

Facilitating a Diversity of Voices to Influence Policy

Graham Haylor and William Savage
STREAM Initiative
Network of Aquaculture Centers in Asia-Pacific
Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

This paper is about a process and practice which is bringing representatives of tribal communities in three Indian states together with district, state and national government officials, around the issue of aquaculture services provision. The project comprises a year-long series of visits, fieldwork, workshops, case studies, a consensus-building process, literature research, reviews and documentation. Among its aims are building shared understandings of government services provision among recipients, implementers and policy-makers, and facilitating an equitable dialogue towards policy change.

Consideration is given to how three of STREAM's guiding principles – being people-focused, participatory and practical – are being transformed from concepts into practice. This is being done by applying STREAM's emerging “process monitoring and significant change” system. Insights are being gained into:

- the practicalities of people's actual participation in influencing policy change
- the interplay of people's opportunities and choices to improve their livelihoods
- how different people's expectations of each other, and how they work together, can change through mediated experiences
- what it means to work with diversity and the realities of being tolerant, and
- rights-based approaches to development work.

The Project

Following negotiations between NACA's¹ STREAM² Initiative, the Indian government, the NGO GVT³ and DFID NRSP⁴, a project was agreed to “Investigate improved policy on aquaculture service provision to poor people” in India (Haylor et al., 2002). The purpose of the project is to identify, test and promote mechanisms for the delivery of improved rural services critical to the development of rural livelihoods, with emphasis on services in support of aquaculture that take account of the objectives, strengths and constraints of marginalized groups and their complex diverse livelihoods.

¹ Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific

² Support to Regional Aquatic Resources Management, an Asia-Pacific regional learning and communications initiative in support of poor people whose livelihoods involve aquatic resources

³ Gramin Vikas Trust, an Indian NGO working in Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal in eastern India and three other western Indian states

⁴ UK Government's Department for International Development, Natural Resources Systems Programme

The project is being undertaken through a series of visits, fieldwork, workshops, case studies, a consensus-building process, literature research, reviews and documentation. Case studies of the experiences of service providers and recipients were identified through the visits, fieldwork and workshops, and include:

1. A Proactive Village – In Support of Aquaculture for Poor and Scheduled Caste Groups (Jharkhand)
2. A Successful Tribal Farmer Conducting Aquaculture (Jharkhand)
3. Contrasting Case Studies of Service Provision and Participation (Orissa)
4. Experiences of Group-building, Production Success and the Struggle to Prevent Capture of the Resource (Jharkhand)
5. Recipients' Experiences of Services Provided by NGOs in Support of Aquaculture for Poor and Tribal Groups (West Bengal)
6. Service Provider's Perspectives on the Implementation of Government Schemes in Support of Aquaculture for Poor and Tribal Groups (West Bengal).

Various methods and media are being used to share experiences and highlight issues raised in the case studies, including video documentaries, photo storyboards, narratives and a street-play.

A May 2002 series of state-level workshops in Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal resulted in a draft statement of “Emerging Indicators of Progress Towards Transacting Institutional and Policy Change”. This key project output will be used as a discussion document in an iterative consultative consensus-building process involving key policy actors (including representatives of government and non-governmental organizations). They will consider and articulate opportunities to improve the delivery of aquaculture support services for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, taking account of the case studies of service provision from different perspectives and of a collation of “lessons learnt from elsewhere” being compiled through literature research.

In April 2003, representatives of all stakeholders who have contributed to the project will gather for a Policy Review Workshop in Delhi with central government policy-makers. In addition to a package of briefing materials and visual media, a street-play will be performed by a tribal drama group to raise awareness of people's experiences of service provision. The aim is to achieve agreement of the priorities for policy and institutional change to ensure cost-efficient, effective delivery systems for the provision of aquaculture support services targeting Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes among relevant institutions in India, and to advocate for these changes.

Guiding Principles: Process Monitoring and Significant Change

To achieve agreement of change priorities, we believe it is necessary to build shared understandings of government services provision among recipients, implementers and policy-makers, through the facilitation of an equitable dialogue towards policy change. But such a conceptually-laden, potentially-jargonistic statement (like this one too) cannot go unexamined. Nor can one of our idealistic responses to the question of what this project is about: “Contributing to ‘giving people a voice’ in policy-making processes that have an impact on their livelihoods”.

One of our intentions in STREAM is to continue learning how to transform concepts into practice, how to give meaning to ideas that often remain in the realm of jargon. We have started doing this by defining a set of STREAM Guiding Principles, which would be able to be described in practice in any of our activities, in this case a process and practice for carrying out a policy change project in India.

