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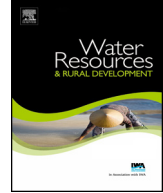
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Enhancing women's participation in decision-making in artisanal fisheries in the Anlo Beach fishing community, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

We describe a participatory action research journey with the Anlo Beach fishing community, Ghana, to promote women's participation in decision-making. It was clear from an early stage that women were absent from formal decision-making platforms, making it difficult for their livelihood and wellbeing challenges to be addressed. We began our work with a belief that community transformation can be achieved only if all community members, including women, participate actively in development projects. We adopted a gender transformative participatory action research approach. We find that before initiating participatory projects, it is critical to address gendered power asymmetries through capacity development to enable marginalised groups to effectively participate in decision making processes. By opening space for leadership to emerge from marginalised groups, participatory action research can bring about transformative and sustainable outcomes. When their needs are genuinely addressed, community members can champion development activities that transform their communities. Implementing such initiatives, however, requires substantial investment and a fundamental change in the way participatory development initiatives are implemented.

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Abbreviations: FGD, focus group discussion; GAD, gender and development; ICFG, Integrated Coastal and Fisheries Governance Program; KI, key informant interviews; MTDP, medium term development plan; PAR, participatory action research; WID, women in development.

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1. Introduction

An estimated 795 million people are malnourished globally (including 780 million in developing countries) (FAO, 2015) and about 1 billion people still live in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2015). The last few decades have witnessed increasing criticism of the failure of participatory development approaches to redress this situation (Cleaver, 1999; Kapoor, 2002; Kumar and Corbridge, 2002; Mansuri and Rao, 2013), well captured in a book 'Participation: The New Tyranny?' by Cooke and Kothari (2001). This book takes aim at participatory approaches for 'tyrannising' development debates, with little evidence of living up to their promise of empowering and transforming lives of marginalised groups. The book paints a pessimistic picture of participatory development that can make one easily dismiss them as more rhetoric than substance.

Other authors have suggested that participatory approaches:

- address local power dynamics as if they are technical issues that can be solved through technical solutions, thus failing to address issues of power and politics due to a lack of understanding of how power is constituted and operates (Mosse, 1994);
- 'romanticise' local cultures and ways of life by assuming that a collective problem solving culture exists, yet local communities are complex and always evolving (Venema and van den Breemer, 1999);
- idealise indigenous knowledge and deem western knowledge irrelevant (Richards, 1985);
- 'romanticise' traditional institutions, yet many have transformed and are no longer respected by local communities (Venema and van den Breemer, 1999);
- create a dependency syndrome as local communities cooperate with development agents, resulting in initiatives collapsing when outside institutions disengage (Kozanayi, 2005); and
- slide easily on a continuum from tokenism to interactive participation (Pretty, 1995).

Like other proponents (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Williams, 2004), we concur with many of the criticisms regarding shortcomings of participatory approaches. However, we are heartened by evidence from cases where participation has clearly deepened and extended, with local communities taking significant roles in developing innovative solutions to address development challenges, leading to transformation (Burns and Worsley, 2015; Burns et al., 2013; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Among promising approaches receiving recent attention include participatory action research (Burns and Worsley, 2015), action learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Zuber-Skerritt and Teare, 2013), and adaptive collaborative management (Ojha et al., 2013; Prabhu et al., 2007).

In this paper, we describe a participatory action research journey undertaken with the Anlo Beach fishing community in Ghana to promote participation of community members in development processes and fisheries governance. This work was embedded within a larger four-year USAID funded program, the Integrated Coastal and Fisheries Governance (ICFG) program locally known as *Hen Mpoano* (meaning – Our Coast). The program was framed in 2009 to support the Government of Ghana in achieving development objectives of poverty reduction, food security, sustainable fisheries management and biodiversity conservation. The program's long term vision was that '*Ghana's coastal and marine ecosystems are sustainably managed to provide goods and services that generate long term socio-economic benefits, whilst maintaining biodiversity*'. The program aimed to assemble pre-conditions for a formally constituted coastal and fisheries governance program to serve as a model for the country. The initiative focused on six coastal districts of the Western Region – Ahanta West, Nzema East, Ellembelle, Jomoro, Shama and Secondi Takoradi Metropolitan Area. These districts include areas that are important habitats for marine fish species and have large coastal wetlands that provide essential ecosystem functions and support livelihoods in many fishing communities. Due to the nature and scope of coastal and fisheries issues, and the scale at which they needed to be addressed, the ICFG program linked its work with policy reforms at the national level.

As in many fishing communities in Ghana, women in Anlo Beach were conspicuously absent from formal decision making platforms, making it difficult for their livelihood and wellbeing challenges to be addressed. Such challenges include: (a) inadequate infrastructure at landing sites, making processing and storage difficult and labour-intensive, resulting in the value of catch being compromised; (b) increasing health issues associated with chronic exposure to wood smoke during long hours of fish

processing (Avotri and Walters, 1999); (c) failure by women to obtain sufficient quantities of fish to maintain profitable businesses due to depleted stocks; and (d) low education levels, lack of vocational training opportunities, and low levels of collective action making it difficult for women to find alternative ways of earning income to moderate losses arising from the decline in fisheries. While men in fishing communities tend to reinvest income into their livelihoods and have a degree of freedom to use their income as they wish, women's income is normally spent entirely in support of their households (Bennett, 2005), leaving few opportunities to build alternative livelihoods.

