

Learning from the Ocean

The recent UN Ocean Conference was outstanding in its methodical design and organization, as experienced by participants from the India-based Friends of Marine Life (FML)

It was in 2015 that the United Nations declared the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are 17 Goals, and SDG 14 deals with marine 'life below water', which is formulated with the aim to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

The Ocean Conference—co-hosted by Fiji and Sweden—was held at the UN Headquarters, New York from 5 to 9 of June 2017 to support the implementation of SDG 14. It included a special event commemorating World Oceans Day on 8 June 2017. This is the first UN conference to be held which sheds

conserving and restoring marine and coastal ecosystems (targets 14.2 and 14.5); theme three, on minimizing and addressing ocean acidification (target 14.3); theme four, on making fisheries sustainable (targets 14.4 and 14.6); theme five, on Increasing economic benefits to SIDS and LDCs and providing access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets (target 14.7; target 14.b); theme six, on increasing scientific knowledge, and developing research capacity and transfer of marine technology (target 14.a); and theme 7, on implementing international law as reflected in UNCLOS (target 14.c)

It was a well-attended Conference. Apart from official representatives of 193 nations the main participants of the conference also included 112 participatory organizations selected from among UN agencies, Voluntary Organizations, and Civil Society Organizations. In addition to the official Indian delegation, three of us from the marine environmental organization called Friends of Marine Life (FML), working with coastal communities in the district of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala State were invited. All three of us: Johnson Jament, Lisba Yesudas and Robert Panipillai are from the traditional fishing communities in the same district and it, probably, was the first time that any members of the fishing families from India were participating in a UN Conference.

Views presented

Presentations and sharing of each target related to SDG 14 were organised as partnership dialogues. There were seven such dialogues. There was one moderator and four panellists for each of the dialogues.

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light on the importance of oceans and seas for sustainable development. It was held with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including CSOs to assess challenges and opportunities relating to the implementation of Goal 14. There was also a Call to Action outcome document.

The themes of the Conference were proposed by the UN Secretary-General and endorsed by the preparatory meeting, convened by the President of the General Assembly on 15-16 February 2017. There are seven themes encompassing all the SDG 14 targets and these are: theme one, dealing with marine pollution (target 14.1); theme two, dealing with managing, protecting,

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While senior leaders from selected UN member countries were the moderators, experts in each subject were the panellists. Officials of selected member countries and organisational representatives got opportunity to present their views and opinions in a short period of time. Side events were also organized on SDG 14 targets. Plenary meetings were held at the UN General Assembly Hall.

Lisba Yesudas spoke at one of the plenary meetings, representing Friends of Marine Life (FML). Referring to India, she said only a small part of India's maritime space is considered rich in biodiversity where any conservation measures are implemented. Lack of proper understanding of the marine ecosystems has led to the opening up of the ocean space to environmentally harmful technologies like bottom trawling. Ocean studies in India should include how traditional fishers have been fishing for a livelihood. Their knowledge of reefs and the ocean environment need to be

documented. This knowledge was to made use of while making policies and programmes for the coast, marine fisheries and the ocean. The traditional knowledge of fishers is unwritten and available only in coastal oral languages and this knowledge is to be valued and documented, she said.

Johnson Jament, FML's representative spoke on making fisheries sustainable at the Partnership Dialogue on 7th June. He began by telling about Mukkuvars, the main coastal fishing community of Thiruvananthapuram, who are in the forefront of identifying biologically rich natural reefs at different depths and locations and their traditional nomenclature. These reefs are the main source of livelihood for Mukkuvars, and, for centuries, they have been preserving these ecologically sensitive areas using only passive and selective fishing gears like hooks-and-line for fishing. But today, their source of livelihood is threatened and

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM OF THE UN



Opening of the UN Ocean Conference's Kava ceremony. Presentations and sharing of each subject related to SDG14 were organized as Partnership Dialogue

being destroyed in the name of 'development' and the main issues are destructive fishing gears like bottom trawls and infrastructure activities like construction of ports with breakwaters, dredging, sea sand mining and industrial and urban pollution. Small-scale fishers are never consulted while these projects are planned and implemented at the behest of the State and as a result these fishers are the major

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victims of unsustainable development, he observed.

