



Fisherfolk's Ways of Claiming Food Sovereignty Through Access and Control of Coastal Resources

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ABSTRACT. For the fisherfolk communities, food sovereignty can be asserted through direct involvement in identifying and implementing appropriate fishery management tools aimed at protecting the coastal and marine resources from destruction and overexploitation. This paper looks at the situation of fisherfolk in the Philippines and examines how the Center for Empowerment and Resource Development (CERD) implements community-led coastal resource management programs, which illustrate how food sovereignty can be achieved in the fishery sector.

KEYWORDS. fisheries · fisherfolk · CERD · coastal communities · resource management

INTRODUCTION

A key to people empowerment is the presence of people's organizations that have the knowledge, skills, and attitude to initiate actions and lead the community in the campaign for their rights to self-organization; decision making in local governance; availability of basic social services and economic assistance from the government; and, more important, the control, use, and management of territorial coastal resources. An active and vigilant civil society can pressure the government to perform its responsibilities and duties as well as undertake its own independent alternative development initiatives.

However, the situation of the municipal fishers on the whole is that they are poor. This poverty brings about an attitude in fishers that emphasizes an orientation toward survival. Their needs are numerous and immediate, thus solutions are sought to answer those short-term needs. The needs brought about by poverty often create an attitude among fishers to pursue their own self-centered interests and to do so without regard for the adverse effects in the future to themselves, the rest of the community, and the future generation (CERD 1998).

In this context the question would be: Would the fishers have the capacity to manage the coastal resources? What would be the role of the government in a fisher-led resource management? How can food sovereignty materialize in the fishery sector? This paper examines the situation of fisherfolk in the Philippines before describing how the Center for Empowerment and Resource Development (CERD) implements community-led coastal resource management programs that not only provide answers to the aforementioned questions but also illustrate how food sovereignty can be achieved in the fishery sector.

THE SITUATION OF THE FISHERFOLK: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The Philippines, composed of 7,100 islands and islets, is an archipelagic country located in Southeast Asia. Its boundaries are formed by three large bodies of water: on the west and north by the South China Sea; on the east by the Pacific Ocean; and on the south by the Celebes Sea and coastal waters of Borneo. The total land area of the Philippines is 300,000 square kilometers or 30 million hectares. It constitutes 2 percent of the total land area of the world and ranks fifty-seventh among the 146 countries of the world in terms of physical size (Department of Agriculture 2010). Being an archipelagic country, fishing is an important source of livelihood for people in the coastal areas.

According to the National Statistics Office, there are a total of 1,371,676 municipal fishers as of 2002. They have an average monthly income of PHP 3,000 or PHP 75-100 per day during lean months.

Fishery and marine resources are declining. In focus group discussions conducted by CERD, fishers are reporting that fish catch declined significantly. Their usual catch is a low of two to five kilograms compared to twenty kilograms in the 1970s. This is usually caused by illegal and destructive fishing and intrusion of commercial fishers in municipal waters,¹ resulting in decline in fish stock as well as destruction of coral resources and sea-grass beds. In addition, mangrove resources are also destroyed by illegal cutting and conversion into fishponds or beach resorts.

Besides the low income, the fishers have limited knowledge and skills on alternative income sources. They also have limited access to capital and technology.

Women's existence in the fisher sector is usually overlooked. They are perceived as merely "wives of fishers," an indication that their roles and activities in the fisheries are unrecognized. Fishery activities are seen

as mainly fish catching. Women's roles in preharvest work (like net mending, preparation of baits for the hook-and-line gears) and postharvest activities (which include fish sorting, selling, and processing) are either unrecognized or seen as merely supplementary.

Aside from their roles in the fishery, the women are primarily responsible in the domestic sphere, taking care of the household and looking after the needs of their husbands and children.

The decline in fish catch compels the women to engage in other income-generating activities that put additional burden on them. Because they usually have no capital for small-scale businesses, women turn to the mangroves and sea-grass areas, collecting shells and other resources for food. But these resources are being degraded as well, usually due to mangrove conversion into fishponds or beach resorts, or owing to illegal mangrove cutting for firewood and other uses. With the degradation of mangrove and sea-grass resources, the women's sources of income are affected. Thus they are forced to seek income from other sources, like doing household work in more affluent families, creating products like mats, etc.

