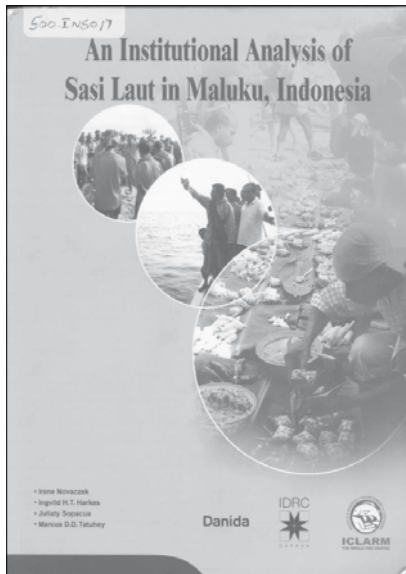


# By, For the Villagers

A review of a study of the traditional Indonesian community-based resource management institution called *sasi laut*



46

AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF SASI LAUT IN MALUKU INDONESIA. Irene Novaczek, Ingvild H. T. Harkes, Juliaty Sopacua and Marcus D. D. Tatuhey. ICLARM—The World Fish Centre, Penang, Malaysia. 2001. pp 327.

This review is by **Neena Koshy** ([icsf@icsf.net](mailto:icsf@icsf.net)), Programme Associate, ICSF

This interesting study of the traditional community-based resource management institution of Indonesia called the *sasi laut* is part of a global project jointly funded by the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, and ICLARM—The World Fish Centre, Malaysia, on fisheries co-management. The study has been undertaken at a time when, in the context of declining resources, fisheries management is in focus in many countries, especially in the Asian coastal States. Specific attention is also being paid to community management institutions, many of which are being revitalized and integrated into formal governance systems for better resource management.

Indonesia has a large number of community-based resource management systems (CBRM) for natural resources. The *sasi* system is one of the few long-enduring CBRM systems in Asia. Unlike other CBRM initiatives, *sasi* has a long history and has undergone transformations over time.

The study makes a detailed comparative analysis of *sasi* in various villages and contexts in Indonesia's central Maluku, which consists of 1,027 islands occupied by 1.8 mn people. It strives to understand why *sasi* could be sustained in some areas, how it has adapted to change, and why, in other areas, it lost its significance.

The study is divided into 18 chapters under five sections. The first section is an introduction to the study and its methodology. Section B sets the context of the regional and village variables, and describes the various factors that could influence the community institution, namely, the socio-political circumstances, and the trends

of fisheries management and markets in Maluku. Section C compares parameters like equity, efficiency and sustainability of fisheries in *sasi* and non-*sasi* villages. Section D contains the six case studies conducted in the central Maluku islands, ending with a comparative analysis. The final Section E reflects on the resilience of the *sasi* system, which many believed would surely disappear into oblivion by the 1960s. The last chapter summarizes the results of the study and concludes with policy recommendations for the revitalization of *sasi* and the development of co-management systems in central Maluku.

*Sasi laut*, the study says, can provide the basis for building local-level management institutions. *Sasi* includes rules and regulations (called *adat*, the customary law, which may or may not be written down) to control resource utilization. The *sasi* has a village police force, the *kewang*, which monitors the proper implementation of harvesting rights or the *sasi lelang*. There are three kinds of *sasi*—the land *sasi* (*sasi darat*), the most prevalent form; the riverine/marine *sasi* (*sasi laut*) and the village *sasi* (*sasi negeri*). The marine *sasi* is sometimes influenced by the land *sasi*. The village *sasi* is more of a social institution that deals with local issues, while the other two are concerned with the regulation of access to, and extraction of, natural resources on land and in water.

## Various forms

*Sasi* varies from locality to locality, even as it maintains the objective of managing resources. The marine *sasi*—*sasi laut*—usually deals with sedentary resources and other resources closer to the land like coral reefs. There are

also *sasi* laws that regulate the resource utilization of estuarine waters. *Sasi* is more prevalent in villages that have a population of over 2,000 fishers. There are villages that do not practise *sasi* but have a communal fish-harvesting system called *sousoki*.

