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## Participatory group planning of a fish preservation project

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#### • Introduction

There are many fishing villages along the shores of Douala, the port city of Cameroon. Youpwe is the principal fishing village, close to Douala. In Youpwe, men, women and youths are employed as fishers, fishsmokers and fish traders. Fishing is an important industry because Youpwe is the main trading point for fresh and dry fish, and the major supplier of fish to the large towns in Cameroon, such as Douala, Yaounde, Nkongsamba, Bamenda and Baroussam.

Fishers go out to fish in dug-out or custom-built canoes. They carry crude boxes, filled with sawdust and iceblocks, to keep their catch fresh for longer periods. Fishsmokers may also go out to sea in canoes to catch or buy fresh fish and store it temporarily in ice or sawdust. The fishers, fishsmokers and traders can stay in the creeks, or out at sea, for days or weeks on end, depending on the catches they make. During this time, they need to keep their catch as fresh as possible, which is quite a challenge in the tropical heat.

Fishing, fish trading and fishsmoking are inter-related professions and they are faced with a common problem. How can their income be sustained when they face large losses, most commonly through the deterioration of their catch or the capsizing of their canoes? These problems brought the principle actors together in a common forum, a weekly self-help fund. They have grouped themselves in what is locally called a *Njangi*. This is a forum where members contribute small savings to a communal fund, which is then paid out to any member in the event of a heavy loss of fish.

During one of their weekly meetings, one of the members of the Njangi informed the others about FRANKLINK. FRANKLINK is a local, development oriented non-governmental organisation, concentrating on operational research for rural development. The Njangi decided to invite people from FRANKLINK to help them examine their operations, assist them in the structuring of their activities, and guide them through the conceptualisation and planning of a project.

#### • Methodology

In response, FRANKLINK planned a participatory problem identification and project concept strategy workshop. This was phased over three sessions on different meeting days as follows:

- First session - round table group discussion and problem identification;
- Second session - problem analysis with proposed solutions; and,
- Third session - visual presentation and conclusions.

During a planned visit to their regular weekend meetings, animators from FRANKLINK engaged the principle actors (fishers, fishsmokers, wholesalers, bulk and retail fish traders) in an open round table discussion. This encouraged all sectors of the fishing trades to contribute. First, the fishers were asked to describe both a successful and an unsuccessful fishing trip. Then the fishsmokers were asked to highlight and identify the problems they face. They made distinctions between the problems faced by different categories of fishsmoker, for example those who catch fish and smoke it, and those who buy fresh fish and smoke it.

Next, the wholesale fish traders outlined the problems caused by handling fish in bulk, particularly if the catch is not very well smoked. This was confirmed by the retail fish traders who discussed the reactions and preferences of consumers and the prices they are prepared to pay.

After listening to the Njangi members, the facilitators listed all the problems that had been mentioned. In a second session, the group concentrated on analysing the problems that had been identified and developing solutions for them. Taking each group in turn, the fisher was asked to propose solutions to both the buyer/smoker and the buyer/wholesaler; the fishsmoker made suggestions for the fishers and bulk buyers; the bulk buyer contributed ideas to the smoker, the fisher and the retailer. Finally, the retailer proposed how to keep the final consumer satisfied, whilst also keeping the fisher, the smoker and the wholesaler in business.

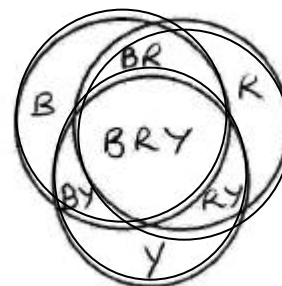
The facilitators listed all the problems which had been identified and their suggested solutions. They made three separate boards and listed the problems and the proposed solutions on each of them. The boards were placed in separate corners of the hall so that the groups could not hear each others' discussions. The facilitators allocated one corner to the fishers, who were given red cards, one to the smokers who were given black cards and the last corner to the traders who used yellow cards.