The Voluntary Commitment prepared and submitted by FML as part of the UN Ocean Conference included taking an initiative to study the seabed and to identifying biologically rich areas using the community knowledge of traditional fishers. FML also planned to propagate and popularise this knowledge among the youth in traditional fishing communities so that public opinion is also mobilized to adopt measures for the protection and conservation of such areas in the ocean. FML will take the initiative for 'ocean environment literacy' programmes in the community, for example. He suggested imposing a 'blue tax' on the commercial users of the ocean and the coast and to use the tax revenue for conservation measures in marine and coastal areas, especially in promoting sustainable fisheries.

Robert Panipilla spoke on a panel dealing with 'small pelagic fishes for food security and for small-scale fishers' at a side event held on 6th June. The main pelagic species landed in India are sardine, mackerel, ribbon fish etc., and the pelagic species contribute around 48% of the total marine fish landings. Traditionally it is the small fishers depending on these species and they also form the most important source of fish for

direct human consumption especially in rural areas. However, 61 per cent of seagoing fishworkers in India today live below the poverty line though they have a sea of potentially rich marine resources. The main problem is that the near-shore waters, their main occupational area, is heavily overfished and destroyed.

Till a few years ago, oil sardine landings in the country was around 0.5 million tonnes and the latest figures of 2015 shows that it has plummeted to 0.26 million tons. Purse-seiners and pelagic trawlers mostly owned by merchant capitalists are increasingly involved in catching pelagic species of all sizes, including juveniles as there is no restriction on the mesh size of nets. Most of the catches from these large fishing vessels go to fish meal companies and not for direct human consumption. The recently pronounced National Policy on Marine Fisheries 2017 clearly states that the number of fish meal plants is increasing and their annual fishmeal production capacity has crossed 65,000 tonnes. These fish meal plants indirectly promote the growth of commercial large scale and environmentally harmful as well as unsustainable fishing practices. Only through strict control of these fish meal plants and through imposing prohibition on production of fishing nets below certain mesh size, that the pelagic fish resources could sustainably be harvested and protected from overexploitation. Only through such measures can the livelihood security of small-scale fishers and food security of common people be achieved.

Organization of the Event

For many reasons, the organization of UN Ocean Conference is laudable. To identify people committed and interested to work for achieving the goals of SDG 14, the organizers started inviting suggestions and well-defined programme of action from interested stakeholders. It was on the basis of submissions received by the UN through this process that 112 participatory organizations were shortlisted and invited to the

Conference, apart from official-country delegates. These participatory organizations were also consulted on the procedures to be adopted at the conference.

As participants who experienced this participatory selection process, we observed that the approach of the organizers was to give priority to the victims of marine and coastal degradation to articulate their suggestions on finding practical solutions. Top priority was given to small island developing nations (SIDS) facing serious issue of existence due to climatic change factors, adversely impacting oceans and seas. Issues faced by developing countries with large number of small-scale fishers were also given due importance. Nauru with a mere 21 sq. km land area but having 431,000 sq. km sea and Tuvalu with 26 sq. km land area and that too on average of 2 m above the sea level, but having 900,000 sq. km sea were given sufficient time to present their anxieties to the world community. Countries like China tried their best to gain appreciation of other countries by presenting actions taken to resolve the issues of ocean governance in China and their plans for the future.

Important issues such as ocean pollution due to plastic accumulation, ocean acidification, human intervention affecting the sea bed environment, coastal erosion, overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices, changes in the environment, and ocean environment literacy were discussed and the participants got opportunity to understand the global view on these issues.

We saw country-wise meeting of these participants to have a better understanding of their own issues and it was an opportunity to find mutually agreeable solutions for the problems. As we went back from the Conference, I was reminded of these words of Sylvia Earle, the celebrated oceanographer, "For the ocean scientists, it is very important from where they gain the knowledge they needed. If it is from ocean they will love the ocean, but if it is from

books or computers they would love that only". In short, today the story of ocean is similar to a mother who does not receive any love or affection from the children whom she gave birth to. 3

For more



<https://oceanconference.un.org/>

Our Oceans, Our Future: Partnering for the Implementation of SDG 14

https://www.icsf.net/images/what%20is%20new%20page/Voluntary%20commitment_1393%20by%20ICSF%20Trust.doc

Voluntary Commitments for the Ocean Conference at a Glance: 1395 Total Commitments as on 14 July 2017—Compiled by ICSF Trust

<https://www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/76-4287-Contents.html>

Samudra Report No.76, May 2017

<https://www.icsf.net/en/samudra-news-alert/articledetail/55714-Women%E2%80%99s-Major.html?language=EN>

Women's Major Group Presents Position Paper to UN Ocean Conference