

SOUTH ASIA WORKSHOP ON FISHERIES AND COASTAL AREA MANAGEMENT

26-29 September 1996
Madras, India

Statement of the Workshop

Background

Social activists, researchers, representatives of fishworkers' organizations and their supporters, from Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and India in the South Asian Region, as well as from several other countries, shared their concerns and views on fisheries and aquaculture, the livelihood struggles of the communities in the coastal regions, and on coastal area management,

Coastal regions of South Asia are extraordinarily rich in ecological diversity. This richness has been historically maintained and cared for by the women and men living along the coast. Fishing communities, through generations of interactions with the sea, rivers, lagoons and other elements in nature, have played a particularly important role in this process. Women of these communities have always played a vital part in sustaining and nurturing fisheries and fishing communities. Unique modes of human-environment interactions have evolved in this region. These have been based on people's knowledge of the terrestrial and the aquatic milieu, as well as of the highly complex and sensitive interactions between them.

People in the Asian subcontinent share common rivers and seas. Caring for fragile and interdependent coastal ecosystems is a crucial strategic concern of the people of this region. Due to this common concern, participants met to explore ways of working together, sharing experience and providing mutual support on their particular struggles. It was felt that solidarity at the people's level is extremely important to resolve issues of major importance in the region. Nothing the increasing struggles of coastal communities for their livelihood rights, participants came together to express their solidarity and pledge their support to this struggle. Participants also reiterated the importance of understanding mutual needs, and, where appropriate, sharing their resources equitably.

Introduction

Coastal areas are not simply geographic locations proximate to the world's oceans. They are arrangements of complex, diverse and fragile ecosystems, unique in nature. These very features require special attention. Coastal ecosystems, such as mangroves, coral reefs, backwaters, estuaries, lagoons and seagrass beds, besides performing crucial coastal protection functions, provide rich spawning and breeding grounds for fish and other aquatic organisms.

Another important dimension is the vital contribution that coastal ecosystems make to sustaining livelihood, particularly of fishing communities. From both an economic and livelihood perspective, fisheries are one of the most important of the resources available in coastal areas.

Living aquatic resources make a crucial contribution to food security, particularly in the coastal zone, as a source of high value protein, providing the sustenance that supports livelihoods, social structures and economic development. In South Asia fish contributes more than half of the animal protein intake in the diet of coastal communities. In the Maldives and Bangladesh, for instance, fish contributes as much as 80 percent of the animal protein intake. This has direct nutritional implications for the fishery dependent, poor and marginalized coastal communities.

Governments in the South Asian region have, however, not sufficiently recognized the ecological, human and economic significance of coastal areas, and of the resources within them. These dimensions have not been sufficiently incorporated in environmental laws and regulations and in the macro economic policies pursued by governments in the region.

While the workshop specifically focused on the coastal zone, attention was drawn to the fragmented and compartmentalized view, which often dominates mainstream thinking. Coastal zones are part of the broader ecological horizons that include inland areas and waters. Activities in these have direct implications for the coast. The inter-relationships between agricultural activities and marine activities were discussed and recognized. In Bangladesh, although agriculture is predominantly a flood-plain activity, it is directly connected to the coastal ecosystem through major rivers and tributaries leading to the sea. Thus rice and fish is produced from the same agricultural land when flood waters enter the fields. Interconnections of a similar nature between rivers, canals, lagoon and the sea are a vital component in the fishery production cycle in parts of Sri Lanka and India. It is such relationships within the totality of water bodies, which account for the high diversity of fish species in the South Asian region. Thus Bangladesh with some 400 fish species has one of the richest inland fisheries in the world.

Despite the enormous significance of inland fisheries in Bangladesh and the importance of the flood-plain ecology to the wider agricultural system, international donors are spending millions of dollars implementing the Flood Action Plan. This project plans to turn the flood plains into dry land to promote a 'green revolution' in the rice fields, and 'blue revolution' in the water. As a result one-third of Bangladesh's flood plan areas, along with the complex flood-plain ecosystem will vanish in only two decades.

