

From Fair to Good

Millions have found livelihoods due to co-management practices that protect aquatic resources, contributing to the sustainable development of small-scale fisheries in Vietnam

Vietnam's 3,260-km coastline spans 28 provinces and cities, supporting thousands of fishing villages and millions of families. About five million people work in the fisheries sector, directly or indirectly, according to the Vietnam Institute of Fisheries Economics and Planning (VIFEP). In addition to its coastline, Vietnam has 2,372 rivers, 112 estuaries, 11 coastal lagoons, and nearly 3,000 large lakes. The Red River and Mekong River deltas create over two million hectares of brackish and freshwater areas. This diverse range of water bodies and abundant aquatic resources support widespread aquaculture and fisheries,

From a legislative point of view, at the central level, the Law on Fisheries of 2017 serves as the primary legal document governing co-management implementation for the protection of aquatic resources in Vietnam. This law includes Article 10 that is dedicated to co-management; it outlines the obligations and interests of the community involved. Furthermore, in Decree No. 26/2019/NĐ-CP, issued on 8 March 2019, the government elaborated on various articles and measures for implementing the Law on Fisheries. This decree provides guidance on co-management in aquatic resources protection, detailing procedures for recognizing and assigning management rights to community groups, and reporting requirements for these groups.

Additionally, other legal documents highlight the importance of developing co-management in aquatic resource protection. These include Prime Ministerial Decision No. 339/QĐ-TTg, dated 11 March 2021, which approves the Vietnam Fisheries Development Strategy to 2030, with a vision to 2045. There's also the Decision No. 76/QĐ-TTg, dated 18 January 2024, that approves the National Programme on Protection and Development of Aquatic Resources to 2030.

The implications of co-management approaches in Vietnam, aligned with the spirit of the 2017 law, are evident in several ways, spelled out hereunder:

Community-centred: Legal documents emphasize the pivotal role of communities in co-management. The Guidelines for Co-Management Implementation in Aquatic Resources Protection prioritize "needs identification" as the initial step, highlighting the significance of understanding the community's needs.

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providing livelihoods for millions across the country.

Coastal and inland fishing villages have sustained communities for thousands of years. These communities deeply understand aquatic resources and depend on them, recognizing the importance of their protection and development. With a large labour force and numerous boats, they are crucial for managing aquatic resources. Authorities should hence share rights, responsibilities and benefits with these communities to promote effective resource management. Given the natural, economic and social conditions of Vietnam's coastal and inland fisheries, the implementation of co-management in aquatic resources protection is imperative.

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Ecosystem-based management:

A key criterion for selecting co-management areas is identifying regions with high biodiversity or unique ecosystems, such as coral reefs, seagrasses, mangrove forests and hidden rocks. Currently, many co-management initiatives in Vietnam focus on areas with these characteristic marine and coastal ecosystems. By enabling community-led management and sustainable resource use, these initiatives foster stronger bonds between communities and their ecosystems, promoting harmonious and responsible coexistence with nature.

Rights and responsibilities sharing: Co-management involves the mutual sharing of interests and responsibilities between community groups and authorities in protecting aquatic resources. The mechanism outlined in law empowers community groups to engage in co-management, representing a progressive advancement, compared to previous legislation. This empowerment fosters community involvement in resource protection, and encourages monitoring of destructive and excessive exploitation activities.

Resource management linked with livelihood development: Across all co-management sites for aquatic resource protection in Vietnam, livelihood concerns, particularly those of community group members, are paramount. Addressing livelihoods within community groups is integral to co-management implementation and is explicitly addressed in the guidelines for aquatic resource protection co-management.

On 11 July 2023 the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development signed the Decision No. 2781/QĐ-BNN-KN about approving the implementation guideline of co-management in aquatic resources protection. According to the decision, there are five steps of co-management implementation in aquatic resources protection; they are:

- identify implementation needs of co-management;
- select co-management implementation areas;
- establish community groups;

- request the recognition and assignment of the right for co-implementation; and
- implement co-management.

