



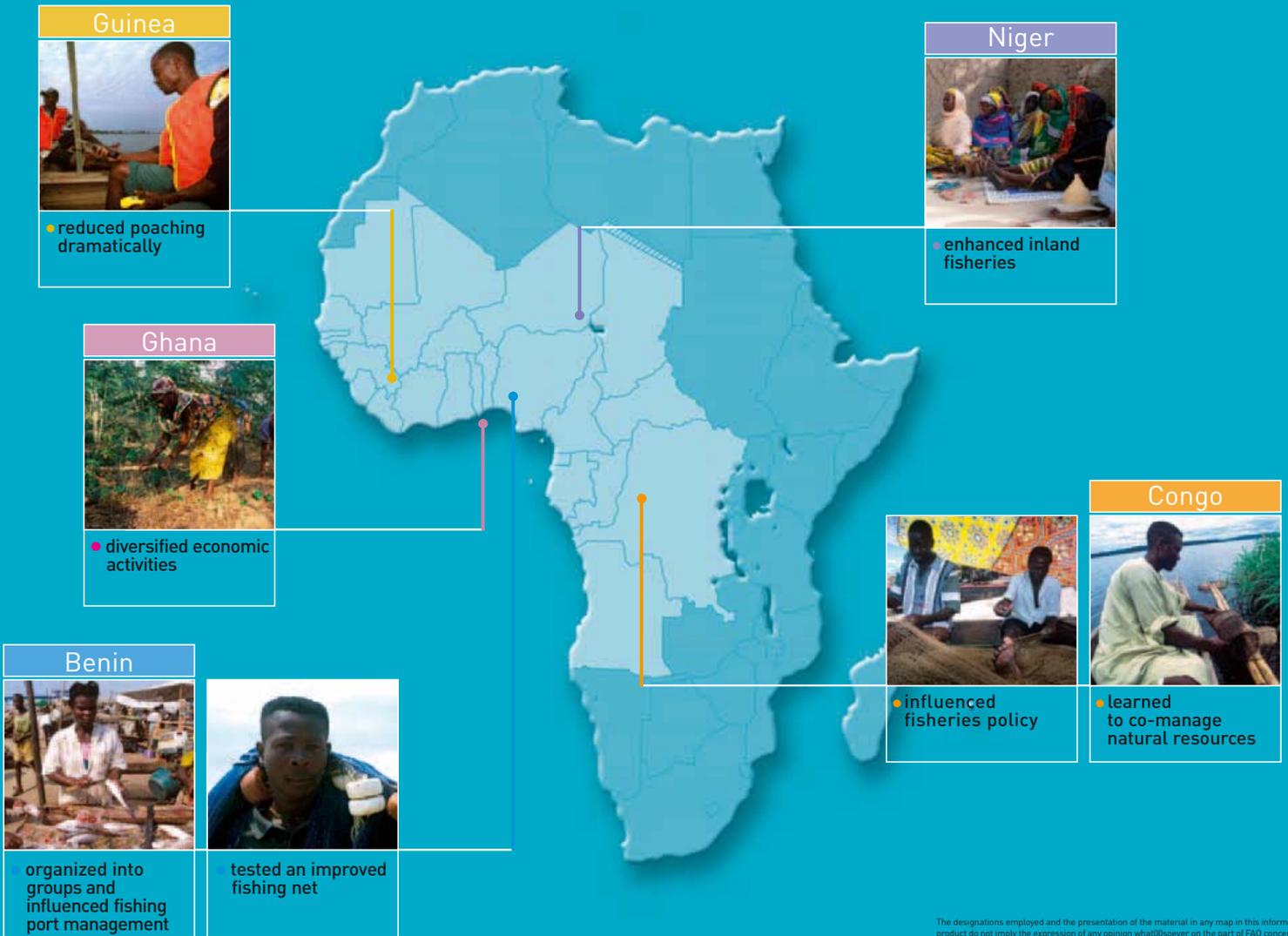
Grassroots potential unleashed

Good news from West African
fishing communities



DFID

Through the sustainable livelihoods approach, communities:



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chapter 1

page 2



Fishing communities mobilize in 25 countries

A new development approach helps them organize and change the system in their favour

chapter 2

page 6



Influencing fisheries policy in the Congo

Newly formed lobby groups prove their worth

chapter 3

page 8



Community-based scientific research: a first

Comprehensive grassroots participation is considered crucial to the future of the fisheries sector

chapter 4

page 12

Women diversify their livelihoods

Involving many partners in the project created momentum behind an ambitious plan

chapter 5

page 16

Poachers routed by community patrols

Successful collaboration between small-scale fishers and the coast guard hailed as a breakthrough

chapter 6

page 18

Enhancing inland fisheries in the Niger

A clever drought-coping strategy served as the basis for expanding the local economy

chapter 7

page 20

Organizing to be heard in Benin's main fishing port

Users formed groups and joined negotiations on a major port upgrade

chapter 8

page 22

Co-managing natural resources

Villagers lose their right to hunt, and struggle to find new livelihoods

chapter 1

Port users hold an impromptu meeting in Cotonou, Benin.

