Differences Matter

The Norwegian experience shows that learning about sustainable small-scale fisheries development should not be a one-way traffic from the North to the South

From the very beginning, Norwegian development assistance has largely focused on fisheries. As a major fisheries nation that came naturally. Norway always ranked high among the world's fish exporters, so why not also export our management experience and fisheries technology—so seemed the official thinking. In hindsight, however, that has not always proven to be such a good idea, since failures seem to have outnumbered successes.

That should not come as a surprise. Transfer of technology and knowledge from the North to the South—whether from Norway or any other Northern country—is not straightforward. Fisheries development has never been a quick fix and experiences from the temperate world are not necessarily relevant for the tropical world. It has been a long time since Norway initiated the Indo-Norwegian Project in the south Indian state of Kerala in the early 1950s. The pioneers of that decades-long and transformative project must have been convinced that the Norwegian expertise was indeed what Kerala needed. This turned out not quite entirely to be the case.

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To say that fisheries in the North are different from those of countries in the South is to state the obvious. A wealth of academic literature tells us *how* they differ. The important question to ask, however, is what difference these differences make—for instance, with regard to what makes fisheries sustainable. The answer is not at all clear. In the book *Angels Fear*, Gregory Bateson notes that we learn when we observe a difference that, in one way or another, makes a difference to us. A Norwegian fisheries expert who goes to Kerala would instantly spot differences. In the process, s/he not only learns something about Kerala, s/he also learns about Norway. Once s/he gets over the 'culture shock', s/he will start wondering: if it is like that in Norway, why not here? S/he will also ponder the reverse: if like this in Kerala, why not back home?

There are, of course, many similarities between Norway and Kerala. We largely share the same concerns: We want our natural environment and ecosystems to be healthy, and our livelihoods to be secure. We all care for our children, and want to live in dignity. Social justice is a concern in both places, and the same human-rights principles apply. In these respects, fisheries in the North and the South are the same, and they are no different from other industries. This is why the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) list them as basic principles, and why the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure talk about fisheries, forests and land in a similar vein.

Universals

As government and civil society organizations act on these general principles, they need to recognize what is unique about a country, a place and a fishery. They should, therefore,

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never work from an assumption that they have seen it all before, that problems are the same everywhere, and that whatever tool they employ will work in the same way as in the North—where they often do not function so well either.

The laws of nature and those of society are fundamentally different. This difference also creates a huge divergence between the natural sciences and the social sciences. If I drop the pen I hold in my hand, it will fall to the floor wherever I am in the world, and it does so every time. If you know a bit of physics, you will know why. While the laws of nature are universal, the laws of society are human constructs designed in ways that are appropriate to context. Therefore, unlike the natural sciences, the social sciences do not deal in universals. Social scientists, like myself, do not assume, for instance, that a new rule, a particular management tool or a technical gadget will perform equally as well everywhere. We may have some clues, but that is all we have after having investigated the matter empirically. Social scientists are trained to be sceptical of technical fixes, because societal problems are different from those in nature. They are typically "wicked", as Rittel and Webber pointed out in their seminal 1973 article about planning (see the For more box below), and, therefore, do not easily lend themselves to quick fixes. Wicked problems are hard to define and ethically charged. Problems are also wicked because they are part of bigger problems—and we cannot be sure that we have solved them, since they have no finishing line. Small-scale fisheries confront managers with many problems of this nature.

This is pretty much what Garret Hardin argued in his famous article in *Science* about the "Tragedy of the Commons". He did not talk about fisheries specifically, but when we read his example about the farmer, who, without limitation, increases his herd on the commons and eventually ruins it because every farmer is working according to the same logic, we easily conclude that this is exactly what happens in fisheries. (Still, we cannot know that for sure until we have checked it out empirically.)

But for Hardin, the tragedy of the commons was an illustration of another problem: the tendency among scientists to believe that the problems

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Trawlers at Neendakara fishing harbour, Kerala, India. Small-scale fishing people in the North, of course, enjoy the same human rights as their brothers and sisters in the global South, and they frequently refer to these rights as they criticize the government

they study always have a technical—or scientific—solution. Some problems, he argued, do not have a scientific solution because they challenge our ethics, norms and sense of morality. Poverty, according to Hardin, is such a problem. Poverty is also the example Rittel and Webber used to explain what a wicked problem is.

