

Fishy Aid

In the murky world of fisheries aid it is imperative to improve democratic accountability and overcome the fallacy of ‘partnerships’

Lack of transparency and efficiency of development aid have become a cause for concern among small-scale fishers in West Africa and in other parts of the world. How much is being spent in countries, by whom, for what purposes, and what has been the impact on small-scale fisheries? This interest in aid is being influenced by regular announcements of new large-scale aid projects, often with small-scale fisheries as one of the beneficiaries.

For example, the World Bank recently launched the Global Partnership for Oceans (GPO). The initial press releases suggested the GPO, through government and private-sector contributions, aimed to amass US\$1.5 bn over five years to help finance fisheries and marine projects. It is one of many examples where, in times of public austerity, public aid is being supplemented by and ‘blended’ with private investments.

Aid clearly matters in shaping fisheries management and reform. Many donors claim that their aid projects successfully advance the interests of small-scale fisheries, food security and sustainable fisheries. Yet, the small amount of independent research on fisheries aid contradicts these optimistic self-appraisals. The World Bank—the largest donor for fisheries in Africa—published a study in 2010 that describes the legacy of aid to the fisheries sector in Africa as dismal, an important study that promoted the World Bank’s wealth-based approach as an alternative.

Other studies have highlighted that the governments of distant-water fishing nations, including Japan, Spain, China and Russia, as well as the European Union (EU) all have used aid

strategically for the interest of their firms, including making aid payments conditional on fisheries access. Funding for governance reforms to support small-scale fisheries, such as community-based co-management, has had widely varying outcomes, and has not always worked in the best interests of fishers themselves. Added to this is the concern that aid itself can have a corrupting influence on government and civil-society behavior, cushioning underperforming departments from outside criticism and fostering what is often referred to as the ‘per diem culture’—an important obstacle to grass-roots

Aid clearly matters in shaping fisheries management and reform.

movements and civic participation in aid-dependent countries.

The focus of this article is less on what the impact of aid is—which, of course, is not simply bad, as some may hold—but, rather, on how it is done. This is one of the primary complaints heard by some small-scale fisheries organizations—that they are not being adequately informed or consulted about fisheries projects in their countries, including the ones that are supposed to be benefiting them.

Improving accountability

While there are vital debates on the purpose and ideological framing of aid, improving accountability in aid also needs to be seen as part of international efforts to support

*This article has been written by **Andre Standing** (andre.standing@transparentsea.co) of *Transparent Sea**

sustainable and equitable fisheries reforms.

The Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA), a non-governmental organization (NGO), has recently published an aid database for fisheries in Africa, predominantly based on information on Official Development Assistance (ODA) published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and supplemented with other sources.

It contains over 3,300 projects in Sub-Saharan Africa over nearly five decades from the 1970s up to 2012. The total declared budgets of these projects is US\$6,017,051,504, which represents the value of projects when started. To understand the relative worth of aid over time, the OECD has developed an equation referred to as the “DAC deflator”. Using this and choosing the dollar value for 2011 as the constant, the total value of aid projects in the database is US\$9,880,342,634.

This database is intended to give an insight into the various projects and spending in countries and regions. But it is not a reliable source

Although it has not been prominent in fisheries debates, improving democratic accountability has become central to international efforts to reform aid since the late 1990s.

of information on the total spending and activities of donors. Reporting by some donors is inconsistent. For example, the EU has, for some years (and only for some countries), reported payments for fisheries-access agreements as ODA.

There are also many important sources of aid to the fisheries sector, such as from China and Russia, that do not share information with the OECD or with anyone else. There is also very limited public information on private flows of aid through international NGOs (INGOs) and philanthropic donors, which would add considerably to the picture. Added to this is the fact that many of the largest fisheries

projects in Africa have been part of multi-sector projects, classified in the OECD database as funding for agriculture or the environment. Where possible, CFFA has extracted amounts for fisheries from these bigger projects, but this is only possible for some.

There are many other challenges to researching aid flows. Although the CFFA database gives a useful indicative insight, much more needs to be done to get a more complete picture. This would then allow further analysis, including on how much is going to different sectors and purposes.

Although it has not been prominent in fisheries debates, improving democratic accountability has become central to international efforts to reform aid since the late 1990s, and reflected more recently in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008, and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation in 2011. There has been a tremendous growth in critical reflection and monitoring of donor performance. This has yielded some improvements, but has also highlighted the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality.

There has also been a deepening of discussions on what accountability means and how it can be achieved. The Paris Declaration, for instance, identified the importance of ‘national ownership’ of aid programmes, intended to ensure that governments of developing countries could choose what was important to fund, and to protect them from the practice of donors making aid conditional. Criticisms of national ownership led to the inclusion of civil society as important stakeholders in the Busan Partnership declaration, and a more common reference now to ‘democratic ownership’—the meaningful inclusion and empowerment of affected and vulnerable populations, not just government partners.