The STREAM Guiding Principles (box) were initially generated by colleagues from Bangkok, Cambodia, Nepal, the Philippines and Vietnam during our June 2002 Workshop on Process Monitoring and Significant Change. The exercise was stimulated by the realization that much of the text of the original STREAM documentation was neither reflective of what was actually happening in STREAM, nor had benefited from Initiative-wide participation. As part of our emerging monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, the Guiding Principles will be examined in terms of how the various activities and their processes and practices reflect them. In other words, we must give life to the principles by describing what they mean in practice.

People-focused Participatory Practical Flexible Supportive Transparent Reflective

For the purposes of explanation, let us take the first three of the guiding principles – people-focused, participatory and practical – and attribute some descriptors to them:

- Being *people-focused* means taking all steps as close as possible to fishers and farmers, remembering that relationships among people often determine any initiative's outcomes, always being aware of the diversity within a group, and focusing on how fishers and farmers themselves define improvements in their livelihoods and well-being.
- Being *participatory* compels us to involve as many people and partners as possible, to share decision-making and responsibility for carrying out the work, and paying attention to how processes and practices are being facilitated so that every person has opportunities to participate, and
- Being *practical* would mean making decisions and taking actions that are possible to implement; starting small, learning and growing; and being realistic about the sorts, levels and degrees of changes in policy that are possible.

While it is not possible to go into detail about our emerging M&E system, it is worth noting that it is based on a STREAM Initiative framework of the “logical” kind, which has been revised according to our contemporary understanding of what we are doing. It captures both expected and unanticipated changes, the former expressed in a conventional form of “objectively verifiable indicators”, and the latter in terms of an M&E approach called “significant change”.

“Significant change” “is believed to be an innovative approach to project monitoring, developed in cooperation with the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) in 1994. [It] was developed in the course of developing an evolutionary perspective on learning within organisations. The design involved the deliberate abandonment of the use of ‘indicators’, a central concept in orthodox approaches to monitoring. Instead, the focus of the system is on the identification of significant change as perceived and interpreted by the various participants. It relies on the use of qualitative, not quantitative, information. The approach is inductive,

extracting meaning out of events that have already taken place, not deductive, making assumptions about future events. The focus of the system is flexible and adaptive, not fixed” (Davies, 1998:68).

Once we have the M&E system up and running, we expect it to give us a structure for documenting, learning and acting upon the sorts of insights we think we are gaining into the issues raised by this paper: people’s participation, opportunities and choices, expectations, diversity and tolerance, and rights-based development approaches. Thus, we intend for the “significant change” dimension of the M&E system to lead us to an examination of the concepts we are dealing with, and to be a check against unquestioned assumptions about the terms we communicate with.

People’s Participation in Policy Change

With notable exceptions, but in common with most other countries, the participation of poor people from rural areas of India in policy change has been limited at best. In 1989, while the Eighth Five-Year Plan was being debated, a seminar at the Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi gave rise to a book (Chambers et al., 1989) which began to look at the cruel paradox of mass poverty coexisting with vast resource potential in much of rural India. The authors were driven to conclude that official and professional misconceptions of the priorities of poor people hindered seeing how to help them. In addition, they asserted that the approaches of policy-makers, analysts and development practitioners to reduce poverty, spring from their ideological principles (Marxist, socialist, Gandhian, humanist, or neo-classical, among others) or their professional specialist stances (scientists, engineers, economists, educators, or others).

Today, as the Tenth Five-Year Plan is being debated and composed, STREAM has been encouraged by the Indian government Fisheries Commissioner to play a role in recommending policy reforms, since, in spite of efforts, the aquaculture development needs of tribal groups were not being adequately addressed (Haylor et al., 2002). Among the project’s objectives would be gaining an understanding of the perceptions of policy-makers, officials and professionals, and more particularly, of the perceptions and priorities of tribal people, and uncovering any misconceptions that may exist. One approach to this could be *advocacy*, which literally means “to speak for someone”. The Latin verb *vocare* (to call or summon) is the origin of the English word *voice*. To advocate has come to mean to plead on behalf of another, to represent a client in court or more generally, to raise awareness and gain support for a cause. Advocacy in its most basic form aims to change an existing situation that is unfavorable to a group of people by applying sufficient pressure on those who control the situation so that they cannot afford to maintain the status quo (Mansfield and MacLeod, 2002).

