

# Coping, Changing, Imagining

By adopting a common analytical framework, this book offers a coherent view across contexts to draw wider lessons about small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fisheries are frequently regarded as a forgotten or neglected sector. Its contributions are undervalued, its successes in adaptation overlooked, and it is portrayed as a relict of our hunter-gatherer past, a subsector on which the sun will soon set. Often, only when resource decline and biodiversity loss in fisheries implicate the large number of people involved in small-scale fisheries is the sector remembered at all—and then only to draw attention to the apparently desperate recourse to destructive fishing methods.

Re-drawing this picture of 'crisis' to bring small-scale fisheries to the foreground of national and global fisheries management and development thinking requires good, up-to-date statistics, descriptions and analysis. Most fisheries research, however, focuses on the fish, rather than on the fisherfolk or the fishery. Those who do work on fishing and post-harvest issues tend to concentrate on the large-scale fisheries of developed countries, despite the fact these contribute less than half of global capture-fisheries landings, and are of minor importance in terms of employment.

Organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the WorldFish Centre and several conservation non-governmental organizations have programmes focused on small-scale fisheries governance and development, but their effectiveness is limited by the fragmentation of the small-scale fisheries knowledge base. This is why this new book under review is so welcome.

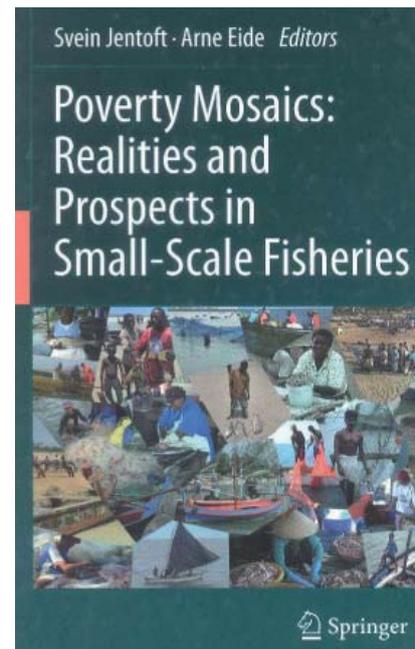
Edited by sociologist Svein Jentoft and economist Arne Eide of the Centre of Marine Resource Management at the Norwegian College of Fishery Science, University of Tromsø, Norway, the book is the main output of the recent POVFish research project, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. POVFish commissioned research studies in 15 countries, mostly in south and southeast Asia, east and southern Africa and central America, as well as individual studies in Ghana, Turkey and Poland.

The resulting work is more than a collection of country case studies. Its universal value springs from a common analytical framework, which allows a coherent look across contexts to draw wider lessons about small-scale fisheries while retaining enough flexibility to allow each author to emphasize the issues most germane to the places they work in.

The stage is set by a thoughtful foreword by John Kurien, Member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and a renowned scholar-activist. He recounts his own early encounters with fishing communities, and how they shaped his future, while also modestly commending readers to explore the book for further insight.

## Shifting environments

In the introduction, the authors describe their book as being "...about small-scale fisheries and the many poor and vulnerable people who draw their livelihoods from this sector...what fishing means to them, their adaptation to shifting environments, and how fisheries contribute to food security and



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wellbeing”. Such a perspective sets this book apart: it is not primarily about the ecological consequences of people’s fishing activities, though these are not ignored; nor is it about how to extract more, or optimal, economic value from fisheries, though this issue is also tackled. Rather, it is about the people who catch, process and trade fish, and their families and community members: their thoughts, motivations, aspirations, social and political relations, and cultures. It is also about their technologies, knowledge, their markets, and their adaptations to change.

In the context of frequent calls for a more integrated or ‘systems’ view of fisheries, here, finally, is a book focused on people as individuals and social groups, and not just as environmental exploiters, economic agents or ‘hungry mouths’. The clarity of that focus on people varies, as does the distance of the observer’s gaze. The anthropologists get up close and personal, while the systems ecologists and governance scholars take a wider, more holistic, look at the context, but the sum is, as the editors say, a “remarkable mosaic of small-scale fishers’ stories, situations and coping strategies”.

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The book is imaginatively structured, not by regions or academic disciplines, but around understanding the dimensions of poverty and vulnerability in fisheries, how these are mediated by the context in which small-scale fisheries operate, how people in the sector are coping, and how the systems of governance are changing to accommodate or anticipate further change.

This analysis is used to imagine a future for fisheries free of poverty and vulnerability. The sophistication of the analysis lies in its refusal to

align universally with either stories of ‘success’ or ‘crisis’. The case studies point to partial, contingent successes: crises delayed or averted, and imperfect solutions in progress. These are much more convincing pictures of life in small-scale fisheries than the popular, sweeping narratives of collapse, poverty and ‘last-resort’ occupations, on the one hand, or the uncritical portrayal of success for all and forever, on the other.

