

Common Sense



The debate is too intense to simply stop for lunch. Even after lunch boxes have been distributed to the group, speakers still stand up from the jute cloth spread on the floor in order to add at least a few, and in most cases many, words to the discussion. Of course, this is not surprising really, when you realise that the debate concerns the wetlands and fisheries which lie at the heart of this community. The agenda of this meeting is important to every one of the 50 or so men in the classroom. In fact, this is the final day of a six-day workshop which will probably change the lives of these villagers.

So this lunch time is not exactly the first chance the villagers from Maijpara, in the Narail District of southwest Bangladesh, have had to speak on this important issue. Nor will it be the last time the group and its spokespeople meet with government officials, visiting researchers and representatives from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in this project. But before we consider the project itself, we really need to look at what the villagers have achieved in the last six days of discussion.

Over the last six days, the men have been working hard (in separate groups in adjacent classrooms and in joint sessions) to get a better grasp

of the issues attached to the wetlands and fisheries which are so important to their community. They have outlined the problems as they see them, what should be changed to remedy these problems, and which of the possible solutions will and will not work for their community.

Now it may sound as if these men are all fishers, and they do all fish at least some of the time. But, few of them are full-time fishers. Most are farmers, who own smaller or larger fields in the area. Others are agricultural labourers who do not own land, but who do own a waterhole in the area. But do not be misled into thinking that the women from the village have taken no part in these discussions. Although they are not attending this joint session, they have attended their own, separate, workshop over the first four days. They had the opportunity to speak out there, and will no doubt be eager to learn the outcome of the last day's meeting.

What they will hear when they are told about the meeting is that the men, invited from around 1,000 households from five villages, really considered the problems facing their fisheries in depth. In so doing, they discovered that they have a lot in common, despite the differences in their occupations and the amount of land they hold. The women will be particularly interested to hear about the debate held on the final day of the workshop, because on that day the men considered a vital issue: how should the villagers organise themselves to tackle the problems identified? To this end, they spent the morning of the last day showing the local politicians and the fisheries officials the conclusions they had reached, and what everyone agreed would be the difficulties ahead. These points had all been recorded on large cardboard posters.

The rest of the day focused on what kind of steering group to set up. The result, for now, was the decision to set up a central management



Rivers and canals connect most corners of Bangladesh, and are an easier way of getting around than muddy tracks or crowded roads.

group, which will not be too big, and some smaller working groups which will tackle different aspects of the overall problem. But none of this is as easy as it sounds, especially when you consider the area in which these solutions must be applied.

A brief geography lesson

You need to be careful when considering the geography of Bangladesh, particularly if you read a figure which states the size of the country in square kilometres. When Bangladesh is in the dry season, roughly the first half of the year, the figures given will probably be correct. But, during the other half of the year, the size of the country is up for discussion. Why? Because large parts of it will be covered by water, although most of it will not be much more than 1.5 m deep. This flooding is a result of the monsoon season. This delivers massive rains directly onto the flat lands, while giant rivers rush down from the north, all the way from the mighty Himalayas.

But do not expect Bangladesh to be divided into two distinct pieces, a dry part and a wet part. In places, the flooding covers huge areas with only a few landmarks rising above the waters. In other areas, including those around the village school of Maijpara, the flooding turns only the low-lying land into lakes.

It is just such a piece of land (soon to be lake) that the men are discussing in the village school. Of course, they do not have to switch between the terms 'land' and 'lake', because their language has a word to describe these areas. To them, this area is simply a 'beel'. Nearly all of the 250 ha which make up this particular 'beel' are, for part of the year, used for agriculture, mainly producing rice. For the rest of the year, the area is fished. If the whole process was left to nature, the 'beel' would, after some years, grow in some directions while other parts of it decreased

in size. An embankment, canals and sluices have been put in place and expanded by Government projects over the last few years. So, now the 'beel' is more or less a standard size during each monsoon season.

Villages are built on the edges of such 'beels', far enough away that they remain dry most years, but close enough that the fields or the fishing are nearby. By tradition, nearly all the families in the village will come to catch the fish which end up in the 'beel', and harvest the snails and useful water plants there. The fish swim in from the surrounding rivers and lakes as the waters rise, and the whole system looks as if it should be able to go on like this forever. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Another meeting

Further up the road from our village lies the large, provincial town of Jessore. Back in 1995, a meeting was held here similar to the one which has just taken place in Maijpara, though the meeting room at Goakhola primary school was even smaller than the classroom used in Maijpara. The 350 families around the 'beel' at Jessore had witnessed the same sad decline in productivity as is now worrying the people at Maijpara. Slowly but steadily their fish catches decreased, and species of fish well-known in their parents' days had disappeared from the waters.

