Improving benefits for poor, landless fishers, Bangladesh
Oxbow Lakes Small-Scale Fishermen Project (OLSFP)

**Context and background**

**Who benefits from the project?**
The target group comprises 11 500 households that depend on 2.5 acres of land or less or who earn an income equivalent to or less than the income that can be derived from 2.5 acres of land. These project participants can be further defined as follows: 3 200 households involved mainly in carp fishing; 1 500 households engaged in fishing miscellaneous fish species; 6 800 households who depend to a lesser but significant degree on fishing; 4 200 households who occasionally engage in fishing; and 500 fisher households headed by women.

**Why are they poor?**
Fishing communities are an important group of landless people with incomes corresponding to absolute poverty level. Traditionally, fishermen are the poorest among the rural poor and belong to a marginalised stratum of society. With the increasing population, the person/land ratio is increasing, compelling people to seek sources of income outside of agriculture, for example in fisheries, where fishermen sell their labour to earn their income.

**What did the project do for them?**
The Oxbow Lakes Small-Scale Fishermen Project (OLSFP) specifically aimed at increasing the lakes’ productivity and empowering the poorest users of these lakes to fully participate in aquaculture development in the lakes. In particular, the catch attributed to each fisherman was to increase.

**How did people participate in the project?**
People participated in the project through their organization in groups of fishermen who held licences; operated the lakes with the technical assistance of the Department of Fisheries (DOF); invested in the productive capacity of the lakes; and were held responsible for the maintenance of the lakes.
**The land and water governance (LWG) innovation**

The problems identified were:
- the public lakes and ponds were in a derelict condition;
- they were always in deficit, to be covered by the treasury;
- landless fishermen could not access leases of lakes and ponds; and
- one-year leases did not provide an incentive for sustainable management of lakes and ponds.

The innovation consisted in negotiating a 50-year lease on public lakes and ponds with the Ministry of Land for the benefit of groups of poor, landless fishermen.

The innovation of a long-term lease was supported by accompanying measures to build the capacity of fishermen organized in groups of 50 to 250 people:
- raising the share of the catch to 50 per cent at least.
- establishing common property regime (CPR) for the groups of fishers to ensure equity of training, responsibility, and share of benefits.

**The LWG innovation context**

**Physical context**
Derelict conditions of public water bodies: poor stocking and poor maintenance (overgrowing vegetation).

**Economic context**
Fishermen traditionally get 40 per cent of the catch (25 per cent in private lakes).
Public water bodies are leased for one year, by auction.
The treasury makes up for any losses sustained.

**Legal context**
Public water bodies are the property of the Ministry of Land.
The Ministry of Fisheries plays a role in the development and maintenance of fishing lakes and ponds.
1989 New Fisheries Management Policy of Bangladesh stated that the lease system for the exploitation of public bodies would be progressively discontinued and the fishing rights would be reverted to licensed fishermen.

**Stakeholders’ context**
For each lake, there is a government-appointed manager.
Fingerling traders are also credit providers.
Fishermen have their know-how to sell.
Despite the disposition of the Hanafi Islamic law granting women 50 per cent of the rights to land that men enjoy, they do not have direct access to productive resources.

**Implementation experience**

The project was implemented between 1990 and 1997.

Through District Commissioners, the Ministry of Land handed the lakes over to the project over two years. In turn, the project supported the organization of fishermen into lake management groups (LMGs) and reverted lake leases to them.

A first key step was the organization of such groups. Membership criteria were refined over two years of experience, and ensured that only target project participants were given membership:
- access to less than 0.4 ha or household income inferior to Tk 10 000 per year;
- participation in fishing activities for at least 80 per cent of the total fishing days during the year; and
- agreement to equal sharing of costs and income.

Resistance came from the elite, who could see their sphere of influence and/or their income threatened.

Capacity-building of the newly formed LMGs concerned:
- technical matters (stocking, for example)
- open and simple procedures for key operations (fish stocking and sale), election of committee members for one year (no monopoly of technical or marketing knowledge)
In order to decrease the dependency of LMGs on their credit (and fingerling) providers, calls for tenders were made for the purchase and stocking of fingerlings and fish was sold by auction at the landing site.

