

The Bangkok Conference Thailand - January 1980

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR WORLD FISHERIES?

During the last few decades there has been a steady increase in the demand for fish by the industrialised countries. This trend has resulted in over-exploitation of marine resources and the anarchic development of large-scale aquaculture projects in Third World countries.

These trends which are in line with global economic strategies aimed at acquiring quick profits have often resulted in the destruction of aquatic eco-systems and of the marine environment, endangering the livelihood of fishworkers and their families.

With the aim of evaluating these trends and developments, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) convened an International Conference in Bangkok (Thailand, 22-27 of January). This event enabled academics, community organisers, fishworkers and representatives of fishworkers' organisations originating from 28 countries of the five continents, to exchange their experiences and to propose measures for the future.

The International Conference (1) was hosted by the Kasetsart University of Bangkok, a University noted for its concern and its direct involvement in the development of small agricultural and aquacultural producers in Thailand.

The future of small-scale fishermen the world over could be jeopardised if, unhappily, we do not undertake a serious struggle for the defence of resources and for the survival of our occupation", declares Humberto Chamorro-Alvarez, fisherman and president of the National Council of Artisanal Fishermen of Chile (CONAPACH), at the opening of the Conference. This urgent appeal exemplifies the fact that more and more the fishworkers insist on participating actively in global resource management. They do not put forward this claim excluding other sectors, as if only they have the answers. On the contrary, they insist on other organisations representing other fields of activity (farmers, scientists, ecologists, etc.) join forces to bring pressure to bear upon the governments and decision makers for the formulation of an alternative development policy.

Excessive pressure on natural resources

The situation is alarming everywhere, all along the coasts of the planet and within most of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). The general scenario is the same: overfishing, over exploitation of resources, indiscriminate destruction of the marine environment,

anarchic development of large-scale aquaculture for export.

"The future of fishworkers has to be seen in the context of modern development and the pressures that these developments make on those who subsist on the common property resources", specifies Nalini Nayak, coordinator of the ICSF, in her communication (see article p.10). "All of us who work with fishworkers", she continues, "are fully aware of the fact that the depletion of fish resources is a biological phenomenon which has an adverse effect on eco-systems through the use of over-efficient technology, water pollution and more broadly, the greed of capital to reap fast profits".

Due to the increase in the demand for fish, the industrialised countries assert the right of access of their fleets to the coastal waters of the developing countries and continue to appropriate the fishery products from these regions. This precipitates the negotiations for fishery agreements between northern and southern countries, capital-intensive investment policies, financial assistance to improve the productivity of local fisheries, development of intensive aquaculture projects (especially prawn culture), etc.

These global trends not only bring heavy pressure to bear on the natural resources, endangering the marine eco-systems, but also generate increasing dependence of small-scale fishermen on outside financial intervention with consequent greater indebtedness.

Growing mobility in the supply of fish

“The boundaries of the world trade in fish have been literally redrawn with the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)”, remarks Kevin Crean, Deputy Director of the Humberside International Fisheries Institute at the University of Hull (UK). “This process has brought about redistribution of the rights of access to the world’s fish resources”.

In fact, we witness today the mergence of new commercial flows, from developing countries towards the developed countries. Fish and fishery products are directed towards the consumer, wherever the demand is greater and the highest profits can be had. Transport by air has made it possible for northern countries to be supplied today with fresh fish coming from southern countries, where there exists a severe shortage of food to supply their own populations.

“The demand for fish and fish products has increased steadily over the last three decades. Nevertheless the differences in the level of consumption between developed and developing countries remained practically the same. The per capita consumption in the industrialised world is 3.5 times more than in poor countries and this trend is likely to continue”, remarks Kevin Crean.

Government policy for the marketing of fish and shellfish is dictated by the need for hard currency. Fish has become a luxury food item, to such an extent that certain species are no longer available to the local people in the producing countries. This situation raises a number of questions. Should one refer to ethical values when analysing the distortions created by market forces on the food supply of low-income populations? One may also compare the monoculture of luxury species to the monoculture of groundnuts, soya or cassava, which destroyed, as we know, the local food production which enabled rural populations in Third World countries to live decently.

