



Empowering small-scale fishers to eradicate rural poverty

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Introduction

Eradicating poverty and hunger appears prominently among the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2002, FAO estimated that 5.8 million small-scale fishers were under the poverty line (FAO 2002).¹ This is a big number, and a global problem, which poses a major challenge for FAO and Member states. Therefore, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) (FAO 2015) has poverty and food security as their central focus. The SSF Guidelines also point to a number of ways in which poverty can be alleviated, of which one is to build organizational capacity among fisherfolk at local and regional levels. By coming together in formal and informal organizations, small-scale fishers and fish workers can gain joint access to resources, set up small enterprises, and work their way out of poverty (Kurien 2014).

Poverty eradication is not an easy challenge, as one can imagine, but it does not necessarily mean that one is starting from scratch, without concrete ideas of what it entails and what needs to be done. In fact, in many parts of the world, small-scale fishers and fish workers are already organized through cooperatives or other institutional arrangements that help them collectively to enhance their own wellbeing and that of the ecosystems on which their livelihoods depend. These are experiences that one can learn from, and be inspired by, which is exactly the focus of this thematic collection in Maritime Studies (MAST). The thematic collection contains eight case studies whose preliminary texts were presented at two project meetings that focused on strengthening fisherfolk organizations from around the world² (FAO 2016). The case studies provide insights into what are the challenges of collective action and organization building and how they can be addressed in the context of poverty reduction and food security. They of course occur in contexts that differ a lot from region to region, and even from one local community to another. The countries represented in this topical collection are Barbados, Costa Rica, India, Indonesia, Norway, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, and the USA. In some cases, the organization under scrutiny covers the entire country or a region; in other instances, it covers a particular local community. There is no one way of organizing small-scale fisheries and the context within which such organizations are established and function must somehow be accounted for in the institutional design of these organizations. Together, the case studies also illustrate that in order to effectively deal with poverty eradication and the empowerment of small-scale fisheries, collective action and organizations may, and perhaps even must, involve different levels on geographic and governance scales. This is because the solution to the problem requires both micro- and macro-management.

These and other lessons drawn from the case studies are summarized in a separate introductory paper as a joint statement by all case study lead authors. This editorial paper also

¹ This data is probably underestimated and as stated in the 2012 Hidden Harvest Report, there is a knowledge gap of the real importance of small-scale fisheries for employment and food supply as well as their role in poverty reduction, and as a source of wealth and economic growth (World Bank 2012).

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² The meetings were organized by FAO in Barbados in November 2014 and in Rome (Italy) in November 2016.

juxtaposes case study findings with existing academic literature on small-scale fisheries, as well as on poverty eradication more generally. Given global engagement in achieving the SDGs, this literature is expected to grow in the years to come, and our topical collection is a contribution to the knowledge that must underpin policy measures within and beyond the sector, including regarding the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. In our view, small-scale fisheries provide intriguing cases for poverty research. Small-scale fisheries constitute a sector that is truly global and displays enormous diversity. This makes small-scale fisheries an excellent laboratory for testing hypotheses for collective action and organizational building, and for learning-by-doing through collaborative, practical interventions at different scales.

Small-scale fisheries provide employment and food security to people in communities where often few alternatives to fishing exist. They also offer important services such as nutritious food for fishers and their families, and for the general population, while helping to sustain the natural environment, building viable communities, and securing cultural heritage. Small-scale fisheries were not invented yesterday, and despite considerable pressure from globalization, climate change, and other forces beyond their control, they still have an important role to play in communities and the society as a whole. This is stressed in Sustainable Development Goal 14.3, but all of the Sustainable Development Goals are relevant in the context of small-scale fisheries, including the two mentioned above (No 1, No poverty and No. 2, Zero hunger, for which FAO has a particular responsibility). Notably, small-scale fisheries are both at the delivering and receiving end of most of these goals.

