

# Assert Rights, Restore Dignity!

The 6th General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), held at Cape Town, South Africa, on 1 September 2014, reached consensus on the rights of fisher people

On 1 September 2014, the city of Cape Town, South Africa, played host to the 6th General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP). Despite visa issues and Ebola quarantines, WFFP delegates from over 30 countries and each corner of the globe settled in for the week-long conference that is held every three years alongside politicians, researchers and the media.

The excitement amongst the delegates was palatable following the recent adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), making the 6th General Assembly an important platform for the WFFP and its future direction.

The Cape Town assembly was hosted by Masifundise Development Trust and Coastal Links. The tireless work of the South African members of WFFP meant that not only did the attendees arrive safely at the assembly, but they were also ensured that all needs and comforts were accommodated throughout the week. The local hospitality was on display from the very beginning of the conference.

Following a rousing rendition of the South African national anthem, 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika', the delegates listened to what became the assembly's energizer and literal call to fight for the human rights of all small-scale fishers across the world, the Coastal Link's struggle song. Written and performed by Coastal Links members, the song 'Sondela' cries out for the dignity of the small-

scale fishers to be restored through the reclaiming of their territories and human rights to access fishing grounds in order to make a living. No better summation of the crux of the issues facing small-scale fishers could have been given.

With the conference room packed with 100 small-scale fisher representatives ready to discuss the future of the struggle, the keynote speech was delivered by University of Rhode Island associate professor, Seth Macinko. He succinctly summarized

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how those who are trying to deny small-scale fishers their human rights are operating, and how their fundamental approach builds on privatization schemes.

With warnings of how powerful entities such as the World Bank adopt the human-rights language of the WFFP in order to push their own agendas, Macinko immediately grabbed the attention of the room.

## Language hijacked

He praised the fight of the fishers but warned that whilst their voices have now been heard in the board rooms of philanthropic foundations and within the UN, their struggle has to take a new form—a form whereby fisher organizations have to hold to their literal word those who try and hijack their language. This message was met with silent determination.

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Whilst the general assemblies of the WFFP are about taking the fight of fishers forward, the sixth General Assembly took a small amount of time out to look back and honour one of its fallen comrades, Thomas Kocherry. One of the pioneers of the WFFP, Thomas was a priest and hardened activist from Kerala, India, and sadly passed away on 2 May 2014. In his inauguration speech as elected president of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) of India in 1987, Thomas challenged the capitalist system and underlined that “all these multinational companies and greedy profiteers should be kept out... if you want a brighter future”. Thomas brought this fight against neoliberalism to the fore until his last days. In his honour, a large candle was lit at the head of the congregation at the Cape Town assembly and stories and words of condolences were offered by those who knew Tom and his struggles for fishers’ rights.

The assembly also recognized the critical contribution that Chandrika Sharma of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) played in the struggle for the rights and dignity of fisherfolk the world over. Chandrika was on the Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 that went missing in March. The assembly paid silent tribute to her momentous efforts and hailed her as an

international heroine of the small-scale fisher folk.

An important exercise present at all of the previous WFFP general assemblies was the reporting back of the activities of the WFFPs Co-ordinating Committee in the global context. Whilst the importance of the feedback on the various meetings on food sovereignty, resource management and conservation is something that can never be overlooked, there was perhaps no bigger topic than the recent approval of the SSF Guidelines by the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in Rome.

As the conference moved on, one of the key topics to be discussed was the privatization of land and fisheries, and dispossession of fisher peoples, threats which were recognized by fishers the world over. This was highlighted time and again as each of the WFFP members took to the floor to outline the issues that they faced, and whilst each individual context was unique, the privatization of the oceans and the loss of access rights due to law and policy shifts was an issue that no one could ignore.

This discussion came to a head when Mads Barbesgaard, chairperson of Afrika Kontakt, was called to the fore to present the issue of ocean grabbing. Following a collaborative effort from the TNI Agrarian Justice Programme, Masifundise Development Trust, Afrika Kontakt and the WFFP, *The Global Ocean Grab: A Primer* is a document dedicated to outlining what ocean grabbing is and what effects it has on small-scale fishers worldwide. The report contained stories from WFFP members, many of whom sat in the assembly, about how their livelihoods had been affected by ocean-grabbing processes. It became clear that it is a question of life or death for fishing families around the world.

