Building capacity, managing change

A fisheries project among women fish smokers of four fishing communities in Gambia offers important lessons

By **Mamanding Kuyateh** (mkuyateh@gamtel.gm), CREST Consult, Gambia

The River Gambia and its coastal zones, together with its tributaries and distributaries, such as the Bolongolu, provide favourable conditions for both artisanal and industrial fishing. In this region, the fisheries sector has emerged as an important employer, with shrimps being the primary species fished. The artisanal fisheries sector has attracted increasing activity, with hundreds of canoes landing thousands of tonnes of fish. Licensed trawlers and transhipment facilities make industrial fishing here highly competitive.

The growth of the sector has, however, also been beset with its own set of issues, with immediate benefits overriding negative consequences. For instance, wood and fuel for fish processing and preservation are increasingly becoming scarce with growing competition. Persistent drought and an unfavourable foreign exchange scenario add to the vulnerabilities of the fishing community, particularly of women fish processors.

National efforts at rehabilitating the sector made by the Department of Fisheries, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and other partners such as the Japanese and European Union (EU) member countries, have met with only limited success. Development interventions vastly improved the capital assets of communities and created an environment of trust and partnership. However, where they failed was in building organizational capacity of fishing communities to prepare for, and manage, change. The absence of governmental or NGO expertise in organizational development, and in building capacity and knowledge in related fields such as forestry, has limited the impact of development interventions. Support structures reflecting only a traditional fisheries sector view did not help beyond offering immediate, short-term palliatives.

MAMANDING KUYATEH

Women in Tanji, Gunjur, Kartong and Brufut using the newly reconstructed fish smoking facilities for a safer and healthier environment

It is in this context that an investment programme to assist Gambian women in coastal fisheries communities has important lessons to offer. The programme, implemented within the framework of the Spanish Agency for International Co-operation (AECID)/ Philippe Cousteau Gambia Women in Fisheries Project, underscores the urgent need to strengthen fisherfolk organizations as well as institutions responsible for fisheries management.

The project seeks to reduce poverty in the four coastal fisheries communities of Brufut, Tanji, Gunjur and Kartong, targeting women dependent on fisheries and aquatic resources. It tries to develop various types of knowledge—social, organizational, human and professional—and build infrastructural capital assets among women fish processors. It also aims to reduce the pressure on the natural resource base through improved fish-processing techniques and smoking facilities aimed at distant markets.

At the start of the project, discussions were held with women about the fisheries cycle, from catch and landing to distribution, handling, processing and marketing. These discussions revealed many aspects that need special attention.

In the Gambian region, landed fish catch is unloaded by *dunu-laalu* (labourers). The catch is handed over to the wives and family relations of fishermen who then sell this to the *bana-bana* (their bonded clients) either for direct sales or for processing, depending

on the type of catch and market forces. Women fish smokers are organized into groups that bid in the wholesale market for fresh fish, which is not targeted for the day's market. This fish is smoked by the women for sale the next morning in nearby markets. Men smoke and process fish for sale in distant smoked-fish markets.

The discussions revealed that despite earlier interventions by FAO, women fish smokers' organizations were weak and lacked leadership skills. The FAO interventions for savings and credit for women, however, were being successfully continued in all four communities, and there was no need to establish additional savings-and-credit schemes. Women reported that they lacked knowledge and skills in improved methods of fish handling, sanitation and processing. Further, the smoke houses and other infrastructure facilities were in a broken-down and dilapidated condition as a result of many years of neglect.

Based on these inputs, the project set out to achieve the following goals: raising public awareness about the role of Gambian women in the fisheries sector; training women in specific professional skills such as post-harvest fish handling, sanitation and processing; conservation; capacity building, including group/association leadership; gender issues; funds management; provision or renovation of fish-smoking facilities; and, provision of fish-processing equipment in the communities.

