The importance of social science to implement good governance principles in community-based fisheries management

The Pacific region is characterised by vast expanses of ocean with thousands of islands, some of them very remote. Pacific peoples have a close relationship and intimate knowledge of the sea, and for thousands of years they established traditional ways of managing their resources. Western colonisation changed this by establishing centralised laws and regulations to control fisheries, with limited enforcement capability. Govan (2015) highlights that most government agencies do not have enough personnel nor funds to control fisheries, particularly in the more remote areas. A shift from mostly subsistence fishing to an increasing commercialisation, in addition to non-fisheries threats, has further influenced the decline of fisheries resources and their habitats. Since the 1990s, community-based fisheries management (CBFM)[1] initiatives, where communities have a lead role, have significantly increased. Considering the success of some of these initiatives, Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) have endorsed the *Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up Community-based Fisheries Management*. This regional framework aims to move beyond working with a few communities to developing systems that provide adequate support to a significant proportion of communities (Pacific Community 2021).

To facilitate the implementation of such a framework, it is important to ensure that governance regimes are adequate to support the management of common resources. The term governance has substantially increased in the literature in recent years, but its definition remains hazy and is sometimes confused with management. Management refers to the process of putting together different resources to attain a specific objective. In turn, governance refers to the process by which different government and non-government actors make deci-

sions, establish who is involved, their responsibilities and how they are held accountable (Worboys et al. 2015).

Good governance is essential to ensure that management decisions are in fact implemented and that the distribution of costs and benefits are fair. When we talk about community-based management, it is easy to fall into the trap of idealising them, assuming that each of them is one homogeneous group and that they make decisions as a whole. The reality is that small communities can have similar problems to large ones, where social and power structures segregate different members and decisions can often lack transparency and be misguided by individual interests (Mohan and Stokke 2000).

In this article, I provide an overview of good governance principles, how power structures inside communities can affect these principles, and how social science, particularly participatory action research, can help practitioners understand the issues and guide improvements.

Good governance principles

Several authors have proposed a series of principles to guide governance regimes (European Commission 2001; Graham et al. 2003; Lockwood et al. 2010; UNDP 1997), whether they are government-led, community-based, private, or a combination of these. These principles could be grouped into four key criteria:

Inclusiveness and fairness

To ensure inclusiveness, participatory processes require the involvement of stakeholders from the beginning and

[1] Encouraging, motivating and empowering communities to sustainably manage their own coastal resources.

Around the world, participatory management planning at local communities adapt to the local context and use the best suited tools. Here, youth developing communication tools in the Colombian Pacific coast, ©Carolina Garcia, SPC and planning workshop in Auki, Malaita, Solomon Islands. ©Watisoni Lalavanua, SPC

throughout the process, rather than at specific stages. Methods need to go beyond symbolic participation (Bammer 2022) and be appropriate for the specific settings. The leading organisation might need to consider options to facilitate the involvement of marginalised sectors of the population and overcome potentially unbalanced social structures. If costs and benefits are inevitably unfair, final decisions should openly balance different interests and consequences, and if appropriate, compensate negatively impacted parties.

Accountability and transparency

Decision-making processes require clear procedures and roles. Information about who, how, and the justification of decisions should be publicly available.

Legitimacy

This is mainly understood as the official authority conferred by a legal mandate, but other forms of legitimacy are important. Legitimacy can be gained by support of stakeholders, by the long-term link of indigenous people to their territories or by evidence of good performance. Either ancestral or legal legitimacy can be in place, but the recognition and support of the stakeholders is crucial in either case, particularly from those who will be responsible of implementing those decisions.

Performance

Efficiency in governance refers to the optimal use of funds, prioritising decisions to be discussed, reducing meetings, and finding alternative discussion mechanisms. Effectiveness of governance involves the periodical evaluation of the regime and the adjustment of less-than-optimal governance arrangements. Coordination across governance levels, coherence of policies and direction, and integration across sectors are considered key requirements.

