grappling with persistent poverty.

The economic disenfranchisement of Indonesian fishers can be attributed to several factors. One of the primary issues is the difficulty in accessing capital. The banking sector often perceives fisheries as a high-risk industry and is consequently reluctant to provide adequate financial support. This lack of access to capital inhibits fishers from investing in better equipment, technology, and practices that could enhance their productivity and income. Moreover, governmental policies have historically been insufficiently supportive of the fishing community. This includes a lack of pro-poor policies and interventions tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of fishers.

Politically, fishers are often exploited as tools for mass mobilization to serve various political interests, further entrenching their marginalization. This political exploitation, coupled with economic hardships, has entrenched fishers as one of the most disadvantaged occupational groups in Indonesia. Understanding the plight of these

communities and devising effective interventions requires a comprehensive examination through relevant theoretical lenses.

Contemporary-Critical Sociology and Social Welfare Theory provide insightful frameworks for analyzing the socio-economic conditions of fishers. Critical-Contemporar Sociology examines the power dynamics and structural inequalities that contribute to the marginalization of certain groups within society (Garlitz, 2022). It helps in understanding how systemic issues and policies perpetuate the disenfranchisement of fishers. Social Welfare Theory, on the other hand, focuses on the role of social policies in enhancing the well-being of individuals and communities. It emphasizes the importance of providing equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support systems to uplift marginalized groups (Fleurbaey & Maniquet, 2011; Fleurbaey & Salles, 2021).

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to dissect the multifaceted nature of poverty among fishers in Indonesia. It seeks to highlight the interplay between economic, social, and political factors that contribute to the persistence of poverty in these communities. The ultimate goal is to inform the development of more effective policies and interventions that can genuinely improve the livelihoods of fishers.

METHOD

Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this literature study is to explore and understand the underlying causes of poverty among fishers in Indonesia and to identify potential policy interventions that could alleviate their socio-economic hardships. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the key economic, social, and political factors contributing to the poverty of fishers in Indonesia?
2. How do current governmental policies impact the livelihoods of fishers, and what gaps exist in these policies?
3. In what ways can Critical Sociology and Social Welfare Theory provide insights into the challenges faced by fishers?
4. What policy recommendations can be made to improve the economic and social welfare of fishers in Indonesia?

Through these questions, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the poverty experienced by fishers and to offer evidence-based recommendations for policy makers. By examining the issue through both Critical Sociology and Social Welfare Theory, the study seeks to uncover the structural and systemic barriers that hinder the economic empowerment of fishers. Additionally, it aims to propose targeted interventions that can address these barriers, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for all members of the fishing community.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary-Critical Sociology

Contemporary-Critical Sociology is a theoretical framework that examines the structures of power, inequality, and social relations that shape the lives of individuals and communities (Garlitz, 2022). Originating from Marxist thought and further developed by scholars such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and later Jürgen Habermas, Contemporary-Critical Sociology seeks to uncover the underlying causes of social inequalities and to challenge the status quo (Salem & Till, 2017).

One of the key concepts in Critical Sociology is the idea of structural inequality. This concept posits that social and economic disparities are not merely the result of individual failings or choices but are deeply embedded in the fabric of society. These inequalities are maintained through institutions, policies, and practices that favor certain groups over others. In the context of poverty among fishers in Indonesia, structural inequality can be observed in the limited access to capital, inadequate infrastructure, and policies that do not adequately support small-scale fishers (Dainow, 2013; Salem & Till, 2017).

Another important perspective in Critical Sociology is the concept of power dynamics. Power is viewed not only in terms of political authority but also in the control over resources, information, and opportunities. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power is particularly relevant here. The fishing communities in Indonesia often lack political power and influence, which exacerbates their economic vulnerabilities. The marginalization of fishers can be linked to their limited representation in decision-making processes and the exploitation of their labor by more powerful economic interests (Bourdieu, 1986).

