

Livelihoods and Fisheries in the Lower Mekong Basin



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Summary

People who manage fisheries in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam are beginning to think of themselves as part of a community within a common river basin. This is a different way of thinking; managing the fisheries is no longer seen as an isolated activity but as a part of the life of people who live along the Mekong River and its tributaries. Previously, fisheries managers might have thought of their job as safeguarding or increasing fish production, but now fisheries managers must share in the effort to alleviate poverty and help local people and their communities participate in local and national formulation of policies, laws and programs relating to resource management.

The specialized sets of words used by groups of people working to alleviate poverty – and the comfortable ways in which they communicate sophisticated meanings and share large amounts of specific information efficiently – must now be learned by fisheries managers. The Technical Advisory Body for Fisheries Management, like a number of other fisheries and development organizations, increasingly reflect “livelihoods” in mission statements and objectives. So, what we can understand *livelihoods and livelihoods approaches* to mean, and what do others understand them to mean?

According to studies undertaken in the basin, livelihoods approaches are about developing a deep understanding, putting people at the center of development, sharing rich information with others (from government and NGOs) about people interacting with resources. *Livelihoods analyses* (a part of livelihoods approaches) are systematic yet flexible approaches to understanding people’s situations, people’s access to resources, the ways in which people are vulnerable, and the things which influence their lives. Such analyses can provide a complex yet more complete picture of the natural environment and the way that it supports people’s livelihoods and help us to recognize that poor people deal with aquatic resources management rather than just fisheries or aquaculture.

Taking a livelihoods approach helps us to recognize and even reconsider the way we think about knowledge and learning and to try to capture not one (dominant) view but the range of views held by those who affect the fishery or are affected by it. Such approaches encourage us to enhance the role for local participants from the stage of planning, to ensure that people’s knowledge and understanding shapes proposed agendas, timeframes, budgets and ways of working. Participation means sharing the capacity to do work.

To support sustainable improvement in the lives of people whose livelihoods are based on fisheries and aquaculture, capacity can be built for a broader ‘livelihoods’ approach, with links to other sectors in order to better support multi-faceted livelihoods, incorporated into planning and policy development, and considering regional as well as national livelihoods approaches.

Working toward managing fisheries as part of a community within a common river basin, will give rise to livelihoods approaches that translate learning about people’s livelihoods into useful options for change that can be monitored and evaluated against the objectives of people who are poor.

Introduction



Children near Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia

photo: STREAM

A number of studies have been carried out in countries of the Lower Mekong Basin, highlighting the importance of fisheries for rural livelihoods, food security and poverty reduction. Considerable regional effort has also gone into disseminating the concept of “livelihoods approaches” and training of line agency staff in “livelihoods analysis”.

Programs and projects of fisheries and development organizations increasingly reflect “livelihoods approaches” in their mission statements and objectives. Among these is the Technical Advisory Body

for Fisheries Management (TAB), established at the initiative of the Mekong River Commission Fisheries Program and several Director Generals of Departments of Fisheries in the MRC member countries. In March 2004 the 7th TAB meeting in Hanoi proposed a mission statement:

“The TAB is a regional body which gives advice, enables and facilitates the exchange and uptake of information on fisheries management and development into government policies and action plans for the sustainable improvement of rural livelihoods in the Lower Mekong Basin.”

However, there remains a perception that the concept of livelihoods is still not fully understood, and that relevant information has not been processed in such a way that it can be utilized by policy-makers and fisheries managers. The TAB therefore requested the STREAM Initiative to help them to pull together information on this issue, to “make sense” of studies undertaken and to try to develop conclusions from existing material and make recommendations for policy-makers. Twelve particular studies relating to livelihoods and fisheries in the Lower Mekong Basin were recommended for review by the TAB. This Mekong Development Series publication is one output from that STREAM Initiative study which has also developed an issue of the TAB’s Mekong Fisheries Management Recommendations.

New ways of working

Language and languages

Any means of communicating can be referred to as language, even gestures or animal sounds. To be able to use spoken sounds and conventional symbols is said to be a distinguishing characteristic of humans compared with other animals, and a particular nation or people may use their own sounds and symbols to express thoughts and feelings; there is then language and languages.

So it is with the people of the Lower Mekong Basin who comprise different nations and language groups. But that is still not the whole story. Particular groups which share a language sometimes need to develop specialized sets of words to which the group attaches specific meanings. Often these word sets relate to technical areas, like medicine or fisheries management. People who communicate about managing a fishery might use a word like *spawning*, when discussing how fish or amphibians or mollusks deposit a mass of eggs. The same group will also likely be aware of technical words like *amphibian* and will tend to know that such creatures typically live on land but breed in water. In this way people who engage in specific types of work together find ways to communicate quite sophisticated meanings and share a lot of specific information quite efficiently.



