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How Fishing Communities on the Sangihe Islands, Indonesia Struggle to Maintain their Traditional Livelihood while Adapting to the Modernisation of Fisheries

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Abstract

Small-scale coastal fisheries have undergone a rapid process of modernisation in many parts of the developing world in the last few decades. The fishing communities on the remote Sangihe Islands in Indonesia are an interesting example of how traditional fishing techniques are being replaced by more modern methods. The study investigates how fishing technique modernisation is affecting social structures and institutions in four traditional fishing communities on the Sangihe Islands; it characterises the influences and drivers acting on coastal fisheries communities during such process of change.

Information derived from interviews and discussions with local fishermen, and a thorough review of available literature was used to characterise changes that have occurred in each of the four fishing communities during the past three decades. In all four communities, the fishery has significantly changed in terms of techniques and social organisation. The “seke” fishery, based on a traditional purse-seine made of bamboo and operated on the beach by communal groups has increasingly been replaced by private, offshore operated fishery with synthetic nets. Correspondingly, changes to the local fishery are transforming community structures that were strongly integrated with fishing practices. As fishermen adopted more modern techniques, group sizes for fishing operations declined while the number of private fishing parties rose. Additionally, a loss of local beliefs and traditions corresponding to fishery came along with these changes in fishing practices. Nevertheless, traditional communal practices, such as marine tenure and communal sharing, were still maintained to a certain degree. Although fishing technique modernisation has propelled individualism and profit thinking, many of the deep rooted communal institutions were preserved or adapted to the changing fishery.

The results of the study suggest that the main influences for modernisation of fishery and transformation of social structures originate from outside the communities. Governmental incentive programs, improved market conditions and the depletion of fish stocks in local waters are the main drivers. Communities have to react to those outside influences and their dynamics, seeking a balance to adapt to the changing world while maintaining their traditional livelihood.

Keywords: Communal sharing system, fishery modernisation, Indonesia, social transformation, traditional marine tenure