Democratic ownership

The concept of democratic ownership in fisheries aid is important to consider. Many development agencies in fisheries have a questionable

approach. There are important exceptions. Developing the guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), demonstrated a great deal of participation and serious efforts made to include the views of small-scale fisheries. But this is hardly the norm.

Japan, the largest bi-lateral donor for fisheries in Africa, reports its spending on fisheries aid projects to the OECD, but without any further information or documentation. Information on Chinese and Russian investments and payments to host countries is extremely limited. The Publish What You Fund 'Aid Transparency Index' ranks many of the most important donors in the fisheries sector, including Japan, Spain and Norway, quite poorly. Other studies have revealed quite dire levels of transparency among UN agencies.

Co-ordination between donors in fisheries is also weak. Some European donors have established an informal working group among their fisheries advisers, but this has yet to produce anything for public reading or input. There seems little that the main fisheries donors, including Japan, the African Development Bank Group, UN agencies and the World Bank, do to avoid duplication or to improve coherence among their projects. Moreover, few African governments have developed a national strategy for fisheries reform that could act as a guide and point for public debate for determining how development assistance is used and how to measure success.

The process through which many aid projects are conceived, what is decided as countries' priorities, and how projects should be designed is, therefore, murky. Donors and host governments are too often operating through ad hoc and largely internal processes, based on the preferences of those that hold senior positions or on the influence of favoured advisors. INGOs, in particular, are becoming a more contentious source of this influence. Those that are better



A fishwoman at the Gabon fish market. A World Bank study describes the legacy of aid to the fisheries sector in Africa as dismal

resourced and more proficient at writing proposals or meeting with donors get to influence where aid goes. This influence has become more pronounced over the past decade, often to the detriment of grass-roots activism.

The problem of democratic ownership is possibly solved by the move towards a partnership model in aid initiatives. But this has also been subject to criticism. Partnerships tend to be arbitrary, with those establishing and funding them deciding on who joins, and who does not.

There are several examples in fisheries, including the EU's Fisheries Partnership Agreements and the African Partnership for Fisheries, the latter originally funded by the United Kingdom (UK) with the aim of creating an African voice on fisheries reform.

Potentially, the GPO is most significant now, an ambitious attempt to bring together divergent interests to direct aid to fisheries and marine conservation.

Vague declaration

But it has still been subject to the criticism that a small number of people have crafted its objectives, and smaller organizations wanting to join have to endorse its vague declaration, which makes reference to a contentious 'wealth-based approach' to reform fisheries governance. Small-

scale fishers were not proactively engaged in the process of developing the purpose of the GPO, and they are not represented in the initiative's steering committee, the Blue Ribbon Panel, which contains representatives of the oil industry, industrial fishing and fish-trading companies, marine scientists and global environmental groups.

...methodological limitations of evaluations, as well as time constraints, render evaluation reports rather limited sources of information...

Aid partnerships, therefore, often struggle to achieve equality in power. Less powerful groups can partner up in the hope of accessing funding; those that choose not to join risk, being branded trouble makers, are less likely to gain funding or invites to 'stakeholder meetings'. Thus aid partnerships can become mechanisms for co-option and exclusion as opposed to fostering democratic representation.

In 2008, FAO commissioned a study on the quality of evaluations on aid projects in the fisheries sector. This revealed serious shortfalls and argued that the poor quality of evaluations was an important reason why ineffective and potentially harmful aid practices are perpetuated.

For many aid projects, publicly available evaluations do not exist. Where donors do publish external evaluations, various factors work to undermine their usefulness. Evaluations, particularly at the mid-point, may be approached carefully, knowing that negative observations may generate political tensions and threaten the remainder of the project's implementation.

External evaluations are generally regarded as more reliable than internal ones, but they are also vulnerable to bias. Donors almost always choose who does the evaluation for their project, which is important given their interests in having a good one.

Moreover, consultants being employed by donors may want to please them with a positive evaluation, increasing the likelihood of repeat business. There are also risks of conflicts of interests, amplified in fisheries because the pool of available fisheries experts is relatively small. The same groups of people tend to straddle multiple roles as advisers to donors, evaluators of donor projects and also implementers or recipients of development aid through NGOs or consulting firms, or both. Beneficiaries are rarely properly consulted.

Some project evaluations are better than others. Evaluations also remain good entry points for a wider discussion on aid effectiveness. They, therefore, need to be actively shared and made as accessible as possible, including being published in local languages, which, typically, they are not.

Evaluations tend to be aimed at the donor, not the wider public. This, arguably, shows that the evaluations are designed to provide upwards accountability to the donors, rather than downwards accountability to the beneficiaries.

Further methodological limitations of evaluations, as well as time constraints, render evaluation reports rather limited sources of information for understanding the impact of aid. Indeed, in-depth evaluations that take a longer time frame are rare. Evaluating a project just after it is completed provides a narrow understanding of its impact, better understood several years after the project has ended.