A NEW DEVELOPMENT
APPROACH HELPS THEM ORGANIZE
AND CHANGE THE SYSTEM
IN THEIR FAVOUR

Fishing communities mobilize in 25 countries

This booklet profiles seven poor fishing communities in West Africa that are participating in their own development as never before. Guided by a step-by-step method and helped by modest project funding, community members tackle problems they have identified as holding back their social and economic progress. In candid and wide-ranging interviews, the men who catch the fish and the women who process

and sell it recount how they have organized lobby groups to influence government policy and legislation, how they now test new fishing equipment, how they play a new role in patrolling their fishing grounds, how they co-manage natural resources with the authorities.

2



Folding fishing nets in Moree, Ghana.



Government officials at local and national levels relate how, often for the first time, representatives of fishing communities sit across the table from them to discuss problems and solutions.

“Before, concepts came from experts and consultants, but now it is the people themselves who identify their problems, set priorities and participate in researching the solutions,” said Mohamed Moustapha Ly, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture in Guinea. “I get around to all the fishing communities. They express themselves freely; they complain about everything; they’re confident – that’s new, honestly, that’s new.”

An ambitious programme

The fishing communities profiled herein are taking part in the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme, a partnership between 25 West African governments (see list on front cover flap), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID). The £21.5 million Programme, which was launched in 1999 and will continue until 2006, uses two main tools: the sustainable livelihoods approach and the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, adopted by FAO member governments in 1995. (See The search for a method to alleviate poverty, page 5)

A holistic approach

In brief, the sustainable livelihoods approach to development encourages communities to consider their assets,

“Before, concepts came from experts and consultants, but now it is the people themselves who identify their problems, set priorities and participate in researching the solutions.”

Mohamed Moustapha Ly
Secretary-General
Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture, Guinea



Women at Agip Beach, the Congo, work fast to smoke fresh fish before they spoil.

Fishing communities mobilize in 25 countries

strengths and opportunities as a whole. Such an analysis provides the basis for a community project. Achievements show governments how villagers can be useful partners in development, not just recipients of services.

The aim is to help these communities, marginalized by poverty, illiteracy and isolation, become full partners in society. Just because villagers are marginalized does not mean they are without good ideas. Government officials and representatives from non-governmental organizations and the private sector, seconded to National Coordinating Units, the national arms of the Programme, act as catalysts to bring out these ideas and help communities to get organized to act on them.

Future of the Programme

The Programme has launched over 40 community projects in 25 countries since 1999, a representative sample of which are profiled here. Soon, building on the lessons learned so far, larger subregional pilot projects, which have been identified by communities, government ministries and other stakeholders in 12 countries in West Africa, will get under way. By 2006, FAO, DFID and more and more West Africans hope that the Programme's approach will be used not only to reduce poverty and protect the environment in the fisheries sector, but also in other areas of society and throughout government ministries. The seeds have been planted across the region and, as the reader will learn in these pages, healthy growth can already be seen.



Women at the village well in Moree, Ghana.



Boat building, as here in Bongolon, Guinea, is an important economic activity in West Africa.



Women have the job of processing and marketing fish.

Preparing food in Guinea.



Women's group members meet with village fishermen and elders in Moree, Ghana.



In the dry season, this backyard tank in the Niger holds fish fingerlings.



Fish oven.

The search for a method to alleviate poverty

Since the 1950s, governments of developed countries, United Nations agencies and development banks, working with developing countries, have tried one approach after another to reach the poorest members of global society. Pilot projects in poor rural or urban settlements used the best methodologies that development thinkers could devise, hoping for successes that could be duplicated in more and more communities in a war of attrition against poverty. More often than not, when the project finished, the empowered individuals slowly settled back into a hand-to-mouth existence. But poverty alleviation as a science continued to grow.

Combining best practices

"We're getting closer; we have experience of what works and what doesn't work," said Diana Carney, a DFID economist and one of the chief theorists of the "sustainable livelihoods approach", which combines lessons learned from decades of development efforts.

"The criticism of development has been that it is overly

technical and focused on one thing, while everything else is going down the tubes," she said. "There has been so much work on different aspects of the development mosaic ... huge debates on participation, on rights, on social capital, but the livelihoods approach says we can learn from all of those things."

Put people first

"Put people first, not the technical bits and pieces. It's not true that they have nothing to bring to the table," she said. As an example, she cited an experimental fisheries surveillance system recently tested in Guinea (see Chapter 5), in which illiterate fishers using radios and hand-held navigation sets work in partnership with the coast guard. "Here is the approach building on people's strengths. After all, the small-scale fishers live in the area to be patrolled."

"The other key issue covered by this approach is that it doesn't get stuck at the village committee level," she said. "If the real issue is, for example, international fishing treaties, let's work on that."



Influencing fisheries policy in the Congo

NEWLY FORMED LOBBY GROUPS PROVE THEIR WORTH



A motorized canoe leaves Agip Beach, the Congo.

6

POINTE NOIRE, the Congo – Eighty-five fishing crews in this coastal city were hit hard when a government minister in faraway Brazzaville, the capital, closed the shark fisheries in 2001. Did he know how many of the 3 000 inhabitants of Agip Beach, the largest fishing community on the Congolese coast, depended on the fisheries for their daily subsistence? As a matter of fact, the ministry had tried to find out, without success.

It was time to put into place a consultation process through which the fishing community could influence such policy decisions, but which also would help the government keep its finger on the pulse of small-scale fisheries and, it was hoped,

do something to relieve poverty in the fishing communities.

