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### Sensitive issues in natural resource management and discursive strategies addressing them

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## Sensitive issues in natural resource management and discursive strategies addressing them

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In natural resource management facilitation literature, little attention is paid to sensitive issues in multi-stakeholder interaction and learning. This article aims to fill this gap. It discusses the variety of discursive strategies used by stakeholders to address sensitive issues with regard to fishery management in Benin, in three different settings: individual interviews, homogeneous groups' discussions, and a heterogeneous group meeting. Issues that proved sensitive were discussed openly in the interviews or homogeneous groups' discussions, but not at all, or only indirectly, in the heterogeneous group meeting. With indirect discursive strategies, two out of the seven sensitive issues were put on the discussions' agenda. We conclude that the other issues were too sensitive among others because of historically grown interdependency between interventionists and fishers. We suggest that dealing with sensitive issues is an important dimension of the facilitation of interactive learning processes and provide methodological guidelines to detect and address such issues.

**Keywords:** fishery; natural resource management; sensitive issues; responsive evaluation; discursive strategies; learning

### 1. Introduction

In many countries of the world, efforts are undertaken to stimulate sustainable management of natural resources as part of broader policies for rural development and poverty alleviation. These rural settings are complex environments characterised by considerable uncertainty and the presence of numerous interdependent stakeholders that are likely to have diverging perspectives, interests, and power resources. Hence, development interventions are likely to encounter ambiguity, tensions, and conflicts (Long and van der Ploeg 1989, Leeuwis and Van den Ban 2004, Giller *et al.* 2008, Ulrich and Reynolds 2010). In order to deal with such complexity, development interventions increasingly rely on multi-stakeholder approaches in which interventionists aim to facilitate constructive interaction among stakeholders. Within such approaches, a lot of attention tends to be paid to stimulating dialogue, social learning, and deliberation to overcome differences and conflict, as a condition for creating concerted action in favour of sustainable development (Mehta *et al.* 1999, Röling 2002, Blackmore 2005, Ison *et al.* 2007, Rixon *et al.* 2007, Giller *et al.* 2008, Muro and Jeffrey 2008, Leeuwis and Aarts 2011). In philosophical terms, such approaches are often inspired by Habermas' (1981) notion of communicative action, which assumes that

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it is possible to have an open process of argumentation in which claims about reality, norms, and values are subject to critical reflection (see e.g. Bawden 1994, Maarleveld, and Dangbégnon 2002). However, the feasibility of creating what Habermas called “an ideal speech situation” has been called into question on theoretical and practical grounds (see e.g. Leeuwis and Van den Ban 2004, 256).

In this article, we do not want to re-iterate this philosophical debate, but rather investigate the implications of acknowledging that open communication and dialogue are unlikely to happen very often. This interest originates from our experiences with responsive evaluation (RE), an approach to foster an open dialogue and learning among all categories of stakeholders in the context of fishery management in Benin. This evaluation approach assumes that facilitating discursive interactions between stakeholders of an intervention can lead to shared understanding, and possibly shared action for solving important issues. Notwithstanding the intensity of this approach used, learning among fishers<sup>1</sup> and interventionists was limited. The fishers learned, among others, that intervention resources are restricted and that they should organise themselves to lobby for and monitor interventions to solve their problems, instead of waiting for interventionists to deliberately and spontaneously come and solve fishery problems as they have been doing. Interventionists learned that they could share knowledge about their roles and limited resources with fishers, so that the latter could help them to lobby for more resources. Fishers, however, did not learn to adopt more sustainable fishing practices and interventionists did not learn to relate goals and resources better (Kouévi *et al.* 2013; Kouévi, van Mierlo, and Leeuwis 2013). Hence, in this earlier study, it was concluded that little second-loop learning had taken place (Argyris and Schön 1976 1996).

In the process of RE, it became increasingly clear that a number of issues remained hidden and/or implicit, which may account for the limited learning. This prompted us to think about the hidden issues in terms of “sensitive issues” which were not addressed openly, but seemed to play an important role in the RE interactions. This article reports on the deeper investigation of the sensitive issues. It aims to uncover in hindsight what the sensitive issues were, and how stakeholders made them tangible in the various interaction settings offered in the RE process. In addition, we reflect on whether these sensitive issues had any consequences for stakeholders, and what this might imply for the facilitation of approaches aimed at fostering dialogue and learning.

The article starts with a conceptual reflection on the nature of sensitive issues and how they may be talked about and recognised in communication settings (Section 2). Subsequently, we describe the context of the case study (Section 3) and discuss our empirical data collection and analysis in the context of the RE process in Grand-Popo (Section 4) as recommended by the facilitation study of Rixon *et al.* (2007). We then proceed to discern the sensitive issues by analysing how the stakeholders talked about them in three communication settings and what the social consequences of an open discussion could be (Section 5). Finally, we discuss the findings, including the possible impact of the way in which sensitive issues surfaced within the RE process (Section 6). In this same section, we highlight the main conclusions and implications of our investigation.