*Bull frogs (Family: Ranidae)
- left (Male) right (Female)* photo: STREAM

A time of change

From time to time a group of specialists, such as fisheries managers, identify a need to change the way they work. This might involve thinking in a different way, expanding what they do or focusing more closely on a particular area of their work. We are living in one of those times right now. People who manage fisheries in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam are beginning to think of themselves as part of a community within a common river basin. This is a different way of thinking; managing the fisheries is no longer seen as an isolated activity but as a part of the life of people who live along the Mekong River and its tributaries. Previously, fisheries managers might have thought of their job as safeguarding or increasing fish production, but now this description is inadequate, and there is more to consider. For example, it is poor people living within the lower Mekong Basin who rely most heavily on fisheries. Now fisheries managers must share in the effort to alleviate poverty.

The power to create change

Our daily lives and work can seem remote from major international gatherings that sometimes feature in news items, and the powerful agendas they create. Examples include the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio, or the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that 191 nations signed up to when the ‘western’ calendar entered the year 2000.



Eight time-bound objectives for a better world

We may not feel we have the forces to “help indigenous people and their communities participate in the national formulation of policies, laws and programs relating to resource management and development that may affect them” (UNCED) or to ‘halve world poverty’ (MDG). Yet we are part of that group which

national leaders have committed to share in such noble struggles. National fisheries managers who come together as the Technical Advisory Body on Fisheries Management are a manifestation of a power base that can create change.

As with all times of change, learning is involved. The specialized sets of words used by groups of people working to alleviate poverty – and the comfortable ways in which they communicate sophisticated meanings and share large amounts of specific information efficiently – must now be learned by fisheries managers, whether they are members of government departments or closer to communities. The effort involved will be great but the benefits to poor people living within the Lower Mekong Basin can be huge. We may be able to begin addressing the lofty aims that our countries have signed up to.

New words to those who alleviate poverty

It so happens that, not long ago, people working to alleviate poverty identified a need to change the way they work too. World *development* it seemed had long been thought of in financial terms, considered by economists and implemented by specialists from a range of technical disciplines. Decisions about what needed to be done, and in what way, were taken by specialists, trained in technical disciplines. People who were poor, although often not defined or identified, were the object of *development* efforts, though not participants in the process.

It was a surprisingly long time before organizations began to monitor how effective their *development* efforts were. There were many problems: what specialists chose to implement, and the way they chose to do that, often did not match well with the needs, objectives and capacities of people, the resources over which people could exercise some control, or the situation in which they found themselves. Eventually, a consensus built that this way of working was proving too difficult to implement. The only way out, it seemed, was to involve people who were specialists in these areas – i.e., poor people themselves. Inspirational thinkers and writers talked of changing the models, of reversals within organizations, “putting the last first”, but such ideas are not easily accomplished (Box 1).

Such a radical ‘reversal’ takes time to implement.

Box 1: When implementing radical reversals

There is:

- resistance from the original specialists (some would be fisheries management specialists), fearing that their role in the process would be diminished or lost,
- the shift in specialists thinking about the kind of roles that people can play in development, and associated training and orientation needs,
- the shift in skills from telling to listening, and associated training and orientation needs,
- a need to take longer and spend more (to establish what people used to believe they already knew), and hence a need for accountants and senior managers to understand that,
- the resources needed to train people to work in new ways and to change or create institutions, and systems that will allow people to implement the new ways of working, and
- the need to relinquish power to people who are poor, so that they are enabled to make decisions, influence policies, practices and laws, to shape service provision and the allocation and spending of budgets.

Non-governmental organizations, United Nations organizations and others, even donors, have begun this process of changing the way they do *development* (1, 9, 10). Many others are playing new roles and working in new ways. These changes are not yet complete; many of the six points highlighted in Box 1 remain to be achieved in many places.



Discussing livelihoods approaches in Kandal, Cambodia photo: STREAM

The Technical Advisory Body for Fisheries Management in the Lower Mekong Basin has joined this front line. Fisheries managers, as part of a community within a common river basin, recognize the need for sharing in the effort to alleviate poverty in the lives of people who live along the Mekong and its tributaries. As they begin to characterize their new role and express their mission to others, they are making a concerted effort to give meaning to specialized sets of words used by groups of people working to alleviate poverty.

To put it in another way, they want to use the “L word”¹, and rather sensibly they want to know what they and others understand it to mean. These are good questions and it is a good time to ask them.

¹ The word *livelihoods*.

The concept of Livelihoods

Development, and people's understanding of the process of development continues to evolve. A dominant model currently involves approaches based around the *concept of livelihoods* and expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.