We began our work with the conviction that community transformation would only be achieved if everyone, including marginalised groups, participated in development projects. This research tackled the question: How can women's participation in decision making be enhanced in fishing communities?

2. Gender and development discourses and participatory action research

Issues of women's participation in decision making processes are better understood by situating them in global gender developments. There has been a historic shift in focus by international development agents to include women in development processes. Two key approaches, 'Women in Development' (WID) and 'Gender and Development' (GAD), have dominated the development scene, as means to enhance women's participation. These approaches are well documented in literature (Jaquette and Staudt, 2006; Razavi and Miller, 1995).

The WID approach was adopted by governments and international aid agencies in the 1970s with the goal of enhancing women's economic independence. The approach focused on 'women only' projects, and in the 1980s was heavily criticized for failing to consider the context of interventions (Jaquette and Staudt, 2006; Razavi and Miller, 1995). Critics contended that the approach treated women as an untapped resource in development by assuming that they had abundant free time. This increased women's workload, as their other reproductive and productive roles in the community were ignored. Additionally, it was argued that the approach inappropriately treated women as a homogenous group.

A new model for including women in development processes, Gender and Development (GAD), emerged in the 1980s. GAD addressed the shortcomings of WID by taking into account women's diversity (Jaquette and Staudt, 2006; Razavi and Miller, 1995). The new approach had a clearer focus on social, economic and political relations between men and women (Razavi and Miller, 1995). The approach aimed to challenge gender roles by training women in what were traditionally male skills, and enhancing women's ownership of land and productive assets. Despite the promises that the new approach brought, implementers still failed to address gender inequalities, largely due to the complexity involved in translating this approach into practice and a lack of commitment by implementing agents. Although both the WID and GAD approaches shaped the way development aid was administered, they were largely unsuccessful in changing the lives of women in developing countries (Apodaca, 2000; Jaquette and Staudt, 2006).

It is clear that efforts to enhance women's participation have struggled to bring about positive change. With a conviction to learn from past mistakes, our research team moved ahead with a gender-focussed participatory action research (PAR) approach that sought to provide a model for enhancing participation of women in decision making processes. PAR is one of the many new collaborative research approaches that offer opportunities for promoting genuine participation by marginalised groups in development processes.

PAR is a participatory process of systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, and self-reflective, seeking to answer questions about real-life concerns to improve participants' well-being. PAR can promote social learning, thus enhancing community adaptive capacity and resilience (Berkes, 2006; Wiber et al., 2004). As the process continues, over time, community capacity and confidence is built, and accordingly the scope of activities increases (Olsen, 2003). The implementation process, the associated leadership and collective capital initiated and built through this process strengthen the group to undertake larger, more complex tasks as the cycle continues and the scope of activities expands (represented by the increasing size of spirals – Fig. 1). PAR views people as contributors of knowledge and understanding, and enables them to collaborate with researchers to better understand their problems and find viable solutions. This empowers people to construct and use their knowledge to increase the relevance of research (Whyte, 1991). Participants in the PAR process collectively

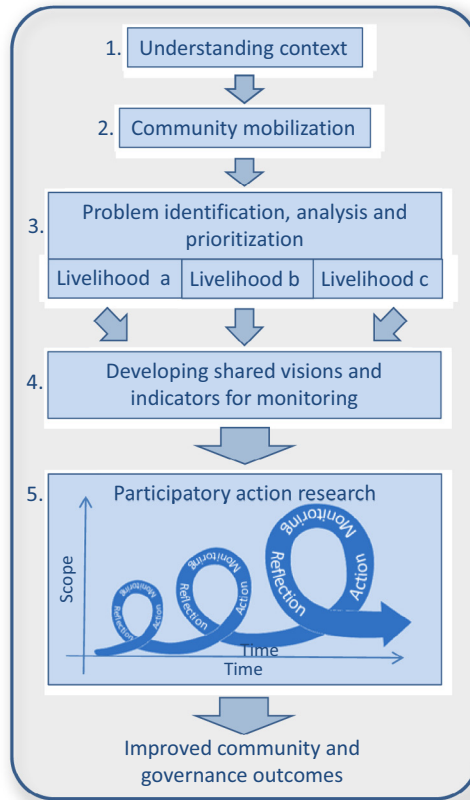


Fig. 1. The participatory action research process we implemented started with setting the stage for action (1 to 4), followed by agreement on shared visions and the development of action plans. The plans were later implemented in a learning by doing fashion, followed by reflection and learning opportunities that fed into the next planning activity. Source: [Inkoom, n.d.](#)

identify their problems, collect and analyse relevant information, devise solutions that promote social transformation, implement the solutions, and monitor the results and evaluate the impact of their actions and learn lessons (Selener, 1998).

