

Asia/Philippines

“It’s the same”

These excerpts are from a recent study “Food Insecurity and Gender Inequality in Property Rights: The Case of Market Access for Philippine Seaweeds” by Hazel Arandez-Tanchuling and Marina Fe B. Durano

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Fish is a Filipino’s primary source of animal protein, and the Philippines reports an annual per capita consumption of 36 kg. This paper seeks to understand the linkages between food security and trade liberalization.

The 2003 Census of Agriculture and Fisheries of the Philippines’ National Statistics Office estimates the fisherfolk population at 1.8 mn, and fishing communities are found to be among the poorest in the country. Since the 1990s, however, several fishing communities have shifted from subsistence fishing and fishing for local consumption towards seaweed production. This growing trend has been encouraged by the aggressive promotion of seaweed farming by the Philippines’ Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to exploit its export revenue potential. This trend is similar to the shift from subsistence crops to cash crops in agriculture. In the fisheries sector, seaweeds are considered cash commodities.

The paper takes a deeper look at this production shift, which forms part of the larger export-led development strategy of the Philippines. The first section introduces the seaweed industry in the Philippines and shows how active the Philippine government has been in promoting the shift from municipal fishing to seaweed production. The second section discusses poverty in fishing communities, which forces fishing households to explore the options offered by the government. The shift towards seaweed production is part of the government’s poverty alleviation programme and is consistent with export-oriented development. The third section, covering the Calatagan case

study, analyzes the impact of the shift from fishing to seaweed production and identifies some dilemmas. Trade liberalization, in combination with aggressive government promotion, is expected to increase the incentives to shift away from municipal fishing. The lessons that can be drawn from the early stages of the shift in production can be useful for future policymaking.

Some edited excerpts from the study follow:

Impact of the Introduction of Seaweed Farming to Coastal Communities (The Calatagan Case Study)

In this section, a case study of a shift from fishing to seaweed production is presented. Researchers visited a town located south of Metro Manila, where the government has been actively promoting seaweed production in coastal communities. Small seaweed cultivators, local government officials, a trader and officials of the local fisherfolk organization—the *Samahan ng Maliliit ng Mangingisda ng Calatagan* (SAMMACA or Organization of Small Fishers of Calatagan) were interviewed.

Common Resource Use Conflicts

Since coastal areas are common resources, competition in usage arises periodically. Seaweed farmers compete with fisherfolk, prawn hatcheries, and even shipping and boat transport companies for use of the coastline. The management of these conflicts becomes crucial not only for the success of seaweed production as part of a growth strategy but also for other productive activities involving the use of common resources in coastal areas. A rational zoning system that allocates the use of common resources becomes an important governance strategy for the local government units (LGUs).

One of the first instances of conflict along the shoreline is between the seaweed producers and the fisherfolk. Fishers find it difficult to manoeuvre their boats in the areas where there is a high concentration of seaweed. This was a major problem faced by the fisherfolk in Barangay Uno during the boom in seaweed cultivation in the area. Seaweed rafts and other infrastructure block the passage from the shoreline to the sea. The use of nets is limited because the fish habitats are inside the seaweed farms and using nets will destroy the seaweeds. Repeated water thumping with the *timbog*, a fishing implement

used to round up fish into the net, affects the seaweeds. Seaweed farms are safe places for fish, allowing stocks to regenerate. With seaweed farming becoming the priority, fishers have to wait for the seaweed harvest season to catch fish, and they thus become subject to the seasonal cycle of seaweed farming. There have been instances when irate fishers would set adrift seaweed rafts as a form of revenge against some seaweed farmers. Mang Junior of SAMMACA is urging the LGU to limit the space available for seaweed farming so that fishers are not marginalized. Indeed, the low cost of the permit (PHP220 or US\$4.4) for 20,000 sq m for seaweed farming is an indicator that the LGU does not want to regulate seaweed farming in its area.

The growth of seaweeds is sensitive to water quality, and pollution is a specific problem in Calatagan. Periodically, the residues from a prawn hatchery in Gulod have affected not only seaweed harvests but also all marine life in the area. Recently, seaweed farmers and fishers from Barangay Uno and Barangay Dos formed a coalition to raise their concerns to their LGUs about the pollution caused by the large prawn farms in their *barangays*.

Seaweed cultivators in Barangay Dos face eviction problems with the Foreshore Lease Agreements awarded by the LGU to tourist resorts. In addition, Barangay Dos is expanding the pier to accommodate roll-on, roll-off (RoRo) boats going to and from the island of Mindoro. Once the port becomes operational, seaweed cultivators in the area will have to find alternative cultivation sites. The pollution from increased boat traffic will be harmful to seaweed growth. Oil slicks from ships passing the South China Sea, which faces Calatagan, have occasionally caused problems in the seaweed farms.

Although, at this point, use-conflict of fisheries is still manageable, there is no guarantee that this will continue to be the case once seaweed areas increase after aggressive government promotion.

