

Guide Questions

1. Identify & explain all social, economic and environmental principles
2. Analyze the project in the context of “systems thinking”
3. Draw a diagram showing the connection between various parts of the system

In Chad, a project to promote sustainable fishing yields extra dividends

APRODEPIT, a Bahá'í-inspired non-governmental organization, stresses participation and consultation in an effort to promote conservation and community development along the Chari River .

WALTAMA, Chad — As a maker and seller of fishing nets, Ali Mahamat knew all too well that fish were slowly disappearing from the Chari River here in the southern region of this sub-Saharan African nation.

“Fifteen years ago, the fishing was good,” said Mr. Mahamat. “But it gradually died out to the point where there was practically nothing.”

Until a few years ago, Mr. Mahamat concedes, he inadvertently contributed to the die-out. In what he now realizes was a misguided effort to help fishermen here, he sold nets with increasingly smaller mesh, designed to catch the few immature fish that remained.

Then, one day, he tried to sell his nets to the fishermen of this village, located about 70 kilometers southeast of Sarh, the regional capital. But the fishermen here had other ideas. They had organized into a community-based group to revive the fishing and they had become serious about enforcing game laws.

“They said I can't sell small nets here,” said Mr. Mahamat. “They said I could only sell nets with large mesh. They said it was to protect the fish.”

Today, because of actions like that, the fish are returning to the Chari River in the Sarh region — as are other signs of prosperity. Much of the credit goes to APRODEPIT, a Bahá'í-inspired non-governmental organization that has worked here for more than a decade to promote a variety of community-based, sustainable development practices.

Based in Sarh, APRODEPIT's outward focus is to provide communities with training in improved fishing practices, fish farming, and the preservation of fish through smoking and curing. It also promotes composting, arboriculture, reforestation, and wildlife protection.

Further, because of APRODEPIT's distinctive participatory methods of community organization and consultation, a number of the groups have branched out into other endeavors, such as the operation of community-based schools, women's literacy classes, and village granaries.

“They start with fish farming, and they harvest the fish. Then they realize they have more money but their children aren't educated. So they decide to create a community school. Next, perhaps,

they realize they have a problem with health. So we assist with health education. And by following this system, the village gradually raises itself up,” said Mr. Kosse Malla.

This approach has certainly worked in Waltama, which formed its first group in 1995 and has since instituted a variety of sustainable fishing efforts, established a village school, created a village granary, and, most recently, launched a program of literacy classes for women.

It is the creation of protected fishing zones that, without doubt, has had the greatest impact in the areas where APRODEPIT is working.

As noted by Mr. Mahamat, the net-seller, local community groups in Waltama and neighboring villages have declared portions of the Chari River protected, enforcing government rules that ban small mesh nets and restricting their own fishing activities in an effort to bring back local fish populations.

The villagers noticed that there were more fish where there were also hippos — and so, with the assistance of field managers from APRODEPIT, they set up signs declaring their section of the river a wildlife protection zone. They also formed surveillance patrols to drive away poachers. As a result, since 1995 the population of hippos has gone from approximately two to about 200.

The increased presence of hippos, in turn, has improved the fishing. The manure from the hippopotamuses serves to breed small insects, which become food for the fish. Additionally, said APRODEPIT staff, the hippos act as natural fish wardens. Outsiders are afraid to mingle with them, while local fishermen have learned how to maneuver through the herd without upsetting them.

Fisherman in Waltama and other communities say fish populations have returned to nearly half of what they once were. “Before we couldn’t even find one fish in this part of the river,” said Bernard Noubaram, a 27-year-old Waltama fisherman.

Other communities east and west along the Chari have heard of the successes in and around Waltama, and they have begun approaching APRODEPIT for similar assistance.

In the village of Kodjoguila, for example, about 30 kilometers northeast of Sarh, a newly formed group has, on APRODEPIT’s advice, restricted fishing in one of the seasonal ponds in the Chari riverbed. Since the group was formed in June 2003, the villagers have been throwing leftover millet hulls and brewing residue into the pond to “feed” the fish.

“In our grandparents’ time, one fisherman could fill four canoes with fish in one day,” said Dangabo Ngamaye, a former fisherman and now a teacher in Kodjoguila. “Then we were invaded by fishermen with nets and we started to notice the disappearance of different species of fish.”

In March 2004, amid much ceremony, villagers gathered along the pond’s shore as fishermen strung out a net for the first time since June. They wanted to see if the method worked — and the

results were quite satisfactory. The men netted a wide variety of species, and many relatively large fish.

Mr. Ngamaye added that in the past, they also had plentiful wildlife, such as deer and gazelle. “By starting with the fish, we hope the population will get a clear example of how we can bring back some things that have been lost. And when they see that is working, we hope to re-establish the forest, and when the forest is protected, we hope the animals will come back,” he said.

The groups are then encouraged to discuss the kinds of problems they face and, in a consultative process with APRODEPIT field workers, to consider possible solutions. This consultative process stands at the heart of APRODEPIT's methodology.

“It makes a great deal of difference to the outcome of a project when local knowledge is considered as valuable input, not something to be ignored — or worse, eradicated,” noted Ms. Madingar of the Ministry of Environment and Water. “The beneficiaries immediately think of themselves as partners in a plan of action rather than observers. This seems to be the basic approach of APRODEPIT, and it should be made accessible to a much larger audience.”

An international consulting group based in Canada that has recently studied APRODEPIT, said it was APRODEPIT's “patience, innovation, explanations, and the implication of all of the principle actors, as well as an understanding of the local environment,” that contributed to the creation of “a very positive group dynamic” in the areas it serves.

One of the primary concerns in the region has been the decline of fish. But disappearing forest lands, wildlife, the lack of education, and the illiteracy of women have also emerged as major concerns.

As of March 2003, APRODEPIT was working with 143 groups in the Sarh region. Ninety-eight were men's groups; 45 were women's groups. Among the men's groups, some 60 were engaged in some sort of fishing-related activity, about 28 were experimenting with organic agriculture, and 11 were growing fruit trees. Among the women's groups, curing, smoking and marketing fish is the primary activity, with about 30 groups involved in such activities. Other groups are exploring small-scale commercial activities.