

# Patience Brings Rewards

The lessons of the Asian Fisheries Social Science Research Network

*Sometimes it takes years of effort to achieve a positive result. In Southeast Asia, IDRC embraced a long and patient commitment to building capacity for social science research in the fisheries industry. This strategy has succeeded: it has trained a whole generation of scientists whose impact on policy-making will be enduring.*

**S**ince the early 1980s, serious problems have troubled Southeast Asia's fisheries sector.

Although both fishing and fish farming are time-honoured occupations in the region and provide people with the cheapest and most popular forms of animal protein, most fishing households are mired in poverty. In spite of loans and subsidies, and other government programs designed to aid the fisheries, and in spite of advances such as motorized boats, better gear, and improvements in aquaculture techniques, most small-scale producers have remained desperately poor.

In the so-called capture or harvest fisheries, many factors have contributed to keeping incomes low. The common property nature of the resource has meant there is no individual incentive to limit the catch ("If I don't take the fish, somebody else will"); inevitably this has led to overfishing. Meanwhile, traditional forms of regulating access to fishing grounds have broken down with the arrival of highly mobile vessels. Moreover, fuel and other inputs have become more costly. Population growth, combined with a lack of alternative jobs in rural areas, has pushed many more people into an already crowded business. Finally, there has been little state support for a marketing infrastructure that would welcome the small-scale operator.

Meanwhile, in aquaculture – a husbandry activity where productivity can be improved through better technology and increases in inputs – a few large and successful enterprises have competed with many smaller and marginally profitable enterprises. The advantages of large size and corporate know-how have meant that much of the growth in aquacultural production has come from a relatively small number of farms.

Not only has each fisheries sector had its special problems, but they have competed with one another for territorial resources such as mangrove swamps and shallow water lagoons, for a share of the consumer food budget, and for government and private investment.

## The quest for information

Both overfishing and the environmental degradation of coastal resources have concerned the region's governments. Issues of food security, rural development, employment, foreign earnings, tourism, and the environment have all put fisheries and coastal resource management high on policy agendas.

Unfortunately, in the early 1980s, much of the scientific research being undertaken on these issues was biological in nature, even while people were beginning to recognize that the real solutions were social, economic, political, and institutional in nature. Too little of the right kind of information was available because too few social scientists were conducting fisheries research in the region. Economists in particular had scant professional interest in these subjects. Consequently, no program of economic and policy research was being carried out either by government fisheries agencies, research centres, or universities.

Meanwhile, policymakers increasingly demanded better social science information. These demands were being met by a growing dependence on countries outside the region for this type of education, consultation, and research. Clearly, Southeast Asia needed its own capacity to undertake social science fisheries research.





So it was that in 1983, under the coordination of the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM) in the Philippines – and with funding support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), among others – the Asian Fisheries Social Science Research Network (AFSSRN or the Network) was launched. The Network's mandate was to overcome the lack of social science research capacity in Southeast Asia through a combination of formal and informal training, scholarships, research activities, information exchange, seminars, workshops, and staff exchanges.

During the period of IDRC funding, which lasted until 1996, the Network went through four phases. Its membership grew and the emphasis of its work shifted from straightforward capacity building to the provision of social science research for policy purposes. All the while, its activities were closely coordinated by ICLARM.

In 2001, IDRC launched a long-term evaluation of the policy influence of the research it has supported. This ambitious exercise aims to improve the design of specific projects and programs where public policy may be an objective, and so to give better focus to IDRC's overall strategic plan.

Part of the evaluation process reviews a series of rich case studies. IDRC engaged Dr Robert Pomeroy to assess the policy influence of AFSSRN. He carried out this study mainly by interviewing members and associates of the Network.

## History of the Network

Dr Pomeroy outlined the development of AFSSRN and the gradual shift in its mandate.

### *Initial capacity building, 1983-86*

The charter members of AFSSRN were universities in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The Network's initial focus was economics, and its broad objective was to build long-term social science research capacity in Southeast Asian institutions in fisheries and aquaculture.

It had three specific goals:

- ❑ To help institutions strengthen their capacity to carry out research. Its methods were direct funding and technical support for projects, the training of researchers, and the planning of large research programs.

- ❑ To build enduring research capacity by fostering training in fisheries economics. The affiliated institutions offered graduate and undergraduate courses in such areas as fisheries management and the economics of aquaculture.
- ❑ To encourage stronger professional links and working relationships among these institutions and policy-making bodies.

### *Expansion and consolidation, 1985-88*

Six new institutions from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines joined AFSSRN. The Network continued where it had left off in the opening phase, funding research projects, hosting workshops and courses, and encouraging links among researchers and policymakers. By now, however, the emphasis had shifted slightly toward policy issues.

Most of the Network's research projects during this period dealt with the economics of aquaculture, marketing, and small-scale fisheries management. Since many of the fish resources of Network member countries were already exhausted or threatened, research on the economic and social consequences of fisheries management, particularly in villages and households, was regarded as crucial for finding policy solutions.

As it happened, although the stated objective was to provide information for the design of better fisheries policies, little actual research on policy analysis was carried out. It was felt that such analysis would be premature because the basic applied research and social science skills of Network members were not yet fully developed.

