

# A Time for Transformation

The voices of small-scale fishers and civil society organizations were loud and clear at the 3rd World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress

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By all accounts, the past ten years have been truly exceptional for small-scale fisheries. One of the highlights is the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) by FAO member states in 2014. As the first international instrument specifically designed for small-scale fisheries, the SSF Guidelines give the much-needed visibility to this important sector, calling all parties to promote small-scale fisheries sustainability through a human-rights based approach. The SSF Guidelines set off waves of excitement and optimism about the new era for small-scale fisheries.

The enthusiasm is shared by several stakeholders—the research community, civil society organisations (CSOs), environmental groups and foundations working to support small-scale fisheries around the world—despite the challenges related to how to ‘walk the talk’. The voluntary nature of the SSF Guidelines is perhaps not as big a hurdle as the lack of capacity among government authorities to carry on the implementation or among other key actors to lend appropriate support. The objectives and the guiding principles underpinning the SSF Guidelines reflect the reality for small-scale fisheries governance; given that they have long been neglected and marginalized, rectifying the situation requires a hard look at how we govern small-scale fisheries. For the most part, major transformation and/or reform of the governing system is unavoidable.

According to the participants at the 3rd World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress (3WSFC), held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in October 2018, this also calls for change in the way we talk about small-scale fisheries, consider their values, conduct research and train

future generations, and take actions to support small-scale fisheries.

Held every four years at a different location since 2010, WSFC is the largest gathering of people with various interests in small-scale fisheries. Although researchers with social science and interdisciplinary backgrounds, and practitioners working in small-scale fisheries form the majority of the participants, the Congress has increasingly become ‘transdisciplinary’, with active participation from natural scientists along with other key actors, including fishers, fishers’ associations, CSOs, environmental organizations, governments and the donor community. The 3rd Congress picked up on the two themes—‘Transdisciplinarity’ and ‘Transformation’—that have been promoted in the Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) Global Partnership, the main host of the Congress, in the discussion about the future of small-scale fisheries.

The idea about the TBTI research network was initially discussed at the first WSFC, held in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2010, to recognize the gap in comprehensive knowledge about small-scale fisheries and the lack of context-specific governance. With major funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), supplemented by contributions from partner and collaborating organizations and team members, the largest research network in small-scale fisheries was then formed. TBTI aims to elevate the profile of small-scale fisheries, strengthen their viability and reduce vulnerability to global change, promote sustainable small-scale fisheries policies, and improve the overall fisheries governance.

## Knowledge advanced

Over the years, TBTI has advanced knowledge on issues related to well-

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Participants at the 3rd World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress, 2019 at Chiang Mai, Thailand. Close to 400 participants from 55 countries participated in the congress to exchange information, share knowledge, discuss issues concerning small-scale fisheries, and articulate their future

being and livelihoods, rights and access, markets, gender, economic viability, inland fisheries, stewardship and governance, among others.

Our governance research, in particular, has resulted into two book-length volumes, each comprising more than 30 case studies, to examine how small-scale fisheries are governed and the challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. The case studies reveal that several transitions have already taken place in the structure and functions of the governing system, signalling the recognition for involving small-scale fishers and other key actors in participatory governance. The need to broaden the perspective about small-scale fisheries, to incorporate formal and informal knowledge in the co-identification of the problems and the co-implementation of the solutions, and to integrate small-scale fisheries in the development discourse, as with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is also recognized. TBTF's pioneering work on Transdisciplinarity for Small-Scale Fisheries Governance captures the essence of the new philosophy and promotes the practice of it through workshops and training programmes.

About 400 researchers, practitioners, small-scale fishers, CSOs, environmental organisations and government representatives

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from 55 countries participated in the 3WSFC to exchange information, share knowledge, discuss issues concerning small-scale fisheries, and articulate future actions to support their sustainability. The Congress took a look back at how things have been with respect to research, policy and actions in small-scale fisheries, with reflections, history and stories told by prominent figures in the field, including Fikret Berkes, Svein Jentoft, Moenieba Isaacs, John Kurien and Rolf Willmann.

#### Presentations

The current issues and cutting-edge research in small-scale fisheries were captured by five scholars from

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Svein Jentoft (second from left) with the Friends of Small-Scale Fisheries and TBTI Hero award, with, from left to right, Andrew Song, Mahmud Islam and Alicia Said

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around the globe, namely, Maria Jose Barragan-Paladines, Mahmud Islam, Ahmed Khan, Alicia Said and Andrew Song, setting the stage for more than 300 presentations during the Congress. The discussion during the science, community and policy days

climate change and environmental variability to issues around rights and access to space, resources and markets. The interplay between vulnerability and viability requires an in-depth investigation to understand the specific contexts for small-scale fishing communities, as well as a comparative analysis to broaden policy and governance.

