



Empowering Women's Groups in Fisheries Project Development and Management: SEAFDEC Experience

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Guided by the policy framework on the need to enhance human resource capability at all levels and encourage greater involvement of stakeholders to achieve sustainable fisheries in the Southeast Asian region (SEAFDEC, 2001; SEAFDEC, 2003), SEAFDEC specifically incorporated in its projects on fisheries management and poverty alleviation the need to develop and enhance the capacity of women for the sustainable development of fisheries in the region. These include the Integrated Coastal Resources Management (ICRM) Project implemented in Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia; and the ASEAN Foundation funded project on the Promotion of "One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP)" in the ASEAN Region. This article reviews the roles and participation of the women's groups in the abovementioned projects that enabled them to establish alternative livelihoods to increase their household incomes.

In the fishing communities everywhere in Southeast Asia, women always complement the efforts of men. While the male household members are fishing offshore, the women had to fish on their own to provide food for their households while the male members are away. In the Southeast Asian region, it is usually common to catch a glimpse of women fishing in near-shore areas for low value fishes and collecting shellfishes such as mollusks, crustaceans and echinoderms as well as seaweeds that could be sold in local markets and also for their households' daily consumption. Specifically in

small-scale fishing communities, the women are responsible for various fisheries-related activities such as processing and marketing the catch as well as in mending and preparing the nets for the next fishing operations. Moreover, women are also deeply involved in the fast-pacing aquaculture activities, particularly in preparing the aquafeeds and feeding the fish as well as in harvesting and processing especially the shellfishes.

Side-by-side with all such fisheries-related activities, the women are also efficient in managing their households and looking after the welfare of their children, and in some cases even providing tutorial services for their own school children. Physically therefore, the contribution of women in fisheries is very obvious but this is not well-documented so that in principle the role of women in fisheries development is still not well recognized. This could also be due to the fact that in Southeast Asia, the society remains male-dominated where men are still considered as the household heads. As a result, women have little involvement in resource management activities even if the downstream fisheries activities are mostly done by women. This is compounded by the fact that most village heads are men, thus women are very rarely represented in activities related to the management of fishery resources.

Furthermore, in a male-dominated sector such as fisheries, there is the perception that women are physically weak

and thus are incapable of undergoing the physical rigors of fishing. Moreover, women have also been assumed to hold insufficient technical knowledge for the fast-developing fisheries technologies. In order to address the abovementioned concerns and value the role of women in the fisheries sector, the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) has always pushed for the empowerment of women's groups in fisheries development and management for food security, by mobilizing their stock of local knowledge not only in fish processing and marketing but in general management as well, and enhancing their participation in the various human resource development activities.

Involvement of Women's Groups in the Integrated Coastal Resources Management Project

The SEAFDEC Project on Integrated Coastal Resources Management (ICRM) was conducted from 2003 to 2009 in Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia in collaboration with the respective fisheries departments of the host countries with funding support from the Government of Japan Trust Fund Program. The main objectives of the ICRM project are to: establish sustainable coastal resources management at the local level, rehabilitate the coastal

fishery resources, and alleviate poverty in coastal fishing communities. As part of the objective of alleviating poverty in the fishing communities, promotion of local business ventures involving the women's groups was one activity of the ICRM project which was considered very vital since women in fishing communities are always accessible. The development of local business ventures in the ICRM project has given opportunities for the women to create alternative livelihoods in order to increase their households' incomes and achieve food security, and to reduce the fishing pressure by diversifying the occupation thereby, over-fishing could be alleviated.

The Women's Groups in ICRM-PD

Under the ICRM-PD (Pathew District) Project implemented in Pathew District, Chumphon Province, Thailand, hosted by the Chumphon Marine Fisheries Research and Development Center of the Department of Fisheries in Chumphon Province, the activity on the development of local business was aimed at increasing the fishers' income and creating job opportunities that could compensate for the fishers' decreasing income from being dependent on the degraded fishery resources. The development of value-added fishery products was an activity aimed at increasing the fishers' income and where the women played the major role, considering that the women in the ICRM-PD project had been active members of community-based savings and financing groups, and thus have easy access to some sources of micro-financing (SEAFDEC, 2007) for their business ventures. Thus, the activity focused on improving the skills and knowledge of the women's groups in fish processing, product development, and micro-financing.