Communication breakdown

“The government thought that we cut off the shark fins for export to Asia and threw out the rest,” said Jean Sylvain Ngoma, a fishing community leader. “In fact, people sold the fins, but ate the rest of the fish or salted them for sale locally.”

Félix Domba, the government fisheries official responsible for the coastal zone, said that although his offices are not far from Agip Beach, “We didn’t know who was catching sharks, who was buying them and who was exporting them – and no one could give us the information.

“The Congo signed FAO’s International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks and we were required to have a national plan. So the minister felt obliged to close the shark fisheries until we could gather enough data on which to base a policy.”

Organizing to be heard

Meanwhile, FAO’s Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme arrived on the scene and began a lengthy

Men repair nets.





consultation process with various elements of the fishing community at Agip Beach. After this “participatory diagnosis” of community potential, the critical first step in the sustainable livelihoods approach, the Programme agreed to launch a small project (with US\$16 500 in Programme funding and US\$1 700 from the community), which would help the community organize into lobby groups.

“We had no groups before, even though this fishing community has been here for 35 years. We went off in different directions. Now we have accounts, a constitution, regular meetings, officers ...,” said Abraham Mossassi, Secretary-General of the Congolese Fishing Boat Owners Association.

Part of the Programme’s approach is to foster better institutional arrangements and partnerships for the benefit of all. In that spirit, the project funded one local non-governmental organization to provide basic management training, and another to try to set up a microcredit system.

Tough talking

Talks over the shark fisheries were anything but easy.

“The negotiations were hard and lasted 14 months,” said Mr Ngoma. “In the end it went all the way to the minister, something that wouldn’t have happened before. He reopened the fisheries, which is good, but he tripled the cost of a shark fishing licence, which is hard on us.”

Nevertheless, the fishing and fish processing associations of Agip Beach have entered a new world of democracy and participation in the system.

How does Mr Domba, the top local fisheries official, see the future? “We are not always listened to in Brazzaville,” he admitted. “For example, the price of petrol was just raised, without reference to the needs of small-scale fishers, who must feed the nation.” (Periodically, Agip Beach fishers cannot put to sea because of shortages of petrol for outboard motors or the cost of petrol.) “In time, though, they’ll be listened to by the government,” he predicted.

Fish-loving nation

The Congo is a fish-loving nation – its 3 million people consume 125 000 – 150 000 tonnes of fish per year, one-third of which must be imported. Overfishing is not presently a problem in the Congo, said Mr Domba, and there is a demand for all the fish landed at Agip Beach. The fishers need to better manage their business and participate actively in the management of the resource to climb out of poverty. But it is clear that they also need to influence the Congolese fishing establishment on an issue-by-issue basis.

“We had no groups before, even though this fishing community has been here for 35 years. We went off in different directions.”

Abraham Mossassi
Secretary-General
Congolese Fishing Boat Owners Association

Officers of the Agip Beach Women’s Group display salted fish.



“We are the women of the Agip Beach Women’s Group”

“We are the women of the Agip Beach Women’s Group”

Agip Beach women, who purchase, process and market the fish, have problems with smoking ovens that waste fuel, with the price of wood and salt, with transportation, with garbage disposal ...

Organizing into associations has helped them, too. They are already cutting their costs by buying salt in bulk. They are investigating how to build more efficient smoking ovens that won’t fill their eyes with smoke. If they could set up a revolving fund they could buy more fish and perhaps send it to Brazzaville, where it would fetch a better price.

“The fishmongers’ association is a good idea. We have an identity. We are the women of the Agip Beach Women’s Group,” said Joséphine Makaya, Vice-President of the Group.



Community-based scientific research: a first

COMPREHENSIVE GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION IS CONSIDERED CRUCIAL TO THE FUTURE OF THE FISHERIES SECTOR



Kilometres of rope are needed for each beach seine.

8

AIDO BEACH, Benin – Tiny fishing communities along this coconut palm-lined coast are engaged in scientific research that officials believe holds the key to the sustainable future of beach seine fishing.

The current seines, with their one-inch mesh, scoop up juvenile fish in the millions along with mature fish. It is estimated that a crate of undersize fish caught in the nets – widely used along the West African coast – if left to grow to maturity, would equal four crates a year later.

“As fishers, we were conscious that we were on the way to emptying the sea,” said Henri Hounna, leader of a group of 38 villagers in this community 50 kilometres west of the capital, Cotonou. Behind him on the beach, a crew of men



Fishers land their boat at Aido Beach, Benin.



Fishers struggle with the heavy net.

“We were conscious that we were on the way to emptying the sea.”

Henri Hounna
Fishing community leader

Smoking fish at Aido Beach.



and women play out the seine and three kilometres of line into the Atlantic, before spending the afternoon slowly pulling the net back to shore.

Fewer fish, but worth more

FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme is supporting a research project in the Aido Beach community and others like it in neighbouring Togo and Ghana. Based on the principle that “seeing is believing”, the fishers are testing seines with two-inch mesh that leave undersize fish behind. With more room in the seine for mature fish, the nets catch a greater number of higher-value large fish, increasing the fishers' income. The new nets are also cheaper and easier to pull in, since the smaller volume of material creates less drag.

