



RESEARCH PAPER

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Assessment of government assistance among small-scale fisherfolks

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Abstract

Small-scale fishers are the poorest sector in the Philippines. Through the years, the City Government of Cagayan de Oro (CDO) has provided fisherfolks with different kinds of assistance. The government was interested to know how the inputs helped them. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted among fisherfolk associations in 3 barangays (districts). Results showed that they had received a number of livelihood support which have really helped them. However, there were some projects that failed due to technical reasons and poor financial management. Providing inputs is not enough to see positive long-term outcomes in terms of poverty alleviation, but a holistic approach is necessary to address all aspects of sustainability.

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Introduction

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) are broadly characterized as dynamic and evolving sub-sector employing labour-intensive harvesting from boats and on foot, along with pre-and post-harvest labor that occurs on land, with processing and distribution technologies to exploit marine and inland water fishery resources (FAO, 2015). Ninety percent of the 120 million employed in fisheries are in the SSF and 97% of those workers live in developing countries, where many have high levels of poverty (UNCTAD, 2017). SSF makes critical contributions to the livelihoods, food and nutritional security, and well-being of predominantly coastal households around the world (Béné *et al.*, 2016).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) clearly recognized the essential function of SSF in reaching zero hunger at the global level by 2030, as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals, while a huge population in developing countries rely on fish and other seafood as the only source of proteins, omega-3 fatty acids, or essential micronutrients such as vitamin A, iron, calcium, vitamin D, zinc and iodine on a regular basis.

In the Philippines, more than 80% of the fishers can be characterized as small-scale with nearly 2 million who are active (Badiola *et al.*, 2021). They contribute significantly to the country's economy, supply the bulk of the dietary fish requirement for over 90 million Filipinos who consume around 38 kilogram/capita/year, and provide direct employment to 1.4 million fishers (Perez *et al.*, 2012). Where 28 out of 100 Filipinos are poor, this ratio becomes 41 out of 100 among small-scale fishers making them the poorest sector in the Philippines (Courtney *et al.*, 2016). Approximately 10 million Filipinos rely directly on small-scale fishing to meet their household food needs (DA-BFAR, 2010).

However, Muallil *et al.* (2014) reported that only 3% of their respondents considered fishing financially rewarding, while 53% said that the income from fishing is barely enough for daily household needs and the rest (44%) said it is no longer enough.

CDO is a coastal, highly urbanized city located in Northern Mindanao (Region 10) and it is the capital of the region. CDO has a heavy, medium, to light industries, with rapid development and strong coastal migration (Macajalar Bay Development Alliance). The city has 11 coastal barangays with a total of 24.1 kilometers of coastline directly facing Macajalar Bay (Figure 1). It has 24 community-based fisherfolk associations with a total of 1,070 registered fishers (as of 2017) under the Fisherfolk Registration System of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) of the country.

The city government has been supporting the small-scale fisherfolks with various programs, projects, assistance and inputs coming from the local and national governments. These are handled, facilitated and implemented by the city's Agricultural Productivity Operations (APO) Office. In 2020, the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines (USTP) and the city government agreed to study and find out from the fisherfolks the present status and outcome of the different forms of assistance they have received from the government over the past few years.

Materials and methods

The APO organized fishing communities in 3 different barangays (Agusan, Cugman and Bonbon) and the Center for Inclusive Development Studies (CIDS) of USTP conducted the study. In every barangay, the researchers employed the qualitative approach and FGD was used as the main tool for data collection. The fisherfolks were interviewed as a group using a set of questions that anyone was free to answer. Researchers used recording devices including video cameras to gather responses.

It elicited narrative information underlying the participants' experiences and understanding. Responses were encoded and interpreted accordingly while the data gathered were grouped and analyzed. Researchers attempted to make sense of, or interpret, social reality in terms of the meanings the participants ascribed to it.



Fig. 1. Coastline area of CDO along Macajalar Bay.