The women's groups in the ICRM-PD were officially organized to facilitate the conduct of appropriate human resource development (HRD) activities to enable them to develop their production and management skills in cottage industries with special emphasis on the standardization and improvement of the quality of their products including packaging materials and design, and enhancement of their marketing promotions. For the sustainability of their business ventures and for the transparency of their business transactions, the groups were trained in good bookkeeping and accounting systems. Thus, the women's groups were able to learn not only the new techniques of improving their traditional products but also gained knowledge in management, accounting, planning and marketing, and eventually succeeded in increasing their incomes.

The Women's Groups in ICRM-PL

For the ICRM-PL (Palau Langkawi) project implemented in Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia and hosted by the Department of Fisheries Malaysia, establishment of local business ventures was conducted to create job opportunities for





Products of the women's group in ICRM-PD, for sale

the women in the community and enhance their active participation in community development. The women's group was formally organized and named as the KEW or *Kumpulan Ekonomi Wanita* (Women's Economic Group) of Kuala Teriang, Pulau Langkawi.

Under the ICRM-PL project, the women's group had been producing two main products, namely: *ikan bilis* (processed anchovy) and *maruku* (snack product). After training in bookkeeping, accounting systems and product development, recording and monitoring of their financial transactions had been enhanced, and the group also acquired improved techniques in factory management, which came very handy considering that their activity had been developed as a commercial business venture. From their improved product management, the group obtained the GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices) certificate in August 2008. Moreover, the performance of the KEW of Kuala Teriang was extremely highlighted as the first successful case in Malaysia and effort to disseminate similar activities in other KEW groups of the country had been proposed (SEAFDEC, 2008).

The Women's Groups in ICRM-SV

The ICRM-SV (Sihanouk ville) project implemented in Sihanoukville, Cambodia was hosted by the Fisheries Administration of Cambodia. Four women's groups were organized in the project site in Community Fisheries (CF)

Prey Nup II to pursue the promotion of the local business ventures. Since the members agreed to focus on mushroom production, they were trained on mushroom production techniques and during the commencement of their cottage-scale mushroom production the members were also trained in bookkeeping and accounting systems in order to ensure transparency of their financial transactions (SEAFDEC, 2010a).

From their mushroom production venture, the women's groups earned supplemental incomes for their families. Although at present their production is still in a cottage-scale, there is a potential to expand such venture further into commercial scale. The women's groups have established themselves into a business association type group called the "Mushroom Producers Group" under the CF Prey Nup II, with the groups' members as cooperators managing their operations in accordance with the provisions of the Internal Rule of the Group which the members themselves had established.

Another very notable activity of the women's group in ICRM-SV is the management of blood cockle *refugia* by the Blood Cockle Fishers Group (BCFG) which comprises all women members. The BCFG has developed the Self-Regulatory Measures for Blood Cockle Fishing in conjunction with the management of the *refugia* in Prey Nup II, Sihanoukville (Try *et al.*, 2010), and for the conservation of such important resource in the area.



The women's group in the ICRM-PL (top) and ICRM-SV (above) projects



Members of KEW preparing ingredients for *maruku*



Members of the Mushroom Producers Group under the ICRM-SV project

The Role of Women in the FOVOP Project

SEAFDEC implemented the 30-month project on the Promotion of “One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP)” System to Improve the Livelihood of the Fisheries Communities in the ASEAN Region from 2007 to 2010, which was financially supported by the ASEAN Foundation through the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund. One of the main objectives of the FOVOP Project was to enhance awareness on gender and development in the fisheries communities, especially clarifying the roles and

functions of women’s groups for the development of small-scale economic activities at the community level.

A special social process in the FOVOP initiative was the involvement of women’s groups and the youth in the institutional set-up of the fishers’ groups. One of the project’s recommendations was for government agencies to make use of the approach developed by SEAFDEC under the FOVOP project, especially in enabling the women’s groups to adopt ways and means in addressing sustainable fisheries development and contributing to poverty alleviation in fishing communities (Wongsanga and Vichitlekarn, 2010). Under the FOVOP initiative, women were empowered to enable them to make full use of their traditional knowledge in fish processing, thus, providing opportunities to shift their role towards economic development in the fishing communities.

