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## Getting fisherfolk off the hook: an exploratory PRA in Southern India

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### • Introduction

Fishers in India are largely unorganised. Where they are grouped together, it is usually in small numbers and their associations are rarely strong enough to ensure their voices are heard. Yet fishers live with many challenges: occupational, seasonal, geographic, social and economic and have not used collective bargaining to ameliorate their conditions. Many claim that they live with the hope that there are as many good fish remaining in the sea as ever came out of it.

Fishing can be lucrative, yet many fishers are poor because of the exploitation which has become so institutionalised that the fishers often do not realise it for themselves. According to a survey of Indian small fisheries, for every hundred rupees worth of fish bought by consumers, only one-third reaches the traditional fishers, the remainder goes to merchant intermediaries.

The Tri-Sea Fishermen Union at Nagercoil works for the welfare of fishers in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India. The union approached the Gandhigram Rural Institute's PRA Unit to assist it conduct a three-day workshop to study the fishing livelihoods in Kanyakumari District. This paper reports the outcome of the PRA workshop which was attended by 25 men and women engaged in different fishing trades.

The objectives of the workshop were:

- to study the socio-economic and occupational problems of the fishers;
- to analyse the factors that underpin these problems; and,

- to elicit the views of fishers on ways to ameliorate their working and living conditions.

To study the livelihoods, a number of PRA exercises were completed, including: a trade inventory, preference ranking, key problem analysis, seasonal, case and time use analysis, semi-structured interviewing, focal group discussions and causal diagram. The findings from some of these exercises are discussed below.

### • PRA findings

#### Trade inventory and risk ranking

During preliminary discussion with Trade Union Officials and the fishers, it became clear that there are many trades in the fisheries sector and that each has its own problems. Thus, the PRA team decided to start by taking stock of the various trades in which fishers are involved. A trade inventory, an adapted form of a resource inventory, was used.

The 25 fishers were divided into two groups to develop inventories of fishing trades. Each group was given cards and pens and was asked to list the various trades in which fishing communities are involved. When both groups had finished their lists, they were presented in a plenary session. Comparison of the lists showed the nineteen sea-related trades in which the fishing community are engaged.

Split into two groups again, the participants ranked the trades according to the severity of problems faced by each. High risk trades are those that face the most challenges with regard

to the labour involved and threats to the survival of fishers.

There was heated debate at the beginning of this exercise as everyone present argued that his/her trade was in the high risk category. Finally, however, the groups completed their ranking and presented them in a plenary. Their lists were similar, with only two trades in varying positions. In the plenary session, consensus was reached and the final ranking of trades prepared in the plenary session is presented in Box 1.

**BOX 1**  
**RISK RANKING OF FISHING TRADES**

- Deep-sea divers: fishers who dive (down to 30 metres) to collect shells;
- Trap fishing using locally made traps to catch expensive and deep dwelling fish;
- Hook fishers who catch fish on a line/fishing rod travelling on a catamaran;
- Country boat (Vallam) fishers who catch fish using nets thrown from a country boat;
- Shore trawling: fishers who catch fish with nets by standing on rocks in the sea;
- Mechanised fishing fleet employees: salaried workers who work off-shore;
- Deep-sea trawler fishing employees;
- Loaders who load sand onto ships;
- Hand net-makers;
- Carpenters (wood cutters) who cut the right size and quality wood for making catamarans;
- Country boat carpenters
- Carpenters who build boats;
- Head load fish monger;
- Cycle load fish monger;
- Lorry load fish monger;
- Ice-plant fish processing workers;
- Fish processing workers (salting).
- Fish processing workers (making fish pickles); and,
- Auctioneers.

Boxes 2 - 4 highlight in more detail the risks faced by three of the 19 trades. They show the real physical and economic hardships that are suffered in some trades, particularly in diving which requires physical fitness, lots of luck and learned skills in reading the currents to find a good harvest.

**BOX 2**

**RISK ANALYSIS OF FISHING TRADES:  
DEEP SEA DIVING**

'When we plunge into the sea, we have to go very deep. We dive with two flat plates tied to the soles of our feet. We wear goggles but do not have an oxygen cylinder or fins that would enable us to swim faster. The maximum time we can normally be under to harvest lobsters, oysters, scallops and clams is two minutes. Timing is very important. Any disturbance or distraction might cost our life. We get back after spending nine to ten hours in the sea. We go to the private traders for selling the catch. The income is not stable. It is nothing but a gamble and depends on luck.'

**BOX 3**

**RISK ANALYSIS OF FISHING TRADES:  
HEAD LOAD VENDING**

Head load fish mongers buy fish from auctioneers in the morning. The fish can be paid for immediately, or in the evening when the fish cost 5 per cent more. The auctioneers prefer instant payment, but most head load fish mongers buy fish on credit and accept the 5 per cent interest for the twelve hour loan. Whether the fish is sold or not during the day, the price has to be paid in the same evening or the monger will not be allowed to buy fish the next day.

The mongers carry the heavy fish on their heads. The dirty water seeps from the fish basket and makes their bodies stink. The mongers become 'untouchables' in buses. When they wait for the bus with their fish-baskets, the buses pass through at high speed without stopping.

**BOX 4**

**RISK ANALYSIS OF FISHING TRADES:  
ICE-PLANT WORKERS**

Girls are mostly employed for cleaning, cutting and packaging fish in ice-plants. They work every day in the month and have money deducted from their salaries if they are absent. The working hours are long, 11 - 12 hours per day. Ice plant workers are given special clothing to wear but many develop skin diseases. They risk electrocution in the plant and have to carry heavy fish (25 to 28 kg) through a cutting machine. Some workers get hurt while cutting the fish in the machine.