The challenge is to convince conservative, risk-averse small-scale fishing communities to switch to the new nets. Here is how the Programme plans to do it: the sustainable livelihoods approach promotes the principle of grassroots participation not only at the planning stage of development activities but throughout the process. Participating fishing groups are therefore testing the nets themselves for 18 months, with a technician living on the beach with them to measure the size and value of the catch. If the communities are convinced by the test results, ministries of fisheries will

Community-based scientific research: a first

use them as a “peer-on-peer” sales force to convince neighbouring fishing communities to convert to the large-mesh seines.

Diversifying livelihoods

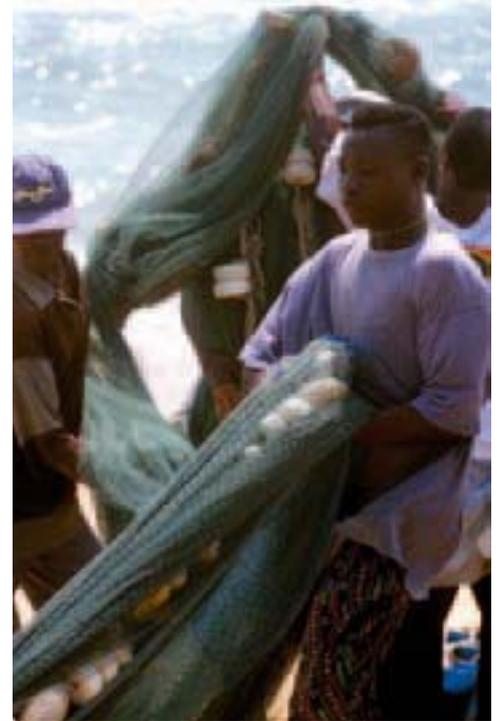
Preliminary results at Aido Beach are encouraging. In one month, using the new net, the group brought in 24 tonnes of fish in 9 outings, earning CFAF 873 526 (US\$140). In the same month, a control group, using the small-mesh net, caught 30 tonnes of fish in 9 outings, but earned only CFAF 471 000 (US\$75).

The results spell out good news for the environment, but the extra income divided among so many villagers is unlikely to reduce their poverty by much. The community has no electricity or dispensary, and villagers must carry fresh water 4.5 kilometres from the nearest tap. They live in huts made of palm fronds.

The Aido Beach community has always raised oysters in the nearby lagoon. As part of the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme, which encourages communities to diversify and expand how they make a living, the project has taught improved production techniques. Villagers have also expanded a sideline of selling coconut meat to Nigerian biscuit factories.

Dreams of progress

Increased earnings, said one woman with six children, go to education and food for the household. “We save money for the hungry season, when there aren’t many fish,” said Victoire Ade-Agbo. “If there was enough money we could get drinking



Fishers at Aido Beach, Benin.

water piped in. That’s my dream, God willing.”

“We’ll help get the seine adopted by other communities that said no to taking part in the experiment,” said Mr Hounna, who appeared both confident and relieved at the end of the trial. “They believed it was a prelude to banning seines entirely. But our community got in first and now we’ll be further ahead because we’ll be used to the new net.”



The whole community helps pull in the seine.



The community is proud to be testing new technology.

Ghana eagerly awaits research results

Ghana eagerly awaits research results

ACCRA, Ghana – Members of the National Coordinating Unit, which oversees Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme activities in Ghana, are already convinced of the wisdom of having fishing communities first test and then spread the word about improved fishing equipment.

“Before, scientists did the research and came back and threw it on the people – who wouldn’t believe them,” said Jacob Okrakh Ansah, of the non-governmental organization World Vision, who lauds the Programme for introducing participatory research to the region.

Emilia Anang, Director of Fisheries in the Ministry of Food and Agriculture of Ghana and the Programme’s national coordinator, awaits results from the Ghana test project. “We have wanted to do the experiment for quite a while,” she said. “I think getting them to test their own nets is the best way. To see is to believe.”

Fishers load the experimental net into their boat.





Women diversify their livelihoods

INVOLVING MANY PARTNERS
IN THE PROJECT CREATED
MOMENTUM BEHIND
AN AMBITIOUS PLAN

MOREE, Ghana – The small-scale fishing economy in this community perched on a rocky headland overlooking the Atlantic is as dynamic as any larger economic unit. Any missing link in the production chain – a shortage of fish or wood for the smoking ovens, for example – spurs villagers to brainstorm for a solution and jump to fill the gap.

The following story recounts not only how the community's lateral thinking solved a particular problem, but how it acquired and worked with both local and national allies, setting in motion the momentum for success.

Boom or bust

On the happy days when full fishing boats land their cargo on the beaches below Moree, the 60 fishmongers and



Women bid for a limited supply of fish in Moree, Ghana.

Preparing fish for smoking.



“We took them through the possibilities of what they could do for themselves.”

Doris Yeboah
Ghana government official



processors in the women's group gear up for business. They buy all the fish they can afford, carry it up the hill in big tin bowls, gut and clean it, and lay it on racks in the smoking ovens. Wood smoke swirls through the community's alleyways. The product is trucked to Accra, the capital, two hours to the east by road, and elsewhere in Ghana.

Life in the community is difficult. The men do not always find fish. Women sometimes must travel as far as Nigeria to buy fish to process and sell. During the hungry season from January to May, there is little money to buy food and some villagers get by on two meagre meals a day. Or sometimes on water alone.

Birth of a "brilliant idea"

With firewood for the ovens becoming more and more expensive, the women's group hit on the idea of starting their own woodlot. They approached FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme, which matched them up with a local government fisheries officer, Yaw Sabah, now a member of the Programme's National Coordinating Unit.

