

Bay of Bengal Programme

Small-Scale Fisherfolk Communities

IMPROVING MARKETING CONDITIONS FOR

WOMEN FISH VENDORS IN BESANT NAGAR, MADRAS

BOBP/WP/66



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANISATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

BAY OF BENGAL PROGRAMME
Small-Scale Fisherfolk Communities

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GCP/RAS/1 18/MUL

**IMPROVING MARKETING CONDITIONS FOR
WOMEN FISH VENDORS IN BESANT NAGAR, MADRAS**

by **Kesang Menezes**
*Consultant,
Bay of Bengal Programme*

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91, St Mary's Road, Abhiramapuram, Madras 600 018, India.
Cable: BAYFISH. Telex : 41-8311 BOBP. Fax: 044- 836102
Phones: 836294, 836096, 836188

In August 1990, a fish market run exclusively by *women* fish vendors came up in Besant Nagar, Madras. This paper describes why the market was needed, the activities that culminated in the setting up of the market, the role of various organizations, and their perceptions of the process by which the market became a reality.

The market was constructed by the Corporation of Madras. The Bay of Bengal Programme for Fisheries Development (BOBP), provided expertise, including the services of a social worker to help train the women in community organization; it also helped the women liaise with the Corporation and other organizations', and provided the Corporation with a draft design for the market. The Fisheries Department extended its co-operation and assistance, particularly in the training of women.

On behalf of BOBP, Ms N Valli, social worker, helped to train the fisherwomen, and coordinate with the Corporation of Madras and other authorities. Mr. A Alexander, community organizer, helped conduct the participatory survey of the Besant Nagar community's needs and problems. Mr Philip Townsley, Sociologist (APO), monitored the project. Fr. Elias of Lovola College helped conduct training sessions. Various Corporation officials—Mr L.M. Menez 's, Ms Shanta Sheela Nair, Mr V. Manivannan—extended their cooperation at various stages to make the market possible.

The activities in connection with the fish market were sponsored by "Small-scale fisherfolk communities in the Bay of Bengal", GCP/RAS/1 18/MUL, which is the BOBP's main project.

The BOBP is a regional fisheries programme which covers seven countries around the Bay of Bengal—Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Thailand. The Programme plays a catalytic and consultative role: it develops, demonstrates and promotes new techniques, technologies or ideas to help improve the conditions of small scale fisherfolk communities in member-countries. The **BOBP** is sponsored by the governments of Denmark, Sweden and United Kingdom, by member-governments in the Bay of Bengal region, and also by UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), AGFUND (Arab Gulf Fund for United Nations Development Organizations) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). The main executing agency is the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).

This document is a working paper, and has not been cleared by the **FAO** or by the governments concerned.

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Above: Before the market — the women fish vendors of Orur and Olcott Kuppam sell fish on the roadside.



Left: The women approach the Co,poration of Madras to urge them to construct a fish market.



The women undergo training in community organisation.





Above: The market is inaugurated. One of the women speaks on behalf of the group of 44 who constitute the "Mahalir manram" or women's association.

Below: The women pose outside their market.



THE WOMEN FISH VENDORS OF BESANT NAGAR

Here are the 44 women, of Orur and Olcott Kuppam near Besant Nagar, who strove for a fish market and got it.



Jayalakshmi



Chinnaponnu P



Krishnaveni



Umay



Pappa



Rani



Rajabai W



Balamani



Ranjitham



Jeeva



Jaya



Kuppu



Gouri



Vaduvamba



Desamuthu



Kokila



Gunasundari



Rajam



Usha



Chinnaponnu R



Malarkodi



Kalaiselvi



Anjalai



Roja



Vanam



Kousalya



Desam



Machagandhi



Parameswari



Papamma



Desapattu



Kaniamma



Lakshmi



Vasantha



Bhoopathy P



Kanaka



Bhoopathy V



Pattamma



Selvi



Desamma



Bhoopathy K



Pushpa



Rajamba



Pattu



Customers patronize the market.



I. INTRODUCTION

Orur and Olcott Kuppam are twin fishing villages on the beach front of the Besant Nagar area of Southern Madras. During the seventies the city expanded rapidly, drastically changing the environment surrounding these two villages. The kattumaram fisherfolk of these villages appear to experience diminishing catches due to the rapid expansion of mechanized fisheries – a problem fairly typical of other fishing communities along the coast. The problems faced by these fisherfolk, however, seem to be accentuated by their proximity to a major urban centre. The villages have remained relatively neglected and isolated. The villagers are unable to earn a sufficient livelihood from fishing nor are they able to avail of the income opportunities that the city has to offer. This is probably because of their low levels of literacy or even because they feel that being from a fishing community they cannot do any other work.

Caught in this kind of a trap, the village fisherfolk seemed overcome by powerlessness and demoralization when the BOBP first met them in 1987.

While BOBP was conducting technical trials of beachlanding craft at the sea front of Orur and Olcott Kuppam they were approached by the villagers for help to deal with their numerous difficulties. From there began BOBP's involvement with these villages, which eventually led to the formation of a group of women to tackle the most critical problem they faced – the lack of a proper marketing facility.

