

Partnership as process: building an institutional ethnography of an inter-agency aquaculture project in Bangladesh

David Lewis¹

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1. Introduction

This chapter presents research into inter-agency project relationships. A process view of projects was central to the methodology which was adopted during the study and this generated a set of distinctive insights and problems. At a conceptual level, ideas about process also contributed to the widening of our understanding of the nature of ‘partnership’ between agencies in projects. The roots of the present case study can be traced back to research undertaken during 1990-92 by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), which investigated government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) linkages during efforts to promote technical change in the agricultural sector using case studies collected in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The research concluded that while collaboration between NGOs and government agencies was certainly taking place and in many cases generating potentially useful new approaches and insights, there was no straightforward ‘functional’ division of agency roles and that social, political and historical contextual factors in different countries were crucial determinants of linkage effectiveness (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

The South Asia portion of the research, which was documented in Farrington and Lewis (1993) attracted attention from one of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) centres, the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM). ICLARM decided to develop with ODI a joint research project in order to study inter-agency linkages in aquaculture. With assistance of ‘holdback’ funds from the then Overseas Development Administration (ODA), a joint project was designed to build on the ODI research using ICLARM’s involvement in aquaculture research and extension in Bangladesh as a case study. With the Government of Bangladesh and several NGOs, ICLARM was at that time seeking to develop sets of institutional linkages or ‘partnerships’ of the types analyzed in the ODI research project.

The objectives of this joint research project (which is referred to in this paper as the ODI research) were twofold:

1. The primarily objective was to suggest institutional arrangements through which mechanisms could be created and sustained to promote effective aquaculture research

¹ Centre for Voluntary Organisation, London School of Economics. This research was carried out while the author was working as a Research Associate at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

and extension;

2. The secondary objective was to document ICLARM's inter-agency aquaculture project in order to draw general lessons and produce guidelines to assist with future project planning.

Before moving on to discuss the project and the associated research, it is first necessary to make some introductory remarks about aquaculture in Bangladesh. Despite impressive increases in agricultural production in recent years such that the country is now approaching foodgrain self-sufficiency, a still increasing population has placed enormous pressure on natural resources. In the absence of new cultivable land and limited opportunities to further intensify agricultural production, aquaculture has become an important development strategy because it is widely perceived that Bangladesh contains a wealth of un- or underutilized water resources (Lewis, Wood and Gregory, 1996).²

Although fish is central to the diet of most Bangladeshis, the decreasing availability of wild fish resources in rivers and floodplains has focused attention on the potential of village ponds and roadside ditches as possibly underutilised resources for aquaculture. Although some large landowners have traditionally undertaken extensive fish rearing practices in the countryside, more intensive aquaculture practices are new to many poorer farmers. The government's strategy for aquaculture is primarily production oriented, while most of the NGOs favour the promotion of aquaculture as a potential income generation activity for the landless and marginal households. In the promotion of aquaculture as with much of Bangladesh's development effort, the role of external resources and foreign donors is very pronounced.

2. The ICLARM project

ICLARM has in recent years been engaged in a consecutive, linked series of short aquaculture projects with the Government of Bangladesh, predominantly funded by USAID. The current project seeks to develop and provide low cost, low input aquaculture technologies mainly in the form of an extension message detailing appropriate pond management techniques including fish stocking densities, feeding regimes, pond preparation and appropriate species mixes which can be readily used by low income rural households towards their income generation activity portfolios. A key structural component of the project is a complex framework of institutional partnership between government agencies, NGOs and international researchers. Training is being provided to government extension workers and NGO field staff who pass on the training to farmer groups who are seeking to pursue aquaculture as part of a range of income generation activities supported by credit provided by NGOs. Women who own little or no farm land form the 'target group' of many Bangladeshi NGOs.