"I thought it was a brilliant idea, but they didn't know about planting and maintaining trees," said Mr Sabah. "So we brought in the necessary expertise."

As part of the Programme method, another National Coordinating Unit member, Doris Yeboah, a trained government facilitator, arrived. "We took them through the possibilities of what they could do for themselves," she said.

Attracting powerful partners

In order to bring about dynamic and sustainable economic development, the Programme encourages community groups to form partnerships with powerful interests for the duration of the project, and beyond. Why not get the village chief involved? The local bank manager? Government extension officers? They all have an interest in the growth of the local economy. "By working together, the groups convinced the chief to release land for the woodlot quickly," noted Emilia Amang, the Programme's national coordinator.

Future plans

Microcredit is proving less successful in Moree. As of late 2002, only 3 out of 20 borrowers had kept up their



Women decided to diversify activities by growing not only trees but also food crops such as cassava, shown here being harvested.

Women diversify their livelihoods

repayments, while 17 were 5 months in arrears. On the women's behalf, a local politician is pushing the project to forgive the loans and start afresh. "Fishing was bad this year," the women say.

However, the women will soon have new sources of revenue. They have planted cassava, pepper, maize, cowpea, plantain and mango between their trees. The fast-growing acacias are now eight metres high and ready for cutting in 2003.

"When ocean fishing is bad, we dream of finding a reliable supply of fish," said Elisabeth Bentum, the group's Financial Secretary. "And we want a day care centre for the children for when we have to travel in search of fish. Most of our relatives are also fishmongers, so we have nowhere to leave our children. If we leave them with an elder child, then that child can't go to school."

And the men of Moree? They are supportive and have helped with land preparation and tree planting. But they have not proved as flexible in their choice of livelihoods as their womenfolk.

"Men prefer to stick to fishing," admitted Nana Kodwo Mensa-Bonsu II, Moree's chief fisherman. "They'll go and fish elsewhere rather than try something like farming."

Delivery of wood from a commercial dealer.



Cleaning the rack of a smoking oven.





A woman sells her wares in Moree, Ghana.



Market in Moree.

An organizer's lament

How difficult is it to organize an effective grassroots group? Listen to Ekuia Atta, the designated "organizer" of Moree's women's group:

"I have to go to some people three times to get them to attend meetings," complained Ms Atta, a young and lively village woman. "Sometimes I get insulted. I get tired of going here and there."

"For Monday meetings, we might get 10 or 15 members out of 60 – although about 20 members have left the village in search of work," she said. "It is even harder to get people to attend unscheduled meetings."

After two years on the job, Ms Atta said she is still keen and keeps trying.



Poachers routed by community patrols

SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION
BETWEEN SMALL-SCALE
FISHERS AND THE COAST GUARD
HAILED AS A BREAKTHROUGH



Selected fishers in Bongolon, Guinea, use a satellite-positioning receiver (in fisher's left hand) and radio to report the position of illegal vessels.

16

BONGOLON, Guinea – An experiment in community surveillance of inshore fishing grounds has succeeded in reducing illegal incursions by industrial trawlers by 59 percent. The success suggests that partnerships between small-scale fishers in their motorized canoes and the Guinean coast guard – which lacks the equipment and resources to patrol 300 kilometres of coastline effectively – may be the key to reducing incursions.

Deaths at sea

Poor fishing communities from the Congo to Senegal complain bitterly about daily, sometimes fatal, encounters with industrial fishing boats that poach in the richly stocked zone reserved for small-scale fishing. The industrial boats, some national, others foreign, destroy the nets of the small boats when they drag their heavy industrial nets over them. They rarely pay compensation.

In Guinea in 2000, before community patrols began in the zone around Bongolon and two other project fishing villages, industrial boats made 450 illegal incursions into the zone, according to government figures. The boats

injured 12 fishers in collisions with their canoes. Only 56 incursions were recorded in the first six months of 2002.

Partnership is hailed as the way forward

FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme is hailing the success of the project as proof that bringing small-scale fishing communities into the fishing sector as full partners is the way forward, both for poverty reduction and for fisheries conservation.

In Bongolon, trouble with industrial boats had reached crisis proportions. Five men had died when their boat was destroyed by a trawler. Small-scale boat crews were afraid to put to sea. Now, according to community elder Sekhouna Sylla, villagers are overjoyed that, thanks to the new surveillance system, fishing has resumed.

"Many of us are now able to obtain credit at the Rural Credit Bank because they now believe that we will be able to repay the loans by catching and selling fish," he said. "Fishing families have started sending their children to school again."

Will surveillance be expanded?

In Conakry, the capital, members of the National Coordinating Unit of FAO's Sustainable Fisheries



Livelihoods Programme are important players in key fisheries institutions. They must act as catalysts and advocates within the fisheries establishment if the partnership between fishing communities and the coast guard is to be institutionalized, with a dedicated operating budget to cover its extension to the entire coastline.

"I have done a major impact study on the community surveillance project, which documents its success," said Mamadou Moussa Diallo, a member of the National Coordinating Unit and a socio-economist at the influential Boussoura National Centre for Fisheries Science. "I think I am getting through to my colleagues about the system. I explain the methodology and how it works. They are interested."

Poverty reduction potential

Guinea has a national poverty reduction strategy that includes the country's 30 000 small-scale fishers.