In line with best practices

The approach to co-management in protecting aquatic resources in Vietnam aligns well with the requirements outlined in the SSF Guidelines, as evidenced by the following points:

One, small-scale fishing communities have been duly acknowledged and empowered in the management and protection of aquatic resources. The law recognizes community groups and assigns management rights in aquatic resource protection upon meeting specific criteria, including: being individuals who directly benefit from the aquatic resources in the designated area; being registered participants in co-management within a specified area; having a formulated plan for the protection and utilization of aquatic resources; and having operational regulations for the community group.

Two, members of community groups are permitted to utilize aquatic resources within the co-management area in compliance with the Community Groups Regulations. These are self-imposed by the community group and are designed to govern and mitigate destructive exploitation and over-exploitation practices.

Three, through controlled exploitation and appropriate monitoring mechanisms, destructive activities will be reduced and brought to a complete end. In fact, now in areas where co-management is implemented, over-exploitation and destruction has almost ceased to occur, while ecosystems have not been further degraded; some show signs of recovery.

Four, through the co-management implementation in aquatic resources protection, community groups have more livelihoods opportunities. For example, in developing ecotourism and aquaculture activities that are environmentally friendly, thereby improving the lives of their members.

Five, the co-management implementation increases the cohesion between authorities and the fishing

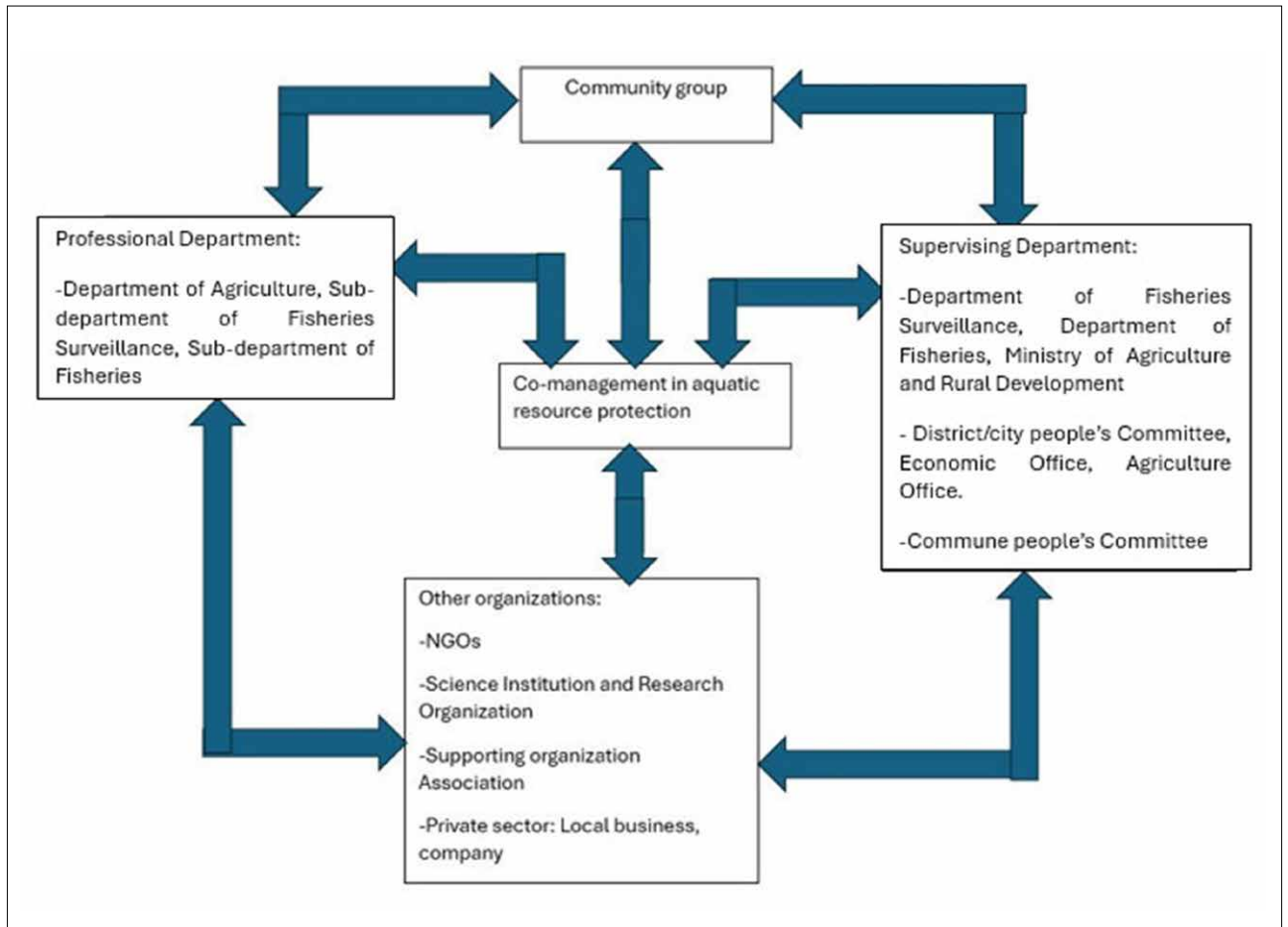


Diagram of stakeholders participating in co-management in aquatic resources protection

community, thereby strengthening the capacity of the parties, and improving the effectiveness in the protection of aquatic resources.

Coral reefs in the south-central coastal region—it comprises eight coastal provinces and cities, namely, Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan—face severe degradation due to natural factors such as coral bleaching as well as human activities like excessive marine exploitation. “Coral reefs in Vietnam have degraded from medium to poor levels. Given this, the conservation, protection and sustainable exploitation of aquatic resources, particularly in the coastal coral reef ecosystem in the south-central region, are top priorities for the government,” said the *Report on the current state of the national marine and island environment in the period of 2016–2020*.

The Centre for Marinelife Conservation and Community

