

A New Platform, A New Engine

The FAO-SSF Umbrella Programme offers a platform to provide direction for the formulation of small-scale fisheries policies, strategies and legislation in many developing countries

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant control measures, the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in an unprecedented move, decided to hold its 34th Session in a virtual mode in the first week of February 2021, almost seven months after the scheduled date.

As with all the previous eight COFI meetings since 2003, the 2021 COFI agenda includes support to small-scale and artisanal fisheries as a standalone agenda item. This is welcome. The range of activities undertaken since the establishment of the FAO-SSF Umbrella Programme (hereafter, the FAO-SSF-UP) in 2015—in partnership with governments, regional fisheries bodies, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academia—towards the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, is quite significant, and has greatly expanded in scope since the last COFI meeting in 2018.

The initiatives under the FAO-SSF-UP are mostly demand-driven activities. Perhaps the most exciting development of all is the establishment of regional platforms for non-State actors (NSAs) in Southern Africa as well as in Western Africa, and the ongoing effort to create a pan-African NSA platform and to link it up with the SSF Global Strategic Framework (SSF-GSF).

Supported by FAO-SSF-UP, some countries are already developing national plans of action in a consultative and participatory manner. Others are developing regional approaches to implementation, including with the participation of Indigenous Peoples, or looking at how regional policies are complementing the SSF Guidelines.

The FAO-SSF-UP is complemented in some countries by other donor-supported projects related to women's empowerment, gender equality, small-scale fisheries governance, co-management and climate-change resilience of small-scale fishers. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the project to evaluate, at the global level, the performance of extant fisheries co-management systems, and initiatives to strengthen small-scale fishers' associations and to develop practical guidance on improving gender and social inclusion in coastal fisheries as positive initiatives.

Private foundations, NGOs, universities and research projects, are also supporting efforts to

disseminate information about the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, to facilitate exchange of information on small-scale fisheries, and to improve co-ordination among small-scale fisheries stakeholders. The SSF Guidelines are also being advocated as a tool for achieving the 2030 sustainable development agenda, particularly to reach the SDG 14b target.

The FAO-SSF-UP, needless to say, is an eloquent testimony to the continued relevance of the SSF Guidelines in providing direction to the formulation of small-scale fisheries policies, strategies and legislation at the regional and national levels in many developing countries. It also has the potential to be the engine to power the SSF-GSF mechanism.

As was argued in *SAMUDRA Report* over a decade ago (see *SAMUDRA Report* No. 57, November 2010), there is need not only for an international instrument but also a global programme to cater to the needs of the world's small-scale artisanal fisheries. The FAO-SSF-UP, in our view, plays this role, and needs to be comprehensively supported to strengthen, or initiate, national

participatory processes for the sustainable development of small-scale fisheries.

Although over 30 countries have impressively benefited from various initiatives in support of small-scale fisheries since 2016, many small-scale fish-producing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are yet to figure in the list of countries engaging in the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. The scope of the FAO-SSF-UP might also be broadened to include initiatives to document how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development indicators measures the social wellbeing of the vulnerable and marginalized in marine and inland fishing communities.

In addition, the FAO-SSF-UP should be encouraged to support monitoring and evaluation of all initiatives under the auspices of all actors involved in implementing the SSF Guidelines. At a time when fishing communities, worldwide, are limping back to their fisheries after being devastated by COVID-19 and the pandemic control measure, it is all the more pertinent to enhance support and to strengthen the FAO-SSF-UP to improve the contribution of small-scale fisheries to livelihoods, as well as to food security and nutrition. **‡**