The process and practice which is bringing representatives of tribal communities in three Indian states (Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal) together with district, state and national government officials, around the issue of aquaculture services provision, is not advocacy in the literal sense. It may be thought of as a facilitated advocacy. The term *facilitation* literally means “to make the process easier” (Webne-Behrman, 1998). We are not aiming to speak *for* people but to make the process easier for them to “speak” for themselves, to give potential recipients of service provision a voice in shaping development processes from which practical support can flow.

The approach is founded on the negotiation of a commitment from policy-makers to build an understanding of the aspirations of recipients, i.e., poor women, men and youth, including tribal and other marginalized and disadvantaged groups. In reality, policy-making involves a relatively few actors at national and state levels, within hierarchical bureaucratic structures and little expectation of equal roles or recipient participation. In this context, there is a clear role for learning with others about the process and practice of facilitating people's participation in policy change.

This learning would support people to feel secure about new ways of working, and introducing facilitation methods that support equity and inclusion in decision-making. Such practices include:

- consistent attention to sharing understanding and meaning across different language and discourse groups (e.g., by transcription techniques in all participants' languages)
- providing space for non-hierarchical debate and analysis for national, state and local-level policy actors, and negotiating space for people to share their perceptions and priorities about service provision (e.g., through appropriate grouping of participants in a workshop), and
- creatively using a variety of media (e.g., video documentaries, photo storyboards and street-plays).

We will still have to hold ourselves accountable to the degree and nature of people's participation in influencing policy, and maintain our humility about how achievable this may be. A starting point will be documenting how representatives of tribal communities are physically engaged in the process, the contributions they make to the outcomes of workshops and meetings, how much learning from our fieldwork with them in their own villages actually makes it into policy change priority statements, and how "close" policy-makers, officials and professionals interact with the people for whom their policies and projects are intended.

Opportunities and Choices

Our aquaculture development objectives could be said to be concerned with maximizing opportunities and choices, especially among disadvantaged groups, within the context of the relationships among commodities, services and people. Tribal people, the Government of India and the governments of states in tribal areas, are aware of the potential of aquaculture to support the livelihoods of poor people through improved food security and income generation. In addition, they are aware of the need to empower local communities, including disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Tribes, to manage their own affairs and attain the ownership and sustainable management of their natural resources, including water and fish resources. However, initiatives which encourage development of commodities and services in support of aquaculture have largely failed to provide the opportunities and choices upon which people can act: national directives and local aspirations have failed to meet.

Some conceptual clarity around the factors which underlie this failure can be borrowed from the field of welfare economics, especially Gorman (1956) and Lancaster (1966) on commodities and their characteristics, and Amartya Sen (1999)

on commodities and capabilities. The existence of a commodity, such as water resources for aquaculture, only holds development promise if, in this case tribal people, can secure entitlement to it and thus exercise command over the corresponding properties of the water resource, e.g., that it can support fish culture. However, the characteristics of the water resource to which there is secured entitlement still does not tell us what tribal people will be able to do with it. What they succeed in doing with the water resource and its corresponding characteristics at their disposal are what Sen (1999) refers to as a *functioning*, reflecting the actual pattern of use and comprising both opportunity and choice.

Understanding and taking account of the livelihood opportunities of tribal people and the choices that they make, we would argue, is the key to addressing the failure of initiatives which aim to support their development. Understanding the realities of other people's lives, livelihoods, priorities and choices, demands us to consider the expectations we have of others and of how we work with them. Importantly, the principle of tolerance, which underlies the full consideration of the opportunities open to others, and appreciation of the right to exercise choice, can lead onto the incorporation of diversity into support initiatives.

Expectations

Bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders means that each person will come with their own set of preconceived notions and expectations of each other. With few exceptions, there will be issues of power and control in decision-making, roles of women and men, positions of government officials and villagers, the places of people from different societal classes, and levels of education. These are roots of the very "prejudices" that must be overcome if, in this case, there is to be any chance for tribal people to have a voice in policy-making.

Through thoughtful, principled facilitation, people's experiences of each other can be mediated, different understandings communicated and common ground found. Those who would exercise control from a position of power, can learn that sharing some of that does not have to be threatening, and in fact, can lead to outcomes that shed favorable light on their own work. More highly-educated people can learn that the knowledge they have acquired through schooling and employment, has also been gained by others through experience and their own livelihoods. Other examples of changed expectations could be stated between men and women, government and non-governmental professionals, nationals and expatriates and those from different castes.

In short, our expectations will change when we have successful experiences engaging with people who are different, in such a way that we feel secure about ourselves and others' perceptions of us, and rise to the challenge of learning opportunities. The resulting trusting relationships that can be built between and among diverse partners is often a key to the success of policy change processes, or any development initiative, for that matter.

