



Dried fish products, Kampong Luang, Cambodia
(Photo by courtesy of Simon R. Bush)

One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP): Seeking “Only One, not Number One”¹

By Yasuhisa Kato

Introduction

It is surprising to see that the Resolution and Plan of Action on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region, adopted by the ASEAN fisheries-related Ministers as a regional fisheries common policy at the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Conference on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security in the New Millennium: Fish for the People in 2001, did not mention poverty alleviation even once! It should also be noted that popularization of the implementation of “the Resolution and Plan of Action” is the main policy basis for the publication of the magazine *Fish for the People*. Does this mean that poverty is not a problem for fisheries in the Southeast Asian region?

It is not only in the ASEAN region fisheries policy is silent on poverty alleviation. Developing countries worldwide have rarely addressed how the fisheries sector can alleviate poverty in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs)

that are produced as one of the main conditions for concession lending by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to developing countries. This is amply demonstrated by Andy Thorpe in a recent FAO publication². Dr Thorpe analyzed the PRSPs produced by 129 developing countries, and found that the fishery sector is largely neglected. Such a situation can have negative impacts in relation to external assistance to the fisheries sector in developing countries. The paper does not include an analysis of why such opportunities have been missed and leaves this study to future research. So to date we do not have a coherent explanation for why this neglect occurs so consistently throughout the world.

¹ For this expression, I am grateful to Ms Rika Fujioka, who examined the concept of OTOP in her doctoral studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

² ‘Mainstreaming fisheries into national development and poverty reduction strategy: Current situation and opportunities’, FAO Fisheries Circular, No. 997, FAO 2005.120p

Despite the absence of an explanation, the facts themselves speak volumes. They indicate that government support services for fisheries may have structural problems when it comes to taking care of social and economic problems in their respective countries, especially when it comes to supporting the poor. Is it related to the fact that fisheries activities, which are mainly conducted at sea, might be relatively invisible to civil society? This would be confirmed by the general observation that most governmental fisheries-related agencies in Southeast Asia have the mandate to support the fisheries industry, especially in terms of technology development, and therefore have a technically oriented staff, with biological and engineering backgrounds rather than social or economic affinities. Government services that systematically deal with poverty alleviation for the sector, in this context, are much less visible within the governmental structure. The facts explain that these poverty alleviation activities for fishing communities have habitually been conducted mainly under project-based activities with the support of external donors, or mandated to other government agencies such as the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Now, thanks to the general economic development in most ASEAN member countries, is it possible that poverty alleviation is no longer relevant to the fisheries sector agenda? Certainly not! When discussing poverty in the context of the fisheries sector, it is essential to caution against undue optimism. Although effective fisheries management has been implemented in many places in the region, effective management systems are still largely missing, and the generally deteriorating situation of fisheries resources can only lead to a deterioration in the livelihoods of fishing households.

Vicious cycle to poverty

A serious problem in achieving sustainable fisheries, especially for small-scale fisheries in the Southeast Asian region, is over-capacity across the sector – too many fishers are competing with each other for dwindling fisheries resources. Due to difficulties involved in establishing appropriate fisheries management systems in coastal areas in the region, fisheries have to date been largely unregulated, with open access to fisheries resources (the so-called ‘race to fish’). Declining trends of daily catches are making fisheries livelihoods much increasingly vulnerable, and it is easy to envisage a future in which many households dependent on small-scale fisheries will be characterized by chronic poverty. But there are few ready options to alleviate poverty, especially considering the lack of alternative income-generating opportunities in rural fishing communities. People usually have little choice but to

continue to be a small-scale fisher. Using illegal and destructive fishing gear and practices then becomes increasingly attractive as a desperate short-term attempt to maintain a livelihood. This vicious cycle would further aggravate the social, economic and financial status, as well as the ecological status of the aquatic resource base.

A vain discussion?

When sustainable fisheries development is promoted in the region, fisheries managers and decision makers often receive ambivalent comments on poverty issues from government technical officers. Discussing the requirements of fisheries management for small-scale coastal fisheries, one might hear the comment that “fisheries management for such a sub-sector might not be required because authoritative management arrangements might only add an additional burden to people who are already socially and economically weak”. To which one might reply, “It might be true, if the management actions are provided in an authoritative manner”. You may also want to add “But can we leave them as they are? Since the resource situation is deteriorating, their situation will be further marginalized unless appropriate support is provided”. “What kind of support?” would be the appropriate question at this stage; but more likely you will hear “Well ... I do not know.”

