Hunger • Nutrition • Climate Justice • 2013

A New Dialogue : Putting People at the Heart of Global Development

15-16 April 2013 - Dublin, Ireland

Getting a seat at the table: fisherfolk empowerment for policy change in the Caribbean

Across the Caribbean, people involved in small-scale fisheries (whether fishing, preparing or selling fisheries products) have organised themselves to advocate for policies that increase their livelihood and food security, and their resilience to risks, including climate change.

Overview

The insular Caribbean region is composed of 31 island nations and territories, varying greatly in size and wealth. Populations range from more than 11 million in Cuba to around 50,000 in St. Kitts-Nevis and even less in some territories. Per capita gross national income is around US$22,000 in the Bahamas but US$650 in Haiti.[1] But although the islands are also culturally and politically diverse, they have many features in common, not least their relationship with and use of the sea that surrounds them. As small island developing states, they are highly vulnerable to natural disasters, global economic shocks and climate change. Even in the wealthier countries, rural and urban poverty is widespread and persistent.

The islands are intrinsically food insecure: agricultural production is constrained by centuries of land degradation starting in the colonial plantation era, and constantly undermined by natural disasters such as hurricanes. Many of the foods in local diets are imported. Given their open economies, the countries cannot regulate import prices, and these can spike due to external market conditions. Fish have long been a staple, providing an important source of protein in Caribbean diets and a harvestable resource in straitened times. Fish also contribute significantly to income and employment, especially in coastal communities.[2] Declines in fish stocks or small-scale fisheries production therefore have a direct and immediate impact on food security and nutrition throughout the Caribbean region.

Climate change is likely to affect the types and relative prevalence of Caribbean marine species, with potentially serious implications for commercial stocks and markets. Rising sea temperatures may drive some species out of their traditional habitats. More intense tropical cyclones will mean greater damage to fishing boats and infrastructure and fewer days at sea. The types of boats now used may not be suited to future conditions. Increasing carbon dioxide in the water adversely affects inshore marine species, and indirectly coral reefs and other important breeding habitats.[3] Climate change thus represents a major threat to an industry on which the livelihoods of many coastal communities, and the food security of the region, depends.

Fisherfolk (used here to mean everyone involved in small-scale fishing, whether through fishing, processing or selling) have long been raising their voices collectively in times of crisis. In many countries, these experiences of coming together led to national fisherfolk organisations that could mobilise the community against threats. For example, the Antigua and Barbuda Fisheries Alliance was formed in the mid-1990s to oppose the threat from neighbouring countries' illegal fishing. These national organisations formed the basis for a regional network, the

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Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations, which has empowered fisherfolk to advocate for policies to address the threats of climate change.

Interventions and impacts

Getting organised. Over the years, some such national fisherfolk organisations became cooperatives or businesses in order to provide services and improve the sector's viability. This earnt the organisations money that could be used to support fisherfolk. But other national associations continued to operate informally, often with little or no ongoing activity.

In 2002, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)[4] established the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) to support the sector's development. The new institution wanted to develop partnerships with stakeholders, including fisherfolk, but lacked the capacity to collaborate with stakeholders individually. It commissioned the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) to survey national fisherfolk organisations. That work gave these organisations the opportunity to come together, share experiences and discuss how they could support each other and the sector more effectively. With encouragement from the CRFM, the organisations decided in 2004 to create a regional grouping, the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations (CNFO), choosing a network over a more rigid organisational structure promoted by CRFM. During the next three years, with CRFM and CTA support, the national organisations developed an agenda of strategic actions for CNFO to take to strengthen the national organisations.

CNFO's four areas of strategic focus are information, capacity building, policy advocacy and policy engagement. From the beginning, it has worked in partnership with others to achieve its overall aim of securing sustainable livelihoods for fisherfolk and viability for the sector. It has longstanding strategic partnerships with the CRFM and CTA (on participation in regional fisheries policy processes), the University of the West Indies' Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (on knowledge generation and exchange), the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (on capacity development and policy advocacy), the FAO (on sustainable fisheries governance), and several others.

