

# Considerations for Mitigating Poverty in Rural Communities of Southeast Asia through Fisheries Interventions

Yasuhisa Kato

How can fisheries perform the role of improving the people's livelihoods when the fisheries resources in the Southeast Asian region have been reported to be depleted due to over-exploitation?

In the Southeast Asian region, fisheries which are characterized as small-scale have played important roles in terms of generating income and livelihood, accelerating economic development, and ensuring food security. However, the irony is that fisheries through its development have no longer provided stable livelihood due to its over-capacity situation and the importance of low value species, once considered as valuable protein food for rural communities, has now become very much in demand as feeds for aquaculture which has been drastically expanded aiming for the foreign market. The provision of livelihood and rural food security by fisheries is no longer a major objective of the sector as the promotion of foreign exchange earning through aquaculture products is becoming a single objective of the fisheries in most of Southeast Asian countries. Behind such situation, the fisheries communities that contribute significantly to realizing such task have remained impoverished and continued to be exposed to the multiple dimensions of poverty such as inadequate support and services, low level of education, generally politically motivated governance, and vulnerability to natural hazards and occupational risks. Moreover, the region's huge numbers of fishers are also confronted daily with the need to chase after the declining fisheries resources.

Looking at the overall progress in the region's social and economic development during the past few decades, the disparity in the social and economic conditions among and within the countries is still very apparent. The concept of "open access" and the guaranteed daily incomes with no heavy investments, and the long preparatory and waiting period in aquaculture, have made small-scale fisheries very attractive to large numbers of immigrants who must have been financially constrained in the other sectors. It is the continued flow of immigrants from other sectors and the lack of means of regulating the numbers of fishers that makes it difficult for the fisheries sector to develop a system for alleviating its over-capacity status.

This is where the possible development of an appropriate management for the fisheries should be carefully examined.

Compared with the management of agriculture, which has been already developed for several thousands of years, fisheries management is a recent development only during the last 30 years after the introduction and expansion of modern fisheries. Such short history is not sufficient enough for many people to successfully understand the interaction between fisheries and the resources as well as the impact of fisheries on the environment. Considering that fisheries resources are renewable and common resources, the resource users go through two special conditions when exploiting such unique resources. These conditions are the unclear ownership of the resources, and the need for government intervention in fisheries management (Kato, 2008).

The fisheries industry is involved in racing for the resources that do not belong to anybody until these are caught. This condition is coupled by the migration nature of the resources that move in a wide range of sea areas and the difficulty in locating the resources through the open waters. This further inhibits the development of a clear sense of ownership of the fisheries resources by the users. It is also due to the unclear or no ownership of the fisheries resources that nobody seems to accept the stewardship over the fisheries resources. This is in spite of Article 56.1 (a) of the UNCLOS specifying the sovereign right for managing the natural resources, whether living or non-living in the exclusive economic zone. In reality, since the fisheries resources are common resources, then government agencies should accept the custodianship authority over such resources including the management responsibilities. However, due to insufficient technical capabilities, most government agencies especially in developing countries do not normally play the role as custodians over the fisheries resources except perhaps in certain trans-boundary fisheries conflicts.

Given therefore these two special conditions, it would be difficult to achieve sustainability in fisheries. The issue of "no or unclear ownership of the resources" makes the users irresponsible in their manner of exploiting the resources. The government's interventions in fisheries management, if such services are not effectively provided, may also provide a negative impact for the resource users. The accountability of the resource users, who are not in the position to be involved in the activities such as fisheries management-related activities, could not also be encouraged nor developed under the current system.

Thus, “chasing after the few fishes by the fishers” continue to accelerate further in an unregulated manner. Such situation also leads to the evolution of two vicious cycles (**Box 1**) characterizing the fisheries conditions in the Southeast Asian region, the vicious cycles of resource utilization and overcapacity in fisheries. The situation is even further aggravated when government agencies increasingly lose their trust on the resource users while the resource users for their part, tend to ignore the rules and regulations to the extent of finding ways to bypass such rules.