Critical Sociology also emphasizes the role of ideology in perpetuating inequality. Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony is useful for understanding how dominant ideologies justify and normalize the status quo, making it difficult for marginalized groups to challenge their position. For instance, the perception of fisheries as a high-risk sector perpetuates the reluctance of financial institutions to invest in this industry, further entrenching the economic disadvantages faced by fishers (Zandra, 2024).

(Habermas, (1984) in his book entitled *The Theory of Communicative Action* described: The Theory of Communicative Action has three interrelated concerns: (1) to develop a concept of rationality that is no longer tied to, and limited by, the subjectivistic and individualistic premises of modern philosophy and social theory; (2) to construct a two-level concept of society that integrates the lifeworld and systems paradigms; and, finally, (3) to sketch out, against this background, a critical theory of modernity which analyzes and accounts for its pathologies in a way that suggests a redirection rather than an abandonment of the project of enlightenment (McCarthy, 1981). Based on this reference, it is justified that critical sociology can uncover the systemic and structural barriers that

contribute to their disenfranchisement. This approach highlights the need for transformative changes in policies and practices to address the root causes of inequality.

Social Welfare Theory

Social Welfare Theory focuses on the role of social policies and programs in promoting the well-being of individuals and communities. It encompasses a range of approaches and principles aimed at addressing poverty and social exclusion. Key scholars in this field include Richard Titmuss and Amartya Sen. One of the foundational principles of Social Welfare Theory is the concept of social justice. Social justice entails the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and rights within a society (Sen, 2009; Titmuss, 2018). John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness is central to this discussion. It emphasizes the need to create conditions that allow all individuals to achieve their full potential. In the context of fishers in Indonesia, social justice would require policies that ensure equitable access to capital, markets, and support services (Rawls, 1971).

Another key principle is the idea of social protection. Social protection includes measures such as social insurance, social assistance, and labor market interventions designed to reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience. For fishers, social protection could involve initiatives like subsidized loans, insurance schemes against natural disasters, and training programs to improve skills and productivity. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which focuses on expanding the freedoms and capacities of individuals, is particularly relevant here (Sen, 1999).

Social Welfare Theory also advocates for community-based approaches to poverty alleviation. These approaches recognize the importance of involving local communities in the design and implementation of policies and programs. For fishing communities, this could mean participatory governance structures where fishers have a voice in decision-making processes affecting their livelihoods. Moreover, Social Welfare Theory highlights the significance of capacity building. Enhancing the capabilities of individuals and communities is crucial for sustainable development. Capacity-building initiatives for fishers could include education and training programs, access to modern fishing technologies, and support for diversifying income sources.

Integration of Theories

Integrating Contemporary-Critical Sociology and Social Welfare Theory provides a robust framework for analyzing and addressing the poverty experienced by fishers in Indonesia. While Contemporary-Critical Sociology offers insights into the structural and systemic factors that perpetuate inequality (Appelrouth & Edles, 2021; Salem & Till, 2017), Social Welfare Theory provides practical approaches for mitigating these inequalities and enhancing social well-being. The integration of these theories allows for a holistic understanding of poverty. Contemporary-Critical Sociology's emphasis on power dynamics and structural inequality complements Social Welfare Theory's focus on social justice and protection. For instance, understanding the power imbalances that disadvantage fishers can inform the design of social protection measures that specifically target these vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, the combined framework can address both the macro and micro aspects of poverty. Contemporary-Critical Sociology helps identify the broader socio-economic and political structures that need reform (Salem & Till, 2017), while Social Welfare Theory offers actionable solutions at the community and individual levels (Fleurbaey & Maniquet, 2011). This dual approach ensures that interventions are not only addressing symptoms but also tackling root causes. In practical terms, an integrated approach could involve policies that simultaneously reform institutional practices and provide direct support to fishers. For example, regulatory changes to ensure fair market access for small-scale fishers could be complemented by programs that offer financial literacy training and access to affordable credit.