This document follows the process as it developed, up to the starting of the fish market by the women, as a learning experience for BOBP. It also has the purpose of sharing this experience with all other organizations engaged in similar work.

The material for this document was collected from women's meetings; interaction with the community: individual and group interviews with the women, Corporation and fisheries officials; discussions with BOBP staff: and various papers and documents.

The file concerning this activity provides a very interesting picture of the events as they unfolded. It includes the guidelines for the first community worker, the results of the participatory survey, various papers analyzing the problems of the villages, detailed reports of weekly meetings held with the women and reports of the training sessions, correspondence with the Corporation and the Fisheries Department, the original draft proposal guidelines set by the women as to how they would manage the market, etc.

For a reader to recreate this whole complex process is not easy because there were so many actors involved, each playing varied roles, with the activity taking place at different levels. At one level was the negotiations with the Corporation to persuade them to change their policy concerning the management of markets. At the other level was the development of the women's group into an organized body. At a third level was the involvement of the Fisheries Department, which could consider replicating such activities in the future. This document attempts a synthesis of activities at these various levels so that the reader gets a holistic picture of the activity.

BOBP was very active in and committed to two aspects of the activity relating to improving the marketing conditions for women fish vendors—*training the women* and *regular weekly meetings*. **Both** these components are elaborated upon in this document. The sequence of activities that follows (pages 8-14) familiarizes the reader with the project as a whole.

How the women fish vendors of Besant Nagar got their market – Sequence of activities

May 1987

BOBP's beach landing craft commences technical trials from Elliotts beach on the seafront of Besant Nagar. Kattumaram fishermen from the twin villages of Orur and Olcott Kuppam co-operate in providing crew for the BLCs and use of the beachfront



June '87

Villagers ask **BOBP to donate** to the village temple fund. BOBP clarifies that it would prefer to assist the village with a community worker who will help them comprehend and analyse their problems.

August '87

BOBP appoints a community worker (Alexander) who begins a participatory survey of the villagers' problems and needs. He lives in the village and talks individually and in groups with the residents. They discuss both socio-economic and fishery-related problems.



September - December '87

The community worker notices that the women buy very little fish from the auctions of the beachcraft landings. The women talk about their fish marketing problems—they lack a proper facility to dispose of their catch.



February 1988

A poster exhibition is held in the village. Problems highlighted by the participatory survey, such as alcoholism, poor housing, low level of literacy, diminishing catches, lack of alternative employment, are put up as posters to provoke discussion. The fish marketing problem is beginning to emerge as a top priority.

May '88

A woman community worker (Valli) is appointed to focus intensively on the fish marketing problem. The women fish vendors write to BOBP spelling out 'the assistance they want. The community worker holds meetings with the women and tries to form a group to discuss and assess the fish marketing problem.



June '88

Meanwhile, BOBP begins initial enquiries with the Corporation of Madras about a fish market. The Corporation responds enthusiastically and selects a site.



August - December '88

Roles are clearly defined.

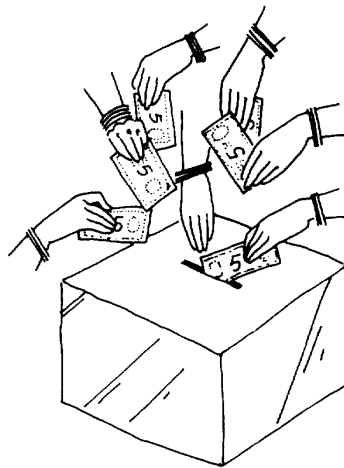
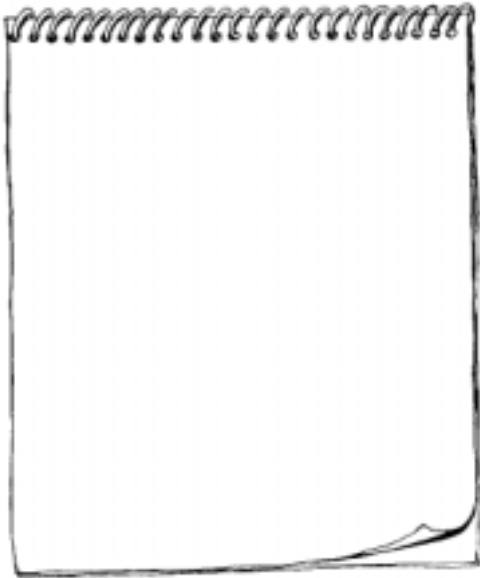
- Corporation to construct the market.
- Women to run it.
- BOBP to train the women to manage the market and assist in market design.

In September, a consultant comes in to discuss the market design with the women and the Corporation and draw up a draft plan. BOBP and women are lobbying the Corporation to commence construction work.

January - April 1989

The women regularly visit the Corporation to speed up action and hasten the process of construction of the market. Training has begun, with the object of getting the women to function together as a group, choose a form of organization and be prepared to take over and manage the market.





June '89

After long delays in processing the file, construction work has finally commenced. But it is stopped almost immediately because of complaints from local residents who object to having a fish market there. Another problem is that the Metro drinking water pipeline runs directly under the market site.

