



## THE TECHNICAL ADVISORY BODY FOR FISHERIES MANAGEMENT (TAB)

# Livelihood approaches and fisheries management in the Lower Mekong Basin

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Working towards Effective, Sustainable and Regional Fisheries Management in the  
Lower Mekong Basin



## BACKGROUND — POVERTY REDUCTION IS THE MAIN GOAL

Poverty reduction is now a major goal of all the governments in the Lower Mekong Basin. The role of fisheries managers is changing as a result. Previously, managers were concerned mainly with safeguarding or increasing fish production. Now, they are also involved in activities that aim to improve the standard of living of rural people. These include helping local communities increase their involvement in formulating policies and programmes concerning the management and development of fishery resources.

### A 'Livelihoods' Glossary

**Asset** = a useful or valuable thing.

**Holistic** = study of the whole rather than individual parts.

**Institution** = policies, rules, and plans, and the organisations that promote them. Markets are also understood to be institutions.

**Living** = an income sufficient to live on, or the means of earning it.

**Livelihood** = a means of securing the necessities of life.

**Livelihood** = a economic and social system, made up of assets and activities, and influenced by factors outside the control of individuals and households.

**Lifestyle** = the way in which a person or people live.

**Standard of living** = a level of subsistence or material welfare of a community, class, or person.

**Vulnerability** = degree of risk to which people are exposed and their ability to adapt, cope with, or recover from the impacts of an external shock to their livelihoods.

**Vulnerability context** = the circumstances, situations or other external factors that make people vulnerable or increase their vulnerability.

This expanded role requires fisheries managers, at all levels from local communities to government, to broaden their perspective of fisheries, the work involved, and the place of fishing and fishing-related activities in the wider community. They must now look more deeply at the contribution of fisheries to the livelihoods of rural people and how the people's way of life interrelates with these and other water resources. To do this requires examining the circumstances of rural people, their access to various assets and resources, their vulnerabilities and the major outside influences on their lives, culture and society.

Known as *livelihood approaches*, this new way of looking at fisheries management is becoming increasingly common, particularly with development agencies and other organisations. However, there is a perception that the concept of livelihoods and livelihood approaches is not well understood or taken-up by policymakers and fisheries managers. Recognising this, the Technical Advisory Body for Fisheries Management (TAB) commissioned the STREAM Initiative<sup>1</sup> to review previous studies that used livelihood approaches to evaluate fisheries and fishing communities in the Lower Mekong Basin. This information serves to illustrate the characteristics, benefits and practical use of livelihood approaches in fisheries management and development. STREAM also made a series of recommendations that would help the uptake and implementation of these approaches in the future. This TAB recommendation is largely based on the findings of their study<sup>2</sup>.

## WHAT ARE 'LIVELIHOODS'?

Originally, the word 'livelihood' meant nothing more than 'occupation' or 'employment', that is, a way of making a living. More recently, the meaning of term has expanded to include broader systems

that encompass social, economic and other attributes. Within these 'livelihood systems', various factors have an effect on the strength, resilience and vulnerability of people's way of life. These may be their assets, their work and other cultural activities, and factors that help people get access (or stop people from gaining access) to these assets and activities. External factors, such as policies, institutions and processes, also affect livelihoods.<sup>3</sup>

Livelihood approaches and livelihood analysis (the method of studying livelihoods in this 'holistic' way) use this broader definition of livelihoods.