The thematic interpretation was adopted as the main interpretive method. Participants were assured of anonymity and were required to sign the Free Prior Informed Consent form, indicating therein that the data obtained from the discussions would be used for research purposes only.

Results and discussion

A total of 40 fisherfolks from the 3 barangays participated in the study. Male and female comprised 57.5% and 42.5% of the participants, respectively. The majority (42.5%) were between 51 years old and above who were mostly married (82.5%). All of them have children and the majority (37.5%) were into fishing ranging from 1 to 10 years period already.

The fisherfolks have formed themselves into organizations. Agusan has a total of 100 household members organized in 3 associations: Tagpuangi Fisherfolks Association, New Agusan Active Small Fisherfolk Association and Tin-ao Agusan Small Fisherfolk Association. Cugman has 46 household members grouped into 1 association: Cugman Active Small Fisherman Association. And Bonbon has the

most number of household members (500) distributed in 4 associations: Bonbon Active Fisherfolks Association, Bonbon Fisherfolks Association, Nabuslutan Fisherfolk Association and Sari-sari Fisherfolks Association.

Results (Tables 2, 3 and 4) showed that over the years, the government had given the fisherfolks a number of livelihood support. The kind of inputs provided varies and also in quantity. Any form of assistance was channelled through their organizations facilitated by their respective local government units (LGU's). The fisherfolks testified that the inputs have really helped them in fishing. However, the limited quantity is the most common issue. The fact is, at any given time, the government can only allocate a few resources. The job in utilizing the limited resources is handed to the associations together with their LGU's. Local communities will need to take more responsibility in solving local problems; therefore, communities must be empowered and resources provided to make decisions and take actions that meet opportunities and problems (Pomeroy and Rivera-Guieb, 2005).

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of fisher folks.

	Agusan	Cugman	Bonbon	Frequency	Percent
<i>Sex</i>					
Male	9	9	5	23	57.5
Female	9	3	5	17	42.5
Total	18	12	10	40	100
<i>Age (year)</i>					
0-20	0	0	0	0	0
21-30	1	1	1	3	7.5
31-40	3	1	4	8	20
41-50	7	2	3	12	30
51 and above	7	8	2	17	42.5
Total	18	12	10	40	100
<i>Civil status</i>					
Single	0	0	1	1	5
Married	17	8	8	33	82.5
Widowed	1	3	0	4	10
Separated	0	1	0	1	2.5
Living with a partner	0	0	1	1	2.5
Total	18	12	10	40	100
<i>Number of children</i>					
None	1	1	1	3	7.5
1-2	4	1	4	9	22.5
3-4	5	6	4	15	37.5
5 and above	8	4	1	13	32.5
Total	18	12	10	40	100
<i>Years fishing</i>					
1-10	5	8	2	15	37.5
11-20	5	0	3	8	20
21-30	4	2	2	8	20
31-40	1	2	3	6	15
41 and above	3	0	0	3	7.5
Total	18	12	10	40	100

Based on the results, the study was able to identify 2 factors that contributed to the outcome failure of some projects. The first is the technical factor. Production of *hito* using barrels, coral reef rehabilitation, *talaba* culture and Tilapia production requires enough technical experience. Technicality includes knowing how to provide the right environmental requirement in handling the said projects. Aside from that, a management or production plan must be laid down at the beginning

containing realistic targets and timelines along with specific tasks assigned to members. Additionally, necessary compensation for services rendered by members should also be considered. Without seriously taking these into account, the probability of success in any project could hardly reach a satisfactory level in terms of sustainability. The second is about how organizations handle money. Two promising income-generating projects (fish cage for "*bangus*" production and financial assistance for

“bigasan” program) started well but went bankrupt because of fund mishandling. Although this aspect was not discussed in detail, it is quite certain to conclude that there was mismanagement of financial resources. The study was doubtful whether: they have policies for handling funds, whether they are doing

correct accounting, or following any proper fund disbursement procedure. Financial literacy training for SSF on the basics of saving, borrowing and insurance is a prerequisite for SSF to grow their business responsibly and avoid becoming over-indebted (Badiola *et al.*, 2021).