July-December '89

As there are so many problems with the present site, the women press the Corporation to select a new site for the market. It happens to be behind the Besant Nagar bus terminus—which is actually a better site and closer to their village. A new plan is drawn up and processed and construction work begins. This time the process takes hardly a month,



January 1990

Formal training sessions are conducted for the women. They discuss what formal body they should form, how it should be registered and what rules should govern their organization. They begin analyzing the pros and cons of various bodies such as a trust, co-operative and a registered society.



March '90

The women have decided to form a registered society, known as a "Mahalir manram". Such a society is easier to manage, allows flexibility and there's limited scope for outside interference. The women choose office bearers and work out a functional model for the administration of the fish market.

April '90

The women's society enters into a formal lease agreement with the Corporation for managing the market for one year on a trial basis.



June '90
Construction work on the market
is completed.



July '90
The women make an advance
payment of Rs.4.000 to the Cor-
poration from their development
fund. This represents the first
month's rent for the market.

August '90
The fish market is a reality
Two Ministers, besides the Cor-
poration and fisheries officials,
are present at a function where
the fish market is handed over to
the women.



3. WEEKLY MEETINGS

More than the fact that a fish market has materialized from the effort of the women fish vendors, what's most instructive is the process by which these women – who were earlier a band of disorganized, uneducated, ragtag band of individuals-became an organized body, capable of decision-making and management skills. It is training that made the process gradually possible. The training began in a humble way, with weekly meetings at the villages.

Every Friday afternoon the women would gather at a common area in the centre of the village. It was only after a great deal of discussion that a time and place for the meetings was agreed upon by everyone. These meetings began in May 1988 and continued through the whole process.

Getting a group together in the beginning was very difficult. Very few women showed any interest. They were not able to come all at the same time – which meant they were constantly walking in and out, making it difficult to conduct a discussion. There were incessant distractions—children, food to be cooked, husbands etc. Some would even come and fall asleep.

However, once the discussions started addressing the reality of the fisherwomen's conditions, the women's enthusiasm began to build up. The Corporation allotted a site for a fish market. Fisherwomen participated in drawing up a draft plan for the market. They started feeling that the market was not just a dream but something that could actually happen. More women started attending meetings. After that their interest grew steadily. In spite of many delays and problems, this interest never waned.

The community worker acted as a moderator at the meetings in order to channelize the discussion and get the women to focus on the real issues. All the women were always very vocal and ready to put forward their opinions.

The meeting agenda was generally on the following lines

- A report of all that had taken place concerning this activity in the previous week. For instance, the women who had visited the Corporation would report on the results of the visit.
- A discussion of problems and possible solutions.
- Suggestions from the community worker to guide the fisherwomen in tackling problems.
- Developing a plan of action for the next week, deciding upon the future course of action and allocation of responsibilities, which were usually rotated to include everyone.

In addition to the general agenda, the community worker would also draw attention to specific items which needed to be discussed. No minutes were kept, but the community worker wrote reports of each meeting.

During the course of the meetings the women decided to start a development fund, to which each woman would contribute Rs.5 per month. The fund was created to meet common expenditure incurred in this activity. It also came to be used to meet the members' immediate credit needs. From this money, small loans of Rs.100 each were given by rotation to members who needed it, on the basis of a group consensus. The loans had to be repaid in one month at a nominal rate of interest. The 21st of each month was fixed for disbursement and repayment of loans. All members were present at this meeting. Repayment of the loans was 100%, probably because it was the fisherwomen's own money, and thus there was group pressure to repay. The development fund played an important role in making the fisherwomen function as a group, it's this fund that made possible the first rent advance of Rs.4000 to the Corporation. Weekly meetings became an important forum at which the women voiced opinions, exchanged views and learned to plan.

4. TRAINING

One of the most important contributions of BOBP to the activity was in the form of training for the women. Over a 1½-year period, from January '89 to April '90, BOBP organised 11 one-day training programmes to help mould the fisherwomen into effective managers of their market. The training aimed at getting the women to function together as a group, communicate, discuss and analyze problems, work out solutions and deal with decisions and conflicts.

An important aspect of the training was to get the women to decide which formal organization would be best suited to their needs, formulate rules for such an organization and select its office bearers.

Father Elias from Loyola College, Madras who has had a lot of experience in mobilizing groups at the grassroots level conducted the entire training.

Each training session was planned in such a way that its contents were based on current issues and concerns, and the level of development reached by the group. The methods chosen for the training sessions were role plays, simulation games, structured exercises, field visits, case studies and street plays. These proved to be excellent stimulants for better participation.