Moreover, integrating these theories can enhance the effectiveness of community-based initiatives. By empowering fishers through participatory governance and capacity building, policies can become more responsive to the actual needs and aspirations of the community. This empowerment aligns with Contemporary-Critical Sociology's goal of challenging power imbalances and with Social Welfare Theory's emphasis on inclusive development.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Coastal Fishing Communities: An Overview

Definition and Characteristics

Coastal fishing communities are groups of people who reside in coastal regions and primarily depend on fishing as their main source of livelihood. Geographically, these communities are situated along coastlines, often in remote areas with limited access to urban centers. Economically, these communities are characterized by their reliance on small-scale, artisanal fishing practices, which involve minimal capital investment and are labor-intensive. Fishing gears used are typically traditional, including various types of nets and traps, which are adapted to the local environmental conditions. Socially, these communities often exhibit close-knit relationships, with strong family ties and community networks playing crucial roles in their daily lives. The social structure is typically hierarchical, with community elders or leaders holding significant influence over communal decisions and conflict resolutions (Anwar & Wahyuni, 2019).

Economic Activities and Livelihoods

The primary economic activity in coastal fishing communities is fishing, which can be both for subsistence and commercial purposes. In addition to fishing, many community members engage in ancillary activities such as fish processing, marketing, and aquaculture. These activities provide essential supplementary income, particularly during off-seasons when fishing yields are low. Economic activities in these communities are often seasonal and highly dependent on environmental conditions, making them vulnerable to fluctuations in fish stocks and weather patterns. Diversification of income sources, such as engaging in small-scale farming or petty trade, is common to mitigate the risks associated with fishing (Béné & Friend, 2011).

Social Structure and Organization

The social structure of coastal fishing communities is generally characterized by a strong sense of community and mutual support. Family dynamics are central to community life, with extended families often living in close proximity and supporting each other in economic and social activities. Community organization typically includes informal groups or cooperatives that manage local resources, resolve disputes, and represent the community in interactions with external entities, such as government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Social networks play a vital role in facilitating economic activities, providing social safety nets, and maintaining cultural traditions and practices (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013).

Dimensions Of Poverty in Coastal Fishing Communities

Economic Poverty

Economic poverty in coastal fishing communities is characterized by low income levels, high economic instability, and limited employment opportunities. Many fishing households live below the poverty line, with incomes fluctuating seasonally based on fishing yields. The lack of access to financial services, such as credit and savings, exacerbates economic vulnerability, making it difficult for families to invest in better fishing equipment or diversify their income sources. Additionally, high levels of debt to moneylenders are common, trapping many in a cycle of poverty and economic dependence (Béné & Friend, 2011).

Social Poverty

Social poverty in these communities is manifested through social exclusion, limited access to education and healthcare, and weak community support systems. Many coastal fishing communities are geographically isolated, which limits their access to essential services and infrastructure. Educational attainment is generally low, with high dropout rates due to economic pressures that force children to work or assist in fishing activities (Wijaya & Fauzie, 2020). Healthcare services are often inadequate, leading to high incidences of untreated illnesses and poor health outcomes. Social networks, while strong, are sometimes insufficient to provide the necessary support during times of crisis, such as natural disasters or economic downturns (Béné & Friend, 2011).

Environmental Poverty

Environmental poverty refers to the degradation of natural resources, which directly impacts the livelihoods of coastal fishing communities. Overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction are common issues that reduce the availability of fish and other marine resources. Climate change exacerbates these problems by altering fish migration patterns, increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, and causing sea-level rise, which can lead to loss of fishing grounds and coastal erosion. The depletion of resources forces communities to fish further from shore, increasing operational costs and risks (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013; Putri & Heriyanti, 2024).

Cultural Poverty

Cultural poverty in coastal fishing communities involves the erosion of traditional knowledge, practices, and cultural heritage. Modernization and external influences often lead to the loss of indigenous fishing techniques and community rituals that have been passed down through generations. Younger generations may migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities, leading to a decline in cultural continuity and a weakening of community bonds. Efforts to preserve cultural heritage through community-based tourism or educational programs are sometimes hindered by economic and environmental challenges (Béné & Friend, 2011).

