



Behind the Chain of Poverty: Social and Economic Conflicts that Oppress Fishing Communities

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ABSTRACT

Fishing communities in Indonesia are often the most vulnerable social group to poverty and marginalization. Although the marine sector has great potential for the economy, small and traditional fishermen are often trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break. This article examines the poverty trap experienced by fishing communities through the perspective of social conflict theory. Using a qualitative approach that includes data collection through a literature review, this study analyzes how the unequal distribution of resources and power in the fisheries sector leads to exploitation and worsens the socio-economic conditions of fishers. Factors such as dependence on middlemen, market price instability, unfavorable fisheries policies, and marine ecosystem degradation due to overfishing and climate change further strengthen the poverty chain. In addition, internal conflicts within fishing communities also play a role in exacerbating poverty conditions. This article seeks to uncover the dynamics of social and economic conflicts that plague fishing communities, and offers solutions based on community empowerment and fairer policy reforms.

Keyword: Fishing Communities, Poverty Traps, Conflicts

ABSTRAK

Masyarakat nelayan di Indonesia sering kali menjadi kelompok sosial yang paling rentan terhadap kemiskinan dan marginalisasi. Meskipun sektor kelautan memiliki potensi besar bagi perekonomian, nelayan kecil dan tradisional kerap kali terperangkap dalam lingkaran kemiskinan yang sulit diputus. Artikel ini mengkaji perangkap kemiskinan yang dialami masyarakat nelayan melalui perspektif teori konflik sosial. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang mencakup pengumpulan data melalui tinjauan literatur, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana ketimpangan distribusi sumber daya dan kekuasaan dalam sektor perikanan menyebabkan eksploitasi dan memperburuk kondisi sosial-ekonomi nelayan. Faktor-faktor seperti ketergantungan pada tengkulak, ketidakstabilan harga pasar, kebijakan perikanan yang tidak memihak, serta degradasi ekosistem laut akibat overfishing dan perubahan iklim semakin memperkuat mata rantai kemiskinan tersebut. Selain itu, konflik internal dalam komunitas nelayan juga berperan dalam memperparah kondisi kemiskinan. Artikel ini berupaya mengungkap dinamika konflik sosial dan ekonomi yang menghimpit masyarakat nelayan, serta menawarkan solusi berbasis pemberdayaan komunitas dan reformasi kebijakan yang lebih adil.

Kata Kunci: Masyarakat Nelayan, Perangkap Kemiskinan, Konflik



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1. Introduction

The fishing communities in Indonesia, most of whom live in coastal areas, are among the most vulnerable and marginalized social groups. Ironically, despite Indonesia being known as an archipelagic nation rich in marine resources, communities that rely on traditional fisheries often find themselves trapped in structural poverty that is difficult to overcome. The issue of poverty among fishermen has drawn the attention of many, especially considering that the marine sector contributes significantly to the national economy, yet the distribution of its benefits remains uneven.

The poverty among small-scale fishermen is not only caused by ecological factors, but also by social and institutional factors such as unequal access and differences in the management of livelihood assets that determine household welfare (Kinseng et al., 2023). This shows that poverty and economic inequality cannot be understood solely from the perspective of natural resources, but also through social structures and power relations within society. In rural contexts, women often occupy a subordinate position in the control of economic assets, both due to patriarchal culture and limited access to productive resources. As a result, women tend to be economically dependent on men or lending institutions, which ultimately reinforces patterns of economic inequality within households.

One of the unique characteristics of fishing communities is their dependence on dynamic marine resources. Marine resources such as fish experience fluctuations that are greatly influenced by seasons, climate change, and other environmental factors. To obtain sufficient catches, fishermen must frequently move locations and face high risks in fishing operations. This uncertainty means that fishing communities live in fragile economic conditions, as their income is unpredictable and highly dependent on catches that are not always consistent. This also leads to high dependence among small-scale fishermen on middlemen or collectors, who often offer unfair prices for their catches.

