

CHAPTER 1

Executive Summary

This report provides an assessment of the livelihoods strategies of the poor people dependent on inland fisheries in Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Vietnam. Drawing upon the results of a one-year investigation under the Project entitled “Understanding Livelihoods Dependent on Inland Fisheries”, the report analyses current poverty status, fisheries resource status and its significance, policies and institutions for fisheries management and livelihoods assets of the stakeholders in inland fisheries in the four countries. The report also discusses the trends and changes in fisheries and wetland resources. It highlights the key challenges and prospects, threats and vulnerabilities of the poor stakeholders and problems and constraints in maintaining and enhancing the livelihoods of the poor stakeholders in inland fisheries. The following reports have been prepared and are included as annexes to this Final Technical Report (FTR): 1) Synthesis Analysis Report; 2) four Country Summary Reports; 3) four Country Status Reports; and 4) four Country PRA Reports.

Confronted with one of the most challenging development goals, i.e. eliminating extreme poverty in the World, DFID and many other governments and international bodies have now focused their strategy on understanding the context in which poor people make a living; ensuring the participation of the poor (“primary stakeholders”) in identifying their needs and priorities; and contributing to demand-led technology development and adoption. Likewise, the strategy seeks to integrate research and development, and ensure the full participation and ownership by partner governments and their extension agencies, and by all parties who have an interest and influence over improving livelihoods.

With international agencies and governments now focused on pro-poor growth and on the contribution that the fisheries sector can make to overall poverty reduction, there is an urgency to ensure that management solutions clearly address the needs of the poor. More detailed understanding of the dimensions of poverty and the needs of the poor is needed if more effective programs are to be developed to address poverty and its related consequences on the poor. The captioned project is an outcome of the felt need for more livelihoods oriented research and for information on the role of fisheries in the livelihoods of poor people. The results will feed into the design of livelihoods options within a common national and international strategy for eliminating poverty. In the Mekong region as well as in Bangladesh, there are changes that place a greater emphasis on redirecting and harnessing fisheries benefits to the poorer communities. A greater understanding of poor people’s interaction with aquatic resources for their livelihoods will be a very timely contribution to targeting the poor.

Although a considerable amount of work has been done under various Programs including FMSP, most of the previous analyses were fraught with “limited coverage”. They lacked information and understanding on the livelihoods strategies and capacities of local people, and failed to understand the socio-economic, institutional and regulatory environment as well as regional and global factors that impinge upon their livelihoods. Likewise, in the past too much emphasis on scientific information on the resources and their bio-ecology has failed to recognize the social complexities and the importance of

beneficiary targeting. Despite these shortcomings, in terms of the incidence of poverty and poverty impacts measurements, the information currently available, particularly in the four study countries, provide a broad basis for assessing the level of poverty. They point to the groups or communities that are invariably poor and vulnerable to shocks. They also suggest that farmers and fishers, including women, with limited or no access to natural resources, are amongst the poorest, while the risk associated with on-farm investment can deter the poor from expanding their economic base.

It is, however, clear that to make a clear contribution to improving livelihoods outcomes for poor people programs should be designed (a) to increasing the opportunities available to individuals, groups or communities by building up their asset base; and (b) by helping ensure that the structures, institutions and processes which define people's options are working in favor of the poor to further fishery specific livelihood analysis.

Keeping these in mind, the present project was designed to fill the gaps in information and analysis that would contribute to improving livelihoods outcomes of the poor. Specifically, the purpose of the project was to characterize the poor, identify their dependence upon aquatic resources, describe the nature and status of those resources, and emphasize the vulnerabilities of the poor in relation to loss or mismanagement. Facilitated through a series of PRA workshops and discussions, through coordination among government agencies and NGOs, the project's effort resulted in all stakeholders, including the poor people, other aquatic resources users, and representatives of organizations concerned identifying and prioritizing constraints and solutions for a better livelihoods outcome in inland fisheries.

The project methodology included a comprehensive review of literature on fisheries and livelihoods. An initial planning meeting, arranged with various national partners, UK partners and the WorldFish Center research team, provided PRA guidelines, and a country profile analysis framework, including orientation to national partners on stakeholder analysis methodology, Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and PRA methods. Using general guidelines on PRA and consistent with other locally significant criteria, each country identified the set of stakeholders involved in the inland fisheries sector.

Likewise, the partners characterized their specific countries' inland fisheries using their own definitions and classification of inland ecosystems. A number of PRA sites were covered in each country. The stakeholder and resource information took into account the wide diversity of both stakeholder groups and aquatic environments.