The two issues, poverty and food security, are closely connected: one cannot expect small-scale fisheries to contribute to greater food security or act on the provision of other essential services unless their own internal governance issues are effectively addressed, such as poverty, lack of basic assets and capacities, secure access to livelihood resources, among others. It is not for nothing that the SSF Guidelines stress the need to respect the basic human rights of small-scale fisheries people which, in the context of this topical collection, involves freedom from political repressions, freedom to organize, and the right to participate in decision-making on issues that affect them. It is for this reason that Amartya Sen (1999:10) points out that “freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means.” Collective action is a means through which such freedoms are achieved, but freedoms are also what enable small-scale fishing people to form independent organizations to serve as the instruments they need in order to secure their interests and enhance their wellbeing. Collective action and organization building are clearly among “the weapons of the weak” (Scott 1987).

This is the lens through which the case studies of this topical collection should be read. In addition to the specific narratives that the papers convey, they also provide insights beyond the

case, which an individual reader will be able also to draw on their own, as they may see in the papers things that are relevant to their particular situation. A case study is not just an empirical description of an event or a study area in all its detail; a case study is a case of something (Flyvbjerg 2006), and it is with regard to that “something”—which in this topical collection is poverty alleviation as collective action through organization building—that we can draw general lessons (Jentoft et al. 2018). This implies that poverty alleviation—as collective action through the creation of formal institutions like community organizations/co-operatives—is the real focus of papers in the topical collection and which justifies their inclusion, whereas the case studies are carried out in contexts that work as locus, as a place from where to explore the issue.

Collective action in an organizational context is a deliberate/planned formation. Thus, a study of a small-scale fisheries organization would describe the history and institutional/legal foundation of the organization. Collective action research in an organizational context would also require description of what the organization aims to accomplish and what it actually does, with an emphasis on how it makes decisions that affect the social and natural environment internal and external to the organization. This involves information on when and how the organization came about, who initiated it, and why. What problem was it meant to solve, what were the challenges involved, and have these changed over time? Organizations often prove to be handy instruments for addressing problems that were not present at the time of their formation. What is the particular design of the organization, and why was it designed in the way it was/is, and is it adaptive and effective? Collective action also includes information exchange, the building of linkages to other organizations at local and regional level, including government. Inter-organizational relations and processes are therefore as interesting as the intra-organizational relations. Government is sometimes the actor that initiates and leads collective action, especially its formalization. What incentives were there for small-scale fisheries stakeholders that induced them to take collective action, what did they hope to win by forming the organization, and what did they risk? These are all relevant questions addressed in this topical collection.

Collective action organizations, whether formal or informal, are a means of inclusion and support to the poor. They do so through giving them a voice, building capacity, and empowering them to exercise their human rights. They also provide access to resources and services, such as funds. Furthermore, organizations may also be effective instruments in empowering women, providing social security, strengthening leadership, and securing their participation in the decision-making process. But they do not always do that. Organizations may promote employment generation by linking to markets, providing for information exchange and training, among other activities that promote entrepreneurship and skill development.

The interactive approach taken through collective action allows communities to confront food shortage problems, become self-sufficient in addressing crisis, and enhance livelihoods and income. In addition, community organizations foster the sharing of local and indigenous knowledge, which can help sustainably manage natural resources. Organizations such as cooperatives may also be a mechanism for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. How effective they are is a research question of great interest in small-scale fisheries that often find themselves in a competitive situation with other stakeholders in the aquatic domain, who may be more powerful. Other specific research questions that our project aimed to explore included the following: When do organizations provide for a security network through safety-net schemes? When do organizations identify, enable, or create alternative sources of employment? When do organizations provide for capacity building activities, which lead to community-based efforts and involvement, thus making the organizations self-sustainable in the long term? How do organizations address the inequitable distribution of resources and market failures? How do organizations promote gender equity and equality? How do organizations address unequal power relations?

This special issue provides answers to some, but not necessarily all, of these questions. Collective action and organization building are issues that require more work and research. Not only are these complex issues but poverty eradication and food security are also problems that are not solved once and for all. Small-scale fisheries can, given the right circumstances and initiatives, ascend from poverty and food insecurity, but they also at a later stage can slip back into it. They therefore require permanent attention, also from the research community. They are what Rittel and Webber (1973) famously termed “wicked problems.” Such problems can only be addressed through an inclusive and interactive governance process that does not rest. They require collective action but also the coordination and focus that organizations, if designed and run well, can provide. Organizational research would, like the case studies in this topical collection, always be helpful as circumstances change and inform how organizations are able to both adapt and lead.