PAR is guided by the following key principles (Apgar and Douthwaite, 2013):

- (1) The process is owned by participants who define their real life problems to be addressed;
- (2) The practitioners recognize multiple voices and power relations, and make a deliberate effort to ensure equity;
- (3) An emphasis on jointly shared responsibility for collection of data and analysis to support improved understanding and action;
- (4) Results of learning are fed back to participants for on-going learning;
- (5) To achieve social change and emancipation – scientific and indigenous knowledge are important resources for the researched (“beneficiaries”) to improve their situation;
- (6) The trained researcher and the observed community work together as co-researchers and aim to direct actions towards desired change;
- (7) Reflection and learning are critical elements and deliberate opportunities are created to promote these.

In the PAR process, dialogue among all stakeholders is important for creating social spaces for participants to share experiences and information, creating common meanings and taking collective action together (Park, 2001), and for maintaining collaborative relations among stakeholders (Jacobs, 2010). Engaging in PAR not only requires a new set of skills and knowledge, but requires facilitators to embrace a new way of thinking and doing research. The process is therefore life changing and transformative.

3. The Anlo Beach fishing community

The Anlo Beach community comprises 740 households (population ca. 4500) and is located in Shama District, Western Region (Fig. 2). The community is bounded on the south by the open ocean and to the north by mangroves and wetlands associated with the Pra River delta, which stretches from the north-eastern to the western side of the community. The community is built on a dune between the wetlands and the ocean, and is highly vulnerable to floods and erosion (Fig. 2). The community derived its name from the dominant ethnic group, the Anlo Ewe, who migrated from the Volta Region about 100 years ago. Due to their status as migrants, they do not generally own land, which is owned, instead, by the original settlers, the Ahanta people.

The dominant livelihoods in the Anlo Beach community are fishing and fish selling, and like the majority of Ghanaians, fish is the preferred source of protein. Participatory wealth ranking reveals that most of the households (71%) in the community are classified as poor, having difficulty in obtaining a single meal a day, educating their children, and affording hospital fees when they become sick. Such households depend on other people for clothes and housing, and invariably work for others, doing hard labour. Most women in the community (70%) are classified as poor. More than half of the women (54%) have no formal education, compared to 27% of men.



Fig. 2. Due to its proximity to the sea and the Pra River, Anlo Beach fishing community is vulnerable to floods from the inland catchment and storms or rising sea level from the ocean side.

Table 1

Some of the responses by community members when asked which occupation they wanted to change to if given an opportunity. This was part of the baseline study on households in four fishing communities in Western Region namely Anlo Beach, Dixcove, Akwidaa and Newtown. Adapted from: [Kruijssen and Asare \(2013\)](#).

Activity		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Farming/ Fishing related	Fish selling/processing	3	7	10
Formal Employment	Zoil (an oil extraction company)	4	6	10
Self-employment (business)	Tailoring/dressmaking	16	78	94
	Hair dressing	13	63	76
	Petty trading/ provision store	8	46	54
	Carpentry	23	3	26
	Masonry	18	5	23
	Mechanic	17	5	22
	Driver (car/taxi)	17	4	21
	Bakery	0	16	16
	Electrician	8	6	14

Anlo Beach community members identified several challenges, some of them related to fisheries management, including:

- *Decline in fish catch.* Fishers explained that fish catch has dwindled over the last few decades. They attributed this to bad fishing practices, such as using powerful lights to attract large numbers of fish to their nets, and the use of drag nets in the Pra River estuary.
- *Weak fisheries management institutions.* Fishermen complained that the Chief Fisherman, responsible for fishermen's affairs, was inactive and there was mistrust, disunity and many conflicts among them. There was a general lack of respect for the Chief Fisherman by fishers in the community.
- *Indiscriminate cutting down of mangroves for firewood.* Discussions with community members revealed that there were no by-laws or traditional norms for managing mangroves in the community.
- *Lack of operating capital.* Fish sellers¹ find it difficult to obtain loans from banks, and this hinders the development and growth of their businesses.
- *Coastal erosion.* In the last 40 years the shoreline has been heavily eroded, moving the high tide mark about 100 m inland, destroying many houses and decreasing available land for the community.
- *Poor infrastructure:* A lack of potable water, coupled with inadequate toilet facilities and the untarred road network, negatively impacts health and productivity in the community.
- *Low retention of teachers due to poor infrastructure.* Community members explained that most teachers posted to this community quickly secured transfers to other communities due to lack of basic social services.
- *No physical market structure.* Community members said that as there was no community market, it was difficult for them to sell fish and produce from farms.

As in many coastal fishing communities in the Western Region, education levels of women in Anlo Beach were lower than for men. The top three livelihood activities for women in Anlo Beach were petty trading, fish selling and processing. Other new occupations that were popular included: tailoring, hair-dressing, catering and fabric dyeing (locally called 'tie and dye'). About 40% of the households in Anlo are female-headed. When asked if they were willing to change their primary occupation and learn a new livelihood activity, 79% indicated they were willing. In a wider survey, respondents from four fishing communities in the Western Region of Ghana overwhelmingly favoured three activities, namely: tailoring, hair dressing and petty trading (Table 1). Several reasons were cited for this willingness, including:

¹ Fish sellers are mostly women who buy fish from fishers (who are mostly male) and sell both fresh and processed fish at different fish markets.