In each country, a major part of the research activities involved a review of information from secondary sources comprising previous studies, government documents and statistics. A literature review of previous rapid livelihoods assessments carried out by the national partners in each country, reported in the Country Status Report, helped identify and assess the following: 1) the main categories of the poor, their numbers and geographic locations within each country; 2) resource inventories comprising data on inland fisheries and aquatic resources, the status, trends and threats; 3) role of inland aquatic resources in the livelihoods of rural people, where possible, by poverty levels; 4) asset base and access to capital by rural people disaggregated by poverty levels; 5) institutional and legal profiles of fisheries and wetlands in terms of the status of access regimes; and 6) determination of information gaps in the existing literature. Evidently, the existing literature shows that there is very little depth in the coverage of information on

livelihoods which are dependent on inland fisheries in all four countries. At the same time the breadth of information varies widely between the countries. While Bangladesh has a large body of literature, the three Mekong countries have a paucity of documented information on the livelihoods and poverty analysis related to inland fisheries and aquatic resources.

In analyzing the rural poverty and fisheries livelihoods, it was revealed that fisheries as a CPR play a vital role in rural livelihoods. For example, Bangladesh faces a relentless pressure on land from a population of 131 million growing at 2.17% per annum. The role of CPRs, and particularly open-access fisheries, feature prominently as a contributor to expenditure-saving and survival livelihood strategies of the poor.

The potential for Bangladesh's vast inland aquatic resources for helping to meet the poor people's livelihood needs is under severe threat, requiring continued and increased targeting of landless, marginal and small-scale male and female producers who live in rural areas by DFID and other donors in their research and action Programs. For example, to deal with the complex issue of property rights and access support for speedier devolution of institutional governance of aquatic resources toward local communities should be a priority, for which continued donor support is crucial.

In Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Vietnam inland fisheries play an equally important role in rural livelihoods, despite poor visibility of the fisheries sector in the national plans and priorities in the latter two countries. The fact that some 2.3 million people are estimated to live in fishing communes and the rate of fish consumption is as high as 75 kg per caput per annum in Cambodia are clear evidence of the overwhelming role played by fisheries in Cambodia. Comparison of issues and trends in livelihoods dependent on fisheries in all four countries also suggest that there is scope for learning from Bangladesh by the Mekong countries.

The PRAs were a substantial part of the research activities under the project, which filled in the gaps in the existing literature significantly. Its main focus was on the primary stakeholders and their livelihood strategies. In addition to making the PRAs a rigorous and comprehensive exercise, such as inclusion of a full range of fisheries stakeholders and ecosystems, and application of a number of PRA tools, in order to capture information about most aspects of livelihoods of the stakeholder groups, key informant discussions and reports from secondary stakeholders were used prior and after the implementation of the PRAs. Discussions with the secondary stakeholders, such as the local authorities, provided an additional opportunity to build linkages with them, and to draw them into the uptake and dissemination process.

Recognizing that national partners had limited experience in conducting PRAs and little understanding of the "Sustainable Livelihoods Analysis Framework" prior to undertaking the project, the PRAs were used as a training forum to build up capacity in participatory research methods and livelihoods analysis framework. However, resources and time limited the scope to fully involve all partners and collaborators in a comparative analysis of livelihood strategies of different stakeholders in inland fisheries as had been hoped. Nevertheless, partners and collaborators were able to compare and discuss their PRA frameworks, results and analyses during regional workshops conducted under the project. National workshops (already conducted in Cambodia and Bangladesh) were intended to disseminate findings to target institutions in the respective countries. Distribution of summary reports (already prepared), including translation of major

findings and key recommendations into local languages, will provide a wider outreach of the project outputs, and promote further uptake and future use of the project methods and results through national and regional networks.

The characteristic features of livelihoods in inland fisheries in the four countries uncovered through this study show a number of similarities and distinctions in terms of overall poverty status as well as in terms of poor people's livelihood strategies across different stakeholder groups and aquatic ecosystems within each country and between countries. In Bangladesh, while members of poor rural households may pursue a variety of livelihood strategies, including agricultural and migrant labouring, transportation, and petty trading, a very significant number turn to fishing as a part- or full-time occupation because of low entry costs involved. In Cambodia, nearly 75% of the poor people are engaged in fishing and farming occupations, whereas households headed by someone working in agriculture and fishing have the highest incidence of poverty (46%). The so called "static poor" groups in Vietnam, whose livelihood options are limited to fish capture and lowly paid wage employment hardly make a living with no means of acquiring any asset or capital.

