

Institutional Settings and Access to Assets in Rural Coastal Fishing Communities in the Volta Region of Ghana

Harrison Kwame Golo^{*}, Lawrence Odumah

Department of Social Studies Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Email address

harrigol@yahoo.com (H. K. Golo)

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Abstract

In Ghana, the artisanal fisheries sector generates both direct and indirect employment for a large number of rural people who work as crew members, fish processors, traders, fish distributors and porters along the entire coastal zone of about 550 kilometres, stretching from Aflao in the East to Half Assini in the Western part of the country. Although the sector is legally an open access (de jure) to every Ghanaian, it is the state and provincial agencies that have prime responsibility for managing it. At the local level, traditional bodies of each coastal community have their own sets of rules and regulations concerning the sector. This paper examines how the formal and informal institutional settings intentionally or unintentionally influence entitlements (assets) and constrain/enhance access in fishing communities of Southern Volta Region. Fifty household heads from Adina, Agavedzi, Amutinu and Tetekorfe were interviewed in addition to eight opinion leaders. One focus group discussion was also held in each of the selected communities. The study revealed that fishing community members were not involved in decision-making and policy processes concerning the fishery management at the national level, and were as a result marginalized in terms of access to vital assets needed for their livelihood and well-being. Traditional rules and regulations of the fisheries resources also have a gender dimension and tend to marginalize women, denying them rights, entitlements and regular access to assets. The findings have implication for the discourse on poverty alleviation in rural fishing communities. It is therefore, recommended among others that there is the need to increase awareness and education on the rights of women and gender equity at both national and local levels in the country to enhance their access to assets.

Keywords

Institutions, Processes, Regulations, Rules, Assets, Fishing Communities, Volta Region

1. Introduction

Although artisanal small-scale fisheries are found across both developed and developing countries, its contribution to food, security, nutrition and poverty alleviation in developing countries is more apparent (FAO, 2004). The sector provides direct and indirect livelihood to tens of millions of people worldwide. In developing countries in particular, the sector constitutes one of the major components of rural livelihoods, providing employment for 25-27 million fishers, while additional 68-70 million people are engaged in post-harvesting (FAO, World Bank and WorldFish Centre, 2008:12). Allison and Mvula (2002), for example, show that households who involve in fishing earn higher incomes than

non-fishing households. Besides, the sector also serves as safety net for the poor urban communities, who might join fisheries as a response to declining opportunities elsewhere (WorldFish Centre, 2005). Various studies, however, show that poor households and individuals in fishing communities have diverse income and employment activities; many of which are directly or indirectly linked to fisheries (Campbell & Townsley, 1995; Kleih, Greenhalgh & Oudwater, 2003; IMM, 2003).

Indeed both national and international legal instruments have recognized the socio-economic importance of traditional fishers and small-scale fisheries. For example, Article 6.18 of FAO's *Code of Conduct of Responsible Fisheries* adopted on 31st of October 1995 recognizes the important contribution of small-scale fisheries to

employment, income and food security with the aim to:

protect the rights of fishers and fish workers, particularly those engage in subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fisheries, to a secure and just livelihood, as well as preferential access, where appropriate, to traditional fishing grounds and resources in the waters under their national jurisdiction.

Moreover, section 17.74b of Agenda 21 of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* of the United Nations emphasizes that states in the design of fishery development and management programmes should take into account traditional knowledge and the interest of local communities, small-scale artisanal fisheries and indigenous people. Accordingly, several countries, including Ghana adopted by law the creation of exclusive zones for artisanal fishing to protect artisanal small-scale fishers’ livelihood and fishing activities from the industrial ones. It is also aimed to encourage the full participation of users in the management of the fisheries as opposed to “mere consultation and top-down information provision to participatory decision-making and interactive management” (Pameroy, 2001:111).

However, it has been observed that artisanal small-scale fishing communities in developing countries broadly reflect underdevelopment and poverty (Campbell & Townsley, 1995; FAO, 2004; FAO, World Bank & WorldFish Centre, 2008). FAO (2004), for example, contends that small-scale fishing communities in coastal areas of developing countries belong to the most disadvantaged elements of rural society. Studies link poverty in artisanal small-scale fishing communities to lack of clear policies, and access to assets (IMM, 2003; Kleih et al., 2003). This paper sets out to explore the impact of both national and local regulatory institutions of the artisanal fisheries sector on access to assets of the poor rural coastal fishing communities of the Southern Volta in Ghana to assets.

