

Viewpoint

# Fisheries governance: A coming of age for fisheries social science?☆

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Received 4 May 2006; received in revised form 23 May 2006; accepted 5 June 2006

## Abstract

The study of fisheries governance has made considerable progress in recent years largely as a result of the concerted actions of the social sciences. A particular focus for this work has been the concept of participative governance and the co-management systems in which responsibility for management is shared between the state and user groups, usually at the local level. With the publication of two books – a scholarly treatise and a practitioners' guide – drawing upon the same international project, our understanding of the complexities of governance in the context of fisheries takes a major step forward. We need to recognise three distinct but interconnected levels of governance: the first dealing with day to day issues of management; the second concerned with institutional arrangements; the third focusing on the construction of images, values, principles and criteria to guide fisheries policy making along a consistent path. The authors' contention is that too much attention has been paid to the end stages of the policy process and too little to refining the principles that underlie sound decision making in the face of often difficult choices. Much of the progress in this field is due to an increasingly multidisciplinary approach followed by the social sciences.

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*Keywords:* Social science; Fisheries governance; Multidisciplinarity

## 1. The changing role of the social sciences in fisheries management

It is not altogether surprising that the opening years of the 21st century should witness a flurry of activity on the theme of fisheries governance. It has taken different forms ranging from individual monographs, typically analysing current systems of governance in specific national or regional contexts, to voluminous collections of papers more or less organised around the themes of co-management and participative governance. Examples of the former include Phillipson's (2002) analysis of the network of local, regional and national organisations in the UK and their capacities for assuming enhanced levels of involvement in the formulation and implementation of fisheries policy; and Pfriz' (2004) study of the institutional barriers to fishermen's involvement in the management of Sweden's coastal fisheries in the Skagerrak, paradoxically created as the result of a strong but inflexible partnership between the

central administration and the national federation of fishermen's organisations.

Two important collections of papers on the theme of governance have already been published in Europe this century. The first is Wilson et al.'s (2003) authoritative global review of co-management based on historical and regional perspectives. Co-management is seen as the appropriate way forward in most situations but its ability to deliver an effective system of decision making depends on the resolution of certain key issues including a more comprehensive knowledge base, better representation of stakeholder interests and the involvement of civil society. A rather more eclectic collection of papers edited by Gray (2005a) draws upon the experience of a wide range of disciplines, geographical contexts and stakeholder interests to provide a critical look at the fashionable notion of stakeholder and public participation in fisheries governance. In his conclusion, Gray similarly draws attention to the fact that the future of participative governance will in part be decided by how well it copes with issues of representation, the integration of fishermen's knowledge and fisheries science and an ecosystem based approach to management. To these accounts must now be added the publications from a very distinctive and highly ambitious project (Kooiman et al., 2005; Bavinck et al., 2005).

☆ This viewpoint is based on reviews of Kooiman et al. (2005). Fish for life: interactive governance for fisheries and Bavinck et al. (2005). Interactive fisheries governance: A guide to better practice.

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The lack of surprise at this flurry of activity reflects several closely related circumstances affecting the development of the social sciences over the last two decades or so:

- (i) a reaction to events in the second half of the 20th century, the failures of fisheries policy and a rejection of simplistic, reductionist models as the basis for decision making;
- (ii) a shift in the ascendancy among the social sciences from social anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s, through sociology, to the political sciences by the start of the 21st century; a concomitant scaling up of the focus of attention from local issues to regional and global concerns; and a move from issue based research to the quest for a more integrated understanding of fisheries and their management;
- (iii) improved organisation, communication and integration of the social sciences and a consequent maturing of social science perspectives on fisheries and their management;
- (iv) an increased awareness that developments in other areas of economy and society – especially the effects of industrialisation and globalisation on agriculture and the food system – were also occurring in somewhat different forms in fisheries.

Taken together these developments entail a major reappraisal of the role of the social sciences in relation to fisheries. They also imply a series of paradigm shifts, not least that from ‘fisheries management’ to ‘fisheries governance’. Relatively few of these changes have so far been reflected or remarked upon in contributions to *Fisheries Research*.

## 2. Governance

Governance is an awkward and somewhat slippery concept, lacking a clear cut, generally accepted definition and rather too easily dismissed as another example of the self-indulgent jargon beloved by social scientists. But for those concerned with capturing the nuances of changing socio-political behaviour it does have real meaning. Early usage was associated with a shift in the policy making process and the composition of the policy community generally discernible in western societies from the 1980s onwards. This shift was sometimes referred to as ‘hollowing out the state’, involving a partial transfer of responsibility and authority for policy decisions from the central agencies of government to networks of public and private bodies at national, regional and local levels (Rhodes, 1996). It thus involved a clear measure of decentralisation and/or devolution.

