Listening to Women Fishers on the Sekong River: Fostering Resilience in Village Fishery Co-Management

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Abstract

The accelerated economic development of landlocked Laos, combined with extreme climate variables, points to dramatic transformations in subsistence fisheries on its rivers. In the country's first Fisheries Law, adopted in 2009, co-management of village fisheries is required as a way to promote sustainable development at a local level. The co-management model, however, does not stipulate participation by women fishers, important stakeholders who make up almost one-half of all Lao fishers and whose work contributes directly to family nutrition and well-being. Based on fieldwork conducted in fishing villages on the Sekong River in southern Laos in 2013, this paper takes an ecosystems approach to discuss how the country can build resilience and social cohesion into fisheries by incorporating women and their knowledge into village fishery management. In the process, the health of river ecosystems and food security will improve, while women fishers will acquire new skills to help them avoid 'poverty traps.'

Introduction

The concept of resilience is central to effective adaptive management of ecosystems. Developed by ecologist C.S. "Buzz" Holling in the 1970s as a theory for managing complex ecosystems, resilience theory suggests that an ecosystem is resilient if it has the ability to remain cohesive during periods of extreme perturbations or what are called 'shocks' (Holling 1973). Rather than "bouncing back" to a former equilibrium, an ecosystem is resilient if it can absorb changes in internal and external variables and still persist, albeit in a somewhat different yet robust form. As a manager of natural resources, Holling wrote that long-term expectations about agricultural productivity, for instance, may even 'fragilize' an ecosystem by undermining complex factors that support the resilience of the system as a whole, potentially leading to its eventual decline or collapse. Now widely applied as a risk management tool by many sectors focused on long-term security (in finance and urban planning, for example), the resilience framework remains particularly relevant to complex agricultural systems where biodiversity is threatened by development and by global phenomena such as climate change. Holling introduced the concept of adaptive management for ecosystems as a practical application of resilience theory. A key component of the adaptive management concept is the acquisition of new knowledge through continual learning to prepare citizens living within an ecosystem to absorb the inevitability of change without losing cultural coherency.

> A management approach based on resilience…would emphasize the need to keep options open, [...] and the need to emphasize heterogeneity. Flowing from this would be not the presumption of sufficient knowledge, but the

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