

Eating for a Lifetime: Filling the Policy Gaps in Philippine Fisheries



“Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime.” So goes an ancient proverb. Does this still hold true today? Can the seas still provide guaranteed food for a lifetime?

Unfortunately policymakers have taken for granted the ability of the sea to feed people, leading to a longstanding neglect of the sector within agriculture. While corrective policies have been recently enacted, a number of serious gaps remain. A comprehensive, up-to-date policy assessment of fisheries,

covering both capture fishery and aquaculture, has been made in a recent paper appearing in the *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*.

What is happening in fisheries?

Philippine fisheries are making a big contribution to Philippine agriculture, accounting for almost 28% of the agricultural output, and providing the main livelihood of 1.5 million Filipinos. Total catch in 2004 was 3.7 million tons, with more than half contributed by marine capture, and the rest by

aquaculture. The sector has been expanding more rapidly than the rest of the economy, averaging 6.5% growth since 2000, spearheaded by aquaculture. Exports have been increasing 17% annually from 1990 to 2003, hitting \$454 million in 2004, compared to the net trade deficit of the agricultural sector as a whole. Major exports are tuna and seaweeds, and other seafood such as octopus, crab, and live grouper.

However rising demand has depleted fish stocks; destructive fishing practices, pollution, and other human activities have inflicted serious environmental damage. The long-term productivity of Philippine fisheries may have already been compromised. The millions of Filipinos dependent on the sector as their source of income not only belong to the poorest of the poor; they are also highly vulnerable to changing local conditions and climate fluctuations.

What is being done about it now?

The most important laws affecting fisheries are the Local Government Code of 1991, and the Fisheries Code of 1997. The former placed municipal waters under the jurisdiction of

municipal governments; the latter introduced numerous management reforms, such as the Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Councils, territorial use rights, and listed licensing, resource pricing, gear restrictions, open and closed seasons, catch ceilings, fish sanctuaries, as the major management instruments.

Some collaborative management projects have been put in place. These projects have promoted: marine protected areas, enforcement of fishery laws, rehabilitation of aquatic habitats, and livelihood generation. In some cases these projects have had demonstrable impact in raising fish catch.

What remains to be done?

Unfortunately, municipalities are unable to maximize the benefits of these projects due to lack of sustainability and lack of program replication on the part of local government units. In addition, institutional weakness, failure to implement fishing laws and insufficient funding on agricultural research plague the sector at the national level. Smallholders also find it difficult to expand operations as they have limited market and credit access. Some of the important policy actions are as follows:

- Fishing effort needs to be reduced at the community level, to help implement

nationally imposed catch limits. Moreover, incentives should be created for fishers to exit the industry, which entails close coordination with livelihood diversification programs.

- Community-based management programs should be expanded. Programs can be made sustainable by amending the project design; one example is for donor-funded coastal management projects to oblige that the local counterpart be increasing over the course of project implementation.
- Fishpond lease rates must be radically increased and fishery cooperatives should be prioritized in receiving leases. The government should also strengthen resource management councils, and impose catch limits. Stock assessment and monitoring by the local government units can reduce risks and operating costs.
- Funding for public fisheries research and the improvement of the extension system should be increased. The role of central DA-operated hatcheries should be supported, as they maintain the breeding nucleus, conduct research, and facilitate the dissemination of hatchery technologies and practices.

- The country's municipal fishing ports need to be upgraded, with strong private sector participation, with government easing the regulatory environment and providing the necessary infrastructure.
- The entry of imported fish (subject to the usual food safety standards) should be eased, leading to lower costs, consumer benefits, and protection of domestic fish stocks.
- The local government units should be empowered by focusing on human resource and institutional development at the provincial and municipal levels. The functions and areas of accountability of concerned institutions such as the DA and DENR should be re-examined. One suggestion is to transfer the fishery resource management functions of the DA to DENR, as the latter's primary function is to protect natural resources.

These recommendations do pose substantial investments up front, but would ensure that fish will be around to feed us for many lifetimes.

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¹Briones, R. 2007. "Eating for a Lifetime: Filling the Policy Gaps in Philippine Fisheries." *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*, Vol. 3 Nos. 1&2.