Beyond commissioned evaluations, accountability in aid projects may be achieved in other ways. It may be hoped, for instance, that projects that fail or cause negative impacts will face criticism from NGOs or civil society, including fishers, journalists, academics and so forth.

Major shortfalls

Unfortunately, here again experience shows major shortfalls in the reality of donor practices, because for many agencies there are no obvious points of contact, or simply donors do not

respond to public comments. Few have policies that address this.

There are examples of where popular protest has occurred around aid projects and the activities of donors. Some have been successful, although there are few examples related to fisheries.

Yet, in undemocratic countries the oversight function of civil society is considerably muted. Research by Reality of Aid, an NGO, has documented that in many developing countries local critics of aid are silenced through various nefarious methods by governments, including imprisonment and harassment.

In a similar vein, a significant barrier to oversight of aid projects is the reality that the vast majority of people working on fisheries in Africa, including those with insights into aid projects, are themselves aid-dependent, and unlikely to rock the boat. Considerable effort is required for development agencies that are genuinely interested to obtain public feedback and assessments.

Billions of dollars in aid have been spent on fisheries in Africa, and it is possible that an increase in aid will be witnessed over the next few years, including through innovative methods of matching public and private funding. Reforms are needed to improve democratic accountability.

The following ideas could help inform discussions on such aid policy reform.

First, international efforts, such as the Intentional Aid Transparency Initiative and the Publish What You Fund campaign, have established standards on access to information. These are putting pressure on donors to conform with these standards which are broad and not sector-specific, so more needs to be done to ensure aid projects in fisheries are more transparent and accountable.

Emerging attempts to better co-ordinate donor efforts in the fisheries sector, such as is being attempted in Europe, could play a proactive role, by sharing information and putting pressure on others to do the same. Members of the GPO should also consider how they could

collectively raise standards among participating donors, as well as with NGOs and philanthropic/corporate funders. Access to information ought to be given serious attention when approving and reviewing any new projects that fall under the GPO initiative.

Second, donors face enormous challenges in demonstrating what the positive impacts of their fisheries projects are. Project evaluations offer a limited, but necessary, role.

FAO has advised donors to find ways of distancing themselves from deciding on who does external evaluations and to ensure that evaluators include not only fisheries experts, but also social and political scientists as well.

But beyond evaluations, there is a potential role here for support to independent research institutes, local journalists, and fishers' organizations to carry out more in-depth reviews, and to highlight what impact aid has had on democracy, on the livelihoods of small-scale fisheries and on the competitive world of industrial fisheries and fish trade. This could increase the chance of gaining a local audience, as well as testing real experiences of people in countries

...donors face enormous challenges in demonstrating what the positive impacts of their fisheries projects are.

in gaining access to information, including budgets and financial reports.

Third and finally, since the Accra Agenda in 2008, there have been efforts to better integrate civil society into the process of aid planning. Aid advisory groups have been established by some donors, which combine CSOs, government representatives and donors.

Working groups

These have working groups on different sectors, but none on fisheries. Extending the work of these

ANDRE STANDING



Women fishworkers from São Tomé and Príncipe. One of the primary complaints of some small-scale fisheries organizations is that they are not being adequately consulted

these be restricted to people engaged exclusively in the fisheries value chain? What about people involved in coastal tourism, conservation and so on? This is an important consideration for thinking more seriously about deepening democratic accountability; who is accountable and to whom?

Here we cannot resolve these questions, but the intention is to highlight the limitations of existing approaches to accountability in development aid and the need for giving this more attention among organizations working on the rights of small-scale fisheries. 3

groups to include fisheries or coastal environment is an option. However, research on aid advisory groups by Reality of Aid reveals that in many places, governments often decide which CSOs can participate. CSOs tend to be given very little time to prepare for meetings, and important decisions are taken outside of these groups by government representatives and donors.

An alternative approach is based on the civic assembly concept, where willing participants are selected by lot and paid a modest stipend for their work. They are supported by external experts, but in ways that ensure that such experts do not capture decision-making processes.

Such an approach could include a mechanism to ensure gender parity and to steer round the problem of domination by larger NGOs claiming to speak for all civil society.

Civic assemblies should act as a complementary body to support decisionmaking by elected authorities. Several organizations are helping establish civic assemblies around the world. Piloting this approach in fisheries remains an interesting proposition, relevant beyond aid planning and accountability.

Setting up alternative mechanisms for deliberative civic engagement in fisheries raises difficult questions—most importantly, identifying who are the valid ‘stakeholders’. Should

For more

cape-cffa.org/

TransparentSea Database on Aid to Africa's Fisheries

www.publishwhatyoufund.org/index/2014-ati/

Publish What You Fund Aid Transparency Index

www.realityofaid.org

Reality of Aid 2012 Annual Report

siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTARD/Resources/336681-1224775570533/PERC.pdf

African Fisheries Development Aid