2. Ghana’s Artisanal Fisheries Sector: A Brief Overview

Ghana has a long history as artisanal fishing nation dating back as early as the eighteen and nineteen centuries, when Fante fishermen introduced ocean fishing along the coast of the country (Lawson & Kwei, 1974; see also Jorian, 1988; Atta-Mills, Alder & Sumaila, 2004). Artisanal marine fishery still constitutes the largest and most important sub-sector in the marine fisheries in Ghana. The sector is allocated exclusive rights as a zone for fishing up to the 30 meter-depth-line from the coast, within which the semi-industrial sector is prohibited (Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, 2002; Mensah, Koranteng, Bortey & Yeboa, 2006:5). Various ethnic groups and communities along the coast are the main actors in the artisanal fishery sector, and a majority of them engage in artisanal fishing activities. The more prominent communities are the ethnic groups of Nzema, Ahanta, Fante, Awutu-Effutu, Ga, Dangbe and Ewe (see Table 1).

Table 1. Ethnic Groups within the Coastal Zone of Ghana.

Region	Coastal Ethnic Group	Coastline (km)	No. of Fishermen
Western	Nzema	105	6,750
	Ahanta	80	10,990
Central	Fante	150	28,300
	Awutu-Effutu	25	6,450
Greater Accra	Ga	45	16,150
Volta	Dangbe	70	13,370
	Ewe	75	14,355

Source: Coastal Zone Profile cited in Mensah et al. (2006:37).

Fishing is an occupation that constitutes an integral part of the life and identity of coastal fishing communities in Ghana (Mensah et al., 2006; Akyeampong, 2007). Consequently, children at a very tender age are trained to acquire all the necessary knowledge, attitudes, skills as well as values that are associated with fishing and fish processing (Mensah et al., 2006:43; Afenyedu, 2010). It is common to see boys between the ages of eight and 12 as fishing crew members (Mensah et al., 2006:38). In these communities, the village chiefs and chief fishermen together with some elders and other successful fishermen were, and are traditionally in charge of all issues affecting the community. They resolved fishing related conflicts and enforced various social norms and regulations relating to fishing (Akpalu, 2002:2).

2.1. Conceptual Issues: Assets, Policies, Institutions and Process

Livelihood literature is replete with discussion and debate on the relationship between institutional structures and processes, and access to capital assets. According to the livelihood literature, people need a range of livelihood resources otherwise known as assets or capital that can be utilised directly, or indirectly, to generate the means of survival of the household or to sustain its material well-being at differing levels above survival” (Ellis, 2000:31). Indeed, studies have documented the influence of institutions and processes on the access of the poor to all types of assets, and the effective value of those assets (Carney et al., 1999; Scoones, 1998; Rakodi, 2001). These assets (human, natural, financial, physical and social assets/capital) are important in terms of their quantity and quality and the extent of their control as well as the security of their access.

The fact here is that these assets, according to de Haan (2000:18), undergo multiple influences, referred to as ‘Transforming Structures and Processes’, from the broader economic, social and political context within which people live. This includes the institutions, policies and the regulations which influence the way people make use of their livelihood opportunities and the approaches they adopt (Blake, 2000:36). They are “the basis of agents’ power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources” (Giddens, 1979 cited in Bebbington, 1999: 2022).

Institutions in this context constitute the rules and norms that interact to facilitate the conditions of human actions

(World Bank, 2005). They are the social cement which link stakeholders to access different types of assets through the exercise of power (Davies & Hossain, 1997), since they are internal to the community. This implies that the mere existence of assets alone is not sufficient to promote livelihood; institutions and processes, namely policies, legislations, culture and norms and, power relations, including gender and age (DFID 2001) influence access to these assets.

