

## Case Study:

### From beneficiary agencies to partners: working with provincial authorities in Viet Nam



#### Overview

The case study describes the working arrangements between the national office of the Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (RFLP) in Viet Nam and government partners planning and implementing project activities. After overcoming initial difficulties caused mainly by administrative and coordination issues the relationship was transformed into a productive working partnership.

#### Key lessons learned

- When implementing projects, particularly in new areas with new partners, it is necessary to take into consideration the learning curve for the administrative requirements and capacity building of the implementers. This is usually not considered during project planning, and can translate into delays and a sense of frustration.
- It is important that the provincial coordinating agency conducts monitoring trips to ensure that progress and implementation quality are satisfactory and so that any potential problems can be identified quickly and addressed early.

## Background

The four-year (2009 – 2013), Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) was funded by the Kingdom of Spain and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) working in close collaboration with the national authorities for fisheries and aquaculture in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.

RFLP activities in Viet Nam took place in 14 coastal communes of three central provinces, namely: Quang Tri, Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue.

## Implementing modalities

The RFLP Regional Project Management Office (PMO) was located at the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (FAO/RAP) in Bangkok, Thailand. Meanwhile, field activities were managed and overseen through RFLP National Coordination Offices (NCO) established in each country. In Viet Nam this office was based in Hue City of Thua Thien Hue province.

At country level, a government counterpart institution was also designated as the implementing agency for the national component of the project. In Viet Nam implementation responsibility was assigned initially by the government to the Research Institute for Aquaculture No.1 (RAI1). From April 2012 until the end of the project the Directorate of Fisheries (D-FISH) was assigned this role by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

At the provincial level in Viet Nam the project was implemented and managed directly by the three Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARDs) of Quang Tri, Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces. As required by Vietnamese law, in each province, a Project Management Unit (PMU) was set up, headed by the DARD Vice Director and composed of relevant technical staff. The PMUs were mandated by the Provincial People's Committee to coordinate RFLP activities in the provinces, and were considered as the liaison office for field-work.



*PMU and FA staff at an experience-sharing workshop*



*Vietnamese fishing operations*

### **A slow and difficult start**

By mid 2011, the progress of implementing RFLP activities in Viet Nam was badly behind schedule. The main reasons for this can be identified as follows:

#### *Difficulty dealing with procedures*

As most of the PMU staff had virtually no experience working with FAO projects, they were frustrated with the rules and regulations, especially regarding administrative issues. The PMU set up was also different in each of the three provinces and confusing for all parties involved. For example, Thua Thien Hue province had a full time project staff member who acted as a liaison between the RFLP National Coordination Office and the PMU. This resulted in better communication and implementation. In contrast, in Quang Nam and Quang Tri provinces, the PMUs were composed of government staff who only worked part-time for the project. As a result their other government commitments prevented them from devoting sufficient time to RFLP activities.

#### *Selection of implementation partners*

Many RFLP activities were implemented via Letters of Agreement (LoAs) with activities contracted out to service providers. All three PMUs insisted that Letters of Agreement (LoAs) for project activities in the provinces should be signed with them, and

they would then sub-contract the work to Sub-DARD agencies. Their argument was that this was the most effective manner for the PMU to keep track of project progress. As the PMU Head was also the Vice-Director of DARDs, they had the authority to decide which agency to sub-contract the LoAs to. While this argument was valid in theory, the internal political situation sometimes resulted in task allocation that was not necessarily ideal. For example, a survey on the status of Fisheries Associations (FAs) in Thua Thien Hue was assigned to the Sub-Department of Aquaculture, rather than the Provincial Fisheries Association or Sub-Department of Capture Fisheries and Resource Protection, both of which are agencies with FA management responsibilities. More seriously, this “outsourcing” had adverse consequences. The actual service providers in many cases were unaware of the contractual requirements, thus producing poor results, often behind schedule, and with poor quality reporting.

#### *Poor technical quality of proposals*

Many of the initial proposals for activities to be implemented were prepared quickly by PMUs with technical and budget issues not adequately considered. As a result, the RFLP National Coordination Office needed to spend considerable time and effort discussing proposals with PMUs before the proposals could be finalized as LoAs and activities conducted.



*PMU participants at photo taking training*

### *PMUs working independently*

Discussing the situation and different needs of each province was difficult as the three PMUs each proposed their own work plan activities independent of one another. As a result the number of planned activities and subsequent NCO workload was increased threefold. This lack of collaboration led to delays and inefficiency. In one example, both Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces wanted to conduct boat master training courses for fishers. However, each province wanted to involve a different training provider. This meant that two different LoAs needed to be developed and technically cleared for signing, monitoring and reporting.

### **Building a better working relationship**

It took almost half a year for the NCO to become fully aware of the problems faced when working with the PMUs. A number of steps were taken to enhance project implementation. The transfer of the coordination role to the local government was crucial to the success and sustainability of RFLP activities. Efforts were therefore made to engage government staff more in participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation and regular reporting to project management at the national level.