In line with the project's objectives, several activities were undertaken. These included: a study to improve awareness about the role of Gambian women in the fisheries sector; the training of 120 fish processors (30 women per community) in professional skills; and improving fish-smoke houses and facilities and upgrading the fish-smoking equipment in each of the four communities. It must be mentioned that improving the fish-smoke houses and chimney facilities required additional behavioural and attitudinal changes, which implied that more than technology was needed for improved fish smoking.

An overall assessment of the institutional capacities of fisherfolk groups indicates that many of the village groups and associations are very old. Their work is to improve fisherfolk activities for personal and professional development. Most have, among their members, treasurers, auditors, cashiers and secretaries with some experience in handling bank accounts. Many have literate members, with a few fluent in European languages. They lack integrated extension staff. Even so, they constitute readily available core groups of community institutions that enjoy respect, support and goodwill within their districts and constituencies. These institutions have strong potential and can be said to constitute under-utilized capacity to address community concerns.

From the experience of the project, we learnt that it is important for consultants to be flexible and innovative with their methodology. There were instances where project beneficiaries could not clearly see the relationship between the various dimensions of the planning or maintenance phases and their specific requirements. We also learnt that experts should be open, direct and fully honest with the group leadership. A realistic awareness of a project's capabilities is fundamental to avoid raising false expectations. The project taught us to be prepared for the unexpected. For instance, in Brufut, a whole building meant for refurbishment collapsed due to age and overuse, requiring additional time and extra funding.

An important lesson from the project was that the community field extension staff is not always able to transcend local politics and social machinations. Women's groups can be infiltrated or influenced by non-productive, idle, beachside men hustlers who attempt to create chaos and confusion, leading to situations that require tact and careful handling by the management. We also learnt that not all women in leadership positions are necessarily able to take on higher responsibilities; hence, a case-by case assessment in training is called for. Smaller groups of women fish-smokers needed greater assistance to form higher apex platform associations in order to inform and influence policies. Probably, the most important lesson was that new technology and equipment have to be accessible, simple to use, socio-culturally acceptable, financially affordable and geographically adaptable in order to be accepted by women.

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*TRY*ing for a Better Future

Women oyster sellers in The Gambia come together to improve the quality of their lives, and as they do, their produce—oysters—receives an upmarket boost

By **Adrian Croke** (adrian.croke@gmail.com), Peace Corps Volunteer, The Gambia

A 35-year old widowed mother of five. During a four-month season, she wakes up at dawn everyday and heads to the river. Her children stay at home by themselves. How nice it would be if they could go to school, but there just isn't enough money. She works briskly throughout the low tide, hacking oysters off the mangrove roots with an axe. Sometimes her hands and feet come in the way of the axe, but then she hasn't met her death yet in the water, has she? That's something to be thankful for. So many of her friends lost their lives this way. She can't swim; she has no boat, no life jacket, no gloves and no boots. The old sweater sleeves wrapped around her feet might get her through the day. Though the sun is high up in the sky, only now is the tide beginning to return. It's time to take her water logged feet out of the mud and head home. Next, to steam the catch and walk to the highway with a bucket of cooked oysters balanced on her head. Will she be able to sell enough today to feed her family tomorrow? On the highway, vehicles roar past. Occasionally, a motorist stops to buy a cup of oysters. The year is 2007. The country: Africa's smallest—The Gambia.

In the year 2007, driving along the Serrekunda highway on her way to Banjul, the capital city of The Gambia, a woman named Fatou Janha Mboob spotted an oyster seller by the roadside and drew her car to a halt. As she placed her order, Fatou began to chat with the oyster seller: "So how much do you make in a day?" "Not much. Nothing really," the woman replied. And so a conversation started. The other women selling oysters began to draw near. Soon, they were all sharing their stories and through these Fatou came to learn about the reality of oyster selling and the lives of the women dependent on it.

ERIN WILKINSON

TRY Oyster Women's Association aims to improve the livelihoods of its members, and their conditions of work

Most of the women were widows, Fatou learned—the sole breadwinners in their families. Oyster harvesting offered only a few months of work. Many of the women could not swim and owned no protective gear. Many had terrible wounds from accidental cuts. Due to the remote nature of many harvest sites, death by drowning was not entirely uncommon; neither were rape and theft.

