Empowerment of a Fishermen Community: An Alternative Roadmap

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Co-management has become more widely recognized as an alternative fisheries management strategy to the centralized government management approach. It is, however, not an easy task for many coastal fishermen to take part in co-management of coastal resources. In order to do this, empowerment or “a process through which people become strong enough to participate within, share in the control of and influence, events and institutions affecting their lives” is needed.

Amid such recent trends involving Southeast Asian small-scale fishermen, the Penang Inshore Fishermen’s Welfare Association (PIFWA) has indicated its intention to participate in decisions on the protection and management of coastal resources. In this presentation, the evolution of activities of PIFWA as an alternative way of empowerment of small-scale fishing communities is shown.

Evolution of PIFWA’s Activities: A Road Map of Empowerment

1) Formation of PIFWA

PIFWA is the first organization in Malaysia created through the initiative of small-scale fishermen. The operations of Penang small-scale fishermen have the following features in common: they fish alone in boats equipped with outboard motors under 40 hp; they time their operations according to tidal flows; they follow customary rules so as not to compete with other fishermen; and they sell their catches to certain brokers. Many of these small-scale fishermen experience dangerous conditions created by trawler encroachment into their fishing areas.

In the second half of the 1980s, the monopolization of resources by trawlers operating in inshore areas troubled Penang small-scale fishermen. At that time, fishermen were isolated from one another, but Mr. B (an ethnic Indian), a local researcher from a nongovernmental organization (NGO), listened to complaints from individual fishermen. In 1988, with Mr. B’s help, seven fishermen formed an activities committee, and in November 1994, the Penang Inshore Fishermen’s Welfare Association (PIFWA) was launched.

PIFWA aims to “protect fisheries resources and promote a sustainable fishing industry,” and its objectives are (a) building friendly relationships among inshore fishermen; (b) strengthening cooperation among Penang inshore fishermen; (c) stating opinions on, discussing, and solving problems relating to the welfare of inshore fishermen; and (d) maintaining and expanding traditional fishing activities. PIFWA’s activities are (a) gaining awareness of the problems that inshore fishermen face, (b) listening to complaints, (c) sending letters to relevant agencies, (d) sending statements to newspapers, (e) having representatives meet with the responsible agencies, (f) providing information on problems relating to inshore fishermen, and (g) showing others how inshore fishermen live.
2) Protest against Shrimp Farms

Friction with trawlers is still a serious problem to small-scale fishermen, but a matter that is taken even more seriously by Penang’s small-scale fishermen is the cutting down of mangroves to create coastal shrimp ponds, which began in the mid 1990s. PIFWA ran a campaign against coastal shrimp pond construction by sending numerous letters to the heads of the relevant authorities, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, appealing for action to prevent the destruction of mangroves for the purpose of shrimp farming, but the campaign ultimately failed. However, PIFWA made it clear that the government could not ignore the opinions of small-scale fishermen, and this was probably the first step in involving fishermen in determining policy on coastal resources. The mangrove planting PIFWA conducted during this campaign became the pillar of their activities, and mangroves were eventually planted along the coast of Penang, which was their home base.

By November 1998, about 600 inshore fishermen were PIFWA members, and 18 commissioners had been chosen as representatives in each of the jetty areas. When a problem arose, fishermen would visit their local PIFWA representatives, then would meet and talk with the advisor, Mr. B, and the association president, Mr. S (ethnic Malay). As a practical matter, fishermen were generally too busy for meetings or could not afford to attend PIFWA events. Much of the PIFWA management was conducted by Mr. B, which meant a high dependency on the NGO that employed Mr. B.

3) New Office, New Operational System

In 1999, PIFWA moved from Penang to Peninsular Malaysia to reach out to the relatively isolated fishing communities there. Here PIFWA set up a new operational system in which the coast was divided into six zones with one leader in each zone. These leaders formed a PIFWA steering committee that met once every two weeks to solve issues raised by fishermen. In this way PIFWA began making decisions based on consultations between representatives of fishermen and Mr. B. By this time, the number of PIFWA members had decreased to 22, mainly because PIFWA had changed its policy and now spoke out on behalf of small-scale fishermen regardless of membership status. During this period, PIFWA focused on three activities: (1) monitoring illegal invasions by trawlers into the inshore zone (2) rehabilitation of environmentally degraded River Kerian, and (3) mangrove planting.

4) Toward a Self-Sustained and Cooperative Approach

The tsunami caused by the Sumatran earthquake in December 2004 struck the coast of Penang and affected subsequent PIFWA activities. Because the coastal mangroves attenuated the energy from the tsunami and saved lives, the government recognized the value of PIFWA’s mangrove plantings and changed its attitude toward the organization.

In May 2005, Mr. B left PIFWA, and PIFWA’s members started managing the organization. Mangrove planting has become the major activity that financially supports the organization and has enabled it to be independent from NGOs. The fishermen are collaborating with companies who are interested in having their employees participate in mangrove planting as part of their corporate social responsibility activities. As of December 2008, PIFWA had 36 member fishermen and employed one staff officer.
PIFWA’s approach to the government when addressing an issue has also changed. In the early stages, PIFWA would write to the head of the authority or issue an immediate press release, but the new president Mr. I makes an effort to have a face-to-face meeting with the officer in charge of the issue. This bottom-up approach has helped PIFWA establish a better relationship with the government.

Concluding Remarks

In its early years, PIFWA was supported in many aspects by an NGO, but the fishermen eventually strengthened PIFWA and became independent. Since the late 1990s PIFWA has emphasized the importance of mangrove reforestation, and this has enabled the organization to be both financially and organizationally independent of an NGO. PIFWA is currently building a cooperative relationship with the government to enable problem solving with small-scale fishermen. By monitoring illegal invasions by trawlers into the inshore zone and pollution of River Kerian and by protesting against deforestation by shrimp farm construction, PIFWA has shown that its members can take actions for coastal conservation. In this way, PIFWA is using its unique influence of empowerment.

Notes

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