Deriving a livelihood is not just about attaining personal income. Income is an important contributor to livelihood because poverty diminishes the capacity to satisfy hunger or to achieve sufficient nutrition, to treat or contain illness, to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary conditions. Livelihoods also link to public facilities and social care, organized arrangements of health care and education, and institutions for maintaining local peace and order.

The concept of livelihoods in development no longer views people as passive recipients of the development programs of others because with adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. Livelihoods therefore link to inclusion, to political and civil liberties and the freedom to participate in public decisions that impel the progress of organized arrangements.

Rather than starting from a simplified view of well-being as the goal of development, the focus of the livelihoods concept is on the capability to *function* - *what a person can do*: i.e. 'get what he wants', 'do what she likes', 'have a good life' or *what a person can be*: i.e. 'well-off', 'happy', 'fulfilled', 'free'....

Things that are useful² have various desirable properties. Securing command over useful things gives the owner access to their desirable properties. For example, access to a water body containing fish gives the owner access to fish, which can be used to satisfy hunger, to yield nutrition, to give pleasure, to provide a means of income or a focus for social organization. However the characteristics of useful things do not tell us what a person will be able to do with them. Someone unable to fish (e.g. due to physical disability, lack of gear, or requisite skills) or unable to absorb nutrients (e.g. due to disease) will not gain well-being just from possession.

Our interest therefore lies in what people succeed in doing with things over which they exercise command. When we analyze livelihoods we are looking at *functionings* – personal achievements which depend on many personal and social factors and the value which is placed upon those achievements by people.

Functionings which reduce vulnerability and increase individual well-being without undermining natural resources or negatively impacting the livelihoods of others will be those which remain in existence longest. It is about these functionings that the TAB seeks to advise, enable and facilitate the exchange and uptake of information and to support through government policies and action plans in the Lower Mekong Basin.

² sometimes called *commodities, resources or assets*

Livelihoods Approaches are

Which is to be master?

People often think of language as something old and wise, to be respected, little changing, that words have quite exact and universal meanings. Yet often this is not the case. Words have exciting and inconsistent histories. Some words used by people working to alleviate poverty – such as *community* and *poverty* – have become notorious; others have risen from obscurity to enjoy a celebrity status like *sustainability* and *livelihood* (9, 10). We have colleagues who have spent months researching, and writing hundreds of pages to define these words, to expand or shrink their meaning or to warn us of the dangers of their use. Such intellectual exercises shape and guide what we mean but the outcomes are rarely exact or universally accepted. Life and language are much more fun and flexible than that. While we all appreciate language we do not need to be too compliant. As Lewis Carroll² reminds us (Box 2), words mean what *we* want them to mean, what we collectively believe them to mean. People who compile and update dictionaries are simply trying to keep up.

Here then the question is what we can understand *livelihoods approaches* to mean, and what do others understand them to mean (7).

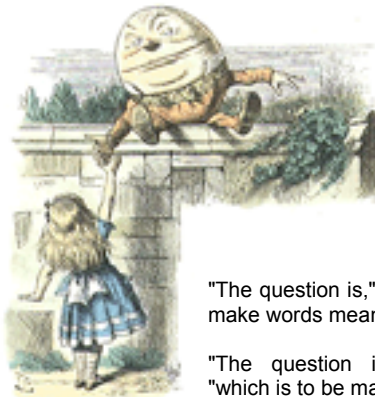
In the previous section we talked about the way people who engage in specific types of work together find ways to communicate quite sophisticated meanings and share a lot of specific information quite efficiently.

These are the kinds of meanings we seek here, ones which serve our practical purpose (9), which we can give life to through the way that we are managing fisheries as part of the life of people who live along the Mekong and its tributaries, working as part of a community within a common river basin.

What we collectively believe them to mean

So what do those who manage fisheries in the Mekong basin individually and collectively believe *livelihoods approaches* to mean?

Box 2: This quote from *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll has an interesting message for those of us considering what words can mean.



"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

² An influential English author and poet called Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (who was also a rather shy mathematics professor) was famous for writing elaborately imaginative and vigorously nonsensical stories and poems under the name of Lewis Carroll; playing with words and meanings, making fun of language, influencing, even creating new words which now reside in English dictionaries.

Tek Vannaara (11) of the Culture and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA) has been studying fisheries on the upper part of the Mekong River in Stung Treng Province in Cambodia, in his words, “to provide **deep understanding** about resources that people rely on for their livelihoods.” The **people are at the center** of his study of Au Svay commune community fishery, not the fish. *His livelihoods approach* is taking time to achieve a deep understanding of one commune but it also has another objective: “to provide additional information and experience related to sustainable natural resource extraction to government institutions and NGOs to implement in other communities fisheries.” In other words, he wants **to share rich information** with other managers (from government and NGOs) about people interacting with resources.