### **Ocean grabbing**

The issue of ocean grabbing was echoed the following day by the fifth General Secretary of the WFFP, Mohammad Ali Shah. His lively speech culminated in a message to all

WFFP members, that now, more than ever, the movement needs solidarity and unity in order to achieve its desired goals and to find success in its fight for fishers' rights around the world.

Throughout the week's proceedings of the assembly, the reinforcement of global unity amongst fishers was made, and the cumulative knowledge and differing perspectives of the fishers present were put to use in order to reach consensus plans of action for the WFFP's future endeavours. The topics that were discussed ranged from how best to utilize the SSF Guidelines to how the WFFP's communication network could be enhanced. The results of these workshops were then reported back to the assembly, with the intention that the wisdom of the WFFP crowd will be implemented into the future actions of the movement.

To report on the SSF Guidelines, Nicole Franz of the FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Department, addressed the WFFP members. Nicole opened her address by extolling the virtues of the guidelines in their ability to help fishers and communities participate and contribute in decision-making processes, a statement that was warmly welcomed by the fishers present.

The speech continued by outlining the FAO's commitment to the implementation of the guidelines, which included the lobbying and advocacy of the guidelines in favour of the inclusion of the small-scale fishers, as well as promoting collaboration with other international instruments such as the Tenure guidelines and the Right to Food Guidelines. The main component of Nicole's speech was the outlining of the Global Assistance Programme (GAP), a proposal made to COFI which would be based on raising awareness, strengthening the science-policy interface, empowering stakeholders and, finally, the collaboration and management component.

On the last day, the national Minister of Fisheries, in his official closing address, proudly announced that the South African government

supports the SSF Guidelines approved by COFI and it will implement them. This drew ecstatic applause from the assembly.

During the closing session, the General Assembly tabled a set of decisions, which came out of the many discussions. The two central themes of the decisions agreed to were the use of the SSF Guidelines in pursuance of human and access rights of fisher people, and the fight against ocean grabbing. The list of decisions taken was comprehensive and included commitments to:

- strengthen the co-operation between WFFP and FAO by involving civil society organizations (CSOs) such as WFFP, WFF, ICSF and IPC in the use of the SSF Guidelines;
- use the guidelines as a knowledge-empowerment and mobilization tool as well as co-ordinating a WFFP campaign directed at governments on World Fisheries Day; and

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- build capacity and knowledge empowerment of WFFP at all levels, in order to understand the political processes and causes of ocean grabbing, and to fight back against this severe threat to fishing communities and our common nature.

The Cape Town assembly also took other decisions around actions at the national and continental levels, which included the forming of cross-sector alliances, campaigning, the strengthening of focus on indigenous peoples, and information and capacity building.

### Consensus election

In the WFFP General Assembly tradition, the closing of the proceedings was highlighted by the consensus election of the new Co-ordinating Committee of WFFP:

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- Co-co-ordinators: Nadine Orchid (the Caribbean) and Mohammad Ali Shah (Pakistan)
- Secretary General: Naseegh Jaffer (South Africa)
- Treasurer: Maria del Mar Pombal Junc (Spain)
- Special Invitees:
  - Jorge Varela Marques (Honduras) and Herman Kumara (Sri Lanka)
  - Africa: Sid'Ahmed Abeid (Mauritania) and Christiana Louwa, (Kenya)
  - America: Moises Osovto (Honduras) and Sherry Pictou (Canada)
  - Asia: Sylvia Malari (Philippines) and Manickam Ilango (India)
  - Europe: Natalia Laino Lojo (Spain) and Jean Claude Yoyotte (Guadalupe)

The 6th General Assembly of WFFP was not solely characterized by the decision taken to combat the removal of small-scale fishers' access rights, but by how a large and diverse group of people could come together to work for a common goal by arriving at consensus decisions that would enhance the well-being of the planet and the world's fishers whilst experiencing and embracing the uniqueness of South African culture.

It is now the responsibility of the new Co-ordinating Committee to pursue and implement the decisions of the 6th General Assembly in the forthcoming three-year period. Masifundise will play a supportive role to the Co-ordinating Committee as the new international secretariat. 3

#### For more

[worldfishers.org](http://worldfishers.org)

**World Forum of Fisher Peoples**

[worldfishers.org/general-assemblies/](http://worldfishers.org/general-assemblies/)

**Keynote Presentations**