



# Swapnojaal: Dreaming of a better life for Child Laborers and their families engaged in the Dried Fish Sector



caption + credit

“The capacity development initiatives of the Child Labor Improvements in Bangladesh (CLIMB) project 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. Now, I am fairly confident in changing community /stakeholders’ perception towards better life of the children and contribute to empower the marginal families,” - Mr. Sakir Alam, founder

of Swapnojaal, a Cox’s Bazar community based voluntary organization. Swapnojaal is widely active in advocating for human rights, education for underserved children and prevention of child marriage, domestic violence and child labor.



## Building trust and changing narratives

Parents and child laborers engaged in dried fish processing at Nazirartek in Cox’s Bazar are hesitant to change their age-old inherited profession, though there are opportunities available for skills and livelihood improvements from the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in Cox’s Bazar. Their outlook can be attributed to the lack of information sharing among the community, resulting in families often being unaware of such opportunities. Further, training facilities are rarely within walking distance and become out of reach for most families. Lastly,

skepticism regarding alternative livelihoods is widespread, where many don't believe changing their livelihoods will be as beneficial in the long run.



Md. Sakir Alam, founder of Swapnojaal, was identified by Youth Power of Sol Action (YPSA) and CLIMB as a valuable member of civil society who could effectively contribute to the conversation and spread awareness on eliminating child labor from the Dried Fish Sector (DFS). Due to his role within the community, his experience and passion for advocating for human rights in the region, Mr. Alam was uniquely positioned to reach out to those most at risk and share with them alternative ways they can create revenue outside of the DFS. Finally, Mr. Alam understanding of the needs of the community was key in lobbying for change at the government and district levels.

YPSA . through CLIMB with the assistance of the, provided Mr. Alam with capacity building tools such as training on existing laws, policies and international conventions on child labor, roles and responsibilities of government established child labor welfare and monitoring committees, grievances mechanisms and procedures and referral service provisions available at Government and NGO sectors. He was also oriented on participatory community engagement approaches to identify community requirements which might help him establish acceptability to the community and procedures to identifying appropriate problems and issues while collectively creating plans that are important to the community. Lastly, Mr. Alam was invited to YPSA to attend CLIMB's organized advocacy initiatives, where he could learn more on

child labor in DFS and share his knowledge and experience with the households involved in dried fish processing.

As a result, Mr. Alam gained crucial knowledge on critical issues connected to and derived from child labor. By identifying these, he recognized the importance of speaking out and taking action to improve the living conditions of children and families engaged in the DFS.

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Mr. Alam's involvement in CLIMB, and coordination with YPSA, opened up a new scope of leveraging services for the community. He was inspired to run a skill development training on handicrafts for 20 family members engaged in dried fish processing, where he highlighted the importance of creating an additional income for their households so that children don't have to work in DFS and instead, can go back to school. The course was designed in consultation with the participants interested in the course. This was a month-long training started in early February and completed on March 8, 2020. The participants attended two-hour lessons every day in the evening at the association office at Nazirartek. The cost of the course was borne by the local organization WAIT N 'C'.

Upon completion of the course, the families were connected to business establishments to become regular suppliers for handcraft goods. These unique pieces are often in great demand due to tourism, with regular supply orders provided to ensure there are products available for tourists and the local community as well. Seeing the success of the first



batch of trainings, Swapnojaal plans to organize two trainings for members of the dried fish sector.



Mr. Sakir's initiative is an example of civil society organizations (CSOs) mobilization towards discouraging child labor in DFS. This initiative was the first coordinated joint technical assistance provided to a community that is completely isolated from the services and resources available from GOB and NGOs. Meanwhile, Mr. Sakir has become an honorary member of the YPSA initiated local advocacy network to coordinate initiatives to protect children from child labor. In January-February 2020, he initiated campaigns to prevent child labor, dowry, child, early and forced marriage, and violence against women and children. He has met with influential leaders of the community, including the local chairman, doctors, school teachers and business owners in an effort to create awareness on the risks and harmful impacts related to child labor, highlighting its effect on children's growth.