The origins of the ICLARM project can be found in informal links between a number of BRAC field staff and members of the Fisheries Research Institute (FRI) which emerged during the late 1980s when BRAC was starting its aquaculture programme and required some technical assistance. ICLARM was already in contact with FRI. At the same time, USAID was looking

² Capture fisheries, despite its potential, has received rather less attention from development agencies and researchers.

for ways to improve the effectiveness of its work in strengthening national agricultural research institutes (including FRI) in Bangladesh. A workshop was held in 1991 between all these agencies and 31 NGOs and the idea to work towards involving NGOs in the wider aquaculture extension effort in Bangladesh was born.³ What resulted was an inter-agency project entitled "Technology Transfer and Feedback Through NGOs" which was funded by USAID. Phase I ran from 1992-93 and Phase II continued from 1993-94, although this phase was later extended owing to delays until 1995. This project, which we shall term the ICLARM project, is the subject of the present paper.

The ICLARM project involves government agencies and Bangladeshi NGOs and is designed to strengthen FRI's aquaculture research capacity and responsiveness to farmer needs along with the capacity of the wider extension system which now encompasses both government and NGOs as extension agents. There are three different government agencies taking part in the ICLARM project. The Fisheries Research Institute (FRI) is the public sector research body responsible for aquaculture and is based in Mymensingh. FRI is a comparatively new research institution without access to adequate resources and with relatively low staff morale, but was judged by ICLARM to have the potential to make a contribution to developing relevant technologies if it is provided with suitable financial support from USAID and 'technical backstopping' by ICLARM.

The Department of Fisheries (DoF) manages the national country-wide extension service but it too lacks sufficient personnel and resources, with only one Fisheries Extension Officer in each Thana, the local government unit which in some areas may contain around a quarter of a million people. The project seeks to bring NGO fieldworkers into a collaborative relationship with DoF staff, although the DoF is driven more by production targets than by a poverty focus. Finally, the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) is the apex body which coordinates research and evaluates the project, although in practice BARC appears to lack a clear function within the project because it has only limited capacity to monitor activities in the field.

For the past decade many of Bangladesh's NGOs have been involved in promoting aquaculture among their organised groups of landless and marginal farmers by providing credit and technical support. Along with the three government agencies described above there are five Bangladeshi NGOs involved in the ICLARM project. In order to overcome the constraints of the government extension system the project has invited NGOs to act as additional extension agents, working in partnership with the DoF, to distribute the technology to their own target groups (usually landless farmers with an emphasis on women). The NGOs are also invited to provide feedback on adoption results and research needs to the scientists and trainers at FRI. NGO field staff are trained by FRI and ICLARM personnel alongside DoF so that this training can then be passed on to the farmers by further demonstration and training. In addition, the NGOs provide credit to their group members. The NGOs involved are the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Proshika (which are the two largest national NGOs in the country), and three smaller local NGOs: Banchte Shekha and Jagorani Chakra which are based in Jessore in the south of the country and Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha TMSS which is active in Bogra in the north.

³ Dr M.V. Gupta, former Senior Aquaculture Scientist, ICLARM Dhaka, personal communication.

For the ICLARM project, the development of collaborative linkages between government researchers and NGOs is central to the idea of developing low input and low cost aquaculture practices which can then be adopted and sustained by low income rural people, who can also provide feedback through the NGO field staff and DoF extension workers to the scientists. Each NGO group maintains a detailed pond data book for this purpose. The key assumptions are that NGOs need technical assistance in their aquaculture programmes, which can be met by specialised training, and that NGOs have comparative strengths in developing links at the grassroots (Gupta and Shah, 1992).

3. Theoretical issues

Recent theoretical work in the social sciences has explored the different kinds of knowledge and forms of representation embodied in development projects. Drawing on Foucault's (1971) theoretical perspective on the ways in which knowledge is historically, politically and socially constructed as 'discourse', the anthropologist James Ferguson (1990) showed how a World Bank funded livestock project in Lesotho first needed to construct and represent a rural development 'problem' which could then be 'solved' by a project intervention. However, Ferguson argued that this constructed reality, or discourse, which was needed to justify having the project, did not necessarily correspond with local realities and indeed was instead driven by the wider structures of institutional power in which external agencies were engaged in interventions in Lesotho's economic and social life.

