

A Community Future

A participatory national-level information gathering and consultative process attempts to develop guidelines for Cambodia's small-scale fisheries

Over the last two years, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been facilitating a process of developing voluntary guidelines for small-scale fisheries (SSF). As part of this exercise, it was considered appropriate to initiate a few participatory national-level information gathering and consultative processes which would provide insights about the nature of small-scale fisheries in specific country contexts—how they are viewed by policymakers; how they have evolved over time; how they are governed; and what the small-scale fishers themselves think about their sector and its future. One of the countries chosen was Cambodia in Southeast Asia.

Cambodia has a vibrant inland capture fishery, a significant marine fishery and an emerging aquaculture sector. Cambodians are avid fish eaters. In October 2000, in the town of Siem Reap, Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen made his now famous pronouncement releasing 50 per cent of the individually owned fishing areas in the Tonle Sap Lake, called 'fishing lots', from the control of the influential owners. He promised to grant the released area to the rural communities around the lake. He challenged them to take over the right to fish without fear and also the responsibility of caring for the resources. He surprised the fishing-lot owners, the fisheries administration and the rural communities with this radical action that is now referred to as the Fishery Reform of 2000.

A whole new social engineering experiment had begun in Cambodia.

This resulted in giving the fishery a greater community-oriented focus. Many laws and rules were changed and new ones enacted. The first Community Fisheries Development Department in an Asian country was started. The Community Fisheries (CFi) organizations were constituted with a law, called a Sub-Decree. Many governmental and inter-governmental development and aid agencies came forward to help the Fisheries Administration (FiA) of the Royal Government of Cambodia to implement this ambitious programme. Many non-governmental agencies

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took steps to assist the communities in their collective efforts to gain control over the fishery and other natural resources.

Today (2012) there are 469 CFi organizations, with a total membership of about 127,000 spread across Cambodia. The majority of them (430) are located in the inland fishery around the Tonle Sap Lake and across the banks of the Mekong River. A smaller number (39) have also been formed in the marine sector.

Historical factors

In the context of the above historical events, two factors make Cambodian fisheries particularly relevant for the FAO initiative in

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relation to the development of the SSF Guidelines:

- Cambodia is the only country in Asia where, since 2000, there has been a conscious government policy-driven thrust towards 'small scale-ization' of the fishery through the creation of CFI organizations—a sort of reform from above.
- In an effort to create participation from below, Cambodia has been experimenting with new forms of local-level governance and institutional arrangements which seek to change the erstwhile individual access- and use-rights into community-oriented tenure arrangements.

In an effort to create participation from below, Cambodia has been experimenting with new forms of local-level governance...

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Against this background, the project in Cambodia straddled three levels. At the local village level, participatory assessments of the relevance and role of small-scale fisheries were undertaken by discussions with a representative sample of the membership of the CFI organizations across the country. Person-to-person interviews and focus-group discussions were the tools used to gather information and data for what was called an 'appreciative inquiry'. The results of this exercise were then consolidated, presented and discussed thoroughly at three province-level gatherings to raise awareness about the merits of small-scale fisheries, particularly with respect to its role in food security, environmental protection and sustainable livelihoods. The results of these three meetings were then presented at a national consultation with the objective of formulating guidelines for a brighter future for CFI organizations in Cambodia.

One of the main outcomes of the 'appreciative inquiry' was

a socioeconomic profile of the membership of the CFI organizations. Men and women, young and old, are members. The educational attainment of the membership is low, and lowest in the coastal region. Though CFI organizations are fish-related, only a quarter of the members identify themselves primarily as 'fishers'. This self-identity, however, does not deter members from undertaking capture fishing, which, after agriculture, is the most important secondary livelihood activity of the members in the wet and dry seasons. Most members own some arable land (on which rice or other crops are grown); they also own the land on which they have built their homes. While the majority own fishing equipment, the number of equipment items per person is very low. Fish-related activity was a vital source of cash income for the members. The estimates made of cash income potentials of the members indicate that they are higher than the estimates of per capita daily income of the population in Cambodia as a whole.