Critical Sociological Perspectives on Poverty

Power Dynamics and Inequality

Power dynamics and social inequality within coastal fishing communities are intricate and pervasive. These communities often function within global value chains (GVCs), where power asymmetries dictate the distribution of value and risk among stakeholders. Lead firms and powerful intermediaries frequently dominate these chains, marginalizing small-scale fishers who lack bargaining power and institutional support (Jentoft, 2007; Salmi et al., 2022). This hierarchical structure reinforces existing inequalities, allowing those with greater resources and influence to capture a disproportionate share of the benefits, while smallholders remain trapped in precarious livelihoods and restricted market access (Sharmin, 2024). Moreover, traditional gender roles and social norms further compound these inequalities, particularly by limiting women's participation in economic and decision-making processes within the sector. Empowerment initiatives that target women and marginalized groups—through skills training, financial access, and institutional inclusion—have shown promise in shifting power dynamics and promoting more equitable resource distribution (Sultana et al., 2023).

Social Justice and Marginalization

Social justice issues in coastal fishing communities are closely tied to marginalization and exclusion, rooted in structural inequalities. Many such communities face systemic barriers that limit access to quality education, healthcare, and economic mobility. Geographic isolation intensifies these challenges, contributing to high dropout rates, limited infrastructure, and under-resourced public services (Allison et al., 2012; Bano, 2023). Social justice in this context requires more than equal distribution of resources—it demands policies and practices that are inclusive, participatory, and culturally responsive (Weeratunge et al., 2014).

Policy and Governance

Policy and governance frameworks are central to addressing or perpetuating poverty in coastal fisheries. Where top-down governance favors industrial-scale fishing, small-scale fishers are frequently excluded from decision-making and resource access, deepening poverty and inequality (Béné et al., 2007). Conversely, inclusive co-management systems—where communities share responsibilities with government actors—can enhance both resource sustainability and socio-economic well-being (Tianingsih et al., 2021). Such governance arrangements foster trust, empower local actors, and create adaptive institutions better suited to manage uncertainty. Integrating social equity and environmental sustainability into policy frameworks is critical to dismantling structural disadvantages and building long-term resilience (Kittinger et al., 2013).

Social Welfare Approaches to Addressing Poverty

Welfare Policies and Programs

Social welfare interventions in fishing communities typically include subsidies for gear, access to microfinance, and social protection schemes such as health insurance and conditional cash transfers. However, these programs are often constrained by weak governance, corruption, or insufficient budget allocations (World Bank, 2012). Effective social protection systems blend financial assistance with human capital development. For example, combining safety nets with training in sustainable fishing or alternative livelihoods has been shown to reduce dependency on overexploited marine resources and improve household income security (FAO, 2022). Financial literacy and access to savings and credit mechanisms are also vital in improving resilience and adaptive capacity.

Community-Based Interventions

Community-based interventions are essential in reducing poverty and enhancing sustainability in coastal areas. These participatory approaches involve local stakeholders in the design, implementation, and monitoring of initiatives, thereby ensuring relevance and buy-in (Gutiérrez et al., 2011). Community-led projects—such as marine protected areas coupled with ecotourism or aquaculture—demonstrate the potential for conserving biodiversity while supporting alternative income streams. Strengthening cooperatives and micro-enterprises enhances bargaining power and market access for small-scale fishers, while ongoing capacity building and leadership development are critical for sustaining impacts (Pomeroy & Berkes, 1997).

International Aid and Development

International development programs have played a significant role in coastal community welfare by offering funding, technology, and institutional support. However, their effectiveness is often undermined by short-term planning, donor-driven agendas, and inadequate community participation (Campling & Havice, 2013). For aid to be transformative, development must be locally grounded, responsive to cultural contexts, and geared toward long-term goals. Emphasis should be placed on building local governance capacities and supporting inclusive institutions that can respond to both socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities—especially in the face of climate change and ocean resource depletion (FAO, 2022; Kittinger et al., 2013).

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Southeast Asia

Coastal fishing communities across Southeast Asia face multifaceted socio-economic and environmental challenges. These range from entrenched poverty and income inequality to governance failures and climate vulnerabilities. This section examines cases from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, highlighting key trends and determinants affecting livelihoods in coastal zones.