It is believed that *sasi* was set up initially to manage social interactions, chiefly to mediate tenure disputes and maximize economic returns to the villagers. Resource conservation and management was a spin-off of this larger control, and dates to 1920, when *sasi* proscribed fishing using poison in parts of central Maluku.

Contrary to the popular belief that *sasi* was established to regulate access to sedentary resources, the system was initially applied to pelagic fish stocks, to conserve migratory fish and maximize their harvest for local consumption. It was only in the 1930s, when a market for top shells (*Trochus niloticus*) and sea cucumbers appeared, that *sasi* began to address additional types of marine access prohibitions and related ceremonies in parts of southern Maluku.

Historically, the central Maluku islands have been subject to a series of invasions, first by the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, the English, the Arabs and the Japanese. The spread of Christianity discouraged traditional customs, which were often branded as pagan superstitions. Even though the Dutch tried to abolish the *adat*, and thereby the *sasi*, they later found it convenient to integrate them into their governance structures so as to exercise control over the resources. The Dutch were the first to formalize *sasi* with the decree "*Het recht van Sasi in De Molukken*" (the rights of *sasi* in Maluku). The Japanese, who invaded later, abolished the village systems and brought in centralization. After Indonesian independence, under Suharto's rule, the centralization process got legalized under Law No. 5 of 1974 and Law No. 5 of 1979, which failed to recognize the village-level *sasi*, *kewang* and *adat*. Despite predictions about its imminent death, and even though largely weakened by the abovementioned processes, the *sasi* rules that were developed long ago are still practised by the communities to maximize their harvests as well

as to regulate aspects of village social behaviour.

*Sasi*, which applies mostly to in-shore resources, does not limit total catches but places restrictions on season, species and gear. In some villages, there are no restrictions on the local villagers, but outsiders are bound by the *adat* should they choose to harvest from the *sasi* area. In most villages, *sasi* is applied only to a few species, mainly top shells, sea cucumbers and pelagic fishes. Over half of the *sasi* villages studied sell or auction harvesting rights for one or more species.

*Sasi* incorporates concepts, attributes and structures that are important in any marine resource management and conservation regime. Among them are the concepts of:

1. open and closed areas and seasons
2. community tenure rights over a marine area
3. limiting access to resources
4. controlled harvest and distribution of benefits
5. locally developed and specifically agreed upon regulations
6. local wardens or enforcers (*kewang*) who have defined rules of process as well as prescribed sanctions they can impose
7. shared responsibility of all residents to report violations of *sasi* rules
8. methodology to advise all residents, at regular intervals, of the

**Even though the Dutch tried to abolish the *adat*, and thereby the *sasi*, they later found it convenient to integrate them into their governance structures so as to exercise control over the resources**

substance of *sasi* rules

9. improving or maintaining community welfare, which, being rooted in *adat* (a belief in the concept of the unity of humans with nature), is consistent with modern concepts of sustainable use of resources
10. a hierarchical institutional structure that divides various tasks among clearly defined bodies (for

- example, the village government, the *kewang*, the church, and so on)
- II. low or no financial cost to the formal governance structures: The *kewang* members and church leaders

**Though most decisions are taken by the traditional *adat* leaders in what can be deemed to be an undemocratic system, the villagers accept them due to the overall community value attached to the rulings**

involved in *sasi* are not paid wages, although they may receive a share of the harvest. Local government offices may also receive income from the sale of harvesting rights for communal resources.

12. institutional resilience and the capacity to evolve

The study quantified the strength of resource management in both *sasi* and non-*sasi* villages by combining indicators of gear restriction, local fisheries rules other than national restrictions on blast fishing and the use of poisons, area closures, the number of species under the management rules, and active enforcement.