## 2. Conceptual exploration

### 2.1. Sensitive issues

An exploration of the literature reveals that no clear definition exists of sensitivity. The term has different connotations. With reference to biophysical phenomena, the term sensitive refers to something that responds quickly and/or strongly to a stimulus

(Robinson 1994; Reynolds and Elson 1996). When talked about in relation to personal characteristics (a sensitive person), the term usually refers to someone whose emotions are easily evoked, which can be positive or (more often) negative, such as feeling hurt, offended, or upset. When connected to issues, it points to topics that have the potential to hurt people or damage social relationships, and hence need to be avoided or treated with care in interactions. There is always a connotation of risk of negative social consequences. In the context of deliberative processes, like RE, sensitive issues have been associated with fear of negative consequences, sanctions, and threats to social identities (Potter 1996, Abma 2006, Warren 2006). Such identity threats may relate to biophysical well-being and the consequences of injury, health and pain, for instance, or to psychological and social relational consequences, like social isolation, stigmatisation, loss of influence, and damaged relationships. In the event of such negative consequences, people tend to conceal the issues that are important to them (Potter 1996, Abma 2006). The facilitator's role in learning approaches then is to help stakeholders to discuss them in order to have useful deliberations. For the purpose of this study, we define sensitive issues as topics and themes that people are hesitant to discuss openly, since they fear that they will evoke threats to social identities and relationships and sanctions in areas that are important to them.

## 2.2. Talking about sensitive issues

Insights regarding communication may be helpful in understanding whether and how people talk about sensitive issues. Several authors have emphasised that communication serves not only to exchange information or create shared meanings, but also to achieve social ends and to manage social relationships (Potter 1996, Potter and Edwards 2001). With issue selection (framing) and rhetorical constructions, people may, for example, attempt to enhance their credibility and authority, avoid responsibility, or build coalitions (see Potter 1996, te Molder 1999, Leeuwis and Van den Ban 2004, Aarts, Lieshout, and van Woerkum 2011, Dewulf *et al.* 2011). Such strategies are often rather implicit and indirect, because of dilemmas of stake (Edwards and Potter 1992, Potter 1996). For our study, this means that, even if people may not openly address sensitive issues, they do not necessarily have to resort to the strategy of complete silence. Instead, they may raise sensitive issues in a more indirect manner that allows them to avoid or minimise the kinds of risks involved with them. Discursive social psychologists have identified several communication strategies that people deploy when they risk being blamed for being prejudiced, lazy, unkind, etc. Several of these may be relevant for the communication about sensitive issues in natural resource management (NRM). See Table 1 for some examples.

Another important insight from communication science is that communication is a contextual and relational affair, and hence people may talk differently about the same issue in different interaction settings (Goodwin and Heritage 1990, Fairclough 2003, Aarts, Lieshout, and van Woerkum 2011). For example, people probably talk differently about a sensitive issue when they are in a "we-group" than when they are in a meeting with multiple stakeholders (Aarts, Lieshout, and van Woerkum 2011). The way people talk about something with others is dependent on whether they have shared or opposing interests, whether backgrounds are similar or diverse, whether or not they know one another, whether people have or do not have a solution to the relevant problem, and whether relationships are characterised by trust or distrust (Edwards and Potter 1992, Potter 1996, te Velde, Aarts, and Van Woerkum 2002, Leeuwis and Van den Ban 2004, Abma 2006, Idrissou *et al.* 2011, Dewulf *et al.* 2011).

Table 1. Indirect discursive strategies.

Discursive strategy	Brief description
Shifting responsibility	In their utterances, people blame the problems on stakeholders or facts that are not present in the conversation (te Velde, Aarts, and Van Woerkum 2002).
Examples without conclusion	People describe concrete cases or very detailed examples without drawing a conclusion (Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1996).
Grounding factual claims	People refer to experience, practice, experts, or data in order to perform neutrality in their talk (Goffman 1981; Potter 1996).
Soft wording	People use metaphors or non-offensive kind synonyms rather than replace insults or words that their listeners/hearers might not like (Potter 1996).
Normal discourses	People refer to norms to indicate to their interlocutors what they want them to do in order not to be charged with responsibility for their talk (Potter 1996; Warren 2006).
Stake inoculation	People present a counter interest to show that they are able to move beyond bias, presumptions, to present their views (Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1996).
Category entitlement	People refer explicitly or implicitly to social, cultural, or professional categories that their interlocutors can easily acknowledge, like doctors, community leaders, or friends (Potter 1996).

As elaborated in the methodology section, our case study offered various communication settings in which the main stakeholder groups could address sensitive issues. These included individual interviews, homogeneous group settings, and a multi-stakeholder setting. We expected that the stakeholders would discuss the sensitive issues more openly and explicitly in the individual and group interviews (assuming that the researcher, individuals, and group members trust each other) and indirectly in the facilitated multi-stakeholder meeting that followed up on the interviews.

