Building Resilience or Transformation?

In the wake of discussions at the Bangkok meets on global small-scale fisheries, it is now time to map out the trajectory of a human-rights approach to small-scale fisheries

Inside the exhibition centre near the entrance to the venue of the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries (4SSF) held in Bangkok in October 2008, was a poster of an old, extremely thin woman, sitting alone on a wooden craft with a net in her hands. The poster's message was aimed at increasing the productivity and resilience of small-scale fisheries.

The juxtaposition of the image and the message felt strangely discordant to me, having just attended the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop, prior to the official 4SSF conference, where I had listened to stories from fishworkers and their supporters describing the current climate in which small-scale fishers operate globally, and the daily violations of their dignity and rights, particularly those of women.

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The word 'resilience' was used by several speakers at the 4SSF conference, from the opening evening to the closing session. Small-scale fishers were urged to become resilient in the face of the global financial crisis, even as their past resilience in adapting to difficult conditions was praised. My own discomfort with the term comes from the difficulty I have had as a researcher in South Africa in trying to find a methodology that translates, to the fishers with whom I work, the analytical usefulness of the term in describing ecological systems and their processes. Added to this was the need to transform the systems of political and economic privilege we experience, in which 'risks' and 'vulnerabilities' are invariably 'violations'.

The increasing use of the term 'resilience' in fisheries management literature reflects the growing application of a socio-ecological approach to natural resource management that has permeated a very wide range of both natural and social science disciplines, as is evident from the extensive literature on the subject. The vast proportion of this work attempts to further extend and refine the application of this 'resilience' approach in various contexts. The concept has been most often applied to disaster management, and a plethora of publications have appeared in the past two years with 'resilience' in their titles, aimed at building communities' resilience to natural disasters.

From a fisheries management perspective, useful interventions have been made to extend understanding of the impacts of human agency on system interactions, and the importance of examining systemic change in terms of multiple scales, as well as the need to locate any inquiry within the context of 'change for what and for whom?'.

Long-standing critique

While there is a very extensive and long-standing critique of systems theory in general, there is surprisingly little

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debate within fisheries management literature on whether or not this socio-ecological approach adequately accommodates the multiple expressions of human agency and power that shape fisheries systems. In the current context of small-scale fisheries, does the application of this approach capture sufficiently the dominance of the neoliberal market system, and stimulate opportunities for 'transformative circumstances'? Does it accommodate the most distinguishing feature of our human systems in the context of the discussions at the Bangkok meets—our moral and ethical capacities to determine the boundaries of 'responsible fisheries' and the power relations within which our choices are embedded?

The increased use of the term 'resilience' and the paradigm it connotes is perhaps most strongly reflected in the July 2008 report on world resources, entitled "Roots of Resilience: Growing the Wealth of the Poor", a joint project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank and the World Resources Institute (WRI).

The report (hereafter called the WRI report) states its thesis as "successfully scaling up environmental income for the poor", which requires three elements: (a) ownership over the natural resources that they use; (b) capacity for development, which is defined as "the capacity of local communities to manage ecosystems competently, carry out ecosystem-based enterprises, and distribute the income from these enterprises fairly"; and (c) connection, which is described as "establishing adaptive networks that connect and nurture nature-based enterprises, giving them the ability to adapt, learn, link to markets, and mature into businesses that can sustain themselves and enter the economic mainstream".

The WRI report locates 'resilience' at the heart of this approach: "They also acquire greater resilience. It is the new capacities that community members gain—how to build functional and inclusive institutions, how to undertake community-based projects, and how to conduct a successful business—that give rise to greater social and economic resilience. It is the insight that ecosystems are valuable assets that can be owned and managed for sustained benefits that builds the foundation of ecological resilience. Together, these three dimensions of resilience support the kind of rural development whose benefits persist in the face of challenge."

