

Fishing Safely

An International Plan of Action (IPOA) on the safety of fishing vessels and fishermen could become a milestone

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has estimated that the global fishing fleet currently consists of about 1.3 mn decked vessels and 2.7 mn undecked vessels. About 86 per cent of the decked vessels are concentrated in Asia. There is little information available for the undecked/non-motorized vessels but it is estimated that Asia accounts for about 83 per cent of them. While virtually all decked vessels are mechanized, only about one-third of the undecked fishing boats are powered, generally with outboard motors. The remaining two-thirds are traditional craft of various types, operated by sail and oars.

Available statistics on fisheries employment are scarce, incomplete and of low quality. According to FAO records, employment in the primary capture fisheries and aquaculture sectors in 2004 was estimated to have been about 41 mn fish harvesters, including full-time, part-time and occasional workers. The great majority of these are in developing countries, principally in Asia. In 2004, the number of fishermen accounted for three-quarters of the total number of fish harvesters, that is, about 30 mn, of which 16 mn are working full-time in the marine sector. About 98 per cent of fishermen are working on board fishing vessels of less than 24 m in length, and about two-thirds, on vessels of less than 12 m in length, both decked and undecked.

Fishing at sea is probably the most dangerous occupation in the world. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 24,000 fatalities occur worldwide each year in capture fisheries. The consequences of loss of

life fall heavily on the dependents of fishermen. In many developing countries, these consequences can be devastating: widows have often a low social standing; there is no welfare State to support the family; and, with lack of alternative sources of income, the widow and children may face destitution.

The safety of fishing vessels and fishermen involves several inter-related components such as design, construction and equipment of the vessels. However, social and economic pressures, as well as overcapacity and overfishing of coastal resources, are probably the major factors that have negated the results of efforts to improve safety at sea. Furthermore, issues of safety on fishing vessels are different from those on merchant vessels, where, for example, the majority of hazardous operations are carried out in the safety of the port, unlike on fishing vessels (particularly

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small fishing vessels), where crews have to work at sea, on deck, in all types of weather, frequently with the hatches open, locating and gathering their cargo from the sea.

Matter of concern

The safety of fishing vessels and fishermen has been a matter of concern for FAO since its inception in 1945, when the organization provided assistance in

*This article is by **Jeremy Turner** (jeremy.turner@fao.org), Chief, Fishing Technology Service, FAO, and **Ari Gudmundsson** (ari.gudmundsson@fao.org), Fisheries Industry Officer, FAO*

ROBERT LEE



Fishermen pushing a vessel into the sea in the coastal village of Paita, Peru

International Maritime Organization (IMO), in developing guidelines and standards on the safety of fishing vessels and fishermen. The first attempt to address the safety of fishing vessels and fishermen at an international level took place in the early 1960s in the form of the following publications:

- FAO/ILO/IMO Code of Safety of Fishermen and Fishing Vessels, Parts A and B
- FAO/ILO/IMO Voluntary Guidelines for the Design, Construction and Equipment of Small Fishing Vessels
- FAO/ILO/IMO Document for Guidance on Training and Certification of Fishing Vessel Personnel

Currently, FAO is working with ILO and IMO in developing new safety standards for small fishing vessels that are not covered by the revised Code and Guidelines. The provisional title of these new standards is "Safety recommendations for decked fishing vessels of less than 12 m in length and undecked fishing vessels". The target completion date for this work, which also includes the development of guidelines for implementation of the Safety recommendations, is 2010. The website of the international correspondence group, which is developing the Safety recommendations and Guidelines, is <http://www.sigling.is/fvs-iscg>

The main reason for accidents in the fishing industry is human error (estimated to be responsible for 80 per cent of accidents in the industry), rather than the design and construction of unsafe boats. Poor fishing practices and seamanship result, for example, in well-designed and constructed fishing vessels capsizing because of ignorance of operational factors that govern the stability of the vessel.

External advice

It is likely that many developing nations will seek external advice in planning the management of fisheries in their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). FAO is the UN agency with the mandate and competence to promote a holistic approach to fisheries management, including safety of fishing vessels and fishermen, in developing countries.

the establishment of fishery-training institutions in a number of countries. Hundreds of training institutions were established, many of which are still operating. Hundreds of fisheries projects related to training and safety, including courses, workshops and seminars, have been organized, in which many thousands of participants have taken part. FAO has carried out several regional projects on the safety of fishing vessels and fishermen. Currently, a number of projects devoted to safety are under implementation and others are under development.

Safety in the fishing industry cannot be divorced from fisheries management, and this fact is recognized in the provisions of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. The Code, which was unanimously adopted on 31 October 1995 by the FAO's governing Conference, provides a necessary framework for national and international efforts to ensure sustainable exploitation of aquatic living resources in harmony with the environment. The Code, which is voluntary, also addresses safety and health in the fishing sector.

There is a long-standing co-operation between FAO and its sister United Nations (UN) organizations, ILO and the

This is in full accordance with FAO's mandate to raise levels of nutrition and standards of living, and follows naturally from the organization's formulation of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and its mandate to monitor the application and implementation of the Code and its effects on fisheries worldwide.

By making safety requirements prerequisites to fisheries authorization, progress is guaranteed. To fish legally will be to fish safely. Such a step will require a change of attitude within the fisheries, and, consequently, a firm motivation on behalf of the legislators, but, given that fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations known on earth, this progress seems inevitable.