Some of the highlights of the training

1. *Games* through which the group began to realize the need for leaders and how lack of leadership could lead to confusion. The group also began to identify the qualities of a leader – a person who can involve all the members of the group, is trusted by all and is calm and patient. They started focussing their ideas about leadership through games, and when the time came to select leaders, they had a clearer idea of what kind of leaders they wanted.
2. *Simulations* such as a mock auction, in which they got totally caught up and excited in out-bidding each other. At the end of it, they realized how competition instead of building collective strength becomes self-defeating and they all stand to lose.
3. *Simulation games*: The women were divided into groups to identify village problems and formulate plans to tackle them. An observer could see how the women are able to analyze and plan, taking into consideration every small detail that is important for the success of a group, like choosing an appropriate time and place for meetings. The drawback was that they have only one action panacea for all ills—approaching governments—and since this has succeeded they have not thought of other ways of tackling an issue.
4. *Field visits* to a similar fish market (Saidapet), which is run by a co-operative society, to observe and learn how it is managed. This visit gave the women practical knowledge and enabled them to begin concrete planning on how their market should be managed.
5. *Role play*, in which the step-by-step struggle towards the market was depicted. It clarified the whole group's understanding of how the process came about and gave them something to reflect on.
6. *Formation of sub-committees* which drew up a tentative work plan and guidelines for the market administration. For rate differentiation the group would first clearly define the various tasks; it was then usually through a process of volunteering that different roles were taken.
7. *Discussions* and talks by resource persons about the pros and cons of different forms of organization. This was difficult for the women to comprehend but two factors were important to them in choosing an organization: (a) It should be simple, and (b) They should not have to deal too much with the government, so as to avoid red tape. This ruled out the option of a Fisherwomen's Co-operative Society. A society registered at the Social Welfare Board (a quasi-government organization) seemed a better option.
8. *Discussion of bye-laws* to fully understand and decide what rules should govern their organization.
9. *Clarification* of the roles of office bearers.
10. *Awareness songs* were a powerful medium to involve the women and they found the words relevant to their lives.

Through this training programme BOBP discovered that placing these women in a new environment, away from the constraints of their daily life, could bring about so much change in them. They were much more relaxed and talked freely.

Father Elias talks about his experiences in training this group. He says, "When the group first came together, they were highly motivated but they had just a single aim—a fish market. They

could not think of anything beyond that. Through the training I could see how each individual developed. All their lives they have had to be aggressive in order to survive, but with training slowly a certain softness came out. They have learnt to be more tolerant and understanding—to a certain extent. They are less self-centred and now have more of a collective feeling.”

But at the same time he says that this group has still got a lot to grow and learn. “Even during training they would always insist that they would be united but when real issues came up they had strong differences which they were not willing to resolve. They will definitely continue to need an outsider to help them settle conflicts.”

About the varying levels of participation, he feels that not everyone is able to grasp what is going on, specially some of the older women, and some are still very individualistic.

Father Elias also commented on how interesting it was to observe how the women grew to understand what sharing responsibilities meant, just by doing simple tasks during the training like cleaning, clearing up etc. “At first some would sit while others worked, but then they began to realize that it was important to divide the work in order to function efficiently.”

He feels that the group has now picked up its own momentum, which cannot be controlled by an outsider beyond a certain point.

The training had started out with many goals and objectives, but training has its limitations, so it has not been possible to achieve all the goals. It's coping with the trials of each day that will determine how the group functions and manages its difficulties. But the training has been an excellent start in shaping attitudes, getting the women to focus their thoughts and preparing them for the tasks ahead.

5. PERCEPTIONS OF THE WOMEN

The fisherwomen of Orur and Olcott kuppam start their day at five in the morning. They take buses to reach various auction points like the Royapuram fish landing harbour to buy their fish. Hence it is a struggle for survival. First of all, they have to have enough capital if they want to buy fish here. There are crowds of people outbidding each other, fighting and hurling insults. It is cut-throat competition.

After buying fish they ice it and take it to the selling place on tricycles for which they pay per basket of fish that they load. Some women bring large quantities and auction it at the market, while some pay others to sell their fish. They market the fish all morning and, after a short break in the afternoon, to cook, eat lunch, finish housework and look after their kids, they are back in the market at 5 p.m. and sell till 8 or 9 p.m. They walk back to the village late at night carrying their baskets and kerosene lamps. But after this long day, very often the amount they have earned just gets them through to the next day.

For them the new fish market is the most important thing in their lives. It is a symbol of hope for a better life after the daily fight against all odds to sell their fish. For most of them, the money from the sale of fish is the sole source of family income. That is why it has been worth the long wait to get a proper marketing facility for themselves.

Being faced with so many other problems in their lives—drunken husbands, poor housing, large families—how and why did the women focus on this particular need—a fish market?

When asked this question they recalled the initial contact they had with the community worker from BOBP (Alexander) and said, “When the fish (from the beach craft landings) was being auctioned on the beach, most of us would buy only the small fish. This surprised Alexander and he asked us why. We told him that we could not afford to buy more because we had no proper marketing facility, so we could not be sure of selling it. That is when our discussions began about our need for a fish market”.

“We came together for one goal—A fish market.”

“Of all our needs this was the most important one. Only if this was provided could we think about anything else.”

What were the difficulties the women used to face with marketing? How would a market improve their circumstances?

This question would trigger an emotional outburst from all of them and such responses as:

“It was terrible, we had to face the sun, the rain, the muck and slush.”

“It was so crowded, we were constantly fighting for space. There wasn’t a moment of peace.”

“We had to pay for the space, pay for a board to keep our fish on. pay for the water, the expenses were so high.”

