

Attempts to Apply Community-based Co-management Approach in Vietnam: The Case of Thanh Phong Commune in Ben Tre Province

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Fisheries cooperative management or fisheries co-management can be defined as a partnership arrangement in which the community of local resource users (fishers), government, other stakeholders (boat owners, fish traders, boat builders, business people, etc.) and external agents (non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic and research institutions) share the responsibility and authority for the management of the fisheries. Through consultations and negotiations, the partners develop a formal agreement on their respective roles, responsibilities and rights in management, referred to as 'negotiated power'. Co-management is also called participatory, joint, multi-party or collaborative management. Attempts to introduce community-based co-management had been initiated in Thanh Phong Commune, Thanh Phu District, Ben Tre Province in Vietnam. The concerns that impede the implementation of the community-based co-management model are described in this paper.

Dependence on marine and coastal resources has been noticeably increasing, specifically by the small-scale fisheries which derive much employment from the coastal fishing communities. Small-scale fisheries have been producing more than half of the world's annual marine fish yield, and considered as the main source of protein supply for humans especially in developing countries including Vietnam. However, overexploitation and environmental degradation are directly threatening the fisheries resources while most of the existing small-scale fisheries management approaches have not been successful in decreasing fishing capacity as well as in solving management conflicts. Reforms in small-scale fisheries management have become the priority and urgent needs worldwide. Co-management, which is one of the new and promising management approaches that has been perceived in recent years, is based on common property theory that recognizes the participation of fishers, local authorities, and other stakeholders in the management process (Graham, 2006).

Co-management and Community-based Management

Co-management

It is generally acknowledged that not all responsibilities and authority should be given to the community level. Although the extent and types of responsibilities and/or authority at the state level and the various community

levels differ, devolution of responsibilities and authority is site-specific and depends on each country's conditions. Sharing of responsibilities and authority should however, be negotiated between the community members and the government but should be within the bounds of corresponding government policies. Determining the kind and extent of the responsibility and/or authority to be allocated to the community level is ultimately a political decision, where the government will always play a very important role. However, the key to co-management is the negotiated power where the interaction of the state and non-state representatives is an important factor in defining a common and acceptable balance in sharing power and allocating responsibilities. Thus, co-management evolves through both top-down and bottom-up processes.

Community-based management

Fundamentally, fisheries community-based management is a concept that has arisen from the reality that fishers and coastal communities, being most dependent on the marine resources, should have a large role in deciding how such resources should be managed. This concept fits within a universal viewpoint that management decisions of all sorts are often best made at the very level where the decisions would be applied (Pomeroy, 2006).

The idea that resource users and the resource-based communities should have the primary responsibility for managing their resources, is what makes community-based management different from other resource management approaches which tend towards much less involvement of the most resource dependent people and communities. Together with the perception that resource users are the primary resource managers is the assumption that the users have the willingness and capacity to manage the resources. This is considering the fact that community-based management requires individuals to work together for the collective good and consider the implications of their individual actions on the community as well as on the resources.

Along with the notion of collective responsibility for self-governance, community-based management implies conservation or stewardship awareness on the part of the resource users. Community-based fisheries is not only about maximizing harvests or profits, but striving to achieve ecosystem health, and promoting conservation and

sustainable use of the resources and ecosystems (Pomeroy, 2006). While the above points provide the basic definition of community-based management, things get more complicated in real life situations, especially when trying to define who is managing and what should be managed. If community-based management reflects the nature of a framework within which local people can participate in addressing complex and interconnected issues affecting the coastal communities, questions would arise on who decides which people are the community and the issues that are confronting these people.

Community-based management can be seen from two perspectives. On one side, it could be considered as being about legal empowerment as in resource management, but with community-based management, empowering the coastal communities and resource users is necessary in order that they can gain access and management control over the coastal resources. This process can be considered part of larger movements for communities to achieve greater economic and political power. On the other side, community-based management could be seen as being about the capacity of the community to carry out specific management activities like research or developing management plans. In this sense, community-based management is considered as a set of skills for local people to carry out the management activities instead of the government (Pomeroy, 2006).

