

## Co-management

# No magic bullet

**This piece discusses whether co-management is the solution to poverty alleviation in fisheries**

In a 2004 report, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) stated that one-quarter of the world's fish resources are overexploited or depleted, and that this fraction has been increasing steadily since the mid 1970s. In another document, FAO estimates that there are about 150 mn people living in households that are primarily dependent on small-scale fisheries and that, among them, about 23 mn have an income lower than US\$1 per day. Globally, therefore, the world's fisheries are confronted with a problem of both ecology and poverty that has enormous proportions and that should give us cause for worry as well as action.

However, the question that immediately comes to mind is: Could there be a connection between these two phenomena? Is overfishing to be blamed for the poverty problem? Would we then automatically solve the latter if we solved the former? If so, the challenge would be easier to handle, as we would have one, rather than two things, to concentrate on.

Perhaps, though, the situation is the reverse: Poverty drives overfishing. Poor people cannot afford to show restraint; they have to put food on the table every day. If this is the case, we would need to address the poverty problem independently of, and prior to, the overfishing problem. If not, we risk exacerbating the poverty problem, at least in the short run, and poor people would pay the highest price. But maybe the two problems are unrelated. Fishing people are poor not because of overfishing but for entirely different reasons. For instance, they are deprived because they happen to live in countries that are poor, because nobody cares about them, or because richer and more powerful people take advantage of them.

I assume that most readers would nod in the affirmative to all these factors. Indeed, poverty is a complex phenomenon. It has many reasons, and is both the cause and effect of resource and environmental problems. Small-scale fishing people are poor for the same reasons that other people are poor, but they have some additional factors to cope with. Consequently, in order to alleviate poverty in fisheries-dependent communities, it is necessary to secure the resource base that poor people live on, but this will not be sufficient. Poverty must be confronted more broadly. The question of whether co-management is the solution to poverty alleviation in fisheries is, therefore, easy to answer: Co-management will hardly eliminate poverty in fisheries-dependent communities. Co-management is no magic bullet; much more is needed.

The question, however, should be rephrased: Will co-management make a difference? Will it be a contribution? I think the answer must be: Maybe, it all depends on how co-management is designed. First, one must make co-management work as a tool, which is a challenging task in itself. Co-management is a demanding project. Much can go wrong, and experience shows that success is not guaranteed. And if one should succeed, there is no guarantee that co-management would benefit poor people. For this to happen, co-management must be designed with poor peoples' interests in mind. But how does one do this?

**Broad participation**

Co-management is a way of ensuring broad participation from user-groups and stakeholders who, together with government, knowledge and interest organizations, form a kind of

public-private partnership where resources are pooled, responsibilities shared, and actions co-ordinated.

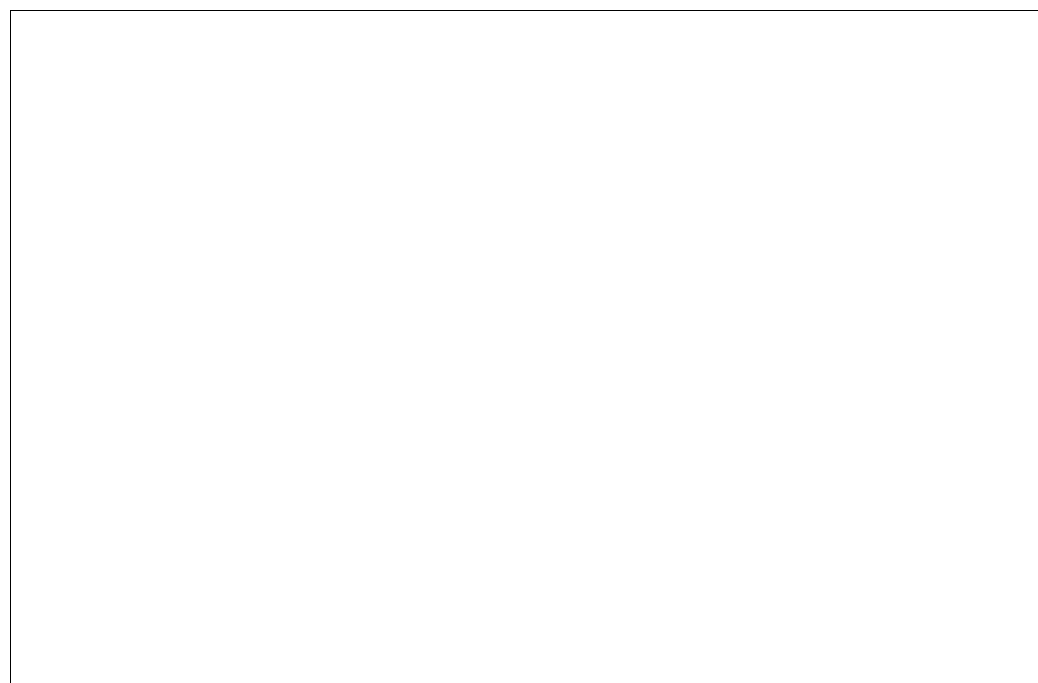
Such partnerships can assume different organizational forms. There are no specific formulae, only some organizational principles to build on. Co-management is now gaining popularity in many parts of the world, partly for the reason that it is seen as a tool in fighting poverty in fisheries communities. In the FAO note referred to above, it is stated: “Pro-poor strategies that include rights-based approaches, co-management regimes and fishing capacity reduction are essential to increased wealth from small-scale fisheries for poor communities.” This quote clearly demonstrates the relevance of the question whether co-management is the solution to poverty alleviation in fisheries. The answer, I would argue, is not necessarily in the affirmative.

