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Communication and Public Awareness Strategies⁹

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Introduction

Fisheries conflicts are not just conflicts between people with different interests or different “stakes” in the fish resource. They are also conflicts of ideas, between different sets of knowledge, different interpretations of the world around us. Ideas, knowledge, interpretations—it is through communication that these are promoted, shared, exchanged and developed.

In the first day of the workshop, presenters used many words and phrases which had “communication” written all over them:

- developing a constituency of *informed stakeholders*
- need for *community information* and cooperation
- *convince* the fishers that entry must be limited
- build a constituency for *information and training*
- *local dialogue* to resolve conflicts
- *increase awareness*
- community *awareness* of what will happen if they do not participate in resource management and conservation
- support the movement to *protest*
- seeking *agreements*
- *dialogue* and negotiation

We cannot escape the fact that communication is an essential ingredient in the management of conflicts over fisheries, as it is in any arena of collective human endeavour. This is not to give communication a privileged position over other interventions and processes: communication can achieve very little if there is no political will to see conflicts managed effectively, or the economic incentives to contravene regulations and agreements are too high for some stakeholders to resist. However, it can play a part in generating political will, or in strengthening legal and social sanctions against infringement.

Communication between various stakeholders is important not only in fisheries conflict management, but also in promoting the uptake of research findings both within and outside the areas in which the research was conducted. Communication in this context means much more than sending messages to people: it includes dialogue and negotiation leading to changes in understanding and perceptions. It is a process that takes place through social and political structures as well as through institutions such as the mass media.

Communication is a normal, everyday human activity amongst people within a given social unit or network such as a family, a group of friends or a set of close work colleagues. But communication by and between organizations, particularly those with different interests, does not happen automatically, and when it does it is not necessarily constructive. Such communication needs to be planned.

⁹ Paper presented at the Regional Consolidation Workshop on Fish Fights over Fish Rights: Managing conflicts and exit from the fisheries and security implications for South and Southeast Asia, 16-20 May 2005, IRRI Complex, Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines organized by the WorldFish Center.

Public awareness and communication

The “public” who we want to become more “aware” may be a relatively small set of people, or the whole population of a country depending on the issue at hand. They may be those directly involved in fisheries management, or those directly affected by a particular conflict. Where the objective is to build popular political support for action to address conflicts or to create new policy tools for natural resource management, the audience might encompass everyone in the country. This might involve getting the issue of conflicts on the “public interest” agenda in the mass media in such a way that politicians have to take notice. More generally, the aim could be to encourage citizens to act responsibly in a context of scarce resources and downward pressure on poor families livelihoods. In most cases, when we talk of “public awareness” we can identify specific categories within the population who we feel we need to share some ideas or information with.

But let’s be careful. Awareness is not something we can simply “spread”. We cannot “make people aware”. Awareness is something that grows within a person. So, although an essential aspect of communication is to make information available to people, to confront them with facts and interpretations of which they were not previously aware, “becoming aware” is a process that occurs through the interaction between new information and what the individual already knows, thinks, believes and wants to believe. So particularly in situations of conflict, where different interpretations of the same situation are creating and sustaining tension, we need to be working with a model of communication that allows for this interaction: for example, a model based on ideas of “convergence” (Rogers and Kincaid) rather than the familiar linear models in which a Source seeks to pass a Message to a Receiver. Our working model of communication should involve dialogue, the working out of solutions, processes, which take place over time through a series of interactions, the nature and extent that cannot be determined precisely beforehand but take shape as the process unfolds.

And what is the role of researchers and research institutes in these processes of communication? Part of our professional job is to inform the debate; to help to make sure that the parties to dialogue have available objective, robust information on the current state of knowledge—e.g. of the level of fish stocks, seasonal and long-term trends, ecological dynamics—in forms and through channels that are both physically and intellectually accessible. Being an objective “honest broker” of information is a big responsibility in situations where local stakeholders and the mass media often promote a highly emotive and partisan discourse. In a sense, the task of researchers is to provide other actors with the means to communicate effectively.

Communication strategies

A communication strategy belongs to someone, or an organization, or a group of people. It is specific to its sponsor. A strategy drawn up by a network of NGOs, for example, will look very different from one drawn up by a government Department of Fisheries. The former may include ideas about how to influence government policy, while the latter may focus on ensuring that the current regulations are widely known, and that all stakeholders understand that current rates of exploitation are unsustainable.

A communication strategy is also specific to the particular context in which it was drawn up. That context includes the channels of communication (face-to-face, mass media, organizations) that are accessible to and used by the various sets of people that one wants to engage in communication. It also includes the nature of conflicts that are being addressed, and the current knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the people involved. This context specificity is the reason why, in the “Enabling better management of fisheries conflicts” project, separate communication strategies were prepared in each of the three partner countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia and India. At a project workshop early in the project we developed together a generic communication planning matrix, on the basis of which each national research team built a strategy and a communication action plan to fit its own national and institutional context.

There are four basic elements to a communication strategy:

- A set of communication partners—a term that is preferable to “audiences” because it makes clear the interactive nature of the process—with which the sponsors of the strategy recognize it is important to communicate with. In the context of fisheries conflicts, the communication partners might include fishers and their families, policy-makers (politicians, government officials), mass media (who can be seen as

both communication partners and channels for reaching various parts of “the public”), community-based organizations, NGOs, researchers, donors, local government and the private sector;

- One or more communication objectives attached to each of these partners, which can be expressed in terms of the changes (in knowledge, behaviour, attitudes towards the resource base and towards other stakeholders) that the sponsor would like to see as a result of the communication process;
- Ideas on what content and treatment of ideas within the communication process are likely to contribute to those objectives being achieved. Information is often the main ingredient here, but what information to include and how to present and treat needs careful thought. Stories of “real lives” can be very powerful ways of putting across information in a way that engages people’s emotions as well as intellect; they can be stories of individuals, families, communities and can be designed to highlight a problem, raise awareness of an issue, promote a solution or suggest a way forward. In other cases, it may be inappropriate to specify content, but rather outline a process—of dialogue, or negotiation. Appeals can be based on fear or rational argument, be negative or positive, involve humour, be one-sided or two-sided: which is most appropriate depends on the objectives and the characteristics of the communication partner or audience;
- Methods—what communication channels and processes does it make sense to use, in order to engage each of the identified partners with the specified content. For communicating with the general public, options include radio, television, newspapers, posters, meetings, local organizations. For policy-makers, short briefing papers and short face-to-face encounters may be effective. For NGOs, appropriate methods might include conferences, reports, engaging in joint activities. It is all a question of what makes sense in the particular context.

The elements of the strategy can be presented in a planning matrix, as in the papers presented yesterday by the Bangladesh and Indian research teams, which can then be used as a basis for prioritizing and scheduling communication activities. In Bangladesh, for example, priority activities have included workshops and meetings for interaction with CBOs and NGOs with the objective of enabling these partners to advocate policy change and effective implementation by local and central government. In India, written complaints were identified by fishers as an effective way of putting pressure on local administration to enforce regulations.

Conclusion

Developing a communication strategy requires good information about the context in which it will be implemented. This includes information about the potential communication partners—their knowledge, attitudes and current behaviour, and their access to, use of and perceptions of available communication channels and opportunities. As part of its commitment to “intelligent communication”, the “Enabling better management of fisheries conflicts” project has included research on the attitudes of different categories of fishers and other actors towards conflicts and their management. The data from this research has been used to prioritize objectives and content for communication activities, and also provides a baseline against which any changes in attitude over time can be assessed.