### *Building capacity*

The capacity building process was implemented in both a formal and hands-on manner. Selected PMU staff took part in fisheries-related training courses, e.g. cage culture of grouper, gender mainstreaming, mangrove ecosystem health monitoring, etc. Courses were also held for most PMU staff as well as those from related agencies on gender in fisheries, reporting, and photo-taking. RFLP National Consultants for each of its thematic areas of activity also provided comprehensive technical backstopping to the PMUs at each step of activity implementation in order to transfer technical knowledge and practical skills. In addition, each PMU was provided with a computer, a digital camera and an LCD projector. This equipment was seen as essential by PMU staff to carry out their work.

### *Collaboration between provinces*

The NCO was able to convince the PMUs of the effectiveness of combining LoAs for related activities in order to reduce the administrative burden as well as to ensure linkages for delivering results.

### *Assigned monitoring and reporting on project progress*

Starting from April 2012, LoAs were signed with each PMU for the management of RFLP activities. With detailed Terms of Reference, the PMUs were better aware of their expected roles and reporting format, frequency and quality. Progress reports on the activities in the provinces were a good exercise for monitoring and evaluation tasks. Thanks to a simple and user-friendly report format provided by the NCO, PMU staff were able to keep track of the key results, to identify potential problems by the end of each quarter and propose solutions.

## Results

The process of building a better relationship between the PMUs and the RFLP national coordination office soon began to bear fruit.

### *Enhanced communication and collaboration*

Communication between the NCO and the PMUs improved. Both sides were open about problems faced during the implementation process and discussion and consultations took place via email, telephone and face-to-face discussions before any decisions were made.

### *Enhancement of project implementation*

In the early stages of RFLP, despite having detailed Terms of Reference, provincial staff tended to carry out activities when they wished and not necessarily in line with the requirements of RFLP. As a result of their active involvement in project implementation as well as through capacity building training, fisheries technical staff have shown a remarkable improvement in their working attitude and performance. They now better understand the importance of complying with the agreed terms in a contract both with regards to technical quality and deadlines.

### *Improved monitoring and reporting skills*

The staff of the Project Management Units (PMU) are now able to devise simple but effective tables for keeping track of project progress. They also send reminders to the NCO when there are delays in technical clearance. This is a significant change compared to the start of the project, when it was the NCO which had to keep reminding the PMU.

The quality of reports submitted by PMUs has also improved thanks to better consultations and communication with the RFLP Consultants. The reports are now more concise, with both qualitative and quantitative data, including sex-disaggregated figures. Report formatting is also much better, which helps contribute to the increased quality of the reports.

### *Project implementation*

As a result of these changes, by the final stages of the RFLP there was no longer a backlog in the implementation of activities.



*PMU participants take part in reporting training*

“Now I realize the importance of preparing an outline before starting writing. Otherwise, I would end up with a one-hundred page report that would lead to nowhere,” said Ms Pham Hoang Tam from Quang Nam Sub-Department of Aquaculture, after participating on a three-day report-writing training course in Dong Ha organized by RFLP in mid-June 2012.

## Lessons learned and recommendations

### *The use of Letters of Agreement*

- The steps by which LoAs are cleared needs to be described in detail so that the reporting chain is understood by all involved.
- The use of government technical agencies as service providers to conduct project activities simultaneously boosted the capacity of government staff during the process. Through the implementation of project activities, government staff were exposed to new approaches and techniques. They also had more opportunities to share their experiences with grassroots level staff and staff from other provinces.
- When government technical agencies sign LoAs as service providers, commitment must be obtained that staff with the required expertise are available.
- The use of government agencies is essential for the sustainability of project results as they remain after project completion. Lessons learned from implementing RFLP activities should therefore be disseminated amongst government/donor programmes.

### *Working through the Project Management Unit mechanism*

- Project Management Units should work as a Coordination Office at the provincial level. As such, they will work mainly on management, rather than sign LoAs as Service Providers (and then sub-contract).
- LoAs should be signed directly with the specialized agencies with the technical expertise required to implement specific project activities. These agencies should also report to the PMU on progress. As a result the actual service providers will be fully aware of the responsibilities and requirements included in their contracts. They will therefore need to take more responsibility for the quality of work, pay attention to deadlines and ensure that reports are of an acceptable standard.
- LoA Service Providers need to consult with the NCO during activity implementation for timely technical backstopping and monitoring purposes.



*A PMU staff member providing training at the commune level.*



*PMU participants at photo taking training*

“When invitations were sent out, the first reaction from almost everyone was ‘Why photo-taking training for Fisheries staff?’ Now they understand that a good photo can convey a message much more effectively than a thick technical report. Therefore, we believe the skills from this training will enable these technical staff to communicate better to a wider audience for both fund raising and lesson dissemination,” highlighted Ms Hoang Thi Phuong Thao, RFLP Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, after a photo-taking training organized by RFLP in Da Nang from 1-3 August 2012 for 18 staff of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development of Thua Thien Hue, Quang Tri and Quang Nam provinces.

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#### **About RFLP**

The Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) sets out to strengthen capacity among participating small-scale fishing communities and their supporting institutions in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. The four-year (2009 – 2013) RFLP is funded by the Kingdom of Spain and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) working in close collaboration with the national authorities responsible for fisheries in participating countries.