Comparison between Co-management and Community-based Management

The above definitions of community-based resource management show that while there could be similarities and differences between co-management and community-based management, the differences are seen from the target of each strategy. Moreover, such differences could be gleaned from the level and timing of the participation in management processes. Community-based management is people-centered and community-focused, while co-management which also focuses on these issues has an added feature on partnership arrangement between government and the local community of resource users. Furthermore, the process of resource management is also organized differently with co-management having a broader scope and scale than community-based management as far as focus inside and outside the community is concerned. While the government plays a minor role in community-based management, by definition co-management includes major and active role of the government.

Co-management often addresses issues beyond the community level, at regional and national levels, and allows these issues, as they affect the community, to be brought more effectively into the domain of the

community. Co-management strategies, on the other hand, involve government agencies, resource managers and elected officials equally, along with the community and stakeholders, developing trust between the participants.

When community-based management is considered an integral part of co-management, it can be called community-based co-management. Community-based co-management includes the characteristics of both community-based management and co-management, that is, it is people-centered, community-oriented, resource-based and partnership-based. Thus, community-based co-management has the community as its focus, yet recognizes that to sustain such action, a horizontal (across the community) and vertical (with external to the community organizations and institutions such as government) link is necessary. Community-based co-management is most often found in developing countries because of the need for overall community and economic development, social empowerment, and resource management. Correspondingly, both community-based co-management and community-based management are long-lasting processes, based on several specific management activities in which community-based management is the core of community-based co-management process.

The Case of Thanh Phong Commune, Thanh Phu District, Ben Tre Province

Geographical position

Thanh Phong Commune is one of the 18 communes/municipalities of Thanh Phu District, Ben Tre Province in Vietnam. It is bordered by the Thanh Hai Commune in the north, Co Chien River in the south, the East Sea in the



Map of Vietnam showing Ben Tre Province



The Mekong River Delta showing Ben Tre

east, and Giao Thanh Commune in the west. Thanh Phong Commune consists of five hamlets, namely: Dai Thon, Thanh Phuoc, Thanh Hoa, Thanh Loc and Thanh Loi. The center of the Commune is located at Thanh Phuoc Hamlet, 25 km from the People’s Committee of Thanh Phu District in the east.

The natural area of Thanh Phong Commune is about 6441 ha including 2858 ha of cultivated land, 921 ha of forest and 17 km of coastline. This area is formed by the alluvial of two rivers, the Co Chien and Ham Luong, and is continuously widening due to encroachment on the East Sea.

In the mainland, there are many long successive sand dunes convenient for settlement, cultivation of cash crops and fruit trees. The climate is relatively temperate with two clear-cut rainy and dry seasons. The overall topography is low land, with an altitude of 1.8 + 2 m above mean sea level. During flood time or torrential rains, most of the commune is submerged.

Socio-economic situation

Thanh Phong Commune has a population of about 9252 in 2380 households with 4613 females. The average density is 6 persons/km². Most of people are of Kinh origin, coming from neighboring areas such as Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, and Ba Tri, who came and changed the wastelands into cultivated areas after settling there. Religious freedom is developed considerably, ranging from Buddhism, Catholicism and Cao Dai. Thanh Phong residents face many difficulties in their lives with the rate of poverty relatively high at 16.07 % in 2007 and 13.25% in 2008. The number of landless families accounts for about 10% of the commune’s total population.

Occupation creation

Many types of occupations have been vigorously developed in the commune, such as: fisheries mainly aquaculture (**Box 1**), agriculture (cultivation) and services. Specifically, the

Box 1. The fisheries and aquaculture potentials in Ben Tre Province

Aquaculture

The total area for aquaculture is about 2955.7 ha, in which 2558 ha is for intensive shrimp farming, 194 ha for extensive shrimp farming in mangrove forests, 50 ha for blood cockle culture. The remaining area, about 288 ha is divided between two cooperatives: Doan Ket Coop with 94 ha and Thanh Loc Coop with 159.7 ha for exploitation of the natural clam resource. About 80% of the population in Thanh Phong Commune is engaged in fisheries-related activities, 18% work in aquaculture and trade, and 5% in the service sector.

