

Enhancing Rural Women's Participation in Fisheries: Post-Harvest Livelihoods, Ilocos Region, Philippines

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Abstract

In Region 1, Northwestern Luzon, Philippines, the aquaculture subsector contributes about 68% of the total fish production. Milkfish (*Chanos chanos*) comprises 87% of aquaculture production. Women have received little attention in fisheries and aquaculture development. In 2004, to improve the livelihoods of women and to enhance the contributions of this major aquaculture industry in Region 1, the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) in collaboration with the Local Government Units (LGUs), trained women's groups to develop skills, add value to the excess produce and create jobs and increase incomes. The BFAR Gender and Development (GAD) Project assisted nine Rural Improvement Clubs (RICs). Women were trained to debone and smoke milkfish deboning, GAD orientation, fish value-adding, packaging and labeling, simple book-keeping and financial management including leadership management for some of the officers and field tours (*labbay-aral*). Equipment and materials were granted to facilitate implementation, improvement and expansion of their fish deboning and smoking activities. This paper reports on how the RICs developed and coped with their different circumstances as the project matured after its inception in 2004. It concludes with suggestions on what is needed to sustain and improve these women-centered activities.

Introduction

In the Philippines, women form a large part of the agricultural workforce and are involved in the preparation, processing and marketing of agricultural commodities. Women constitute a substantial economic resource, yet their status in this sector is low. Generally, existing strategies for improving the situation of women tend to emphasize their roles as wives, mothers, child-rearers and home-makers (e.g. cooking, gathering fuel, fetching water, cleaning, and maintaining the family budget). Accumulating evidence shows that women also have broader roles in planning, implementing and evaluating as Filipino women increasingly take part in the labor force, including in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors, and in community organizations.

In spite of their involvement, women and young girls in the Philippines still often have very low incomes, including in the fisheries sector. Of the total workers formally employed in Philippine

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fisheries and aquaculture, women constituted only 6.3% in 2002 (BFAR, 2004). Whereas men are primarily involved in catching fish, women are engaged in pre- and post-fishing activities. Women undertake 50-70% of local fish processing and marketing activities. They are also involved in mending nets and tending fishing equipment, and other activities (FAO 2005; Raquiza, 2005).

In view of the basic roles and responsibilities of women in fishing and aquaculture communities, special efforts should be made to provide for the needs of women workers and their families. In Region I (Northwestern Luzon), the aquaculture sub-sector contributes about 68% of the total fisheries production. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the aquaculture production is milkfish (*Chanos chanos*), making a surplus of 48,235 tonnes. Of this surplus production, 43,000 tonnes are taken to the greater Metro Manila area and other neighboring regions such as Cordillera Administrative Region and Region II (Northeastern Luzon) while the remaining production is used by fish processing plants in Region I (BFAR-BAS 2006). Milkfish production is a resource for household consumption and for the business sector. Women in the fisheries sector, in collaboration with Local Government Units (LGUs), have responded to household and business demands for value-added fish products. Fish is a very perishable commodity and people handling it need knowledge and skills to prolong its shelf life and add value to capture higher prices in markets.

In accordance with the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998 (RA, 8550), the Local Government Code of 1991 (RA 7160) and the Women in Development and Nation Building Act (RA 7192), the state is mandated to uphold the rights and privileges of fisherfolk with special attention to women for priority development assistance. With the assistance of the government through the Gender and Development (GAD) Project of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), nine Rural Improvement Clubs (RICs) participated in the Post-Harvest Livelihood Project. Equipment and materials were provided including capability building training on milkfish deboning and smoking, gender and development orientation, value-added products, field trips (*lakbay-aral*) for the members, packaging and labeling of products, simple book-keeping and financial management including leadership management for some of the officers to facilitate implementation, improvement and expansion of the projects. The present paper presents the significant roles of women and their contributions through this government intervention to the development of the fisheries industry through post-harvest livelihoods.

Objectives and Methods

The intervention aimed to develop skills of rural women of the Federated Rural Improvement Clubs (RIC) in Region I in fish processing essential for adding value to fish products that increase their chances of earning a modest income. Specifically, the intervention sought to develop women's skills in processing fish into deboned, smoked, and other value-added products such as *longaniza* (fish sausage), *embutido* (fish loaf) and *shanghai* (fish roll). The long term goal was to generate income and employment, enhance women's skills, entrepreneurship and business acumen.