Scientists, nevertheless, trade in fixes or panaceas. We live in disciplinary bubbles where our tunnel visions only allow us to see one concern, be they conservation, economic efficiency, or local communities. Yet, as any fisheries manager would know from experience, fisheries management is about all these concerns, and more. If they were to focus only on one and be blind to others, they are doomed to fail. Neither can they address them sequentially. Since these concerns are linked, they must be addressed in an integrated fashion.

In 2006, together with colleagues of multiple disciplines (biology, economics and sociology), I published a paper titled *Painting the Floor with a Hammer* (*Marine Policy*, Volume 30, Issue 5). Here, we illustrated our argument about panaceas in the form of individual transferable quotas (ITQs), marine protected areas (MPAs) and community-based management (CBM). While ITQs are the love children of fisheries economists, MPAs are the favourites of environmental biologists. Sociologists and anthropologists, on the other hand, are great advocates of CBM. These panaceas arise from the narrow interests that define our disciplines. Despite much talk about holistic and interdisciplinary perspectives, academics enforce discipline within their ranks. People who dare to deviate are penalized when they apply for jobs or promotions or try to get published in journals.

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A consequence thereof is also that we continue to produce, advocate and export panaceas. It does not take long for a new fix to get its own acronym, which we need to learn in order to understand what people in fisheries are talking about. These days you have to learn what RBA (Rights-based Approach), EBM (Ecosystem-based Management) and MSP (Marine Spatial Planning) mean.

These panaceas are each emerging from within the ranks of economists, ecologists and geographers. If you, as an engineer, are called in to help combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, the solution you are likely to come up with has another acronym: VMS (Vessel Monitoring System). The SSF Guidelines talks about HRBA—the human rights-based approach, which is where lawyers have particular expertise. Not only is this soup of acronyms brimful, but the size of the bowl keeps expanding.

In our paper about the hammers we employ for painting, we wanted to point to the risks that are associated with the implementation of panaceas if you do not know the context within which they are introduced. The fix you suggest may not fit the problem. You must also be open to the idea that your fix does not fix everything. In fisheries, there is no-one-size-fits-all fix. There is simply too much diversity. Solutions must always, therefore, be adapted to context.

Elinor Ostrom, the 2009 Nobel Prize winner in economics, argued that uncritically adopting panaceas is foolish. The title of Gregory Bateson's book plays on a line from an old poem by Alexander Pope (1711): "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread." We may well question the existence of angels but not of fools. We should be open to the existence of foolish angels in fisheries development and management as well.

Policy measures

While pursuing one concern, you may complicate the pursuance of another one that is equally important. ITQs

are good for economic efficiency, but bad for communities. MPAs may bring about conservation, but may exclude people from accessing their fishing grounds and thereby lead to more poverty. CBM empowers local communities, but does not address challenges at larger scales. MSP may facilitate 'blue growth', but may further marginalize small-scale fisheries. VMS may scare fishers from catching more than their quota, but cannot be the solution if poverty is driving overfishing.

Fisheries management and development cannot do without the natural sciences and their knowledge about issues that are universal, like ecosystem dynamics. This is the type of knowledge that Aristotle called 'epistêmê'. Fisheries development and management also requires knowledge that he named '*technê*', which we tend to associate with an engineer, a craftsperson, and a bureaucrat.

However, there is a tendency of ignoring Aristotle's third knowledge-type—*phronēsis*—sometimes translated as 'prudence'. This is the deep understanding of the difference that context makes and what it means to be ethical. To be smart and clever is, we know, not the same as being wise. What we admire in political leaders is primarily the latter. We definitely want fisheries development and management policies to be effective, and for that, we need to be smart about technical solutions that are evidence-based. However, we also want our fisheries policies founded on reason and compassion, namely, *phronēsis*.

