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Inter-Agency Task Force on
Social and Solidarity Economy

Social and Solidarity Economy as a tool for Sustainable Marine Fishery

*An illustration based on Fishermen's Cooperatives in
Kerala, India*

*Preethi Solomon
Tata Institute of Social Sciences
India*

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What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?**

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Abstract

The fishing community spread over its long coastal belt of the country makes a vital contribution to the daily requirements of society as well as to the export earnings of the Country. However the social and economic benefit associated with the sector is not reaching at the grass root level. They remain marginalized, live in miserable conditions and experience several occupational risks. The cooperative in the fisheries sector seems to hold a high promise for reducing their vulnerability through its social and solidarity approach. The present paper attempts to describe how and to what extent fishermen's primary cooperative societies could cater the needs of the marine fishing community and achieve a sustainable fishery. It also describes the economic and social function of primary cooperative societies and critically analyzes the responsiveness of state led and community led cooperatives towards the specific condition and needs of traditional marine fishing communities in Kerala.

Keywords

Cooperatives, Social and Solidarity Economy , Fisheries

Bio

Preethi Solomon is currently a PhD scholar in Social Work at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, India and her area of research is institutional pluralism in resource governance in the context of marine fishing community's in Kerala, India. Her primary research interests include resource governance, democratic decentralisation, and rural development.

Introduction

The Indian marine fisheries have undergone rapid changes over the last six decades to transform from a sustenance fishing to the status of a multi-crore fishing industry, contributing massively to employment generation, food and nutritional security and foreign exchange earnings to the country. India is the second largest fish producing nation in the world (GoK 2018). The country is also ranked 6th globally in marine capture production and exporting of fish as well as fish products in the year 2016 (FAO 2018). The fisheries sector contributed to 1.1 of the GDP of the country (GoI n.d.) and engaged over 14.50 million people at the primary level of the sector (GoK 2018). However, the economic and social benefits associated with this makeover have not reached the grass root level of the Indian small scale or traditional fishing community (Sathiadhas, Salim and Narayanakumar 2014). They are still living in the vicious circle of poverty and continue to be the victims of social inequality and social deprivation. In India, access to marine fisheries resource is free and is termed as “open access fisheries” (Singh 1994). This privilege provides the opportunity to multiple actors to intervene in marine fisheries with different power structure, different knowledge system and different financial strength.

How do they gain strength to compete with the larger community and improve their socio-economic status? Fishermen’s cooperatives are recognized and seem to be the most appropriate organization to enhance the socio-economic status of the small scale or traditional fishermen communities in India (Nair, et al. 2010). Fishermen’s primary cooperative societies are democratically functioning local institutions and it is one of the best renounced forms of organization which practices social and solidarity economy.

In Kerala 42 percent of adult fisherfolk have membership in primary cooperative societies, 68 percent have membership in fisheries cooperatives and the rest of them have membership in other cooperative societies (GoI 2010). The statistics marks the significance of fisheries cooperatives societies and other cooperatives in the lives of fishermen communities in Kerala. Hence the concept of institutional pluralism is used to study the significance of cooperative societies for sustainable marine fishery.

The present paper attempts to describe how and to what extent fishermen’s primary cooperative societies could cater the needs of the marine fishermen community and achieve a sustainable fishery in Kerala. It explores the types and dynamics of primary fishermen societies in marine fishing communities of Kerala using the concept of institutional pluralism.

Social and solidarity economy is considered as the economy of the people which aims to bring production of goods and services as per the needs of the people rather than maximizing profit (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 2014). The paper engages with the social and solidarity contribution of state led primary cooperative society and community led primary society in the lives of traditional marine fishing community. Here primary cooperative societies of Kerala State Cooperative Federation for Fisheries Development Limited (popularly known as *Matysfed*) and primary level societies of South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) are taken into account to explain the components of social and solidarity as a state driven as well as community driven initiative. Therefore the paper is trying to analyze these two forms of social and solidarity initiatives to understand the social and economic benefits drawn by the fishing community and the reason they own it. Finally it unravels the scope and significance of social and solidarity economy as a tool for sustainable fishery through fishermen’s primary cooperative societies.

