

FROM ASIA/ Philippines

Fisherwomen as researchers

A research project proves to be a fascinating learning process

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After several years of preparatory awareness building and organizing work, fishing communities and the supporting NGO, Pipuli, decided that they were ready to take up the management of the 2279 hectares covering Danao Bay (Misamis Occidental in Northern Mindanao). By that time, every *barangay* (village) around the bay had a local fisher organization, which, besides addressing local needs, together formed a Resource Management Council (RMC), which is the officially recognized representative body of the fisher community to undertake the resource management of the Danao Bay. Various resource management initiatives had been organized, such as the establishment of a fish sanctuary, a ban period for fishing, a ban on destructive fishing methods such as dynamite and poison, and mangrove rehabilitation.

Until then, women had been practically invisible in the resource management initiatives. Women had participated in these initiatives, but mostly as supporters and not as initiators. There were no women in the leadership of the organization and women's special interests as resource users were practically not recognized, leave alone addressed. The NGO, while working with the communities, had already observed this gender-imbalance and had begun organizing work among the women. They had started with leadership training for women and gender sensitivity training for the local leaders and their wives. Women were encouraged not only to give voluntary support, but also to speak out their specific problems and needs in the resource management initiatives. This resulted in women coming forward in their roles of shellfish gleaners, fish-trap operators and mangrove harvesters.

Now, at the threshold of taking up the management of the Danao Bay, the leaders of the fisher organizations and the supporting NGO realized that until now, the resource management initiatives had never been assessed with the community. Plans had been made and projects designed mostly based on assumptions or on

the (technical) views of the NGO and also on the problems and needs of the most active members of the fisher organization. To be sure of a broadly-supported and effective management plan, they were in need of more insights about the resource users. They required more factual data about their socioeconomic background, their resource-use practices and dependency, and their perceptions about resource management. They also wanted to know what their experiences with the resource management initiatives and the fisher organization were so far.

In mid-1998, the leaders of the organization, some active fisherwomen, the supporting NGO, myself (research adviser) and a colleague (gender adviser), gathered to prepare the research, which we called the Resource Users Profile of the Danao Bay. We had decided to make it a community-based research, which is to be understood as involving the community in all stages of the research, from defining the research question, and collection of data, up to the final analysis. The approach is process-oriented and, therefore, needs time and intensive monitoring, but yields interesting insights and, moreover, it generally has an awareness-building and mobilizing effect on the community.

During the first session with this preparatory group, we organized a workshop where all could familiarize themselves through various exercises with what research is and how to define a research question. The formulation of the actual research question led to the first exciting discussion. It appeared that the leaders (men) had a rather limited definition of a resource user. In their eyes, resource users were first and foremost fish harvesters—who were mostly men—and that the data collection should focus on these. This implied that other resource users, such as shell gleaners, mangrove harvesters and those involved in pre- and post-harvest activities—all activities where women were to be found—would be left out from the research. The women participants were encouraged to give their views on who a resource user is and, after a lively discussion, the men indeed broadened their definition.

In order to collect solid baseline data, it was decided to choose the survey as research methodology. The formulation of the questionnaire showed again how important the involvement of the community leaders and women was. They pointed out issues, problems and views that would have been overlooked by the NGO, which had a different perspective. The women

were of great help in making the questionnaire gender-sensitive, meaning that the concerns of the women as resource users were addressed as well. The women also pointed out that the resources are not only valued commercially in the community, but also considered for their non-cash value, such as food for the family, and that they were also used as an exchange product. This preparatory phase of the research was already a fascinating learning process for all.

The next step was to select and train research volunteers in the community. It was decided that we would select only women research volunteers, because women were seen as more approachable and better listeners than men. After we made a profile of the research volunteer, the leaders of the organization and the NGO went to look around in the community. More than 29 curious and enthusiastic women of all ages came for our training session. Their motivation and commitment was great and this made them good learners. And we also learned a lot from them, because after they pre-tested the questionnaire, they gave us very valuable feedback that enabled us to make important improvements.

When the first batch of filled-in questionnaires came in, we found out that it was mostly men who had been interviewed, despite our instructions to interview in every household, both the husband and the wife. During our assessment meeting with the research volunteers, we were confronted with rather persistent gender biases, as they told us that women were just housewives and, therefore, did not need to be interviewed. They also said that many women did not want to be interviewed and had told them that it was sufficient to interview their husband only. We encouraged them to go back to the households and interview the women too.

When the preliminary processing of data showed that women were very much involved in resource use—it was even revealed that 21 per cent of the women respondents were actually engaged in fish capture—and that women's knowledge about the state of the resources and ideas about resource management were as good as that of men, the last barriers to interviewing women were finally taken away. So, again, we had an exciting step in the learning process.

As said earlier, community-based research also has an impact on the mobilization of the community. After

we had presented the initial findings to the community, not only did more people join the organization, but the organization also adjusted its strategy based on the feedback from the community. And moreover, many of the women research volunteers became activists, advocating the concerns of the women as well.