Northerners, like us Norwegians, showing up in the South as policy experts with a toolbox full of hammers, should make anyone uneasy. Policy is something that should be generated from below, not be imposed from the top down, and certainly not from the outside. Neither should it be a scientific exercise. The process should be transparent and inclusive—which is why there is now a literature on the concept of 'inclusive development'.

This is how fisheries democracy has worked in Norway. Fishers were always involved in legislation, which often originated at the local level and within fishers' organizations, with government at the receiving end. Before launching a new policy initiative, the government, as a routine, would also consult these organizations, which the government helped form in the first place. This, I believe, is a model that is worth exporting.

Transfer of technology and knowledge from the North to the South—is not straightforward.

Norwegian fishers had (and have) critical opinions about fisheries policies, but they still assumed that government was honest, acted in good faith, addressed their concerns, and served their interests. For this reason, there is a level of trust between the government and the fishers, which, over the years, has paid off. I know of countries where the fishing population regards their government as their enemy. Not so in Norway, where the conflicts between government and fishers have been relatively few, and where it has been possible to enforce strict, but necessary, rules—for instance, pertaining to IUU fishing—without causing a revolt from fishers.

This has much to do with how we historically organized our industry and how the legislation enabled it. The Kerala project started at about the same time as the Norwegian Raw-fish Act became permanent law in 1951. The Norwegian parliament had also enacted the Temporary Fishers' Ownership Act in 1950 (which became the Participation Act in 1972). While the former legalized the sovereign right of fishers' co-operative sales organizations to fix minimum prices, the latter law determined that only active fishers have a right to own a fishing vessel.

A new paradigm

Both laws fundamentally changed power relations in the Norwegian

fishing industry in ways that have lasted to this day. Their relevance for implementation of the SSF Guidelines, I would argue, is that they also helped to bring the fishing population out of poverty. It took a couple of decades to develop this new legislation, partly because of the interruption of the Second World War. The New York stock market crash of 1929 hit the export-oriented Norwegian fishing industry and population hard.

Norwegians with even only meagre knowledge about the fishing industry know this story, but they may differ about its relevance today. That is not the point here. The question is rather about the relevance of what happened back then to the poor and marginalized Norwegian small-scale fishers to their counterparts in the global South today.

The question is also interesting from the perspective of the SSF Guidelines, which talk about the need for legal and institutional reform. In fact, when Norway endorsed the SSF Guidelines at the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) meeting in June 2014, the delegate who spoke for Norway, mentioned the Raw-fish Act and the Participation Act.

A caveat is, however, in order. As part of the Kerala project, the Norwegians also tried to introduce our raw-fish sales organizations, but they apparently underestimated the power of the local fish merchants. In reflecting on this experience, social scientist John Kurien, who is a native of Kerala, points out that there is a major difference between creating new organizations of fishers, as with the sales organizations in Norway, and for fishers, as happened in Kerala.

This is a difference that the different approaches to fisheries development make. It is also a difference that different contexts make. I believe in the power of example, not because examples are easily replicated, but because they can be a source of discovery and inspiration. The more examples we have, the more we learn about alternative ways of doing things. But learning is only possible if we are willing to leave behind the prejudgment that comes with the panaceas and prejudice that follow the disciplines.

With their emphasis on "food security and poverty eradication", the SSF Guidelines are particularly meant for the global South. This does not make them irrelevant in the North. Since small-scale fisheries people in the North seem to be on the path of extinction, one could even make the case that their impending demise makes the SSF Guidelines especially relevant.

Small-scale fishing people in the North, of course, enjoy the same human rights as their brothers and sisters in the global South, and they frequently refer to these rights as they criticize the government. When, for instance, indigenous people in the North, like the Norwegian Sami, argue for their fisheries rights, they do so by invoking the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The SSF Guidelines and the Tenure Guidelines strengthen their case.

Small-scale fishers in Norway and throughout the Arctic should learn what these Guidelines say about tenure, communities and gender, for instance. Norwegian fisher organizations should also follow their implementation around the world. If they pay attention, which I am not sure they do yet, I feel confident that they will conclude that the SSF Guidelines are also meant for them. Thus, I do believe that learning about sustainable small-scale fisheries development should not be a one-way traffic from the North to the South.

For more

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