

Comment

Encourage self-regulation

The fisheries of many Asian countries have, over the past few decades, witnessed the proliferation of fishing methods such as bottom trawling for high-value demersal species like shrimp. The Asian region today has arguably the largest concentration of trawlers in the world, and perhaps the largest proportion of marine fish catch coming from these fisheries.

The growth of trawling has been accompanied by conflicts—often violent and even fatal—between the trawl and non-trawl sector in many countries of the region, as in India and Indonesia. While the proliferation of bottom trawling has been alarming, no less alarming has been the growth of non-selective methods like purse-seining and push-netting. These technologies have grown virtually unchecked in situations typically characterized by ineffective regulation and weak fisheries management. Not surprisingly, the economic, social and environmental consequences have been severe.

Ironically, the non-trawl small-scale sector has often had little choice but to join the race for fish. Several countries of the region have thus witnessed a transformation of this sector. From a situation where it comprised mainly non-motorized craft using selective, often passive, gear such as gillnets, lines and traps, there has been a tremendous expansion of fishing capacity in the non-trawl sector in many developing countries of South and Southeast Asia. The rapid expansion of this sector under *de facto* open-access regimes is also contributing to the overfishing pressures on coastal fisheries resources in several countries of the region.

The problems in putting in place effective fisheries management systems in such complex situations, where millions depend on the sector for livelihoods and incomes, are well known. Urgent measures are, no doubt, essential to ensure sustainable fisheries and to eliminate incentives that have led to unchecked growth in capacity in the small-scale sector.

In this context, reports about fishermen-led initiatives that aim to regulate, and even eliminate, practices such as trawling, in the Palk Bay region between India and Sri Lanka, are heartening (see page 24). Similar initiatives are also being reported from Gujarat, India, where trawler owners are reported to have agreed that, with effect from 1 January 2004, no new vessels will be added to the trawl fleet in the province. It is vital to recognize and provide adequate policy and other support to such self-regulation initiatives. Experience from other parts of the world, including Thailand and the Philippines, indicates that chances of such systems of self-regulation succeeding are higher, particularly if they are backed by appropriate policy support.

It is vital, therefore, to stimulate dialogue among the various stakeholders in the fisheries sector, to arrive at collective solutions. Long-term and short-term goals for management should also take into account social, economic, ecological and other relevant aspects of labour-surplus fisheries in developing countries. The future of sustainable fisheries hinges critically on the twin processes of self-regulation and participatory management of resources.