### 2.3. Research questions

As previously indicated, we are interested in uncovering sensitive issues and their role in the RE process to stimulate learning related to NRM. Our theoretical exploration revealed that sensitive issues might be indicated by stakeholders' use of indirect discursive strategies. However, not all such strategies found are likely to relate to sensitive issues, since the use of indirect discursive strategies is part and parcel of everyday communication and relationship management. We are especially interested in those issues that pose identity threats. This leads to the following research questions:

- (1) What are the main sensitive issues of the fishers and interventionists with regard to fishery management in Grand-Popo?
- (2) What discursive strategies did the stakeholders use in the different RE communication contexts?
- (3) What identity threats did the stakeholders fear in connection to each sensitive issue?

### 3. Research context

Our research builds on the data of and experiences with an RE approach which was implemented for evaluating and contributing to the improvement of intervention programmes for fishery management in Grand-Popo, Benin, West Africa. RE is an evaluation approach aiming at facilitating a dialogue among all categories of stakeholders about their important issues, in order to stimulate learning and possibly the development of shared solutions and actions (Stake 1983; Abma 2005). In the fishery management context of Grand-Popo, the RE approach implemented consisted of, first, conducting many individual interviews; second; organising homogeneous group meetings, and finally setting up a group meeting with both fishers and interventionists.

In fact, many Beninese are vulnerable because of biophysical conditions and poverty. The tropical conditions of bugs and parasites cause multiple diseases and high mortality risks (Dossou-Togbé *et al.* 1999). This situation is aggravated by the absence of a supportive social care system, such as health insurance and housing. In order to reduce people's vulnerability, the government of Benin and NGOs provide them with financial and technical support via intervention projects and programmes. Thus, to date, several development projects have been designed and implemented in different sectors involving crop production, livestock breeding, fisheries, industry, and infrastructure construction. The results achieved vary from project to project, but in general they yield limited success (Pliya 1980; MEHU 2001, MPDEAP, MEF, and MAEP. 2007).

In the coastal area of Grand-Popo, artisanal fishery has been the most important source of income and protein for the population (Dagnon-Prince *et al.* 2004, FAO 2011). Fishery resources (such as fish species, shrimps, crabs, and salt) are threatened with severe degradation in the near future. The fish populations have been plagued by, among others, siltation, erosion, the blending of fresh and salt water, pollution by industrial activities at sea, and floods from the main river of Grand-Popo. As a consequence, fishers have experienced fishery resource depletion, which is also due to the use of illegal and aggressive fishing techniques (such as the use of *gbagbaloulou*<sup>2</sup> and *xhâ* fishnets<sup>3</sup>). While the fishery sector in this area has been the subject of generations of interventions, it has not led to an alleviation of the problems of decreasing fishery resources and pollution. In earlier research, it was concluded that a lack of learning interaction among interventionists and fishers was one of the reasons for the limited effectiveness of these interventions (Kouévi, van Mierlo, and Leeuwis 2011). To facilitate learning interaction among fishery stakeholders, an RE approach adapted to social and biophysical complexity of the situation was implemented (see Kouévi *et al.* 2013). In line with other studies documenting the effectivity of an RE approach (Stake 1983, Abma 2005), we assumed that by facilitating an open discussion among stakeholders about essential issues, learning about how to improve the effectiveness of intervention projects would occur. However, since the learning was limited, in this article, we analyse to what extent major issues were indeed openly discussed.

### 4. Methodology

In order to investigate sensitive issues in fishery management in Grand-Popo, we analysed how they emerged and how they were addressed by the fishery stakeholders in different discussion settings in hindsight. In the RE process designed specifically for this complex context (Kouévi *et al.* 2013), three settings were offered to the fishery stakeholders: individual (formal and informal interviews), homogeneous group meetings, and finally, a heterogeneous group meeting (the multi-stakeholder setting) attended by artisanal fishers

and interventionists. In the interviews, members of the two main stakeholder groups (fishers and interventionists) were invited to discuss their concerns about the fishery, the main causes of the failing interventions and potential solutions. The homogeneous groups were designed to check interpretations of stakeholders' perspectives generated during the interviews, stimulate reflection about their own practices, and prepare the stakeholders for safe heterogeneous group dialogue. The heterogeneous group encompassed fishers as well as interventionists and aimed to have a safe and valuable dialogue and collectively deliberate on ambiguous issues. For an elaboration of the design of this contextualised RE approach which lasted two years and its outcomes in terms of learning, see Kouévi *et al.* (2013) and Kouévi, van Mierlo, and Leeuwis (2013).