'current occupation is no longer profitable', 'do not like present occupation', 'fishing is seasonal', 'health consequences of present job', 'not enough fish', 'would like to start own business', 'would like to acquire a trade', and 'would like to be educated' (Kruijssen and Asare, 2013).

Unlike fishermen who belong to a national fishermen's organisation, the Ghana National Canoe Fishermen Council, women in Anlo Beach (as in all fishing communities in Ghana) do not belong to any livelihood based groups, either at local or national levels. Women are also not part of formal decision-making bodies in the community. Such bodies include the Council of Elders – the highest traditional governance body, and the Unit Committee – the lowest local government unit in the community.

Although the Pra River and its associated mangroves and wetland areas were highlighted in participatory mapping exercises as highly important for livelihoods, pollution of the river by illegal gold mining and indiscriminate cutting of mangroves is increasing. Mining for minerals at Krobo Bosomdo to the west of Anlo Beach, close to the Pra River, has resulted in high turbidity, low oxygen levels, and extremely high nitrate levels, suggesting an unhealthy riverine system with consequent adverse impact on aquatic life (Okyere, 2013). Degraded mangrove areas are used for refuse disposal.

4. Research methodology and implementation framework

We embarked on a participatory action-research journey with the people of Anlo Beach to gain an understanding of how women's participation could be enhanced. The implementation framework developed for this project (Fig. 1) builds on a rich catalogue of research on adaptive collaborative management and contextualises previous work (Andrew et al., 2007) on implementing adaptive management in fisheries management situations. The research was conducted over a period of 18 months from early 2012 to late 2013. We worked with a team of two research assistants, a man and a woman, who helped to organise and facilitate meetings, and take minutes, especially during the time we were away. The two assistants, who were selected by the community members because they were literate, received a monthly allowance to compensate for their time when they organised and facilitated meetings.

To understand the existing situation in Anlo Beach, we conducted context studies, making use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Components 2, 3, and 4 of the implementation framework relied heavily on focus group discussions (FGDs) and wide community meetings with both men and women. Focus group discussions were frequent during the early implementation stages (2 to 3 FGDs per month, each lasting from 2 to 5 hours²) and less frequent later, as the women took on the leadership in implementing their activities. The number of women who participated in our meetings ranged from 80 to 100. Because of the large numbers, meetings started with introductions and presentation of meeting objectives in plenary, followed by focus group discussions in smaller groups of 8 to 25 participants, formed in many cases around livelihood activities, and ended with group presentations and discussions in plenary. Although it was difficult to encourage all participants of large focus group discussions (20 to 25 participants) to participate, it was not possible for us to divide the groups further, due to the limited number of facilitators and interpreters³. We also organised community meetings (with both men and women) and these were useful for sharing knowledge and experience. The average number of people participating in these meetings was 87.

We started by identifying interventions, implemented these, and then analysed the outcomes to see if these were effective. Because of our involvement in facilitating the process, we used reflexivity to step out of the process we facilitated and analyse it from an external perspective. There is an overlap of methods drawn on for the paper and those that formed the participatory action research process itself. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and analysis techniques were employed. As none of the research team spoke the dominant Ewe language, we employed local translators and recorded meeting conversations as translated to us. While we encouraged women to assist with translation, low education levels and limited English skills made this difficult. In most cases, our research assistants did the translation for us. The local patriarchal culture presented challenges in ensuring

² During the early days when meetings lasted more than two hours, we provided some refreshments to community members.

³ Our time in the community was limited, as women had other roles and responsibilities. They could only attend our meetings at agreed upon times when they were free to do so.

accurate and unbiased translation. At one meeting, our male translator scolded one young woman, saying that she was disrespecting him. The meeting was stopped while the woman was comforted and convinced not to leave the meeting, and the translator was reminded to respect women and to translate conversations as they occurred. Similar incidents happened on several occasions.

5. Implementing participatory action research in Anlo Beach

The process of progressing through the implementation framework (Fig. 2) and the outcomes are described in detail below.

5.1. Understanding context

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to understand the context of the project. Qualitative methods included participatory resource and social mapping, focus group discussions, key informant interviews (KII), participant observations, and wealth ranking exercises. The KII during the early stages of our project were dominated by men; at this stage, women were not part of formal decision making bodies. Quantitative methods included a baseline survey using structured questionnaires. The quantitative and qualitative assessments provided a valuable picture of multiple dimensions of life in the community. The results of the studies were presented to relevant stakeholders during community meetings for their verification and this generated interest among them.

Spending time with women's groups in meetings was critical to understanding power dynamics, and for setting directions for the process of building skills and confidence to engage with development processes. Due to the Ewe patriarchal culture, women rarely spoke in public when men were present. This presented a challenge to the research, as by its nature, the approach challenged existing cultural norms. Also apparent was a pervasive sense of helplessness among community members, who were waiting for outside help to solve their problems. When we asked a group of fisherwomen to articulate their vision for success, one woman stated '*if you have some money, just give it to us, for we cannot think of anything*'. With repeated emphasis, through illustrations and examples, of the importance of community ownership and building on their own strengths, women ultimately developed their own vision.