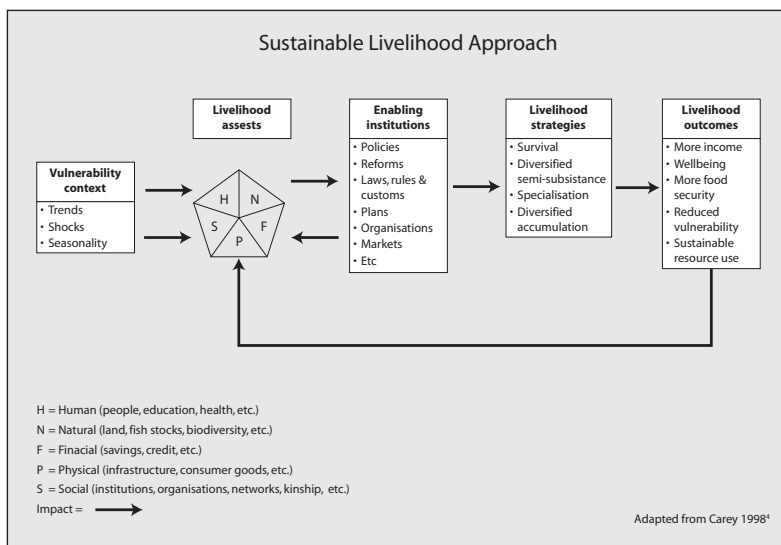
### 'SUSTAINABLE-LIVELIHOOD' APPROACHES

People's livelihoods are 'sustainable' when they can maintain or enhance their assets, and cope with and overcome internal and external stresses, without undermining or diminishing the natural resource base on which they rely. In this context, 'sustainability' is not a static and balanced state, but is a condition that needs constant adaptation, and is similar to the concept of resilience.

A 'sustainable-livelihood approach' is the application of this wider understanding of livelihoods to:

- Direct poverty-related research to take account of the fact that many rural people make their living from a variety of water resources and associated activities;
- Improve programme planning and implementation, by giving a fuller account of the strengths/weaknesses and opportunities/threats associated with water-resource developments;
- Review proposed strategies for fisheries management and development, and provide advice on future policies, by offering an holistic view of rural people's livelihoods.

These 'sustainable-livelihood approaches' typically involve a framework that brings together the main elements of livelihood systems, as well as the interactions between them.



## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LIVELIHOOD APPROACHES

- They are people-centred rather than resources-centred.
- They build on people's strengths rather than their weaknesses.
- They build on the diversity of people's subsistence and income-earning activities.
- Their approach is cyclical/iterative rather than linear.
- They are inter- and multi-sectoral; they adopt a holistic view, including environmental, economic and social factors.
- They emphasise the difference in impacts of development activities on different groups of people.
- Though focused on households, they also emphasise micro-macro links (households to national policies).
- They are multi-organisational (private, civil, local, national, global).
- They are adaptive, allowing for modification and adaptation as conditions and circumstances change.

## THE BENEFITS OF LIVELIHOOD APPROACHES

- Livelihood approaches provide a fuller and more complete understanding, capturing not one view, but the range of views held by all those who have an interest in the fishery.
- Livelihoods approaches help us understand the complexity of aquatic resources (including fish, shrimps, snails, frogs, crabs, aquatic plants and aquatic insects, as well as rice-fields and other habitats) and capture the diverse role of these resources in rural livelihood.
- Recognising that poor people manage aquatic resources as a whole rather than just fisheries or aquaculture, livelihood approaches often require coordinated, multi-agency, activity and, as a result, they take both government objectives and people's objectives into account.
- Livelihood approaches can provide information to help ensure that programmes and strategies to alleviate poverty incorporate the complex interrelationships between natural resources and other assets. These strategies will be more even-handed as a result, and will not give disproportionate weight to any particular resource, means of livelihood or development activity.
- Livelihood approaches can help policy makers and planners see natural resources from the perspective of all the people who use and rely on them. Consequently, development plans should reflect the needs of all the users and involve them in the decision-making processes.

## LIVELIHOOD APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

There are a number of studies that have used livelihood approaches.

In Cambodia, Vannaara (2003)<sup>5</sup> used a livelihood approach to assess the aquatic resources targeted by the Au Svay community fishery in Stung Treng province, Northern Cambodia. One of his

objectives was to, 'provide additional information and experience related to sustainable abstraction of natural resources to government institutions and NGOs that could then be implemented in other community fisheries'. Marschke (2006)<sup>6</sup> explored livelihood strategies that build resilience in Cambodian fisheries.

In *Lao PDR*, Shoemaker *et al.* (2001)<sup>7</sup> used the approach to understand the complex interrelationships between resources and livelihoods in the Xai Bang Fai River basin. They found, 'from place to place and from season to season, different ethnic groups take advantage of the natural wealth of the basin in different ways'. Mollot *et al.* (2003)<sup>8</sup>, employed the approach to study how the livelihoods of rural communities living in seasonally flooded habitats in southern Lao PDR were closely linked to the preservation of biodiversity in these ecosystems. By getting the communities to share their local knowledge, they were able to obtain a greater understanding of the balance between the benefits and threats resulting from seasonal floods. Through this analysis, Mollot *et al.* aim to prevent 'the implementation of incomplete poverty alleviation strategies', that is, development activities that do not take fully into account the benefits of the flood.

