

POVERTY AMONG SMALL-SCALE FISHERMEN IN ILOILO

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Earlier studies have reported fragmentary evidence that small-scale fishermen are among the poorest of the poor in the Philippines. The present analysis confirms this picture, as based upon interviews with a random sample of 200 small-scale fishermen in Iloilo province. Respondents showed evidence of a low quality of life on various individual and household indicators (e.g. income, food consumption) and were also both poorly organized and isolated from government welfare services.

The Philippines is one developing country where poverty is a fact of life and a way of life for many of its people. Abrera (1976) reports that in 1971, 57 percent of all Filipino families had incomes below the subsistence level. The great majority (80 percent) of these impoverished families were found in the rural areas, while 5 percent were in Manila, and the rest were in other urban areas. Abrera also found that farmers, farm laborers, fishermen, hunters, loggers and related workers had the highest incidence of poverty. A more recent study of this problem by the World Bank (1980) reports that the incidence of poverty is on the rise. The percentage of all Philippine families below rural and urban poverty lines increased from 36.1 percent in 1971 to 54.3 percent in 1975. Of all families below the poverty line, 68.3 percent derived their incomes mainly from agriculture, fishing, hunting, forestry and logging.

As in other countries, programs and services have been launched to lessen, if not to eradicate poverty. However, efforts by both the government and private institutions have failed to make significant inroads into the structure and dynamics of poverty-stricken families and communities. A possible reason for this failure is that social scientists, social planners, and social welfare workers do not have adequate knowledge about poverty and its effects upon the lifestyle of the individuals, families and communities faced by this problem (Decaestecker, 1978). Moreover, while certain conceptual notions about poverty-stricken families have been advanced, the process by which

families become impoverished, perceive themselves as such, and are labeled by the society as poor, is by no means clear. There is an urgent need, therefore, to have more studies on poverty, particularly as conducted on the micro-level.

Iloilo Small-scale Fishermen

This study is concerned with municipal or small-scale fishermen in Iloilo province. These may also be called subsistence or sustenance fishermen since their catch is primarily for family consumption or for barter trade. They are sometimes referred to as traditional fishermen because they employ traditional techniques in fishing. They may or may not own a boat. If they do, their boat's capacity is less than three tons. It may be powered by a small inboard or outboard motor, by a sail or by mere paddles.

The decision to study poverty among fishermen was influenced by Abrera's report mentioned earlier, and by the fact that sustenance fishing is a major industry in the province of Iloilo, which has half of its 46 municipalities located along the coastline. The provincial profile of Iloilo shows that, as of 1982, there were 20,406 sustenance fishermen in the province. Their fishing crafts numbered 7,451, while their annual production was 91,082 metric tons (Iloilo Provincial Development Staff 1982).

Poverty among artisanal fishermen - on the individual, family, or community level - may stem from the socioeconomic condition of their

families of origin, their geophysical environment, their socio-cultural system, as well as current economic conditions or the political climate. These factors may work individually or collectively. On the individual and family levels, poverty may be seen in the quality of life (food, clothing, shelter, utilities, etc.), family assets (land and savings), as well as in education and employment. On the community level, the condition of poverty may be seen in infrastructure, services, and facilities; inequitable land tenure; shortage of employment opportunities; the presence of institutionalized forms of oppression and exploitation of the poor; and absence or inadequacy of institutions which provide opportunities for people's participation in local government or in decision-making.

The present study is based upon a sample of 200 fishermen respondents living in ten coastal barangays of three municipalities in Iloilo province. These municipalities were Buenavista (40 cases), Concepcion (94 cases) and San Joaquin (66 cases). In order to arrive at this sample, a listing of all households headed by small-scale fishermen in these barangays was conducted. Systematic sampling with a random start was then applied to arrive at the final sample.

All interviews were conducted in Hiligaynon, the local dialect. Persons interviewed were uniformly fishermen, and were in most cases either the father (household head) or one of his older sons. Three families were also chosen for case studies. These were selected to represent various socioeconomic levels and were all taken from the most economically depressed community. Interviews of key informants and non-participant observation were also used to supplement the above two methodologies.