Interactions with some community members revealed their lack of understanding of basic fisheries issues. A fish seller explained that before the project, many fish sellers in fishing communities believed that fish were "poured down from heaven by God when it thundered". When it thundered, fish sellers would shout 'more fish, more fish!' to encourage God to pour fish into the sea. She later added that after the introduction of the research activities, they learnt about the importance of breeding sites (such as wetlands) for fish, and the need to preserve these to improve fisheries' productivity and sustainability. While clearly some fishers (both men and women) likely had a better knowledge of fish biology and reproduction, the above anecdote shows that some community members still lacked basic fisheries knowledge, or were unable to integrate that knowledge with thinking about fisheries management. We attribute this partly to the lack of effective fisheries extension services, a key challenge facing all fishing communities in Ghana. In addition to our own fisheries education and capacity building focus, the broader *Hen Mpoano* project also provided appropriate training across a number of communities including Anlo Beach. These included community educational fora in which basic fisheries information was presented and discussed, radio dramas that conveyed fisheries information, public debates regarding fisheries issues and erecting billboards with fisheries related information in the Western Region.

5.2. Community mobilization

This was a process of seeking engagement with the community, working alongside marginalised groups, and ultimately identifying opportunities to recalibrate power relationships in decision making. The ultimate objective was to facilitate a self-determined platform, balanced among key stakeholders, and capable of representing the community in development and fisheries governance processes.

Though presented as a discrete activity in Fig. 1, community mobilisation was an on-going process that was reshaped regularly according to the changing needs of stakeholders. Critical to this process was an early understanding of livelihood activities and the time available for stakeholders to engage with project activities. During the early stages, women avoided public speaking, even during women-only meetings. We made use of principles for transformation (Freire, 1970), employing innovative approaches such as sketches, illustrations, and dramas to challenge underlying gender norms and encourage women to take an active role in addressing their challenges. Practising speaking in public and expressing appreciation to those bold enough to contribute to group discussions were encouraged.

As the project progressed, capacity building became central to mobilisation efforts. Capacity development activities included study tours, training workshops (Asare et al., 2013a, 2013b; Mutimukuru-Maravanyika et al., 2013), and community discussion and learning meetings. Study tours focussed on various issues including requirements and capacities necessary to engage in alternative livelihood opportunities, such as aquaculture. Training courses, as requested by the community, included basic fishery systems, fishery collaborative management, fisheries laws and regulations, and alternative livelihood skills (tailoring and hairdressing). After a year of meetings and planning, training in these alternative livelihoods was initiated, as the women were keen to see tangible results from their protracted efforts.

5.3. Problem identification, analysis and prioritisation

The context studies revealed that women in Anlo Beach were not a homogenous group, but belonged to different livelihood groups facing diverse challenges. We initially worked with self-selected livelihood groups (fish sellers, fisherwomen fishing in the river,⁴ service providers for fishing companies, and firewood sellers) separately to facilitate the identification of shared challenges, prioritising them, and discussing the underlying causes. The groups had opportunity to present and discuss their challenges and learn from each other.

We started by working with women's groups as context studies, highlighting them as being systematically marginalised by norms and existing governance structures. However, as the women's group became effective, and had built a level of trust and confidence, we facilitated processes for them to engage directly with men in the community development activities.

5.4. Developing shared visions

Building on their experience and knowledge, the groups developed visions of success, depicting what they desired to see happening in their community and fisheries. After developing individual visions, they presented them, identified similar and different elements, discussed these and agreed on a joint vision. Some elements were contentious, for instance, fisherwomen argued for illegal gold mining to be banned as it affected fisheries productivity, while other women whose children were working for the gold mining companies were against the idea. After agreeing on the joint vision, the women later prioritised them by voting. The developed vision items in their order of priority are shown in Table 2.

6. Participatory action research

6.1. Action planning and emergence of new leadership to oversee implementation

Building the fish market, grading the road, and training in alternative livelihoods were identified as high priority actions to be taken. The women then formed three groups to tackle each of the top ranked vision items. Each group was tasked to develop action plans with clear activities, time frames, resources required, and responsibilities (Fig. 3). We encouraged them to start by identifying internal

⁴ In Ghana, it is a taboo for women to fish at sea or get into canoes used for fishing at sea, so women fishers only fish in rivers and lagoons and the challenges they face are different from those faced by men at sea.

Table 2

The jointly agreed vision items by women in their order of priority.

-
1. A constructed market for fish
 2. A senior secondary school
 3. Alternative jobs such as petty trading, gari processing (local food made from cassava granules), hair dressing, tailoring, commercial farming and aquaculture, factories
 4. Good roads
 5. A bank
 6. Bumper fish catch
 7. Pipe born water
 8. Big mangroves
 9. More money
 10. Self-contained houses
 11. Change from current fish smoking ovens to chorkor smokers
 12. More tilapia in the area with mangroves
 13. Big fish laying their eggs in the river because of improved spawning grounds
 14. Community members no longer dumping refuse in the river
 15. Community members no longer defecating in the river
 16. Improved cleanliness along the river
-



Fig. 3. Women presenting outputs from an action planning exercise. Although it was difficult for women to speak in public in the early days, they gained confidence over time and could speak freely in public.

resources they could provide before looking for external help. Group outputs were then presented in plenary, and the groups obtained feedback from each other on how to improve the action plans.