Let us consider another case. When we discuss the overcapacity of small-scale coastal fisheries, other people might comment: “You cannot freeze the number of boats of these poor people! They cannot survive if we limit their access to fishing”. OK then, but “How do we solve the overcapacity problem?” “Well ... We have to provide alternate work opportunities for them in their communities.”

People know the difficulties faced by small-scale fishers. The problem, however, is that we cannot find a way to improve the fisheries management systems for these small-scale fisheries. Our discussion sometimes focuses on the root causes of the problem, which are linked to social and economic dimensions, but at this stage, government fisheries officers do not usually find the conversation to their liking, or simply have difficulties in comprehending what is discussed and follow-up action needed, due to their own weak mandate and capacity in the matter. We find ourselves then jumping back to square one. [We know fisheries management problems.] [We can not propose a system with only technical dimensions, but must also consider the social and economic situation.] [Unfortunately, these social and economical related needs and actions are not specifically mandated to fisheries management authorities.] [Under such circumstance, we are sorry but we cannot improve our fisheries management system.]

Addressing institutional weaknesses

If this is the case, what is the real problem? Can we attribute it to Departments of Fisheries in various Southeast Asian nations not being the agencies mandated to improve the socio-economic dimensions of fisheries? Haven't these needs been identified as the bottleneck to promote an appropriate fisheries management system for coastal fisheries? If so, we could seriously discuss what strategies might address these institutional weaknesses, so that fisheries-related agencies can intervene appropriately to improve the socio-economic conditions prevailing in fishing communities.

Along these lines, I would like to develop a preliminary reflection on a system of economic activation in fisheries communities that would not rely on large-scale assistance by competent agencies such as those under Ministries of Social Welfare.

While we have seen above the consequences of not managing fisheries, which leads to vulnerability and in turn poverty, we have not discussed ways for the fishing community to obtain maximum benefits from fish and the fisheries products they are producing. This, to date, has not effectively been achieved due to social and other problems.

Obtaining a decent share of the benefit from the fish

Traditional marketing systems are in most cases dominated by the so-called middlemen', who purchase fishers' catch, often as fresh fish, in order to sell it through their own marketing channels that will ultimately reach retailers and consumers. There is typically an ongoing tension between fishers and middlemen. Fishers are paid very little for the fish they catch, while middlemen take the risk of locating an eventual buyer, and usually of lending money to the fisher. The arrangement is sometime fair, sometime not so.

However, even if the deal is fair, fishers do not normally obtain a decent share of the benefits from their catch if these are sold simply as fresh fish, especially in the peak season. Processing fish is a problem, as in most cases they are not in the position to initiate a small business that would add value to their catch, considering their limited technical and financial capacity. In addition, those who manage to produce fisheries value-added products must then face a competitive marketing situation with fisheries products developed elsewhere, often by large fisheries industries. This chain of events would seriously affect the promotion of feasible economic activities in rural coastal areas.



*Fresh fish for sale in Pakse market, Lao PDR
(Photo by courtesy of Simon R. Bush)*

A Japanese success story...

In 1979, Mr. Morihiko Hiramatsu, the Governor of Oita Prefecture in Japan, proposed a "One Village, One Product (OVOP)" movement to provide greater motivation for the rural people to take an active role and activate the rural economy by mobilizing various assets available and unique to these rural communities. Over 25 years, such movement has been successfully developed in Oita but also in other Prefectures of Japan. It has been recognized as a great source of differentiated products that can be successfully marketed to customers nationally and internationally. OVOP has revitalized rural communities by mobilizing rural people, especially women.

Through comprehensive human resource development activities, the OVOP movement has reviewed the specificities of local communities, with a focus not on limitations and shortcomings but on the untapped potential of people in communities, identifying potential products and activities that can be economically, financially and socially activated and sustained in each respective rural community.

... Replicated throughout Southeast Asia

The Japanese OVOP initiative and its approach, strongly bottom-up, has been replicated and developed in many developing countries as a mean to develop and activate rural communities and improve their status, motivating the people and mobilizing the unique but locally available technical skills and materials.