Of course, individuals who rely on the fisheries sector for livelihood do not depend only on money, boats and fish to support their livelihood, but they also draw on “their family labour, physical strength, educational and professional skills, political influence, the social services provided by the state, infrastructure funded by taxpayers, and a host of other ‘assets’ that policy and management interventions potentially support, undermine and redistribute” (Allison & Horemans, 2006:764). Thus, the ability of households in fishing communities to increase economic productivity depends, in essence, on their initial assets, and how these assets are transformed into income, food and other basic necessities (Rakodi, 2002; Moser, 1998) by existing institutional structures.

The most important factor to be considered in this paper is how these assets are accessed by fishing communities in the Southern Volta within the prevailing context of processes and institutional structures that determine social, economic and legal rights (Ellis, 1998). Put differently, the central argument of this paper is that the institutional context in which fishing communities in the Southern Volta Region live and work can both intentionally or unintentionally influence their entitlements (assets) and constrain access.

2.2. Institutional Regulations of the Fisheries Sector: The Ghanaian Situation

Institutions have been considered a key factor for sustainability in the fisheries management (Jentoft, 2000). In Ghana, although the artisanal marine fish resources are legally an open access (*de jure*) to every Ghanaian, it is the state and provincial agencies that have prime responsibility for managing them. However, its activities are controlled by two sets of regulations. These are, the open access system regulated by the state, and the village system of traditional user rights and common property resources (Bennet, 2002:239). That is, while the Government of Ghana through the Directorate of Fisheries, under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, has *de jure* mandates to set regulations concerning the fishery, each fishing community also has its own set of rules and regulations that guide fishing within its territory. The Chief Fisherman, the community chief and their council of elders are responsible for the enforcement of both types of regulation. Both the traditional and state regulatory systems contain the same objective: the sustainable use and conservation of fishery resources (Mensah et al., 2006). Therefore, the institutional environment in which individuals and households of poor fishing communities exist is dedicated to a number of formal (State) and informal (Traditional) bodies that are responsible for management decisions regarding the fisheries.

2.2.1. Government Institutions

In Ghana, the ministries and other administrative actors regarding fisheries have been subjected to frequent changes, either merging or separating them (Linselink, 2004). Currently, the Department of Fisheries is merged into the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. In view of this, the fisheries administration under the decentralization process has become part of the agricultural unit during the decentralisation process and at the same time shifted its tasks from general authority in fisheries to technical assistance to the decentralized organisations (Linselink, 2004). The purpose of the decentralization process, according to Linselink, was to encourage more flexibility in planning. This enables the staff at the lower level to better carry out cooperation with fishing communities.

As far as fisheries management is concerned, it is structured in accordance with the general administrative system of Ghana. The country is divided into 10 regions which are sub-divided into 216 districts. Each District Assembly is presided over by a District Chief Executive under the Local Government Law of 1988 (PNDC Law 207), Chapter twenty of the 1992 Constitution and the Local Act of 1993 (Article 462) (Mensah et al., 2006:47). The District Chief Executives, who are the main representatives of the Central Government, are responsible for policy development and planning to harness resources at the local level. The decentralization was thus to bring the government closer to the people as District Assembly members are more accountable to their communities (Bannet, 2002:239).

Consequently, the Agricultural Offices were set up at the district level (Bannerman, 1998 cited in Kraan, 2009:184) with the aim to make the Directorate of Fisheries through their staffs more closely linked to all coastal fishing communities. The District Assembly offers technical assistance to fishing communities through the decentralized departments (Mensah et al., 2006). Various departments and their services rendered are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Technical Departments of Local Government and Services Rendered.

Departments	Services
Public Service Unit, Ministry of Health	Child immunization, education on communicable diseases, improved sanitation and family planning
Ministry of Food and Agriculture	Agricultural extension, animal health, fisheries management
Ministry of Education	Literacy and numeracy and functional training in income generation
Department of Co-operatives	Formation of groups to access credit
Social Welfare and Community Department	Child custody, counselling and community responsibilities
National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO)	Organize the communities for disaster preparation
National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE)	Education on civic rights and responsibilities

Source: Mensah et al. (2006:48).

The key government bodies responsible for managing the fishery resource in Ghana are the Directorate of Fisheries under the Ministry of Agriculture and the various District

Assemblies. However, at the local level, traditional bodies of each coastal community also have their own sets of rules and regulations concerning fisheries.