Findings of the Study

Household Features. On the average, the sample households were composed of seven persons, most of whom were females, with an average age of 22 years. The heads of the households were typically in their late thirties

and had completed only five years of schooling. The employment ratio of the household members of labor force age was high, but many of the employed members were underemployed, underpaid, and working on an irregular basis. Most of these economically active household members were engaged in fishing and fishing-related trades. Only a few were engaged in farming, small-scale business, or in carpentry and construction work. The average income of the sample households from all sources was low. The majority's per capita income of P65 per month is below the poverty line of P83 per person per month for a family of six. This can be explained by the fact that the households were not getting much from the major occupation of the family heads. Also of importance is the fact that only 60.5 percent had sources of income other than their major source, with these coming to only P77 per month, on the average.

Most of the household expenditures were on food, thus supporting the theory that the more impoverished the family, the larger is that part of its income which is spent on food. On the other hand, their expenses for the education of their children, most of whom attend the public schools (which charge minimal fees), were low. The same was true for their medical expenses which averaged only P233 during the year preceding the survey.

As a consequence of their low income, the usual food intake of the sample households consisted of rice and fish. Vegetables and fruits were served during lunch in only 64 and 14 percent of the sample, respectively. Their usual morning beverage was coffee, *taho* (ginger), or tuba. During the difficult months when the catch was very low, some fruits and rootcrops were eaten as substitutes for rice at breakfast and even at lunch in some households. Again, since the earnings of each household were small, the majority had purchased clothes only once or twice in the last year. There were even a few who just depended on used clothing given to them for free by their relatives and friends.

The poor condition of the households under study can be explained partly by the

meager assets that they have. Only a small number (22.5 percent) owned a piece of land. On the average, these came to 1.14 hectares with a productive area of 1.06 hectares. Only 16 percent owned their homelots, the average size of which was 455.8 square meters. Although a majority of the sample owned their houses, these were mainly made of bamboo and thatch (nipa, cogon or coconut leaves). Most of these houses consisted of a living room which also doubled as a dining room, kitchen and/or a bedroom.

Additional assets included production tools. These consisted mainly of a fishing boat with an average capacity of 256.1 kg and a hook and line. A few (5 percent) did not even own any fishing gear; they rented, borrowed or used for free the fishing equipment of their parents, relatives and friends. Those whose major or secondary occupation was farming had a plow, hoe and trowel. There were also a few (9 percent) who owned carpentry tools.

The quality of life of the respondents' households depicted a picture of poverty. Although 41.5 percent of the households drew their drinking and cooking water from the communal water system, unsafe dug wells were the water source for another 34 percent of the households. Wood and charcoal were the cooking fuel for the majority and an open-pit toilet was common to 63 percent of the sample respondents. A battery-operated transistor radio, and sala and dining sets made of bamboo and wood were the most common utilities owned (56 percent of the households). Only 2.5 percent owned a refrigerator and a television set, some of which were battery-powered. (Some study areas had not yet been reached by electricity when this study was conducted.)

In spite of their poor life condition, only 11 percent of the households have changed their residence in the past. The majority of these had moved only once to places within the same municipality where they were residing when interviewed.

Perceptions, Aspirations and Strategies for Survival. Their poor condition notwithstanding, half of the total sample perceived their

life situation as "average," neither poor nor good. This could be explained by their comparative reference to other fishing households, or by their being conservative in assessing their condition. Fifty-four percent were optimistic that their life situation will become "good" or "very good" in five years' time. To realize this, the majority say that they will work harder and are trying to save. The others plan to look for better jobs, to send their children to school, to put up or expand their business, to wait, be patient or to pray for God's help to improve their quality of life. Only a little over one-half of all respondents had perceived a change in their respective communities, the effects of which were described as either "good" or "very good."

In order to cope up with poverty, respondents seek the economic assistance of their parents, relatives, and friends, in that order of priority. The same people are approached by the respondents for the latter's non-economic needs. Their other means of survival include applying for credit in sari-sari stores, selling or pawning household property or valuables, making children work as household help, limiting their number of meals or reducing the amount of food intake, substituting root-crops for rice, and attending celebrations or vigils to save on meals and to eat good food.

The respondents had high aspirations. To have good health was the aspiration of most respondents for themselves. For their family, the aspiration of most was for their children to become professionals. For their community, the important wish of the majority was for their place to be progressive, peaceful, and livelier.