“The police would harass us. even beat us up and throw our fish and then ask for bribes.”

“The area would become so slushy that no good customers would come there; then we had to spend on putting mats and stones so that it stayed clean.”

“Sometimes I’d roam the streets in the sun for so long but still I wouldn’t be able to sell much fish.”

And the new market ?

For them the new market means stability, infrastructure like water and a clean counter, means of protection from the sun and rain, reduced spoilage, and definitely no more fights and harassment. Indeed a place where they can sell in peace and dignity.

Does this mean better earnings?

“We are not sure, we will have to wait and see.”

It is quite evident that this experience has brought about a change in each of them.

“Although we have the reputation of being noisy and aggressive, we would never venture beyond our village or market or dare talk to outsiders. but now we have so much confidence.”

One of the women says, “Earlier I used to sell fish for someone else and earn Rs.10 a day. The community worker asked me why I did not buy fish from the auctions on the beach and sell it. I did not have enough money and I was scared of the auctions, but the community worker gave me confidence. I finally took the risk and started buying fish there. It sold so well that I’ve earned enough to build my house. My husband is useless and hardly ever gives me money. I manage to support my four daughters.”

The change is more obvious in those who took responsibilities like going to the Corporation. Those who never volunteered to go out are still timid.

“I don’t know anything. How could I talk to a government official?”

“What can I do ? Those who are literate can do so much more than I can.”

But the others say, “We did not even know the bus routes but now we can go all over on our own and talk to government officials without any hesitation”.

“We have learnt courtesy.”

“As a group we are more willing to try and reason and listen to each other’s opinions.”

How does the group function now? Who takes responsibilities, how are decisions made, how do they resolve conflicts?

“There are clearly a few of us who have to play the role of holding the group together and taking responsibilities”, says the president of the fisherwomen’s group. “Not all members have a strong group feeling. Some are more concerned about their own gain.”

Another fisherwoman says. “There are times when we do not agree on an issue, but after having gone through so much together no one will disagree on an issue to the extent of breaking up the group.”

“Even if one person gets angry, we have learnt not to shout back. If she goes away, we have to talk to her, convince her and bring her back.”

According to one participant in the programme “All 44 of us say whatever we want to say when it comes to making a decision. No decision can be taken without a common consensus.”

But not all are fully involved in the process and aware of what is happening. For example, one very old fisherwoman admits that she does not speak much or participate in decision-making. She says, “We have chosen people we trust as our leaders. We are willing to follow the decisions they take.”

“I don’t talk much at meetings. After all, the one who makes decisions has the same problems that I do. Why do I need to voice an opinion ?”

The president of the fisherwomen’s cooperative says, “I am confident that I can reason with the women and find a way out of any disagreements”.

When it came to going to the Corporation, the women said they all took turns so that everyone got a chance and was aware of what was happening.

After such a long wait, an outsider could expect to find the women totally disillusioned with the government and the manner in which it functions. Surprisingly, however, most of them seemed to have positive things to say about their dealings with the Corporation.

“We were so scared to talk to the Special Officer but he was concerned about us. He asked us about our problems and said that we should not have to spend 60 paise on bus fare in going to the market, so he changed the site so that the market would be closer to our village.”

“The officials spoke to us properly and even we were never aggressive or demanded that they do things faster. We would always speak humbly and plead our case. We felt that if we were aggressive, the officials would say ‘Look at these women, they fight like real fisherwomen, how would they be capable of managing the market.’ That is why we were very polite.”

But one fisherwoman has another opinion. “If we were to approach the government on our own without the support of an organization, they would listen to what we say but it would go in through one ear and go out through the other.”

Another says, “Every time we go to the Corporation we have to wake them up”.

One member feels that the biggest problem was the constant change of officials from a particular post. “We explained everything to the Commissioner and when she had just understood the problem she got transferred. Then we had to explain everything to the new Commissioner and even he was there only for a short while. With the third Commissioner we had to start all over again.”

It is not only the women of the man ram who will be occupying the market. There are many more stalls. How will these women feel about other vendors coming into the market?

“Right now the most important thing is that we have to pay the Corporation a rental each month, so we have to take in as many women as possible even if it means sharing our stalls.”

“Why should we have problems with other fisherwomen ? They are women and we are women. It is men who cause problems. We do not want men in the market.”

All along the women never seemed to have any doubts about their ability to manage the market.

“A few days after we opened the market, the Corporation officials came to visit it. They were so impressed with how we had organized everything. We were maintaining proper records and ticket books, and we had hired a watchman and cleaner”.

“There is no question about whether we can manage the market or not. We HAVE to manage it.”

What pleases the women a great deal is the fact that this process has changed the community’s attitude towards them, especially the way the men react.

They recall the time when their meetings first began. The men laughed at them, ridiculed them

and even taunted them that trying for a market was an impossible dream. The women are thrilled when they talk about the difference in men's attitudes now. "We are respected so much more."

The big question that looms in front of them is: Would they be able to work on their problems and find solutions independently now, without outside support?

