

Clash or understanding? The case of fishery co-management on Bonaire

¿Luchar o comprender? El caso de la cogestión pesquera en Bonaire.

Affrontement ou compréhension? Le cas de la cogestion des pêcheries à Bonaire.

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ABSTRACT

As part of the strategy to develop economically viable and community-supported sustainable fisheries, WWF-NL is active in the Dutch Caribbean municipality Bonaire. The success of these activities is dependent on participation and support from the fisheries community itself, which has not been forthcoming in the past. In this context, WWF-NL worked on the establishment of a fisheries cooperation on Bonaire. Working closely with local fishermen, as well as other stakeholders responsible for (sustainable) management of the fisheries sector, we identified, analyzed, and sought for solutions for the bottlenecks inhibiting the co-management of the sector. Co-management was concluded to be a preferred method to achieve successful and effective fisheries management on the island. However, the conditions for effective co-management system were yet to put in place. We examined how the presence or absence of these a fishery cooperative affected the implementation journey of co-management on Bonaire.

KEYWORDS: Co-management, Dutch Caribbean, Cooperative

INTRODUCCIÓN

Fishing is one of the oldest professions on the Dutch Caribbean Island Bonaire, which since 2010 is together with Saba and St. Eustatius, a special municipality of the Netherlands. Bonaire's fishery sector is best described as small scale, artisanal, low value, multi-species in which little development or growth has taken place over time. Despite its relatively low economic value it is accorded great cultural value on the island.

Over the years, the sector has become increasingly visible from a nature conservation perspective, because fishing and related activities take place in the marine area which, as a resource, is one of Bonaire's biggest economic, and tourist assets. While most natural resources are challenging to conserve and manage, the marine environment from the perspective of fisheries presents a particularly complex set of ecological and social management challenges.

The small-scale fisheries sector of Bonaire is faced with both global and context specific challenges. It has become increasingly difficult to make a decent living from fishing. Both global developments (e.g., pollution, climate change, global overfishing and by-catch) and local pressures (e.g., coastal development, erosion, invasive species (lionfish), introduced diseases and uncontrolled fishing) have devastating effects on the health of oceans and coral reefs and consequently local fish populations. Over the years, however, the number of professional fishers has declined.

In the past, there have been several attempts to achieve more sustainable and better-managed fisheries practices on Bonaire, but they (partially) failed. Since the constitutional change in 2010, during which the three smallest islands of the Dutch Caribbean became special municipalities of the Netherlands, the Netherlands is more prominently present on the islands in terms of policy, legislation, and management. Because the Dutch government has an international accountability concerning fisheries has more capacity to and is in general more active in getting things done, more pressure has been put on the fisheries sector of the islands to be managed.

The World Wide Fund for Nature – The Netherlands has been working on Bonaire for many decades and has an interest to develop economically viable and community-supported sustainable fisheries. As WWF-NL learned about the difficulties present on the islands regarding the fisheries sector, WWF-NL also became more involved in attempting to realize sustainable fisheries management on the islands. Aware of the fact that managing the fisheries sector is as much a social as an ecological issue, WWF-NL identified the social bottlenecks present. The question raised was under which circumstances it will be possible to engage fishers in an organized manner in the development of sustainable fisheries.

To answer this question, I conducted three months of fieldwork on Bonaire. What was supposed to be a commissioned study consisting of a series of interviews with key stakeholders within the fishery sector, turned into a participatory action research, which resulted into the establishment of the first successful fishery cooperative on Bonaire.

The idea for establishing a fishery cooperative was the result of the repeatedly expressed need by informants in preliminary interviews to involve fishers in the management process of the fishery sector. Many local stakeholders, including representatives from the Dutch government and public entity of Bonaire and ENGOs who worked with the fishers in the past, argued that this was a necessary measure to improve the existing management efforts of Bonaire's fishery. Specifically, the idea of decentralizing fisheries management and moving them towards what are known as co-management strategies by means of a fishery cooperative was argued to be favorable for Bonaire's fishery sector.