In the light of the growing mobility in the marketing of fish and fish products and the unbalance it has engendered, the leaders of fishworkers organisations recognise the need for setting up mar-





keting channels which they could manage themselves with the required technical assistance. Without excluding production for export, priority should of course be given to supplying local, regional and national markets with the protein that is needed by deprived populations.

Is there a future for the blue revolution?

Over the past ten years, the anarchic development of aquaculture projects in Asia and Latin American countries has in many cases deprived local communities of their means of eking out a living. This “blue revolution”, thus called by analogy with the “green revolution” in agriculture, has largely taken place in vast mangrove areas the natural breeding grounds of numerous species of fish and shell-fish or in traditional paddy fields which were the source of staple foods for the local populations. This has also caused the forced displacement of entire communities.

This large-scale aquaculture development is essentially export oriented this is particularly the case with intensive prawn culture to the detriment of the protein needs of the local populations. Moreover the intensive type of aquaculture also causes pollution owing to accumulation of toxic organic and inorganic substances.

The large-scale production of certain species shrimp for example also causes a fall in prices on the international markets. Those involved in this type of economic activity do not hesitate, when such is the case, to invest their capital in other economic activities, but the fall in price has serious effects on the artisanal fishermen involved in the capture of similar species. Nevertheless, Hector-Luis Morales, sociologist from Chile and specialist on aquaculture issues (2), mentions a growing tendency towards the culture of more popular species in response to the food requirements of local populations. *“This was made possible in Chile because of the stricter control exercised by the community organisation. It is essential, he adds, to challenge certain policies that use aquaculture exclusively for export. This is the case in Bangladesh, for example, where the World Bank invests huge amounts of money to promote the aquaculture of shrimps for export”*

Finally, Hector-Luis Morales concludes that the blue revolution has its positive as well as its negative aspects. *“There is an urgent need to implement training programmes for people directly involved and to fight for reorientation of aquaculture production”.*

New types of organisations

“In the light of the present developments, there is urgent need to form our own organisations for the defence of our profession and of the rights of fishworkers”. This vehement appeal was repeatedly made during the Bangkok Conference.

Fishworkers organisations have a crucial role to play in the management of marine resources and in settling, by means of negotiation and dialogue, conflicts between different types of fishing. They are indispensable in affirming the economic, social, political and cultural role of fishworkers within society. In asserting the access to credit and insurance systems technological know-how, to health services and education.

The state, on the other hand, has to recognise their role in fisheries management and grant them rights and responsibilities. However, such recognition is usually allowed only when fishworkers organisations have pressurised the governments to redirect their fisheries policy.

During the last few decades, new types of organisations have in this way been established in many countries like the Philippines, India, Chile, Senegal, and New Zealand. In Senegal for example, a National Fishermen’s Collective was formed in 1987. With a membership of 1.800 the Senegalese Government is

obliged to take into account its propositions and demands. *"Fishworkers organisations are today becoming important forces which cannot be circumvented if any fishery policy is to be efficiently implemented"*, emphasises Aliou Sall, Senegalese sociologist and consultant of an organisation which supports fishworkers in his country.(3)

In the Philippines, with the support of various professional organisations, a national movement of small-scale fishermen, proposed a New Fisheries Code in 1988, after two years of broad-based consultation at grass-roots level. This Code has been put before parliament. It has been the subject of numerous deliberations with fishworkers which today constitute a powerful pressure group.

Similarly in Chile, India and New Zealand where the Maories are actively challenging the quota system of the New Zealand government.

Last but not least, the militancy of women active in the fishery sector has to be mentioned. All over the world women are rising up in protest against the hardships they have to face in every day life. In India, women are playing an important role in the struggle against pollution. In Europe they have organised international meetings and challenged their governments. They in fact play an important part within the fishing community in defence of social issues, are active within the profession itself, as well as sustaining the family, the children's education, In fact, the future of the fisheries sector depends for a large part on their commitment to the struggle. Without doubt, this Conference has shown on the one hand the complexity and universality of the problems facing the fishery sector and on the other hand the considerable innovative capacity and militancy of the fishworkers in meeting the huge challenges of a changing world.

François BELLEC

