

## Good credit risk: Investing in microcredit schemes for women in poor coastal communities to curtail overfishing

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Overfishing in many of the world's coral reef ecosystems is escalating as coastal populations boom and desperate people go to sea as an occupation of last resort. Conservation groups have tried for years to offset the problem by offering impoverished fishers other means of employment, but most of these efforts fail because of poor social or economic viability. I advocate a different strategy: offering microcredit to women.

Since the 1970s, the Grameen Bank and many other microfinance institutions have enabled millions of people in developing countries to start self-employment projects without collateral or a verifiable credit history. Most of these initiatives focus on women, in part because women are considered a good credit risk and tend to invest their earnings in their families' well-being. Microfinance schemes in impoverished fishing communities should follow suit.

The way it works is this: A woman would apply for a small loan — perhaps as little as USD 20 — to invest in an entrepreneurial venture showing clear potential to reduce her family's fishing effort. She might start a shellfish farm, for example, or buy a pig to slaughter and sell. To improve its chances of qualifying, the activity would also need to lessen the family's dependence on fish for food. Unsustainable fishing will continue unless poor coastal communities find alternative sources of dietary protein; most still rely heavily on seafood.

Besides drawing people away from fishing, I predict that a microfinance initiative directed at women would greatly enhance current conservation efforts in at least three key ways. First, such a scheme would allow women with a strong entrepreneurial spirit to develop projects that respect local ideas,

skills, conditions, and limitations — giving those activities a better chance for success than the current alternatives, most of which depend on external expertise and ignore the costs incurred by outside organizers.

Second, women with higher economic capacity would have a stronger voice in community affairs. In the fishing communities where I work in the central Philippines, women are seldom consulted in the initial planning meetings regarding local ecosystem management, despite their considerable role in both fishing and conservation. The same is true elsewhere. Women in the Pacific islands have told researchers that they remove half the biomass harvested each year, yet their activities are largely ignored in official fisheries statistics and decision-making. Involving women would generate conservation plans that embrace all fishers instead of men only. Empowering women also tends to build community cohesiveness, which often generates other collective efforts to improve resource management.

The third and perhaps most-important payoff from a microfinance initiative for women would be a trend toward smaller families. Experience proves that women with greater economic opportunity have fewer children — a major benefit for coastal communities where population growth overwhelms current conservation efforts.

Initiatives to curb the pressures on marine resources for food and livelihoods while still supporting local communities would be a boon for marine conservation. Such change does not, of course, eliminate the need for distant markets to curb seafood consumption, but it is a significant step in the right direction.

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