

Organizing Fisherfolk in Barbados

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ABSTRACT

It is generally thought that the fisherfolk of Barbados are individualistic, and that it is consequently difficult for them to form and sustain organizations. This view is especially prevalent amongst the fisherfolk themselves. It has been supported by studies and apparently validated by history. The nine fishing cooperatives that had formed in the 1960s became inactive by the 1970s. In the 1980s and 90s a company of boat owners and fisherfolk trade union were both short-lived. During this period one new fishing cooperative and a few fisherfolk organizations were formed, but maintained low levels of activity and organization. Against this background the government initiated the Fisherfolk Organization Development Project with the assistance of the Commonwealth Secretariat in May 1997. Since then, nine fisherfolk organizations have been formed or strengthened and a national coordinating council established. This paper describes how through intensive fieldwork, attention to history and socioeconomic factors, provision of training and information, formation of linkages with credit institutions and other means this was accomplished. The next phase of incorporating these organizations into participatory fisheries management or co-management is also described.

KEY WORDS: Barbados, fisheries, co-management

INTRODUCTION

Recently, accounts of fisheries governance (Chakalall et al. 1998) and co-management (Brown and Pomeroy in press) in the Caribbean Community have found a place in mainstream journals. However, less frequently published for this region are details of the methodological approaches to fisheries governance and co-management. One is most likely to discover how governments attempt incorporating fisherfolk into organizations or governance structures in the grey literature of government documents and external agency evaluation reports.

This article addresses some methodological details of the early and recent attempts at organising fisherfolk in Barbados and incorporating them into fisheries governance. While the social, cultural and political specificity is appreciated, there is value in sharing the lessons learnt in a region where several of the fisheries authorities appear to be following similar paths for the introduction of fisheries management (McConney and Mahon 1998).

Generally, fisheries management is being actively promoted more by government than the fishing industry, and consequently so is the participation of

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fisherfolk organizations in management. This brings into question the role of government in fisheries co-management, an area that has also received recent attention (Pomeroy and Berkes 1997). Examination of this role is particularly critical at this time when governments in many countries are evaluating their relationships with the private sector and seeking ways in which to forge "social partnerships". In cases where the private sector partner is poorly organised, it is critical to acknowledge the fine line between encouraging co-operation and collaboration on the one hand, and engaging in co-optation and coercion on the other. This distinction is best seen, not in the results, but in the process of fisherfolk organization development.

EARLY FISHERFOLK ORGANIZATIONS

The observations below are drawn from McConney (1995 and 1997). Most attention is paid to cooperatives as historically the most common, the most influential, and the most frequently promoted type of organization in the early days. A brief section on associations, connecting with recent initiatives, follows. Emphasis is on the relationships between government and the organizing fisherfolk.

Cooperatives

Between 1961 and 1964 several Cooperative Fishing Savings Societies were initiated and registered by officers of the Cooperatives Division of the Department of Agriculture (DoA). Although the colonial Fisheries Advisory Committee (FAC) of the DoA had discussed cooperatives as early as 1946, nothing was done to promote them. Correspondence from the Fishery Officer on file ten years later states that as long as government loans remain in operation, fishermen will be unlikely to form cooperatives. He also says one should not be over-optimistic in expecting fishermen's cooperatives to develop since the Barbadian fisherman is an individualist.

Within the DoA, the Fishery Officer continued with initiatives geared towards individuals while the Cooperatives Officer worked towards the formation of collectives. That is, the government was simultaneously reducing and trying to increase the motivation for collective action through different agencies. According to respondents, the principal colonial motive for fisheries cooperatives was to encourage savings, not empowerment. Fisherfolk say that prior to 1961 they knew little or nothing of cooperatives, and that while individuals assisted each other, organized collective activities were infrequent. The industry was said to be "individualistic", and "it was a challenge to get fishermen to operate in a group." However, they were enticed to join cooperatives by the prospects of improved availability of inputs and services not addressed by the Fisheries Division. The early cooperatives were multipurpose, involving mainly fuel and paint supply, fish transportation to Bridgetown, and fish marketing.