Becoming empowered. Since 2007, CNFO has supported its members in structured capacity building, aimed at increasing their ability to support the sector and effect policy change. The focus has been on developing leadership and management skills including advocacy and negotiation, policy analysis and development of common positions This process has involved formal meetings, mentoring, information and practical exchanges, and peer-to-peer support.

Speaking out. As its members have gained knowledge and confidence, CNFO has become an increasingly effective channel for fisherfolk advocacy. While they have tapped knowledge and expertise from their partners, the main resource in developing their advocacy positions is the community's own considerable knowledge. A major route to empowerment has been the affirmation of fisherfolk's own scientific expertise, derived from days and years of being on the sea observing its processes and changes.

Food security has been an important advocacy issue from the start. CNFO and its members promote food sovereignty, whereby national food and nutrition requirements are met through local industries. In this way, regional food security and livelihood security for food producers become inextricably linked. The aim is to get politicians and decision makers to go beyond acknowledging the importance of fish and its nutritional value, to considering that value when making investment decisions that could affect the sector.

Climate change is a very real issue for fisherfolk, who are among the first to suffer from its effects. CNFO's engagement started by building the members' knowledge about climate change and its potential impacts on the sector. Members could then identify actions they needed to take in response to climate change, and also actions required of others, for example infrastructure to protect fish landing beaches from erosion induced by sea level rise. They have now crafted messages that offer practical policy directions to reduce the sector's vulnerability. Using an ecosystems approach, the messages highlight climate change's potential impacts on fisheries habitats and human livelihoods, and the need for adaptation responses by fisherfolk and other stakeholders. Such responses should take account of the social and cultural values of fishing; respect traditional practices; and aim for optimum sustainable use of fisheries-based goods and services.

CNFO's initial aim is to get national and regional fisheries policy to address current and anticipated climate change effects. The network would then like to stimulate adaptation planning processes involving all marine-related sectors and interests. CNFO realises that it cannot have a real impact, or even demand to be involved in adaptation planning processes, until the region's governments begin taking climate change more seriously. For most

Fisherfolk repair their nets at Claxton Bay, Trinidad and Tobago

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countries, it remains a niche issue dealt with solely by ministries of environment. There is no mandate or incentive for other agencies to engage, even those dealing with sectors that, like fisheries and agriculture, are already affected. And despite the need for cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary responses to climate impacts, there are still few if any effective processes of interagency planning and collaboration.

Main achievements and challenges

Accomplishments. CNFO is still far from where it wants to be, but it is getting stronger as a network, with greater fisherfolk participation despite the costs involved. Its proudest accomplishment is its growing cadre of strong leaders, which has in turn strengthened the member organisations. Many of the national leaders have become confident, knowledgeable and eloquent policy advocates who have earned the respect of policymakers in their countries and regionally.

With its growing ability to open doors and promote its positions, CNFO has increased fisherfolk influence on national and regional fisheries policy. It has contributed to drafting a CARICOM Common Fisheries Policy, gained observer status on the CRFM, and collaborated with the fisheries management agencies in many member countries. These accomplishments represent a major cultural shift for governments in the region, which have long resisted working in partnership with small-scale resource users. There is still a long way to go, however, before governments have the desire and the capacity to institutionalise more equitable and stakeholder-driven ways of working.

Challenges. Fisherfolk are notoriously resistant to formal organisation, because involvement in an organisation takes time away from their work. So the issues that CNFO engages in, and the work it does, must bring members greater benefit than the high opportunity costs of involvement. While CNFO advocates for broader policy objectives, such as food security and better inter-sectoral coordination, it approaches everything it does from the perspective of the sector's survival and resilience. The strong partnerships that CNFO has developed, and the project resources that these have brought, have also partially overcome organisational costs.