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Resilience is defined as "the capacity of a system to tolerate shocks or disturbances and recover". The WRI report argues strongly that rural communities are facing increasing challenges: it posits climate change as one of the most serious challenges, while also citing population growth, "the disruption of traditional systems of land tenure, depressed and volatile prices for agricultural commodities, and armed conflict" as "serious sources of vulnerability" for these communities, and that "the ability to adapt to (them) would be crucial to the survival of rural communities".

At the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop at Bangkok as well as

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A scene from the fishing village of Kasaba, Kerala, India.
There is need to adopt a human-rights approach to small-scale fisheries

at the official 4SSF Conference, the need to adopt a human-rights approach to small-scale fisheries predominated discussions. In the preparatory processes facilitated by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), Federation of Southern Fisherfolk (FSF) and the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), this issue was also strongly articulated. The keynote papers by Chandrika Sharma and Edward Allison captured these sentiments strongly. Sharma stressed that the human-rights approach was not a question of choice, but was mandatory: It is not "a means to an end but an end in itself". The Statements adopted at all the preparatory processes, including the Civil Society Statement presented at Bangkok, emphasize the centrality of a human-rights approach to fisheries and coastal resource management.

In South Africa, their own 'resilience' has been the biggest obstacle for artisanal and small-scale fishers...

How is it possible then that there is such disparity between these processes and the WRI report, which represents the current collective thinking of the key international institutions dealing with the protection, promotion and financing of natural resource management? The WRI report does not mention 'human rights' even once in its entire 200 pages. What it does do is explain very clearly the paradigm behind the poster of the vulnerable, elderly small-scale fisherwoman displayed at the Bangkok conference. It does so by developing a very strong, apparently seamless, argument for an economic-efficiency approach to the access to, and use and governance of, natural resources, including many examples from small-scale fisheries around the world. The WRI report is based on the premise that poverty must be addressed through enabling rural communities to use natural resources more "productively and sustainably". The aim is ultimately "to enter the economic mainstream". Building ecological, social and economic resilience is a means to achieving this.

The WRI report demonstrates most visibly how concepts and terminology are embedded in the social and economic relations within which they are used. "Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM)" with "tenure security rights", "capacities" and "networks" are the tools that will be used. Participation and empowerment are instrumental, motivated primarily by expedience; they facilitate processes, reduce conflicts, and thereby promote sustainability and fast-forward the process of "scaling up local enterprises". The benefits are described in monetary terms: "currency"; "resilience dividends"; "incentives"; and (to) "overcome current deficits". The report notes that "incentive is born of self-interest" and hence governments must create the incentives for enterprise development. Sustainability makes good monetary sense, it would appear.

The WRI report never questions the legitimacy of the model of the global economy, industrial expansion or the system of capitalism upon which these are based. The need to adapt and become resilient to the impacts of climate change is explored with no reference to the 'drivers' of climate change. Reference is made only to the broader global community through the fact that political and social instability will arise if the poor cannot adapt to the challenges of poverty and climate change, which is "of increasing concern to the international community".

Useful examples

The WRI report highlights best practices in CBNRM in building "capacities" and "networks", and focuses on useful examples of success, but fleeting attention is paid to real issues of conflict or difference. The report is particularly patronizing in its assumption that until now, rural communities have not had local-level customary practices that have managed resources sustainably for generations, or social networks that have served the functions of the social capital that is now envisaged. Instead, it is suggested that it will be "the new capacities that they gain that will give rise to greater resilience".

The WRI report notes briefly—in a small boxed insert—that equity is an important consideration, but fails to draw the logical conclusions. There is no suggestion that the fundamentally unequal and exploitative relations that underpin the current global economy should be changed or questioned. Even the notion of an ethic of care, and the need for a nurturing approach, most strongly voiced by feminists from developing countries, has been appropriated and is asserted as the need to develop a "nurturing natural enterprise".

How is it possible that the reality that I have heard described by fishers is so different? Consider these examples: tourism initiatives blocking fishers' access to traditional landing sites in Tanzania; ecotourism 'opportunities' in South Africa, where the traditional communities did not know that they owned 60 per cent of the tourist lodges; marine protected areas (MPAs) in Indonesia that have excluded fishers dependent on resources such as water for their basic survival...