The NGO BRAC, which has know-how in microcredit, provided for credit requirements. The Bangladesh Krishi Bank answered loan requirements.

The same approach was used to transfer pond leases to women’s pond farming groups (PFGs). These groups were smaller than the groups organized on lakes and counted between 15 and 50 members.

**SWOT analysis**

**Strengths**
A clear and long-term stake in lake fisheries management was devolved to a definite group of fishermen, or to women. Women had a strong incentive to struggle to obtain and retain their rights. A long-term structure for credit was provided by NGOs for women groups (15 to 50 people).

**Weaknesses**
Every ten years, there is the administrative burden of renewing the lease. A long-term institutional structure for credit was not found for fishermen’s groups (50 to 250 people). NGO and civil society organizations gave poor support to women establishing their users’ rights.

**Opportunities**
Increased income for fishermen through semi-intensive fish culture. Training in CPR method and fish culture systems. Additional income was ensured for women from fish culture and gardening. Households improved, as well as the social status of women.

**Threats**
Renewal of lease is an opportunity for powerful entities to lobby and deny renewal.

Politically-based eviction of women from the land they were leased. Weak position of fishermen with credit providers, who also provide fingerlings. Poor cohesion in a group of fishermen would lead to the apparition of a new elite of fishers, taking a higher share of fish income. Inability to solve internal conflicts would lead to a return to the former derelict conditions of the lakes.

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**Results and impact**

Seven years after the project closed, 15 lakes (65 per cent) were visited out of the 23 lakes of the project area, as well as the ponds of 9 lakes (40 per cent).

Both lakes and ponds showed improved productivity, as compared to their state before the project. There were high levels of stocking and income; infrastructure had improved; and maintenance was good (no overgrowing vegetation).

The share of income the fishermen get is (compared with the traditional 25 per cent ad 40 per cent share fishermen get on private and public lakes respectively):
- 60 to 70 per cent of total income in 8 lakes;
- 40 to 50 per cent in another 3; and
- 20 to 30 per cent in 2 lakes.

This corresponds to an income over the year of about Tk 300 a day, compared to the peak agricultural wage of Tk 80 a day.

As for women, through less than 20 days of work, they earn a daily income over the year of between Tk 150 and Tk 500, without taking into account vegetables grown on the pond embankments.

The most successful LMGs have become bankable in the commercial bank system.

Most houses’ conditions improved, sometimes livestock was purchased. Some people have used their additional income to take a lease on land.
The smaller groups (on ponds) were easier to organize and proved more sustainable. Indeed, the NGO BRAC is continuing its microcredit services to them, while it stopped providing it to the bigger groups (on lakes) that now have to turn either to the commercial system or to their local entrepreneurs (fingerling traders).

Role of IFAD

IFAD played a key role in identifying the need and the possible options.

Conditions and potential for replication

The innovation has now completed its cycle. It has been a success, with a sustainable increase of fishermen’s income and improved lake conditions. It is ready for replication, but could achieve a greater impact if a credit provider was available for groups of 50-250 members.

Various organizations replicated the idea of long-term leases, but none of them obtained a 50-year lease.
- BRAC sometimes obtained 3-year leases, which were not long enough for users’ sustainable investments or stocking. As a consequence, the replication was dropped after a few years.
- The World Bank, with its Fourth Fisheries Project, obtained 10-year lease arrangements.
- ICLARM replicated the idea with its Community Based Fisheries Management and obtained 15-year leases.
- IFAD itself obtained 20-year leases for its replication project, Aquaculture Development Project.

The variety of stakeholders’ interests needs to be further analysed in order to identify an optimum enabling environment as the condition for a successful long-term replication.

General lessons learned

On the whole, the NGO BRAC has played a crucial role in:
- mobilizing fishermen and women project participants for extension; and
- tailoring methods and themes to suit their specific needs.

The OLSFP project was a pioneer with regard to the method of transferring water bodies to common property resources management systems.

As the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project was formulated along similar principles for Nepal, a comparison will most likely give more global lessons on the transfer of natural resources to group management systems.

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Links

The full case studies, plus a synthesis paper on the results and lessons learned, are available at:
www.ifad.org/events/water
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