A bigger challenge, because it requires change from others, is reforming the region's rigidly sectoral approach to policymaking, in which national policy and planning issues that touch on every aspect of peoples lives and livelihoods (such as climate change and food security), are consigned to a single department of government and barely considered by others. This structure has been impervious to change until now, and it will likely take more than the work of the CNFO to shift it. Many Caribbean countries have established multi-stakeholder fisheries advisory bodies that bring together some of the actors, but key sectors may be left out since membership is usually at the discretion of the relevant minister. Few if any countries have effective, formal intersectoral processes mandated by legislation.

CNFO is however not giving up, and hopes that by working with and through its diverse and influential partners, it can nudge the region towards a more integrated approach to policy and planning. Its vision is for national and regional inter-sectoral policy platforms dealing with the marine environment, where all relevant agencies and stakeholders, including the fisherfolk, have an equal place at a single decision-making table.

Finally, there is the continuing challenge of getting policymakers to give attention to the sector and take the time to listen to fisherfolk's concerns and proposals. The situation has been slowly improving over the past twenty years; one indicator of progress is the CNFO's observer status (though not yet full membership) in the CRFM. Other marine resource sectors, including large-scale fisheries, tourism, and oil and gas, remain more influential: they are better organised and have more money and power to promote their objectives. In contrast, fisherfolk sometimes have to pass up hard-won offers to participate in regional planning processes because the invitation comes without funding for travel.

The fisherfolk's positions are also often undermined by the scientific community, much of which continues to see marine issues through a conservation rather than sustainable development perspective. Views of sometimes ill-informed international senior scientists steer many major regional marine management projects, while fisherfolk's traditional knowledge is ignored or discounted. The result is projects that offer little for, and can sometimes actually threaten, fisherfolk livelihoods.

By becoming more empowered, fisherfolk are better equipped to confront these continuing inequities and biases, but much still needs to be done to sensitise other sectors to the value of small-scale fisheries for national development. One strategy has been to engage directly with the public to get widespread understanding of and support for fisherfolk objectives. In this, CNFO has built on members' successes in generating public support during past crises.

Lessons

Collective action is a powerful means of empowerment for marginalised people, but for people to engage, they must see a link to their own needs. Caribbean fisherfolk's primary motivation has been to foster change that can make their livelihoods more secure. Many such changes would also improve food security and climate resilience for the region generally. The CNFO and its members have been able to mobilise fisherfolk by demonstrating the benefits to them, in terms of knowledge, information, access to resources and policy influence.

Partnerships are crucial for empowerment processes. Partners must be strategically chosen and partnerships must be equitable and well-nurtured. CNFO's partners have provided many tools for empowerment, such as influence, mobility, information and knowledge sharing.

Effective leadership and clear objectives are essential to group empowerment. CNFO's investment in building leadership capacity has paid off in the growing assurance and strength of its voice. Its attention to strategic planning and programming has made it possible to measure, and take courage from, the progress it has made.

Groups can empower themselves to take effective action without being formally organised. Many of CNFO's member organisations continue to operate informally, with long periods of dormancy, yet can still mobilise when action is needed, and can still exert leadership and be repositories of knowledge.

Effecting change requires more than empowerment; it also requires a receptive policy environment. CNFO has got a 'foot in the door' in many places as it has gained confidence and knowledge. But its major goals have been stymied by the lack of processes and institutions capable of addressing the network's objectives in an integrated way: CNFO has demonstrated its right to a seat at the table, but the table itself is not yet adequate to the task.

Notes

[1] Source: World Bank statistics. [2] CRFM. 2012. *Diagnostic Study to Determine Poverty Levels in CARICOM Fisheries Communities -Technical Document.* CRFM Technical & Advisory Document - Number. 2012 / 3. Volume I, 398p. [3] Cambers. C., R. Claro, R. Juman, S. Scott. 2008. *Climate change impacts on coastal and marine biodiversity in the insular Caribbean: Report of Working Group II, Climate Change and Biodiversity in the Insular Caribbean.* CANARI Technical Report No.382. [4] CARICOM is a political and economic grouping of 15 Caribbean member states and five territories that have associate status.