The main lesson learned from FAO's experiences in the implementation of its various safety activities is that recommendations, however sound, do not form an adequate basis for administrations to act or for industry to respond. Despite the development of instruments and guidelines related to the design, construction and equipment of fishing vessels, the accident rate in the fishing industry is unacceptably high. The main cause of accidents and loss of lives in the industry is not poorly designed, constructed or equipped vessels, but human errors resulting from lack of awareness of safety problems, and poor fishing practices and seamanship. Such practices often place demands on boats that exceed their design limitations. Regulations that result in the vessel being stronger, more stable or more seaworthy may simply result in the operators taking greater risks to improve their catches. This could be avoided by fisheries management measures that deter or prevent skippers from doing so, or by fisheries management measures that might remove some of the economic pressures that force fishermen to take risks.

At the 27th Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI), a large number of Members expressed concern about the safety at sea for fishing vessels, especially small-scale fishing vessels. FAO was urged to continue collaboration with IMO, and it was suggested that FAO should develop guidelines on best practices for safety at sea, and that

COFI should consider developing an International Plan of Action (IPOA) on the subject.

An IPOA on the safety of fishing vessels and fishermen, which would incorporate guidelines on best practices for safety at sea, could become another milestone to improved safety, providing the opportunity to address safety in a holistic fashion. An IPOA is a voluntary instrument elaborated within the framework of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

In implementing the existing IPOAs,

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States are required to carry out a set of activities in conjunction, as appropriate, with relevant international organizations, and conduct a comprehensive assessment of the issue in question to determine if a problem exists. If a problem exists, States should adopt a National Plan of Action (NPOA), which is a plan that a State designs, implements and monitors to mitigate the problem.

JOHN SWAMY/SIFFS



The use of a lifebuoy being demonstrated at a training programme in a south Indian fishing village

The NPOA should prescribe appropriate mitigation measures; contain plans for research and development; prescribe means to raise awareness among fishers, fishing associations and other

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relevant groups; provide information about technical or financial assistance; and prescribe collection programmes of reliable data. This model could be carried forward by an IPOA on the safety of fishing vessels and fishermen.

Changing fisheries

States that determine that an NPOA is not necessary may be requested to review that decision on a regular basis, particularly taking into account changes in their fisheries. If, based on a subsequent assessment, States determine that a problem exists, they should implement an NPOA. States should report on the progress of the assessment, development and implementation of their NPOAs as part of their biennial reporting to FAO on the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

An IPOA would have many advantages. Being a voluntary instrument, it would be unlikely to face the obstacles encountered in the development of a new international instrument. It is foreseeable that it could apply to all sizes of vessels. But as an instrument elaborated within the framework of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, it would have greater authority than voluntary guidelines. Following its adoption, an IPOA would require States to carry out, in effect, a national audit of the problem and the underlying causes, and to prescribe a broad range of actions to improve safety. It would also require States to report every two years to COFI on actions undertaken, and thus permit a sharing of experiences and lessons learned. 3

For more

www.imo.org/Conventions/contents.asp?topic_id=257&doc_id=647

International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974

www.fao.org/fi/website/FIRetrieveAction.do?dom=topic&fid=12272

Fishing Safety at Sea, FAO

www.ilo.org/public/portugue/region/europro/lisbon/pdf/rep-v-1.pdf

Conditions of Work in the Fishing Sector, ILO

www.icsf.net/SU/Dos/EN/57

ICSF's Safety at Sea Dossier

Shoring Up

In the wake of the adoption of the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007, working conditions in shore-based fishing operations must be improved

The Work in Fishing Convention, 2007, of the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines commercial fishing as all fishing operations, including fishing operations on rivers, lakes or canals, with the exception of subsistence fishing and recreational fishing. Fishers are defined to mean every person employed or engaged in any capacity or carrying out an occupation on board any fishing vessel, including persons working on board who are paid on the basis of a share of the catch, but excluding pilots, naval personnel, other persons in the permanent service of a government, shore-based persons carrying out work aboard a fishing vessel and fisheries observers.

It is worth noting that although the definition of commercial fishing encompasses all fishing operations, the definition of fishers takes into account only vessel-based fishers. Shore-based fishers are thus excluded from the scope of the Convention.

The Provisional Record of the discussion on the definition of the term 'fisher' during the 92nd session of the International Labour Conference (ILC), in June 2004, throws some light on the debate that took place on the issue of an inclusive definition of a fisher (see box) to cover both vessel- and shore-based fishers.

Delegates agreed that for the purposes of ILO's Work in Fishing Convention, a fisher would be seen as a person employed or engaged in any capacity or carrying out an occupation on board any fishing vessel, but that Member States could extend the protection of the Convention to other types of workers, if they so wished. It was noted that

the ILO Constitution allows governments to apply more favourable conditions than those provided for in a Convention or Recommendation.

The onus is then on governments to consider the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007, in the light of the realities within its own fishing sector, and to ensure that the protection provided by the legislation following this Convention is enjoyed by all significant categories of fishers.

In particular, it should be ensured that provisions related to minimum requirements for work, conditions of service, occupational safety and health protection, medical care and social security apply to all significant categories of fishers.

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In many countries, particularly developing countries, fishers who engage in harvesting of living resources without the use of vessels—those who glean, dive and shore-seine—are an important part of the fishing population.

Most marginalized

By all accounts, many of these fishers are amongst the most marginalized and vulnerable among the fishing population, and many are women. This is certainly the case in India, for instance.

*This article is by **Neena Koshy** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Associate, ICSF, and **Chandrika Sharma** (icsf@icsf.net), Executive Secretary, ICSF. A list of references for this article is available with ICSF*