2.2.2. Local Level Institutions

In almost all marine artisanal fishing communities in Ghana, traditional forms of fisheries management and control are dominant. The traditional authorities, namely the village chief, the Chief Fisherman¹ and the Chief Fishmonger² including the council of elders, are responsible for the management of the fishery resources at the community level (Bennet, 2002; Mensah et al., 2006). The entire community is responsible for the everyday management of fishing activities in agreement and collaboration with the Chief Fisherman (Mensah et al., 2006). In all, the Chief Fisherman acts as the main link between the government and the fishermen. Accordingly, he has more power than the traditional chief in all communities where fishing is the main source of livelihood (Overå, 2001). The Fisherman, according to Overå (2001), negotiates with government organizations in terms of benefits, credits and inputs for fishermen.

3. Methodology

A multiple case study research design was chosen for this study. Four rural coastal fishing communities were selected in Southern part of the Volta Region. There was no sampling framework on which to draw, so we sampled the households’ socio-economic characteristics to get a sufficiently large number to explore a diversity of cases. This way, convenience sampling technique was employed in the selection of a workable size of fifty (50) households in the four study locations. Communities with many households had a larger sample size, and those with less size had smaller sample drawn from them (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of sample size by sex and community.

Communities	Male	Female	Total
Adina	10	5	15
Agavedzi	11	4	15
Amutinu	8	2	10
Tetekorfe	6	4	10
Total	35	15	50

Source: Fieldwork 2014

¹ In Ghanaian fishing communities, the post of a Chief Fisherman (locally known as *Dortorwofia*), which is either by experience and expertise or hereditary is accorded with an amount of power and prestige (Bennet, 2002:240; see also Odotei, undated). It is his responsibility, among others things, to advise the village chief on fisheries matters. Consequently, he chairs the fisheries committee, made up of his council of elders, in settling disputes, issues penalties and supervises the distribution of any communal inputs (p. 240.). However, more serious issues, other personalities, such as the Assemblyman of the community, the traditional head and the paramount chief as well as the law court are resorted to in that order (Mensah et al., 2006: 58).

² Like the Chief Fisherman, the Chief Fishmonger also holds a very important position in Ghanaian fishing communities. She settles disputes between fish traders and processors in terms of pricing and comportment at the beach (Lenselink, 2004: 34).

The primary target for this study was the households within the selected communities. However, household heads, including 35 male household heads and fifteen female household heads were interviewed based on the general assumption that they see to the day-to-day affairs of the household. For the purpose of this study, the household is defined, in line with Ghana Statistical Service, to mean all those who share a common residence and catering arrangements. Apart from gathering data at the household level, eight (8) opinion leaders, two from each of the selected communities, were purposively selected and interviewed.

The data collection for the study took place between February and August 2014. Two instruments were used in the study, namely in-depth interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Data collection was done mainly through interviewing using structured and open-ended questions and FGD. To attain a convincing result, we framed the interview questions from general to specific knowledge and issues around themes. Hence, the interview guide was structured into two major parts. The first part solicited information on the socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. Second part sought information on institutional context the respondents exist and work as well as its influence on access to assets. One FGD was organized in each of the selected community to elicit different views, perceptions, opinions and experiences on the issue under investigation. Each group comprised between 8 and 10 people from cross sections of community members with different backgrounds in terms of sex and occupation.

Data collected with the instruments above were edited and analysed by: 1.) identifying the relevant issues in relation to the emerging themes of the research; 2.) comparison with different and similar responses; 3.) employing descriptive statistics to enable the use of percentages to describe data. The study findings were compared to relevant literature corroborating, conflicting and/or offering new insights.

4. Results

4.1. State Institutions and Access to Assets

In line with the decentralization process, the local administrative officials of the Directorate of Fisheries under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture are expected to carry out various activities with fishing communities. These activities involve settling of conflicts, educating fishermen on government policies and fisheries law, the collection of statistical data on types of fishing equipment used as well as quantity and quality of fish catch (Mensah et al., 2006). For an effective implementation of the above objectives, Fisheries officials at the local level are supposed to have expert knowledge in fisheries.