Coastal Areas Issues

A major challenge for coastal area management is the maintenance and enhancement of the ecological diversity of the region. Achieving this will contribute to the general economic prosperity of the region, and the livelihoods of the coastal communities, in particular. However, economic activities and government policies must recognize the customary rights, especially of women, to land and other resources, as well as the vitality of traditional practices and indigenous knowledge of communities, if this is to happen.

The rapid development of coastal areas, fuelled largely by macroeconomic policies supporting industrialization as well as by the pressure to generate foreign currency through the mass production of goods for global export markets, is, therefore, a matter of concern. Such

unplanned and unsustainable development is generating huge profits for relatively few people at the expense of the many who are left with a degraded and polluted environment. The communities' rights to livelihood are being overridden by the commercial rights of developers.

Thus, in Sri Lanka and India, fishing communities are under threat from their own governments which are trying to sell off their deep sea fishery resources to joint ventures with foreign companies. In Bangladesh, national mangrove forest reserves in the Chokoria-Sunderban (a total of 8,500 ha) have been handed over from the Ministry of Forestry to the Ministry of Fisheries (2,834 ha) and the Ministry of Land (5,666 ha) for leasing out for shrimp aquaculture. As a consequence large tracts of mangrove forests have already been completely destroyed.

Fishing communities are increasingly having to compete with other resource users in the coastal area. Coastal shipping, construction of harbours, seabed mining, the development of industry and tourism, and urban development, are all impacting on coastal communities. Tourism in coastal areas, for instance, is displacing traditional fishing communities and disrupting their access to fishery resources and to beach space. The livelihoods of fisher people, and women fish processors are consequently under threat. Fishing grounds and the habitats of fishing communities are being encroached upon. Displaced from their traditional activities in fish processing and marketing women are increasingly exploited as factory workers in processing plants. They are being forced to migrate in search of work. For instance, women workers from Sri Lanka form the bulk of the labour force in the fish processing plants of Maldives.

In the face of such threats it is crucial that the right to livelihood be afforded a higher priority than the right to profit from commercial activities. Moreover, it is necessary to encourage collective and democratic initiatives at the level of the local communities. This will encourage using, caring for and managing the coastal environment and resources in ways which incorporate principles and responsibilities of common property, understood as community ownership. Coastal area management must include in equal measure human, ecological and economic elements. The participation of the coastal communities must be ensured from the beginning in the formulation and implementation of policies regarding coastal area management. Institutions of the local government must be given proper authority and a clear role in community development as well as in conserving, maintaining and enhancing biodiversity. Local-level institutions need to be supported by, and should work in cooperation with, appropriate decision-making bodies at the State/provincial and national levels.

The meeting, therefore, highlighted the importance of participation in, and decentralization of, decision-making processes and management as desirable objectives in their own right. Management needs to be oriented towards actually controlling and guiding the development process in a manner which benefits coastal communities. There is a need to recognize the advantage of allocating responsibilities at different levels.

Initiatives in Coastal Areas Management

Coastal area degradation, particularly in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India, is acute. In Maldives, the problem is evident only near populated islands, such as Male. In most other atolls

the only concern is on the issue of global warming and associated climate changes and rises in sea level.

Several initiatives in coastal area management have been taken by the governments in the South Asian region. In the context of Maldives, however, the concept of coastal area management is not considered appropriate. The emphasis is on the integrated management of reef resources, since the country depends on these for its survival. In Sri Lanka coastal area management has a history of fifteen years. However, numerous loopholes in the legislation and in its implementation have provided scope for violations and for possible misuse of the coastal zone. A second-generation programme for the comprehensive management and development and development of coastal resources is being finalized.

India has recently issued a notification for the management of coastal areas. However, the dynamic nature of the land and sea interface is not recognized. Arbitrary boundaries drawn around the coast are inappropriate in areas where the tidal patterns vary, where the shape and structure of the beach areas is constantly changing, and where the paths and profiles of inland waters flood and recede seasonally. A flexible approach to defining boundaries and planning development, based on the unique geographical features, as well as the specific resource management issues present, is required. Moreover, the impact of activities in inland and marine areas on coastal waters, needs to be taken into consideration.