In *Thailand*, the Thai Baan research followed a livelihood approach in demonstrating the great diversity of activities taken up by rural people, including fishers. Furthermore, the long-enduring Village Fish Pond Program (VFP) developed a strategic management approach to emphasise aquatic resource development for alleviating rural poverty in northeast Thailand, which makes use of a number of principles of the livelihood approach. In doing so, it emphasised the unique socioeconomic and biological characteristics of each village and water resource under consideration, as well as the importance of multiple variables encompassing social, agro-biological, institutional, and organisational components (Virapat, 2002)<sup>9</sup>.

In *Viet Nam*, the livelihood approach was used 'to characterize the poor, identify their dependence upon aquatic resources, describe the nature and status of these resources, and emphasize the vulnerabilities of the poor in relation to loss or mismanagement' (Sultana, *et al.*, 2003)<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, 'livelihoods' figure prominently in a series of activities that inform the implementation of the Ministry of Fisheries (MOFI) Strategy on Sustainable Aquaculture for Poverty Alleviation (SAPA) under the Vietnamese Government's Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) Program (STREAM, 2002)<sup>11</sup>.

These examples are taken from the studies that used livelihood analyses to achieve a more complete understanding of the role of aquatic resources, particularly fish, in the livelihoods of rural people in the Lower Mekong Basin. **However, livelihood approaches involve more than just livelihood analysis; they also require that the understanding of livelihoods that these analyses produce, is taken up in policies and procedures for fisheries management.** To do this requires a more structured categorisation of livelihoods, their characteristics and functions.

## FROM LIVELIHOOD ANALYSIS TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Recently, Smith *et al.* (2005)<sup>12</sup> used livelihood approaches to generate a framework in which to analyse and categorise fishing-related livelihoods.\* Their analysis is based on the view that, 'in contrast to the stereotype that all fishers are poor and that fishing is the activity of last resort, actual fishing communities are likely to be varied in terms of wealth, social status, fishing methods and livelihood roles performed by fishing' (pg. 375).

\* Smith *et al.* (2005) base their analysis on data from African and Asian countries, including the Lao PDR.

They recognise four principal types of 'livelihood strategies' which include fishing:

1. As a primary livelihood of last resort — a fisher or fishing household that fishes as a subsistence activity
2. Part of a diversified semi-subsistence livelihood — a fisher or fishing household that fishes and gathers other natural resources (such as other aquatic animals or non-timber forest products) as a subsistence activity.
3. A specialist occupation — a fisher or fishing household that makes a living or an income from fishing primarily for trade.
4. Part of a diversified accumulation strategy — a fisher or fishing household that gains income from fishing (or letting fishing grounds) as one of a diverse set of activities that may involve other water resources, or work outside the sector such as farming.

The fisheries associated with these 'livelihood strategies' have different characteristics and functions.

Livelihood strategy	Fishery Characteristics	Livelihood functions of fishery
• Survival	• Open access, likely to be over-exploited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subsistence</li> <li>• Full-time or significant part-time</li> <li>• Particularly important to women, children, the aged, and infirm</li> </ul>
• Semi-subsistence diversification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open access, but possibly self-regulating depending on population</li> <li>• Pressure on land and other natural resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food security</li> <li>• Buffering, coping, smoothing</li> <li>• Source for cash or reciprocal exchange</li> <li>• Important to women and children</li> </ul>
• Specialist occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs restricted access and effective management</li> <li>• Measures to sustain incomes</li> <li>• May be subject to 'monopolisation' of access rights by individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Income and accumulation</li> <li>• Mainly male dominated</li> </ul>
• Diversification for accumulation	• Open access and probably self-regulating given 'light' regulation by community or state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some residual buffering function, but of declining importance</li> <li>• Own-consumption and recreation</li> </ul>

This analysis, they argue, has important consequences for policymaking as it identifies a need for more diverse and flexible management measures, tailored to local priorities and conditions, which also ensure that poor people can access the benefits of inland fisheries whilst achieving conservation objectives.

This calls for greater differentiation of fisheries management policies than often currently exists, and recognition that the best combination of policies may be very location specific.

The table below sets out the main policy objectives and instruments that Smith *et al.* (2005) attribute to particular types of livelihood.