About the contributions

The introductory paper is a collective effort of the project participants, Svein Jentoft, Maarten Bavinck, Enrique Alonso-Población, Anna Child, Antonio Diegues, Daniela Kalikoski, John Kurien, Patrick McConney, Paul Onyango, Susana Siar, and Vivienne Solis Rivera. Titled “Working together in small-scale fisheries: harnessing collective action for poverty eradication,” the paper builds on lessons learned from the case studies presented in this topical collection, while juxtaposing them with existing literature on this topic in small-scale fisheries and

beyond. It discusses the nature of poverty in small-scale fisheries and argues that lack of secure tenure rights and debilitating power relations are among the factors contributing to poverty. Collective action through organization building, involving small-scale fisheries stakeholders, with the support of government and civil society organizations, is analyzed as a remedy to enhance the wellbeing of fishers and fish workers, and to sustain their communities. The authors also argue that since small-scale fisheries are nested in the structures and dynamics of wider society, the solutions to poverty eradication cannot be found within the fisheries sector alone, but would need supportive infrastructure, like legal frameworks and macro-economic policies, that enable collective action and organization building at local scales.

Patrick McConney, Bertha Simmons, Vernel Nicholls, and Rodrigo Pereira Medeiros’ paper, titled “Building the Barbados National Union of Fisherfolk Organisations,” is a story about an association (BARNUFO) formed to build collective capacity and provide a voice to local fisheries communities. The association became the preferred form of organization as previous community cooperatives tended to be short-lived. In Barbados, the most urgent problem of small-scale fishers and fish workers is not poverty per se but rather powerlessness and lack of policy aimed to strengthen the sector. Attention to both livelihoods and resilience is essential if the organization is to succeed in maintaining and growing membership as well as participating in multi-level fisheries governance. The paper illustrates the complexities involved in building fisher organizations and the groundwork needed for mobilizing local support. Implementation of the SSF Guidelines has now become an important focus of BARNUFO, which the authors believe would also help to revitalize the association, and which could open new avenues for collective action. However, they stress the need for building organizational capacity through networking, institutional learning, and leadership professionalization.

Vivienne Solis Rivera, Patricia Madrigal Cordero, and David Chacón Rojas’s paper, titled “Institutions and collective action in a Costa Rican small-scale fisheries cooperative: the case of CoopeTárcoles, R.L.,” is a demonstration of the positive difference that multi-purpose organizations can make for the wellbeing of fishing people and communities. The cooperative has successfully helped to advance the sustainability of small-scale fisheries and provides a more secure basis for local community development and governance, including better prices for fish. The cooperative has also created job opportunities and leadership roles for women and thus improved gender equity. Their study emphasizes the constructive role of government, both with regard to fostering the development and viability of local organizations and to make local organizations into a vehicle for resource management. This has been accomplished through the formation of a Marine Responsible Fishing Area as a measure to achieve conservation, sustainable resource use, and the inclusion of local populations in protecting the ecosystem that they depend on.

In their paper, “Qualities of self-governance and wellbeing in the fishing communities of northern Tamil Nadu, India - the role of Pattinavar *ur panchayats*,” Maarten Bavinck and V. Vivekanandan are similarly focusing on the actual and future role of customary institutions. In their case, the customary institution is the *ur panchayat*, which is the informal community council governing the life and harvesting operations in fishing villages of the Coromandel Coast. These councils handle social conflicts and oversee the overall wellbeing of community members by performing a broad range of functions. *Ur panchayats* constitute an institutionalized form of collective action, which, despite flaws like excluding women in the structures of decision-making, still play an important role in the governance of local affairs. Importantly, their multi-purpose nature means that fisheries management is not carried out in isolation from other functions that are crucial for the functioning of the community. By being embedded within the populations that are under their jurisdiction, the councils can respond quickly to problems and needs that emerge.

