

# **Networking for Rural Development**

## **A closer look at the evolution of communications in the STREAM Initiative**

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### **The reckless and the brave**

From time to time, if they are bold, organizations review what they do well and what they do less well. Sometimes, if they are also committed to improvement, they may even act on what they find, build on their strengths and improve areas in need of development. When, some years back, the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA) took a region-wide look at itself, it saw a healthy, lively network, focusing on technical aquaculture issues, near-industry development and information-sharing in a range of well-written English media. However, it did not see great impacts of its efforts in support of poorer people with limited access to services, those who can invest little, though proportionately more, of their resources on aquaculture, those who perhaps do not read English and those who do not read.

If public peer review was brave, then what followed might even be considered reckless. Rather than highlight only its strengths, or pay some small regard to improving impact among those in need of less intensive aquaculture support, the NACA secretariat and its Governing Council began finding partners to conceive a process to make rural development and poverty alleviation its core business. Although wildly ambitious, this was an honorable course. It embodied a response to Chapter 26 of Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development calling on inter-governmental organizations such as NACA to “establish a process that empowers indigenous people and their communities through, *inter alia*, recognition of their lands, support for alternative environmentally-sound means of production, and arrangements to strengthen indigenous participation in the national formulation of policies, laws and programs relating to resource management and development that may affect them.”

With a rationale from Agenda 21, formidable yet tangible tasks ahead and powerful adjectives like bravery and honor in the air, partners began to come forward. NACA countries that had contributed to the original review, and already owned the agenda, committed to play a role. From within the UN, FAO saw a need and desire to help shape the effort. The international non-governmental organization, Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO), shared its recent innovative efforts (and its volunteers), an early NGO to complement NACA, an intergovernmental organization. The UK government, sensing a small opportunity to give life to its recent theoretical steps forward in approaches that put poor people at the center of development, stepped in to encourage and coordinate early pilots and broad conceptual frameworks for communications and learning.

Many big and small ideas went into the mixing pot. Innovators were actively encouraged to air their local and global aspirations, discuss productive working cultures and share their observations on the nuances which divide successful outcomes from those which fail.

### **Four interlinked themes**

Over time four interlinked themes for a poverty-focused development agenda emerged: livelihoods, institutions, policy development and communications.

## *Livelihoods*

The choices that people make, the resources they can command and the circumstances in which they can be woven into supporting *livelihoods* are the context in which aquatic resources management is being considered. This explicitly puts people, not aquatic resources management, at the center of



*Discussing livelihoods in eastern India*

aquaculture, laboring, manufacturing and the supply of services.

agenda-setting. There are other approaches that target the promotion of fisheries or fish culture or increments in utilization of ponds, which remain common in fisheries institutions in Asia-Pacific, though these can give rise to conflicts between what people want and what institutions want. The broad focus on aquatic resources management over aquaculture helps to avoid constraining our agenda to one sub-sector, when we know that people's lives are complex. We know well that farmers, especially those who are vulnerable, rationally choose mixed portfolios of livelihoods sub-systems, which may include many interlinked activities associated with aquatic resources management, such as farming, fishing,

## *Institutions*

An appreciation of the value of livelihoods approaches to the support of aquatic resources management is still growing within Asia-Pacific. Sharing the benefits of this way of working, over approaches focusing on resources and pre-set institutional agendas, remains a considerable task. Influencing "arrangements to strengthen indigenous participation in the national formulation of programs relating to resource management" (Agenda 21), begins with introducing livelihoods approaches into the way that *institutions* operate. An intergovernmental organization wields the collective influence of its members through networking, especially partnerships with institutions, collective learning and maybe sometimes a little peer pressure. It is through these avenues that help is provided to aquatic resources management institutions with their rural development and poverty alleviation objectives.



*Working with institutions in Vietnam*

### *Policy development*

Effective policies for rural development and poverty alleviation will support people's access to resources and the choices they have to build their resource base and reduce their vulnerability. The



Considering policy changes in western Orissa, India

opacity of policy making tends to confound poor people in rural areas although they have much advice to offer. *Policy development* takes place near centers of power, where governance happens, inconveniently set some way from the centers of rural poverty. At the same time, the complexities of the lives of people who are poor tend to confound policy making, although seeking their advice seems fraught with difficulty. The key entry point here is to negotiate an arbitrating role with both of these policy partners. The objective is to give poor people a voice in policies that have an impact on their lives while giving policy-makers access to information which they need to craft effective policy.