Everyone agreed that the explanation for this was obvious: the population was growing and, because everyone fished, over-fishing was the result. The first get-togethers between the families were not as well organised as the Maijpara workshop, but they came to the same conclusion: "we need to organise ourselves if things are going to improve".

An NGO was already working with other projects in the area, and the villagers contacted them to discuss their problems. These were just the



As Basontbi Audbikary feeds rice bran to her many fish, she inspects them and is proud to see how well they are growing.

right people to contact, and it was just the right time to contact them. The NGO had just begun to co-operate with WorldFish Center staff in Bangladesh in partnership with the Department of Fisheries, and had begun working on exactly these problems. What is more, they had secured funds from the Ford Foundation for action to combat the alarming decrease in fisheries operating from 'open fresh waters' (the technical term for the lakes, rivers, canals and, of course, 'beels').

Because of all this, the answer to the question which took up so much of the final day of the meeting at Maijpara was already obvious in Jessore. They had already founded a Management Committee of 27 people. This represented all the relevant families, as well as all the local authorities, local politicians and fisheries officials from the area. No group is unrepresented, as five of the members are women (one of them an elected a councillor in local government). Starting in the mid-1990s, this group came up with a number of ideas which really broke with the past.

How it used to be...

Let's just, for a moment, go back to 1995. It is early in the year, so the 'beel' has dried up. Almost everywhere you look there are rice fields, and now and again a small hole dug in the ground to retain water. Outside the perimeter of the 'beel' flows a canal, but only a few fishers will try their luck there, as virtually all the fish are gone; only when the rains come back will some fish return.

As soon as a new supply of fish comes into the 'beel', everyone will begin catching as many as possible, from fully grown fish to those undersize—right down to the very smallest. To make sure that everything is taken, people will closely inspect the ground when the last of the water drains away from the fields, grabbing any fish trying to hide in the mud. The families who own a water hole are the lucky ones, as they



A WorldFish Center staff member gives useful advice to a villager and, at the same time, learns more about what the villagers find works best in their fields.

really benefit from fish left over at the end of the wet season; once the wet season ends, they too will concentrate on agriculture. This was the recipe which, once the population began to increase, ensured that the number of fish went down year by year.

... and how it changed

At a meeting of the Management Committee of the Goakhola-Hatiara 'beel', the now experienced chair proudly recounts what happened following the institution of Community Based Fisheries Management, CBFM as everyone calls it. The committee was started in 1997, practical work began in late 1997 and the first results were seen in 1998.

He explains the goals and objectives of the scheme and explains why they were handled in the way they were. Certainly, he states, the fish belong to everyone. Even if some of the people are not landowners, they have always had the right to harvest the fish. This rule still holds true under the new scheme. The only difference is that now there are limits to how often you can fish and which fishing tools you can use.

Another problem these people had faced was that the 'beel' was 'fished-out' each year. If no fish remain, there is no security for the next season. Part of the answer to this problem consisted of the villagers clubbing together to rent five of the waterholes or 'kuas'. Fish would be left in these to grow during the dry season and so start producing fish fry when the next monsoon started and the water rose again in April. These 'kuas' were thought of as a small game park for fish, a 'sanctuary' to use the term used by the researchers behind the concept. No one was allowed to fish in the selected water holes, so that the fish growing in them could invade the 'beel' in numbers. Later in the season the sluices would also be opened to let in other fish from outside.



Farmers tend small rice fields here for half the year. But, the seasonal rains have now turned those fields into fish-rich waters.

The idea of a sanctuary was a difficult concept to implement, because fish have to remain untouched for at least two to three months, to make sure they grow to a big enough size. So, you have to impose a kind of hunting ban or 'closed season', as it is often called. But this is easier said than done when the fish are visible and tempting everywhere in the shallow water.

In fact, the reason the whole project worked, more or less, from the start was that a system of 24-hour guards was put in place. In the day, the women would watch over the water holes; then, at night, the men would take turns keeping an eye on the fish and so keeping everyone in line. Not that this system was totally foolproof, because there would always be some outsider willing to try their luck. It was even thought that a few people within the 'beel' community might believe that they could get away with just a few fish now and again. But, it was decided, rules are rules. So now if a family is detected fishing out of season, it risks having its fishing gear confiscated by the Management Committee.

The chair will assure you, with the full backing of his committee, that the scheme has worked. The fish of his childhood are back, and there is enough to go round. The project's statistics back him up too: from 1997 to 1999 the catches went up by 41 per cent, and this trend is still increasing.