### The role of governments and other actors in the implementation of the SSF Guidelines was highlighted on the 'Policy Day'.

The voices of small-scale fishers and CSOs working to support small-scale fisheries were loud and clear during the 'Community Day' and throughout the Congress. Nobody could have said it better when they spoke about the intimate relationship that small-scale fishers have to the aquatic environment they depend on, the place they live and the people they interact with. They emphasized the importance of family-based fisheries, highlighting the involvement of women and other family members throughout the entire fish chain. While conflicts with large-scale, industrial fisheries and other ocean users continue, hope and optimism were evident when referencing the SSF Guidelines.

came together on the final day of the Congress, when the participants were encouraged to look into the future by putting together a set of vision and actions for 2022, which has been declared the International Year for Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA), and is also when the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress is scheduled to take place.

It is clear from the 'Science Day' what research and case studies have illuminated in terms of values, importance and contributions of small-scale fisheries. More efforts are necessary, however, to look at factors affecting their sustainability, from

#### Policy Day

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SSF Guidelines was highlighted on the 'Policy Day'. The multiple demands from within the small-scale fisheries sector and outside—including through the SDGs—for better governance that is inclusive, accountable and transparent add to the multiple challenges that governments at all levels are already facing. Lack of capacity and funding, along with political inertia, do get in the way of progress. Many elements must be in place, and many conditions met, to enable governance reform and transformation, some of which can be facilitated by a transdisciplinary or a 'TD dialogue'.

The Congress was intentionally organized in an inland area, far away from the coast, as a way to give a much-needed spotlight to the inland fisheries sector, which, for the most part, remains under-studied. Inland fisheries are almost entirely small-scale, and more needs to be done to bring up the level of understanding about this sector at par with its marine and brackishwater small-scale fisheries counterpart. The visit to a small freshwater lake in Phayao Province, some 150 km away from Chiang Mai, during the one-day field excursion, brought home this message.

Throughout the Congress, the participants were reminded to keep in mind five cross-cutting questions: (1) What is the major knowledge gap in small-scale fisheries?;(2) What are the major challenges facing small-scale fisheries?;(3) What kind of change in science, community, markets and policy is required to improve viability of small-scale fishing communities, reduce their vulnerability and promote small-scale fisheries sustainability?;(4) What actions are required from CSOs, the research community and policy people in order to implement the SSF Guidelines?; and(5) How to strengthen the policy-science interface?

On the final day of the Congress, several 'action circles' were organized to discuss key topics such as 'The Meaning of Small' to recognize the importance that terminology, concept, definition and language play in the contextualization of small-scale fisheries and the framing of their issues and problems; the 'Multiple Values of Small-Scale Fisheries' and how to enhance the value chain, taking advantage of the Target 14b in the SDGs; and the 'Governance Transformation' required in order

to co-ordinate policies and actions to implement the SSF Guidelines, in concert with other efforts to achieve SDGs, going beyond Target 14b. One of the circles highlighted the need to look at issues related to rights and access of small-scale fisheries, recognizing the current insecurity and the risk of displacement, especially in today's development agenda oriented towards 'blue growth' and the 'blue economy'. The call for 'Blue Justice' was echoed at the Congress, urging all involved actors to critically examine what the current development agenda means to small-scale fisheries and their communities, in terms of distributive justice, community empowerment, human rights, food and nutritional security, gender equity and sustainability.

More discussion and actions are required to follow up on the great energy and ideas shared and fostered during the Congress. The plan for IYAFA 2022 is being developed and inputs are sought from the global community about what should be achieved and highlighted. Many of us are already working in our own networks and in collaboration with our partners to keep the momentum going for small-scale fisheries. We at TBTI are doing the same, and remain committed to play our role in building and sharing knowledge, enhancing research and governance capacity through TD training, and communicating news and information about small-scale fisheries. We are also taking actions with the 'Blue Justice for Small-Scale Fisheries' commitment, which we submitted as a voluntary commitment towards fulfilling SDG14, as well as the 'Blue Justice' campaign, aiming to document threats to social justice and risks associated with the current development agenda on small-scale fisheries.

### Conversations

The success of the Congress proved that the time is certainly ripe for a conversation about innovation and transformation in research, training, community engagement and governance for sustainable small-scale fisheries. The outcomes from these discussions lay down the foundation for greater co-ordination across the sector, leading up to the IYAFA 2022 and the 4WSFC. ↴

#### For more



<http://toobigtoignore.net/>

**Too Big to Ignore: A Global Partnership for Small-scale Fisheries Research**

<http://toobigtoignore.net/tbti-publishes-book-on-the-transdisciplinarity-for-small-scale-fisheries-governance-analysis-and-practice/>

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