

## ***Swapnojaal: Dreaming of a Better Life***

### ***Child Labor in Dried Fish Sector in Cox's Bazar District, Bangladesh <sup>1</sup>***

Both the children engaged in dried fish processing at Nazirartek, Cox's Bazar and their parents do not often take steps to change their age-old, inherited 'profession' of dried fish processing, even though there are opportunities available through the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) programs working to improve skills and livelihoods of vulnerable families. One of the main reasons for this outlook is that families living in the isolated communities do not have easy access to information. Additionally, there are economic, cultural and social constraints to moving beyond their communities to access services and alternative livelihood solutions for a better life.



**Children work long hours under hazardous conditions processing dried fish**

“The capacity development initiatives of the CLIMB Project<sup>2</sup> influenced me to address social inequality and advocate for child labor prevention in Cox's Bazar; also to create alternative livelihood opportunities for the families involved in dried fish processing,” said Md. Sakir Alam. Alam is the founder of Swapnojaal, a voluntary organization based in Cox's Bazar that is widely active in advocating for human rights, education for poor children and prevention of child marriage, domestic violence and child labor. “Now I am fairly confident in changing community/stakeholders' perceptions towards attaining a better life for the children and contribute to empowering marginalized families.”

Young Power of Social Action (YPSA), a CLIMB Project implementing partner, identified Mr. Alam as a potential community leader who can effectively contribute to eliminating child labor (CL) from the Dried Fish Sector (DFS) through provision of alternative sources of revenue for families and advocacy for effective and accountable functioning of the local government institutions (LGIs), government organizations and NGO service providers to ensure community needs are met.

To develop Mr. Alam's capacity, YPSA, with the assistance from the CLIMB project, provided comprehensive training on Bangladesh CL laws and policies; international conventions on CL; the responsibilities of government established by Child Labor Welfare and Monitoring Committees at national, district and Upazila (sub-district) levels; the child labor grievance mechanism and procedures; and services available through government and NGOs.



**A community information sharing meeting organized with support from YPSA**

<sup>1</sup> *Swapnojaal* means “dreamland” in Bangla.

<sup>2</sup> The CLIMB project is managed by Winrock International under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Labor. The project runs December 15, 2017 through February 28, 2021.

Mr. Alam was also oriented on participatory community engagement approaches important to establishing trust and credibility, identify priority problems/issues and collectively develop solutions appropriate for the community. He was invited to participate in CLIMB advocacy initiatives organized in partnership with YPSA to learn more about the child labor situation in the DFS and share his knowledge and experience with families. As a result, Mr. Alam gained knowledge on critical CL issues and is even more committed to playing an active role in improving the living conditions of children and their families in his Nazirartek community.

Mr. Alam was inspired to organize a skills development training on handicrafts for 20 family members of children working in dried fish processing enterprises (DFEs). The objective was to create an additional income source for families so that they can send their children to school instead of engaging them in DFEs. The course was designed in consultation with the participants interested in the course. The month-long training took place in February 2020, with two-hour lessons each evening at the communication association office at Nazirartek. The cost of the course was borne by another NGO, WAIT N' C.



**Women receiving skills training to make handicrafts for additional income.**

Upon completion of the course, the families were linked with business establishments to arrange supply orders on a regular basis. There is good demand for the handicrafts from tourists and the local community. After the success of the first group of handicraft entrepreneurs, Swapnojaal is moving forward with plans to organize two additional trainings and support to market the products.

Mr. Alam's initiatives are an example of the importance of mobilizing NGOs and CSOs to help children and their families to respond to the pressure to engage children in child labor in the DFS. He has become an honorary member of the YPSA-initiated Child Labor Advocacy Network and is actively participating in events and meetings organized in DFS communities to protect children from child labor. In January and February 2020, he organized campaigns to build awareness and promote action to address child labor, dowries, early marriage, and violence against women and children. He visited influential leaders of the community, including the local chairman, doctor, school teacher, and business owners to bring to their attention the consequences of the child labor and how it affects children's development and futures.

The CLIMB project and civil society partners such as YPSA believe that identifying and increasing capacity for community leaders such as Mr. Alam is essential to sustaining advocacy and bringing services to the DFS communities that provide families with alternatives to children working under the hazardous labor conditions.