For the purpose of the current study, we analysed the contents of 210 individual interviews held with 160 fishers (68 women and 92 men who were randomly selected from six fishery villages of Grand-Popo that were targeted in one or more intervention programmes) and 50 key interventionists (4 women and 46 men purposively selected from 17 intervention organisations). We also analysed contents of nine homogeneous group discussions that had taken place (3 groups of interventionists, and 6 groups of fishers), and the final heterogeneous group discussion with 12 interventionists and 18 fishers who had been interviewed before and joined one of the homogenous group discussions. While the individual and homogeneous groups' discussions took place in the houses and working places of the interviewees, the heterogeneous group meeting was held in a public meeting room of Grand-Popo. We first looked at whether important issues were discussed in all three settings. Especially, in heterogeneous group discussion, we first let the stakeholders bring their important issues to the table. After we noticed that they were not bringing the important issues raised during individual and homogeneous group discussions to the table, we recalled the issues to them and invited them to discuss the issues. To discover sensitive issues we looked for those issues that were treated differently (openly, indirectly or with silence) in the diverse discussion settings. We assessed whether these issues were sensitive by exploring whether and how it could threaten the speaker's identity if discussed openly, with reference to explanations given by the stakeholders. In general, the main researcher and facilitator had been assisted by two to three other well-informed researchers and facilitators. Together, we facilitated discussions among stakeholders, and we observed and took note of the interactions. The results reported here have been drawn from the reports of all the facilitators. The processes have also been tape-recorded and contents of the records have been used.

To illustrate the discursive strategies in the scope of this article, we selected extracts from the discourses of both fishery stakeholder categories that are illustrative of the general strategy used in each of the discussion settings. The extracts were derived from transcripts of tape recordings and from notes. With the help of categories distinguished by discursive social psychologists and interactional framing authors, as presented in Table 1, we interpreted the kind of indirect discursive strategies used to address sensitive issues. In the following section, we present and discuss these issues.

## 5. Sensitive issues in fishery management in Grand-Popo

This section discusses the identified sensitive issues, which relate to:

- interventionists' failure to fulfil raised expectations;
- primacy of interventionists' material interests;
- compliance of the interventionists with electoral concerns;

- corruption of the interventionists;
- money concerns of fishers;
- fishers' physical aggressiveness; and
- fishers' occult threats.

For each issue, we present examples of the utterances of the interventionists and the fishers in different discussion settings, deduce the discursive strategies, and discuss why the issue is sensitive for the fishers and/or interventionists.

### **5.1. *Interventionists' failure to fulfil raised expectations***

An important issue for the Grand-Popo fishers was that interventionists failed to fulfil the expectations they raised during the meetings that were organised to explore the situation and potential solutions to problems before the implementation of new interventions. All the fishers wanted interventionists to act more consistently with the expectations raised during diagnosis meetings. The fishers articulated this issue explicitly in individual and homogeneous group discussions and rather openly in the heterogeneous meeting, sometimes with the use of metaphors. The following utterance from a fisherwoman from Avlo-Houta village during a homogeneous group discussion illustrates how the fishers feel let down by interventionists:

We are suffocating under our problems... Once election or intervention day comes, they come and talk with us and we reveal all down to our viscera [secrets] with the hope of getting satisfaction, but nothing follows...

The fishermen talked about this issue in all the discussion settings rather openly, sometimes with the use of metaphors. Thus, the unfulfilling of expectations was not a sensitive issue for the fishers. For the interventionists, however, it was even in the individual interviews. They expressed themselves in terms of their concern for consistency with their job responsibility despite the insufficient resources provided to them:

We know that the intervention resources available may not suffice to intervene effectively. However, we cannot be inactive. We should justify our existence or job.

During individual as well as homogeneous group discussions, this interventionist and his peers indirectly acknowledged that the interventions were not effective, which they attributed to the insufficiency of the intervention resources. In the heterogeneous group meeting, when the fishers accused them of failing to meet expectations, the interventionists again blamed the lack of resources, as evidenced in the following quote:

For example, the fishing community development fund is money, a lot of money. If I give the whole amount now, you will all cheer. However, if we divide that over all Benin, that's not a lot. It is approximately 2 billion F CFA. And superiors and financial partners said we interventionists should use that to construct schools, hospitals, to repair roads, or help the population to dig wells, to provide potable drinking water and so on. However, before using such money for your places, it would be good that you fishers also adopt good manners or behave kindly according to rules in the management of the water from which you fish.

In this quote, the interventionist shifts responsibility to superiors, the numerous demands to be satisfied by interventions, the limited intervention money available, fishing communities' unsustainable fishing practices, and uses normative discourses. That

interventionist only used indirect strategies to discuss this issue which can be well understood, since admitting to the fishers that they did not fulfil the expectations raised during their interaction with the communities would threaten their social relationships with the fishers as well as their own interests. The interventionists seemed aware that the fishers were not pleased with being consulted at the beginning of intervention projects without experiencing the desired results. Interventionists explained in the interviews that discussing the ineffectiveness of interventions with the fishers could entail difficulties when they had to consult the communities again. Besides, as we shall see later in [Sections 5.3, 5.6, and 5.7](#), the interventionists' concern also arose for electoral reasons and because of their fear of possible physical and occult aggression.

### 5.2. *Primacy of interventionists' material interests*

In Benin, fishery interventions are generally carried out as projects or programmes of the government, NGOs, or international cooperation organisations. They generally have fewer resources than would be required given the formulated goals. Those projects and programmes provide advantages to interventionists, such as jobs and incomes. Fishers openly accused the interventionists of letting their own material interests prevail over concerns for effective interventions in both individual and homogeneous group discussions. The utterance below comes from a fisherman from *Hokouè* Village in a homogeneous group setting.

