

Policy Gaps Related to Small-Scale Fish Processing and Marketing in the Domestic Market



Introduction

Fish being a highly perishable item, sustainable manufacture and marketing of small-scale (SS) processed products and fish-based ready-to-cook (RTC) and ready-to-eat (RTE) value-added products depend on premium quality fish, standard handling and processing procedures, along with sanitation and hygiene maintenance and adequate packaging for storage and marketing. On the other hand, licensing and certification by regulatory authorities are found to be a prime necessity for sustaining the business.

Objective for developing the policy

The existing food policies of the government do not support establishing, propagating and promoting small-scale fish processing businesses for domestic markets. A major portion of fish value-added Ready-to-Eat (RTE) products are cooked and marketed by street-side food carts, shops and local small restaurants. These small-scale fish food productions must be of premium quality and safe for the consumers. In fact, there is no specific policy, act or regulation that ensures the quality and safety and promotion of SS Ready-to-RTC or RTE fish food business. There is no provision for easy certification and a license for small-scale fish products. Development of SOPs for fish-based RTE and RTC products and provision of license and certificate would promote the SS fisheries sector and help in the functional and efficient utilisation of surplus fish production of the country every year. Considering such a backdrop, this paper identified the policy-related gaps and suggested measures for the commercialization of safe and healthy fish-based value-added products and promotion of sustainable small-scale fishery micro-enterprises on fish RTC and RTE products.

Major findings related to policy gaps

- Mud crab, despite being a fishery item, its production, processing, quality control and marketing are controlled by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate.
- Open water bodies- rivers, haor and beels, are leased to non-fishermen elites by the Ministry of Land, which destroys ethnic fishermen's livelihood and biodiversity.
- The management of fisheries resources of the country is in jeopardy.
- No specific policy or programmes existed for small-scale fish processing businesses for domestic markets.
- No specific policy or programmes existed to reduce post-harvest loss of fish in the country.
- No policy existed on safe and sustainable street food businesses.
- Incentives (25% of the penalty fee) given by the Vokta Odhikar Shanrakkhan Odhidoptor (Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection) to the complainant against the manufacturer make ample opportunity to abuse the law.
- Lack of stakeholders' participation/influence on policy formulation is visible.
- Lack of monitoring and impact assessment on policy implementation is visible.
- Lack of standard protocols for fish handling, distribution, and marketing, along with the use of equipment, disposal of solid and liquid wastes, hygiene, sanitation, and occupational safety in domestic markets.
- Lack of standards and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for small-scale processing of fishery products sold in domestic markets under DoF/FIQC policies.
- Lack of an inspection and certification program in FIQC policy for both conventional and innovative fish-based value-added products (VAP) intended for domestic markets.
- Lack of entrepreneur-friendly licensing procedures and fees for small-scale operators across various fish food categories and product variants.

Policy recommendation

Defining Market Actors and Registration	All market actors including the SS fish processors and allied stakeholders should be defined in the fisheries policy with specific roles. Provisions should be kept in the policy for their registration, in order to control undue /unauthorised invasion of the sector and to make them responsible for regulations and their compliance.
Inclusion of Jolmohals and Crabs under MOFL	Both Jolmohals and crabs are fisheries resources, so they should be brought under the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (MOFL).

Handling, Processing, and Marketing SOPs	Development of SOPs for fish handling, distribution, processing, and marketing, along with equipment used, waste disposal, hygiene, sanitation, and occupational safety for domestic markets, ensuring quality inspection and technical training for SS fish RTC and RTE entrepreneurs.
Deployment of Skilled Technical Manpower	Provision for deploying appropriately skilled specialised technical manpower (B.Sc. Fisheries-Honours graduates) in BFSA, BSTI, and VOSA for efficient monitoring of fish food safety, quality, hygiene, and sanitation to promote SS fish processing for the domestic market.
Separate Registration and Certification	Provision in government policies for separate registration, inspection, and certification of stakeholders involved in small-scale RTC and RTE fish VAP enterprises.
Simplified Licensing Process	Provision of an easy licensing process in government agencies for SS fish RTC and RTE VAP entrepreneurs.
Capacity Building and Women's Participation	Government interventions in policies to improve the capacity and technical skills of stakeholders for good manufacturing of fish VAP products for domestic markets, with special programmes to train and promote fisherwomen in SS fish processing and RTC/RTE businesses.
University–Industry Internship Programmes	Provision in policies to develop internship programmes in universities to establish functional linkages with fish VAP entrepreneurs for capacity development, technology transfer, and promotion of fish VAP products for domestic markets.
Reduction of Licensing Fees	All licensing fees for RTC and RTE ventures should be reduced by 50%.
Uniform Electricity Tariff	Electricity bills for aquaculture, including fish RTC and RTE enterprises, should be made uniform with the agriculture irrigation rate.
Public–Private and Corporate–Private Partnerships	For wider market creation, PPPs and CPPs should be created through GoB intervention.
VAT Exemption on Fish Processing	Policy support for complete exemption or no VAT imposition on SS fish RTC/RTE product processing/marketing.
Import Duty Exemption	A 25% import duty exemption on machinery/spares used in fish RTC/RTE product manufacturing.
Formulation of Bangladesh Street Food Policy	A separate new food policy named “Bangladesh Street Food Policy” should be formulated to promote SS fish-based RTC and RTE food carts and street shop-based businesses.

Conclusion

Ample opportunities exist for fish-based RTC and RTE ventures, driven by surplus aquaculture production, changing consumer behavior, and the increasing involvement of Gen Millennials and Gen Z. As the future food market gravitates toward ready-to-eat options, demand for nutritious and safe cooked seafood at premium prices will continue to grow.

A supportive policy environment, combined with capacity building, hygienic production practices, attractive packaging, expanded market access, and strong branding, can transform RTC and RTE fish products into a sustainable business model. With new entrepreneurs entering the sector and wider niche markets emerging, these ventures have the potential to spark a socio-industrial revolution in Bangladesh—similar to the aquaculture revolution of the mid-1990s.

To realize this potential, it is imperative to formulate a fresh government policy that ensures the sustainable development of small-scale fish processing and marketing for domestic markets.

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