Gray chooses not to define ‘governance’ but opts instead to juxtapose the more familiar concept of government ‘with connotations of a legally based, centralised, sovereign state authority, formally elected and possessing constitutional powers. . .’ alongside that of governance with its ‘more informally based, decentralised, shared, collective and inclusive decision-making structures’ (Gray, 2005b, p. 2). Kooiman, on the other hand, does provide a definition:

‘Governance is the whole body of public as well as private interactions taken to solve problems and create societal

opportunities. It includes the formulation of principles guiding those interactions and care for institutions that enable them’ (Kooiman and Bavinck, 2005, p. 17).

*Fish for Life* is largely concerned with decoding this rather cryptic statement, intended to reflect the facts that governing is a task shared by public and private actors, that the boundaries between the public and private domains are becoming increasingly blurred and that governance is rooted in the conditions of society.

There is broad agreement over the basic styles of governance: the state centred, top:down mode of *hierarchical governance*; *self-governance* involving privatisation, deregulation and the transfer of responsibility to individuals and organisations; and participative or *co-governance* based on a partnership between the state, user groups and elements of civil society. For Kooiman et al., however, it is also important to recognise three distinct orders of governance: first order concerned with the identification and solution of everyday problems – ‘the nitty-gritty of governance activity’ (Kooiman and Bavinck, 2005, p. 19); second order focusing on institutional arrangements – ‘systems of agreements, rules, rights, laws, norms, beliefs, roles, procedures and organisations’ (op cit., p. 20); third order or meta-governance dealing with the values, principles and criteria that guide policy making. It is the third order and co-governance that particularly exercise the authors of *Fish for Life*.

As Jentoft (2003) points out, the idea of co-governance (or co-management) has been around for a relatively short time, rekindling interest in forgotten values associated with the management of common pool resources. It challenges the insensitivity of top:down management systems in dealing with the diversity of fishing behaviour at the local level and the wealth of specific ecological knowledge held by those whose livelihoods depend on fishing. Co-governance is seen as having the potential to confront a range of problems associated with the process of modernisation including the disembedding of governing institutions from their particular social and cultural milieux and the assertion of universal rules. According to Symes and Phillipson (1999, p. 65) the benefits commonly claimed for co-management include: a more open policy system; a broader basis of information and knowledge; an increased rationality for the regulatory system; a stronger legitimisation of the policy process and its outcomes; an enhanced level of commitment and compliance; lower transaction costs. Overall, co-management is held to embody several attributes of ‘good governance’: democracy, transparency, legitimacy, accountability and subsidiarity. It involves neither an abdication of power on the part of the state nor a shuffling off of irksome administrative tasks but rather a purposeful drawing out of opinions, skills, knowledge and experience from different actors in a genuine sense of partnership. However, it is not – nor ever likely to be – a perfect form of governance. Constrained by imperfections in the system and by basic human failings, most notably self-interest, the search for true consensus is in constant danger of being abandoned in favour of compromise, the harbinger of weak management and inadequate regulation.

So what can the two latest additions to the literature – *Fish for Life* and *Interactive Fisheries Governance* – bring to our understanding of fisheries governance? On the face of it, they promise a good deal – not least a deeper appreciation of the challenges involved and the complexities of the governance concept.

### 3. Fish for Life: Interactive Governance for Fisheries

Both *Fish for Life* and *Interactive Fisheries Governance* are the product of an ambitious collaboration of academics and practitioners within the framework of the European Commission's programme for development cooperation (INCODEV). The output comes in two very different forms: *Fish for Life*, a substantial academic treatise, and the much shorter *Interactive Fisheries Governance* summarising the findings of the larger text, designed to serve as a guide to better practice, and expecting to find a very much wider readership.

Although the structure and methodology of *Fish for Life* are clear and logically set out, its aims only really crystallise in the final third of the book. It is here that its true significance and originality of thought become apparent, though the seeds of the argument were sown somewhat earlier both in Kooiman's writings on governance (Kooiman, 1993; Kooiman, 2003) and in a previous foray into fisheries governance (Kooiman et al., 1999). The present volume starts from the assumption that existing forms of policy making – reliant on narrowly defined, static policy communities with limited knowledge applied to fairly simple world models – are no longer fit for the purpose of governing increasingly diverse, complex and dynamic fishing systems. They need to be replaced by open, interactive forms capable of reflecting the diversity of the systems they seek to govern and of measuring up to the challenges posed by issues such as ecosystem health, social equity, employment, food security and safety.

