

Now Walk the Talk

The recent adoption of the International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) is historic

The tenth of June ought to be celebrated as “World Small-scale Fisheries Day” since it was on this historic day in 2014 that the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) formally endorsed the International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). In adopting the Guidelines, COFI also honoured Chandrika Sharma, former Executive Secretary of ICSF, for her invaluable contributions to small-scale fisheries.

By adopting these Guidelines, the international community has lent its weight to the struggles of fishers, fishworkers and their communities in the small-scale sector, as well as to indigenous peoples worldwide to defend their right to secure life and livelihood from fisheries-related activities, both marine and inland. The adoption of the Guidelines marks an expression of support to a politically and economically marginalized people, beleaguered by, among other things, pollution, displacement, conflicts over space and resources and climate-change impacts, and poor access to education, health and housing facilities.

The Guidelines represent the first formal attempt to talk in the same breath about equitable development of fishing communities and sustainable small-scale fisheries. They recognize small-scale fishing communities as a subsector that demands multisectoral and multistakeholder solutions. The Guidelines are couched in the language of a ‘rights-based approach’, where human rights take priority over property rights. Developed in an inclusive, ground-up and participatory manner, the Guidelines weave together international human-rights standards and soft and hard legal instruments that deal with fisheries, labour, women and gender, land, food, nutrition, ecosystem, trade and climate change. They deal substantially with most of the concerns of small-scale, rural and indigenous communities worldwide, as articulated through a raft of workshops of civil society organizations (CSOs), held in Africa, Asia, Central and Latin America since 2011, in preparation for the FAO technical consultations in May 2013 and February 2014.



The Guidelines will now have to move into the implementation mode. In this context, firstly, they should be made relevant for all vulnerable and marginalized groups who depend on small-scale fisheries.

Secondly, considering the number of stakeholders—including fishing communities, governments, regional bodies, multilateral and bilateral donors, CSOs and the private sector—that may want to participate in their implementation, a coherent approach to this process is required. It is especially urgent to ensure the Guidelines do not deviate from the spirit in which they were developed. Governments, in particular, should be encouraged to involve fishing communities in the development and application of implementation plans and in the development of national or subregional small-scale fisheries policies, based on these Guidelines.

Thirdly, it must be remembered that fishery stakeholders, particularly small-scale ones, are often the most powerless in many fishing nations. In the absence of strong political will at the highest level, they cannot hope for support from other ministries and departments to implement the Guidelines. A full implementation of the Guidelines is impossible without the support of non-fishery stakeholders; the United Nations General Assembly should pass a resolution to support the Guidelines and seek co-operation and collaboration from all stakeholders at various levels for their implementation.

Fourthly, since the Guidelines are to be interpreted and applied according to national legal systems and institutions, which in many countries are not fully mature enough to recognize all human rights of all individuals, it is necessary to understand the implications of justiciable and non-justiciable human rights, and the distinction between the right of the citizen and the right of an individual.

Finally, mechanisms should be developed to make sure that small-scale fishing communities receive direct support at the local level from the international community towards implementing the Guidelines.

The time has now come to walk the talk!