This perspective is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it opens us up to the possibility that there is far more taking place in development projects (which may of course either assist or constrain its official objectives) than is normally described in the official project literature. If these insights can be rendered more visible to project actors, it is possible that more might be learned about project progress and potential. Secondly, it suggests that multiple realities can be expected to co-exist within a project among the different participating agency actors, acknowledgement of which may help to explain the different motivations for becoming involved in projects and the likelihood that there will be unintended outcomes.

All this indicates that the conventional and still common view of projects as linear, controlled systems misses fundamental aspects of their nature, origins and character and that more information can be uncovered which might promote a higher level of institutional learning. In particular, efforts to understand ongoing efforts to negotiate different interests and reconcile conflicts may offer the key to improved performance. In a recent article Long (1996: 57-58) writes

The interactions between government or outside agencies involved in implementing particular development programmes and the so-called recipients or farming population cannot be adequately understood through the use of generalised conceptions such as 'state-peasant relations' or by resorting to normative concepts such as 'local participation'. These interactions must be analyzed as part of the ongoing processes of negotiation, adaptation and transfer of meaning that take place between the specific actors concerned.

Long is making the case here for a methodology which he calls ‘interface analysis’, but his comments are also relevant to the ‘process’ view which we have adopted in this research which is discussed later in this paper.

4. The discourse of ‘partnership’

It is only relatively recently that governments and donors have ‘discovered’ NGOs and brought them into more prominent roles within development projects (Edwards and Hulme, 1995). The Government of Bangladesh has been explicitly committed to working with NGOs as ‘development partners’ since the Fifth Five Year Plan which was drawn up in 1990.

However the language of partnership is a flexible one and as we have seen it can also be viewed as a Foucaultian discourse produced by prevailing configurations of institutional power and influence as development agencies, both government, NGO and International Agricultural Research Centre (IARC) compete for resources and status in relation to external resource provision. Bangladesh is one of the most aid dependent countries in the world with foreign assistance making up almost 8% of GDP. What this means is that reference to partnerships, linkages and other collaborative arrangements may not be as straightforward as they seem since they are likely to be linked to the wider resource negotiations among agency actors. For example, Biggs and Neame (1995) argue that linear models of development tend to obscure the fact that NGOs are not individual agencies but operate in a wider context based around negotiations with wider formal and informal networks and coalitions with other agencies. The negotiation *process* can be used by NGOs (and other agencies) to challenge the perceptions of donors and government and, of course, vice versa.

Two examples drawn from the ICLARM project are relevant here:

1. The agency motives for becoming involved in partnership (in terms of what each may want to get out of the relationship) may well differ between the participating agencies. For example, while ICLARM views NGOs as carrying out the role of extending aquaculture technologies to the farmers and providing feedback, the NGO Proshika has agendas of its own, such as seeking to influence farmers and researchers towards more organic aquaculture technologies.
2. Arrangements in practice may differ from those described in the project literature. For example, while the DoF has the mandate for aquaculture extension across the country, in practice it does not have the staff to perform this role, but does not necessarily want to be seen to delegate this task to NGOs because they are competing for similar scarce resources and legitimacy.

There are also contested assumptions behind the centrality of FRI to ICLARM’s work in Bangladesh. Although this relationship clearly has its roots in ICLARM’s mandate as an international research organisation to make links with and try to strengthen the ‘appropriate’ national research institution concerned with aquaculture research, two problems emerge with such a strategy.