Fishing activities

The number of fishing vessels in the commune is about 68, engaging mainly in coastal fishing. Most of them use prohibited, destructive fishing gears and methods such as stow netting with very small mesh size, bottom trawling while some people use gill nets and traps. The output is unnoticed compared with the provincial overall productivity, but it is a main source of livelihood for the commune’s fishing households.

commune is naturally blessed with a clam seed ground in the coastal tidal flat. This clam ground could bring big income to the people (about VND 20 billion equivalent to about USD 1 million) if only it is properly managed and exploited.

Fisheries infrastructure and fishing gears

The road network in Thanh Phong Commune is seriously degraded, while a road to the clam ground is not present at all. Low-capacity fishing boats cannot go offshore for fishing while irresponsible coastal fishing gears bring about very low outputs and destructive impacts. Watch towers in clam grounds are not solid, while communication facilities (intercom) for rescue operation plans in case of emergencies (storms or acts of sabotage) are not present.

Low education level, a major obstacle to changing jobs, and applying science and technology

Majority of Thanh Phong residents have completed the primary or lower secondary school educational level,



Workshop on co-management in Thanh Phong Commune



Infrastructures in Thanh Phong Commune

although those with upper secondary qualifications are not many. Illiteracy rate is fairly high at 0.5%. This situation is a major limitation to the enhancement of professional knowledge, training and changing jobs. People with upper secondary education accounted for 15%, lower secondary 30%, and primary education 64.5%.

Conditions for Selecting Thanh Phong Commune

The selection of Thanh Phong Commune to develop a community-based co-management model is based on

Box 2. Criteria for the selection of areas where community-based co-management model could be adapted

- Poverty rate
- People's dependence on fisheries resources
- Destructiveness to fisheries resources
- The consensus between local government and fishers community
- The possibility of developing a new livelihood based on the local existing potential and partly assistance from external agents
- Besides other resources, a large amount of clam seed comes up every year in the commune. The local authorities are aware that it is a big revenue for the community and have established two cooperatives for management but with little efficiency. The main reason for this is poor management of cooperative staff and low awareness of the community on managing and protecting the resources.
- Resource ownership, legal resource use rights: Recently, the People's Committee of Ben Tre Province has granted the land use rights of the coastal tidal flat of 200 ha to the community for management.
- Knowledge of local resources: Most of the people and local government officials are aware that natural resources are depleting rapidly. Fishers' awareness of their job - depleting the fisheries resources- is unlawful. Their low awareness of protecting resources is due to the fact that their lives are dependent on the resources and a new livelihood is not created.
- Local fisheries resources include clam, shrimp, prawn, crabs, cockles and fishes. Every year these species come up with great quantity in estuaries and coastal area. They are less migratory and live together in schools.

various criteria as shown in **Box 2**. Through seminars and surveys conducted at the community, district and commune levels, authorities, groups and organizations, it was agreed to establish a co-management model in the residential community of Thanh Phong Commune.

However, most of the opinions suggest that during the initial stage the model would cover only two hamlets: Thanh Loc and Thanh Loi, considering the clam resource, the fishing fleets and many poor households. After several years the model could be expanded to cover some more hamlets in the commune. The surveys carried out by the commissioned consulting agencies and the local government units have



Bottom net with very narrow mesh size (top), tiny shrimps collected from bottom net (right),





traps being prepared for fishing

identified the core group which could be developed to participate in the management of the model.

The core group comprised those from the communal People's Committee staff, police, farmers and women union, border guards, leaders of fisheries cooperatives and fishing fleets, and fishers representatives. The core group should be trained to strengthen their capacities in planning, report writing, and production/business management, among others.

Need for Information and Assistance on Management

The Division of Fisheries Resources Protection and Inspection of the Agriculture and Rural Development of Ben Tre Province coordinates with the border guard posts to conduct regular patrol of the provincial marine waters upon request. The Vietnam Centre for Fisheries Services and Transfer of Technology has assisted in the adoption of the co-management model in Ben Tre under the Fisheries Sector Programme Support (FSPS) II of Denmark.