Conceptual approach

Pluralism can be defined as a variety of groups with autonomous, different and sometimes mutually conflicting interests, perspectives and values exist within any society. Institutional pluralism refers to different types and forms of institutions with different legal and social status applicable to identical territory (Anderson, Clement and Crowder 1999). It is not possible to make a common perspective from these differing views by the reference to an absolute standard. It helps to educate each other.

The state of Kerala is declared as the front-runner and trendsetter in the country in decentralized planning (Vijayanand 2009). But the development experience of the fishing community is contra with the development of the state due to dismal social development, high gender disparities, active interventions of external agents, ravages of nature and occupational hazards. This provides adequate space for external agents mainly non-governmental organizations (NGO) as well as community-based organizations in shaping and setting development priorities among fishermen communities (Jose and Kannan 2004, Matsyafed 2019).

Social and solidarity institutions are avenues of voluntary collective operations of a group which provide autonomy and solidarity through its economic and social functions. The paper attempts to understand the significance of social and solidarity economy among the vulnerable community in the context of cooperative societies. Cooperatives are an autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned democratically controlled enterprises (International Labour Organization 2002). It is a member-user driven initiative. Primary cooperative societies of *Matsyafed* are state driven which are categorized as state led primary cooperative societies. Primary societies of SIFFS is a community driven “from the people to the people initiative” which are categorized as community led primary societies. Both of the initiatives aim to bring socio-economic development of traditional fishing communities through their collective participation. State led primary cooperative society means an initiative launched by the government for the betterment of the community and is run by the people in the community. Community led primary society means an initiative commenced and run by the people in a neighbourhood with or without the support of external agents such as NGOs and community based organizations aimed at bringing about social and economic development of the community.

The paper attempts to explore the significance of institutional pluralism for sustainable fishery through the following dimensions. How a community led primary society is able to function within the premises of state led primary societies to improve the socio-economic standards of marine fishing community? How the state led primary cooperative society is able to improve the socio economic standards of marine fishing community through its legally established system of governance? How do the interlinkages and patterns of interactions established between the community led and state led primary societies for executing the goal of sustainable local development? The paper followed a qualitative approach with a case study research design which helped to conduct the study through an intense contact with the life situation of marine fishing communities in Kerala.

Fishermen Cooperative Societies in Kerala

Cooperatives are considered as one of the sources to meet the everyday needs of life (Rananavare 1964). The cooperative societies among the fisherfolk communities acted as a turning point of their transition toward mechanization and socioeconomic developments of the traditional fishermen population in Kerala. The author found relevance in discussing the history of cooperative societies in fisheries sector to understand its role in the development of the sector. The paper analyzes the characteristics of social and solidarity economy is associated with functioning of primaries societies at present.

A Historic perspective of Fishermen Cooperative Society in Kerala

The first cooperative society for fishermen in the region that is now known as the state of Kerala was registered in 1917 on the basis of communities (Kurien 1980, Rajichandra 2013). The fishermen were able to reap the benefits of cooperatives only after independence. Mechanization of boats was a break through by which fishing has become easier and more an economically profitable occupation. But the traditional fishermen were bonded laborers where the benefits of their efforts were denied. The government initiated cooperative societies to tackle this issue. These societies were not economically viable due to the unmet credit needs of fishermen. Therefore increased production in fisheries sector benefited the middleman and the money lenders rather than the fishermen. They gave services to fishermen and made the profit

from the sector. The major defect of the movement was its extreme emphasis on credits for the fishermen either in the form of cash or in the form of mechanized boats and nets. The result was the socio-economic condition of the traditional fisherfolk deteriorated in spite of an increase in fish production (Rajichandra 2013). The Kerala Fishermen Welfare Societies Act of 1980 formed many societies for the development of fishermen communities which remained more or less inactive until the formation of Kerala State Cooperative Federation for Fisheries development limited popularly known as *Matsyafed* in 1984.

Matsyafed: A top to bottom approach

Matsyafed aims at promoting production, procurement, processing and marketing of fish and fish products through its four wheeler strategy of credit, technology, marketing and capacity building (*Matsyafed*, 2019). It followed a three tier structure of fishermen welfare societies in the lower level, district level societies in the middle and state level apex federation was at top.