### *Communications*

Technologies for rural aquaculture are necessarily simple. Many good ones exist already and further adaptive work on these should be the preserve of people who use them in their daily lives. However, a large collection of needs centers on *communications* and the knowledge and learning that already exists. Communications gaps can be identified along two directions: one functional, which links farmer's aspirations and assets with potentially useful policies and service provision (as referred to above), and another geographical, where learning is shared among neighboring communities, provinces and countries. The issue is – with reference to language, culture and power relations – to share meanings across countries and languages, tackling complex concepts



*Communications with service providers and Self-Help Groups*

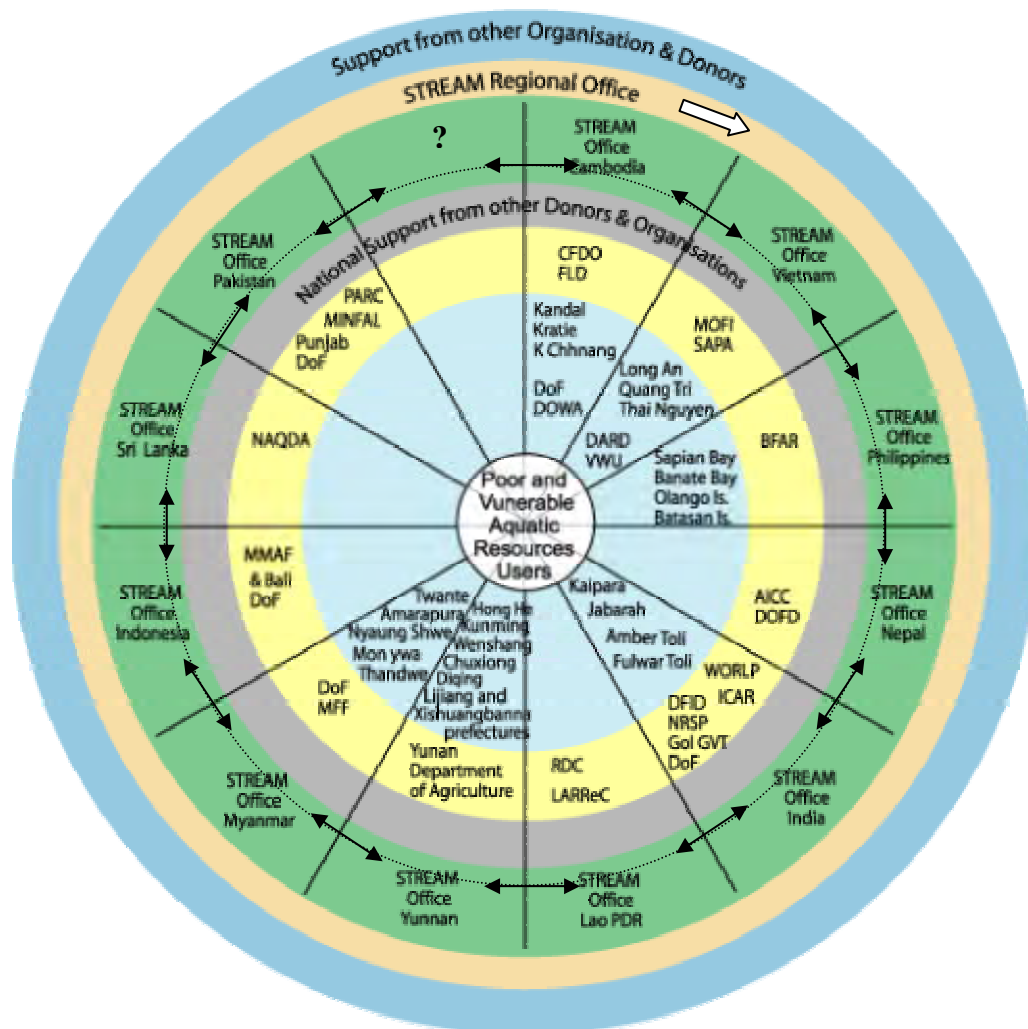
like sustainable development and livelihoods approaches, along with some of their basic components like foraging from paddies and small water bodies, gleaning from shores and reefs, fishing and managing small-scale aquaculture.

