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## Investigating systems of fisheries access along the River Benue in Nigeria

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### · Introduction

Fishing plays an important role in the communities living along the Upper River Benue, Nigeria. Economically fish provides an important source of food and income for both men and women and fishing has an important social and cultural position in the villages of the river side. Decreased flood levels and modern fishing techniques have caused concern about the sustainability of these livelihoods. This concern prompted a participatory investigation of access to fishing to understand the fishing systems along the River Benue. This paper describes the findings of this study which was conducted as part of the Traditional Management of Artisanal Fisheries (TMAF) in North East Nigeria project.

### Background

The River Benue is a major tributary of the River Niger: it rises in the mountains of central Cameroon and flows south-west for 1500 kilometres before joining the River Niger in central Nigeria. The river consists of a series of braided channels of different sizes which meander across the floodplain. The floodplain also contains seasonally inundated depressions, known as *fadama*. These provide important fishery resources, which are exploited after the flood has receded.

The Bwatiye people have a long history along the River Benue in Nigeria. They claim to be first settlers of the Upper River Benue Valley. The Fulani arrived in the Upper River Benue valley during their *Jihad* (holy war) at the beginning of the 19th century. The Fulani

imposed an administrative structure based in the current state capital, Yola, and used this to collect taxes and/or dues such as forced labour, from the Bwatiye people. British colonists arrived in the Upper River Benue valley at the beginning of the twentieth century and worked with the collaboration of the Fulani hegemony to colonise the region. During the British colonisation, a modern administrative structure was developed in parallel to the Fulani administration. Since Nigerian independence in 1960, this has evolved as the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Under, the 1992 Inland Fisheries Decree, the management and regulation of access to the fisheries comes under the jurisdiction of the State Commissioner for Agriculture (in this case, Adamawa State). However, evidence from sample surveys indicates that there are many different systems of access to fishing in operation, many of which do not conform to the system stipulated by the State Fisheries Department. Despite the ultimate aim of both the State Fisheries Department and the local fishing communities to sustain fishing livelihoods along the river, there are instances where the local fisheries management systems are subject to dispute and/or conflict.

The aim of the investigation was to understand the fisheries access along the Upper River Benue and contribute to a community-based fisheries management plan. This article describes the participatory approach used to understand systems of access to fishing rights and their evolution in a series of five village appraisals. The sequence of the participatory techniques that were used are described using examples from the appraisal of Njoboliyo village. The second part of the paper discusses the lessons learned from the five villages which

participated in the study; Geriyo, Rugange, Njoboliyo, Worro-Bokki and Bilachi-Bwatiye.

### **Investigating systems of fisheries access**

On arriving in each village, the research team met with the village head and requested that he call a meeting of the village elders in order to explain the research mission and request the village's participation. By working through the village head and meeting with the elders, the team was able to follow traditional protocol.

Furthermore, the team used the opportunity to discuss the village history with the elders. They were keen to explain their history and believed that it was important that the key events in the village were recorded. The process worked well as an 'ice-breaker': the elders were able to talk about something of which they were proud, while the research team was able to demonstrate their genuine interest in the village. The village history provided a useful introduction to the community and enabled common, temporal, points of reference to be established.

The elders were also asked to explain the administrative hierarchy of the community. They spent an afternoon consulting, and then provided a detailed explanation of the clans in the village, their leaders and their roles. The research team asked the elders if a group of youths could draw a diagram of this hierarchy. The youths drew the hierarchy diagram independently of the elders. This confirmed the

