

Empowering Fishers: The Vital Role of Cooperatives and Farmer Producer Organizations in Fisheries Extension

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ABSTRACT

Fisheries extension is crucial for improving rural fishing communities through resource management, skill development and knowledge dissemination. Cooperatives and Fish Farmer Producer Organisations (FFPOs) are important players in this endeavour. FFPOs are more professionally managed and focused on business, whereas cooperatives are democratically operated and based in the community. By sharing infrastructure, arranging training, enhancing market access and forging closer ties with government and finance services, they work together to support small-scale fishermen. By working together, fishers can better advocate their needs, adopt sustainable practices and secure fair prices. Real-world examples, like Kerala's MATSYAFED and NABARD-backed FPOs, show the positive

impact of these groups on fisher livelihoods. However, there are still difficulties, particularly with technical capability, legal concerns and women's involvement. By filling these gaps with inclusive programming, policy assistance and training, these organisations will be able to fully realise their potential as catalysts for sustainable fisheries development.

INTRODUCTION

Fisheries play an important role in the livelihoods of millions of people living in rural and coastal areas, particularly in countries like India, where communities rely significantly on fishing for revenue and sustenance. However, small-scale fishermen often encounter several difficulties, including restricted market access, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of technical expertise and minimal negotiating leverage. This is where fisheries extension services come in, trying to close the gap by imparting useful information, introducing better fish farming techniques and advising fishermen on how to manage natural resources more sustainably (ICAR, 2020). Cooperatives and Fish Farmer Producer Organisations (FFPOs) have been important collaborators in these endeavours over time. These institutions bring fishers together, not just to strengthen their voice, but to offer them a support system where they can learn, grow and thrive collectively (FAO,2018). Cooperatives are often deeply rooted in local communities and operate based on mutual trust and democratic principles. FFPOs, on the other hand, bring a more structured, business-oriented approach, focusing on profitability and professionalism.

1. What Are Cooperatives and FFPOs?

- **Cooperatives:** Long-standing community organizations that bring fishermen together are frequently registered under cooperative regulations. They are run by members and encourage shared resource ownership as well as infrastructure and scheme access.

- **FFPOs:** FFPOs, which are supported by India's PMMSY program, concentrate on fish farming collectives for value addition, production, and marketing. These are business organizations run by farmers that are formally organized as producer firms or societies. FFPOs prioritise profitability, professionalism and commercial operations more than traditional cooperatives (NFDB, 2022).

They give small fishermen access to high-quality inputs and premium markets by providing them with financial assistance, technical training and negotiating power against middlemen. By providing training in sustainable harvesting, post-harvest processing and market connections, these organizations expand essential services (FAO,2018).

2. Why We Need Them in Fisheries Extension

Fisheries are frequently small-scale and fragmented, which restricts personal advancement. FFPOs and cooperatives assist in overcoming these obstacles by:

- **Uniting Fishers:** The voice and bargaining strength of small fishermen are increased when they are grouped together.
- **Extension Efficiency:** When fishing is organized, more individuals receive training and support.
- **Affordable Inputs & Shared Infrastructure:** Groups can buy quality materials in bulk and build common facilities like hatchery and cold storage.

- **Better Market Access:** Selling as a group leads to better prices and less dependence on middlemen.
- **Finance & Insurance:** FFPOs make it easier to get loans, subsidies and coverage for risks.
- **Sustainable Practices:** Organized groups can manage local resources better and encourage conservation.
- **Policy Influence:** A collective voice helps shape policies that work for fishers.

3. How They Help with Fisheries Extension

3.1 Skills & Knowledge Sharing

These organizations train members in sustainable aquaculture, disease prevention, feed management and value addition.

3.2 Providing Inputs & Infrastructure

They help fishers get reliable, affordable supplies and operate shared facilities that boost production and reduce waste.

3.3 Market Development

By aggregating products, they negotiate better deals, tap into export markets and build direct retail connections.

3.4 Financial Access

Formal structures make it easier to obtain loans, subsidies and insurance.

3.5 Representing Fisher Voices

They advocate fair policies, monitor implementation of government schemes and represent marginalized voices.

4. Why Collective Action Matters

Working together benefits fishers in many ways:

- **Lower Costs:** Bulk buying reduces input prices.
- **Stronger Negotiation:** Groups get better deals with buyers and suppliers.
- **Shared Learning:** Members learn from each other and adopt new practices faster.
- **Better Resource Management:** Communities take ownership of their shared water bodies.
- **Stronger Communities:** Trust and cooperation grow through joint action.

5. Building Capacity Through Cooperatives and FFPOs

5.1 Training Opportunities

Members learn about advanced techniques like **biofloc, RAS and cage farming** and improve skills in record-keeping, digital tools and business planning.

5.2 Organizational Development

Training for leaders, drafting bylaws and setting up transparent systems help ensure smooth operations.

5.3 Linking with Extension Services

These groups connect fishers to research bodies like ICAR and use mobile advisory services for real-time updates.

5.4 Supporting Women and Youth

Special programs engage women in fish value chains and empower young people to lead digital or entrepreneurial initiatives.

6. Real-World Examples

- **MATSYAFED (Kerala):** MATSYAFED, Kerala's leading fisheries cooperative federation, was founded in 1984 and now represents over 700 primary societies in ten districts. An exceptional cooperative that

offers fishermen everything from marketing assistance to welfare. Through procurement centres and sales outlets, microfinance, welfare loans, production incentives, and input subsidies like diesel engines and nets, it offers marketing to fishermen.

- **Aqua FPOs in Andhra & Bengal:** Andhra Pradesh encourages FFPOs in shrimp-dominant PMMSY blocks to improve negotiating leverage, disease surveillance, and species diversity. West Bengal encourages integrated aquaculture clusters with NABARD financing organic fisheries and FFPOs for infrastructure and capacity building. Boosted productivity and incomes with organized extension services.
- **NABARD-Backed FFPOs:** NABARD provides 80% grants for farming infrastructure and funds FFPOs for clusters such as Sikkim's organic model, integrated systems, and ornamental fisheries. Put emphasis on long-term capacity building, integrated aquaculture, and ornamental fish (NABARD,2021).

7. Challenges That Need Addressing

- Limited skills and knowledge at the grassroots level
- Inconsistent access to funds and markets
- Complicated regulations and overlapping institutions
- Gender inequality and underrepresentation of women fishers

8. What Needs to Be Done

- Invest in training leaders and extension workers
- Align and coordinate government schemes through these groups

- Use digital platforms for education, advice and marketing
- Ensure inclusion of women and marginalized communities
- Provide startup capital and operational funds for new FPOs

CONCLUSION

In India's fishing industry, cooperatives and FFPOs are more than just support systems they are agents of change. They open genuine prospects for rural development and sustainability by uniting fishermen, exchanging information and facilitating better access to markets and loans. Their combined power facilitates resource management, policy influence and the development of resilient communities. But we need to close existing gaps if we want them to realise their full potential. This entails enhancing leadership, advancing gender parity, utilizing digital tools and guaranteeing steady funding. Long-term, inclusive growth will be further ensured by involving women and young people. Strengthening these organizations is essential for ensuring better livelihoods, food security and rural development.

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