Abdourahamane Kaba, Director-General of the Boussoura Centre, explained that coastal fisheries are not at their limits. "There are important resources that are not sufficiently exploited. Small-scale fishers will have to diversify and catch high-value species. They will need training and new techniques. But there is a potential for fisheries to contribute to poverty reduction," he said.

The coast of Guinea is guarded by the National Centre for Fisheries Surveillance and Protection, which has a budget for six or seven patrols per month. How does Mohamed Sidibé, the Centre's Assistant Director-General, rate the community surveillance experiment? "It is a good success. After all, now our boats can intervene when there is a call and not patrol at random," he said. "In the beginning, my patrol officers were a bit sensitive about the project – they thought they might be replaced by village patrols – but now the spirit has changed. The system isn't perfect, but we can perfect it."

"The Centre doesn't have the means to expand the network, but community surveillance has been included in the government strategy against poverty," he said. "The government will find the means to pay for its expansion."

Children back in school after fishing was resumed in Bongolon.

"Small-scale fishers will have to diversify and catch high-value species. But there is a potential for fisheries to contribute to poverty reduction."

Abdourahamane Kaba
Director-General
Boussoura National Centre for Fisheries Science



Salted fish dry in the African sun.

How canoe patrols keep the big boats at bay

Small-scale fishers in Guinea had reached the point of firing submachine guns in the direction of industrial trawlers that were poaching in their waters.

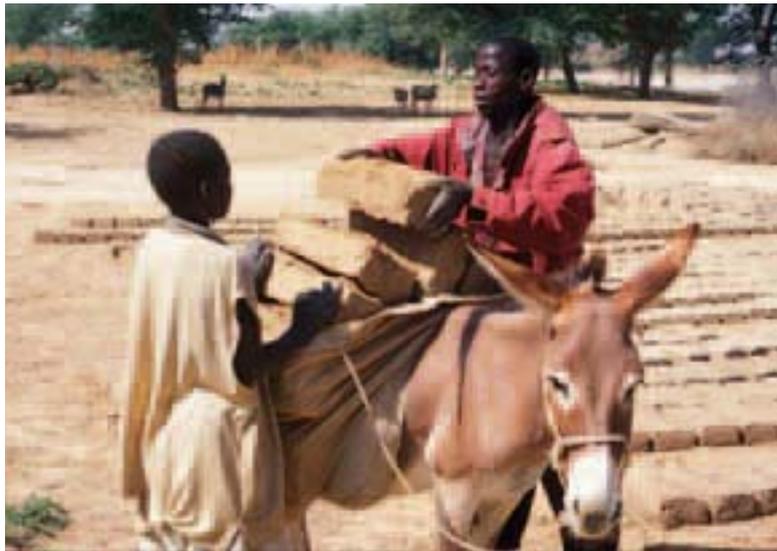
Now the crews who have received project training calmly radio the offending boat's latitude and longitude, calculated by using a hand-held satellite-positioning receiver, to the nearest coast guard station. A patrol vessel is dispatched to intercept the trawler.

Fishers report that trawlers now flee at the sight of their canoes, knowing how quickly they can summon the authorities.



Enhancing inland fisheries in the Niger

A CLEVER DROUGHT-COPING
STRATEGY SERVED AS
THE BASIS FOR
EXPANDING THE LOCAL ECONOMY



Mud bricks are used to build improved smoking ovens.

18 TAFOUKA, the Niger – On first encounter, this village in the harsh southern savannah of a landlocked country seems an unlikely place for fishing. Inhabitants, who live in mud-brick houses and rely on camels for much of their transport, tell of major community health problems: malnutrition, meningitis and cholera. Five young village women died in childbirth in a single month.

When FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme came to Tafouka in 2001, it launched a week-long "participatory diagnosis" of community potential, the important first step in the sustainable livelihoods approach.

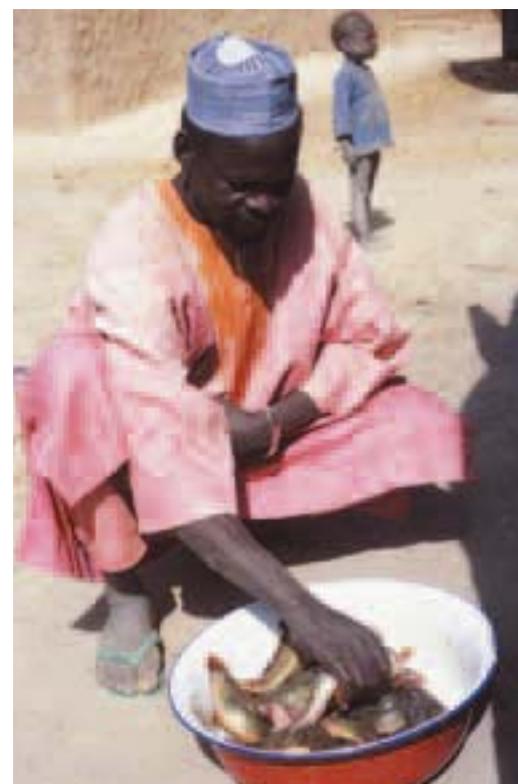
"We have used a participatory approach to development planning in the Niger for about ten years now," said Talatou Harouna, Service Chief, Fisheries Management in the Government of the Niger, who oversees the Tafouka project. "It lets you identify the point of entry for any particular development project because you listen to the people," he said. "With this Programme, we learned a more sophisticated method and spent a whole week in this village talking to the people about their strengths and weaknesses, instead of the usual half-hour filling in a questionnaire."