In the year 1988, *Matsyafed* is reunited under Kerala Cooperative Societies Act of 1969 and started to follow two tier system of primary society is in the lower level and the apex federation called *Matsyafed* at the top level. 651 primary Fishermen Development and Welfare Cooperative Societies in Marine, Inland and Women are affiliated to *Matsyafed* (*Matsyafed*, 2019). The administration and management of *Matsyafed* is vested in a Board of Directors having elected members, official members and non official members. The societies receive funds from various national financial corporations.

Genesis of Community led fishermen cooperatives in Kerala

The rehabilitated village of Marianadu was created by a church aided in Trivandrum district of Kerala during 1960-1962 periods. A team of community organizers had also lived with the community to support the villagers to start a new life in new environment (K. Kumar 1988). The villagers were also trapped in the control of moneylenders during their community building and development stage (Kurien 1980). The villages initiated a movement of resistance to overcome from the clutches of moneylenders. It led to the formation of a well knit collective group. They approached the department of fisheries to register a cooperative so that they may act within the official hierarchy. The attempt failed due to existence of a registered defunct cooperative society in Marianadu. Then the group bought the defunct cooperative from the person who had registered the cooperative in a great secrecy. The Marianadu *Malsya Ulpadaka* Cooperative Society (means fish producing cooperative society) thus begun to function a true cooperative in 1967 and acted as a true people's organization (*ibid.*). The Government of Kerala had proclaimed the experience of Marianadu *Malsya Ulpadaka* Cooperative Society is an "eye opener" to the fishermen cooperatives in Kerala. It mentioned that the dedicated leadership and united action of fishermen against the exploitation of fishermen could be considered as the causative factor for the success of Marianadu *Malsya Ulpadaka* Cooperative Society (GoK n.d).

SIFFS: A model of Bottom - Up Approach

The cooperative model of Marianadu *Malsya Ulpadaka* Cooperative Society had replicated to the coastal villages of Trivandrum. Sixteen cooperatives societies from Trivandrum coastal villages came together to form an apex organization called South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) in 1980. The Government of Kerala has restricted the registration of cooperative societies in the year 1976 leading to the formation of cooperatives under Societies Act (South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies n.d.). The organization was registered under the Travancore Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act of 1955. It promoted the organization of fishermen cooperatives in eight districts of Southern peninsular India. It is democratically managed society of fish workers (SIFFS 2009).

SIFFS follows a three tier cooperative structure of governance where the primary societies and district federations form the two tiers of the organization. The primary level society functions as an independent unit where the fishermen are practicing marketing of fish catch for local consumption through the process of auctioning. It promotes compulsory saving by collecting 2

% of member's catch, providing fishing inputs through bank loans and retail selling of fishing requisites. District federation comprises of representatives from each primary society who intervenes in the second tier of organization. The district federation takes care of the local as well as export markets of fish, purchase and supply of fishing requisites, conducts education and welfare activities and monitor and assist the primary societies. SIFFS is the apex organization functioning at the third tier of the structure. The major function of SIFFS is technological innovation and its promotion. SIFFS is educating fishermen along with its other activities (Rajichandra 2013).

Cooperatives in the lives of Traditional Fishing Community: Case Studies

The primary cooperative societies of *Matsyafed* and SIFFS are taken as two case studies. The effectiveness of primary societies in the lives of traditional fishermen communities are analyzed in terms of voluntary involvement, participation, autonomy, solidarity, innovation and collective good. It also describes the economic and social function of societies and critically analyzes the responsiveness of state led and community led cooperatives towards the specific condition and needs of traditional marine fishing communities in Kerala.

1. Primary cooperative Societies of *Matsyafed*

Fishermen's cooperatives hold a prominent position in the fisheries sector and in the economy of Kerala at present. It is a state driven initiative. There are 651 cooperatives under *Matsyafed* where 335 societies belong to the marine sector and 118 are women's societies (Matsyfed 2018). Only 106 societies are actively functioning among 651 societies (Lalaji 2015). These societies are registered as fishermen welfare development cooperative society under Kerala Cooperative Societies Act of 1969. The self help groups (SHGs) in the state consists of 15093 groups (Matsyafed 2018). One of the major activities of the primary cooperative societies is to organize beach level auction for ensuring the first right of sale of products to the producer fishermen. Societies provide a number of financial aid and subsidies for self employment, microfinance, procuring fishing inputs, motorization of country craft and debt relief. Therefore economic activities are the central focus of societies. On the other hand social activities such as capacity building and awareness programmes are organized by the apex federations.