The high risks of the business also affect the social life of fishing communities, who often live in harsh and uncertain conditions. They not only have to deal with the risk of failure in fishing, but also threats from other external factors such as competition with large-scale fishing vessels, changes in fisheries policies that often do not favor small-scale fishermen, and their inability to access modern technology that could improve fishing efficiency. In addition, declining fish catches due to overfishing and damage to marine ecosystems further exacerbate the situation, trapping fishing communities in endless poverty.

Key sectors in coastal areas such as fisheries, marine affairs, and tourism are dominated by capital. This capital takes the form of middlemen, moneylenders, and ship owners. When the coastal economy is controlled by capital, fishermen not only depend on middlemen for capital, but also lose their autonomy in determining prices and catches. This capitalistic structure reinforces the "chain of poverty." The process of marine tourism development and expansion has not taken into account the welfare of fishermen. The central and regional governments are more oriented towards increasing tourist numbers, spending, and length of stay. Social and economic conflicts within fishing communities arise as a result of unequal distribution of power and policies. Hermanwan's statement supports this view: when development policies favor capital and the tourism sector, fishermen become mere "spectators" in their own living space. From the perspective of social conflict theory, this illustrates the structural domination of the ruling class over coastal communities (Hermawan, 2024).

Causes of poverty among small-scale fishermen are multidimensional. It is not only due to ecological factors, but also the unequal control of livelihood assets (Kinseng et al., 2023). Fishermen's poverty is not only the result of natural limitations or individual factors, but also a reflection of structural inequality and the unfair distribution of resources. In the context of social conflict theory, fisher poverty arises as a result of unequal power relations between capitalists and small-scale fishers, which impacts economic, social, and public policy access.

In this context, social conflict theory is highly relevant for understanding how fishing communities are trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to overcome. Conflict theory, first popularized by Karl Marx, focuses on the power struggle between groups in society that have different access to resources. In this case, fishing communities are often in a weak position because of their inability to compete with larger economic forces, such as large fishing companies that have access to advanced technology and international markets. This inequality not only affects their economic conditions, but also reinforces the dominance of elite groups who continue to exploit the socio-economic conditions of fishing communities for personal gain.

Poverty experienced by fishing communities is often considered a structural phenomenon, where factors such as government policy, control over natural resources, and the distribution of power within society contribute to worsening conditions. Fisheries policies that do not take into account the needs of small-scale fishermen, for example, often benefit large-scale fishermen or fishing companies that have more capital and better access to markets. Small-scale fishermen who do not have access to these resources are

forced to rely on exploitative systems, where they have to sell their catch at low prices to middlemen or collectors who dominate the local market.

Limited access to education and other public services also plays an important role in reinforcing the poverty trap experienced by fishing communities. Most fishermen's children do not have the opportunity to continue their education to a higher level, because their parents prefer to involve their children in fishing activities from an early age. This means that the fishing industry keeps getting new workers, but without better skills or access to modern tech, they keep working in tough conditions. On a bigger scale, fishing communities' dependence on dwindling natural resources adds to the economic pressure. The decline in the quality of the marine environment due to overfishing, climate change, and marine pollution has led to fewer catches for fishermen. As a result, they not only have to deal with income uncertainty, but also the threat of long-term survival if marine resources continue to experience environmental degradation, which is often caused by the activities of more powerful groups, such as large fishing companies, who ignore environmental sustainability for short-term profits. While small-scale fishermen face the direct impact of environmental damage, they have little or no power to prevent these destructive activities (Awalia et al., 2023).

This article aims to examine how social and economic conflicts play a role in shaping and reinforcing the chain of poverty that oppresses fishing communities. Through the lens of conflict theory, this article will analyze structural injustices in the distribution of resources and power among fishermen, and identify the main factors that prevent them from escaping poverty. By combining an analysis of social and economic conflicts, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of inequality experienced by fishing communities.

2. Method

This journal article was written using a qualitative research approach that included data collection methods through literature review. Secondary data was collected from several related journal titles as well as books and websites related to the title of the scientific article "Behind the Chain of Poverty: Social and Economic Conflicts that Oppress Fishing Communities." This literature method is a process of collecting information or references that are undoubtedly relevant to a particular subject. The data obtained is then reorganized, analyzed, and summarized to arrive at conclusions about the topic being discussed.

