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NACA
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Printed by
Scand-Media Co., Ltd.

AQUACULTURE ASIA

Volume XIII No. 4
October-December 2008

ISSN 0859-600X

A matter of process

In the April issue I wrote a bit about the development and proliferation of competing standards for catfish aquaculture. There are a few problems with these and standards that have been developed for other aquaculture commodities to date. I remain convinced that most of the current crop will never see any significant adoption in the field, for the simple reasons that they are impractical and do not deliver much in the way of benefit to farmers. The root cause of this would appear to be something of a cultural clash between those developing the standards, and those who are supposed to implement them:

- The vast majority of Asian aquaculture is small scale and farmers are relatively poor. Aquaculture standards have to be developed and implemented *within this context*.
- Proposals for aquaculture standards tend to originate from developed nations where aquaculture is industrialised or large scale and there is a strong regulatory environment.

While the concepts behind standards are generally good, the actual process of their development is often poor, in that the consultative processes tend to be geared towards stakeholders in developed countries and fail to address important cultural differences and the socio-economic realities of small-scale farmers in the Asia region.

In developed countries it is quite common to conduct consultations by posting key documents on the web for comment and convening a few public meetings in major cities with key stakeholder groups and peak industry associations. It works because people have good access to information and communication facilities, farmers and other groups tend to be well organised with representative bodies to handle such matters, and culturally they are used to doing business this way.

But this is not an appropriate way to get the views of small-scale farmers in Asia. Most do not have access to documents on the web and they won't be emailing their comments to you anytime soon. They don't have powerful associations to lobby and represent their views. If you convene a public meeting, the odds are they won't even hear about it, let alone suspend their farming activities and travel in to engage in a vigorous debate (via translation!) about farming standards with groups representing largely foreign interests. Yet all too frequently, this is how the 'consultative process' is organised. The outcome of such processes tends to be a laundry list of presumed issues of interest to lobby groups, of which some are relevant and some are not; and arbitrary benchmarks that may be difficult or impossible for farmers to measure, let alone meet.

Consulting with small-scale farmers is not easy, yet it is incumbent on organisations that wish to develop credible standards for Asian farming systems to do so. Standards that are developed in ivory towers (from the farmers' point of view) and don't deliver a share of benefit back to them are unlikely to see significant adoption. The mark of a true standard is its adoption by the principal stakeholders, in this case, the farmers.

Simon Wilkinson