When NGOs and project actors come to discuss with us, we tell them what we think and they go back. But, later, we do not hear anything about the follow up. If they get any money or eating opportunity because of what we told them, they forget that we here, we should also eat... That's what we are saying. It is always the 'Gbadétchédjinnabi' [i.e. only my maize should cook or all advantages for me, nothing for the others] which is hindering our country.

In an interview, one interventionist confessed the primacy of concern for cash by talking about his peers:

Listen! One month or three weeks ago, there was a project evaluation mission... It was composed of external and local people as usual... They phoned me...I told them: me, I will tell you one thing: This project is zero. If it is still in existence in 10 years, it will still be zero. They asked: Why? I said, which result can they show? It is a project for communities. Which community, which results?... When I started developing my arguments for why I said it is zero, my friend from the mission who made me agree to discuss with the delegation, he said I cannot write those things you are telling! It will look like the national head of the project provided me with food to eat and I throw it away."

In the heterogeneous setting, the fishers no longer talked about the interventionists' material interests. Thus, this is a second sensitive issue for the fishers. They could have lost face by accusing the interventionists of personal interests, because they could not come up with convincing evidence given their relative distance to the design and management of the intervention programmes, and hence, their lack of arguments. Furthermore, the fishers probably kept silent in front of the interventionists in order to keep a chance to effectively benefit from interventions (see below in [Section 5.5](#)).

For the interventionists, the primacy of personal interests in their intervention practices also seems to be a sensitive issue, since they discussed it indirectly and in the interviews only, by shifting responsibility to their peers. Openly expressing these issues as their main concerns could generate a conflict, because the fishers would then have a reason to protest

against the interventionists and politicians. As a consequence, interventionists talking openly about their material interests could be fired by their superiors.

### 5.3. *Compliance of interventionists with electoral concerns*

Both stakeholder groups mentioned the politicisation of intervention processes in individual and homogeneous group discussions. In the following quote, an interventionist describes briefly how political relationships influence interventions for income—source diversification, quoting first an imaginary fisherman and then the thoughts of the interventionist:

“Ah! It is you a political friend who is there, eh! Me [fisherman] I should get this advantage.”  
However, you [the fisherman] know very well that your land is not suitable for that crop.

Something similar was mentioned about land reform. Land reform is considered important for diversification of the sources of income among fishers. However, people have settled before any kind of town planning. Therefore, town planning and other land reform activities destabilise the status quo and are often disliked and resisted (sometimes violently) by settled people and other landowners. To avoid frustrating the people who are potential electors, the politicians are said to delay land reform as much as possible, even if they are aware of its necessity. An interventionist said, for instance, in a homogeneous group discussion:

Indeed; you know; the government doesn't have resources, and even less the municipalities. What the government and municipality politicians try to do is the 'lotissement' [allotment for urbanisation]... Because they have election mandates, that doesn't allow them to take certain decisions. So, if you a technician, you propose land reform to them, they will immediately tell you no... Thus, they protect their electors... It is that. Already at their own level, they are in a situation of ambivalence about land reform...

During the heterogeneous group discussion, the interventionists mentioned indirectly their compliance with the concerns of the political and administrative authorities as a compliance with their role and their incapacity to go against decisions and the wills of their hierarchical superiors, as follows:

Somebody talked about the industrial maritime fishers who destroy the fishnets of the artisanal fishers in the artisanal fishing zone. The project doesn't have... euh, we are not officers under oath [mandated officers]. So, we do not succeed in talking about those, the bad boats that pick up people's fishnets in the sea... We cannot talk about that. The only thing we can do is that we inform the fishery directorate about those kinds of practices. Eeh! Some of the boats that do these kinds of things come from our country. And we [politicians] are ourselves those who rekindle this fire. So, we, we [project interventionists], things concerning politicians, we cannot... that's why we do not like putting our hands in those things.

As we can see, the interventionists talked about the politicisation of intervention processes in the individual, homogeneous, and heterogeneous group discussions rather openly, but never by fully taking responsibility. Thus, this seems to be a sensitive issue for the interventionists, who used responsibility shifting and detailed narrations of experiences to speak about their compliance with political and administrative authorities. The fishers did not say anything about this at the heterogeneous meeting, while they had discussed it openly in the interviews and homogeneous groups meeting. Hence, for them, it may also be a sensitive issue.