The reality on the ground is, however, different. It was found out that some of these Fisheries Officers were just extension officers specialised in crop and stock farming and had no background in fisheries. This was confirmed in an interview with one of the Ketu District Fisheries officers,

when we enquired from him about his specific role in the District. According to him:

...my area of expertise is crop production and animal husbandry; hence my focus is more on crop production and animal husbandry in the district than fisheries. I only compile data in terms of quantity of fish catch and the type of fishing equipment being used by the fishermen within fishing communities in the District and forward it to our research division for further action.

It is thus not surprising that 81 per cent of respondents revealed little or no attention from Fisheries Officers in terms of providing technical advice concerning fisheries management in their various communities. Further investigation in this study also indicated that the District Fisheries Officers pass on information concerning government decisions and policies through the Chief Fishermen without explaining their relevance. As indicated by a 69 year old fisherman.

You will never see them (the Fisheries Officers) here, unless there is a new decision taken from the government regarding fisheries management. They make sure that we implement it without seeking our opinion or any explanation for us to understand why such policies are being formulated for us to observe....

Information from the FGD indicate that government representatives in the District do not accord community members due respect because of their profession and low level of education. One respondent who happened to be a chief fisherman (68 years old) noted in the interview:

We are very much aware that these government officials do not respect us; since we are illiterate poor fishermen... they think we do not know what is good or bad for us over here.

Sixty-four per cent (64%) of the respondents reported that the District Chief Executive, in particular, persistently refused to pay attention to their plea to assist them in acquiring fishing gears and boats on hire purchase basis. They also intimated during the FGD sessions that their political leaders only came to them during the campaigning period to talk them into voting for them with various promises but always disappeared as soon as the elections were over without offering them any assistance thereafter.

The ban on light fishing as a way of regulating the fisheries also featured prominently as one of the controversies between the state and fishermen. The issue which generated displeasure and protest through demonstrations by fishermen throughout the country had received extensive attention from the media during our fieldwork. The ban was based on the Fisheries Act 11 (1), which states that:

A person shall not within the fishery waters of this country (a) use any fishing method that aggravates fishing by light attraction, including use of portable generator, switchboard, bulbs beyond 500 watts or bulbs whose cumulative light intensity attracts fish, and long cable to

facilitate light production or any other contrivance for the purpose of aggregating fishing by light.

Some of the aggrieved fishermen who took to the principal streets in their various communities and towns demanding the lifting of the ban claimed, among other things, that it had left them extremely poor, since it prevented them from abundant catch (*Ghanaian Chronicle*, 14/2/2011, see also *The Daily Graphic*, 15/6/2011). However, these demonstrations were met with counter-demonstrations from other fishermen, who were in favour of the ban stating among others that it was timely, and that light fishing was ruining the fishing business (*Daily Graphic*, 15/6/2011).

In the locations of this study, all the respondents, including their Chief Fishermen were in favour of the government's decision to prohibit light fishing practice in the country. The District Chief Fisherman, for example, noted that:

...apart from its depletion of the fish stock, light fishing practice also destroyed small fish species, which served as food for bigger fishes, and by this sent them into the deeper sea beyond our reach.

Asked whether fishermen were sensitized on dangers associated with the practice before the ban was enforced, he responded in the affirmative. But he was very quick to state again that the sensitization was not enough to make the majority of fishermen in the country to understand and comply with the ban. He explained that fishermen and their communities for many years had been suffering neglect and marginalization from government, but the government continuously failed to come to their aid despite the persistent appeals. Hence, according to him, any government policy that seemed to be inimical to the fishing business was always met with resistance by poor and aggrieved fishermen. He further explained that fishermen in recent years experienced loss as a result of dwindling catch and exorbitant prices of pre-mix fuel³ that they used for their outboard motors. Some of the respondents thus specifically attributed their refusal to comply with the ban to high levels of poverty and decline in fish catch. A fisherman (59 years old), for example, remarked during one of the FGD sessions that:

the low fish catch we are experiencing during recent years account for the reason why we adopt another strategy to increase our catch through every possible means in order to survive.

