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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE FEA

In Chapter 5, we discussed many aspects of the work of the FEA. We saw how important the role of the agent is in the success of extension efforts; not only should the agent have knowledge about fisheries and fisheries-related technical subjects, but he or she also needs communication skills to successfully conduct extension activities. However, people have different personalities, and not all FEAs find it easy to communicate with, often unknown, clients.

Besides this drawback, there are also general aspects related to the position of the FEA that may hamper smooth communication with the clients. To better understand his or her role, an FEA should be aware of these general aspects and, more importantly, have an understanding of his or her attitudes to these aspects of the relationship with the clients.

Combining fisheries extension with other duties

In this handbook we have, up to now, assumed that,

- FIRSTLY, the fisheries agency has a fisheries extension service, and that,
- SECONDLY, there are FEAs who conduct fisheries extension at the field level.

However, if you look at government fisheries services in the region (BOBP, 1990), it becomes clear that the Fisheries Field Officers (FFOs)

are often involved in many other activities apart from extension. In fact, most of the core duties of these officers involve enforcement of fisheries legislation and the registration of fishing craft.

The question then arises whether it is possible for a FFO to assume the duties of enforcement of legislation as well as extension at the same time. It may very well happen that a FFO has to punish a fisherman for a certain offence one day, yet has to gain his confidence for extension activities the next day.

It has been argued by some that the two duties are incompatible. Yet, in Chapters 1 and 2, we saw that the fisheries sector does require a large amount of regulation, compared to the agriculture sector, and that fisheries extension and legislation can be intervention instruments of the same fisheries programme. Fisheries extension can make fisheries legislation more effective and fisheries legislation can support fisheries extension (Van Woerkom, 1989).

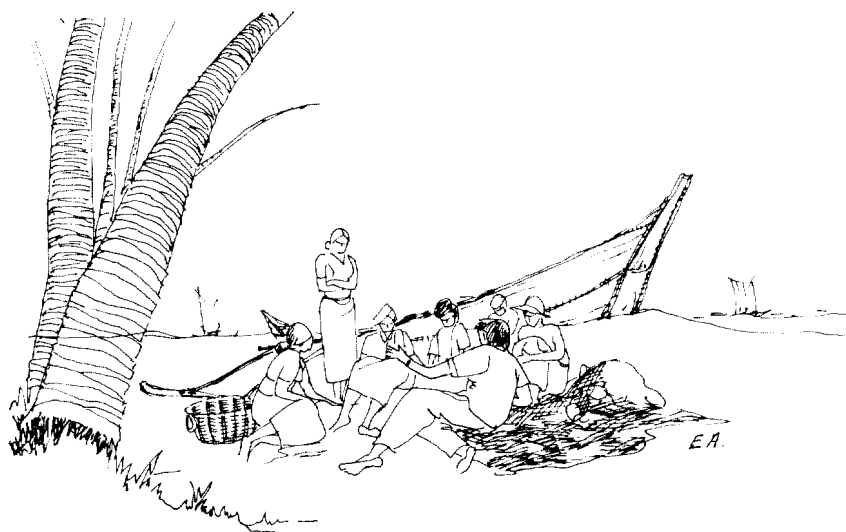
Take for instance the problem of depletion of fish resources which will in the future become more pressing and for which there may be need for more legislation. At the same time, there will also be a need for more extension. Extension can, in this context, broadly serve two purposes:

- To explain the purpose of the legislation, which may serve the long-term interests of the fishing community, rather than their short-term interests; and
- To advise on alternative fishing methods that would endanger the fish resource less.

Thus, in principle, it can even be very meaningful to combine legislation and extension duties. But this is only possible if the attitude of the field officer towards the fisherfolk is one of willingness to assist, to explain and to listen. FFOs too often take refuge under the shield of authority that goes with the enforcement of legislation, rather than allow themselves to be exposed to the criticism and comments of their clients. Such authority gives the FFO the esteem of a white-collar employee and covers the crucial fact that he or she often has too little knowledge about the fishing and fisheries-related activities to confidently face his or her clients.



A white-collar versus a client-oriented attitude



It goes without saying, if limited time is assigned a FFO for extension tasks, the extension tasks should be limited as well. It is of **little use to conduct a lot of poor quality extension.**

White collar perceptions

A FFO's post is regarded by fisherfolk as a white-collar job. The average field officer has had a higher education than his or her clients, and is a permanent government employee. Furthermore, as mentioned before, field officers often like to enhance their white-collar status. With this status, an attitude of superiority towards the clients could develop over a period of time, especially as fishing does not have a high social status in the region.