Policies related to fishery tend to be conflicting. While the Philippine Fisheries Code is anchored on the principles of food security and protection of the rights of fisherfolk as the overriding considerations in the utilization, management, development, conservation, and protection of the fishery resources, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources also promotes increased production from aquaculture, which tends to result in conversion of mangrove areas into fishponds. Promotion of the country to boost tourism also encourages investors to establish beach resorts that result in dislocation of fisherfolk communities. The foreshore areas are supposed to be public domains—meaning, they cannot be privatized—but some individuals manage to get titles and claims to foreshore areas, leading to physical and economic dislocation of the fisherfolk communities.

THE CENTER FOR EMPOWERMENT AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

CERD is a nongovernment organization (NGO) that has been operating for thirty-two years now. It envisions empowered, self-reliant coastal communities sustainably living in harmony with abundant and diverse coastal and marine environment, and as such would like to contribute to saving and restoring coastal environment through capability building of Community-Based Fishery Integrated Resource Management (CB-

FIRM) local institutions, creating model communities and learning areas, and building partnerships.

It was in 1978 when an informal group of professionals embarked on a community-based health program in a farming community in Pangasinan, using it as an entry point in organizing the people toward solving their various problems. Maintaining links and sharing experiences with other development organizations helped the group focus its efforts on fishing communities where only but a few development agencies have been involved with.

In 1983, the group concentrated on conducting studies to identify fisherfolk problems and issues, holding consciousness-raising activities and providing training for the fisherfolk. CERD was then formalized and registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission in September 1983 as Community Extension and Research for Development. After a series of reflections, evaluations, and other changes in the organization in 1996, the name was eventually changed to Center for Empowerment and Resource Development, Inc. The name was changed (a) to dispel the impression that CERD is an agency attached to BFAR and (b) to affirm its essence, which is fisherfolk empowerment through coastal resources development (CERD 2003).

Facilitating the emergence of sustainable, vibrant, and diverse coastal communities of empowered men and women fisherfolk forms the core of its philosophy. Such an empowerment can only be achieved by making them realize their human right to effectively control, use, and manage their fishing grounds and resources sustainably anchored in a profound concern for biodiversity and the welfare of the current and future generations.

The process of empowerment also ensures increasing political, economic, and social guarantees and benefits. Such processes facilitate solidarity with other sectors, classes, and people that work for a national and international community where social and environmental justice, gender fairness, and people-centered development reign.

CERD believes that the right to use and manage natural resources—such as land, water, and biodiversity—are in the hands of those who produce the food. Hence, there is a need to have a transfer of control and management rights over the fishery and other aquatic resources from the state to the local communities. This is people empowerment for the fisherfolk and coastal community. This means that fisherfolk involvement should not be limited to electing local and national

officials but should extend to development planning, fishery policy formulations, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO MANAGE THE COASTAL RESOURCES

CERD's major program is the Fishery Integrated Resource Management for Economic Development (FIRMED). The program facilitates the formation of fisherfolk organizations and enables coastal communities to engage in sustainable fishery management, policy advocacy, governance, and livelihood development.

FIRMED is a multidisciplinary approach to fishery management as it integrates development strategies such as community organizing, capability-building, human resource development, sustainable fisheries management, socioeconomic and enterprise development; rehabilitation and conservation work, policy advocacy, and networking; and institutional development toward addressing the problems and issues of men and women fishers and the entire coastal community.

The program was previously implemented in Balayan and Pagapas Bays in Batangas, as well as in Maqueda Bay and Samar Sea in Samar. The fisherfolk organizations established in the said areas continue the protection and management of their coastal resources even after the completion of the CERD project.

