

Philippines

Empowering participation

The Community-based Coastal Resource Management Festival was a time to celebrate, reflect and ponder over strategies

The Community-based Coastal Resources Management (CBCRM) Festival was held between 2 and 4 June 2003 in Subic Bay, Zambales, Philippines. About 150 CBCRM practitioners, implementers, researchers and advocates from coastal communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic and research institutions, development organizations and government agencies in the Philippines and selected countries in East Asia, Europe and North America participated. The Festival critically analyzed the multifaceted achievements of CBCRM, while celebrating its gains, so as to learn lessons that will guide CBCRM practice into the future.

There was much to celebrate at the Festival, despite the fact that several fishers have been killed, while others remain in prison for conscientiously safeguarding their marine resources and apprehending illegal fishers.

The CBCRM movement could not have achieved this level of commitment but for a long and persistent process of interaction and collaboration among the coastal communities, NGOs, academics, scientists and funding agencies.

“Our involvement in CBCRM has not only changed our perspective about our fishery but it has continued to develop our views on the whole,” said Pedro Valparaiso at a creative panel discussion at the start of the festival.

“It was we women who moved first,” added Patricia Panaligan, chairperson of a local people’s organization (PO). “We decided to establish the fish sanctuaries and our men backed us up, assisting in demarcating it with buoys and bamboos.”

From the manner in which these fisherfolk spoke out at the festival, it was quite obvious that they were not only capable but also committed to the concept of CBCRM. This seemed to be the result of a dual process that has emerged as the crux of CBCRM, namely, a painstaking process of capacity-building of POS through very creative and genuine participatory rural appraisal (PRA), the motto being “participation that empowers, with equity as the guiding principal”.

This process that commenced in the Philippines more than a decade ago as an NGO initiative of partnership with coastal communities to build local, democratic organizations to conserve resources for sustainable livelihoods, gained legitimacy with the enactment of the new Fisheries Code in 1998. The Code delineated 15 km of the inshore waters as municipal waters, beyond which the ‘commercial’ fishers could operate. This Code also made mandatory the creation of Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Councils (FARMCS) at the local municipal level, based on the principles of co-management. The local governments could thereby enact suitable ordinances to apply the Code. But, as we all know, mere enactment of ordinances, even when they are very progressive, do not make them automatically applicable, unless there are active POS at the base. Sensing a top-down and manipulative approach, several of the earlier operative CBCRM groups were reluctant to get integrated into this initial process.

Budget allocation

While the dominant trend of the discussion during the Festival was that the POS should engage the government and the mainstream CBCRM process so that budget allotments could be made to carry the process ahead, one could not but be

impressed by the reports of the POs on how they collectively made their management plans, demarcated their sanctuaries, engaged in the regeneration of the mangroves, apprehended illegal fishers, developed paralegal skills, and created systems to sustain their efforts through contributing a percentage of their incomes for the labour of the fish wardens.

The CBCRM groups that create their own constitutions take on the responsibility of not only conserving the resources but also developing ways of transforming these efforts into means of livelihood. Several of them launch better fish marketing networks, make value-added products, diversify income generation and even create co-operatives and credit mechanisms for their members. In fact, an external evaluation conducted of the Oxfam-supported efforts notes how overburdened these POs are, taking on the responsibility of conserving, nurturing and policing the fish habitats as also the livelihood alternatives in the communities, even as most of the members of the POs struggle to make ends meet in their households.

Coming from India, which has a long contiguous coastline, I could not but appreciate how the geophysical formation of this island nation of the Philippines lends itself to such a programme of micro-ecosystem management. In a way,

the cultural context of the Philippines, which is far less hierarchical than in India, is more cohesive and defining, and the community does not seem to be as complex as it is in India. Certainly, there could be no absence of conflicting interests, but, I guess, the groups that were present at the Festival came from areas where the chief conflicts arose mainly between the legal and illegal fishers, and not with other contenders for the coastal resource.

The CBCRM movement also struck me as being a very feminist concept in fisheries, where life and livelihood are put centre stage, and caring and nurture become the responsibility of men as well in the public domain.

Similar strides have to be made in the private domain, although I did meet a couple of women who said they felt very supported by their husbands who now also take responsibility in household chores as they are required to be out in the community handling their responsibilities.

Reviewing challenges

True to the spirit of learning fostered at the Festival, there was also time for critical assessment and reviewing the challenges for the future. One of these was the need to widen the concept of management beyond the micro-ecosystem, which now focuses mainly on habitat conservation, to

creating alliances with other resource users in the watershed.

Several warnings were flagged regarding:

- the implications of communities demanding tenurial rights that will deny use by others;
- the ability of the POSs to remain democratic so that 'empowerment' does not result in domination;
- the need to continue to strengthen support mechanisms as the NGOs withdraw and the POSs come of age;
- establishing sustainable mechanisms within the POSs that are transparent and accountable;
- creating an enabling policy environment so that the processes of co-management remain democratic;
- transforming the gains into tangible livelihood inputs; and
- further addressing the threats of globalization vis-à-vis markets and other terrestrial rights.

The challenge is to remain eternally vigilant.

It was indeed striking to hear people echo that CBCRM is not merely a management strategy but a way of life. Committed as they are to a process, it is also a challenge to the NGOs to practise what they preach to the POSs, thereby making resource management a way of life and fostering communities of practice wherever they are. For the seven or so POSs that collaborated in organizing the Festival, this is not a distant dream as they successfully managed to transcend differences among themselves and generate a creative atmosphere with tremendous energy.

This Festival was the third in a series of such celebrations, a way of collaborative learning, storytelling and documenting. In the words of Elmer Ferrer *et al*, "This process of learning and the relationships

between people that are established as a result of this process, generates social energy that advances and sustains the CBCRM process. Social energy becomes manifest when individuals and groups work together to achieve common aspirations."

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