The action plan for 'fish market construction' included asking the village Chief for land, clearing it, building the market, dividing it into stalls, and publicising it to outsiders. To build on their own strength, women agreed to start by constructing a bamboo-under-thatch market as materials were locally available. It is important to note that, in Ghana, District Assemblies have the mandate to construct and manage markets and use them for revenue generation. Rather than waiting for the District Assembly, which so far had shown little interest, the women decided to take the lead in building their market.

After developing action plans, the women appointed a leadership team comprising representatives from the different livelihood groups. The team was tasked with overseeing implementation of action plans and representing women in various decision-making fora, and was trained to build their leadership capacities.

6.2. Implementing action plans

Action plans were implemented in an experimental way, using internal processes for review and learning. Implementation was a difficult and complicated process, politicized to a degree never anticipated at the planning stage, and requiring considerable investments in time to model and build capacity for trouble-shooting. As examples, the processes and outcomes for implementing the fish market, road and alternative livelihoods action plans are described below.

6.2.1. Implementing 'the fish market construction' activities

When the women leaders requested land from the chief,⁵ he was happy to hear about their plan and he asked us:

What have you done to the women to create this transformation?

He told us that, in the past, he had organised several meetings in the community and women had not participated. He was surprised by the large number of women who attended our meetings (around 80–100 per meeting) and expressed joy after seeing the women's vision⁶. He informed us that since our interactions, the women had begun actively participating in community meetings too.

After consulting his Council of Elders, the chief informed the women that they had agreed to locate the market on high ground, on an area designated for the community's relocation by the District Assembly.⁷ The women were happy with the site as it was close to the highway and was accessible. The Chief later facilitated discussions with the District Planner to ask for assistance with marking out the construction site. The Planner expressed happiness when he heard about the market location and promised to assist the community. Previously, efforts by the district to encourage Anlo people to move to the proposed new site had been met with strong resistance, and this was perhaps a sign of changing attitudes.

Less straightforward was navigating the opinions of men who resisted the proposed location of the market, likely because they felt that accepting the idea would signify their readiness to relocate. When informed that there was no more land in their current location for constructing a market, the men proposed filling up existing wetlands to create space. This was a contentious issue in the community, and a community meeting involving all key stakeholders (including Fisheries officers and district personnel) was organised to resolve it. The meeting began with women presenting their vision, action plans and the current status of the plan (Fig. 4). They reminded all about the risk of flooding that the community faced and the dangers of filling up wetlands, citing their importance as spawning grounds for fish. The Chief, the District Planner, and the fisheries officers supported the women's perspective and provided further arguments on the importance of locating the market at the new site. The men were finally convinced and approved the new location.

After hearing the women's vision, the District Planner explained that this helped him identify community needs for inclusion in the district Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP). A follow-up two years later showed that indeed a number of the vision items had finally been included in the District Assembly's MTDP.

In their efforts to build the market, the women identified the approaching presidential and parliamentary elections as key opportunities to lobby for external support. They approached both the

⁵ Unlike many fishing communities in Ghana where the Chief is the custodian of land, Anlo Beach community members are immigrants and do not own land. Rather than engaging in a complicated process with Shama people to ask for more land, the Chief and his Council of Elders decided to locate the market on land already designated by the District for their relocation as their area was highly vulnerable to floods.

⁶ Although one may be tempted to think that the Chief's excitement was staged, given the patriarchal nature of the community, we felt some genuineness in his efforts. The chief was recently appointed and was much younger (probably in his forties) and looked dynamic and keen to embrace new ideas compared to his Council of Elders. His attitude and reception were very different to that of other chiefs in nearby fishing communities, like Dixcove, where we also worked. In Dixcove, we never got an opportunity to meet the chief – we only worked with the Chief fishermen.

⁷ District Assemblies in Ghana are responsible for planning and developing areas within their physical boundaries and have deliberative, executive and technical support services to assist in articulating views and aspirations of local communities for development at the district level.



Fig. 4. Women leaders defending the location of their fish market during a key stakeholder meeting in the community. Despite the meeting taking place on a market day when women travel to the markets, the leaders stayed in the community to participate in the meeting.



Fig. 5. Site plan for Anlo beach relocation area, showing the market location. It took considerable effort and follow up for the community to get this as the person responsible for keeping the plan had misplaced it.

ruling and opposition party candidates for their support, and demonstrated their determination by promoting the slogan 'no market assistance, no vote!'. With considerable follow up actions (for about five months), by the time the project ended the District Planner had handed over the approved site plan to the district works department (Fig. 5). After the design, the district would grade the area to pave way for the construction of the market.