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WHY MUST ARTISANAL FISHERS BE BEGGARS
Paternoster
Langebaan
CORRUPT OFFICIALS IN
AN UNJUST POLICY MAKES CRIMINALS OF US

South African fishers, along with allied workers, marching at Cape Town to fight for their rights to the sea

In South Africa, their own 'resilience' has been the biggest obstacle for artisanal and small-scale fishers, evidenced by the fact that nearly 15 years after the death of apartheid and the introduction of democracy, in a country with one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, small-scale fishers still do not have access to their traditional fishing grounds, and are being squeezed out by the industrial fishing sector. Women have indeed been 'resilient': they have been like shock absorbers in their communities, adapting to the vagaries of the apartheid capital that set up the industrial fishing enterprises in their towns, drew them as seasonal labour into the lobster export processing industry and then, more recently, spat them out when consumer demand in the North shifted towards live lobsters. The women have been resilient in the face of the individual quota system, which failed to allocate fishing rights to their male partners, dividing their communities, destroying their social capital, and introducing privatized, individual notions of 'rights'.

There has lately been much talk of the "death of capitalism" but, as Lenin predicted, capitalism has proved to be very resilient, in particular, global capital. It has a way of reinventing and mutating into increasingly insidious forms, and finding new markets and labour supplies. Is this the new approach to the rural poor who are dependent on natural resources? The WRI report appears to be a 'pro-poor' approach to building the wealth of the poor so that they can fund poverty alleviation, and cope with the fallout of industrial capitalism. Yes, the WRI

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A mussel harvester from Eastern Cape, South Africa.
The world over, fishers are seeking a new ethic that prizes human dignity

report is correct: small-scale fishers want ownership; they want to build social capital and practise CBNRM; they want to reduce poverty, and scale up; and they want to engage in the broader markets. But this will not happen on the scale envisaged if the systemic obstacles are not engaged with, and challenged. And, as we heard repeatedly at the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop at Bangkok, fishers want to engage with a transformed market, one which is based on a different ethic, on a system that prioritizes the human dignity and collective responsibility of all to secure the well-being of the community.

The challenge for us, post-Bangkok, appears to be the need to explore what this trajectory of a human-rights approach would look like from the perspective of implementation and action. We know that much of the language of human rights is already present in a wide range of international and regional instruments, including fisheries instruments and commitments. Many of the methodologies and tools that we are now using to assess our fisheries systems contain the potential to identify the systemic challenges and threats to the human-rights approach. But we now need to take this a step further and develop an integrated approach to strategies for intervention that we must activate to ensure that these commitments are realized. Fishworkers and fishing and coastal communities need to lead a process of mapping out this approach, being aware of the danger that it has already been pre-empted by opportunistic global governance, financial and technical aid institutions that are already using the language of a human-rights approach in their interventions.

As we have heard from many of the speakers at both the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop and the 4SSF Conference in Bangkok, a human-rights approach will, of necessity, require a more transdisciplinary approach that will link small-scale fisheries management and implementation with a wide range of other sectors and institutions. New forms of alliances among fishworkers, their supporters and activists in other sectors will be necessary, as will a fundamentally altered approach from the State and other fisheries management institutions towards their 'stakeholders'. We need to identify the mechanisms that must be put in place to expand fisheries management mandates to the interstices of this integrated approach.

Most critically, it appears to me that, as individual fishworkers, activists, researchers, academics or fisheries managers, we need to find ways to strengthen this 'reflexive' capacity of human systems that the resilience literature highlights, and individually and collectively create the pathways towards a radically transformed system and a new set of socio-ecological relations for using, producing, consuming and sustaining our fisheries resources.

For more

www.resalliance.org/
Resilience Alliance

pdf.wri.org/world_resources_2008_roots_of_resilience.pdf
World Resources 2008: Roots of Resilience - Growing the Wealth of the Poor

http://www.worldfishcenter.org/v2/ourwork-ssf.html
Productive and resilient small-scale fisheries: WorldFish Centre