The first relates to doubts in some quarters over the effectiveness of FRI as a research institution and over its operating style, both in terms of prevailing resource scarcity and institutional culture which make the envisaged shift to farmer-centred aquaculture research unlikely.⁴ The second is that further doubts exist as to the overall importance of technical constraints to aquaculture, which can be solved through scientific research through projects such as this one, as compared with the social and economic ones (Worby, 1994; Lewis, Wood and Gregory, 1996).

It is tempting therefore to suggest that ICLARM and FRI need each other far more for the individual institutional survival of each agency than the average low income farm household in Bangladesh needs new technology for aquaculture. FRI clearly needs a donor patron, as do many such agencies in Bangladesh. Farmers at the village level trying to get more involved in aquaculture, on the other hand, are struggling with issues such as access to secure pond rights, the timely supply of appropriate aquaculture inputs and less than adequate access to credit and markets and these are discussed in more detail below.

The more that can be uncovered about these discourses the more we can assess the practical basis for partnership and the constraints within the project which may be distorting it. The ODI research suggested that in some cases the basis for partnership linkage was misplaced, while at the same time other opportunities for complementarity between agencies and projects was occasionally missed. For example, the ODA's Northwestern Fisheries Project, which is an aquaculture research and extension project with many commonalities and possible lessons to share with the ICLARM project (it has developed links with thirteen NGOs), has no formal link with FRI and has now shifted its original objectives from production and research to the extension of existing technologies. Nor does there appear to be a particularly high level of mutual learning taking place between ICLARM and ODA in Bangladesh.

Another feature of the potentially distorting effect of the dominant agency discourse is that it becomes 'necessary' for aquaculture to be represented primarily as a technical problem (because both of the key institutional partners have a research mandate) even when there is growing research evidence and NGO experience which point to the fact that constraints on the intensification of aquaculture in Bangladesh are primarily social and economic. These constraints include the poor availability of inputs, conflicts around multiple pond use, difficulties with the secure leasing of ponds, the high level of investment risk to which low income villagers are highly averse, complexities of gender in the decision of labour and profit within households, and class and patronage issues in which pondowners may reclaim their ponds once they are shown to be profitable (Worby, 1994; Lewis, Wood and Gregory, 1996). These stark realities contrast with the official picture of Bangladesh as a country dotted with hundreds of thousands of un- or underutilized ponds with the potential for massive increases in aquaculture production.

5. The research methodology

⁴ Personal communication, ODA and interviews with other agencies in Bangladesh.

The ODI research project secured funding from ODA's 'holdback' facility, began in March 1994, and was scheduled to run for two years. The basic research plan was that ODI would first document the history of the ICLARM project, with particular reference to decision-making processes, successful and unsuccessful partnership linkages, and agency expectations and perceptions of project activities. This can be likened to the idea of building an 'institutional ethnography' of the project, a term employed by Escobar (1995) to describe the detailed documentation of processes and relationships using anthropological methodologies and insights. The idea then was to develop and implement, with project participants and beneficiaries, the necessary 'course corrections' which would address perceived problems and constraints.

The original intention of the ODI research and documentation project was to hold three workshops with ICLARM project participants followed up by semi-structured group and individual interviewing. The initial workshop discussions and interviews were recorded in order to provide a 'benchmark' of assumptions, attitudes and experiences against which lessons can be debated, successes and failures acknowledged and solutions evolved. Participant observation techniques were also to be employed both around the project office and on field trips to localities where the new technologies were being introduced to farmers by NGOs, government and project staff. In addition project documentation was to be consulted, an alternative history of the project drawn up to include planned as well as unplanned outcomes and comparative discussions with other agencies involved in aquaculture.

