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WORKING PAPER

Social Development Issues and Fisheries

The vast majority (over 95%) of small-scale fisherfolk (fish farmers, fishers, traders and related occupations) are from low-income developing countries. Recent studies of poverty in fishing communities show that cash incomes from fishing are often higher than earnings from agriculture, but vulnerability and insecurity are higher too. Livelihood insecurity and lack of social and human capital limit fisherfolks' ability and motivation to participate in resource governance, and hinders their capacity to engage successfully with globalising markets. While the following discussion focuses on the capture fisheries sector, many similar concerns regarding labour rights, human rights and environmental justice apply in the context of aquaculture development as well.

With fishing often taking place on the neglected and poorly regulated margins of society, there are serious human development concerns around gender discrimination, dangerous working conditions and widespread incidence

of child labour – as well as involvement of fishing boats and fisherfolk in international crime, including drug and arms smuggling and people-trafficking. Emerging partnerships between fishery sector agencies and ILO, UNICEF, UNCHR, labour unions, international police forces and human-rights organizations are beginning to address some of these issues, but the links between these initiatives and improved fisheries governance have not yet been articulated. Strategies for reducing fishing-dependent peoples' vulnerability are an integral part of any attempt to improve the governance of fisheries. This can be achieved by investment in their health, by governing fishing-related labour markets more effectively, supporting gender equity, addressing justice and security issues, and upholding basic human rights. A well-governed fishery sector will bring benefits to society that go well beyond securing a sustainable supply of fish, to include improved human security – and not just for fisherfolk.

1. DEFINING POVERTY

The multiple dimensions of deprivation faced by many people involved in small-scale fisheries can be considered in relation to three main concepts, drawn from the wider understanding of poverty in development policy and practice:

- Poverty is typically understood in terms of low income and ownership of limited capital assets. Standardized measures of poverty of this type can be compared to targets and poverty lines and are useful for assessing the impacts of economic policy and for targeting social protection measures. Increasingly, however, broader definitions of poverty are being used, for example:
- While poverty and vulnerability are sometimes thought of as ‘end results’ of natural stresses combined with policy failures of various kinds, [marginalization](#) or [social exclusion](#) is conceived as resulting from negative social and power relations with others; the marginalized are excluded from political, social and economic opportunities enjoyed by other citizens.

Poverty: *a human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.* (UN Committee on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights, 2001)

- [Vulnerability](#) is understood in terms of people's exposure to risks, the sensitivity of their livelihood systems to these risks and their capacity to use their assets and capabilities to cope with and to adapt to these risks. Two commonly used applications of this concept are in the World Food Programme's famine vulnerability mapping, and the IPCC's mapping of vulnerability to climate change.

Income and asset poverty, marginalization and vulnerability are interrelated and overlapping conditions. For example, the poor tend to be more vulnerable to external ‘shocks’ because they lack assets to absorb and recover from the impacts of events such as destructive floods. Those who are vulnerable because their livelihoods are exposed to and sensitive to physical risks may become impoverished; fishers impacted by the December 2004 Asian tsunami are an example. Similarly, poor people can become impoverished because they are excluded from the rights and opportunities available to others, sometimes on grounds of ethnicity, citizenship, or gender. The poor, lacking assets such as access to education and information, can become marginalised in political processes such as local development planning and are thus denied rights of participation.

2. POVERTY, VULNERABILITY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN FISHERIES

Recent research on poverty in fishing communities¹ concludes:

- The [income and asset-ownership status of fisherfolk](#) is [highly variable](#) within communities. Boat and gear owners and larger-scale traders can be among the wealthier members of their communities. Working as a crew member on a fishing boat or processing fish for sale can provide better financial returns than other wage-labour options. However, incomes are often uncertain and seasonal, and where fisheries resources are in decline, incomes are also declining.
- Fisherfolk are often excluded from access to other employment opportunities, from equitable access to land, social services such as health and education, and may have weak political representation. They may also be poorly served by roads, markets and other infrastructure. These factors lead to [marginalization of fisherfolk](#) in development processes.
- Marginalization, insecure rights of access to resources and dependence on uncertain production systems, as well as the risky nature of many fishing operations, make fishing people [vulnerable](#). They are exposed to risk; their livelihood systems are sensitive to those risks; and their marginalization makes it difficult to adapt to the impacts of ‘shocks’ and adverse trends in the natural environment, the economy or to policy and governance failures.