1.1. Voluntary involvement, Solidarity and participation of fishermen in societies

There are two types of memberships available for traditional fishermen in a primary society: "A class and C class". "A class" membership is for life such members can have the right to cast their vote during the time of society election. "C class" membership has one year validity and it is meant for accident insurance scheme and SHG members under societies. It is renewable. This categorization itself makes a division and affects the solidarity among its members. Only 48 percent of fishermen populations in the area of operation are the members of primary fishermen's cooperative societies in Kerala (Lalaji 2015). There still remains a population without membership even though numbers of societies have increased. The number of societies increased at the time of each government which is mainly constituted based on their political affiliation. The field data revealed the fact that all the societies have particular political affiliation and the "A" class membership is mostly restricted to their affiliated person. It creates outliers in membership (John 2018). This is one of the drawbacks of top down approach where the government and political parties see primary societies as a platform to achieve their basic development objectives as well as executing of their power over the community.

Voluntary formation of society under the cooperative act is possible. But the affiliation to the apex federation for accessing the service of the government is mainly controlled by the political parties (Janardhanan 2018). In the case of membership of women in cooperative societies seems to be less compared to men. The interest level of women to form societies is very less as compared to men due to the nature of activities of society. Women are mainly associated with societies through self-help groups. They act as a source of interlinkage between the society and the fishermen. Women deal with the financial interactions of fishermen to the society (Dasy 2018). The financial back up of men's society is much better than women through primary sale

of fish catch. The members have very limited knowledge about the concept of cooperative due to lack of dissemination of knowledge to the lower part by the government.

1.2. Autonomy in management and decision making

The governing body of society comprises of a 11-member team including reservation for women, scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. The selection of governing body is conducted democratically through elections. But the problem is associated with the selection of the candidate. The political parties make their panel of candidates and contest in election to secure their hold in the societies (Janardhanan 2018).

The general body is entrusted as the ultimate authority to make the decision for the society according to the bye-laws of the society. It is not followed as per the bye-law and is organized in a passive manner due to the lack of awareness among fishermen communities about the system. Office bearers are managing the society's activities depriving fishermen of their ownership rights. Majority of the societies are recognized by the president of the society. Thus, emphasizing autonomy as the autonomy of the individual rather than the group.

The fishermen's groups get some extend of autonomy and decision making power during sale of their product. *Matsyafed* launched the initiative of a beach level auctioning of fish catch to eliminate the exploitation of middlemen in the lives of fishermen. The auction commissions collected about 5 percent in which 1.5percent goes to the auctioneer, 1.5 percent to primary societies, 1percent to *Matsyafed* and 1 percent to the savings account of the fishermen (Ramdas 2018). The fishermen can withdraw their savings as per their requirements. There is an average 248 out of 651 primary cooperative societies are participating at beach level auction (Lalaji 2015).All the groups in a society are not involved in direct auctions of the society.

The cost of their fishing implements altogether have range from 25 lakh to 1.50 crore depending on the facilities. The fishermen are not capable of purchasing fishing implements with a meagre loan support from primary societies. They are still indebted to middlemen and distribute their fish catch sales share to the chain of financial aid providers. Therefore society gets a portion of share from its members and does not possess full right on auction commission. The beach level auction has other challenges too. Every society has its own operational boundary. There are a number of fish landing centres under the area of operation of society. The fishing groups cannot land within the boundary every time due to nature of their work. And federation fails to develop networks in beach auction all over Kerala (Jerald 2018).

With respect to women they enjoy decision making power in their SHGs. SHGs under primary societies are showing a good momentum in terms of thrift collection and loan dispersal. Women are taking more loans than men and having more savings than men. The average of velocity of lending of loan is increasing over the year which means the fishermen community is depending on SHGs as one of the significant sources of financial support for creating livelihood options. The frequency of taking loan is higher among women than men.

