

Comment

Small scale, large agenda

The 25th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture of the United Nations (FAO) was held from 24 to 28 February 2003 at Rome. Notably, one of the agenda items was on 'Strategies for Increasing the Sustainable Contribution of Small-scale Fisheries to Food Security and Poverty Alleviation'. The last time small-scale fisheries was on the agenda of COFI was 20 years ago, in 1983, in the lead-up to the FAO World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development in 1984.

The inclusion of this agenda item was particularly appropriate, given the recently organized World Food Summit and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, both of which focused on the importance of eradicating hunger and poverty. It was also appropriate in view of the process being initiated by the FAO to develop "voluntary guidelines to achieve the progressive realization of the right to adequate food", as a follow-up to the World Food Summit.

The inclusion of this agenda item once again reaffirmed the important role small-scale fisheries plays, especially in the developing world, in providing income, employment and in contributing to food security.

What was needed, however, was a much stronger endorsement that the small-scale model of fisheries development is inherently more suitable, even on grounds of environmental sustainability, a key issue of concern today. In this context, it is worth recalling the observation made in the report of a joint study by the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, Commission of the European Communities and FAO in 1992, titled A Study of International Fisheries Research:

"...in many situations, the comparative advantages may lie with the small-scale sector. It is labour intensive, consumes less fuel, generally uses more selective gear, and is less dependent on imported equipment and materials. The small-scale sector's capital is owned locally, often by the fishers themselves. And because the small-scale fishers depend on resources adjacent to their communities, they have a greater self-interest than large-scale fishers in management of their fisheries."

With many fisheries the world over showing evident signs of overfishing, the imperative is to create a policy environment supportive of small-scale fisheries using selective gear. One of the most crucial prerequisites for this, as mentioned in the paper prepared by the FAO Secretariat for this agenda item, is the need for "better management through the allocation of secure fishing rights—backed by appropriate legislation—to small-scale fishers in coastal and inland zones and their effective protection from industrial fishing activity or activities that degrade aquatic resources and habitats."

Moreover, in view of the increasing technological capacity of the small-scale fleet to harvest resources in deeper waters, as well as the greater pressure on inshore resources, it is appropriate that governments extend the areas reserved for exclusive exploitation by the small-scale fleet within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). This will also, in no small measure, contribute to increasing safety at sea, as many accidents result from both the industrial and small-scale fleets using the same marine space. Many small-scale fishworkers have lost their craft and gear, and even their lives, as a result of accidents involving industrial fleets.

A clear recognition of the inherent superiority of the small-scale model of fisheries development and a reallocation of resources in favour of small-scale fisheries, is the need of the hour. Given that it is State policies that have supported industrial fisheries, often at the expense of both small-scale fisheries and environmental sustainability, and even in areas where small-scale fleets are capable of operating effectively, a reorientation of these policies is urgent.

A vote for small-scale fisheries would be a vote for long-term socioeconomic and environmental benefits over short-term profits, for livelihoods and a dignified existence for many over benefits for a few.