6.2.2. *Implementing the road action plan*

During the many meetings they had, the women took the opportunity to find out how the District personnel would assist them in their plans. The Assemblyman present at one of the meetings promised to help them clear the market area and grade their gravel road. The community members



Fig. 6. A tailor receiving her certificate from the Hen Mpoano Chief of Party during the graduation ceremony. Like all the graduates, she was wearing a dress she made.

had to put a lot of effort in following up with the district on the road issue. After about two months, the road was finally graded. This kind of engagement with their district was appreciated by the community who at that stage felt they were neglected by the government. A follow up two years later revealed that the District finally made a decision to tar the road and this had been incorporated in the MTDP (see section 1.7). A tarred road would be a significant step on the journey to transform the community.

6.2.3. *Implementing alternative-livelihoods-training action plan*

The alternative livelihood trainings in tailoring and hair dressing⁸ took place from April to September 2013. The trainings covered hair-dressing and tailoring basics, and the trainers adapted their normal training manuals to suit the requirements of the new trainees. The training was highly participatory and trainers used principles of adult education to deliver their lessons. As per agreements, sewing machines, hair dryers, fees and transport costs for the trainers were covered by the project, whilst the trainees provided desks, chairs and all other learning materials including brown paper and pieces of cloths for practising. This contribution was significant for people struggling to survive given the dwindling fish supply, and showed their commitment to learning new skills. When faced with challenges in accessing the learning materials, the trainees became innovative, making use of second hand materials (e.g. old bed sheets) and setting up various fund raising activities such as introducing fines for late comers and forming savings and lending groups. At the end of the training, the trainees had mastered new skills, with some excelling in their work to the amusement of the trainers who had earlier doubted their capability given their low education levels (Fig. 6).

6.2.4. *Women leaders in action*

Although none of the peer-selected leadership group members had previously occupied a leadership position, as time went by they began to knock on doors to lobby for support for implementing their action plans. The leaders became 'a force to reckon with' due to the role they played in implementing women's action plans. By the time the project ended, the team had gained acceptance and respect as perceptions in the community on the role of women in decision-making had changed. This was evidenced by women leaders being called upon regularly to attend important community meetings called by the Council of Elders and the Unit Committee to bring on board women's views. The Council of Elders organised regular meetings to deliberate on issues confronting the community and a clear transformation had occurred in women taking an active and pivotal part in these meetings.

⁸ In line with the findings of the baseline study conducted by [Kruijssen and Asare \(2013\)](#), women in Anlo Beach selected hair dressing and tailoring as their top priorities for the alternative livelihoods training.

7. Discussion and key lessons

The process of working with the community in Anlo Beach was at the same time organic, 'messy' and insightful. Taking seriously the call to genuine participation and promoting high levels of autonomy in collective action was undoubtedly costly in terms of resources and time, and required our unfaltering patience and flexibility. Unanticipated complexities left us short of our ultimate project goals within the brief project time frame.⁹ Nonetheless, we exited the community with confidence that our approach had been transformative in the lives of the women and men involved and there was a high chance that outcomes would be built upon and sustained.¹⁰ This was confirmed in a follow up visit two years after the project had ended, as implementation of activities in pursuit of the community vision had continued. These positive outcomes show the potential of participatory action research in dealing with some criticisms laid down against participatory development approaches (e.g., that they create a dependency syndrome resulting in projects collapsing when outside help is withdrawn). Although not all vision items were realised, there were clear signs of transformation in the community and among those who participated in the project (see section 1.7). A number of lessons can be drawn from this experience and these are presented below.

7.1. Deal with power asymmetries first

Well-intentioned, inclusive community-level stakeholder planning fora are often among the earliest actions of participatory development interventions. We argue that this would not have been commensurate with the gender-transformative approach we sought to test through this project. Rather, the risk of imposing existing power asymmetries onto project actions would have been high, and pathways back to empowerment and inclusion of marginalised actors potentially blocked. In situations of vast disparities in distribution of power such as seen at Anlo Beach, capacity building and empowerment of marginalised groups are critical early steps to create a 'level playing field' prior to collective stakeholder interactions. This principle was applied both at the community level, but also amongst women's groups, where there were naturally powerful players who tended to dominate interactions. Working in livelihood grouping fostered greater participation and ownership of project actions.

Our approach of working 'quietly' with women's groups early in the project allowed a nuanced understanding of power distribution and inequities, and our understanding of pathways to sustained engagement and empowerment was in turn built around livelihood identities. Our approach diverged substantially from past WID projects, in that the re-engagement with men and with governance institutions across multiple levels was planned, and recognized as critical for the success of project actions. By the time this engagement occurred, women were confident, coordinated and motivated to see their plans come to fruition. Their contributions in the collective fora were substantial and insightful. The use of new knowledge was clearly evidenced when women argued successfully along ecological lines against filling in wetlands to create space for the fish market.

7.2. Nurture latent leadership

Leadership is repeatedly highlighted in literature as being important in successful development and collaborative management endeavours (Cinner et al., 2012; Gutiérrez et al., 2011), although critical analysis of the characteristics of such leadership is generally lacking (Evans et al., 2015). The PAR process helped to nurture the emergence of latent leadership, thereby enabling women to effectively participate in decision making processes and take ownership of project plans and actions. Providing safe spaces for women to discuss issues and opportunities fostered self-organization and provided

⁹ Although the Hen Mpoano Project was implemented within a period of four years, our active engagement with local communities started two years after the commencement of the project.