The long and winding road to achieving improved systems of interactive governance is mapped out through the book's five sections. In part I the concept of governance is outlined and the challenges facing fisheries governance identified. Part II provides a review of the system to be governed, including aquatic ecosystems, capture and culture fisheries and the post-harvest chain of processing, distribution and marketing. Part III explores local, national and international institutions of governance; it builds an important bridge between the description of the fisheries etc and their present and future governance, encapsulating the prevailing influence of globalisation which exposes the inadequacies of conventional modes of governing. Thus far the argument is relatively straightforward; it covers reasonably familiar territory without recourse to abstract theory. Its relevance to actual situations is ably demonstrated through frequent boxed examples mainly from the South.

Once through these foothills, however, the terrain becomes more demanding. Part IV introduces the reader to the principles of governance. Fisheries governance should be founded on certain basic principles and those who govern need to make their analytical, ethical and political convictions clear and to ensure their consistent application. Many of the principles for governing international action are laid down in agreements such

as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in the FAO's *Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries* (1995). Kooiman and his colleagues, however, take the reader a little further into the realms of ethical argument in the identification of three 'meta-principles': rationality, responsibility and performance (Chapter 13). In practice, however, the results are far from esoteric: rationality calls for sustainability as the guiding image, efficiency in the choice of instrument and precautionarity as the basis for action; responsiveness involves respect for individuals, inclusiveness of representation and equity; performance demands effectiveness, legitimacy and moral responsibility. But it is in the consistent application of these principles that those responsible for fisheries management must face sometimes controversial and politically painful 'hard choices' (Chapter 14), as for example between small and large scale fisheries, short and long term development goals, support for domestic markets or for foreign trade. And it is here, too, that the overall aim of the book is revealed. According to the authors too much attention in the past has been focused on the end stages of decision making and the means of delivering fisheries policy rather than on refining the values and principles on which rational decision making should be based (p. 238).

Part V – the prospects for fisheries governance – provides a fairly long drawn out dénouement, reconnecting the argument to some of the issues discovered at the start of the volume and so clarifying the links between theory and practice. It offers little by way of fresh insights into the way forward for fisheries governance beyond reasserting the fundamental importance of inclusivity of representation and interactive learning.

So much for the argument: but how easy is it to absorb the lessons that the book has to offer? Perhaps more to the point, for whom is the book really intended? The answer to the second question eventually becomes clear: an essentially academic audience drawn mainly from the social sciences with an interest in fisheries or, more broadly, development theory. However, it does deserve a wider audience. Despite the fact that *Fish for Life* is beautifully written and presented, involves a skilful melding of the analytical styles of sociology and political science and betrays a remarkable sense of teamwork and common purpose among the 20 or so authors, it is not a particularly easy read and its very length may defeat all but the most committed reader. It is closest in style to a textbook that demands to be read as a continuous narrative, rather than as a source book, though the frequent reiteration of key parts of the argument can provoke a sense of exasperation. For those who do complete the journey, they will be rewarded by a very much deeper appreciation of the complexities of fisheries governance than has hitherto been available, and a strong sense of the direction we need to travel to make it truly fit for purpose.

### 4. Interactive Fisheries Governance: a Guide to Better Practice

The core readership for this 'practitioners' guide' is identified from the very start: policy makers, administrators and fisheries

scientists. It also addresses those who by the very nature of ‘interactive governance’ are caught up in the governing process. These include a wide range of individuals from leaders of fishers’ organisations, managers of the fish distribution chain and NGOs to ‘members of civil society’. All stand to benefit from a new and creative approach presented in a cheerful, colourful format and written in a very accessible style. And if the photographic images are anything to go by, it is intended principally for an audience situated in the South.

What is immediately remarkable about this volume is that the detailed and complex argument presented in *Fish for Life* can be distilled into such a succinct form. Inevitably it prompts the mischievous question as to whether all the 400 or so pages of *Fish for Life* were really necessary and a serious recommendation, to all but the most dedicated student of fisheries social science, to sample the distinctive approach by reading the much shorter guide first.