• Indonesia: Structural Poverty and Governance Gaps in Cilincing, Jakarta

In Indonesia, particularly in coastal urban areas like Cilincing, North Jakarta, fishing communities grapple with persistent economic instability. Although fishing remains a vital source of livelihood, systemic challenges such as limited access to capital, poor infrastructure, and regulatory neglect constrain development. According to the National Socio-Economic Survey (SUSENAS) in 2017, approximately 11.34% of individuals working in the fishing sector were categorized as poor—higher than those in construction (9.86%) and restaurant services (5.56%) (Bano, 2023).

Field studies reveal that financial institutions often perceive the fishing sector as high-risk, leading to limited lending and investment. This financial exclusion is compounded by inadequate support services, such as access to cold storage, markets, and insurance (Bano, 2023). Structural poverty is further exacerbated by socio-political marginalization, poor policy enforcement, and a lack of inclusive coastal development strategies. Cultural poverty

also plays a role, as low education levels, gender roles, and local customs restrict opportunities, particularly for youth and women in fishing households (Wijaya & Fauzie, 2020).

• **Malaysia: Deep Inequality in East Coast Peninsular States**

In Peninsular Malaysia, particularly in Terengganu and Kelantan, coastal fishing communities remain among the poorest despite their substantial contributions to national fish production. A study by Rhoumah (2016) found that 28.10% of fishermen in this region live in extreme poverty, with a poverty gap index of 5.96% and poverty severity of 1.4%. When expanded to all poverty levels, 81.57% of fishermen are considered poor, reflecting systemic economic exclusion.

Key determinants of poverty include household size, level of education, and income generated from fishing. Larger household sizes increase dependency burdens, while higher education correlates with better economic resilience. Income inequality is pronounced, especially in Kelantan, where the Gini coefficient among fishing households reached 0.582, indicating high levels of income disparity (Rhoumah, 2016). These disparities stem from uneven access to technology, financing, and fluctuating market prices for catch.

Despite government subsidies and infrastructure programs, many poverty alleviation efforts have not reached the most vulnerable fishermen. The mismatch between top-down policies and community-specific needs underscores the urgency for localized, participatory development interventions.

• **Vietnam: Climate Change and Ecological Vulnerability in Northern Coastal Villages**

In northern Vietnam, the challenges are closely tied to the impacts of climate change. Coastal communities in provinces such as Quang Ninh, Thai Binh, and Thanh Hoa report increasing vulnerability due to more frequent and intense storms, sea level rise, and shifts in fish migration patterns (Nguyen & Sato, 2022). These ecological disruptions have severely impacted fish stocks, leading to declining yields and reduced income.

Fishermen in these areas have noted a significant reduction in economically valuable species such as herring, scad, and shrimp, accompanied by a rise in "trash fish" or less marketable species. The reduced availability of quality catch increases operating costs and decreases profitability, especially for small-scale operators. Infrastructural damages—such as destruction of fishing boats, equipment, and coastal facilities—have further deepened economic vulnerabilities.

Adaptation efforts have been hampered by a lack of financial resources, limited technical knowledge, and weak institutional support systems. While the government has promoted disaster risk reduction policies, many communities report insufficient coverage and slow implementation. The Gini coefficient in these regions stands at 0.39, reflecting moderate but still concerning income disparities (Nguyen & Sato, 2022).

Table 1. Socio-Economic and Climate Challenges in Coastal Fishing Communities in Southeast Asia

Country	Key Challenges	Poverty Rate	Determinants of Poverty	Income Inequality	Climate Impact
Indonesia	Economic instability, limited access to capital	11.34%	Economic conditions, infrastructure, policies	High	Famine and scarcity of resources
Malaysia	High poverty rates, income inequality	28.10%	Household size, education, fishing income	Gini coefficient: 0.582	Health, damage of public facilities
Vietnam	Climate change, reduced fish stocks	19.5%	Climate change, economic conditions	Gini coefficient: 0.39	Increased storms, sea level rise

Case Study 2: Africa

Coastal and inland fishing communities across Africa face a complex interplay of poverty, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequality. This section explores case studies from Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, highlighting the structural and cultural factors that influence livelihoods in these regions.