For each group, one person read out loud the problems and proposed solutions. This ensured that those who could not read were involved in the process. For each problem and proposed solution, the groups had to reflect on whether it was relevant to them and allocate cards against the problems that affected them the most.

At the end of this session, the boards were brought together and the results were amalgamated. All the cards were put on to one board. The participants were now able to see with which problems and proposed solutions they had identified themselves. They could also see which problems affected only one group of them, two groups or all of them. The problems/solutions were clustered according to

which group, or number of groups, they affected and were transferred to a diagram, which has been copied in Box 1. This formed the focus of the third session.

**BOX 1**  
**DIAGRAM SHOWING RESULTS OF PROBLEMS/SOLUTIONS EXERCISE**



B = black cards (smokers)  
R = red cards (fishers)  
Y = yellow cards (traders)

The diagram reflects how many problems were identified as affecting only fishers (R only), only smokers (B only) and only traders (Y only). The diagram enables the problems that affect different combinations of fishers, smokers and traders to be calculated. For example, the area BR represents problems/solutions that affect only fishers and smokers, while the central area (BRY) reflects problems that are common to all three groups.

### Analysis of the results

The diagram showed that about 70 per cent of the problems identified were of communal concern to all the groups represented. These problems centred on issues of preservation and fish conditioning. On the basis of this exercise, the participants came to realise that the fishers, smokers and traders each face the problem of fish conditioning and preservation, but from different angles:

- If the fisher can preserve the catch for longer periods of time, the fish will be of higher quality and will command higher prices. This can reduce the frequency with which s/he makes fishing trips out to sea and might also reduce the amount of occupational risk involved.

- If the fish smoker can condition large quantities of fish well, and also reduce fuel consumption, large losses from deterioration can be prevented and profits will increase.
- If the trader can be assured of a steady supply of well conditioned fish, even during periods when fishing activities are normally low, the consumer will be satisfied and prepared to pay higher prices for the better quality fish.

## • Outcomes

This exercise showed that a main area of concern for the fisherfolk was the problem of preserving the catch and maintaining its quality through each step of the trade, from the harvesting, and the processing to the eventual marketing. The fisher, smoker and trader groups represented in the exercise were thus able to identify areas of communal concern.

It was agreed that a preservation and conditioning facility would be central to all sections of the trade. An outcome of the exercise was the formation of a Fish Preservation and Marketing Cooperative, comprising the fishers, fishsmokers and bulk buyers. Their objective was to procure their own canoe with an out-board engine, construct deep freezing facilities, build a fish smoking house and purchase a truck for transportation. This would ensure that fresh fish can be maintained for longer while at sea and that good quality smoked fish is available at all times.

To date, and after six months of self funded contributions, the Njangi have bought their own canoe with an outboard engine of 15 horse power. This ensures that fish reach the mainland more quickly and are of therefore of better quality. FRANKLINK helped the Njangi by drawing up a project proposal document. This outlined the participatory process, the situation as it was with no intervention, the desired situation and options for resolution of the problems. The proposal gained support and the Njangi were able to combine their self generated funds with help from local government and grant assistance from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, in Yaounde, Cameroon.

The Canada Fund is monitoring the project and, if it develops favourably, will assist in the provision of materials for the smokehouse, a shop and will provide deep freezing equipment. In addition, the Douala II Urban Council, the local authority controlling the area, have provided a free piece of land for the smoke house and sales shop. They consider the project to support the interests of the community, and would like to encourage similar group activities in other domains.

The new canoe has been named 'My Wife' and is the 'talk of the creeks' among the many fish dealers in the Youpwe fishing port. The possible intervention of the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, with the provision of materials and equipment, along with the free land donated by the local council serve to increase the validity of this project. Many who were previously sceptical about it are regretting their reticence to get involved. However, one thing is certain, everyone will ultimately benefit: the provision of regularly supplied, good quality fish will have indirect benefits for the entire locality.

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