On this, opinions vary. Some feel that they could never do anything on their own, others feel it would depend on the nature of the problem. And there are others who are very certain about being able to do things on their own. "We could surely find solutions to some of our smaller problems, but we may need help in dealing with larger problems." Another woman says, "What is most important is that we are guided to the right government officials who would treat us with respect and not ask for bribes". And yet others say, "We would definitely be able to tackle our own difficulties now. We have the confidence".

Whatever they might feel, it is obvious that there is no longer so much of a feeling of powerlessness amongst them as before and they know that if they work together as a group they can achieve a lot.

When the president of the manram was asked what advice they would give another group of women who wanted to achieve what they had achieved, she said, "We would say that the most important thing is for them to be united and have one opinion".

6. PERCEPTIONS OF THE CORPORATION

For the Corporation of Madras (the local municipal body), being approached by a group of fisherwomen with a request to build a market was a totally new experience. In this venture the fisherwomen and BOBP worked with officials at all levels in the Corporation, beginning with the Special Officer who heads the Corporation, the Commissioner, the Chief Engineer, the Building Engineer, the Traffic Wing, the Health Department, the Circle Officer etc.

The Besant Nagar group of women became quite a familiar sight in the offices of the Corporation, as they would visit it every few days to talk to the officials, find out what progress there had been and try to speed up the process.

What were the reactions of the Corporation officials at different levels to being approached with an issue like this?

"The municipal body has a special responsibility for specialized markets, like meat and fish, because of environmental and public health considerations," says Mr L M Menezes, Special Officer of the Madras Corporation. "So for the Corporation it was a legitimate demand, also there is no organized market for fish in that area. The provision and maintenance of a clean efficient fish market in Madras is a crying need, one of the many failures of the Madras Corporation. The existing fish markets are in a deplorable state. That is why we welcomed this proposal. It would be an effort towards preventing indiscriminate street vending which always creates public resentment."

Did the Corporation have doubts about handing the market over to a fisherwomen's manram? Did they feel the women were capable of managing it?

According to Mr Bhupal, Building Engineer, "One of the IAS Officers from the Corporation attended the women's training programmes and observed that the women were receiving excellent training and that they were very responsive. As the Corporation has not been successful in maintaining markets, if other groups come in to maintain them, it would be very good for the Corporation. The local MLA (political representative) should have been involved; he should know what goes on in his constituency."

He also suggests that if the market also runs other types of stalls, like chicken, mutton, eggs, there would be many more customers. The Chief Engineer of the Madras Corporation says, "As it is a registered society, the Corporation accepts it as a body that can take over this responsibility".

The Circle Officer of that area has had a lot of contact with the women. He says, "The women are

fully capable of managing the market. When we auction a market, it is a rich businessman who benefits from it. There is no upliftment of the poor. Therefore it is a very good decision to lease out the market to these women”.

“The government is keen to encourage self-management of various activities by people themselves. The Corporation was quite willing to hand over the market to the fisherwomen as long as they organized themselves into a formal group. I am happy that they have decided to become a registered society. This means there is very little scope for government interference, which has been the ruin of many organizations,” says the Special Officer.

This process has dragged on for so long. Could it have been shortened or made easier?

“The present working environment of the Corporation is highly bureaucratic, procedure-oriented and audit-conscious. As a body there is very little inclination towards innovation, speeding up etc., but depending on an individual officer’s interest in such ventures it is quite possible to reduce the time taken.”

“If someone in the Corporation takes an interest it can be done in a year.”

“It is important that Corporation land should be available. If not, the process of acquiring land can drag on for years.”

Can the Besant Nagar market experience be replicated? Would the Corporation consider a process by which it could seek out and encourage more disadvantaged groups to approach it in this manner? There are different views in the Corporation on this issue.

“Already other groups of fisherfolk are asking for similar facilities in other parts of Madras. The successful running of this market would be a forerunner of similar markets elsewhere. Officials **would not feel diffident to hand over such markets to organized groups of vendors.**”

“After all, rehabilitation of street vendors is an important issue.”

“The Corporation does not have an extension department which can go out and identify groups, so **we cannot take on such a function.**”

“**We can definitely encourage such ventures as long as they are not politically motivated.** The Corporation has to function without political interference.”

“The auction system contributes to the objectives of the market not being achieved, corruption, plenty of litigation, massive rental arrears and very poor maintenance. Therefore the Corporation would definitely encourage non-government organizations to identifying groups with whom the Corporation can work within this manner.”

7. PERCEPTIONS OF THE FISHERIES DEPARTMENT

When the BOBP first put up a draft proposal for the women’s fish market, it was keen that the Fisheries Department should be involved because this is the only department that can replicate the activity. Since fisherfolk are basically the concern of the Fisheries Department, it was hoped that the Department would help initiate such activities in the future. The draft proposal envisaged that the Fisheries Department would act as a liaison in this venture between BOBP and the Corporation of Madras, assist in registering the women’s organisation, participate in training, provide technical back-up and do monitoring and evaluation. **BOBP** had also suggested that the Fisheries Department should designate one staff member to coordinate between **BOBP** and the Corporation of Madras. Because of administrative constraints the Department was unable to implement this suggestion. However, the Department took part in the initial discussions.