The focus-group discussions (FGDs) conducted in each of the CFI organizations were intended for two purposes: to obtain a greater qualitative understanding of the changes that have taken place in their respective local areas over the last decade with respect to the prime objectives of the CFI; and, secondly, to discuss some topical matters and issues of future concern and to elicit views on them. These issues included child labour in fisheries; climate change and the environment; the role of NGOs; and threats to the development of CFI, to mention but a few.

Some of the key points emerging from the FGDs are enumerated below:

The significance of CFI as a people's organization with the significant participation of men, women and youth is beyond doubt.

1. If the prime objective of the 2000 Fishery Reform was to ensure that the rural communities of Cambodia obtain access to fish for food and livelihoods, then this objective has been reasonably

- achieved. The 'fishery success' must, however, be viewed against the overwhelming and continued importance of agriculture for the members of the CFi organizations.
2. CFi have shown that people consider conservation to be the key to resource sustainability, and are willing to take concrete actions to achieve it. The role of women in promoting this achievement has been significant.
 3. Illegal fishing carried out by individuals with backing from influential persons in society was one of the most important threats to fisheries in Cambodia. CFi Committees suggest that they should have a greater role and facilities in tackling this problem. Women play a crucial role in the moral economy of illegal fishing.
 4. The roles of government officers of the Fisheries Administration and the elected members of the Commune Councils have been meaningful in helping to set up, and in the continuing functioning of, CFis. This interaction should be keenly fostered in the future.
 5. CFi organizations were a major source for building trust and fostering co-operation in the community. This CFi function may perhaps be even more important than catching fish!
 6. Child labour in fishing was, and is, prevalent. Boys are the ones who are involved in fish-related activities. However, in the majority of cases, this was largely to help their parents, and the children were not exploited. Working part-time, they should also be able to go to school.
 7. The involvement of women in the CFi has given them a formal status and voice in decisionmaking. They have undertaken actions in the key realms of conservation, education, development and dissemination of information and particularly on the benefits of community co-operation.
 8. There have been significant and strongly noticeable changes in weather patterns. Whether these impacts are favourable or adverse depends on the resource activity in question. Flooding, for example, has positive impacts on fish production.
 9. Non-governmental assistance has been, and continues to be, important for CFi activities. NGOs provide important support to CFi organizations, which the government cannot provide. However, the role of respected and resourceful persons and organizations within the village also needs to be considered and recognized.
 10. Development of human capacity is still one of the key elements required for the CFi to flourish. Developmental efforts must contribute to increasing the participation of members in the affairs of the CFi, to enhance their livelihoods skills, and to ensure effective and efficient CFi management.
 11. Keeping records of data and information is important for institutional sustainability. Data to estimate the fish catch of members of the CFi can be generated, if so required.
 12. CFi have given people freedom to access resources, which has, in turn, resulted in the reduction of poverty and better resource conservation and management. The tenure rights of the CFi should

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Representatives of Cambodia's Fisheries Administration, civil society, international development agencies and UN organizations, during discussions at the three-day meet

Box

GUIDELINES FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES IN CAMBODIA THROUGH COMMUNITY FISHERIES

These Guidelines have been formulated as the culmination of a series of consultative processes held between October 2011 and February 2012 with a vast cross-section of members of the Community Fisheries (CFi) organizations in Cambodia.

These 20 points have been grouped under four important themes and are considered as the most important guidelines for making a brighter future for small-scale fisheries in Cambodia through the CFi organizations.