Although it is necessary to find ways to improve the current human relationship between government agencies and the resource users, many government agencies instead tend to strengthen the enforcement of management requirements when low level of compliance of management rules are observed. Unless the relationship between government agencies and resource users is improved, intensifying any fisheries management system in such top down manner could only lead to escalating costs and increased burden on the part of the governments in securing the required annual budgets which could be difficult task for many developing countries to undertake.

Despite the importance of regular communication and cooperation work by the government fisheries related agencies with fishing communities through their fisheries management intervention, as such basic contact with sector can be the basis for any national safety net system such as poverty alleviation programs, it has been observed that most of the relevant agencies have already given up such important work due to overwhelming difficulties to accomplish the required tasks based on past experiences. Frequent communication between the government agencies and rural fishing communities could help identify the real rural problems. The general absence of mutual trust between government agencies and resource users would make the rural fishers feel that they have been systematically left out in terms of government support and services in fisheries and could result in irresponsible and unregulated fisheries operations adding to the problems of over-capacity and over-exploitation.

## Modification of the Two Unique Conditions for Fisheries

In a situation where the daily incomes of small-scale fisheries are not enough for their daily needs, the fishers could resort to destructive fishing gears such as using fine mesh nets and illegal fishing practices such as using dynamite. Furthermore, as the fishing grounds normally operated by the fishers include the inshore waters known to be spawning and nursery grounds for commercially important species, unregulated fisheries could provide

destructive effects not only on the coastal resources but also on the entire fisheries ecosystem. In evaluating the current social, economic and sustainable use of fisheries resources in especially coastal/inshore waters where small-scale fisheries are operating in the region, it is urgently needed to develop an alternate fisheries management system that is aimed not only at improving the fisheries system but also in improving the social and economic conditions including alleviating rural poverty.

The MSY (Maximum Sustainable Yield) based “resource management” system (stock assessment driven system) has been promoted but not successful. Although most of the analysis of such failure tended to focus on the different ecosystem (single and multi-species ecosystem) between temperate and tropical ecosystems, such failure can also be attributed to the different fisheries or social structure of fisheries. Compared with temperate fisheries where the fishing units (number of fishing boats) are in the order of 1,000~10,000, tropical fisheries such as in the Southeast Asian region can be measured in the order of 100,000~few millions in most of the countries. In addition, the sizes of fishing boats used are quite different (in temperate areas >100 G/T while in tropical areas <100 G/T, 90% of which can be categorized as small-scale fisheries using less than 5 G/T boats). The current international thrust including globalization opts to apply a standardized system such as the MSY-based “resource management” in the case of fisheries management, ignoring the wide diversification of social, economic and ecosystems in the world. Considering such diversified situation of fisheries, it is more appropriate to develop the most applicable fisheries management system (Alternate Fisheries Management System) analyzing the situation of the fisheries in the respective regions. In the case of tropical fisheries, especially in the Southeast Asia region, the social factor of its fisheries is critically important compared with those in the temperate areas where relatively small numbers of people are involved and operated in offshore areas. In this connection, regional policy discussions are now being directed towards the modification of the two unique conditions for fisheries as basis for the development of such Alternate Fisheries Management System.

As major fisheries management activities conducted by most Southeast Asian countries are more focused toward solving local conflicts over the use of fisheries resources, when such conflicts occur, interventions are conducted in an *ad hoc* manner similar to fire extinguishing exercises when fire had already broken out. In general, the effective preventive management system to avoid resource conflicts among the users or over-exploitation of the fisheries resources has not yet been developed. Since the solution of such fisheries management problems is very much

socially and economically rooted and normally considered as local problems, it should also be understood that any government intervention can be more effective if actions are initiated at the local level.

The Southeast Asian countries developed its regional fisheries policy in 2001 through the adoption of the “Resolution and Plan of Action on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region” (Resolution and Plan of Action). Paragraph 5 and 6 of the Resolution indicated respectively, the need to “*Encourage effective management of fisheries through delegation of selected management functions to the local level*”, and “*Recognize the need to progressively replace open access to fisheries resources with limited access regimes through the introduction of rights-based fisheries which may also facilitate the management of fishing capacity and promote the use of responsible fishing gears and practices*”.