John Kurien’s contribution “Collective action and co-management initiatives in post-disaster Aceh, Indonesia” is a study of what has happened in this area in the aftermath of the disastrous 2004 tsunami which wiped out entire fishing communities, killing thousands of fishers and their families. His paper deals with capacity development, which needs to be pursued in the longer term after the immediate humanitarian crisis is addressed. Organizational innovation is part of such a strategy. He describes a development assistance program initiated by FAO and the American Red Cross, which also involved a new co-management initiative to revive and “build back better” the small-scale fishery and coastal communities. Rich in customary institutions that provide the small-scale fishery a sense of cohesion, identity, and autonomy, in the post-tsunami situation, they were conducive to promoting collective action. His paper provides important lessons on how to mobilize local people and build institutions, also in situations less disastrous than what occurred with the tsunami.

Svein Jentoft and Bjørn-Petter Finstad’s “Building fisheries institutions through collective action in Norway” describes a pre-WWII legal reform to empower Norwegian fishers in the value-chain that fundamentally changed the institutional and organizational setup in ways that have persisted until this day. The reform was essential as a mechanism to bring fishers out of the poverty situation they found themselves at the time of its inauguration. Passed in 1938, the Raw Fish Act legalized the establishment of cooperative sales-organizations and authorized them to set minimum prices for fish at the dockside. Thus, from being price-takers in the hands of a wealthy class of merchants, fishers became price givers and, by this, power relations were transformed. The authors posit that although the historical context and institutional designs of the Raw Fish Act and the cooperative sales-organizations that it mandated are unique and historically specific, together they

addressed a problem that small-scale fishers are experiencing in other parts of the world—one of poverty, marginalization, and exploitation—and what can be accomplished if there is sufficient will to intervene in the market.

Paul Onyango’s paper “Fisheries co-management: assessing the contribution of Beach Management Units in Lake Victoria, Tanzania to reduce rural poverty” argues that involvement of resource users, through their organizations, will enable their effective participation in management decision-making and thus on issues that affect their lives and livelihoods. Situated on Lake Victoria, Tanzania, his study examines how Beach Management Units (BMUs) combat poverty through creating an opportunity for fishers to manage the Lake’s fish, by pulling together their resources, knowledge, and efforts. The collective action of these fisher organizations helps them gain access to safety-net schemes and create alternative sources of employment. The BMUs are also a mechanism to monitor and check fishing operations, and thus represents an evolving co-management system, which provides lessons for poverty reduction strategies through collective action and community building in small-scale fisheries beyond the Lake.

The title of the paper by Enrique Alonso-Población, Pedro Rodrigues, Crispen Wilson, Mario Pereira, and Robert Ulric Lee is “Narrative assemblages for power-balanced coastal and marine governance. Tara Bandu as a tool for community-based fisheries co-management in Timor-Leste.” The *Tara Bandu* is a community-based resource governance mechanism that combines custom-based elements in a hybrid arrangement, which despite change over time, has proven to be adaptive and resilient. It remains still to be fully integrated into state law. The authors argue that strengthening custom-based institutions like the *Tara Bandu* in combination with co-management institutions provides an opportunity to promote a more sustainable use of coastal and marine resources. This is especially the case in situations like Timor-Leste where mainstream resource management is difficult to initiate due to political, social, and geographical marginalization and the dominance of local elites and state bodies. The authors see the narrative capital of individuals and communities as a potential resource that may help to empower the participants in small-scale fisheries in resource management. Codifying the origin narrative of small-scale fisheries would help local people to secure their tenure rights to marine resources.

Finally in this special issue, Anna Child’s paper “Beyond the cooperative: the story of collective action in North Carolina’s small-scale fisheries” is about collective action in a small fishing community that has resulted in an innovative hybrid organization, the Ocracoke Working Watermen’s Association and subsidiaries. The organization both embraces and deviates from many of the classic cooperative principles to form a case of social and organizational entrepreneurship. The collective effort has served multiple purposes, such as preserving and

strengthening local fisheries' livelihoods and culture as well as maintaining the local tourism industry, thus making the community less vulnerable and livelihoods more secure. The community's willingness to experiment with new, locally adapted organizational design should provide inspiration to others regardless of geographical location. Furthermore, this case study emphasizes that it is sometimes important to think outside the box in terms of organizational design. Cooperatives in their traditional form are not the only way to secure cooperation and coordination among local stakeholders.

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