Past fisheries management efforts on Bonaire

Effectively implementing sustainable initiatives within the fisheries sector has proven to be difficult on Bonaire. On Bonaire, there is no fisheries monitoring, no permit obligation for most fishers, existing laws and regulations are minimally and sporadically enforced and there is little participation from the fishers in developing or implementing management measures. All these issues contribute to a steady decline of fish stocks, and consequently, a loss of income for the fishers as well as the deterioration of the ecosystem. Furthermore, the fishers received little material and financial help from the government. To better understand the possibilities for co-management through the establishment of the fisheries cooperative on Bonaire, I analysed past fisheries management efforts on Bonaire. This analysis of Bonaire's management efforts over the past decades revealed several important findings.

First, contrary to the dominant argument made by the fishers that the government neglected the sector, there have, in fact, been several attempts to expand the sector and invest in its development. However, there seems to be a detrimental mismatch between the wishes and capabilities of the fishers on the one hand, and the vision of the government and the complex levels of bureaucracy and professionalization required to realize these projects on the other hand. Moreover, it also became clear that non-fisher stakeholders with an interest in marine resources tend to be more capable than fishers to follow the increasingly complex bureaucratic guidelines and thus are better able to achieve their goals.

Second, the analysis revealed that over time the vision of the government for the sector shifted from exploitation and economic growth towards more sustainable and conservation-focused measures. This shift took place long before the island became a special municipality of the Netherlands in 2010, and is in line with a growing global awareness on the detrimental effects of overfishing. Another much heard argument is that with the constitutional changes of 2010 and, with them, the dominant presence of the government of the Netherlands, the state of the fishers has significantly worsened because the primary focus of the National government is now to implement measures that protect the environment. However, the description of management of the sector prior to the constitutional reforms reveals that, in fact, this focus was already part of the vision and policies of the island government long before 2010. Moreover, while increasing attention is paid to conservation measures, economic opportunities are not entirely dismissed by the government of the Netherlands: the leading objective is sustainable development, but fish are still considered an important and accessible source of food and income for the poorer communities. Furthermore, the transition after 10/10/10 has increased the available resources and capacity available for fisheries management and, therefore, has sped up the pace at which certain developments are taking place.

Lastly, the current formal structure and division of roles and responsibilities strongly builds on the structure that existed prior to 2010. In the Caribbean every social and cultural trait and therefore also the way the environment is interacted with is shaped by the island's colonial

history. Not only are the dominant players in the arena of nature conservation on Bonaire politically and historically determined; it is also affected by the small scale of the island and the fact that the constitutional reforms led to the reproduction of colonial inequality and resentment of perceived "re-colonization". Bonaire went from being a colony, to becoming part of the Netherlands Antilles as an autonomous country within the Kingdom, to now once again losing autonomy as they are yet again strongly integrated in the Netherlands because of its status as a special municipality. While the governance structure of Bonaire always fell under the "regime" of another country, the constitutional changes in 2010 further fragmented and complicated the managerial landscape of government agencies locally and at the level of the Kingdom. This has made involvement in fisheries (or environmental) management more complex for local fishers.

Despite the small size and the relatively insignificant economic value of fisheries on Bonaire, the marine environment does face several ecological threats (including overfishing), resulting in smaller and fewer catches and thus affecting the fishery sector. These changes are visible and felt by local fishers. There is a growing concern voiced by the fishers and the community in general that Bonaire's fishery is a dying part of the culture because it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a living from fishing. Moreover, this decline is affecting one of the poorest groups within Bonairean society who, due to their limited levels of education, feel they have little to fall back on. While the number of professional fishers seems to be decreasing, the number of recreational fishers is increasing, as are the number of resource users with somewhat conflicting interests in the marine environment (e.g., divers, snorkelers, coastal developers). Consequently, it seems as though the fishers are reluctant to openly acknowledge that their local fishing practices contributed to the declining fish stocks as they fear the implementation of measures that would directly limit their fishing freedom.

