



Photo: Tanvir Sharif

# BANGLADESH CLIMB

## Child Labor Improvements in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's dried fish sector is plagued by some of the worst forms of child labor. Poverty and indebtedness often mean that in order for families to meet basic needs, children must work to increase household incomes. Some of the worst labor conditions are found in fish drying along the coastal areas of the Sundarbans, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong.

While data on child labor in dry fish processing is limited, according to a 2011 study, more than 78,000 children work in the sector. Child workers labor for hours under direct sun (often for 9-13 hours), work with knives, have no protective gear, climb on unstable drying racks and often do not go to school. Laborers (both children and adults) are repeatedly exposed to hazardous chemicals and smoke, leading to skin disease and respiratory problems. Indebted labor from pre-payments, delayed payment and non-payment for work performed are common.

Without sufficient data, it is difficult for the Government of Bangladesh to prioritize and address these labor violations. Likewise, few civil society organizations have the capacity or resources to address child labor or unacceptable labor conditions. The problems in the dried fish sector are also underreported in the media.

Parents who send their children to work in the dried fish sector may be uninformed on the risks and illnesses that long hours in hazardous conditions pose for children, and may not know how to access support to address violations and vulnerability.

Since launching its first programs in Bangladesh in the 1980s, Winrock's primary focus has been on strengthening the country's critical agriculture sector, including helping farmers and fishers increase their production and develop markets. In recent years, projects have also focused on climate change resiliency, collaborating with communities to manage critical wetlands and other agricultural land that Bangladeshis rely on for their livelihoods. Since 2010, Winrock has increasingly worked with government and civil society groups to improve policies, social protection programs and services. Programs have focused on human trafficking and women's empowerment through education, livelihoods, and leadership development.

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The three-year U.S. Department of Labor-funded Child Labor Improvements in Bangladesh (CLIMB) project, which started in December 2017, aims to improve civil society's awareness of child labor in southeast Bangladesh's dried fish sector, promoting acceptable work conditions through more focused efforts by civil society organizations (CSOs) and government to identify and address child labor and the vulnerability of communities and households.

## Primary Objectives

1. Improve CSO capacity to produce accurate, independent research on child labor and work conditions that will build stakeholders' awareness of the nature, consequences, and scale of the problem in the dried fish sector.
2. Strengthen CSO capacity to use the research findings to raise awareness among vulnerable communities and advocate to government, employers, and other key stakeholders to identify child labor and enforce laws and policies,
3. Empower civil society actors to raise the voices of vulnerable families, refer them to services and address the lack of economic alternatives in fishing communities.



## Strategic Approach

- Stakeholder engagement on labor issues from different vantage points, including workers' rights, health and education.
- Peer-to-peer learning and engagement to amplify voice and reach of diverse civil society actors such as academic institutions, NGOs and media at local and national levels.
- A learning-by-doing model in which CSOs put new knowledge and skills into practice by implementing activities across the three objectives.

## Specific Interventions

- Provide technical assistance and support to the **University of Chittagong** for research on child labor and dissemination of findings with CSOs for awareness-raising and advocacy.
- Conduct assessments of CSO capacity for child labor advocacy and provide training and mentoring to address capacity development needs.
- Partner with **Youth Power in Social Action (YPSA)**, **INCIDIN Bangladesh** and other CSOs to raise awareness and build support to address child labor in the dried fish sector.
- Strengthen networks of regional and national CSOs/NGOs to improve policies and enforcement.
- Develop a referral service directory for vulnerable communities and strengthen referral networks for legal, skill development and other services.
- Assist CSOs in using media to amplify workers' stories.

## Geographic Focus

CLIMB interventions will focus on southeast Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar area, the site of most of the country's dried fish processing activities.

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*Funding is provided by the United States Department of Labor under cooperative agreement number IL-31478-17-75-K.*

*This material does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the United States Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the United States Government. 100 percent of total costs of the project is financed with Federal funds, for a total \$2 million dollars.*