Fishing-related Information. The majority of the sample households had one member engaged in fishing. All fished in the sea, although there were those who fished in inland fresh waters, particularly during bad weather. The majority owned their own boat, with an average load capacity of 256.1 kg and with three operators/crew members. The median investment in fishing gear was ₱616. Only 30 percent had borrowed for the purchase of fishing

equipment. Loans were typically extended by private individuals and were not large, as shown by their median value of ₱214. Most fishermen were paying their loans on a monthly basis, with an average monthly interest of 10.6 percent.

The common fishing methods used by the sample fishermen were *pamunit* which uses hook and line, *into-into* which also uses line, hooks and artificial bait like fowl feathers or colored plastic, *kurantay* which is stationary and uses a net, and *lambat* which is also stationary, but uses bamboo pens and nylon in catching fish. The use of boats is extensive during the peak fishing months but less extensive during the lean months. The most popular sharing arrangement practiced by the fishermen was for one third to be allocated to the boat's maintenance or rent while the remaining two-thirds is shared equally by the members of the crew.

Fishermen are able to fish for an average of 21 days during peak and normal months, but for only 11 days during the lean fishing season. They spend an average of 7 hours on sea, but this fluctuates depending on the weather. The peak season is from December until March along the southern and western coasts of Iloilo, while it is from November to May in the northern part. The best fishing month is December and May for western and northern areas, respectively; March for southern areas. The lean fishing season lies between June and October. August is the leanest month for all sample municipalities. The kinds of fish caught by the fishermen under study differ from season to season and from municipality to municipality.

The production (volume of catch) of the sample fishermen varies according to fishing season, averaging 604 kg. or, in cash, ₱905 per month. To be deducted from this are expenses per fishing trip which averaged ₱23, the pay for the boat maintenance or rent, the share of other crew members, and the value of catch given to friends, relatives and neighbors. Ninety-five percent of the fishermen's catch was usually sold, while the rest was consumed or shared for free with relatives, friends and neighbors.

The major problem that most fishermen see with regard to their work is the encroachment

of big and "modern" fishing vessels on their fishing grounds. This is followed by their lack of capital, which is in turn related to other problems, such as the lack of fishing gear. Additional problems include the high price of gasoline and fishing gear; the low price of fish; inadequate credit facilities; lack of information on the weather; poor storage and processing facilities, particularly when fish are abundant; and the increase in the number of fishermen in the area.

Only 26 percent of the respondents perceived a change in the fishing industry, the effects of which, according to the majority, were "bad." The few who were hired by big fishing boats or by fishpen operators perceived the changes to be "good" because of the personal benefits which they had been able to derive. The majority were of the opinion that favorable changes in fishing would have been effected had there been an organization which could have taken the welfare of the small-scale fishermen as their major concern.

Welfare services like schools, health clinics, credit facilities, water and lighting systems, and roads were inadequate if not absent in the communities covered by the study. Local governments and social organizations were not perceived to be functioning effectively by most of the respondents. This has made the life situation of the sampled households more unpleasant and difficult.

Conclusion

The findings of both the survey and the case studies support the report that fishermen in this country are among the poorest of the poor (Abrera 1976, World Bank 1980). The quality of life of the small-scale fishermen covered by this study was far from desirable. This is indicated, for example, by their low income, their poor living conditions, and their inadequate food consumption patterns. Furthermore, government welfare services which might have ameliorated their living conditions were inadequate if not absent. Thus, the small fishermen are faced by such apparently insurmountable difficulties that the best that they can do is to just bear these stoically.

A number of factors were found to be associated with the poor quality of life of the small-scale fishermen in our sample. These may be seen as both contributions to and consequences of the present state of life they are in. Their relatively big households; their low educational attainment; their underemployment; their irregular or seasonal jobs; their low pay; their meager assets, if they have any at all; and their traditional fishing methods are some factors which may explain their poverty and indicate just how disadvantaged they really are.

It is surprising, though, that, with all these odds against them, the fishermen still perceived themselves as having an "average" life condition; that is, neither poor nor well-off. Even more remarkable was that they can still afford to be optimistic about their future condition. This, one can surmise, may be attributed to the Filipino's trait of resiliency, that is, the ability to adjust and to make do with whatever is available in whatever situation he finds himself.

Notes

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