The concept of 'project as process' was fundamental to the study and underpinned the selection of a form of process monitoring to document expectations and activities and to plan course corrections. The methodology of process monitoring and research, a loose and evolving set of alternative approaches to conventional monitoring, differs from what has sometimes been termed the 'blueprint' view of projects, which relies upon the linear planning and design of projects often as closed systems. By contrast, process monitoring and research rests on the assumption that projects are open systems in which solutions to problems can arise through experimentation and practice rather than through design. Development is seen as a dynamic process which may be perceived in different ways by different social and institutional actors and is likely to generate important unplanned outcomes (Mosse, this volume).⁵

6. Understanding the ICLARM project in terms of process

As we have seen, the ICLARM project is in reality a series of projects aimed at developing and introducing sustainable aquaculture technologies. These projects have been extended and adjusted as experiences (and available funds) have allowed. As such they may be viewed as an entry point to both understanding and approaching a range of important issues around aquaculture and inter-agency partnership more generally. The problems and unintended

⁵ The current interest in viewing projects in terms of process is to some extent paralleled by recent thinking among organizational change theorists such as Dawson (1994: 4) who writes "... organizations undergoing transition should be studied >as-it-happens= so that processes associated with change can reveal themselves over time and in context ... This temporal framework of change can also be used to accommodate the existence of a number of competing histories on the process of organizational transition ... The dominant or >official version= of change may often reflect the political positioning of certain key individuals or groups within an organization, rather than serving as a true representation of the practice of transition management".

outcomes, we would argue here, may be of value and should therefore be documented rather than lost or omitted from project documentation. This is one of the advantages of using process documentation of this kind.

Much of the ODI project was spent discussing the original intentions of the ICLARM project and comparing these intentions with what actually worked out in practice. The partnership linkages within the project were categorised and levels of partnership were identified. Through interviews with key project staff efforts (some of which remained unfinished, which is explained in section 7 below) were made to understand how these linkages had functioned, the constraints which existed and possible ways in which constraints could be overcome.

Some of these linkages proved effective, others weak. They are classified in a preliminary way in Table 1 below. For those linkages which were categorised as weak, possible corrective action was discussed. For example, when tensions between large and small NGOs, and with local DoF extension staff were identified, the feasibility of strengthening, through lobbying and negotiation, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh's (ADAB) regional Aquaculture Forum was investigated, albeit with mixed results. However, each of these linkages and subsequent attempts at course correction helped to throw more light on the overall partnership issue.

Although the ODI project did not run long enough to reach its projected conclusion, indicative findings were emerging. The ICLARM project had achieved many of its objectives which are to provide NGOs with the opportunities to gain access to technical assistance with their aquaculture programmes, to report back adoption problems encountered by the farmers with whom they work and to begin to form ties with government agencies in aquaculture for the first time. By late 1994 a total of 3,563 farmers (of which 2,029 were women) had been trained, 900 ponds had been cultivated and the technology is clearly effective where it is 'properly' applied.

In particular, the feedback loop from the farmers through NGOs to researchers has been strengthened. Modifications have been made to the original ICLARM project's uniform technology package which has now been redesigned into several options in order to take account of different agro-ecological priorities based on feedback from farmers via participating NGOs in different agro-climatic areas (ICLARM, 1994). Furthermore, NGOs and government researchers are now, perhaps for the first time, talking to each other about aquaculture. On paper the stated objectives have been largely met. But once we take a view of the project as embedded in a wider system of relationships and discourses some other outputs would clearly be desirable in key areas. As one might expect there are still certain areas of weakness:

1. Inter-agency links may not last beyond the cessation of ICLARM's 'technical backstopping' support and motivating work and donor funding provision;
2. The 'institutional culture' within government agencies such as FRI remains essentially top down and oriented primarily around the old 'technology transfer' model. Participatory language is being assimilated much more rapidly than it is being put into effect, and the attitudes of some junior staff are becoming more open, but these have little influence in the absence of support from their superiors;

Table 1: Points of partnership linkage and their relative effectiveness.