1. INTERNAL STRUCTURE

1. Strengthen the capacity and upgrade the general knowledge of CFi members using both the formal and informal education system and adopting both classroom and field-exposure trainings. At the same time, request the Ministry of Education and Youth to include the basic knowledge related to fisheries into the general educational curriculum.
2. Capacity building of the CFi Committee and youth members from the CFi should be undertaken as a priority. The focus of capacity building should be on practical livelihood skills, community organization functions, and fisheries resource conflict resolution strategies.
3. The democratic character of the CFi should be enhanced by conducting fair and simple elections to elect new CFi Committees as and when their mandates expire.
4. Strengthen accountability of the CFi Committee to CFi members. This can be achieved by having regular meetings, ensuring greater transparency in decisionmaking and also undertaking regular monitoring and evaluation of the quality of management and member participation.
5. Open up and encourage the active and effective participation of women and youth in the affairs of the CFi and CFi Committee, particularly in combating child labour in fishing activities.
6. Enable and equip the CFi to directly communicate and make contact with NGOs and other relevant institutions to support CFi activities

2. TENURE AND RIGHTS

7. Establish clear tenure rights for the CFi using the official Area Agreement. There should be emphasis on (i) ensuring good boundary demarcation and (ii) providing effective patrolling and facilities to achieve the same.
8. Encourage local people's participation to abolish illegal fishing activity by designating specific CFi members as patrollers and encouraging local people to provide information on the illegal fishing activities to them.
9. Any development plan or project undertaken in the demarcated fishing area of a CFi should be undertaken only

after consultation with CFi members and after making a clear study of the environment impact assessment (EIA) with the participation of CFi members. The benefits of such projects should be shared with the CFi also.

10. Provide a greater physical and legal role to the CFi Committee and Patrolling Teams in stopping, preventing and controlling illegal fishing activities, and support the CFi for appropriate facilities to achieve this.
11. Provide rights to the CFi to collect a fee for giving legal rights to migrants to fish in demarcated CFi areas.

3. ACTIVITIES AND FUNDING

12. The CFi should be transformed from a fishery organization to a livelihood-focused organization, keeping fishery activities as the core focus while undertaking income-generating activities.
13. Create a Community Fisheries Revolving Fund exclusively for the CFi and link borrowing rights of the CFi to their respective performance based on the following criteria: (i) evaluation of their fishery/ecosystem conservation efforts; (ii) effectiveness of their internal functioning and member participation; (iii) their efforts at controlling illegal fishing; and (iv) their efforts for prevention of child labour.
14. Provide financial and other support to establish small enterprise, ecotourism projects and other livelihood initiatives, giving a share for CFi members and, at the same time, reducing the profits of middlemen.
15. Encourage CFi members to pay their annual membership fees regularly.
16. Incorporate CFi plans into the Commune Council Development and Investment Plan, and connect the CFi with the village and commune safety policy.
17. Consider the flooded forest protection initiatives undertaken by CFi for community carbon credits under climate-change schemes.

4. INFORMATION AND NETWORKING

18. Establish a regular data and information-gathering system at the CFi level for fishery catch monitoring, and socioeconomic and ecological biodiversity data collection.
19. Establish a provincial-level CFi network forum to provide good collaboration opportunities for CFis in each province.
20. Disseminate to the CFi, on a regular basis, the laws and regulations related to fisheries, fisheries environment, fish migration, fishing gear, fishing techniques, and climate change that might have impacts on fishing.



be strengthened. Proper demarcation of boundaries and equipment for patrolling are vital to support the CFI. Provision of more credit for investment and expansion of service-sector activities like tourism and fish marketing are important and will result in greater benefits from tenure rights.

13. Migrants should fish in CFI areas only with permission and only using legal fishing gear. Payment of a small fee to the CFI for the right to fish should also be considered.
14. There are several serious threats to sustainable fisheries and to the CFI organizations, which need to be promptly addressed.
15. CFI have helped to alleviate poverty, and taught members the value of conservation and working together. But the major benefits of the CFI have only gone to CFI Committee members.
16. A menu of diverse activities is needed to make the CFI the institution of our dreams. One of the biggest challenges is enhancing leadership capacity.

The overall conclusion from this participatory assessment of CFI organizations in Cambodia is that after a decade of functioning, they have made good beginnings towards becoming true community-based organizations supported by the State and larger civil society.