The good ideas in this rich collection start in the introductory chapters. I was particularly struck by Eide et al’s argument of irreversibility of privatizing the aquatic commons. Chuenpagdee and Jentoft then outline the overall research framework for the project—a ‘fish-chain’ approach that examines the drivers and policy impacting the whole fishery system, from the environment, through harvest to post-harvest activities.

Jentoft and Midré provide an indepth, critical examination of the concept and measurement of poverty and vulnerability, while also introducing a key research methodology—querying fisherfolk themselves about the meaning and experience of poverty, rather than relying on externally conceived indicators and meanings derived by ‘poverty experts’.

Each case study affords indepth understanding of poverty and wellbeing through detail. We learn from Mahmudul Islam, for example, that fishers in the Sunderbans live in fear of attack by Bengal tigers, and spend a large proportion of their earnings on medicine. Sustaining fishery systems in this context requires actions that are unlikely to be found in the average fishery management ‘toolkit’.

### **Livelihoods approach**

Onyango’s study of fisherfolk’s own understanding of poverty and wellbeing on Lake Victoria reminds us that the guiding principles of the livelihoods approach are to “put people at the centre of the analysis”, “focus on what the poor have, rather than what they do not have”, and “build on strengths”. Instead, there

has been a tendency for development analysts to focus on deficits and needs, thereby portraying fisherfolk as victims seeking assistance, rather than as resourceful agents of their own destinies. Onyango's chapter on Lake Victoria captures the pride and enjoyment of fishing as an occupation and way of life. I would have liked to hear more of the voices of the women in this fishing community. Indeed, although gender is mentioned frequently, and the importance of women in fisheries is emphasized, we hear little from women (except as researchers and authors).

The book's three significant quotations from women in fishing communities all relate, in some way, to 'coping' with hardships. Marciniak's chapter on Polish small-scale fisheries illuminates a woman's perspective on alcohol abuse in a community in decline. Knudsen and Koçak's study of boom and bust in the Turkish sea-snail fisheries makes a woman's story of adversity a baseline for subsequent analysis of 'coping'. González's study of empowerment in Nicaraguan fisheries exposes the frustration of a member of a women's co-operative.

However, all the chapters—even Kraan's meticulously researched and fascinating overview of fishing as a way of life and not just a source of livelihood in Ghana—are silent on how girls growing up in fishing communities identify with fish-related occupations, or what women traders enjoy about their work. Few of the statistical tables in the book are gender-differentiated, but several authors do have specific subsections on the 'role of women', which are basically an acknowledgement of gender divisions of labour and differential vulnerabilities.

Despite the adoption of a 'fish-chain' research framework in the book, the analytical focus is still on the fish-capture process, fishing incomes and fish-stock management. Processing, trading and marketing, and the broader household livelihood activities undertaken by women are seldom accorded the same level of analysis as the fish-capture processes.

The sections on "Coping" and "Change" give particularly good overviews of the multiple experiences of change from countries like Mexico, Nicaragua, Turkey, Malawi and Thailand. Governance reforms, development initiatives and co-operative formation are some of the mechanisms identified for achieving improved futures. The examples in this section all come from countries undergoing major economic and social

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change, following civil conflict or regional geopolitical struggle in their relatively recent histories. They include Vietnam, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Mozambique and Guatemala.

The vision for the future is drawn on theory introduced at the start of the book, and is illustrated by the 15 case studies: development as freedom, the notion of wellbeing, which encompasses both material and non-material aspects of life, and the attention to people's aspirations, securing rights and reducing vulnerability.

The imagined future for governance of small-scale fisheries is one where we learn from the poor, and where we involve the people affected by change in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policy process. The vision is also one that sees fisheries are part of a wider cultural, economic and social system, and even allows for movement out of fisheries when they can no longer sustain people's wellbeing.

The book concludes by hoping it will "trigger curiosity, promote learning, and spur willingness to adopt new strategies" for governing and developing small-scale fisheries. It should do all that, and help convince more people that small-scale fisheries have a bright future. 

#### For more

[sites.google.com/a/maremacentre.com/povfish/](https://sites.google.com/a/maremacentre.com/povfish/)

**Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihoods in Small-scale Fisheries (PovFish)**

[www.worldfishcenter.org/](http://www.worldfishcenter.org/)

**The WorldFish Centre**

[www.maremacentre.com/](http://www.maremacentre.com/)

**Centre of Marine Resource Management, Norwegian College of Fishery Science**