The Programme discovered that the village has an ingenious fish farming system that not only copes well with chronic drought, but could be improved to boost local incomes.

Moving with the seasons

For about three months of the year, the village is surrounded by 50 seasonal ponds and lakes ranging in surface from very small to as much as 28 hectares. Years ago locals began stocking these waters with catfish. They harvest the small ponds first, moving up the chain as the heat intensifies and the ponds gradually dry up. Finally, they take fingerlings from the last of the ponds and transfer them to backyard concrete tanks filled with well water. Fed bran left over from the threshing of village grain, the fingerlings are returned to the ponds when the rainy season comes and the cycle begins anew.

In discussing livelihoods with the villagers, the Programme found a dynamic, cohesive community already grouped into associations. If they could enhance fisheries production, a prosperous nearby town would buy all the fish they could produce.



A villager in Tafouka, the Niger, with a bowl of freshwater fish.

Here is the “business plan” the villagers came up with, with the help of the project:

- start a revolving fund
- improve literacy so someone can keep the accounts
- build more fish tanks
- improve fish processing
- plant trees – Saharan sands were filling in their precious ponds!

Progress is always possible

Less than two years later, Moussa Garba, Secretary of the Fishers Cooperative, proudly showed visitors one of 11 improved fish smoking ovens constructed with the help of the local fisheries service.

“The old ovens used a lot of wood, and let in sand and dust,” he explained. “The modern oven takes 30 to 40 kilograms of fish and is closed, so it keeps the heat in and the sand out.”

The improved ovens smoke the fish more evenly, and the fish fetch a higher price, up to CFAF 30 000 (US\$47) a carton, instead of only CFAF 20 000 (US\$31).

Fish production increased from 68.6 tonnes in 2000 to 125 tonnes in 2002, thanks to new fish tanks. Between Tafouka and the creeping Sahara, villagers have planted 12'600 acacia trees. The accounts of the revolving fund show, in neatly written columns, that 34 fishers and 34 business people have borrowed money so far and ploughed back CFAF'330'000 (US\$520) in interest alone into the fund. Soon, the villagers will show their accounts to a credit and savings institution as proof that they are ready for bigger things.

Tackling malnutrition

Mama Shatu, a village mother, said she is inspired by the progress she has seen in the community in so short a time. “We women want to learn how to prepare fish for our children,” she said as she sat in the doorway of her house. “Now we feed them millet porridge or rice – but they don't eat vegetables, and as for fruit, well, we'd have to buy that. The older children make themselves a snack after school, but we really need to feed the younger children better.”



Women in Tafouka, the Niger, take part in a village meeting.

“We... spent a whole week in this village talking to them about their strengths and weaknesses, instead of the usual half-hour filling in a questionnaire.”

Talatou Harouna
Service Chief, Fisheries Management
Government of the Niger



Fishmongers in Niamey, the Niger take time off from work to attend an open-air literacy class.

A hunger for literacy

NIAMEY, the Niger – What more basic foundation for a sustainable livelihood could there be than knowing how to read and write? Yet 90 percent of the Niger is illiterate.

In the shade of a tree near the central market on a weekday morning, market women aged 30 to 60 sit on mats intently watching a young teacher writing on a blackboard. A Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme project to reduce poverty among fishmongers starts with the alphabet in two

local languages, Djerma and Zerma. Only literate women will be able to manage the accounts of a project revolving fund.

Adama Zakari, a widow who cares for two orphans, takes precious time away from her market stall to attend classes. One of the oldest students, she insisted in a strong voice to a visitor: “I'm not too old. I can learn.”



Organizing to be heard in Benin's main fishing

USERS
FORMED GROUPS AND
JOINED NEGOTIATIONS
ON A MAJOR PORT UPGRADE

COTONOU, Benin – When a major industrial country offered to pay to upgrade the busy but basic fishing port here, it expected that the details would be worked out in routine government-to-government talks. The newly formed fishing community associations had other ideas.

FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme, which has its regional office not far from the port, had arrived the year before with an offer to support the community with a small project. Representatives of more than 4 000 port users decided after a long, facilitated discussion that the community would welcome help in building its capacity to organize the different professions in the port – fishers, scalers, processors, fishmongers, boat builders and others – so they could have greater political clout and improve their lives.

20

Change was in the air in Benin. The national government was decentralizing power to local level and the fishing community wanted to be ready. The foreign-financed port upgrade proved to be a test case.

Scalers clean fish at Cotonou Port, Benin.



Small-scale fishers depend on outboard motors – and on those who maintain them.

A non-governmental organization, Oxfam Quebec, provided management and organizational training so that the groups could be constituted and run properly. The stage was set.

Different priorities

“The donor was interested in port infrastructure, while the government wanted research labs,” recalled Eustache Allaro, president of the Administrative Council of Cotonou Port. “But the user community, especially the women fishmongers and processors, wanted an ice plant and cold storage rooms since spoilage is quite high in the heat.”

“We had three intense days of negotiations with the government and donor,” he said. “We won a small battle in being able to participate, and we influenced certain decisions.”

At the local level, there are many battles to be fought as well.