While it is difficult to determine the extent to which past efforts to develop or manage the sector have failed or succeeded, the general impression within the fishery community is that more efforts have been made to introduce protective environmental measures (such as legislation, regulation and prohibition of fishing gears, implementation of restricted fishing zones, species moratoriums, etc.) than attempts to economically develop or stimulate the sector. Moreover, where policy documents and research prior to 2010 tended to emphasize the healthy state of the coral reefs and marine ecosystems of Bonaire, more and more evidence has been found that even though the coral reefs of Bonaire might be among the most pristine and healthiest in the world, they too are experiencing a steady decline. Thus, there seems to be a growing trend to approach fisheries management from a resource conservation perspective and less from a solely economic growth perspective. Even though this shift took place long before the constitutional reforms, it does contribute to the overall sentiment among fishers that the government neglects the fishers and the fisheries sector.

In addition, besides the “formal” institutions responsible for fisheries management, there are increasingly numerous stakeholders with an interest in, or a degree of responsibility for, the marine area of Bonaire and who are therefore also concerned with the actions taken to manage fishing activities. These stakeholders include, for example: the diving industry; fish distributors such as hotels, restaurants, and supermarkets; other marine related NGOs such as Reef Renewal Bonaire (RRB) and Sea Turtle Conservation Bonaire (STCB); and other tourism nature-related service providers such as The Mangrove Info Center, who provide kayak tours through Bonaire’s mangrove forests. The success garnered from the establishment of the marine sanctuary, which was strongly lobbied for by the NEV, exemplified the large impact Dutch ENGOS can have on the islands, particularly because they are able to navigate the spaces of Dutch bureaucracy.

A final important finding is the lack of structural inclusion of the fishers in management and development efforts. This does not mean that attempts were not made to include the fishers, but the developments I have discussed do illustrate that these attempts were only marginally successful, if at all. There have been several attempts to include the fishers in management efforts. As I already mentioned, several of these efforts focused on the establishment of a fisheries cooperative, but other measures to include the fishers in management procedures have been taken as well. The executive Board member position of STINAPA was not successfully filled — the reasons for this being unclear. Other times when fishers were approached and included in management efforts. They repeatedly used the argument that that they (as an individual) were not able to speak for all fishers as a reason to decline to serve or involve themselves.

What can be concluded from the analysis of the fisheries sector of Bonaire and its management and development over time, is that Bonaire’s fisheries face much of the challenges which have been argued could best be addressed by co-management. Literature and practice have shown that small scale fisheries on small islands almost demands co-management due to the limited infrastructure, capacity, and resources available. This is even more the case for low-value fisheries as the financial return of effective management cannot be covered by the sector. Consequently, management officials often have little incentive to make the adequate investments effective management requires. Studies have argued and shown that co-management can bridge the gap caused by the shortcomings of management efforts by the government in these cases (Pomeroy & Williams, 1994; Trimble & Berkes, 2013).

A new approach? Fisheries Co-management on Bonaire

Co-management can be defined as a form of management wherein the responsibility for the management of a resource is shared between the government and other users. It had been argued to be an ideal solution for fishery management on Bonaire. Co-management has been argued to be effective for small scale, low value, artisanal, fisheries as it can address the shortcomings associated with governing from a single institutional level alone. Because co-management is a participatory management model in

which multiple resource users are actively involved, it is able to develop measures that cater to multiple needs (i.e., biological, social, and economic) related to fisheries, the marine resource, and its users (Costanza, et al., 1998; Gutiérrez, Hilborn, & Defeo, 2011; Jentof, 1989; Pinkerton, 1989).

Co-management is believed to have many advantages, including, but not limited to, enabling more inclusive and transparent decision making processes, more effective collective action and conflict resolution through the inclusion of relevant fishery stakeholders, more support and compliance with management measures, reduced management costs, and increased sensitivity to local realities and conditions which can, thereby, lead to the development and adequate implementation of fitting, supported, credible measures (Berkes, 2009; Evans, Cherrett & Pems, 2011; Gutiérrez, Hilborn & Defeo, 2011; Pomeroy & Williams, 1994).

Indeed, there have been some forms of co-management of the fishery sector of Bonaire for many years. However, despite many attempts, up until 2017, the fishers as the main stakeholders have not been sufficiently, structurally, or effectively included in the management process. Past co-management efforts of Bonaire’s fishery sector targeting the inclusion of the fishers experienced many setbacks and failures.