Government Cooperatives Officers initiated the early fishing cooperatives. The savings society phase during which members were to be educated on cooperative principles, learn to operate collectively, and accumulate capital, lasted about two years. Cooperative leaders were chosen from among the more articulate and respected boat owners upon the advice of the Cooperatives Officer. Only in one case was a leader specifically trained, overseas, in cooperative management. In all other cases investigated the Committees of Management received only basic local training initially. US Peace Corps Volunteers provided management assistance in the short-term. Cooperatives did fairly well during the volunteers' stay, but failed when they departed because there were no local understudies. Lack of sustained cooperative management education was a severe constraint.

The Cooperatives Division was reportedly more interested in the number of cooperatives than in creating a sound foundation and cooperative spirit. The greater the number and diversity of cooperatives, the greater the justification for the Cooperatives Division to request (apparently unsuccessfully) more staff and other resources. The International Labour Organization, for example, severely criticized the registration of the marine insurance cooperative in the absence of actuarial advice. It noted the absence of well established primary cooperatives dealing with the more fundamental problems of supplies and marketing (ILO 1964). The report also warned of jurisdictional overlap and inadequate means for coordinating the Fisheries and Cooperatives Divisions of the DoA. Respondents indicate that the Fisheries Division, while not overtly opposed to cooperatives, did little to encourage them. Interaction continued to be mainly with individuals, and benefits such as technical assistance, loans and duty free concessions were available to anyone, thereby reducing the motivation for collective action.

There were also some successes in the early cooperative experience. With the assistance of the Cooperatives Division, bulk fuel tanks supplied to landing sites reduced fuel costs and labour. Good relations were established with commercial firms to supply paint and other inputs at discount prices. Most of the cooperatives were sufficiently organized to offer members education through films on fishing and navigation. For a while, most had efficient and low cost systems for transporting their fish. And although support and dependence on government was necessary to some extent, respondents were quick to point out that they tried to avoid turning to government for everything and developing a dependency syndrome.

Government attempted to provide tangible assistance to cooperatives in the critical area of fish marketing, primarily through its Barbados Marketing Corporation (BMC). The BMC's strategy was to offer low prices for fish delivered by individuals and cooperatives, then process and sell this fish at a small mark-up to the public through its own retail outlets. This system caused frequent disputes amongst members, and between them, vendors and the BMC.

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Much of this centred around the BMC's rejection of low quality fish and its insufficient space to handle the volumes delivered. When, in the 1970's, increased economic efficiency was demanded from the BMC, the problematic purchases from the local fleet discontinued.

The relationship between cooperatives and government also concerned price controls. Around the time of the Second World War, upper ex-vessel and retail price limits for "fresh fish" were controlled by legislation in order to ensure a supply of cheap protein. These prices were quite low and seldom revised. Ministry files show, however, that it was not until 1971, after giving "careful consideration to representations made by the various fishery cooperatives", that ex-vessel price controls were removed.

Fisherfolk say that government was only partially committed to the early cooperatives. By not strengthening its Cooperatives Division, the latter could do little to educate and supervise the fishing cooperatives. Records of cooperative meetings reveal members' dissatisfaction with government assistance and uncertainty about the roles of government agencies such as the Cooperatives Division and BMC.

In contrast to the early co-ops, the first members Barbados Fishing Cooperative Society Ltd. (BARFISHCOS) were contacted by the founder, not the government's Cooperatives Division. It was more of a grassroots movement as opposed to a government stimulated initiative. Membership peaked at about fifty persons following registration in 1986.

With BARFISHCOS, both similar and different problems surfaced with management. There was neither a savings society phase nor much cooperative management training of the executive (several of whom ran their own businesses). The by-laws listed objectives that were fairly specific but no work programme was formulated. Members were not aware of the complexity of issues related to these objectives (Burtonboy and Jones 1988). BARFISHCOS almost immediately sought considerable assistance from government, and it was assumed that government would assure success.

