

## Two Worlds Across a Highway

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Our cars turned off the national highway to the north toward what appeared to be a part of Lake Keenjhar near Thatta town in Sindh Province, about 85 km east of Karachi, Pakistan. We bumped over the dirt and rock track until we came to a stop in front of the only concrete building in a settlement of grass huts. We were shown into the meeting venue and sat down, with mostly elderly women then invited to join us, and soon surrounded by men and boys of all ages. Other younger women and girls stood behind. Our host, Mr Adam Gandro, a fishing community leader from the area, facilitated a session in which various of the older women in front of us began speaking of the problems they faced, as individuals and as residents of Chilya Village.

Mr Adam had been an active participant in our previous two days' stakeholder consultation meeting in Karachi, the first of two sessions in Sindh Province, with the other scheduled for the next day near Thatta town. We had come a day early to discuss with local colleagues the arrangements being made for the consultation and took the opportunity to meet with a group of women in Chilya. We were almost halfway through a series of provincial stakeholder consultations across the four provinces of Pakistan, and had not yet had many inputs from women. The purpose of the consultations was to seek stakeholder affirmation of the draft "National Policy Framework and Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture Development in Pakistan", following earlier community consultations - including with many of the same people in Chilya - and inputs from other stakeholders.



Back in the Chilya meeting, Mr Junaid Wattoo, my STREAM Pakistan colleague responsible for taking the consultation groups through the sections of the draft national policy, tried to ask questions of the women in a structured manner, and had limited success. With each query, the women continued calling out their issues. It seemed that there

were no longer any fish in the lake, that they had no or little access to what was there, and even when they were caught, they were so few and small as to be worthless. Because of decreased catches from the lake, villagers had no alternatives but to resort to stone crushing which earned marginal incomes for their families. Most of their comments had little to do with fish or the lake itself, but concerned schools, medical clinics, disease and money.



As we left the meeting venue, we were taken closer to the water's edge by one of the women who had spoken most. She wanted to show us the conditions in which she and her family lived, in a temporary grass shelter in which one of her woman relatives was sick with hepatitis. The ruins of her previous hut lay nearby where it had been destroyed by a storm.

We left Chilya and drove back to the highway, then down it a short piece and turned to the south, again traveling over a dirt and rock track, with - as was pointed out by my colleagues - a branch of the River Indus visible in the distance. We pulled up to a single concrete-block building, walked up to it, and saw just below that point an oasis of fish ponds



constructed on the edge of a tank, with several other bodies of water located just over

several bunds. This was the fish farm of a well-respected, influential businessman from Karachi, Mr Muhammad Alam, and his son, Nadeem. Mr Alam had also been an active participant in our earlier consultation in Karachi and had invited us to visit his farm while



we were in the Chilya area, in particular because harvesting would be taking place. We saw water being pumped out of one large tank into a canal, as four workers were netting it. Another worker showed us a large common carp of about 4 kg that had been caught.

The contrast between these two neighboring places could not have been more clear, nor more stark. I was immediately compelled to ask myself, not how these vast differences could exist, since reasons are well known why businessmen and villagers have such different experiences of life and their livelihoods. Rather the question which

came to my mind was: What can possibly be done to close the gap between these two worlds across a highway, a few kilometers or less away from each other?

In our Karachi consultations, Mr Alam had spoken passionately and forcefully to the group about the imperative to finally make policies and implement activities that would benefit poor people who fish. He himself has contributed personally to Chilya Village in several ways. He has paid license fees of Rs 1,000 for individuals to enable them to fish for one year and he employs men from the village on his fish farm. Over twenty years back, the Chilya government hatchery was unable to obtain broodstock to start its operations. Because he expects the hatchery to contribute to the betterment of the area, Mr Alam paid for fishermen to catch and provide the hatchery with over 1,000 kg of carp broodstock averaging 3-4 kg in size.

His relationship with Chilya started when the villagers helped him in their boats for angling and duck hunting on Keenjhar Lake. This friendship led to his constructing his fish farm

nearby, his assistance to the villagers and supplying broodstock to the hatchery. On occasion he and his son spend weekends in Chilya, staying there, eating with their neighbors, at times attending their weddings and funerals.

Even though he's semi-retired, his mission is that, in the neglected coastal areas of Sindh where people are poorest, there should be small-scale fish and shrimp farming with minimum investments, under circumstances where farmers can afford most inputs. He also firmly



believes that all public waters should be accessible to the people who live around them. His sincere efforts and practical experience were recognized in his appointment to the national task force that had commissioned the policy development process funded under the FAO Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP). Mr Alam himself talks about his transition from businessman, to fish farmer, to facilitator, to activist.

Is it a notion from another world to expect that the policy which results from the process - or future activities or projects - will have any impact at all on the women, girls, boys and men we met in Chilya? They certainly were knowledgeable, specific and vocal about what they saw as necessary to improve their lives, livelihoods and the lake itself. A list of what we documented from them shows this:

- Provide basic amenities such as housing, education and hospitals in the village
- Make available loans at low mark-up for construction of boats and procurement of gear
- Provide training on improved fishing methods
- Establish a marketing center
- Provide training, skills development and opportunities in cottage industries and other skills so that the fishers may diversify their livelihoods and increase their incomes

- Provide jobs to fishers' sons in government departments, especially the Fisheries Department
- Restore the habitat of Keenjhar Lake, which has been seriously affected by over-exploitation, illegal fishing and proliferation of exotic species such as tilapia
- Release seed of commercially important species, and take steps to control their escape from the outlet canal to restore the habitat and increase productivity
- Ban the use of large fixed nets (*pattara*) in the lake
- Control undesirable weeds and tilapia in the lake, and
- Instead of license or contract systems, give control of the lake to fishers to manage it; exploitation of the lake's resources may be done by the community and no one else may be allowed.

The Government of Pakistan and FAO have put into practice a participatory process that sought to involve as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, with two rounds of consultations 'close' to people in communities and in some cases, actually with poor people and women. How will their voices be heard? How will their realities be understood and addressed? Among the participants in the consultations, Mr Alam was able, interested and willing to speak up for those not present. Short of having more poor people and women in the consultations themselves, or holding more sessions in places like Chilya, we need to be aware of who their advocates are among those with more prosperous experiences of life and with influence over decision-makers. Can they somehow be the activists who will work toward closing gaps even though they live in one world and not the other?