The Xe Bang Fai River Basin is in central Lao PDR. Here, Bruce Shoemaker, Ian G Baird and Monsiri Baird (6) have also been trying to describe the means of livelihoods of communities. Their study also has another objective, in their words, “to contribute to the development of a more holistic and sensitive approach to development in the Mekong River Basin.” Holistic means **considering the whole system** (not just the fish), rather like Vannaara’s (11) “deep understanding” about people interacting with resources. An approach which is sensitive would be one which takes into consideration such a deep understanding and how to respond to it.

These studies involve *livelihoods analyses* which are systematic yet flexible approaches to understanding people’s situations, people’s access to resources, the ways in which people are vulnerable, and the things which influence their lives (1). *Livelihoods analyses* involve people sharing rich information (11), reaching a deep understanding about the whole system (6). They are part of the picture; they give shape to *livelihoods approaches*, make them real and bring them to life.

As well as shaping approaches, *livelihoods analyses* are sometimes undertaken with a specific purpose. Roger Molloy, Chanthone Phothitay and Sonsai Kosy (4) looked at livelihoods associated with seasonally-flooded habitats in southern Lao PDR. This group represented the World Wildlife Fund and their interest in biodiversity, as well as those responsible for the day-to-day management of fisheries in Savannakhet Province (the Department of Livestock and Fisheries) and the Living Aquatic Resources Research Center, established in 2000, which supports learning about and management of basin resources. They wanted to see how biological and habitat diversity contribute to rural livelihoods, while commenting on the role of the hydrological cycle in generating and maintaining this high level of diversity. The specific purpose of their *livelihoods analysis*, in their words, was “to explore local knowledge of natural resources by inviting local communities to discuss the daily use and management of biodiversity.” There was also a second and broader strategic purpose to their approach, to use *livelihoods analysis*, “**to discourage the implementation of incomplete poverty alleviation strategies.**” Like the central Lao study above, the aim was to consider the whole system. However, the specific interest here was to use *livelihoods analysis* to **influence policies and strategies.**

The **coordinated multi-agency approach** of their study reflects the coordinated livelihoods strategies of poor people within communities. This kind of **fitting together of institutional objectives and people’s objectives** is a part of livelihoods approaches. The agenda for their study group, which is an example of a *livelihoods*

approach and of *basin management thinking*, was to aim to avoid a single-issue policy focus. An example would be “flood prevention and mitigation to improve rice production” which “may come into conflict with the natural ecosystem services (seasonal flood pulse maintaining critical habitat, biodiversity and fish production) that currently support rural livelihoods.” In other words, **a livelihoods approach to policy development is based on a complex yet more complete picture of the natural environment and the way that it supports people’s livelihoods.**

One question which policy-makers, accountants and senior managers in the Mekong Basin will consistently face is “how much complexity can we cope with?” (7)

When we consider “fisheries and (poor people’s) livelihoods” not only are we thinking beyond the resource, **we want to expand our definition of the complexity of the resource itself.** As the Xe Bang Fai River Basin study (6) highlights,

besides fish, many other living aquatic resources are gathered from rivers and wetlands by villagers, although the amounts and types of resources harvested can vary widely from village to village. These aquatic resources include shrimp, snails, earthworms (used for fish bait), frogs, crabs and aquatic insects. These resources are especially important in villages with a small area of wet rice fields or fields that are particularly vulnerable to flooding. While many non-fish living aquatic resources are utilized as food within individual households, some people realize substantial income from their sale. Women and children often play the major role in the collection of these resources.



Mapping aquatic resources at Nam Houm reservoir, Vientiane Laos photo: STREAM

Many organizations in the region already **recognize that poor people deal with aquatic resources management rather than just fisheries or aquaculture** (7, 8, 9, 10), and organizations have expanded their efforts to match this element of complexity. Some examples are the Living Aquatic Resources Research Center (LARReC), the Aquaculture and Aquatic Resources Management Program (ARRM) at the Asian Institute of Technology, Support to Regional Aquatic Resources Management

(STREAM) of the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific and WORLDFISH (The International Center for Living Aquatic Resources). Like the coordinated multi-agency approach highlighted above, supporting institutions to develop areas of interest which reflect those of the communities they serve is another example of the fitting together of institutional objectives and people’s objectives and is a part of *livelihoods approaches*. Along with **capturing the complexity of the resource** there

is the need to **capture the diversity of the role of resources within livelihoods**. As Bruce Shoemaker, Ian G Baird and Monsiri Baird (6) from central Lao PDR comment: “from place to place and from season to season, different ethnic groups take advantage of the natural wealth of the basin in different ways, in the same way that women and men in these communities undertake a diverse range of responsibilities in managing and harvesting this wealth.”