### **Sharing the concept of the STREAM project Initiative**

After some debate we named our rural development and poverty alleviation efforts the “Support to Regional Aquatic Resources Management” (STREAM) Initiative. By definition an *initiative* can be a plan or a scheme, a proposal, a process more than a blueprint, which is what we had (and were trying to sell). *Initiative* can mean inventiveness, enterprise and ingenuity (which were the spirit, the very

approaches, we envisaged) and it can also imply ascendancy and advantage, which all partners sought for the people they wanted to position at the center of their development efforts.

We began to share the concept of a sustained, embedded presence of so-called STREAM Communications Hubs, linking into ministries, provincial offices, cities and towns and reaching out to diverse networks of people, self-help groups and their federations, and supporting them to provide ever better services.



*Directions of communications among poor and vulnerable aquatic resources users, service providers, embedded Communications Hubs, and other national and regional stakeholders*

As people listened to our communications strategy for the initiative and its four themes, two types of responses were common. The first was that people translated back the word *initiative* (that we had coined to describe what we thought of as an innovative approach) into the familiar, but inadequate word *project*, with its more prescribed and directive nature and short-term funding base. This is a problem because we believe that significant impact cannot be made by an intervention unless it is sustainably integrated within local institutional contexts.

Also, although many share our view that projects tend to have governance structures which do not adequately share power, the project as a way of working has become so ingrained that people use the term (and its implied ways of working) almost as if no other way exists. Yet there is increasing interest in sustainable livelihoods approaches and a growing disillusionment with projects as



mechanisms for addressing the development needs of poor people. Especially where the ways of working and communicating tend to structure which people have voice at the micro level and how much room there is for maneuvering by partners. In most cases changes to these relationships will have to be initiated by the dominant partners (that is, those who hold the funds and make the agendas). As the STREAM Initiative sees fundraising and regional agendas as areas where it can play a bridging role among donors, local communities and service providers, it becomes clear why we need to question strongly the assumption that we are a project.

The other common reply was a response to what were seen as the grand (admittedly ambitious) notions of influencing institutional, policy change and communications approaches and working from the perspective of people's livelihoods. In other words, how did we expect to do it?

While questioning the assumption that we were a project was a useful task which helped us all to engage in debates about sharing power and our capacity to deliver on ambitious target approaches, we chose not to debate but to demonstrate evidence of impacts through practice. Following requests from two NACA member governments and one NGO to become STREAM partners, we signed Partnership Agreements in Cambodia with the government Department of Fisheries and the NGO SCALE, and in Vietnam with the government Ministry of Fisheries, and began working.

### **Establishing Communications Hubs**

In January 2002 we proceeded to pilot the embedding of Communications Hubs within the Community Fisheries Development Office (CFDO) of the Department of Fisheries in Phnom Penh, with joint working agreed with the NGO SCALE, and within the Sustainable Aquaculture for Poverty Alleviation (SAPA) Office in the Ministry of Fisheries in Hanoi. This reflected in each case the priority fisheries and aquaculture objectives of the government at the time: community fisheries development around the Tonle Sap and Mekong corridor in Cambodia, and the refocusing of government support for aquaculture to increasingly include poverty alleviation objectives, including the introduction of livelihoods approaches, throughout Vietnam.

After capturing initial lessons from the first pilots of Communications Hubs established in Cambodia and Vietnam, and following a request from the Philippines government, the STREAM Initiative embedded in May 2003 a third Communications Hub within the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) Region 6 at Iloilo on Panay Island in the Western Visayas. This was chosen to be close to a number of on-going community management programs such as BFAR's Fisheries Resources Management Project with Asian Development Bank (ADB) funding, and the local presence of another regional stakeholder, the South East Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) Aquaculture Department.

On behalf of the NACA member countries, the intergovernmental secretariat and the STREAM Regional Office in Bangkok proposed to FAO that they provide catalytic funds to expand the network of Communications Hubs to other countries seeking partnerships within STREAM. The considerable interest in the STREAM Initiative among NACA governments and the award of a Technical Cooperation Project from FAO in June 2003, catalyzed the expansion of the network of Communications Hubs to a further eight countries over the next two years: India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Yunnan, China.

