

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESEARCH: HOW IT CAN THROW NEW LIGHT ON THE FISHING INDUSTRY**

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Everyone in the Maldives already knows a lot about fishing. It is, after all, the most widespread occupation. But it is, for precisely that reason, practically impossible for anyone to be familiar with all the difficult aspects of the fishing industry, just by relying on their own personal impressions. The fishing industry is experiencing unprecedented change and development. This makes it exceptionally hard to understand all the implications of the many innovations which are taking place. Each development tends to have different effects on boat owners, or crew members, or anyone who just buys or eats fish. Socio-economic research can help to provide a clearer picture.

Research of this kind is just one way in which the Ministry of Fisheries keeps abreast of what is happening, in order to look after the fishing industry. Research co-exists with other approaches. On some subjects, the Ministry collects and analyses comprehensive statistics, such as those for the number of fish caught. These statistics show that, so far, there is little sign that fish stocks are actually being depleted. Some other, more complicated questions, centering on people rather than fish, can best be answered through socio-economic research. This would involve, typically, some form of survey and questionnaires. (It is a pity that fish themselves are not willing to be interviewed; if only they were, that would solve a lot of problems.)

When a cook wants to know the taste of a curry he/she is making, he/she does not need to eat it all. He/she simply has to try a little bit. Most research is similar, in that only a relatively small sample of fishermen, or boat owners, or island chiefs, will be asked about their attitudes and experiences. Although, in the Maldives, as in many other countries, a full census of the whole population is carried out every few years, only a limited number of topics can be included in this. On the other hand, by using sample surveys of comparatively small groups of people, each group can be asked different sets of questions about separate issues, as and when the need arises. And by repeating any such survey after a few years, it is possible to discover the extent to which changes are taking place.

A survey needs to be based on interviews with as typical and, to some extent, as large a group of people as is possible. Ideally these people should be selected completely at random. Here, though, the Maldives present special difficulties. First, because the 202 inhabited islands are all relatively self-contained, it is hard to be certain how far one can form generalizations about the country as a whole, on the basis of research results obtained from perhaps 20 islands. Secondly, because it is both costly and time-consuming to travel from island to island, the number of islands which can readily be included in any sample survey will tend to be fairly limited. This, too, means that the results of any research project need to be interpreted with caution. Would the findings have been the same if a different set of islands had been involved?

Fortunately, it is possible to minimise these problems. It may be difficult for researchers to visit more than a limited number of islands, for any one project, but these islands can be carefully selected to as to include a range of contrasting characteristics. Islands of different sizes; islands from different atolls; islands near to and far away from Male', from the north of the country and from the south as well as from the centre; islands where different sorts of fish are caught, or where fishing is of varying importance – these and other contrasting features will need to be considered in deciding where research is to be set.

The Ministry of Fisheries has already some experience of socio-economic research. In particular, a survey was conducted in 1985, and analysed with the help of Mr. Rolf Willmann of FAO. This survey looked at the social and economic structure of 20 islands. These were selected so as to reflect different patterns of economic activity: tuna fishing, reef fishing, agriculture, boat building, handicrafts, etc. The 20 islands included 7 from the southern zone, 8 from the central zone and 5 from the northern zone. Thus islands close to Male' and also further away from the capital were studied.

On each island, households were selected randomly, with a total of 625 households. That is equivalent to 13% of all household on sampled islands, or 2.4% of all households on atolls (excluding Male'). To collect information, interviews and observations were used, with the help of questionnaires which dealt mainly with earnings, expenditure and savings. The aim was to throw more light on the diversity of incomes and income distribution and the standard of living. Furthermore, the study attempted to assess the impact on the islands economies of the rapid changes which have been taking place.

It was found from the survey that each island has its own distinctive features.

For instance, the impact of the growth of the national economy during the last few years has benefitted different islands to varying degrees. The survey report painted a picture that was true of the selected islands rather than of the entire Republic.

One of the shortcomings of the survey, which was undertaken over a period of 6 months, was that seasonal differences in weather or sea conditions or fish abundance may have had an effect on the pattern of responses. Another shortcoming was that some of the answers given to certain questions were simply unrealistic, and these questions had to be excluded from the analysis. Given the lack of earlier work of this kind such difficulties were hardly surprising.

Hopefully, more such studies will be carried out and will help to bring about a better understanding of the work of people in the fisheries sector, which plays so important a role in the overall economy of the Republic of Maldives.





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