Fund Sourcing

Recently, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) also assisted Ben Tre Province in the implementation of the model through the conduct of training activities and surveys, as well as facilitating the organization of local institutions, among others. However, DANIDA does not have concrete assistance programs to develop new livelihoods for the community, especially supporting the poor families and fishers engaged in prohibited jobs, and destroying fisheries resources. Therefore, there is an urgent need for support from governmental/non-governmental organizations, academic and research institutions, and scientists in training, building/raising awareness, creating

jobs, and improving infrastructures for local economic development and management.

The Community-based Co-management Model in Thanh Phong Commune

There were some manifestations during the course of the preparation of the community-based co-management model in Thanh Phong Commune, which should be taken into consideration in any future action, such as:

- Thanh Phong has a high political stability, with the local government and community showing energetic participation.
- The community is authorized to use the fisheries resources.
- The lives of most fishers have been dependent on the resources, since majority of them are landless and without alternative source of income. However, the people in the community indicated that they would welcome other livelihoods such as cash crops cultivation, aquaculture, handicrafts making, and local product processing if such ventures are partially funded, and that they are provided with land for cultivation or opportunities for the introduction of new livelihood which should be suitable to the local conditions.
- The majority of local people are closely and timelessly bound to the fisheries resources. Outside fishing vessels from other localities rarely come to the area for fishing. All fishing practices are not in compliance with the law but there are no suitable measures to solve the problem.
- Local residents, government and organizations are in urgent need for support from academic and research institutions, and non-governmental organizations.
- From the results of the surveys and investigations, building of a co-management model in the commune is compatible with the local customs and laws.
- The possibility of building a co-management agency in the area is quite high.
- Thanh Phong co-management model is aimed at managing, protecting and using the local resources efficiently to ensure economic satisfaction for the community, help poor families raise their standards of living and eradicate poverty. The model developed is targeted towards local fisheries management in combination with conservation efforts of the mangrove forests and the introduction of other economic ventures such as ecotourism, handicrafts production utilizing the existing local potentials in the villages.

To sum up, during the course of putting up the co-management model into operation in Thanh Phong, the community, government officials of all levels and relevant agencies have reached a high consensus for the adaption of the model in the commune. The people in Thanh Phong

community strongly support the view of Pinkerton (2003) that: “Co-management is a misnomer unless it involves the right to participate in making decisions about how, when, where and how much fishing will occur” and the view of Jentoft *et al.* (2004) that: “Co-management is strengthened if it can draw on “social capital” embedded in social relations that form the community, because co-management is a team-work that requires mutual commitment, trust, loyalty, and empathy”. At the same time, the suggestions as well as conclusions from the consultants stated that the model is feasible and properly oriented. Such opinions pointed at the need to help the people of Thanh Phong in enhancing their capacities in protecting their fisheries resources, raising their incomes, improving their living standards and eradicating poverty. However, in order to successfully build the co-management model some conditions are needed for the immediate future, besides time and capacity. These include:

- More resources are needed to support the landless poor community since fishing households continue to destroy the fisheries resources, and for the jobless or those without stable employment to change their jobs or create new stable jobs for the community.
- Continued efforts are needed to raise the people’s awareness and knowledge on co-management.
- Efforts are needed to help the community develop their strengths, and existing potentials based on the local resources.
- Actions are needed to perfect the legal institutions, promote partnership among stakeholders in resources protection, create more jobs, stabilize market, and mainstream activities of the commune-level with the government and those urgent in the community. Assistance should be given to train community representatives in enhancing their capacities in management, planning, report preparation, and business operations.
- Active support from the state are also needed through the following activities: training in fish culture and tourism; granting land use rights and resources to the community; upgrading infrastructures and facilities including regional communication network, telecommunications systems, markets, etc.
- Scientific research projects are needed to treat and prevent incidence of clam/cockles diseases, transfer breeding technology for clam, shrimp and cockles, assess quality of the environment in clam and cockle farming, investigate and protect clam and cockle resources, etc.

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