

# Fisheries Co-management Policy Brief: Findings from a Worldwide Study

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	2
<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>The challenge for Governance</b>	4
Globalization and the exclusion of local fishing communities	4
Market driven agreements and conventions	4
Competition for the use of resources	4
Who should take the responsibility for managing fisheries?	5
Inadequacy of traditional fisheries management	5
Inadequacy of 'modern' fisheries management	5
A new approach is needed	6
Problems facing fishing communities	6
<b>Reforming governance institutions</b>	7
Fisheries co-management	7
Definition of co-management	8
Rationale for co-management	8
Instrumental co-management	8
Empowering fisheries co-management: an institutional innovation	9
<b>Meeting the challenges in implementation</b>	11
Empowering communities to help define management objectives	11
Integrating the scientific knowledge base for co-management decision-making	12
Co-management and conflicts over fisheries resources	13
Gear conflicts	13
Excluding others	14
Traditional authorities	14
Managing scale issues	14
<b>Conclusions and implications</b>	16
Scale	16
Local and global	16
Knowledge base	16
Conflict resolution	16
Empowerment	17
Learning from experience	17
Fisheries Co-management Research at the WorldFish Center	17
List of Collaborating Institutions	17
<b>Literature: a reading guide</b>	19
<b>References</b>	19
<b>Case study boxes</b>	21

## Executive Summary

**F**isheries in developing countries are under intense pressure from increasing human populations, overexploitation of resources and conflicts over access to degraded resources. Who should take the responsibility for managing fisheries? A new governance approach is needed to address the problems facing fishing communities. One promising approach involves an arrangement where management responsibility is shared between the government, fishing communities and other stakeholders. This co-management approach will address the problems facing fishing communities which include the following: 1) the risk of exclusion from resources and markets due to globalization, 2) the intense competition for the use of the freshwater and coastal environment leading to reduced resource productivity, 3) the need to reverse the overexploitation and establishment of sustainable management of the living aquatic resources on which the fishing communities rely, and 4) reconciling the immediate needs of the fishing communities with international agreements focussing on the aquatic ecosystem. Studies of various co-management implementation cases have revealed the potentials and benefits of co-management. Potentials for reducing conflicts, enhancing cooperation between communities and government and recognising conservation needs have been documented. Scale issues, approaches for reconciling local and global needs and identifying knowledge base for co-management and ways for effective empowerment of local communities for setting management objectives are areas that require further attention.

# Introduction

**F**isheries in developing countries are under strong and increasing pressure. Increasing populations in coastal and freshwater environments create pressures leading to overexploitation of resources and conflicts concerning access to resources, space and markets. Competing uses of resources and space in coastal zones and freshwater environments such as infrastructure development, tourism, hydropower development and aquaculture bring about loss of access to and control over fisheries resources by fishing communities. Changes in the environment due to pollution, coastal erosion and deforestation also result in further losses of production and value of fisheries resources. Globalisation, which is the integration of local markets into global markets and the subsuming of political and social processes by international economic forces, often leads to exclusion rather than new opportunities for fishing communities.

Current fisheries management approaches based on centralised government intervention have proven inadequate to deal with these issues and do not meet most reasonable objectives including reversing stock depletion, resolving user-group conflicts, increasing profitability and preventing social disruption.

Existing institutions within fishing communities are not able to cope with these rapidly developing pressures either. The communities are in effect disempowered relative to emerging, stronger and, in many cases, distant stakeholders including fish consumers.

There is thus no easy solution to this problem given the strength of the forces. New institutions enabling fishing communities to deal with the present pressures are needed. Fisheries and aquatic resources management is, however, still largely government-driven although experiences worldwide show that various forms of partnership between government, industry and fishers strengthen management and produce results. Such partnerships have become known as co-management.

During the last decade the co-management concept has gained increasing acceptance among governments, development agencies and researchers as an important option for future fisheries management systems. At the same time it has, however, become increasingly evident that the co-management concept is not clearly defined and often means different things to different people. A growing number of attempts to introduce variants of co-management systems have been studied and documented and there is now a considerable body of documented experience available. It is, therefore, timely to move on to a more comprehensive understanding of co-management and to summarize the experiences with both the positive outcomes and the problems in actual implementation.

This policy brief distinguishes co-management systems according to the scope of the cooperative features of the governance system and provides evidence from a recent worldwide study on fisheries co-management that has researched cases of co-management arrangements in coastal and freshwater fisheries in Asia and southern Africa. Some of these case studies are used as examples in this brief. The project and references to publications of case studies are presented in the bibliography of this document.