

Eight years on

Years of struggle have empowered the fishworkers of the Philippines to effectively manage their resources

Eight years have passed since the Filipino fisherfolk began to lobby for the passage of the Fisheries Code. This bill is meant to replace the previous Presidential Decrees of the Marcos regime, still being enforced under the present government.

The essence of the Bill, which is non-negotiable, is the establishment of Resource Management Councils (RMCs) to be headed by fisherfolk. The main thrust is the management of the local fisheries resources by the stakeholders themselves. However, the three-tonne limit on fishing vessels in municipal waters (15 km from the shoreline) has been changed to a maximum of 50 gross registered tonnes.

The fisherfolk are thus opposing the approval of the Bill in its present form. This makes the struggle doubly difficult, as President Fidel Ramos has adopted an Administration Bill (known as the Fisheries Code of 1996).

At the recent General Assembly of BIGKIS-LAKAS, it was decided that all members make it their priority to convince their respective Congressmen to oppose the definition of small- and medium-scale fishing vessels specified under the 1996 Code. In the Senate, Senator Leticia Ramos-Shahani has been pushing for a Department Bill in Fisheries. This caused one fisherman to remark "If BFAR (Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources) has been 'very far' from the fisherfolk, a Fisheries Department will be farther still, almost unreachable."

However, the dauntless nature of the fisherfolk, whose environment has long been one of uncertainty, has made it possible for them to carry on the struggle. While their voices have apparently not been heard in the halls of power, they have

nevertheless become a force. They have participated in environmental campaigns, the most recent of which was against the marine sanctuary in Bolinao, Pangasinan, a project which the government had to reject after strong protests from all sectors.

Organizations of women in fisheries are increasing nationwide and are proving a good source of development workers- As a testimony to their achievements, former Senator Aquilino Piemental had succeeded in incorporating a provision in the Local Government Code, designating 15 km from the shoreline as municipal waters (Presidential Decree 704 provides 7km as municipal waters).

Likewise, President Ramos had appointed Arturo Olegario of KAMMPI as sectoral representative to Congress, and Sofronio Balagtas of BIGKIS-LAKAS as sectoral representative to the Social Reform Council (SRC) with a cabinet rank. This Council has the task of drafting 'Flagship Programs' in line with the Social Reform Agenda (SRA).

Implementation

Taking the lead in the campaign for the implementation of the FARMCS were the leaders themselves, who exhibited their skills as organizers, facilitators and speakers in these workshops / consultations:

- SRA Workshop/Consultation for the Fisherfolk of Mindanao, January 1996, Davao.
- SRA Regional Workshop for the Fisherfolk of the Visayas, 16-18 February 1996, ECOTECII, Lahug, Cebu City.
- Batan SRA Consultation Baptist Camp, 7-8 April 1996.

Power—now and for ever

During the dictatorship regime of the Marcos administration, the struggles of fisherfolk for governance (access and control) in the management of fisheries resource, started to take shape, propelled by the unprecedented depletion and degradation of marine and freshwater resources. The concerns covered a wide range of issues-ecological, social, economic and political.

Ecological issues included excessive fishing effort, overfishing, destructive/illegal fishing, coral reef degradation, destruction of mangroves, pollution and siltation.

These have had a dramatic bearing on the economic deprivation and marginalisation of fisherfolk, as reflected in the low returns from fishing, lack of support facilities and inefficient marketing systems, among other hurdles.

The social issues relate to the inequity between commercial and marginal fishers, small-scale gear fishers and other users, apathy and lack of discipline. Compounding these problems is the lack of political will among the government officials concerned regarding genuine reforms for the fisheries sector.

This reality has become the basis of the growing campaign in the sector for a change in basic fishery policies, such as the repeal of Presidential Decree 704 or the Fishery Decree of 1975.

Ironically, these decrees remain the basis of the nation's policy guidelines on fisheries. They regard the fishery industry as an investment sector, rather than an area of ecological and social concern. The Fisheries Code, a bill filed in Congress by fisherfolk, advocates the formation of Resource Management Councils

empowering fisherfolk to take the lead in managing local fishing resources.