There are certain push factors that lead women to enhance their employment options. The major push factor is the concern of fisher population on education of their children. The unstable income of their husbands is a threat to their children's education. Women contribute their share to family to reduce the hardships of husbands and to educate their children (Matsyafed 2018).The SHGs are the main platform for women to experience the strength of solidarity. But it is not visible in men's group. It has been very evidently noticed everywhere in the fishing community that people are always acknowledging solidarity as a means of their economic functions. The cooperative society which has the major mission to promote autonomy of societies had failed due to centralised approach and power riding within certain individuals. However the women could exercise autonomy through the platform of SHGs.

1.3. Scope of collective dimension in Societies

The collective dimensions of societies are hardly visible in societies under *Matsyafed*. It is still there in few societies where there exist collective ownership and will of the people are very strong to meet their own needs. There are a few societies running cooperative medical stores, subsidized provisional stores and fishing input supply store. They are also engaging in community development activities especially in education sector (S. Kumar 2015). Fishermen are considering primary societies are avenue for availing credit as well as services of government. The thought is basically associated with origin of society. It is completely a state driven initiative where the fishermen are associated as an individual without collective consciousness.

2. Primary cooperative Societies of SIFFS

2.1. How does the components of social and solidarity economy works in primary societies of SIFFS

20 primary societies are affiliated to SIFFS in Kerala where 11 of them are from Trivandrum district and 9 are from Kollam District. The SIFF couldn't expand its area of operation to other districts of Kerala due to unsustainable fishing practices. The federation is against the practice of ring seine in fishing. Majority of the fishermen population in central and northern part of Kerala are practicing this method (Joseph 2018).

The society has economic as well as social function. The major economic activities are fish marketing, provision of credit asset replacement, promotion of savings and insurance for members (SIFFS 2009). The social components include networking with other organizations those who are serving in the field of fishery, organizing and educating the fishermen community and participating in the avenues created for the rights of fishermen.

There are a few numbers of societies under SIFFS. They have minimum number of members even though the State has its large spectrum of societies. It is also evident that the societies of SIFFS are functioning voluntarily with the philosophy of collectivism. It is completely autonomous in its structure and functions. The societies are playing a major role in the management and decision-making process at its federation level. The representation of fishermen comes in two ways at the apex federation. The apex federation is a democratically managed society of fishermen (SIFFS 2009). This is to ensure that the voices of the member fishermen at the bottom level would reach to the apex federation. Therefore all the programs and policies are framed based on the needs and demands of member fishermen.

All the societies are unique in their activities and engagements with the community which proves the autonomy of society. Very few societies in Kerala have constituted Self Help Groups (SHGs) and credit services to women. One of the limitations of the society is that membership restricted to craft owners. Usually a fishing unit comprised of craft owners and crew members. Hence it is difficult to incorporate women and crew members into the membership of society. The rule is enforced mainly for the viability of society. The election of the society is organized democratically and the governing body members are elected through a collective decision making process.

All the government welfare schemes and services are distributed through primary societies. The members of the societies of SIFFS would still prefer to continue with the present society even though the number of memberships has decreased over the years. The ownership of the society is completely vested in its members. It is not monitored and managed by a group of external agents such as politicians, bureaucrats etc which is one of the drawbacks of the societies of *Matsyafed*.

The societies are also providing financial aid to its members for purchasing fishing inputs. They also get subsidies from federation while purchasing boat and engine from their yards. It is very evident that all the technological innovations done by SIFFS are evolved from the demand of

primary level societies. Another remarkable impact of these cooperatives is that it facilitates the emergence of an active and democratic leadership among the community at the village level (Jose and Kannan 2004).

Beach level auctioning is also the backbone of SIFFS society. The auction commission pattern is different from societies of *Matsyafed*. The auction commissions collected from the fishermen are about 5 percent in which 1 percent goes to the auctioneer, 2 percent to primary societies, 2 percent to the savings account of the fishermen. The primary society gives meagre amount to its federation. The society gets a good amount from auction even though the number of societies is very few.

Awareness creation among its members is a major activity of the society. They possess comparatively better knowledge about cooperatives than the members of *Matsyafed* societies. It is done through continuous meetings and training workshop at its primary level as well as the apex federation. The resources for the trainings are availed through networking with local as well as government agencies. Each experience of fishermen would become the stone for new innovations at its apex federation.

