

Towards Participatory Small-scale Fisheries

On its 25th anniversary, there is a general feeling that the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers should continue to promote low-impact fisheries

It is now 25 years since the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) was formed in 1986 in Trivandrum, India, four years after the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. At a time when the industrial model of fisheries development was celebrated by donor agencies and governments as the key to increasing global fish supply towards removing poverty and malnutrition in coastal developing nations, ICSF upheld the importance of just, participatory, sustainable and self-reliant artisanal and small-scale fisheries.

ICSF has, within this framework, been supporting the formation of fishworker organizations at the national, regional and global levels, and providing information, analysis and training to better understand and articulate small-scale fishworker concerns and interests. Specific efforts have been made to valorize the role of women in fisheries and fishing communities, and to articulate a 'feminist perspective' on fisheries development.

ICSF has been associating with several international processes such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement, the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), to expand civil society space in fisheries policy and planning at different levels, and to address some of the key areas of interest to artisanal and small-scale fishworkers.

The provisions of the CCRF on preferential access to small-scale fisheries to their traditional fishing grounds are a direct outcome of ICSF's work. ICSF has also been promoting a human-rights approach to fisheries development and management. Over the last five years or so, small-scale fisheries and human rights have gained greater attention of the world community, culminating in the recent decision of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) to look at options for a negotiated international instrument for small-scale fisheries.

Despite some gains, some of the old challenges still remain. Fishworker organizations at different levels are yet to consolidate the gains from international

processes for empowering fishing communities. High-impact fishing gear and techniques, such as bottom trawling, are still rampant. Certain elements of artisanal and small-scale fisheries are getting more diversified and becoming singularly market-driven, making the subsector more complex, while raising new issues of equity and sustainability. More and more people from non-fishing communities seek employment in fisheries. Market-determined management regimes are becoming a condition for market access.

An expanding globalization process, manifested through new challenges to the coast and nearshore waters in the form of oil and gas exploration, mining, coastal industrialization, indiscriminate aquaculture development, is leading to greater pollution, displacement, disruption of fishing activities and loss

of livelihoods. Narrow socially-blind, donor-driven marine and coastal conservation programmes are marginalizing fishers in their traditional fishing grounds.

Climate-change issues threaten to disrupt the livelihoods of coastal communities. Natural disasters like tsunamis and cyclones have intensified of late.

On the occasion of its 25th anniversary, ICSF has sought the views of a cross-section of its Members, and well-wishers about the role that the organization should play in fisheries and how it could improve its engagement toward sustainable outcomes for fishing communities (see the supplement). The thought-provoking responses tell us that we should continue to promote low-impact fisheries and rights- and responsibility-based approaches in fisheries development and management, to involve youth, and to pay greater attention to decent work, and alleviation of poverty and hunger in fishery-dependent communities. ICSF takes these suggestions seriously and reckons to strengthen its work in molding global, regional and national opinion on fisheries and climate change. Capacity-building of fishworker organizations will be taken up towards greater coherence at national, regional and international levels. ICSF will utilize the preparatory work towards a new international instrument for small-scale fisheries proposed by FAO as an opportunity to address some of the new challenges facing fishing communities, and in meeting the expectations as articulated by its Members, and well-wishers.

