

Opportunity in Adversity: Collective Fish Culture in the Seasonal Floodplains of Bangladesh



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Collective action increased communication and cooperation, effectively unifying the villagers
- ✓ CBFC enabled them to produce 400 kg fish/hectare, an increase of 133% from baseline production
- ✓ Researchers gained a deeper appreciation for the need to not only look at technical innovations, but also socio-economic, institutional and policy factors affecting local systems

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Outcome Stories

Archana carefully adjusted the settings on the video camera as she waited for the arrival of Meguma, one of the research assistants helping her community to produce a participatory video entitled “The Islands of Dreams and Success.” Archana and her community wanted to share their success and tell their story to other communities. The participatory video came to chronicle how the lives of villagers in Melandi, Rajshahi District in Bangladesh, improved significantly as a result of research supported by the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF).

Archana and her community are fully convinced that it was community-based fish culture (CBFC) that made floodplain

fishing a successful intervention in Bangladesh. CBFC enabled them to produce 400 kg fish/hectare, or an increase of 133% from the baseline production. It was not only the volume but also the length of the harvests; traditional fishers, the landless and the poor were able to harvest fish over a longer period of time than prior to the intervention, obtaining higher incomes from fish harvests. This decreased the need for food during traditionally lean months (the flooding season). Collective action increased communication and cooperation, effectively unifying the villagers. The project allowed even those who had

"The Islands of Dreams and Success" rise out of floods of adversity. Archana and her community share their story of success.



no access rights to land, and no investments in the collective fishing venture, to fish, provided that they limited catches to their basic needs.

Scaling up and out

Past efforts to increase the productivity of seasonal floodplains focused primarily on increasing water productivity per drop during the dry season when farmers were able to plant food crops. The complexities of access and ownership to land, water, and fishing rights posed serious challenges to the successful application of CBFC. A community fishers' society in Beel Mail was able to enter into a leasing arrangement with the support of local authorities. This allowed them to practice fish culture during the flood season when the land is inundated. Before the establishment of the society, households fished individually and competed with one another for the catch. With the introduction of CBFC, households in Rajshahi have learned to work together to manage fish culture activities and to protect the stock. A benefit sharing arrangement was agreed on,

according to which landowners and fishers both receive a share of the net benefit from CBFC. The society has become more financially stable, which in turn strengthened its ability to raise funds for the subsequent year's investments in the fingerlings and fencing needed to prevent the fish from escaping. An extension of the lease was secured through 2012, with support in obtaining an extension for a further three years.

When trialed in other countries, the approach met with variable success. Important lessons were, however, learned about why collective action between households did not work as effectively as in Bangladesh. CBFC was, for example, not successfully adopted in southern Vietnam because flooded areas there are entirely under private ownership. People favored individual fish culture or the planting of a third rice crop instead of engaging in collective fish culture. In Cambodia, farmers also demonstrated a preference for fish culture on an individual basis, using similar technology on their own homesteads and private plots.

About CPWF Outcome Stories

The CPWF Outcome Stories document changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices that have emerged through CPWF-funded research. Outcomes occur when research outputs foster engagement processes that result in changes in practice or changes in behavior. These stories capture outcomes at a specific point in time; outcomes may have evolved since the completion of these projects.

Their reasons for doing so included the unpredictability of flood events, economic migration during the flood season, and aversion to collective action. In Yunnan, China, farmers preferred to hire caretakers to look after their fish.

Another important outcome of the project was the opportunity to foster exchanges and build international research partnerships. National Research and Extension System (NARES) partners engaged in the project and reported important changes in their working practices, research knowledge and skills. In China, research partners took greater interest in socio-economic factors and were keen to learn more about the institutional and policy factors affecting their research. They also became aware of the use of participatory research methods, effectively expanding the scope of their research beyond a conventional

analysis of fish productivity. As an outcome, consultations with farmers are now undertaken to better understand their needs and preferences.

Conclusion

Community-based fish culture in seasonal floodplains can enhance food production. However, this requires an understanding of factors that enable inclusion of fisherfolk and the landless in the distribution and sharing of benefits from the floodplains, under conditions where access to resources is essentially contested. This CPWF project has highlighted how simple technological interventions and informal institutional arrangements can turn adverse conditions like seasonal floods into opportunities to generate additional food and income for people who live and rely on floodplains for their livelihood.

Reference

Sheriff, N., et al. 2010. *Community-based fish culture in seasonal floodplains and irrigation systems*. CPWF Project Report PN35. Colombo, Sri Lanka: CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food.

http://cgspace.cgiar.org/bitstream/handle/10568/3924/PN35_WorldFish_Project%20Report_May10_final.pdf?sequence=1

Project Partners

Agriculture Research Center, Bangladesh
Freshwater Fisheries Research Institute, China
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Rice Center, Africa
Fisheries Administration, Cambodia
International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
WorldFish Center
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About CPWF

The CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food was launched in 2002, with the aim to increase the resilience of social and ecological systems through better water management for food production (crops, fisheries and livestock). We do this through an innovative research and development approach that brings together a broad range of scientists, development specialists, policy makers and communities, in six river basins, to address the challenges of food security, poverty and water scarcity.

The CPWF is part of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems. WLE combines the resources of 11 CGIAR centers and numerous international, regional and national partners to provide an integrated approach to natural resource management research. The program goal is to reduce poverty and improve food security through the development of agriculture within nature. This program is led by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI).

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Mailing address

CGIAR Challenge Program
on Water and Food
P.O. Box 2075, 127 Sunil Mawatha
Pelawatta, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka
T: +94 11 288 0143
F: +94 11 278 4083
E: cpwfsecretariat@cgiar.org