3. Result and Discussion

Poverty is a complex social problem that has long been a concern for sociologists. Poverty can be defined as a situation in which a person or group of people do not have access to adequate resources to meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. According to sociologist Karl Marx, poverty is the result of inequality in the capitalist system. For Marx, poverty is the result of the exploitation of the working class by capital owners. He sees poverty as a consequence of class conflict in society. Poverty can be viewed as a structural and cultural problem. Structural poverty is caused by injustice in social and economic systems that argue that poverty is the result of a system that benefits certain groups and harms others. Cultural poverty is defined as poverty caused by factors such as social values and norms. Cultural poverty is caused by a culture that hinders hard work and productivity in society.

The poverty trap is a condition in which it is very difficult for an individual or group of people to escape the cycle of poverty due to various factors, both structural and cultural. These factors can make it difficult for individuals or groups of people to find work, increase or supplement their income, and improve their quality of life. Sociological concepts related to the poverty trap are: First, poverty as a lack of capital, where an individual or group of people do not have social or physical capital that can be used to improve their welfare. Second, poverty as powerlessness, a concept that views the poverty trap as a condition in which an individual or group of people do not have the power to determine their own destiny. This powerlessness can be caused by various factors, such as injustice in the economic and social systems, discrimination, and violence. This powerlessness can make it difficult for individuals or groups to take action to escape the poverty trap. Third, poverty as injustice because the system benefits certain groups and harms others. This system can make it difficult for individuals or groups to have equal opportunities to escape poverty.

Every phenomenon that has occurred in social reality must have a causative factor. The same applies to structural poverty among fishing communities. The phenomenon of poverty among fishermen can be caused by several factors, such as culture, quality of resources and education, as well as government capital.

The phenomenon of poverty among fishing communities can be attributed to cultural factors, such as a fatalistic mindset or a lack of motivation to improve their quality of life. This mindset has become ingrained in the culture because it has existed since long ago and has been preserved to this day. This mindset makes it difficult for fishermen to improve their standard of living by utilizing the potential of marine resources. The persistence of this mindset can also limit the skills of coastal communities, especially those who work as fishermen. The mindset of clinging to the status quo is caused by a sense of comfort and fear of taking risks.

In terms of education, according to data published by the Directorate of Primary Schools (Ditpsd) of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which was revealed in an online discussion by the Indonesian Traditional Fishermen's Association (KNTI) in 2023, around 80% of small-scale fishermen have an education level below junior high school. With low levels of education, it is difficult for fishing communities to find alternative employment, such as small traders or boat builders, and poor education has an impact on sales targets. These fishermen face problems due to a lack of knowledge about appropriate marketing strategies. The final factor is the lack of attention from the government. The empowerment of fishing communities is not prioritized by the government itself. Fishing communities struggle to conduct transactions outside of traditional channels because they lack access to free government empowerment programs, such as marketing outreach, modern fishing technology, transportation, capital, and many other resources (Doaly, 2023).

In fishing communities, the “patron-client” pattern of working relationships is a factor that causes poverty among fishermen to persist. Chambers (1983) refers to this condition as a trap, a situation in which small and vulnerable groups, such as fishermen, are trapped in long-term poverty caused by various structural factors and unequal power relations. In the context of fishing communities, one of the main factors causing them to be trapped in poverty is the “patron-client” working relationship pattern.

This patron-client pattern occurs when small fishermen (clients) depend on patrons (businessmen or middlemen) who provide capital for equipment or other needs. Although this allows fishermen to work and earn an income, the relationship is exploitative. Patrons often impose unfair conditions, including paying low prices for catches, charging interest on debts owed to them, and controlling access to markets, which often forces small-scale fishermen to sell their catches to middlemen at low prices.

Chambers describes this situation as a poverty trap because fishermen lack the ability to escape this dependency. They are trapped in a cycle of debt, low income, and exploitation, where the potential to improve access to welfare and achieve significant gains in resources is severely limited. This trap is reinforced by structural injustices in the economic and social systems, as well as a lack of policies that protect small fishing communities.