¹⁰ By the time the project ended, men had developed their own visions and together with women, agreed a joint vision for their community. Together, they also got opportunity to present this to wider stakeholders in the community.

the catalyst for latent leadership to emerge. Although it took considerable time to nurture the emergence of women leaders and develop their leadership capacities, the leaders were ultimately a critical investment in the sustainability of project actions. A diverse leadership group that could back each other up and provide a wide range of skills proved an asset particularly when engaging with other powerful institutions that need to be involved in development actions. The selected leaders were representative of their livelihood groups and were well respected. With capacity development, the leaders became a powerful voice for women in several decision-making fora within the community.

In reflecting on the mobilisation efforts in this project, the deconstruction by [Campbell \(2014\)](#) of health-related community mobilisation efforts becomes particularly insightful. Campbell emphasises the political context of mobilisation, and highlights the work of [Foucault \(1992\)](#) in stressing the importance of recognising the distributed nature of power in communities. Campbell's commentary emphasises the need to avoid 'grand narratives of identity, solidarity, power and social change' and contends that calls to collective action at the scale of communities can be detrimental to the process of developing meaningful identities.

As other scholars have recognised ([Agrawal and Gibson, 1999](#); [Britwum, 2009](#); [Jentoft, 2000](#); [Walker, 2001](#)), women within our focal community were far from a homogenous group. Women strongly identified with others in the same livelihood groupings, sharing diverse challenges, interests and needs. Working with these groups independently in the early stages nurtured a sense of 'self-identity', encouraged active participation and leadership, and fostered a high level of engagement in the later participatory action research processes. This contrasts with examples of WID projects in Ghana given by [Walker \(2001\)](#), where project actions were pre-determined, and resources ultimately appropriated or manipulated by stakeholders to meet their own interests, while 'role playing' engagement in the project.

Understanding identities within the community, and thus avoiding 'grand narratives', was without doubt critical in developing contextualized interventions that were owned and nurtured by the community. Interventions that genuinely addressed all stakeholders needs (including women) generated interest and energy among community members who continued to implement their action plans in pursuit of their dreams beyond the life of the project.

8. Final reflections

Our experience echoes the message of other scholars (e.g. [Burns and Worsley, 2015](#); [Hickey and Mohan, 2005](#)), enforcing the view that participatory development approaches can indeed be transformative, if engagement is well conceived, engaging first with marginalised groups such as women (in our case). When their identities become central in prioritising development needs, coupled with a program of well-targeted capacity building, community members' commitment and interests are unlocked, enabling them to lead development processes in their communities. Opportunities for community transformation then follow.

With new toilets and a clinic having been constructed and a tarred road network about to be put in place, the Anlo Beach fishing community will move incrementally along the path to transformation, as outlined by community members. The fast pace at which these developments took place in a community that was previously largely ignored by the District Assembly is remarkable, and illustrates the transformative power of participatory action research.

Fundamentally, the study highlights the need for reflection on the way community development initiatives are conceived, implemented, and supported. This project found success with a level of deep engagement that may be challenging to achieve in many circumstances. The level of social engagement required for the bottom-up or 'constructionist' approach to empowerment, mobilisation, and capacity building modelled through this project is considerable. Government agencies often charged with leading community development rarely have the capacity or resources to follow the model outlined here. This raises concerns on how participatory development can be implemented at scale. As in our case, external actors such as NGOs and development partners may be important parts of the solution, either in terms of direct engagement with communities or appropriate training and resourcing of government agencies and staff members.

9. Post script

During the preparation of this manuscript, two years after the project ended, we followed up on the developments in Anlo Beach. We found that:

- The community vision developed jointly by men and women has been incorporated into the District Assembly's Medium Term Development Plan. We were informed that in 2015, as per the plan, two toilet facilities were constructed by the District Assembly in the community; a Community-based Health Planning and Service compound was being upgraded to a community clinic, with community members contributing labour and 2 Cedis (about USD1)/person; and the road was being surveyed at the time of the visit with plans to tar it in 2016. The market, however, was not yet constructed.
- The women leaders remained active and engaged, and continued to participate in the Council of Elder's meetings, community development meetings with the Unit Committee, and fisheries governance meetings organised by local NGOs.
- Women who participated in the alternative livelihoods trainings were using their new skills to earn money and save, although it was apparent that the dressmaker training had been more successful than that for the hairdressers.¹¹

While attribution of outcomes is invariably contestable, it is apparent that project actions with community members were a major contributor to unlocking their interests and agency to pursue their community vision. This was strongly supported by comments from community members during the return visit. Although some of their vision items have not yet been realised, it is evident that the Anlo Beach community had made major strides towards the transformation they had envisaged in our early meetings. The sustained engagement by new leaders and the incorporation of the joint vision into the District Medium Term Development Plan give considerable cause for optimism that this momentum will continue.

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¹¹ Qualified hairdressers are considered to be those with 3-year training, and community members ultimately did not have confidence in those who had participated in the shorter course offered through the project.

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