Diversity and Tolerance

According to Vogt (1977), *tolerance* can be defined as "intentional self-restraint in the face of something one dislikes, objects to, finds threatening or otherwise has a

negative attitude towards, usually in order to maintain a social or political group or to promote harmony in a group". Tolerance, Vogt argues, is necessary for diversity to peacefully coexist with equity.

It follows, therefore, that facilitating a diversity of voices in policy formulation requires a process to promote equity and minimize conflict, and thereby provide conditions conducive to tolerance. The inequity in this case is in terms of inclusion of proposed recipients and their expression in the policy process. Expression that is "active, free and meaningful" (UN Declaration on the Right to Development) requires facilities to bridge divides between "policy-makers", "recipients" of services, and other discourse communities.

One of the inherent conflicts, not only in the Indian context, is the diversity of ideological principles and professional stances of a range of stakeholders. Therefore, to promote tolerance amidst diversity requires professional services and resources for coping with difference. The process to promote equity and minimize conflict must also attempt to break down the hierarchy of power relations among different policy actors.

Another source of inherent conflict are the necessarily diverse components of the livelihoods of people who are resource-poor, where diversity serves a strategic function for vulnerable individuals and groups. This sits uncomfortably with a tendency in policy formulation to simplify and homogenize. Formulating a clear, concise policy that can tolerate a necessary range of approaches pursued simultaneously by those who are vulnerable, represents a substantial challenge. Rights-based approaches enshrined in the Indian constitution have an important role to play here in establishing the principle of recognizing and working with diversity.

Rights-based Approaches to Development

The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 (UNHCR, 1996-2002) enshrined minimum rights based on elementary human needs and bestowed them on all people. Each country has an obligation to provide to individuals the rights contained in two covenants on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights.

Essentially, a rights-based approach integrates the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into the plans, policies and processes of development. The norms and standards are those contained in the wealth of international treaties and declarations. These include rights to education, information and a decent standard of living. The principles include equality and equity, accountability, empowerment and participation, and involve express linkage to rights, non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups.

Rights-based approaches require a high degree of participation from communities, civil society, minorities, indigenous people, women and others. According to the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, such participation must be "active, free and meaningful" so that mere formal or "ceremonial" contacts with beneficiaries are not sufficient.

Rights-based approaches give due attention to issues of accessibility, including access to development processes, institutions, information and redress or complaints mechanisms. This also means situating development project mechanisms in proximity to partners and beneficiaries. Such approaches necessarily opt for process-based development methodologies and techniques, rather than externally-conceived “quick fixes” and imported technical models.

In India, indigenous people are referred to as *adivasis* (meaning literally, first settlers) and under the constitution, they have been specified as Scheduled Tribes (Thakur, 2001). Human rights are provided for by the Indian constitution and specified in the Protection of Human Rights Act (1993) which makes the constitution and international covenants enforceable by Indian courts (Khaitan, 2001). National development processes have often failed to include the “active, free and meaningful” participation of *adivasis*. As a result, national development objectives and policies, as conceived by national-level officials and processes, have not always been consistent with the perceptions and priorities of indigenous people affected by them. Some have had a serious negative impact on indigenous communities, including displacement, loss of livelihood, destruction of local environments, damage to sacred sites and, from the perspective of indigenous people, an intrusive, unsustainable and unplanned influx of outsiders into traditional territories. These are what may be thought of as some of the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice which rights-based approaches attempt to address.

Indigenous people are often wary of programs offered in the name of development, perhaps even those which claim to be rights-based. While not necessarily opposed to development policies that bring improvements nationally and locally, indigenous people have consistently insisted that they be empowered to affect decisions that have an impact on their communities and rights. Recognition of and respect for land and resources are fundamental to many indigenous belief systems. Experience has shown that conflicts arise when development projects take place without an understanding of, or respect for, indigenous people’s strong spiritual attachment to and traditional association with their lands and territories.

Emerging international and state standards and practices are increasingly recognizing that indigenous people should have rights over their lands and development projects that affect them. Article 30 of the draft “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” states that indigenous people have the right “to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands, territories or other resources”.

The STREAM Initiative, which is mandated by the governments of 15 countries in Asia-Pacific, embodies a response to Chapter 26 of Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development which calls upon inter-governmental organizations such as NACA to establish a process that empowers indigenous people and their communities through, inter alia, recognition of their lands, support for alternative environmentally-sound means of production, and arrangements to strengthen indigenous participation in the national formulation of policies, laws and programs relating to resource management and development that may affect them. This is a powerful rationale for the STREAM Initiative and a goal for this project to aspire to.

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