Currently the FIRMED Program is implemented in four municipalities across the country: Biri and Mondragon in Northern Samar, and Hinatuan and Marihatag in Surigao del Sur. The implementation led to the formation of thirty-three fisherfolk organizations with 849 members, of which 508 are male and 341 are female. There are already two fisherfolk federations: the Nagkakaisang Mangingisda ng Hinatuan (NAMA HIN) and Mondragon Atamanon Lugar-dagat Asikasuhon Sunod nga henerasyon Upod Gugma Ig-undong (MALASUGI). These organizations are capable of formulating, implementing, assessing, and evaluating their own projects as well as managing their respective organizations, with their own set of rules and regulations.

These organizations, because of the members' poverty, low educational attainment, and lack of access to information, were unaware of their rights and capacity to lead the sustainable utilization and management of their coastal resources. Thus, information, particularly on their rights as primary stakeholder of the coastal resources, was provided to them. Analysis of their community problems

and issues, and identification of strategies to address them were also facilitated.

After undergoing participatory researches, consultations, organizing, and planning as well as orientations and skills training, these fisherfolk organizations now manage to have primary access and control over the coastal resources. Their management instruments are as follows:

- One women-managed area in Hinatuan (19.5 hectares). This is a mangrove area that serves as gleaning site of women. Taking note of the declining yield of shells, the women realized the need to protect these mangroves to ensure sustainable harvest of shells for food.
- Eight marine protected areas (MPAs) in Hinatuan (total area of 482 hectares). These MPAs have a no-take zone, which the organizations guard against illegal fishers. They realized that fish catch has been declining and they need to protect their fishing ground to ensure sustainable fishery harvests.
- Three fish sanctuaries in Biri (total area of 37.7 hectares). This is also guarded by the fisherfolk organization against illegal fishers.
- Mangrove reforestation and protection especially against illegal cutters (546 hectares in Biri and 946 hectares in Hinatuan).
- Three demarcated fishery area in Mondragon (2,900 hectares). As stated in RA 8550, these areas are designated for primary use of the small fisherfolk in Mondragon.

Through partnerships with their respective local governments, the LGUs recognize and support fisherfolk organizations as legitimate stewards of the coastal resources. They have accredited the fisherfolk organizations, included them in local bodies like Fishery Aquatic Resource Management Councils, and deputized them as fish wardens. As deputized fish wardens, the fisherfolk organizations are authorized to apprehend illegal fishers in partnership with the Philippine National Police.

The fisherfolk organizations address not only coastal resource management issues but also other community concerns such as potable water (level three in Biri and Hinatuan) and community

pharmacy (Botika sa Barangay) in Biri. Other projects implemented include boat transportation and day-care center in Hinatuan.

The fisherfolk organizations have already established credibility and track record with their respective local governments, thus the local government recognizes them as partners in coastal resource management. The municipal councils approved the proposed ordinances that protect the coastal resources. Partnerships were forged for the information and education drive regarding the Municipal Comprehensive Fishery Ordinances that they jointly drafted. The local government also adopted other fisherfolk-proposed development programs like access to social services such as potable water.

EFFECTS AND IMPACTS ON COASTAL COMMUNITIES

The community-based coastal resource management efforts of the fisherfolk organizations have been accepted and supported by the communities. Increased awareness of the importance of the coastal and marine resources to their livelihood led to a strong commitment of these communities to manage their coastal resources, as manifested by the following:

- The fisherfolk organizations mobilize their youth to conduct biophysical data gathering and processing with minimal assistance from partner NGO and LGU, in the form of financial and equipment support.
- The fisherfolk organizations elect officials with resource management as primary agenda.
- The fisherfolk organizations already have courage in addressing gender issues as manifested by filing of case against a rapist and seeking rehabilitation of rape victim.
- Even nonmembers of the fisherfolk organizations participate in coastal resource management activities such as coastal cleanup, mangrove reforestation, and reporting of known fishery law violators.

Access to basic human rights of the fisherfolk communities has improved with the implementation of projects like potable water, medicines through Botika sa Barangay, transportation through the boat project, especially in remote island sitios.

The fisherfolks' economic situation has improved with sustained livelihood activities such as seaweed farming. Their income also increased from PHP 3,000 per month in 2005 to PHP 6,000-9,000 per month in 2009.²

Some species of fish—such as gizzard shad (*kabasi*), rabbitfish (*siganid*), and sea bass—have been “returning” to their fishing grounds as a result of protection efforts.