With regard to the mesh-size, information gathered from 78 per cent of the respondents interviewed indicates that its ban by the government was premised on the fact that if used persistently, it could result in overexploitation of fish stocks because of the high possibility of catching juvenile species. Indeed, a study by Nunoo, Eggleston, and Vanderpuye

³ Premix fuel is a special fuel used for outboard engines. It was introduced in 1992 with 100 percent subsidy by the Government after persistent appeal from the Ghana Fisheries Association (Mensah *et al.*, 2006: 75. It was, however, withdrawn and later reintroduced (Department of Fisheries, 2003: 61).

(2006), for example, suggests that more than ninety per cent of species caught by the mesh-size were juveniles of commercial value. However, almost all the respondents (92 per cent) expressed concern about the prohibition of the mesh-size net. They intimated that the ban served as a major constraint on their means to make a living. A participant at the FGD session, for example, noted that the official prohibition of the mesh-size was affecting them severely because it prevented them from exploiting anchovy fish (locally called *abɔbi*), which is the common species in their fishing zone. One of the women interviewed at Amutinu reiterated that, since the ban was enforced, their source of income has reduced as anchovy was the only fish that boost their trading activities in the community.



Source: Fieldwork (2014)

Figure 1. Anchovy species (locally known as *Abɔbi* or *Keta school boys*).

A frustrated father of seven who could not hide his anger at the prohibition of the mesh-size noted:

Government officials responsible for fishery regulations are very unfamiliar with livelihood situations in communities that depend on the fishery...they vehemently refused to involve community members in the processes and discussions of fishery policies before enforcing them.

Interviews with a large number of both elderly and young fisher household heads (96 per cent) brought the same reaction to the fore. They expressed strong feelings that they were not adequately involved in decision-making processes on the ban of the mesh-size net, which was widely used in catching anchovy in the area. An aggrieved elderly man (74 years) who happened to be a fishing company leader, for example, stated:

...if the government officials were to involve or even consult our community representatives while deliberating on the ban, they would have been told that the anchovy is the only specie we have here, in our community.... They only sit in their offices and impose laws on us without our involvement or finding out about our livelihood situations.

Many respondents (93 per cent) and participants during the FGD further explained that the beach seine was their main method of fishing and that the small mesh-size was the only

net that they could use to catch anchovy species, which served as their source of income and nutrition. They complained, therefore, that the ban on its use deprived them and their household members of their only source of livelihood.

The respondents' perspectives on the influence of institutions in determining access to capital, and return on livelihood strategies was also highlighted in this study. It has been observed that access to financial and physical assets appeared to matter most for the respondents. They criticized the complex procedures of government financial institutions that prevent them from obtaining loans. According to them, they found it impossible to have access to credit facilities to boost their livelihood strategies. A large number of the respondents (85 per cent) also indicated that lack of access to health care facilities, portable water and toilet facilities impeded their health and working abilities. A 47-year old fish processor/trader reported during the FGDs that absence of such facilities undermined their health and ability to earn enough income in order to provide for themselves and the members of their households.

Unwillingness of the Government to subsidize fishing nets and outboard motors used by fishermen was also cited as yet another problem hampering their livelihood strategies. Under the decentralization process fishermen are supposed to have access to subsidize inputs, such as nets, premix fuel and outboard motors to alleviate their operational costs. However, the reality on the ground is different. The majority of the respondents (85 per cent) cited high prices of the above mentioned inputs as one of the major problems hampering their fishing activities. It also came out in one of the FGDs that even though the premix fuel, which is used for the outboard motors, was sold to the fishermen at subsidized prices, fishermen hardly obtain it on regular basis. As a result, they sometimes spent weeks or even months at home without fuel for their motors for fishing.

Additionally, almost all the respondents expressed concerns about the failure of the Government and other stakeholders to protect artisanal fishing activities by allowing foreign industrial trawlers to encroach on their fishing zone. This remark was made by a 68-year chief fisherman on the issue:

We do not even have access to the sea for fishing these days because the Government has allowed these Korean fishing pair trawlers to fish in our territory and to destroy our fishing nets. The Government persistently refuses to protect our fishing activities from these foreign fishers.