The risk analysis enabled the fishers in each trade to explore their key problems. In the course of the discussion, one of the participants commented that he had never thought of his work with so much seriousness in the past. A fisherwoman in the group stated that the discussions enabled fisherfolk to collectively share their experiences and the problems involved in their trades.

### Seasonality analysis

Fishing is subject to weather conditions and is highly seasonal. It was therefore decided to study the season-wise activities and problems of the fishing trades. The participants were divided into four groups of six members each, based on their trades: Group 1 - Communities involved in fishing, Group 2 - Community involved in occupations relating to fishing,

Group 3 - Community involved in fish vending and Group 4 - Community involved in fish processing.

Each group was asked to draw a seasonal calendar and identified the activities occurring in each month. Extracts from the calendars drawn by Groups 1 and 4 are shown in Tables 1 and 2. The exercise confirmed that fishing, and all the related occupations, are highly seasonal. Fishers have surplus money during the peak season. They borrow money during the slack season but have to deal with the high interest rates charged by local money lenders. Many fishing trades are inter-related, a poor catch affects the fish processors who preserve the fish (compare Tables 1 and 2). Much work is intermittent, such as that of carpenters and net makers.

**Table 1. An extract from a seasonal trade calendar as produced by fishers**

Month	Diving	Trap Fishing	Hook Fishing	Fishing on Country Boat	Shore Trawling	Mechanised Boat Employees	Deep-sea Trawler Employees
<b>Jan</b>	Harvest scallops, shells	Fishing season, low catch, low income	Fishing season, fairly good income, savings possible	Fishing season; savings possible	Fishing season; income just to meet the expenses	Fishing season; fairly good income	Off-season; expenses more
<b>Mar</b>	Employment is at peak. Earn fairly well. No need to borrow, pay back debts.	Fishing season, low catch, low income	recession	almost no work	good catch possible. debt redemption plus savings	moderate catch, not enough to meet expenses, borrowing	Off-season; expenses more
<b>May</b>	the advent of mid-May - sea faring stops	off-season, no occupation	off-season, no occupation, borrowing	moderate catch, expenses more	off season, borrow	good catch, good income, savings possible	fishing possible on all days - good income and savings
<b>Nov</b>	start sea faring after 15th	season begins - fairly good income, investment required for equipment	good catch, good income, pay back debts, savings	fishing possible, problem free life	moderate catch	off-season, expenses more, borrow	fishing possible on all days - good income and savings

**Table 2. An extract from a seasonal trade calendar as produced by fish processing**

Month	Ice-plant fish processing	Fish processing by salting	Fish processing by making fish pickles
Jan	Employment available every day but fixed salary	Fish available in plenty; fish salting possible; work is there; poor income	fish-pickle making in full swing; good income - equal expenses
Aug	full employment, over-time, savings possible	fish available in plenty, salting possible, savings possible	employment for a few days, inadequate income, problems with money lenders
Oct	full employment, over-time, savings possible	Fish salting possible, sometimes loss occurs due to rain	full employment, good income, high expenses, redemption of debt
Dec	not very active business, fixed salary	no business, borrow	no work, borrow

## Fisherwomen

A focus group discussion employing semi-structured interviewing was conducted among fisherwomen to understand the specific problems they face. All the women participated in the discussion.

Women are mainly involved head load fish mongering and the fish processing industries. These are poorly paid positions and are usually temporary assignments. Women may also discrimination in wage payments: even if the work done by male and female workers is of the same quantity and quality, women will usually be paid less. Yet the income women generate is key in almost all families, ensuring that children are fed and the luckier ones can attend school.

Women fish mongers who head load fish suffer from the little income that this business generates. If men also get a meagre wage when catches are low, there can be much tension in the household. To bring up the family, wives and husbands often have to borrow money, but do not usually tell each other about their credit arrangements. When money is short, young daughters start work processing fish in the ice-plants. Workers in most of these factories are prone to occupational diseases and these affect their marriage prospects.

## • Planning

The workshop aimed to learn the views of the participating fisherfolk on how to improve their working and living conditions. Given the wealth of information shared during the workshop, this was not completed. However, the participants made thirteen recommendations for improving their livelihoods. Examples of these are listed below:

- Deep-sea divers have the highest risk profession. The government may consider supplying oxygen cylinders and other protective equipment for deep-sea divers at a subsidised rate.
- The fishers who go deep-sea diving or trap fishing encounter many accidents and sometimes die at sea. With a view to helping the family of the diseased fishers, the government has introduced an accident insurance scheme, by which the premium is paid by the government. There is often much delay in the payment of these claims and this needs to be investigated and rectified.
- Head load fish mongers need to organise a credit co-operative society exclusively for women. This would help them to negotiate more successfully with money lenders.
- Boat owners only give 35 per cent of the catch to the workers who have toiled on their boats. The Tri-Sea Fishermen Union should try and negotiate better terms for the workers.

- The Tri-Sea Fishermen Union needs to work more closely with fishers to impart greater financial skills in budgeting and calculating interest rates with money lenders.
- The Tri-Sea Fishermen Union can play an important role in negotiating with the ice-plant owners to fix a fair wage and reasonable working hours for the girls working in ice-plants. The plant owners should arrange for regular medical check-ups for the ice-plant workers.
- With a view to eradicating the merchant intermediaries' domination of fish markets and unfair price fixation for fish catches, there is need for government regulation of fish markets.

Three years have passed since this workshop was conducted. Since then, a group of women have organised themselves into a self-help group. Some have started a fish pickling business, others have used their organisation to negotiate with ice plant workers for better wages and conditions. But there are severe local, political threats to improving the conditions of the fishers. They are not off the hook, but they are on the way to being released.

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<b>NOTES</b>
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