

Perils of Partnership

Peligros de la Asociación

Périls de Partenariat

PATRICK MCCONNEY

*Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (CERMES)
The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados.
patrick.mcconney@gmail.com*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

The quest for successful partnerships within the fisheries sector is increasing with the trend towards more participatory forms of governance and the ecosystem approach to fisheries. Global instruments such as the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), and regional initiatives such as the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem + Project (2015 - 2020), encourage such partnerships. Yet, there are practical perils in public sector, NGO or academic projects that include partnerships with fisherfolk organizations, all sides being at risk. These perils affect, and need to be considered by, all sides in the contexts of knowledge, learning, and adaptive capacity. It would be naive of the parties to do otherwise. However, this is what often happens, especially with the intangibles rather than operational logistics, funding or technical content. Untested assumptions are made on all sides about information, skills, relationships, ethics, values, beliefs, attitudes, and more that cannot be easily assessed in advance of an agreement to partner. This communication offers a perspective on the perils of partnership. It draws upon the experiences of applied research with a long history of partnering with fisherfolk and their organizations in projects.

Methods

The results are derived primarily from participant observation as a collaborator in several projects involving a variety of fisheries stakeholders including government authorities, NGOs, academic institutions, and fisherfolk organizations. A decade of working with the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations (CNFO), from 2007 to 2017, provides most of the observations. The observations are framed in the context of governing interactions between authorities in the governing system and beneficiaries in the system to be governed (Bavinck et al. 2005). The focus within this context is on participatory problems (herein called perils) that are common to fisheries governance everywhere (Pita et al. 2012).

Results and Discussion

The two sections of results deal first with the perils confronting the governors and second those faced by the governed. Between these two camps there are grey areas and shared perils relevant to both sides, as well as many examples of differing perspectives on the same peril. This sets up incentives for finding common interests and areas for communication, negotiation and collaboration that help to dispel false assumptions and

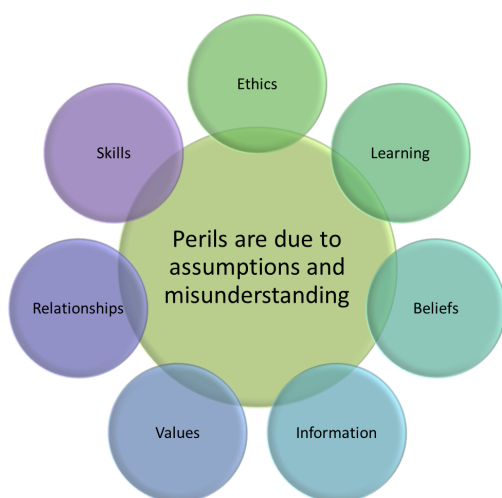


Figure 1. Areas of concern for persistent perils.

Observations suggest that perils confronting governing system partners such as fisheries authorities, and some NGOs that exercise power through projects, are largely of their own making. Dismissing the real costs to fisherfolk of collaborating with intervening agencies is one of the most common and persistent perils. The assumption that benefits to fisherfolk will outweigh costs can be false, especially in the short term when people in poverty are struggling to make ends meet. Participation such as attending workshops or reviewing documents is perilous as it consumes scarce productive time for pursuing livelihoods. Finding out that altruistic arguments are not sufficient to persuade fisherfolk to participate in partnerships is upsetting to many governors, and especially highly committed conservation NGOs.

Assuming that the principles, beliefs, and values held by conservationists and managers are shared by resource users is a related peril that causes misunderstanding. While

the governors and the governed are seldom entirely incompatible, their priorities typically differ. In addition, when authorities ignore heterogeneity within fishing communities they run the risk of amplifying inequalities and other social injustices in their interventions. Gender is an area of concern in this respect, with women being marginalized by initiatives geared towards men. Refusing to invest in social science skills and methods makes it less likely for the governors to bridge the gap between them and the governed. Presuming there are only a few means of participation often maintains the gap, keeping the marginalized on the periphery. Discounting powerful actors within the fishing industry can reinforce this marginalization and allow elites to capture interventions based on their continued repression of the disadvantaged.