¹ Summarised in Thorpe et al., 2007; Béné et al., 2007; Allison & Horemans, 2006; see further reading for details.

3. THE CASE FOR ADDRESSING FISHERY GOVERNANCE FAILURES THROUGH SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN FISHING COMMUNITIES

The solution to fisheries decline in the small-scale sector is thought to lie in replacing or supplementing currently ineffective governance systems, where states manage inshore coastal and inland fisheries, with those based on better defined fishing rights, usually devolved to groups or communities. Granting fishing rights to communities is thought to make management more effective and efficient as resource users are presumed to have a direct incentive to manage resources optimally so they can derive the maximum future benefit from their property right.

Strengthening of fishing rights can provide a route out of poverty if fisherfolk's poverty and vulnerability is mainly related to resource degradation brought about by insecure resource access and inadequate fishery management. Securing the right to fish (and to exclude too many others from fishing) doesn't, however, inure a fishing family against high incidence of malaria and HIV/AIDS, rent-seeking officials, theft of fishing gear, unsafe working conditions or forced eviction from their house. Yet this is the 'vulnerability context' faced by many small-scale fishers. They may also lack the power, education and cohesive social institutions to be aware of their rights, ability to self-organise and articulate their demands, negotiate with government officials and to carry out their responsibilities. In short, they are in need of social development in order to participate effectively as partners with government in fisheries management.

In the circumstances described above, the risk of resource degradation or stock collapse may be perceived as low or distant by many fishers in comparison to the exposure of their livelihood systems to the risks of ill health or death (particularly from malaria, HIV/AIDS, waterborne diseases, and drowning and accidents), theft or loss of fishing gear, or lack of secure access to alternative productive assets, such as land.

The small-scale fisheries sector is also vulnerable to external factors beyond its control. These include floodplain modification and damming of rivers, displacement by aquaculture, tourism and other coastal development, and pollution. Local systems allocating fishing rights can confront and prevent some of these threats, but not all — notably pollution and upstream modifications in river basins. Where fishing interests are historically overridden or unrepresented by competing claims, then people have no incentive to invest in managing their local fishery resources to optimise future yields.

The overall outcome of the set of circumstances described above is that, because of their continuing vulnerability and social exclusion, many fishing people currently lack both the incentive and capacity to claim and defend systems of access rights that aim to conserve fish stocks for their exclusive use. Addressing small-scale fishing people's vulnerability and social exclusion should therefore be an important component of any programme that aims to define and strengthen rights of access as a means to improve the contribution of fisheries to poverty reduction and to rebuild fisheries to contribute to wealth creation and economic growth.

4. PRINCIPLES FOR INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN FISHERIES

In order to interest and enable fisherfolk to participate in resource management, fisheries development programmes will need to address the factors that most immediately and directly threaten the sustainability of fisherfolk's livelihoods. A strategy to bring together responsible fisheries with social development to strengthen capacity and incentives of fisherfolk to invest in defending their fishing rights should consider the following principles:

- i. Address over-exploitation that threatens resource sustainability and the flow of benefits from fisheries to the wider economy as the priority objective of a shift towards rights-based fishing. As well as defining rights to fish, the rights of present and future generations to benefit from the resources should be included. Building the value of the resources should be an explicit objective of fisheries management in the small-scale sub-sector.
- ii. Support empowerment of fishing communities, both through their social inclusion and building their capabilities. Transition to rights-based fishing requires relationships between fishing rights-holders and duty-bearers (such as governments) to be transparent and based on mutual trust and accountability of the duty-bearers. Social inclusion of fishing communities, together with improved fishery governance, would also help address many of the conditions that currently link the fishing sector with illegal activities — both related to fishing and to other maritime and trans-national crime.
- iii. Integrate broader human rights of fishers to an adequate livelihood as part of an expanded rights-based approach to fisheries management. This means including poverty-reduction criteria as a key component of decisions over equitable allocation of rights, including decisions over inclusion and exclusion, and the protection of small-scale fishworkers' access to resources and markets. It also means addressing deficiencies in fishing people's rights of equitable access to health care, education, justice and the rule of law.
- iv. Integrate responsible fisheries policies with wider poverty reduction policies, such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, in countries where fisheries are economically important. This is a necessary condition to achieve inter-sectoral policy coherence and maximise the contribution of fisheries to meeting poverty targets such as the Millennium Development Goals. It is also important for ensuring that fisheries agencies receive an appropriate allocation of central and local government budgets.

5. FURTHER READING

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