The project is located in Region I in the northwestern part of the Philippines on Luzon Island. Region I includes four provinces. The project started with two recipient associations in each province. The implementation strategy began with planning by LGUs. Annual planning workshops were conducted in which programmes and projects were discussed, using BFAR approved project guidelines and requirements. Project recipients were then identified by the LGUs and the Provincial Fishery Officer (PFO). Each recipient who accepted the requirements then signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with relevant parties, such as the BFAR and the LGU. The MOA specified requirements and responsibilities for the recipient.

The RICs in the municipalities of Vintar and Batac in Ilocos Norte, Sto. Domingo and Sta. Cruz in Ilocos Sur, Sudipen, Paraoir and Rosario in La Union, and Calasiao and Labrador in Pangasinan were the recipients of the post-harvest livelihood projects.

Results and Discussion

The identified RICs were existing women's organizations sponsored by the Department of Agriculture. RICs were created to address the development needs of rural women. Each RIC has a large number of members engaged in various activities. Those active members who intended to be part of the fisheries livelihood component were initially chosen through criteria such as status and capacity of the organization for implementation and expansion. The project started in the latter part of 2004 and reached 241 housewife/homemaker members from eight RICs and one Fish Processing Association (Table 1). The RICs are managed by a set of officers headed by a President who facilitates project implementation. The post-harvest project was named the Fish Deboning and Smoking Project.

Table 1. Location, Name of Associations and Membership.

Location	Name of Associations	Membership
Ilocos Norte		
- Vintar	Bulbulala Homemaker Fish Processing, Inc.	23
- Batac	Federated RIC	30
Ilocos Sur		
- Sto. Domingo	Suksukit RIC, Sto. Domingo	20
- Sta. Cruz	Villa Garcia RIC	30
La Union		
- Sudipen	RIC of San Francisco Sur	30
- Balaoan	Paraoir RIC	30
- Rosario	Integrated RIC	33
Pangasinan		
- Labrador	Federated RIC	30
- Calasiao	Federated RIC	15
	TOTAL	241

MOAs were forged by BFAR with the relevant Provincial or Municipal Government Unit and the Project Recipients of the nine associations. BFAR provided capacity building on gender and development orientation, training in skills, and technical assistance and materials for the project operation. The technical materials included deboning kits, knives, freezers, smoking chambers, stoves, tables and chairs, chopping boards, basins, trays, and measuring equipment. The LGU provided continuous technical assistance, counterpart funds, and regular monitoring and coaching for its operation. The recipients attended the training sessions conducted by BFAR and LGU, and operated and expanded the project activities by increasing membership, capital build-up and fund sourcing. The project was officially turned over to the association six months after full endorsement by the BFAR and LGU evaluation team.

During the launching of the projects, a two-day training session was conducted by BFAR in collaboration with the LGUs. BFAR provided the deboning materials and 20 kilograms of milkfish, while the recipients and the LGUs shouldered the training expense. The initial training included gender and development orientation, values formation, Good Manufacturing Practices/Sanitation Standards Operating Procedures (GMP/SSOP) and fish deboning. To facilitate its operation, BFAR devised a reporting format to track the progress of the project. The report was submitted to the Regional Office on a specified date each month. Further assistance was provided to the RICs by BFAR based on the monthly reports and the action plan prepared by the association with assistance of the LGUs. Following the project acceptance, the Fish Deboning Project was expanded to include smoking activities and other value-added products using other marine and freshwater fish abundant in the locality. Some recipients purchased additional materials and equipment, such as freezers.

To strengthen the organization, BFAR facilitated leadership, management and organizational development courses, including simple book-keeping and financial management. The association members also participated in two field trips (*Lakbay arals*) conducted by BFAR to successful fish processing establishments such as Anjo Farms Incorporated in San Fabian, Pangasinan; Bagoong Processing Plant and other BFAR projects for additional learning experiences.

