

# A Human-rights Approach to Fisheries

**Adopting a human-rights approach to fisheries and fishing communities is really not a matter of choice, but rather an obligation**

In some ways, the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries (officially titled “Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries: Bringing Together Responsible Fisheries and Social Development”, and abbreviated as 4SSF), co-organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Department of Fisheries, Thailand, from 13 to 17 October 2008, at Bangkok, was historic. For the first time, FAO took the lead in organizing a meeting that focused exclusively on small-scale fisheries. More importantly, conscious efforts were made to ensure that a significant proportion of the conference participants were representatives of fishworker organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting small-scale fisheries. However, while the large representation of small-scale fisher people and NGO supporters was heartening, the low representation of governments was disappointing.

Civil society participants came to the 4SSF Conference well prepared. A series of preparatory workshops in Asia, Africa and Latin America, organized by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), along with other organizations, had explored fishworker perspectives on the themes of the conference. Apart from the statements adopted at these workshops, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) had come prepared with its own statement, arrived at through a participatory process. And, at the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop, also held at Bangkok prior to the 4SSF Conference, civil society groups arrived at a consensus statement that drew on all the earlier processes.

The Civil Society Statement (see page 7) captures the aspirations and perspectives of small-scale fishing communities, and needs to be taken seriously by all relevant organizations and governments. The central and unequivocal message from the Statement is that the human rights of fishing communities are indivisible,

and that responsible and sustainable fisheries is possible only if the political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights of fishing communities are addressed in an integrated manner.

This message was reiterated throughout the Bangkok meets: It was repeatedly emphasized that achieving human rights is an end in itself, and adopting a human-rights approach is really not a matter of choice, but

rather an obligation arising from the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and subsequent legally binding human-rights instruments. The resounding call was for adopting a human-rights yardstick for all interventions related to fisheries and fishing communities, and,

indeed, all vulnerable groups.

Several proposals were put forward on the final day of the 4SSF Conference to take this agenda forward. Civil society participants were emphatic that protecting the human rights of small-scale fishing communities needs wider endorsement, particularly at the United Nations (UN), taking a leaf from the recently adopted UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

There were also calls addressed specifically to the FAO’s Committee on Fisheries (COFI). The Civil Society Statement highlighted the need to include a specific chapter in the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries on small-scale fisheries, recognizing the obligations of States towards them. There were also calls for a separate sub-committee on small-scale fisheries, and for ensuring that small-scale fisheries is declared a permanent agenda item during COFI, so that it gets the attention it deserves. Some participants were in favour of an International Plan of Action (IPOA) on Small-scale Fisheries. COFI needs to take the message from the 4SSF Conference seriously, and explore the various options before it to take forward the agenda of a human-rights approach to fisheries and fishing communities.