From their major role of taking care of their families and helping their husbands in fishing, sorting fish or marketing fish, the FOVOP project has paved the way for women in the communities to be involved in more productive activities to increase their household incomes (Wongsanga and Sulit, 2010). Moreover, the Project also recommended that in order to support the promotion of FOVOP in the ASEAN countries, institutional set up could be promoted in terms of groups and organizations comprising the fishers as members, and that the capacity of the groups could be strengthened through institutional building by “initiating social preparation and gender responsive activities for FOVOP community leaders and members as well as the youth and elderly groups, in areas that include values formation, community organization, paralegal issues, and environmental awareness” (SEAFDEC, 2010b).

Case Studies on the Promotion of FOVOP in the ASEAN Region

Addressing the issue on gender and development in the HRD activities was part of the FOVOP project where more than 90% of the participants were women, and where there was a general consensus that women in fisheries community have the capability of performing the major role of developing the economies of the communities. The women’s traditional knowledge and skills on backyard fish processing was considered very useful not only in preserving fish food for household consumption, but also in generating income for their households. In addition, the FOVOP project also enhanced the women’s good common sense and potentials to manage business and finance.

For example, in Ban Donxaoudom Village, Keooudom District in Vientiane, Lao PDR, members of a women’s union initiated their monthly savings activity which had provided accessible source of loan with low interest rates



Members of the BCFG developing the appropriate sieve for the Self-regulatory Measures for Blood Cockle Fishing



Women representatives participating in the FOVOP case study in Lao PDR

for its members. Such experience stressed the usefulness of their savings and credit system which helped their members to depend less on fish middlemen. The key factors of the successful credit system were the members' participation in using the loan for improving their engagement capacity in fisheries as well as in complying with the debt repayments and other related regulations established by the members themselves.

In another development, the experiences of the Thai women's groups in handling the groups' business activities relevant to fish products processing, non-fisheries products and fish market and network, enabled the groups to accumulate funds which had been invested in the groups' intensified business activities. The groups also set up soft loan with low interest rates for its members to be able to have funds to meet their major household needs. The groups made it a practice to return incentives to members of good standing as well as profit refund at the end of the year. Such activity has emphasized the success of the Thai women's groups in empowering their groups' members to participate in the wise management of the groups' finances.

Way Forward

The ASEAN and SEAFDEC have always recognized the role of women in fisheries development and management as well as promoted the greater involvement of women in economic development in fishing communities. The Resolution and Plan of Action on Sustainable Fisheries for Food Security for the ASEAN Region which was adopted during the so-called Millennium Conference in November 2001, called for the ASEAN and SEAFDEC countries to: "Acknowledge the need for enhanced human resource capabilities at all levels and encourage greater involvement by stakeholders to facilitate consensus and compliance in achieving sustainable fisheries". It was towards this goal that the ICRM Project incorporated as one of its major

activities the promotion of local business ventures with the involvement of women's groups to enable the women to establish alternative livelihoods to increase their household incomes and thus, alleviate poverty in fishing communities.

The implementation of the 2001 Resolution and Plan of Action will undergo thorough assessment and revision during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Conference in June 2011 to consider the emerging issues that impede the sustainable development of fisheries in the ASEAN region. This would be an opportune time for the mainstreaming of gender and development in the policies and plans for sustainable fisheries for poverty alleviation and food security in the region.

Specifically, it has been envisioned that the new decade Resolution and Plan of Action which would be adopted during the aforementioned Conference in June 2011, could incorporate the need to: "Provide alternative/supplementary livelihoods to fishers and their communities through enhanced rural economy, alleviate poverty, and empower fishers to be actively engaged in long-term fisheries development and management processes by mobilizing the "One Village, One Fisheries Product (FOVOP) approach". Moreover, for the proposed Plan of Action, the need to "mainstream FOVOP initiative into national poverty alleviation program, mainstream FOVOP initiative into national fisheries policy and strategy for implementation in the ASEAN Countries, mainstream FOVOP initiative into regional policy and cooperation framework, and develop



Regional Supporting Program to support the promotion of FOVOP in the ASEAN Region” had been recommended. Similarly for the ICRM Project, it had been recommended that activities of the women’s groups should be supported by the governments’ concerned in order to improve their knowledge and skills in various fisheries technologies and finally, to enhance the role of women in the economic development of the fishing communities.

From the outcomes of the SEAFDEC projects that recognized the role of women in the economic development of the fishing communities, it has become necessary to promote the gender concept among the male members of the communities. The painstaking household work of women which could not be expressed in terms of monetary value unlike fishing operations could be the reason why men never appreciate the fact that women work harder than men. Therefore, educating the female members of the communities is vital towards the promotion of gender issue especially in the fishing communities.

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