What are the views of the Fisheries Department regarding this activity?

There are varying views about this activity at different levels within the Department, and about fisherwomen’s extension services in general.

The Deputy Director of Fisheries, in charge of the women’s extension services, took an active interest in the whole process. She says, “The Fisheries Department does not give any priority to extension work. If officials at the higher levels felt that extension services are important, we would have got a free hand and could do much for the fisherfolk, but extension work has no status in this

department. Government talks a lot about women's development, **but** in reality no one is concerned about doing anything for women. Even female government officials are not willing to work for the Fisherwomen's Extension Services because it means a lot of field work."

The Director of Fisheries has another opinion on this issue. He says, "No Department can engage in purely technical, purely research, or purely extension work. Each part needs the other, but only when you are taught can you teach someone else. I definitely feel that the Fisherwomen's Extension Services are important, but these have to be properly defined. First of all, the Fisheries Department should have sound knowledge and information on a subject before we can go out to propagate it. Secondly, I do not think the Fisherwomen's Extension Services should do generalized work like health, education, water, etc. That is the work of other departments. We should concentrate on fisherfolk getting a good catch and then getting a good value for their catch. This means improvements in storage, handling, transportation and marketing. At present the Extension Department is not focusing enough on these issues."

Will the Fisheries Department be able to continue supporting this group of women? Will it initiate similar activities in the future?

The Deputy Director says, "We would definitely like to support the women, but being a Mahalir Manram and not a fisherwomen's cooperative they are recognized only by the Social Welfare Department, not by our department. If they had been a fisherwomen's co-operative they would have been able to get a lot of funds from us. Yet we did not want to force them into forming a co-operative. We have seen that cooperatives are a total failure."

The Director feels that the Fisherwomen's Extension Services should focus completely on marketing, as that is the main concern of fisherwomen. He says, "We are planning more markets like this in the city of Madras which should be handled by the women so that they do not have the feeling that they are being cheated."

Despite these differing views, it's clear that the Fisheries Department is enthusiastic about initiating more markets like this in the future.

8. LEARNING FROM THIS ACTIVITY

What has BOBP learnt in these three years of facilitating a fishing community towards a goal, and how can this process benefit similar activities in future ?

Formation and growth of a group through a Participatory Approach

For BOBP, working with this community was essentially an experiment to test the model of development which believes that ultimately it is people who make the difference. It was an experiment to see if it is people and their own personal motivation, rather than cash or predefined planning, that could help a community to identify and eventually resolve problems and needs.

From this process BOBP has learnt that a facilitator has to truly believe in the capacity of the individual. Forming a group is a slow and painful process. It requires a great deal of time and enormous patience. You must let people grow at their own pace without forcing any issue, till they, as a group, develop a willingness to come together and derive solutions which are mutually beneficial.

Within a group there are various processes which develop in different ways.

Leadership: Interestingly, in this group it took a very long time for any definite leaders to emerge. It was perhaps all to the good – it forced different people to take up responsibility each time, thus ensuring that more people got involved in the activities of the group. There were women who were outspoken and active; but, surprisingly, the women finally chosen as leaders were quiet and unassuming. It's these women whom everyone else trusted, and who really held the group together.

The women considered literacy an important quality for a leader.

Democracy: It is BOBP's learning that in the process of group formation, although the facilitator knows that it is important to introduce democratic principles, in reality it is very difficult for

people who come from different frameworks to participate in sharing power. Although BOBP has not been able to really pinpoint what exactly influences the extent to which women exercise control over events, the women feel that this is strongly influenced by their level of literacy.

Decision-making: There are situations where the decision which has to be made by a group is too abstract for it to fully grasp the implications of each choice. For example, when this group had to choose what form of organization it wanted to have, it was not possible for it to really understand the difference between a registered society, a cooperative and a trust. What does a facilitator do when faced with a situation like this? The ideal option would be to provide the group with all the relevant information as objectively as possible, including the advantages and disadvantages of each choice, so that the group is in a position to make a decision. In this case the pros and cons of various forms of organization were put forward and discussed during training. But it still remained slightly abstract for the women, so eventually it's BOBP that influenced them into choosing a registered society because it was felt that this would be the easiest form of organization for them to handle.

What does a facilitator do when a group is obviously making a decision that will be harmful to it? If a group is not allowed to make mistakes, it is definitely being hindered in its growth. If a group is allowed to make mistakes, it is important that the facilitator is there to support the group through a crisis.

BOBP has learnt that these two aspects have to be weighed before a facilitator intervenes in the decision-making process. Allowing a group to make mistakes was more possible here because the activity did not have to fit into a time-frame.

Occasionally, even in participatory development, a decision has to be made which is governed by outside factors.

Participation: After presenting its problem to the community worker, the group sometimes felt that its task was over and that it was now up to the community worker to find the solution. The difficulty lay in getting the women to realize that the community worker was there only as a guide, and that if they wanted solutions to their problems they themselves would have to work on it: that is why after they came together to present the problem, it took time before they could be persuaded to form a group to actually work on the problem. This is probably a characteristic feature of any participatory work.