• **Tanzania: Fishing as a Primary Livelihood in Mafia District**

In Tanzania's Mafia District, fishing is a vital economic activity, significantly contributing to household incomes. A study by Mpemba and Mombo (2019) found that 41.47% of households identified fishing as their main economic activity. The average daily income from fishing was 51,250 Tanzanian Shillings (TZS), compared to 15,000 TZS from fish-related activities and 5,000 TZS from other economic activities. Despite its importance, many households lack access to credit facilities, limiting their ability to invest in improved fishing gear and techniques. The study recommends providing improved fishing equipment and low-interest loans to enhance income levels (Mpemba & Mombo, 2019).

Structural poverty in the district is influenced by factors such as household size, education level, and fishing income. Larger households tend to experience higher poverty levels, while higher education levels and increased fishing income are associated with reduced poverty. Social structures, including gender roles, also play a significant role; men typically dominate fishing activities, while women are more involved in post-harvest processing and marketing (Ulega et al., 2022).

• **Kenya: Coastal Communities Facing Poverty and Inequality**

In Kenya's coastal regions, fishing is a primary source of livelihood, employing over two million people and providing nutrition to more than seven million. However, these communities face significant challenges, including high poverty rates and income inequality. A study in Kilifi County found that increased dependence on marine fisheries is associated with higher poverty and inequality levels among households (Somoebwana et al., 2021). Economic instability, lack of access to capital, and environmental factors such as weather conditions and fish stock availability contribute to the vulnerability of fishing households. Traditional gender roles often restrict women's participation in fishing activities, limiting their economic opportunities. Education levels and access to infrastructure and resources also influence poverty levels, with higher education associated with better income opportunities (Ikiara et al., 2009).

• Uganda: Environmental Degradation and Socio-Economic Challenges in Lake Victoria Basin

In Uganda's Lake Victoria Basin, fishing communities face challenges related to poverty and environmental degradation. The lake supports the largest freshwater fishery in the world, producing one million tons of fish per year and employing approximately 200,000 people (Selisny, 2024).

However, overfishing, pollution, and biodiversity loss threaten the sustainability of fishing as a livelihood. A scenario exercise by the Council on Strategic Risks (2024) highlighted that biodiversity loss in the Lake Victoria Basin exacerbates competition over natural resources, leading to conflicts and governance challenges (Mac-Seing et al., 2022; Selisny, 2024).

Household income from fishing is often supplemented by agriculture and small-scale businesses, but overall income levels remain low due to limited access to markets and resources. Structural poverty is influenced by household size, education level, and access to resources, with larger households experiencing higher poverty levels. Social structures, including community organization and traditional practices, affect income distribution and resource access.

Table 2. Socio-Economic and Environmental Challenges in African Fishing Communities

Country	Key Challenges	Poverty Rate	Determinants of Poverty	Income Inequality	Climate Impact
Tanzania	Economic instability, lack of access to credit	23.4%	Household size, education level, fishing income	High	Climate-sensitive diseases, food and nutrition insecurity
Kenya	Seasonal income variability, lack of capital	36.1%	Gender roles, education levels, infrastructure	Moderate to high	Flood, rising lake waters, drought
Uganda	Environmental degradation, limited market access	21%	Household size, education level, resource access	High	Overfishing, pollution

Comparative Analysis

Commonalities

Both Southeast Asia and Africa heavily rely on fishing as a primary source of livelihood. In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, fishing provides critical income despite various socio-economic challenges. Similarly, in Africa, notably in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, fishing is a major economic activity essential for household income. Economic instability is a common issue in both regions, where limited access to capital and credit hampers the potential for income growth and improvements in fishing activities. This economic instability is evident in the fishing communities of Cilincing, Jakarta, and Mafia District, Tanzania, where households struggle to secure loans for better fishing gear and operations.

