

The importance of fishing for different social strata in rural Bangladesh, experiences of the CPP project

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The Compartmentalisation Pilot Project, a water management project in Tangail, Bangladesh, monitored floodplain fisheries during the period May 1992 till May 2000. To provide some data for the discussion on "the importance of aquatic resources for the rural poor" we have summarised some of our results in this paper.

THE FISHERMEN

The fishermen in the CPP-project area can be classified in the following groups:

Professional fishermen

Their main occupation is fishing throughout the year and their total number was estimated at 355 at the start of CPP and this reduced to about 300 in 1998. Traditionally the professional fishermen in Bangladesh and also in the CPP project area are low cast Hindu (Schidule) with fishing mainly carried out by the Rajbangshi, the Bapari and Halder communities. The professional Hindu fishermen belong to the poorest segment of the population and some basic socio-economic data are presented in Table1.

Average annual income per HH	14000 Tk ²
Percentage functional landless	94%
One room house	75%
Assets below 2000 Tk	97%

Table1: Socio economic parameters of professional fishermen in the CPP project area

Occasional fishermen

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² 1 US\$ =51 Tk

In the social stratified society of Bangladesh fishing was considered as a taboo for Muslims. But the last decades the number of Muslims with fishing as a major occupation increased. This often in spite of intense social pressure from their co-religionists who regarded the involvement of anyone from their village in fishing as impinging on the status of the community. Because of this social stigma, people who have overcome the social barrier fish occasionally but relatively intensively during the period when fish is easily available (FAP 17, 1995).

Subsistence fishermen

Subsistence fishermen fish mainly for their own consumption. They use a simple gear and often it is the children or the elders who catch the fish. The total number of households carrying out subsistence fishing in the CPP area was estimated at 23 000 (68% of the rural population, Household survey CPP, 1992).

CATCH DISTRIBUTION

In Figure 1 the distribution of the catch over the different fishermen over the different years is presented. On average 42% of the catch is caught by occasional fishermen, 19% is caught by professional fishermen and 33% or about 100 mt/year is caught by subsistence fishermen.

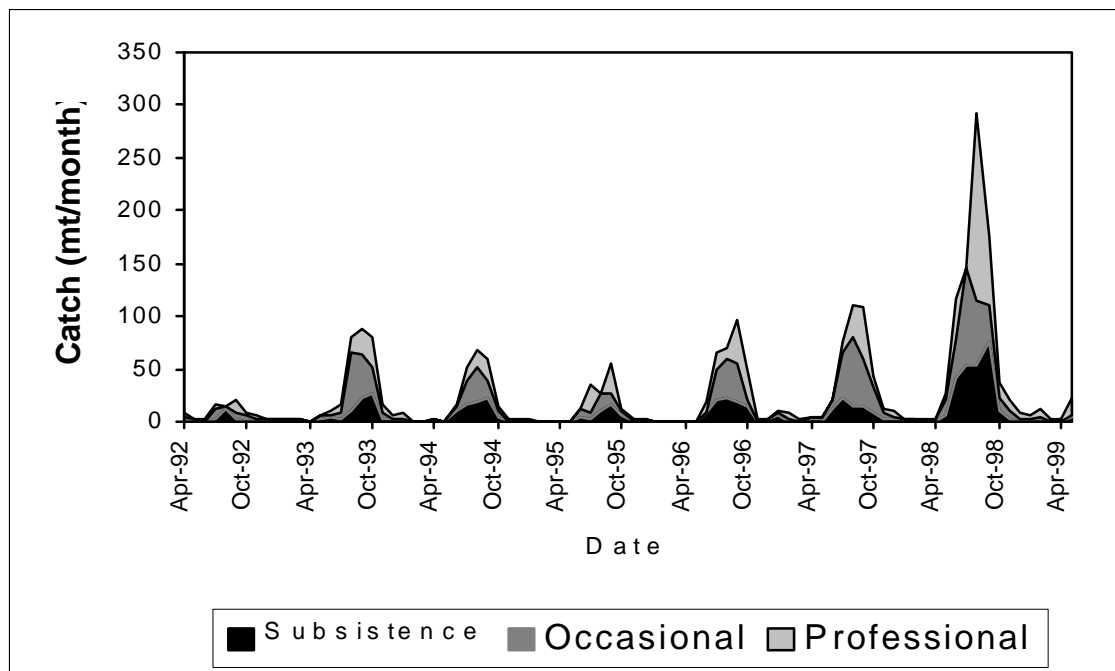


Figure 1: Distribution of the monthly catch among the different type of fishermen in the CPP project area.

