



Voices to influence policy

Natural resources researchers are often frustrated that their findings, honed over many years by careful studies and experimentation and often for the benefit of the poor, are not more widely used in development.

The reasons for this are complex. Many development agents are not well informed of the links between management of natural resources and the issues of rural poverty. Some are unable or unwilling to see how research can change and improve things. Others may not want to hear about how problems of sustainability can be addressed through improving the livelihoods of poor people. Even when people want to take up apparently useful findings, they may not have the resources to do so. All this can add up to a policy environment that is unfavourable to changes that can help the poor.

While researchers have learnt to accept such circumstances and the fact that their work is unlikely to change attitudes and policy, at least in the short term, they have also recognised that the scope of natural resources research needs to be widened. Research can address policy processes and develop and test instruments and mechanisms for negotiating policy change.

Fish farming for poor communities

One example of this approach is a project in the Eastern Plateau states of India, led by the STREAM Initiative, in association with the Network of Aquaculture Centres for Asia-Pacific (NACA). It is concerned with ways of influencing policies that control the provision of support services for aquaculture for disadvantaged tribal groups.

Despite considerable economic growth in India, the situation for the poorest groups has not substantially improved. Programmes meant to help them were ineffective and little effort went into empowering people to contribute to policy change processes to give the poor a voice and to help them to realise their rights.



The Eastern Plateau states are characterised by poverty and inequality, land alienation and seasonal migration. Some castes and tribes are amongst the poorest communities in India. Most farming families rely on rainfed crops and livestock for their livelihoods. They also have access to seasonal ponds that provide them with opportunities for aquaculture to complement their other sources of food and income.

Whilst there is no tradition of fish farming among the poorer communities, research has identified, tested and demonstrated ways of incorporating aquaculture into their existing farming systems that rely on seasonal ponds. Not only are these low-cost they also use water bodies and some fish species that larger scale systems do not use and so they do not pose a threat to the livelihoods of richer fish producers who use perennial water bodies.

Support services for aquaculture in India are well developed but they are totally geared to the needs of large-scale perennial production systems and do not cater for the small-scale seasonal systems. If the research findings are to benefit the poor then the aquaculture extension policy must reflect the needs of all those involved in fish farming.



How should such a policy change be negotiated? What kind of information, forms of communication and ways of interaction are best able to present the issues, raise awareness and stimulate debate and action amongst relevant policy actors?

An opportunity for change

An important part of change is an acceptance of the need for change. The Fisheries Development Commissioner for the Government of India was aware that aquaculture was not adequately addressed in the many programmes that were designed to help tribal groups. As a result he encouraged the project team to play a role in recommending a new “tribal” rainfed fish-farming component that could be launched in the government’s Tenth Five-year Plan, which is currently being finalised.

Defining this component provided a unique opportunity to give tribal people a voice in policy-making processes that could have a significant impact on their livelihoods.

As a result, the project has three thrusts:

- Understanding service provision from the recipients’ perspective
- Understanding ‘lessons learnt from elsewhere’, and
- Understanding ‘modes and priorities for policy change’.

The final strand was pursued through a process of consultation and consensus-building with stakeholders.

Consultation

Consultations took place at all levels involving recipients and implementer workshops and state-level and stakeholders’ workshops. Information was also collated on fish farming issues to present to policy makers. This needed to be interesting to catch the eye of policy makers as well as enabling people to discuss and articulate their opinions on what could be done. It was decided to use six ‘live’, contrasting case studies to demonstrate examples of current

Case study – A successful tribal farmer

Ras Behari is an example of how struggle and hardship can achieve success. He once led a life of poverty and now he employs 50-60 people from his village.

Ras Behari used to walk barefoot to school, sometimes tying leaves to his feet to save them from burning on the hot sand. He was unemployed after passing matriculation but started to help his father who saved his family from hunger by starting a business selling fish seed.

One day, Ras Behari’s father sent him to the local town to bring fish seed. He spoke to an experienced farmer about learning the techniques. He leased a pond in his father’s name, started production and sold seed to the local fish farmers. People reported back that the seed grew well in their ponds and the number of customers increased the next year. He says that the reason for his success was that he offers Catla, a fast growing seed most suited to seasonal ponds.

Ras Behari now sells around 5,000-6,000 kg of seed every year. He bought a small truck to supply seed to more distant customers but he finds it difficult to get loans from the Banks and has to depend on local moneylenders who charge high rates of interest.

When transporting seed by truck it must be stored in water in iron containers while men continuously stir the water with their legs to keep oxygen levels high. Scientists need to help develop some other method for transporting seed.

The fish seed business has changed the lives of the villagers. They are employed for at least six months of the year. Some of them work with Ras Behari while others buy seed from him and sell it in other villages. He has shown the villagers a new pathway to income generation and livelihood improvement.



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service provision, their inadequacies and the complex environment in which farmers live and work (see box on previous page). The idea behind this was to put real issues firmly 'in the face' of policy makers. But having good material is not enough; it needed to be well presented. So considerable thought was given to ways of avoiding long, turgid reports that often go unread and using attractive computer based visual presentations, video documentaries and street theatre involving local actors. The latter is a very popular form of entertainment in India and a tribal playwright was commissioned to write a short play, including songs in Hindi, based on the case studies for presentation at the final workshop with policy makers.

Consensus building

When stakeholders come together to discuss issues, there can be conflicting views over scheme goals, types of outcomes, who to help and how. Sometimes such disagreements can widen their differences rather than heal them. Some are unable to say what they think because they are intimidated or they do not wish to criticise a superior or an older person. The project embarked on consensus building, using a process that is designed to circumvent these problems.

The approach is a potentially powerful tool and involves sharing information from the case studies, workshops and lessons learnt from elsewhere with a group of policy-makers from state and national government in the form of recommendations for policy change and "emerging indicators of progress". Each member of the group knows who the other group members are, but each member works separately. In the first step, information on and options for policy change are presented for comment to establish the various views among the group.

A moderator collates the responses and returns them to the participants, but without participants knowing which comment came from which person. They are now free to agree or disagree and to change their own view anonymously. The moderator highlights any new emerging consensus, and non-aligned

participants can accept this or propose further arguments why others should change their views. Through several iterations, usually not more than four, unity of thinking is sought.

The Consensus-building Process keeps the benefits of group decision-making while avoiding some of its limitations. The case studies, lessons learnt from elsewhere, and outputs of the recipients and implementer workshops, and state-level and stakeholders' workshop are the basis of the consultative inputs and give people a voice in this process.

The next steps

The overall success and impact of this project depends on its ability to influence policy change and so the next step is the workshop with policy makers. Considerable time is being devoted to planning the workshop to ensure that the organisation, programme and participants are appropriate. The timing of the workshop is also crucial so that it does not conflict with the government agenda. This should help ensure that key policy actors from national and state government can participate to the full. We look forward to reporting a favourable outcome for pro-poor policy in future NRSP highlights!

R8100 Investigating improved policy on aquaculture service provision to poor people

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