As if the complexity of the resource and the diversity of its role within livelihoods are not enough to deal with, as people, we do not always think the same things are important (5, 10). Different groups have different ideas about the way things are, about what should be done and about how things should be done, sometimes known as “social reality”. Differing views about how things are, or what to do, can lead to conflicts, between different resource users (10), neighboring villages or community fisheries, between outsiders and local people (10), even between people and their governments (5). A part of livelihoods approaches is therefore to try **to capture not one (dominant) view but the range of views held by those who affect the fishery or are affected by it** (10).

Sometimes a conflict may arise between local people and their government, perhaps over the citing of a dam. They may see different courses for a river’s *development*, a government seeking to build a dam, local people preferring not to block the water course. The stated objective of dam developers, both the builders and the funders, might be to promote the development of the villagers. Yet the dam, in the eyes of the villagers, may be interrupting the flow of the river, negatively impacting their livelihoods, and their own path for *development*. No one “social reality” is universally correct, but imbalances in power can result in a representation of reality that does not reflect people’s practical understanding of the complexity and dynamics of natural resources, and the ways they are used. *Livelihoods analysis* together with debate can be approaches to **help to resolve differences between sets of views about the way things are, and about what and how things should be done**.

Local people sometimes may not recognize the way they are represented in certain kinds of development (and research) proposals if the “assembly and presentation” of local knowledge is in the hands of outsiders who claim to have a certain methodology to understand it. Research undertaken by villagers – can sometimes reveal local knowledge about the environment and how villagers interact with it. The approach would differ from conventional participatory research if villagers could choose what they want to study and the research team could be chosen by the community. In this way villagers would take control over the process of knowledge production and ‘write’ their own story of how they perceive and interact with their environment. Such *livelihoods approaches* can **help people to play a more complete role within the process of knowledge production and development** (10).

Here then, the question was, what we can understand *livelihoods approaches* to mean (8), and what do others understand them to mean? If words mean what *we* want them to mean, what we collectively believe them to mean, then in our own words, we can make the statements in Box 3.

Box 3: *Livelihoods approaches* in the Mekong Basin have the following features

- *Livelihoods analyses* are a component of *livelihoods approaches*. They are systematic yet flexible ways to understand people's situations, people's access to resources, the ways in which people are vulnerable, and the things which influence people's lives.
- *Livelihoods approaches* are a way of thinking and working that put people at the center and can provide a deep understanding, and share rich information, capturing not one (dominant) view, but the range of views held by those who affect the fishery or are affected by it, considering the whole system (but sometimes undertaken with a specific purpose).
- *Livelihoods approaches* help us to expand our definition of the complexity of the resource (to include along with rice, fish, shrimp, snails, earthworms [used for fish bait], frogs, crabs, aquatic plants and aquatic insects) and capture the diversity of the role of resources within livelihoods.
- *Livelihoods approaches* help us to recognize that poor people deal with aquatic resources management rather than just fisheries or aquaculture and so often involve coordinated multi-agency approaches, a fitting together of institutional objectives and people's objectives.
- *Livelihoods approaches* can support the definition and implementation of complete poverty alleviation strategies, based on a complex yet more complete picture of the natural environment and the way that it supports people's livelihoods and can change how policies and strategies influence what people's lives.
- *Livelihoods approaches* can help to resolve differences between sets of views about the way things are, about what and how things should be done and can help people to play a more complete role within the process of knowledge production and development.

(1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11)

“All that glitters is not gold”

Not all approaches which are referred to as *livelihoods approaches* share the same understanding. It is clear from the *livelihoods studies* from the Mekong Basin referenced above, that being people-centred and participatory requires time; it also requires a strong commitment to facilitation and to dealing with power and language issues, understanding and building trust (7, 8, 9, 10). Although this may seem self-evident, there are indications that short projects promising local participation in multiple countries are still attractive to donors and their reviewers, even though we would be misguided to think that these hold much meaning for local people.

To capture the complexity of fisheries resource and the ways that people interact with them in wide ranging national and ecological environments takes time. There is much to understand about the diversity of the role of resources within livelihoods and the range of views held by those who affect the fishery or are affected by it. The enormity of such undertakings has been a key realization for researchers themselves (2).

