

SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES, AS SEEN FROM THE NORTH

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Daniel Pauly speaks with an authority on the world's fisheries that few others can match. We can only hope that governments and international organisations are listening to what he has to say. This time Daniel has also offered some observations about our work as social scientists, which I imagine most of us would appreciate. My remarks are therefore not so much a critique as a few additional comments on some of the issues he has raised. Most of Daniel's examples and reflections on the fate of small-scale fisheries are drawn from the South. So as someone coming from as far north as you can possibly get, my perspective is naturally focused in that direction.

Social Science at the Margin

First let me note that, like small-scale fishers, fisheries social scientists are of course well aware that they are a marginal group. We hardly play any role in informing fisheries policies at various levels, and we do find this to be a paradox given that policy formation and governance are typically social science specialties. This often makes some of us feel a bit disillusioned and perhaps even a little bitter from time to time, and we ask ourselves why we bother. I think my own country, Norway, must have more fisheries social scientists per capita than most other countries. But after almost thirty years in the trade, I must confess that I cannot remember having seen any trace of our work in the fisheries policy documents that various Norwegian governments have ever produced. And I am sorry to say that I do not think that our situation is unique.

It is therefore reassuring when someone like Daniel Pauly tells us that we do, after all, have an important contribution to make: that there are issues out there requiring the effort and input that only professional social scientists can provide. He is asking us to shape up in certain respects, and I think we should take his advice seriously. We cannot deny that we are partly to blame for our lack of influence in policy processes. We are too modest sometimes; clearly, we could do more to make ourselves heard, including in the form of sweeping generalisations, as Daniel encourages us to do. The micro studies that we carry out at the community level often contain important macro messages, and we should make an effort to communicate these to the public at large. There is nothing as instructive as a well-told narrative featuring real people. But for what purpose, one may legitimately ask? What is it that social scientists aim at when we spend time in local fishing communities? I think that most of us see our effort as a contribution to the empowerment of fishing people and the building of sustainable livelihoods and healthy human communities, particularly in small-scale fisheries. And we feel that our mission is as noble as those of the biologists and the economists.

Research Agenda

Daniel Pauly asks us to focus our research on issues that have not yet received the attention they deserve, and I think we should listen to what he has to say. Important questions remain as to what is really happening to small-scale fisheries. There are a number of high quality small-scale fisheries social science case studies available, but the data we have at an aggregate level is not as solid as it should be. Who are small-scale fishers, and what motivates them? To what extent, why, and how are small-scale fisheries becoming marginalised? What are the main reasons and driving forces behind this process? For instance, how does globalisation contribute to marginalisation? How do those who face marginalisation perceive it?

Daniel has provided us with an interesting research question on marginalisation with his Malthusian model. However, although intriguing, I think we do wisely, as Daniel also suggests, if we consider it a hypothesis yet to be tested. We may find many examples of Malthusian mechanisms in fishing; it seems to fit well with what I know from South India through the IDPAD project¹ where the fishing population has drastically increased in recent years. But the lot of small-scale fishers may also be determined by a whole range of other factors which may have little to do with biology and economics. Marginalisation, for example, usually results from ineffective organisation, and hence little or no political clout. We should take notice of the fact that marginalisation is a gradual process. It rarely occurs overnight. Tsunamis are, after all, exceptional events. Small-scale fishing people were marginalised before the tsunami, and there is every reason to assume that they will continue to be so, also as a consequence of this tragedy.

The Malthusian model emphasises a push factor that results from a lack of alternative employment opportunities. People overfish because they are poor. Thus, providing them with other ways of sustaining themselves will help relieve the pressure on the resource. This assumption is the opposite of Garret Hardin's, that people are poor because they overfish: When there is open access and no effort restriction, fishers will eventually bring ruin to themselves. We would do better, I think, if we recognised that in many instances both are probably true and that this is a two-way process and a vicious circle. Our research focus would then be broader, and the policy options would increase. Access and effort restrictions would have to be matched with the creation of alternative employment opportunities and welfare systems. This should, one would expect, release pressure on the natural resource and make fishing communities more resilient. We should not, however, be oblivious to the fact that small-scale fisheries often provide an important safety valve for poor people in times of crisis. If we were to remove this buffering utility of small-scale fisheries without providing people with other safety nets, closing the fisheries would lead to more poverty, more anguish, and hence greater pressure on fishing communities and marine resources because people, when they get hungry enough, will fish regardless of what the government tells them not to do. In the fisheries of many countries, banning people from fishing is impossible.