In the open air

Basonti Audhikary is one of the villagers in Goakhola trusted by her neighbours to sit on the Management Committee. She is quite happy to show you how the new ideas have worked for her and her young boy, even though her husband has only taken a very limited interest in the work.

Her small homestead is not much larger than a typical European suburban family garden. The 26-decimal plot ('decimal' being the measurement used locally) is divided into a piece of land on which there are a few small buildings and a pond, which right now contains growing shrimps. One of the buildings is a small barn with two calves tied to it. Chickens roam everywhere, and there are ducks and ducklings enjoying their freedom on the pond. The agriculture on this homestead consists of a fruit garden, with tropical fruits which range from banana to papaya, coconut, guava and mango. Now much of this fruit can be sold for a profit. However, Basonti has gone from being a full-time agricultural labourer to a landowner in the last few years, and she could not have achieved that simply through what is produced on this little homestead. Outside her homestead, Basonti has added steadily to her land and fishery holdings in the middle of the 'beel'. In 1997 she bought 24 more decimals, in 1998 she rented 28 decimals, in 2000 10 decimals and in 2002 another 50 decimals.

As a result of her new-found prosperity, Basonti now has a tube-well, which provides good quality drinking water, and a concrete toilet of a standard that would not really have been known in the village some years before. In fact, such toilets are now commonplace, though they were once regarded as facilities which only the better-off could afford. But there is one modern convenience which other households have but Basonti has not yet had installed: a tin or, even better, a concrete roof. But Basonti happily explains why she still has a straw roof. She has invested whatever new money has come her way in land, and she does not want to go for a tin roof, which is the cheap solution. She would rather wait until she has acquired enough land to promise her a secure future, then she will have a genuine concrete roof constructed.

Basonti's achievements are closely connected with the advice and



A representative of landless workers makes a point during a debate. The villagers are deciding how they should pool their resources, to make best use of the fish stocks available in the wetlands around their village.

training she has received over the years. The NGOs in the area, the partners of the WorldFish Center and, of course, the small amount of credit they gave her to help her over the first hurdles she would encounter, have all helped her improve her small farm and establish and expand her fisheries. Her parents, who live just down the road and who have watched how she handles the intricate affairs of her small rural home, admire the progress she has made in life just as much as, we are sure, you do.

Will it carry on?

Back in Maijpara, the people attending the opening meeting of the new Maijpara Beel Association have observed what is happening elsewhere, and have high hopes that they will be able to repeat Goakhola's success story.

But they know that they will face some difficulties. So, at the end of their meeting they ask, as has always been their intention, that the NGO continues to work with them, not only in terms of advising them on the new techniques but also by acting as an impartial intermediary. This is a very important role, and if you consider just some of the in-built dilemmas you will understand why. For example, the landowners will probably want the 'beel' to be drained as early as possible, so that they can carry on farming, but the fishers will want the water to stay. Labourers may lean towards the fishers' side. But this is not certain, because they can use the cash income provided by field work. What is more, if you are a landowner, your interests will be different if your fields are on the higher part of the 'beel' and not on the lower part.

But, while there may be some tension within the group, we should remember that the project remains a community effort in which the villagers work closely together. So, for example, the cost of renting the

'kuas' is divided amongst the community, though the Beel Association will, in the beginning, obtain credit from the project. If, later, Maijpara's Beel Association becomes more ambitious, as is the case in Goakhola-Hatiara, they will need even more money.

Goakhola-Hatiara's Management Committee has its eye on a piece of canal next to the 'beel'. They can rent this for a five year period, and keep native brood fish in it all year round. But, they will have to pay up front. This is high on the agenda right now, because only collectively can the members raise the required amount (around US\$ 350).

The WorldFish Center and the Department of Fisheries keep a close eye on such project developments. But this is no easy task, because the programme of which this project is a part is growing very quickly. Financed by British development funds, the programme is now being expanded, from its first phase, to cover over 100 pieces of open water. Up to 30,000 families will be added to the 5,000 or more who have already benefited from the early years of this progress-oriented, co-operative work scheme.

Maybe the best sign that this programme is in good health is given by the keen interest the Bangladeshi authorities have taken in it. They realise that it is good sense to let whole communities take care of their own resources. Community support for sanctuaries and the use of a closed season are concepts that are finding their way into national policies. Gradually, rights to the use of government-owned open waters are being transferred to local communities for stronger protection and higher income.

No wonder that the participants in the Maijpara workshop found it worth their while to postpone lunch and get their future on the right track.



A sales agent carries baby fish (fingerlings) to sell to pond owners. He might come back and transport them to market in half a year's time, once they have grown to a marketable size.