Whereas Thai Baan Research (5) might represent a *livelihoods approach* which can help to renegotiate unbalanced power relations and provide a clear development path, projects which limit the scope for participation can lead to conclusions that do not capture people's practical understanding of the complexity and dynamics of natural

resources or social contexts and may not therefore translate into useful options for change. Examples might be:

Problem: lack of fishing grounds

—————→ *Solution:* ensure access of the poor fishers to good fishing grounds

Problem: “relaxed law enforcement” and ‘corruption’

—————→ *Solution:* “strict law enforcement”

Although such solutions are logical responses to the problems to which they refer they lack any detail about the path for change that could help managers. As the TAB implies, “it is difficult to make sense of such information and to develop conclusions and recommendations from such material for policy-makers.” Earlier we posed a question relating to how much of the complexity which livelihoods analyses deliver can we cope with. A second question then, which policy-makers, accountants and senior managers in the Mekong Basin, and donors and others more generally must address, is “what minimum level of complexity and detail is necessary for studies to be of value?”

Sharing the capacity to do work

Co-management (in fisheries) is about sharing the capacity to do work, and more especially the sharing of capacity held by governments, with local people. In this context, making only cursory attempts to understand (poor) people’s needs and appropriate mechanisms for satisfying these, can risk giving undue weight to other stakeholders’ interpretations and agendas. This can negatively impact people’s livelihoods and ruin their own path for development.



Fish depicted on the wall of the 16 century Wat Xieng
Thong, Luang Prabang, Laos photo: STREAM

A very important recommendation about *livelihoods approaches*, especially where these are managed by outsiders, might be that those for whom the studies are undertaken (such as farmer and fishers, and policy-makers) should advise on the types of outcomes that they would find most useful. There is perhaps considerable scope to develop systems which enhance the role for local participants at the stage of planning *livelihoods approaches*.

This would ensure that local participants knowledge and understanding shape proposed agendas, timeframes, budgets and ways of working.

There is increasing interest in *sustainable livelihoods approaches* and a growing disillusionment with some other mechanisms for addressing the development needs of poor people. Especially those where the ways of working and communicating tend to structure which people “have a voice” at the micro-level and how much room there is for maneuvering by partners. In most cases, changing the way of working will have to be initiated by the dominant partners (that is, those who hold the funds and make the agendas), building on the conclusion of Ahmed and colleagues (2), so that ways of working are planned where resources and time do not limit the scope to fully involve all partners.

To support sustainable improvement

What to do and how to do it?

In the first section we considered fisheries managers as part of a community within a common river basin and how this is leading to an expanded role, requiring new approaches and the need to share in the effort to alleviate poverty. We have seen that the need to communicate quite sophisticated meanings and share a lot of specific information quite efficiently, requires us to command a new vocabulary, an understanding of what livelihoods approaches mean to us and an awareness of what others understand them to mean.

In the second section, using examples of approaches and reports related to livelihoods drawn from the Lower Mekong Basin, we saw several dimensions of the meaning of livelihoods and livelihoods approaches. We have seen that not everyone understands livelihoods approaches in the same way, but that sharing the capacity to do work must be seen as a crucial component. The question now is how organizations and groups can continue to give life to livelihoods approaches, as they give advice, enable and facilitate the exchange and uptake of information on fisheries management, and aim to develop policies and action plans for the sustainable improvement of rural livelihoods in the Lower Mekong Basin? In other words, what to do and how to do it?

There are potential insights to be drawn from livelihoods approaches for those who make policy, those who manage the fishery or provide services to fishers and farmers and those who take on research to better understand and improve management practices. Table 1 takes four different types of stakeholders and some of the roles that they play in fisheries management and describes examples of how livelihoods approaches might complement, or even change the way things are done to support sustainable improvement in the fishery.

Table 1: Livelihoods approaches which support the roles of stakeholders

Policy makers	
<p>Building country-level development strategies</p> <p>Developing/reforming legislation</p> <p>Monitoring and evaluation</p>	<p>Building country-level development strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Aquatic resources management plays a key role in poor people’s livelihoods which should be reflected in country-level development strategies. ➤ Policy makers should be informed and should highlight the role of aquatic resources in poor people’s livelihoods in National Strategies for Sustainable Development (Agenda 21, of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit), Comprehensive Development Frameworks (World Bank), Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (now the centerpiece for policy dialogue in all countries receiving concessional loans from the Bank and IMF). ➤ Livelihoods approaches can be useful to improve policy development. <p>Developing/reforming legislation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fishing and aquaculture are not only a source of food but also a source of livelihood. ➤ Laws in support of people who are poor will consider the choices that people make, the resources they can command and the circumstances in which resources can be woven into supporting livelihoods. ➤ Livelihoods approaches can be useful to improve fisheries law. <p>Monitoring and evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fisheries statistics tell us something about the overall picture. ➤ Understand the way that strategies, policies and laws, as well as institutions impact on people’s lives can be appreciated through livelihoods analysis.