Three more comments and then a final remark:

Science versus Politics

Social scientists have a job to do in filling small-scale fisheries knowledge gaps. How widespread is Malthusian overfishing? What other factors are contributing to the dismal situation of small-scale fisheries? However, many of the problems facing small-scale fisheries are not necessarily scientific: they do not result from holes in our knowledge that natural and social scientists could and should fill. They will therefore not be resolved by more research. Rather, these problems are political in nature, stemming from unrestrained power, special interests, and government inaction. Sometimes they originate from arrogant decision-makers who are biased in favour of large-scale fisheries. Thus, it is often power, rather than lack of knowledge, that makes things stay as they are. No doubt, governments could do a lot to alleviate poverty and help small-scale fisheries based on what is already known. I am afraid that sometimes the constant requests for more research fit well into government's non-decision strategy, which is to avoid provoking powerful interests with policies that would redistribute wealth. Doing something that would effectively help small-scale fisheries and communities, such as shielding them from large-scale, industrial fleets; building stronger local economies to fight unemployment and hence reduce pressure on fisheries (as Daniel argues); establishing welfare schemes that would keep people safer; fighting corruption; enforcing laws, etcetera -- these are actions that governments could take right away. Therefore, more than anything else, including more research projects, there is a need for bold political initiatives to change the current conditions that lock small-scale fishing people into destitution. If there is a job for the social scientist here, it is to shed light on what keeps governance systems from addressing these issues.

North versus South

I think Daniel is correct in talking about the marginalisation of small-scale fisheries as a global phenomenon happening in both the South and the North. But I believe that small-scale fishers in the North and South are becoming marginalised for very different reasons. The policy implications may therefore also be very different in these two situations. For example, I do not perceive in the North a Malthusian effect similar to the one Daniel has described in the South. In developed countries in the North, where fisheries tend to be an occupation of last resort, people -- and most particularly young people -- want to get out of, rather than into, fisheries. If not for any other reason, it will be the lack of new recruitment that will eventually kill small-scale fisheries, with all the negative impacts that this will have on coastal communities and lifestyles and, we should add, marine resources, since more aggressive large-scale operators will quickly take their place. The reasons for this lack of new recruitment are of course multifaceted. One reason is that small-scale fisheries are becoming less and less attractive as a career, relative to other career opportunities. This is only partly due to the fact that, in the North as well, small-scale fisheries are experiencing intensified pressure from large-scale fleets, although perhaps not to the same extreme as that described by Daniel Pauly in the South.

We often think of the marginalisation of small-scale fisheries as something occurring in spite of management, or because of a lack of functional management. This is no doubt true to some extent. But there is also a lot of evidence to suggest that the marginalisation of small-scale fisheries is happening *because* of the management systems that have been put into force. Small-scale fisheries are quite simply losing out as a consequence of the management systems that currently exist. Thus, I think that Daniel's reservations with regard to rights-based systems, such as Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs), are well put, but that they apply to the North as well as to the South. It is true that such systems would work under very different conditions in the North than in the South, because of the Malthusian effect, for example, but their impact on small-scale fisheries and fishing communities may be just as detrimental.

Poverty

Daniel's description of the Malthusian model leaves us with a general point that I think is equally relevant to the North and the South. The fishing industry is not always its own problem producer, but rather the receiver. Thus, most potential problems would be more effectively resolved if they were addressed at their point of origin rather than at the point of arrival. Let me add to this that the marginalisation of small-scale fisheries and its causal mechanisms may well be common knowledge but they are still not addressed, because governments lack the necessary resolve and turn a blind eye to them, and because the general public does not care all that much. Nor are the problems experienced within small-scale fisheries necessarily unique. They may be experienced just as strongly in other sections of society. Thus, fishing people may be poor for the exactly the same reasons as people are poor in other parts of society. Women in fisheries may be discriminated against for exactly the same reasons as they are discriminated against in society as a whole. There is a danger that we as fisheries social scientists may regard fisheries as a special case, when in reality they may not be all that different from the rest of society. Therefore, poverty alleviation and gender inequality correction in fisheries require broad social reforms that encompass more than the fisheries alone. And that would be true for the South as well as the North.

Our Credo

Finally, let me suggest that fisheries social scientists have particular reason to pay close attention to the fate of small-scale fisheries. The marginalisation of small-scale fisheries would have a negative effect on our discipline, since we thrive on them, as Daniel rightly observes. We need them, as it were, and they could ideally benefit a great deal from the work we do. Thus, our discipline and the destiny of small-scale fisheries are inter-connected, and we may therefore both risk becoming extinct species. The day fisheries are a super-efficient, large-scale, profit-driven, capitalist enterprise and, hence, removed from their social and cultural roots (which might not be a distant scenario for the North), social scientists will lose interest in them. I think I would. I must confess that I find Norwegian fisheries less and less interesting, as there is less and less for us to do. Who cares

about the profit margins of the new harvesting machines that are now being introduced? Who worries about the fate of the big corporations that are now taking over? Perhaps business economists and marketing researchers might find such fisheries intriguing, and the biologists would certainly still be alarmed about what is happening to the fish stocks and ecosystems. But social scientists will turn their attention to other, more rewarding areas and to where their particular expertise is more valued -- and no one will miss them. Then the MARE conference will draw fewer participants, and that I should be sorry to see. So, let's strive to make our future turn out differently. In the North as well as in the South, small-scale fisheries are still worth fighting for. If we as social scientists need a political credo, and I guess we do, that might be it.

Notes

¹The project is called 'Co-operation in a Context of Crisis: Public-Private Management of Marine Fisheries in South Asia'. It is coordinated by the Centre for Maritime Research (MARE), at the University of Amsterdam and funded by the Indo-Dutch Program for Alternatives in Developments (IDPAD).