Fishing is an important economic activity in the CPP project area as is indicated by the number of fishing days it generates (Figure 2)

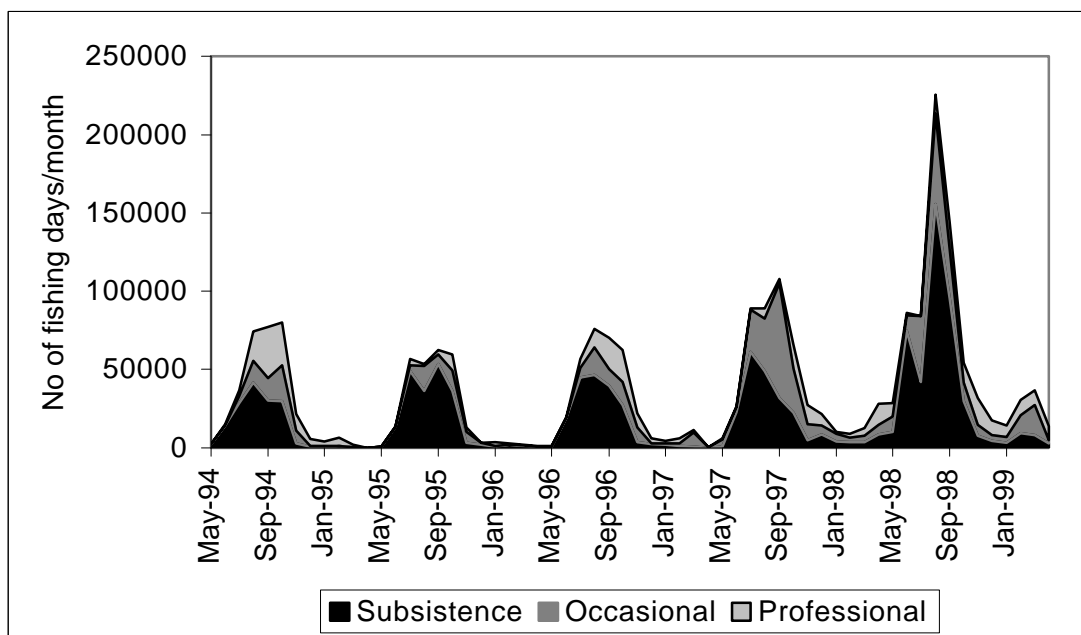


Figure 2: No of fishing days for the different type of fishermen in the CPP project area.

Depending on the extend of flooding between 50 000 and 150 000 fishing days are generated through subsistence fishing. This seems a lot but it has to be realised that this number is used by 23 000 subsistence fisheries households living in the project area. The significance of subsistence fishing becomes clearer if looked upon the distribution over the different social strata and related to their annual income which is done in Table 2.

HH type	No HH	Annual catch	Value annual catch (Tk)	Value catch as % of annual income	Fishing days	Labour day equivalents
Large farmer	475	0.0	0	0.00%	0	0
Medium farmer	1 362	4.3	300	0.57%	7	6
Small farmer	4 589	8.7	608	1.96%	13	12
Land less & Marginal farmers	22 399	8.3	580	3.05%	13	12

Table 2: Key parameters of the catch of non-professional fishermen in the CPP project area in relation to their land holdings

From this we come to the same conclusion as FAP 17 (1995): subsistence fisheries is of importance for the rural poor of Bangladesh but the significance of fishing within the annual income should not be overstressed, it is one of many sources, which becomes more important during the flood season when all three of their main sources (agriculture labour, non-agriculture labour and self-employment) are at their annual low.

It is our experience that in order to look upon the importance of fisheries for the rural poor you have to work with "clear definitions". The results of our project show that 68% of the rural population in the project area are subsistence fishermen. It is however more correct to state that 68% of the rural population goes fishing when there is no other possibility to generate an income.

Furthermore, any improvements on fisheries management have to be placed not only in the biological context of the area involved, but also in the social and cultural context of that area. Fisheries in the floodplains of Bangladesh is "biologically" similar to fisheries in the floodplains of Vietnam, but socially completely different as fishing for income in Bangladesh has a strong social taboo which is not the case in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

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