

Bay of Bengal News: Lessons for the Future

by Arne Andreasson

A distinguished Swedish fisheries expert analyses the role and relevance of Bay of Bengal News (BBN) for development, as well as the future of the BOBP-IGO as a regional forum.

Bay of Bengal News is 25 years old, a respectable age for the newsletter of a development programme. How did it become a success and what can we learn from *Bay of Bengal News*?

I remember the first publisher postponing the launching of the newsletter for two reasons. He said that you need a long-term commitment and you must have something to say.

The BBN has evolved over the years and has become a household name in fisheries circles around the Bay of Bengal. The basic criteria for a successful newsletter remain the same as those defined by the first publisher.

First, you have to be able to commit yourself, your organisation, to publish more than the odd issue and publish regularly. You also need to define your target group. The BOBP had poor fishermen and their families as the ultimate target group. The newsletter would not have been an effective tool to reach that target group directly. Instead, the target groups for the newsletter were fisheries administrators and managers, scientists, other projects and programmes, and mass media.

An important criterion for a successful newsletter is that what you write must be relevant. The content must be appropriate for your target group and must be useful. And by choosing the content carefully, the *Bay of Bengal News* was relevant. It reported on issues faced by fisheries administrators, project staff and fisherfolk in the region, it described in popular terms the

approaches and methods the Programme used for its activities and surveys. And it reported on results - both successes and failures.

Finally, the BOBP hired a professional editor and professional artist. This is a lesson future newsletter publishers should remember. The professional approach ensures that the information is presented in a way that can be understood by the target groups, and with a lay-out that stimulates reading.

I had the privilege to work in the BOBP some 20 years ago. After my stint with the Programme I moved to Africa to start another regional FAO Programme. It followed the model of the BOBP, although with a more limited mandate (small-scale aquaculture). After a couple of years with ALCOM, it was time for us also to establish a forum for exchange of information in the region. The way forward after analysing the success of the *Bay of Bengal News* was obvious; make a long-term commitment, be regular, be relevant, use a language and a lay-out which stimulates your target group to read and to contribute. And hire a professional as editor.

We did not have the same resources in ALCOM as in the BOBP. But we managed to hire a professional, the first Editor of *Bay of Bengal News!* He produced *Alcom News* with contract help for layouts. *Alcom News* became a success story too.

Twenty-five years after *BBN* and with a revolution in communications today, it is relevant to ask questions about the future. The BOBP has

become the BOBP-IGO, an inter-governmental organisation. What demands does that change imply? We have instant communication via Internet. What is the role, if any, of a newsletter in this age?

The BOBP-IGO is the natural follow-up to a long-lasting development programme. Although geographically more limited than the original programme, the new organisation serves the purpose of exchange of information – also as a possible platform for development interventions. We have seen the subjects for the BOBP change over the years. From very technical activities in boat and gear development – to extension methods, socio-economic issues and gender issues – to fisheries management in a broader sense.

Recently the BOBP-IGO organised a conference on safety at sea, a long-neglected subject in fisheries development! Other issues which are likely to become more and more important over the coming years are the quality of the final product, quality assurance, traceability – to name a few. BOBP-IGO is a forum that can take up these issues; it is also an efficient tool for regional activities. Donor agencies would be wise to note this and use the IGO. And member-countries would be wise to support the organisation and widen its membership.

The BOBP-IGO is needed to supplement the more research-oriented institutions of the region, not to compete with them. There is need for a forum for practical fisheries management in which fisheries administrators and managers can meet, share information and take joint actions to conserve the fragile fisheries in the Bay of Bengal.

And the newsletter? Whatever form it may take in the future, a print newsletter linked to a website is essential. The lessons from the last 25 years are still valid: long-term commitment, regularity, relevance and professionalism!