Power structures

Power or influence can be defined as the capacity of an actor to affect the actions of others in an intended and calculated way (Wrong 1979). It can be overt or covert, and stakeholders can use different sources of power – political, ideological, economic or military – or more frequently, a combination of them.

The importance of social science to understand and guide governance regimes

Social sciences offer a variety of methods that allow practitioners to understand specific communities, particular management and governance regimes, along with the enablers and limitations of each of them, and the consequences of following or not following good governance principles. Social methods can be quantitative, qualitative, or use a combination of them.

In general terms, quantitative methods are those that use numbers to qualify results and include among others: surveys (the most frequently used), Q-methodology, economic experiments and social network analysis. Reporting tends to be more straight forward as readers tend to better understand tables, figures and percentages. It is often associated with a more objective analysis of information. Surveys in particular, if well designed, with the inclusion of local knowledge, can provide a representative view of a population's opinions and attitudes.

On the other hand, qualitative research is often associated with more subjective analysis of information. It includes the most widely known tools, such as interviews and focus group discussions (Young et al. 2018), but also observations and ethnographies. While it is impossible to generalise results from qualitative methods, it often provides key insights into the worldviews and reasonings behind opinions or attitudes of research subjects. Direct quotes from participants can provide readers with a connection to the real world. Again, methods should be carefully designed to suit the objectives of the study, but given its perceived subjectivity, they are often conducted without paying attention to validity criteria. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can help combine the benefits of both approaches, but such an approach often requires more resources – financial and human.

Whichever approach is selected, social research can provide information about the quality of governance and identify key issues; can help explain factors of success or failure and recommend ways to strengthen positive aspects and to address issues; can show the level of support that a regime has and the perceived effects of specific management decisions.

Social research, however, only contributes a fraction of what needs to be done to promote good governance practices in fisheries management or co-management. Other criteria to be considered include:

- Clear and attainable objectives – establishing a common purpose for the process helps stakeholders to understand why they participate, value the opportunity to participate and make compromises between individual and common benefits.
- Flexibility to adjust the process to specific circumstances – all communities are different, and for this reason, a standard process might need to be adjusted to their circumstances. Some of the factors that can affect the process can include, for example, the existence or non-existence of clear local leaders, knowledge of their resources, social norms and available resources.
- Integration of different sources of knowledge, particularly scientific, local and traditional – traditional knowledge might be sufficient to support decisions in some cases. However, with current synergy of pressures, like climate change, changing economies and population

Socio-economic survey in Daliconi, Vanua Balavu, Fiji. © Sailasa Tagica

shifts, communities might need to complement their knowledge with scientific knowledge. Both scientists and communities need to be open to accepting a different kind of knowledge.

- Good communication channels – all relevant stakeholders need to be able to exchange information independently and on a regular basis, including for instance about emerging problems, funding opportunities, or new regulations.
- Professional facilitation of processes – participatory workshops should not be improvised, particularly in places with high levels of conflicts. A professional, impartial facilitator can help steer discussions to reach an agreement.
- Institutional support from government structures – sometimes processes are led by the communities themselves or by non-government organisations; while this is a valid starting point, eventually it is recommended that authorities endorse the process, and that the legal framework supports it.
- Long-term financial and technical support until a regime is self-established – when the process is financed through annual governments' budget, there is more certainty about continuing the process until it is mature and can function on its own. However, when funds come from short projects, processes might be left without funds to continue, leaving them half-way. These cases are particularly hurtful for the overall CBFM scaling-up, as communities can lose faith in external organisations and be reluctant to be involved in the future. This is particularly true when one considers that participatory processes are usually not fun, and stakeholders get involved due to a real interest in improving the management of the marine resources.

As a concluding remark, it is inspiring to know that PICTs have endorsed the CBFM Framework for Action, as it seems the most appropriate approach to devolve management powers to the communities that depend on fisheries resources, in a region where government control is practically impossible. This article aims to inspire a reflection on the role that social sciences can play in supporting participatory processes, key in turn to assist more communities in implementing CBFM.

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