*Interactive Fisheries Governance* follows fairly faithfully the basic structure of the argument set out in the larger volume with two important variations. First, the balance of the two volumes is reversed: whereas almost two thirds of the main treatise is taken up with the ‘preliminaries’ (parts I–III) and only a third dedicated to the principles and prospects of interactive governance (parts IV and V), in the shorter text the proportions are almost exactly the other way round. Second, what for me was a pivotal section of the main volume – institutions for fisheries governance – has been largely omitted from the practitioner’s guide. Also missing are the boxed case studies which so effectively linked theory and practice. Both omissions are regrettable but inevitable in an attempt to provide a short but comprehensive account of interactive governance. Indeed the authors have judged the cut of the cloth almost to perfection. The four chapters follow a much more direct route to create an outline of the argument without making too many concessions or falling into the dangers of over-simplification. In keeping with the idea of a practitioners’ guide, it is made clear in the introduction what this slim volume can and cannot do—and again in its conclusion it attempts to answer, albeit in very general terms, questions of who? what? when? and how? that might be forming in the mind of the reader.

## 5. Fisheries governance: the products of a multi-disciplinary approach

Wilson et al.’s (2003) masterly review of *The Fisheries Co-management Experience* provided strong evidence that co-management was becoming a widely accepted mode for governing what had threatened to become ungovernable and that a major shift in the way fisheries policies were being formulated and implemented was taking place. Gray’s (2005) collection of papers on the theme of participative governance provides still further evidence of the innate attractions of the concept, demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of the new approach, the diversity of its form and the ever widening range of its appeal. Yet in both publications there still linger doubts about the efficacy of participative governance and suspicions that, in some cases at least, the new inclusivity of policy making is more apparent

than real. There is a common concern that institutional changes are not keeping pace with the needs of the new forms of governance and that until these transformations are complete, power will remain in the hands of the old oligarchy.

The publication of *Fish for Life* and *Interactive Fisheries Governance* takes the analysis of alternative forms of fisheries governance to a new level. Setting aside the image of co-management as a pragmatic response to a crisis in state:industry relations, they establish the idea of interactive governance as requiring a fundamentally new approach building upwards from firm foundations in ethical values and carefully articulated governing principles. They reinforce the importance of inclusivity, partnership and interactive learning as key elements of the new governance structures. It follows that new institutional frameworks must reflect the new values so as to make the key elements of interactive governance function effectively. The authors are, however, less explicit about how these necessary institutional changes can be brought into being.

A number of quite specific issues can readily be identified which go directly to the heart of institutional reform. These include (a) the closer integration of modern fisheries science and local ecological knowledge built up through years, if not generations, of practical experience; (b) the development of interactive learning and adaptive management systems; (c) the compatibility of property rights systems and the new governance models; (d) how to promote a fair and balanced system of user group and civil society representation across the different scales of governance from local to global; (e) the incorporation of new approaches to fisheries management – most notably the ecosystem based approach – within the new governance structures.

Together the three projects provide evidence of the increasing maturity, relevance and potential influence of the social sciences through the strength of their multi-disciplinary approach. While the individual social science disciplines remained essentially isolated, inward looking and intent on furthering their own limited ambitions, their influence was destined to remain weak. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, there was a growing awareness that the single discipline approach to applied research was beginning to reach the limits of its utility. The way forward lay in greater collaboration within a system where each discipline would contribute directly through the application of its own epistemology, methodology and theoretical construct to a range of common issues (Symes, 1999, p. viii). Things have moved on apace. Disciplinary distinctiveness is beginning to fade quite rapidly. There is an evident willingness, bordering on determination, to pool ideas and to collaborate in joint research programmes. Indeed, some might argue that the danger today is that the unique contributions of discipline based epistemologies are being too readily sacrificed in pursuit of a common social science perspective.

The strengths (and weaknesses) of a multi-disciplinary approach are ably demonstrated in Gray (2005a) and Wilson et al. (2003). Both initiatives bring together a wide range of academic disciplines each overlapping the boundaries of the social sciences to include fisheries science and ecology. In Gray’s case the attempt to mark out the common ground and distil a unified approach is somewhat muted. Wilson and his co-editors, com-

binning the instincts of sociologist, economist and biologist, are more successful in smoothing off the raw edges of the individual disciplinary approaches and in presenting a more coherent perspective. In the project led by Kooiman and Bavinck, however, we take a further step forward from a multi-disciplinary to an inter-disciplinary approach, in which the collaborators are working to a common plan and with an emerging consistency of theoretical underpinning. It is far too soon to judge how influential their work will be but it is appropriate to note that an inter-disciplinary approach naturally complements the basic elements of interactive governance.

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