Countries in Southeast Asia which have promoted the “One Village, One Product” concept are Cambodia (“One Village, One Product”), Indonesia (“Back to Village”), Lao PDR (“Neuang Muang, Neuang Phalittaphan”), Malaysia (“Satu Kampung, Satu Produk”), Philippines (“One Barangay, One Product”) and Thailand (“One Tambon, One Product - OTOP”).

Thailand in particular stands out with the rapid success of its “One Tambon, One Product” initiative, which has proved to be a highly effective means of exploring new ways to promote rural products. OTOP targeted both rural development and the promotion of internationally tradable products. Its success was accomplished in a short period of time, and was largely due to the setting up of a special nationwide support system centrally coordinated by a special unit in the Office of the Prime Minister. The support offered to local communities has included support to the communities in promoting and marketing OTOP products, including export promotion.

The success of OTOP in Thailand demonstrates the potential for promoting the OVOP principle in other countries and localities.

Export market for fisheries products?

Now, let us think about the principles behind the OVOP movement, to see whether it can be applicable for social



and economic improvement of fishing communities, and possibly to some extent for addressing poverty issues in fisher communities. What coastal communities have in common with other rural communities should be left for large-scale rural development activities; the focus should be placed on what make fishing communities different from others.

The main target of government promotion of OTOP was the export market. Given this aim, OTOP has to develop very high quality products. To do so, the promotional system of OTOP successfully encouraged competition among the communities which joined the scheme through the provision of quality certification, authorizing the producer to use the OTOP packaging and marketing channels. Such certification was done using a ‘stars’ system. The system aims overall to encourage producing ‘Number One Product’ – a top quality product with the highest star ranking, five star, in order to gain and maintain a competitive position in the export market.

Since one of the objectives of the Thai initiative has been the promotion of local products for export, let us also start to think about such potential for fishery products. Food safety is a keen concern of international markets. Stringent and high level trade regulations under WTO such as SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures), Codex Alimentarius, and other recommended measures such as HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) greatly disadvantage fisheries communities attempting to develop and promote local fisheries products for the international market by operating on a backyard scale. It is too ambitious to attempt to develop rapidly a system that could meet international requirements on sanitary and other issues such as



OTOP products of Thailand

packaging, considering the current technical and financial capacity and the status of the group of people who would produce fisheries products in rural fishing communities. Export promotion of fisheries products produced in rural fishing communities is not an appropriate option at this stage.

The special situation of backyard produced fisheries products

The lack of any possibility to export artisanal fisheries products is exacerbated by the perishable nature of fish. These are negative factors militating against the development of value-added products in the fishing communities. Public support, moreover, tends to focus on the production and management side of small-scale fisheries, while marketing is usually not much considered, as it is considered that the industry can handle this part on its own. One has to remember that marketing people for small-scale fisheries (middlemen) have an ambiguous nature, and do not always cooperate well with fishers, and neither are they always fair. Certainly, under this system, small-scale fishermen are vulnerable to abuse.

We are again focusing on the negative side of the issue. What are the benefits to fishing communities?

Let's consider what kind of campaign might be developed to promote fisheries products, with the goal of providing positive economic effects on rural fishing communities, by developing an appropriate system that takes all due account of the special circumstances of fisheries. Going back to the original principle of OVOP, what would the main strategy of a One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP) be? OVOP has been distinguished by its objective to produce products and activities differentiated from one tambon (sub-district) to another. Considering that we are not aiming at

export, we might envisage that FOVOP should promote its activities with a strategy to produce "Only One Product" instead of a "Number One Product."

Visualizing FOVOP activities

How should we visualize FOVOP activities? Let me start with a simple analysis of the current economic activities of fishing communities. Many communities have over the years attempted to add value to their catch by processing fisheries products. These efforts have not always been successful, frequently due to marketing constraints. The groups of people who develop these products on a backyard scale do not normally have knowledge on how to sell, as they have a lack of marketing skills and no strategy. Eventually, they have to entrust their products to existing marketing professionals and local marketing channels in the areas. However, as they do not know about marketing strategy or consumers' demand, the outcomes of using such channels often do not live up to their expectations.