STREAM Communications Hubs are currently operating in 11 countries across Asia-Pacific. Managers are fluent in local languages and English, with backgrounds in fisheries, aquaculture or other natural resources management areas, and with an understanding of contemporary development issues. Crucially, they are good communicators in regular face-to-face and internet contact, and now form part of a regional network linking government and non-governmental colleagues through Partnership Agreements, into aquatic resources institution in countries across the region and promoting work within the four inter-related themes.

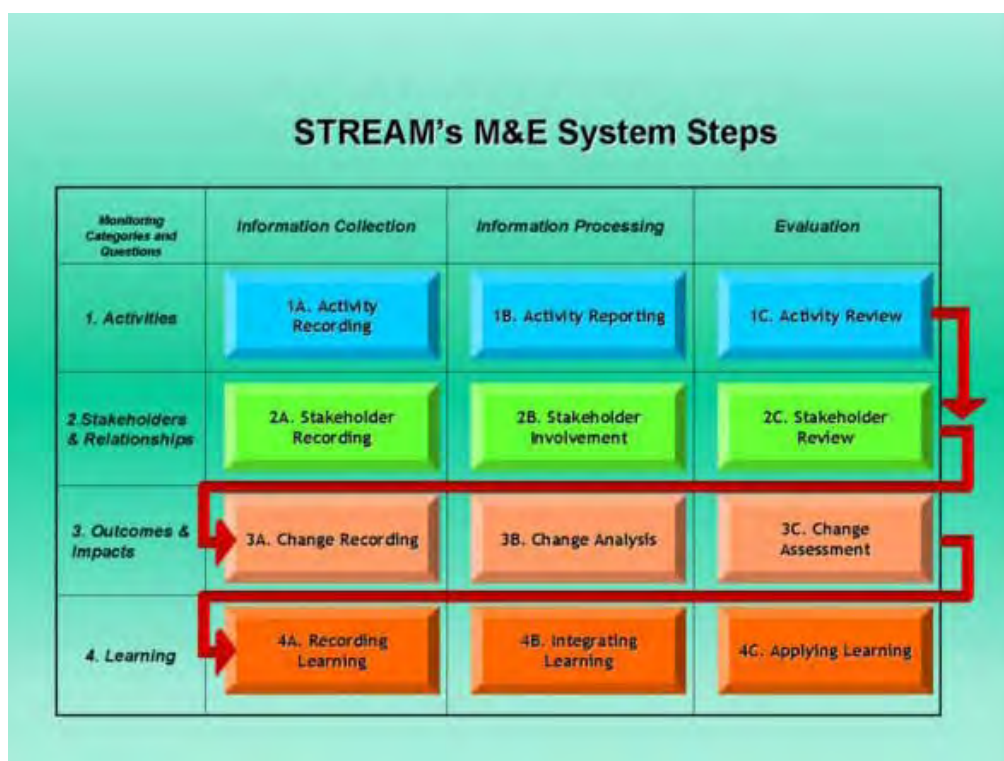
## Building strategies and integrating learning

Ways of working are established to bring together these aquatic resources institutions and their various management approaches and, through the regional network, create avenues and opportunities for learning and communicating.

Communications Hub Managers recruited by STREAM, together with National Coordinators designated by partner governments, act as co-representatives for the initiative. An early task in each partner country is to develop a Country Strategy Paper (CSP) in consultation with a range of national stakeholders, and with support from the STREAM Regional Office in Bangkok. A CSP identifies relevant national poverty and aquatic resources issues, examines policy and institutional environments, establishes key objectives, proposes implementation approaches, highlights linkages with national and regional stakeholders, and provides a basis for seeking financial support from STREAM, its partners and other sources.

A CSP should remain valid for three to five years, after which time the CSP, and the process and practice to develop it, will be reviewed and revised as circumstances change and learning takes place. The document acts as a guiding framework, enabling STREAM Country Offices and the Regional Office to make more detailed action plans so that the STREAM Initiative focuses its efforts in support of countries priorities around the themes of livelihoods, institutions, policy development and communications.

Keeping in mind questions about our capacity to deliver on ambitious target approaches, and our need to guide our learning and its application, we developed a Monitoring and Evaluation System (which took over two years) through a process of consultation among the Regional Office and Communications Hubs and building on existing ways of working. The system combines process monitoring using indicators (with quality, quantity and time characteristics) to learn from how we do things, combined with the collection and assessment of Significant Change Stories to capture unanticipated changes.