The need for people's participation in decision making has been the overriding message of the marginalized sector to the various Presidents of Philippines, from the late Ferdinand E. Marcos (during the martial law era) to Cory Aquino (post-People Power Revolution) and on to the present head, President Fidel V. Ramos.

All these years, the fisherfolk, through a process of social transformation, have been empowered for genuine people's participation in governance. It is perhaps their visibility, in addressing the country's sociopolitical issues, that has earned them recognition from the government as the basic actors in the sector, whose participation is crucial.

To date, we have the following policy mandate for people's participation in decision making:

1. The passage of the Local Government Code or Republic Act 7160, in 1991. This act recognizes the role of People's Organizations (POS) and NGOs to participate in the development process, by recognizing their membership in the various development councils in local government units.

2. Social Reform Agenda (SRA) is a package of interventions which the government shall pursue to ensure the welfare, and early integration, of disadvantaged groups into the political and economic mainstream. As such, it makes operative the government's human development goals, embodied in the Medium Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP), through interventions meant to alleviate poverty and attain social justice, equity and lasting peace.

- SRA Workshop/Consultation for the Fisherfolk of Luzon, Regions 4 and 5, 27-29 May 1996, Carolina, Naga City.
- SEA Workshop/Consultation for the Fisherfolk of Luzon, Regions 1-3, CAR, NCRD, 15-17 July 1996, San Sebastian, Pangasinan.
- Series of Regional and National Workshops for the Philippine Council for Sustainable

Development and Philippine Agenda 21 Formulation.

Besides his active involvement in the campaign for Executive Order 240, the present president of BIGKIS-LAKAS, Charlie Capricho, is also a member of the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development.

This council pursues the effective implementation, in the Philippines, of the important provisions of UNCED's Agenda

Implementation of the SRA is being undertaken through nine Flagship Programs, namely, Agricultural Development; Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Conservation; Management and Development; Respect, Protection and Management of Ancestral Domain; Worker's Welfare and Protection; Socialized Housing; Comprehensive Integrated Delivery of Social Services; Institution Building and Effective Participation in Governance; and Credit and Livelihood.

3. Executive Order No. 240 creates Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Councils (FAMRCS) in barangays, cities and municipalities, with the following composition and functions:

Executive Order 240 Institutionalizes the major role of the local fisherfolk and other resource users, in community-based planning and implementation of policies and programs, for the management, conservation, development and protection of fisheries and aquatic resources of the municipal water, as defined by the Local Government Code.

The FAMRCS shall have the following among their primary functions:

- Preparing and recommending fisheries and aquatic resource management policies and plans for integration into the Local Development Plan. Such policies and plans should be based on sound assessment of the bio-economic characteristics of the resources.
- Recommending to the local government units and special agencies guidelines on the development and implementation of projects, issuing permits and licenses for the appropriate use of fisheries and aquatic resources, and ensuring that

resource use limits and controls are imposed. Such guidelines may include the evaluation of all projects and applications by FAMRCS, prior to the approval by appropriate offices.

With these policy directives, the fisherfolk have found broader parameters for participation in social reforms.

To date, the fisherfolk are in various structures of government at the barangay, municipal, provincial and Congressional levels, as well as in the National Social Reform Council, National Sustainable Development Council and other networks of NGOs and POS.

Building up alliances and coalitions has become a part of the sector's agenda to move towards a truly empowered civil society. Training and advocacy continue with great vigour towards strengthening the organization. We believe that an empowered citizenry is the best guarantee for sustainable development, equity and peace.

Notwithstanding the differences in principles and ideology among fisherfolk organizations, we keep our doors open towards foreign a national movement of fisherfolk, for our concern is not only for the present, but also for the generations to come.

— This article has been written by Charlie Capricho, President, BIGKIS-LAKAS Pilipinas.

21. All these developments, highlighted by the more active and visible national level, raised the spirit and enthusiasm of the fisherfolk to new heights. Their voices have grown even louder, further strengthening active local organizations, and inspiring them to continue with their struggle.

For the newly formed organizations, what has unfolded and continues to unfold are challenges that will carry them through to their goals. As Ka Onie would put it,

“We’ve come a long way, there is no involvement of fishworkers’ leaders at the turning back”

This piece is by Nenita Cura, Director, Family Centre, Asian Social Institute, Manila and Member, ICSF.