Correspondence shows that its requests amounted to either the government delivering the cooperative's objectives wholesale, or putting the cooperative in a position of power relative to other stakeholders in the fishing industry. Government assisted primarily and promptly by facilitating the operation of fuel franchises that were later mismanaged, incurring considerable debt. The ministry told the cooperative that issues concerning activities at fish landing sites, interest and insurance rates, minimum guaranteed fish prices, charges for some government services, foreign fishing and fish importation could not be dealt with except through multistakeholder negotiation. The fisheries ministry denied requests for provision of office space and a subvention.

Part of the reason was because, in 1987, after decades of including cooperatives in fisheries development plans, the government requested the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to determine in which specific areas

cooperatives would be economically and socially viable, and so contribute to the achievement of fishery development goals (Burtonboy 1988:3). The FAO consultant concluded that BARFISHCOS' "main orientation is towards expectation of sustained generous Government's help which will continue to solve all their problems" (Burtonboy 1988:9). He adds that a boat owners' association would probably have served the members better as an instrument for voicing grievances and lobbying government. The Ministry ceased to recognize BARFISHCOS as the main industry representative only around 1992 when it became obvious that it was not supported by most fisherfolk.

The apparent willingness of the Barbados government to work with BARFISHCOS could have been a positive step towards participatory planning if the cooperative had flourished. Some BARFISHCOS members maintained that insufficient support from government contributed to the cooperative's demise. In conclusion, Burtonboy (1988) did not recommend the cooperative as an appropriate fisherfolk organization for Barbados. Yet most fishers and some boat owners still believed in the ideal of fisherfolk "unity" and BARFISHCOS was recently revived.

Associations

In 1985 about 30 fishers formed the Barbados Fisherman's Association. The fundamental purpose was to "bring fishermen together as one voice" to facilitate dialogue within the industry and with government. The movement was led by fishers acknowledged to be the most highly trained, successful and innovative. The Fisheries Division supported them by providing premises for meetings but it never really got going. Since then, fishers have apparently not attempted to form another organization exclusively for themselves.

The West Coast Fishermen's Association was hastily formed by fisherfolk in 1991 specifically to protest the Coast Guard's "hassling" fishers in and near a no-take marine park. Public meetings that included politicians and government officials were held, and some of the matters were partially resolved. Subsequently, meetings called to discuss the formation of a formal body were not attended by fisherfolk. Government did not seek to assist the association or involve it in park policy and management.

The Sand Pit Fishing Community Association started in 1989 as a group of mainly elderly fishers and boat owners who refused to be removed from their customary landing site by the Barbados Port Authority's plans to expand its harbour facilities for tourism. To assist them in their fight against the government, the fisherfolk enlisted the services of a young lawyer so that people would "pay attention". The media portrayed the scenario as a vulnerable lower class group being victimized by the government on behalf of an economic elite. The campaign drew politicians into the fray. The result was that improved physical conditions were provided for the fisherfolk to remain on site. The group generally remains dormant during non-crisis periods.

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The Oistins Fisherfolk Association focussed efforts in the early 1990's on fund-raising. Government provided the association with premises to use as office and meeting space, and a fuel franchise. Funds raised outfitted the premises with radios for ship-to-shore communication. An attempt by government to hand over operation of the vessel haul-out system at the site was not successful due to logistic and human resource problems on both sides.

The Barbados United Fisherfolk Association was formed by fishers and boat owners in 1994 in reaction to the arrest of Barbadian boats by Trinidad and Tobago for illegal fishing. The fisherfolk felt that they could lobby the government of Barbados to pursue a fishing agreement with Trinidad and Tobago and also look after domestic fisherfolk issues better through collective action. This association soon faltered due to problems with its leadership.