With respect to the Indian Coastal Regulation Zone notification, the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) pointed to some lacunae in the notification. They will nevertheless press for its implementation in its present form, because it recognizes the traditional and customary rights of fishing communities to their habitat, and places checks on the anarchic expansion of large-scale coastal tourism and industrial developments. Alert interventions by public interest groups and the positive attitude of the judiciary can play a crucial role in curbing violations. Instilling an awareness among coastal fishing communities to utilize the notification to their advantage is required in India.

It was recognized that as well as needing to actively campaign to stop harmful activities in the coastal areas, fishworker and producer groups need to actively research and promote viable alternatives. Such alternatives need to be based on human and ecological values, rather than purely motivated by the profit potential of the global market.

Polluters must be penalized for the damage they cause. The burden of proof should be on the developers (including government agencies) to show that their activities will not cause harm to the coastal environment or the coastal communities.

Environmental as well as social impact assessment should be a compulsory part of the procedures in the approval process of potential development activity. Provisions for a public review process should be made mandatory. Further, environmental impact assessments (EIAs) of new development must be prepared in the context of existing activity in the area and their burden on the ecosystem. EIAs need to take traditional as well as 'modern' scientific knowledge into consideration. Where the information base is poor, or the likely adverse impact cannot be

predicted with any certainty, the 'precautionary approach' must be adopted, and development activities should not be undertaken.

All environmental impact assessments should account for the social and economic costs which environmental degradation causes to local communities. There must also be ways and means for accounting for the costs to be borne by future generations whose rights may be jeopardized by current developments. Once such costs are internalised, the economic rationale to pursue many 'development' policies or projects may cease to exist.

Many formal acts pertaining to natural resource access and use in the coastal zone have been introduced in most of the countries of the region, over different points in time. In the context of integrated coastal area management, there is a need to examine and harmonize these different acts to ensure that there is coherence between them. It is also necessary that national and State / provincial Governments ensure that there is clarity between different departments on the allocation of responsibility and accountability.

While many characteristics and needs of fisheries are unique, there are several aspects which need to be integrated into a broader approach to coastal area management. In particular, there is a need to harmonize policy objectives between different natural resource users, and to establish mechanisms for conflict resolution. Wherever possible, different stakeholders need to be brought together to plan and prioritize the uses to which coastal areas are put. There are clearly many areas where harmonious development is possible, and these areas need to be identified and prioritized.

Industrial Shrimp Aquaculture

The debate on industrial shrimp aquaculture highlighted the history of its development in the region. South Asian governments have yielded to the pressures of international funding agencies, multinational companies and local industrialists. They have turned a deaf ear to the problems which this industry has already created in other Asian countries. As a result of this, extensive land alienation, especially of agricultural land, has taken place in Bangladesh, both for intensive and extensive forms of shrimp aquaculture. In Sri Lanka, the government is implementing plans to develop shrimp aquaculture in the South of the country, despite evidence of the harmful effects of aquaculture in the northwest. In both Bangladesh and India there has been substantial loss of biodiversity and destruction of coastal habitats, such as mangroves. Aquaculture growth has also led to groundwater depletion and land salinization. This has threatened both local food security and the livelihoods of many coastal communities, in particular of small-scale fishers, farmers and landless labourers. The impacts of the 'predatory expansion' of aquaculture in Bangladesh and India have resulted in immense human costs in the form of physical harm and violence, especially against the women of coastal communities.

In Bangladesh and India, people's movements opposing this type of aquaculture have sprung up they have been met with strong resistance from the investors. Public interest litigations in India and appeal to international forums, have helped focus attention on the issues. Despite this, new areas continue to be brought under aquaculture.