Senior Managers

Action planning	Action planning <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Fisheries Department actions need to promote fisheries and aquaculture, conserve the environment and also support the livelihoods of poor people.➤ Action plans in support of people who are poor will consider the choices that people make, the resources they can command and the circumstances in which resources can be woven into supporting livelihoods.➤ Livelihoods approaches can be useful to action planning.
Capacity building	
Budget allocation	
Monitoring and evaluation	
	Capacity building <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Traditional roles of DOF colleagues are changing. Technical skills are still very important, but must now be supplemented by other skills.➤ Capacity must be built to understand the role of aquaculture and fisheries in the lives of people who are poor. To learn how to appreciate aquatic resources management from people's perspectives and the circumstances that influences livelihoods approaches and aquatic resources use.➤ Livelihoods analysis skills can supplement technical knowledge.
	Budget allocation <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Funds to train significant numbers of people will be required.➤ Funds and time to conduct livelihoods analysis will be required.
	Monitoring and evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Activities, fish production, conservation and spending can be monitored.➤ The way that strategies, policies and laws, as well our activities impact on people's lives can also be monitored through livelihoods analysis.

Service Providers	
Provide:	
Information	<p>Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The kind of information people want, the form in which they want it (type of media), language and communications issues can be learned from livelihoods analysis (literacy rates, preferences, access to TV, radio, mass media).
Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The subject matter for awareness raising as well as technical and economic information can be targeted accurately following livelihoods analysis.
Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Livelihoods approaches can be useful to communications.
Monitoring and evaluation	<p>Credit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The existing options for borrowing; people's financial situation; capacity for repayments; needs for and specifications of financial products - can be understood from livelihoods analysis. ➤ The design of Self-Help Group savings and credit and the provision of effective appropriate micro-credit systems benefit from livelihoods analysis. ➤ Livelihoods analysis skills can help in effective credit provision. <p>Inputs</p> <p>Livelihoods approaches can demonstrate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What people need and when (timing issues). ➤ How to facilitate people to get the inputs they need. <p>Monitoring and evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Activities, services and spending can be monitored. ➤ The way that service providers impact on people's lives can also be monitored through livelihoods analysis.

Researchers	
Develop: Proposals Work plans Actions Reports Monitoring and evaluation	<p>Proposals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Participatory research can lead to conclusions that capture people's practical understanding of the complexity and dynamics of natural resources and social contexts and can translate into useful options for change. ➤ A crucial element in research for development is the participation of people whom the research is to benefit, beginning by playing a central role in research proposals. ➤ Livelihoods approaches are important ways for researchers to learn more about farmers and fishers. <p>Work plans and actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Research and development approaches should have structures which adequately share the capacity to do work with the people in whose name they are undertaken. ➤ The design of work plans and actions by local people ensures that people's knowledge and understanding shape proposed agendas, timeframes, budgets and ways of working. ➤ Livelihoods approaches can help to ensure that the research which is most valuable to people is conducted. <p>Reports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reports in local language share research. ➤ Shared reports can help to resolve differences between sets of views. <p>Monitoring and evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Activities, services and spending can be monitored. ➤ The way that research impacts on people's lives can also be monitor through livelihoods analysis.

What conclusions can we draw? And what recommendations can we make?

There is no single *livelihoods approach*, no *blueprint* like a plan or drawing to guide the construction of a building. Yet, as we have seen, there are some guiding principals, some conclusions can be drawn.

Through the Millennium Development Goals we are all increasingly required to think about poverty alleviation and how we are undertaking this role within our work. This tends to take our thinking beyond the fishery resource, putting people at the center of our efforts as part of a broad approach to fisheries management that builds upon our understanding of people's livelihoods.

However, because people's livelihoods are complex and varied, adopting livelihoods approaches within an organization has implications for strategic plans, including human resources development and budgets. There may be a greater requirement within some organizations for people with social development skills, as well as fisheries training. There may be a need to build capacity in livelihoods approaches at ministerial, departmental and field levels and in how to conduct livelihoods analysis amongst field teams.

Capacity building can be understood in two ways, each important here and each derived from different meanings of *capacity*. The first relates to *capacity* as commonly understood as *capability* or *skill*, i.e., creating opportunities to learn the skills necessary to do livelihoods analysis in a participatory way. The second comes from an understanding of *capacity* as *role*, i.e., the capacity in which a person works; where the introduction of livelihoods approaches means giving people new roles or having to fulfill new roles in the work context. Orientation may be required, and in some cases skills development may be desirable such as learning how to be a facilitator of groups, how to adapt materials or how to collaborate with new stakeholders.

It has been common to think about poverty in terms of identifying and satisfying needs. Yet as fisheries managers continue to understand the context of people's lives and how they use aquatic resources they are seeking to understand not only people's *needs* but also their *objectives*.