Eugenie Boko-Vou, a fishmonger, tells of problems with the market where she sells her wares. “It is not a well-run market and sometimes we are driven out because they don't like the smell and we must sell in the street,” she said.

“Before, it was everyone for themselves, but now when we go to those in authority at least we are speaking as a group.”

The Association of Women Fishmongers also brings order to the landing beach, where rogue traders and unscrupulous



fishers cheat women as they try to buy and sell fish. As part of the FAO Programme's strategy to promote networks of grassroots institutions, the women's group was encouraged to form alliances with other groups of port users. They now send a representative to meetings of the National Association of Benin Fisheries.

Synergy between livelihoods projects

Akakdovi Anani, who has fished out of the port for 25 years, described one of his biggest concerns: industrial boats that damage his equipment at sea, then refuse to pay compensation. The Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme sponsored an experimental fisheries patrol project in distant Guinea (See Poachers routed by community patrols, page 16) that could well serve as a model for Benin.

Another issue that is constantly discussed in West African fishing communities is the lack of access to credit. Often banks feel that the risks of getting involved with microcredit outweigh the possible benefits. Yet, a visit to Cotonou Port shows surprising amounts of money being advanced to finance fishing expeditions – and being paid back.

"The fishers need money to buy petrol for their outboard motors and supplies to go fishing," said Veronique Kpongou, being interviewed and counting out money at the same time. "I finance them for 15 days for CFAF 20'000 (US\$30) and then have first right to buy the fish on their return."

"But I need far more credit. I want CFAF 5 million (US\$8'000) over one or two years," she said. "I have 190 members who can pay back CFAF 20 000 a month each."

Are you listening, bankers?

Repairing nets in Cotonou Port, Benin.



A fishmonger carries fish to market.



Landing the catch.

“We had three intense days of negotiations with the government and donor. We won a small battle in being able to participate, and we influenced certain decisions.”

Eustache Allaro
President, Administrative Council of Cotonou Port



Co-managing natural resources

VILLAGERS LOSE
THEIR RIGHT TO HUNT,
AND STRUGGLE
TO FIND NEW LIVELIHOODS



A villager supplements his income by making furniture from liana, a forest creeper.



One way that villagers who live in the park diversify their livelihoods is by raising pigs.

22

CONKOUATI-DOULI NATIONAL PARK, the Congo – When this remote half-million-hectare area on the Atlantic coast became a park in 1999, 2 000 inhabitants of a cluster of fishing villages suddenly found themselves forbidden to hunt game, a traditional source of additional food and revenue. The loss came with an opportunity: to learn to co-manage the park with the authorities and to influence policies, regulations and land use.

Meanwhile, villagers had to diversify their livelihoods: possibilities include crab fishing, vegetable farming, furniture production and perhaps tourism, one day when park facilities are built.

FAO's Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme acted as a facilitator, bringing together the different players

and strengthening the capacity of the community to take up its new management role. The application of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries in the park's marine zone, with its endangered sea turtles, is expected to set a standard for all of West Africa.

Give and take

"We meet every six months with the village committees," said Park Manager Grégoire Bonassidi. "We discuss which zones will be for agriculture, which for conservation."

"We decided together to ban the hunting of sea turtles," he said. "It didn't affect villagers' livelihoods since it didn't have commercial value. They were hunting them for sport."

The fishing community seems to have risen to the challenge of co-managing the vast park. "The villagers were satisfied with the outcome of the sea turtle talks," said Alertin Cogeren Tiaba-Tchibun, President of the Natural Resource Management Committee. "On land-use zones, we talked, we argued, we compromised"

Share good ideas

A more pressing concern is how villagers will make an adequate living now that they cannot hunt gazelle and porcupine and sell the meat. "We expect that a solution will be found to the cutting of our nets by the industrial boats,



especially since the boats are fishing illegally in the park,” he said, echoing complaints by small-scale fishers heard across West Africa (See *Poachers routed by community patrols*, page 16).

As part of the sustainable livelihoods approach, villagers are being encouraged to forge partnerships with local research institutes and non-governmental organizations to solve problems, such as attacks of pests and diseases, as they plant new crops and try new ways to earn a living.

Eugène Bagamboula, national coordinator for the Programme, urged a village committee during a recent visit to share farming techniques and good ideas with other villages. “I don’t have any money to give out,” he told them. “The project can set up a demonstration so you can see how new things work. But you have to share expertise among yourselves. You have a right to know what other villages are doing.”



Preparing food.



A fisher repairs his net in Conkouati-Douli National Park, the Congo.

“We decided together to ban the hunting of sea turtles.”

Grégoire Bonassidi
Park Manager



Checking a fish trap in the Congo.





FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme
RSU.USR@sflp-pmedp.firstnet.bj

RICHARD COUTTS
Coordinator, Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme
richard.coutts@fao.org
International Institutions and Liaison Service
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome, Italy

BENOÎT HOREMANS
Team Leader
Benoit.Horemans@sflp-pmedp.firstnet.bj
KYRIAKOS KOURKOULIOTIS
Information – Communication Officer
Kyriakos.KourkoulIotis@sflp-pmedp.firstnet.bj
Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme
Regional Support Unit
01 BP 1369
Cotonou, Benin
RSU.USR@sflp-pmedp.firstnet.bj

www.fao.org
www.sflp.org

Busy beach scene in Moree, Ghana,
as a large fishing canoe arrives with its catch.