Oyster beds in The Gambia are located in the root systems of mangroves, an essential and highly threatened habitat. Mangroves are among the most productive and biologically complex ecosystems on earth but they are also in grave danger from development, deforestation, salt production, pollution and overexploitation. Irresponsible harvesting of oysters, due to ignorance or desperation, poses great risks to the health and survival of the mangroves. Careless hacking or the use of large machetes may damage the roots of a mangrove plant, leading to its death. The more mangroves destroyed, the smaller the oyster harvest and greater the level of insecurity in the lives of those dependent on oyster harvesting.

Fatou was deeply moved by the stories she heard. Born in The Gambia and trained as a social worker and agricultural extensionist, Fatou had lived abroad for a while. On returning to her homeland, she started a fashion designing business. The roadside encounter with women selling oysters by the cup and struggling to make ends meet was, however, a turning point. It was the beginning of a process that would culminate in the formation of the TRY Oyster Women's Association, an organization started by 40 women in one village. Today, TRY has expanded to include 500 women from across 15 villages. Supported by the USAID-funded Ba Nafaa project and the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center, TRY is now a force to contend with in the world of women's development and sustainable resource management.

The association aims to improve the livelihoods of its members and their families, the oyster product, the conditions of work, and the sustainability of the industry. Currently, the association is involved in a number of projects to meet these goals. First, there are 250 women enrolled in a microfinance scheme that started in January of 2011 and will continue over the next year. Each contributed GMD300 (approximately US$11) and received a loan of GMD1,000 (US$37) to start a small business enterprise. The loan period was six months. Before the loan was given, the women received training on small enterprise development and business and marketing skills. The project has had considerable success, as at least 25 women have saved over GMD5,000 (US$185) and some as much as GMD14,000 (US$518). This is particularly remarkable considering many of the women never previously dreamt of having their own savings and assets. TRY hopes that in five years, thanks to the microfinance programme, each woman will be able to build a decent house for herself and her family and successfully break the cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

TRY's first goal—improving the livelihoods of its members—is inseparable from the responsible management and protection of mangroves. Mangrove reforestation programmes and educational training help to underscore the importance of the mangrove ecosystem. Gambians depend on the mangrove habitat not only for consumable resources like fish, oysters and cockles, but also for the success of the tourism industry, which benefits greatly from the natural beauty of the country's coastal landscape. Improving women's work conditions thus leads to the protection of the environment and supports the country's main source of income, the hospitality industry.

During the week, TRY's Resource and Processing Centre hosts a skills-building class for 35 young girls, daughters of oyster harvesters, who, unable to pay their fees, have dropped out of school. These girls receive training in sewing, cooking and computer literacy. The aim is to provide training in tailoring, catering and computer skills so that they have a set of marketable abilities with which to start a business. In addition to these activities, the Centre is engaged in the continuous improvement of the oyster product. In partnership with the Ba Nafaa project, TRY is involved in water quality studies of the wetlands in which oysters are harvested so as to eventually harvest and export raw oysters to international markets.

Do women sell oysters by the roadside then anymore? They do, of course, but they now have cleaner spaces for selling, better tools for harvesting, and also a space in the public market reserved for them. Earlier, the women had no place to meet except by the side of the highway. Today, there is a Resource Centre where they can gather, receive training and process their oysters. The Centre offers a good price for the oysters, which are washed, cleaned, hygienically packaged, labelled and refrigerated for sale. Once, oysters were available only at roadside stands. Today, they are an improved, clean and safe product in high demand. Once water quality studies are completed, TRY aims to export raw oysters. This opportunity for international export would not only put The Gambia on the world economic map, but would also make TRY a model for financially beneficial, sustainable resource management.

Improving the livelihoods of women oyster sellers is inseparable from the responsible management and protection of the mangroves.