*The system used to collect, process and evaluate information about STREAM activities, stakeholders, outcomes and impacts, and learning*

## Sharing knowledge

Communications is expanding along two directions through the network of hubs, associated structures and communications vehicles. As referred to above, one direction can be described as functional, linking farmer's aspirations and assets with potentially useful policies and service provision, and another geographical, where learning is shared among neighboring communities, provinces and countries.

Regular links among each of the Communications Hubs and with the STREAM Regional Office are maintained through facilitated netmeetings (currently every three weeks) and virtual conferencing (each December), and frequent face-to-face workshops and meetings and an annual regional conference (each June). This provides considerable opportunities for intra-regional interaction and sharing. The STREAM Initiative website has become a central resource with its News and Events feature and Media Monitoring Reports, and the ever-growing Virtual Library, from where thousands of copies of hundreds of documents from STREAM and other organizations are downloaded. There are country pages and documents about ways of working: developing country strategies, planning processes and ways to monitor and evaluate.

Other communications vehicles include the *STREAM Journal*, published quarterly to promote participation, communication and policies that support the livelihoods of poor aquatic resources users in Asia-Pacific, and to build links within the aquatic resources management and other sectors across the region. The *STREAM Journal* covers issues related to people whose livelihoods involve aquatic resources management, especially people with limited resources, and government, non-governmental and international practitioners who work with them in communities. Such issues include learning, conflict management, information and communications technologies, aquatic resources management, legislation, livelihoods, gender, participation, stakeholders, policy and communications.

Another equally important purpose of the *STREAM Journal* is to provide an opportunity for seldom-raised voices to be heard and represented in a professional publication that is practical yet somewhat academic. To date sixty-six two-page articles have been published. The English version of the journal is translated into local languages by Communications Hub Managers. Most of the hard copies distributed, and currently around 70% of all those downloaded, are in local languages.

## Implementing changes recommended by stakeholders

Especially to facilitate communications linking farmers' aspirations and assets with potentially useful policies and service provision, STREAM has piloted (in India) a process for giving people a voice in policy-making processes to enable recipients of policy and services to recommend policy changes and build consensus for change among policy-makers and implementers. Some of the policy recommendations from the pilot are already being implemented, including changes to the process and period for leasing fish ponds and changes to the way that information is made available to farmers and fishers. The first change, to increase the length of the lease period for water bodies, provides farmers with opportunities to plan for more sustainable and more productive aquaculture over the longer term. The second change involves the establishment of so-called One-Stop Aqua Shops (OAS), local to people's homes. The purpose of the OAS is to save potential fish farmers' time and energy by providing a single location for them to gain access to aquaculture information, training, sources of micro-credit, loans and details of government schemes. In the future, the OAS will provide additional services including the provision of inputs needed to start aquaculture such as fish fingerlings.

The first OAS in India was opened on 7 May 2004 in Ranchi, operated by the Jharkhand Department of Fisheries, Fish Farm Development Agency (FFDA). It is already implementing new ways of sharing aquaculture information with farmers, and links with the STREAM India Communications Hub One-Stop Aqua Shop Information Service (Oasis), rural banks and the Fisheries Department.

The second, opened on 1 June 2004 in Kaipara Cluster, Bara Bazar, Purulia, in rural West Bengal, is run by a federation of 20 Self-Help Groups with over 250 members. Here the OAS is already developing income-generating activities such as fingerling production that enable the facility to fund itself and to provide a sustainable information service. The third opened on the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2005 in Bilanjo, Orissa by the NGO SVA in association with a fish hatchery and nursing network. A further four are being developed in Nuapara and Bolangir, two of the poorest districts of western Orissa. We hope that the concept and practice will continue to grow and fill gaps that exist between farmers and service providers. As these kinds of changes take place and have an impact on people's lives, others can begin to envisage how influencing institutions, policies and communications approaches, and working from the perspective of people's livelihoods, might make a difference.

What began as a general desire to share messages about processes, technologies, lives and opportunities – among farming and fishing communities and those who work with them – has evolved into a network that shares meanings and lessons learnt. Now instead of relying on core funding or catalytic support, the STREAM Initiative is self-funded through the services its network provides to academic, development and other organizations.

For more information, please visit [www.streaminitiative.org](http://www.streaminitiative.org)

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