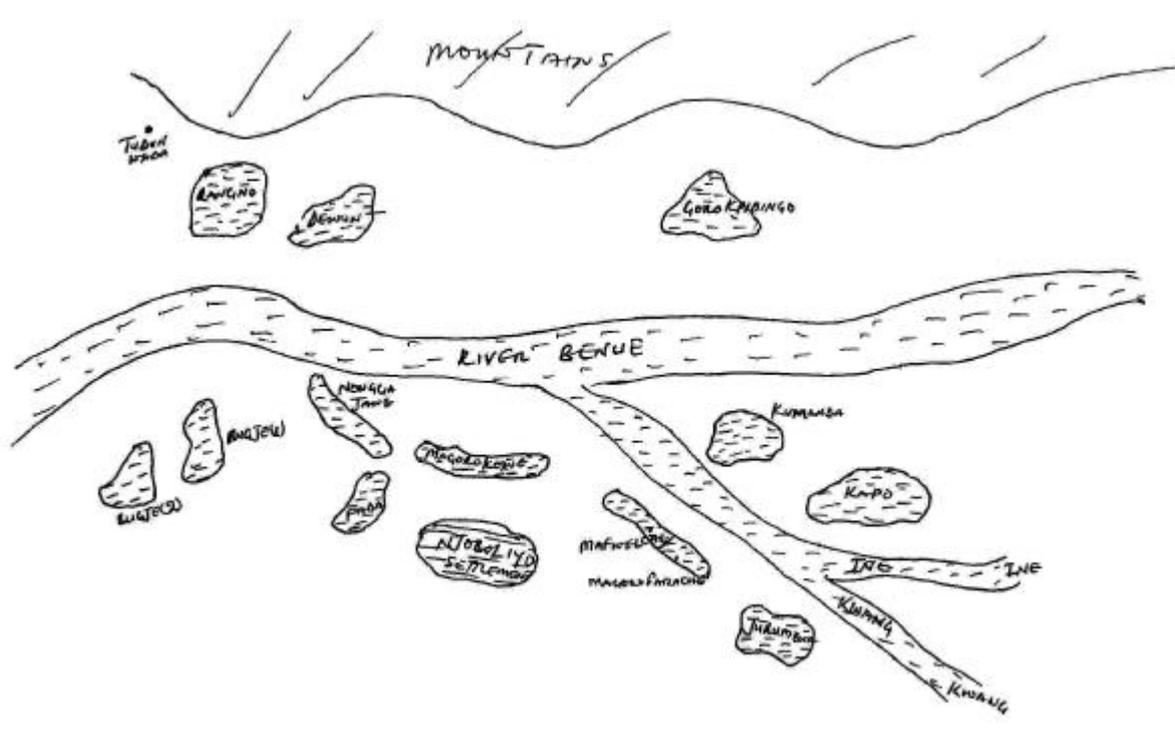
roles of the key members of the village, which had been described by the elders.

Having learned about the basic administration of the village, the research team went on to inquire about the administration of fishing within the community. The community believed that fishing was an important part of their heritage and were eager that the team understood how access to fishing worked in Njoboliyo.

A young men's group drew a map of Njoboliyo and the water bodies surrounding it which has been reproduced in Figure 1. The map indicates the water resources which the community relies on for their livelihoods. The water bodies to the north of the village are associated with the River Benue, while those to the east of the village including pools and *fadamas* are associated with the Ine and Kwang tributaries of the Benue. Discussion around the map revealed that the floodplain is also an important resource as it provides grazing and farm land. The forests on the mountains to the north of the River Benue provide some fuelwood and hunting opportunities.

The group explained that access to the River Benue is open to all. However, a number of lakes are privately owned, as are the floodplains which are mostly used as farmlands. The owners of the lakes control their usage and decide when fishing in each lake is open to the village. Before the 'open season', individuals can fish for a fee at the discretion of the owner. Fishers are usually expected to acknowledge the owner of the lake which they have fished with a part of the catch.

**Figure 1. Map of water resources drawn by a young men's group, May 1995**



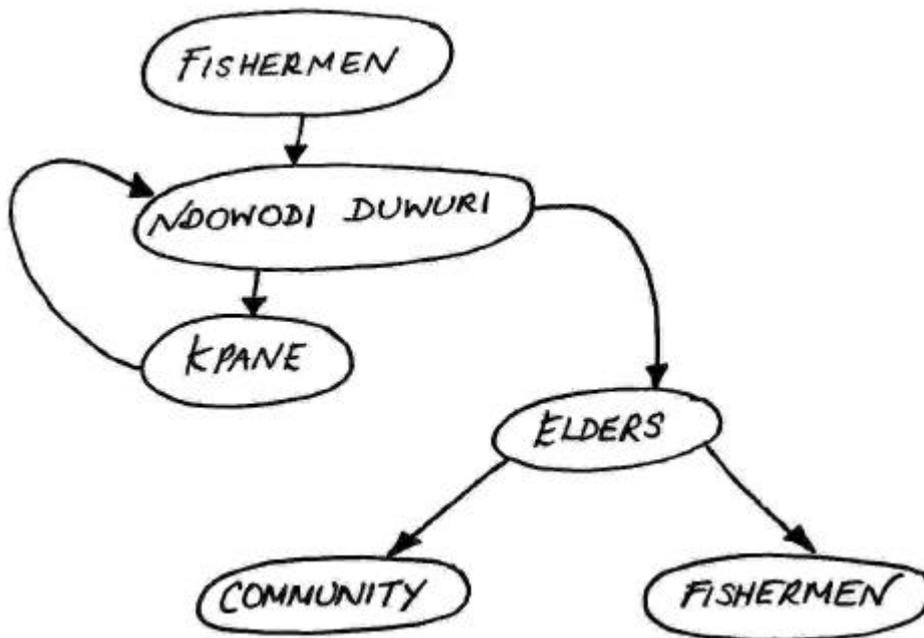
Throughout the village appraisal, careful attention was paid to discussion of conflicts or disputes. Towards the end of the study, and when a rapport had been established with the community, it was possible to hold discussions with community leaders about conflicts and problems in the community. The various conflicts and disputes which emerged were used as the basis for discussions about how these had arisen, and if, and how, they had been resolved.