People, who are poor, for rational reasons related to managing risk and vulnerability, follow various livelihood activities concurrently. That means that poor people who fish, who are natural *clients* of fisheries management are likely also to be clients of other line agencies such as agriculture, animal husbandry or forestry. This strengthens the existing rationales to build links with other sectors, in order to better support poor people's multi-faceted livelihoods.

Policy-makers endeavor to shape policy in ways that people find relevant and valuable. Seeing policy development through the *livelihoods lens* provides additional opportunities to understand the role of local culture and to value indigenous knowledge about livelihoods options, resources use and food security. The shared need for coherent policies across sectors further strengthens the rationale for strong links with other line agencies within the basin.

Those who work hard to extend new knowledge to farmers and fishers are naturally expected to offer advice. Livelihoods analysis provides Fisheries Extension Officers with an opportunity to understand the context in which advice is sought and to identify how best to support people's objectives locally.

The true value of livelihoods approaches in fisheries management is however not limited to the local context. Following the recognition that small-scale artisanal fishing and fish farming are crucial to so many people in the Mekong region, and indeed in Asia, especially those who are poor, a consensus is building, not only for new national policies, laws and development strategies to be based on livelihoods approaches, but also for a regional policy direction to be agreed that puts people at the center of development planning in aquatic resources management (see Box 4). Just as aquatic resources, the life stages of fish, even fishers, are not always constrained by national boundaries, so policies must move beyond the national context.

There are regional implications for the exchange and uptake of information, even the potential for "joined-up policies". This has special meaning in trans-boundary areas of the Mekong Basin as well as more broadly in other contexts in Asia-Pacific.

**Box 4: A Framework for a Pro-Poor Regional Strategy on Sustainable Aquatic Resources Management in Asia-Pacific:
A Statement of Understanding and Recommendations**

The following statement is an example of the growing regional emphasis on the value of livelihoods approaches and was endorsed by government representatives of each of the countries of the lower Mekong basin in April 2005, along with twelve other Asia-Pacific economies at the 16th Governing Council Meeting of the Network of Aquaculture Centers in Asia-Pacific.

“As we work toward Millennium Development Goals – and in the context of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and National Strategies for Poverty Reduction – we recognize the limits on aquatic resources and the importance of their management to the food security of poor and disadvantaged fishers and farmers.

In order to better identify poor people and understand the contexts of their lives and how they use aquatic resources, to understand their needs and objectives, and the role of local culture and indigenous knowledge, a comprehensive and broader approach is needed, that goes beyond a focus on resources and technology alone.

A *livelihoods approach* involves learning about the resources that people can command, the choices they make, and the circumstances of their livelihoods. The livelihoods approach means putting people at the center of development planning in aquatic resources management.

Livelihoods analysis is a systematic yet flexible approach to understanding situations, access to resources, vulnerabilities and influences. It makes use of participatory approaches for learning from individuals and groups within communities. This often means that the people involved in livelihoods analysis work may need to take on new roles.

Participation and shared understandings of all stakeholder groups are made possible through a livelihoods approach, which builds community capacity, develops trust and encourages ownership. This approach minimizes adverse impacts and reduces conflicts during changes to community development policy, the introduction of co-management and the consideration of options for people’s livelihoods. These approaches can be a bridge between communities and policy-makers and can also play useful roles in the assessment of the impact of decision-making processes and policies on people.

Therefore, policy development should not only depend on technical knowledge about aquatic resources management. It requires government investment and interventions in planning and implementing fair and equitable development strategies based on information about poor people in communities.

This statement was prepared by the participants of the *FAO/NACA-STREAM Workshop on Aquatic Resources and Livelihoods: Connecting Policy and People*, 17-19 March 2005, in Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines. This was the concluding event of the FAO Technical Cooperation Program (TCP) project entitled “Assistance in Poverty Alleviation through Improved Aquatic Resources Management in Asia-Pacific.” The workshop reviewed and share experiences, built consensus on the value of livelihoods approaches in aquatic resources management and poverty alleviation, and identified ways of promoting livelihoods approaches throughout the region.

As we work toward managing fisheries as part of a community within a common river basin, *livelihoods approaches* will become what we do and the way we do it. Livelihoods approaches will come to mean what *we* want them to mean, what we collectively believe them to mean. We will use them to ensure that people's knowledge and understanding shape proposed agendas, timeframes, budgets and ways of working. We will use them to help us conduct research, frame laws and policies, build country-level and regional development strategies that capture people's practical understanding of the complexity and dynamics of natural resources and social contexts. We will translate learning about people's livelihoods into useful options for change and monitor and evaluate our efforts against poor people's objectives.

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