

# Challenging Collective Action

## Acción Colectiva Desafiante

### Action Collective Difficile

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#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

##### Introduction

Collective action describes the pursuit of a shared goal by a group of people, typically under the guidance of an identifiable leader. It usually occurs when the desired goal cannot be reached by any of the individuals acting alone, so they have little choice but to collaborate. Few fisherfolk use the term, and not many are able to achieve it, but most believe deeply in it as reflected in the popular saying among them that “unity is strength”. What then is the challenge?

Experience with formal and informal fisherfolk organising and leadership points to several, closely linked, challenges. These challenges arise both from within the fishing industry and from external actors and situations. A few of these are explored based on the author’s observation as a participant in initiatives aimed at starting and strengthening collective action. Recommendations are made for future learning by doing through adaptive approaches.

##### Key Concepts

Many of the key concepts useful for understanding and addressing collective action challenges are in the realm social science to which neither fisheries managers nor fisherfolk are normally exposed. Collective action was defined in the Introduction but several other concepts may be unfamiliar to fisheries scientists. For example:

- i) *Governance* includes institutionalized, preferably interactive and collaborative, decision-making arrangements to solve societal problems and create societal opportunities. Policy, planning and management are levels of formal governance.
- ii) *Free-riders* try to get as many benefits as possible out of a collective, of which they are a member, while contributing as little as possible to the collective. It is seen as an individually rational strategy.
- iii) *Institutions* are rules, conventions and customary patterns of interaction (among individuals and groups, formal and informal) established by society and its structures such as found in governance, whereas *organizations* are formal groups formed to achieve one or more shared goals through collaboration.
- iv) *Social capital* is the value attributed to the cumulative benefits from relationships among actors (e.g. individuals and groups) in a social network. It can be used to leverage other types of capital.

##### Methods

The author has utilized participatory action research extensively in several investigative and developmental initiatives that aimed to establish and/or strengthen fisherfolk organizations. Observations were made on how collective action was both enabled and constrained in these endeavors. Discussions with fisherfolk and other stakeholders in these processes have, over time, helped to explain the nature of challenges as well as suggest recommendations for overcoming them. The mode of participant observation relied on here was neither rigorously qualitative nor quantitative, but it was useful.

##### Results and Discussion

A review of the literature combined with the author’s observations yielded the following set of propositions:

- i) Conventional, top-down, management has failed in fisheries governance worldwide .
- ii) In the Caribbean, collaborative arrangements, e.g. co-management, are being tested .
- iii) Fisheries authorities and fisherfolk are seldom adequately prepared for co-management.
- iv) Despite a revived interest in fisherfolk organizations there may be little collective action.
- v) Failure to understand and address collective action is a major challenge to be overcome.
- vi) Without collective action there is low probability of collaborative management succeeding.
- vii) Without collaborative management, governance arrangements will remain sub-optimal.
- viii) Understanding factors challenging collective action provides information for governance.
- ix) This can be used to design and implement better institutional arrangements for governance.

Since collective action has not been much researched in Caribbean fisheries, the author's observations acquired over decades and a small amount of Caribbean primary research were used to consider the propositions. It was found that:

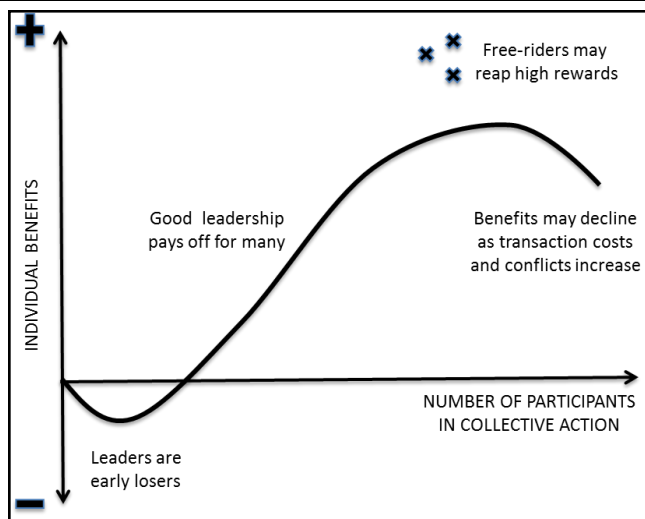
- i) Establishing and sustaining institutions for collective action are significant challenges.
- ii) Fisheries authorities typically do not gain access to the necessary social science skills.
- iii) Fisherfolk organisation leaders typically do not understand intricacies of collective action. Fisheries authorities and fisherfolk leaders may also fear the power of collective action.
- iv) Powerful citizen groups demand more from their leadership and governance structures.
- v) Formal and informal organising, and leadership, reveals several, often linked, challenges.
- vi) Challenges are both internal to the fishing industry and generated by external actors.
- vii) Fundamental is low capacity for fisherfolk leadership and scarce leadership development.
- viii) Fisherfolk have a high propensity to react to crisis rather than be proactive and prepared.
- ix) Fisherfolk leaders are challenged by high levels of free-ridership in the industry (internal).
- x) Examples include difficulties leaders encounter in forming and sustaining working groups.
- xi) Leaders are challenged by the undermining of social capital by state agencies (external).
- xii) Examples include individual-oriented goods and services that reduce collective incentives.
- xiii) State agencies that seek populist support for their power also undermine collective action.
- xiv) Social network analysis and institutional analysis can inform recommendations to improve.
- xv) Network analysis can aid future institutional and organisational design and management.
- xvi) ... and there are many more related to state and non-state actor roles in collective action.

Of the above, fundamental is low capacity in fisherfolk leadership and a propensity to react to crisis rather than be more proactive and prepared. Free-ridership in the industry, tied to declining social capital caused by socio-cultural trends that promote individualism, also challenges fisherfolk leaders. Collective action dynamics in relation to leadership, cost, free-ridership and benefits (Figure 1) must be known and managed. Recommendations must be tailored to these realities.

### Recommendations

Means of strengthening collective action are well documented in the literature with much practical guidance. We lag in putting these into practice in the Caribbean. A few recommendations illustrate what fisherfolk can do:

- i) Invest heavily in developing capacity for leadership and engaging social science for insight.
- ii) Solve free-rider problems by re-structuring individual positive incentives for collaboration.
- iii) Discuss clear goals with the entire group and arrange to monitor and evaluate progress.



**Figure 1.** The benefits of collective action vary with phase and participation

- iv) Agree on schedules for results, each person's responsibilities and transparent feedback.
- v) Use social network and institutional analysis for organisational design and management.
- vi) Reduce fisherfolk propensity to react to crisis rather than try to be proactive and prepared.
- vii) Manage diversity in organisations to capitalise on capacity and resilience with low conflict.
- viii) Participatory monitoring and evaluation, learning and adaptation sustain collective action.

Understanding the factors challenging collective action offers information that can be used to design and implement better institutional arrangements for fisheries governance. However, this knowledge is only useful if it is mobilized by way of practical initiatives that address specific challenges, and designed to encourage fisherfolk learning by doing.

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