Several conflicts emerged from the study in Njoboliyo, many of which concerned access to natural resources and the power to control access to them. One of the most important conflicts concerned control of the Bugje, Rangno and Dewun lakes, which the elders described using the conflict resolution chart in Figure 2. The lakes are owned by the Duwuri

clan, and two brothers in the family both wanted the lakes as their own personal property. The brothers consulted the head of their clan, the Ndowodi Duwuri who discussed the problem with other Clan heads and elders in the village. Oracles were then consulted and the lakes were then divided into two portions for the separate ownership of the two battling brothers.

In recent years, conflicts over ownership of water bodies have occurred with outsiders. These have arisen where outsiders, usually rich individuals from the cities, have bought land which has included a seasonal waterbody. The community have disputed their rights to the fish in the waterbody and several such cases are awaiting settlement through court cases. The community felt less able to draw a chart for these conflicts.

**Figure 2. Conflict resolution process chart redrawn from the discussion with the village elders, May 1995** This shows the process by which the brothers' dispute was referred to the clan elders, to the elders and ultimately to the oracles.



### • Lessons learnt

#### Can the participatory process be manipulated?

Almost everybody in each village was keen to participate in the participatory appraisal of their village. This willingness can be partly attributed to earlier visits by the research team in the previous two years. The village communities knew about the TMAF project and supported the basic aim that there should be a better understanding of fishing livelihoods along the river.

Although the team made it clear that any development initiatives were not within the scope of the project, there were, not surprisingly, some expectations that the research may result in some development investment. It is also likely that this response originates from the community's history of co-operation with European missionaries. Through this collaboration, the youths had received an English education which was

frequently mentioned as an empowering and valuable development in the community.

Most of the case study villages had been included in a sample survey in 1993. Villagers told us how much they preferred the participatory approach. They felt that the 'every tenth house' approach meant that many of them did not get their chance to speak. They wanted to share their views because access to fishing resources is an important topic and they wanted their views to be represented. Although this is a very positive endorsement of the participatory approach, we were always aware of how the approach can be manipulated by the more powerful in the community. For example, within the community, various groups were most confident when discussing issues which they believed they knew the most about: the elders preferred to talk about administration, the youth about their community development work and the women about fisheries marketing.

This meant that most of discussions concerning the administration of fishing were directed to the village elders. The research

team needed considerable diplomacy in order to triangulate the details of fishing rights, especially in villages where there was some tension between different groups over access to fishing. The team needed to be careful not to upset the elders by overtly cross checking their information with that provided by other groups. The research team would explain that they did not want to trouble the elders to show them the water bodies of the village and would ask if a group of young men could direct the team around them. This provided a means of discussing access issues with other groups.

### Can every issue be triangulated?

The detail with which each community explained the development of their administrative structures and procedures not only illustrates the value and the depth of local knowledge, it also shows how the participatory approach has facilitated a highly valued record of the village history. The level of detail provided suggests that the research team has not simply been used to legitimise the claims of an interest group, although it is impossible to consolidate local information outside of the village. For example, it is unlikely that the records of the court cases mentioned during the discussions of conflict would be available to examine. This sort of problem confronts the issue of triangulation of information outside the village, since its utility to the village community far exceeds that to anybody else.

### Can rapport be sustained?

Despite the diplomacy needed to discuss certain issues within the study villages, a genuine rapport was developed between villages and the research team. Many of the researchers were permanently employed by the State and Federal Departments of Fisheries and developed an enormous respect for the village communities. The relationships developed were a key part of the research process and are crucial to the success of any future initiative. However, it has proved difficult to ensure that a sense of this mutual co-operation and the depth of information provided by communities themselves is included in project reports.

## Conclusion

A sequence of participatory research tools has proved valuable in investigating issues of access to fishing rights. They have been used to reveal the complexity and detail of the systems of fisheries access along the Upper River Benue and have provided useful information for future fisheries development initiatives.

The participatory process has not been simple or easy to use. Pitfalls do exist, and avoiding them has required careful thought and preparation. The next challenge is to sustain the rapport established with the fishing communities and use it to build a participatory process of fisheries management and development.

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### NOTES

The goal of the TMAF project was to examine the need and potential for designing a more effective management system for the fisheries of sub-Saharan Savannah region. TMAF was funded by the UK Overseas Development Administration Project No R5471 from 1993 to 1996. It was conducted by the University of Portsmouth (UK) in collaboration with the University of Maiduguri (Nigeria) and the Federal University of Technology, Yola, Nigeria.

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