Development (MCD) has a project titled ‘Supporting Vietnamese fisheries reform under the Fisheries Law 2017 from national to local action’; it is funded by Ocean 5 through the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPAs) from 2021 to 2023. Focused on scaling up co-management practices in aquatic resource protection, the project operates in three provinces: Binh Dinh, Quang Nam and Khanh Hoa. It offers valuable lessons and capacity building for participating partners. Support and co-ordination for the project come from the Directorate of Fisheries (now the Department of Fisheries and the Department of Fisheries Surveillance), as well as the fisheries sub-departments of the provinces of Binh Dinh, Quang Nam and Khanh Hoa.

Since 2019, the Nhon Ly commune in Binh Dinh has been proactively running a community group for aquatic resource protection, comprising 60 members. This group manages an area of 8.2 hectares in Bai Dua. With

the enactment of the 2017 law, these community groups were officially recognized and granted specific management responsibilities. In Binh Dinh, two additional community groups were established in the Nhon Hai commune and in the Ghenh Rang ward. Drawing from the lessons of co-management and resource protection in Binh Dinh, similar groups were formed in Quang Nam and Khanh Hoa provinces. Notably, these co-management areas are monitored and managed by community group members. Currently, the co-management group in the Tam Tien commune in Quang Nam comprises 42 members managing 64 hectares in Ba Dau Reef. In the Van Hung commune of Khanh Hoa, 54 members oversee 89 hectares in the Ran Trao Ecosystem Protection Area.

From April 2018 to March 2021 the Fisheries Sub-Department in partnership with the Fisheries Association of Binh Thuan province run the project titled 'Promoting Community Empowerment and Capacity Building for Coastal Fishery Resources in Ham Thuan Nam District, Binh Thuan Province' with financial support from the Global Environment Fund's Small Grant Programme (GEF SGP). Its goal was to manage, protect, develop and sustainably exploit coastal aquatic resources, and foster socio-economic development for communities in local coastal communes. The project established three community groups in Thuan Quy, Tan Thanh and Tan Thuan communes, covering over 43 sq km, and supported their management responsibilities in aquatic resource protection.

Results that shine

Positive changes have occurred in sea-based aquatic resources after two years of project implementation, according to the 2021 report from the Binh Thuan Fisheries Association. Soft corals and seagrasses have thrived on reefs like Hon Lan, Mui Ngua and the Suoi Nhum mouth. There has been an increase in the abundance of various aquatic species, resulting in higher catches. Fishing communities have experienced a more than 20 per cent rise in income

levels, with sustainable livelihoods maintained. Three community credit funds totaling VND 440 million have been established, facilitating 128 instances of borrowing by fishing households.