Social differentiations amongst ethnic and occupational groups as well as gender differentiations have influenced livelihoods options and strategies of the poor stakeholder groups in the four countries. In Bangladesh, the three distinct stakeholder groups, namely fishing dependent people from traditional Hindu fishing castes; poor Muslim population who fish for food and subsistence; and wealthier fishery investors and financiers have a varying range of constraints and advantages in pursuing their livelihoods strategies. Likewise, the majority of those who fish as an occupation are men, with women and children fishing on a subsistence basis, as well as being involved in post-harvest activities such as drying, processing and trading of fish. On the other hand, despite being a relatively homogeneous society, Cambodia's fishing dependent population cluster around two distinct groups, such as those who combine fishing and farming or depend on fishing in the seasonally flooded areas; and those who can afford to buy fishing rights in the fishing lots, and employ poor people as workers in industrial-style fishing operations.

From the analysis of fishery resources status and importance, it appears that the types of fishery in all four countries are broadly similar, being dominated by major rivers and their floodplains and/or deltas. The seasonality in water areas and water flows means that fish follow seasonal cycles and depend on a range of habitats whether these are at the local micro-scale or involve long distance migration. However, nationally two distinct patterns are observed amongst the four countries: Bangladesh and Cambodia both with large areas of inland fisheries have high total catches, while the Lao PDR and Vietnam with relatively smaller inland areas have low total catches. Two common threats and trends were identified in the four countries: high fishing pressure and loss/degradation of wetlands and floodplain habitat to agriculture. These were, however, attributed to 1) flood control, drainage and irrigation structures; 2) modification of river-flows for hydroelectric power; and 3) effects of pollution and agro-chemicals. However, there are few studies to demonstrate clear impacts such as the quantity and value of the losses being incurred due these trends.

Policies and institutions are critical for poor people's access to resources and strategies to improve their livelihoods. Bangladesh's fisheries policy invariably supported the dominance of wealthier investors and financiers at the expense of the poor and

subsistence fishers, farmers and fish workers. Recent experiments through government organizations, (principally the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock), NGOs and community partnerships have provided alternative institutional options and management models which can ensure poor people's access to fisheries, and consequently enhance their livelihoods. Likewise, recent policy shifts toward community management of fisheries in Cambodia presents a potential scope for enhancing the livelihoods of the poor people dependent on inland fisheries.

The PRAs have provided a good understanding of the major livelihood assets (human, financial, natural and social) of the stakeholders in inland fisheries in the four countries. In general poverty remains a major obstacle to poor people's ability to gain and maintain access to critical livelihood assets. Likewise, declining trends in the asset holdings have been observed by the poor stakeholders, reflected in the declining income from fishing, low rate of savings amongst poor households in inland fisheries, and high rate of degradation or loss of Common Pool Resources (CPR). Despite continued threats of access to CPR and displacement of the poor from natural resources, the poor invariably place a high premium on the water and aquatic resources to maintain their livelihoods. Fish becoming less and less abundant, higher market prices for fish have naturally placed fish stocks and natural resources high on the list of assets that poor people would like to have access to, although they have become increasingly inaccessible.

The challenges and threats that have besieged the inland fisheries have many sources and origins. They include: 1) competition and conflicts over fishery resources leading to over-fishing; 2) land conversion and degradation of natural water bodies causing loss of habitat for natural fish species; 3) deforestation and structural changes in land; 4) agricultural intensification, another factor causing habitat loss and degradation; and 5) privatization of CPRs for aquaculture development. PRA results show that all of the above challenges and threats to inland fisheries have already reduced the livelihoods base of the poor people, and made them more vulnerable to shocks such as drought and flooding, and the natural decline of the fish population, high population growth, and low prices for fish due to seasonality and problems of proper access to markets.

Although no separate effort was made through the project to develop an agenda for future research and action, the analysis of livelihood strategies of the poor people and their degree of dependence on inland fisheries clearly warrant urgent research and policy actions on a number of issues and concerns. It is also recognized that several international organizations (e.g., WorldFish Center and FAO) and donor countries/organizations and their implementing agencies (DFID-MRAG, ADB, World Bank) have already committed to undertaking research and action projects on institutional and legal frameworks; increased stakeholder involvement in the governance of aquatic resources; appropriate assessment mechanism of fisheries resources, including valuation of aquatic resources. It is important to link and feed the results of the present research into some of the above initiatives through follow-up research and actions. Immediate and most important among them are those that will: 1) increase the policy uptake of the livelihoods development and poverty elimination through integrating aquatic resources valuation and the policy development process with livelihood values and aquatic resources management; 2) assess the role of market and market forces, and impact of international trade on the fisheries livelihoods; and 3) provide further in-depth analysis of livelihood outcomes and impacts on ongoing and planned natural resources management projects.

