

Fisher folk conference

## Globally fishy business

**A recent meet in Thailand focused on Asian fisheries in the era of globalization**

**M**illions of people in Asia depend on fisheries for a living, making it a critical component of economic growth and a major source of food security in the region.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), in 1990, 84 per cent of the world's fishers were concentrated in Asia—9 million in China, nearly 6 million in India, and 4 million in Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines taken together. The majority are small-scale, artisanal fishers, eking out a living from coastal and inshore resources.

A conservative estimate would place the total number of people involved in fishing, processing, trading and other fisheries-related activities in Asia at about 120 million. For artisanal fishing communities, fishing is a source of livelihood as well as a culture and a way of life.

Asian fisheries have, however, witnessed major changes in the past few decades, as governments have sought to modernize the sector by bringing in more efficient gear and technologies, including bottom-trawling and purse-seining.

The focus on expanding production and exports has received an impetus in the current phase of globalization. It was to discuss these developments and their implications for the small-scale marine and inland fisheries sector that representatives of fisherfolk and peasant organizations as well as NGOs from 11 countries in Asia met from 25 to 29 January 2002 at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand for the *Asian Fisherfolk Conference: Cut Away the Net of Globalization*.

Representatives from the following countries were present: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam, along with representatives from the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and Aotearoa-New Zealand and South Africa.

The conference was organized with the following objectives:

- to analyze the impact of globalization, specifically liberalization, privatization and deregulation, on the small-scale fisheries sector;
- to document initiatives and gains by Asian fisherfolk to improve their situation, such as, but not limited to, organizing, peoples' campaigns, advocacy, resource management and lobbying;
- to learn about the role and situation of women in the fisheries sector; and
- to consolidate networks among fisherfolk organizations in the Asian region.

### Joint effort

The workshop was a joint initiative of several organizations. These included the the Federation of Fisherfolk of Thailand, the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), the Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture (FSA), NGO-COD, the World Wildlife Fund, the Andaman Project, the Prince of Songkhla University and the Waliluk University—all from Thailand, as well as PAMALAKAYA (the National Federation of Fisherfolk Organizations in the Philippines), the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers

(ICSF) and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).

**P**articipants felt that globalization processes lead to a loss of income and livelihood, dislocation from fishing grounds, denial of access rights, breakup of communities, social problems, loss of traditional systems of knowledge and wisdom, degradation and destruction of aquatic resources and violations of human rights.

The pressure on women of fishing communities has increased in specific ways, translating directly into increased workloads, stress and pressure to earn higher incomes. Participants called for a reversal of laws, programmes and policies as well as the dismantling of institutions of globalization that are primarily attuned to the interests of powerful economic players and that marginalize fishing communities.

Participants demanded an immediate halt to, among other things, the following:

- destructive use of fishing gear like trawlers, push-nets, anchovy purse-seines (using lights), fine-meshed nets and other similarly destructive practices, that deplete aquatic resources, and destroy the very livelihood of artisanal fishers;
- fisheries access agreements between countries, as well as joint ventures and other similar arrangements for harvesting and utilizing aquatic resources, that deplete these resources and deprive local fishers of their livelihoods;
- investment, subsidies and other forms of State support to the industrial and large-scale sector and to non-owner operated mechanized vessels, that have led to overcapacity and overcapitalization;
- further growth in capacity of domestic industrial fleets in several countries of the Asian region and the export of this overcapacity (through formal and informal means) to waters of neighbouring countries, impacting negatively on artisanal fishers, both of the home country and of the country they fish in;
- ‘free trade’ in fish and fish products, given the overwhelming evidence from all parts of the world that free trade in natural resources leads to the rapid destruction of resources and of livelihoods of the majority, even as it brings in profits in the short run for a few;

- imports of fish and fish products, especially of products harvested/ processed locally, that push down prices and impact negatively on incomes and livelihoods of local fishers/ processors, including the women;
- export-oriented policies of governments, often under the compulsion of repaying foreign debts, even as domestic fish supplies stagnate, and sections of the population are malnourished, endangering local food security and sovereignty;
- export-oriented aquaculture, mariculture and other similar forms of monoculture, not including traditional aquaculture, that are displacing local communities and destroying their environment;
- collection of live coral fish and coral reefs for export;
- adoption of technologies, programmes and policies that marginalize the role of women in the fisheries sector;
- big 'development' projects, such as construction of dams, bunds and barriers that destroy the livelihood of local fishers, both in the inland and marine sectors, displace local communities and destroy local habitats such as mangroves;
- the privatization of coastal commons and water bodies through activities like industrial expansion, tourism, aquaculture and the establishment of national parks, which displace local communities and destroy their way of life;
- polluting activities including indiscriminate use of agrochemicals, mining, dumping and transshipment of toxic and nuclear wastes, that impact negatively on the health of local populations and lead to the degradation of inland and coastal habitats;
- introduction of exotic species in inland water bodies for aquaculture, a practice that has led to the extinction of local species and impacted negatively on local ecosystems;
- introduction of genetically modified fish species in water bodies, even on an experimental basis, in keeping with the internationally agreed 'precautionary principle';
- violence against small-scale fishers, including destruction of their life and gear by the owners of industrial and commercial fleets;
- detention of fishermen by neighbouring countries in the Asian region for alleged illegal fishing; and
- human rights violations by the State, in the form of arrests and detentions of members of fishing communities and their organizations.

Participants called for establishing participatory mechanisms to ensure that all decisions related to the use and management of fisheries resources at the local, national and international level are made in partnership with the fisherfolk.

They stressed the need for States in the region to work out appropriate mechanisms for the release of artisanal fishers who drift into the waters of neighbouring countries and face punishments completely disproportionate to their offense. They also called for an agreement that ensures safety for artisanal fishers who target shared stocks between countries, taking into account traditional rights to access such resources. In this context, they endorsed Point 7 of the Statement from the recent meeting organized by ICSF, titled *Forging Unity: Coastal Communities and the Indian Ocean's Future*.

Above all, participants called for the sustainable and non-destructive



management and use of the resources of the lakes, rivers, seas and oceans by all humankind and asserted that the rights of artisanal fishing communities—the guardians of these water bodies—to use, manage and benefit from them, must be protected and accepted.

Finally, participants committed to protecting the rights to life and livelihood of fishing communities and to protecting and conserving aquatic resources, indigenous species and ecosystems, while demonstrating concrete alternatives towards a people-centred development. They also committed to observing World Fisheries Day on 21 November, the Anti-WTO day on 30 November and the World Food Day on 16 October, at the Asian level with a regionally co-ordinated action by fishing communities to demonstrate their solidarity. 3

This report has been filed by Chandrika Sharma (icsf@vsnl.com) of ICSF, who attended the Hat Yai conference