Success is not unqualified, however. Yet, the information and collective views gathered, provide a basis to state with reasonable confidence that these organizations have made a difference in the lives of the membership in a multiple manner of impacts and achievements. The membership has unfettered access to more fish to eat. They spend more time in fishing-related activity and earn cash income which plays an important role in contributing to their living standards. The co-operation and sense of community between members, which has been fostered by these organizations, have yielded many social benefits. These include: building greater trust; a higher awareness and value placed on

conservation; a keen sense of being recognized as a collective; recognition of their weaknesses and lack of capabilities; and the urge and desire to make a better future. These are not mean achievements.

However, what requires close scrutiny is the sustainability of these organizations into the future, if the status quo of 2011 prevails. This calls for honest introspection by the State, civil society and, more importantly, by the members themselves.

The State needs to consider how it can move from being the initiator of these organizations to becoming a facilitator. This role of facilitation needs to be done without undue and overbearing presence. The State and its representatives (primarily the officers of the Fisheries Administration at all levels) must learn how to play the role of partner, not master, in a co-management process for the

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sustainable management of aquatic resources. The instruments (laws, decrees, etc.) which have given the legal framework for the CFI need to be reviewed and made more flexible and suited to the reality faced by the membership. Most important in this will be to consider how the CFI can become a multi-purpose organization catering to all livelihoods needs of the membership—particularly their agriculture and related interests—and not focus solely on the fishery. Additionally, a greater role for the organization in dealing effectively with the menace of illegal fishing must be seriously considered.

Capacity building

Civil society needs to continue its support to the CFI organizations and focus on capacity building of the committee and the members. Effort is needed to ensure that the

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Focus-group discussions (FGDs) showed that, after a decade of functioning, community fisheries organizations have helped alleviate poverty

be simple, free and fair elections conducted at the earliest, so that the true democratic character of the organization is retained. The current committee members should take the initiative for this with the assistance of NGOs and the relevant officers of the fisheries administration at the appropriate level of governance (district, cantonment, etc.).

The above are only suggestions indicative of the broad contours of what needs to be done. Each CFI organization is unique in its local context. Each must, therefore, ultimately have its own plan of action.

If the State, civil society and the membership can work out how they will collectively and individually act to sustain the CFI organization, then there is a bright future for small-scale fisheries in Cambodia. This may be the surest route to ensure protection for the aquatic ecosystems of Cambodia, fish for all Cambodians and decent and dignified livelihoods for millions. Striving to achieve these goals is surely a worthy effort.

Three inter-provincial meetings (termed region-level workshops) were conducted to feed back the analysis of the data and information gathered from the members during the local-level assessment. They were held in Kampong Cham (for the Mekong region) and Kampot (for the marine region) in December 2011 and Pursat (for the Tonle Sap region) in January 2012. It is significant to note that for more than 60 per cent of the participants (representatives from the CFI organizations that participated in the local-level consultation and a few representatives from other CFI organizations which were not part of the sample), this was the first time in a decade that they were gathering together as representatives of their CFI organizations.

Summary presentation

Initially, a consolidated summary presentation was made by the Deputy Director General of Fisheries, giving the highlights of the local-level assessment. The focus was on the results pertaining to the specific region—Tonle Sap, Mekong and

whole membership begins to take ownership of the organization. In this matter, emphasis should be given to stressing the role of persons from the locality—teachers, nurses, religious leaders, educated youth, village elders, etc.—who can play a supportive role to give encouragement and friendly advice to the leadership of the CFI.

Non-government organizations (NGOs) that have their base outside the locality should adopt the concept of having resident village community organizers (possibly from among the educated youth in the community) who can animate governance and networking processes within the CFI organizational structures. They can lay the ground for building savings-and-credit schemes which will work on a 'group basis' and cater to the productive purposes of the membership. Provision of new livelihood skills, as well as greater stress on social and developmental village-level activities as a whole, must be considered.

The membership themselves should seize the opportunity to make the CFI a 'live and spirited' organization and take it away from the 'empty shell' status which it may stagnate into if the current trajectory is continued. Women members can play a significant role in making this mid-course correction. There should

marine—where the workshop was being held.