ORGANIZING FISHERFOLK TODAY

The Fisheries Act of 1993 sets the legal framework for fisheries management in Barbados. Although not particularly strong, there are provisions for fisherfolk participation in fisheries management planning. The actual Fisheries Management Plan approved by the minister under the Act in 1997 goes further by making fisherfolk participation a key element and speaking of co-management (McConney and Mahon 1998). This initiative was taken in the context of a political climate that had state agencies promoting public participation in decision-making and establishing social partnerships.

In the absence of fully functioning fisherfolk organizations the government of Barbados sought and received assistance through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) in the form of a Fisherfolk Organization Development Adviser (FODA). Dr. Anton Atapattu, the Director of Fisheries in Sri Lanka, began his Barbados assignment in May 1997. Unlike the FAO study, the first step was to undertake a rapid historical socioeconomic study to determine attitudes towards collective action and cooperatives in particular given past experience. The results indicated that an alternative to cooperatives, or a pre-cooperative period similar to the savings societies of the 1960s, was desirable.

Taking into account recent grassroots organizational attempts, a focus on fisherfolk associations (FFAs) was decided. An additional reason was that the recent cooperative legislation was geared more towards credit unions than producer cooperatives. The promotion of FFAs started with awareness meetings for fisherfolk at all landing sites. The Adviser and counterparts at each site conducted several meetings until, in some cases, those attending decided to form a steering committee to work on a constitution.

A generic constitution was drafted by the FODA. The steering committees made minor changes to suit their particular needs, and their constitutions were adopted at inaugural general meetings where officers were also elected. Since the Fisheries Act does not provide for the registration of FFAs, the Chief Fisheries

Officer as a means of official recognition agreed to administrative registration until additional legislation can come into force. In this way eight associations were formed or strengthened (see Table 1). The cooperative, BARFISHCOS, was also assisted in its revival.

Table 1. The fisherfolk associations of Barbados

Fisherfolk association and landing site	No. of members	Adoption of constitution	Date registered by Fisheries Division
Oistins FFA	42	12 Oct. 1997	4 Dec. 1997
Weston FFA	18	21 Jan. 1997	29 Jan. 1997
Sand Pit FFA	25	5 Dec. 1997	6 Feb. 1997
Northern FFA	24	25 Nov. 1997	20 Mar. 1998
Paynes Bay FFA	11	17 Mar. 1998	4 May 1998
Speightstown FFA	17	11 Mar. 1998	13 May 1998
Pelican FFA	13	12 Jun. 1998	24 Jul. 1998
Tent Bay FFA	19	11 Jun. 1998	30 Oct. 1998

The FODA and counterparts continued to encourage and assist the fisherfolk organizations to become more fully functional by arranging sessions on business planning and credit with other agencies. The board of the former Barbados Development Bank (BDB), which was being liquidated, made funds and resource personnel available to the organizational effort. They perceived that established organizations could assist in improving the climate for providing credit to a fishing industry that had a poor record of loan repayment for various reasons. The Bank also approved grants for equipment purchases, funded the refitting of a research and training vessel for the Fisheries Division from its portfolio of indebted vessels, co-sponsored training courses for fisherfolk with the Fisheries Division, and made its officers available to assist where necessary. Also in terms of grant funding, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development provided a budget from which the Fisheries Division could support small projects. But what is more significant is the approval of draft legislation that would see members of fisherfolk organizations paying only 33% of the fees to be introduced for most of the services performed by the Fisheries Division. These include vessel inspection, registration and licensing, and the haul-out of vessels by the tractor service. When it comes into force this will be the single most tangible demonstration of government support of fisherfolk organizations in recent times.

For the future, the Fisheries Division also hopes to have duty and tax concessions administered through fisherfolk organizations and available only to members of them. However, lack of credit for the fisheries sector remains a major constraint for the growth of fisherfolk organizations and the industry on the whole. No development financing institution has arisen to replace the Barbados Development Bank and commercial banks typically steer clear of most

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fishing enterprises. Also, while there has been some institutional strengthening of the Fisheries Division through counterpart assignments, this has not yet been reinforced by formal training under the project. Funds for this are being sought. A problem on the fisherfolk side has been that several of the associations and the cooperative lack the dynamic and effective leadership to sustain the interest and involvement of members. Except for socially oriented events, some do relatively little unless nudged by the FODA and counterparts to develop activities for economic advancement. Training aimed at strengthening organization leadership and business skills is required to assist them in formulating their own stream of projects without prompting.