With regard to co-management, the problem with poor people is not that they are materially poor but that they are politically poor. They lack the social and cultural capital needed to function effectively and competently in decision-making processes. Co-management involves formal procedures. It requires stakeholders to be able to understand written documents, and for that, they need to be literate. If not, they are vulnerable and easy to

manipulate. Co-management also builds on the principle of ‘communicative rationality’ to borrow a concept from the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas—where stakeholders talk to each other and try to strike some consensus or compromise. For that, they would need to understand what other stakeholders and experts say, and be able to argue well for their own views and interests. Furthermore, even if poor people are many, and thus potentially represent a powerful force, they are typically not well organized. They do not have anyone to represent them or to speak for them. They are, in other words, ‘disempowered’, incapable of exercising their potential power because it requires collective action and discursive power. Poor fishers are much like the French smallholding peasants that Marx talked about in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: As a social class they are nothing more than an “accretion, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.” They do not form an integrated whole, a united social class with a common identity and consciousness, capable of acting “in corpore”.

#### **Empowerment**

If this comparison is valid, small-scale fishing people are not only poor because they overfish but because they are unable to break the chains that hold them back. As a consequence, co-management must also involve empowerment and the



redistribution of power which are not entirely synonymous terms.

**I**f not, the danger is that co-management may lead to more disempowerment and, thus, to more deprivation, since there is every reason to expect that already wealthy and powerful people know how to make co-management work in their own interest. But even with a deliberate poverty profile, the question remains: Is co-management sufficient? Is empowerment only an organizational issue?

My most intense confrontation with poverty is with the Rama Indians on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua where for, the last six years, I have been involved in a collaborative project with one of the local universities. Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in that region, and the Rama people figure at the bottom end of Nicaragua's poverty scale. The Ramas are not only economically poor, they are poor in almost every sense of the term: they are about to lose their land and their natural resources; their traditional indigenous language is almost extinct, which makes them lose their identity and self-esteem; their communities are ridden with internal conflict; and they are in desperate need of a more professional leadership, skilful at voicing their concerns and representing their interests nationally and internationally. Thus, the conclusion

is obvious: Poverty alleviation among the Ramas must have an economic component. They definitely need more food security, and fish has traditionally been a staple diet and it is also a source of income. But they need more than that. In their case, poverty alleviation must also involve social, cultural and legal dimensions. The Ramas need help building their communities; they must have their communal land and resource rights secured; and they need assistance in revitalizing their culture and strengthening their formal competency. All these things are related; they are about empowerment; and if you should succeed with one, it will be easier to succeed with the other. One thing should not be forgotten though: The Ramas have had lots of international donors sympathetic to their situation, and who have visited their communities. But after they leave, things soon return to how they were. Over the years, the Ramas have developed into a dependent culture of sorts; instead of initiating development themselves, they passively wait for the next donor to appear. They have thus ended up in a vicious cycle that has left them increasingly disempowered.

#### **Broad reform**

The example of the Rama people serves to illustrate that poverty alleviation requires broad social reform and not just some technical fixes such as co-management. Co-management offers no direct solution

to the poverty problem. Co-management scarcely offers even a solution to the problem of overfishing since it is primarily about how to make decisions—and not what decision to make. At best, co-management offers a partial solution to a problem that is a part of a bigger problem. Co-management may lead to empowerment if it is designed to redistribute power, address issues of equity, and stimulate participation and learning. This is a necessary condition for sustainable fisheries management, which is an essential but not complete condition for alleviating poverty in small-scale fisheries. But poor people must be allowed in; management cannot make them more dependent and, thus, turn them into passive clients. Instead, poor people must obtain control and real participation in the decision-making process, or else there is a danger of co-management making them even more marginalized. ♣

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