### *Review of progress, 1988-94*

By now, AFSSRN comprised 14 teams with 80 researchers in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The general objective was to develop social science research capacity as a partner to the "hard" sciences in aquatic systems management.

This phase also concentrated on the publication of research findings. As well, it introduced a national networking program to connect AFSSRN members and other national fisheries organizations. And it put greater emphasis on generating results useful for formulating development policies and management strategies. A shortage of research in the capture fisheries led to the creation in 1990 of a research and training program – funded by

IDRC – joining the efforts of AFSSRN and Canada's Simon Fraser University.

A review of AFSSRN's entire history carried out during this period concluded that the Network had succeeded in its goal of pulling together economists and other social scientists to promote research and training in the social science aspects of fisheries and aquaculture.

The review also found that the Network had improved members' research skills, supported their research endeavours, helped them connect with other researchers in the region, and expanded the pool of trained researchers. The review further concluded that although the actual impact of Network activities on fisheries policy and management had been modest, AFSSRN had helped members develop their capacity to address these issues.

### ***Emphasis on policy, 1995-96***

In this phase AFSSRN extended its membership to Viet Nam.

Much of the Network's focus continued as before, but policy-relevant social science research became a central goal. Members had achieved the necessary skills base and so could concentrate more on research related to decision-making.

While this shift was taking place, it was recognized that members needed other new skills if their emphasis was now to focus on developing management-related policies and programs. Networking, education, and training were therefore accorded higher priority.

AFSSRN made an extra effort to publish its research reports, over 50 of which had been generated since 1983. It developed a publications series and distributed the reports in the region, in particular to policymakers.

### ***1997 and beyond***

After IDRC funding ended, members were concerned that the activities of AFSSRN should continue. With support from ICLARM, the Network became part of the Asian Fisheries Society.

The Network continues today. Its members meet at regional meetings, and there is an AFSSRN news section in ICLARM's quarterly publication *NAGA*.

## **Influencing public policy**

Until its final phase, the Network was not designed explicitly to have an influence on public policy. Instead, its early objective was to build national research capacity to address important social science issues in the management of fishery resources in the region. As it turned out, however, its networking, training and education, research support, and information dissemination activities did influence policy.

AFSSRN played a large role in helping to *expand policy capacities* in the region, in particular by developing new talent for undertaking issues-based research and analysis. In other words, the Network helped improve the institutional framework surrounding policy-making.

AFSSRN also helped *broaden policy horizons*. It introduced new ideas to the agenda and nourished dialogues among researchers and decision-makers. In other words, the Network helped improve the intellectual framework surrounding policy-making.

The Network achieved its policy influence in a number of overlapping stages:

- ❑ Before the Network was launched, fisheries social scientists in the region had a low skills base and almost no capacity to undertake policy analysis. The Network first provided *training and education* in the basics of social science research. This foundation exposed members to new concepts and methods, and helped them advance their careers.
- ❑ *Research projects* supported by the Network helped members gain more experience in using the new concepts and methods. The small grants provided by the Network for research projects often produced important results with policy implications.
- ❑ As Network members *gained more confidence*, the level of research improved, and many of the projects produced policy recommendations that were used by both the public and private sectors.
- ❑ Network involvement *advanced the careers* of members. Many early members have become senior officials in universities or government fisheries departments, where they now direct public policy. In all cases they attribute their advancement in part to membership in the Network.





- ❑ The collegial relationships that have been developed through *networking* have linked researchers and policymakers. These connections have been critically important in influencing policy in all Network member countries.
- ❑ Network members have *published research results* in all the important peer-reviewed scientific journals. These articles serve as the foundation for developing new policies on fisheries and aquaculture not just in the region, but worldwide.
- ❑ Having achieved this skills base, scientific maturity, career advancement, self-confidence, and partnership with policymakers, Network members became better able to conduct policy analysis and began to *influence policy*.

- ❑ In a region that at one time was obliged to import its social science expertise, Network members began to *act as consultants* and to advise others on projects, including policy projects, throughout Asia and around the world.

Dr Pomeroy's study concluded by underscoring two important points. First, IDRC's capacity-building networks in Asia, such as AFSSRN, have had wide and lasting impacts. The lives of many people have been improved as a result of these efforts. Second, these networks have succeeded in part because IDRC has had the patience to support them, sometimes for very long periods of time, until their objectives were met.

"Before the AFSSRN it was difficult to find economists working on fisheries issues in Thailand. We did not have good economic information on which to make decisions. We relied on biological information, but that only gave part of the information that we needed to make good policy. Now, in part as a result of the AFSSRN, we make more informed policy."

**Mr Prayot Supavivat**, Department of Fisheries, Thailand

"Originally I would just do research for research's sake. My audience was not the policymaker. Now, being in government, I better understand the need for good research to inform my decision-making and I better understand why the AFSSRN was pushing, through training, the need for us to do policy-relevant research. I request our researchers, both in government and in academe, to do research which I can use to support or not support decisions."

**Dr Victor Nikijuluw**, Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Indonesia

**The International Development Research Centre (IDRC)** is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: [www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy](http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy)