In the early 1980s, the fishing industry in many Southeast Asian countries was in serious trouble. Most fishing households were mired in poverty, largely as a result of overfishing and coastal degradation.

In the capture fishery, the “common property” nature of the resource meant there was no individual incentive to limit the catch (“If I don’t take the fish, somebody else will”). Traditional ways of regulating access to fishing grounds had broken down with the arrival of highly mobile vessels. On top of all that, fuel and other inputs had become more expensive. In aquaculture, meanwhile, a few large corporations had pushed out many smaller and marginally profitable enterprises.

Related issues of food security, rural development, employment, foreign earnings, tourism, and the environment all combined to put fisheries and coastal resource management high on policy agendas.

At the same time, much of the scientific research being carried out on these issues was primarily biological in nature, even while people were starting to recognize that the real solutions were social, economic, political, and institutional in nature. Too much of the focus went toward studying the fish, and not enough toward studying the fishers.

The need for social science research

Policy-makers were becoming desperate for more useful social science information. This demand was being met by a growing dependence on countries outside the region that could provide this type of education, consultation, and research. Clearly, a locally based, multidisciplinary approach to dealing with fisheries problems was badly needed in Southeast Asia.

So it was that the Asian Fisheries Social Science Research Network (AFSSRN) was launched, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It got going back in 1983, with IDRC funding and under the coordination of the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM) in the Philippines.
AFSSRN’s initial mandate was simply to overcome the lack of social science research capacity in Southeast Asia’s fisheries sector. It tackled the problem using a combination of formal and informal training, scholarships, research activities, information exchange, seminars, workshops, and staff exchanges.

The network’s growth

IDRC support lasted from 1983 to 1996. During this time, the network grew from including a few member universities in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand to embracing over a dozen teams and many dozens of researchers in the charter countries as well as in Indonesia and Viet Nam. It went through four distinct phases as the emphasis of its work shifted, from straightforward capacity building toward the provision of social science research for policy-making purposes. Eventually, network members began to act as consultants on a worldwide basis. In other words, AFSSRN helped Southeast Asia transform itself from being a net importer to a net exporter of this category of specialized knowledge.

In the late 1990s, AFSSRN became a section of the Asian Fisheries Society, a larger organization with similar aims that is based in the Philippines, and its work continues.

Developing links between biological and social science

A co-founder of the network is Nik Mustapha Raja Abdullah, nowadays Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Management at the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). As he says, “The purpose of the network was not only to develop social science capacity, but also to develop links between biological science and social science.”

Mustapha explains that his own academic base (formerly called Universiti Pertanian Malaysia) was “the lead training institution for the network.” UPM and the network were instrumental in teaching many young researchers the virtues of the multidisciplinary perspective. “UPM provided a broad spectrum of knowledge... Students came from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.”

Mustapha also notes that the network “provided the basics for furthering the careers of many people in the region” — a large number of whom advanced to policy-making positions in regional governments. Such is the network’s reputation that affiliated institutions are routinely approached by public officials and invited to provide policy input.

Mustapha himself is a case in point. He was a co-founder of AFSSRN, he now occupies a senior academic post, and he provides policy advice as a member of various Malaysian and international advisory councils.

A social science approach

AFSSRN has entrenched the idea that fishing, like pretty much all human activity, is complex and driven by many factors. Thanks to this network, nowadays social scientists and economists also study the fishers as well as the fish.

In some contexts, the very notion of social science is relatively new. In Viet Nam, for instance, the network introduced the idea of public opinion research, a concept that until then was unknown in the command economy. Nguyen Chu Hoi of the Ministry of Fisheries mentions a study that “asked fishermen about their opinions on fishing and their life, which had not been done before.”
Research to inform policymaking

Many projects supported by the network and using the multidisciplinary approach have offered policy recommendations that were readily taken up by governments. One example is Thailand’s review of “community-based coastal resource management.” This research recommended that small-scale fishers should be given preferential property rights to nearshore areas, advice that was adopted by the Department of Fisheries in the development of a fisheries rights program. In other words, the social “resource” we know as ownership or responsibility was mobilized to help safeguard the biological resource of fish stocks.

Mustapha points out that UPM helped foster other faculties, departments, and programs in fisheries economics at AFSSRN-affiliated universities in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Another notable aspect of the network, which he is proud to mention, has been the balance between male and female representation in individual membership.

The fundamental problems of the Southeast Asian fishery that spurred the network in the first place are still far from being solved. What’s more, the cataclysmic tsunami of December 2004 has drastically set back the fishing sector along many coasts. But now, at least, a range of diverse and effective mechanisms is in place to help meet these challenges.

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