Basing interventions primarily or only on natural science is narrow, but still common even under the guise of ecosystem approaches that do not acknowledge fisheries ecosystems as complex social-ecological systems. This biased use of knowledge leads to underestimating the importance of creating learning institutions in order to adapt to uncertainty. Assuming that fisherfolk have adequate adaptive capacity for effective partnership can also be false. They bluff. The constraints on capacity can be many and varied, ranging from illiteracy to deficient functional skills and networking.

Perils also confront the fishing industry when contemplating partnership with non-fishery entities. Similar to those of the non-fishery partners presented first, addressing the industry perils also demands considerable attention to sharing information even prior to agreeing on the partnership, and much more communication during the collaboration. First of all, fisherfolk may discover that practical arguments are inadequate for justifying action. Interventions that seem to be common sense may still need to be framed by science and/or policy and go through a gauntlet of reviews and approvals via a maze of institutional arrangements. Distrusting science when it contradicts strong beliefs is part of the problem that fisherfolk face. While many revere local and traditional knowledge, the counterpoint is that some of this knowledge is not based on evidence or experience, and many myths can prove to be barriers to collaboration. An example is that recruitment patterns and population dynamics may simply be attributed to god or chance by fisherfolk, whereas science may offer alternative plausible explanations due to ecology and an environment impacted by humans.

Frustration over the real or apparent implementation gap between ideas and interventions that involves spending more time, money and effort than seems necessary to fisherfolk can threaten the partnership. This is especially so if the fisherfolk leaders have an impatient set of constituents to convince in the participatory process. Underestimating the importance of good and sustained leadership is a related peril as fisherfolk discover interventions and interactions are often high maintenance, demanding constant attention from capable leaders. Postponing succession planning until the leaders retire is a peril that leads fisherfolk into unnecessary uncertainty, gaps in capacity and possible loss of support. It has proven difficult in some cases to convince fisherfolk organizations to be constantly grooming potential new leaders.

Fisherfolk may also initially fall into the trap of assuming technical/scientific agencies share their interests. This is almost the mirror image of the peril faced by the agencies. Often the interests are shared only to a point. Beyond that the fisherfolk find themselves on their own. Expecting a steady stream of funds to provide support is consequently a peril as the extent of shared interests (e.g. in time and topic) limits financial support and can amplify disappointment with the partnership. Managing expectations from all sides is essential, as is testing assumptions and learning by doing. If learning entails risk and innovation, then expecting collective action to overcome free-ridership can be another peril. An ethic of egalitarianism pervades many fisherfolk groups. Yet, it is reasonable to expect only a few to take action while the majority either just observes or reap the collateral benefits. Collective action does not mean waiting on the mass of the group. Ignoring the management of networks for collective action is a partnership peril. Fisherfolk leaders who actively manage networks for leadership, bonding, bridging, penetrating cliques, and drawing in isolates should be much more effective at getting desired results and scaling up benefits through collective action.

Finally, neglecting to engage in longer term strategic planning and defaulting on partner agreements when expedient are two linked perils that fisherfolk organizations often face from within. The absence of effective planning is related to the deficiencies in leadership and succession planning. The resultant shortsightedness can lead to a tendency to go after the shiniest bait around, rather than stay the course. Abandonment of agreements can be the outcome. This is put as an industry peril since the most harm is done to the presumed fisherfolk beneficiary as the non-fishery partner can often find a fix, but word will spread that the fisherfolk partner is fickle and not to be trusted for sustainability in an alliance. This maintains the vicious cycle of the fisherfolk organization constantly chasing short-term coalitions with immediate pay-offs of almost any kind rather than embarking on a genuinely developmental path of organizational growth.

Conclusions

Perils in partnerships have become more noticeable with increasing interactive fisheries governance. There is a need to make partnership risks tangible, transparent, and manageable. Set out such potential perils systematically for discussion in early negotiations. Developing adaptive capacity, communication, and networking skills facilitates long-term success.

KEYWORDS: Communication, learning, partnership, projects, risk

LITERATURE CITED

- Bavinck, M., R. Chuenpagdee, M. Diallo, P. van der Heijden, J. Kooiman, R. Mahon and S. Williams. 2005. *Interactive Governance for Fisheries: A Guide to Better Practice*. Centre for Maritime Research (MARE). Eburon Academic Publishers: Amsterdam.
- Pita, C., R. Chuenpagdee and G.J. Pierce. 2012. Participatory issues in fisheries governance in Europe. *Management of Environmental Quality: An International Journal* 23:347-361.