There are numerous reasons why fisheries cooperatives or organizations can more efficiently facilitate fishers’ participation than approaches that focus on the individual fishers in fishery management efforts. Pollnac (1994), for example, identified four main reasons, namely:

1. it eases the coordination of meetings to discuss management matters;
2. working with smaller representative groups increases the chances of achieving agreement on management decisions;
3. it can create fairer representation for individuals affected by the proposed changes, as organizations can help effectively represent the less privileged and educated groups; and lastly;
4. it reduces the pressure placed on individual participants as organizations are often better able to defend themselves against (il)legal threats.

The awareness of the value of co-management to small-scale fisheries and the acknowledgement of the fact that fishers had been insufficiently heard and involved as active stakeholders in fisheries management efforts on Bonaire, led to the strong belief among (mostly Dutch) experts and institutions on Bonaire who strive for sustainable fisheries that the missing link to effective management was the inclusion of the fishers themselves. Moreover, learning from past experiences, it was argued that fishers should be included in an organized form and not individually. Past efforts to collaborate with fishers had shown that if fishers were approached and included individually, other fishers would argue that the collaborating fisher did not represent all of the fishers.

Hence, at the time of my fieldwork, there was a strongly held belief among governmental officials, local ENGOS, fisheries legislation enforcers, and local marine scientists

who had worked with Bonaire's fishers for many years that including the fishers in the form of a fishery cooperative could serve as the "silver bullet" for resolving the existing social management struggles within the sector.

METHODS

Aware of the need to include fishers in the management of the sector, my action research focused on setting up a fisheries cooperative. I chose this approach based on the literature review and insights derived from the preliminary interviews. Initially the intervention was aimed at organizing a meeting with fishers in order to involve them in fisheries management practices. Because the desire for a fisheries cooperative was expressed by various stakeholders, including the fishers themselves, I decided to shift my focus to helping the fishers establish a fisheries cooperative.

I chose this approach for several reasons. First, researchers who conducted research on fisheries on Bonaire in the past shared that fishers, in particular, place little value on research and extensive interviews as they feel that these have little effect or impact on improving the sector. Instead, fishers expressed a need for "real" action in order to improve the sector. Second, having a fisheries cooperative in the view of WWF-NL as well as of other local fisheries stakeholders, is essential to ensure the proper representation of fishers as a group in fisheries management decisions and discussions. Third, several attempts had been made in the past to set up a fishery cooperative but had been unsuccessful thus far. Thus, it was crucial to find out in what manner the fishers could be effectively organized. Lastly, working closely with the fishers and, particularly, the Board of the cooperative would give me in-depth insights into the bottlenecks facing the sector and create for me the opportunity to experiment with solutions for achieving a management climate in which the fishers are structurally and equally involved.

RESULTS

Social bottlenecks of fisheries management through co-management on Bonaire

While the establishment of the fisheries cooperative of Bonaire was successful, by providing unprecedented amounts of support and guidance, the fishers and the cooperative still faced many barriers in relation to the sector that inhibit effective co-management. An overview is presented in Table 1.

CONCLUSION

Although Bonaire's fishery sector still faces many challenges regarding its management, even in its early stages the fishery co-op PISKABON has helped to address some of the issues that are required to achieve effective co-management. Namely, the cooperative proved to be an effective platform to give the fishers a voice in management decisions regarding the sector. They have been able to actively lobby the public entity of Bonaire to execute several long overdue maintenance

projects on fishery facilities, such as the piers.

As the cooperative is able to represent (theoretically) all fishers, the Board creates an effective and well-organized point of contact for governmental institutes and other organizations seeking dialogue or collaboration with the fishers. Moreover, as the cooperative is formally established it creates and increases the opportunity for fishers to receive subsidies for the execution of projects.

The cooperative has also proven to be an effective way for the government to delegate certain responsibilities and tasks to the fishers. This in turn can help in working towards creating more clarity in the division of roles and responsibilities within the sector. The cooperative has been able to actively advocate for certain changes in Bonaire's fishery management; for example, informing fishers proactively on extreme weather conditions, fishery legislation, and sustainable fishing measures, which has incentivized the government to implement some of these changes as well.