One can wonder how it would threaten their identity if the interventionists were direct or open about their compliance with the political concerns of their superiors. A lead towards an explanation is that intervention processes are formally supposed to be separated from politics. Thus, the interventionists may have feared being perceived by the fishers as serving the interests of members of some political parties only, to the detriment of others. This could be a risk in Benin, a democratic country with more than one hundred political parties that compete for votes at the local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. Since both interventionists and fishers belong to a diversity of political parties, they work directly and indirectly for their parties to be in power, win elections, and protect their interests on many occasions. To this end, interventionists are careful not to provide arguments that could result in electoral failure for their political parties or a social conflict. An image of being prejudiced could lead to protests by people who feel discriminated and conflicts among the fishers, or massive adherence by fishers to the political parties of the interventionists, which might generate a conflict with members of opposing political parties. The identity of the fishers would directly be threatened as well, because they (would) behave the same and they do not want to be denounced by interventionists. Also, if the fishers would accuse the interventionists of complying with electoral concerns, they would be accusing themselves, given they are part of the electorate.

#### **5.4. Interventionists' corruption**

Fishers mentioned corruption among interventionists as an existing practice that hindered effective fishery interventions in Grand-Popo in the interviews and homogeneous group meetings. The following quote from a homogeneous group meeting reveals a fisherman's view:

That's what we are saying. It is always the 'Gbadétchédjinnabi' which is hindering our country. Is that not the fact of corruption we have always been talking about?

An interview with an anti-corruption organisation in Grand-Popo confirmed the widespread corruption and the lack of sanctions. Indirectly, the interventionists themselves also mentioned corruption during the individual interviews in terms of generalised practices or practices of others. As an example:

There is need to attribute responsibility for the failure to promote income-generating alternatives. There is need for more strictness... We should take the implementation of our job more seriously at the level of beneficiaries... We should no longer give credit for income diversification irregularly... And the backer, I go and see the backer to ask him: give me this, develop this for me, I give you 10%. If you develop that, take your share. You see! Those are things we do, we do, which ... euh, how to say it, do not benefit producers.

During the heterogeneous group discussion, neither interventionists nor fishers made any comment on interventionists' corrupt practices. This suggests that it is a very sensitive issue for both stakeholder groups.

Our investigations about possible explanations for this sensitivity revealed that the interventionists were aware that corrupt practices are not allowed. Indeed, since the 1990s, several civil society and public organisations have been set up that denounce corrupt practices publicly in order to discourage perpetrators in Benin. Among those organisations are the National Front of Anti-Corruption Organisations, Transparency Benin, and Social Watch Benin. People fear those organisations because they fear the

social stigmatisation, isolation, and loss of power or their jobs to which they are systematically exposed when they are publicly denounced or known by victims. Thus, corrupt people try as much as possible to hide their corrupt practices or even to fight against those people who can denounce them or prevent their corruption.

The fishers may have turned to complete silence about corrupt practices in the heterogeneous setting, because they are not sure how to prove their allegation, and do not want to lose face in front of interventionists and their peers. Since corruption involves corrupted and corruptor, fishers may also keep silent because they are themselves corrupted and do not want to be denounced by interventionists. They may also fear potential stigmatisation from interventionists.

### **5.5. Money concerns of fishers**

In the individual and homogeneous settings, the interventionists mentioned that the fishers had financial interests in ongoing interventions. An interventionist from an NGO, for example, said:

For the population, being associated with an intervention process equates to accessing money... We should demystify projects, which are not cash cows as the population thinks.

In the heterogeneous group discussion, the interventionists also discussed this issue rather openly. They did so, by inviting fishers to start caring for development issues instead of looking for opportunities to satisfy immediate interests. They also gave concrete examples to demonstrate to the fishers that they let their material advantages prevail over finding solutions to their problems. An interventionist said:

When your representatives come to meetings, they hardly open their mouth to say what you need. What is important for them is to attend meetings, to sleep, to eat, to sleep. When they want to leave, take their per diem and go. When they come back, do they answer to you?

To this question the fishers confirmed that their representatives do not always inform them about the meetings, by collectively saying no. While the fishers talked openly about their financial interests in both the interviews and the homogeneous group meetings, during the heterogeneous meeting they rephrased their own personal concerns into food concerns because of hunger. Financial interests thus seem to be a sensitive issue for them.

As we can see, silence, reframing the issue to align to the audience of interventionists (hunger instead of food and money), and shifting responsibility (to their representatives) were the main discursive strategies used by the fishers to deal with this sensitive issue.

The reasons for obscuring financial interests may be related to the intervention goals. The interventions are designed to address fishery problems, and not general needs for cash and food. By openly talking about their need for cash, which is not specifically part of the intervention goals, the fishers could be seen and treated as non-serious by the interventionists.

### **5.6. Fishers' physical aggressiveness**

For decades, rules for allowed and prohibited fishing techniques, including the types of nets have been set in Benin. During individual and homogeneous group discussions, some interventionists mentioned their fear of fishers' physical aggressiveness as an

important reason for not imposing sanctions for illegal fishing practices. One of them said explicitly:

Some rules were elaborated somehow for rational fishery management. We sensitize the fishers on that... It is themselves who do not respect the rules. We, we try to avoid repression. We avoid that because when it starts like that, that causes confrontations. Some people last time gave the example of the Ahémé Lake where; euh! The police for example went on the water, and where the finger of one policeman was cut off and put in a glass by a fisherman; and then, he puts some Sodabi [a local alcoholic drink] on it and started drinking. So, you see, those people living in water areas are savage enough...