Moreover, starting in 1998, SEAFDEC has implemented the Regionalization of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF). From 1998 to 2006, SEAFDEC came up with Regional Guidelines embodying four themes, namely: responsible fishing operations, aquaculture development, fisheries management, and post-harvest and trade, that clarified the corresponding issues specified in the global CCRF. The Regional Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries Management in Southeast Asia address the importance of decentralization, rights-based fisheries, etc. (SEAFDEC, 2003). To elaborate on particular issues in the said Regional Guidelines, the Supplementary Guidelines on Co-Management Using Group User Rights was later on published (SEAFDEC, 2006). The Supplementary Guidelines also aim to further assist the SEAFDEC Member Countries in developing the most practical national system that could address the various aspects of improving their fisheries management in a responsible manner.

### **Open Access to Regulated Entry**

Although the concept of “open access” for the aquatic resources has been modified to suit the different levels of ocean governance, exploitation of the aquatic resources still considered as common resources through the “open access regime,” is still a major problem in fisheries. While it is not feasible to drastically modify such regime to “limited access regime” as stipulated in the Resolution and Plan of Action (SEAFDEC, 2001) because “open access regime” was developed through various awareness and consensus building, it is equally more difficult to simply modify such regime as a matter of convenience for the fisheries sector. Considering the widely prevailing perceptions of “open access” regime on aquatic resources, the use of “regulated entry system” could therefore be considered as a possible option to be used as basis to introduce the appropriate right-based fisheries.

### **Delegation of Management Authority and Co-management**

The promotion of “delegation of management authority to local level through the decentralized process” could mean “transferring the authority within the government structure.” In order to avoid any misinterpretation, co-management has been introduced. *Co-management is an approach to management in which the government shares certain authority, responsibilities and functions of managing the fisheries with the resource users as partners* (SEAFDEC, 2006). Thus, co-management has been considered convenient for government officers who may fear of “losing their administrative power” due to the decentralization and delegation process of fisheries management. Such officers would have better feeling even after certain authority has been delegated to the local level as far as co-management system is used.

### **Rights-based Fisheries**

Since any fisheries management system could not be effectively implemented under the “open access regime”, the introduction of rights-based fisheries has been considered for the effective implementation of a sustainable fisheries management. In rights-based fisheries, the right to fish or utilize the fisheries resources is licensed or permitted by competent government authority, giving the licensed fishers access and use rights to a particular fishing ground, where such rights are being accompanied by obligations to comply with the rules and regulations of the rights-based regime (SEAFDEC, 2006). Moreover, in order to develop and improve fisheries management, SEAFDEC has promoted the “group user rights” as appropriate “rights-based fisheries” in the designated area under the co-management system together with institution building exercise which promote to establish appropriate resource users group to whom the “group user rights” are given. It is expected that the use of “group user rights” over the designated area allocated to the respective fishing communities could strengthen the ownership of the resources and enhance partnerships in resource utilization. Eventually, when the responsibility in management is shared among the resource users, compliance level of the rules and regulations could be improved, thus achieving sustainable fisheries.

Thus, the aforementioned unique conditions of the fisheries in the region could be modified where “unclear ownership” could be addressed by the introduction of rights-based fisheries: group user rights for small-scale fisheries (in the case of commercial fisheries using larger fishing boats in offshore areas, fisheries licensing system can be improved and promoted.), while “government intervention” could be promoted through the delegation of management responsibility or rights to the resource users. By modifying such unique conditions, fishers would

consequently be freed from being perpetually entangled in the two vicious cycles.

## Poverty Alleviation in Rural Communities through Fisheries Interventions

The fisheries communities are increasingly vulnerable to many factors such as natural hazards (e.g., drastic changes in climatic conditions, unfavorable weather conditions such as typhoons, cyclones, seasonal fluctuation of fish stocks, etc.), economic disasters (e.g., increasing cost of fuel, fluctuating fish prices, poor market accessibility, intervention of middlemen in marketing, etc.), occupational risks (e.g., poor living conditions, low educational level, absence of medical care, unsafe fishing vessels and equipment, etc.), and political instability (e.g., weak and not fair law enforcement, top-down system of governance, etc.). The presence of any of these factors could lead to the chronic deterioration of the living conditions of the fishers.

