



Towards a better understanding of conflict management in tropical fisheries: evidence from Ghana, Bangladesh and the Caribbean

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of conflict and how institutional failure may be a primary cause of conflict over natural resources. Typologies for studying conflicts are reviewed and a typology specific to tropical fishery conflicts is proposed. Using data from three tropical fisheries, it shows how conflicts emerge and how they are managed.¹ The paper concludes that local level management of conflict can be successful, but, without proactive support from higher levels of government the underlying causes of conflict are unlikely to be removed in the long term. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Conflicts over the use and management of natural resources are widespread² yet the formation and impact of such conflicts are often poorly understood. In the case of fisheries, although there is much case-study information on conflicts from around the world, there have been few systematic investigations of conflict per se. The information deficit is particularly acute in tropical fisheries,³ where, because of their important socio-

economic role (e.g. employment, income, food supply) conflict may produce hardships for some of the poorest members of society. In order to provide a better understanding of conflict, and in particular its impact on sustainable livelihoods⁴ in tropical fisheries, this paper will (a) produce a preliminary typology of conflicts in tropical fisheries; (b) assess the relative importance of different conflict types in three case-study fisheries and (c) explain why conflict might occur, its potential impacts and management.

Previous literature on fisheries conflicts can be divided between the ‘post-modernists’ and the ‘theorists’. The post-modernist approach provides detailed information on a particular scenario, presented as a case-study [10–17]. Although these studies provide useful information on a specific location or issue, the results cannot necessarily be extrapolated with any ease or certainty to

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² See [1–9] for case studies of forestry, water, land and farmer–herder and livestock conflicts.

³ For the purposes of this paper ‘tropical fisheries’ refers to fisheries operating in tropical environments (between latitudes 23.5°N and 23.5°S) which are usually associated with non-industrialised or developing countries, and inshore and small-scale fisheries. Statements made here about tropical fisheries would therefore not necessarily apply to places such as Australia or the southern USA, or to industrial fisheries in tropical regions, such as tuna, for example.

⁴ “A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base”. (Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets (1.1), UK Department for International Development, www.livelihoods.org).

a wider context (thereby limiting the utility for policy-makers).

The theoretical approach to the study of conflict advances new frameworks that can be used to describe and analyse natural resource conflicts. Since the inception of conflict theory during the immediate post-war period, these approaches have included sociological aspects, economic and econometric aspects, technological aspects and anthropological aspects [18–26]. In addition there is a large body of literature that sees the emergence of conflict in natural resources as the specific function of rising population and/or a decreasing resource base. Based on Malthus' original thesis,⁵ more recent work on this theme has been conducted by Homer-Dixon [27,28]; Maxwell and Reuveny [29] and Myers [30]. Econometric analysis of secondary data has attempted to show that as the resource base declines, so conflicts emerge.

Although both the post-modernist and theoretical methods have their merits, there have been few studies of the institutional aspects of fisheries conflicts. Given the increasing recognition of the role of institutions generally, this appears to be an important omission. For example, little attention is paid to the way communities can and do co-operate over natural resource usage which might explain why conflicts do not emerge in some situations.

The research reported in this paper focuses on institutional aspects of conflict. Data were collected during 2000 from three study regions: Ghana, Bangladesh and the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) in the Caribbean. Each study region represents a different institutional, economic and social setting. Ghana has large, marine artisanal fisheries important for rural livelihoods; most of the artisanal catch is consumed within the country. Bangladesh is dominated by flood-plain fisheries that are governed by a complex patchwork of legislation and fishing rights and make an important contribution to domestic food supplies. Finally, TCI, a British dependent territory in the Caribbean consisting of sparsely populated small islands, heavily dependent upon off-shore finance, tourism and fishing.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 examines the definition of conflict, associated conceptual frameworks and then reviews the typologies that have been previously produced in the literature to explain conflict and suggests appropriate modifications based on evidence collected in tropical fisheries from the current research.

Section 3 describes the methodologies used for studying natural resource conflicts. Section 4 presents the results from three field studies conducted in Bangladesh, Ghana and TCI. Section 5 discusses these results with reference to the emergence and management of natural resource conflicts whilst the final section provides some conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Background to understanding conflict

2.1. Definitions

Broadly speaking, conflict emerges when 'the interests of two or more parties clash and at least one of the parties seeks to assert its interests at the expense of another party's interests' [31, p. 199]. Conflicts of this type do not necessarily have to be violent nor highly disruptive, in fact many conflicts that arise as a result of differing interests are low-level, non-violent phenomena [32].

Although conflict involves one group asserting its interests at the expense of another, conflict is not always negative. Positive conflict highlights incompatible goals or objectives, thus focussing attention on something that needs to change for the benefit of all concerned. Positive conflict has also been described as the means by which communities hold themselves together through establishing consensus within groups [33,34] and also proof that 'society is adapting to a new political, economic or physical environment' [32, p. 9]. Boulding [26] and Buckles and Rusnak [35] however, both note that only when political and economic elites are prepared to act with marginalised groups is change likely to occur: if the elites' priority is to maintain their position and the status quo, the positive role of conflict may not emerge.

2.2. Concepts and theory

Conflicts between groups emerge for a variety of reasons. Conflict can arise as a function of social structure (the sociological perspective), as a function of power relations (the political perspective) or as a result of rational decision-making by an individual seeking to maximise their personal utility given a pool of scarce resources (the economic perspective).

The issue that often sparks off a conflict is the 'perception' that the one group is gaining (or, in economic terms, maximising their utility) at the expense of another. The underlying reason why conflict emerges, however, is often more complex. It may transpire that opposing groups are working to a different set of objectives but the focus of the conflict settles on more visible differences (race, gender or religion for instance).

⁵Malthus predicted that human populations would eventually outgrow their ability to feed themselves. As they reached the limit of existence so major conflicts or diseases would emerge to 'cull' large sections of the population until the planet was once again in equilibrium.

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