Table 2. Results from Agusan.

Government assistance	Project outcome with testimonies of fisherfolks
Fishing nets	With limited quantity, they hope the government can provide for each of them in the future.
Technical training on seafood processing and increasing shelf-life	They were able to sell processed products such as <i>alamang</i> (shrimp paste), <i>ginamos</i> (salted fish) and <i>bulad</i> (dried fish). But they needed to have their production area be certified by the authorities (Food and Drugs Agency) to be able to expand their market.
Production of “ <i>hito</i> ” (catfish) using barrels	The project failed because it was not viable.
Coral reef rehabilitation using rubber tires	Rubber tires are not good for the environment so they were replaced with concrete posts but the posts became buried due to over time siltation. They need help from the government in taking out those posts.
“ <i>Talaba</i> ” (oyster) culture	It did not grow so it failed.
Fish cage for “ <i>bangus</i> ” (milkfish) production	This was in 2011. It was going well and earning income. But it went bankrupt because of fund mishandling. They want to revive the project but they need government support.

Table 3. Results from Cugman.

Government assistance	Project outcome with testimonies of fisherfolks
Development of fish sanctuary	They expressed concern on the on-going quarrying operation in their area which they believed could bring negative impact to the sanctuary.
Ten fiberglass pump boats	In 2019, raffle method was used in the distribution of the boats to the members because of limited quantity.
Nylon ropes and buoys	These were given to all members.
Ten thousand Tilapia fingerlings	It failed because people used poison to catch fish.
Financial assistance for “ <i>bigasan</i> ” (rice) program	Some members borrowed money but did not pay back so the project failed.

It is becoming clear that the issues discussed above have something to do with internal management or governance in general which is highly crucial for sustainability. To deal with the complexities of fisheries problems, the management organization must be flexible and balanced (Lane and Stephenson, 1998). Fisheries management can be improved through joint regulation by government bodies and resource users and through partial devolution of management authority

from the government to fishers' organizations (Sunderlin and Gorospe, 1997). As SSF are increasingly conceptualized as complex social-ecological systems, attempts to manage these as such systems have created sustainability challenges for researchers and management practitioners (Partelow, 2015).

Managing SSF in a developing country like the Philippines is very challenging because of high

pressures from expanding fishing population, poverty and lack of alternative options (Muallil *et al.*, 2014). But as Pomeroy and Rivera-Guieb (2005) pointed out,

there is no blueprint formula for managing a fishery because each one is different and therefore, different approaches need to be tried and integrated.

Table 4. Results from Bonbon.

Government assistance	Project outcome with testimonies of fisherfolks
Four fiberglass pump boats	On March 2020, each association received 1 pump boat. They hope the government could provide more.
Fish nets	On February 4, 2020, raffle method was used in the distribution of the nets to the members because of limited quantity. They hope the government could provide for each of them.
Fish landing facility	This is very helpful for them.
Development of 7 hectare fish sanctuary	There are only 2 people working as <i>bantay-dagat</i> (sea guard or sea patrol) which is not enough. They need more people to protect the sanctuary.

The community of fishers and the government, through a co-management arrangement, will need to work together to decide the best combination of approaches for their situation. There will be a success and there will be a failure. There must be learning and adaptation.

Conclusion

Provision of inputs and assistance to the small-scale fisherfolks is just a first step in the overall support scheme of poverty-alleviation programs. A single step alone cannot produce the desired outcome. To sustain such programs requires a holistic approach to dealing with all the necessary components of sustainability. Fisherfolks need constant support and guidance from the government to help them establish a functional independent organization capable of serving its members increase production potential.

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