To create a larger critical mass of leadership skills and an entity that could perhaps attract external funding, the Fisheries Division encouraged the formation of an umbrella organization to which all fisherfolk organizations could belong and be their organ of national representation. The primary organizations fully appreciate and agree with its formation and the FODA went through the typical preparatory steps. But there has been understandable hesitation by leaders to form the secondary level organization when most of the primaries are still fairly weak. They have taken the compromise route of establishing, informally, the Barbados Coordinating Council of Fisherfolk Organizations in order to meet regularly and undertake steps agreed to lead eventually to the umbrella body.

Unfortunately the Council has not proven as effective a vehicle for advancement as hoped, but it has the advantage of allowing information exchange between leaders of organizations at different stages of development and levels of activity. This internal communication rather than government's intervention may be a more appropriate means of motivating progress. Most recently, the fisherfolk organizations have been asked to nominate representatives to sit on the Fisheries Advisory Committee that advises the minister responsible for fisheries on various matters of policy. The Council itself was invited to be on a task force addressing critical areas of interaction between the agriculture and tourism industries.

The final phases of fisherfolk organization development are the vertical integration of the national umbrella body into a Caribbean Community or other regional apex organization. Because fishing in the insular Caribbean is a small industry on a global scale, this degree of integration may be necessary to attract developmental funds. Although it may be desirable for the local level primary organizations to individually become strong first, it may be necessary for them to be fed collectively from above by the regional one in a parallel development.

DISCUSSION

Early fisherfolk organization development was apparently focussed more on formation than sustainability, and not on empowerment or participation in government's decision-making. In contrast, recent initiatives by government have emphasized fisherfolk organizations as having a long-term role to play in

fisheries governance. Yet there are several parallels between the periods.

Foremost is that government has remained, if not the initiator, the prime mover in the development of fisherfolk organizations. The main differences are that the Fisheries Division has taken over the lead role from the Cooperatives Division, the approach is now more sensitive to the needs of the fisherfolk themselves and there is an attempt to involve them meaningfully in fisheries management. However, the latter is problematic since the data do not suggest that fisheries management is high on the agenda of fisherfolk priorities. Given the existing strong orientation towards infrastructure and capital development (McConney and Mahon 1998), fisherfolk organizations are reluctant partners in management. Without some pressure from government it is unlikely that they would of their own accord seek to involve themselves in sharing the responsibility for management decisions.

Although the incremental approach to fisherfolk organization development employed in recent times puts most of the decision-making in the hands of the fisherfolk, the directional influence of government is strong. If fisherfolk organizations are to become true partners in co-management, it will be necessary to provide more assistance in the areas of leadership skills, business management and information acquisition for decision-making. A greater degree of independence and initiative must be attained by fisherfolk organizations in order to avoid the tendency to become co-opted into government's management agenda without meaningful participation in decision-making.

If social partnership is the new way of doing business, then there should be collaborative roles for the private sector and facilitatory NGOs in fisherfolk organization development (Chakalall et al. 1998). These linkages are not as well developed in Barbados as in other CARICOM countries such as Jamaica (Brown and Pomeroy in press). Recent government fisheries and coastal management projects that have private consultants working on institutional issues with fisherfolk may make a slight difference. While government needs to retain its provision of information and tangible benefits, implementation of legal frameworks and generally create an environment suitable for organization development, it needs if possible to step back from the task of intimately directing their development. Organizing fisherfolk in Barbados is at the stage where the bodies formed could benefit considerably from mechanisms for forging linkages with non-governmental partners in development.

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