This methodology provided the occasion for the members to comprehend the manner in which their individual views were aggregated. It also showed them how these consolidated profiles of their socioeconomic status and the views expressed at the focus-group discussions provide material to policymakers for taking future decisions. Participants requested clarifications. They raised doubts about the meaning and implications of some of the conclusions. Where appropriate, corrections were incorporated. The power and significance of participatory assessments became apparent.

The culmination of the three-stage process was a three-day national consultation held in Phnom Penh in February 2012. The consultation was titled “Making a Brighter Future for Small-scale Fisheries through Community Fisheries in Cambodia”. It was attended by 159 participants, including representatives of the CFi organizations, the Fisheries Administration, civil society, international development agencies and UN organizations. The main purpose of the workshop was to share the full results of the earlier process and conclusions with a wider cross-section of stakeholders in the fisheries who could comment on the findings and, importantly, contribute to developing some key guidelines for sustainable development of small-scale fisheries in Cambodia through CFi. These national guidelines would then become a contribution to the SSF Guidelines being developed by FAO.

Four processes were adopted in this part of the national consultation. First, the report of the local-level consultations and the three region-level workshops was presented by the Acting Director of the Community Fisheries Development Department (CFDD) of the Fisheries Administration. The CFDD is formally responsible for the activities of the CFi organizations.

Second, there was a period of intense group work where seven groups, made up of representatives from all the various stakeholders in the fishery, discussed the report and formulated suggestions which could make up elements for the guidelines for the future of small-scale fisheries in Cambodia.

Third, a committee, consisting of elected participants from each of the seven groups, discussed and produced a draft of the key elements of the group discussions which were to form the basis for the list of guidelines and recommendations for making a brighter future for small-scale fisheries in Cambodia through CFi.

Fourth, there was a plenary discussion where the draft guidelines were read, discussed and endorsed, point by point. The finalized document (see box) was then approved by the whole plenary.

Following the presentation of these Guidelines at the National Consultation, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries, who was present at

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the consultation, officially endorsed them in his official closing speech. Given the complex governance and administrative system in Cambodia, this formal endorsement is a first step towards these guidelines—developed in a participatory manner—being taken up by the government and the Fisheries Administration for implementation.

As a first step to making these Guidelines more widely available, the Fisheries Administration will publish them in the next issue of its official journal.

Guidelines created

Though not directly related to the process of creation of these Guidelines, a week after the National

Consultation in February 2012, the Prime Minister of Cambodia announced that the fishing-lot licences in the Tonle Sap Lake would be permanently cancelled and these areas would be reserved as conservation zones “to protect the lake’s pressured wild fisheries on which tens of thousands of subsistence fishermen rely”.

This decision of the Prime Minister is basically a continuation of the 2000 Fishery Reform process which he set in motion. The future implications of this decision for the CFI organizations are enormous. They will now become the main institutional arrangement,

A three-year plan, which focuses on conservation and gives priority to strengthening of the CFI organizations, is on the anvil.

Both these orders contain recommendations which have been influenced by the Guidelines. These include the need for capacity building of CFI to enable them to participate more fully in the fisheries reform process; encourage greater conservation of flooded forests and mangroves; prevent illegal fishing; and strengthen partnership networking all levels.

In the light of all the above, and, in particular, the abolishing of the fishing lots, the Action Plan for 2012 of the Fisheries Administration is being revised. A three-year plan, which focuses on conservation and gives priority to strengthening of the CFI organizations, is on the anvil.

In the context of the FAO initiative to formulate SSF Guidelines, there are some important insights to be gained from the experience of organizing CFI in Cambodia.