In Southeast Asia, the number of rural poor could be increasing. The World Bank (2008) for example cited that in South Asia including many Southeast Asian countries, the number of rural poor has continued to increase from about 380 million people (below \$1 a-day poverty line) to almost 400 million in 2002. Compared with the urban poor in South Asia, the number was a little over 100 million (below \$1 a-day poverty line) in 1993 to about 120 million in 2002. In the South Asian region, high priority has been placed in mobilizing agriculture for poverty reduction and this includes the fisheries sector. However, while agriculture and fisheries could play the role as main provider of environmental services that could be tapped to alleviate poverty, the unwise use and inappropriate management of the natural resources could also lead to environmental disaster and eventually further aggravating poverty in the rural areas.

Many technical interventions within and outside the fisheries sector have been advanced by the national and local governments, donor agencies, and the NGOs, however, these were predominantly aimed at accelerating foreign exchange earnings through the introduction of modern fishing technologies and infrastructure development. Little focus has been given to improving the living conditions of the poor fishers because their problems are considered less technical and such social and economic issues are difficult for external parties to handle.

Considering that the fisheries resources in the region although renewable, have already been depleted, such resources or whatever is left of it should be properly managed to avoid further degradation. Harkes (1999) reported that there used to be some so-called traditional management systems adopted in Asia and the Pacific. Although such management systems may not have been scientifically developed as with the modern resource management system, these were aimed at the equitable distribution of natural resources or social functions mitigating the conflicts among the resource users. Since such systems have been replaced by the so-called “modern system”, more focus has since then been given to the centrally controlled governance disregarding the capability of the people at the local level. Thus, the traditional management systems subsequently disappeared due to various external factors including colonization, development assistance and globalization. Nonetheless, the prevalence of the vicious cycles (**Box 1**) in tropical fisheries has deterred all efforts to achieve sustainability and alleviate poverty in the fisheries communities. In the vicious cycle of resource utilization, fishers are always encountering difficulties in finding additional sources of income in the rural communities in spite of governments’ attempts to overcome their deteriorating financial status. This further aggravates the resource situation when fishers are involved in unsustainable fishing operations to be able to desperately cope with their families’ daily needs. With the absence of

Box 1. Two vicious cycles that characterize fisheries in the Southeast Asian region



government support, the fishers have no other way out and continue to get entangled in the vicious cycle. In order to achieve sustainable fisheries, it is therefore necessary to consider the various possibilities of improving the poverty situation in the fisheries communities by fisheries interventions. SEAFDEC believes that any potential effort in alleviating poverty in fishery communities should give extra attention on human resource development by allowing the fishery communities to take part in sustainable resources utilization and management. There is also a need to enhance the capacity of government staff to enable them to appropriately provide the long-term support to the target communities.

Many factors should be considered in order to achieve sustainable fisheries in the Southeast Asian region. Firstly, overcapacity should be addressed considering that there are too many fishers competing with each other and chasing after the dwindling fisheries resources. Secondly, since fisheries are being conducted under the open-access regime, it is very difficult to regulate fisheries, and much more the establishment of an appropriate fisheries management system could not be easily put in place. Lastly, the continuing reduction of the fishers' daily catch exacerbates their socio-economic conditions leading to the further worsening of the poverty status in the fisheries households.

Given such scenario, there is not much option at hand to alleviate the fishers' socio-economic status mainly because of the absence of alternative income-earning opportunities in the rural fisheries communities where the people have always depended on fishing activities for their livelihoods. Fishers turn to using illegal and destructive fishing gears and practices in order to desperately cope with their families' daily needs. Thus, the further aggravation of the fishers' social, economic and financial status leads to further deterioration of the ecological conditions of the fisheries resources.