LINKAGE	MECHANISM	EFFECTIVENESS
Farmers with farmers	Informal contacts	M
	Demonstration sessions	S
	Household division of labour	M
Farmers with NGO field staff	Training sessions	M
	Demonstration sessions	S
	Regular NGO group meetings	S
Farmers with DoF extension staff	Occasional visits	W
Farmers with researchers	FRI field visits	W
	Monthly meetings (via NGO feedback)	S
NGO workers and DoF extension staff	Project monthly meetings	M
	FRI training sessions	M
	Special FRI workshops	M
Large NGOs with small NGOs	Project monthly meetings	M
	ADAB Forum	W
NGO staff with FRI researchers	Special FRI workshops	M
	Monthly project meetings	S

Key: S ‘ strong; M ‘ medium or varies; W ‘ weak

(Note: these are indicative assessments based on interviews, limited field observation and actor

perceptions).

3. The relations between national and local NGOs are often weak and under-coordinated. Large NGOs tend to be well-resourced and require little but the most specialised occasional technical help; smaller NGOs need both resources and basic technical advice and training. Attempts to strengthen links through the ADAB Aquaculture Forum, established by the national NGO umbrella organisation, remain tentative at best, partly because the interests of larger NGOs tend to be represented within ADAB over those of smaller NGOs and many smaller NGOs do not become members of ADAB and are therefore excluded from any benefits which may arise;⁶
4. There has been a relatively low level of coordination between and exchange of lessons learned between ICLARM and ODA, which operates a large project in Bangladesh with at least some common interests;
5. Farmers may now be seen by some government research agencies as being capable of testing or adapting technologies which are passed down to them, but not yet as a force for significantly guiding research agendas;
6. Problems faced by low income farmers in the sustainable adoption of aquaculture technologies remain acute and primarily social and economic rather than technical in character.

Nevertheless, serious though these problems are, they do constitute an agenda for action for agencies and projects willing to confront them. Thus a constructive agenda for practical action in the form of creating or expanding 'room for manoeuvre', can be generated by the type of process view taken by the ODI research.

7. Emerging issues

This analysis led to several initiatives, evolved either by the ICLARM or the ODI projects (or jointly), for learning more widely from projects and achieving course corrections. The main issues which emerged are summarised in this section.

Firstly, the contingencies of project reporting do not necessarily lead to the interrogation of all available evidence (by project partners) which relates to partnership performance or to the internalisation of any lessons learned. The involvement of a third party in process documentation, in this case ODI, can play a useful role in this respect. Secondly, partnership only makes sense if can be shown to have achieved certain outcomes which would not have been possible by partners singly. Sometimes the rhetoric or 'discourse' of partnership can be used to command attention and resources in itself, and this may suit a variety of wider interests and political objectives. Process documentation can encourage project participants to confront any gaps between what they say they are doing and what they *actually* do.

⁶ See Noble (1995) for a description of this ADAB initiative and the problems encountered in NGO-NGO cooperation in aquaculture. Noble points out that there is as yet no formal collaborative project between NGOs underway in aquaculture. An exception to this general lack of partnership is Caritas, which does give informal technical support to small local NGOs.

Thirdly, the process of building an institutional ethnography of a project can generate new, supplementary activities aimed at correcting limitations. Sometimes these arise from unintended outcomes. But many agencies within a resource dependent environment find it difficult to confront preconceptions and organisational jealousies and improve communication and therefore performance within the project. This is one reason why the ODI research exercise ended prematurely. However, the issue of NGOs beginning to provide an input into the formulation of a new fisheries policy is a valuable unintended outcome. Also as we saw, agencies decided after the first workshop to take a more proactive role in strengthening the fledgling (and in some areas dormant or sidelined) NGO Aquaculture Forum.

A set of guidelines for the future is being developed through which projects can explore partnership issues more fully and through which the value of partnership can be assessed based on results. These guidelines, containing the experiences distilled from this project, will it is hoped be of value to ICLARM and ODA when planning and implementing future projects (Lewis and Ehsan, 1996).

