

Building capacity, managing change

A fisheries project among women fish smokers of four fishing communities in Gambia offers important lessons

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The River Gambia and its coastal zones, together with its tributaries and distributaries, such as the Bolongolu, provide favourable conditions for both artisanal and industrial fishing. In this region, the fisheries sector has emerged as an important employer, with shrimps being the primary species fished. The artisanal fisheries sector has attracted increasing activity, with hundreds of canoes landing thousands of tonnes of fish. Licensed trawlers and transshipment facilities make industrial fishing here highly competitive.

The growth of the sector has, however, also been beset with its own set of issues, with immediate benefits overriding negative consequences. For instance, wood and fuel for fish processing and preservation are increasingly becoming scarce with growing competition. Persistent drought and an unfavourable foreign exchange scenario add to the vulnerabilities of the fishing community, particularly of women fish processors.

National efforts at rehabilitating the sector made by the Department of Fisheries, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and other partners such as the Japanese and

European Union (EU) member countries, have met with only limited success. Development interventions vastly improved the capital assets of communities and created an environment of trust and partnership. However, where they failed was in building organizational capacity of fishing communities to prepare for, and manage, change. The absence of governmental or NGO expertise in organizational development, and in building capacity and knowledge in related fields such as forestry, has limited the impact of development interventions. Support structures reflecting only a traditional fisheries sector view did not help beyond offering immediate, short-term palliatives.

It is in this context that an investment programme to assist Gambian women in coastal fisheries communities has important lessons to offer. The programme, implemented within the framework of the Spanish Agency for International Co-operation (AECID)/Philippe Cousteau Gambia Women in Fisheries Project, underscores the urgent need to strengthen fisherfolk organizations as well as institutions responsible for fisheries management.

The project seeks to reduce poverty in the four coastal fisheries communities of Brufut, Tanji, Gunjur and Kartong, targeting women dependent on fisheries and aquatic resources. It tries to develop various types of knowledge—social, organizational, human and professional—and build infrastructural capital assets among women fish processors. It also aims to reduce the pressure on the natural resource base through improved fish-processing techniques and smoking facilities aimed at distant markets.

At the start of the project, discussions were held with women about the fisheries cycle, from catch and landing to distribution, handling, processing and marketing. These discussions revealed many aspects that need special attention.

In the Gambian region, landed fish catch is unloaded by *dunu-laalu* (labourers). The catch is handed over to the wives and family relations of fishermen who then sell this to the *bana-bana* (their bonded clients) either for direct sales or for processing, depending

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Women in Tanji, Gunjur, Kartong and Brufut using the newly reconstructed fish smoking facilities for a safer and healthier environment

on the type of catch and market forces. Women fish smokers are organized into groups that bid in the wholesale market for fresh fish, which is not targeted for the day's market. This fish is smoked by the women for sale the next morning in nearby markets. Men smoke and process fish for sale in distant smoked-fish markets.

The discussions revealed that despite earlier interventions by FAO, women fish smokers' organizations were weak and lacked leadership skills. The FAO interventions for savings and credit for women, however, were being successfully continued in all four communities, and there was no need to establish additional savings-and-credit schemes. Women reported that they lacked knowledge and skills in improved methods of fish handling, sanitation and processing. Further, the smoke houses and other infrastructure facilities were in a broken-down and dilapidated condition as a result of many years of neglect.

Based on these inputs, the project set out to achieve the following goals: raising public awareness about the role of Gambian women in the fisheries sector; training women in specific professional skills such as post-harvest fish handling, sanitation and processing; conservation; capacity building, including group/association leadership; gender issues; funds management; provision or renovation of fish-smoking facilities; and, provision of fish-processing equipment in the communities.

In line with the project's objectives, several activities were undertaken. These included: a study to improve awareness about the role of Gambian women in the fisheries sector; the training of 120 fish processors (30 women per community) in professional skills; and improving fish-smoke houses and facilities and upgrading the fish-smoking equipment in each of the four communities. It must be mentioned that improving the fish-smoke houses and chimney facilities required additional behavioural and attitudinal changes, which implied that more than technology was needed for improved fish smoking.

An overall assessment of the institutional capacities of fisherfolk groups indicates that many of the village groups and associations are very old. Their work is to improve fisherfolk

activities for personal and professional development. Most have, among their members, treasurers, auditors, cashiers and secretaries with some experience in handling bank accounts. Many have literate members, with a few fluent in European languages. They lack integrated extension staff. Even so, they constitute readily available core groups of community institutions that enjoy respect, support and goodwill within their districts and constituencies. These institutions have strong potential and can be said to constitute under-utilized capacity to address community concerns.

From the experience of the project, we learnt that it is important for consultants to be flexible and innovative with their methodology. There were instances where project beneficiaries could not clearly see the relationship between the various dimensions of the planning or maintenance phases and their specific requirements. We also learnt that experts should be open, direct and fully honest with the group leadership. A realistic awareness of a project's capabilities is fundamental to avoid raising false expectations. The project taught us to be prepared for the unexpected. For instance, in Brufut, a whole building meant for refurbishment collapsed due to age and overuse, requiring additional time and extra funding.

An important lesson from the project was that the community field extension staff is not always able to transcend local politics and social machinations. Women's groups can be infiltrated or influenced by non-productive, idle, beachside men hustlers who attempt to create chaos and confusion, leading to situations that require tact and careful handling by the management. We also learnt that not all women in leadership positions are necessarily able to take on higher responsibilities; hence, a case-by case assessment in training is called for. Smaller groups of women fish-smokers needed greater assistance to form higher apex platform associations in order to inform and influence policies. Probably, the most important lesson was that new technology and equipment have to be accessible, simple to use, socio-culturally acceptable, financially affordable and geographically adaptable in order to be accepted by women. ❏

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