The conditions that cause the poverty trap, according to Chabers (1983), are as follows:



1. Poverty (low income), which is generally experienced by fishing communities with low levels. As a result, their skill levels are very low, making it very difficult for them to switch to other sectors and difficult to meet their basic needs. In addition, dependence on unstable resources also affects their income due to seasonal factors, weather, and damage to the marine ecosystem. Exploitation by clients, environmental degradation, high operational costs, and public policies that do not favor this vulnerable group are other reasons why fishing communities are trapped in poverty.
2. Physical weaknesses are experienced by fishermen due to the nature of their work, which involves working all day and night on the open sea with poor nutrition, exposure to extreme weather, work-related injuries, sleep disorders, chronic physical fatigue, and other illnesses. Not only that, their access to health facilities is also still limited.
3. Isolation (exclusion), seen from their daily lives, they must go to sea, thus isolating them from their social and cultural environment. This is especially true for traditional small-scale fishing communities, which experience isolation in social, economic, geographical, and political terms. This condition makes it difficult for them to connect with the resources, markets, services, and opportunities available to improve their welfare and become a bridge for them to escape the poverty trap in fishing communities.
4. Vulnerability is often experienced by fishermen who are susceptible to accidents at sea or occupational hazards that can easily lead to workplace accidents. Vulnerability is also influenced by the instability of their work, their dependence on marine resources that are often subject to change, and limited access to social services and protection.
5. Powerlessness can be seen in their inability to meet their daily needs and raise capital. Their dependence on employers or leaders has conditioned them to remain in a position of powerlessness. Fishing communities also experience limitations in their ability to change the social, economic, and environmental conditions that oppress their lives. This powerlessness can occur in various dimensions and is exacerbated by unsupportive social and economic structures, as well as a lack of access to the resources needed to break out of the cycle of poverty.

The five interlinked chains of poverty are closely connected and usually make it extremely difficult for fishermen to escape the poverty trap. In the context of fishermen's poverty, this becomes a distressing reality and a form of social pathology for an archipelagic nation like Indonesia. Overall, these five chains illustrate how small-scale fishermen are trapped in a structured cycle of poverty, where each element is interrelated and mutually reinforcing, thus worsening their situation. The poverty experienced by fishing communities is caused by the lack of access to basic rights such as food, clothing, and shelter, as well as healthcare, education, employment, and infrastructure. Additionally, limited business opportunities, internal competition, unstable incomes due to natural conditions, and falling market prices further exacerbate the problem.

Furthermore, the lack of access to information, technology, capital, and cultural recognition, along with inadequate government support, keeps them in a perpetual state of poverty. In the context of fishing communities, this situation is particularly relevant as their survival depends directly on marine resources. The marine ecosystem provides fish as the primary source of income, but access to these resources is often unfair, sparking social and economic conflicts that deepen poverty. The ecological dependence of fishermen on unpredictable marine yields affected by seasons, climate, and ecosystem damage puts them in a weak position within the socio-economic structure. Based on Kurniawan's (2024) analysis, conflicts arise from the dominance of economic interests particularly those of industrial actors that systematically exploit natural resources for short-term gain (Kurniawan, 2024). This conflict perspective illustrates that unequal socio-economic structures not only produce environmental degradation but also place significant pressure on local communities, especially those whose livelihoods depend directly on natural ecosystems, such as traditional fishing communities.

Beyond the chains of poverty, internal conflicts also exist within fishing communities. One of the most common is the tension between traditional and modern fishermen. Traditional fishermen, who have passed down environmentally friendly fishing methods across generations, often feel threatened by modern fishermen who arrive with large boats and advanced equipment. When modern fishermen enter traditional fishing zones, the catch for traditional fishermen decreases drastically. As a result, traditional fishing communities are forced to work even harder to meet their daily needs.

This tension not only creates division between the two groups but also worsens the long-standing socio-economic difficulties faced by the community. Amid this competition, even deeper conflicts arise among the fishermen themselves. As fish populations decline due to overfishing, fishermen compete more intensely for smaller catches. In such situations, social norms that once governed behavior begin to erode. Fishermen who once helped one another are now forced to act selfishly to survive, leading to suspicion and hostility within the community.