In some cases, the distinction between *sasi* and non-*sasi* rules are often

blurred. There is evidence of national laws becoming *sasi* rules, as in the case of the ban on blast fishing, and *sasi* rules feeding into the drafting of national law, as with proscription of poison fishing.

*Sasi* villages often displayed greater communal harmony and activity, including communal harvest of fish and equitable sharing of profit among the villagers. In some villages, the catches are sold to provide funds for infrastructure and projects that benefit the whole community, as in the case of the *trochus* harvest of Nolloth village.

*Sasi* is relatively efficient as it does not rely on expensive State infrastructure and bureaucracy. Though most decisions are taken by the traditional *adat* leaders in what can be deemed to be an undemocratic system, the villagers accept them due to the overall community value attached to the rulings. Involvement of people in management decisions was seen to be higher in *sasi* villages than in non-*sasi* ones.

Compliance with *sasi* rulings was better than in the case of national or provincial laws and regulations. Compliance was found to be even stronger in those *sasi* villages where the *kewang* members were locals. The degree of compliance depended heavily on the quality of leadership, the status of economic needs and education levels, and awareness and fear of the threat of sanctions. Cases that are deemed necessary to be reported to the police go outside the village for settlement.

*Sasi* applies only to nearshore waters but a large number of people—especially younger, commercially oriented fishers—earn their livelihood by fishing for pelagic species in deeper waters a little off the coast, where *sasi* does not apply. The traditional fishers find it difficult to access these resources due to increasing competition from newer and more efficient technologies. Fishers in villages closer to the cities show an increasing predilection for jobs outside the fishing sector. This could imply a decreasing level of allegiance to the village laws and *sasi*.

The greatest obstacle for the maintenance and development of *sasi* is the complete lack of recognition of such

KG KUMAR/CSF



A fishing village on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia

systems by the government. In the absence of a legal basis for *adat* and *sasi*, the village institution is seen as a mere implementing agency rather than an active policy-making body. *Sasi* is not inherently equitable in the sense of being inclusive and democratic. As a strongly patriarchal system, it does not encourage the participation of women in its working.

Apart from being limited mostly to inshore resources, *sasi* is applied to relatively small areas or a few species, and does not really comprise a comprehensive area or species management plan. The study found *sasi*'s impact on the health of the resource and habitat to be minimal or, at best, moot.

As an institution, though, *sasi* has never been static but has changed with the times, remaining resilient. It has been used for different economic and social reasons, not simply for resource management. *Sasi* and the underlying *adat* culture have waxed and waned over time, absorbing and reflecting the impacts of colonialism, war, economic development and social change.

Apart from suggesting that more species be placed under *sasi*, the study also recommends an increase in the area under *sasi*, after consultation with the villagers, as well as differentiated access for the traditional and modernized fishing sectors.

Since *sasi* has been able to spread certain important resource management concepts through the villages and make them valued as part of the local culture of central Maluku, it can function as a basis for the development of a modern resource management institution. It would also reduce the potential costs of public education and enforcement of such a management regime.

One major limitation of the study is that by concentrating mainly on Christian villages, it failed to take into account the contextual variables described earlier, which could be different in predominantly Muslim villages. ❧



The majority of rural, coastal villages in Indonesia are still directly or indirectly dependent on fishery resources

#### For more



[www.co-management.org](http://www.co-management.org)  
**Fisheries Co-management**  
**A worldwide collaborative research project**

Excerpt

### An effective alternative

In the place of a science-based rationale for management, we find an ethic of working together for the benefit of the community, attachment to a cultural tradition and the tendency to comply with sanctions based on religious beliefs. These have combined to form the basis of a resilient and, within its narrow scope of application, demonstrably effective institution. *Sasi* also provides an alternative to the Western idea that local management must be highly democratic. The paternalistic model is potentially very efficient and cost-effective, putting little demand on the time of busy fishers, farmers and women, and is also culturally acceptable.