A respondent who incidentally happened to be a member of the District Fishermen Association complained to me during an interview that every effort to have their concerns addressed by the Fisheries Department and Navy proved futile.

Information gathered from respondents suggests that the Chief Fishermen, especially the District Chief Fisherman tend to neglect the priorities and needs of poor fishermen who were the most affected victims of the declining fishery

resources and focused on the welfare of the council of elders only. One of the fishermen (42 years) complained bitterly about the behavior of Chief Fishermen and their council of elders.

...most of our so called leaders, I mean the District Dotorwofia and his elders are just too selfish and greedy. They don't even respect the chief of the village just because they see themselves as powerful and rich men. We don't know whether they represent us here...whatever decision they take with their elders over here is mainly for their own benefit but not for poor people like us who depend on the fisheries for everything. They divert everything that the government sends to all of us into their personal account, and are always preventing people like us from gaining access to them.... This is one of our major problems over here, my brother.

Complaints and comments, such as those above were often heard from respondents. Their main concern was that Chief Fishermen were abusing their position and thus losing the trust of community members.

4.2. Traditional Institutions and Access to Assets

Traditional regulation of the fishery in Ghana is based on various traditional religious beliefs, customs and taboos that are unique to each fishing community, especially those along the coast. In particular, the worldview of the Anlo-Ewes regarding the environment in which they find themselves has both social and religious meanings (Akyeampong, 2001:19). Thus, to the inhabitants of Ketu South District fishing communities, the sea and the lagoon are protected by gods and goddesses. In view of this, the community chiefs and traditional religious leaders are charged with the responsibility to act as a link between the spiritual and secular worlds to ensure good fortune for the entire community. Therefore access to, and the use of, the fishery resources rest in the powers and competence of the traditional religious leaders and the chiefs together with their council of elders.

Some of the respondents hold the belief that a good catch and the fortunes of the community were contingent on the harmonious relationship between community members and deities of both the sea and the lagoon. A respondent (who coincidentally happened to be a traditional priest at Tetekorfe explained during an interview that there were customary laws and regulations that every community member was supposed to observe in order not only to avoid the wrath of the gods, but also to maintain this harmonious relationship. He noted that failure of community members to observe traditional rules and regulations regarding fishing, and to disregard sea gods, were the reason for the decline in catches they had been experiencing in recent years. Some of the relevant traditional rules and regulations pertaining to fishing he mentioned were, 1.) prohibition of fishing on Wednesday regarded as a day of rest; 2.) prohibition for fishermen to go fishing

without having a bath after they had slept with a woman; 3.) prohibition for women to go to the beach during their menstrual period. According to the priest, the non-compliance of any of these regulations attracted punishments, such as confiscation of gear and heavy fines to appease the gods.

Respondents were, however, ambivalent with regard to the observation and non-observation of these traditional regulations, and how they allegedly contributed to the decline in catches. Some respondents, indeed, alluded to the fact that low catches were a result of non-compliance with the traditional regulations. One of the Chief Fishermen who apparently attributed the declining catches to the non-observance of traditional rules and regulations pertaining to fishing stated:

Tradition is tradition; it is the gods that give life and wealth...we need to respect and honour them by going according to their wills and commands, but what do we see of late? The youth over here refused to take advice from our traditional priests concerning our rituals that grant us good catches...we are suffering because the gods are very angry...these days, even women who are [in their menstrual period] stand up and go to the beach for fish at any time....

Others, who were mostly Christians, suggested that the non-adherence to the traditional rules and regulations was not responsible for the reduction in fish catches in the community. Some explained in both focus group discussions and interviews that, if anything at all, most of the traditional regulations were rather reducing the income of some people. According to them, most of the traditional practices pertaining to the fisheries regulations marginalized and discriminated against particular groups of people, especially women. A large number of women respondents (91 per cent), therefore, expressed their concerns about the way some of the socio-cultural practices and norms in the district prevented them from adequately accessing the fishery resources. A fish processor/trader respondent (41 years), for example, remarked in an interview with her: "I depend on processing and selling of fish for living, but I am always compelled to stay at home without going to buy fish any time I am menstruating". It was also revealed in the FGDs that the social norms or customary laws and practices such as inheritance rights discriminated against women, resulting in their inability to obtain adequate income.⁴