Lastly, with the existence of PISKABON, fishers have been more informed about the latest developments in terms of legislation, conservation measures, and sustainable fishing techniques. This knowledge has reached the fishers through Board members of PISKABON participating in regional conferences and workshops on fishery developments and management. Receiving the information directly from a source the fishers trust increases the credibility of the information (Röckmann, Leeuwen, Goldsborough, Kraan & Piet, 2015). Enhancing fishers' knowledge and awareness on the need for management measures through credible sources can in turn help to increase their support for and adherence to other measures being implemented (Cochrane & Garcia, 2009).

The establishment of the fishery cooperative on Bonaire, illustrated that giving the fishers back some sense of control and ownership through co-management creates new possibilities for cooperation between the various fishery and marine ecosystem stakeholders, and thus for successful management. This finding also underscores that fishers are more likely to participate in conservation actions if their peers support them and, therefore, they do not run the risk of damaging their reputation, i.e., their sense of belonging. Nevertheless, the establishment of the cooperative did not magically resolve all the existing inequalities between the fishers and the other stakeholders, most of whom have more formal organizational skills and experience with (complex) bureaucratic procedures.

While I argue that organizing the fishers greatly aids formal institutions in structurally involving fishers in management efforts, simply having a fishery cooperative within the current managerial structure is far from sufficient to ensure the creation of equal and effective inclusion of fishers in efforts towards environmental preservation. Effective co-management requires a lot of work and time to establish and does not guarantee success (Pomeroy & Williams, 1994; Kraan et al., 2014).

While numerous researchers have provided evidence for the effectiveness of fishers' cooperatives or organizations as facilitators for fishers' inclusion in fishery management; (Berkes, 1986; Jentof, 1989; Bailey & Jentof, 1990), it has also been stressed that the existence of cooperatives

does not guarantee successful co-management. The latter depends greatly on the effectiveness and the success of the cooperative and the cooperation among fishers. Or as Pollnac (1994) stated: "... the mere existence of a cooperative does not guarantee either successful cooperation among fishers or successful co-management. It could, however, be a beginning as well as influence members' willingness to manage the resource" (p. 101-102).

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Table 1. Practical, Psychological / Emotional barriers for co-management on Bonaire

Practical Barriers	
<i>Availability of Adequate, Trusted Long-term Assistance</i>	A first major practical barrier that is clearly evident is the necessity of adequate, trusted, and long-term assistance for the fishers to achieve co-management through a fishery cooperative. Fishers do not accept just any person to provide them with assistance. To gain trust, tireless communication and transparency proved to be key. Keeping all parties, particularly the Board members, informed about the latest developments was crucial to ensure a sense of fairness and understanding among the fishers and, therefore, in the overall process of achieving co-management of the fisheries sector.
<i>Volunteering Board Members</i>	Currently, the fisheries cooperative is still made up of volunteers with limited time to run a fisheries cooperative. In order to set up a cooperative, fishers are required to volunteer and invest their free time. However, fishers and especially part-time fishers have irregular and very diverse schedules. Fishers do not or cannot always attend organized meetings.
<i>Language Barriers</i>	While most fishers have some understanding of the Dutch language, they primarily speak Papiamentu and are thus better able to converse, discuss, and express themselves in Papiamentu. While this is not an issue in their day-to-day lives, this does create a large barrier when having to deal with government officials — in particular those representing the Dutch ministries — and scientists or (foreign) ENGOs. The barrier is even more evident when trying to organize the fishers and create forms of government supported by co-management as this requires fishers to be able to read, understand, and write often complex (or advanced) Dutch texts.
<i>Educational and Experience Differences Between Stakeholders</i>	The five fishermen who were willing to take a seat in the Board lacked experience and knowledge about how to run a cooperative. In addition, they lacked knowledge about, and experience with, formal bureaucratic systems, and were consequently confronted with institutional barriers during the establishment of PISKABON (i.e., finalizing the required by-laws, writing a business plan). This realization tended to demotivate the Board members and this demotivation hindered the speed at which certain actions were taken. This slow pace, in turn, diverged from the pace at which the government and other stakeholders tended to work and the rate at which they expected actions to be completed.
<i>Increased Bureaucracy with a Distant The Hague</i>	A clearly felt practical barrier was that the practical needs on the island level do not fit with the type of support the ministries in The Hague are willing and able to provide. While the Ministry of LNV tried to make concessions to the cooperative to simplify procedures and to meet the needs of the fishers, their ability (or willingness) to do so was limited due to rigidity of the Dutch governmental system.
<i>Reluctance of the Government to Structurally and Actively Include Fishers in Management Decisions</i>	Even though PISKABON is able to actively lobby the government for proper fisheries management and voice their concerns and demands, this does not guarantee that the fishers will be structurally and actively included in (all) difficult management decisions the government makes.
<i>Unclear Roles and Responsibilities of Fishery Management Stakeholders</i>	Whenever organizations were willing to establish some form of collaboration, the ambiguity of roles and responsibilities inhibited these organizations from making concrete agreements with PISKABON. In sum, the general existing ambiguity of roles and responsibilities between the national government, public entity, and other organizations such as STINAPA and WWF-NL made it difficult for PISKABON to navigate and determine their own role regarding the management of Bonaire's marine environment and fishery.
<i>Limited Availability of Resources: Financial and Human Resources</i>	The perceived urgency of the issues affects the priority given to, and the budget made available to, invest in fisheries management. The limited budget in combination with the perceived lack of urgency for fisheries sector management compared to other sectors results in little-to-no investment being made in the capacity of the organizations concerned with the sector, with the end result being that proper fisheries management remains elusive.