Empowerment: At the beginning of the group formation, a strong feeling of powerlessness, the feeling that they were incapable of doing anything, was obvious among the fisherwomen. BOBP has learnt that it is not possible to overcome this feeling just by putting the group through a hypothetical problem situation and getting it to work on it. Although training helps in some ways, it is more important to utilize opportunities to get the group to experience problems and successfully tackle them. For example, with this group it was only after the women had gone to the Corporation, approached the officials and spoken to them that they really felt that they were capable of doing anything on their own.

Trust: There is only a certain degree to which group members are able to trust each other. The level of trust is often influenced by cultural factors. This limits the extent to which collective action is possible. For example, the women were willing to pool together their money and start a women's development fund, but they were not willing to consider the idea of procuring fish collectively—probably because they felt that it would be too much of a risk.

Conflict: Conflict in any group is a matter of great concern. This group has still not reached a stage where members can resolve conflict by discussing it in a rational manner. They definitely need a mediator to conduct a dialogue, and when an issue gets too heated, it is important to give them time to calm down and reflect on the problem. When asked how they had resolved any particular problem, they would say, "One group has to give in when the other group refuses to give in". Thus, they remain bitter about it. Until a group reaches a point where they can conduct a proper dialogue, they are always in danger of breaking up over a controversial issue.

The process of problem identification

The first principle to be followed during problem identification is that it was important to wait for problems to surface before coming up with solutions. Even if an outsider sees an important problem, he has to wait until the people themselves consider it a priority.

When the people themselves decide which issue they want to work on, the facilitator does not have to spend time sustaining their interest. The group's enthusiasm does not waver as this is its activity.

Another useful lesson is that even when people are overwhelmingly sure about what the solution to their problem is, there should be a process of analysis to ensure that what they want to do is really feasible. Also, one should not expect them to think of problems in the same terms as a facilitator would. Sometimes their most important need may not necessarily be economic—like in this case, where a market did not necessarily mean better earnings for the women but it definitely meant freedom from harassment and social degradation.

It could also be seen that the fact that the solution to its problem was within reach made it possible for the group to grow together towards a concrete goal. If the first problem it had chosen to work on was something that could not be achieved, there is a possibility that the group may have disintegrated.

Dealing with the Government

The Corporation of Madras reacted positively to the Besant Nagar market proposal. The Corporation was open to the idea and willing to take the risk of sponsoring an unusual venture. Its **officials were usually accessible not only to BOBP but also to the women. Obviously, government** is conceding its limitations and is becoming more and more open to the idea of people's groups taking over functions that the government is unable to perform properly.

It is quite clear that dealing with the government requires a lot of patience and tact, but what remains questionable is whether a more aggressive, demanding stance would have hastened the process. One of the main reasons the whole procedure dragged on is lack of coordination between government departments. As a result, anyone wishing to expedite the process has to play the role of a coordinator himself, pushing a file from department to department.

Unplanned, open-ended activities

Since BOBP did not have any commitments in terms of time and money, the whole activity could be adjusted to the pace of the women and the Corporation. The catalytic role was of paramount importance and it was never necessary to force or push decisions. Another advantage of having the activity unplanned was the flexibility to explore other avenues if things did not work out as they were meant to. If any project is meant to be participatory, the facilitating agency should be committed to the fact that it expects everything to come from the community. Thus, the whole process is bound to take time and cannot be fitted into any allotted time frame.

9. ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

The market has been handed over to the women and now the main concern that lies ahead is whether they will be resilient to the ups and downs of an organization.

They will definitely be faced with problems to tackle each and every day—Will there be enough vendors coming to sell in the market? Will they make enough money to pay the Corporation rent each month? Will there be enough customers? Will they be able to manage the administration? How will they maintain the market? Will they be able to work together as a group?

Each day is bound to be a challenge and the women will surely need some kind of continued support till the market is properly established.

The future will determine the success of this endeavour. And if this market is a success it will be a forerunner to many such ventures in the future where the government will encourage people's groups to take responsibilities and play an active role in the programmes and plans that concern them.

Publications of the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP)

The BOBP brings out six types of publications.

Reports (BOBP/REP/...) describe and analyze completed activities such as seminars, annual meetings of BOBP's Advisory Committee, and projects in member-countries for which BOBP inputs have ended.

Working Papers (BOBP/WP/...) are progress reports that discuss the findings of ongoing BOBP work.

Manuals and Guides (BOBP/MAG/...) are instructional documents for specific audiences.

Miscellaneous Papers (BOBP/MIS/...) concern work not sponsored by BOBP — but which is relevant to the Programme's objectives.

Information Documents (BOBP/INF/...) are bibliographies and descriptive documents on the fisheries of member-countries in the region.

Newsletters (Bay of Bengal News) issued quarterly, contain illustrated articles and features in non-technical style on BOBP work and related subjects.

A list of publications since 1984 follows.

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17. Report of Investigations to Improve the Kattumaram of India's East Coast. Madras, India, July 1984.
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47. Exploratory Fishing for Large Pelagic Species in Sri Lanka. R. Maldeniya & S.L. Suraweera. Madras, India, May 1991.

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