With attitudes of superiority go certain perceptions of what is good or bad for the clients. An *EXAMPLE* of one prominent perception *is the importance attached to education; it is frequently stated by officers that fisherfolk families should be educated in order to improve their lives.* But are people really better off with more education? And what is actually meant by education? Are fishermen, in contrast to many FFOs, not already well educated in their own field? Is fishing not a very laudable occupation that provides a very important source of nutritious food to the nation and employment to many people? Of course, improved fishing and more education can go hand-in-hand, but education is not by itself an alternative for fishing. Another *EXAMPLE is the perception that fisherfolk do not take up certain activities because they do not know how to do it.* But often, on thorough analysis, it will be found that there are other, more complicated, reasons why fishermen and fisherwomen do not change their situations. Reasons that can be beyond their control, such as consumer preferences or even limited enforcement of fisheries regulations. It is very easy to say that lack of education or knowledge are the main problems.

Not all FFOs have biased perceptions, but it would be very good if they regularly reflected in their opinions and perceptions so that they could give fisherfolk families the rightful place they deserve.

Clients and superiors

Many FEAs find themselves now and then in contradictory positions because of having to address the needs of both clients as well as their superiors. *FOR EXAMPLE, during an extension campaign to improve skills in maintenance and operation of outboard engines among fishermen, the superiors may like to report (to their superiors) that their agents have been able to reach large numbers of clients within a certain period of time. However, the FEA, while working with the clients has found that more time than anticipated is required for the clients to acquire the necessary skills. Consequently, less clients than planned can be well briefed within the allotted time.*

As long as the clients do not contribute to the agent's remuneration and the agent is employed by others, the wishes of his or her superiors will come first. It will, thus, for a large part depend on the attitude of the direct superior whether the FEA is allowed to give sufficient time and attention to address the client's needs. In the context of the above example, some superiors are willing to take the risk of upsetting their superiors and would report that the experience in their area suggests that a smaller number of clients could be effectively reached than anticipated for the reasons given. Other superiors are not willing to take that risk and urge their FEAs to give greater priority to quantity than to quality, in order to reach the targeted number of clients. In the end, it depends to a large extent on the attitude of the national fisheries extension service how far it is willing to accept criticism of its programmes and to adjust the programmes accordingly.

The FEAs have the very crucial role of voicing to their superiors the experiences, problems and needs of fishermen and fisherwomen. To many superiors and extension experts at headquarters level, the field agent's experience is the only professional contact with the ultimate clients of the extension service. Thus, supervisors should be eager to obtain a share of that field experience and should be open to listening to the FEAs.

A FEA should also be rewarded according to his or her commitment

to working with clients. Like any other employee, FEAs need support and motivation to remain committed to their work. While many officers enjoy the luxury of working in an office, the FEA works alone in **the** field. He or she faces comparatively more inconveniences, such as:

- Working in isolation;
- Enduring frustrations alone, without getting any direct encouragement or support from colleagues and superiors;
- Having to put in a lot of effort to reach remote places; and
- Sustaining a considerable degree of self-discipline.

Supervisors should acknowledge these inconveniences. But the FEAs should learn that positive feedback and support can be obtained as much from clients as from superiors (Jiggins and Roling, 1982).

Often superiors do not know precisely what the agent is doing and a lot of good work may go unnoticed. Therefore, it is very important **that** supervisors make regular field visits and that the FEA gets sufficient opportunities to exchange experiences with colleagues and supervisors. Furthermore, professional attitudes within the organization and a sound reward system, such as career prospects, are necessary to sustain the commitment of **the** FEA.

Commitment in organizing extension activities

What has just been discussed relates, for the greater part, to the conditions of work and the organizational environment in which the FEAs work. Although conditions of work are indeed very important, much still depends on **the** personal commitment of the FEA to doing a good job. Too often, adverse conditions of work are used as an excuse for not being able to perform well. The real challenge is to do as much as possible when work conditions are not optimal. In the following paragraphs a number of attitudes, that may help the FEA to make the best of his or her work with limited resources, are summarized. Most of these attitudes have been discussed to some extent in Chapters 4 and 5 as well.

LOCAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Much information is available at the local level and, for extension, this information can be applied very effectively, both with respect to quality and cost. A sound local experience is, as a principle, the most practical source of information for many clients. *FOR EXAMPLE*, exchange of experiences of fishermen stranded at sea can be more useful than inviting a resource person from the navy to give a talk *about the causes for being stranded and possible solutions*.

It is the FEA's task to, in the first place, tap this information, when appropriate. This requires that the agent has a positive attitude towards appropriate practical information obtained from practising persons and not an attitude that only favours the more theoretical information obtained from training or research organizations. The agent should also have good contacts with client groups in his or her area to be able to identify, and obtain, the services of potential local resource persons.

FOR EXAMPLE, inviting a local person to explain **improved methods of fish processing** can be more cost- and quality-effective than inviting a person from a research institute. However, the research institute may have developed applied methods as well. In some cases, local persons will, very understandably, be reluctant to share their successful experiences with other persons for fear of increased competition. The FEA will have to judge which sources of information are most appropriate.

BEING ANALYTICAL

Although FEAs have to work within the context of their duties and also with the consent of their superiors, we have seen that there is a wealth of possibilities for the agent to initiate fisheries extension or to support local-level initiatives leading to fisheries extension activities. But before the actual extension can take place, a lot of thinking has to be done; and this requires an analytical attitude. The FEA will have to ask himself or herself many questions and will have to discuss these with the potential clients.

Some such questions are:

- Is extension the best way to solve the identified problem or to address the need?
- Are the problems not caused by reasons that cannot be solved by extension only?
- What else has to be done?
- If extension is regarded as a solution, what will be the effects on other people — will other people lose jobs, will some persons exploit the opportunities at the expense of others, will there be resistance from certain groups in the community etc?
- Which are the best extension methods? and
- What is the best way of getting extension activity organized?

Of course, not every little aspect of fisheries extension can be foreseen or anticipated, but the FEA should feel responsible for the fisheries extension activities in his or her areas and their effects.

BEING CREATIVE

Another attitude that can be highly beneficial when organizing cost- and quality-effective extension is to be creative. As mentioned earlier, field officers often complain of their inability to do certain activities because of lack of resources. It is indeed very difficult to conduct certain activities when the required resources are not available or are inadequate. But, again, there is a wealth of resources that can be tapped at the local level.

In the first place, clients are normally willing to supply resources, such as time, contributions for tea, raw materials available in the village etc., if they are guaranteed a high-quality fisheries extension service. The levels of contribution can be decided by mutual consent and special arrangements can be made for participants who are unable to contribute some of the resources. Some people may be short of financial or material resources, others may be short of time and there will be people short of both.

In the **second place**, there are other resources that do not belong to the clients but which can be used or borrowed. Schools have chairs (however small in size) and blackboards. The church, mosque, temple or community centre may have good notice boards. There may be another ongoing programme in the village or on the island (community development, health or otherwise) which might be willing to supply resources.

OBTAINING OUTSIDE SUPPORT SERVICES

The FEA can only know a part of the technical aspects of fisheries and fisheries-related activities. It is very important to **admit** that a person cannot know everything and that, if the information is not available at the local level, external sources of information will have to be sought. The next chapter documents the places where FEAs might be able to find the information that they are looking for.

Some organizations have provisions for sending resource persons who can explain and provide the information on the spot. Other organizations have resource material or audio-visual aids available for use by the FEA. But whatever outside support may be obtained for conducting extension activities, including resource material, resource persons or trainers, the FEA **is** the person responsible for all fisheries extension activities in his or her area.

FEAs, have argued that they do not have enough authority to ask other organizations for their services. As long as you do not make any requests, cooperate or communicate with other organizations, you will not know what you can get. Also, you will not be able to find out which organizations are best to contact and what are the best ways of obtaining their services. The best attitude is to make a start and not be too disappointed when you get negative responses initially.

For the FEA to build-up skills in cooperating with organizations that can provide external resources, it is recommended that he or she maintains a list of

- The organizations that have been contacted;
- The contact persons in these organizations; and
- The services that they are able to provide.

Such a list is also very useful for the agent's successor, who would otherwise have to build up this experience from scratch again.

While the FEA may, in many cases, take the initiative to obtain the services of other organizations, his or her superiors will have to consent to this. Therefore, the agent should keep them informed about the actions taken. The superiors, in turn, should assist the agent when required and support an exchange of information about ways to obtain outside services from other FEAs in the area, say, at the district level.