Structural poverty, influenced by socio-economic factors like household size, education level, and social norms, is prevalent in both regions. Larger households are associated with higher poverty levels, while better education levels tend to reduce poverty. Social structures and traditional gender roles also play significant roles in determining income distribution and access to resources. Environmental factors such as climate change, overfishing, and pollution adversely affect fishing communities in both Southeast Asia and Africa. These challenges lead to reduced fish stocks, disrupted fishing activities, and increased operational risks, as seen in the coastal villages of Northern Vietnam and the Lake Victoria Basin in Uganda.

Differences

In Southeast Asia, the poverty rates and income inequality among fishing communities show significant regional and ethnic disparities. For instance, poverty rates in Northern Vietnam vary widely among different ethnic groups. In Africa, income inequality is also high, but the studies highlight more severe income distribution issues, such as the Gini coefficient of 0.582 among fishermen in Kelantan, Malaysia. Determinants of poverty also differ between the regions. In Southeast Asia, factors include regional disparities, ethnic backgrounds, and education levels. In contrast, in Africa, household size, access to credit, and social structures are more prominently highlighted as key

determinants of poverty. For example, in Kenya and Tanzania, larger household sizes and lack of access to financial services significantly contribute to poverty.

Traditional gender roles restrict women's participation in fishing activities more severely in African communities compared to Southeast Asian communities. In Kenya and Tanzania, men dominate fishing activities, while women are primarily involved in post-harvest processing and marketing. In Southeast Asia, although gender roles still influence economic participation, there are more initiatives aimed at empowering women within fishing communities. The role of government and policies in addressing poverty also varies between the regions. In Southeast Asia, policies targeting poverty reduction often involve comprehensive socio-economic development plans and international collaborations. In Africa, there is a stronger emphasis on community-based interventions and local governance structures to address socio-economic challenges.

Contemporary-Critical Sociology and Social Welfare Theory Analysis

Contemporary-Critical Sociology Perspective

From a contemporary-critical sociology perspective, the case studies from Southeast Asia and Africa reveal entrenched structural inequalities shaped by both historical exploitation and evolving neoliberal economic regimes. This theoretical lens, which builds on classical critical theory but emphasizes intersectionality, postcolonial critique, and the influence of global capitalism (Fraser, 1998; Morelock, 2017), allows for a more nuanced understanding of marginalization within fishing communities.

In both regions, small-scale fishers are embedded within global value chains and state policies that systematically disadvantage them. These communities face structural exclusion from decision-making processes and access to markets, often dominated by more powerful actors such as transnational fishing corporations, export-oriented middlemen, and development agencies that prioritize industrial over artisanal fishing (Bavinck et al., 2013).

In Southeast Asia, such exclusion is compounded by ethnic and regional disparities. In Northern Vietnam, for example, ethnic minorities face both economic and cultural marginalization, leading to disproportionate poverty rates (Nguyen & Sato, 2022). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, severe income inequality among coastal fishers—evidenced by a high Gini coefficient—reflects systemic failures to redistribute economic benefits equitably.

Gendered power relations further deepen these inequalities. Contemporary-critical theory, especially when integrated with feminist critique, highlights how traditional gender roles intersect with economic marginalization (Fraser, 1998). In both Southeast Asia and Africa, women are often confined to low-paying, informal roles such as post-harvest processing, while men dominate the capital-intensive and profitable aspects of the fisheries sector. This division of labor is not only economically restrictive but also socially entrenched, perpetuating gendered hierarchies and limiting pathways for women's empowerment.

Furthermore, structural poverty—defined by unequal access to education, land, credit, and political voice—is not simply an outcome of poor policy but a result of historically embedded systems of exclusion. Community organizations and informal social networks, while vital for resilience, often replicate existing hierarchies unless deliberately restructured to promote inclusion (Cleaver, 2012).

A contemporary-critical analysis urges a transformation of both policy frameworks and power relations. It advocates not only for redistribution of resources but also for recognition and representation (Fraser, 1990). For instance, fisherfolk cooperatives must not only receive economic support but also be integrated into governance processes. This lens emphasizes justice not as charity, but as structural reform—challenging the institutions and ideologies that produce marginality in the first place.