Finally, an essentially top-down vision of 'technology transfer' lives on in many agencies, particularly those of the government. As we have seen, it is by no means clear that technological constraints are important in the development of aquaculture.⁷ But modifications to the institutional culture of government agencies (in particular) and also to NGOs in order to make them more responsive to farmer needs and to pursue more flexible working strategies through partnership will require longer term solutions. However this 'action research' is beginning to show that intra-project, inter-agency workshops and group discussions with a third party can be creative in moving agency culture towards this goal.

8. Reflections on the methodological problems encountered

During the course of the ODI research it became apparent that we had underestimated the methodological difficulties likely to be encountered during research and documentation by a 'third party'. There were several factors at work here which need to be outlined:

1. Bangladesh is a country in which local organisations and institutions, both NGOs and government, compete for funding and credibility within a highly resource dependent context. Alliances are constructed between individual agencies and these can sometimes take on a patron-client character. However we may describe them, such relationships are highly sensitive and therefore likely to resist outside documentation efforts which may be perceived as interference. Indeed such documentation may exacerbate tensions within the project.⁸

⁷ However there are experiences which point to the fact that once farmers are convinced of the value of a technology they need little encouragement from extension workers. For example the success of ODA/CARE's rice-fish culture promotion prompts Gregory and Kamp (1996: 21-22) to write that 'a technology really worth extending is not difficult to extend'.

⁸ A persistent issue was the GoB sensitivities around procedure and control in dealing with outside agencies. A key weakness of the ODI research was that it had not been included as part of the original official ICLARM project proposal but was an adjunct which did not fit into a clear bureaucratic category.

2. The above set of problems is not only limited to local or national agencies. International research organisations such as ICLARM are under strong external pressure from their funders to demonstrate the centrality of their research agendas to national policy priorities and may understandably be more prepared to document the ‘strong’ aspects of their programmes rather than the weaker ones. Tensions between headquarters and field staff were felt in terms of varying degrees of identification with the ODI research. This was true in spatial terms given the distance involved between the ICLARM headquarters and the Dhaka project office and in temporal terms in that some of the initial understanding of the project was lost when a senior ICLARM staff member and co-designer of the ODI research project left.
3. As part of the drive among key project actors to ensure the institutional survival of both the agencies and the institutional linkages which hold projects together, there was a tendency by the ICLARM project to view insights generated by the ODI research as already understood and being addressed. Of course in many cases this was true, but the desire by the project to ‘own’ its problems as well as its achievements made it difficult to work together with project actors in devising and implementing appropriate course corrections.
4. Further problems revolved around different versions of reality being contested; tensions between insider and outsider researchers and project staff; questions of status between junior researchers and senior staff members; tensions between ‘researchers’ and ‘researched’; and the general (and understandable) difficulty that most people have about being open about ‘bad things’.

These problems eventually led to a situation in which the envisaged methodology was unable to take account of the ‘political’ complexities of inter-agency projects in Bangladesh, let alone the subtleties of the key research questions. Resistance to the ODI documentation project by certain project actors took the form of negotiation and conflict about the direction the research should take, occasional lack of co-operation in providing introductions between researchers and key power holders which would facilitate smoother running, questioning of the legitimacy of ODI suggestions for possible ‘course corrections’, the suggestion that the ODI research had deviated from its original objectives, and finally the demand that the project should end earlier than planned because of the danger that project activities, and the legitimacy of certain key actors, might be threatened.

As a result of these difficulties, only the first of the three projected workshops was held which served to introduce the purpose of the ODI project and highlight ongoing achievements and problems. This workshop served its purpose in generated a wealth of basic data which was then followed up through several field trips and individual semi-structured interviews with ICLARM project actors. However there remained a basic unease among some project staff that the presence of outsiders (which has not been indicated in the original project documents agreed by ICLARM and the Government of Bangladesh) might destabilise the precarious relationships among the different government agencies, donors and NGOs. This concern was to some extent born out and on more than one occasion sensitive or inaccurate information was used by certain actors for ‘political’ purposes, occasionally generating an extra burden for project managers.