The vicious cycle on resource utilization could even be magnified further by the least benefits that the fishers normally obtain from the fish they caught, a commodity that could have improved their livelihoods. The presence of a traditional marketing system in small-scale fisheries communities orchestrated by the middlemen does not give the fishers much chance to dictate the price of their catch. Moreover, the fishers are also not in a position to initiate small business using their catch through value-adding due to limited technical and financial capabilities. Then there is the general competitive marketing situation for fish and fishery products in the markets, which worsens the situation in the rural fisheries communities.

## **“One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP)” System**

In an effort to address the persistent poverty situation in the fisheries communities, SEAFDEC is implementing the project on the Promotion of “One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP)” System to Improve the Livelihood for the Fisheries Communities in ASEAN Region with financial support from the ASEAN Foundation through the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund. The project aims to improve fisheries livelihoods by motivating the potential people in the fisheries communities through the introduction and promotion of the concept of “One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP)”.

The Japanese OVOP (One Village One Product) initiative and its bottom-up approach have been replicated and developed in many countries in the Southeast Asian region as means of activating the rural communities and improving their economic status, motivating the people and mobilizing the unique but locally available technical skills and materials (Kato, 2006). Through FOVOP, the principle of the OVOP movement is now being gradually applied for the social and economic improvement of the regions' fisheries communities. Thus, FOVOP has been promoted by SEAFDEC in the region focusing on the strategy of seeking “Only One Product” instead of “Number One Product” in order to reduce competition from the industry. This requires local producers to identify and promote a unique and differentiated traditional fishery products and related services from each particular fisheries community (Kato, 2006).

The FOVOP project also recognizes that women, having been actively involved in the fisheries activities although their level of involvement has been kept informal, should be considered as potential stakeholders in rural economic activities. Moreover, guided by the principle that the identification of FOVOP project ideas should be promoted based on bottom-up approach, three major priority areas have been considered in the introduction of the FOVOP concept, namely: Human Resource Development to build up the community leaders; development of special marketing strategy of FOVOP products; and production of FOVOP products. Furthermore, it is also the principle of FOVOP that community products and services should initially focus on the domestic market or at the maximum the intra-regional trade level, with some potential products and services to be developed further and gradually promoted to cater the international markets.

## Alternate Fisheries Management System

A probable way out for the fisheries sector to address poverty issues in fisheries communities is the promotion of an Alternate Management System, which can be a package of systems being fully applicable for the tropical multi-species nature and large number of people involved fisheries in the Southeast Asian countries. If the fisheries management system is only focused on the sustainable use of fisheries resources, such system will not convince poor fishers who normally have short-term perspectives (food for tomorrow rather than long term sustainability) in terms of resource use. Alternate Fisheries Management System should include long term sustainability by modifying the two unique conditions of fisheries and scenario that provide economic improvement of the fisher's livelihood. In this connection, as an important prerequisite under the system, modernization and improvement of domestic marketing system should be considered in order to: (1) retain the maximum benefits of fishery products in the fisheries communities; and (2) ensure that the production and marketing of community products including value-added products would activate the rural economic activities thus creating additional livelihoods in the fisheries communities.

In connection with the proposed Alternate Fisheries Management System, the Regional Advisory Committee on Fisheries Management in Southeast Asia (RAC) at its first meeting in September 2008, agreed to recommend to the Council of SEAFDEC during its meeting in early 2009 that: In the promotion of innovative fisheries management in the Southeast Asian region to address poverty alleviation in the region's fisheries communities, the adoption of an Alternate Fisheries Management System should be considered (SEAFDEC, 2008).

