

Empowerment – what it can ‘look like’



In rural West Bengal in India, poor but talented people are working together to develop small-scale fish farming in seasonal water tanks to improve their livelihoods. By forming a federation of Self-Help Groups they are providing and drawing in the support services they need. Together they have established a One-stop Aqua Shop (OAS) – a single point where people can buy essential inputs and obtain the range of information that they need on aquaculture.

Knowing the problem

In India, for a long time now, voices have been raised in support of the advancement of severely disadvantaged social groups that are trying to derive a livelihood from limited resources in remote rural areas. Although various schemes have been developed to try and improve their circumstances, most people would agree that so far there has been only limited success. The will is there but the way appears to be hard and difficult to accomplish.

Nevertheless in the gently undulating hills of rural West Bengal, a quiet revolution of self-determination is underway. Poor but talented people are taking control of their future. With limited arable land and dwindling forest resources, many are beginning to use the seasonally stored water around their villages for livelihood enterprises. Fishers and farmers are working together in groups on small-scale fish farming and, linked with this, have progressed to forming and building up a mutually supportive federation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Their efforts provide, and also draw in, the support services they need, and they are beginning to influence policies that affect their livelihoods.

In Kaipara Village

Kaipara Village in West Bengal State is 15 km from the tarmac road and home to about 1,600 people in some 280 households. They come from at least five ethnic groups variously classed as scheduled tribes, scheduled castes or the unfortunately classified Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Many have had little schooling and literacy is low.



Kaipara is not well endowed with natural resources. It has only 150 ha of irrigable land and no nearby forest resources. The moderately high rainfall (about 1200 mm) is seasonal (June to September) and variable – the rains fail as often as once in four years. There are 36 small tanks (ponds) that are used for fish culture as well as for conserving rainwater for irrigation, livestock and domestic purposes.

Livelihood options involving food production are eagerly sought – the common view, based on harsh experience, is that food producers have greater food security than those who have to purchase it. However, 75 percent of households could not produce enough food for the whole year and were faced with two unattractive options. They either borrowed rice from richer families and paid high interest rates which consumed scarce cash, or they migrated for work and ran the risk of exploitation.

Fish culture – a popular option

Poor people in Kaipara are attracted to fish culture for several reasons. Fish is an important part of people's diets. Bengalis love to eat fish so there is a ready market for the products. Small-scale fish production in seasonal ponds has already proved to be successful. People know about the favourable results of DFID-NRSP funded research from 1996-2000 on aquaculture using seasonal rather than perennial tanks and the successes of the SHGs that were involved.

Yet despite the livelihood opportunity that fish culture offers, a range of factors still influence success. Disputes over access to tanks and leasing rights can constrain aquaculture operations for many years. There are the various tank owners to consider and general access may involve the whole community.

Support services are also needed such as information about good practices, materials and labour to get started, money, and help when things go wrong. Most districts have professionals who can help – District Fisheries Officers and rural bank managers. Friends and family can also help. But the reality is there are many small tanks and many remote communities, and not enough support people to meet the demand for help.

A Federation of Self-Help Groups provides service support

In Kaipara the community has solved the problem of services by forming a Federation of SHGs. More than 70 SHGs federated to develop their own support network and to draw in the support of others to provide a 'home-grown' support infrastructure. Currently 174 men and 890 women make up the federation that proudly includes 14 SHGs belonging to the so-called 'Below Poverty Line' groups. The Federation has a 40-member General Body and an 11-member elected Steering Committee. As is often the case, there was one local person (with good experience of fish rearing in seasonal tanks), who had the vision and the drive to stimulate and facilitate individuals and SHGs towards federation.

Two further inputs were important – the role of STREAM as an external facilitator and the findings from a DFID-NRSP research project on pro-poor aquaculture policy. The STREAM Initiative works in India to help 'give farmers a voice' and take forward prioritised recommendations for policy change. These recommendations resulted from widespread

consultations and consensus-building with farmers, fishers, state and national fisheries policy-makers, shapers and implementers – a process that included the Kaipara fish culture SHGs. A priority recommendation was the need for single-point under-one-roof provision of services for aquaculture – a One-stop Aqua Shop (OAS).

When the Kaipara SHGs federated and agreed to operate an OAS service they contacted STREAM who then helped them to advance the proposal. This included support for a workshop in Kaipara, hosted by the Kaipara Federation, to develop the relationships between the Federation, banks and other GO and NGO service agencies. At the workshop, a Federation spokesperson highlighted how the OAS would change the way that information is made available to farmers thus making the process of starting aquaculture more efficient. Farmers saw how this would mean less journeying around chasing information on fish culture, suppliers, government schemes and micro-credit. Support agencies also saw how this could make their efforts more efficient, and began to pledge their support. Exactly a month later, the Steering Committee of the Federation passed a resolution that launched the Kaipara OAS.

Generating finance to sustain the service

One service that the Kaipara OAS offers is the supply of fish fingerlings. Farmers with seasonal tanks need these early in the season in order to produce a fish crop before the water dries up. So far the OAS has supplied about 25,000 fingerlings to farmers in a 3 km radius. But people are already coming to buy fingerlings from up to 24 km away. The Federation is cautious about making promises it cannot keep as it wishes to build a reputation for quality service. It estimates that the local market for fingerlings is one million and their first objective is to develop their capacity to supply half this total.

Sustainability for OAS operation is taken seriously. Each SHG has invested 2,000 Rupees (about US\$ 27) to provide operating capital. Another action which is helping to sustain the OAS is, at the same time, helping six all-women SHGs in a nearby village to use ten tanks for raising large fish for sale. The OAS is testing an arrangement whereby 50 percent of the

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benefit will go to the SHGs, 25 percent to the tank owners and 25 percent will go back to the OAS to pay for the fingerlings it supplies.

One local person summed up the experience so far as – ‘No one used to come and now they’re all coming’.

Wider implications

The Federation of SHGs and their OAS are a new model for development communications and supply services where farmers build groups, link up and develop local service centres which then can act as a beacon – the contact and delivery point – for other service providers.

Kaipara demonstrates how poor people have taken ownership of the changes that have occurred and it is an example to others of what the poor themselves can achieve. It is also an example to policy-makers of the favourable outcomes from using policy formulation processes that include the views of the poor and enable poor people to be fully aware of agreed policy priorities.

In the case of the poor of Kaipara, they voiced their needs as part of a policy process, and then decided they were well capable to take their own action to meet their needs. The seeds that have led to this flowering of

collective confidence were sown some years ago and were nurtured by project continuity and transparency in the inclusion of the poor. But on top of this, poor people’s initiative and drive are enabling the whole project to be greater than the sum of the parts.

R6759 Integration of aquaculture into the farming system in the eastern plateau of India

R8100 Investigating improved policy on aquaculture service provision to poor people

R8334 Promoting the pro-poor policy lessons of R8100 with key policy actors in India

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