The difficulties experienced in the deployment of this process monitoring and research methodology and indeed the partial failure of the documentation project itself, does, however contain several useful insights about:

1. The workings of inter-agency projects in Bangladesh against the backdrop of competition for scarce resources.
2. The discourse of 'partnership' and the ways in which this is translated into practice.
3. The ways in which the 'problems' of aquaculture has been constructed in Bangladesh by development agencies along with their 'solutions'.
4. The means through which the rhetoric of participation can be assimilated relatively easily into a 'technology transfer' of technology model.

In this way the tensions generated by the research methodology created a set of very real practical problems; but at the same time they helped to produce some valuable insights into project processes. Few of these issues are raised in the official project literature but can be usefully explored in supplementary work carried out specifically for that purpose such as the type of process monitoring we have attempted here. As Escobar (1995) has written

... a textually mediated discourse substitutes for the actual relations and practices of the "beneficiaries", burying the latter's experience in the matrix that organises the institution's representation.

On one level this view is supported by the present study in that the project tends to claim and represent a level of participation which goes well beyond the actual relationships which exist both with people at the pondside and at the institutional level within the different participating agencies. But we have tried to move beyond this here; unlike Escobar, who presents an ultimately pessimistic picture, we believe that the dominant discourse is not monolithic but may contain some opportunities for 'room for manoeuvre' through improving the space for negotiation and transparency (Gardner and Lewis, 1996).

In more practical terms the main lesson which emerges is the need for sensitivity while conducting process documentation and research, particularly with regards to the role of the external agent or agents carrying out the monitoring. This external agent requires a wide range of skills in this area, such as the ability to build trust among all sections of the project and the various participating agencies, displaying an awareness of the often unavoidable contradictions implied by different actor perspectives and maintaining a respect for the hard work put in by many of the staff involved. In the case of the present research, we were not entirely successful in ensuring that these skills were always put into practice.

9. Conclusions

Despite the practical problems encountered in the research, the process documentation and research methodology which was developed during this study can be seen to have generated a

range of useful insights about the inner workings of development projects, and the fields of power and discourse with which they are surrounded. On a practical level the study also provides some important clues to potential future progress around both aquaculture in Bangladesh and inter-agency partnerships more widely. While 'active' partnerships are difficult to create and maintain within a resource dependent context such as Bangladesh and while different analyses and prescriptions for promoting aquacultural development are also in competition with each other, there may be significant areas of 'room for manoeuvre'. Some agencies are clearly getting closer to confronting some of the key issues which might generate the conditions under which economically marginal households can improve their income and nutrition.

However, the resource dependency issue does not only mean that the sustainability of agency linkages is questionable, but also calls into question the nature and the focus of the technological prescription offered by many projects of this kind in Bangladesh. This is because external resource flows may help to determine the ways in which 'problems' are constructed, just as they help to structure the form in which interventions are made. The process documentation approach used in this study helps to throw the operation of these wider forces into relief in the context of aquaculture.

There are difficult decisions ahead for development practitioners working in aquaculture in Bangladesh. Research and extension initiatives will need to become more participatory, less top-down and ideally will move beyond narrow definitions notions of farmer feedback towards models in which farmers can actually influence research agendas rather than simply commenting on technologies which are presented to them. There is also a need for development agencies to 'grasp the nettle' of addressing important social and economic constraints in ways which transcend an invocation of the assumed NGO abilities to reach farmers within what might be termed an 'instrumentalist' perspective of government and NGO relationships. By carrying out further process documentation of the kind described here, it is hoped that the disequilibrium which is likely to be generated may hold more in the way of creativity and solutions than destructiveness and contradiction. Active partnerships between NGOs and government and IARCs may yet unlock more of this potential.

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