Table 1. Practical, Psychological / Emotional barriers for co-management on Bonaire.

Psychological / Emotional barriers	
<i>Lack of Trust between Fishers and Other Stakeholders</i>	The lack of trust among the fishers towards other stakeholders was one of the most evident and destructive factors inhibiting co-management on Bonaire. Fishers generally do not want to be “controlled”. They are often in the profession because of the sense of freedom it provides. Establishing a cooperative with the intention to make management agreements with the government and other resource users is thus perceived by them as a direct threat to this sense of freedom. They feared that organizing themselves and collaborating with nature organizations and/or the government would only make it easier to implement more restrictions, rules, and regulations to their detriment. Not only are fishers not always willing to collaborate with other stakeholders, but also not with each other. The previous unsuccessful attempts to establish a fisheries cooperative left the fishers feeling unmotivated and skeptical as to why fisheries management is needed or even desirable. Fishers felt that there were hidden agendas involved and that the previous cooperative had not helped all fishers equally.
<i>Power Inequality between Stakeholders</i>	The topic of power among stakeholders concerned with fishery management on Bonaire is an intricate one. On the one hand, it can be concluded that government officials and ENGO representatives have more power as they tend to have completed higher levels of education and possess both the human and financial resources required to take action. On the other hand, this disadvantage is compensated for by the fact that all stakeholders are highly dependent on the collaboration of the fishers and thus PISKABON to realize and implement effective co-management measures. Reflecting on this, it seems as though in terms of negotiating co-management on Bonaire, it is not so much a question of there being power inequality but more so a power difference meaning that the different stakeholders possess of a different type of power.
<i>Personal and Organizational Reputational Concerns</i>	Reputational concerns affected the willingness of and extent to which individuals were ready to actively engage in co-management efforts, such as instigating collaboration between the different parties. This was visible on an individual level, but also at an organizational level.
<i>(Perceived) conflict of interest</i>	Throughout my fieldwork, stakeholders shared their views about why it is difficult to manage the fisheries sector and proposed solutions on how the sector should be managed. The different views distilled from these interviews illustrate that “Fisheries management is characterized by multiple and conflicting objectives, multiple stakeholders with divergent interests and high levels of uncertainty about the dynamics of the resources being managed” (Smith, Sainsbury & Stevens, 1999; p. 965). Interests do not necessarily have to conflict to be harmful for achieving co-management. Even if interests are shared among stakeholders, the priority they give to each individual interest is different, this difference can affect the willingness of stakeholders to collaborate with each other.