5. Discussions

In the decentralisation literature, the concept has been associated with rural development. It is all about giving

⁴ Most of the customary laws and practices in the study communities are inherently patrilineal. Thus despite the fact that the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) Law 111 of Ghana stipulates that women should inherit their deceased husband's or father's property, in reality females are barely allowed to have a share in their father's or late husband's properties in this study locations.

priority to rural development, as opposed to the previous development interventions, which had been based on 'top-down' approach. The current decentralization process underscores an interaction between the central and local government as well as between government and the grassroots to promote development at the local level. To this end, the Government is supposed to relinquish control over the development process through institutional arrangements at both the local and grassroots levels to facilitate greater participation, interaction and active involvement at various levels by all stakeholders with financial and technical support to achieve that goal. On the contrary, it was found in this study that households or community members were not involved in decision-making processes on issues concerning access to the fisheries resource, which serve as their sole source of livelihood. This aligns with Lenselink's (2004) observation that fishery is typically an area that receives little attention in the decentralization process. Also, in his study of small-scale fisheries management in West Africa, Bennet (2002) found that "agriculture trained officers do not understand the complexities of small-scale fisheries management" in Ghana (Bennet, 2002:243). The finding in the present study that some Districts in the Southern Volta lack qualified fisheries technical staff for technical support towards the enhancement of access to vital assets in the area is, to large extent, in line with Bennet's research which show that "agriculture trained officers do not understand the complexities of small-scale fisheries management" in Ghana (Bennet, 2002: 243).

It is established in this study that although middlemen between community members and the government exist to help negotiate for credits and fishing inputs, the beneficiaries of the outcome of this negotiation were limited only to some key individuals, including council of elders. Similar situation is echoed in Kleih et al. (2003) observation that poor representation of coastal communities in the power structure hampered their access capital. Moreover, the enforcement of the mesh-size ban, which prevented the use of the beach seine and the catching of anchovy fish in the area without the concern of community members, contradicts the Article 6.13 of the FAO's Code of Conduct of Responsible Fisheries. The above Article stipulates that: "(States)...should ensure that fishers and fish farmers are involved in the policy formulation and implementation process".

In its effort to protect the right of women against any discrimination, Ghana has signed and ratified the International Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, this study further revealed that women's efforts to access assets within the selected fishing communities were undermined by traditional fisheries regulatory practices in the area. The above finding is consistent with research findings of FAO (2009), which indicates that rural women suffer systematic discrimination regarding access to resources needed for their socio-economic development due to cultural bias. The finding in the current study also points to the facts that although appropriate laws exist in the country, they are

ineffective or do not sufficiently protect women.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The institutions that influence households' and individuals' access to assets have been broadly categorized into formal (government) and informal (traditional) institutions. It is evident from the findings that lack of proper co-ordination between members of the studied communities and the government regarding the fisheries management has adversely impacted on their access to assets.

Concerning local institutions, women continue to suffer marginalisation and discrimination in the name of socio-cultural practices and norms in the study location. This study has shown that socio-cultural conception of womanhood in the study setting has created a situation where women are denied their entitlements and rights to access assets for the enhancement of their livelihood strategies. An instance of this is the denial of women the rights to either inherit their late husbands' and fathers' properties or go to the beach for fish during their menstrual period. These practices are related to the fact that women still remain subordinate to men in accessing assets. The findings deepen our understanding of livelihood literature on institutions, policies and laws as well as general rules and norms that guide people's behaviour by highlighting their crucial roles in terms of access to assets and how. Any mechanism or approach to enhance access to vital assets in rural poor communities should be based on concerted efforts that can encourage grassroots participation in decision-making processes. This should be done through adequate education, capacity building and skill development that can empower local people to play more effective roles on issues that affect them. Such approach can go a long way not only to enhance their access to assets, but will also help to alleviate poverty. The findings also stressed that women in particular were deprived access to assets by traditional institutions in the name of socio-cultural practices. This calls for the need to increase awareness and education on the rights of women and gender equity at both national and local levels in the country to enhance their access to assets.

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