Another constraint, as mentioned above, is that their products are not in a position to compete with similar products produced on an industrial scale. This last point is worth stressing because it is largely because of the failure to adopt an appropriate marketing strategy, as the products are usually promoted in competition with industrial ones, seeking to be 'Number One Products'. A strategy seeking 'Only One Product' instead of 'Number One Product' would reduce competition from industry, but would require local producers to identify and promote a unique and differentiated artisanal product and related activities from each particular community.

Then, the next question would need to be "What are the unique and differentiated product and activities for a particular community?" The product might not necessarily be limited to a fisheries product but could be anything relevant. It might be an activity, that could be sold outside the community mobilizing materials and skills available in the community, provided that it is related to aquatic environment and resources.

Below are some ideas for further exploring types of products and services that could be promoted:

- 🐟 Is the community known to people as a producing site of a unique aquatic animal? Are there any specific aquatic products, including resources such as seaweed or shells, that could be sold outside while facing less competition others?



Backyard processing of fishery products by women group in Thailand

- 🐟 Has the community developed a unique harvesting method? Special (and usually environmentally friendly) harvesting methods, such as crab banks or use of JTEDs or TEDs, etc. can be promoted under a local eco-labelling scheme that can be unique and would face less competition with others.
- 🐟 Does the community have a special aquatic environment that could be promoted through eco-tourism or a 'traditional' festival?
- 🐟 Is the community reputed for the production of specialized fisheries products or handicrafts? Specific products obtained through the use of special seasonings, recipes or other processing techniques or handicraft skills have the potential for marketing outside the community without facing excessively tough competition.

The list above is certainly not exhaustive, but tentative listing of such ideas could be greatly improved if countries in the region could share their experience on the activation of economic activities or revitalization of rural communities. Such a process would also be facilitated and could be better visualized through discussion and formulation of applicable strategies to promote social and economic activities in the fishing communities. SEAFDEC is now planning to promote FOVOP through one of its new projects, which should start in early 2007.

Promote intra-regional trade

Let us give some more thoughts on another aspect of the marketing strategy. If export promotion is not the objective of FOVOP, we have to think about what (and who) could be the target for sales of local fisheries products. It is understood that the promotion and marketing of value-added fisheries products requires a suitable cultural background from consumers to be successful. Food habits are historically developed and of a conservative nature, and they are not likely to change or adapt fast. In the Southeast Asian region, which is composed of ten countries, a culture of eating fish is firmly anchored. This habit is much diversified, and there is acceptance for a wide range of fisheries products.

With such similarities between cultures, where eating and fish are closely linked, and considering other similar social factors, an exchange and sharing of regional experiences among the ten ASEAN countries in terms of the motivations driving the people, or the production of value-added products and other activities specific to each locality, would be very useful. If properly encouraged, this could be a strong regional advantage to support the proposed FOVOP in the region, rather than a weaker promotion on a country basis.

This ultimately should lead us to think about the potential to promote intra-regional trade of artisanal fishery products. Based on this recognition, regional promotional work of FOVOP would be accepted.

But let us look beyond distribution, and consider how to sell FOVOP products to the consumer. In the case of OVOP, there has been a successful initiative to sell their local products at an antenna shop called 'Station of the Road', located along the major roads and built with support from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport. The people travelling along the road by car can drop at the shop and enjoy a bit of shopping by browsing local products. Various temporary stalls are a widespread sight along the roads of Southeast Asian countries, and most of the time these are selling local products. Considering these local stalls and more centralized shops, we have the basis for developing some strategies for marketing FOVOP products.

Conclusion

We daily encounter the waves of globalization, with everybody facing the standardization of rules, specifications, codes, systems and habits. In such global conditions, 'Number One Product' can be appreciated as an attempt to enforce standardization in a competitive situation. However, coming back to local fisheries communities, such a global movement will only provide a negative impact as it does not fit well with rural conditions in Southeast Asia or elsewhere in the developing world. A strategy such as 'Only One Product' should be considered and promoted in order to support the socio-economic development of people in the coastal communities.

About the author

Yasuhisa Kato, Ph.D. in population dynamics and marine ecology, was President of Overseas Agrofiseries Consultants Co., Ltd (1976-1985). Moving to the Fisheries Department of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), he was Director of the Operation Services from 1985 to 1994 and of the Policy and Planning Division from 1994 to 1997. Since 1997, he is Special Advisor for the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC), based at the Secretariat in Bangkok, Thailand.