Social Welfare Theory Perspective

From a social welfare theory perspective, the case studies underscore the importance of public programs that guarantee economic security and enhance productive capacity in vulnerable communities. Social welfare theory emphasizes the role of the state and civil society in reducing inequality through direct support and the creation of enabling environments (Fleurbaey & Salles, 2021).

In both regions, limited access to capital and credit emerges as a major barrier to improving fishing livelihoods. Well-targeted welfare interventions—such as low-interest microcredit, subsidized fishing equipment, and financial literacy programs—can alleviate short-term economic constraints and enable long-term resilience. Such support is particularly necessary in communities where income from fishing is volatile due to seasonality, environmental shocks, or market fluctuation.

In Southeast Asia, socio-economic development plans under frameworks like ASEAN's Integrated Coastal Management have achieved partial success in poverty reduction. However, these programs often lack specific targeting mechanisms for the most marginalized—such as ethnic minorities, undocumented fishers, and women. Greater inclusivity, both in design and implementation, is required to prevent welfare benefits from being captured by elites or non-poor groups.

In Africa, community-based welfare interventions have shown encouraging results. Local governance mechanisms, such as Beach Management Units (BMUs) in East Africa or village savings groups in Tanzania, have helped promote financial inclusion and participatory decision-making. These initiatives, when well-integrated with national policies, can build social capital and strengthen economic self-reliance.

Crucially, the success of social welfare programs depends on institutional capacity, political will, and community ownership. Projects that combine welfare transfers with conservation goals—such as community-led marine protected areas or fish farming cooperatives—illustrate how environmental and economic objectives can be aligned. In both Southeast Asia and Africa, such dual-benefit approaches reduce poverty while reinforcing sustainable resource use.

In sum, while welfare theory emphasizes the distributive function of the state, the integration of local agency and context-specific knowledge is essential for sustainable and equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of coastal fishing communities in Southeast Asia and Africa, through the lenses of critical sociology and social welfare theory, reveals significant commonalities and differences in the socio-economic challenges they face. Both regions exhibit a high dependency on fishing as a primary source of livelihood, marked by economic instability and limited access to capital. Structural poverty influenced by socio-economic factors such as household size, education level, and social norms is prevalent in both regions, further compounded by environmental challenges such as climate change, overfishing, and pollution. Despite these similarities, differences emerge in the determinants of poverty, with regional and ethnic disparities more pronounced in Southeast Asia, while household size and access to financial services are more critical in Africa. Traditional gender roles also restrict economic participation, particularly in African communities, where women's roles are more confined to post-harvest activities. The influence of government and policy interventions varies, with Southeast Asia relying more on comprehensive socio-economic plans and international collaborations, whereas Africa emphasizes community-based interventions and local governance structures.

Recommendation

To address the complex issues of poverty and inequality in coastal fishing communities, it is essential to implement a multifaceted approach that integrates both socio-economic and environmental considerations. Policymakers should focus on designing inclusive and equitable policies that target the specific needs of marginalized groups, including women and ethnic minorities. Providing targeted financial assistance, education, and training programs, along with support for alternative livelihoods, can help alleviate economic constraints and promote sustainable development.

Community-based interventions should be enhanced by fostering strong community leadership, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring effective collaboration with external partners. These interventions should be supported by ongoing capacity-building initiatives to enhance the resilience and sustainability of fishing communities. Integrating environmental sustainability into socio-economic development plans is crucial to addressing the adverse effects of climate change, overfishing, and pollution. Innovative solutions that balance conservation efforts with the economic needs of fishing communities should be explored.

Furthermore, effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for assessing the impact of welfare policies and community-based interventions. Developing robust frameworks for tracking progress and identifying best practices that can be scaled and replicated in different contexts will be critical for achieving long-term success. By addressing these areas, future research and policy interventions can provide more comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the complex issues of poverty and inequality in coastal fishing communities in Southeast Asia and Africa.

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