Livelihood strategy	Main policy objectives	Policy instruments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survival</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce number of fishers</li> <li>Resource conservation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alternative employment in the rural economy</li> <li>Welfare 'safety nets'</li> <li>Enhancement of the fishery as a 'safety net'</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Semi-subsistence diversification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainability of traditional livelihoods</li> <li>Resource conservation and enhancement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Light' regulation</li> <li>Maintain access for the poor through enabling institutions and 'permeable barriers to entry'</li> <li>Fishery enhancements</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specialist occupation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainable commercial fishery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen community management, or regulate exclusive private access rights</li> <li>Fishery enhancements</li> <li>Modernization of methods</li> <li>Credit and market access</li> <li>Processing and marketing</li> <li>Effective access restrictions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversification for accumulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ecological conservation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Light' regulation</li> <li>Ecological protection measures</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Livelihood approaches provide an analytical method for studying rural livelihoods that can be used to provide a framework for drafting and implementing policies for the sustainable management of the Mekong's fisheries.

1. Because they take a holistic approach, they should be used to help draft and implement management policies and procedures that target the differing types of livelihoods that involve fishing or associated activities.
2. However, livelihood approaches as a method has yet to be taken up or used by policymakers, administrators, and fishery managers. This is largely because the principles and practice of the approach are not widely disseminated or accepted. This requires an organised, and concerted, programme of training that may best be achieved through participatory workshops.
3. Likewise, research into fishery-related livelihoods, particularly that which aims to provide background information to policymakers and legislators, should be conducted in the context of livelihood approaches. Institutes and other bodies commissioned to undertake this work should adopt a livelihood approaches when planning, carrying out and reporting their research activities.



## END NOTES

1. The STREAM Initiative is based around partnerships, involving at the outset a coalition of founding partners (AusAID, DFID, FAO and VSO) supporting NACA. It has adopted an inclusive approach, reaching out to link stakeholders engaged in aquatic resources management and supporting them to influence the initiative's design, implementation and management.
2. The full text of the report, *Livelihoods And Fisheries In Lower Mekong Basin: Understanding the Concept of Livelihood Approaches*, can be downloaded from the STREAM web site, [www.streaminitiative.org](http://www.streaminitiative.org).
3. There are numerous publications explaining the concept of livelihood, such as MRAG, 2006: Fisheries and Livelihoods (FMSP Policy Brief 4).
4. Carney, D. (1998) *Sustainable rural livelihoods: What contribution can we make?* Implementing the sustainable rural livelihoods approach. Paper presented to the DfID Natural Resource Advisers' Conference. London: Department for International Development.
5. Vannaara, T. (2003) *Sustainable Livelihoods of Local People in Community Fisheries, The Upper Mekong River Cambodia, Stung Treng Province. A Case Study "Au Svay community fisheries"*, Stung Treng Province. Culture and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA), Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 9 pp.
6. Marschke, M. (2006) Exploring Strategies that Build Livelihood Resilience: A Case from Cambodia. 2006 Biannual IASCP Conference, Bali, June 2006.
7. Shoemaker, B., Baird, I. and M. Baird (2001) *The people and their river - a survey of river-based livelihoods in the Xai Bang Fai Basin in Central Lao PDR*. Canada Fund, Vientiane Lao PDR. Vientiane.
8. Mollot, R., Phothitay, C. and S. Kosy (2003) *Seasonally Flooded Habitat and Non-Timber Forest Products: Supporting Biodiversity and Local Livelihoods in Southern Lao PDR*. WWF Lao PDR Program, Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre (LARReC), Livestock and Fishery Section of Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR. 27 pp.
9. Virapat, C. (2002) Strategic management approach to the Village Fish Pond Program (VFP) in alleviating rural poverty in Thailand. FAO/NACA-Expert Consultation 'Focusing small-scale Aquaculture and Aquatic Resource Management on Poverty Alleviation', Bangkok, 12–14 February 2002.
10. Sultana, P., Thompson, P., and M. Ahmed (2003) *Understanding Livelihoods Dependent on Inland Fisheries in Bangladesh and Southeast Asia*. Final Technical Report (DfID/FMSP Project R8118).
11. STREAM. (2002) *Learning Workshop on Livelihood analysis Report*. Long An, Vietnam, 19-20 November 2002. STREAM, Bangkok.
12. Smith, L.E.D., Nguyen, K.S. and K. Lorenzen (2005) Livelihood Functions of Inland Fisheries: Policy Implications in Developing Countries. *Water Policy* 2005 (7), 359–383.







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