Additionally, a regulation instrument on co-management co-ordination was signed in May 2019, involving various stakeholders to ensure synchronized implementation of the co-management approach, addressing previous weaknesses.

MCD facilitated the co-management mechanism, empowering communities in planning, resource management, and leadership. It did this by establishing five community organizations, totaling 278 members, provided with project support, implementing co-management plans for marine resource protection across Khanh Hoa, Binh Dinh and Quang Nam provinces. Additionally, 375 individuals received direct capacity strengthening through technical expert guidance, aligned with national guidelines. From 2021 to 2023, MCD and partners conducted over 20 local training sessions and provided national management guidance, enhancing community groups' proficiency in coral reef and aquatic resource planning, sea patrolling, information technology, communications and livelihood strategies.

The positive impact of promoting co-management rights in protecting aquatic resources is evident in the recovery of critical ecosystems like coral reefs. Monitoring in 2023 shows significant progress: coral cover at sites in the Binh Dinh province reached 'fair' and 'good' levels, with percentages of 79.38, 44.38 and 30.63, respectively. Additionally, coral reefs in Khanh Hoa and Quang Nam provinces have seen increased coverage due to protection activities led by community organizations. In Tam Tien, live coral coverage rose from 26.69 per cent to 30.68 per cent between May 2022 and May 2023. At Trao Reef, live coral coverage increased to 23.6 per cent in 2023, up from 10.95 per cent in 2022, showcasing the positive impact of co-management efforts on coral reef health and recovery.

Effective co-ordination among authorities at all levels, community

groups and stakeholders forms the essence of co-management in protecting aquatic resources. However, collaboration in enhancing supervision and enforcement of legal regulations—between communities and authorities—requires further enhancement. Governance mechanisms, such as fisheries zoning, within co-management areas should be established to ensure mutual benefits and shared responsibilities between community groups and government agencies.

Securing financial resources through suitable financial and credit mechanisms and policies is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of co-management implementation. During the initial stages, numerous activities in co-management necessitate funding; yet these activities do not yet yield incomes for the community. Therefore, establishing a reasonable financial mechanism to support the community during this period is essential.

Capacity gaps exist in community group governance, encompassing human, financial and social aspects. Leveraging traditional practices and indigenous knowledge in aquatic resource protection and development is a key strategy for ensuring successful co-management. The community's traditional practices and indigenous wisdom are valuable resources that contribute to co-management success. Utilizing these resources, community-based initiatives can devise suitable exploitation and sustainable livelihood plans. Additionally, the community's customs and traditions provide a basis for fostering community-based ecotourism, a vital livelihood that supports co-management efforts.

The fisheries law and related legal documents need to be amended in the direction of specifying the rights and obligations of community groups and authorities when implementing co-management in aquatic resources protection. Regulations need to be developed on co-ordination among authorities at all levels, community groups and stakeholders in the co-management implementation in aquatic resources protection in localities.

The other steps that need to be taken include:

- Establishing a mechanism for inspection, supervision and evaluation of results of co-management activities;
- introducing regulations on handling, and sanctioning violations of, fisheries laws in water areas assigned to community group management;
- continuing to support and train community groups to improve their capacity in developing and organizing the implementation of plans on protection and exploitation of aquatic resources;
- imparting communication and training skills, and improving the capacity for people to participate in, and implement, co-management activities effectively;
- reviewing the legal provisions to guide community groups to establish 'community funds' in accordance with regulations; and
- developing mechanisms to support community groups to maintain and develop livelihood opportunities.

Climate change impacts and environmental issues reduce resources and create difficulties for the development of small-scale fisheries and community livelihoods. In this context, it is recommended that research be done on applying 'Green Finance' tools that can support sustainable livelihoods in empowered areas through co-benefit mechanisms to protect and exploit sustainable resources. Business models/initiatives also need to be developed by applying information technology, enhancing the role and participation of women, linking chains and enhancing product value, so as to ensure benefits and conservation values for community groups adapting to climate change. 3

For more

Centre for Marinelife Conservation and Community Development (MCD)

<https://mcdvietnam.org/>

Vietnam: Law on Fisheries (18/2017/QH14)

<https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/vie171855.pdf>

Shared Success

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Learning from Experience

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