As proposed, the Alternate Fisheries Management System should be developed taking into full account the regional specificities and requirements. The system is not based on fisheries stock size, it should not be promoted only by scientists but by mobilizing the "local knowledge", and it can be promoted by "input control" system, not by "output control system" as in the resource management system. In the promotion of an Alternate Fisheries Management System, some major considerations should be taken into account (**Box 2**). In this regard, the Alternate Fisheries Management System for Southeast Asia (Kato, 2008a) can be further recognized in the region and its necessity can be clarified in the promotional work of Ecosystem-based Fisheries Management System as an opportunity, as the development of Ecosystem-based Fisheries Management System has been internationally initiated based on various

### Box 2. Major Considerations on Alternate Fisheries Management System

- Change from "open access" to right-based fisheries enhances the sense of ownership by fishers
- Delegation of management responsibility/right to resource users enhances the extent of fishers' involvement into the activities promoting sustainable fisheries
- Institution building for fishers at community level is the key to promote above co-management
- The fisheries management will be promoted by two alternate fisheries management system "input control/ right-based fisheries" system in Southeast Asia by the different scales of fisheries
- Regionally promoting an alternate fisheries management system to majority of the small-scale fisheries by "group users right system" (SEAFDEC, 2006) and to commercial fisheries by "licensing"

criticism and constraints for The MSY based "resource management" system.

## Conclusion and Way Forward

Fisheries in the region which have been characterized as small-scale have traditionally absorbed the economic needs of the rural population by providing them livelihood opportunities. With the current large number of small-scale fishers constantly increasing because fisheries have been considered as the last resort of life for the rural people in many developing countries, it has been generally understood that the absorbing capacity of the sub-sector has already been saturated and reached the overcapacity status based on various scientific evidences and trends. Considering the ever increasing population in most of the rural areas, it has become necessary to develop a fisheries management system for "regulating small-scale fisheries through the introduction of regulated fisheries entry system". Although such introduction might mean some sacrifices on the part of the rural people, it should be recognized that a delayed action would accompany much greater social and economic pains later. In addition, people and the aquatic environment would continue to suffer from the impact caused by such "no-action".

As stock assessment driven resource management system is not applicable to the multi-species tropical fisheries, especially to coastal fisheries, a package of alternate fisheries management system for the coastal fisheries has already been discussed among the Southeast Asian countries (SEAFDEC, 2008). However, there is still a need to discuss further several issues in order to set up national policies for establishing and promoting such alternate fisheries management system. During such discussions, policy makers should be specifically made aware that the system is not fully dependent on stock assessment and

that there is a need to delegate the management right to the resource users who do not have any scientific and high educational background to cope with the resource management system if this is to be applied to the target sub-sector.

The most important aspect in the management package is institutional building of the fishers' organizations where eligible fishers can be members, having some public functions in each community as far as practical for such group of resource users. This is a critical element in promoting rights-based fisheries through "co-management" arrangement. A set of privileges and obligations, both fishing rights in the designated areas to be allocated for each community and part of the management right, especially on the day to day management actions can be delegated to the community institutions, while government agencies either central or local governments would focus on the development of the enabling environment (legal framework and technical assistance) to support the fisheries communities' initiatives.

Empowerment of the resource users through institutional building should be further strengthened to provide additional privilege, such as the right to organize public auction of the resource users' harvest. Involvement of fishers in marketing at community level will provide with financial incentive to manage the fisheries as well as a stable financial income for the community institutions. This would ensure the sustainable institutions on such factors as being financially independent from government support, and reducing financial burden of government agencies. The formalization and some modernization of the local market system is also justified from the aspects of national food security and the preparatory work for increasing the involvement of community products in regional and international trade.

Although the proposed alternate fisheries management system primarily aims to regulate small-scale fisheries through the introduction of regulated fisheries entry system, it could have positive effects on the various issues that have been identified as difficult for improvement under the conventional system. Such issues include: the promotion of responsible fisheries including the reduction of governments' involvement in the MCS (monitoring, control and surveillance) activities, mitigation of overcapacity, improvement of the collection of fisheries information, promotion of resource enhancement programs, and improved support for the national safety net program on poverty alleviation.

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### About the Author

Dr. Yasuhisa Kato is the Special Advisor of SEAFDEC based at the Secretariat in Bangkok, Thailand. He is the Editor-in-Chief and member of the Editorial Team for Fish for the People. When his tour of duty with SEAFDEC ends in December 2008, Dr. Kato will join Kagoshima University, Japan as Professor starting in January 2009. The Editorial Team for the Special Publication "Fish for the People" takes this opportunity to bid Dr. Kato farewell and wish him the best of luck in his new place of work.