Production Shifts and Cultural Rigidities

Policywise, there are no impediments towards women participating in seaweed cultivation. User rights are given to both men and women as long as they reside in Calatagan. Yet no woman has applied for a seaweed production permit. This is very



interesting in itself. Studies on the impact of trade liberalization on women in agriculture indicate that women are unable to benefit from shifts towards cash cropping because they do not have rights to own land, as in several African countries. This cannot be the case for Calatagan. No prior private ownership by an individual of the coastal area, whether male or female, was established. With the implementation of the permit system, which gave the holder private usufruct rights for designated coastal areas, it was the men who claimed the rights since none of the women applied for a permit. Thus, the result is that women are not in a position to benefit from seaweed production, except through their relationships with their husbands who have the usufruct rights.

Women do not consider themselves engaged in productive activities when undertaking tasks required of seaweed production. Rather, women consider their labour in the trade as extensions of their household work. They only provide supplemental labour. Since women's work is seen as tied to household work, it is not surprising that women have not applied for a seaweed production permit. These women think that permits for seaweed production are in a realm outside of their socially designated authority.

All the women interviewed in Barangay Dos do not see seaweed cultivation as an added burden, although they admit that seaweed cultivation takes time away from household duties and child rearing. The women

are involved in practically all areas of seaweed production, particularly when their farm is close to the shore. They are involved in the preparation of materials, planting, especially during low tide, and harvesting. In one day, they can prepare up to 25 kg of seedlings for planting, which can fill up half a raft. One respondent, Aling Tinding, said that she usually sets aside all her Saturdays to attend to her seaweed farm, alongside her family.

The women do not see any difference in work hours with the change from fishing to seaweed cultivation. They all said, '*Pareho lang*' ('It's the same.'). Thus, in terms of work hours, the women do not see any improvement. They were also involved in the capture and marketing of the harvests. The same tasks remain today as the women continue to gather seashells and other marine products along the shoreline for household consumption and sales.

All the women are grateful to the seaweed industry. They say that if not for the seaweeds, they would not have been able to build concrete houses, send their children to school and eat meat. The increase in their family income has provided more room for managing the household budget, but only during the harvest season.

The management of the household budget is, however, limited to those areas dealing with household consumption. Decisions over seaweed production remain with the men. How much of household income is to be allocated for seaweed production is decided by the men. Mang Nilo, for instance, secures an amount sufficient to buy gin, and leaves the rest of the earnings to his wife. More importantly, he also decides how much money should be set aside for the seaweed farm.

This division of labour indicates that women are tasked with socially reproductive activities, such as food security for the household. Although incomes may have risen, the rise is not sufficient to ease the women's burden of providing for the family. Women act as default providers of food when the lean season arrives. Although the well-being of the women has improved because of higher incomes, their work responsibilities remain the same. Women continue to have to perform the roles expected of, and imposed on, them by society.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps the most important lesson from the case study is how the shift from fishing in a common resource area, such as the coastal area, towards seaweed farming allowed men to gain property rights, while the women did not. Before the shift, both shared the property rights of the common areas with the rest of the community. The permit system imposed by the local government unit was meant to manage conflicts over the use of common community resources. Instead, the unintended consequence was to increase gender inequality in property rights.

The shift towards seaweed farming has not been complete in the coastal communities in Calatagan. The main barrier to entry is the size of capital needed to start the business. In order to pursue this activity, many seaweed producing households enter into sharecropping or contract-growing arrangements that leave them tied to their financiers in a cycle of debt. Seaweed cultivation is also very labour-intensive because the seaweed is sensitive to its environment, whether it is pollution from competing activities, an increase in seawater temperature during summer months, or the monsoon season. It is probably more time-intensive than fishing, requiring the construction of temporary shelters over the farm areas in order to undertake 24-hour surveillance, especially when there are weather changes.

Although the rise in incomes has been recognized by seaweed farming households, its variability needs to be highlighted. The seasonality in income forces these households to borrow money during lean months. The quality of food also follows this seasonality, with fresh meat and luxury food items available just after the harvest, while processed and canned foods become the main food source during the latter part of the gestation period as well as the monsoon season. As those responsible for food security, women ensure that food is available through careful budgeting, gathering of marine products from the shore, and cultivation of fruits and vegetables in their backyards. Occasionally, the men will catch fish from the seaweed farm. Overall, food security is not consistently assured, despite the higher incomes; at the same time, the work burden of women has not been relieved.

Increased market access for seaweed products raises the incentives for export producers to urge

BFAR and the LGU partners to support the increase in supply of seaweeds. It can be expected that export promotion programmes will coincide with increased seaweed seedling distribution and seaweed production technical assistance, and support to convince fishing households and communities to change their production activities. The distribution of gains is disproportionate, as the experience of Calatagan shows. The production shift does not guarantee food security and has increased gender inequality in property rights.

[This project was jointly implemented by the International Gender and Trade Network-Asia, and Tambuyog, a non-governmental organization in the Philippines doing community-based coastal resource management, research and advocacy of coastal/ fishery issues and community property rights.]

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