The efforts of these coastal communities are already showing results, like significant reduction in illegal fishing. In some areas, illegal fishing has been totally eliminated.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FISHERFOLK COMMUNITIES

For the fisherfolk communities, food sovereignty was asserted through their direct involvement in identifying and implementing appropriate fishery management tools aimed at protecting the coastal and marine resources from destruction and overexploitation. They have lobbied for the approval of local government regulatory fisheries policies (e.g., assigning the fifteen-kilometer municipal waters for use of the municipal fishers).³ In this way they have ensured that fish production or, in this context, fish harvesting is within ecologically sound method because they are preventing overextraction of fishery products by commercial fishers in municipal waters, as well as preventing the illegal fishers from continuing their destructive ways like using dynamite, cyanide, and fine-mesh nets.

The fishers have also asserted their rights to fishery governance through their inclusion in government-mandated councils like the Municipal and Barangay Development Councils and the Fishery Aquatic Resource Management Councils. Most important, they have proven that they are more than capable of enforcing fishery laws through their designation as Bantay-Dagat or Fish Wardens, where men and women are empowered to go after violators of fishery laws and ordinances. In this way they have asserted their rights to use and manage the coastal waters.

LESSONS LEARNED

There is indeed no other stakeholder that has more right to manage and utilize the coastal and marine resources than the fisherfolk themselves.

They are the primary stakeholders who understand the situation and thus have the capacity to manage the said resources. Local government support must be geared toward recognizing and providing spaces for their management decisions to be mainstreamed in government plans and programs, if it wants to achieve sustainable resource management.

Community support and ownership of the resource management strategies are crucial factors for these efforts to be effective and sustainable. Other community members have to realize the importance of protecting and managing the resources. To build community support and ownership, they have to be involved in all phases of project cycle—from project development to evaluation. In addition, there is a need to effect change in the communities' values and perspectives from pure exploitation toward sustainable use, protection, and management.

Resource management is effective if involvement of both men and women in planning, decision making, and implementation is ensured. It also facilitates positive changes in men and women's relation in the household.

Community and local government partnership could happen if fisherfolk are empowered and capable of negotiating their concerns and agenda. Awareness of their rights would also help boost their confidence and capacities.

Resource management efforts should be complemented by livelihood interventions, which also help lessen overextraction of fishery resources.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

The coastal communities are already experiencing the effects of extreme changes in climate and weather conditions. They had experienced too much rainfall and stronger typhoons causing floods. The stronger winds brought about by stronger typhoons exposed the coastal communities to stronger wave actions, making it more difficult for them to go fishing or travel from the islands to the mainland.

The small islands are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise as it can cause substantial loss of lands. With the coastal communities living in foreshore areas, loss of settlement is a real threat, which puts more burden on the women, who are usually in charge of household maintenance.

Climate change and sea-level rise increase the communities' vulnerabilities. While they protect the fishery resources from

overextraction, stronger typhoons prevent them from doing their livelihood. Their settlements get destroyed. They are more exposed to health hazards. Hence there is a need to come up with measures to reduce their vulnerabilities in terms of food sovereignty, secured settlements, and health.

Fishing is a livelihood vulnerable to climate change and disasters. Frequent typhoons and strong waves mean frequent time that fishers cannot go out to fish. Hence there is a need for fisherfolk communities to secure disaster-resilient livelihoods, without abandoning the protection and management of coastal resources. ❁

NOTES

1. Philippine law (RA 8550) states that fishing vessels weighing three gross tons or more are not allowed to fish within municipal waters (fifteen kilometers from the shore). The local government, however, may permit small and medium commercial fishing vessels to operate within 10.1 to 15 kilometer area from the shoreline in municipal waters.
2. This is based on estimated average fish catch and other livelihood activities.
3. The Philippine Fisheries Code defines municipal fishers as those engaged in fishing using fishing vessels of three gross tons or less, or fishing not requiring the use of fishing vessels.

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