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Fisheries in the Small Reservoirs of Northern Ghana: Opportunities and Constrains of a New Natural Resource

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Abstract

An increasing number of extreme climatic events such as droughts and floods pose threats to rain-fed agriculture, the traditional and most important livelihood strategy in northern Ghana. Hundreds of small reservoirs were built during the past 50 years to help the rural population to deal with the difficult environmental conditions by enhancing their flexibility and diversifying income sources. Fisheries in these reservoirs was assumed to be a rather incidental benefit. However, in many communities in northern Ghana, where poverty and malnutrition prevails, fisheries developed into an important supplement to income. The steadily increasing demand for fish further shows that fish is a very welcome addition to the menu as well. Fisheries activities in four communities were studied and provide good examples for local responses to uncertainty resulting from climate change. Unfortunately, the growing popularity of fishing results in massive fishing pressure without accompanying management of this comparatively new natural resource is poor.

The few attempts of science and policy to increase fish production focused on technical solutions to increase fish production and neglected problems of implementation. A look into history shows that clashing traditional, governmental, and participatory management strategies as well as generation conflicts overtax the capacities of the communities to cope with management responsibilities. Organisational problems and difficulties in the implementation of even the simplest, well-known management rules, such as compliance with the ban on small meshed nets or close season, are some of the consequences. If cooperation between science, politics and local stakeholders can be established to overcome the disenchantment with management, fisheries in small reservoirs has a great potential to support the adaptation of the rural population to climate change.

Keywords: Fisheries management, livelihoods, northern Ghana, technical options