In the heterogeneous group discussion, the interventionists did not discuss the aggressiveness any longer, but converted the discussion to an underlying cause of the fishery problems – by inviting the fishers to review their illegal fishing practices:

If you are asked to no longer practice Gbagbaloulou, Xhâ; to no longer practice Amèdjrotin<sup>4</sup> ... if you continue practicing that, if you ask for financial support, then, we will not give you... We should convert our behaviours, our ways of thinking and of perceiving things...

In no discussion setting did the fishers talk about their alleged physical violence. With regard to the illegal fishing practices mentioned by the interventionists in the heterogeneous group discussion, the fishers shifted responsibility to the interventionists for not sanctioning rule breakers, without going into further details. Thus, we can see that the fishers did not discuss their alleged physical aggression practices in any discussion setting. It thus seems to be a sensitive issue for both stakeholder groups.

We can explain the fishers' discursive strategy of complete silence by the fact that they do not want to be perceived as dangerous and the cause of their own problems. The interventionists' silence can be understood as a concern to prevent the fishers from having the impression that they are vulnerable and afraid of them to maintain an image of being powerful. We can explain it also as a concern to preserve a peaceful relationship with the fishers, since an open accusation of physical violence could provoke even more aggression. However, by referring to what the fishers should do to solve their problems (normative discourses), the interventionists nonetheless put the issue of illegal fishing techniques on the agenda in the presence of the fishers.

### 5.7. Fishers' occult threats

The fear of fishers' occult forces is an important issue for fishery interventionists. They discussed this openly in interviews and among themselves, by using metaphors. An interventionist who discussed the need to have much support when collecting the debts of fishers related to a credit facility, said, for instance,

... If it is only you who are dealing with credit recovery, you can experience pressure from credit clients. You can start receiving some missiles [metaphor to talk about occult forces]... The client can start threatening you verbally, and you can start dreaming that you sleep on the sea, on the ocean... So, it is like that. It is not easy.

The manifestation of, and interventionists' fear about, occult forces were also stated in general terms during a homogeneous group discussion:

Ninety percent of Beninese people believe in that... That means that the occult factor is there and it acts against development. We cannot deny that! Where you are now, if you have

resources and you say I want to build a house, and people ask you to come and do that in your village, maybe you can yourself have the willingness and the courage to do so. But, your parents will tell you: Eh!!! Do not come to invest your money here because you can be hurt occultly. And, I know many people faced this issue in Benin here.

Fishers' use of occult beliefs was also mentioned by the fishers, mostly in informal discussion settings. The following utterances from a fisherman, member of an indigenous religions promotion organisation, illustrate it:

Nowadays, due to the proliferation of the good religions, i.e. new religions other than the catholic religion, the young people no longer respect indigenous fishing rules... The lack of responsibility of some actors from indigenous religion convents also allows young people to access 'ébobadawo' [worse occult forces] with which they challenge traditional authorities and offend indigenous fishing rules in some places...

During the heterogeneous group discussion, however, the interventionists no longer mentioned the existence and manifestation of occult threats, while a fisherman turned to the general term of "social-cultural realities" to talk about it. Hence, this also seems to be a sensitive issue for both stakeholder groups.

We can explain the interventionists' silence in front of the fishers in the light of their concern to maintain their power position and peaceful relationships with the fishers. Showing the fishers explicitly that they fear occult forces could cause the fishers to lose respect for them and give rise to a further increase in illegal practices. The fishers may have avoided the issue because if they openly confirmed their occult threats to the interventionists, the latter would have good reasons to exclude these fishers from further interventions.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we analysed the discursive strategies of fishers and interventionists in a facilitated learning process. This RE approach aimed to facilitate a dialogue among the stakeholders about all their important issues and concerns related to fishery management in order to stimulate learning by first conducting many individual interviews; second, organising homogeneous group meetings; and ending with the heterogeneous group meeting composed of both stakeholder groups. In contrast to the assumptions in many other interactive approaches, we expected to find that sensitive issues are not discussed openly, but the stakeholders would develop ways to discuss them indirectly in the multi-stakeholder setting, after having been able to discuss them openly in a trusted environment and with the aid of the main facilitator.

Table 2 gives an overview of the discursive strategies used by each stakeholder category to address the sensitive issues in the different settings. We distinguished three main types of discursive strategies: open discussion, remaining silent, and indirectly addressing an issue.

The table shows the seven issues that are sensitive for one or both stakeholder groups and could not be discussed openly in a multi-stakeholder setting. The variation in the discursive strategies is illustrative of the fact that the sensitivity of the issues is associated with the identities and the relationships of the interactants (Lessler and O'Reilly 1997, Warren 2006, Aarts, Lieshout, and van Woerkum 2011, Idrissou *et al.* 2011). Surprisingly, many of those issues showed to be sensitive even in the setting of the interviews with the researcher only (the first author), given that the stakeholder group

Table 2. Discursive strategies used by fishing people and interventionists in different discussion settings in Grand-Popo.