FROM AFRICA/ Gambia

Informal power

The *kafos* of Gambia are informal associations of women fishworkers

by Anna Mbenga Cham, a researcher based in Gambia

In Gambia, as in many other countries, fishing is predominantly men's work. Women are engaged in post-harvest activities (smoking, drying and marketing). They encounter several problems in this work, such as the lack of access to credit. These problems, combined with the fact that women also have to manage their heavy household responsibilities, make it difficult for women to improve their business prospects.

Generally, women have no access to institutionalized credit. Some credit is provided by the Fisheries Department, which operates a revolving loan scheme for artisanal operations. This, however, benefits more the men. In fact, few loans are destined for the post-harvest activities in which women are involved. Due to such problems, women have, on their own, formed associations to try and access traditional as well as institutionalized credit.

Kinship plays an important role in these associations. It is the basis of co-operation at the beach site, market places and processing houses, as well as in *kafos* (an informal rotating credit organization where members contribute money regularly to a central pool). Women help each other in many ways, such as by lending tools and drying racks. The social organization of kinship relations helps women escape from the cycle that perpetuates poverty.

There are several *kafo* groups in different villages. The *kafo* network is usually limited to women of the same ethnic group. Through membership of these groups, women can overcome barriers due to lack of credit facilities. The credit schemes of the *kafos*, which operate with a set of agreed rules and regulations, involve specific weekly or monthly cash subscriptions by members. From the fund, credit is given to members in rotation, to help them meet operating costs. The amount of credit obtained through these *kafos* may not be large enough to enable the women to substantially expand their businesses, but it has proved the ability of women to organize and create by themselves.

FROM AFRICA/ Gambia

Educating Ms. Fish Cutter

An experiment in Ghanatown catches up on women's education

by Eva Munk-Madsen, a Copenhagen-based consultant on fisheries and women's issues

In Gambia, women of all ages come together after finishing their household chores, in the late evening. They are here to learn English. Few of them got much school education in their childhood. They work hard every day at the beach, where they cut sharks and skates, the catch of their husbands, brothers, sons or other fellow villagers. There they salt and spread the meat on drying racks for sun-drying. Some of them are wage workers, while others are able to buy the catch and export the final processed product themselves. All of them aim at keeping their children in school and most of them succeed. At the same time, they are eager to improve their own abilities and to learn English.

In Ghanatown, a Ghanaian immigrant fishing village in the Gambia, an evening school was started this year in August. It was open to women and men who had never learned to speak English. As an outsider in the village, attempting to open an export-promotion house for by-products from the traditional fishery, I soon learned that communication in English was only possible with men, as they generally have received more school education than women. This restraint on building direct business relations with the women, together with my Danish background, made me propose the organization of evening classes in Ghanatown. In Denmark, adult education through evening classes, at low cost, is very widespread and popular.

The proposal was received with enthusiasm. The idea was presented to the council of village elders, to church leaders, in churches, and to the women's leaders, and soon the community mobilized its own internal resources. Several educated villagers had earlier organized classes for women in both English and Fanti, but the migratory character of the fishing business had always put an end to these initiatives. Now a school board has been set up with members who hold important positions in the community. This includes: the headmaster of the primary school, the Imam, a church leader, a member of the elders council, a teacher with experience in adult education, two young innovative fish traders, two women students and me. The women rarely show up at board meetings, as they are busy with household chores when it is quiet at the beach.

I had the pleasure of teaching the first two conversation classes in English for about 15 dedicated women and 14 dedicated men. Under the light of a few petrol lamps and sometimes with strong competition from the noise of the rain falling on the tin roof, the students learned to present themselves and their occupations. "I am a fish cutter", said most women, and "I am a fisherman", said most men. On my departure, several teachers were ready to take over on a voluntary basis. For the rest of the year, the evening classes will be given free of charge. The teachers work for free. The school board has applied for some financial support to get lights in the school building and wages for the teachers from next year. A school fee will also be introduced, but it is the intention to keep it low.

The success of this initiative relies upon its acceptance, not only by the women students, but also by their husbands. The male students are, whether married or not, in a different position to make decisions on their own. The support of younger and/or educated men in the community is here of utmost importance. Blessed be the school board for their dedication to the task and their visions for a better future.