

# Build Back, Build Forward

By reminding us of the connection between food, health systems, sustainable development and human rights, the global COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to build forward better

Even as we celebrate the contributions of small-scale fisheries to nutrition and food security within a rights-based framework, which is part of an ICSF campaign, we ought not to forget the context in which these are located. The global pandemic of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), commonly referred to as COVID-19, has swung the spotlight to illness, wellness and immunity. Precisely therein lies the importance of fish as food in various contexts and for diverse actors along the marine and inland fisheries value chain.

The articles in this edition of SAMUDRA Report – from 10 countries in Africa, Asia, South America and Oceania – reflect on the worrying impacts on fisheries of COVID-19, which since its outbreak in December 2019, has infected over 31 mn people and killed nearly 1 mn (as of 22 September 2020) worldwide. The lockdowns and pandemic-control measures have disrupted food production and trade in the fisheries sector as well.

Initially, small-scale coastal and inland fishing communities in rural areas were largely spared by the virus. Brazil, however, is an exception. Indigenous Peoples bore the full assault of the pandemic, as the article (page 15) in this edition reveals. A total of 127 Indigenous tribes were affected as of September, with the virus infecting 22,489 people and killing 646 in the sparsely populated Amazonas region. While some subsistence fishing, gleaning and fish consumption remained less affected, commercial fishing operations were severely curtailed due to bottlenecks in the movement of fishers and fishing vessels and the supply of fishing inputs. Further, the closure of fish markets and restaurants, and reduced demand, depressed fishing activity, especially in the developed world.

The article on Nigeria (page 49) points out that shortages in the supply of fresh fish made landing prices unaffordable for women fish processors. Women also had to take on the additional burden of the household, as schools were closed and families were forced to stay indoors.

As the virus began to spread through local fishing communities, it exposed pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as poor access to healthcare and diagnostic facilities in remote areas. Sanitary measures such as hand washing and physical distancing have proved difficult to be practised in the congested living and working spaces of many fishing communities in the developing

world (although some remote Indonesian fishing villages were able to impose community lockdowns to contain the virus – (page 4). Focused on containing the pandemic and on supporting overstretched medical infrastructure, most governments have thus far been reluctant on expanding social protection coverage, particularly in the developing world.

For many people in developing countries, fish is the main – often, the only – source of animal protein and micronutrients in their daily diet. Nearly half the supply of fish in the world comes from small-scale fisheries—a subsector that provides a whopping 90 per cent of employment in the marine fisheries sector. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis highlight the importance of integrating the universal right to food with the specific rights of fishing communities to their lives and livelihoods – consistent with the recommendation of the

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food in 2012: establish an “explicit link between the right to food and the rights of those who produce it to fair access to resources such as fish and water.”

As COVID-19 persists uncannily, there is a clear need for improved access of fishers, fishworkers and their families to healthcare

and testing infrastructure. If severe pandemic control measures have to be reimposed, a judicious balance between disease prevention and human rights ought to be maintained. To tide over the period when those employed in the fisheries sector cannot work, social-protection measures should be inclusive of all fishery workers. These measures should be proportional to the sector’s significant social and economic contributions.

As signs of a post-COVID-19 reset or recovery are yet to emerge, sustainable small-scale fisheries need to be supported to better contribute to local food security. Simultaneously, safe fishing and fish-marketing mechanisms should be identified or developed to facilitate the access of small-scale fishers and fishworkers to fishery resources and markets. Robust protocols and standards must be developed for the fisheries sector, considering that outbreaks of zoonotic diseases are expected to be more frequent in future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant setback to the global struggle against poverty and food insecurity. Yet it has reminded us how connected our food and our health systems are, as are sustainable development and human rights. Will COVID-19 be an opportunity not only to build back but also to build forward better? 🐟