Aquaculture is being promoted as a major earned of foreign exchange. However, environmental impact assessment studies conducted in India have revealed that the social and environmental costs associated with aquaculture far outweigh these benefits. The profits from intensive aquaculture as compared to the use values of unspoilt mangroves have also been grossly exaggerated. In this context, it is important to note the findings of a recent South East Asian Fisheries Development Cooperation (SEAFDEC) study, which has shown that the market value of the harvested resources from a well managed hectare of mangroves (valued in the range of some US\$10,000) is only a little less than the net profits from a hectare of intensive shrimp aquaculture.

In the context of falling marine fish production, aquaculture has been advocated as a viable, alternative source of fish supply. However, the feed for intensive shrimp aquaculture is primarily from the harvest of industrial fisheries converted into fishmeal. It is estimated that by year 2000 about 570,000 tonnes of cultured shrimp will be produced in Asia. The Fish feed requirement for this will be of the order of one million tones (dry weight). This represents a staggering 3.5 million tones wet-weight of fish, more than the total marine fish harvested in India today. This is clearly unsustainable, with an unknown impact on marine biodiversity and the food chain. It has negative implications for the livelihoods of small-scale fisheries. Additionally, the diversion of fish to fish meal manufacture not only deprives the local population of inexpensive fish protein, it also displaces women whose livelihood was earlier derived from fish processing using traditional methods, as recently witnessed in West Bengal, India.

All this points to the link between industrial aquaculture and industrial fisheries both of which are detrimental to the interests of artisanal fishing communities. The demands, therefore, to ban shrimp monoculture, industrial fisheries and to strictly regulate trawl fisheries, are intrinsically related if coastal management is to be oriented towards sustaining coastal communities and fishery resources.

Fisheries Management

Many of the fishery resources of the countries of the region are heavily exploited, particularly in the coastal waters. As a consequence, these resources are more susceptible to adverse environmental impacts caused by degradation of fishery habitats and pollution. Further, the economic and social benefits derived from the marine resources are significantly lower than they could be if more effective fisheries management measures were implemented. These require stricter limits, reductions of the fishing capacities of industrial fishing vessels, expansion and effective enforcement of zoning arrangement to protect the fishing activities of small-scale fishers, as well as the establishment of community-based fishery management regimes for the small-scale sector. There is a need to recognize customary and cultural rights to fish resources and to revive and strengthen traditional systems of fisheries management. These are essential functions of fisheries administrators. In Maldives, for instance, the government strictly regulates the type of gear used within its waters, both by domestic and foreign fishing vessels. Only the use of pole-and-line for tuna fishery is permitted. Similarly, State legislation in India provides for zoning regulations and sometimes imposes seasonal bans on non-selective fishing activities in coastal waters.

International Instruments

The workshop had the opportunity to discuss the relevance of important international instruments related to fisheries, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the related UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, International Maritime Organization's (IMO) instruments regarding pollution and safety at sea, as well as the FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

The relevance of these instruments to artisanal fisheries and to coastal fishing communities was examined. All these documents take into consideration the importance of coastal communities. FAO's Code of Conduct, for instance, recognizes the importance of coastal communities in the planning, management and development of coastal resources.

It was also indicated that there has been a misinterpretation of articles 61 and 62 of the Law of the Sea on the possible claims by another State with regard to the use of marine resources considered as not fully utilized by the Coastal State. Under UNCLOS, Coastal States have the sovereign right and obligation for the utilization, conservation and management of the living marine resources of the EEZ for use by its present and future generations.

Conclusion

This report is the result of a conscious pedagogy of learning. It has fused together the life experiences and struggles of coastal people, with a distilled analysis of issues pertaining to natural resource use, management and related property regimes. It has enabled participants to locate their own personal perspectives in the context of the newly emerging regime of coastal area management. It provides some firm foundations to construct future partnerships and regional linkages for sustainable use of coastal resources and for promoting the livelihood rights of coastal communities.

Nothing all the above, the meeting concluded by endorsing a commitment to continue the process of learning, campaign, struggle, sharing and mutual support initiated and fostered by this workshop.