Kerala fisheries was wounded last year due to the “OCKHI cyclone” . Hundreds of fishermen lost their lives and livelihood options due to the disaster. Most of the fishermen are from the Southern part of Kerala. The lack of holding facility in the boats increases the number of diseased. At this point the member fishermen of the society requested its federation to make modification in its facilities to fight against the disaster (Joseph 2018). The federation are at the final stage of launching the new model. SIFFS gets boat orders from the *Matsyafed* too. *Matsyafed* and SIFFs are official engine dealers which control the market value of engine. Hence the societies of SIFFS are a community driven collective initiative which gives the feel of cooperatives despite the society possessing a different legal status.

Conclusion

Cooperative societies are a proved as a viable platform to intervene the socio-economic and political development of fishing communities. Societies of *Matsyafed* and SIFFS are parallel organization with a similar mission but with different visions for its implementation. The society of *Matsyafed* provides a number of avenues for fishermen to develop and share their solidarity for social ends through their economic activities. The economic as well social service delivered from the society enable its members to compete with the power structure in open access fisheries. However economic centric activity of societies restricts its members from developing other values of social and solidarity economy. The scaling up of micro-credit provision, self employment generation through micro-enterprises and SHGs in primary societies of *Matsyafed* has constituted empowerment of the fisher community especially among fisher women. The state of Kerala has initiated the movement of cooperatives to ensure the participation of fishermen community not only at the micro level of decision making and governance process within the society, but also at the macro level of apex federation. The expected social and solidarity outcomes of such processes are yet to be measured and there are studies suggesting that the outcomes are much below the desired levels (Kurien 1980, Singh 1994).

The societies of *Matsyafed* are encountered with multiple problems incorporating all the traditional fishermen community under the umbrella of cooperatives which means the inclusion of the excluded and inequitable distribution of resources. It is mainly because of the interference of political parties as well as the heightened bureaucratization of such cooperatives. The societies of *Matsyafed* being promoted by the state have to follow strict procedures of compliances, social and solidarity elements of the units get sidelined in the process. The *Matsyafed* societies are also failed to engage the fishermen community in the spectrum of extensive education programme and resource governance process due to its highly focused economic activity. Resource governance perspectives are a missing link in its activities.

The society of SIFFS draws the dimensions of solidarity in it unit itself. Societies of SIFFS consider themselves as units of social and solidarity economy. It ensures and practices the values of collectivism for achieving a common goal. Dedicated leadership and autonomous functions of primary societies make the society viable and more collective among its members. It flourishes through the continuous guidance and trainings apex federation enabling them to intervene with the challenges experienced in their daily lives. The major strength of societies of SIFFS lies in their autonomy and collectiveness in planning, implementing and monitoring of its activities.

It has been noticed that there is wastage of resources due to the unnecessary duplication of services due to the intervention of SIFFs and *Matsyafed*. SIFFS has a lot of weakness. The membership is restricted to the craft owner where the labours of the craft are leftout from the mainstream. The members of the societies are excluded from the benefits drives especially through *Matsyafed* cooperative. The legal status restricts the society to own the benefit of cooperatives.

Both the system have contributed the elements of social and solidarity economy through fishermen cooperatives / collectives. It is mandatory to strengthen people's collective with the support of a state initiative to achieve the goal of social and solidarity economy. Rather than having an independent bureaucratized cooperatives system, a combination of mutually enriching interface of state supported community owned initiative can bring desired outcomes in the economic and social and solidarity domains. The country has started the movement for a parallel cooperative and has enacted the act of mutually aided cooperative act in many states in India. There exists such initiative called Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission in Kerala which looks at solidarity perspective in its economic activities where by state provides only financial support to the community initiative rather than controlling, owning and governing. The critical analysis of these two forms gives an impression that a synthesis of both the approaches has to come through, where the people can benefit by strengthening the solidarity and by promoting collective action. At the same time people can own, control and govern those institutions rather than State directing and governing it. This is ultimately the application of institutional pluralism in fisheries where we can integrate the existing institutions with different legal status through the process of social and solidarity based cooperation.

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