For the first two years, deboned and smoked milkfish and other marine fish, such as round scads, were the initial products produced by the associations. Milkfish was used as the main product because Region 1 is the primary producing area and has a surplus. Deboning was the first skill transferred because milkfish has numerous bones and spines integrated in the muscles. The bones are difficult to remove to create an acceptable product. Clients soon requested other fish-based products for their associations to sell. BFAR then began a succession of training courses on value-adding, focusing on products such as fish sausage (*longaniza*), fish roll (*shanghai*), fish “sisig”, fish tapa, fish paste from bangus entrails, dried tilapia (*tilanggit*) and fish loaf (*embutido*). Of these, fish roll, fish paste and fish loaf were the most sought after products. With the start up materials from BFAR, the nine RICs projects became operational and produced the following quantities and income (Table 2).

Table 2. Production and Sales from the Processed Products of the Associations

Association	Processed products (kgs)			Value (₱)
	Deboned	Smoked	Value-added products	
Bulbulala Homemakers Fish Processing	575.5	155.5	28	P68,860.00
Batac Federated RIC	860	230	28	P162,200.00
Suksukit Sto. Domingo	4221	717	349	P652,319.00
Villa Garcia RIC	21	40		P9,470.00
San Francisco Sur RIC	769	460		P116,318.00
Paraoir RIC	630	30	900	P131,300.00
Integrated RIC of Rosario	40		40	P5,920.00
Federated RIC of Calasiao	528	61	10	P46,510.00
Labrador RIC	480	50		P46,240.00
TOTAL	8,124.5	1,743.5	1,355	1,239,137.00

Source: BFAR RFO 1 2008.

Agreements on manpower requirements, scheduling of operations, and product marketing strategies were made. Fish processing was normally carried out by members of the RICs. Some of the associations hired their members as laborers on a piece work basis, paid ₱5.00/deboning process. The Suksukit RIC had all its small number of members working. In other associations, members supplied their services without remuneration. In such cases, all the profit obtained was retained and rolled over for project expansion. Villa Garcia RIC in Ilocos Sur and Integrated RIC of Rosario, La Union had very low production (Table 2) because the associations were dependent on members' contributions and orders from buyers. The Integrated RIC of Rosario reorganized its association last year when the previous president did not pursue the project. The Labrador RIC was only established last year. Most of the other associations considerably expanded their production capacity as the project progressed. To expand operations, the RICs of Calasiao, Bulbulala and Suksukit requested financial assistance from their LGUs and from the Department of Social Work and Development's *Puhunang Pangkabuhayan* (Livelihood capital) programme, while other associations sourced their capital from their existing funds. The RICs of Bulbulala and Suksukit have permanent workplaces but the other associations only had temporary venues. Such temporary arrangements sometimes caused the loss of equipment and materials and significantly affected the quality of the processed products.

To sustain the source of raw materials, BFAR assisted the organizations by linking them to assisted fish farms in other areas within the four provinces, especially during lean months. The orders were consolidated and delivered to them, based on an agreed schedule and payment. Bulk orders meant that additional capital was needed to operate a project, with the LGU helping the associations gain funding. Marketing of the processed products was done by the members by linking with Non-Governmental Organizations and other government agencies. Regular monitoring was conducted by the LGU and the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee of the BFAR regional office.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Through the project, the national agencies and the LGUs have seen the importance to livelihood of working with women as development partners. The project proved to be a worthwhile and profitable activity for the RICs. In addition to direct income, the project generated funds for the associations to construct a temporary food processing center for their activities, sponsor livelihood projects for their members and help finance other activities. Over time, more orders were received and more retail outlets found for the products. The associations also developed innovations for the fish smoking chambers originally provided and fostered closer working relationships among their members.

The project also fostered and strengthened relationships among the different associations. Through the training courses and meetings attended by the members and officers, individual members and the associations exchanged ideas and activities and more advanced associations became models for the others. Some of the associations were selected to represent their group in the national annual search for the best women's groups in agriculture.

The project served as a venue for other agencies to come together and assist in the entrepreneurship of the associations. The Department of Trade and Industry provided trade and marketing assistance; and the Department of Science and Technology assisted in product labeling and packaging.

The project could be institutionalized in the regular programmes of the national and local government units for economic advancement. Five areas for improvement were identified. (1) Longer term members need continuous skills enhancement and new members need help to maintain and upgrade product quality. (2) More advanced training should be given on Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) based standards to assure product safety and quality. (3) Improvements are needed to ensure a continuous supply of affordable raw materials between fish producers and processors. (4) Capital must continue to be built and credit linkages forged. (5) Better product packaging and labeling are needed to assure product safety.

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