Issues	Discursive strategies of fishing people			Discursive strategies of interventionists		
	Individual setting	Homogeneous setting	Heterogeneous setting	Individual setting	Homogeneous setting	Heterogeneous setting
Issues raised by fishing people about interventionists	Fishing people's expectations unfulfilled by interventionists	O	O	O	I	I
	Material interests of interventionists	O	O	S	I	S
	Compliance with electoral concerns by interventionists	O	O	S	I	I
	Corruption of interventionists	O	O	S	I	S
Issues raised by interventionists about fishing people	Material interests of fishermen	O	O	I	O	O
	Physical aggressiveness of fishermen	S	S	S	O	S
	Occult threats of fishermen	I	S	I	O	S

Source: Analysis of the findings of this article.

I = indirect discursive strategy; O = open discourse; S = silence.

held responsible for it seldom brought these issues up itself. The only exception is the money concerns of fishers which were openly discussed by themselves.

We now turn to the question of whether in Grand-Popo the facilitated learning process indeed offered opportunities for stakeholders to put sensitive issues on the agenda in a multi-stakeholder setting, albeit indirectly. Table 2 shows that three of the seven sensitive issues were not addressed at all in the heterogeneous group discussion by either of the stakeholder groups. Two other issues were addressed indirectly by one of the groups, but not responded to by the other. Hence, these also did not enter the deliberation agenda. However, two other issues were addressed openly by the accusing group and responded to by the accused group with indirect discursive strategies. The first (fishers' money concerns) thus remained on the agenda; the second (non-fulfilment of fishers' expectations) did become part of the deliberation.

The general conclusion is that the RE process did not lead to an open discussion on the sensitive issues. The accusing stakeholder groups reverted from discussing these issues openly at the beginning in the interviews to indirectly or not at all in the end. This shows how hard it is – maybe impossible – to put sensitive issues openly on the agenda of heterogeneous group discussions, even with a relatively long preparation phase of individual interviews and peer group meetings. However, the sensitivity of an issue may fade over time. Two other issues that were mentioned as very important to the stakeholders in the interviews, and could well be expected to turn into a sensitive issue, were openly discussed in the heterogeneous setting; the limited resources of the interventionists and the illegal fishing practices of the fishers. Hence, sensitive issues can best be regarded as a special category of important or ambiguous issues.

Two sensitive issues were discussed indirectly. From this, we deduce that the RE process has given the stakeholders opportunity, albeit restricted, to put sensitive issues on the deliberation agenda of the heterogeneous group. Hence, an open dialogue among stakeholders is, as we expected, not a precondition for putting major issues on the agenda, as is often assumed in literature on interactive approaches, at least not in the context of sensitive issues.

However, most sensitive issues (five out of the seven) were not discussed at all, which may well help to explain the limited learning (see Kouévi, van Mierlo, and Leeuwis 2013). Interestingly, these issues are all sensitive for both stakeholder groups. Discussions on these issues would not only threaten identities, but especially the interrelations between the two groups. These findings urge to nuance the general idea that issues are less sensitive for the people in power, because they do not have to fear the consequences. According to Noelle-Nuemann (2009), commitment to open discussion of sensitive issues is often easier for powerful or avant-garde people (convinced intellectuals, artists, and reformers, for instance) and “hard-core non-conformists” who are like “immunised victims”. Although the interventionists in our case obviously have more power resources, such as financial means and information, than the fishers, they themselves are dependent on not only their superiors, but the fishers as well in many ways. This interdependency between interventionists and fishers has grown over generations of interventions (Kouévi, van Mierlo, and Leeuwis 2011).

The results of this study provide new insights for the facilitation of multi-stakeholder learning in NRM. Sensitive issues seem to be an important dimension of it, and need attention right from the start. Throughout this article, we have presented some methodological guidelines to detect and address sensitive issues. With knowledge about indirect discursive strategies, facilitators can detect sensitive issues in all settings. As we have shown, even in individual interviews, issues may be sensitive, especially when they

relate to personal responsibility. The comparison between the different settings helped to discover the most sensitive issues about which the stakeholders turned to complete silence in the multi-stakeholder setting. Comparing the stakeholder groups helped to identify the issues that are sensitive for the blamed stakeholder group. Further exploration of the potential social consequences of open communication about these issues is an important additional step to identify the sensitive issues. A major challenge for facilitators is to help the stakeholders to convert these sensitive issues based on mutual, historically grown dependencies into problem definitions that include a sense of mutual responsibility followed by developing options for collective action.

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### Notes

1. Fishers stand for women and men living from fishery activities.
2. Fishnets with 10 mm of mesh sizes and in the form of conical pocket with a big mouth placed as a barrier in the water and preventing all kinds of fishery resources from moving from one side to the other.
3. Fishnet made with slats of trees and preventing fishery resources, and even sediments, from moving from one side to the other.
4. A cage made with slats of trees on the water, and in which fishery resources are caught, bred, and fished to feed visitors.

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