- Initiatives in support of small-scale fisheries that are driven initially by concerns of the State can be turned around into genuine people’s initiatives, if participative, appropriate, and well-thought-out development and management initiatives are planned, financed and implemented.
- Long-term and secure rights to resources is a basic requisite, if small-scale fishers are to commit themselves to participative governance and management of the resources and the ecosystem in which it is located.
- Resource conservation is a key factor in the management of small-scale fisheries. Supportive institutional and infrastructure initiatives to aid conservation efforts of the aquatic ecosystem need to be envisioned as a central pillar of management efforts. Conservation must become a passion if it is to succeed.
- Good leadership is the bedrock of successful organizations for small-scale fishers. Few fishers may be born good leaders, but leadership can be cultivated by practice and training. Capacity-building initiatives that focus on developing leaders is an investment which

with rights of tenure and access to the fishery resource, which exist in Cambodia. The success of fish harvests from the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River will depend on their initiative and resourcefulness. If the CFI organizations are to meet these expectations, many elements in the Guidelines endorsed above may have to be carefully examined and implemented.

Following the National Consultation, the CFDD also officially transmitted the Khmer version of the report of the local consultations and the Guidelines endorsed at the National Consultation to the Minister in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Deputy Prime Ministers who are responsible for implementing the abolishing of fishing lots.

In April 2012, the government issued two administrative orders. The first was on the implementation of the latest fishing-lot reform. The second was on strengthening and expanding CFI to manage the abolished fishing lots and fish conservation areas, and suppression of illegal fishing activities

pays rich dividends for vibrant and sustainable organizations.

- Women's involvement must be central to any effort for small-scale fisheries development and management. Women are a vital social, economic and moral force in small-scale fishing communities, and their participation in development initiatives must become a foundational input as agents for change and not just as an afterthought.
- Management plans for small-scale fisheries should become a central part of any fisheries development programme. These plans need to be developed with a clear and keen understanding of the local natural-resource realities and viable structures for the governance of tenure. The implementation of plans should be participative, with the fishers, the riparian community and the State each setting up key stakes to ensure its success.
- Financial support for a new and ambitious programme for small-scale fisheries development and management must be forthcoming from international donors and financial agencies that have appreciated the role and relevance of small-scale fisheries into the future. More than the size of funds, it is when funding becomes available in the form of partnering initiatives that is most likely to achieve the objectives


The process which has been described in this report was a facilitative initiative of FAO undertaken in close partnership with the Fisheries Administration of the Royal Government of Cambodia and the members of the CFI organizations to evolve a set of participatory guidelines for negotiating a brighter future for small-scale fisheries in Cambodia.

It was the first time since the Fishery Reform of 2000 that such an elaborate exercise was undertaken by the Fisheries Administration to assess the opinions of the members of the CFI about the past, the present and the future. The systematic and large coverage of the fishers, which was

attained through the local consultation process, was by itself an important achievement.

This initiative highlighted how CFI—an organizational intervention which was instituted by decrees and administrative orders—has gradually attained the potential of becoming an important local democratic enterprise which can transform the livelihoods of an important section of the rural population of Cambodia. Whether, and how, this will materialize in reality depends on the confluence of many factors like, *inter alia*, secure tenure and rights to resources; good and committed local leadership; proper planning; and adequate and appropriate funding.

It was an important historical conjuncture that this process of assessing the CFI was accompanied by the political decision for total abolishment of the fishing lots system in Cambodia and the consequent opening up of new possibilities for CFI organizations to play a lead role in the inland fisheries sector of Cambodia.

There may be influential opinions and adverse comments about the underlying rationale and top-down decisions which marked the initiation of the Fishery Reform that commenced in 2000. Be that as it may, it points decisively to the pre-eminent role which political process and political will have in supporting a commitment for small-scale fisheries. This is a key 'takeaway' lesson from the Cambodian experience. 

For more



[www.ilo.org/ipec/Events/National Consultation on Child Labour in Fisheries](http://www.ilo.org/ipec/Events/National_Consultation_on_Child_Labour_in_Fisheries)

www.fao.org/cofi/24008-0c5031a8f865bdf0baac62c1aac1a031b.pdf
COFI Report on Cambodia Workshop

www.maff.gov.kh/en/
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Cambodia