Inequity in profit-sharing also arises, with older or more experienced fishermen often taking a larger share, leaving younger or newer fishermen with less. This dissatisfaction further fuels internal tension within the fishing community. Generational conflict is another significant issue in fishing villages. Older fishermen, who are strongly tied to tradition, often clash with younger generations who are more open to change and new technologies. Young people believe that if they do not adapt to modern methods, they will be left behind. In contrast, the older generation clings to values passed down over decades. Tensions escalate when younger fishermen propose modern and efficient fishing techniques, which are often rejected by the elders who fear the negative impacts on the marine ecosystem.

Gender-based conflict also emerges strongly. Although many women in coastal communities are involved in the fishing process, they are often placed in undervalued roles. Men, seen as the main breadwinners, tend to overlook women's contributions to the economy. When women try to take a more active role, they often face resistance from men, creating gender-based tension within the community. These internal conflicts are further complicated by sustainability and conservation issues. With declining fish populations and damaged marine resources, some fishermen advocate for stricter conservation measures. However, not all agree many feel that conservation efforts threaten their already fragile livelihoods. This disagreement causes division between those who care about the future of the ecosystem and those focused on short-term, unsustainable gains.

Even the presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) aiming to empower fishermen is not free from conflict. Although they come with good intentions, some fishermen feel that these interventions fail to consider local needs and long-standing traditions. The sense of being excluded from decisions that directly affect their lives creates deeper dissatisfaction toward such supporting groups. From an ecological analysis using conflict theory, it is evident that fishing communities in Indonesia face numerous conflicts related to resource access, public policy, and environmental conditions. Limited marine resources are contested by small-scale fishermen, large fishing companies, and the government which determines fisheries policies creating a power struggle that marginalizes weaker groups like traditional fishermen.

Inequality in the distribution of marine resources leads to exploitation and subordination. Traditional fishermen, with limited access to tools and support, cannot compete with large companies that are well-equipped with advanced technology and better market access. Small-scale fishermen often lack access to profitable markets and must rely on middlemen who typically offer low prices for their catch. The power imbalance between small-scale fishermen, middlemen, and large fishing companies further entrenches poverty. Environmental degradation also contributes significantly to the poverty trap facing fishing communities. Due to damaged ecosystems and climate change, fishermen must work harder and travel farther to find viable fishing grounds, increasing operational costs and reducing economic stability. This uncertainty keeps fishing communities trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Furthermore, unjust policies in the management of marine resources often disadvantage small-scale fishermen. These communities frequently fall victim to policies designed to benefit more powerful economic groups, creating "structural conflicts" due to policies that fail to support their needs. Such policies worsen conditions for fishermen and reinforce existing cycles of poverty. To break this cycle, more equitable policy reforms are needed, along with efforts to empower fishing communities through sustainable community training programs. Within the framework of conflict theory, a new solution involves restructuring power dynamics and redistributing access to resources. Fairer fisheries policies, such as more evenly distributed subsidies and stronger protections for small-scale fishermen, can help reduce inequality and improve their economic conditions. In addition, providing education and training in modern technologies to traditional fishermen is essential to help them compete in a broader economic system.

4. Conclusion

Based on analysis through the perspective of conflict theory, it can be concluded that poverty in fishing communities is not a natural condition, but rather the result of a chain of structured social and economic conflicts. This poverty functions as a poverty trap that is maintained by unequal power relations, biased policies, and ecosystem degradation.

The core of this problem lies in the conflict over access to and control of resources. Exploitative patron-client relationships, in which small-scale fishermen (clients) depend on middlemen or financiers (patrons), have stripped fishermen of their economic independence and trapped them in a cycle of debt and unfair prices. This conflict is exacerbated by competition with modern vessels and government policies that often prioritize the interests of capital and the tourism sector over the sovereignty of traditional fishermen. As a result, fishermen are not only economically marginalized, but also become the most vulnerable to the impacts of environmental damage.

Therefore, breaking this chain of poverty requires a transformative approach that focuses on restructuring power relations. The solution lies in empowering communities by providing fishermen with access to markets, technology, and fair financing, as well as policy reforms that explicitly protect the livelihoods and economic rights of small-scale fishermen. Without fundamental intervention in this oppressive structure, fishing communities will remain trapped in a cycle of conflict and endless poverty.

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